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KYLE A. CASTILLO &  
PROFESSOR SMARAN DAYAL

**PROMPT:**

*The philosophical study of time has a long and complex history. Among the most fiercely debated topics within the field is whether the past, present and future in fact exist. Eternalists argue for the existence of all three, Presentists for only the present, while those who subscribe to the “growing block theory of time” believe that the past and present exist, but not the future. Are the past, present, and future objective realities, and if so on what grounds? Is it possible to envision alternative models of time, or are past, present and future inherent in the very concept of time? If such alternative models exist, how would they change how we live?*

Dear Kyle,

I am glad to be having this conversation with you in the context of the Palaver issue on time. I want to begin by talking about how I happened to cross paths with you well before you were my student in my first semester teaching at Stevens last Fall. It segues quite well into the issue of time. As the pandemic was raging, sometime in 2020 or 2021, as we were all confined indoors, I remember coming across a TikTokker who did an eerily accurate impression of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek—and as someone who has encountered Žižek a few times, once as a (polite) heckler at a talk of his in Berlin and then, later, in my Ph.D. department at NYU, I had a real-world reference with which to compare the impression. That TikTokker, of course, was you. However, when you enrolled in my “Images of Science in Literature” class, I didn’t connect the dots. You just seemed vaguely familiar. It was only later, when we were discussing creative projects, that I put two and two together.

There are a few ways in which our socially constructed sense of time has been profoundly shaped by the circumstances of our lives these past few years, and they intersect with our meeting. First, we routinely hear talk of “pandemic time,” and how these past few years of quarantine, remote-work, Zoom school, and other related changes to our daily lives have shaped how we experience time. I know Gen Zers often talk about how they have missed out on crucial years of their lives, especially college years that would have been spent socializing and spending time away from their families. In a similar vein, people in my own generation (Millennials) talk about how their early 30s (or late 20s) were “taken away” from them, and all of a sudden, we’re in our mid-30s and don’t know how we got here. It feels like just yesterday that I was a fresh-faced 27-year-old, getting off a plane at JFK, ready to begin graduate school in New York.

Another way in which our sense of time has changed is through technology. Not only has TikTok invented and normalized a new, shorter format of video content, which can be seen as either cause or effect of our shortening attention spans, it has also been a conduit for Gen Zers to rethink their relationship to work. In a recent segment on the news channel Al Jazeera, three content creators talked about the various trends that have arisen on TikTok recently to counter the toxic productivity culture endemic to corporate America. Isn’t that re-negotiation of people’s work-life boundaries also a re-invention of our social understanding of time? This recent debate reminds me of a polemical essay written in the early 1990s by the American anarchist Bob Black that I really appreciate. Titled “The Abolition of Work,” Black critiques what “time” means under capitalism. “What I really want to see,” he writes, “is work turned into play.” In his utopia, “[t]here won’t be any more jobs, just things to do and people

to do them.” Black’s essay is one of those instances in which political theory and speculative fiction converge.

Dear Professor Dayal,

I often think about my videos through the lens of time. I started making comedic videos under the username @KyleTheCowboy way back in September 2019. I was double parked in the street waiting for my father to come back from visiting my grandma. Typical for New York, there was no place to park. I stayed in the car to keep away ticket-happy officers. As the time passed in the car, I remember the sheer boredom, boredom that was almost offensive. I swear, I felt it sting my legs and almost burn my chest. I had heard of TikTok as a platform and always had an affinity for comedic videos. I used to make skits with my friends and post them on Snapchat. Everyone would swipe up on my story asking me to make a TikTok account and post videos on that platform so the sketches wouldn't disappear. There, outside the apartment in NYC, I caved. I posted my first TikTok. It got a whopping nine likes. I didn't care. I loved the fact that I could post for friends to see and share with others. The numbers kept going up though. The followers and likes increased. Today my account sits at 360k followers and 15 million total likes. There was never a grand plan. I only started posting because I was mind-numbingly bored in my 2006 Toyota Rav 4. That connects back to time. What is boredom but being aware of the passage of time?

“Pandemic time” was a phenomenon that shaped my experience of 2020-2022. To be honest, my memory from that time is hazy. I filmed a lot of personal videos to document the passing time and posted a lot on TikTok (sometimes 3 videos a day). I just wanted it all to end. Humans have an internal clock that tells them when time is passing, and I turned mine off. Mornings melted into evenings, which melted into

mornings. It made the pandemic easier. 2000 people are dying from COVID each day, but that doesn't seem so bad when days simply don't exist. This attitude towards time has been something that I've been struggling with to this day. To be fully satisfied in life, I have to be fully aware: drawing my awareness to my breath, how my body feels, and taking time out of my day to reflect on big life events. It's getting better each day.

