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José Carlos Mariátegui and the Time of Myth

Jaime Hanneken

In the midst of Latin Americanism’s ascending rapprochement with postcolonial theory and criticism, one often sees the ideas of Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) mentioned as a ripe site for new dialogues about the vicissitudes of coloniality beyond the geopolitical, historical, and conceptual lodestars of postcolonial studies. In particular, Mariátegui is seen to hold out to the apparatuses of academic postcolonialism a reminder of the priority of thinking colonial relations as locally and historically produced practices: his defense of heterodox Marxism in the experience of uneven development and his insistence on dissolving the universal currency of the modern linear European notion of time both speak directly against postcolonial scholarship’s tendency, as Epifanio San Juan summarizes it, to take the “unsynchronized and asymmetrical formation [of the postcolonial world] as the ideal habitat for . . . all those cultural expressions and practices described as hybrid, creolized, syncretic, ambivalent, multiplicitous, and so on, [and fetishizing and reifying them] as permanent, ever-recurring, and ineluctable qualities” (232).

Given the ample correspondence of Mariátegui’s concerns with many of the questions raised in the slow pendular swing in postcolonial cultural studies from wholly discursive theoretical bases to materialist and even ontological critique, it is surprising that the exchanges anticipated at the intersections of Latin Americanism and postcolonial studies during the past ten years have not produced more extensive studies of Mariátegui. The absence can be explained in large part, I think, by the vexed legacy of Mariátegui’s alliances to vitalist thought, most clearly incarnated in his proposals regarding the indigenous revolutionary myth he saw as the key to an integrated, modern Peruvian nation. For example, it is telling that the most thorough examination
to date of Mariátegui’s confluences with the postcolonial reticulate, by Sara Castro-Klarén (134), painstakingly analyzes his heterotemporal rendering of Peruvian citizenship and his prescient awareness of the dialectical entanglement of coloniality and modernity—both essential to creating a “pluritopic” dialogue beyond the North–South bilateral scope that has characterized Latin America’s engagement with postcolonial studies—without once mentioning myth. The relative silence surrounding this cornerstone of Mariátegui’s thought, especially where it is aligned with assertions of his relevance for postcolonial contexts, can be seen as symptomatic of the broader discomfort of postcolonialism’s dominant reading paradigms with the irrational or the religious, betraying a tacit submission that the Mariátegui best suited to reintegrate Marxist Latin American and poststructural metropolitan insights to postcoloniality is a figure that showcases his historical materialist acumen and bears no traces of mysticism.

My objective in this essay is to recuperate the other, mystical figure of Mariátegui as the starting point for the conversation heralded above. What I aim to demonstrate is that such an initiative cannot be content to station liberationist writing from Latin America as a corrective to Anglo-American assumptions about the postcolonial, nor more broadly to reinsert Marxist categories of nation, class, and consciousness back into its cardinal vocabulary; rather, an earnest reading of myth forces a revision of the ways both postcolonial studies and Marxism manage, or not, to apprehend those elements that have traditionally inhabited the constitutive outside of philosophy’s Cartesian thinking subject, elements that have social significance in the real experience of modernity in many places but are unintelligible to the paradigms charged with understanding it. In their second balance sheet of postcolonialism, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge cite this necessary elision within Marxist and postcolonial criticism of what they call contramodernity (following Homi Bhabha) as a central obstacle to any continued purchase of the term “postcolonial”:

[A] radical consciousness [of history] is not to be found by adherence to the current narratives of either postcolonialism or Marxism... Only by contemplating itself in the past tense may postcolonialism still continue into the future. The past it needs to accommodate includes a serious engagement with those premodern (and countermodern) tendencies that colonial instrumentalism systematically excised under the sign of the
rational “man.” . . . Into the Marxism we believe is foundational to an understanding of postcolonialism we need also to factor those life-worlds of spirits, myths, religions, indeed of poetry, that cannot be explained in totally modern terms, but which are nevertheless (as sites of contramodernity) so essential for a proper postcolonial reconstruction. (Mishra and Hodge, 391)

Taking my cue from Mishra and Hodge, I am departing from the premise that it is precisely the obscure moments of Mariátegui’s writing—where myth emerges as a nodal point of contemporary vitalist philosophies, indigenous subalternity, and a determinate program for social change—that stand to expand the intellective horizons of current thought on contramodernity. Interrogating these moments requires close attention to theory’s interpellation of the time of its objects, especially since, as Mabel Moraña enumerates, Mariátegui’s mission to “revindicate forms of belief and religiosity,” to “link belief and productivity,” and to “reaffirm . . . the place that experience, the past, and community occupy in collective imaginaries,” naturally led him to articulate his ideas not as “theories” at all but as contingent and productive moments of political action.4 Visualizing Mariátegui himself as a moment that grates from within the temporal cynosures shared by Marxist and deconstructive branches of thought on contramodernity would not then be a matter of attaining a perfect theory of myth but of grasping its attempt to intervene in real contemporary events: indexing Mariátegui’s postulates to an ideal of effects and actions rather than critical irreprescbachability may in its turn introduce a more effective role for Latin American anticolonial writing in the pantheon of postcolonial critique.

“MATERIALIST IDEALISM”: MARIÁTEGUI’S MYTH AND MARXISM

Mariátegui is best known as one of the fathers of socialist thought in Peru and across Latin America, both as the founder and editor of the periodical Amauta (1926–30) and as an integral participant in national and international politics. His abundant corpus consists of short essays on a wide variety of topics—world politics, philosophy, cultural and literary criticism, and national history and economy—most of which
are directed, especially in the last seven years of his life, toward forging a path of socialist revolution in Peru through the political and economic empowerment of its indigenous population. The most representative of his later essays, published as *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* shortly before his death (Mariátegui 1971), focus on the systematic subjugation of Peru’s indigenous people, what Mariátegui calls “el problema del indio.” Mariátegui’s framing of the national condition results from two years he spent as a young adult in Italy, a formative journey that afforded him extensive contact with contemporary political thinkers (particularly Piero Gobetti and the Ordine nuovo group, although only marginally with Antonio Gramsci) and from which he would return to Peru in 1923 a confirmed socialist.5 His insistence on defining indigenous exploitation in statistical, concrete terms marks a radical departure from previous treatments of *el problema del indio* in Peru that relied on evangelistic endeavors, racist treatises based in theories of social Darwinism, or nostalgic indigenista literature in the romantic tradition. The *Siete ensayos* undertakes a comprehensive analysis of education, religion, literature, and land reform, threading through its treatment of all the major institutions of public life a demonstration of indigenous suffering as the fundamental dilemma preventing the articulation of a unified Peruvian nationalism. Most of Mariátegui’s articles on national issues propose some version of the same argument: because each successive stage of Peruvian “development”—from the independence movement, to the republic, to export-driven capitalism—derives from a rhetoric that is never reflected in real practice, the society of twentieth-century Peru operates under the same feudal systems implemented by Spanish conquistadors four hundred years earlier. In effect, Mariátegui maintains, because independence and the subsequent emergence of comprador capitalism in Peru is accompanied by no true revolution in social relations—that is, because the legitimization of the ruling classes does not undergo a transition from aristocratic elitism to bourgeois consciousness—the nation’s economic production, overwhelmingly constrained to latifundia dependent on indentured servitude, remains essentially feudalistic in nature.

