Barbarism, Otherwise is an interdisciplinary 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," I argue that it can be recast as a creative and critical concept in cultural theory: it can unsettle the logic of 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, visual art, film, and philosophy, and brings together cultural objects from several national contexts, including American, Argentinean, Bulgarian, Czech, German, Greek, Mexican, and South African. By staging encounters among diverse objects, media, and discourses, I pluralize barbarism and chart the complexity of its operations.

The terms "barbarism," "barbarians," and "civilization" figure prominently in political speeches, the media, historiography, cultural theory, and everyday language in the West. This study intervenes in the rhetoric of "civilization versus barbarism," which has been particularly popular since the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern-bloc Europe, and especially since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The opposition between "us" and "them" today is primarily established in moral and cultural terms. Global conflicts are no longer perceived as a struggle between right and left, capitalism and communism, but rather in terms of what Samuel Huntington has called "the clash of civilizations." This purported clash is often translated as a struggle of "right versus wrong" or "good versus evil." In this context, tagging others as "barbarians" enables their construction as enemies needing destruction rather than worthy adversaries with legitimate standpoints.

In this study, I take issue with the current rhetoric around barbarism and civilization and interrogate contemporary as well as historical uses of the "barbarian" in the West. Despite the long-standing history of the "barbarian," and although a lot is being written and said these days about "barbarism" and "civilization," the meaning of these terms is often taken for granted and the hierarchical opposition between "civilized" and "barbarians" remains fixed. In the face of this semantic rigidity, I show how literature, art, and theory can mobilize the concept of barbarism in the cultural field. Instead of reinforcing a discourse that divides the world into forces of good and evil, I contend that barbarism can also challenge dominant discourses and engage in constructive operations. By dislodging it from its conventional contexts, I rekindle the critical potential of this concept, propose it as an agent in cultural critique, and steer it towards new fields of application.
To that end, I propose a shift from an essentialist to a performative approach to barbarism and the barbarian. The central question is not “who (or where) are the barbarians?” but what kind of critical operations barbarism and the barbarian can be involved in. Specifically, I am concerned with the following questions: How can the operations of barbarism in literature, art, and theory unsettle its rigid and violent uses in current and historical Western discourses? How can the concept of barbarism intervene in our discursive frameworks and inspire new modes of knowing, comparing, and theorizing? Can it help us imagine alternative ways of relating to others that are not based on essentialist binary schemes?

Both “barbarism” and the “barbarian” are accompanied by a seemingly inescapable negativity. Barbarism operates as the negative standard against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity or level of sophistication. In this opposition, barbarism and civilization are interdependent concepts. The “civilized” can conceive themselves as sophisticated, mature, superior, humane, because they construct their “barbarians” as infantile, inferior, or savage. In refusing to go along with this logic, I contend that the concept of barbarism oscillates between two conflicting functions. On the one hand, it reinforces the discourse of civilization that needs it as its antipode. On the other hand, barbarism also nurtures a disruptive, insurgent potential, which can undermine the workings of the same discourse that constructs the “barbarian” for the sake of civilization’s self-definition.

I argue that by not taking its formal meanings for granted we could conceptualize barbarism otherwise. By revisiting underexposed aspects of barbarism, I explore its potential operations in language and other media, without circumventing its violent history in Western discourses and without rendering the concept “harmless.” In the gaps and tensions between its various meanings, between its history and present uses, and between its formal meanings in language and its effects in speech, I see possibilities for doing different things with this concept in literature, art, and theory.

Barbarism is recast as a theoretical and methodological concept. As such, it is not only involved in what I explore, but also in how I explore it: I treat “barbarism” and the “barbarian” not only as objects of analysis, but also as agents in theorizing. By actively involving them in the methodological and theoretical considerations of this study, I make “barbarism” and the “barbarian” partners in the close readings and comparisons that take place in its chapters.

My argument takes shape through close readings of cultural objects in which barbarism or barbarians take center stage. These objects are situated in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and most of them are contemporary. What these objects share is a critical engagement with Western discourses on barbarism. The diversity of these case studies enables me to situate the operations of barbarism in a broad comparative context. There are several valuable historical studies that focus on the “barbarian” in a particular period or culture. Nevertheless, there are few comparative and interdisciplinary approaches
to “barbarism,” and even fewer attempts to chart it as a theoretical, methodological, and epistemologically productive concept. This study makes a contribution to the latter domains.