I never thought about Gen Z's renegotiation of work-life balance through the lens of time. I was raised on stories from my father about how his company expected him to work 60-hour work weeks without extra pay. I remember hearing these stories and swearing I would never abide this exploitation. My time would be spent on things that felt enriching, and I would devote as little time as financially possible to work. I read through the Bob Black essay you sent, and I enjoyed it. The writing style is incredibly evocative and captured me all the way through. One part I found myself revisiting was the idea of free time. How free is that time? We have to get ready for work, get to work, come back from work, and recover from work to go again tomorrow. It's as if the time itself doesn't count. Often the present is darkened by the shadow of the future. Sometimes the future isn't a source of hope, but the very thing that robs the "now." I'm excited that Millennials and Gen Z have started talking about our relationship with work and time. Hopefully, we can become hopeful about our futures.

Dear Kyle,

That's so interesting that it was *pre-pandemic* boredom that led you to start posting your skits on TikTok. Because it was *pandemic* boredom that led many of us, especially Millennials, to create TikTok accounts to keep ourselves entertained during the long, grueling, and sometimes nerve-wracking

months of 2020 and early 2021. I remember the occasional pushback from Gen Zers about Millennials suddenly showing up on which until then had been largely free of most people born before the mid-1990s (or the last decade of “the 1900s” as some Gen Zers have taken to saying).

I appreciate your question about boredom: “What is boredom but being fully aware of the passage of time?” The literary scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks wrote a book on boredom in the 1990s, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*. (In fact, it was published just as the last of the Millennials were being born in 1995.) In “The Necessity of Boredom,” an article published some years before her book, she analyzes several canonical literary works for the way they tackle the theme of boredom: Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Edith Wharton’s *A Backward Glance*, Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, and Saul Bellow’s *Humboldt’s Gift*, among others. In response to Bellow, she writes, “What it [boredom] means, here too, is the failure of intimacy, the impossibility of power (in a society too complex and too dangerous to allow persons within it the sustained experience of power), the incapacity of individuals to take responsibility for themselves.” It’s that last insight that I want to pause on: might taking responsibility for our lives—in a muscular, interventionist way—*abolish* boredom altogether?

The semester after our “Images of Science in Literature” class, I was asked to teach a “Western Literature” class. I bristled (and still bristle) at the title of that class because the very idea of “the West” or “the occident” is an ideological invention by European colonial discourse to differentiate between the West and “the orient” or “the East,” which referred to everything from East Asia, through the South Asian subcontinent, to West Asia (the so-called Middle East) and North Africa. So, I decided to spend the opening weeks of the semester unpacking that concept with my students,

along with related terms such as “Europe,” “the First World,” “developed countries,” and so on. Later in the semester, we read important works of World Literature both from Europe and other parts of the world.

One of the moments in European literature that I decided to focus on was French existentialism. For the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, an important part of his philosophical project was to counter the idea of a fixed human “essence,” the sense that people are *by nature* a certain way and that cannot be changed. Earlier philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed in a relatively stable “human nature,” even while they understood it in often radically different ways, and thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre were trying to break away from this idea. That’s why one of the phrases Sartre is most often associated with is “existence precedes essence.” By this he means that there aren’t any inherent or fixed characteristics to humans, but that we create our identity or nature through our actions. I take this long detour in order to say that, if we embrace the existentialist notion that we create our reality through our actions, that we are all alive for a limited time and share the fate of death, and that it is up to us to make our lives meaningful through our actions.

Existentialist philosophy is one way to reshape our experience of time, and while I find it convincing and empowering in some ways, I’m not entirely convinced it’s the only or best way to relate to time or the world. The thought of our own death, however distant, even if it does spur us to take charge of our lives in a certain way, still feels a little macabre to me, and a way to divert our attention away from the wholeness of the present. It’s as you say: “Sometimes the future isn’t a source of hope, but the very thing that robs the ‘now.’” You seem to share the sense that I have that there’s something valuable to be gained by focusing on the present. I

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appreciate what you say about being “fully aware” and practicing mindfulness techniques (even if you don’t use that word), like observing your breath and body, and taking time out to reflect on big life events (maybe through journaling?).

In class, the existentialists got some of the students reflecting on their majors, reasons for applying to Stevens, career choices, the lives they envision for themselves going forward, and what brings meaning to their lives. So, at least as an aid to inquiry, I find existentialism really valuable. A lot of them expressed a sentiment similar to yours, how if it were up to you, your “time would be spent on things that felt enriching, and [you] would devote as little time as financially possible to work.” I’m often torn between two sentiments: on the one hand, not letting work take over my life, and making sure I have a vibrant social life outside of work. And on the other—and here I’ve been somewhat successful—making sure that *what* I do for a living is rewarding to begin with, so I don’t feel the constant need to run away from it.