Mariátegui’s ambitious treatment of imperialism and modernity, buttressed by the voluntaristic interpretations of Marxism in vogue in the first part of the twentieth century, is one of the first to situate
Peru’s local predicaments on a global horizon of capitalist development: he viewed national crises of disunion (a disunion so grave that, as Manuel González Prada put it, “wherever one places a finger pus spews out” [donde se aplica el dedo brota el pus]), not as an endemic affliction of Peru itself, but as a product of historic processes of a world order, starting with Spain’s first colonial foray into the New World. This watershed formulation of what Aníbal Quijano would later call the coloniality of power lays the ground for a customary reading of postcolonial inflection in Mariátegui’s explanations of Peru’s “insufficient” modernity, one that instrumentalizes Mariátegui to effect a dismantling of the organizing narrative of European modernity. Such a reading, of course, also passes over the essential kernel of Mariátegui’s schematics, the way his peculiar deployment of Marxist dialectics hinges on an assertion of the communist spirit of the indigenous people. The possibility of the kind of consciousness necessary to bring about a socialist revolution depends for Mariátegui upon the survival of the communal character of the Andean ayllu among its contemporary descendents.

The methodological inconsistency between an emphatic and meticulous grounding in economic facts (in “unmistakable and clearcut terms” [Mariátegui 1971, 32]), and recurrence to a notion of spirit, is made all the more apparent by Mariátegui’s reiterative and insouciant melding of the two. Take for example the following passage from “The Problem of the Land”: “In Indian villages where families are grouped together that have lost the bonds of their ancestral heritage and community work, hardy and stubborn habits of cooperation and solidarity still survive that are the empirical expression of a communist spirit. When expropriation and redistribution seem about to liquidate the ‘community,’ indigenous socialism always finds a way to reject, resist, or evade this incursion” (1971, 58). This overt assimilation of “spirit” to empiricist rhetoric that defines Mariátegui’s eclectic approach to socialism makes him something of a conflictive character for critical interpretation. A Marxist reading, wont to draw its conclusions from the material conditions of indigenous populations that Mariátegui so carefully outlines, finds it difficult to account for his accommodation of spirit into an otherwise orthodox economic analysis. Indeed, his main reproach of Spanish colonialism is the very destruction of the ayllu and its institutions. The spirit of the “community,” then, has persisted for
four hundred years despite historical conditions, rather than because of them: it is a preternatural socialism rooted in a long-extinguished primitive economy that, thanks to the anemic capitalist development of Peru, now announces the promise of a socialist future. What is more, the indigenous revolution Mariátegui envisions will come about through popular adherence to a socialist myth. He states in the well-known prologue to José Valcárcel’s *Tempest in the Andes*, “It is not the civilization or the alphabet of the white man that is lifting the soul of the Indian. It is the myth, the idea of the socialist revolution” (1996, 81).

The fixation on spirit and myth as cortical features of social progress, what Mariátegui calls “materialist idealism,” constitutes an indigestible element of his work for contemporary readers insofar as it aligns him with a number of irrationalist and/or neo-Hegelian thinkers (Henri Bergson, Georges Sorel, and Benedetto Croce in particular), whose ideas quickly fell out of favor after the 1920s. A clear reticence, to say the least, toward Mariátegui’s vitalist streak has always been visible in the Latin American intellectual tradition identified most strictly as Marxist, where criticism was long caught up in refashioning his legacy alternatively as populist, elitist, or Stalinist according to Peru’s self-positioning in response to changing headwinds from the Comintern (embracing the idea of its “heterodoxy” beginning only in the 1980s), and where even today reevaluations of his work denounce its Sorelian moments as “dead paths” of Marxism; the best known of these, by David Sobrevilla, concludes that the recuperation of a Mariáteguian approach to socialism today will have to abandon any appeal to “intuition, imagination, and affect” (424). Yet even for a more culturally oriented line of scholarship based in Latin America, there long persisted a conviction that a truly “critical” study must somehow fashion Mariátegui as a preliminary figure of modern *indigenismo*, an intellectual on the cusp of the more ecumenical approaches to *el problema del indio*—notions of mestizaje, transculturation, and heterogeneity, as well as the anthropological and testimonial modes of writing that dominated Latin America’s scene of politically committed literature through the 1970s—whose preference for ambiguity is more palatable to postmodern scholarship. Such a retrofitting, at the least, helps to settle Mariátegui among the roots of later intellectual trends, important as a contributor to more interesting things yet to come along: it is in this spirit, for example, that Angel Rama credits him with making
the concrete plight of indigenous peasants a part of national discourse, thus facilitating the narrative transculturation of José María Arguedas in the 1950s and ’60s, even as he dismisses Mariátegui’s mystical side as a predictable recitation of irrationalism. At the most, this retrofitting goes a long way toward relieving Mariátegui of his essentialist burdens by translating them to a lexicon of cultural suturing: this is evident in Antonio Cornejo Polar’s seminal studies of heterogeneity, where Mariátegui figures as the arbiter of Peru’s nonsynchronous literary production. But neither of these approaches intends to explore how the use of spirit and myth might themselves be consequential to his task. The line of questioning I want to pursue here is not of a genealogical or redemptive character—that is, it will not try to illustrate how Mariátegui prefigures other intellectuals, nor can it promote the sort of political program he envisioned. Rather, the goal here is to identify what gets left behind when “spirit” and “myth” are swept into the background of his corpus in the name of critical pulchritude.

DECONSTRUCTION AND THE “TIMES OF THE GODS”

In a trenchant parallel discussion, Dipesh Chakrabarty has addressed this same issue as it taints historiographic inquiry into the religious bases of Indian jute mill workers’ movements. Grappling with the inadequacy of Marxist narratives of labor and agency to account for the religious significance infused in workers’ labor practices—through everything from official holidays for the blessing of machines and tools to rituals carried out as part of the workday—Chakrabarty seizes upon the temporal disjuncture marking the historian’s every translation of singular “enchanted” processes into “disenchanted” academic structures. Given the set of assumptions conveyed by the use of historical, secular time as the universal medium of intellectual and political discourse—including the assumption, for example, that time is empty and homogeneous, able to accommodate every event along its all-encompassing continuum—the historian concerned with subaltern agency is hard-pressed to preserve the specific meanings attached to the “times of the gods” without abandoning the ethical disciplinary duty to restitute subaltern consciousness to the universal “time of history,” with the result that “claims about agency on behalf of the
religious, the supernatural, the divine, and the ghostly have to be mediated in terms of [universal time]” (Chakrabarty, 39).

