As Jair Bolsonaro claimed victory in the Brazilian presidential election, news outlets quickly dubbed him the “Trump of the Tropics,” pointing to the authoritarian and anti-establishment orientation that have marked the rise of the New Right in the Americas. At the same time, however, the overlapping racialized and gendered logics that propelled the ascendancy of Trump and Bolsonaro are rarely the subject of sustained public discussion. Instead, narratives of national exceptionalism, such as the constant invocation of Brazil’s history of racial mixing and its status as a majority black and brown country, obscure the hemispheric trajectories of white supremacy.

Reading Juliet Hooker’s award-winning *Theorizing Race in the Americas* in this context is a welcome disruption of the national silos that prevent an interrogation of the entangled histories of native genocide, black slavery, and settler colonialism that mark the Americas. Joining the hemispheric turn in American studies and helping to bring this approach to the study of American political thought, Hooker reads Latin American thought and African American thought “in conjunction” to “[reveal] the intellectual connections and political ideologies of racial thought within the Americas” (2). Her study tracks two moments of racial thought—the mid- to late-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. For each historical moment, Hooker pairs an African American and Latin American thinker to move these traditions of thought outside the “unthinking nationalism” (2) to which they are often conscripted and draw out novel interpretations of each thinker’s political thought. For the nineteenth century, she focuses on Frederick Douglass and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, while the chapters on the twentieth century take up W.E.B. Du Bois and José Vasconcelos. In each instance, Hooker carefully reconstructs the historical context and political predicaments of each thinker’s interventions, paying particular attention to the ways they navigated their “shared albatross” of scientific racism. At the same time, she illustrates the theoretical payoffs to be gained by deploying a hemispheric lens that imports new conceptual tools for understanding the figures in her study.
In part 1, “Ambas Américas” (Both Americas), Hooker examines how Douglass and Sarmiento invoked and deployed depictions of the other America to intervene in debates within their respective political contexts. While often contrasted to black nationalists such as Martin Delany for his commitment to black inclusion and citizenship within the United States, Hooker illustrates that Douglass’s overarching commitment to multiracial democracy prompted at different moments in his career a turn to the Caribbean and Central America for “models of a black ‘city on a hill’” (48). For instance, in the 1850s Douglass’s paper functioned as a site for articulating visions of collective black self-rule in Nicaragua. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, Douglass mobilized this hemispheric orientation to remake the United States itself. Hooker deftly reads his support for US annexation of the Dominican Republic as an effort to decenter domestic whiteness. If his white supremacist contemporaries rejected annexation due to fears of an expanding nonwhite population, Douglass embraced a human right to migration and endorsed nonwhite incorporation in an effort to realize his vision of “composite nationality” and multiracial democracy within the United States. By situating this episode within Douglass’s recurring theoretical and political pivots to the Caribbean, Hooker explodes the integrationist/separatist framework of African American political thought to reveal Douglass’s “subaltern hemispheric approach to cosmopolitanism” (49).

The Argentinian statesman Sarmiento, whose best-known text, Facundo, represented an Argentina caught in a racialized struggle between civilization and barbarism, offers a productive counterpoint to Douglass’s cosmopolitanism. Hooker, however, looks beyond Facundo to examine lesser-known texts and to highlight the impact of Sarmiento’s tenure as ambassador to the United States (1865–68) on his political thought. In his engagement with the other America, Sarmiento rejected the association of democracy and economic prosperity in the United States with Anglo-Saxonism, arguing instead that it was the product of access to public education and an egalitarian ethos (86). In downgrading racial determinism, Hooker argues that Sarmiento also conceived of Latin America and the United States as “political equals who should establish a horizontal intellectual dialogue and mutually beneficial exchange of ideas and models” (89). This formed the basis of an anti-imperialist critique of US expansionism and hegemony.

In attending to the partial and idealized depictions of the United States that structured Sarmiento’s hemispheric outlook, Hooker reveals the pitfalls of comparison against which she offers the alternative method of juxtaposition. Comparison is a strategy all four figures in Hooker’s study deploy, but Sarmiento especially exemplifies how comparison “involves creative misreadings of the other refracted through one’s own political concerns and philosophical dilemmas” (12). In “his rosy depiction of US republican freedom,” Sarmiento elides the history and legacy of slavery (87). Moreover, while he rejected racial determinism, his comparative orientation worked to reify the differences between the United States and Latin America, grounding his argument for the US as an exemplary model (88). Hooker identifies hierarchical ranking as a frequent handmaiden of comparison, which persists even in the writings of a more radical thinker like Vasconcelos who deployed comparison to vindicate a Latin American model of mestizaje.
Rather than stage a methodological debate in abstraction, Hooker locates her critique of comparison in the very thinkers she studies and advances juxtaposition as a resource from within a hemispheric perspective. According to Hooker, “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” (13). Her pairing seeks to destabilize the assumed boundaries between Latin American and African American political thought, not for the purpose of reconciling these two traditions but instead to situate moments of resonance in a shared historical context.

