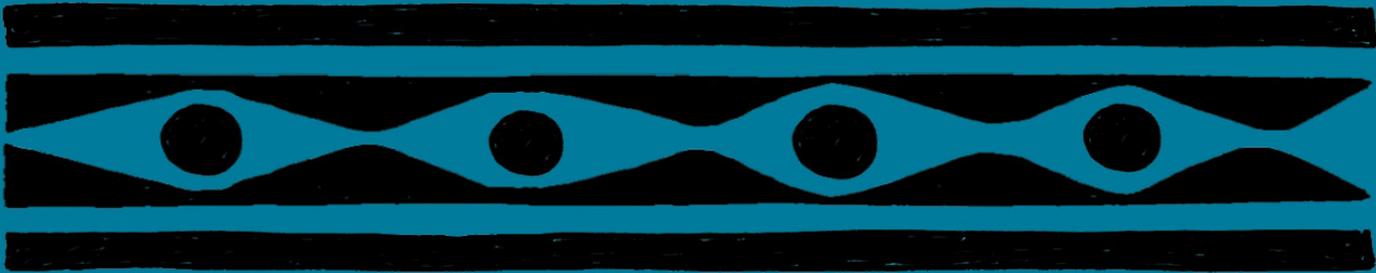


"Ailton Krenak's ideas inspire, washing over you with every truth-telling sentence. Read this book."

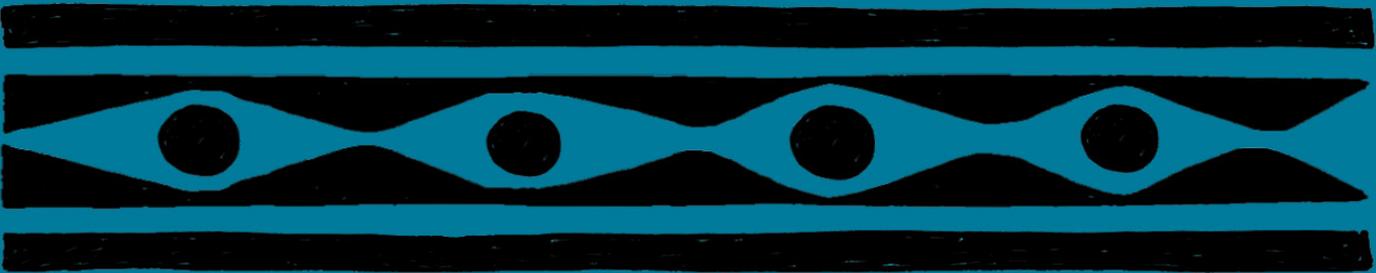
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IDEAS TO POSTPONE THE END OF THE WORLD



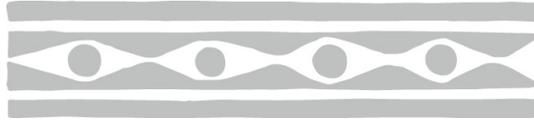
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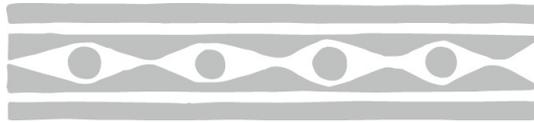
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IDEAS

**TO POSTPONE
THE END OF THE
WORLD**



AILTON KRENAK

Translated from the Portuguese
by ANTHONY DOYLE



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INTERNATIONAL

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CONTENTS

[Introduction: Tomorrow Is Not for Sale](#)

[Ideas to Postpone the End of the World](#)

[Of Dreams and the Earth](#)

[The Humanity We Think We Are](#)

[References](#)

[About the Book](#)

[About the Author](#)

INTRODUCTION

TOMORROW IS NOT FOR SALE

April 2020. The rhythm of life today is not the same as it was last week, or last summer, or in January or February. The world is in suspension. And I don't know if we're going to come out of this crisis the same as we went in. The future is here and now, and there may not be a next year.

I've stopped going out, cancelled all commitments. I'm with my family at the Krenak village, which is located along the Middle Doce River. Due to the rapid global spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, our Indigenous reserve has been in isolation for almost a month. The truth is we've been corralled here for a long time, refugees in our own homeland, on a four-thousand-hectare reserve (which would be a lot larger, if justice were served). This involuntary confinement has given Indigenous people resilience, made us more resistant. I planted corn this morning. I planted a tree.

We at Krenak village have been mourning our Doce River for decades now, watching it defiled by industrial and agricultural pollution, deformed by hydroelectric stations, and, more recently, choked with toxic mud from a burst

tailings dam. I wasn't expecting the world to make us grieve for something else too. For a long time, it was us, the Indigenous peoples, who were on the verge of seeing our ways of life driven to extinction. Today, everyone, without exception, is facing the imminent collapse of the earth under our collective weight. We're witnessing the unfolding of a tragedy, of people dying all over the globe in such numbers that corpses are being taken to the incinerators by the truckload.