Chakrabarty takes the opportunity provided by this translational impasse to revisit Marx’s notions of abstract and real labor, in an attempt to read difference back into their universalist conceit. If we turn the unveiling of the assumptions of historical time back on the conventional relation between these two types of labor, through which the abstract term, as the basis of exchange that hails individuals into capitalist structures, absorbs the heterogeneous capacities of every individual laborer into a monolithic equation of value, we can perceive the way they also inform an understanding of real labor over against the order of abstract labor as a natural, ahistorical, and therefore nonsocial event. Reversing that assumption means opening thought to the heterotopic inscription of social meaning: “the real . . . must refer to different kinds of ‘social,’ ones that could include nonhumans—and hence to different orders of temporality as well. . . . Real labor, the category, itself universal, must nevertheless have the capacity to refer to that which cannot be enclosed by the sign commodity, even though what remains unenclosed constantly inheres in the sign itself” (Chakrabarty, 54).

Chakrabarty’s analysis finely illuminates the problematic of myth for Mariátegui: his dilemma corresponds on multiple levels to the situation faced by intellectuals intent on retrieving indigenous consciousness for social projects in 1920s Peru, indicated most saliently by materialist idealism in the inseparability of labor and spirit, the “hardy and stubborn habits of cooperation and solidarity” that indicate the survival of the ayllu for Mariátegui. Indeed, his exposition of the religion of Tawantinsuyo accentuates the quotidian, almost utilitarian marriage of citizenship, work, and worship through which Incan leadership managed the incorporation of subject populations: the religious institutions of the Incas “conformed strictly to their agricultural economy and to their sedentary spirit” (Mariátegui 1971, 130). Although his writing circulated in a more politically oriented milieu than that of the historian, Mariátegui thus similarly struggled to activate within the homogeneous time of Peruvian nationhood a social value that acted in history without being enveloped by it.

Hypothetically, if one were to follow the affine points of these arguments to discover in Chakrabarty a viable issue from the entanglement
of myth, one would arrive at a solution along the lines of Derridean trace, which consists of recognizing that “the gap between real and abstract labor [introduces] the movement of ‘difference’ into the very constitution of the commodity, and thereby eternally defers its achievement of its true/ideal character” (Derrida 1970, 54). This proposal occasions an awareness of the ways myth jumbles any smooth transaction between Marxist analysis and the deconstructive models conventionally assigned to postcolonial difference. If, as Chakrabarty himself appears to acknowledge, myth is generally a non sequitur in nondeconstructionist Marxism with the exception of its recurrent metaphorized appearance in discussions of reification, commodity fetishism, or religious ideology, in principle it finds a more adequate role in postcolonial critique as a destabilizing component of imperial reason: here it slides into the place of the ambivalent or split sign that permits the very ordering of signs. Its status, with slight variations, is that of Bhabha’s Third Space, which, as he writes in “The Commitment to Theory,” “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (37). The rise of the Third Space (along with the variegated terminology it has inspired) as a premier platform for analyzing the postcolonial suggests that all options for the investigation of myth begin in a universe where the unfixed meaning is paradoxically fixed by its discursive structure. A number of studies of extrarational phenomena have already followed this avenue. However, it bears asking: if the nascent examination of myth within new approximations of postcolonial and Marxist paradigms continues to heed a general concurrence that deconstructive metaphors are the best bet for theory today, what does it stand to lose?

I think the concept of time must be central to these stakes. For Chakrabarty, once again, the problem of subaltern history is precisely how to make known the presence of enchanted time in capital through a marred translation into disenchanted discourse, the necessary medium of political action. The clearest way to recoup the first without sacrificing the second turns out to be—in a vein of Spivak’s signature of thought as much as that of Derrida—to fashion the subaltern as a fracturing from within of history’s codes, “to take history, the code, to its limits in order to make its unworking visible” (Chakrabarty, 58). Thus, a problem of multiple temporalities is resolved through a
critique of temporality as such, understood as metaphysics of presence. Time is not temporal insofar as it rests in a now, just as the now is not time in itself but only in a process of temporization through nonpresence. The affirmative character that from the 1990s on has surfaced the ethical injunction of this deconstructive maxim renders the time of change as a future anterior, a democracy to come that Derrida prescribes in Specters of Marx as “the opening of [the] gap between an infinite promise . . . and the determined, necessary, but also necessarily inadequate forms of what has to be measured against this promise” (1994, 81).

Affirmative deconstruction apprehends the threat of a specious self-presence—presence that could only be another teleology—by attesting to the absolute indeterminacy of a potential that the successive determinate forms of real politics can only vainly approximate. One can identify two main ways this theoretical scenario steers inquiry away from the goals and investments of myth as we have understood it here. The first stems from the well-known charge that deconstruction erases political subjectivity and erects barriers to action in the real world. Figured as an ambivalence that wavers between inclusion and exclusion as a built-in symptom of historical narrativity’s own ruptures, myth becomes an exercise in theoretical self-critique that ironically leaves only the critic’s voice, making theory its own object: Asha Varadharajan’s powerful assailment of deconstruction showed how the “adventure” of différance plays out in an economy removed from the conflicts of objects and subjects so that “acquiescing to the inevitable deferral of its presence leaves the object no alternative but to defer to the subject’s assertion of its absence” (32). From that state of affairs it is difficult to imagine how myth avoids the fate of neologisms like transculturation, hybridity, or créolité, all of which carry a specific and influential history in Latin America and which have been transfigured, in their passage through the discourses proliferated by postcolonial studies’ commercial annex, as “permanent, ever-recurring and ineluctable qualities” of the sort San Juan complains about in my opening quote. Programs of self-vigilance like democracy to come have a record of offering insufficient traction against the equalizing sweep of the history of capital: the ambivalence of terms like “myth” in theory harbors a potential dissident force, but in reality it often translates to one more category of consumption.
A second limitation of democracy to come, perhaps more consequential to the uses of myth Mariátegui envisions, is its binding temporal aporia. Derrida stipulates the structure of the promise, emphatically indifferent to the content of any future it may introduce, as the “necessarily formal necessity of [that future’s] possibility” (1994, 92). Holding open unconditionally the (im)possibility of time, the promise refutes any “temporality made up of the successive linking of presents identical to themselves and contemporary with themselves” (1994, 87). In other words, the promise works against time’s spatial emplotment, its metaphorical transferral of cause and effect, quantification, and beginnings and endings from the world of extended phenomena: this is how it achieves a messianic without messianism. And yet inherent to the promise’s formal status is a temporal inscription in the same spatial features as those of the history it undoes. The promise signals the limit of the general structure of experience, the weft around which the warp of progressive time is woven. Mimetically ciphered vis-à-vis homogeneous time, the promise affords nothing beyond history’s abyssal “beyond,” a veritable conceptual mirror image of empty, fillable universal time: because it is consigned to facilitate “think[ing] the necessarily pure and purely necessary form of the future as such” (1994, 92)—a task inversely determined by history’s own form—the promise is curiously inert in its absolute possibility. Here again, the social significance of contramodernity is relegated to aporia, flattening the wildly variable relationship between myth and universal time, its facture within, without, and against history, into a “purely necessary form” of the Derridean messianic.

