



After the End of the World: Killing Myths with Dr. Thomas Stanley

INTERVIEW

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VIRGINIA TECH
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

In this wide-ranging interview, Dr. Thomas Stanley reflects on the themes of his ASPECT plenary address, “America the Beautiful: Violence as Statecraft,” and elaborates on his call to confront the foundational myths that structure U.S. political consciousness. Linking contemporary state violence to longer histories of racial domination and imperial expansion, Stanley argues that myth-breaking is a transformative act that reshapes identity and expands the horizon of political possibility. In conversation with Elhom Gosink and Chris Thorne, he turns to Sun Ra, Afro-Futurism, and the temporalities of capitalist stagnation to consider how alternative imaginaries can disrupt the “temporal treadmill” of the present. Stanley emphasizes pedagogy as a frontline in the “war against myths,” advocating candor, critical rupture, and courage as necessary tools for collective reorientation. Through discussions of futurism, noetic transformation, Indigenous epistemologies, and the structural absurdities of contemporary U.S. politics, the interview frames the present moment as both catastrophic and generative; a time “after the end of the world” in which new forms of ethical, social, and planetary life must be imagined and enacted.

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KEYWORDS:

Afro-Futurism; Political Myths;
Neotic Transformation

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gosink, Elhom, Chris Thorne and Thomas Stanley. “After the End of the World: Killing Myths with Dr. Thomas Stanley.” *SPECTRA* 12, no. 1 (2026): pp. 44–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v12i1.288>

Elhom Gosink: Okay, just for the record, we are now recording officially. Thank you so much for coming to the ASPECT conference and for giving this great talk last night. I would like to start off the interview by asking you a framing question. A bit about your plenary talk, which was titled “*America The Beautiful: Violence as Statecraft*,” and then the theme of the conference is, of course, “*On Violence*.” What were your thoughts and the stakes you were grappling with as you decided how you were going to construct the plenary? Particularly in the context you brought up American history, but also the urgency of the moment, and the urgency of the moment because of the genocide.¹ Why go the direction you went?

Thomas Stanley: Someone asked a question about the relationship of [intellectual] work and the transformations that are implied by this work. What the role of consciousness-raising was in it. And to me, I meant literally that destroying myths is an important part of the work, because the myths are like psychological ghosts that are imparted to us very, very early and by people that we trust. They are the foundation on which all other ideology is stacked. When the myths are obliterated, you actually have changed yourself, and you’ve changed your consciousness. You’ve made a really large shift in identity that is impossible until you’ve broken those myths apart.

So, it was necessary to show how a realistic, a truthful, a critical look at America’s racial history and its history of violence as a way of projecting the Nation, expanding the Nation, how that was feeding into some of the uglier situations that we’re acquiescing to by being a part of this political order.

You’ve seen, through the brave actions of the Republic of Ireland, the Republic of South Africa, what moral nations do and say when horrifically 20th century scaled and 20th century looking violence is happening. Mass violence, intentional violence. There’s nothing about it that’s accidental or that’s forced by security. It is just what it looks like.

So, if we’ve reached a place where you can’t say genocide, why? That requires understanding what this regime and that regime have in common, which is, the necessity of ethnic cleansing as a way of building the state. It is what it is.

EG: Absolutely. Thank you for a great introduction there. I’ll turn it over to Chris.

Chris Thorne: Sure. I’d like to connect what you just said to some of your past work, specifically your book *The Execution of Sun Ra*. It’s a topic that’s actually pretty near and dear to me, I’ve been teaching politics of music for a long time.

TS: So, you’re familiar with *The Strange Celestial Road*.

CT: Absolutely. I’m walking it. In terms of what you just talked about, myths and those psychic ghosts, we could talk about how Sun Ra and Afro-Futurism help us with that. But my more formal question would be: how do we take Sun Ra’s ideas seriously?

I think there’s so much about Sun Ra that’s falsely mythologized. He’s got the crazy dress, his style, which I think sometimes gets remembered more than his massive discography. Could you tell us how Sun Ra and Afro-Futurism describe the present, our modern condition? And the sort of future they envision? How is their description different from other musical or political approaches?

TS: There’s something about a capitalist, consumer-driven economy that needs to keep us on a temporal treadmill.

