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## AFTERWORD: TENTATIVE GUIDELINES FOR BARBARIAN SCHOLARS

The future can no longer be thought of as the “defense of Western civilization,” constantly waiting for the barbarians. As barbarians are ubiquitous (they could be in the plains or in the mountains as well as in global cities), so are the civilized. There is no safe place to defend and, even worse, believing that there is a safe place that must be defended is (and has been) the direct road to killing.

—Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (xix)

In this study, I suggested ways to pluralize and mobilize the concept of barbarism in the cultural field, hopefully leading to a better appreciation of its complexity. I engaged contemporary debates about new barbarians, civilization, globalization, and multiculturalism, and tried to problematize or cause small shifts in some of the key terms of these debates. I tried to dislodge barbarism from its conventional contexts, rekindle its critical potential, propose it as an agent in cultural theory, and steer it towards new fields of application.

The constellation of objects this study engaged shows that barbarian operations and constructive sites of barbarism can be found everywhere: inside, outside, and at the interstices of the walls of civilization; on a microscopic level, in the smallest details of our texts; on a macroscopic level, in the travel or migration of people and objects through places; on a kaleidoscopic level, in normative or subversive citations and repetitions; in mistranslations and in allegorical readings; within ourselves; in foreign objects or people we identify as guests or neighbors; inside the labyrinth of Western civilization or at the other side of a fence; in the overload of culture; in visual excess or in suggestive absences; in texts, visual objects, and songs; in the interaction between the reader or critic and the cultural objects they encounter.

Identifying or activating the barbarian operations and barbarisms that are possibly at work at all these sites is a task for what we could call a “barbarian scholar.” This study has therefore been an implicit process of instruction for me on what it could mean to act as a barbarian in one’s discipline and field of research, and in one’s relation to the object of study. In other words, the trope of the barbarian has helped me reflect on how I do what I do and how the object of my research can be involved in my research practices. How, then, could a barbarian scholar act?

A barbarian scholar can move across disciplinary borders, invading disciplinary fields with foreign discourses and perspectives. At the same time, functioning as a barbarian scholar would call for a constant rethinking of one's position in the academic field. This position would differ from what we could here call—for the sake of the argument—the position of the “civilized scholar.” A civilized scholar needs an established and proper position of authority from which to speak, exert power, and possibly identify other disciplines and discourses as barbarian—i.e., foreign, and thus either not worth engaging or constructed as enemies. This scholar needs a demarcated territory, a center, and a preconstructed method or set of methods, produced within his or her field. Even if this method is applied to objects from different cultural contexts, genres or media, these objects are translated into the hegemonic idiom of the scholar.

Barbarian scholars, on the other hand, do not claim a proper territory and within it try to reaffirm their own discourse. Rather, they try to challenge the function of the center without wishing to occupy it. Barbarian scholars traverse foreign territories—discourses, methods, and objects—and involve them in their research. They do not view these territories as potential conquests that need to be subdued to an overarching method or to a hegemonic cultural center, but as adversaries or partners, involved in comparisons, dialogues, as well as conflicts.

The relation of barbarian scholars to their objects is one of tension and mutual influence. Barbarian operations are not launched from an active and intentional agent (the analyst) upon a passive receiver (the object), but are initiated by the object, the analyst, and the analyst's theories at the moment they meet. As a result of this encounter, the power relations among the agents involved may change, creating small shifts in our research frameworks. Our theoretical discourses may start stumbling or stuttering, their flow may be disrupted, they may lose some of their arrogance, certainty or sense of superiority vis-à-vis the object. Our perception of the object may change too, because the object stops functioning as a mirror for our discourse and starts projecting its alterity—its barbarian character. In this way, both the analyst and the object can leave traces on each other.

Barbarian scholars do not try to turn their peripheral language into the dominant one or assert its universality. They want to disperse the power of the center and generate a plurality of barbarian languages in contact with each other, but not in a center-periphery relation. Nevertheless, they are also careful not to naïvely assert a neutral ground, on which objects, methods, and discourses encounter each other on equal footing. The theories and objects involved in one's research are fraught with power relations. Barbarian scholars do not bypass these relations, but refuse to accept that they determine the outcome of their critical ventures.