Each chapter has a thematic and a theoretical component. In other words, each chapter deals with 1) an issue that emerges from a different aspect of barbarism or the figure of the barbarian, and 2) a different theoretical or methodological aspect of the barbarism, i.e. a different barbarian operation.

In a prelude (Chapter One), I offer a preview of the operations of barbarism at play throughout this study through a close reading of Franz Kafka’s short story “The Great Wall of China” (1931). Kafka’s story enables me to chart the critical potential of barbarism, its relation to civilization, the intertwining of its positive and negative meanings, and its involvement in questions of knowledge and comparison. Revolving around an unfinished wall, Kafka’s story functions as a scale model through which I present the structuring principles of this study as a whole.

In Chapter Two, I situate this study within contemporary debates around culture, civilization, and barbarism. In particular, I present examples from contemporary Western political rhetoric, and especially the rhetoric of the U.S. administration after what became nicknamed as “9/11.” I also discuss responses to this rhetoric from political and cultural theorists, sociologists, philosophers, and intellectuals. These responses depart from various ideological premises, including conservative, liberal, humanist, left-wing, relativist, and deconstructionist perspectives. By scrutinizing the ways in which “barbarism” and “civilization” are signified and deployed in them, I position my own study through and against these approaches.

After unpacking the contemporary rhetoric on barbarism and civilization, in Chapter Three I look into the meanings and uses of the “barbarian” in Western history. While most historical studies of the barbarian focus on a specific era and culture, and few others opt for a genealogical approach, I try a different take. Instead of providing a chronologically ordered history of the barbarian, I thematically structure this chapter around a series of criteria that have determined what constitutes “civilization” in the West from the Greek antiquity to the present. The logic behind this choice is the following. The changing meanings of the “barbarian” in history depend on the shifting self-perceptions of those who claim the status of the “civilized.” I thus relate the significations and uses of the “barbarian” in different eras to the standards that have determined what counts as “civilized.” To that end, I develop a typology of what I call civilizational standards. These include language, culture, political system or ideology, morality, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, race, progress, and the psyche. Based on this structuring principle, I revisit the history of the barbarian as a narrative of discontinuities, repetitions, and unexpected intersections, emerging through a web of cultural, social, political, ideological, religious, and scientific discursive strands.
After the historical travels of the barbarian as the negative pole of civilization, in Chapter Four I delve into the notion of positive barbarism. I read Walter Benjamin’s essay “Experience and Poverty” (1933), in which “positive barbarism” is introduced, and juxtapose this notion to other uses of “barbarism” in Benjamin’s writings. The issue is how Benjamin’s positive barbarism breaks with the negative genealogy of barbarism and articulates a new project without fully dissociating itself from the destructive, violent aspects of the “old” barbarism. This chapter has a parallel theoretical objective: it experiments with a kind of reading that activates the “barbarian” qualities of Benjamin’s writing. The reading I perform combines a philosophical with a literary perspective. By means of a microscopic approach, I look for odd, deviant details as an entrance to the text. I view these details as latent “barbarisms” in Benjamin’s writing, which are activated by the reader. These linguistic barbarisms enable me to explore how Benjamin’s project of positive barbarism is put to work in his own writing as a textual strategy.

While Chapter Four follows Benjamin’s prefigurations of the kind of “barbarians” that can actualize “positive barbarism,” Chapter Five explores the critical potential of the barbarians’ absence. Here, I center on the topos of waiting for the barbarians through a comparative reading of C.P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904) and J.M. Coetzee’s homonymous novel (1980). In Cavafy’s and Coetzee’s works, the non-arrival of the barbarians confronts civilization with the absence of its antipode. Thematically, this chapter probes the implications of the barbarians’ absence. Theoretically, it foregrounds repetition as a barbarian operation. Repetition operates here on two levels. First, it takes the form of citation, intertextuality, and allegorization. Cavafy’s poem and Coetzee’s novel are part of an intertextual network that revolves around the topos of waiting for the barbarians. They are cited and redeployed in various genres. In their interpretations, citations, and adaptations, I explore how these works resist reductive allegorizations in order to propose a new kind of allegorical reading, which I call barbarian allegory. Second, I am concerned with how the words “barbarism” and “barbarian” can be repeated into new senses in the space of literature and redeployed in ways that create confusion in their established uses.