We’re constantly redoing the same epic, just recycling it. The stagnation is that we’ve been forced to stall out at a particular point on the timeline. We, our relational truth as human beings, are sharing everything. Yet the technological edifice, the toys, the tools, the AI, the programming, keeps whizzing past us, creating more power for people that hold that power with less and less organic connection and authority derived from the rest of us who are creating that power.

We’re creating that power just by living. You were doing it right here. I asked you if the software was free. I’m glad it’s free.² Doesn’t mean we’re not still contributing to commerce. The

1 The weight of the ongoing genocide in Gaza showed up as a consistent theme and concern throughout Dr. Stanley’s plenary talk and the 2025 ASPECT Conference.

2 Prior to the interview, Dr. Stanley asked if the recording software employed for this interview was free to use.

commerce gets taxed, and the taxes do all sorts of stuff. They are used to fund a lot of research, but now those in power will do what they do. And what they do is kill people.

That's what our money will do, money we earned working. So, we defend it. We've worked hard and put money into the Social Security fund, and somebody wants to tamper with it, and that should be there for us. But I don't know any killers. I don't know anyone who would be okay with their effort, their labor being converted into acts of murder. That's what's on the table.

You talk about Sun Ra and Afro-Futurism— that's where our work has to drift out of conventional means of discourse, because normal means of discourse are not constructed to handle the truth. We're in a place that's about constructing knowledge. That's our job. That's what we do, we construct the knowledge. We're supposed to be the last stop, where the bullshit gets filtered out. We have to figure out ways of communicating that open up the way for speaking about how urgent the present is. Because it is urgent, there's a lot of killing. And it looks bad now.

This is a funny thing to put into your serious academic journal, maybe it's not, but it seems like we might be on the brink of expanding what the social and the political means to include civilizations that don't even share our planet with us. They show up, they pop out, and we're still dealing with this other stuff.

I think we have to get [our intellectual and political priorities] under control immediately. There's an intimate connection between the squandering of our efforts, represented by all this killing, and our inattention to the state of the planet as a habitable zone. Political discussions become irrelevant if there's no oxygen and no water. If the biological substrate falls away because we can't get a check on what we're doing to Mother Earth, then who cares about the wars?

There's an urgency there. Sun Ra was a brave individual. He was a brave individual. He stood out. See, he left the planet a while ago, and now everyone wants to be down with Sun Ra, but it wasn't always like that for him. It's going to take some of that bravery. Be that person in the staff meeting who brings up the things we're not supposed to talk about.

[Genocide] is hard to ignore. It's a lot of dead people. Shouldn't it be hard to ignore? Shouldn't it be hard to ignore?

Is the media sphere doing its job? Maybe it is. Al Jazeera will put you right there. And if people don't care, what's that based in?

So, if white supremacy, at the end of the day, is driving the whole thing, it's no surprise that at this critical moment mentioning white supremacy is off the table. The logic is if you don't want DEI, what you want is homogeneity, inequity, and exclusion. It sounds ridiculous, and you must give yourself permission to do damn near anything once you slip into the zone of the absurd.

They're already pulling people off the street and taking them to places.³ Everything is a probe, *We'll take some of them to Guantanamo*. No ugly associations there. The next absurdity will be, "Did you hear about those people they killed?" That's how desperate it is.

Don't be desperate. Be courageous. I'm old. I have permission to be courageous. Do you know what I mean, I'm real with that.

But the flip side of that is it's your future that has to be defended. You've got younger brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. They're beautiful, and you love them. That ugliness over there, it's ugly. Do you think it's going to stay over there? Is that how it works in this world of interconnectivity? Everything flows through the network including violence and death.

How silly is it for these cocky people, how irresponsible is it of them to have so much faith in their now fortified powers of surveillance and intervention? To think they've insulated us from the blowback of their participation in that ugliness?

I have loved ones who pass through airports all the time. Airports. You're not safe if someone decides it's too much.

The reason I used Aaron Bushnell as an example in my talk is because he solved an equation in the most honorable and moral way he could.

3 Dr. Stanley is referencing the continued and intensifying seizures presently carried out by ICE across the US.

And the equation goes like this: “Isn’t that way too many children being murdered? Somebody should die for that. Okay, well, I can’t just pick some random people and kill them. I’ll kill myself.” That was his answer to that equation. That’s not everybody’s answer. And I don’t want that to be.