For barbarian scholars, each disciplinary area offers possibilities for constructing their own alphabet and language as they move forward in their research—and there is no

reason why such a language should lack precision or coherence. The interdisciplinary methodology constructed in this way is a “barbarian language” not because it does not make sense. It is barbarian, because it is not bound by a preconstructed method, but takes shape in practice, through the interaction of different methodological tools and theories as they are brought to bear on different objects. In such as methodology, objects, concepts or theoretical views that do not initially come from the same toolbox, academic jargon or context, and are thus “barbarian” to each other, are put to work together and can lead to critical insights and surprising outcomes. A barbarian research or mode of theorizing is not a disavowal of method, but makes its own tentative rules and tools as it moves along. In the following, I lay out some reflections on the possible principles and traits of such a theorizing.<sup>1</sup>

1. First, barbarian theorizing could experiment with the non-serious, the playful, and the frivolous as expressive modes. This “non-serious” modality is not a way of producing oversimplified and easily digestible versions of theory, but a strategy of breaking with the formal conventions and disciplinary restrictions of “serious” theoretical discourses and reclaiming the “edge” of saturated theoretical concepts.

In the last three decades, theory in the fields of comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies has been accompanied by metaphors of travel and mobility. Edward Said’s “travelling theory,” Deleuze’s “nomadic thought,” and Mieke Bal’s “travelling concepts” are cases in point.<sup>2</sup> Said’s concept of “travelling theory” unsettles “the propensity of theory to seek a stable place, to float above historical conjunctures,” and draws emphasis to the “sites of production, reception, transmission and resistance to specific theories” (Clifford). Deleuze proposes the notion of “nomadic thought” as producing a mode of writing that creates something uncodable in theory, traverses the frame of the text, and hooks up thought to the outside (Deleuze 2004: 255). Bal proposes a concept-based interdisciplinary methodology for cultural analysis based on the possibilities that unravel as concepts “travel” from one discipline to another. These tropes reflect the wish to keep theory open and unfinished, and prevent it from being “monolingual, presentist, narcissistic” (Spivak 2003: 20).

Nevertheless, as Peter Hallward argues about postcolonial theory in *Absolutely Postcolonial* (2001), while theory sets out to create a non-generalizable discourse that privileges difference, indeterminacy, and contextual specificity, it often masks a self-regulating and self-authenticating discourse. Concepts initially invested with a revolutionary potential turn into commonplaces or buzzwords. Terms like crossculturalism, translation, interdisciplinarity, hybridity, creolization, in-betweenness, transculturality,

<sup>1</sup> As explained in Chapter Seven, the term “barbarian theorizing” was coined by Walter D. Mignolo (1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Said’s “Travelling Theory” (1983), Bal’s study *Travelling Concepts* (2002), and Deleuze’s essay “Nomadic Thought” (2004).

transnationalism, nomadic subjects, diasporic identities, or deterritorialization, for example, are regularly employed in ways that deprive them of their rigor and specificity.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, theory often loses its radical potential by being entangled in a web of (self-imposed) limitations, which demand that scholars be overly cautious with the way they formulate arguments. Being alert to our blind spots and to the risk of excluding others from our discourse; addressing sensitive political issues in a responsible manner; the demands of political correctness, the catachrestic nature of available terms; the complicity of the critic in the discourses she employs and questions, and the demands of self-reflexive scholarship: all these considerations constitute a double bind. On the one hand, these are indispensable considerations for practicing responsible scholarship. On the other hand, they can also operate as a straitjacket for those who desire to say something new and to formulate it in radical terms.

The limitations, conditions, and “traffic regulations” of academic scholarship often strip theory of its spontaneity, immediacy, rhetorical force, and even world-making potential. The paradox of theoretical discourses that tend to become restrictive while trying to be responsible, just, and inclusive, is in my view one of the predicaments of contemporary theorizing. Theoretical discourses and concepts tend to lose their transgressive potential and controversiality. They threaten to become too “civilized”—too serious, cautious, and tamed.

