

# Ailton Krenak - The Power of the Collective Subject - Part I

## Introduction

by **Julia Sá Earp\***

Ailton Krenak couldn't have emerged with a more pertinent interview or at a more pertinent moment. Now is the time to hear a voice that inspires, one that shakes our perceptions, keeping our clarity and conscience from being swept away in the wind. Introducing a figure such as Ailton Krenak is not an easy task. When I first read the following pages, I heard his calm narrative swinging from that of a celebrated precursor of Brazil's social indigenous movements to that of a sincere and curious man, expounding on the peculiarities and contradictions of the white world.

Effortlessly, his speech forces us to turn our preconceptions upside down. Ailton Krenak is one of the most knowledgeable figures of the tangled history of the fight for indigenous rights both within Brazil and internationally. His participation together with Álvaro Tukano, Marcos Terena and Raoni Metuktire in 1988 brought a new phase of visibility to Brazil's original peoples, guaranteeing and legitimizing the right to demarcation of their lands -- a recent turn in Brazil's history, one that suffers attacks and attempted sabotage at the hands of the current government.

There are so many episodes shared in this interview, that in order to present an introduction without ruining the content of the following pages -- which, without a doubt are better read through Ailton's own words -- I had to remove my sandals and place my

feet to the floor in search of the earth, in search of something meaningful without being redundant or repetitive in introducing the texts he presents so brilliantly. With my feet to the floor, I feel the heat of the wood; former trees from a distant territory; in this moment they vibrate only with the daily movement of the bakery at the foot of the building. Below this wood, meters of cement form the foundation of the building, and only after so much overlapping material and history do I finally reach the earth.

These are seemingly banal perceptions, but whenever I become hypnotized by Ailton's words I find myself questioning and investigating every centimeter around me. Contrary to what it may seem, I leave these profound trips attempting to see the collective individual in the everyday life of the city, or deconstruct its borders and feel the territory with Krenak's interpretive depth.

The disconnect is not mythological or particular as it may seem at first contact with the professor and writer Krenak. It is material, palpable like the distance between our bodies and the earth, provided by the cement and hidden kilometers of history in the production of the apartment's floor itself. These are daily distances in our urban world, distances of production and intense processes of disconnection and omission of history. The visible and invisible connection between the territory and its inhabitants are important concepts for capturing the Ailton's perspective on the world and the citizen, and even on the sense of "being in a village." These perceptions may be distant from the reality of the city, but they can, in the same way, resonate with spontaneity and vigor in that of the urban peripheries and their potential.

The question of potential is key for the two personalities in dialogue here: Jailson Sousa e Silva and Ailton Krenak, interviewer and interviewee. Not by chance, the potential

reverberates on various levels in this interview -- not only in the conceptions elaborated by Ailton, but also in his personality and in Sousa e Silva's deep interest in the past and present of Brazil's indigenous peoples. Such power allows the interview to provoke uncommon levels of reflection for both Sousa e Silva and Krenak, and, in turn, for the reader.

This interview is extensive and profound, and it is thus divided in two parts. Part one takes a more historical tone, presenting the following thematic blocks: Trajectories, Liberation Theology, Military Dictatorship and "Emancipation."

Part two of the interview deals with the contemporary, addressing: The Time of the Myth, Education, Florestania, Indigenous Youth and "Democracy and Globalization."

Given that it is almost impossible to discard any line of reasoning in our current political context, it is fundamental, as in homeopathic treatment, to listen to and approach these original peoples. We do so not only to rescue a memory, but also to achieve a gradual cure, listening to these powerful voices as they echo and recover the history of the land shut up in our cement.

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## PART I

*Translation from Portuguese: Edmund Ruge*

### TRAJECTORIES

**Jailson Sousa Silva:** Biographies are references for paths constructed in our personal and socially constructed lives. Can we start there? Take it away.