I want to say this, this is going to get me in so much trouble. That’s why I talk. We’re here for a reason.

Okay, she [Kamala Harris] lost. She was never going to be that great a candidate.

But you know what? If she hadn’t brushed off the Pro-Palestine movement, if she had stood and said something that sounded heartfelt. And this is a stereotype, but we turn to females and expect a heart to be there. But had she said something that showed she really cared about the connection between U.S. policy and ethnic cleansing, U.S. policy and 60,000 dead people who don’t have to be dead, I think she would have won.

Because here’s how Donald Trump won. He won because, and I’m not going to get into whether it was staged or not. I don’t play conspiracy theories. He got nicked in the ear, went down, came up with a bloody ear, and said, “Fight, fight.” And people want to hear that. I was ready to vote for him. I said, “Wait a second. What?”

But people want to hear that. Meanwhile, half the political system is sitting on their hands or waving little signs and shaking their sticks.⁴ That’s where we are. All of us. It’s global.

It’s interesting that people frequently try to create a parallel between Russia’s threat to Ukraine and the way the world looked around 1938 or 1939. I just got back from Europe, I was in the Czech Republic, and the anxiety there was palpable.

There’s been a media effort to create this historical comparison between Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine and the way Germany rolled out over Europe, beginning with Poland in ‘39. But I’m at a loss to understand how the images of homes and hospitals, mosques, schools, whatever it is being destroyed, *it might have Hamas in it; it has to be destroyed*, how those images aren’t creating similar historical resonance for people. That’s what it looks like.

We have the information that people said they didn’t have at the beginning of the Holocaust that Hitler executed. We have it. We can watch it on TV right now. And yet... it just looks bad.

And this posture at the end of the day, as bad as politics are here, is being sustained by large numbers of the public who think it’s okay. Which means those people are around us all the time. I don’t know what to do with that tension personally. But maybe trying to work around it is precisely the wrong thing to do. Maybe, posing, in different performative and rhetorical ways, the question: *What’s up with you? That’s not enough dead children for you?* There was a ceasefire. You let them go back and set their tents up on the broken memory of their home. Then you bomb them again. What are we looking at? And who is doing this?

And I’m not getting anywhere by screaming at you people, am I? I’m not. It’s not helping anything. Somebody’s dying right now behind this shit.

So again, numbers matter. Is it an issue? I don’t like to call it an issue. It’s a calamity, an emergency, a crisis. But are there people whose minds *still* haven’t been changed? Is there a reason why more people don’t feel and see and are responsive to the emergency?

Part of it is that the state has made a calculated effort to criminalize dissent, especially in institutions that have historically been breeding grounds of youth dissent. They have history books too. They’ve done a good job cutting off our arms and legs, right down to banning, without cause, organizations supportive of Palestinian freedom. I mean, that’s the cause: Palestinian freedom. That’s illegal ideology. That’s an illegal position to have. You can hold it in your head, in your heart. You can pray about it, but that’s about it.

This gets back to my talk last night. You really do have to ask yourself: *why is this* the issue the system is willing to go to the wall on?

⁴ Dr. Stanley was referring to Democratic legislatures holding up signs during Donald Trump’s 2025 State of the Union.

It's weird to say it, but Reagan was more progressive on Palestine than these people are. There were certain actions that he wasn't going to put up with, because he was like, "You're gonna sully the good name of the United States doing that crap. You gotta do it, let me show you how it's done." That was another part of what I wanted to get people to look at: *why*.

Now, I had the honor, my friend Mark Tayak, he's a bit older than me, he's the son of Chief Billy Redwing Tayak, who was a really important guy in my life. I don't like to name-drop just to be name-checking people, but he was good to me and my family. He brought me into a place where I could see, feel, and hear an Indigenous perspective on the colonial aspect of the American project. It grew my perspective.

Last month, after Leonard Peltier had been confined for half a century, Mark and some other Native elders put together, at Bowie State College in one of the conference rooms, a really, really lovely celebration party. Leonard wasn't there, but that was what we were celebrating. We were celebrating, finally, this brave man, this hero of his people's effort to fight. There's a song, usually called the Leonard Peltier song. I've sung it for years, and I knew that there would be a day where I would sing it, and the man would be free to be out here with us, singing it with us. He came out and said, "All we gotta do is stay together. We're winning. We're winning right now."

