

## Preface

*Barbarism and Its Discontents* is an inquiry into the operations of the concept of “barbarism” and the figure of the “barbarian” in modern and contemporary works of literature, art, and theory. Although barbarism is traditionally viewed as the negative offshoot of “civilization,” it can be recast as a creative and critical concept in cultural theory: it can unsettle binary oppositions, imbue authoritative discourses with foreign, erratic elements, and trigger alternative modes of knowing and relating to others. This study situates barbarism in a broad context: it touches on theory, politics, history, literature, and visual art and brings together cultural objects from several national contexts, including Argentinean, Czech, German, Greek, Mexican, North American, and South African. Staging encounters among diverse objects, media, and discourses pluralizes barbarism and charts its complex operations.

“Barbarism” and the “barbarian” are not only treated here as objects of analysis but are also cast as theoretical and methodological concepts, which help me reflect on *how* I do what I do. This study therefore contains bits and pieces of what I imagine as a barbarian mode of theorizing. The premises of this theorizing, which inform and guide my approach, can be sought in certain ongoing theoretical conversations. 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 (1983) “travelling theory,” Mieke Bal’s (2002) “travelling concepts,” and Deleuze’s (2004) “nomadic thought” are cases in point. Said’s concept of “travelling theory” unsettles the tendency of theory to seek stability and abstract generalization and draws emphasis to specific “sites of production, reception, transmission and resistance to specific theories” (Clifford 1989). Bal proposes a concept-based interdisciplinary methodology for cultural analysis based on the possibilities that

unravel as concepts travel from one discipline to another. Deleuze introduces the notion of nomadic thought as producing a mode of writing that creates something uncodable in theory, traverses the frame of the text, and connects thought to the outside (2004, 255). Such tropes mark the attempt to conceptualize theory as an open and unfinished process and prevent it from becoming “monolingual, presentist, narcissistic” (Spivak 2003, 20).

Nevertheless, as Peter Hallward (2001) argues with regard to postcolonial theory, while theory aspires to create a nongeneralizable discourse that privileges difference, indeterminacy, and contextual specificity, it often ends up masking a self-regulating and self-authenticating discourse. Concepts invested with a revolutionary potential often turn into dogmatic, saturated versions of their initial forms, deprived of rigor and specificity. Moreover, theoretical concepts often lose their transformative potential by being entangled in a web of limitations, which make scholars overly cautious when employing them. Being alert to our blind spots and to the risk of excluding others from our discourses; 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: such considerations are indispensable for practicing responsible scholarship, but they can sometimes also operate as a straitjacket, which strips theoretical discourses and concepts of their transgressive potential and controversiality, making them too “civilized.”

This study is an attempt to dislodge barbarism from its conventional contexts and rekindle the critical and transgressive potential of this concept, not despite but *through* its controversiality. Instead of reinforcing a discourse that divides the world into civilized and barbarian, barbarism can also challenge this discourse and engage in constructive operations. This critical potential in barbarism can take the form of a “barbarian theorizing”—a term I borrow from Walter Mignolo (1998).

Some of the tentative premises of such barbarian theorizing, which also function as implicit guidelines in this book, are the following. The theorizing I call barbarian is not a disavowal of method but constructs tentative methodologies in practice, using tools from different disciplinary fields. It invites unlikely juxtapositions that may push our thinking, shift our theoretical presuppositions, expose their shortcomings, and make our theories more relational and less narcissistic. Barbarian theorizing

welcomes instances whereby theoretical discourses stumble, stutter, or lose some of their confidence vis-à-vis their objects.

Barbarian theorizing focuses on dissensus or miscommunication not as problems to be resolved but, in line with Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Jacques Rancière (1999), as constitutive of “the political.” It accommodates nonconsensual speech in order to counter the semblance of congruity in culture, interrogate the premises of established theoretical and academic discourses, and determine which voices are excluded from the social or even perceived as “barbarian noise” and why.

Barbarian theorizing invites experimentation with playful expressive modes, which break with the formal conventions of “serious” theory. Annexing literary strategies in theoretical or philosophical discourses—for example, by imagining literary modes of reading or doing theory—would be one of the many forms this experimentation may take.

Barbarian theorizing is never fully present, complete, or identical to itself. It knows only provisional moments of realization and simultaneously points to not-yet-existing modes of knowing: it promises a future “barbarian” epistemology. This promise, even if it can never be fully realized, enables theory to constantly renew itself.

Although “barbarism” is an overdetermined and historically charged term, this book makes a case for its critical thrust—its “edge”—in cultural theory. If we do not take this concept for granted, relying on its conventional meanings and functions in discourse, we are more alert to the shifts and fissures it may create in the categories of this discourse. Through these fissures, new grammars, new relations, and new modes of speaking and knowing could emerge.