This tendency can be correlated with the desire for a transparently communicative and “transcendent interdisciplinary language” beyond the limited scope of every discipline, which, as Danielle Bouchard argues, reflects the “ideal of inclusion via consensus democracy” in academia (12). The ideal language of the university is typified by an anxiety for impropriety or incomprehensibility, seen as “something to be shut down in the name of communication and consensus” (12). What underlies this ideal, Bouchard contends, is an attempt to eliminate all dissimilar, improper, and barbarous elements or identities that are indefinable and block communication (11). Thus, institutional frameworks often encourage a “safe” mode of theorizing that isolates and excludes radical otherness in the name of “equal rights humanitarianism” and in an attempt to counter racism and exclusionary thinking.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, barbarian theorizing can describe a mode of writing that reclaims the radical potential—the “edge”—of theory and maximizes its transgressive possibilities without shying away from indefinable and “improper” otherness. As an alternative to

<sup>3</sup> In *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (2001), Peter Hallward critically discusses some of these categories, and especially the “signature postcolonial concepts” (such as the hybrid, the intercultural, the in-between, the interstitial, and the counter-hegemonic).

<sup>4</sup> The consensus system, as Rancière argues, tries to cleanse the world of “surplus identities” that are not recognizable or representable (Rancière 117). Accordingly, the university tries to “simultaneously enforce a proper identity for individual groups and to eliminate those identities which are improper to ‘the people’” (Bouchard 15). It thereby eradicates those indefinable, barbarous elements which are “charged with invoking exclusion” (Bouchard 15).

what I sometimes see as a restrictive seriousness in theoretical idioms, I propose the “non-seriousness” of a barbarian theorizing.<sup>5</sup> This non-seriousness does not suggest not taking issues seriously enough. Rather, it concerns a different mode of expression that challenges the discursive order and institutional framework from which a theoretical idiom is perceived to emanate. Literary language, for instance, because it is assumed to have a different discursive status (fictional, and in that sense “non-serious”), has more institutional liberty to say everything and anything, and to push the limits of language and thinking.<sup>6</sup> Finding ways to annex literary expressive forms in theoretical discourses—for example, by experimenting with a literary methodology of doing theory instead of only using theory to read literature—may enable us to tackle questions that seem settled, repressed or off limits. Barbarian theorizing could also accommodate nontheoretical interventions from artistic practices. Rephrasing Deleuze’s and Guattari’s thesis about philosophy, we could say that theory needs nontheory “just as art needs nonart and science needs nonscience” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 218). Such an attitude to theory calls for a certain degree of “de-training” or “de-disciplining” ourselves in our disciplines, in order to counter the self-authenticating knowledge produced in our academic fields and explore alternative ways of knowing and speaking.<sup>7</sup>

Granted, barbarism itself is an overcharged concept fraught with power relations and violent connotations, many of which are addressed in this study. It is, in that sense, an all too serious concept involved in all too serious discourses: used abundantly in political rhetoric and history, but also used frequently and with a lot of suspicion in literary and postcolonial theory. However, as I argue in this study, barbarism can transmute its own murky and serious usage into more playful and disruptive operations. It is the combination of the subversive potential of barbarism and its immersion in politics and discursive violence that makes it a risky, but potentially effective, trope for revisiting theoretical idioms.

2. A second feature of barbarian theorizing could be a specific attention to errors, misunderstandings, discordances or unfitting elements—in other words, those elements I laid out as “barbarisms.”<sup>8</sup> Texts or other cultural objects may contain erratic or inconsistent elements, which are sometimes consciously employed by an author or artist as part of a critical strategy, but may also be generated independently of the author’s or artist’s

<sup>5</sup> An example of how this “non-serious” theorizing can take form in artistic practices was laid out in Chapter Seven, in my analysis of “The New Barbarians” by Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

<sup>6</sup> The claim that literature has the freedom to say everything and anything is expressed by Derrida’s notion of “tout dire.” See Chapter Four.

<sup>7</sup> Rafael Hernández, for instance, uses the term “dediscipline” to express the need to “dediscipline academic knowledge, change old habits and disciplinarily correct approaches, not by tossing them out of the window, but by critically historicizing them” (97).