We don't know, because we haven't been there. It happens over large time scales. What does it look like when empires collapse? When massive structures of ideology and institutions, presumptions of ownership just fall apart and something replaces them?

I use Sun Ra's futurism as a platform from which to advocate that everyone ought to be considering that collapse as one of the potential outcomes of everything that's going on. We're intelligent. It's not going back to the way it was, whatever was so great about that. It's not going to be what you say it's going to be, like, "Woohoo, we'll all go to church together or something." So, what's it going to be?

But it's going to change. And the change is going to come. It's going to emerge from us being present with each other and accepting that it's got to change. We're going to do it. We're doing it. You're doing it right now. You're under fire. You'll do it as long as you can. When the institutional rug is pulled out from underneath, you'll do it some other way. But you'll do it.

This is another thing I try to insert into futurism: we're trying to outflank them morally because we can't outflank them militarily. We can't have nuclear weapons, and they're not ashamed to use them. They're horrible people. They're just horrible people.

So, we've got to be real with each other. We've got to be better.

Men have vast areas of improvement to become better heterosexuals. Heterosexuality has to be better. How we deal with our idea of being sexual beings has to be better. All of it has to be better.

Ultimately, we get down to the real, the hard structures of social reality. And now we got to talk about: what the heck is property? Where does that mythology come from? The Europeans stole the planet, then enslaved us, and made us buy back little pieces of it. And that's just the system we're going to deal with? Actually, it's not. *Actually, it's not.*

A lot of blood has been shed already over centuries, getting us to this point of transformation.

I fear that sometimes people's hesitation to embrace the kind of radical change that I'm talking about is because they can't imagine it except as the end product of a whole lot of force. Like some Pol Pot-type shit is what it's going to take to make those kind of changes. "It's going to take a lot of ass-kicking to get that done." If you release that, say, "No. I'm not going to concede that. There's another way to do it."

There's another way to do it.

It's a noetic transformation that's possible to us now, because we've kind of hit the end of the road of what religious spiritualism and techno-pragmatism have to offer us. We have hit the end of the roads, and now it's like, well, none of these things will work. What is it?

So, the problem on the table is almost a mass reprogramming of the self; of what we are, who we are, how we are. I call it a *noetic (r)evolution*, with the R in parentheses to emphasize

evolution. It's part of where we're moving. It's a part of where we were destined to go. It's a part of coming up off our knuckles and losing a whole lot of hair.

CT: Can I follow up on some of this?

TS: Yeah, please.

CT: There's a lot I could riff on from what you said. One thing I'm picking up on is that we're trying to ask: how do we get people to snap out of it? How do they hop off the temporal treadmill, as you said, of capitalism?

What accounts for people not being able to do that, especially in an age where they do have the information? They do see [structural violence]. Aaron Bushnell is a household name because he's one of the only guys. So, it sounds, to me, like a big part of that is, as you said, we don't have the material force the system has. So, we have to construct our morality. That's our alternative project.

I want to link that to what I think is probably my favorite song lyric of all time, which I put on all my syllabi, which is, *It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that?* I love this song.

TS: There's momentum in it.

CT: Yeah. It cuts. And it usually upsets my students. That's how you know you got a good line. Because they hear that line and they think you're being cynical. It sounds cynical to them. Can you tell me why?

TS: Because you're not burdened with all that shit. That world is dead. It's already ruined. You're not burdened. You could just step outside of it. It's already ruins. There was a horrible movie, I don't know why I reference it, with Bruce Willis and the little kid. And the kid said, *I see dead people*.

CT: *The Sixth Sense*.

TS: Yeah. *I see ruins*.

I look at contemporary America, I live in Washington, DC, I see all that marble. It makes my heart happy. I see the dandelions growing through it, everything collapsing. And somebody will bring my great-grandchild there and say, *Yep, one day we won. And it was cool. It was really cool. And now we see deer in the park all the time. We can breathe the air, we walk a lot, live longer, see the doctor less, and we're not afraid of each other*.

