

Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy



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Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ, EDITOR

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FROM THE EDITOR

Carlos Alberto Sánchez

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

I take over the *Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* after a two-year apprenticeship with Bernie Canteñis, whose professionalism and leadership I can only hope to emulate. Over the next few years, I aim to continue to uphold the standards of excellence set by Bernie, and all past editors, and ensure that the newsletter fulfills its mission as a forum for the discussion of issues related to philosophy and the Hispanic/Latina/o experience. As in the present embodiment of the newsletter, a goal will be to showcase the contributions of emerging and established Latina/o philosophers, and to continue to serve as a forum for the discussion of issues marginalized in mainstream philosophical journals and forums.

The fall 2013 issue of the newsletter begins with Robert Eli Sánchez, Jr.'s "The Process of Defining Latino/a Philosophy," a report from the first national symposium on the current state of the Latino/a philosopher and Latino/a philosophy in the United States, a gathering held at SUNY Stony Brook in March 2013. Sánchez's report is an indication that, as he puts it, Latin American and Latino/a philosophy is "here to stay." Instantiating this point, Natalie Cisneros's interview with philosopher José Medina (Vanderbilt) sheds light on Professor Medina's philosophical development, his contributions, and the future of his research. It is an inspired and inspirational interview that reflects the heights to which emerging Latino/a philosophers might aspire. Continuing with this theme, the third piece, *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, is a review of George Yancy's edited volume on the marginalization of Latino/a and African Americans in the academy. Grant Silva's sensitive and informed reading of this important collection gets to the heart of the matter, concluding that "Yancy's text allows for the emergence of patterns of systematic exclusion that venture beyond the incidental." In one of two articles in this newsletter, Francisco Gallegos offers an excellent reading of the Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del Relajo*. Gallegos defends Portilla's assertion that *relajo*—or the suspension of seriousness—is a socially destructive act, and argues against the view that perhaps Portilla overlooked the revolutionary implications of such suspensions. Finally, Kim Díaz's article on José Carlos Mariátegui explores the Peruvian philosopher's indigenous communism. Díaz spells out Mariátegui's notion of a "revolutionary myth," arguing that only through the notion of a socialist myth could Mariátegui reconcile the goals of European communism/Marxism with the realities of the indigenous communities of Peru. Thus,

she situates Mariátegui's thought in both the historical and intellectual context of the 1920s.

SPECIAL FEATURES

The Process of Defining Latino/a Philosophy

Robert Eli Sánchez, Jr.

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

The following is a report on "Latino/a Philosopher: A National Symposium," which took place at Stony Brook University on March 15-16, 2013. My aim here is not to summarize the papers one by one, but to convey some of the general themes and concerns that emerged from our conversation, and which loosely connect the talks that were heard. What I cannot convey, however, is the enthusiasm and camaraderie—or what Ofelia Schutte aptly called "the energía Latina"—which made this such a special event. I take full responsibility for any confusion herein and encourage the reader to refer to the forthcoming anthology of essays that were presented.

For the past seventy years, Latin American philosophy has struggled to establish a permanent place on the academic scene in the United States. For those of us who have had a reason or desire to teach it to ourselves and represent the importance of an unfamiliar philosophy, we could not be sure that it would ever be more than a side interest—something in addition to the "serious philosophy" that would one day earn us tenure. However, having attended "Latino/a Philosopher: A National Symposium," I believe it is now safe to say that Latin American philosophy is here to stay. It's not that there haven't been a number of signs attesting to the growing respectability of Latin American philosophy in the United States: publications, dissertations, job advertisements, other conferences, and this newsletter, to name a few. But never have so many Latino/a philosophers gathered together in the United States to discuss their own philosophy, confirming that there is finally a critical mass of philosophers in the United States who identify as Latino/a and who believe that their ethnic identity somehow impacts the philosophy they produce. To say that Latin American philosophy is here to stay, then, is in part to say that Latinos/as are here to stay.

To be more precise, what we witnessed was, in some way, the arrival of *Latino/a* philosophy, for it is not just the growing interest in philosophers from, or issues particular to, Latin America that is becoming more popular, but the arrival of what Jorge J. E. Gracia called in the first paper of the symposium an "ethnic philosophy"—that is, a "philosophy

produced by an ethnos and, as such, [one that] reflects the ethnos and whatever may characterize it.”¹ So it was the number and mutual recognition of the Latinos/as (as opposed to Latin Americans) in attendance that signaled the arrival of a distinct philosophy, one that is characterized by the lived experience of thinkers of Latin American descent who are situated in the United States today. And the emphasis of the symposium was placed on Latino/a philosophers (as opposed to Latino/a philosophy), since, as Eduardo Mendieta, the convener and organizer of the event, said in his opening remarks, “before there is Latino/a philosophy, there are Latino/a philosophers.”

As Gracia noted, however, the very phrase “Latino/a philosophy” is a Pandora’s Box of philosophical questions and debate,² and it is not the number of Latinos/as alone that marks the existence of Latino/a philosophy. So one may expect that announcing the arrival of Latino/a philosophy implies that we are ready to define what it is and close Pandora’s Box. However, as Gracia argued, using the phrase “Latino/a philosophy” meaningfully does not require that one knows or can say what it is, only “that in certain periods and places, Latino/a philosophy has shared certain interests, topics, approaches, or methods that were geared toward the immediate historical context and thus distinguishable from other philosophies of ethnic groups in other places and times.” Moreover, there’s a double sense of “define” that is relevant here: besides being able to say what something is, we can also speak of defining something in the sense of making or establishing what it is. So, given the emphasis on Latino/a philosophers as opposed to Latino/a philosophy, although the what-is-it question was addressed, the primary aim of the symposium was to share our interests, topics, and approaches, and to reflect together on our immediate historical context—that is, to take a weekend (hopefully the first of many) to define Latino/a philosophy in the second sense of the word.

The most central piece of context that inspired almost all of the papers is the fact that Latinos/as are currently the most underrepresented minority in philosophy. As Manuel Vargas reminded us, “Latinos are almost entirely invisible in the profession. According to the statistics gathered by the American Philosophical Association, Latinos make up 2 percent of philosophers in Ph.D.-granting institutions,” and only slightly more in other tenure-track positions.³ And this in spite of the fact that they are the largest and fastest growing minority in the United States—currently at 52 million or about 17 percent of the population.⁴ Philosophy, in other words, is not only “demographically challenged,” as Linda Alcoff has put it,⁵ but the numbers suggest that it is especially unwelcoming to Latinos/as.

For Ofelia Schutte, what the “dismally low representation” confirms is that, given the current practices, standards, and teachers of philosophy, Latinos/as tend not to be attracted to the field. They tend to see studying philosophy as a mark of social privilege—“at best, a protected space for asking unusually clever questions and, at worst, a field reserved for exclusionary white privilege”—and so they fail to identify with either the subject or its professors. The result is that Latinos/as tend to see philosophy as an ultimatum between proving oneself in a challenging discipline and staying true to one’s socio-cultural—some of the presenters

would add economic—roots. In short, because of the underrepresentation of Latinos/as in philosophy, a certain population is being discouraged from exploring a resource that could help to address a number of issues that do concern Latinos/as.

Schutte argues further that we are not facing an issue that is purely sociological or political, but one that reflects a crisis in philosophy itself. In her view, philosophy is a social construction: “a social practice made possible by educational, financial, and scientific institutions whose standards of performance do not work in isolation from the rest of our social practices.” So the fact that philosophy has always been dominated by a certain population is not unconnected from what we think philosophy is. She claims that the fact that the core identity of philosophy has been established by white Anglo males—i.e., the dominant group whose gender and racial and ethnic identity is an uncontested privilege—in part explains the incessant effort in philosophy to separate reasons from the reasoner, an approach which in effect has ruled out counting as philosophical those issues that are tied to one’s identity, and thus the larger metaphilosophical issue concerning the relation between philosophy and identity. As a result, Schutte thinks, philosophy is “socially and culturally impaired,” something that it is becoming uncomfortably aware of as the demographics start to shift.⁶

According to Linda Alcoff and others, the idea that “philosophy is just philosophy” is itself exclusionary, a stand-in for “philosophy is what we do” and the basis for “what you do is not philosophy.” And philosophy has been able to perpetuate this binary and remain “decontextualized,” as Alcoff says, by continuing to “marginalize those constituencies that complain about its demographic and philosophical narrowness, and those who might thematize its demographic limitations as a problem with philosophical implications.” The challenge facing Latinos/as is compounded, then, since it is not just *that* certain topics or approaches are considered non-philosophical, but that those in the core of the discipline are often justified in dismissing them as such. In other words, since certain competing views of philosophy are already discounted, almost nobody receives the financial and educational resources to develop them, which entails that these views will remain underdeveloped, which will in turn justify rejecting them as non-philosophical or “bad philosophy.”

Another problem with underrepresentation that has philosophical implications, according to Manuel Vargas, is that the lack of diversity in philosophy, ethnic and otherwise, makes us prone to epistemic error and distortion, especially in subfields that are “intended to encompass populations that are rarely part of the philosophical profession”—e.g., moral, social, and political philosophy. And while Vargas points to specific ways the “epistemic reliability” of philosophy is compromised by the lack of diversity in general, and the absence of Latinos/as in particular, perhaps the biggest compromise is that, given the lack of diversity, it is almost impossible to tell exactly how philosophy might be improved by epistemic diversity. He says, “until our discipline has had substantial engagement with the beliefs, intuitions, convictions, concerns, and standpoints of those in non-male, non-white social positions, it should, on the present account, be extraordinarily difficult for us to make out the precise ways in which we are subject to distortion.”

So, according to everyone so far, a major problem with the lack of diversity in philosophy is that it breeds the lack of diversity, and makes it difficult to appreciate and defend the value of diversity in a homogenous field. Because there are so few Latinos/as in philosophy, and because Latino/a philosophers are discouraged from philosophizing as *Latinos/as*—from exploring one's socio-cultural roots through philosophy—neither philosophy nor Latinos/as have felt an urgent need for each other. And the collective recommendation seemed to be, as Rocío Zambrana put it, that more diversity represents a “chance” for both philosophy and Latinos/as—a chance for philosophy to expand its horizons and improve its reliability, and for Latinos/as to find in philosophy a resource to address their concerns.

It is impossible to say whether this chance will be fulfilled, or to what extent, but the symposium offered all of us in attendance sufficient reason to be optimistic. José Jorge Mendoza and Grant J. Silva are perhaps each a case in point. Both are sons of undocumented immigrants and have had to negotiate life on the borderlands, and they have both dedicated their careers so far to examining the ethics of immigration and civic belonging. They are not the only philosophers to address these issues, of course, but they may be the only ones in the literature who understand first-hand the moral conflicts that are particular to the U.S.-Mexico border, background understanding which promises to radically complicate the standard literature. Importantly, Mendoza and Silva are not changing the subject—i.e., switching from universal, philosophical questions to particular, sociological questions—or ignoring the standard philosophical literature. Instead, they are informing it with different lived experiences and demonstrating not only that Latinos/as could use philosophy to address issues close to home, but also that philosophy could use Latinos/as to better understand issues that for the majority of philosophers in the United States are far from home.

What incorporating the Latino/a experience offers is not a chance to realize a distinct *kind* of philosophy—an alternative to Western philosophy—but a chance to enlarge philosophy by representing differences within it. To recognize Latino/a philosophy, or ethnic philosophies more generally, is simply to make visible an aspect of philosophy that has been covered up by the overly simple philosophy/not-philosophy binary. It is an almost aesthetic—not just epistemic or socio-political—call to recognize the variety already within philosophy.⁷ And it is the basis, as Gracia says, of a truly comparative philosophy, for although “comparative philosophy was born from the desire to see similarities between the great philosophies developed in different parts of the world, . . . as important as the similarities are the differences.”

But Latino/a philosophy doesn't represent only a chance; it also represents the possibility and actuality of exclusion. More specifically, assuming that it is right to say that Latino/a philosophy represents a difference *within* philosophy, it represents the possibility of *internal exclusions*, which as Mariana Ortega and Rocío Zambrana demonstrated in their papers, are harder to track and easier to ignore. The challenge is to conceptualize and defend Latino/a identity or group politics without generating new exclusions or ultimatums in the process. On the one hand, it seems that if we want to avoid all exclusions that arise from recognizing

group identities, or if we want to stop reproducing oppressive projects and traditions in new systems of categorization, we have to do away with group identities altogether.⁸ On the other hand, however, both Ortega and Zambrana acknowledge that defending group rights requires recognizing group identities. So, while destabilizing identity categories may be a step in the right direction, leading us away from those internal exclusions which are generated by recognizing group identities, we should not do away with them altogether. And we don't need to; what we need are better conceptions of group identity that recognize both internal differences and the role of identity categories in social, political, and economic reality.

The arrival of Latino/a philosophy, then, represents a chance, a cause, and a warning. It is a chance to contextualize philosophy, in part to incorporate the concerns of Latinos/as into the core identity of the discipline and to be more welcoming to future Latinos/as (the cause). But it comes with a caveat: as several of the speakers cautioned, both in conversation and in their presentations, it is important not to generate new stereotypes and forms of exclusion in the struggle for recognition. It is important to realize that although the participants of the symposium undeniably share a distinct ethnic identity, which on this occasion left a particular stamp on the philosophy I have tried to summarize briefly, it is only a family resemblance and not immune to the possibility of internal exclusions. We should not be left thinking, for instance, that one is contributing to Latino/a philosophy only if one is responding to the problem of underrepresentation, Latino/a identity, the decontextualization and colonization of philosophy, immigration, or the identity of Latino/a philosophy. Those may be the shared interests, approaches, and circumstances that loosely define Latino/a philosophy today, and which distinguish it from the philosophies of different ethnic groups at different times. But they do not constitute *the* definition of Latino/a philosophy. Nor do we want to create a new ultimatum for up-and-coming Latino/a philosophers—namely, represent your ethnic identity or get out.

