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The previous two chapters centered on the topos of *waiting for the barbarians* in literature and visual art, and probed its implications for the subject of civilization. This chapter turns to an artistic visualization of “new barbarians,” as they take shape in the photo-performance portfolio “The New Barbarians” (2004-2006) by performance artist and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his troupe “Pocha Nostra.”¹

As I laid out in the previous chapter, Geers’s labyrinth confronts the visitor with the absence of barbarian others, which draws attention to the barbarism in civilization’s structures. The foreign presences evoked by the installation are specters, which shift our perception of our surroundings and of ourselves as historical subjects. Sacco’s “Esperando a los bárbaros” offers metonymical traces of the other by bracketing the body and the face through an exclusive close-up on the eyes. By visually staging the invisibility (Geers) or minimal presence (Sacco) of the other, neither of these works brings an end to the “waiting” by offering representations of barbarians. The absence of barbarians in these two works is counterpoised by their ostensive presence in Gómez-Peña’s project. “The New Barbarians” overwhelm the viewer with an overload of cultural signs, arranged in provocative combinations on the bodies of performance personas. If the “waiting” in Geers’s and Sacco’s title contains the promise of arrival, Gómez-Peña’s “The New Barbarians” seem to materialize that promise. The form this materialization takes, however, falls short of the expectations of the civilized imagination.

Born in Mexico City, Guillermo Gómez-Peña moved to the U.S. in 1987, where he established himself as a prominent performance artist and writer based in San Francisco. In his art projects, performances, and books, he explores issues of cross-cultural and hybrid identities, migration, globalization, the politics of language, border cultures and border crossings, and the interface between North and South (especially the U.S.-Mexican border) and between mainstream U.S. and Latino culture. His performances, essays, and experimental poetry—in English, Spanish, or Spanglish—stage confrontations and misunderstandings between cultures, races, ethnicities, and genders by using various media and technologies.² In the “ever-evolving manifesto” of his performance troupe “La Pocha Nostra,” Gómez-Peña describes his troupe as a “transdisciplinary arts organization” that crosses borders “between art and politics, practice and theory, artist and spectator” (2005: 93).

¹ For the sake of brevity, in this chapter I refer to “The New Barbarians” as Gómez-Peña’s project, even though other artists were also involved in the making of these portfolios.

² This information is drawn from Gómez-Peña’s books *The New World Border* (1996), *Dangerous Border Crossers* (2000), and *Ethno-Techno* (2005).

"The New Barbarians" is a large body of work, which, in the artist's words, intends to "explore the cultural fears of the West after 9/11."³ It comprises a series of photo-performance portfolios, entitled "Ethno-Techno," "Post-Mexico en X-paña," "The Chi-Canarian Expo," "The Chica-Iranian Project," "Tucuman-Chicano," and "Epcot-El Alamall."⁴ These photo-performances also developed into a real-life performance in the format of a fashion show. The show was entitled "The New Barbarian Collection" and premiered in November 2007 at Arnolfini in Bristol. For "The New Barbarian Collection," Gómez-Peña, his troupe, and a number of European-based artists set up what they called "an X-treme fashion show," through which they engaged the audience with "fashion-inspired stylized performance personas stemming from problematic media representations of foreigners, immigrants, and social eccentrics, as both enemies of the state and sexy pop-cultural rebels."⁵ This is part of the show's description on the artist's website:

The show is about politicized human bodies far more than clothing. What is actually being "sold" is a new designer hybrid identity and the human being as a product. The performance also explores the bizarre relationship between the post-9/11 culture of xenophobia and the rampant fetishization of otherness by global pop culture.

The photo-performance portfolios comprising "The New Barbarians" are expressions of the same rationale. They feature hybrid personas in provocative costumes and props borrowed from stereotypical media representations of "new barbarians." By constructing alternative versions of "new barbarians," the project challenges the "typecasting" of others as "barbarians" in the West today. This strange fashion shoot results in photographic portraits with characteristic titles such as "Androgynous Guest," "Guerilla Supermodel," "Islamic Immigrant," "Generic Terrorist," "Hybrid Gang Banger," "Supermodelo Zapatista," "Turista Neo-Victoriana," and "Aristócratas Nómadas."

As the only materialization of the figure of the "new barbarian" I look into, Gómez-Peña's project forms a crucial part of this study. This project addresses the thematics of

³ From the short description of the project on the artist's website at <http://www.pochanostra.com/dialogues/page/6/>.

⁴ The first four of these portfolios are published on Gómez-Peña's website. A selection of images from the last three portfolios is published in an issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* (2006). Only a few images of the photo-performances I mention or analyze are reproduced in this study. The rest of the images can be accessed on the website of Gómez-Peña and his performance troupe at <http://www.pochanostra.com/photo-performances/>. These portfolios were created by Gómez-Peña in collaboration with members of his troupe, as well as with other international performance artists and photographers. "Ethno-Techno: Evil Others and Identity Thieves" was shot in San Francisco with photographer James McCaffrey in 2004. "Post-Mexico en X-paña" was shot in Madrid with photographer Javier Caballero in 2005. "The Chi-Canarian Expo" was shot (in black and white) in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with photographer Teresa Correa in 2006. "Tucuman-Chicano" was developed in the Argentine city of Tucuman with twenty Argentinian performance artists in 2005. "The Chica-Iranian Project" was created with four Chicano artists and three Iranians in San Francisco. "Epcot-El Alamall" was shot with photographer Ric Malone.

⁵ All information for "The New Barbarian Collection" performance—including this quote—is from Gómez-Peña 2008 (<http://www.pochanostra.com/dialogues/page/6/>).

barbarism and the “new barbarian” through what I call a *barbarian aesthetic*. In this chapter, I examine how this aesthetic can contribute to a “barbarian theorizing”—to borrow Walter Mignolo’s term—from the periphery of the West.⁶ By doing so, I assert that the notion of a “barbarian methodology” that this study proposes does not necessarily depend on linguistic strategies and practices, but can also take shape through the visual, as well as in the interstices of the visual and the textual.

More specifically, I start with a short survey of linguistic barbarisms in Gómez-Peña’s work through an analysis of samples from his bilingual writing practices. Subsequently, I explore how *visual* barbarisms are at work in “The New Barbarians”: elements that do not allow the viewer to synthesize the images into coherent narratives. These personas form a visual “barbarian grammar” based on heterogeneous elements from a wide range of discursive fields and theoretical idioms. I lay out how this visual grammar takes up, appropriates, but also questions popular theoretical concepts and frameworks. By overloading the viewer with cultural references, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians tempt us to engage in the game of their theorization, while they simultaneously confuse our attempts to theorize them.

By conversing with theory, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians perform their “barbarian theorizing” through and against existing theoretical idioms. This theorizing should not be imagined as a visual demonstration of popular theoretical views. “The New Barbarians” do not support a theoretical discourse by functioning as post-dictions and making the theory “pre-dictive metaleptically” (Spivak 1992: 776). In other words, they do not illustrate a theoretical position, but become agents of a visual mode of theorizing. This theorizing, I argue, is based on an attitude of non-seriousness, the implications of which I try to chart.

These barbarian figures are also compared with other positive conceptualizations of new barbarians, particularly in Walter Benjamin and in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire*. Finally, I compare the aesthetic vision in Gómez-Peña’s barbarians with those in Graciela Sacco’s “Esperando a los bárbaros” and Kendell Geers’s “Waiting for the Barbarians.” By unpacking the artistic interventions of Gómez-Peña’s barbarians in relation to Geers’s and Sacco’s installations, I pose the question of these works’ relation to the political, as it ties in with their aesthetic performance.

⁶ Mignolo develops this notion in “Globalization, Civilization Processes, and the Relocation of Languages and Cultures” (1998), where he uses it to refer to theory outside or from the margins of the West that challenges and questions Western discourses.



Fig. 8. "Islamic Immigrant." From the "Tucuman-Chicano" portfolio. Photographer: Ramon Treves (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")



Fig. 9. "El Indio Amazonico." From the "Epcot-El Alamall" portfolio. Photographer: Ric Malone. (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")



Fig. 10. "Guerila Supermodel." From the "Tucuman-Chicano" portfolio. Photographer: Ramon Treves. (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")



Fig. 11. "Killer Ballerina." From the "Tucuman-Chicano" portfolio. Photographer: Ramon Treves. (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")



Fig. 12. "Hybrid Gang Banger." From "The Chica-Iranian Project" portfolio. Photographer: James McCaffry. (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")



Fig. 13. "Generic Terrorist." From "The Chica-Iranian Project" portfolio. Photographer: James McCaffry. (Gómez-Peña, "The New Barbarians")

The Barbarisms of Bilingualism

I am not interested in [...] legitimizing the global by reversing it into the local. I am interested in tracking the exorbitant as it institutes its culture.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Acting Bits, Identity Talk” (775)

In her article “Acting Bits/Identity Talk,” Gayatri Spivak argues that what we call “culture” stands for “an unacknowledged system of representations that allows you a self-representation that you believe is true” (785). Following this logic, Spivak continues, U.S. culture is “the dream of interculturalism: benevolent, hierarchized, malevolent, in principle homogenizing, but culturally heterogeneous” (785). As this hegemonic system is taking over the globe, however, people tend to forget that the word “American” accompanies every manifestation of U.S. interculturalism—as in “African-American,” “Mexican-American,” “Muslim-American” (885). This suggests that in U.S. interculturalism there is still an overarching cultural authority, a hegemonic center, towards which all cultural forces are drawn. This kind of hierarchized interculturalism accommodates minor identities and (sub)cultures as long as they conform to the homogenizing normative principles of U.S. culture and acknowledge the English language as the global language of communication—a *lingua franca*.