These are positive transformations that if we were talking about, not society, but what your computer could do, we'd just go in and do it.

Everybody's heard of this, forgive me for exploiting it, but it's just too good. The point, this teacher in Idaho, the sign in her class said, *Everyone is welcome*.⁵ It had to come down. That's a little bit too much like DEI. She's working with children. Isn't that the best thing? Ain't that the core of Christianity?

No, that's some old leftist Marx, Karl Marx, shit, isn't it? *Everyone is welcome*. So, she took it down for a couple of days, then said, *You know what? I put it back up. They're just going to have to do what they're going to do*. Because that's where we're at. It's the world of absurdity. It doesn't take much to push back. It doesn't take much. Just push back.

EG: Can I pick up on that point? I think there's a hope in what you're saying, a hope for liberation in the end of the world. Or not even a hope, but the reality that if the world ends, then it is hopeful.

We're constantly circling the specter of the institution, specifically the academic institution, talking about how it pulls the rug out from under us. We're talking about welcome signs in our classrooms, what our students think of our cynicism, if they view it as cynicism, when we view it as hope.

So, I wonder, with these myths you're trying to confront, how do you see your pedagogy as a tool for that? You had this great phrase in your plenary talk where you said, "you're a combatant

⁵ Dr. Stanley is referencing Sarah Inama, a 6th grade history teacher who refused to comply when her school's administrators told her to remove the *Everyone is Welcome* sign.

in the war against myths”. How is the classroom part of that structure? And how do you see your students in that?

TS: Sometimes it’s just being candid. You can start a conversation that puts you in a place where you can show people how easy it is to assume something that’s true, when, if you actually get a little perspective, it can’t be true.

I got into academia by being asked to co-teach a course with a broadcast legend named Bobby Hill. And co-teaching is great, right? Because it’s almost like a comedy team. You can go back and forth, you can riff off of each other. He’s talking, I’m thinking, I’m talking, he’s thinking. It was just great. This was 2004 and there weren’t a lot of offerings anywhere on hip hop and on our campus, we were the only one, and it was a huge class.

So, I got in the habit of asking provocative questions. I would ask, during the Obama era, I would ask things like *Who’s the hip hop president?* And they’d all say Obama. And I’d say, *No, Reagan was the hip hop president.* Then we’d talk about the war on drugs, militarism, guns, and the cult of the gun. But at the beginning of class, I would ask the students, really early in the semester, *Who won the Vietnam War? Did the U.S. win?* Hands up. *How many people think it was a draw?* And *How many people think that the Vietnamese people won?*

Then I explained to them I was a teenage child, and I watched it with a bowl of popcorn as the Yankees scrambled out of Saigon. And I was loving it. It was like watching Ali. I was a big Muhammad Ali fan. It was like watching him beat Chuck Wepner’s ass. It was great.

And they’re college students going like, *What?* Because A: *America doesn’t lose wars.* That’s why we spend all this goddamn money, isn’t it? B: *Well, we heard they didn’t really win, but it’s because Congress wouldn’t let the military do its job, so they were stymied. They could have won, but they politically weren’t allowed to.* But they never heard that we just got our asses handed to us in a teacup. But that’s what it looked like, people hanging onto helicopters.

So, okay, that myth has been burst. Now you want to lose the next one? Because next time, it might be nuclear. When we talk about being in the Atomic Age and the threat of nuclear weapons, which, why would that come up in a critical theory class about art, visual art? But it does, believe it or not.

Last night, I had this idea I could go through *everything*. But there’s a lot of “everything.” And I didn’t specifically talk about the bombing of Japan when there was no military necessity. It was clearly and purely a demonstration. Like a bully killing your dog to show you what will happen if you don’t obey. And the world fell in line. Because America has that weapon. And to this day, America is the only nation willing to use it against other human beings.

You have to just say it like that, be candid to get the students to go, *Oh...* And then, now I want you to figure out: *What does it mean that the CIA probably killed one of your most popular presidents?*⁶ So, put it together. Put it together and stop investing in the myths you’ve been told.

It’s different for people when the government is messing with them personally. This is the thing I think only the right points out about the anti-war movement against Vietnam, people were materially and personally scared of going to Vietnam and dying in the jungle or coming back like, “Shoot, what happened to Dude’s face?”