This virus is discriminating against humanity. Just look around. Nature's getting on with nature. The bitter melon grows just as it always has in my garden. The virus isn't killing birds, bears, or any other creature; just us, humans. It's humankind and our artificial world that has gone into a tailspin. The virus, a natural organism, is attacking the unsustainable way of life we chose for ourselves — this fantastic freedom we so love to demand, but which comes at a cost no one thought to consider.

Some governments think that the economy can't stop, even though "people are going to die, there's no avoiding it."¹ The other day, the president of the Republic said that Brazilians have privileged immunity to disease, because they walk through sewage every day and don't catch a thing.² What Jair Bolsonaro has been doing can only be called necropolitics — death as policy. It's a sick mentality that is spreading worldwide. It devalues life, but also the power of the word. Because to make such a declaration is to issue a death sentence, whether to someone of advanced years or to their children or grandchildren, but always to someone who loves and is loved.

In Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher says that the market society we live in considers the individual useful only so long as he or she is productive. With the advancement of capitalism, instruments were created to let us live and to make us die: once people stop producing, they become dispensable. Either you produce the conditions to keep yourself alive, or you produce the conditions to usher in your death. For governments, the death of those who generate costs for the state is good for business. In other words: let the vulnerable die.

What's happening is terrible, but society needs to understand that we are not the salt of the earth. For a long time, we were fed the story that we, humanity, stand apart from the great big organism of Earth, and we began to think of ourselves as one thing, and Earth, another: Humankind *versus* Earth.

We have to abandon our anthropocentrism. There's a lot more to Earth than us, and biodiversity doesn't seem to be missing us at all. Quite the contrary.

My communion with what we call nature is an experience long scoffed at by city folk. Rather than see any value in it, they poke fun at it: "He talks to trees, he's a tree-hugger; he talks to rivers, he contemplates the mountains." But that's my experience of life. I don't see anything out there that is not nature. Everything is nature. The cosmos is nature. Everything I can think of is nature.

Mother Earth puts us to sleep and wakes us up again with the rising sun; she lets the birds sing, the currents and winds flow. She creates this wonderful world for us to share, and what have we done in return? What we are going through now might well be the act of a loving mother who has decided her child needs to be taught a lesson. "Hush, now." That is what the Earth is saying to humanity.

I hope things don't go back to normal, because if they do, it will mean that the deaths of thousands of people around the world were in vain. The changes are already on course. We can't go back to that rapid pace of life, turn the ignition on in all those cars, rev up all those machines at once. It would be tantamount to accepting that the earth is flat and that we ought to go on devouring it and one another. Then we will have proven that humanity is a lie.

1 Conservative politician Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil in October 2018 and took office on January 1, 2019. He is a divisive figure known for his far-right policies on certain issues. Talking to a group of supporters outside the Presidential Palace on March 30, 2020, Bolsonaro said the following: "Do you think people are going to die? Yes, people are going to die, there's no avoiding it. We've got two problems. The virus, and unemployment."

<https://catracalivre.com.br/cidadania/em-novo-discurso-bolsonaro-normaliza-mortes-por-coronavirus/>— Trans.

2 One hundred million Brazilians, 47 percent of the population, do not have access to basic sanitation (flushable toilets, piped sewer systems, etc.). In making this quip, Bolsonaro was referring to the open sewers that trickle through the streets of the nation's shantytowns and slums. Sanitation is a key indicator of inequality in Brazil, as shown by the percentages of access to basic sanitation per region: Southeast 79.2 percent, South 45.2 percent, Midwest 52.9 percent, Northeast 28 percent, North 10.5 percent. Source: Instituto Trata Brasil, <http://www.tratabrasil.org.br/saneamento/principais-estatisticas/no-brasil/esgoto>. Accessed on May 19, 2020. — Trans.

**IDEAS TO POSTPONE
THE END OF THE
WORLD**

THE FIRST TIME I disembarked at Lisbon Airport, I had a strange sensation. For over fifty years, I'd avoided crossing the ocean, for emotional and historical reasons.³ I thought I'd have nothing to talk to the Portuguese about. It wasn't a big deal to me or anything, it was just something I avoided. In 2000, on the five hundredth anniversary of the Atlantic crossing of Cabral and co., I declined an invitation to visit Portugal. I said: "This is a Portuguese celebration. You're going to commemorate the invasion of my corner of the world. Count me out." I suppose feelings were raw on that historically sensitive occasion, but sentiments change, and with time I began to see a visit to Portugal in a different light.