In his writings and performances, Gómez-Peña expresses his fear of English becoming the only language in an authoritarian state. The following quote is characteristic:

I dreamt the U.S. had become a totalitarian state controlled by satellites and computers. I dreamt that in this strange society poets and artists have no public voice whatsoever. Thank God it was just a dream. In English. English only. Just a dream. Not a memory. Repeat with me: *Vivir en estado del sitio* is a translatable statement; to live in a state of siege *es suseptible de traducción*. In Mexican in San Diego, in Puerto Rican in New York City, in Moroccan in Paris, in Pakistani in London. Definitely, a translatable statement.⁷

Against the totalitarian impact of the English language, Gómez-Peña describes and performs a counter-suggestion: speaking simultaneously in multiple languages, mixing linguistic codes, and creating new idioms, in which the English language loses its hegemonic force, as it is made to co-exist with different languages on a common ground. “*Vivir en estado del sitio* is a translatable statement; to live in a state of siege *es suseptible de traducción*.” The repetition of the first phrase in reverse translation pleads for the equal standing of the languages participating in this equation.

However, Gómez-Peña here does not advocate an absolute translatability, according to which every utterance could be transferred into another language without any change or

⁷ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, from a performance tape, qtd in Spivak 1992: 791.

loss. If that were the case, then there would be no point in resisting the idea of a *lingua franca*. Gómez-Peña's writings and artistic practices problematize translation. Issues of (un)translatability and the challenges of translation are thematized and enacted in his writings. He often speaks or writes in *Spanglish* (a combination of English and Spanish) and inserts foreign words and phrases (primarily Spanish) in his English texts. This practice is in accordance with Chicano language, which consists of a version of American English with elements of a pseudo-Mexican slang.⁸ The following text is part of a performance piece entitled "To those who are as afraid of us as we are of them":

I speak therefore I continue to be a part of "us"
 To the shareholders of monoculture
 I say, we say:
 We, bilingual, polylingual, cunilingual,
 Nosotros, los otros del mas allá
 del otro lado de la línea y el Puente
 We, rapeando border mistery; a broader history
 We, mistranslated señorrita,
 eternally mispronounced
 We, lost and found in the translation
 lost and found between the layers of this text
 We speak therefore you cease to be
 even if only for a moment
 I am, US, you sir, no ser
 Nosotros seremos
 Nosotros, we stand not united
 We, matriots and patriots
 We, Americans with foreign accents
 We, Americans in the largest sense of the term
 (from the many other Americas)
 We, in cahoots with the original Americans
 who speak hundreds of beautiful languages
 incomprehensible to you
 We, in cahoots with dozens of millions of displaced
 Latinos, Arabs, Blacks and Asians
 who live so pinche far away from their land
 and their language

⁸ The Chicano community, with whom Gómez-Peña is affiliated, is a syncretic border community of American-born and Hispanic-cultured peoples of Mexican descent. It has its own particular culture and language, which is a mixture of U.S. elements with bits of a culture and language they imagine as Mexican, although they have not lived in Mexico themselves. Being Chicano thus represents the struggle of trying to be accepted in an Anglo-dominated U.S. culture and at the same time maintaining a sense of identity in differentiation from mainstream U.S. culture.

We feel utter contempt for your myopia
and when we talk back, you lose your grounds. (Gómez-Peña 2005: 231-32)

The poetic voice in this piece is a collective “we,” explicitly addressing a “you.” The “we” and the “you” seem to delineate a distinction between a heterogeneous, multicultural, “polylingual” group vis-à-vis the monolingual “shareholders of monoculture.” The latter group most likely refers to mainstream U.S. culture and its use of English as a *lingua franca*.

Although the multilingual “we” is clearly opposed to the “you,” it does not stand outside it. The “we” includes “Americans” but “with foreign accents” and “in the largest sense of the term (from the many other Americas).” It would perhaps be more accurate to say that the “we” is situated at the margins of the “you.” This plural, marginal “we” poses a threat to the “monoculture” of the “you.” This threat stems from the incomprehensibility of the “we” to the “you”: the “hundreds of beautiful languages” “we” speak are “incomprehensible to you.” If power and control over the other is based on knowledge, then the incomprehensibility of the languages of the “we” confuses the “you” and deprives it of its sense of control over its marginal others. As a result, the “we” threatens the very grounds of the existence of the “you”: “We speak therefore you cease to be” and “when we talk back, you lose your grounds.”

What I find most fascinating about this performance piece is not its constative message as such—the idea that the margins can challenge the center through their difference and linguistic pluralism—but the way this idea is performed in language. This central idea is enacted through a series of linguistic “barbarisms,” which confound the dominant or standard language. These barbarisms can be seen as part of a strategy, through which the challenge of the “polylingual” margins to the monolingual center materializes in language.

The piece is bilingual. The biggest part is written in English, but with several Spanish verses, phrases, or words interrupting the flow of the English text. There is no strict division between the English and the Spanish: the two languages interfere not only within the same verse, but sometimes even within the same word. This mutual interference takes different forms, including neologisms, unorthodox word combinations, errors, misspellings, surprising alliterations, puns, and wordplays. New words are devised based on common English words. For instance, the neologism “matriots” is placed next to the word “patriots” in a juxtaposition that denaturalizes the latter by reminding us of its etymology and, through it, of its patriarchal origins.⁹ Similarly, the word “cunilingual” is modeled after “bilingual” and “polylingual.”

⁹ The word “patriot” derives from the ancient Greek “πατρις” (*patris*, “father-land”), which derives from “πατήρ” (*pater*, “father”).

Apart from neologisms, there are also *Spanglish* phrases and words, such as “rapeando,” in which the English verb “rap” is adjusted to the Spanish conjugation for present continuous. In the same verse, the juxtaposition of “border mistery” and “broader history” and the striking alliteration and rhyming it produces, acoustically creates a broadening of borders from lines into spaces (border – broader). On these border spaces, “history” is not a fixed account but still a “mystery,” and can thus be rewritten in order to include the histories of border cultures and of “Americans in the largest sense of the term.” “Mystery” is here misspelled, perhaps under the influence of the “i” of “history.” Another linguistic error follows in the next verse: “We, mistranslated señorrita,/ eternally mispronounced.” Here, the poetic voice slightly misleads the reader: while “mistranslated” and “mispronounced” suggest that the reader should look for mistakes in translation or in pronunciation, that actual error lies in the spelling of the word “señorrita,” wrongly spelled with double “r.”

In the verse “I am, US, you sir, no ser,” alliterations and linguistic mixtures generate different semantic possibilities. Starting with the English “I am,” the verse ends with the Spanish “no ser” (“not to be”). The negation of existence implied in “no ser” puts the English “I am” into question and implicitly refers to the verse “We speak therefore you cease to be.” The Spanish “no ser” functions as a barbarism in the identity of the mainstream culture, confidently affirmed by the phrase “I am” and the word “US” right next to it. In the second part of the verse, “you sir, no ser” sounds very similar to the phrase “yes sir, no sir,” which holds connotations of servile obedience and cowardly subordination.¹⁰ These connotations are at odds with the overall function of this verse, which questions the authority of the “US” and the English “I am” and triggers acts of *insubordination* to the dominant language through linguistic barbarisms. The submissiveness of the “yes sir, no sir,” acoustically hidden within the more insurgent “you sir, no ser,” reminds us, however, that no act of contestation is permanent. A barbarism with a destabilizing function within a certain context may also turn into a confirmation of, or an act of subordination to, the dominant culture.

This observation also implies that marginal groups and border cultures—the poem’s “we”—do not by definition contest the dominant simply because they are at the margins. In fact, marginal groups often try to impose their own “universal” truths and hegemonic positions or imitate the mechanisms and power structures of the mainstream culture, thereby becoming subordinate to the logic of the center.¹¹ That is why the margins should also be under critical scrutiny. This is also suggested in one of Gómez-Peña’s “Activist Commandments of the New Millenium”: “Confront the oppressive and narrow-minded

¹⁰ The phrase “yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir” has been used to describe an obedient, servile or cowardly subordinate. It is attested from 1910 and used to be common in the British Royal Navy. The phrase is also found in the nursery rhyme “Baa Baa Black Sheep”; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baa,_Baa,_Black_Sheep.

¹¹ On this issue, see Judith Butler’s “Competing Universalities.”

tendencies in your own ethnic- or gender-based communities with valor and generosity. The 'enemy' is everywhere, even inside ourselves" (2000: 93).

Through its barbarisms, Gómez-Peña's performance text shows how the heterogeneous, polylingual, mistranslated, misspelled, mispronounced, misunderstood "we" does not succumb to the "shareholders of monoculture" but threatens the existence of the mainstream. The "polylingualism" of those other Americans is perceived as a threat precisely due to the mainstream culture's insistence on unity. In the face of the patriotic motto "united we stand, divided we fall," commonly used in U.S. political speeches and popular culture, Gómez-Peña writes in the same performance text: "Nosotros, we stand not united." The gist of the former motto is that as long as people stay united, they cannot be easily destroyed. Here, this message is revised. When unity becomes a unifying and homogenizing principle that distrusts and marginalizes foreign elements, then this artificial unity is not as strong as people may think. Such a constructed unity suppresses the tensions, conflicts, and agonistic elements that arise at the borders between "languages" (broadly defined), where different idioms, ideas, practices, and cultures rub against and into each other. These tensions come alive in Gómez-Peña's performance text, which shows the surprising insights we can gain about our own language when we open it up to foreign elements. The tensions between languages need not be a threat to their respective unity, but can form political sites of contestation. In this way, Gómez-Peña turns the non-unity of a multilingual, heterogeneous "we" into a source of power.