That put people in the streets.

They’re careful about how they squeeze us. Brother last night talked about the objective conditions.⁷ That really is the bottom line: people get up when they’re uncomfortable. The honorable Elijah Muhammad said, *Dissatisfaction brings about a change.* I’ve never heard a truer statement.

What we’re living through right now is a hiccup in America’s maniacal grip on history. What we’re seeing right now reflects some group of people who were dissatisfied and willing to show

6 The JFK records were declassified and released on March 18, 2025, a few days before this interview. Dr. Stanley is referencing the resurgence of the narrative that the CIA could have been hiding their involvement in JFK’s assassination.

7 At the plenary talk, Dr. Stanley was asked a question essentially asking when the objective, material conditions would get bad enough for people to protest the genocide in Gaza. The questioner was highlighting the conditions in Gaza and asking why people, in the US and/or the West more broadly, did not see the objective conditions in Gaza as a reason to get in the streets.

up and express that at the voting booth. If we are dissatisfied, how dissatisfied are we? And what are we going to do about it?

Part of breaking through myths is denormalizing the stress that we internalize and take on as a badge of honor while trying to compete within a goal driven, zero sum, competitive, rat race. If you normalize *that*, you think you can build happiness on top of it. Then you have people living in gigantic McMansions in the suburbs, blowing their brains out because they're not happy. And they've done all this to attain and have this image of what happiness should look like. It's all around them, and they're like, *Well, I'm still miserable*.

Here I want to speak as a parent of Black children, it's hard to get that kind of awareness on how much we sacrifice in our surrender to the hustle. It's hard to get that through the phalanx of pop culture mediated, bling driven images that they're surrounded by. It's hard to get past that.

Whatever hip hop did, and I came up in the P-Funk generation, and the P funk generation at the beginning, especially, was black hippies, hip hop beat the hippie out of Black young people. They don't want to hear it if it's not about having large sums of money— and to get it, all you have to do is be about your game.

I saw Will.i.am in something the other day, saying, *I'm on my game all the time. I don't nine-to-five, I nine-to-five, then I six-to-whenever. And if you want it, you'll do that too*. And, okay, some will get it. And a whole lot will become neurotic, addicted, and unhappy. So, isn't there something else?

People's alienation from nature, from what we call nature: the birds, the bees, the flowers in the trees, our alienation from that is an alienation from ourselves. And it keeps us tied up in the matrix.

We're constantly surrounded by form, rhythm, pattern. At the end of the day, I try to tell this to my 10-year-old, everything around you, everything you see is there in the way that it is because of something that considered and was driven by and was framed by money.

Buildings have rectangular right angles because, my golly, that's cheaper than other forms of architecture. The architecture, speaking globally, our social existence, is constantly screaming at us that it is righteous and true. That it is progressive, it is moral, it is what you should want. Of course, you should aspire to this.

I grew up with a middle-class mom who would look at me with this confusion in her eyes, and she would say, *Well, baby, don't you want nice things?* So, with my children I'm trying to constantly refresh and fortify their relationship with nature, with cultural practices that are grounded in nature. When our Indigenous friends and family bring us into their ceremonies, we come in not just to enjoy what's going on with people, but it's a different way of *being* on the land, of *being* with the earth. And we try to enjoy it and be conscious of it.

I went to grad school with a woman from Taiwan, and she said, *I lived in big city, and we're constantly aware that the next human being is probably less than five meters away, just on the other side of the wall. We're constantly aware of where the other is*. And I don't know that that's healthy.

In biology, you can take every organism and it has a capacity that is its carrying capacity for a given space. And when you push up against the edge of that, all sorts of behavioral and physiological pathology results. We don't think like that. That's not on the table. It's not in how we talk about these problems, but it's in there. It's definitely a part of it.

CT: Yeah, can I return to that quote you mentioned, *Dissatisfaction brings about change*. I think one thing anyone could say about capitalism, people that like it and that don't like it, is that it takes the production of satisfaction seriously. It uses that with profound effect.

To tie it back to some of the music I was asking about earlier; some music, without getting into good or bad, can be too comfortable.

TS: Yeah, it's cozy.