**Ailton Krenak:** I think that biographies have the potential to evoke paths of our education and our lives, of our engaged experience, be it in local contexts, when one lives in a small community or when one extrapolates the limits of such a community, where we feel protected by memory and history, even if that means that not every one of us can experiment. Extrapolating these community limits is a rare experience that some people consciously undertake, in an active way. The majority of us, spit out of this comfortable environment of familiar life, of co-living in the case of indigenous communities, or in the case of one of those independent communities that resides at the peripheries of social [life], this environment where life prospers backstage of political arrangements and in general... It is as though we were living in isolation from the planned world, where many inventions occur.

These are inventions that social history does not capture. I think that for a long time these lives were invisible experiences, of wonderful people that managed to raise their children, form a community, protect a territory, construct a feeling of territoriality where that complex of exchange, of families, of camaraderie goes on giving and children grow in these environments with a potential, a capacity, a freedom so wonderful. This world ends up forming something of a biosphere; a place where those same lives reach one hundred years

or more. They are wise. Their lives are rich trajectories, but they do not connect to the complex realities of the global world which we later become aware of. In my case, we were spit out of our territory very early, because we lived in a context of communities that were already given as integrated or dissolved -- indigenous communities. It was as though we made up the last surviving indigenous peoples following the colonization of the Rio Doce, yet still maintained those organizational models that permit common access to things: common access to water, to the river, and to places where you could find food, places that involved the lives of many people.

These collectives, [redacted] this is what they call communities. But I think that when they name these collectives communities, it drains some of their potential and replaces it with an idealized notion of community -- they are unable to problematize the lives of these people. Writing a biography of one of these environments is a way of illuminating all of this environment and projecting sense into the lives of everyone; our grandmothers, uncles, fathers, our brothers, our childhood friends. It is a ship. It is a constellation of beings travelling and transiting the globe, not through economy or commerce, but in the world of the lives themselves, of the beings that live and experience constant insecurity. It is as if these mentalities, these people, needed a dilated world in order to be able to experience their own potential as creative beings.

People that grew up listening to deep histories, relating events left untold by the literature, by the official narratives, and that cross the plain of daily reality for a mythic plane of narratives and tales. It is also a place of oral tradition, where knowledge, knowing, its vehicle is oral transmission from person to person. It is the oldest telling a story, or the youngest that had an experience that he would like to share with the collective that he belongs to, and this serves to create a sense of life, enriching the experience of life of each

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This perception of the collective subject is born early for us. I was about 17 when I, my parents, siblings, uncles, and a few cousins were all lumped together in a caravan leaving our place of origin to find another place to camp, another place for us to continue living. And the characteristics of this new place made little difference, it was a place that could reproduce collective experience, that allowed us to continue living together.

We left the Rio Doce for the world. Let's imagine some address in the state of Paraná. This group that left the Rio Doce in the second half of the century -- 1960, or 1966, 1967 -- experienced the dissolution of the collectives in which we lived, through the violence that came alongside the occupation of that territory, with land disputes, grave conflicts over ownership, and a permanent negation of our right to be and to have the experience of living in collectives. Our neighbors had places, including those that took land from the indigenous peoples had small plots. It was a family, people, individuals that owned those places. The way of existing collectively no longer fit into that space, and it became impossible for us there. Those that resisted paid for it with their lives; there were people being killed because they no longer fit in that place. We had to look elsewhere.

I am of the exiled generation, from when many left and traveled to Goiás, São Paulo, Espírito Santo, Mato Grosso. It is as if it was an escape without a destination, in an exile with unknown length, but I believe that everyone deep down hoped to return -- not unlike the northeasterners that leave for Rio and São Paulo, as though it were: "I'll go and I'll come right back." Sometimes this "come right back" didn't happen and we fell into the great ocean of life's events. In the trip to São Paulo, where we settled down, in order to attempt to survive, without any reference in the middle of Paulistas and all the other migrants there, we began to feel a deep discomfort in placing ourselves there as subjects in that context.

I looked around me -- this was around the time of the [military] dictatorship -- and people had different degrees of knowledge, of understanding of what we were living. At that age I had already begun to look around me and to perceive a certain activism in the workers, a people both simple and poor, swinging from one side to the other in order to make themselves understood, respected and seen. We had no defined idea yet of where these things called rights came from, the so-called human rights, but [we did have] a massive discomfort with our invisibility.