The barbarisms Gómez-Peña inserts in this piece, as well as in many of his other writings, transform the English language by breaking its illusion of homogeneity and self-sufficiency. These foreign interventions challenge the reader to operate in two linguistic systems simultaneously. As one system is measured against the other, their limitations, problematic aspects, and power relations are also brought to the foreground. The foreign words and phrases that interrupt the flow of the English demonstrate the impossibility of an absolute transference of meaning through translation. It is impossible to replace them by English words and still retain the same meaning and effect.

"*Vivir en estado del sitio* is a translatable statement; to live in a state of siege es *suseptible de traducción*." If I now reread this statement by the artist, which I quoted at the beginning of this section, I cannot "translate" it as a naïve endorsement of translatability. Rather, I read it as staging the possibility of transforming the dominant language when we place it next to another language. This transformation is possible even when one lives "en estado del sitio"—under the suffocating influence of an Anglo-dominated culture. "To live in a state of siege" is a translatable statement, and the linguistic reversal that takes place in its translation suggests that the content of the statement is also reversible. A way of reversing the tyranny of monolingualism is by infusing the dominant language with barbarisms. This is a common practice in Gómez-Peña's performance texts. But what happens to this practice when we move from the textual to the visual realm?

From Visual Mimicry to a Babelian Performance

In Gómez-Peña's "The New Barbarians," his bilingualist practices appear in the titles of the photo-performances, which are either in English or in Spanish—or both. In titles such as "El Indio Amazonico," "Hybrid Gang Banger," "La Geisha Apocalíptica," "Typical Arab Chola," "Warrioress in Norteño Bondage," "Natural Born Matones," "El Spaghetti Greaser Bandit," and "Palestinian Vato Loco," both languages are used—often in the same title—without an apparent privileging of the one over the other.

Gómez-Peña's practice of using two (or more) languages simultaneously and inserting barbarisms into dominant idioms also finds a parallel in his visual practices. In "The New Barbarians" different visual codes interact and clash with each other. These barbarian personas borrow elements from diverse sources: media representations of "evil others," bits and pieces from American popular culture (fashion shows, movies, TV, comics, rock and roll, hip-hop), border and Chicano culture, Western high art, the history of the visual and performing arts, religious imagery, journalism, anthropology, and pornography. Oversaturated signs from the above sources meet each other in subversive combinations, constructing an array of eccentric barbarians.

Typologies of barbarians in contemporary Western media and politics belong to a strictly coded representational regime. As a result, visual representations of barbarian others are often perceived as natural and left unquestioned. Although the tag of the barbarian is conferred on diverse "others," the media-construed personas of these others bear fixed features, which ensure their recognizability by the public. Gómez-Peña's barbarian personas confront us with the flipside of these constructions of others. By distorting a repository of stereotypes, these excessive personas emerge as civilization's nightmare. As we read about the "New Barbarian Collection" on Gómez-Peña's website, the parade of the new barbarians aims at "bringing your dreams to life, one nightmare at a time." Drawing from the raw materials of Western barbarian fantasies, they perform and parody the cultural and political fears of the West today.¹²

These personas are located at the U.S. periphery and at the interface between mainstream Western and non-Western cultures (mainly Latino and Middle-Eastern). With this in mind, one can argue that Gómez-Peña's "New Barbarians" employ the strategy Homi Bhabha calls "colonial mimicry." This is a strategy of appropriating colonial discourse in a way that produces "its slippage, its excess, its difference," resulting in the disavowal of its authority (Bhabha 122-23). Colonial mimicry reads Western narratives in unorthodox ways or employs them for purposes not foreseen by the dominant culture (Bhabha in Moore-Gilbert 131-32).

¹² In the performance workshops organized by Gómez-Peña and his troupe, one of the tasks consisted in developing an "artificial savage." Gómez-Peña describes this "homework task" as constructing a persona that is not just an impersonation "of popular or stereotypical characters, but rather a composite collage of each person's political, religious, social, and sexual concerns" (2005: 125).

Certain photographic performances in “The New Barbarians” enact a visual mimicry of Western classical themes. This is, for instance, the case with “Piedad Post-Colonial” from the portfolio “Post-Mexico en X-paña.” As the title announces, “Piedad Post-Colonial” is a postcolonial appropriation of a classic subject in Christian art, the *Pietà*, which depicts the Virgin Mary in grief, cradling the dead body of Christ.¹³ In Gómez-Peña’s “Piedad” the role of the Virgin Mary is performed by the imposing figure of a man. From the waist up he is dressed as a Native American and from the waist down in drag, wearing a long black skirt.¹⁴ The man is holding an ax with his left hand, and with his right arm he is supporting a naked dead body. Instead of showing grief or meditative sorrow—as the Virgin Mary in the Western tradition—this Native American is looking away from the dead body with an austere facial expression, which can be read either as anger or ruthlessness. The dead body supported by his arm appears to be female, as breasts and genitals are exposed (unlike the body of Christ, covered with a loincloth in the classical *Pietà*). Despite its female features, the body structure looks rather masculine. The head is shaved, which confuses the viewer’s attempt to assign a sexual identity to this persona. The facial characteristics are partly indistinct, as the largest part of the face is painted red, as if wearing a mask. This queer body has one stereotypically recognizable racial feature: the eyes suggest that the figure playing the dead Christ is of Asian descent.

Hardly any of the elements in the classic *Pietà*-theme remain intact in this staging, apart, perhaps, from the position of the dead body. The participating figures—a Native American (played by Gómez-Peña) and (possibly) an Asian—are foreign to classical Western culture. The gender roles of the *Pietà* are also reversed, with the Virgin Mary as male and the body of Christ as female and queer. The ruthless expression of the Native American figure and the ax he holds suggest that either he has killed the body he is holding, or he is determined to avenge her death. The violent connotations of the ax and the man’s defiant expression turn the Christian narrative of the grieving mother upside down. The association of the Christian faith with violence unsettles this narrative. The image strongly evokes the role of Christian Europe in the annihilation of the Native American population. If the dead body is a visual synecdoche for this annihilation, then we can read the man’s expression as deep grief and anger, and his ax as a pledge for revenge.

The Christian narrative is robbed of its innocence and sanctity by the suggestion that Christianity has committed worse crimes against Europe’s others than the crime staged in the *Pietà*. The new “Piedad” casts a critical eye upon its Western “original,” but it also contains visual ambiguities—barbarisms—that prevent us from categorizing it as a transparent anticolonial narrative. The Asian features of the dead body, for example, could be a hitch in such a narrative. Other elements that complicate the interpretation

¹³ The subject of the *Pietà* is primarily found in sculpture (with Michelangelo’s version being the most famous), but also has a long tradition in Western painting.

¹⁴ The same persona appears in several photo-performances in this project. In one of them, this figure (played by Gómez-Peña himself) is identified in the title as “El Indio Amazonico.”

of the image are the gender of the Christ-figure, as well as the hybrid costume of the man, combining Native American and drag elements. These elements turn the image into a complex intersection of cultural, gender, queer, (anti- and post-)colonial, historical, religious, and racial discourses, which deter us from limiting its interpretation within a singular framework.

Apart from "Piedad Postcolonial," "The New Barbarians" project includes two more translations of the same Western theme: "La Piedad Intercontinental" and "La Piedad Intercontinental (Invertida)," both from the portfolio "Chi-Canarian Expo."¹⁵ Other photo-performances that appropriate Western religious themes are "La Dolorosa" (from the portfolio "Chi-Canarian Expo") and "Sagrada Familia" (from the portfolio "Post-Mexico en X-paña"). In "Sagrada Familia," we have a comparable "blasphemous" recasting of the religious theme of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus, staged by three very unlikely figures: a weighty Arab man holding a gun (Joseph), a Muslim woman covered with a black burqa but with her legs exposed in a seductive pose (Mary), and a third figure wearing an oxygen mask and underpants with the Superman-logo, which parody the "almighty" Jesus.

As performances of colonial mimicry, these images engage with Western iconography and religious narratives, and turn these icons and narratives against themselves. In doing so, they uncover the contradictions that inhere in Western culture itself. Such is the contradiction of a religion proclaiming love and mercy and instigating brutal wars and barbarism.¹⁶ The association of Christianity with barbarism was also suggested by Geers's installation. This association suggests that contemporary Western condemnations of Islam as a barbaric religion turn a blind eye to the barbarism committed by followers of Christianity in history.

What is more, the non-Western personas featuring in these restagings of Western high art function as a reminder of the non-Western origins of Western art and its strong influences from other cultures. By exposing these interconnections with other cultures, as well as the internal contradictions in Western discourses, Gómez-Peña's barbarians manage to pluralize the "West" itself. The "West" is "barbarized," as it is shown to consist of heterogeneous cultures and discourses. It thereby emerges as a collective heritage, constituted by various non-European influences.¹⁷

Although the concept of mimicry yields a productive reading of these images, it does not fully capture the range of their operations. By subverting Western narratives, Gómez-Peña's barbarians do not impose a new authoritative narrative in the place of the one they rewrite. Although they project alternative histories from the margins, the bits and pieces of

¹⁵ The former image presents a half-naked woman, her chest pierced with nails, holding a dead black man with bandaged hands. The latter image is a reverse repetition of the previous image, with the black man in the role of Mary and the woman lying dead in his arms, with a crooked pair of scissors falling from her hand.

¹⁶ Gómez-Peña has referred to both Islam and Christianity as "two forms of dangerous fundamentalisms" (2005: 278).