In the previous chapters, the question of barbarism is located in—and limited by—language (either that of history, literature, philosophy or cultural critique). Chapters Six and Seven hive off barbarism from its purported “natural habitat” to an extralinguistic, barbaric realm: the visual. Chapter Six turns to visual restagings of the topos of waiting for the barbarians, whereas Chapter Seven focuses on artistic embodiments of “new barbarians.” In these chapters, I show how the “barbarian theorizing” this study proposes does not necessarily rest on linguistic strategies, but also takes form through the visual, as well as in-between the visual and the textual.

In Chapter Six, I deal with the question of an alternative to the state of waiting for barbarians. The artworks I analyze—South African artist Kendell Geers’s labyrinthic
installation “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2001) and Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco’s billboard-type installation “Esperando a los bárbaros” (1995)—flirt with two different answers to the aporia of a civilization trapped in a passive and solipsistic state as it awaits the barbarians in vain. The topos of waiting for the barbarians is transferred to a visual medium, to non-Western sites of enunciation, and to a contemporary context. I therefore explore what waiting for the barbarians might mean today and how the predicament this topos captures may be overcome in art.

Chapter Seven centers on Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s photo-performance portfolio “The New Barbarians” (2004-2006). While Sacco’s and Geers’s installations play with the theme of waiting, Gómez-Peña’s barbarian personas appear to materialize the promise of the barbarians’ arrival. However, these materializations fall far from the expectations of the civilized imagination. “The New Barbarians” overwhelm the viewer with an overload of cultural references that play with Western stereotypes of barbarian others in new, subversive constellations. This project addresses barbarism and the figure of the new barbarian by means of a barbarian aesthetic, which takes shape through a visual grammar of what I call “barbarisms.” The artworks in both Chapter Six and Seven revisit contemporary discussions about barbarism, comparison, and cultural translation, and perform a kind of “barbarian theorizing” from the West’s periphery.

The final chapter—Chapter Eight—conjoins the familiar and the foreign, the self and the other, in the trinity of the neighbor, the guest, and the barbarian. By exploring the relation between these three figures in the context of Balkan nationalism, I assert that the construction of the other as “barbarian” can also be grounded in similarity rather than absolute difference. I develop this claim by following the journey of a popular song in the Balkans, as it unravels the documentary film “Whose is this Song?” (2003) by Bulgarian filmmaker Adela Peeva. Although the song’s performance around the Balkans suggests the commonality of Balkan peoples, the song becomes the object of fierce proprietary claims by each nation. The main issue is the apparent paradox that the “barbarization” of each Balkan nation by its Balkan neighbors is not motivated by radical alterity, but by similarity. Denying that we share similar cultural objects with our neighbors enables their construction as barbarian enemies. But if the neighbor is turned into a barbarian, what happens when this “barbarian” is shown to share the same cultural products, only in slightly different versions? What happens when the national self is forced to confront a slightly altered mirror image in its neighbors?

In this chapter, I test the concept of hospitality in the Balkans, with regard not only to people but also to cultural objects. Under the laws of a highly conditional hospitality, the host often turns the guest into a barbarian enemy. But I also show how the figures of host and guest can be renegotiated into more flexible positions, engaged in productive—though not necessarily peaceful—encounters. Based on an analysis of Peeva’s film, I argue that we can envision the relation between self and other otherwise: in ways that do not
construct the other as barbarian, threatening, inferior, and illegitimate, but turn “the Other” into simply an other.

In the Afterword, I bring this study’s recasting of barbarism to bear on academic practices and modes of theorizing. By introducing the figure of the “barbarian academic,” I reflect on what it could mean to act as barbarians in our disciplines and fields of research. I thus show how the trope of the barbarian has helped me reflect on how I do what I do. In this context, I end this study with some preliminary guidelines for a “barbarian theorizing” in the humanities.