If you live a community experience, the idea of the person is strongly constituted, as a real personality, with her own perspective, interacting with her equals. There is no need to continually adjust in order to relate. You do as you please in a community. To each her own, there is no pattern - and people are not surprised if you make one choice or another.

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Now, when you fall in the mined camp of exile, you must update your memory daily; what you are doing and seeking there. It was then that I began to perceive that there were some Guaranis there in São Paulo's plains, there were some there on the border that I didn't know and only came to know some years later. But there, around the 1970s, I already witnessed a movement of Guaranis attempting to survive around São Paulo, being stamped out.

**Jailson Souza e Silva:** Repressed, right?

**Ailton Krenak:** Yes, the Billings, those in Parelheiros, in Jaragua, suffering all kinds of wrongs... the same evictions we suffered in the Rio Doce, they suffered there as well. I began to frequent that area and visit family members, to understand the movements they were undertaking, to be present in some of these situations, though I still felt exiled. I have always felt that I was away from home.

I realized that I could have a more active presence in that circulation they were creating, as in how to remove someone that gathered palm from the sierra in the area someone hunted and gathered before, only that now there was a private company overseeing it; eventually, it turned into a land dispute.

We began to see that there was a path to reclaiming this with the State, with the

Municipality. We began to take inventory, and we'd soon be knocking on the doors of FUNAI in Brasilia. Knocking on the doors and complaining, and that would later turn into rights for us.

It is interesting how this idea of rights, this perception that there is something called a right and that we can constitute that right, that we don't need to wait for rights to present themselves to us -- we could go after them ourselves. This got me going from early on.

With few tools to interact and interfere, but with plenty anguish and hope that we would be able to open new paths, I began to participate in initiatives to re-configure those collectives. When you begin to act in one community or another, even in one spread out over poor neighborhoods, that are there fighting to for a plank bridge over some local trench, because when it rains, everything floods.

So, what is there to claim?

A passage. From those small questions up until you begin to look around you and think: "hold on, what land is this, what place is this, what community is this that we've formed here?" and you go along arousing so many concerns, awaking your own potential as a subject that can't even rationalize the idea of citizenship, because this idea is too sophisticated.

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The majority of people that move from place to place to release themselves from spacial existence do not do so because they already have some idea about what it means to be a citizen. Rather, this is a natural inclination to search for air to breathe, for co-existence, for the ability to throw a party, give food, share things. My own education coincided with this when this thing called Brazilian culture, when we were all being incorporated into this marketed thing. Families that were just scraping by suddenly had to learn to count money, to enter a warehouse and buy things, to pay for things on credit, to measure the size of things. Stemming from the imaginary, this means projecting a map of the worlds and places we traversed.

It was out of this kind of ocean that my route as an activist began to reveal itself. I looked at the whole thing and thought, goodness, I'm in this sort of pool game where I can look for work at a factory and disappear into the tunnels. Going to SENAI, becoming a lathe operator, a toolmaker, or spend my whole life as a work-hand at a factory, because there are many people that lived just in this way -- they started from the bottom and then modernized, becoming laborers, workers.

What's interesting is that something inside of me told me that I wasn't a subject of that kind of world of labor, of that kind of world of selling my work in exchange for something that I might want -- a school, a house, a car, some material good.

It's something that really moves the lives of those who have been swept from their places of origin. Anyone in their place of origin is completely boxed in, if he spends 60 to 80 years living in a flour-house, milling and making rapadura, that's it. His creation, his universe of invention and creation is plain. But when his is torn from this place and thrown into whatever other, he must reallocate. This exile must now reinvent himself and his world. I

think that I had a sort of yearning, a desire that this reallocation weren't just individual, of my own person, but that it dragged with it my brethren, the people that had expression and feeling in my effective memory, in my family relations and everything. I didn't want to find myself an exit. I think it was from there that I understood that it made sense to wage a more open struggle, and that was when I began to see that there were xavantes, guaranis, caingangues, and other families too that had been expelled from their land... [...] and that our place was not in exile.