Have you seen the science fiction movie *In Time* (2011) starring Justin Timberlake and Amanda Seyfried? It’s a poorly made film formally but the idea it’s trying to communicate is fascinating: in a future where the wealthy are genetically engineered to live forever, the protagonist Will Salas (Timberlake) and other working class people have to constantly work to recharge a timer on their bodies, so as not to die when it runs out. The film uses science fiction to express the Marxian ideas of alienation, surplus value extraction, and (social) reproduction.

Dear Professor Dayal,

I’m glad we share a discomfort with the term “the West.” It often takes disparate cultures and periods and mashes them

together. We “Westerners” are taken to be the intellectual inheritors of Greek and Roman philosophy (as if there is one philosophy for each culture), Judeo-Christian values (as if these traditions aren't internally diverse), and Freedom (whatever the heck that is). This, of course, is in stark contrast to the East. Never mind that Southwest Asian and North African countries have just as much claim to the Greek and Roman thinkers of old. Never mind Judaism and Christianity both come from Southwest Asia. The West is a kind of myth about the past. It's a story told for a particular purpose, which is to self-servingly flatten the diverse history of humanity into “East” and “West.”

The existentialist approach to boredom and time has its benefits. There's nothing quite like Death to make you think about Life. For a time, I found a lot of value in using the idea of mortality to spur action in my life. I've found that on some days I benefit from remembering that my time on Earth is limited. This reminder is particularly helpful when I feel social anxiety. People's expectations weigh less upon me when I reflect on their temporary nature. I'm Hispanic and grew up in the Hispanic Catholic tradition. We have a holiday called Ash Wednesday that marks the beginning of Lent, a 40-day period of fasting that leads into Easter Sunday. On Ash Wednesday, the clergyman will draw a cross with a mixture of palm ash and oil on the forehead of churchgoers. As we get our fun forehead doodle, the priest will say “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

How rude of this middle-aged man in a robe to draw a black cross on my forehead and remind me of my imminent death! But even as a young kid, I understood the profound nature of meditating upon my origin and destination. It still brings me peace today. I find hope in the present, where any goodness that exists is felt and enjoyed. I'm reminded of one of my favorite novels, *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis. It



purports to be a series of letters from one demon to another about the best way to corrupt humankind and set them on the path to Hell. It's unapologetically Christian, but I feel people of all faiths (or none) can find truth in some of the passages. At one point Screwtape, the senior demon, tells his nephew Wormwood that "the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them."

By "Enemy" the demon refers to the Christian understanding of God, and I think there is truth to this. My happiest moments in life have not been when I've worried about what will happen tomorrow or how my future will turn out. It has been the moments where I'm grateful for what I have now, and who I am with at that time. I think that would fall under the category of mindfulness (I'm not an expert). Journaling and reflection have been part of that journey, as well as simply drawing my awareness back to my own body instead of dissociating into space.

I'm gladdened by the fact you've found success in making sure that what you do for a living is rewarding to begin with. I think that is what convinced me to pursue my Master's in Sustainability Management. I was dissatisfied with only site civil work and wanted to address our unsustainable form of urbanization worldwide. I think of the future as something to preserve for those who succeed us. What are we leaving them? I've only seen clips of *In Time* on TikTok, but it always seemed interesting to me. Work often feels like you are selling your time. If work is to remain in our lives, I feel a transformation is necessary. Work itself must become enjoyable so we don't become alienated from our very production. A work that becomes a kind of game!

Dear Kyle,

Like you, I have found the “generation wars” amusing to say the least. There’s both humor and politics there. The widespread use of the phrase “OK, Boomer” to push back against some solipsistic and conservative views espoused by people of the post-war generation has been genuinely fascinating to me. Perhaps the most memorable instance of this was by the young Australian Green Party MP Chlöe Swarbrick, who, when interrupted by an older parliamentarian while making a case for slowing down our impending climate catastrophe, casually snaps back, “OK, Boomer!” and continues with her speech.

That phrase has, I think, offered us a way to frame political and/or ideological disagreements as generational ones too. Aside from the generational sparring, I honestly enjoy following some Millennial nostalgia accounts on Instagram, which offer up a never-ending flow of content related to Super Nintendo's, Game Boys, flip phones, wraparound sunglasses, baggy jeans, kitschy Euro dance pop like Ace of Base and Real McCoy, dial-up Internet, the Y2K panic, and just general 90s pop culture. I think Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice’s recent cover of the sickly-sweet 90s pop sensation Aqua’s “Barbie Girl” might, however, be the nail in the Millennial nostalgia coffin.