¹⁷ For an elaboration of this argument, see Shohat and Stam.

these histories do not add up to a coherent account issued from a particular perspective. They draw from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and gender discourses and unravel their critique by mobilizing various theoretical perspectives—non-Western, queer, anticolonial, postcolonial, posthuman—without pledging dogmatic allegiance to any of them. “The New Barbarians” do not propose a unified anti-Western narrative, but a syncretic, barbarian visual idiom, which contradicts the very possibility of a homogeneous cultural narrative. Their visual grammar cannot be appropriated by a singular representational framework or theoretical discourse.

The confrontations that “The New Barbarians” stage between diverse discourses expose the limitations and blind spots in these discourses. Things culturally normalized within a certain discursive framework—the burqa in Muslim communities, an ax or saw in the hands of a carpenter, a cross in the hands of a priest, sexy lingerie on female bodies on billboards and in commercials, machine-guns in the military, red feathers on Native Americans in American westerns—are transformed into ex-centricities. They lose their reference to a specific center that issues their normalization, because they are subjected to contextual shifts and confrontations with foreign visual idioms: a burqa covering a woman with fully exposed legs (“Islamic Immigrant”), a saw in the hands of a ballerina (“Killer Ballerina”), a cross next to a gun in the hands of a “gang-banger” or a bandit-figure from a western (“Hybrid Gang-Banger,” “El Spaghetti Greaser Bandit”), women’s lingerie on a male body (“Angrogynous Guest”) or on the body of a military cyborg (“Cyborg Miliciana”), a machine gun held by a neo-Victorian/Native American female tourist (“Turista Neo-Victoriana”), and red feathers on the head of an Amazonian Indian in drag, occasionally posing as the Virgin Mary (“El Indio Amazonico,” “La Piedad Postcolonial”).

In the above ways, Gómez-Peña’s “The New Barbarians” exceed the practice of colonial mimicry and engage in what in Jacques Derrida’s terms we could call a “Babelian performance”: a performance that demands translation and simultaneously makes translation impossible by projecting the unfeasible univocity and transparency of signs.¹⁸ Their visual “Babelian performance” invites “translation” into a familiar narrative and simultaneously makes this translation impossible. These personas speak a barbarian language, which plunges the center’s dream of a *lingua franca* into a sea of errors, cacophonies, and incongruities.

The aspirations of the U.S. to establish English as a common language and to appropriate the difference of minorities by “translating” it in the dominant discourse could be visualized as the dream of unification in a contemporary “Tower of Babel.” The performance of Gómez-Peña’s barbarians impedes the construction of this tower by showing what happens when this translating impulse goes mad. “The New Barbarians”

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida first used the notion “Babelian performance” in “Des Tours de Babel” (1985). In Derrida’s use, “Babelian performance” describes the paradox in the “translatable-untranslatable” name of “Babel,” which “at once translates and does not translate itself.” “Babel” performs for Derrida the necessity and impossibility of translation (175).

reap stereotypical images out of their usual context and make cultural signs fulfill unorthodox functions or co-exist with signs that belong to different visual orders and typologies of others. As a result, the “letters” that make up the Western visual alphabet are rearranged in a barbarian visual grammar, although the images may still remind us of things we have seen on TV. Gómez-Peña’s troupe, “Pocha Nostra,” sees itself as “a virtual *maquiladora* (assembly plant) that produces brand new metaphors, symbols, images, and words to explain the complexities of our times” (Gómez-Peña 2005: 78). Their language contains barbarisms—elements used in improper ways, which contaminate the imagery we have internalized as citizens of the West. The name of Gómez-Peña’s troupe, “Pocha Nostra,” is a Spanglish neologism and thus itself a barbarism, while it also *signifies* barbarism (as a foreignism or contamination): one of the possible translations of “Pocha Nostra,” as we read in the troupe’s manifesto, is “our impurities,” while the other possible translation is “the cartel of cultural bastards” (Gómez-Peña 2005: 78).

Recasting the Stereotype

“The New Barbarians” may be interpreted as expressions of the dream of a transcultural world, wherein people exchange identities and construct themselves as they please. Although this may seem like an obvious viewing of the barbarians, I argue that their intervention in contemporary debates on identity is of a different kind. Most of these personas do not look like happy citizens of a hybridized world. Melancholic, apathetic, perplexed, or distant, they recast Western stereotypical imagery in a grotesque fashion.

What kind of vision on identity do “The New Barbarians” act out? And what do they do with stereotypical images of barbarian others? The “Chica-Iranian project,” one of the portfolios comprising “The New Barbarians,” is a good theoretical object for probing these two questions. In the Chica-Iranian project, Gómez-Peña and a group of mainly Chicano and Iranian artists “exchange” and alter each other’s identities. They use elaborate costumes to create twelve barbarian personas in “ethnic drag,” which incorporate Hollywood and media typecasting and stereotypes of Middle Eastern terrorists, Latino “gang bangers,” and other “evil others” from these two cultural spaces. As we read on Gómez-Peña’s website, the resulting photo-performances are meant to visualize the dangers of ethnic profiling in the post 9/11 era. The subtitle of the project—“Orientalism Gone Wrong in Aztlan”—hints at the confusions and “mistranslations” that take place in this Oriental/Latin American mix.¹⁹

The presentation of this portfolio on Gómez-Peña’s website takes place through an interactive game with the viewer, entitled “Test your Ethnic Profiling Skills.” The viewer is asked to match the names of the participating artists with the performance personas they have constructed. The underlying question of the game is: “Can the US differentiate

¹⁹ Aztlan is the mythical place of origin of the Aztec peoples.

between Mexicans and Iranians? Between 'Latinos' and 'Middle Easterners'?" The game is of course a trap: the viewer will most probably fail this classification exercise. Guessing the artists' "real" ethnic affiliations (Chicano, Iranian, and, in the case of one artist, Hapa/Half-Japanese) behind their elaborate ethnic personas is not easy. In most cases the artists play a persona that deviates from their own ethnic affiliation. The "Typical Arab Chola" is played by a Chicana, "El Spaghetti Greaser Bandit" by an Iranian, "Palestinian Vato Loco" and "Generic Terrorist" by Gómez-Peña, who identifies himself as "Post-Mexican," "La Kurdish Llorona" by a Hapa/half-Japanese, and so on.

The probable failure of the viewer to win this game brings out the misconceptions on which ethnic profiling is based. As Gómez-Peña remarks elsewhere, with ethnic profiling being accepted behavior after 9/11, the category "Arab-looking" includes most Latinos and brown people as well. As a result, all these ethnic "others" have "become an ongoing source of anxiety and mistrust for true 'patriotic' Americans" (2005: 274). Staged as an interactive game, the Chica-Iranian project makes the viewer/player complicitous with practices of ethnic profiling. Moreover, it hints at the constant "misunderstandings" of the police, the military, and the justice system—misunderstandings that turn people into victims of hate speech, violence, and discrimination.

Although cultures and ethnicities mix more and more as a result of globalization, people still cling to simplistic representations in order to make sense of the chaotic realities around them. Stereotypes offer a secure point of identification for social groups, assisting them in defining themselves against reductive and degrading representations of others. But while the stereotype itself, as Ruth Amossy and Therese Heidingsfeld argue, is "necessarily reductive," it does not always have to be involved in "reductive enterprises" (700). Amossy and Heidingsfeld suggest a functional approach to stereotypes, focusing on their shifting operations in the interaction between text and reader (or image and viewer) (700).²⁰ In *Declining the Stereotype*, Mireille Rosello suggests that it could be more useful to ask "What can I do with a stereotype?" instead of trying to eradicate or oppose it (1998: 13). The Chica-Iranian project probes precisely this question. It acknowledges the power and ineradicability of stereotypes, and, instead of trying to eliminate them, it plunges in our sets of preconceptions in order to perform them otherwise.

The Chica-Iranian project does not counter stereotypes of Middle Eastern and Latino others with positive images of these groups. Instead, it tries to interrogate the economy of the stereotype itself. A stereotype, according to Amossy and Heidingsfeld, is a hyperbolic figure of a cultural model, which exacerbates the general rule and presents itself "in the margin of excess where forms become fixed and hardened" (690). However, despite its fixity, there is ambivalence at the heart of a stereotype: it oscillates between something

²⁰ In their article "Stereotypes and Representation in Fiction," Amossy and Heidingsfeld focus on stereotypical representations in texts, but their theoretical points about stereotypes can be employed in the study of stereotypes in visual material as well.

already known and taken for granted, and something that must be constantly and anxiously reconfirmed through repetition (Bhabha 95). This suggests that the “known” in the stereotype is not as securely established as the rhetorical force of the stereotype might suggest (Moore-Gilbert 117). Stereotypes must be repeated in order to maintain their force. Their reiteration, which is the source of their power, also makes it possible to shift their pervasive functions.

The Chica-Iranian project makes use of this ambivalence. It reproduces stereotypical images of Latinos and Middle Easterners, but with a twist. The images are infused with barbarisms that unsettle the homogeneity of stereotypical patterns. Such barbarisms are: the message written on the naked chest of the “Palestinian Vato Loco” and the “Generic Terrorist” that reads “Pleez do not liberate me,” the American flags that form the pattern of the burqa in “Afghani Immigrant in Texas,” the cloth with an Arab script the “Cigar Shop Indian Chief” holds, or the cross in the hands of the “Hybrid Gang Banger.”