CT: Yeah, absolutely. And no one's saying that about the Art Ensemble of Chicago. That's music that challenges you. That's a *push*.

TS: Two words: Suzi Analogue.

She's a brilliant woman, a professor. I think she's transitioning out of one of the North Carolina State schools. She's on a mission to create something, I think it's a new genre. She needs to be able to say it's either hip hop or EDM, but it's something else. It has the energy of hip hop. It has lyrics that are, even if they're personal and about relationship with self and others, they're at a much higher level than the dumb stuff. And, I don't go to lyrics first, for the challenge.

CT: No, absolutely.

TS: And that's what's beautiful about her work. It's just, Oh my God. Those beats are just so, wow. I have lots of artists that I love, but Suzi Analogue is the only person I'm going to mention in this interview, because that's where I think people should direct their attention.

CT: Can I follow up on that? You were asked last night about the *form* music takes, like when you talked about Fela,⁸ and you got a question about, more than the lyrical content, the form that music adopts having its politics, having its political impact. Could you rehash some of that for us?

TS: I think of Fela and I think of how he finds this really charged sweet spot between the groove which is continuity, repetition, and these combustible elements that ride on top of the groove.

The groove is the kind of idea that by itself it's going to fade out, or it's going to anesthetize the listener. Which if you need music as an analgesic, then okay, maybe that's what it has to do. But when you put that combustible stuff on top of it, you are demonstrating in a musical performative context how time, history, the continuity really needs, cries out for that insertion of something dramatic. Something that departs, something that moves away from the groove.

My job, in the largest sense, is to plant that combustible element in as many places as I can. I leave Virginia Tech, and I hope that I planted some seeds of combustion, and the seeds are not sprouting and growing because people said something cool about Thomas Stanley. It's because they did something that added to that sense of combustion going on in the world.

And then that's great. And maybe you're just nudging somebody, they've already been moving in that direction, and you just give them a nudge. We're looking for and trying to inculcate in ourselves and each other *permission*. Permission.

Like the guy at the talk last night, his stuff was very profound and very provocative, because he was essentially saying, *we talk, we're good, we're academics. We can talk, talk well, talk for a long time, but history is shit that happens.*⁹

We have to make some shit happen. How do you tilt the equilibrium, the balance between agitated spectator to agitated participant. Where do you find that?

And let me say something here... I haven't vetted it out, so it might be stupid.

I've been teaching for what I think is a long time. I started in 2004; that's more than 20 years. I didn't expect to be teaching this long. Like a lot of things in life, you get into it and look up, *Oh my gosh, how did I get here?* But I'm here. Each academic year they feed me a new group of young people who are all roughly the same median age. Our students tend to be just a touch on the older side, maybe than Virginia Tech, and so they're 19, they're 20, they're in their early 20s.

I'm not encountering nearly as many students in my classroom who I read as being infected by the mythologies of youth. When I was their age, those things had already been printed and embossed and they were rock and roll, and they were drugs, and they were challenging authority and challenging conventions. And it didn't stop with that. It became, you know, grunge and boom and boom and boom.

And now, I mean, their parents must be really happy is all I'm saying. I don't know who these young people are. *Where's your skepticism?* We're obviously fucking things up. *Where's your skepticism?* Don't listen to us [older generations]. Don't follow us.

⁸ Afrobeat musician and co-founder Fela Kuti, known for politically charged lyrics.

⁹ Dr. Stanley is referring to Dr. Bikrum Gill, who posed several questions on the role of theory and thought relative to crises requiring urgent action.

That is a weird place to find oneself. Because obviously, what's implicit in the way I describe my history with this population of young people is that each year I get a little older and crotchier. They're always the same, but I'm drifting on into the Wherever people go or don't go. But boy, is that skepticism just not to be found anymore? Is that just not to be counted on? And I don't know what to do with that question. But that's been my experience.

We had a talk last night, just a cluster of people trying to figure out, really, really, really, what's wrong. People are too comfy-cozy in their mediated worlds and their Instagram lives. And their painstakingly selected armor; all the stuff that defines who you are, your identity and your personality, and you can't get through that. How do you get through that? Where do you start?

There always are defectors. And keeping an eye open for those people is important.