Everyone there had their own place, and it was from there that we began to think about where our places were. This was the embryo that came to be the indigenous movement, that helped us to think, or rather, to project. It was born from people with more or less my age, that went from Mario Juruna, who is a bit older, Alvaro Tucano, Marcos Tereno, and a collective of other indigenous youth that were studying in Brasilia. Their sketch was the thing of students.

**Jailson:** The noun was student and the adjective was indigenous?

**Ailton Krenak:** Right. but when I and Alvaro Tucano, who was exiled from the Alto Rio Negro by the salesians, the religious group they had there and excommunicated him, sending him out, because he had gone along with Mario Juruna in the Bertrand Russell Trial to denounce the dictatorship, indigenous genocide, when he returned to Brazil, the priests did not allow him to return to Rio Negra. He got together with me and other relatives, even Angelo Kretan, Nelson Xangre, and some of our guarani relatives from São Paulo's plateau, from the interior of São Paulo, where there are indigenous reserves, and we began watch and to be watched by those pastoral land movements, the indigenous, that came to be the CIMI - the Indigenous Missionary Council. It was in those base communities, in that

environment that we began to cultivate our alliances.

## **LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

**Jailson:** Was Liberation Theology a space of dialogue for you all?

**Ailton Krenak:** I have no doubt that it was, because they created a flow, they opened up to the possibility of you walking and going to the community meetings. I remember that one of the first times that I had a vehicle to make my voice heard was in one of those fraternity campaigns, while we were still in that...

**Jailson:** This happened at the beginning of the 1970s?

**Ailton Krenak:** At the end of the 70s, the beginning of the 1980s, was when I was still involved in these debates. There was a fraternity campaign that had as its theme “bread for the world” I believe, or bread is life, that addressed the topic of hunger.

We lived in communities of hunger. Nowadays if you say that we had lived in communities that suffered from hunger with people dying of starvation, you might even hear someone say: “no that was at the beginning of the 20th century.” No, it was at the end of the 20th century. That is why we have Betinho.<sup>[1]</sup> I still didn't know about him at that point, about the campaigns. It was later that his campaigns took off. But back then hunger was already terrorizing the lives of thousands of people. That's why I believe that it was during one of these campaigns about bread for life, or bread is life, about breaking bread, that they used one of my speeches and mobilized my image and it went viral. From the Northeast, to Amazonia, to everywhere that received Prelazia pamphlets, or TV images, that little boy

appeared saying something. and that begin to amplify my perspective in terms of who I could speak with, I began to realize that I could talk with other shores and other people, that I can engage with more than the homeless from the peripheries of the large cities, like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba. I could also talk with those in the forest, with my imaginary relatives somewhere in the forest. and we begin to send and discourse, as though we were sending it to another planet. Sending the discourse to our relatives that were in the forest. Going to meetings doing our communication at a distance, recording tapes with messages to send to the villages, we believed that there was someone on the other side that could understand what we were saying.

I believe that it was this first sustainable environment for the idea of a greater social movement, where indigenous peoples were the protagonists. We no longer waited for food, or clothing, or help. We assumed initiative to begin to debate the reality in which we were living.

## **MILITARY DICTATORSHIP AND “EMANCIPATION”**

**Ailton krenak:** what is curious is that it was in this time that the state resolved to emancipate the indigenous. It was at the end of the 70s, emancipation took place under the government of Geisel.

They decided to undertake a campaign of emancipation in 1976. They launched the slogan of the emancipation, a reform of the state, around the question of land and civil rights even.

We could say that it was the most wasteful period in these relations, when the state

decided to say that those people that thought they were indigenous, no longer were. That sprawling state violence that reached everyone from the Ianomamis, to the Xavantes, to the Ticunas, to the Guaranis, to all the urban and peripheral indigenous, that was the first opportunity for an indigenous coalition that we had. The state attacked and there was cohesion.