In 2017, the year of Lisbon's stint as Ibero-American Capital of Culture,⁴ a cycle of extremely interesting events was arranged, with theatre performances, film screenings, and lectures. Once again, I was invited to Portugal to attend. Our friend the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro was going to deliver a conference talk at the Maria Matos Theatre called "The Involunteers of the Fatherland."⁵ I thought to myself: *Now that's something that interests me, maybe I'll tag along.* The day after Eduardo's lecture, I had the opportunity to meet a lot of people who were keen to hear about the upcoming release of the documentary *Ailton Krenak e o sonho da pedra* (Ailton Krenak and the dream of the stone), directed by Marco Altberg. The film, released in 2018, is a good introduction to the theme I want to deal with here, which is how we have, over the last two or three thousand years, built the idea of humanity. And how that very idea of humanity might lie at the heart of our worst decisions, justifying a great deal of violence.

The notion that white Europeans could jump in their ships and go colonizing the rest of the world was based on the premise that there was an enlightened humanity that had to go in search of the benighted humanity and bring those savages into their incredible light. This call to civilization was always justified by the idea that there is a right way of being in the world, one truth, or concept of truth, that has guided the choices made down through history.

Now, at the start of the twenty-first century, collaborations between thinkers with distinct visions derived from different cultures are enabling us to critique that idea: Are we really *a* humanity? How can we justify calling ourselves a humanity when 70 percent of us are totally alienated from even the minimal exercise of being — when the majority of us are denied any real agency because the world we are living in does not want or require our input, only our custom?

If we look at society as a company, you have the board of directors, which sets the Vision and Mission — the Humanity Club, in short — and then you have the staff, who do what they're told, working in the name of something that doesn't belong to them while wearing the T-shirt with the company logo on it. The board is stocked with the rich trendsetters behind the growing exclusion and inequality promoted by technological progress and accumulated wealth. Everyone a rung down is just a consumer of the artificial existences the club members design. But here's the rub: though excluded, we go on nourishing the dream of someday being admitted, of being inducted into the club, where the future is planned and meaning is produced. We're so high on progress that we allow a tiny segment of the population to create the narratives of our world.

We might think of our most consolidated institutions, such as universities or the multilateral organizations, that emerged during the twentieth century: the World Bank, the Organization of American States (OEA), the United Nations (UN), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). These agencies and institutions were designed and maintained as structures of this one-truth humanity. But when we wanted to create a biosphere reserve in a certain region of Brazil,⁶ we had to justify to UNESCO why we thought it was important not to let the planet be devoured by mining operations. It seems it's quite enough for that organization merely to safeguard

a handful of heritage sites for posterity, cobbling together a sort of open-air museum of the world's past. If we survive, we'll have to fight for the slivers of the planet we didn't destroy, and our grandkids and great-great-grandkids — and their great-great-grandkids — will have to travel to these sites to see what the earth used to look like. And we legitimize the perpetuity of these institutions, and accept their often egregious and damaging decisions, because they are in the service of this singular humanity we think ourselves to be.

My travels in different parts of the world, visiting a range of cultures, have enabled me to assess the guarantees given upon entry to the Humanity Club. Modernization has herded people from the fields and the forests into sprawling favelas and outlying slums, where they serve as cheap labour for the urban centres. These people were plucked out of their traditional ways of living and places of origin and literally flung into the great big blender of humanity. If they did not have deep ties to their ancestral memory, with references that sustain their identity, they'd go insane in this nutty world we share.

And it all makes me think: *Why have we insisted so hard for so long on belonging to this club, which, most of the time, just limits our capacity for invention, creation, existence, and liberty?* Are we not endlessly refreshing our old disposition toward voluntary servitude? When are we going to understand that the nation-state is already falling apart, and that the worn-out notion behind these agencies was bankrupt from the very start? But no. Instead, we keep finding ways to dream up others just like them in the hope that they will be the glue that holds our humanity together.

“Ideas to postpone the end of the world” — the title is a provocation.

I was out in the garden when they brought me the phone, saying: “It's the University of Brasília, inviting you to a meeting on sustainable development.” The University of Brasília's Center for Sustainable Development runs a master's degree program, and I was delighted to be invited to speak to the students and faculty, and accepted immediately. Then the organizer said: “You'll have to provide a title for your lecture.” I was so engrossed in my

gardening that I answered perhaps too quickly: “Ideas to postpone the end of the world.” They thought I was being serious and put the title on the program.

Three months later, they called me up, saying: “Your lecture’s tomorrow. Have you booked your flight to Brasília?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow you’re scheduled to deliver that lecture on ideas to postpone the end of the world.”