<sup>8</sup> As I argued in this study, barbarisms are not inherently erratic, improper, or discrepant elements, but are defined in a relational sense, either because they diverge from a standardized or mainstream “language” or because they are juxtaposed with other seemingly incommensurable elements.

intentions, as unconscious slippages. Either way, in some cases these erratic elements hold a subversive or creative potential. This potential can be activated by the intervention of the reader, viewer, or critic, who reads or looks with an eye for deviant, unfamiliar elements. Thus, barbarian theorizing probes the potential of discordant elements in texts or images instead of correcting or erasing them.

Barbarian theorizing also pays attention to elements that cannot be accounted for in speech. It focuses on instances of dissensus and miscommunication, not as problems to be resolved, but, in line with Chantal Mouffe's views, as constitutive of the political.<sup>9</sup> Barbarian theorizing accommodates non-consensual speech not for the sake of miscommunication, but in order to interrogate the premises of "proper" theory and academic discourse and determine which voices are perceived as "barbarian noise" and by whom.

Barbarian theorizing does not necessarily strive for perfect structure, coherence, and closure, but exploits the energy that might reside in incomplete ideas and arguments. The complexity and interrelatedness of the objects and issues we write about, and the illimitability of their contexts, make it almost impossible to strive for comprehensive scholarship. We inevitably make selections in our writing—selections often also dictated by the marketability of research projects and ideas. In making these selections, we sometimes discard research material and ideas that seem like dead ends, either because they refuse to deliver coherent claims, or because they do not have a big market value at a specific moment. Barbarian theorizing could bring such marginalized research ideas or objects to the foreground, perhaps not in the form of well-structured and finished arguments, but as snapshots of aspiring theories—theories not yet articulated, but containing sparks of inspirational thinking that may or may not be fully realizable, but may nonetheless be worth engaging.<sup>10</sup>

We do not always read texts in order to extract structured and coherent arguments, but also for a word or sentence that sticks with us or puzzles us, for unexpected or outrageous small discoveries that are baffling, refreshing or unbearably annoying. Provocative elements, incomplete ideas or forgotten and excluded objects could be accommodated in theoretical writing, even if they do not form complete narratives. I am not pleading for incoherence and incompleteness in opposition to well-built and argued cases. Most times, incomplete, unsystematic or unmarketable ideas are simply reflections of bad, sloppy or uninteresting scholarship. There are, however, exceptions.

How we can distinguish these exceptions from simply bad, disjointed ideas is a challenging question. One way might be to subject incomplete or strange ideas to a counterintuitive approach, and see if they live up to the challenge. In the first chapter

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<sup>9</sup> I refer to Mouffe's conception of the "political" not as a space of consensus, but as an "'agonistic' sphere of contestation" that acknowledges the necessity of conflict in democratic politics (4).

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin's fragmented and incomplete mode of writing in *The Arcades Project* would be a case in point.

of this study, I argued that we can view Kafka's incomplete wall of China and the tower of Babel not as failed, unfinished projects but as positive manifestations of the desire for barbarism. Such a counterintuitive approach requires switching our perspective and adjusting our criteria in order to ask new questions to old and seemingly settled objects or stories. Similarly, we could approach excluded, strange or unfinished ideas by asking: what change of perspective does this idea require from us and what kind of desire does its incompleteness, failure or strangeness express? If we reverse their negative valuation by looking at them differently, what kind of insights could our displaced viewing yield? Thus, doing creative things with fragmented, rejected, or incomplete ideas and objects requires a shift in our own perspectives and criteria for reading or looking. This shift will not lead to productive outcomes every time. Nevertheless, it may be useful in probing the potential of such ideas and objects.