This warning is related to another, equally important hazard that Gregory Pappas made clear to us. Although Pappas agreed with everyone that philosophy is demographically challenged and needs to be contextualized, he argued that “not all contextualisms are created equal” and that we ought to avoid “contextualism gone wild.” That is, although contextualizing philosophy is an important aim, we should not lose sight of the universal aspiration of philosophy for the sake of a *purely* social or political goal. What philosophy needs from Latinos/as are significant *philosophical* contributions, not a political revolution disguised as philosophy. He argues, moreover, that politicizing philosophy too much will not only be counterproductive—in the end, those in the mainstream would dismiss such efforts as “insular, provincial, separatist, narrow, and political”—but that doing so is also unnecessary. If the contextualist is right in claiming that we can't but philosophize from and within our historical context, and that one's circumstances inevitably leave their stamp on philosophy, then any philosophy by those who are politically and professionally marginalized will help. Philosophy doesn't have to be polemical or politically charged to problematize the canon and change it from within, and more importantly, it is often more successful when it tries not to be.

About this Pappas is right: it is important not to forget that the effort to realize an autochthonous Latino/a philosophy can undermine itself by becoming too ideological and thus un-philosophical. But, if the symposium proved anything, it showed that having a cultural or political agenda in philosophy is not incompatible with doing philosophy well. What the possibility of Latino/a philosophy can teach us is that the self-referential nature of philosophy might include ethnic identity as one more relevant difference within philosophy—alongside gender, for example—and that the problem of marginalization in philosophy is a philosophical problem in need of a solution, not just a sociological or administrative problem. And while it's true that a philosophy whose *only* aim is to achieve some political agenda is not philosophy, what all the speakers demonstrated throughout the symposium is that having an agenda doesn't necessarily compromise the aspiration to universality or dull the critical edge, which, more than anything, distinguishes philosophy from other disciplines. The symposium was ultimately an opportunity to hear from great philosophers who happen to be Latino/a, and the excellence of whose work was in no way compromised by the awareness that our coming together was a major moment in the process of defining Latino/a philosophy.

NOTES

1. All quotes are from drafts of the papers presented at the symposium unless otherwise specified.
2. One question to ask is whether ethnic differences matter to philosophical truth. To answer this question, though, we should be able to say what an ethnicity is—what distinguishes it, for instance, from race—and what philosophy is. Further, the phrase “Latino/a philosophy” suggests that we can define “Latino/a”—Is it an ethnic or racial identity? One or a cluster of identities? A meaningful identity in Latin America or just in the United States?—and, as we have seen in the previous two paragraphs, that we can or should distinguish it from “Latin American,” “Hispanic,” or, say, “Mexican-American” or “Chicano.”
3. Vargas adds that the situation is much worse for Latinos/as born in the United States and that “anecdotal data suggests that a non-trivial percentage of Latinos in the APA data are foreign-born nationals who do not identify as Latino.” The data from the APA are from February 2013.
4. Again, the numbers are misleading, since they don't highlight that there are more than twenty-eight cities—defined as cities of more than 100,000 people—in the United States with majority Latino populations, or that 40 percent of California is Latino/a. In other words, the data don't quite capture the degree of underrepresentation in certain regions.
5. Alcoff offered this phrase first in her presidential address to the Eastern Division of the APA in December 2012. The address can be heard at <http://alcoff.com/2012-american-philosophical-association-presidential-address>.
6. In support of Schutte's claim that philosophy does not work in isolation from the rest of our social practices, Mendieta would add that “[s]ociety in general has become cynical and skeptical of identity-claims, especially when these are supposed to entitle the claimant to some sort of social benefit.” See Eduardo Mendieta, “The ‘Second Reconquista’, or Why Should a ‘Hispanic’ Become a Philosopher?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 11 (2001): 14.
7. Schutte would agree that there is an aesthetic dimension to diversity. See “Negotiating Latina Identities,” in *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century*, eds. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004): 341.
8. To illustrate how recognizing group differences leads to internal exclusions, Ortega cites a famous Supreme Court case, *DeGraffenreid vs. General Motors*, in which a group of black women sued General Motors for discriminatory practices in hiring black women. “Famously,” she said, “the court ruled that the company hired white women, thus was not guilty of sex

discrimination and that the company hired black men and so was not guilty of race discrimination.” Because the court was focused on sex discrimination (gender), on the one hand, and race discrimination (racial identity) on the other, it was blind to the *unique* discrimination against black women (a third category besides race and gender). Likewise, Zambrana told us how the cultural nationalism that defined the process of Puerto Rican self-identification in the middle of the twentieth century aimed to homogenize what it meant to be culturally Puerto Rican and was thus exclusionary. For example, because cultural nationalists romanticized their Spanish heritage, they obscured the history of resistance against Spanish hegemony and marginalized those who continued to identify with the resistance.

Interview with José Medina

Natalie Cisneros

GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

José Medina is professor of philosophy and director of graduate studies at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *The Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy: Necessity, Intelligibility, and Normativity* (SUNY, 2002), *Language, Key Concepts in Philosophy Series* (Continuum, 2005), and *Speaking From Elsewhere: A New Contextualist Perspective on Meaning, Identity, and Discursive Agency* (SUNY, 2006). His most recent book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford, 2012), winner of the 2013 North American Society for Social Philosophy Book Award, discusses the epistemic aspects of race and gender oppression and explores avenues of resisting this injustice. This project, like much of his other work, underscores his influential voice in contemporary conversations surrounding race and gender theory, philosophy of language, and social epistemology. Along with these contributions, he is a leading thinker in the incorporation of Latina/o and Latin American philosophical perspectives into contemporary philosophical debates, especially in the areas of epistemology and philosophy of language.

I came to know José as a graduate student at Vanderbilt, where he directed my dissertation. His mentorship inspired and made possible my graduate work on questions of race, gender, oppression, and resistance, and he and his work continue to serve as major influences on my own projects. In this interview, José discusses how his intellectual and political interests emerged, and how they have evolved throughout his career. He also speaks to the current state of the field, including the contributions of Latina/o and Latin American thought, the relevance (or irrelevance) of disciplinary and subdisciplinary divisions, and the work that remains to be done in order to resist epistemic injustice in philosophical communities.

Natalie Cisneros: Can you tell us a little bit about your early experiences growing up and how they may have influenced your work? How did you come to study philosophy?

José Medina: I grew up in Spain in the 1970s and 1980s, during the last years of the Franco dictatorship and the early years of the democratic transformation. It was a time of political turmoil, a time where you could still feel the political

repression and the social silences in all areas of life, public and private; but it was also a time of vibrant resistance, full of political possibilities, with the formation of strong communities that were articulating political demands and denouncing their oppression publically for the first time in Spain, and philosophers had an important role to play there. I am thinking in particular about the early Spanish feminists and queer activists. The demonstrations, the performances, the town-hall meetings, the critical discussions of that time taught me that sexuality could be a site of resistance and political contestation, and more generally that issues of identity were at the same time deeply personal and deeply political. One of the attractions for me to move to the United States in the early 1990s was to come to a place with a longer history of political struggles such as the fight for women's rights and for GLBT rights, although interestingly I found that American society was not changing and advancing on these issues as quickly and aggressively as Spain. But I moved to the US mainly for academic reasons. I came to Chicago to attend graduate school at Northwestern University and to work on issues of meaning and normativity, which for me were from the beginning also issues of identity and of political struggle. I had the fortune of receiving my graduate training in a place where I could do serious, specialized work in Wittgenstein and in critical theory at the same time.

NC: It's fascinating that your decision to go to graduate school at Northwestern was motivated by your personal and philosophical interests in identity and political struggles, especially since this move, as you suggest, complicated and broadened your experience and understanding of these issues. How does Spain and your identity as an immigrant, and in general, influence your work?

JM: Like my sexual identity, my ethnic and national identity has been something that left me out of the mainstream in the United States; and it is also something that has shaped my work and how I approach philosophy. Although not fitting in anywhere completely, being multi-national and multi-lingual allowed me to articulate and approach things from different perspectives, to *speak from elsewhere*, as I call it. I have been very fortunate to find welcoming immigrant communities in which I feel at home, both in philosophy and outside philosophy, and both in the United States and outside the United States. I am thinking about transnational and global feminist and queer communities, but also about Latina/o communities—and I think it is important not to think of Latina/os as forming a single group, but rather, as a collection of communities, as a *family* (as Jorge Gracia would put it) or as a network of communities brought together by linguistic and cultural differences and historical experiences.

NC: Given your positionality within this network of Latina/o and queer communities, and the historical and current climate for women, people of color, and sexual minorities in professional philosophy, can you talk about your experiences in the discipline? What has changed since you entered into the profession, how do you think it needs to continue to evolve, and is that different from where you see it headed?

JM: Women, people of color, and sexual minorities are definitely better represented and more visible now than they were twenty years ago. But their representation and visibility

are often constrained in problematic ways: for example, they are often relegated to certain areas (such as applied philosophy or feminism or race theory). And of course people of color are still heavily underrepresented in philosophy. The work of philosophers of color is receiving now more recognition and that is wonderful; but this recognition is also constrained, only given in special or applied areas or reserved for a very select few whose work is read and engaged by the mainstream. Only the work of very few philosophers of color (such as Linda Alcoff, Charles Mills, or Anthony Appiah) is discussed in areas such as epistemology and philosophy of language. Something that needs to happen more systematically, and not just sporadically, is for philosophers of color and their contributions to be able to reach and have an impact in core areas of philosophy. It is important that now more and more people are discussing issues of gender and race in these areas, so that these issues are no longer taken up *only* by racial and sexual minorities and they are no longer perceived as issues of special interest to some, but as central issues of interest to all. Think, for example, of recent discussions of race in epistemology by people like Miranda Fricker, or recent discussions of hate speech and racial slurs in philosophy of language by people like Ernest Lepore, Rebecca Kukla, and Mark Lance. At the same time, although it is a great step forward that these issues are addressed by all kinds of philosophers, there is also the danger of getting validation only when mainstream voices speak for us or speak to us. It is important to give credit and recognition to the long history of achievements by feminist philosophers and race theorists because sometimes their insights and provocative suggestions are appropriated by others without more acknowledgement or engagement than a passing remark or a footnote. To counter the marginalization of nonmainstream philosophical voices, it is important to have initiatives that bring minority groups together, celebrate their achievements, and nurture the next generation of scholars. In this sense, initiatives such as Mariana Ortega's Latina Feminism Roundtable at John Carroll University and the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers created and led by Kathryn Gines at Penn State are invaluable. It is also important to have initiatives that put these minority philosophical communities in conversation with other groups (including mainstream ones). One example of this is *The Latina Dialogues*, a Latina feminism conference that Andrea Pitts and I are hosting at Vanderbilt University, where prominent Latina feminists will discuss their ongoing research with scholars in other areas, drawing connections, contrasts, and mutual challenges.

NC: Your commitment to resisting the marginalization of diverse voices is evidenced by your important service to the profession, including *The Latina Dialogues* conference as well as your service on the executive committee of the APA's Eastern Division and the APA's ad hoc committee on sexual harassment, as well as your research, which often takes up these concrete political problems of representation and subjugated knowledges and explores avenues of resisting the marginalization of the voices of women, people of color, and sexual minorities. This is a concern of your most recent book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford, 2012). Can you talk a bit about this project? How did it form? What are its central questions and motivations?

JM: The focus of the book is the epistemic side of oppression (social silences, bodies of ignorance and patterns of distortion, inability to listen and understand certain people and certain things, epistemic vices of all sorts, etc.); but more specifically, the book tries to uncover the different forms of resistance available to us to fight against the kinds of epistemic exclusion and marginalization associated with racism, sexism, and homophobia. I discuss how to resist epistemic injustices in ordinary interactions in our daily lives; but I also address how ordinary forms of contestation relate to social movements of resistance and political struggles that call for structural and institutional transformations. The book wrestles with the ways in which political, ethical, and epistemological questions are intertwined and have bearing upon one another. More specifically, it tries to contribute to what might be called *political epistemology*, which feminist epistemologists (such as standpoint theorists) and race theorists (such as Charles Mills) have been engaged in for a long time. I bring to these debates the polyphonic contextualism and kaleidoscopic perspectivalism that I have articulated in my previous work in philosophy of language (especially in *Speaking from Elsewhere*). Like my previous work, this book in social epistemology is “methodologically promiscuous” and combines various methods and philosophical styles that are not simply merged, but brought into critical dialogue with one another. My discussions engage with the recent literature in virtue epistemology and epistemic injustice, but they draw from bodies of literature that have been underrepresented in epistemology: pragmatism, critical race theory, queer theory, Latina feminism (from Sor Juana to Linda Alcoff), and transnational and women color feminisms (from Patricia Hill Collins to Uma Narayan). These bodies of literature are rarely brought together and put in conversation; they often only intersect or touch each other at the edges (when they do not simply ignore one another and their connections). It is difficult to bring all these different discussions together because there are terminological, methodological, and substantive differences. I don’t know if I have done justice (epistemic justice!) to all the voices and perspectives I have drawn from, but the risk was worth taking in order to bring all of them to bear on issues of silencing and epistemic marginalization; there was the need for a book-length treatment of the epistemic side of oppression that connected all these different vibrant discussions.

NC: Risky, but also incredibly philosophically and politically fruitful! Your commitment to exploring the links between ideas and thinkers not often brought together—what you term “methodological promiscuity”—is also reflected in these different fields in which you work, including philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and critical race and gender theory. Can you tell us about what you find difficult and productive about working across these areas of philosophy?