Whenever a stereotype is reproduced, Amossy and Heidingsfeld argue, elements that happen to disturb the pattern of the stereotype are “relegated to the level of ‘remnants’” (693). The reader or viewer is usually trained to disregard and neutralize those remnants by viewing them as details that individualize a stereotypical image or add to its reality-effect (693). This, however, is on the condition that these remnants “be neither completely heterogeneous nor visibly contradictory” (695). The Chica-Iranian project does not meet this condition. The “left-overs”—the elements not recognized as part of the stereotype—are very hard to neutralize or ignore. They are not simply additional, irrelevant details, but elements in stark contrast to the narratives each stereotypical image evokes. They stand out as unfitting intrusions, sabotaging the reassuring *déjà-vu* effect that stereotypes produce (695).

The “Palestinian Vato Loco” and the “Generic Terrorist,” for instance, reproduce the figure of the Arab terrorist/suicide bomber. But it is the message “Pleez do not liberate me” on the chest of these figures that becomes the crux of the image. Instead of being neutralized under the pressure of the image’s stereotypical elements, it attracts the viewer’s attention because it carries a different narrative. Where we would perhaps expect to see a message praising the glory of Allah or proclaiming “death to infidels”—the supposed typical motives of suicide bombers—this message confronts the West with its own presuppositions: it contradicts the Western conviction that non-Western people are waiting for the West to save, liberate, and enlighten them. This message hints at political reasons behind terrorist actions, which involve the West’s determination to “liberate” others by imposing its liberal values on them. Thus, by “producing unexpected connections which confuse or cover up the fixed relationships of the basic model,” this deviant element prevents the stereotype of the Middle Eastern terrorist from being unproblematically recuperated (695).

The critique of the Chica-Iranian portfolio towards media-cultivated stereotypes of others does not aim at disclosing the “real others” behind an array of simulacra. The

contamination of ethnic stereotypes in this project performs the impossibility of articulating stable ethnic or cultural identities. The barbarians in the Chica-Iranian project do not make claims to a true, essential identity by trying to set a “wrong” representation “right.” There is no authentic cultural narrative to be retrieved from these performances. As Rosello argues, stereotypes imply a theory of identity and can thus be employed “to exclude, to police borders, to grant or deny rights to individuals” (1998: 15). If stereotypes help draw clear-cut ethnic distinctions and identity lines, then the barbarian ethnic others in the Chica-Iranian project try to blur these lines. They infuse stereotypes with barbarisms—elements that confuse, as Spivak puts it, “the possibility of an absolute translation of a politics of identity into cultural performance” (1992: 782). As a result, “they blur the identity among minority voices without creating a monolithic solidarity” (782).

In his article “The New World (B)order” Gómez-Peña writes about new identities in the contemporary world:²¹

This new society is characterized by mass migrations and bizarre interracial relations. As a result new hybrid and transitional identities are emerging. [...] The bankrupt notion of the melting pot has been replaced by a model that is more germane to the times, that of the *menudo chowder*. According to this model, most of the ingredients do melt, but some stubborn chunks are condemned merely to float. Vergigratia!” (1992: 74)

In these reflections, Gómez-Peña sees models of cultural assimilation—the concept of the “melting pot”—as a failed and outmoded experiment. Instead, he proposes the “menudo chowder” model and chooses to focus on its stubborn chunks: the elements that refuse to melt and thus be translated into the dominant idiom.²² In his discussion of Gómez-Peña’s “menudo chowder” model, Bhabha sees these “chunks” as the basis of cultural identifications, which take place through performative operations. According to Bhabha, these chunks are spaces “continually, contingently, ‘opening out,’ remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race” (Bhabha 313). In the performance of “The New Barbarians,” the “chunks” that refuse to go away can be identified as visual barbarisms: discordant elements that invade familiar narratives and prevent the viewers from synthesizing the elements of the image into a coherent picture.

“The New Barbarians” expose the internal ambiguities in Western visual codes and narratives. As Bhabha argues, colonial discourse is never consistent, monologic, and confident, but full of contradictions and anxieties (Bhabha in Moore-Gilbert 118). The same argument can be extended to contemporary neocolonial discourses. The visual incommensurabilities in Gómez-Peña’s personas give expression to these contradictions.

²¹ This article was developed into a book with the same title.

²² “Menudo” is a hearty and spicy Mexican soup, considered as an effective cure for hangovers. Chowder is also a thick, hearty and chunky soup, usually with fish and potatoes.

The barbarian persona entitled “Islamic Immigrant” is a case in point. This image features a woman sitting on a chair with her legs crossed in a seductive pose. The woman is holding a rifle and wearing a black burqa that cloaks her face and upper part of her body, revealing only the eye area. Her legs, however, are exposed and attract attention due to the sexy pantyhose and high-heeled shoes. The background is covered by wallpaper with a military camouflage pattern. In this image, the female “Islamic immigrant” is portrayed as a hooker, a religious fundamentalist, and a terrorist: an outrageous condensation of stereotypes in one image. Her portrait contains all the contradictory ingredients of the stereotypes of Oriental peoples, and especially Muslims: she embodies a rampant sexuality, she follows strict religious prescriptions that restrain this sexuality, she looks enigmatic, erotic, and treacherous, and she poses a violent (possibly terrorist) threat. This threat is not only suggested by the rifle and the military-patterned wallpaper, but also by the juxtaposition of the gun and the burqa—a connection reminiscent of the practice of Muslim women during anticolonial struggles to carry guns under their veil. The interweaving of all these stereotypes highlights the inconsistencies and absurdities in popular representations of Islamic women immigrants. As a result, it undercuts the credibility of these representations. Since the image does not add up, the reality-effect of its stereotypical elements is put under suspicion.

The Chica-Iranian project redeploys stereotypes in ways that confront dominant cultural discourses with their domestic barbarisms. This is a significant component of the “barbarian theorizing” Gómez-Peña’s barbarians perform. The combination of familiar elements in unfamiliar constellations hinders the process of signification of Gómez-Peña’s barbarian personas. In doing so, it problematizes the easy application of the signifier “barbarian” on specific subjects, as it is witnessed in the contemporary “typecasting” of Arab-looking people as terrorists. The media put together generic images of “new barbarians,” which foster the illusion that these barbarians are easily recognizable and can therefore be held under control. Having undergone a process of “barbarization” in the artistic imagination of Gómez-Peña and his troupe, the same elements form personas that maintain caricatured aspects but are too visually complex to fit into Western blueprints of barbarians. What is more, the seemingly random pastiche of visual elements in “The New Barbarians” hints at the arbitrariness of stereotypical constructions of barbarians. Stereotypical images are shown to be just a different combination of the same strange ingredients. This combination nevertheless appears natural, only because it happens to be acculturated and blessed by convention.

By accommodating visual signs that do not always make sense, “The New Barbarians” become visual metaphors of an irretrievable “reality.” Their designation as “barbarians” does not refer to real people but to a set of highly stylized and constructed personas. I argue that the theatricality and hyperbolic performance of these overtly fabricated figures underscores the *catachrestic* nature of the name “barbarian”: the fact that this name does not correspond to a real presence but is a “concept-metaphor without an adequate

referent" (Spivak 1993: 60).²³ Defined as a name applied "to a thing which it does not properly denote," a *catachresis* is always an approximation, a misfit, an improperly used word "for which there is no adequate referent to be found."²⁴ The concept of catachresis is crucial in Spivak's thought as a reminder of the perils of transforming a name to an actual referent (156).²⁵ Against this essentialist tendency, catachresis points to the breach between a name and its referent, while it recognizes the inescapability of using this name—though always with the awareness that its use is *improper*.²⁶

If the name "barbarian" is a catachresis without a literal referent, what, then, do Gómez-Peña's barbarians pose as? I contend that these figures embody the impossibility of literalizing the metaphor of the "barbarian." The diverse cultural references and discursive fields that permeate them make them anything but "literal." As a result, they pose as visual metaphors for something not retrievable or graspable. Just as these figures deliberately fail to represent "real barbarians," any attempt to attach the "barbarian" to real human beings can never fully succeed. In this way, these personas also contribute to the perpetuation of the "waiting" for barbarians, seen as the desire for a presence that remains inaccessible. These visual stagings of "new barbarians" point out that no matter how hard we try, we can never match the name "barbarian" to a literal referent, because that referent does not exist outside of discourse. The name "barbarian" is always a misuse; it may be applied to bodies of others, but it cannot grasp them through this designation. Therefore, Gómez-Peña's personas point to the dangers of using this appellation for others. Its use is accompanied by the violence of a misuse, suggested here by the improper and mismatched combinations of signs on the bodies of "The New Barbarians."

²³ For her use of "catachresis," see Spivak 1993, particularly pages 29, 60, 71, 127, 137-39, 161, and 298. See also Morton 34.

²⁴ The first quote is part of the *OED* definition of "catachresis" (qtd in Spivak 1993: 29). For the second quote, see page 298.

²⁵ "One of the offshoots of the deconstructive view of language," Spivak argues, "is the acknowledgement that the *political* use of words [...] is irreducibly catachrestic" (1993: 161). As a result, the task of a feminist political philosophy according to Spivak should not be to try and grasp the proper or true meaning of a name or to show how this proper meaning "always eludes our grasp" but "to accept the risks of catachresis" (161). The concept of catachresis could easily turn into a general position that acknowledges the catachrestic nature of all language. Spivak, however, warns against turning "catachresis" into what she calls a "totalizing masterword" (71). She explains her position more elaborately in a footnote: "The *OED* defines 'catachresis' as 'abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor.' It should by now be clear that we appropriate this to indicate the originary 'abuse' constitutive of language-production, where both concept and metaphor are 'wrested from their proper meaning.' Thus, it is only in the narrow sense a word for which there is no adequate referent to be found. We have resolutely kept ourselves to this narrow sense rather than the general philosophical position that all language is catachrestic, where the notion of catachresis might itself be catachrestic" (298).

