

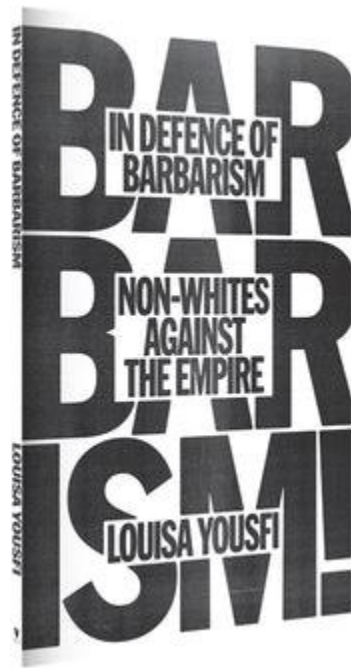
In Defence of Barbarism: Non-whites against the Empire

Louisa Youfsi

London and New York, NY: Verso, 2025 [2022]

ISBN: 978-1-80429-443-7

Translated by Andy Bliss



French journalist and political activist Louisa Youfsi published her first book, *Rester Barbare*, in 2022 and this has now been published in English by Verso courtesy of a translation by Andy Bliss. It is a noticeably slim volume. Several of the sections review French rappers of non-European ethnicity who have been brought to France one way or another as the result of empire. As a British person, I am rather more familiar with the history of the British Empire, although I have had to find out about it by myself. One distinction that may be made between major European imperial systems is that (this is slightly reductionist in nature) the Spanish wanted to save people's souls, the British wanted to take their money and the French wanted to share the benefits of French culture and society by making their subjects little French people. Now that President Macron has signalled the end of the French presence in Africa, although (absurdly) expecting people to say thank you to the armies and support people, so that the field is left clear for the Chinese, Turkish and Emiratis to take their place (Barnay, 2025). Yet the river having been entered cannot be returned to its pre-entry stage. The French that empire has created must be treated as exactly French as everyone else. That this has given rise to various political and identity issues is at the heart of Youfsi's arguments. She points out that being a hyphen person, French-Arab, French-African and so on, is a symbol of the process of integration: "Gradual integration into the Empire is what this

hyphen denotes, a line on the page to which the second part clings.” However, this is a process rejected by the rappers and other dissenters she discusses, who want to remain, as she terms it, barbarians (while noting that barbarians are not savages).

As a non-white woman, she writes in the autobiographical concluding section, *The Path of Blame*, she says that progressive circles now welcome her and her fellow writers into their presence, as part of the process of integrating her into the fold. This, she argues, may be seen as completing the work of empire and, by allowing herself to have fallen for this trap, she has betrayed herself. It is a situation that has afflicted a number of women writers such as herself and the responses have been sub-optimal:

“Faced with such a dilemma, my unfortunate fellow female writers have made a choice: reluctant to act as native informants, but nevertheless willing to tell our stories, we have built museums.”

Museums, she suggests, are no longer living places with meaning attached to the objects displayed but lifeless nicknacks, in which people can feign a superficial interest while at the same time guiding the curator to the more sophisticated and developed artifacts of the culture of the present and the future.

To fight back meaningfully, she embraces the raucous anthems of rappers (of whom I confess I had never heard) and their aggressive and non-standard approach to the French language, as she observes in *Ounga Ounga*:

“This is the privilege of the dispossessed: to perceive better than anyone else the potential of a language that overfamiliarity and servility have prevented others from imagining.”

It has long been a truism, of course, that the institution intends to control the use of the French language, deciding which new words should be permitted and which declared unconstitutional. The rappers pose a critical threat here, challenging the state with both their behaviour (which is often *outré* in the way rappers tend to be around the world) and their refusal to speak properly but still be understood. At this point, I would like to acknowledge the work of the translator, Andy Bliss, since this may be a short work but rendering the rap in English in an understandable way which nevertheless contravenes the generally accepted rules of grammar must have made for quite a challenge. Notwithstanding the misogyny prevalent in rap wherever it might be found, Youfsi claims that it speaks for her, not about her. She should, she claims, have retained some of her barbarism.

It is perhaps trite to observe that this is a book that can only have been written in France because no other country has the same combination of bloody history and approach to multiculturalism that the French do. Nowhere else really has the same *banlieus*. As a consequence, I am not how much her thesis can be generalized beyond her own situation. Clearly there are similarities evident elsewhere but these seem mostly to be on the surface. The foreword to this book notes that she is

at work on a novel and when this becomes available it will be interesting to see the extent to which she sees the need to broaden the focus of her gaze.

Reference

Barnay, M. (2025). The Franc zone, *Sidecar* (January 10th, 2025), available at: newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/the-franc-zone.

John Walsh, Krirk University