

Race Analysis in the Frame of Both Americas: a review of *Theorizing Race in the Americas* (2017) by Juliet Hooker<sup>1,2</sup>

Juliet Hooker's new book, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (2017), is an informative, insightful, and extremely well-researched analysis of four intellectual giants from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this rigorous engagement, Hooker presents two biographical and historiographical *juxtapositions*—as distinguished from *comparisons*—in order to persuasively and provocatively defend a nuanced tapestry of methodological and conceptual theses. In part one, “*Ambas Americas*,” Hooker examines Frederick Douglass alongside Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. And in part two, “*Mestizo Futurisms*,” she examines W.E.B. Du Bois alongside José Vasconcelos. As Hooker notes, “African American and Latin American political thought are rarely analyzed in conjunction” (p. 2). In spite of the fact that they are both “subaltern traditions,” which is to say, each constituted in part by their relationship to white supremacy and global imperialism, they function as discrete schools of thought. Incidentally, each of Hooker's pairs were contemporaries, historically speaking, though there is no historiographic evidence that they corresponded or read each other's' work. Perhaps the reasons are simply linguistic; perhaps the differences are more fundamental, born of differing geographies and histories. Nevertheless, as Hooker argues, there are compelling reasons to widen the geographical scope of our contemporary analyses to include “*Ambas Américas*.” In widening our scope, we will appreciate the similarities of these schools of thought, without, of course, reducing them to each other. For example, as already intimated, “these two traditions are subaltern insofar as they are both situated at the margins of Western political thought” (p. 4). Concretely, this situatedness has entailed negotiating claims and proposals proffered by the American school of ethnography and its attendant post hoc, pseudo-scientific justifications for racist policies. Second, Hooker argues that this widened analytic frame “highlights underappreciated elements of the political thought of each of these thinkers” (p. 19). In the cases of Douglass and Sarmiento, we have failed as scholars to appreciate the degree to which their respective *ideas* of the “other America,” albeit stereotyped and also selectively appropriated, influenced their thinking. In the cases of Du Bois and Vasconcelos, we mistakenly interpreted their theories of race as narrowly nationalistic, and thus unidimensional and essentialist, when in fact they each proposed dynamic, internationally-informed, “mixed-race utopias that sought to envision post-racist futures” (p. 18).

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are in order to Juliet Hooker, Stephanie Rivera Berruz, and Sergio Gallegos, who, along with myself, comprised an Author Meets Critics Panel at the 2018 meeting of SAAP. Our collected comments are now forthcoming in the *Radical Philosophy Review*.

<sup>2</sup> Jaima, Amir R. 2018. “Race Analysis in the Frame of Both Americas.” *Radical Philosophy Review* 21 (2): 339–44.

Reading the chapters more closely, “*Ambas Americas*” juxtaposes Douglass and Sarmiento. She analyzes them both through three key moments. Douglass’s moments correspond roughly to the periods before the Civil War, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction. Before the Civil War, Douglass “forged a radical black fugitive democratic ethos” (p. 29). Basically, he was concerned with protecting the human rights and freedoms of fugitive ex-slaves, whose legal status in the United States before the War was precarious. To this end, he held up Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Mosquito Kingdom as exemplars of “alternative political spaces for black self-government” (p. 28). During the second period, the high hopes of Reconstruction imbued Douglass with a new political optimism. Hooker notes, “During Reconstruction, Douglass’s commitment to the United States was at its apex; he believed the US polity was in a process of radical re-founding and retreated from political ideas consonant with black fugitivity” (p. 54). This attitude led to Douglass’s strong “endorsement of the annexation of Santo Domingo in 1870-1871” (p. 28). This controversial, imperialistic proposal was ultimately part of Douglass’s hope that the United States would become a majority non-white nation, and through the democratic process would cease to be dominated by racist ideas. The failure of Reconstruction would return Douglass to his previous skeptical, black fugitive ethos. Most characteristic of this re-orientation is Douglass’s impassioned “defense of Haitian political capacity” (p. 28) at the World’s Columbian Exposition. In a speech delivered ostensibly to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, Douglass chose to celebrate the “90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Haitian independence in 1804” (p. 62), highlighting “Haiti as the source of an alternative founding genealogy for all of the Americas” (p. 65).