²⁶ In this sense, the concept of catachresis comes close to Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" as "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (1996: 214).

A Non-Serious Theorizing

In this time and place,
what does it mean to be "transgressive"?
What does "radical behavior" mean after Howard Stern,
Jerry Springer, Bin Laden, Ashcroft, Cheney,
six-year-old serial killers in the heartland of America,
[...]
what else is there to "transgress"?
Who can artists shock, challenge, enlighten?

—Gómez-Peña, from the performance piece "Post-Script: Millennial Doubts" (2005: 210)

The hyperbolic performance of Gómez-Peña's barbarians creates a distance from the viewer. This distance is enhanced by the way these personas lay bare the act of acting: everything, from the general set-up of the photos to the posture of the barbarians, indicates that we are dealing with a staged, fictitious, and highly stylized performance, which has no pretensions to subtlety or realistic representation.²⁷ Their performance can be articulated in terms of the Brechtian approach to acting. In Bertolt Brecht's theory of acting, the actor maintains a certain distance from the role, which may be perceived as "coldness and haughtiness" (Jameson 1998: 75). Pomposity and haughtiness marks the acting of the barbarian personas too. The performance artists do not only take a distance from the personas they embody, but also from the viewer. They provoke the viewer without asking for empathy. Producing empathy, so that the spectators feel what the actor is feeling, is part of the Aristotelian aesthetic of acting, which Brecht renounces (Jameson 1998: 39, 95). In a Brechtian vein, the Barbarians shut down empathy and identification, inviting their viewers to think and reflect rather than feel.

The distance these personas take from the viewer allows us to watch images with disturbing, confrontational, and violent elements. These include no less than dead animals ("El Chamán Travesti," "Supermodelo Zapatista" et al.) or dead people ("La Piedad Postcolonial," "La Piedad Intercontinental" et al.), knives, axes, pistols, and machine guns in threatening angles ("Sin Título," "Alianzas Aleatorias," "Ciborg Miliciana," "Unapologetic Evil Others" et al.), naked bodies in bondage with their heads and faces covered or with their limbs attached to instruments of torture ("Desencuentro Total," "Re-enactment" et al.), people wrapped up in barbed wire ("Abu Ghraib Reenactment"), and so on. The emotional impact of the violence staged by Gómez-Peña's barbarians is in my view dampened by means of their excessive, staged, non-serious character.²⁸ The viewer is

²⁷ See also Jill Bennett's analysis of the "act of acting" in the stage play "Ubu and The Truth Commission" (119).

²⁸ Jill Bennett explores how animation is able to perform a similar operation: accommodating extreme, even unwatchable violence and simultaneously deadening the effects of this violence (116).

unable to identify with them, because they are far removed from our subjectivity. In Brecht's theory, this distancing is a necessary ingredient of the so-called "Verfremdungseffekt" ["defamiliarization" or "estrangement-effect"].²⁹ The action must constantly be made strange and alien in order to shatter the illusion that what we see is real.³⁰ By obstructing emotions based on identification, Gómez-Peña's barbarians invite reactions that do not rest on sentimentalism or sympathy, but on the shock of disidentification. This shock is part of the critical thinking these barbarians put forward—a critical thinking that, as I will argue, manages to be engaging and politically relevant through its distance.

One political ramification of the Barbarians' theatricality is the anti-essentializing of "the barbarian" in the social world. The "barbarian" becomes an array of staged roles performed by actors, rather than an inherent quality of certain subjects. The emphasis of these personas on the act of acting unveils the operations through which barbarians are "staged" in civilizational discourse. In these performances, it is as if civilization dresses up its others in barbarian costumes and has them perform their role as "evil others."

The projection of "the barbarian" as a series of staged roles has further implications. As Jameson argues, the Brechtian performance not only foregrounds the act of acting on the stage, but wants to show to the audience "that we are all actors and that acting is an inescapable dimension of social and everyday life" (Jameson 1998: 25). Gómez-Peña's barbarians highlight acting as an indispensable aspect of social life. But how does this Brechtian insight, in the way "The New Barbarians" perform it, function in a contemporary context? In what kind of relation do the Barbarians stand with our realities today?

On a first level, the theatricality of the Barbarians brings out the theatricality in contemporary U.S. culture—a culture wherein, as has so often been claimed, spectacle is indistinguishable from "reality." American performance culture permeates everyday life, but also the realms of politics, war, and torture. Describing his reaction to a photograph of a prisoner tortured by the U.S. army, Slavoj Žižek remarks:

When I saw the well-known photo of a naked prisoner with a black hood covering his head, electric cables attached to his limbs, standing on a chair in a ridiculous theatrical pose, my first reaction was that this was a shot from the latest performance-art show in lower Manhattan." (2009: 146)

As opposed to torture practices in other cultures and nations, which are executed in secret, Žižek argues that U.S. army tortures tend to record the prisoner's humiliation with a camera, making it part of a performance. "The very positions and costumes of the prisoners," Žižek continues, "suggest a theatrical staging, a kind of tableau vivant, which

²⁹ One of the origins of the Brechtian V-effect is the "ostranenie" (making-strange or defamiliarizing) of the Russian formalists, which employs estrangement to fight habitual looking and a certain "perceptual numbness" and make people look at familiar things with a fresh eye (Jameson 1998: 39).

³⁰ The V-effect, Brecht wrote, involves "stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them" (Brecht qtd in Brooker 191).

cannot but bring to mind the whole spectrum of American performance art and ‘theatre of cruelty’” (146).³¹ Viewed in this context, the excess and theatricality of Gómez-Peña’s barbarians does not seem foreign to American culture.

Nevertheless, the barbarian personas add a second layer of distance from the American “theatre of cruelty.” This distance draws attention precisely to the theatrical aspects of U.S. culture. For example, the photo-performances that thematize torture overemphasize the staged aspects of the scene. In the image entitled “Abu Ghraib Reenactment,” shot in black and white, two men stand next to each other. Both are wrapped up in barbed wire. The man on the left is holding a machine gun, pointed at the other man. The man on the right has a serene facial expression, his eyes closed, perhaps in awaiting of his execution. He is wearing a shirt full of holes and covered in what seems to be blood, and underneath he is wearing a woman’s pantyhose—a possible allusion to the sexual humiliations of prisoners by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib. What strikes me in this image is that neither one of these men is looking at the other. Standing next to each other, they are both turned to the camera: the prisoner with his eyes closed and the torturer with his eyes wide open. It is thus an explicitly staged scene, confirming what Žižek asserts about U.S. army tortures: that they are performed not simply in front of a camera, but, first and foremost, *for the camera*.

However, there is a subtle difference in the effect of this photo-performance compared with the photos of army torture Žižek describes. The personas in “Abu Ghraib Reenactment” do have the same affective impact as recorded scenes of torture. They do not emulate pain, agony or humiliation. By emptying their performance of empathetic ingredients, what they enact is the *staging* of pain and agony in recordings of torture. Moreover, the viewer’s empathy is further diminished by the knowledge that these are not recordings of real torture. As a result, the image becomes an occasion for the viewer to reflect on the relation between the “real” and the staged. What the barbarians communicate to the (Western) viewer may sound like this: “it is not our fault you cannot identify or sympathize with us. Even if you are not aware of it, you are used to keeping this distance from others in everyday life, because real pain and violence reaches you as a spectacular performance. But our staged performance bothers you, because we make you aware of your own distance from beliefs, things, or other human beings.”

That the culture of spectacle permeates every aspect of our lives does not mean we do not experience things as “real” anymore. On the contrary, as Žižek argues, there is an “underlying trend to obfuscate the line that separates fiction from reality” (2005: 147). We do not give up on “reality,” but try to create a sense of reality in everything, without

³¹ The staging of violence may be typical for U.S. culture but is certainly not unique to it. A striking example of staged and recorded violence from outside the U.S that comes to mind are the videotaped kidnappings and even beheadings of victims in Iraq as “a media tool for exerting asymmetric pressure on various states” (Appadurai 2006: 12).

the dangers “the Real” entails. As a result, the kinds of reality we get today are products, situations or actions deprived of their substance:

[i]n today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, [...] up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances [...], while features like wife beating remain out of sight...)? (Žižek 2004: 105)

This describes a process that yields “reality itself deprived of its substance”: “Just like decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee” (Žižek 2002: xxvi). As a result, Žižek claims, the “twentieth-century passion to penetrate the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitute our reality thus culminates in the thrill of the Real as the ultimate ‘effect’” (xxvi-xxvii).

Reality TV is one example of this trend: these shows sell “real life,” while in fact people are still acting: they play themselves. “The New Barbarians,” on the other hand, bring about the opposite effect. With their stylized performance, they sabotage this effect of reality-without-its-substance and incite us to see things as constructed, fictional, unreal. They reintroduce a distance and a distinction between performance and real life—it is impossible to view those personas as real people. They do not make claims to the “reality” behind the spectacle, but rather challenge our conviction that we can, in fact, penetrate “the Real” through “the cobweb of semblances” our realities are made of. In so doing, they bring the fiction back into our sense of reality. In other words, they do not put the caffeine back into our decaf coffee, but they make us taste decaf coffee as no real coffee.

