

Ailton Krenak (author)

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Born in Itabirinha de Mantena, in the Doce River valley, in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil, Ailton Alves Lacerda Krenak (1953-) is an Indigenous writer, philosopher, activist, and environmentalist of the Krenak people. He is the author of *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2020), *Life is Not Useful* (2023), and *Ancestral Future* (2024), as well as other books in Portuguese. He became widely known for his performance at the National Constituent Assembly of Brazil on September 4, 1987, when he painted his face with black dye while speaking for the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples, drawing attention to violations they suffered. He was part of the committees that drafted the chapter concerning Indigenous peoples in the 1988 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil (Title VIII, Chapter VIII), known as the ‘Citizen Constitution’.

Throughout history, the Krenak people have experienced violent incursions and persecution from settler populations. Although the recognition of Krenak land dates back to 1920, its official approval by a presidential decree only happened in 2001. Located on the left bank of the Doce River, between the cities of Resplendor and Conselheiro Pena, in the state of Minas Gerais, the Krenak Indigenous Land was affected by an environmental disaster on November 5, 2015, when the Fundão tailings dam in the city of Mariana, belonging to Samarco, Vale, and BHP Billiton mining companies, suffered a catastrophic failure, contaminating the river with mineral waste. After several invasions of the Krenak territory in the 1960s, Ailton and his relatives were forced to move to the south of Brazil, first to the region of Iguaçu, Paraná, close to the border with Paraguay, and then to São Paulo, where he completed school and later graduated in media and communication studies.

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Ailton Krenak's ideas and writings are based on these experiences, as well as on his travels around the country, on the contact he established with other Indigenous groups, and on conversations with anthropologists and intellectuals in Brazil and abroad. He criticizes the historical process of colonization in various texts, such as: 'O eterno retorno do encontro' [The eternal return of the encounter] (1999), 'Do tempo' [Concerning time] (2020), and 'História indígena e o eterno retorno do encontro' [Indigenous history and the eternal return of the encounter] (2012); an interview to *Plataforma Entre-Entre* in 2017; the chapter 'A questão indígena e a América Latina' [The Indigenous issue and Latin America] in *Encontros | Ailton Krenak* (2015); the documentary *Guerras do Brasil* [Brazilian Wars] (2018); and a lecture given at the São Paulo Museum of Art (*MASP Seminários*, 2017), which had great repercussions. The author also criticizes the principles and functioning of the contemporary Brazilian State, understanding it as the heir of colonialism and loyal to the interests of large corporations.

In his reflections, Ailton Krenak questions the nature-culture divide, which tends to inform Western thought, and the idea that humans are the only beings endowed with subjectivity and creativity. Furthermore, he critically points to the hierarchy within the very idea of humanity: one associated with Western and capitalist culture and another relating to a 'sub-humanity', composed of those who refuse this way of being in the world. The idea of 'humanity' in the singular is thus seen as an abstraction stripped of any reality, creating inequalities and the deprivation of rights. In this sense, he defines Western thought as anthropocentric, as it neglects other living beings.

Ailton Krenak brings together fields of knowledge that tend to be separated, projecting, from his elaborations on non-Indigenous settler society, a 'counter-history' and a 'counter-anthropology', as defined by Brazilian anthropologist [Eduardo Viveiros de Castro](#) (1951-). Based on this proposal, he defends the idea that humanity has left deep marks on the planet to the point of inaugurating a new geological era, making it impossible to think about it without considering the Earth as a living organism that does not belong to 'Man'. With this idea, he proposes a

research agenda about life, based on Indigenous epistemology, defending the creation of knowledge based on the experiences of being Indigenous, that engenders the formulation of new narratives. His proposal to postpone the end of the world, for example, is based on the thesis that it is always possible to tell more stories and, in doing so, enable different ways of living.

Ailton Krenak's public life is marked by publications (books, articles, prefaces, chapters, and afterwords) and public interventions (lectures, classes, live streaming talks, interviews, conversations, and conferences), in addition to his intense activism in favor of Indigenous rights and social-environmental issues since the 1970s. In the 1980s, he presented *Programa de Índio*, a radio program broadcast by the University of São Paulo Radio (Radio USP). During this decade, he was also involved in the creation of the União dos Povos Indígenas (UNI) [Union of Indigenous Peoples], in 1980; and the organization of the Aliança dos Povos da Floresta [Alliance of Forest Peoples], in 1987, alongside other Indigenous leaders and the environmentalist Chico Mendes (1944-1988). He was also present, with other Indigenous leaders, at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit. Between 2003 and 2010, he served as the Special Advisor for Indigenous Affairs to the State Government of Minas Gerais. In 2016 and 2021 he was awarded the title of doctor *honoris causa* from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora and the University of Brasília, respectively. In 2020, he received the Juca Pato Award from the Brazilian Union of Writers (UBE). In 2023, he was elected a member of the Minas Gerais Academy of Letters, and an immortal member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, the first Indigenous person to do so. In the same year, he created with the director Cibele Forjaz (1966-) a new production of the opera *O Guarani* (1870), by Carlos Gomes, with Indigenous actors, musicians, singers, and other artists.

In Ailton Krenak's publications and activism, we notice an effort to bring together different ancestral knowledge forms and make them reverberate in other epistemic settings in Brazil and abroad. Among the authors he dialogues with are Indigenous intellectuals that problematize the anthropocentrism of Western thought, such as the

Yanomami shaman and leader [Davi Kopenawa](#) (1956-), the Guarani Nhandeva anthropologist and curator [Sandra Benites](#) (1975 -), the Maxacali writer Cristine Takuá (1981- ), and the Guarani Mbya filmmaker Carlos Papá.

**Editor's note:** aside the English translations mentioned above, his books were also translated into French (*Idées pour retarder la fin du monde*, 2020), Dutch (*Ideeën om het einde van de wereld uit te stellen: berichten van een bijna uitgestorven volk*, 2021), German (*Ideen, um das Ende der Welt zu vertagen*, 2021), Norwegian (*Ideer for å utsette verdens undergang*, 2021); Spanish (*Ideas para postergar el fin del mundo: Pueblos indígenas y medioambiente*, 2021; *La vida no es útil*, 2023), and Swedish (*Om drömmen, om Jorden. Idéer för att fördröja världens undergång*, 2024).

## HOW TO CITE

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## KEYWORDS

art; cosmology; Indigenous rights; Indigenous intellectuals; Krenak; Native Americans; nature/culture

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