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Books No Artist Told Me to Read

I don't know what to say, or think, or feel. I'm numb. I avoid social media more than I used to. I read the news less; I only started checking it habitually again last week. I was unprepared for how the events of 2016 (Brexit, the US election, the terrorist attack in Brussels, the seemingly unending stream of atrocities in the Middle East and Africa) would affect me. I have been reading more books, not to escape, but to look to the past for models. *Crisis of the Republic* by Hannah Arendt and *South and West* by Joan Didion stand out. The latter, a collection of notes that do not make for an entirely satisfying reading experience, is remarkable for the simple reason that Didion feels that the south, not California, is the future of her country.¹ In *South and West*, Didion wants to understand her nation's past, not its present, because she intuits that America's future is bound up in its past. Today that contrarian impulse feels either uncannily prophetic or painfully obvious. The problem in America has always been a crisis of history. Didion's impulse is almost un-American—to look to the past—in a country and culture so obsessed with its present and future. The slogan "Make America Great Again" is a case in point. Of course, it is not an appeal to memory or history but its opposite—a call to forget the complexities that make the United States of America what it is. Current protest movements in the U.S. are, among many things, attempts to start or continue the work of historical reckoning.² Just read James Baldwin. Or more recently, Eula Biss or Ta-Nehesi Coates.

And so, for that reason, I find myself wanting to look back: to understand things that might allow me to make sense of our era, instead of succumbing to the hyperbole-generating machines of our time. It helps me attempt to process the deluge of information we call the news. Arendt's book gave me context, not because we've entered a new totalitarian era, but because it has helped me understand how our circumstances differ. We live in a time when we're told everything is urgent; everything is now-more-than-ever, changing faster, worse-than, horrible, etc.—just log onto Twitter. Those estimations might very well end up being true. I don't know. But even by quickly reconsidering the past we can realize that the anxiety of our time is close to the historical norm; that threats to equality and freedom are average. Our rights have never been given; they are things, unfortunately, we must continually advocate for. The essay "Lying in Politics" from *Crisis of the Republic* was a revelation in how it examined the Pentagon Papers. Arendt looks at how it became more efficacious for a government, in that case the US government during its involvement in Vietnam, to create an image than to be truthful. To be sure, our present moment has its precedents. In "On Violence," another

essay in the collection, she examines the relationship between power and violence. She claims that they're not the same thing—in fact, they are opposites. When power disappears, violence emerges. Power is achieved through violence, and once established, violence is no longer necessary.

After the Brussels attacks, I was invited on a Canadian radio program to discuss what it was like living in the city. The radio host asked how I thought Brussels would be "tested" by the attacks, how the city would "live up" to such a horrific and violent event. The question bemused me because its phrasing was so North American. It is the kind of thought that could only have been formulated by someone from a saturated culture that willfully avoids its history. I stammered in response. Brussels would be fine, I thought, because it has lived through worse things than the suicide bombings of March 22, 2016. The implication was that Europe had been threatened. Any quick examination of the past hundred years offers a more complicated story. Yes, there are more soldiers on the streets now. Yes, the Belgian constitution grants the terrifying power to arrest and deport foreign nationals. Yes, there is a sickening swing to the extreme right. Yes, after attacks in other cities, there is a noticeable tension among passengers on the tram. Etc. Yet there are people still alive here who remember the Nazi occupation.

Americans understand European history in terms of their own. When New York was attacked, American culture was ill equipped to handle the significance of the event partially because white America continually discards its history. 9/11 is often considered to be the moment that the contemporary US *entered* history. I don't have time to get into what that statement even means. History is never clean. It's never something we want to return to. It's something we embody, in all of its complexity and messiness, in order to confront our contemporary circumstances.

The Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso once claimed that the United States of America is a country without a name. Perhaps its political problems are bound up in its inability to name itself anything other than the continent that it shares with numerous other nations, *America*. Without a proper name, it cannot address or articulate its history. Without a name, it can shrug off the responsibilities of its violent beginnings—viz., slavery and the genocide of its indigenous populations. Without a proper name, it can feel free to not hold itself accountable to its own past and therefore its own present. That's why I've been reading: it's my attempt to reckon with our present state of namelessness. ===

1 I say "her country" because I'm a Canadian who currently lives in Brussels. 2 Also, I might add, Canada's.