Unchained Cannibals

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The lecture tonight is on taboos. The lecturer, Larry Maslin, invites us to shout out the different taboos in American society. Without missing a beat, a comedian on the left side of the room yells, “Cannibalism!” Genius. Pure genius. Acknowledging laughter confirms it. However, the room is quickly brought to order, and the ‘right’ answers are written up on the board. Race, religion, sex, and politics shove cannibalism out of the conversation. If eating human flesh is excluded from a talk on things you’re not supposed to talk about, it must really be taboo.

I learn that I can’t talk about cannibalism the way a little kid learns he can’t say the “f” word; all I want to do on my walk home from lecture is discuss eating people, and yet I know this is not a topic that will elicit a positive response if I bring it up at dinner with my friends. But why? Why is it so bad to eat people? It is a strange question for a strict vegan to fall in love with, but absence makes the heart grow hungrier. And cannibalism is indeed absent from my world. The only glimpse I catch of my desires is an advertisement for a new Hannibal Lector movie at the Fourth Avenue AMC. I pass it, cross Fourteenth Street, and look up. Across the traffic, the fifteen illuminated numbers above the Virgin Megastore continue their quick arithmetic progression, mirroring the rapid rush of the crowd below.

The numbers are actually part of an art installation called *Metronome*. They are three measurements of time linked together to create what appears to be one long chain of numbers. The four digits farthest to left in the piece read like a digital clock, telling military time. On the other end, the numbers count the hours and minutes to go until the day ends. In the middle, the numbers count seconds, split seconds, nanoseconds, right down to the middle, which is just a blur of computerized lines.

If cannibalism is my new crush, the *Metronome* is my great love. It is always there for me when I am lost in time and space, which happens a lot. A native of Atlanta, Georgia, a city where driving a car is as necessary as brushing your teeth, I use the amount of time spent in my blue Toyota Prius as a

ruler for distance. In New York, a walking city, I find myself uncomfortable relying on the local measurement of distance: the block. The block is ineffective, not only because there is no uniform distance from one street corner to the next, but also because the time it takes for me to walk a block is dependent on a number of other factors. If I'm wearing heels, and the wind is blowing me backwards, and I'm stuck behind an old woman, a block is significantly longer than it is when the streets are clear, the weather's nice, and I'm in tennis shoes. Instead of my hybrid car, I have *Metronome* to aid me when I'm in transit to tell me what time it is, so I can anticipate what time it will be when I arrive at my destination. It isn't a very precise system, but I am not concerned with precision. I just need to know if I'm going to be eaten alive for being late.

The relationship between distance and time is the subject of Rebecca Solnit's essay, "The Annihilation of Time and Space." She punctuates the transitions in this piece by reiterating one simple fact: "In the spring of 1872, a man photographed a horse" (4). The man was named Edward James Muybridge, the horse Occident, and the remarkable thing about this action was that it was actually a series of photographs, one after another, so the horse appears to be in motion. The use of photography to produce consecutive images of Occident running was a prelude to moving picture shows, which in turn became movies, her first example of a "new technology," which she says, "exists for the very purpose of annihilating time and space" (11).

In 1846, 26 years before "a man photographed a horse," another man led a wagon party from Independence Missouri to settle in California. The man's name was George Donner, the wagon party the Donner Party, and the remarkable thing about this action was that it didn't turn out well. Before the party could cross through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, a blizzard struck, forcing the Donner Party to camp out until conditions improved. Supplies and food ran so low that the people resorted to cannibalism to survive. Of the 87 who began, 46 made it to California, the last of them on April 29th, 1847, almost 11 months after their journey began.

To commemorate those who died, the place the Donner Party settled that winter was renamed Donner Lake, and the surrounding area Donner Memorial State Park. PBS made a documentary about the Donner Party, which my fifth grade teacher showed our class when we studied Western Expansion (*Donner*). My dad was on a business trip in California at the time, and I remember wondering if he passed over the park on his six-hour flight from Atlanta to L. A. If this is what Solnit means by new technology annihi-

lating time and space, it doesn't sound so bad. I would rather be flying Delta eating peanuts than trapped in a delta eating people.