**VITALIST MEMORY AND POLITICS: SOREL AND BERGSON**

The understanding of time capable of engaging seriously with myth, then, must appeal to its real social significance without trammeling it either to homogeneous history or to that history’s fissures. It must aim to mediate the relationship between inclusion and exclusion of indigenous consciousness on Peru’s historical stage. That is exactly what Mariátegui sets out to do, however unsystematically, by drawing on the vitalist precepts of his motley contemporary sources. In vitalist terms, myth introduces dissent as a virtual motivator of action gathered up
in the lived experience of subaltern subjects: the event it anticipates is absolutely singular, composed of elements that live off of but do not inhere in a Cartesian spatiotemporal universe.\textsuperscript{18} The French syndicalist Georges Sorel, the central influence quoted in Mariátegui’s discussions of myth, articulated the virtual motivators of political upheaval as a key to revolutionary change. Contemptuous of the complacent and integrative brands of socialism prevalent in France at the turn of the twentieth century, Sorel promoted in his \textit{Réflexions sur la violence} (1908) what he called a myth of the general strike: specifically, “a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by socialism against modern society” (127). With such a highly improvisational notion of myth, Sorel hoped to combat the stagnation of European proletarian movements in scientific formulas by recentering the problematic of socialism on the transformative moment continually elided by intellectual circles of the period: the potential for action embodied in the collective imagination of the proletariat. In this sense, myth for Sorel points to the emotional and creative motivations for action, motivations that are necessarily divorced both from the eventual historical realities they may produce and from the analytical mode of inquiry that seeks to describe them. Sorel avers that “a myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the conviction of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical description” (50).

In displacing the grounds for social transformation from the plane of historical causality to contingent collectivity, Sorel’s ideas marked an important alternative both to the more determinist theories of the Second International and to the parliamentarist interests of fin-de-siècle socialist leaders in France. It is logical that this flexibility should be easily transposed to Mariátegui’s analyses of Peru, where the ideas of stable class identity and historical necessity appear themselves to be a fiction. In his essays on national politics, Mariátegui’s prescriptions for myth are generally linked to an emergent indigenous activism (although he also enthusiastically propounds proletarian social myth, particularly in \textit{El alma matinal}), and often seem poised to cathex Andean spiritual traditions as their impetus: he ends his overview of religious practice in the \textit{Siete ensayos} by declaring that “present
revolutionary and social myths can occupy man’s conscience just as fully as the old religious myths” (1971, 152). Disseminated as they are within Peru’s dichotomous cultural arena, his evocations of indigenous spirit and myth could easily be interpreted as a rhetorical prestidigitation, a sleight of hand capable at once of closing the gap between Marxist theories and Peruvian reality and of conjuring a revived Andean past as social protagonist. Yet it is precisely this romantic sentiment Mariátegui censures in indigenismo and socialism alike as a decoy of conservatism. The innovation he praises in Peru’s new “vanguardist” indigenismo (much of which circulated in Amauta) is its refusal of earlier mythological or ahistorical portrayals of indigenous people: “[vanguard] indigenismo does not indulge in fantasies of utopian restorations. It perceives the past as a foundation, not a program. Its conception of history and its events is realistic and modern. It neither ignores nor slight any of the historical facts that have modified the world’s reality, as well as Peru’s, in these four centuries” (1996, 71); in Defensa del marxismo (1928), he deplores the Orientalist bent of Belgian socialist Henri de Man, urging readers to resist any affinity with the “menopausal spiritualism” of the pseudo-progressive bourgeois order. Here he counters de Man’s affirmation of the “primacy of spirit” over material values, scoffing that “to distinguish material from spiritual values would require a reliance on the most archaic dualism” (1996, 162).

Mariátegui’s nuanced stance on the mind/body problem, not unlike his notion of materialist idealism, strives for a usable concept of spirit while avoiding both positivist and neoromantic political perspectives. This aspect of his thought bears solid ties with Henri Bergson, who addressed a similar “archaic dualism” of realism and idealism in Matter and Memory and Creative Evolution. As a philosopher of life, Bergson rearticulates perception in the realm of living organisms as a problem, above all, of action. Rather than as a contended threshold between two possible sources of knowledge about the world (one based in unextended thought, the other in extended physical data), perception for Bergson operates as a tool driving life’s survival and adaptation in the world. Bergson envisions matter as an infinitely multiple and interpenetrated “aggregate of images” in which the body figures as one more image and where perception functions as a sort of automatic filter, making visible only those images of interest to the future potential actions of the living thing. In this role, perception is constantly
aided by memory, so that past events and images circulate in and out of a virtual “zone of indeterminacy” where they may guide possible actions.

Bergson’s profound influence on Sorel’s myth of the general strike is overwhelmingly apparent here, although he himself disavowed any association with Sorel’s ideas. But the important consequence of his conception of virtual action, at least for my examination of Mariátegui, is that it understands time as an immeasurable, indivisible continuity of lived moments, what Bergson famously termed duration: “Pure duration is the form taken by the succession of our inner states of consciousness when our self lets itself live, when it abstains from establishing a separation between the present state and anterior states” (2001, 74–75). In fact, Bergson prefigures deconstruction’s attack on the spatialization of time, but his own attack goes further in striving to conceive time, movement, and change as nonspatial occurrences. Unlike the outside world plotted in causes, effects, sequences, and juxtapositions, inner life proceeds in a “confused multiplicity” ordered only qualitatively by the perceiving mind: thus the change we sense in the brightness of a sheet of paper as light passes over it obtains only as it registers various unique states in our minds, and owes nothing to the source of light cast on the paper; what is more, “brightness” itself becomes a unique quality in every iteration (of course, here the concept of iteration is inoperative), so that all our previous experiences of it live on in each renewed perception. Seen in this way as “qualitative progress,” the time of life becomes a function of endurance, emptying out the categories of past and present: “Like the universe as a whole, like each conscious being taken separately, the organism which lives is a thing that endures. Its past, in its entirety, is prolonged into its present, and abides there, actual and acting” (1975, 19). Spirit, a rather nebulous concept in Bergson that is interchangeable with mind and later with the élan vital, serves as the core of duration in that it is a “synthesis of past and present with a view to the future [that] contracts the moments of . . . matter in order to use them and to manifest itself by actions” (2004, 294).