JM: Problems in philosophy often span across different areas and levels of discussion, and their narrow and rigid compartmentalization results in impoverished analyses blind to all kinds of important connections and implications. The issues of silence and marginalization of voices I am interested in, for example, are ethical and political problems, but they are also problems in epistemology and philosophy of language. Bringing together two or more areas of philosophy is always a difficult challenge, but the cross-fertilization of fields can be incredibly productive and lead to new avenues

of research (think, for example, of Ernest Sosa’s work in virtue epistemology). Maintaining an up-to-date mastery of multiple fields is not easy, but even more difficult is being able to engage multiple audiences. When you work on epistemological issues concerning race and gender, you run the risk of losing the attention of those who are interested *only* in epistemology (whatever it means to be interested *only* in epistemology, in *pure* epistemology). But it is a risk worth taking. We need to keep trying to make connections across fields because it is our intellectual responsibility to explore these connections. If it is a scandal, as many have argued, that for a long time white philosophers writing on justice in the United States ignored the issue of racism, isn’t it also a scandal that until recently philosophers of language remained silent about hate speech or that epistemologists didn’t address the issue of epistemic exclusion?

NC: You also work on major figures associated with the “analytic,” “continental” and “pragmatist” traditions (including in your most recent book, for example, where you productively draw on Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Addams, among others). In some ways, drawing together these philosophical traditions is just as difficult and potentially politically fraught as your work bringing together epistemological concerns and critical race and gender theories. But it is also equally vital. How do you understand the distinctions often made between these traditions? Why are you interested in drawing from each of them?

JM: I am a problem-oriented philosopher and draw from whatever resources might be useful to deal with a question. Very often philosophers in different traditions are dealing with similar and related questions, so why not explore those connections? Why not use their analyses and arguments in tandem (enriching each other, correcting each other, or simply challenging each other)? But given my contextualist sensibilities, of course I do not think that ideas and arguments should be simply taken out of context, disregarding the dynamics that shaped their trajectory. Sensitivity to context is key for a proper understanding and for responsible use of philosophical resources, but contexts can—and often should—be connected and put in critical dialogue with each other. It is also part of our intellectual responsibility as philosophers to call into question traditional and disciplinary boundaries, to challenge received interpretations and disciplinary habits, and to interrogate the lack of dialogue between traditions or between philosophical perspectives.

NC: This critical interrogation of traditional boundaries in your work is also evident in your work on philosophical traditions often excluded from the canon of academic philosophy in the United States and the West more broadly. Many of your works, including your most recent book, engages Latina/o and Latin American thought in particular, including contemporary Latina feminists such as Linda Alcoff and María Lugones, and figures from the history of Latin American philosophy, including José Martí and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. How did you become interested in working on Latina/o and Latin American thought? What do you think Latina/o and Latin American philosophy contribute to the contemporary landscape of philosophy in the United States?

JM: I received very limited exposure to Latin American philosophy in Spain, but I was very interested from the

beginning in Latina feminist and queer thinkers, including the very early ones such as Sor Juana. I continued reading classic and contemporary Latin American philosophers when I was in graduate school in Chicago, but it was mainly self-taught because I didn't have anybody to guide me or to explore those interests with me in philosophy. Interdisciplinary reading groups in Latin American philosophy helped me to identify authors and ideas that were useful for the issues I was working on and enabled me to approach the debates I was engaged with in different terms. There is still an unexplored wealth of ideas in Latin American philosophy that can illuminate and enrich many philosophical debates in the United States. People like Jorge Gracia and Ofelia Schutte have been pioneers in calling attention to the history of Latin American philosophy and using its resources. There is a new generation of Latina/o scholars (such as Andrea Pitts) doing superb historical work and bringing classic figures in this tradition to bear on contemporary debates. There is also the ground-breaking work of philosophers such as Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta who have combined Latin American philosophy and critical theory; and there is much more to be done in following their footsteps. But if there is a single school of thought that I want to highlight for its originality and its contributions to the contemporary philosophical landscape, it is Latina feminism because, with their heterogeneous and often conflicting voices, Latina feminists have raised challenging questions and offered provocative suggestions about identity, relationality, intersectionality, solidarity, social justice, and community formation—questions and suggestions that have created an agenda for ongoing and future debates. And I think the next generation of Latina feminists will continue and deepen this trajectory of highly original and provocative research. The cutting-edge work of young Latina feminists on intersectionality is already breaking new ground and opening new avenues of interdisciplinary research, bringing together race, nationality, class, sexuality, and other aspects of identity in very productive and provocative ways. A prime example of this is your forthcoming book on immigration, *The "Illegal Alien": An Intersectional and Genealogical Approach* (Columbia University Press).

NC: Given the contributions of Latina/o philosophy, and Latina feminism in particular, to thinking through contemporary philosophical and political problems, can you say more about the possibilities and opportunities for dialogue between Latin American philosophical thought and European or American philosophical thought? What do you find fruitful about reading thinkers from these traditions together?

JM: The problem is that the dialogue has always been going in one direction: Latin American philosophers have always been responding to European and Anglo-American philosophers, reacting to their ideas, integrating them, applying them, offering alternatives, etc. But the dialogue has rarely taken place in the other direction: for the most part, European and Anglo-American philosophers have simply ignored philosophical discussions in Latin America. Things have been changing a bit recently with a few Latin American philosophers acquiring prominence and being taken seriously. But there is still a long way to go until there is a truly reciprocal dialogue, and the work to be done cannot be done exclusively by Latina/o philosophers in the

United States working across traditions. Others have to do their part as well. With recent demographic and geopolitical changes, there seem to be new curricular demands for Latin American philosophy, and this can help change things by giving more visibility and recognition to this tradition and making it available to new generations. I think one of the valuable consequences of reading Anglo-American and Latin-American philosophers together (John Dewey and José Martí, for example) is that it helps you situate their perspectives and it gives you a good sense of the diversity of American philosophical voices and the truly pluralistic nature of philosophy in the Americas. It also brings issues of coloniality, post-coloniality, and imperialism to the fore in a way that contrasts sharply with the invisibility of these issues when Anglo-American and European philosophers talk among themselves. This is another important critical payoff.

NC: What is the direction of your work now? What are the questions you continue to be interested in working on?

JM: I find myself these days occupied with responding to the critics of my last book. I am honored that the book is getting so much attention and that there are already some objections and critical challenges raised about my view of epistemic responsibility and my notions of "meta-insensitivity" and "meta-blindness." Taking time to respond to my critics is an opportunity to clarify and elaborate further the ideas of *The Epistemology of Resistance*, and this helps me with the development of my new projects because they draw from my analysis of epistemic injustice and epistemic resistance. The focus of my current projects is the *imagination*. In particular, I am interested in how we can take responsibility, individually and collectively, for our imagination and its limits. These projects connect the literature on the imagination in philosophy of mind, epistemology, and social theory. The book project I am planning to develop first has the working title "Imagination and the Ethics of Acknowledgement" and it draws from Wittgenstein and the epistemology of ignorance. As I conceive it now, the book will develop a Wittgensteinian view of the imagination that calls attention to the opacity and self-ignorance constitutive of our subjectivity and agency. Through this Wittgensteinian exploration of the personal and interpersonal aspects of our imaginative capacities and their limits, I want to flesh out my notion of *shared* epistemic responsibility. This demands from us that we subject ourselves to critical scrutiny in interactive practices of contestation so that we can recognize our blindspots and how they obscure some aspects of our own experiences and of our interactions with others, making problematic the intelligibility of certain domains of human experience and social life. I want to develop these ideas more specifically with respect to the racial imagination. But I think that this will become a separate book or a collection of essays in which I offer an account of the different communicative and epistemic injustices associated with racialized ways of imagining. I am interested in developing an analysis and critique of different kinds of racial insensitivity and their defense mechanisms, exploring ways in which we can resist them through improved communicative dynamics and transformed practices of interaction. I think about this project under the rubric "Resisting the Racial Imagination."

NC: In light of your continuing work on philosophical and political questions of oppression and resistance, can you

talk a bit about what you see as the role of philosophy in contemporary society? What does philosophical work have to do with our political, ethical, and everyday lives?

JM: That is a really important and a really difficult question. One of the results of the professionalization and narrow specialization of philosophers is that our work often becomes too far removed from ordinary affairs, too detached from the lives and concerns of ordinary people. But we have an obligation to connect our philosophical reflections (no matter how abstract they get) back to real life and real people; not that each of us needs to do this in every essay or in every class, but we collectively have the responsibility to show how our critical reflections bear on people's lives and problems. For me, philosophy should be a critical activity that offers new avenues for thinking and acting to people. It is in this sense that I am drawn to philosophers like Wittgenstein and Jane Addams, whose philosophical reflections begin and end with actual practices and people's lived experiences; that should be the starting point and the end point of our philosophical exercise and in between what we need to produce and work with is *perplexity*, that is, a deep interrogation of how we do things and how we think and feel, an interrogation that interrupts the flow of familiarity and obviousness of our lives, making the familiar unfamiliar and the obvious bizarre. The emphasis placed on the critical potential of perplexity by philosophers like Addams and Wittgenstein (and of course many others since Socrates) points in the direction of processes of self-estrangement and self-questioning in which we look at ourselves with fresh eyes, and we become capable of calling into question things we have taken for granted and have become invisible to us, being then able to recognize limitations and possibilities for transformation and improvement. Of course, making people perplexed is not enough. Philosophers (in collaboration with other scholars and also with artists and activists) need to find ways of making that perplexity productive in leading people to think and act *better*, not just in more sophisticated ways, but also and more importantly in ethically, politically, and epistemically responsible ways. Ways of doing this can be found in the critical methodologies of feminist theory, queer theory, and critical race theory. These are some of the most innovative theories philosophy has offered in recent years and they have a tremendous transformative potential for our political, ethical, and everyday lives.

NC: As we've discussed, in your written work you actively and critically interrogate philosophical, political, and epistemological assumptions. In doing so, you engage in this important work of making your readers more perplexed while asking them to think and act in more responsible ways. How do your work in teaching and mentoring play into this practice of philosophy for you?

JM: I cannot think of philosophy without teaching as an essential part, whether in the classroom, reading groups, workshops, conferences, or in more informal ways. Philosophy is a self-critical exercise, but for me it is not something that can be done by individuals in isolation because it requires a practice of mutual interrogation and challenge; it involves learning from others and their critical exercises as well as offering our own reflections for the learning of others. One thing that I think philosophy as a critical activity should help us do is to bring teaching and

activism closer together, so that our philosophical activities become oriented toward the critique and transformation of both theories and practices at the same time. This aspiration is something that have in common with all the authors I draw from: pragmatists, feminists, queer theorists, and critical race theorists. The ways in which these different theorists practice philosophy provide useful paradigms or models for how to do philosophy in a critical and transformative way, working toward making a difference in people's lives.

BOOK REVIEW

A Cadre of Color in the Sea of Philosophical Homogeneity: On the Marginalization of African Americans and Latino/as in Academic Philosophy

A Review of Reframing the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge

George Yancy, ed. (Albany: SUNY, 2012). 393 pages.

Reviewed by Grant J. Silva

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

For readers interested in acquiring insight into the plight of people of color in academic philosophy, particularly the predicament of African Americans and Latino/as in the field, *Reframing the Practice of Philosophy* is incredibly illuminating while simultaneously upsetting. Each essay tackles tough questions of inclusion and exclusion in ways that reveal an assortment of biases and structural flaws latent to professional philosophy. "The attempt to explore and explicate the lack of African Americans and Latinos/as in the field of philosophy," Yancy writes, "actually resulted in a much broader and comprehensive text that uncovered complex and multifaceted issues such as alienation, institutional prejudices, insidious racism, canonical exclusion, linguistic exclusion, nonrecognition, disrespect, white hegemony and power, discursive silencing, philosophical territorial arrogance, and indignation" (2). The volume is a powerful, self-conscious, and exigent analysis of one of the whitest fields in academia. More honest conversations like this must take place in order for our field to reinvent itself along more equitable lines, assuming that this is indeed a collective goal.

Almost every essay addresses one or more of the above issues through insightful argumentation infused with autobiographic prose—a hallmark of several of Yancy's volumes. The contributors comprise a prominent list of active Latino/a and Black voices in professional philosophy, many of whom specialized in more "mainstream" areas of philosophy prior to delving into such topics as philosophy of race, feminist theory, Latin American philosophy, Caribbean philosophy, Africana philosophy, and more. Through their efforts, the volume asks meta-philosophical questions about the nature and practice of philosophical inquiry in societies shaped by legacies of racism and other forms of widespread, systematic oppression. How has the history of classical, institutional, and non-conscious forms of racism, particularly

that which targets Blacks and Hispanics, or, for the same reason, the blind commitment to a tradition that continually marginalizes minorities, women, and the philosophical topics pertinent to both, affected the conditions that make possible philosophical inquiry? How have the range of questions philosophers are willing to ask, the type of books they read, the *kinds* of people they listen to been shaped by the history of these forms of oppression and ignorance? This range of questioning alone makes the volume worth picking up.

Philosophers of color alive today will find the text a useful resource for dealing with some of the pressures and frustrations of academic life. In fact, the volume may serve as a springboard for voicing one's opinion and (most likely) similar experiences. As Yancy explains, "I began to see just how important the text had become beyond the scope of low numbers, particularly in terms of the text's forward-looking dimensions. The text constitutes an important site—a textual balm of sorts—for blacks and Latino/as currently pursuing degrees in philosophy and who, as a result, may feel isolated, 'out of place,' and marginalized. Moreover, the text speaks to future philosophers of color who might need confirmation of their sanity, a collective voice that says, 'We also know your pain, your blues'" (2).

The dedication to "philosophers of color not yet born" adds a sense of urgency to the topics discussed throughout the volume, especially in light of changing demographics in the United States, which will undoubtedly bring more nonwhites into philosophy and expand the range of philosophical inquiry. If the critical thinking skills acquired in a philosophical education are a good thing, then more should be done to ensure that vast segments of the population, if not the majority, do not feel alienated from this field of study (this might actually serve to philosophy's benefit in terms of institutional support and funding).