The Wari are a tribe of people in the Amazon rainforest that, until recent outside intervention, practiced cannibalism. It was a ritual performed as part of a funeral rite. For the Wari, "cannibalism seem[ed] to be the best, most respectful, most loving way to deal with the death of someone you care about" (Salisbury). The Donner Party's famous acts of cannibalism, on the other hand, became a symbol of extreme desperation, and Donner Memorial State Park commemorates their struggle to traverse the western part of America. The Wari people do not eat their ancestors out of hunger, or make an attempt to preserve their remains. After the ceremony in which the body is eaten, all possessions are burned, the favorite places of the person are deemed off limits, and even the name of the deceased is not spoken in the village. There is no sacred place to mark the end of a life, much less a national park (Salisbury). The memories are digested quickly. Perhaps this annihilation process is the heart of the taboo of cannibalism in the West: it is not the act of eating a person that is sickening but the idea of leaving no trace, not even the skeleton of a memory that was once a human life.

America loves to hold on to the memories of dead people. It doesn't take but a quick glance around Union Square Park to prove that. Reminders of history fill the space. They stand cast in bronze, framing the park as if to box in the here and now together with the past. One is in the shape of Abraham Lincoln, another the Marquis de Lafayette, and off to the side, always with offerings of fresh flowers around his neck and at his metallic feet, Mahatma Gandhi. The grandest reminder is in the middle of the lawn. Titled "The Beginning of America," this reminder is created to resemble George Washington on horseback.

I lean against "The Beginning of America," people-watching. *Metronome* tells me it is four o'clock in the afternoon. A man hops the black fence encircling the lawn area and approaches one of the huge old oak trees. He assumes a boxing stance, shifting his weight from side to side, hands level with shoulders, ready to block any blows from the enemy and throw a one-two punch in retaliation. Then with a loud "HI-YA!" begins a sequence of karate moves around the tree. After five minutes of this shadow boxing, he falls back on the ground, exhausted. "I WON!" he victoriously informs the heavens. He then calmly stands, walks out the gate, and sits down next to a man reading *The Post*. Nobody in the park gives the slightest attention to the man who fought an oak tree in Union Square Park and won.

The man remembers winning a fight against an oak tree, I remember watching a likely schizophrenic or drug addict go ignored in a public park. The man reading *The Post* can't remember a five-letter word for "skin disease" (which is too bad because he needs the answer to 44 down). The man's experience is a crossword puzzle, mine is watching a likely schizophrenic or drug addict beat up a tree, and the likely schizophrenic or drug addict's is . . . probably something a little different. These three experiences are momentarily represented by digital numbers flashing across the middle of the Metronome and, just as quickly, replaced by countless others.

When I say these daily experiences, these memories of mine, are represented by numbers, I am measuring them with time. Jonathan Lethem prefers the ruler of space. In his essay, "Speak Hoyt-Schermerhorn," Lethem returns to the subway station he frequented as a child and observes how the once-familiar space has morphed into something he barely recognizes: a deteriorated version of what was familiar buried by what is new. "Contemplation of the life of a site like the Hoyt-Schermerhorn becomes, in the end, tidal," he says (574). The evidence of scraps and bones of the past fill the station: abandoned platforms and worn-down department store signs encase Lethem's childhood memories in that space. But as people ebb and flow through the station, they wear away the evidence of Lethem's memories, just as water does to earth. Like the remains of a Wari consumed by his loved ones, the space Lethem once knew is annihilated, not instantaneously, but by the passage of time. Maybe we in America treat the memories of everyday people and places the way the Wari treat bodies. Those memories that we deem important, like those represented by the feats of George Washington, are preserved; the rest are washed away with the tide.

This is the dark side of *Metronome*, the side I ignore when it functions as my oversized digital clock. It is the side on the right, the future, pointing toward the hours left in the day, but representing the fact that, eventually, those numbers will go away, and my time will be up and the memories of me will be forgotten. From an early age, I was told I could be anything I wanted to be. Of course, as I grow older, I understand this isn't altogether true. I will never be the starting quarterback for the Green Bay Packers, and my chances of becoming Pope aren't so hot either. But the sentiment behind this Sesame Street encouragement echoes one of the ideals of George Washington's America: if we work hard, we gain the skills, money, and freedom to choose the course of our lives. Watching documentaries on the Donner Party and weaving through the rush of people and statues in and around Union Square Park, it is evident to me that people are working hard, making choices, and

existing. Yet, no matter what our net worth or abilities, in the end we all wind up dead, perhaps forgotten. We are erased by time.