I never retreat from those people. Even after it settles out and I figure out what's going on, there might have been reasons to retreat from them. But when I feel like somebody is not in alignment with that centrality, that norm, then I want to find where we can be in alliance, because I'm not either.

EG: If I could pick up on that as a way of conclusion, not to cut off any last thoughts, but what's resonating with me as I think about my students and my experiences with my students is that skepticism or wanting that skepticism.

I'd like to go back to that song lyric again; *It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that, yet?*

Could you speak a little bit about if you see a certain type of cynicism as killing that skepticism. I notice in my students...

TS: "What's the point?"

EG: Yeah, the students always have that response: "What's the point?" Or if they do accept it's the end of the world or it's past the end of the world, they can't envision. The skepticism invokes a desire to envision something else; the cynicism is the foreclosure. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that distinction.

CT: Yeah, knowing about all these things makes them more passive than you'd expect. Like they're flooded with information, and then it turns them off, rather than waking them up.

TS: My son is 18. And he tries to impress upon me in those moments where he wants to get real with me, *Baba, you have no idea how much anxiety I carry about what the future is or if it will be there.*

What I hear in that, though he doesn't always go deeper, is: *I could fight the good fight, like you. Or I could just live in the moment.* Enjoy his friends, his music, his style, the little things.

Part of what I read in that conversation, is: *I could, like you, Dad, tilted at windmills, fight the good fight, or I could just get about with the business of living in the moment.* And living in the moment means enjoying my friends, our camaraderie, the handful of things that are interesting to us, our style of music, our style of dress. And part of what I also read into it and now I'm like, really reaching into his psyche, is, *What can you say? Because you put us here, you're the old gray beard now. Everything that is, is because of you. We've had to adjust to so much because of things that you pushed for. Here we are.*

There's a personal side to all this. When optimism becomes faith, isn't it counterproductive? When I try to be that guy that's very positive about what we can do, will do and must do, because we can't lose this planet. But you know, without a savior in your pocket, and Sun Ra won't quite do, nobody wants to hear that shit. And I guess I struggle.

I'm working on a book, and it's a meditation on this problem of: *how do you start that fire?* You know, revolution is a fire. It's a fire. It's religious in scale, and it's a fire. Revolution is a fire. And the wood is really damp, and you're blowing on it, and your cheeks are worn out, and you've got no lighter fluid. What do you do?

I talked about how important it is that we not co-join massive transformation with massive violence. That we decouple them, even if at first the decoupling is dogmatic and fantastical. It's like, *Oh, that sounds like bullshit.* Well, Okay, but it's good bullshit. Put the good ideas there, and let's work with it. That's important. I think that's one part of it. The other part of it, I think,

especially in this society, is really getting people to look at a granular level and then back up and look at a distance at what your own life is as framed by this contemporary institutional dynamic.

You aren't going to buy yourself into happiness and security. No matter how hard you work, study, how clever you are, how many people buy your next record, or whatever. That's not it.

And when I refer to nature, I know that when we've done work of bringing young people from urban environments into situations where it's just sky and water and trees. I know that it changes them in the direction of seeing that. There's something about nature that offers possibilities of happiness, even if they're temporary. Happiness and security that I can't get when I go back to the city. I can get all sorts of stuff, but, man, I can't get this. I can't get *this*.

I always feel people are being done a favor when they're being asked to lift up out of that urban thing that you're in. And I don't want to belittle anything, but it's more than just walking in the woods. It's really getting into a place where, in some way, through some process, you are refreshing your connection.

We are part of a community of life. The whole planet is humming with life. We're not over and above it. We're not separate from it. And the illusion that we have created the mess that we live in. And it's choking us. Literally, it's poisoning us. Both of you guys look like you have a lot of micro plastics going on.

Is it going to get better if something doesn't change? No. Every addict has to get slapped across the face. And maybe this condition that we're going through right now, which is fairly new still, maybe it's that slap across the face.

Dissatisfaction brings about a change. I know you're not happy with this shit.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gosink, Elhom, Chris Thorne and Thomas Stanley. "After the End of the World: Killing Myths with Dr. Thomas Stanley." *SPECTRA* 12, no. 1 (2026): pp. 44-54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v12i1.288>

Submitted: 07 December 2025

Accepted: 07 December 2025

Published: 17 March 2026

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