Insofar as the indigenous spirit of Peruvian peasants is congenial with Bergsonian spirit, it suggests a social practice driven by the images and memories of local tradition: it is in this way that spirit is communicated precisely by the peasants’ “hardy and stubborn habits of
cooperation and solidarity” quoted above. As an enduring consciousness that motivates action according to the interest and character of the organism, spirit, as Bergson would have it, effectively shrinks the world down to that sliver of matter that bears directly on our lives, so that interior states of being may be said to eclipse the exterior world in the phenomenon of life: “Our previous psychical life exists for us even more than the external world, of which we never perceive more than a very small part, whereas on the contrary we use the whole of our lived experience” (2004, 188). Duration is a palpable influence in the “living values” Mariátegui counterposes to the occult spiritualism of Henri de Man as “[the desirable satisfaction] one feels in one’s conscience when reflecting on what is most enduring in the reality of the self and the medium that surrounds it” (1996, 162).

In the indigenous context, spirit is linked to a perdurable religious and economic practice. Mariátegui affirms in “The Process of Literature” that “[t]he Indian has a social existence that preserves his customs, his understanding of life, his attitude toward the universe . . . Notwithstanding the conquest, the latifundium, the gamonal, the Indian of the sierra still follows his own tradition” (1971, 282). In locating the nucleus of a collective social myth for disaggregated peasant populations in these practices, Mariátegui discards the grounding principle of class that organizes Sorel’s revolutionary schema, affirming instead the significance of cultural memory. His maneuvers outline an iconoclastic approach to the work of representation in vanguardist politics in that Mariátegui is compelled to carry out the bulk of this work through the promotion of an indigenismo he recognizes as irremediably ersatz. He thereby employs an artificial literary edifice to promote solidarity with indigenous peasants, even as he must renounce any possibility of “representing” them directly. One of the most cited passages of the Siete ensayos reminds us that indigenismo “cannot give us a strictly authentic version of the Indian, for it must idealize and stylize him. . . . It is still a mestizo literature and as such is called indigenist rather than indigenous” (1971, 274). 

For vanguardist indigenismo, then, political advocacy becomes a prosthesis for literary portrayal charged with bringing consciousness—both in the sense of creating national (criollo and mestizo) awareness, and of laying the foundations for political agency—in anticipation of a unified and self-knowing Peruvian subject.
In their combined approach to speaking of indigenous populations, his essays follow a logic akin to that of the dialectics Keya Ganguly explores in her ethnography of Indian immigrants in New Jersey, which inscribes critical inquiry around a constant redrawing of the subject/object relation. This “adequation” to the object required by dialectics involves “moving beyond a narrowly hermeneutic model of reading texts and cultures toward something that approximates approximation—that is, toward significance, not reference” (Ganguly 2001, 36). Ganguly’s statement recommends an adjustment of scholarly priorities, from representative precision in the form of identity to a concern for effectiveness: dialectics is offered specifically as an alternative to deconstructive critiques of logocentrism that, as she puts it “en[d] up in increasingly refined definitions of questions and their categories but bring no real illumination to the circumstances to which thought might apply itself in the real world” (34). This relocation of intellectual practice from the airy realm of refined concepts to the imperfect sphere of action was, of course, one of Mariátegui’s main goals in his elaboration of indigenous socialism, as his prolegomena to Amauta unequivocally states: “The perfect, absolute, abstract idea, indifferent to facts, to moving changing reality, is worthless; what is useful is the germinal, concrete, dialectical, operative idea, rich in potential and capable of movement” (1996, 88). Indeed, Mariátegui’s defense of myth, much as that of Sorel, is prefaced in a withering disdain for the “refined ideas” debated by his contemporaries both in Europe and Peru, which themselves become mythical, religious: the sin of these “prophets of progress” consists in “conceiving the nation as an abstract reality supposedly superior to and distinct from the concrete, living reality of its citizens,” what amounts to “sacrificing man to myth” [conc(ebir) la Nación como una realidad abstracta que suponen superior y distinta a la realidad concreta y viviente de sus ciudadanos . . . están siempre dispuestos a sacrificar al mito el hombre] (1972, 68). The counterpoint Mariátegui often limns between the exhausted liberal-national myth that “sacrifices” man and the spontaneous myth of collective motivation signals a religiosity of history of the type theorized in early Frankfurt School dialectics, as a phantasmagoric machine of equivalence that “finds its equilibrium in dogmas and the old order” (1930, 30). Alberto Flores Galindo understands this counterpoint as an axis of Mariátegui’s thought, figured following Miguel de Unamuno’s Agonía de cristianismo.
(a book well loved by Mariátegui) quite literally as an agon, a dialogue and struggle. This means, as Flores Galindo rightly affirms, that reading Mariátegui also requires agony: there is no finding a passkey to his way of thinking, because “it was not elaborated patiently in a study, but in the interior of life itself, in struggle and conflict, day by day” [no se elaboró pacientemente en un escritorio, sino al interior de la vida misma, en la lucha y el conflicto, día a día] (11).

We have seen how, in raw terms, Mariátegui’s use of myth demarcates an intersection between postcolonial and Marxist interpretive frameworks: it adheres to an eschatological narrative of liberation and progress even as it replaces the colonial logic of the latter’s more intractable features—such as historical necessity or class consciousness—with a recognition of something “beyond.” It remains far from clear how theory ought to reckon this “beyond,” given that a stock inquiry from either a Marxist or postcolonial perspective, as so many critics have already sensed, will be driven by its own tenets to expose the terms “myth” and “spirit” as more keywords from a page of irredeemable anticolonial thought—of a piece with Négritude, mestizaje, la “raza cósmica,” and so on—that uses vague ethnic agglutinants to suspend the effects of ideology and violence and to call up a transparent relationship to the subaltern. Even less perfunctory readings have yet to capture myth’s capacity to couple a rigorous view of historical modernity with something like the significance Ganguly speaks of. I would like to conclude by looking briefly at two available options for such an approach to Mariátegui’s work in order to illuminate, if not to resolve, some of the difficulties involved.

**MYTH, SUBJECTIVITY, DISCOURSE: LARSEN AND LACLAU**

Neil Larsen, a Marxist scholar who elsewhere has established himself as a critic of postcolonialism, has proposed to disclose through a study of Mariátegui the failure of that field’s critical mechanisms to give adequate measure of the historico-social concerns of the *Siete ensayos*, more precisely their failure to see Peru as an historical site of social struggle. To that effect, Larsen begins his study by asking ironically whether Mariátegui can be considered a postcolonial theorist. In keeping with this introduction, his essay aligns myth with postcolonial
deconstructive practice, positing it as a sort of catachresis upon which the future narrative of Peruvian nationalism is to be forged. Larsen maintains that, while the nation in the classic sense is typically a narrative (or myth) elaborated to buttress what already exists in real life, narratives of nationalism in Peru describe a content that is absent in social praxis. Myth, then, serves Mariátegui as a strategic mechanism—or, as in Spivak’s early work, strategic essentialism—meant to reunite form and content. Like strategic essentialism, Mariátegui’s myth is a temporary device, what Larsen calls a “leap of faith” [salto de fe], which is destined to disappear once its purpose has been fulfilled: “National liberation adopts the subjective and conscious form of myth, but only momentarily, only until form and content are cemented—the moment in which, at least theoretically, all recourse to myth becomes historically superfluous. That is to say that the project of national liberation never ceases to be for Mariátegui a rational project, in its objective historic form” (1996, 871).