Ways of doing theory that are premised on other structuring principles than systematic argumentation may be the future of theory. The overload of knowledge produced every day; its short-term validity and life-expectancy due to its constant replacement by new discoveries and new paradigms; the short time-span in which data are perceived and processed under the impact of the internet and new media: all these—and other—developments are radically changing the ways we know and understand the world, as well as the ways we read texts. Due to institutional restrictions and mechanisms of institutional regulation and control, academic discourses tend to be slow in catching up with these new realities and expressive modalities, and in adjusting their frameworks accordingly. This does not mean that theory fails to critically engage with the above developments. Nevertheless, its expressive modes and frameworks remain quite conventional. Therefore, academic theory is often unable to incorporate the possibilities of new media and new modes of knowing, reading, and writing, in order to refashion its epistemological frameworks.

When scrolling through hypertexts on the web, for example, our reading is usually structured around words or phrases that form hyperlinks connecting us to new texts and images. We often read texts on the web not in order to follow an argument from beginning to end, but in order to wander in an intricate web of links, leading to new pages and new texts or images, which bear unexpected relations (or no relation whatsoever) with the text we started with. This mode of reading is challenging our epistemologies and theoretical discourses in ways not yet fully mapped. Such new modes of reading also call for new, *barbarian* modes of theorizing. Of course, what would be deemed a barbarian mode of writing in the present might be standardized and conventionalized in the future. The attribute "barbarian" does not pertain to permanent qualities of a kind of reading or theorizing, but to constantly renewed modes of contestation that respond to changes in our social and cultural realities.

3. In the third place, we can qualify as “barbarian” a theorizing that is relational. In his critique of postcolonialism, Hallward distinguishes two kinds of theorizing. The first kind, which he names “singular,” “creates its own medium of existence or expansion” and is self-constitutive, self-sufficient, self-regulating, and independent of external specific criteria and frames of reference (Hallward xii; Boelhouwer 572). The second kind, on the other hand, which Hallward names “specific,” “yields elements whose individuality can only be discerned through the relations they maintain with themselves, with their environment, and with other individuals” (Hallward 4). It thus operates through an “active negotiation of relations” (xii).<sup>11</sup> Within the context of this study, I identify the former mode of theorizing as “civilized” and the latter as “barbarian.” The former mode, which I call “civilized,” describes a self-absorbed discourse that functions “in the absence of others as such” (xii). Barbarian theorizing coincides with the latter kind of discourse in Hallward’s distinction. This theorizing is not self-authenticating, but takes shape through its relations to other elements, just as the “barbarian” is a relational, comparative figure. Barbarian theorizing is interested in the boundary spaces between languages, subjectivities or objects, and in the tensions and “barbarisms” generated in these spaces. Unlikely comparisons with “the others” of our theories could push the limits of our thinking, expose its shortcomings, and make our theoretical idioms more relational and less self-sufficient.

4. Finally, “barbarian” is a kind of theorizing that embraces what in this study I called “(not) knowing” as a promise for alternative ways of knowing. The positivity

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<sup>11</sup> Although Hallward’s distinction is very useful, I find his use of the terms “singular” and “specific” to identify these two modes of theorizing somewhat unsuccessful, especially because the term “singular,” which in Hallward is negatively tinted, has a history of positive and productive significations in theory. The term “singular” and the notion of “singularity” have been central in philosophy and literary criticism. The “singular” has been used in positive fashion by several thinkers and scholars, such as Jacques Derrida, Derek Attridge, Alain Badiou, and Mieke Bal. For a brief discussion of the notion of “singularity” see Chapter Six of this study. Although it takes on different meanings in different thinkers, the “singular” usually pertains to a kind of discourse that is attentive to the difference and specificity of an object but also highlights its iterability, imitability, and connectedness with other contexts and discourses, making it relevant outside its strictly delimited context. Thus, the “singular” usually denotes a discourse that comes closer to what Hallward describes as its precise opposite, namely the “specific.” This is why I find Hallward’s choice of terms rather confusing and prefer to use his distinction by naming it differently, i.e., through the terms “civilized” and “barbarian” theorizing. Hallward’s main argument is that although postcolonial discourse—with its focus on particularity, difference, and contextual approaches—may seem genuinely relational (and thus, in Hallward’s definition, specific) on a thematic level, it actually has a singular orientation. As opposed to postcolonial discourse, anti- or counter-colonial discourse is specific and relational in its main terms, because it assumes a world of constituent conflicts, antagonisms, and demarcated interests (xiv). The postcolonial is singular because it is usually associated with a consensual or harmonious field of multiple identities, traveling theories, cultural synthesis, hybrid intermingling, and dissolution of boundaries. In the end, the postcolonial asserts a univocal coherence rather than radical tensions and specific conflicts. Consequently, according to Hallward, the postcolonial perspective lacks engagement with problems of inequality or other urgent issues in the world, which can only be dealt with if we acknowledge conflicts and the boundaries of categories such as nation, ethnicity or class (xiv-xv).