To switch gears to something more substantive, I’m glad to hear that you have also spent time problematizing the idea of “the West.” There are some interesting ways in which the idea of “the West” intersects with issues of time and history. In his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty critiques “historicism”—the study of social and cultural phenomena with reference to the historical processes that brought them into being—as a mode of thought that has at times been used to separate “the West” from “the non-West,” or Europe from its former colonies. He writes:

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*Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This 'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time was historicist [...] Historicism thus posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization.*

What Chakrabarty argues in *Provincializing Europe* is that a particular understanding of history (and, thus, of time itself) laid the groundwork for Europe's justification of colonialism. It's fascinating to entertain the idea that how we think about time might have such immense implications for the way the world is ordered.

To stay with this conundrum of time and colonialism a little longer, I want to talk about how some scholars in Native American Studies have thought about time and history. In an almost opposite move to Chakrabarty, who takes issue with postcolonial nations being assigned to an earlier, allegedly less developed stage of history or consigned to the past of Europe's present, the Indigenous Studies scholar Mark Rifkin in his book *Beyond Settler Time* is interested in how Indigenous nations are forced to inhabit the *same* time or temporality as settler states (such as the US, Canada, or Australia) that now occupy these Native nations. For Rifkin, "the insistence that Native people(s) occupy a singular present with non-natives" and that both Native peoples and settlers belong to a "shared, unified 'now' (which includes a shared 'then' of the past) seems to eerily resemble the representation of Indigenous populations and territories as necessarily part of the United States."

Whereas formerly colonized nations in Africa and Asia may aspire to belong to the shared present of global modernity so as not to be relegated to the past, for Indigenous nations it may be harmful to be forced into the territory and history/time of the settler state. Rifkin tries to counter this by arguing for Indigenous “temporal sovereignty.” As I understand his argument, by marking the beginning of American history with Columbus’ voyages in 1492, the settlement of the Jamestown colony in 1607, or the Declaration of Independence in 1776, we are erasing and de-centering the much longer history of Native nations on this land. Rifkin wants us to understand “the importance of attending to Native conceptualizations, articulations, and impressions of time that do not easily fit within a framework...oriented around settler needs, claims, and norms—a pluralization of time that facilitates Indigenous peoples’ expressions of self-determination.” I’m not sure what that looks like in practice, but I appreciate both attempts to challenge how colonialism has impacted the ways we think about time.

There’s something humbling about that phrase the priest would say to you on Ash Wednesday: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It’s humbling both on an individual level—it makes us confront our own mortality and finitude—as well as on a political level—nations and empires would do well to remember that their power isn’t perpetual. The ways that we, as people, governments, and institutions, choose to interact with each other ought to be informed by the knowledge that our time is limited and that our actions will be judged by those who come after us.

Dear Professor Dayal,

The Swarbrick “Ok, Boomer!” moment is saved on my phone because of how iconic it is. The phrase was always

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interesting to me because (as you mentioned) it wasn't simply a generational attack, but an ideological one. It was a rejection of sentiments of rugged and toxic individualism, staunch distrust of progressivism, and misogyny disguised as "humor" (think "I hate my wife" jokes).

The nostalgia accounts are a guilty pleasure of mine as well. Though I am not technically a Millennial (born 2000) all of the devices and pop culture phenomena you referenced were also part of my childhood (except the Y2K Panic). I find myself returning to some devices I have from the early days and playing with them, thinking back on my life. I'm in a position now where, though I miss the days past, I am far more satisfied with life today. That being said, the Ice Spice x Nicki Minaj song is a certified bop.

I've been thinking about this concept of "Historicism." Chakrabarty's argument of history as a tool of colonialism fascinates me. It goes to show that what is understood as "Truth" and "History" is oftentimes another way of seizing power from others. If you control what is considered "the Past" you can justify any actions in the present. I'm reminded of the classic Norm Macdonald joke, "It says here in this history book that luckily, the good guys have won every single time. What are the odds?"

"Temporal sovereignty" is certainly new to me. Intuitively it makes sense. If Europeans could colonize space, why would they not colonize time? I also think the simplification of American history by marking its beginning with Columbus' voyages in 1492 flattens the Indigenous cultures. We often talk about "Indigenous People" for the sake of simplicity. As someone whose mother has Taino ancestry, I can attest that Indigenous ethnicities are incredibly diverse. By not exploring that history, we don't get to explore the wonderful plurality of Native cultures. Temporal sovereignty is a part of the solution along with geopolitical sovereignty. I say Land Back and Time Back!

Though it is humbling to think of our mortality, I also find great solace in the idea that we are "dust." Look at all the

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wondrous works we humans have accomplished. Not bad for twirling clouds of dust. Our time on this planet is limited, but the time we have is enough to do great work. Let's hope that we can do something that those who come after us will be proud of.