The Barbarians make us experience our realities as less than real by refusing to take themselves too seriously. The *non-serious theorizing* they develop carries significant political ramifications. As cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues, humor, irony, and parody can function as strategies of defiance and negation, which allow us to counter false expectations of congruity in culture (2001: 97). In his article “Culture with an Attitude,” Fabian proposes a strategy of negativity in our approach to culture, which he describes as “a critical mode of reflection that [...] negates what culture affirms” (93). In our theorization of culture, he argues, we need to challenge “those ideas that make us so terribly positive and serious” (98). In the performance of Gómez-Peña’s barbarians, the redeployment of stereotypes turns into such a strategy of non-serious negation. By using reflexivity, mockery, and self-deprecating humor, and by “being unserious about culture”—all ingredients of Fabian’s strategy of negativity—Gómez-Peña’s barbarians unsettle the seemingly rational structures of Western society and tease out its irrational underbelly (98).

The non-serious attitude of the barbarian personas is not only aimed at culture, but also, specifically, at theory. Through self-irony they take a critical distance from the theoretical discourses that could try to claim them. The titles of photo-performances such as “La Piedad Postcolonial,” “Hybrid Gang Banger,” or “Aristócratas Nómadas,” for example, contain explicit references to postcolonial discourses, theories of cultural hybridity, and (intellectual) nomadism, respectively. The references to popular theoretical concepts in the titles are, I contend, not a manifestation of the theoretical allegiances of the Barbarians. Rather, they reflect a strategy through which they avoid being appropriated by theory—be it postmodern, postcolonial, postructuralist, or humanist—by making it part of their parody and critique.

By refusing to take themselves too seriously, “The New Barbarians” avoid reduction to theoretical commonplaces. The Barbarians explicitly thematize several currently popular issues, including borders, identities, race, gender, violence, the West and its others, the role of the media, and the relation of the margins to the center. In so doing, they may easily trick critics into viewing them as perfect case studies for multiculturalism, globalization, border crossings, the postcolonial condition, alternative histories, cross-culturalism and (cultural) translation, hybridization and syncretism, queer identities, the posthuman, and so on. The theoretical references of their performance are so outspoken that they are almost impossible to miss. And even if one would miss these references in the photo-performances, Gómez-Peña’s extensive writings, replete with theoretical buzzwords, would certainly make up for that. Surrounded, as it were, by theory, the Barbarians make it hard for their viewer not to look at them through a preconstructed theoretical lens.

Do their theoretical allusions make these barbarian personas predictable, convenient, and obedient case studies for theorists? I argue that this is not the case. Thematizing theory can be seen as part of their non-serious attitude and aesthetic of excess. The Barbarians are not just overloaded with props, make-up, and costumes, but also with popular issues, concepts, and theories. The latter are also part of the cultural baggage they try to recycle. By performing an overload of theory, they point to the oversaturation of certain theoretical concepts and views, which have lost their critical potential and have become commonplace within self-authenticating theoretical discourses. Taking this implication a step further, I argue that the Barbarians make well-established theory part of their non-serious theorizing in order to plead for a constant revision of theoretical concepts. By playing with theoretical buzzwords, they reclaim the “edge” of theory. By performing theory in a non-serious way, they challenge theorists to convince us again of the critical value and radical potential of popular concepts. The potential of concepts is not to be taken for granted, but has to be proven time and again, so that concepts do not turn into empty fashionable terms. Therefore, by not taking theory seriously, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians urge us to take theory more seriously than we often do.³²

³² In a dialogue with Lisa Wolford entitled “The Mindfields of Dystopia: The Pervasive Effects of 9/11,” Gómez-Peña points out that even the meaning of terms like “transgressive,” “radical,” “extreme,”

In borrowing tools from different theoretical “toolboxes,” Gómez-Peña does not commit to a theoretical discourse. In one of his “Activist Commandments of the New Millennium,” he writes: “Be an ‘outsider/insider,’ a temporary member of multiple communities” (93). This practice of multiple and provisional belonging may be interpreted as lack of true engagement, but not necessarily. By changing alliances and belonging to different communities, we expose our practices to critique and may evade the blind spots we have when we are trapped within one specific framework. In this spirit of self-critique and antidogmatism, it is perhaps slightly contradictory that Gómez-Peña has often formulated his artistic and theoretical principles in the form of commandments and manifestos. However, even in these prescriptive texts he makes sure to insert self-undermining “barbarisms.” Thus, among his “Activist Commandments of the New Millennium,” we read: “question everything, coño, even these commandments” (2000: 93). The same commandments end with a subversive postscript: “P.S.: And one more thing—don’t make the mistake I am making in this text and take yourself too seriously” (94). Moreover, the manifesto of his troupe “Pocha Nostra” is entitled “an ever evolving manifesto,” which underscores its provisional character (2005: 78).

“The New Barbarians” refuse to yield expected configurations. Instead of functioning as our “constitutive outside,” they challenge the viewer’s (civilized) identity. Although they flirt with different theories of identity and difference, they do not commit fully to any of them. For almost each theory, they contain visual “barbarisms” that could trigger its deconstruction. Just like their extravagant costumes and the overflow of signs on their bodies, the overall performance of “The New Barbarians” is in excess of its signification. It allows temporary interpretations, but in the end slips away due to a surplus, something that does not fit the narrative we ascribe to the image. They seem to celebrate hybridity and multiculturalism, but also problematize these notions; they perform cultural translation, but also show that it is problematic, if not impossible; they speak back to Western narratives, but also develop their own theorizing; they invite a serious revising of theoretical concepts through a non-serious attitude; by mimicking the dominant culture and borrowing its materials they risk reaffirming it, but they also distort, mistranslate, and transform it; they expose the internal contradictions in Western discourses, while they capitalize on these contradictions to create a visual grammar of “barbarisms.”

These operations point to one of the main tasks of the “new barbarian” that they propose. The new barbarian offers a radical critique of existing discourses not by seeking to construct a new dominant discourse and, through it, a new center of power, but by

or “revolutionary” is changing. This is partly due to the American culture of excess, in which there seems to be nothing left to transgress. But it is also due to the fact that these terms have “now been overlaid with the demonizing meanings of the Bush doctrine and the Patriot Act.” After 9/11, terms like “transgressive” or “extreme” are associated with terrorism. As a result, artists are forced to “tone down” their vocabulary and images, so that they don’t “‘offend’ American patriots” (2005: 273). Gómez-Peña tries to reclaim these concepts for his artistic practices.

creating a language able to generate its own barbarisms. Such a language would question and renew itself before its signs turn into stereotypes.

Other New Barbarians

Just as Kendell Geers's and Graciela Sacco's installations participate in a cross-cultural and intermedial network through their title, "The New Barbarians" converse with works that engage with the figure of the "new barbarian."

Thus, Gómez-Peña's barbarians may be compared with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's "new barbarians," laid out in *Empire* (2000). Hardt and Negri's "new barbarians" are a "new nomad horde," a "new race" invested with the task of invading, evacuating, and bringing down Empire (213). The authors view the "new barbarians" as the answer to Nietzsche's famous question in *The Will to Power*: "Where are the barbarians of the twentieth century?" (1968: 465). Hardt and Negri see Nietzsche's barbarians, for example, in the multitude that brought down the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, the new barbarians, Hardt and Negri argue, should not only cause destruction; they must also create an alternative global vision. This would be the "counter-Empire," which the authors identify with a "new Republicanism" (214). Taking up Benjamin's notion of positive barbarism and his vision of the "destructive character," they contend that "the new barbarians destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence" (215).³³

According to Hardt and Negri, barbaric deployments that can trace such new paths often appear in configurations of gender and sexuality: bodies "unprepared for normalization" transform and mutate to create "new posthuman bodies" that subvert traditional boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, male and female, and so on (215-16). In this delineation of the new barbarians we can recognize the transgressive and posthuman bodies of Gómez-Peña's barbarians. These barbarians dissolve fixed boundaries and accommodate not only different identities, but also incongruous life forms, matter, and modes of being in the same body. Among them, we find half-naked cyborgs with machine-guns and robot-like masks ("Ciborg Militiana"); actors in a soap opera with alien heads ("Telenovela Española"); figures in drag with shields, high heels, and Indian feathers, holding dead chickens and supporting themselves with crutches ("El Chamán Travesti," "Alianzas Aleatorias"); and numerous other queer bodies defying borders of normality. Such corporeal mutations constitute for Hardt and Negri an "anthropological exodus," which is crucial in the struggle of republicanism (read: barbarism) against imperial civilization (215). They conclude that "[b]eing republican today" (for them a synonym for their "new barbarian") means "struggling within and constructing against Empire, on its hybrid, modulating terrains" (218).

³³ On Benjamin's positive barbarism and "destructive character" see Chapter Four of this study.

Although Hardt and Negri's conclusion seems to find support in Gómez-Peña's barbarians, I argue that the two visions are not a perfect match. Hardt and Negri's project of building a counter-Empire has, in fact, hegemonic aspirations: it aims to replace one Empire with another. Through their critique of Empire, Hardt and Negri unwittingly reveal their own imperial project, the "New New Empire," or, as they call it, "New Republicanism"—a project that, as Mihai Spărosu argues, does not really "offend the sensibilities of democratic Western society" (92). As opposed to Hardt and Negri's, Gómez-Peña's barbarians do not aspire to replace a dominant discourse with a new doctrine. They rather try to de-centralize dominant discourses by assuming a multiplicity of positions and testing several aesthetic strategies and theoretical tools, without committing to them dogmatically.

Gómez-Peña's barbarians could also be seen as embodiments of a twenty-first century version of Walter Benjamin's barbarian. As I argued in Chapter Four, Benjamin's barbarians in "Experience and Poverty" share most of the qualities of Benjamin's "destructive character." Gómez-Peña's project differs considerably from Benjamin's. Each project responds to different social and political conditions and realities. In 1933, Benjamin's barbarians are invested with the potential to create something radically new through a destruction of the old, in order to "to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further" ("Experience and Poverty," 2005b: 732). Gómez-Peña's barbarians, on the other hand, do not begin with "a little" after having erased the old. They rather construct their barbarian grammar out of the excess of the existing culture, by devouring and contaminating its saturated modes of expression. In their performance, the existing culture is parodied, restaged, and reinvented.