Sarmiento’s three important moments correspond to texts he published across his political career. As an aristocrat in the 1840s, Sarmiento published *Facundo* and *Viajes en Europa, Africa y América*. The contrast between these texts betrays Sarmiento’s turn “away from Europe as the political model for Argentina to the United States” (p. 71). In *Facundo*, Sarmiento advocates for “Europeanization” as the solution to what he perceived to be Argentina’s greatest political threat: “*caudillo* rule” (p. 79). By *Viajes*, Sarmiento had grown to admire what he perceived to be the successes of democracy in the United States. Between 1865 and 1868, Sarmiento served as Argentina’s Ambassador to the United States. During his tenure, he published a journal called *Ambas Américas* and a report on public education in the United States entitled simply *Las Escuelas*. In brief, under the influence of Mary Mann, one of Sarmiento’s American interlocutors, Sarmiento appears to moderate the racist ideas for which he is so notorious. And finally, during his term as president of Argentina (1868-1874), Sarmiento wrote *Conflicto y armonías de las razas en América*. In this text, Sarmiento appears to return to the prejudicial sentiments of *Facundo*. Yet, upon closer reading we can appreciate that he was most concerned with Argentinean sovereignty in the face of US imperialism. Without

apologizing for his racism, we can appreciate that he was invested in positioning Argentina as a political equal to the United States.

In part two, “Mestizo Futurisms,” Hooker juxtaposes Du Bois and Vasconcelos. Hooker examines three moments in Du Bois’ corpus. First, in 1897, Du Bois delivered his famous speech, “The Conservation of the Races.” This is one of Du Bois’ earliest statements on the scientific concept of race. Here we find the kernels of what appear to be a racial essentialism. Upon closer reading, however, and placed in the proper historical context, we can appreciate that he was being tactical for political, anti-racist purposes. Hooker explains that Du Bois “argued instead that African Americans should enact a distinct form of black politics built on separate institutions or ‘race organization’” (p. 126). The second moment is 1928, when Du Bois published *Dark Princess*, “an interracial romance that imagines a political alliance of people of color worldwide, in which racial mixture serves as a catalyst for black internationalism and a global anti-colonial uprising” (p. 118). The interracial romance is between an African American man and a princess from India, both of whom are ‘people of color,’ according to Du Bois. In a work of fiction, which Hooker explains, could “portray what could not be achieved through political activism at the time” (p. 120), Du Bois betrays an appreciation of the diversity among “we who are dark” (Du Bois 1926, “Criteria of Negro Art”) who nevertheless must form ‘blood’ alliances for the sake of a better future. The third moment is 1940, when Du Bois published his second autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*. Here, Du Bois argues that the Negro is *essentially* mixed-race, and that the color line is an arbitrary mark. This suggests, most importantly, that mixture alone, as further evidenced by Latin America, will not eliminate racism.

And finally, Hooker’s examination of Vasconcelos begins by amending interpretations of his most famous text, *La Raza cósmica* (1925) by contextualizing it among his the lesser known and as yet untranslated later works, *Indología* (1926) and *Bolivarismo y Monroísmo* (1934). In brief, *La Raza cósmica* articulates “a utopian vision in which racism would be overcome by the unfolding of a universal Latinidad defined by mestizaje” (p. 125). Hooker clearly and persuasively presents some of the limitations of Vasconcelos’s vision. Most notably, however, *La raza cósmica* presumes “a national population that is homogenous in its mixed-ness” (p. 156), and this homogeneity correlates with political equality. The reality, of course, is that mixed-ness varies, and some mixtures conferred social and political advantages, betraying the latent racism in society. Vasconcelos’ later texts, Hooker argues, reframe mestizaje, not as a concept of race, but primarily as an anti-colonial strategy to effect a decolonization of knowledge and power. His later texts notably include “critiques of the internalized racism of Latin American elites” (p. 160) and their aspirations to whiteness. Hooker concludes by critically engaging Anzaldúa’s “selective borrowing” from Vasconcelos. Hooker explains: “By centering a feminist, female, queer mestiza subject, Anzaldúa ‘queers’ Vasconcelos’s theory of mestizaje.

Yet, she was not able to escape the problematic racial and gender inheritance of his mestizo futurism” (pp. 160-161). In short, Anzaludúa is too conceptually indebted to Vasconcelos in order fully deconstruct his patriarchal legacy with her intersectional critique.

Hooker also makes two methodological claims. First, Hooker advocates for—and performs—analyses by *juxtaposition* as opposed to *comparison*. Juxtaposition evades many of the “pitfalls” that have plagued previous attempts to bridge these historically discrete schools of thought. Hooker explains, for example, that “comparison constructs the racial, national, and cultural differences it purports to analyze....It assumes, or constructs, an illusion of coherence and distinctness of the units being compared. It thus tends to overlook moments of exchange or overlap, as when ideas travel, or thinkers from different traditions engage with shared interlocutors. Most centrally, however, there is also often an implied evaluative aspect of comparison, whereby it becomes an exercise in ranking” (pp. 11-12). For example, scholars may be inclined to ask, mistakenly, “which of the two traditions has formulated the better approach to race” (p. 12). By contrast, Hooker explains that “juxtaposition places two disparate objects side by side, and it is by being viewed simultaneously that the viewer’s understanding of each object is transformed.” Hooker continues, “Juxtaposition thus allows us to ask: What happens when thinkers and traditions that are viewed as disparate are staged as proximate, what insights are revealed?” (p. 13) The difference between juxtaposition and comparison is like the difference in the visual arts between a triptych and a series, respectively. A series imposes an order, where previous images inform later ones. By contrast, a triptych invites the viewer to participate in an imaginative project of including the “wall” and space between the parts as part of the “canvas,” so to speak. We might rearrange the parts, or view them in isolation without loss. In any event, their relationship remains underdetermined, and thus hermeneutically fertile. The analogy breaks down, of course, when we consider that artists intend for triptychs to be viewed together, whereas scholarly juxtapositions like the ones Hooker presents are not. In scholarship, one must make a case for particular pairings, as Hooker does.