Granted, Larsen’s objective is to bespeak what is lost in postcolonialism’s erasure of the nation as a concrete political venue, and for the purpose it serves, his argument is successful. He is right to point out, for example, that “unlike the current tendency to think of the nation as only one subject position among many available to literature, Mariátegui, along with conceiving of the nation as a ‘myth’ . . . never stops insisting on the social and historical place the nation occupies as an integral factor in postcolonial emancipation” (1996, 872). But his characterization of myth as a momentary and in the end solely discursive “leap of faith” exemplifies how the tendency to classify contramodern elements according to the main frameworks at hand often musters nothing more than a coercive identification through the same careworn categories. For Larsen, of course, the detour through Spivak merely permits a return to a wholly materialist conclusion: in equating the spiritual component of revolution with textual legerdemain, he at once conveniently rationalizes Mariátegui and disregards the potential for change harbored specifically in indigenous practices that is so central to the proposal of the Siete ensayos. Larsen strenuously defends Mariátegui’s rationalism, insisting that “it is only because Mariátegui considers the ‘Indians’ to be historical agents incapable of capturing their own historical role in its rational form . . . that [he], in the last instance, turns to the irrational” (1996, 870). The sentence
misleadingly implies that myth is purely disingenuous, invoked for an aesthetic likeness to the “premodern” rather than for its insights into the revolutionary process. Considering, as Larsen does, that the only readable trace of myth is to be found in a literary circuit that involved little if any indigenous participation, his suggestion relies on an a priori exclusion of the indigenous from the social realm: myth remedies a logical aporia, but it does not reflect anything in Peruvian reality. Once the moment of myth is resolved as an intellectual trick, the social significance of indigenous practices can only be conceived in the traditional Marxist way, as a function of hegemonized subjectivity, thus dispelling the presence of anything one could properly call mythical.

Ernesto Laclau’s post-Marxist political philosophy, in principle the closest thing to a deconstructive but interventionist notion of myth, is somewhat more accommodating than Larsen’s “leap of faith.” Sorel’s idea of social myth—via Gramsci—was instrumental in the radical rethinking of hegemony Laclau first carried out with Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. Here, the Sorelian–Gramscian concept of historical blocs is reread from poststructuralist and psychoanalytic angles as a nodal point, a momentary coalescence of partially sutured elements within a constantly shifting discursive structure. Unlike the constituencies discussed by Sorel and Gramsci, which are in every instance guaranteed by class alliance, Laclau and Mouffe’s equivalences are groundless and never complete. Any identity composes itself on the suppression of other intervening elements, thus borrowing a fullness it can never achieve. Their characterization of hegemony as a spontaneous, incomplete relation conserves integral remnants of Sorel’s social myth: it is theorized, much like the latter, as an unruly potentiality, something that is “unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical description” (50). Laclau’s independent work, starting with *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, goes so far as to locate political subjectivity in the creation of a “mythical” space that “bears no relation of continuity with the dominant ‘structural objectivity,’” and which does not share its “logical form” (1990, 61–62). While his initial characterization holds out the possibility of an alternative of social meaning, a “logical form” other than differential structural objectivity, an inconsistency is quickly introduced. For mythical space can only originate in the structural dislocations of
social discourse, and its existence as such is predicated on the failure—or, in the Lacanian intertext, Lack—of the system: in other words, it is born of the same logic as the objectivity it confronts, differing only in that it strives to manifest another, unrealized objectivity. “The fascination accompanying the vision of a promised land or an ideal society stems directly from this perception or intuition of a fullness that cannot be granted by the reality of the present. Myth only springs forth as a metaphor on a ground dominated by this peculiar absence/presence dialectic” (1990, 63). This absence/presence dialectic, arguably Laclau’s signature theoretical move, gives an accurate account of the way messianic social movements—and here we may include Mariátegui’s own agenda—are articulated at the margins of the social. Certainly, in writing about the mythic potential of indigenous peasants Mariátegui is fabricating an abstract space in contention of the obvious dislocations of Peruvian national discourse: in part, the space of indigenous myth is simply another vision of Peruvian nationhood. But in order to move from an observation of the ideological investiture of myth within social movements to the conclusion that its meaning is always already defined by the process of hegemonization, inquiry must be limited to a hermetic and uniform sphere of signification, one in which the smooth surface of discourse’s play of absence/presence leaves no room for surprises.28

It is easy to observe here that the constriction of mythic space to the interplay of Laclau’s hegemonic relation responds to the same features of “spacing” that mimetically conform the content of Derrida’s promise to a discursive structure of experience. Laclau’s review of *Specters of Marx* picks up on the points of resemblance between Derrida’s messianic and Sorelian–Gramscian theories of historical contingency as the most promising opportunity for deconstruction to effect a “turning/deepening/supersession” of the Marxist tradition: this opportunity lies in prefacing theories of emancipation on the condition that “[c]ollective will, ‘organic ideology,’ ‘hegemonic group,’ and so forth become empty forms that can be filled by any imaginable political and social content,” making emancipation “something like an ‘existential’ of historical life and . . . no longer the announcement of a concrete event” (1996, 95). The unspoken premise of Laclau’s asseverations, namely, that an “existential” of historical life, and therefore all political and social meaning, necessarily complies with the semiotic terrain
of his absence/presence dialectic, or Derrida’s (im)possible promise, may be the right place to rethink the study of myth’s uneven entry on the scene of modern historical time, precisely through a reconsideration of its original vitalist articulations. This would require re-engagement with the contours of heterogeneity as Bergson and Sorel saw it—that is, as a singular and qualitative multiplicity, whose unprecedented incursions in the conventional realm of social action do not hew to a structural limit-point between identity and difference, but rather belie the very understanding of society as a space marked by degrees of determinacy and identity. Indeed, it is the priority of action over identity that Laclau’s avatar of Sorel forfeits, together with the virtual nature of its emergence, in favor of a social heterogeneity embedded, as Nathan Widder explains, in “a notion of flat space, one ideal for a politics of boundaries and horizons, and therefore one which allows the impossibility of full inclusivity to imply the necessity for exclusion” (124). Widder considers how a virtual understanding of difference forgoes this necessity for exclusion and broadens the scope of radical democracy: in accordance with the Deleuzian principle of singularity, his argument proposes a model of engagement defined by “multiple affirmation,” one for which heterogeneity “does not constitute the failure of meaning, but instead enables a very peculiar thought of pluralism, one which envisions a world that is whole yet incomplete” (131).