This method pays its highest dividends in part 2 of the book, organized around the “Mestizo Futurisms” of Du Bois and Vasconcelos. Hooker illustrates how Du Bois’s fictional accounts of interracial romance such as Dark Princess, engagement with miscegenation law, and autobiographical explorations of mixture in Dusk of Dawn worked to critique biological conceptions of race and reimagine black futurity. Reading Du Bois’s “mulatto fictions” as a form of “mestizo futurism,” Hooker demonstrates the theoretical and political purchase of borrowing the category of “mestizo” from Latin American thought to reconsider race in the United States. In Du Bois’s hands, mestizo futures “counter dystopian narratives about the dangers posed by mixture affirmed by scientific racism as well as white utopias of Anglo-Saxon racial domination” (122). By highlighting the instability of racial categories, Du Bois reveals scientific racism to be “a form of ‘science fiction’” (123). While Du Bois at times equated “multiracialism with racial egalitarianism” (152) in his invocations of Brazil and Jamaica, what makes Du Bois’s mixed-race futurisms distinct and compelling, according to Hooker, is that he avoids rendering interracial mixture as “a utopian color-blind, post-racial future” given his attentiveness to the persistence of white supremacy (152).

The relationship between multiracialism and racial egalitarianism is at also at the heart of Hooker’s chapter on Vasconcelos. In his influential book The Cosmic Race as well as the untranslated works Indología and Bolivarismo y Monroismo, Hooker identifies a defense and celebration of Latin American mestizaje that Vasconcelos mobilized to critique claims of Anglo-Saxon supremacy that underwrote US imperialism. Radicalizing Sarmiento’s comparative framework, Vasconcelos inverted racial hierarchies to reimagine racial mixture as a mark of Latin American superiority vis-à-vis the United States (164). As Hooker notes, while an important anticolonial discourse, this imagining of mestizaje elides the forms of racial and sexual domination that produced racial mixture and still locates black and indigenous Latin Americans at the bottom of a hierarchy that privileges multiracialism (192, 171). At the same time, Vasconcelos deploys mestizaje to reject Latin American attachment to whiteness and furnish resources for regional unity (183). If Sarmiento embraced a model of horizontal relations between the two Americas, writing at the height of US expansion in Latin America, Vasconcelos sought to create an anti-imperial model of “Our America” (158).

As Hooker illustrates through the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, both the critical possibilities and the contradictions of Vasconcelos’s vision of mestizaje persist in our contemporary moment. Thus, rather than a set of easily recoverable theoretical resources for thinking about race in our contemporary moment, what Hooker offers in Theorizing...
Race in the Americas is a compelling account of how a hemispheric lens reframes our approaches to the study of race and black political thought in new and unexpected ways. Taking the hemisphere as a space and frame of analysis reveals the convergences that structure the discourses of race in both the United States and Latin America and promises an alternative orientation to the resurgence of authoritarian populism in both Americas.

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NOTE


The re-publication of Cedric Robinson’s 2001 An Anthropology of Marxism arrives at a specific historical moment in which misery, exploitation, and the death of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized and poor communities are becoming more visible. Yet, like Robinson’s previous work, Anthropology is a rigorous critique of the terms of order justified from the fabrications and myths of and by a bourgeois strata as much as it is also about the actions of ordinary people (as in our present) who recreate their worlds amid oppression and exploitation. Similar to his other work, whether in stateless societies like that of the Ill-Tonga people in Zambia or in the Black maroon communities of the Americas, Robinson’s commitment that domination is only one part of our condition is unwavering; we have always been more than just these conditions. Thus, Anthropology’s argument is straightforward: Robinson rejects the claim by Marx and Engels (historical materialism) that bourgeois society and its material contradictions is a necessary precondition for socialism. Through meticulous analysis of what Lenin underscored as the three pillars of Marxism (French socialism, German philosophy, and English political economy), Robinson highlights the vestiges of a socialist tradition prior to capitalism by the practices and rebellions of peasant communities in medieval Europe, which were later appropriated by the Catholic Church. As he argues, this was not as a result of class hegemony “but of a dialectic between power and resistance to its abuses” (123). Central in Anthropology’s thesis is to highlight that if a socialist impulse existed prior to the scientific socialism Marx and Engels prescribed, then it is unmistakable that other forms of socialism can and do exist outside the purview of Marxism.

Through the use of anthropology as a method for historical inquiry, Robinson’s approach interrogates the ways in which Western socialism and historical materialism were the expressions of “the ferment of a civilization” and not the product of events, a specific era, or a select intellectual cohort (2). As Robinson argues, Marx and Engels’s