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All of a sudden you had in the same protest people like Daniel Cabixi, who came from Mato Grosso, Aniceto Celestino, who were Xavante leaders that hadn't even gotten a firm grasp on Portuguese yet, despite having a marked speech because they were Salesian students, they were catechists of Salesians and spoke the Portuguese of priests. But they came with potential and the capacity to animate the debate about indigenous rights, and that took the blindfold off of our eyes. It was then that Marçal de Souza said "Brazil was not discovered, it was invaded." The Kaiowa Guarani indigenous from Mato Grosso do Sul, from deep within an insurmountable Estate Ranch yelled and lashed out: "Brazil was not discovered, it was invaded." They said this in 1976. And it was at that moment that the stick began to break, the repression fell on the villages in a violent way. At that time it was generals, colonels, that directed the national foundation for indigenous, which actually, still applies today. We

have a general in pajamas directing FUNAI, but at that time they were dressed and armed. And they really did repress. The military commanders didn't go easy on any area of the country.

We had indigenous youth that were in Salesian high schools, that were in the last of religious missions spread through Goiás, Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Acre, Alto Rio Negro. These youth read, wrote, and began to give consistency to the messages the ancients and elders spoke, and one of those Marçal de Souza talks echoed about, that Brazil was not discovered but invaded. Look at the wording, what a wonderful thing to give basis to something being born: it wasn't crawling, it was already born on its feet saying: "Brazil was invaded." Well, if it was invaded then our task was to take it back. And from there we began our fight for the demarcation of indigenous lands. It was a campaign for land demarcation, a campaign for indigenous rights.

The first meeting we held was called "indigenous, historical rights." And look -- the rights were historical. They weren't something new.

We were charging for what had been taken. And in this first meeting we had 68 different ethnicities, in an age when the official documents said that Brazil had 120. We gathered 68 just like that. Later they would say that Brazil had 180. There's some people that repeat to this day that there are 180, there are several official documents then maintain them there are 180 ethnicities and peoples, but they forget that there are 300 or more could be many more than that.

And this was just as the statistics of the age said the Brazil had around 120 or 150,000 indigenous peoples, because they counted the villages too. When we talk about villages, we

are in fact talking about different situations, and these relatives were being corralled and segregated in several territories, and had no conditions for survival, with a federal administration on top of them controlling their lives, to the point that a person could not move from his village to another without getting a pass, that the head of the administrative post would authorize.

**Jailson:** Concentration camp?

**Ailton Krenak:** Well yes, without that pass you couldn't leave. And those that circulated without a pass were not considered indigenous peoples. If you walked around without the administrative head's approval, you were no longer considered indigenous. Aside from that narrative that says that those who wear jeans, watches and glasses are no longer indigenous, there was also this one about whoever circulated without their official card and the FUNAI transportation stamp from the post head, was no longer indigenous. "He is already emancipated." So the emancipation was compulsory. Rather than advancing the exercise of citizenship for indigenous people, rather than having a perception of what is advancement in the sense of conquest of new spaces for expressing citizenship, it was seen as giving up to emancipation. I remember a huge line for the INPS,<sup>[2]</sup> that took up the whole sidewalk, it took up the whole block and spilled onto other roads. There, at the end of that line there were a few good-looking guys, looking like huka huka fighters from the xingu. It was the end of the line of the INPS, the end of the poor line. It was the place where they were going to place the "emancipated." So emancipation of the indigenous meant placing them at the end of the poor line. We had to fight against the stigma stamped upon our common destiny... that stigma that sent the indigenous to the end of the line meant for those who had everything taken from them.

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I think that that type of movement was a reaction against a certain negation of our existence, against the negation of our historical rights and our ability to invent other ways of being in any way, but principally it fought for the respect of our territories where people were still able to maintain resistance, to stay alive. This articulation of the idea of human rights with territory was practically tied for the majority of these guys my age. And for the elders, this was a revelation. If for the elders the idea of territory was magical, an idea founded in myth, they now had a bunch of children and grandchildren telling them that beyond that of being informed by our ancestral narratives, there was also a correspondent out there in the world: the rights that we had.

