As Indigenous people living in diaspora, my family participates in capitalist institutions instilled with European values,
such as punctuality and discipline, that dictate our experience of time. When I adhere to the schedule of my graduate program in New York, for instance, time is compressed and accelerated. I long for more time to savor readings, conduct research, and compose multiple drafts of assignments, regardless of how much I accomplish each week. When I am in creative flow, on the other hand, time expands, decelerates. I can spend hours at home working on creative projects with no awareness that time has passed at all. The dissonance I feel as I shift between these two time worlds echoes the internal split felt by all of my family members as they navigate life in the West.

I’m Tornatrás Mestizx. That’s the simplest way to acknowledge my multiracial heritage: Indigenous Filipinx, East Asian, Native North American, African, and European. But I’m full of disclaimers about this identity; “mestizx” is a loaded term. For thousands of years (and into the present) it has implied a position of superiority legitimized by proximity to whiteness. It also underlies the utopian vision of La Raza Cósmica, 20th century Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos’ term for the belief that an increasingly multiracial population would eradicate racial divisions, unify humanity, and produce harmonious new civilizations—a far cry from the racial hierarchies, nationalized borders, and fascistic violence we see around the world today.

But I continue to call myself “Tornatrás Mestizx” because the term, like my background, reflects how colonial legacies insinuate themselves throughout the world. My heritage also complicates the question of whether I should rebel against or conform to the temporal orientation of capitalist institutions by which I am marginalized by my gender, sexual orientation, and racial identities. Most often, conforming would entail short-term, self-involved thinking at the expense of long-standing communal practices and ways of being. Anthropologist Michael French Smith summarizes this dilemma when he describes the case of Papua New Guineans adjusting to life after colonization: “Succeeding in such institutions as schools, government service, or private business in an urban setting [...] [requires] adapting to the Yuropian time world, and long immersion in such institutions is likely to lead people to internalise the habits and values of that time world.” Papua New Guineans, Smith explains, experienced intense anxiety in the 1970s while becoming an independent nation after being a colony of Australia. Many still organized themselves by concrete events (like the amount of daylight available or cycles of the moon) or the type and quantity of work to be accomplished in a day. The process of incorporation into a capitalist political economy entailed the adoption of a new belief in the scarcity of time; framed as a finite resource, time was imbued with “magico-religious significance.” As a result, Papua Villaseñor-1 New Guineans began to berate themselves and others for failing to live up to capitalist time values, accusing those who did not schedule their activities by a clock of “wasting time.”

I’m often overwhelmed by how fast time moves, especially when it’s infinitesimally measured. I felt it even as a child, groomed to serve as an intermediary between my parents and the white world. I had to help relatives fill out forms, draft business correspondence, pay taxes, and confront others at work, school, the hospital, or offices in the town hall if they treated any of my family members unfairly. These duties exposed me to the costly consequences of absent documentation, late payments, and acquiescence to abusive behavior. I learned early that capitalist time, like nearly everything else in Western culture, is curt and adversarial, especially to outsiders.

Adapting to capitalist time is largely a question of adapting to speed. French philosopher Paul Virilio devised the term ‘dromology’ to describe the logic, science, and impact of speed, and applied it to his examination of the pace of modern culture, from images and technology to politics and war. Virilio describes dromology as “a question of rhythm, of the variety of rhythms, of chronodiversity,” concluding that “our societies have become arrhythmic. Or they only know one rhythm: constant acceleration. Until the crash and systemic failure.” Virilio’s interest in speed began as a child of World War II, which led him to realize that “the determining element in violence, of whatever kind, was speed.” Virilio sees the
violence of speed in the ongoing dispersal of news in the 21st century, which he calls an “informational bomb” resulting from instantaneous means of communication:

“[Instantaneous communication] plays a prominent role in establishing fear as a global environment, because it allows the synchronization of emotion on a global scale. Because of the absolute speed of electromagnetic waves, the same feeling of terror can be felt in all corners of the world at the same time. It is not a localized bomb: it explodes each second, with the news of an attack, a natural disaster, a health scare, a malicious rumor.”

As one of the first children in my family to be raised with access to the internet, I try to shield myself from the “informational bomb” Virilio describes by going online specifically to study traumas that have bedeviled my family for generations, such as violence against women, homophobia, the devaluing of artistic activity, and, of course, shifting experiences of time in different cultures and epochs. Studying Western capitalist and Indigenous time worlds, past and present, has helped me negotiate my own experiences of time. When I need to manage myself and others by completing tasks as efficiently as possible, which reminds me of the role plantation overseers undertook in Papua New Guinea, I schedule my day in hour-long intervals. But when I need to create something of lasting value, I focus on the one task at hand by measuring time like Papua New Guineans in the Kragur village often do, in units of half a day at least. My father Villaseñor-2 engaged with Western institutions to accrue financial capital for our family and community, ensuring a degree of stability for the next generation; the question of how I will balance Western capitalist and Indigenous modes of being in time depends on the degree to which I do the same.

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Irene Villaseñor is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in New York. Her essay is reprinted from PLEXUS, a project of the Los Angeles Review of Books.

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