The incompleteness retained by the virtual (which informs both Bergson’s duration and Deleuze’s “repetition with a difference”) contends that the contours of social meaning are not reducible to the conceptual dimensions of discourse. Mariátegui’s allusions to spirit and myth can be said to make room for these contours in that they couple an unknown quality of indigenous life with the possibility of social change. As with Laclau’s chains of equivalence or empty signifiers, Mariátegui’s myth pools a multiplicity of values for a specific political demand, but unlike in the former the meaning of myth cannot be determined retroactively by a cause–effect relationship: its force is singular insofar as its constitutive elements—of memory and experience, of agriculture and spirituality, and so on—are incommensurate with their discrete political import, even as they help to shape it. Myth thus lays claim to a “dirty” object, whose composition is heterogeneous to the categories available to the criollo or mestizo intellectual,
but which is nevertheless present on the scene of social signification. When it limits the problem of myth to the modal and temporal structures of discursive (non)systems, critical analysis runs askance of the possibilities of meaning Mariátegui deliberately leaves open, in the same way that it risks foreclosing the contingencies introduced by other phenomena that bear a similarly “dirty” relationship with modernity. The perceived relevance of Mariátegui in political and cultural debates beyond Latin America negatively gestures at a mapping of history for which faith, superstition, and other rites of contramodernity can attest, as Chakrabarty says, that “other temporalities, other forms of worlding, coexist and are possible” (57).

In my discussion of Mariátegui I have tried to demonstrate how the presence of unmodern elements in socialist struggles for decolonization can complicate the materialist critique of postcolonialism. If this critique is to include a committed engagement with socialist anti-imperial writing, it seems that one of its crucial tasks will be ceding some theoretical territory to the events and successes of the non-theoretical world. In a roundtable published in a recent issue of *PMLA* titled “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” Susie Tharu, a founder of the South Asian Subaltern Studies group who works and teaches in India, submits that this sort of concession is necessary for the reappraisal of the postcolonial:

Any graduate student of history, anthropology, or literature in the United States can probably write with authority about the conceptual irregularities of Orientalism, critique the series Subaltern Studies, point to what has been left out of a study, pounce on a binary, and so on. One only has to apply the ready-made theory to do that—so much so that many young people today find it unnecessary to read any of these texts, let alone take them seriously. Yet living as I do in a place where these texts are still pored over and endlessly discussed by those who do not seem to appreciate their theoretical inadequacies, I find that the challenge is to understand the complex transformations these texts achieve and set in motion. It is their success—or, better put, the enigma of their success—rather than their theoretical or political incorrectness that draws me. (Agnani, 644)

Tharu speaks as an intellectual working on the margins of metropolitan academia, and she describes not Marxist revolutionary texts, but the foundational texts of postcolonial studies itself. Yet her statements
are eerily reminiscent of the challenges confronted by Mariátegui in his navigation of interwar socialism. The question she intimates serves as a useful preface for his essays, as well as for theoretical discussions of Latin American anticolonial writing as a whole: that is, what gets left behind in the quest for a theoretically impeccable account of difference? At what point does it spectrally reprise the same technocratic ethos Mariátegui battles, the “bourgeois mind [that] amuses itself with a rationalist critique of the methods, the theories, the technique” of social change (1996, 145)? The question is hypothetical, but the pre-emption of the moment it augurs may well lie with a deeper cognizance of those nonrational elements that have always been and continue to be a crucial part of modern and postmodern social practice.

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Notes

1. In Local Histories / Global Designs, for example, Walter Mignolo cites Mariátegui’s understanding of the entwinement of local and global processes of modernity as a basis for an alternative thinking of the postcolonial (139–43); in a more recent essay, he includes Mariátegui in a group of models for “decolonial epistemologies” (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 109). See also Román de la Campa (26).

2. See the other essays in Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies (Bartolovich and Lazarus) for similar critiques of this tendency in postcolonial studies.

3. Patricia d’Allemand’s essay offers an exception, but it aims to dissuade from thinking Mariátegui’s thought together with postcolonial studies. One of very few examinations of Mariátegui’s thought in Anglophone scholarship appears in Robert J. C. Young’s Postcolonialism (195–200), although it does not go beyond a cursory overview.

4. “Reivindicar formas de creencia y religiosidad propias de las culturas vernáculas y vincular creencia y productividad . . . reafirmar la importancia de la cultura popular y el lugar que ocupan en los imaginarios colectivos la experiencia, el pasado y la comunidad . . . reconoce esos niveles de funcionamiento social era, en el pensamiento Mariáteguiano, una forma de intervenir los discursos del poder [por medio de] una filosofía de la praxis en la que la teoría era concebida como un momento de la acción política, nunca como su reemplazo” (70). These
“notes” Moraña offers on the place of Mariátegui’s thought today constitute the most comprehensive review to date of recent scholarship and ongoing debates about his work, although they do not discuss myth specifically. (All translations followed by the original Spanish are my own.)

5. The extent of Mariátegui’s familiarity with Gramsci’s thought, and the presence of the latter’s influence on his interpretation of Marxism, remains a subject of speculation: while the startling similarities between their telluric, geographical orientation of socialist strategy is widely noted (see, for example, Melis, 17–22), there is little evidence in his essays or correspondence that Mariátegui had anything but a passing encounter with Gramsci or with his work, as Chavarría documents (206 n.13).

6. Fernanda Beigel (chap. 4) subtly documents how the changing historical interpretations of Mariátegui “constructed an imaginary debate on the work of Mariátegui with a corpus and a set of Soviet practices that the Peruvian never could have visualized, simply because he died in April of 1930” [construyeron] un debate imaginario de la obra de Mariátegui con un corpus y un conjunto de prácticas soviéticas que el peruano nunca pudo visualizar, sencillamente porque murió en abril de 1930] (143).

7. The term “dead path” is Sobrevilla’s. Similarly, Aníbal Quijano, writing in 1980, sees the Sorelian elements of Mariátegui’s proposals as unjustifiable, claiming that “Fifty years later, it is surprising to see in a man like Mariátegui this unbridled admiration for a thought as confused and dispensable as that of Sorel” [Cincuenta años después, sorprende en un hombre como Mariátegui esa desaforada admiración a un pensamiento tan confuso y prescindible como el de Sorel] (74).

8. See “El área cultural andina” in Rama.

9. Cornejo Polar sees Mariátegui as a maverick patron of heterogeneity, noting that his perspective “does not attempt to dilute indigenismo’s underlying contradiction, which is a real contradiction; it tries, rather, to explain and legitimize its heteroclite condition, defining its context and granting it an ideological direction within the problems of the contemporary world” (113–14).

10. Indeed, the violent legacy of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru must give us pause before any such proposal, although, as Roger Zapata points out in his genealogy of the guerrilla group, the dogma of the Sendero employs an “anachronic” and “erroneous” interpretation of Mariátegui (121).

11. Even contemporary discussions of commodity fetishism have trended toward discursive, rather than materialist, hermeneutics. Michael Taussig’s work, for example, places commodity fetishism in conversation with the pre-capitalist practices of different South American indigenous communities to reveal the “magical” qualities of modern discourse; the contributors of the volume Border Fetishisms understand the fetish primarily as an interstitial object and aim to “explor[e] the forms of difference that fetishism both marks and negotiates in the process of producing or alluding to novel, creative hybridities” (Spyer, 2).