Second, Hooker illuminates some of the pitfalls of selective readings of history and scholarship. This criticism functions on two levels. On the one hand, contemporary scholars—you and I—have selectively read the works of each of these figures in a manner that has distorted their intellectual legacies. We misread them narrowly through their respective nationalistic and disciplinary lenses. As evidenced by the woefully selective appropriation of Vasconcelos’s *The Cosmic Race*, we need to pay “attention to the dangers of selective reading, or more precisely, to the silences and erasures that result when texts are read without paying attention to the historical and intellectual context in which they were produced and to which they were responding” (p. 193). And on the other hand, the figures themselves engage in

selective readings of the “other Americas,” which should make us wary of the uncritical adoption of their ideas for contemporary purposes.

In the short space remaining, I have two questions/comments for Hooker. First, Hooker concludes her chapter on Du Bois noting that “rereading Du Bois as a theorist of *mestizaje*” breaks with disciplinary tendencies and places him alongside Latin American thinkers who have also “grappled with mixture as a means of critiquing white supremacy” (p. 152). It seems that African American thinkers *have* grappled with this question. In light of, for example, the Protean nature of legal, racial designations, African American thinkers in particular have been sensitive to the fact that “Racial justice required more than the trespassing of the color line” (p. 143). Consequently, Black Americans have been more likely to avoid “the conceptual trap of equating multiracialism with antiracism” (p. 152). This is why Black Americans have tended to homogenize ‘people of color,’ because what is most salient is that we have a common foe. Du Bois’ color line was never biological or physiological; it is political and ideological. Either you are anti-colonial or you’re a colonizer, effectively Black or white.

Second, Hooker notes in a footnote that the figures she analyzes are “all heterosexual men, all of whom wrote from a masculinist perspective.” Hooker continues, “I address this potential gap in the book through an intersectional feminist reading of their work that is attuned to the operations of gender and sexuality in their writings” (p. 207). My question is, does an “intersectional feminist” analysis actually add to our appreciation of these figures? It is always, of course, important to be sensitive to the gender politics that are implicit in our theories. Yet, on the face of it, an intersectional feminist reading seems anachronistic when analyzing figures from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As an historical note, feminism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century harbored a lamentable imperialist undertone that these four anti-colonial thinkers would be opposed to, in spite of at least Douglass and Du Bois’s advocacy of gender equality.<sup>3</sup> Consider, for example, Douglass’s controversial endorsement of (white) women’s suffrage during what Hooker describes as Douglass’s hopeful second period.<sup>4</sup> Considered more critically, an intersectional feminist analysis tends to conflate a politics of identity and visibility with a theory of oppression, which can be contrary to the anti-colonial impulse of the figures in this text.<sup>5</sup>[3] In the specific context of Hooker’s analysis of Anzaldúa,

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<sup>3</sup> Newman, *White Women’s Rights*

<sup>4</sup> See Harley & Terborg-Penn, *The Afro-American Woman*, especially chapter three, “Black Male Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century Woman.”

<sup>5</sup>See Nash, “Rethinking Intersectionality”; Purdue-Vaughns and Eichbach “Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities” and Curry “Killing Boogeymen: Phallicism and the Misandric Mischaracterizations of Black Males in Theory”

arguably it is *only* when viewed as levying an “intersectional” critique that Anzaldúa is “not able to fully escape the problematic inheritance of Vasconcelos’s racial and gender politics” (p. 192). Perhaps escape is not the goal. Just as Vasconcelos’s *mestisaje* is arguably not a racial designation, strictly speaking, but an anti-colonial orientation, Anzaldúa’s Chicana futurism is the particularization of an “anti-colonial strand of...Latin American political thought” (p. 193).

Hooker’s *Theorizing Race in the Americas* makes a valuable contribution to both Latinx and Africana thinking and research on race. It offers a new and rigorous analysis of these four canonical figures. Additionally, Hooker introduces a compelling methodological approach—juxtaposition, rather than comparison—that suggests opportunities for further cross-disciplinary work. And thinkers and writers who are interested in broadening the scope of their work to include *Ambas Americas*—historiographically and philosophically—will find in this text a resource and an invitation.

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