of “civilized” knowledge lies in its visibility, transparency, and familiarity, and is often grounded in preservation, reproduction, and normalization of already existing knowledge. The knowledge-producing potential of barbarian theorizing, on the other hand, is not “positive” in the sense of fully present, realized or complete. Following the principle of piecemeal construction, it constructs openings in the walls of dominant epistemologies. Furthermore, it only knows provisional moments of realization and simultaneously points to not-yet-existing modes of knowing: it promises a future barbarian epistemology. This promise is necessary for barbarian theorizing to keep being renewed without simply reproducing itself.

I do not claim that this study is exemplary of such barbarian theorizing. Given the institutional limitations of an academic dissertation, I have tried to create a new, shifting ground for the concept of barbarism, on which a barbarian mode of theorizing may be envisioned and realized in future projects. To what extent this kind of theorizing, as I have roughly sketched it above, is feasible in practice, is certainly open to debate. However, even if its realization seems tricky in the present, its principles and tentative guidelines could still be useful for measuring and assessing our academic discourses and practices.

The above concluding reflections pertain primarily to the question of how (else) we could do what we do as academics, cultural analysts, theorists or students. Next to the “how” remains the perhaps even more significant question of “why.” In this study, this question could concern the practical value of a plural, positive recasting of barbarism when it comes to “real people”: people (or other beings) marginalized, excluded, and/or subject to violent processes of barbarization and othering by dominant groups. Where do these “others” and their bodies fit in all this talk about barbarian theorizing? And what is the point of theory, even a barbarian theory, if it has no impact on constructions of others as barbarians and the violence against them? Especially in the humanities, the question of the practical value and effects of a research project is often a cause for headaches for scholars. However, difficult as the answer may be, it is still a question one cannot lose sight of.

In the case of barbarism, I argue that the “how” is interwoven with the “why.” The strategies, operations, and analyses in this study will certainly not give clear-cut solutions or put an end to the violence against others in the name of civilization, liberalism, religious fanaticism, or other interests. The applicability and practical merits of this study’s recasting of barbarism might therefore seem far-fetched—and in a certain sense they are. However, it is important to bear in mind that the construction of barbarians and thus also the violence against them (discursive or physical) starts with the performative act of naming. Naming barbarians creates barbarians. But as a purely discursive construction, dependent on perspective, the barbarian is also an exceptionally mobile category. Although it is often applied to specific groups of people, the criteria and features that make us “recognize” others as barbarians have never been fixed and stable. As demonstrated in this study,

these criteria change in each context and period, according to the interests and defining standards of the self. Viewed as such, the barbarian is an overarching, versatile category of otherness. It is almost a passkey for constructing subjects as dangerous or inferior. This makes its violence more pervasive and “real,” since it could be applied to virtually any subject under specific circumstances. Paradoxically then, the barbarian—the most persistent other in Western history—has all the more “real” effects because it is purely discursive. However, it is precisely its discursive nature that makes the barbarian suitable for resignifications and subversive, critical operations.

As a result, when it comes to barbarism and barbarians, the distance between theory and practice, words and acts, linguistic and physical violence, is not as vast and incommensurable as one might think. Small shifts in the ways we conceive and use “barbarism” and the “barbarian” in language or in visual representations could have a tangible impact on the ways we tag, construct, and treat others as barbarians in domestic and international politics and in everyday life. The distance between an either/or logic—the logic of “you’re either with us or with the barbarians”—and a plural, performative, creative conception of barbarism and the barbarian, could also be the very real difference between a barbaric war against the West’s “new barbarians” and, in Cavafy’s words, another “kind of solution.”