Cannibalism isn't the real taboo in America—death is. No matter how hard one works, it is impossible not to become dead, and because death goes against the American dream, we bury it. *Metronome* is constructed to symbolize the intangible human construct of time, through which we record dates to measure lives. In doing so, it presents the idea that without the measurement of time, people would still pass through space; they just wouldn't be aware of their beginnings or endings. Life would be what it is for the Wari—tidal. And, yet we in America fight the tide. With all our might we dig our heels in the sand to carve out statues of the memories that really matter.

This conception of time seeks to capture the memory of those who starved in the wilderness or those who forged nations, but these reminders can never truly teach us the experiences of those people's lives. I can write an essay exploring the relevance of the Donner Party's difficult journey to a work of art, but this recognition of memory gives me no taste of the experience of that deadly winter in the Sierra Nevada mountain pass. Looking up at the statue of George Washington makes me wonder at the bravery of a man whose leadership allowed for the greatest political experiment of the Western world, but it does not give me the rough feel of a horse's mane or the smell of freshly dead bodies on a snowy battlefield. Those memories were George Washington's, and they were annihilated when he breathed his last breath. And even while America's sculptors scramble to turn the remains of the memories of those who created nations into park monuments for me to lean against, those whose conquests consist of oak trees and crossword puzzles will one day be shut in wooden boxes.

The Wari do not want the scraps and bones. They know that salvaging the past is as impossible as predicting the future. We are different—not because we can salvage the past, but because we deny our inability to. Our culture confines what will eventually become dirt in a coffin and sums up each life in two numbers on a tombstone: a birthday and a death day. And, although we may think we are preserving the past, the experiences of life between these numbers, except perhaps for memories, are left to decay.

The three measurements of time flow into each other to become a representation of the timeline of a life, displaying the numbers on the left as the past, the time already spent, and the numbers on the right as the future. Existence and experience are in the nanoseconds in the middle. Since I am usually looking at *Metronome* as a large digital clock/yardstick, I rarely take time to understand if the present moment is a 2 or a 6 or a 9. And when I do,

the numbers, steadily keeping a consistent visual beat, make me temporarily forget that the piece tells time at all. The rhythm is set for all of us underneath *Metronome*, all those brisk walkers and slow steppers treading across the concrete stage of Fourteenth Street. And I realize that there are as many memories as there are people, providing more stories to be told than ears that have time to listen. It is unreasonable to think that I, or the billions of other people who travel through time, can all be somehow preserved on the planet whose space we travel across.

While the idea of watching my life flash before my eyes makes me want to buy many brimmed hats to protect me from seeing such a truth, the simple words of composer John Cage console me. When once asked what the purpose of art is, he replied, "To celebrate!" And so we should, perhaps, embrace and rejoice over the fact that we are chained to the construct of time. Technology has come a long way since a man photographed a moving horse. Though technology can alter our experience in the present moment, it does not, nor has it ever, annihilated time or space. *Metronome*, "The Beginning of America," and the photographs of Occident are devices that America uses to illustrate the human capacity to control our experience within the construct of time, which annihilates itself. The changes that America resists the loudest are embodied in the things we never talk about. The fear that time will devour us is pervasive, yet silenced. The truth is disguised as a huge panel of numbers, residing over the busy masses traveling through Union Square Park.

The Wari know that the juiciest part of life is in the middle, the present, the now. And perhaps this is the key America needs to unchain our memories from this taboo of death. What if we were released from the beginning and the end, our birthday and death day, and chose to live in the present? *Metronome* counts the lives of people, not to tell us that we are going to die and that our memories will be lost, but to show us that we are alive and that the experiences in and around us are numbers we can count for ourselves. Lethem's subway, Solnit's Occident, and my Union Square are unchained cannibals, eating away at life, and at the same time giving me the space to become something savory.

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