In terms of Latin American philosophy, Jorge J. E. Gracia describes the canonical marginalization of this sub-discipline as follows: "Latin American philosophy is a good example of a philosophy systematically excluded from both the Western and world philosophical canons as these are conceived in the United States. This claim . . . may be easily documented by looking at histories of philosophy, reference works, anthologies, philosophical societies, evaluating tools of philosophy as a field of learning, education programs such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminars, Ph.D. dissertations in philosophy and common areas of specialization in the discipline, and the college curriculum (in the United States, philosophy is generally taught only at the college level)" (89). In his essay, Gracia quickly dismantles a veritable list of objections that would justify the exclusion of Latin American philosophy from the Western canon. However, the real reason, according to Gracia, stems from a blind commitment to tradition.

Ofelia Schutte summarizes the reasons for the marginalization of Latinos/as in professional philosophy with three problems: (1) the Anglo/Eurocentric orientation of philosophy, (2) the desire by "prestigious" philosophers to safeguard prestige (sometimes talked about in terms of "rigor"), and (3) the "we" of philosophy, or the fact that the mainstream academic philosophical community is a rather monochromatic bunch where people of color often feel second-class or

unwelcomed (unless, of course, people of color are willing to "play the game" as it is). All of these arguments, Schutte explains, depend upon "extra-philosophical" factors that reveal implicit biases against Blacks and Latino/as in ways that perpetuate the whiteness of philosophy.

Charles Mills explains that the entire discipline of philosophy is "inimical to the recognition of race." He continues, "Philosophy is supposed to be abstracting away from the contingent, the corporeal, the temporal, the material, to get at necessary, spiritual, eternal, ideal truths" (60). Much of the difficulties engendered by the incorporation of marginalized voices and topics has to do with the subject matter of philosophical thought and its supposed universality. Philosophical truths are supposed to escape the realm of the particular and rise to a level of abstraction beyond cultural, ethnic, and racial particularities (59–60). With one intriguing sentence Bill E. Lawson captures the essence of this sentiment when he writes, "when race comes in the room, logic goes out the window" (197). The idea that race and logic are incompatible can mean that when discussions of race take place, conversation quickly deteriorates to irrational, emotion-driven fights. Put differently (and in terms that garner instantaneous philosophical capital in some circles), there cannot be any *logos* when speaking about *ethnos*.

Thus, the volume highlights the subtle and not-so-subtle prejudices held by professional philosophers. Besides historical contingency, there are no good reasons as to why the concerns of people of color are ignored. Although their work aspires towards levels of abstraction that make universal truth claims possible, philosophers are nonetheless born into particular societies, cultures, and histories, all of which yield an assortment of racist or sexist leanings, cultural insensitivities, bias and jingoism, etc. Yancy thus endeavors to show how it is the case that "blacks and Latinos/as often experience nonacademic spaces and academic spaces as a distinction without a difference" (3).

Along these lines, the critical dimensions of the text are found in aggregate. Individually, the question of marginalization or specific examples of racist/sexist statements and attitudes may appear to be scandalous moral failures, the kind of material that gets talked about on national blogs and at APA meetings. Viewed piecemeal, these incidents and complaints appear sporadic and incidental. However, the forms of marginalization experienced by Latino/as and African Americans are manifold, often intersecting and widespread—this volume serves as proof. By allowing prominent thinkers to voice their experiences and concerns Yancy's text allows for the emergence of patterns of systematic exclusion that venture beyond the incidental: "As the text continued to take shape, what also began to emerge was a parallel between many of the issues that black and Latino/a bodies experience within the everyday world of social perception as linked to pervasive de facto racism, and the refined and intellectually highfalutin world of professional philosophy" (2). Reiterating the goal of the text, Yancy writes, "[The] goal was to create a critical space where both groups [African Americans and Latino/as] would come together to discuss critically a collectively important defining theme, a common problem—our marginalization within the profession of philosophy, which is one of those 'inappropriate' philosophical subjects" (1).

Yancy revels in a bit of ambiguity at the end of this quote. Not only is the subject matter of philosophy at stake, i.e., the range of questions philosophers think about and the ways in which philosophical issues pertinent to Latino/as and African Americans are often relegated to the philosophical wayside, but also at stake is the question of philosophical agency, i.e., whether or not Blacks and Hispanics constitute true philosophical “subjects.” Central to the volume is the assumption that philosophical inquiry is pertinent to what it means to be human, a natural outgrowth of having critical reflective skills. To deny the ability to practice philosophy, or to impose terms that make a fetish of rigor, tradition, and prestige, is to deny human subjectivity and autonomy. It is to say to Blacks and Latino/as that philosophy cannot take place on their terms.

Donna-Dale Marcano’s wonderful contribution, “Re-Reading Plato’s *Symposium* Through the Lens of a Black Woman,” lends support at this point. Marcano’s reading of Plato’s *Symposium* compares the character Alcibiades as a stand in for black women in philosophy. Both attempt to negotiate their relationship with philosophy (or Socrates) in ways that cannot divest themselves of the particularities of their existence. She writes, “Does philosophy fail some of us then? Yes! It fails those of us who understand that we are particularly situated. We are particularly situated in our desires, in our communities, in our race, in our genders, in our loves. For this, black women’s intellectual work that engages their racialized and gendered perspectives and which aims to take account of the social and political context in which these perspectives take shape are often viewed as so particular as to be of no philosophical value” (232).

Jacqueline Scott’s essay, “Toward a Place Where I Can Bring All of Me,” speaks towards this notion when comparing the “traditional” view of the self as afforded by the history of philosophy, and the more complex, “impure” understanding of the self provided by life. She writes, “We need to conceive of a philosophy that is in the service of life—in the service of the complex, multifarious, incoherent lives most people really live, and we need to convey this in both our research and teaching” (220).

Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains the way in which his studies of Frantz Fanon allowed him to approach a conception of “decolonization as first philosophy,” which breaks with the idea that some people are subjects of knowledge while others are mere objects in need of dominance. He writes, “the fundamental axes of reflection about human reality are grounded in the human-to-human relation, and that the primary questions out of which philosophy itself emerges are motivated not so much by wonder in the face of nature, but by desire for inter-human contact and scandal in the face of the violation of that possibility. This means that the *telos* of thinking, if there is any, is the struggle against dehumanization, understood as the affirmation of sociality and the negation of its negation. I refer to the negation of sociality as coloniality and to its negation and overcoming as decoloniality” (261).

Lawson writes something similar: “Our colleagues are not idiots. They are trained to solve problems. Like most people they will work to solve a problem if they think that it is important. If they think that racism in the profession is

a problem, they will begin to work with their own and their colleague’s racism and sexism. No person of color can force them to work to change the game or their attitudes. If they think that blacks are indeed inferior intellectually, then they will feel no compulsion to change the game” (197). Drawing from John Hope Franklin’s “The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar,” Lawson continues by stating that if there are white philosophers passionate about the elimination of disrespectful practices in academic philosophy, they must realize that the respect owed to black scholars is connected to the type of respect black people receive outside of academia. In a powerful line, Lawson writes, “It has been a truism that a black person being respected in one arena of social interaction gives us no hint of how he or she will be respect [sic] in others. However, respect must begin at home” (197).

By rethinking the agents responsible for philosophical thought, the volume attempts to “reframe” the practice of philosophy. This process “steps back and takes another look, realizing that the current frame excludes all that does not fit with the demarcated limits of that frame.” “In fact,” as Yancy continues, “that which is outside the frame is constituted as . . . unintelligible and ersatz. This form of framing actually deforms, delimits, and truncates the very power of philosophical imaginings. To reframe the current practices of philosophy, then, functions to reveal the limits of its current practices, its current assumptions, its current conceptual allegiances, and its current self-images. The aim is to expand the hermeneutic horizon of what is possible, philosophically” (5).

Yet the process of reframing philosophy remains difficult when philosophers inherit forms of prejudice and ignorance ingrained throughout their societies. Yancy writes, “Philosophical academic spaces are . . . continuous with everyday, politically invested, racially grounded, prejudicial, social spaces. Such normative (white) academic spaces are shot through with much of the same racist toxicity that configures black and brown bodies as outside the normative (white) *Demos*” (2). Returning to Lawson’s essay, his point was to note that African Americans will not acquire philosophical clout until Black people, as a whole, are respected as full, rational agents. This starts at home *and* in our own departments. Returning to Maldonado-Torres’s essay, his understanding of philosophy necessitates reciprocal social exchanges that assume co-subjectivity; to deny this is to colonize the mind of others and even the self (since one is denying the possibility for dialogue and instead supplies only monologue). Returning to Scott’s essay, philosophy should be a place where a person does not have to sacrifice one’s cultural, ethnic, or racial particularity to reach standards set by racist.

Obviously, white allies will find much value in the text. More importantly, white philosophers who fail to see the importance of diversification would also benefit from reading the text. At the very least, the volume succeeds in placing the onus upon those who fail to see the importance of philosophical diversification to justify their stance. Along these lines, several contributors provide interesting arguments that explain why academic philosophy, as a whole, fails to take seriously the philosophical questions pertinent to people of color or even make difficult one’s personal existence inside the field. One

could only imagine how the text would be improved if it went beyond a black/brown binary to include people of Asian and indigenous descent (among others). Nonetheless, that form of exclusion sets the stage for a new volume expanding this discussion in ways beyond the confines of this volume.

ARTICLES

Seriousness, Irony, and Cultural Politics: A Defense of Jorge Portilla

Francisco Gallegos
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Nearly sixty years after the publication of the *Phenomenology of Relajo*, the work of Jorge Portilla (1919–1963) seems poised for a rediscovery. Reading the first English-language translation of the text—published just last year as the appendix to Carlos Alberto Sánchez’s excellent scholarly treatment—one cannot help but wonder how the text remained untranslated for so long.¹ Portilla’s work is full of novel and profound insights into topics that are both timeless and timely, including the nature of values, the meaning of freedom, and the proper use of passive resistance in the struggle for liberation.

The *Phenomenology of Relajo* (1966) centers upon Portilla’s critique of a well-known figure in Mexican culture known as the *relajiento*. As a first approximation, we can think of the *relajiento* as a kind of “class clown,” a person who refuses to take anything seriously and never misses an opportunity to disrupt a group practice. He is an irrepressible jokester, beloved and feared for his ability to derail any meeting, performance, or party with his loud and obnoxious antics.

In Portilla’s view, Mexican culture has always had great affection for the jokester. But Portilla worried that what was once a delightful cultural idiosyncrasy was becoming a dangerous cultural habit that threatened the entire society. More and more Mexican men were becoming *relajientos*, he thought, and their refusal to take *anything* seriously was becoming truly nihilistic. Portilla worried that “the best representatives” of his generation were squandering their talents, and “in the midst of perpetual laughter . . . giving themselves up, really, to a slow process of self-destruction.”²

Sánchez’s treatment of the *Phenomenology* illuminates how creatively Portilla drew upon European philosophical influences to address this distinctively Latin American issue, and he is quite persuasive in his argument that this ostensibly provincial topic has great relevance for a wider audience. But while Sánchez is a capable champion of Portilla’s work, he concludes his book by offering some challenging thoughts to his readers, suggesting that Portilla may have been shortsighted in his unmitigated rejection of the *relajiento*.

Sánchez proposes an alternative reading of the *relajiento*’s disruptive behavior that “reconceives it as an act of defiance before the colonial legacy . . . and against the axiological imperialism which that legacy instituted.”³ The point here, I take it, is that when we consider the immense legacy of colonial oppression facing our world, and consider how

many of our cultural practices either collaborate with this oppression or seem powerless to challenge it effectively, the *relajiento* begins to look like a heroic freedom fighter, engaged in a kind of *civil disobedience of the cultural sphere*. Colonial oppression, Sánchez notes, protected itself by imposing “values of sobriety and order and progress,” and these values have been “kept alive today as a power that itself colonizes.”⁴ In this context, the behavior of the *relajiento* should be seen as “a creative response of the marginal in their marginality, whose resistance to value is, truly, an act of defiance.”⁵

Sánchez hopes that although the *relajiento*’s apathy and disruptions may undermine traditional cultural practices, this destruction might clear the way for new and better possibilities to emerge. Citing Jean-Francois Lyotard’s call in *The Postmodern Condition* “to increase displacement in the games, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected ‘move,’” Sánchez suggests that the *relajiento*’s actions might be “such a displacement and such an unexpected ‘move.’”⁶

In the meantime, Sánchez says, the *relajiento*’s “suspension of seriousness” may at least bring peace of mind. The *relajiento* may have found a way to avoid being filled with anxiety about the enormous problems confronting the post-9/11 world and the dizzying complexity of today’s socio-political landscape. As “an expression of that world and those anxieties,” he says, the *relajiento* “can survive the angst and terror through acts of suspension which might, possibly, as for the ancient skeptics, bring *ataraxia*, or tranquility.”⁷ This *relajiento*’s acts of suspension are thus a way to “postpone” serious commitment “for a future time”—a time when taking cultural practices seriously will not involve buying into an oppressive ideology, and may actually contribute to genuine liberation.⁸

Wrestling with Sánchez’s challenge has inspired me to dig deeper into Portilla’s work. While I find Sánchez’s re-reading of the *relajiento* compelling, looking at Portilla from the perspective of answering this challenge has unearthed aspects of Portilla’s rich text that I had not appreciated previously. As a result, I have come to believe that there are a few good points to be made in response to Sánchez’s criticism. I will try to outline those points here in the hopes of contributing to this important, ongoing dialogue about how best to understand the *relajiento*.