There is the discovery of a world outside of here with a representative body for this society, that despite being our devourer, inside of it there are institutions that we needed to know, and inside of those we could shake the basket to see what comes out as references for what we could consider our rights. The most effective document the state had to dialogue with this demand of ours was the indigenous statute, Law 6.001. It was a law made during the dictatorship that Darcy Ribeiro Considered a fundamental element for the state not to crush the rest of the indigenous, and that's why he said: "calm down, if you all are going to break terms with the state, pay attention, because if you put an end to this Law 6.001, you will destroy the last barrier that still defines the limits of a dark place, but at least one where you are still recognized. Outside of this place you all are in the general mass of the

expropriated and the landless.” At this point they didn't even have this category and segment identified yet. That is to say, to take on this status the poor have to go deep, they must scrape through the most desolate conditions in order to rise as a member of the landless.

I think that in the case of indigenous people, we stood on the brink of disappearing. When we managed to turn the corner, we were able to rise as an inventive social movement, made extremely fragile by the very historical context in which we were placed, but we were able from that point on to be a part of history.

That is why it is possible to call it historical context. The state dragged our leg and we left the scene with heads held high, lashing and yelling ( kicking and screaming?). I think that the first acknowledgement of this crisis of rights came from the intellectuals, the University, with figures I have already mentioned, like Darcy, though there were others just as fundamental as he, that in different areas of the country began to pull indigenous people into the debate, bringing us onto the scene and into public discourse.

## **THE VILLAS-BÔAS BROTHERS**

**Jailson:** How do the Villas-Boas brothers fit into this?

**Ailton Krenak:** The Villas Boas brothers were the captains of the forest for the state; they didn't want the indigenous to go back to being indigenous. For them, the Xingu people were doing well: the 17 ethnicities that they had placed in Noah's ark were to stay there. The others would have to be swept away with the flood. If they weren't taken with the flood, it was because they were too late. In a certain way, they thought that it was a lag in the

modernization of the Brazilian state, having allowed such borders and peripheries to sneak by the edges of the rivers and streams, at the foot of the mountains, and to continue resisting.

It was unthinkable for the Villas-Boas brothers that the Xacriaba would be able to, at the end of the 20th century, re-emerge as a strong nation, one capable of claiming rights in their region's socio-political arrangement and consolidating a presence like they did in the north of Minas Gerais. Or as the Maxacali continue to do, or even like the Krenak people at the edge of that river, the Rio Doce, with the miners and their commitment to destroying the mountains.

As Carols Drummond de Andrade said, they remain quick in their determination to wrap up these mountains tuck them into a ship, and send them off to who knows where. This determination to destroy the landscape and finish off whoever sees their own reflection in the land, whoever sings to the mountains and rivers, or whoever dances for the mountain and gives names to the rivers. Every stream has its name, and this name is the innovation of other beings, of its relatives, of the oldest narratives to reach our memory. This is why it makes sense to say 'Mother' Earth, because she is not a thing; she is not a tract, a plot, a field, or a farm.

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As much as they try to transform it into a land holding, to remove the sense of life that the earth holds, these people that were born on the land, and have memories of the land, they will not accept this. They resist, die, and continue to reappear in other terms. But they continue fighting and shouting, saying that 'that is mother earth.'

The indigenous movement was born with this conscience of the children of mother ear, and with a capacity for active political critique, like in the case of Marçal saying that Brazil was not discovered, it was invaded. So these conceptual bases that sustained the thought of my generation in contemplating the indigenous movement are deeply shaped by our cultural heritage; they were not just some ramblings... they were a deep implication arisen from these individuals and their collectives. Perhaps it is because of this that the movement, as much as it gets diluted in each age's debates -- be it in the political crisis or when the country is surfing on money -- shows up to confront Belo Monte, contesting the construction of dams and hydroelectric plants, of ports, and of state infrastructure, because the State is the same invader in the process described by Marçal de Souza back in the 1970s. That is to say, this is no discovery. This is a continual invasion, and the State is the principal mobilizer in this invasion, all of the State and its agencies. The Villas-Bôas brothers that you brought up represent, from the perspective of this growing wave of history that came to be the indigenous movement, indigenous conservatism. They thought that you had to have, just like in biological reserves, something to guard this cultural heritage.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Herbert José de Sousa, sociologist and leading human rights activist in Brazil

<sup>[2]</sup> National Pension Institute



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