However, the common denominator between Benjamin's and Gómez-Peña's barbarians lies in their readiness to question existing structures that shape our experience, and replace them with something new, whether this newness emerges from the ashes of the old (in Benjamin) or from its excess (in Gómez-Peña). What is more, although Benjamin's and Gómez-Peña's projects spring from a different historical moment, they share a similar starting point: the overload of culture, which Gómez-Peña's barbarians perform and exploit, is also what triggers Benjamin's proposal for a new kind of barbarism.

The poverty of experience that Benjamin diagnoses emerges from an excess of ideas and styles and an overload of culture. People, Benjamin says, "have 'devoured' everything, both 'culture and people,' and they have had such a surfeit, that it has exhausted them" ("Experience and Poverty," 2005b: 734). Benjamin wants to counter this excess through new expressive forms. Gómez-Peña exploits this excess and turns it against the culture that has produced it. His barbarians expose the excess of capitalist U.S. culture and simultaneously reclaim this excess in ways that cannot be captured by the norm or the stereotype. While the overload of culture Benjamin describes in 1933 is a sign of bourgeois decadence, in the wake of the new millennium, Gómez-Peña's barbarians resignify this overload and turn it into a force of contestation of dominant narratives. In this way, they

propose a new “Barbarentum,” based not on a destruction of the old (as in Benjamin) but on a cannibalistic aesthetic that devours everything.

Despite their differences, Benjamin’s and Gómez-Peña’s barbarians share an openness to self-contestation. To Gómez-Peña’s motto “question everything, coño, even these commandments” we could juxtapose Benjamin’s principle: “always radical, never consistent” (Gómez-Peña 2000: 93).³⁴ This openness to questioning prevents their practices from becoming authoritative and their positive barbarism from turning into another version of the “old” or the dominant. “The destructive character sees nothing permanent,” writes Benjamin, and that includes its own methods and beliefs. He “has no interest in being understood. [...] Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it” (“The Destructive Character,” 2005b: 542). As I have argued, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians also invite self-questioning and misunderstandings through their “non-serious theorizing.” The willingness to safeguard the openness of one’s own statements or performances becomes an indispensable feature of the new barbarian, either of the twentieth or of the twenty-first century.

From Absence to Excess: Three Ways to Political Art

Although they may seem to respond to civilization’s waiting for the barbarians, “The New Barbarians” do not embody a clear-cut solution to civilization’s hope for their arrival. If Geers’s labyrinth is empty and Sacco’s installation conceals every trace of the other besides the eyes, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians are there, full-fledged, in front of the viewer. And yet, they are just as confusing and illegible as the eyes in Sacco’s work. Although we can analyze the individual signs that comprise each persona, when trying to bring our analysis to an interpretation that makes sense, we are often at a loss.

The mismatched elements—the barbarisms—that comprise Gómez-Peña’s visual grammar invade the Western imaginary with an aesthetic of excess. In stark contrast with Gómez-Peña’s project, Kendell Geers’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” and Graciela Sacco’s “Esperando a los bárbaros” adopt an aesthetic of invisibility and suggestiveness, respectively. Compared to Geers’s and Sacco’s works, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians reveal too much instead of too little. Their extravagant costumes and props make everything about those barbarian personas too outspoken and transparent. However, precisely this extreme visibility and the theatricality of their performance discourage the viewer from relating to them as human beings. The inability to relate to the figures of “The New Barbarians,” however, has a political function. It compels the viewer to experience the dehumanization that takes place in constructing the other as barbarian. Moreover, it projects the catachrestic character of the designation “barbarian” by suggesting that this name has no proper meaning and literal referent. Their excessive and theatrical aesthetic

³⁴ Benjamin’s motto in German reads: “Immer radikal, niemals konsequent.” Benjamin wrote this in a letter to Gershom Scholem 29 May 1926 (1994: 300; 1978: 425).

also has theoretical implications. It proposes a cultural attitude of non-seriousness as a strategy of (self-) critique and of reclaiming the “edge” of theoretical concepts that have grown too saturated and “serious.”

Geers's and Sacco's works play with traces, absences or elusive signs. Gómez-Peña's barbarian bodies are overly representational, so much so that they defeat and question the very possibility of representation, seen as an intelligible correspondence between a certain reality and an image of this reality. The constellation these three artworks form through their engagement with barbarism and barbarians moves from an aesthetic of absence and invisibility (Geers) to minimal presence and suggestiveness (Sacco) to excess and visual overload (Gómez-Peña). The figures of otherness that emerge through these aesthetic visions—absent barbarians and invisible specters, half-hidden others, and ex-centric new barbarians—denaturalize and question the “barbarians” Western discourses have constructed in the past, and particularly today, in the twenty-first century.

Although their aesthetic approaches differ, the critical operations performed by Geers's, Sacco's, and Gómez-Peña's works are comparable. Geers's and Sacco's installations show more by showing less: their affective operations are based on what absence or (partial) invisibility allows the viewer to imagine and perceive. Gómez-Peña's barbarians show less by showing more: despite their semiotic overload, they remain inaccessible and perplexing, and refuse to “represent” any “real barbarians.” This play between visibility and invisibility, excess and inaccessibility, distance and proximity, makes us question the kind of straightforward knowledge our vision supposedly produces. In all three artworks, what we think we know (and control) by seeing, is put in doubt. We simply cannot trust our eyes. Neither the eyes in Sacco's installation, nor the elusive spectral forces in Geers's labyrinth, nor Gómez-Peña's “New Barbarians,” offer us the ease of recognition that familiar faces and objects guarantee.

In “The New Barbarians,” the explicit political content of the work—its critique of mainstream U.S. culture—enhanced by the theoretical essays and manifestos that accompany the portfolios, questions the extent to which the aesthetic is subordinated to the political. Does the work's aesthetic become an auxiliary means of serving a political propaganda of resistance to the mainstream? Although Gómez-Peña's barbarians practice a kind of activism through art, it is not their political agenda that makes them political art. Their performance, I argue, remolds and rearranges politically charged cultural material to create a barbarian aesthetic. Their political interventions unravel through this aesthetic.

Gómez-Peña's “Pocha Nostra” troupe calls this a “robo-baroque” and “ethno-techno-cannibal aesthetic” of samples that consumes everything they encounter.³⁵ Western imagery is inflated, cut, and pasted in such a way that its own severed parts are unrecognizable and yet strangely familiar. This barbarian aesthetic accommodates bits and pieces of Western popular representations, mixed with elements from non-Western

³⁵ See http://www.pochanostra.com/downloads/pocha_manifesto.do.

spaces, from border cultures at the margins of the West, or from Western mythical constructions of these spaces. The political is played out in the tensions they stage between different elements and frameworks; tensions often suppressed by the mechanisms of a “monolingual” culture of consensus.

Gómez-Peña’s, Sacco’s, and Geers’s aesthetic strategies carry political investments. In the definition of political art that Bal develops, the intertwinement of art and the political is “essential rather than incidental” (2010). The aesthetic of these works is not a vehicle for an extractable political message, but creates political spaces, charged with the kind of agonistic relations that, according to Mouffe, typify the political. Their aesthetic strategies—showing too much or too little—oppose a visual economy of excess to an economy of debt and withholding. Despite their divergent strategies, however, they all resist reduction to illustrations of a theoretical and/or political position. Instead, they become agents of a barbarian mode of theorizing. Their political potential emerges from showing “the kinds of critical thinking that images can make possible” (T.J. Clark 185).

The performance of Gómez-Peña’s barbarians presents us with a nightmarish version of our discursive fictions. At the same time, Gómez-Peña’s barbarians, as the enigmatic eyes in Sacco’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” and the spectral forces in Geers’s labyrinth, could also function as the caterpillars that bear the promise of an alternative to the binary logic of “civilized versus barbarians.” “The New Barbarians” turn the “barbarian” from the founding term of a binary paradigm into a marker of ambiguity and confusion. This barbarian has nothing to do with “the barbarian” of Western discourse, whose function is to be the inferior part in a predetermined comparison with a “civilized” standard. The “new barbarian” is a genuinely comparative figure, invested with the potential to perform comparison, defined as the open outcome of a confrontation between two (or more) beings, objects, languages or discourses, foreign to each other.

The confrontation of the viewer with Geers’s, Sacco’s or Gómez-Peña’s works could also be seen as a moment of comparison, when our sense of self and our preconceptions are measured against the artworks’ performance. The effects of this comparison are not fixed. This means that our encounter with the works also runs the risk of reconstituting dominant discourses instead of challenging them. A certain viewer might still fill in the missing gaps of Sacco’s eyes with images of threatening barbarians behind the wooden fences, ready to invade our space. This could reinforce that viewer’s conviction, for instance, that the borders of civilization should be closed for immigrants. Likewise, Gómez-Peña’s exposure of the internal contradictions within the Western representational system need not have subversive effects on all viewers. As Bhabha argues, internal contradictions always exist, and do not necessarily make powerful discourses less effective (134). Some viewers may perceive the performance of “The New Barbarians” as too “unserious,” provocative, and estranging to be worth engaging, or as a form of activist resistance that can be anticipated and absorbed by the dominant. The kind of agency “The New

Barbarians” assume might thus end up reconstituting the dominant. Such risks are part of open-ended confrontations and comparisons, but they are risks certainly worth taking.