In this essay, then, I will defend Portilla’s criticism of the *relajiento*. I argue that Portilla was right to see the *relajiento*’s behavior as counterproductive in the fight for liberation from ideological oppression. Genuine freedom, in Portilla’s view and mine, requires seriousness and sincerity; it requires wholehearted participation in cultural practices that one finds truly valuable.

In trying to work out Portilla’s reasoning for this conclusion, I will suggest some new ways of understanding Portilla’s analysis of values and freedom. I suggest that Portilla sees values as neither self-standing nor subjectively posited; instead, he thinks that values “emerge” in a *mood-like* way. Moreover, Portilla thinks that the values most crucial for achieving genuine freedom—the values that unify an individual’s experiences into a coherent and meaningful

whole, and thus make life worth living—are the kind of values that emerge only in the context of *group practices*. This is why the *relajiento* is so dangerous; by disrupting these practices and killing the mood that sustains them, the *relajiento* undermines not only his own freedom, but the freedom of others as well.

However, Portilla clearly thinks that those who are *overly* serious also undermine genuine freedom for themselves and others. With this in mind, I suggest that, for Portilla, the kind of “seriousness” that is required for freedom is one that is totally committed without being neurotic or uptight. One of Portilla’s most valuable contributions in this text, in my view, is his suggestion that *black humor* and *Socratic irony* can help us negotiate these competing demands of freedom. In other words, black humor and Socratic irony—which I will distinguish from the “postmodern” irony of the contemporary “hipster”—can enable us to remain detached enough from our values to avoid becoming uptight, dogmatic, and tyrannical, but yet not become too detached to participate wholeheartedly in the cultural practices that allow our values to be realized. Portilla’s ideal kind of seriousness is thus an attractive alternative to both the detachment of the *relajiento* and the hipster, as well as the uptight sobriety that expresses and entrenches a colonial legacy of oppression.

I argue that black humor and Socratic irony might also be extraordinarily potent tools for overcoming alienation from our communities and intervening effectively in cultural politics. Read in this way, Portilla’s text becomes a sort of manual for cultural politics in the contemporary era. Those committed to the struggle for liberation must learn to cope more effectively with the stubborn yet fragile societal moods that drive historical change. Doing so is difficult and frustrating, today more so than ever, and so we may be tempted to lose our patience with the struggle altogether, as the *relajiento* does. I suggest, however, that Portilla’s nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics offers us hope that we can become more effective in transforming the values that guide our communities—and this hope should make us wary of the temptation to resign ourselves to the Stoic tranquility of postponed seriousness.

LET’S GET SERIOUS

At the most basic level, Portilla’s *Phenomenology* is a perceptive analysis of the cultural phenomenon *relajo*. The term is difficult to translate, but we can think of *relajo* as a specific way that any *group practice* (such as a ballet performance or a birthday party) can break down—namely, by being intentionally undermined by “class clowns” and “spoilsports,” individuals who repeatedly disrupt the practice and distract the participants. *Relajo* occurs when this kind of disruptive behavior ruins the event or practice for anyone who was trying to “take it seriously.” In this sense, *relajo* might be summarized as a “suspension of seriousness.”⁹

Portilla offers the following example of *relajo*:

During a screening of the film version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in the scene in which Cassius falls pierced by his own sword, the expectant silence in the movie theater was broken by a long moan that invincibly provoked laughter among the audience.¹⁰

Now, clever as it may be, a single well-timed joke is not sufficient to constitute the “suspension of seriousness” that is characteristic of *relajo*. In order to generate *relajo*, Portilla says, the disruption must be *repeated*.¹¹

In some cultures, perhaps, such repetition would be unlikely. But in Portilla’s view, this kind of behavior had become something of a cultural habit in Mexico, with people coming to anticipate such disruptions and play along with them. Thus, it is entirely possible that, in this case, other people in the audience would have joined in the disruption, making jokes and mocking the film. If this had happened, then “between the mocking attitude of some and the indignation of others, disorder and confusion could have proliferated, putting an end to the aesthetic situation.”¹² The film would be ruined for anyone trying to take it seriously—and this full-scale breakdown of the group activity would be *relajo*.

Many of us might participate in such a “suspension of seriousness” on occasion, but the *relajiento* goes so far as to adopt *relajo* as a *way of life*. Portilla criticizes the *relajiento* for this extremism. The *relajiento* has convinced himself that he is free—a lone wolf, free of commitment and not tied down to anything; indeed, the only one not duped by the hypocrites and fools who convince others to take things so seriously. But in fact, Portilla argues, the *relajiento* is not free at all.

Portilla argues that genuine freedom does not consist merely in being free *from* external constraints, but also in being free *for* life’s possibilities, or, in other words, being free *to* live for something that one finds worthwhile and takes seriously.

Freedom as pure negation . . . is not more than a mirage and a deception, since the “freedom from,” the negative freedom, is but the negative side of a “freedom to” . . . [Negative] freedom is but an aspect of positive freedom that is indeed a genuine liberation, an opening up of the path for *effective action in the realization of values*.¹³

To see Portilla’s point here, consider how oppressive it would be to find *nothing* worth doing: Does this not perfectly describe the prison of clinical depression?¹⁴ In order to be genuinely free, then, one must find value in at least *some* of life’s possibilities. Thus, Portilla concludes, the *relajiento* “illegitimately identifies rebelliousness with freedom.”¹⁵

But what does it mean to “find value” in something? Portilla argues that values are not self-standing; that is, values are not part of the “furniture of the universe,” waiting to be discovered. Instead, values exist only insofar as people hear and respond to the “call of value”—i.e., take those values “seriously.”

All value, when grasped, appears surrounded by an aura of demands, endowed with a certain weight and with certain gravity that brings it from its pure ideality toward the world of reality. The value solicits its realization. The mere grasping of the value carries with it the fulfillment of that demand, of that call to its own realization in the world; and in order for this demand . . . to be realized, the subject, in turn, performs an act, a movement of loyalty [to the value]

that is a kind of “yes,” like an affirmative response. . . . This answer, this “yes” that corresponds by means of the subjective aspect of the grasping of the value . . . is an intimate movement of loyalty and commitment. This is seriousness.¹⁶

Portilla thus avoids two common but mistaken views of value. Not only are values not self-standing but, contrary to the view of some of his existentialist contemporaries, neither are values simply *posited* by the voluntaristic choice to see something as valuable. Instead, in Portilla’s view, values *emerge* into reality through the call-and-response interaction between a value and the person or group who recognizes that value.

Portilla distinguishes between the kind of values that can emerge for individuals in social isolation, and the kind of values that emerge only in the context of group practices. He says that the values that can emerge for individuals outside of group practices are values that do not depend upon our freedom. For example, the refreshing quality of cool water on a hot day is generated by a kind of biological *reflex* and does not depend on human freedom.¹⁷

But, Portilla argues, life’s most important values—the values that are truly essential for freedom—can only emerge in the context of a *group practice*, i.e., the coordinated, purposeful activity of a plurality of people. These are the values that emerge in the context of performances, educational activities, ceremonies, conversations, and parties.¹⁸ As Portilla notes, they include what we might call “civic values,” as well as “religious and spiritual values,” but I would add that the category is really much more expansive than we might think. Even the beauty of nature as it is appreciated on a solitary walk in the woods emerges in the context of a group practice—in this case, the practice of taking solitary walks in the woods to admire the beauty of nature.¹⁹

In Portilla’s view, the values that emerge through group practices are the values that one must take seriously if one is to achieve genuine freedom. The reason these values are so important, he says, is that they are the basis for an individual’s sense of *temporality*. That is, group practices—birthday parties, funerals, elections, late-night conversations, and so on—are what bring a life together into a coherent whole, binding together what is otherwise an “indefinite sum of moments” to form a narrative with a meaningful sense of past, present, and future.²⁰ No such meaningful narrative can be generated from the refreshing quality of cool water, nor from the mere collection of such experiences.

Genuine, positive freedom—freedom *for* or freedom *to*—is essentially future-oriented, and an authentic future only exists in relation to a meaningful past and present. Thus, by refusing to participate in the group practices that solidify an individual’s sense of temporality, Portilla says, the *relajiento* becomes “an individual without a future.”²¹ He is doomed to “a fragmentary temporality, a flicker of presents without direction and without form, of negations of the immediate past.”²² In this way, he undermines his own genuine, positive freedom. And as we will see, by ruining group practices for those trying to take them seriously, the *relajiento* undermines the freedom of others as well.

KILLING THE MOOD

We often take our values for granted. When our practices are working, and we unproblematically “find” joy at the *fiesta* and solemnity at the funeral, we typically do not notice how *fragile* these values are, and how they depend upon people’s participation in the roles and rules that govern group practices. This is precisely why analyzing *relajo* is so fruitful: As every phenomenologist knows, we can best understand the nature of a phenomenon by comparing its normal functioning to what happens to it during a “breakdown.”

I argue that analyzing the sort of breakdown described in Portilla’s example of the Shakespeare film, for example, reveals that life’s most important values emerge *in a mood-like way*. That is, the successful functioning of all group practices depends upon the participants’ ability to evoke a mood, or an affectively charged atmosphere, which binds the group together and allows their shared values to emerge. The tragic quality of the film, for example, requires that members of the audience give themselves over to the tragic mood invoked by the film, just as the joyfulness of the *fiesta* depends upon partygoers giving themselves to the joyful mood of the party.

Although Portilla does not discuss the concept of mood, I suggest that it perfectly articulates what is at stake in the successful functioning of group practices, and what is lost when a practice devolves into *relajo*. Two features of mood are particularly salient in this regard. First, moods are *fragile*. Setting the right mood is often difficult, but “killing the mood” is all too easy. Secondly, moods are *atmospheric*, in the sense that they are both *social* and *contagious*. They require the cooperation of everyone present, but yet they can easily fill a room and grip everyone in it. Moods are also atmospheric in the sense of being *intangible* and even *invisible*. We typically recognize and respond to moods intuitively, below the level of explicit conscious awareness.

Keeping these features of mood in mind can help us make sense of one of Portilla’s particularly controversial, but important, claims. When discussing a ballet, Portilla argues that the gracefulness of the dancer depends not only on the dancer’s skill and technique, but on the participation of *the audience* as well.

Gracefulness, undoubtedly, rests on the dance technique—learned laboriously by the performer—but also on recognition by the spectator. In a certain sense, it is a collective endeavor directed from within by a tacit agreement between performer and audience. It emerges, precarious and vulnerable, like a burgeoning that lays root in the field of harmony among dancers, musicians, and spectators, and it survives as something definitive, perfect, and stimulating in the memory of all these groups. This gracefulness cannot attain the stability and solidity of the “thing-value.” Its evanescent reality has required the support of multiple generousities, and it rests on this support. Just as the value pursued in the self-constitution of existence, the value never comes to attain definitive being; but in contrast to it, [this gracefulness] can almost be touched in a perception that partakes in the evidence of things and of the transparency of the purely meaningful,

of the etherealness of consciousness and of freedom.²³

Moods are like this. They can be palpable, plainly evident, gripping everyone present; but they nonetheless remain ethereal and vulnerable to sudden reversals. As an essentially social phenomenon, anyone present potentially has the power to alter the mood of the group and radically disrupt the entire practice. Imagine, for instance, that just as the mood of the ballet is beginning to take hold, and the gracefulness of the dancer is beginning to mesmerize the audience, someone begins to make noises mimicking flatulence every time the dancer leaps into the air. Suddenly, the gracefulness of the dancer is transformed into something quite different!²⁴

This is why the *relajiento's* extremism, his unrelenting refusal to take anything seriously, constitutes a profound threat to the freedom of everyone he comes in contact with.

Relajo kills action in its crib. It negates the only thing that gives an act sense; it impedes the light of value from illuminating those ends and means through which its realization could be conducted. It is a paradoxical inactive action which makes the call of value sterile.²⁵

Although filmmakers and dancers may need courage to face harsh critics, they are often inspired by this challenge. Yet who could feel called to "effective action in the realization of values" when the mood of the group is dominated by the mockery of the *relajiento*? Thus, by rendering "the call of value sterile," the *relajiento* diminishes others' freedom for life's possibilities.

While the *relajiento's* extremism is to be avoided, his bold action may help us to overcome an unfortunate fetishism that plagues both the art world and the world of politics and cultural activism. In art, we tend to fetishize the *art object*, not realizing that its beauty or power depends to a significant degree on the response of the audience, and that audience members have a great deal of latitude to determine for themselves how they will approach and appreciate any piece of art. Similarly, in both politics and culture, we tend to fetishize the *figurehead* of a practice, the individual who functions as the "repository" of the shared value of the group.²⁶ The *relajiento* has much to teach us about how those of us who are not in positions of power or authority can radically alter the mood of a group—and thereby help to shape the values of a community. We will return to this theme in the concluding section.

THE DANGERS OF BEING UPTIGHT

Although Portilla comes down hard on the *relajiento*, his sharpest criticisms are directed toward another cultural figure in Mexico, the *apretado*. The *apretado* is an uptight snob, a person who is self-important and devoid of playfulness, strictly adhering to elitist or "establishment" norms of success.²⁷ The *apretado*, Portilla says, takes himself and his projects far too seriously. Like the *relajiento*, the *apretado* is unable to achieve freedom for himself, and he becomes a profound danger to the freedom of others as well.

Thus, in Portilla's view, seriousness is not enough for freedom. In order to be truly free, we must also retain and utilize the

capacity to be *reflectively detached* from our values. He suggests that the capacity for language endows all humans with some ability to gain such reflective distance.

[Language can] situate me in accordance to that ideal distance to myself which is freedom, or, at least, which is one of the conditions of freedom. It allows me to take different positions relative to myself and it delivers me to my own decision; it allows me to choose, with a clean conscience, a mode of conduct not necessarily reducible to the situation in which I find myself. The word can tear me from the magma of the situation allowing me to act against the objective stream of forces that emanate from it: against the forces of psychological habit, tradition, class interest, etc.²⁸

By putting the values I experience into language, Portilla suggests, I project them from my interiority onto the external, social plane. This allows me to step back and contemplate my values more dispassionately and even to look at them from different angles. The capacity for reflective distance, then, is a kind of negative freedom that is a crucial prerequisite for genuine, positive freedom.