12. In the essays of the edited volume Magic and Modernity, for example, conflicts between magic or other occult practices and discourses of modernity are
framed largely in terms of “magic vs. modernity or the magic of modernity” (Meyer and Pels, 37). That is, the analysis of magic either points up its construction as the discursive outside of modernity, or it locates the hidden “magical” operations of modernity. This circumscription of paths open to humanistic or social studies of irrational phenomena owes at least in part to the rational bent of dominant critical idioms: as Gauri Viswanathan comments in her study of religion in colonial India, “to engage in discussions about belief, conviction, or religious identity in a secular age of postmodern skepticism is already fraught with infinite hazards, not least of which is the absence of an adequate vocabulary or language” (1998, xiv).

13. This is, of course, Derrida’s hypothesis in his notes on Being and Time, that “the [now] as an element of time . . . is temporal only in becoming temporal, that is, in ceasing to be by proceeding to no-thingness . . . in the form of past- or future-being” (1970, 63); from these conclusions he deduces the form of the trace that will inform différence and democracy to come.

14. Along with the work of Asha Varadharajan mentioned below, Peter Dews has also registered the political lassitude of deconstruction’s “eternal vigilance” from an Adornian perspective. In a discussion of temporality in postcolonial theory, Keya Ganguly echoes these concerns, noting that Bhabha’s translation of nonsynchronicity into a discursive scheme of différence erases its importance as “a contradiction within modernity” (2002, 173).

15. Jacques Rancière’s recent appraisal of democracy to come reiterates some of Varadharajan’s insights, averring that the structure of promise as ethical injunction “substitutes aporia for dissensus” (282), in that it is “the commitment to an absolute other, an ‘other’ who can never become the same as us, who cannot be substituted . . . ‘Democracy to come’ means a democracy without a demos, with no possibility that a subject perform the kratos of the demos” (280).

16. There is a decades-long line of critique in Latin Americanism that points out how “hybridity,” “the postcolonial,” and other fashionable terms often draw on peripheral culture according to academic demands, ingesting and molding local knowledge and intellectuals with a series of value-coding mechanisms to turn culture into marketable resources. See Moreiras for a thoroughgoing critique of the entire corpus of twentieth-century concepts of cultural difference in Latin America.

17. This primacy of aporia with its implicit spatial references complicates the ostensible appositeness of Derrida’s promise with Mariátegui’s own brand of messianism. Moraña’s assertion, for example, that Derrida’s promise and Laclau’s theories of emancipation (theories that I discuss below) offer a productive focus for future reinterpretations of Mariátegui (Moraña, 58, 86–87 n.27) may thus be read against the grain to pursue the inverse, the merit of reinterpreting prevailing ideas about emancipation through Mariátegui.

18. The introduction to a recent issue of Theory, Culture & Society dedicated to vitalism explains that “[c]hange . . . does not occur in time and space. Instead, time and space change according to the specificity of an event. . . . [T]he focus on
relationality in process thinking represents a departure from an understanding of material processes via language and discourse [by seeking] to acknowledge the situated heterogeneity of stubborn facts . . . given neither in matter nor in discourse” (Fraser, Kember, and Lury, 4).

19. Paris describes Bergson as a “quite involuntary artisan of an antipositivist renovation of Marxism” [artesano harto involuntario de una renovación antipositivista del marxismo] (21). Bergson himself wrote in a letter to a student that “there is no connection between [Sorel’s] daring innovations and my ideas” (qtd. in Ohana, 737).

20. Suzanne Guerlac uses this passage from Time and Free Will (55) in her eloquent introduction to Bergson, which covers all three of his major treatises.

21. A spate of books and edited volumes has appeared over the last decade proposing a reconsideration of Bergson as a contemporary thinker: see in particular Mullarkey, Pearson, and Massumi. This renewed interest in Bergson, who was absent from structuralist and poststructuralist debates because of his apparent association with phenomenology and existentialism, is largely due to Gilles Deleuze’s reworking of his ideas starting in the 1950s; however, as Guerlac points out, the “new” Bergson, derived from his Deleuzian incarnation, is often divested of “all those features of [his] thought that might appear ‘metaphysical’ (the soul, life, value, memory, choice)” (179).

22. The presence of Bergson in Mariátegui, as well as in the broader intellectual scene of 1920s Latin America, is well documented. Indeed, Aníbal Quijano describes Bergsonism as an “ideological watering hole” [bebedero ideológico] (78), which fed diverse discontents of positivism in the region. For a detailed discussion of Bergson’s influence on Mariátegui, see Paris.

23. While contemporary criticism often cites the nuanced understanding of literary representation put forth in “The Process of Literature,” it rarely pays attention to the fact that Mariátegui (who spent the last years of his life confined to a wheelchair and conducted his political activities from Lima) also sustains the impossibility of transparent political mediation between vanguard activists and indigenous peasants: in a report presented to the Latin American Trade Union Confederation, he maintains, “The Indian peasant will only truly understand people from their midst, who speak their own language. They will always distrust the white, the mestizo” (1996, 108).

24. Ganguly borrows “adequation” from Husserl, and her discussion of “approximation” centers on Fredric Jameson’s own exploration of dialectical thought in Marxism and Form.

25. Javier Sanjinés links Mariategui’s heterotemporal articulations of socialism and his awareness of the religiosity of progress to a (speculated) familiarity with important Jewish thinkers of the early twentieth century, thus developing an unexplored thread in the vast constellation of intellectual currents that fed into his signature of thought. Sanjinés notes that Mariátegui’s Andean utopian vision shared with the Jewish messianic tradition “the violent rupture of the fabric of history with an instantaneous eruption of absolute alterity that opposes, as a sudden
and unexpected current event, the ideal end that is always postponed” [la ruptura violenta del tejido histórico con la irrupción instantánea de la alteridad absoluta que se opone, como un repentino e inesperado acontecimiento actual, al término ideal siempre postergado] (131).

26. See, for example, Determinations (Larsen 2001). Parts of the essay discussed here appear in significantly altered form, in English, in chapter 6 of that book. Because the essay, published in Spanish, is itself a translation from an original in English that is unavailable, where it is quoted here I include only my own English translation.

27. While Larsen does note the presence of Sorel’s ideas in Mariátegui’s writing, he takes his reading of myth from one quote in “The Process of Literature” where Mariátegui states, “The nation itself is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth, which does not correspond to a constant and precise, scientifically determinable reality” (1971, 198). This mischaracterizes the dual character of myth Mariátegui employed as discussed above.

28. Laclau gives a concise overview of his approach to hegemony in On Populist Reason, where he summarizes discourse as “any complex of elements in which relations play the constitutive role” and reiterates that meaning and discourse are coextensive: “This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus ‘relation’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous” (2005, 68).

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