The capacity to gain reflective distance from these values gives us some "room to maneuver" in relation to them. Without this minimal reflective distance from what we experience as valuable, Portilla suggests, our actions would look more like mere *reflexes*. This is precisely the situation of the *apretado*, who refuses to utilize his innate capacity to gain reflective distance and insists upon seeing his values as a settled fact of the matter. Taking up this stubborn and dogmatic attitude, the *apretado* cannot "take different positions relative to [himself]," and so he cannot "laugh at [himself]."²⁹ Thus, the *apretado* is not free.

Building upon Portilla's analysis, I argue that the *apretado's* uptight nature will make him particularly incapable of working successfully with the mood-like nature of value. His heavy-handed approach is unsuited for the task of coaxing value into existence. Indeed, the *apretado* sees no need to cooperate with others in the delicate call-and-response interaction that allows value to emerge, largely because he sees himself as an embodiment of values that are self-standing and objectively valid.

To "apretado" individuals, "being" and "value" are carefully identified with each other at that privileged point in the world which is their own person. . . . "Apretado" individuals are compact masses of value; they live themselves on the inside like a dense volume of value-filled "being," like a bundle of valuable "properties," conceived according to the model of the properties of a thing. . . . Perhaps they may not yet be more than an honest official, very intelligent, very effective, and full of qualities. But "apretado" individuals have an infinite advantage over all other individuals: they are all these things. . . . When an "apretado" goes for a walk, an official goes for a walk; when an "apretado" eats, an official eats. An intelligent and efficient person sleeps; a person with good taste walks along the street; a person of talent calmly enjoys breakfast. (191f)

Thus, the *apretado* is guilty of the kind of “bad faith” that Jean-Paul Sartre famously attributes to the café waiter who pretends that he *is* a waiter in the same way that a table *is* a table.³⁰ In Portilla’s view, however, values never exist with such stability. Thus, no matter how much I try to *be* a punctual person, rushing every morning to make it to the office on time, I will always discover that “value has escaped me once again. I have not succeeded in incorporating value into myself, in constituting my being definitely, nor will I ever achieve this.”³¹

Although he tries to deny the mood-like nature of value, the *apretado* is constantly confronted with the fact that the value he seeks can only emerge when it is recognized by others. Like the gracefulness of the dancer, the *apretado*’s talent, calmness, and punctuality only emerge into being with the collaboration of an audience, just as his office and his important projects could not function without the cooperation of others who recognize their importance. But since he insists that he is a solitary embodiment of self-standing value, the *apretado* has no interest in “constituting a ‘we’” with others in order to cooperatively realize the values he seeks.³² Thus, he can only feel threatened by his inescapable dependence upon other people, as if this dependence makes him a “slave of others.”³³

Resentful of the need to cooperate with others, Portilla argues, people who are overly serious tend to “demand recognition of themselves as value-filled beings” and “want others to submit to them.”³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point about the tyrannical tendencies of the “serious man.”

By virtue of the fact that he refuses to recognize that he is freely establishing the value of the end he sets up, the serious man makes himself the slave of that end. . . . [The] serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution—army, highway, revolution, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant.³⁵

By becoming tyrannical, the *apretado* is likely to squash the emergence of value within any group practice. After all, no one is able to genuinely and spontaneously feel the “call of value” when the demands of a tyrant are constantly killing the mood. In this way, the *apretado* undermines both his own freedom and that of others as well. He is indeed “the living denial of freedom.”³⁶

As we have seen, Portilla’s analysis of the *apretado* parallels similar analyses in the work of Sartre and de Beauvoir. Nevertheless, Portilla makes an important contribution: although Sartre and de Beauvoir recognize the dangerousness of the “serious man,” they themselves are quite grave in their treatment of freedom. Indeed, one is unable to find much of a sense of humor or irony in any of their writings. Although these Europeans are admirably committed to the cause of liberation, they do not seem to recognize just how powerful humor and Socratic irony can be.

HUMOR AND IRONY IN CULTURAL POLITICS

Cultural politics is largely about shaping the mood of a community. Of course, moods are hard to predict or control, and so it is tempting to dismiss their importance, or even detach completely from the cultural practices that build them, as the *relajiento* does. But this would be a mistake. Moods, while fragile, are also astoundingly powerful. When the mood for change grips a society, regimes that once appeared invulnerable will crumble with astonishing swiftness. On the other hand, even the most capable and well-intentioned activists will become utterly irrelevant if they alienate themselves from the moods that are ascendant in their societies.

Those who recognize the power of mood may be tempted to become too forceful in attempting to shape the mood of a community. This danger is especially pressing for those who feel that the cultural habits and institutions around them are in need of radical transformation. But more often than not, forcefulness will kill a mood. An ugly eruption of violence caused by a momentary lack of restraint, for example, can quickly destroy a society’s appetite for reform. Those who are overly serious or uptight in their commitment to the cause of liberation are unlikely to have the finesse and patience required to cope flexibly and effectively with the vicissitudes of cultural moods.

One thing that makes Portilla’s work so exciting is that he offers a plausible account of how to participate wholeheartedly in cultural practices without becoming overly serious. Indeed, negotiating these competing demands of freedom—remaining totally committed to one’s values while also retaining the capacity to reflectively detach and even laugh at oneself—is the essence of genuine liberation. To this end, Portilla offers two potent tools to the cultural activist: humor and Socratic irony. With these tools, one can both negotiate the competing demands of freedom, and contribute effectively to the transformation of the mood and values of a community.

Humor, Portilla says, has the unique power to “[free] us from a negative value, from an adversity.”³⁷ Portilla is particularly fond of black humor in this regard. Black humor begins with an acknowledgment of adversity and suffering. Thus, it does not alienate those who are suffering with a flippant denial of “the painful, somber, or sinister aspects of existence.”³⁸ But in a sudden reversal, black humor reveals a way to laugh about these circumstances, and thereby to transcend them.

Thus [humor] shows how human beings are always beyond themselves and their circumstance, how humans can find themselves in the most adverse situations and face up to them as if they were external, alien acts that cannot get to them completely. . . . “I am me and my circumstance,” said Ortega y Gasset. To the humorist, I am rather me before my circumstance.³⁹

In this way, black humor can help people cope with their suffering and regain control over their circumstances.

It would be profoundly imprudent to dismiss the serious power of humor. Anyone who has suffered knows that physical and emotion pain are among the most powerful

forces in setting the mood of a person or a community. Pain can radically diminish the field of live possibilities and even deform the long-term dispositions of individuals and groups. When we are suffering, black humor is one of the only ways to avoid becoming either overly detached or overly serious. It offers a way to remain totally committed to one's values while nurturing one's freedom of thought and spirit.

In a similar vein, Portilla also recommends the tool of Socratic irony for both preserving one's own freedom and effectively intervening in the mood of one's society. We must take special care to understand Portilla's analysis of irony, however, because it is quite different from both *relajo* and the form of irony we are perhaps most familiar with, the "postmodern" irony of the contemporary "hipster."

In his essay, "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*," David Foster Wallace skewers the irony that characterizes the contemporary era in popular culture.⁴⁰ Wallace argues that irony was an appropriate and effective response to Ward Cleaver, the prototypical fifties father, and to the hypocrisy of the advertisers and cultural elites of that era. But today, cultural elites have abandoned that old-fashioned sincerity and have co-opted the irony of their critics. In this new age of postmodern irony or "meta-irony," advertisers no longer even pretend that their products are Good and Right, and cultural elites are quick to make fun of themselves. Thus, propaganda today comes with a wink to acknowledge that the audience is "in the know" and cannot be duped.

In these circumstances, Wallace says, irony is no longer liberating. Instead, irony only enables people to continue betraying their loftiest ideals, reassuring themselves that no one is silly enough to think that buying a Pepsi signifies that they actually endorse Pepsi or want to be part of the "Pepsi Generation." In this way, irony is the last refuge of the hipster, who is committed to expressing himself "authentically" and rejecting all manner of conformism—even the "conformism" of the sincere, non-conformist "hippie" of his parent's generation.⁴¹ By making people overly detached from their values and overly suspicious of any sincere participation in communal practices, irony today is nothing but "the song of the prisoner who has come to love his cage."⁴²

I admit that the *relajiento* may feel like a welcome alternative in this context. After all, like the ironic hipster, the *relajiento* is also detached from communal values, but the *relajiento's* bold and aggressive style actually succeeds in disrupting the smooth functioning of cultural practices where the hipster's irony only entrenches them. In this way, *relajo* can be seen as a kind of "active nihilism" that says, with Nietzsche, "that which is falling, let us push it down faster!" And Sánchez is surely right that, theoretically, the *relajiento's* disruptions could possibly clear the way for unexpected, anomalous possibilities to emerge.

The problem, however, is that the *relajiento* does not use his impressive ability to disrupt cultural practices in any strategic way. He does not attempt to undermine specific values at particular times. The *relajiento* is an extremist, and Portilla is right to argue that his refusal to be sincere and serious about *anything* will make him ineffective in establishing any mood other than nihilism. Thus, even if new values do emerge from the ruins of old practices, these values will only be sustained

by the fragile call-and-response interaction that sustains all values, and then the *relajiento* will be as dangerous to these new values as he was to the old.

Fortunately, we need not choose among being an *apretado*, a *relajiento*, or a hipster. Portilla offers a more promising alternative: Socratic irony. As Jonathan Lear explains, Socratic irony is a way of responding productively when we find ourselves to be representatives of social practices that fall short of their own ideals.⁴³ The strategy is to maintain sincere fidelity to these ideals, even while provoking uncertainty about what the ideals actually require of those who hold them.

Socrates utilized this strategy to great effect. As Portilla notes, Socrates's irony was capable of suddenly undermining the authority of his interlocutors.

When Socrates tells Euthyphro, "You, admirable Euthyphro, are the only one of us who knows what piety is," all of us see that Euthyphro knows nothing about piety. What has happened here? . . . The meaning of the proposition "You know what piety is" remains the same, but its sense has totally changed. . . . Irony has suddenly transformed Euthyphro the wise into Euthyphro the ignorant.⁴⁴

Lear notes that Kierkegaard utilizes this same strategy, asking, in effect, *in all of Christendom, is there a Christian?* This question, Lear says, "asks whether amongst all who understand themselves as Christian there is anyone who is living up to the requirements of Christian life."⁴⁵ The question "injects a certain form of not-knowing into polis life," an uncertainty not only about what the ideal requires, but even about what it means to reflect critically on that ideal. This profound kind of not-knowing undermines the authority of those who claim to know what is required by the ideals of Christianity and portray themselves as the embodiment of devotion to those ideals.⁴⁶

Cultural authorities are typically accustomed to coping with direct confrontations with people who reject their values, and these days they have also become adept at dealing with post-ironic apathy. But cultural authorities are vulnerable to Socratic irony precisely because it *embraces* traditional values with extraordinary seriousness. Indeed, this sincerity can itself be quite disruptive in the post-ironic age. In this way, Socratic irony can be thought of as a kind of *cultural jujitsu* that uses its opponent's strength against him. It yields unconditionally to established values, but in a sudden reversal, it undermines the traditional manner in which those values are understood and reflected upon.

One example of Socratic irony, I suggest, might be found in José Martí's famous essay, "Our America." In this essay, Martí embraces traditional Latin American *machismo*, even while reshaping its significance. In a subtle but poignant transformation of the ideal of masculinity, Martí declares that "real men" are those who embrace the value of staying home to nurture sick family members.

Those without faith in their country are seven-month weaklings. . . . Their puny arms—arms with bracelets and hands with painted nails, arms of Paris

or Madrid . . . let them go to the Prado, to swan around, or to Tortoni's in high hats. . . . Those born in America who are ashamed of their mother who reared them because she wears an Indian apron; and those scoundrels who disown their sick mother, abandoning her on her sickbed! Then who is a real man? . . . These delicate creatures . . . are unwilling to do men's work!⁴⁷

The power of Socratic irony is its capacity to produce this kind of transformation. Its success depends on its ability to hew closely to traditional conceptions of an ideal even while radically changing the significance of traditional practices. In this way, it is akin to a musician changing the key of a familiar melody, or a writer changing the mood of a familiar narrative.

For Kierkegaard, as for Lear, Socratic irony is something that provokes radical uncertainty in individuals, not groups.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine what precisely would be required to experience Socratic irony in public and thereby provoke radical uncertainty in an entire community. I will simply suggest that something like this is precisely what is driving many of today's most promising political movements around the world. We can recognize this Socratic irony in movements that present themselves as patriotic or "conservative" even while opposing their governments or traditional cultural practices, and in forms of activism that are truly innovative but manage to draw upon recognized aspects of their cultural heritage.

With this strategy even the most radical cultural reformers might be able to take seriously their society's mainstream values—including democracy, national security, religion, capitalism, and *machismo*—while also working to provoke radical uncertainty about what is required by these values and how we can manage to reflect critically upon them. After all, as Lear points out and Martí's essay demonstrates, all values are complex, evolving, and eternally open to revision. For this reason, our cultural heritage is almost always complex enough to find the seeds for novel and inspiring modes of thought and action.⁴⁹

Unlike the postmodern irony of the hipster, Socratic irony does not deny its wholehearted acceptance of these shared values. Socratic irony does not wink. As Portilla puts it, Socratic irony "is founded on a supreme seriousness, since seriousness is nothing other than vocation for and unconditional devotion to a value."⁵⁰ And precisely because it is so serious, Socratic irony offers a way to overcome one's alienation from society. In contrast to *relajo*, Portilla says, Socratic irony is "capable of founding a community . . . of opening up a perspective for communication of some human beings with others in a constructive task."⁵¹

Thus, Socratic irony might not only make us more effective in cultural politics, it might also allow us to experience the kind of seriousness that is required for genuine freedom. That is, it might enable us to balance the opposing requirements of freedom, taking our values seriously without losing touch with the reflective detachment that allows us to see our values from different perspectives.

In conclusion, I hope to have outlined some good reasons to think that Portilla was wise to reject *relajo* as a way of life.

By utilizing black humor and Socratic irony, it is possible to work effectively *from within* established cultural forms in order to bring about radical change. Indeed, doing so is of the utmost importance, for as Portilla shows, an individual's freedom is inescapably wrapped up with the liberation of his society. Once we recognize that values emerge in a mood-like way, and that the values that are most crucial to genuine freedom and make life worth living can only emerge in the context of group practices, we will see the need to resist the temptation to detach from these practices—and the urgency of taking them seriously.

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NOTES

1. Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012). Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo* was translated by Eleanor Marsh and Carlos Alberto Sánchez.
2. *Ibid.*, 125.
3. *Ibid.*, 104.
4. *Ibid.*, 111.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 102, citing Jean-Francois Lyotard. "The Postmodern Condition," in Kenneth Baynes, et al., eds. *Philosophy: End or Transformation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 76.
7. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 117.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 128.
10. *Ibid.*, 137. I have slightly altered the translation to substitute "moan" where Marsh and Sánchez have translated *gemido* as "groan," in order to better convey the sexual connotation that makes the joke especially funny, as I see it.
11. *Ibid.*, 133f.
12. *Ibid.*, 137.
13. *Ibid.*, 187, emphasis mine.
14. Matthew Ratcliffe, for example, describes clinical depression as a feeling of "isolation from the social world, an inability to experience anything as significant, captivating, worth pursuing." Matthew Ratcliffe. *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 67. I suspect that the connection between depression and *relajo* is more than superficial. If the *relajiento's* behavior is driven by mental illness, or is merely a set of neurotic defense mechanism brought about by his inability to cope with his situation, this would help to confirm Portilla's assessment that the *relajiento* is not free. In this case, the *relajiento* would be much closer to the "subject position" of "patient" rather than "author." Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 160.
15. *Ibid.*, 186.
16. *Ibid.*, 129.
17. *Ibid.*, 144.
18. *Ibid.*, 145.
19. One indication that this is a group practice is that it is governed by norms: Those of us who take such walks seriously might think that it is entirely possible to do it *incorrectly*—for example, while checking Facebook on your iPhone. Such norms are distinct from personal preferences; otherwise, it would impossible to do it incorrectly. In this case, the members of the "group" that maintains the practice are more distant from each other than in most practices, but they find ways to communicate, in ways both subtle (like a nod to a fellow walker passed on the trail) and overt (such as the American transcendentalists' treatises on walking in the woods).
20. *Ibid.*, 148.

21. Ibid., 147.
22. Ibid., 150.
23. Ibid., 145.
24. Thanks to Lori Gallegos de Castillo for this example.
25. Ibid., 188.
26. Ibid., 145.
27. Ibid., 190ff.
28. Ibid., 127.
29. Ibid., 180.
30. "In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the rights of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o'clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired . . ." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 101f.
31. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 141f.
32. Ibid., 194.
33. Ibid., 196.
34. Ibid., 197.
35. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1949), 45ff. There are quite a few parallels between this text and Portilla's *Phenomenology*. De Beauvoir analyzes several characters who reveal possible positions one can take on his freedom and responsibility, including the "sub-man," the "serious man," the "nihilist," the "adventurer," and so on. Portilla's text fits nicely in this vein, adding a character distinctive of Latin America, the *relajiento*. Portilla's description of the *apretado* is also much more loaded with overtones of class and racial oppression than de Beauvoir's description of the "serious man."
36. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 196.
37. Ibid., 178.
38. Ibid., 180.
39. Ibid., 179.
40. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 151–94.
41. Sánchez considers the possibility that in the contemporary era, "relajo, understood as a suspension of serious commitment to value and duty, is the rule, not the exception." Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 118.
42. Ibid., 193.
43. Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.)
44. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 171f.
45. Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 12.
46. Ibid., 76.
47. Jose Martí, "Our America," in *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, ed. Susana Nuccitelli and Gary Seay (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 232f.
48. Thanks to Robert Sánchez for helping me appreciate this point.
49. I find the discussion of *machismo* to be particularly relevant here because I suspect that the *relajiento* may be motivated, ultimately, by frustration and wounded pride. Excluded and alienated from the cultural practices that dominate his society and render him impotent to address the injustices that he sees all around him, the *relajiento* pronounces these practices "sour grapes" and acts as though he never even wanted to participate anyway. If this analysis is accurate, then although he may act as tranquil as an ancient Stoic, the *relajiento* would remain deeply conflicted and liable to act out in destructive ways. A more humane understanding of masculinity, on the other hand, might ease the conflict of the *relajiento*—and change the world for the better.
50. Sánchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 174.
51. Ibid., 176.

Mariátegui's Myth

Kim Díaz

SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY

José Carlos Mariátegui is among the best known Marxist philosophers of Latin America. Arguing on behalf of Indigenous rights and influencing the likes of Ernesto Che Guevara, Mariátegui is not only respected by Latin Americans as a philosopher but also admired for his uncompromising courage. This article aims to provide readers with the historical and intellectual context from which Mariátegui developed his thoughts regarding a revolutionary myth. To this end, we begin with Mariátegui's historical context; we then consider the influence that Manuel González Prada, Georges Sorel, and Antonio Gramsci had on Mariátegui's thought. We also examine Mariátegui's suggestions and his assessment of the Peruvian situation.¹

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mariátegui formulated his ideas regarding a revolutionary myth between 1920 and 1930, about a century after Perú became independent from Spain in 1824. These hundred or so years allowed Mariátegui the historical perspective to see the various stages that Perú had undergone, and where his country was at that time. He was well aware of Peruvian history, the slavery of the Indigenous people during the Spanish colonization, and the promises of freedom for all peoples that were made during the war of independence.

During the nearly four centuries that Perú was a Spanish colony, Spain was primarily interested in mining silver and gold from Perú. Aside from institutionalized slavery, the colonizers were not interested in developing other internal structures, and the interests of the Indigenous people were simply not a factor when the Peruvian war of independence took place. Mariátegui explains that there were two main reasons for this war.² First, the French Revolution and the U.S. Constitution evoked a sense of freedom in the Latin American bourgeoisie, and these events caused them to want their independence from Spain. The second reason for the war of independence was the economic interests of the Latin American bourgeoisie who wished to engage England, Europe, and North America. As long as the Latin American bourgeoisie were subject to Spanish rule, they were not free to engage other countries economically. Thus, the Peruvian war of independence was fought to gain freedom for the Peruvian people; however, Indigenous people did not figure into its goals. It was ultimately the economic interests of the creole class that propelled the various wars of independence in the Americas.

Once Perú became independent from Spain, the local bourgeoisie entered into trade agreements with England and other European countries as well as North America. These economic agreements enabled Perú to borrow money from England in exchange for *guano*. England and the United States invested in the development of railways in Perú, in machinery to further mine gold and silver, and in the industrialization of the cities on the coast.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mariátegui observed three types of economies in Perú: communism,

feudalism, and capitalism. In the Peruvian context, communism was the economic system that characterized the Indigenous communities where there was no private property to exploit or invest. Indigenous communism was based on the reciprocity of services. A feudal system existed alongside the Indigenous communism. When Perú became independent from Spain, the land that had been previously assigned to the Peruvian *criollos* in the form of *encomiendas* became the property of the Peruvian bourgeoisie who took control over the land along with the Indigenous people who lived there. Mariátegui writes that, during the time of the new republic, “the elements and characteristics of a feudal society were mixed with the elements of a slave-holding society.”³ The Peruvian bourgeoisie obtained their freedom from Spain and now had absolute power to continue exploiting the Indigenous population. Instead of gaining their freedom, conditions for the Indigenous people during the new republic worsened.

The Spanish viceroyalty was actually less harsh on Indigenous people than the republic. True, the Spanish viceroyalty was responsible for the enslavement of the Indians. However, during the Spanish inquisition, Bartolome de las Casas intensely defended the Indians against the brutal methods of the colonizers; there was no such figure to argue on behalf of Indigenous people during the time of the republic. The Spanish viceroyalty was a medieval and foreign regime while the republic was a Peruvian and liberal institution. In this sense, the republic had economic and political obligations towards Indigenous people that the Spanish viceroyalty did not have. Contrary to this duty, the republic further impoverished Indigenous people, aggravated their depression and intensified their misery.⁴

During the republic, the feudal lord had absolute power over the land and the people who lived there. Mariátegui explains how the peasants contributed the seeds, their labor, and the materials necessary for farming. After the harvest, the peasants and the feudal lord divided the products, “and this, with the feudal lord having done nothing more than to allow the use of his land without even fertilizing it.”⁵ Besides working for a feudal lord, Indigenous people also worked in the mines.

The mining industry is almost entirely in the hands of two major U.S. companies. Wages are paid in the mines, but the pay is negligible, the defense of the worker’s life is almost zero, the workers’ compensation law is circumvented. The system of *enganche* falsely enslaves the workers and places the Indians at the mercy of these capitalist enterprises. The feudal land condemns the Indians to so much misery that the Indians prefer the fate the mines have to offer.⁶

Needless to say, Mariátegui was deeply affected by his historical circumstance. This resulted in his exile from Perú in 1920 due to his criticism of Augusto B. Leguía’s government (1908–1912, 1919–1930). In Europe, Mariátegui became acquainted with the thought of Georges Sorel and Antonio Gramsci, both of whom influenced Mariátegui decisively. When Mariátegui returned from Europe in 1923 he wrote his *Siete ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana*, his most incisive critique of the Peruvian situation. The following

section provides the intellectual context from which Mariátegui developed his revolutionary myth.

GONZÁLEZ PRADA, GRAMSCI, AND SOREL

Mariátegui was influenced by several of Manuel González Prada’s (1848–1918) ideas. Among these are the distinction that González Prada makes between the Indigenous reality *vis-à-vis* the other social classes of Perú and what González Prada calls, “indigenism.”

González Prada aimed to promote Peruvian nationalism with his “Discurso en el Politeama” (1888). Here, he exposed the schism of the Peruvian republic among the creole, mestizo, and Indigenous people. The collective consciousness of the Peruvian bourgeoisie acknowledged the existence of Indigenous people as *people* only after Perú was defeated by Chile in the Pacific War (1879–1883). Peruvians expected to win the war against Chile because Perú had been the center of the Spanish viceroyalty and Peruvians believed themselves to be more powerful than Chile; nevertheless, Perú lost this war.

González Prada was critical of his own social class and suggested that lack of nationalism was the likely cause for their defeat. Mariátegui wrote that González Prada embodied “the first moment of lucid consciousness of Perú.”⁷ González Prada represented the moment when the Peruvian bourgeoisie realized for the very first time that Indigenous people were part of Perú. González Prada writes, “If we made a serf out of the Indian, then what country is he supposed to defend? Just like the medieval serf, the Indian will only defend the interests of his feudal lord.”⁸

In his 1904 essay “Nuestros Indios,” González Prada associates Peruvian nationalism with indigenism. He points out the feudal conditions that existed in Perú at the time:

It is nowhere written but everywhere observed that when it comes to the Indian he has no rights but obligations. When it comes to him, a personal complaint is taken as a sign of insubordination, as a collective outbreak of revolt. The Spanish royalists killed him when he tried to shake off the yoke of his conquerors. We the Republicans will exterminate him when he grieves of his onerous work. Our form of government is essentially a big lie because a state where two or three million people live set apart from the law does not deserve to be called a democratic republic.⁹

González Prada speculated that given the circumstances, “either the ruling class ceded some of its power to Indigenous people, or Indigenous people would muster the courage to punish their oppressors.”¹⁰ Mariátegui agreed, “the main question regarding the Indian, more than pedagogical, is economic, it is social.”¹¹ For Mariátegui, the Indigenous condition would only be ameliorated by the return of land and the empowerment of people.¹²

Like Antonio Gramsci, Mariátegui was also interested in studying cultural issues. Gramsci believed that the seizing of political power by the proletariat would not be sufficient to manifest a revolutionary movement. Besides the seizing of political power, a counterhegemonic structure must be

developed in order to replace the existing structure. Gramsci believed that the role of the socialist party was to motivate awareness so that politically passive subjects would become politically active agents.¹³

Given Gramsci's influence upon Mariátegui's thought, Mariátegui argued that a change in the economic structure would not be sufficient to change the sociopolitical conditions of the Indigenous people in Perú. In his essay "El Proceso de la Instrucción Pública," Mariátegui cites the declaration made by the Argentine newspaper *La Vanguardia* in 1925. There are two important ideas to note here. The first idea is what Mariátegui thought about education, and the second, Gramsci's influence on Mariátegui regarding hegemony.

The educational problem is but one phase of the social problem, hence it cannot be solved in isolation. The culture of any society is the ideological expression of the interests of the ruling class. The culture of our current society is therefore the ideological expression of the capitalist class interests.¹⁴

Given that the problem was the hegemony of the capitalist class, and the oppression was not merely economic, but also cultural, aesthetic, and educational, Mariátegui believed that besides changing the economic structure, it was also necessary that the proletariat and Indigenous people be made aware of their sociopolitical situation.

In addition to Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, Mariátegui also believed it would be best to stop thinking of the socialist revolution as being historically determined. Rather than expecting the revolution to take place on its own, the socialist revolution requires a deliberate activism to bring about the revolution. This is crucial because Mariátegui goes on to combine Gramsci's idea of deliberate activism with Georges Sorel's notion of myth to arrive at his own conclusions.

In *Reflections on Violence* (1906), Georges Sorel argues for the rejection of reform movements. Instead, he recommends a revolutionary myth that would bring about a general strike, which would in turn encourage and mobilize the proletariat class to enter the class war and undermine capitalism.¹⁵ Unlike Gramsci, Sorel was not interested in building a coherent and consistent ideological structure that would ensure that desired change would endure. According to Sorel, what was important was the political mobilization of the working class.¹⁶ Sorel admired the passionate blind faith that characterizes some religious followers, and he advocated for the proletariat to develop a similar kind of faith that the socialist revolution is not only possible but also desirable, imminent, and necessary. Sorel writes:

Those who live in the world of myths are free from any kind of refutation and cannot be discouraged. It is therefore through myths that we should understand the activity, feelings and ideas of the public as they prepare to enter a decisive fight.¹⁷

For Sorel, it was of utmost importance for the proletariat to develop absolute trust in the success of the revolution; even if this meant the revolutionary leaders had to deceive

the proletariat, "even assuming that revolutionaries must be entirely deceived in the project to begin with the general strike."¹⁸ Like Sorel, Mariátegui also believed it would be necessary for the proletariat to be spiritually prepared in order to bring about a successful revolution.

MARIÁTEGUI'S ASSESSMENT OF THE PERUVIAN SITUATION

In 1924, the Communist International believed the best way to establish socialism in Latin America would be to classify the continent by language and race.¹⁹ Although Mariátegui wished for Perú to stop being a neo-colony of Western imperialism and also believed the best way to achieve this goal would be through socialism, Mariátegui disagreed with the International's approach. He was convinced the Indigenous problem was not one of language or race, but rather the feudal condition of land distribution. He wished to see Perú end its economic dependence on foreign capital as well as the integration of Indigenous people into the Peruvian national culture.

Mariátegui argued that the best alternative to feudalism in Perú would be the native Peruvian community structure of the *ayllu*. An *ayllu* is an Indigenous community where private property does not exist; thus, members of the *ayllu* cannot invest in, nor exploit property for economic gain. The *ayllu*'s economy is characterized by the reciprocity of services the members provide for each other. Mariátegui believed the *ayllu* would solve Perú's feudalism problem because the *ayllu* was a native communal structure.²⁰ However, in 1929, during the First Communist Latin American Conference that took place in Buenos Aires, the International decided to censor Mariátegui's ideas for being unorthodox.²¹

Just the year before the International censored Mariátegui, he disagreed publicly with Víctor Raul Haya de la Torre, the founder and leader of APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana). Mariátegui struck out on his own and established the Socialist party of Perú. This is important because, having been influenced by Sorel, Mariátegui did not believe that a democratic consensus was necessary to establish a socialist system in Perú. Instead, like Sorel, Mariátegui focused on how to bring about a revolution and advocated a revolutionary vanguard consisting of the proletariat and Indigenous people.²²

Mariátegui also refused to consider education as a means of improving the sociopolitical and economic situation of Indigenous people because the type of education they received at that time was only a means of perpetuating the status quo. For Mariátegui, the right of Indigenous people to own their own land was more fundamental than their right to an education. As long as Indigenous people continued living in a feudal system, their education would only serve to maintain the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. According to Mariátegui's Gramscian interpretation, education was simply indoctrination to the belief that Indigenous people were naturally inferior to the bourgeoisie. Education only served to further bind Indigenous people to the subservient place they had been assigned in the feudal system.

The Indigenous problem of illiteracy is in reality a much larger problem that goes beyond being a

simple pedagogical issue. Everyday we can see how instruction is not the same as education. The elementary schooling the Indian receives does not uplift him morally or socially. The first concrete step towards a redemptive improvement must be abolishing their subservience.²³

Given this type of education, Mariátegui was doubtful that Indigenous people would acquire the necessary skills to govern themselves, and no democratic or liberal institution would be able to thrive as long as Perú remained a feudal state.

Moreover, communist movements have been generally characterized by their rejection of religious beliefs. Mariátegui did not agree with this communist approach either. A biographical anecdote about Mariátegui relates how his mother, Maria Amalia La Chira, had lost her first three children shortly after giving birth to them, and she had found refuge from her suffering in the Catholic religion. Her commitment to religious faith was so strong that in order to protect her children, she left her husband Francisco Javier Mariátegui when she learned that he was the son of an atheist. Maria Amalia shared her deep religious commitment with her children, and although Mariátegui was critical of the catastrophic consequences of the Spanish colonization and genocide, still Mariátegui writes: "As far as religion is concerned, the Spanish colonization did not commit any excesses."²⁴ Mariátegui believed that religion is an essential part of being human, and it was not necessary to reject religion to bring about social change.

Mariátegui suggested we expand our definition of religion because, he argued, a revolution is a type of religious endeavor, and communism is essentially religious.²⁵ He believed human beings are spiritual beings who are compelled into action by the spiritual and ethical dimensions of myths. He writes: "Secular morality . . . does not satisfy the need for absolutes that exists as the basis of every human question."²⁶ He believed that without a myth or ideals for us to believe in, and strive towards, human existence would have no historical significance.

A MYTH AS SOLUTION

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries philosophers were increasingly captivated by positivism in science and philosophy. Positivism became such a strong philosophical current that it affected the policies of several Latin American countries. Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in México (1876–1911), for instance, was justified by *los científicos*.²⁷ For example, the justification as to why the class in power should remain in power was an argument along these lines: "Who should we trust to make important decisions, such as how to govern? Should the average uneducated person, or those who have experience with these issues, decide? It makes sense for those with the most relevant experience to make the decisions." In this way, power remained in the hands of the upper educated class, while the lower classes had no choice but to bend to the decisions of the scientists.

But not all philosophers of this time were captivated by positivism. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, pointed out that positivism oftentimes led to nihilism.²⁸ Mariátegui was not impressed by positivism either, and instead saw religion as

a solution to the nihilist attitudes of this time. He believed it would be preferable for the upper classes to be left with the nihilist consequences of their positivism, while the proletariat class developed their faith in a revolutionary myth. Mariátegui agreed that the power of revolutionaries did not come from their ability to manipulate science. The power of revolutionaries came from their faith, passion, and determination. For Mariátegui, revolutionary leaders were an embodiment of religious, mystical, and spiritual forces.

Like Gramsci, Mariátegui believed the working class should be agents of change, not merely peaceful spectators; and like Sorel, Mariátegui broke with the determinism of historical materialism to restore the power of myth to the socialist cause. In his 1925 essay "El Hombre y el Mito," Mariátegui suggests that philosophers ought to stop rationalizing with common people because they are "simple people who are not able to understand subtleties."²⁹ Mariátegui believed human beings are fundamentally metaphysical creatures who need myths or stories to give meaning to their lives, and neither philosophy nor the materialism of science fulfills a person's profound sense of being. Scientific skepticism, though rational, is not fulfilling, and philosophy only provides relative truths. Reason tells us that it is useless to believe in absolute truths, while science tells us that the truths we believe in today will be rejected tomorrow.

Mariátegui did not believe the average person would or could understand the relativist language of philosophers and scientists. He argued it would be best to encourage belief in a revolutionary myth because, according to Mariátegui, people only act decisively when they believe in a cause in an absolute way. The bourgeoisie with their science and philosophy had been left without absolute truths, and Mariátegui believed it would be easy to displace them from power if Indigenous people and the proletariat fought together with a common conviction.

Ultimately, Mariátegui argued for a broader definition of religion because, for him, communism is essentially religious.

Today we know . . . that a revolution is always religious. The word "religion" has a new value, a new meaning. It connotes more than rituals or churches. Never mind that the Soviets write in their propaganda "religion is the opium of the people." Communism is essentially religious.³⁰

Mariátegui recognized the similarities between religious and communist doctrines. Both provide absolute answers and the promise of a better life to come. Hence, Mariátegui argued, the absolute answers provided by belief in a communist revolutionary myth are more conducive to the change he wished to see than a relativist dialogue.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to emphasize that Mariátegui had the best interests of the Indigenous people in mind. He was passionate about this issue and worked relentlessly to secure the rights of Indigenous people; and when one considers Mariátegui's life as a whole, it is easy to be inspired by his work ethic despite the numerous health problems from which he suffered.³¹ Nevertheless, Mariátegui is ultimately inconsistent in the way he relates to Indigenous people. On

one hand, he believes Indigenous people are human beings, deserving of recognition as rational autonomous agents. On the other hand, Mariátegui also believes that Indigenous people are not sophisticated enough to understand scientific and philosophical subtleties. Mariátegui was ultimately not confident in the ability of Indigenous people to establish institutions that would promote the development of their society.

In effect, Mariátegui's well-meaning conclusion suffers from the internalized paternalism of a colonized consciousness. Mariátegui believed that since Indigenous people were not able to think rationally through their oppression, it would be best if those who could think rationally made decisions on behalf of those who did not so long as these were in the best interests of the latter. And the most urgent decision to be made was to change the direction and thus the command of the state's institutions through a revolution. After gaining political power through the revolutionary process, Mariátegui believed the Indigenous people would then be recognized as equal and autonomous members of the Peruvian society.

Of course, there are problems with Mariátegui's approach. One such problem is that suggesting that people adopt ideologies—for instance, faith in a revolutionary myth—has led more than one Latin American country into the hands of populist demagogues.³² Another problem is that the social change that takes place is not authentic and consequently not long-lasting. This is because the individual person is not autonomously engaged in the process of change. The "social change" is only a change of who is in power and the system remains paternalistic, authoritarian, and unstable because the minds and hearts of people continue to be subject to manipulation.

Given our place in history, it would be easy to judge Mariátegui's approach as ultimately misguided. But we must acknowledge his historical context and understand that unlike our own situation in this time and age, he had no knowledge of the differing models of democracy currently prevalent and thus could not mine these models for ideas and guidelines as to how a society may bring about the changes he wished to see. When Mariátegui wrote his *Siete Ensayos*, slavery had been abolished, but Perú was still a feudal state. The predominant consciousness of the time, which affected Mariátegui himself, was to think of Indigenous people as morally immature, and generally underdeveloped people. Mariátegui was genuinely not aware that freedom is not something that can be imposed upon others, or even gifted, but rather something that must be cultivated in an authentic manner by each one of us.

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NOTES

1. All translations from Spanish into English are mine.
2. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos de Interpretación de la Realidad Peruana* (Perú: Biblioteca Amauta, 1981), 15.
3. *Ibid.*, 15.
4. *Ibid.*, 46.
5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. *Enganche* means indenture. *Ibid.*, 48.
7. *Ibid.*, 255.
8. Manuel, González Prada, *Ensayos Escogidos* (Lima: Editora Latinoamericana SA, 1958), 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 53.
10. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 41.
11. *Ibid.*, 41.
12. *Ibid.*, 50.
13. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1985).
14. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 150.
15. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
16. Marc Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory* (U.S.: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993), 42.
17. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.
18. *Ibid.*, 117.
19. Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory*, 10.
20. *Ibid.*, 46.
21. *Ibid.*, 49.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 160.
24. *Ibid.*, 113.
25. Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist Theory*, 50.
26. José Carlos Mariátegui, *Temas de Educación* (Perú: Biblioteca Amauta, 1970), 21.
27. Leopoldo Zea, *El Positivismo en México: Nacimiento, Apogeo y Decadencia* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1968).
28. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (USA: Vintage Books, 1967), 97.
29. José Carlos Mariátegui, *El Alma Matinal y Otras Estaciones del Hombre de Hoy* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1964), 24.
30. Mariátegui, *Siete Ensayos*, 264.
31. See Genaro Carnero Checa, *La Acción Escrita: José Carlos Mariátegui Periodista* (Lima: Biblioteca Amauta, 1980).
32. See Sergio Fiengo Villena, Fernando Mayorga, Carlos de la Torre, and Anibal Quijano, *Neopopulismo y Democracia: Estudios Andinos* (Costa Rica: Programa Costa Rica, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1997).

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Natalie Cisneros is assistant professor of philosophy at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. She obtained her Ph.D. in philosophy from Vanderbilt University in 2012. Her research interests include feminist philosophies, critical philosophies of race, contemporary continental philosophy, and Latin American philosophy. She has an article forthcoming in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* entitled "Alien' Sexuality: Race, Maternity, and Citizenship." Her first book, *The "Illegal Alien": An Intersectional and Genealogical Approach*, is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

Kim Díaz works in socio-political philosophy within the American pragmatist, Latin American, and Eastern traditions. Her recent articles have been published in *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, *Societies Without Borders*, and *Pragmatism in the Americas*. Kim received her Ph.D. from Texas A&M University in 2012 and is currently visiting assistant professor of philosophy at Sam Houston State University. She also serves as assistant editor to *The Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*.

Francisco Gallegos received his B.A. in philosophy from the University of New Mexico. He is currently in the philosophy Ph.D. program at Georgetown University. In addition to

Latin American philosophy, Francisco's interests include existentialism and twentieth-century European philosophy, especially the work of Martin Heidegger. He is particularly interested in examining the affective bases of rational agency and the role that moods and emotional events can play in changing the way individuals and groups experience the world.

Robert Sánchez is a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at the College of William & Mary, where he has taught for four years. He is also an affiliated faculty member in the Latin American studies program. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of California, Riverside, in January 2012 and works primarily on Latin American philosophy, the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, and ethical issues related to race, identity, diversity, and immigration.

Grant J. Silva is assistant professor of philosophy at Marquette University. Specializing in Latin American philosophy, the philosophy of race, and political philosophy, Grant is currently working on a manuscript entitled *The Political Nature of Latin American Philosophy: Nation-Building, Nation-Fixing, Nation-Transcending*. In addition, he is in the process of publishing several articles on the problem democratic exclusion, the dynamic nature of racism, and the challenges that undocumented immigration and the militarization of the border pose to mainstream political philosophy.