The next day it was raining, and I thought to myself: *Great, no one’s going to turn up.* But, to my surprise, the auditorium was packed.

I looked out across the hall and asked: “So everyone here is doing their master’s degree?”

And my friends said: “No, the whole campus is here, wanting to know how to put off Armageddon.”

I couldn’t help but reply: “Me too.”

Being in the company of those people made me reflect on the myth of sustainability, invented by corporations to justify their theft of our idea of nature. No company on this earth is sustainable, no matter what they say. But these companies and even whole sectors opportunistically appropriate the concept of sustainability for its marketing value. Corporate sustainability managers have become the sacerdotes of a new planetary order, self-righteously preaching something their employers, by their very nature, can’t practice. And people are afraid to contest anything these sacerdotes say. But the fact is, it’s dishonest to use a term like *sustainability* when we’re on the verge of being expelled from Gaia. Not even the Indigenous communities are sustainable today, because we can’t provide for all our needs in a way that is fully integrated with the land. No community that is in debt to the land can call itself sustainable, because we take out more than we can put back in. Our deficit to Gaia is half an earth per year.

For a long time, we have been alienated from the organism to which we belong — the earth. So much so that we began to think of Earth and Humanity as two separate entities. I can’t see anything on Earth that is not Earth. Everything I can think of is a part of nature.

I remember reading a story by an early twentieth-century European researcher who travelled to the homeland of the Hopi Nation in northeastern Arizona. He’d asked for someone from the village to set up a meeting for him

with an Elder he wanted to interview. When he went to interview her, she was standing in front of a rock. The researcher waited and waited, then finally said: “Isn’t she going to talk to me?”

The intermediary replied: “She’s talking to her sister.”

“But it’s a rock,” said the researcher.

“So?” said the intermediary.

In Brazil, there’s a rocky mountain near the stretch of the Rio Doce affected by the burst mining tailings dam.⁷ The Krenak village is on the left bank of this river, about thirteen kilometres from Resplendor, in Minas Gerais, but not far from the border with Espírito Santo. This part of the river is flanked on the right by a range of mountains. I learned that those mountains have a name — Takukrak — and a personality. Early in the morning, down in the village, the people look up at the mountain to see if it’s going to be a good day or whether it would be best to stay inside. They can read this from the mountain’s mien. If the mountain looks grumpy, they take extra care. When the mountain wakes up splendid, beautiful, and all done up with fluffy white clouds drifting around its peak, the villagers say: “Today we can throw a party, dance, fish, do whatever we like. It’s all good.”

Just like the Hopi Elder who was talking to her sister, the rock, a lot of folks converse with the mountains. In Ecuador, Colombia, and some regions of the Andes, you can find places where mountains pair-bond and form families. You’ve the mother, father, and their children, and they interact amongst themselves. The people who live in these valleys organize parties for the mountains, offer them food and gifts, and receive gifts in return.

Why do such stories not excite us anymore? Why are they being forgotten and erased in favour of a superficial globalized narrative that wants to herd us all under a hegemonic history?

The Maasai, in Kenya, entered into conflict with the colonial administration because the English, who ruled Kenya as a protectorate from 1895 to 1963, wanted to turn their mountain into a park. The tribe revolted against this apparently banal idea, quite common in other parts of the world, of turning sacred sites into parks. Personally, I think what starts as a park ends up as a *parking lot*. They’ve got to find somewhere to park the endless stream of cars they produce out there.

It's abuse dressed up as reason. While humanity is cut off from its spiritual home, a bunch of savvy corporations takes over the earth. We, humanity, are going to end up living in artificial environments produced by the very same corporations that devoured all the forests, rivers, and mountains. They keep turning out all this junk, integrated into super-interesting kits of TV, internet, video games, social media, just to keep us in the bubble, alienated from everything, and, ideally, popping heaps of medication, because they keep coming up with that too. So it's a steady stream of new toys and new pills to keep us entertained.

Just so you don't go thinking I'm inventing another myth — that of the corporate monster — he's already got a name, address, and even a bank account. And what an account it is! He owns the world's money and is raking in more by the minute, with new malls popping up everywhere. He propagates the same model of progress we're encouraged to embrace as "well-being." The world's major centres, its metropolises, are carbon copies of one another. If you visit Tokyo, Berlin, New York, Lisbon, or São Paulo, you'll see the same delight in erecting incredible high-rises with ultra-smart panoramic elevators, fast as spacecraft ... It's like you've been sucked into a Flash Gordon movie.

In the meantime, humanity is being extricated from this organism we call Earth. The idea that we, humanity, should peel ourselves off the earth to live in a civilizing abstraction is absurd. The notion suppresses all diversity, denies the plurality of forms of life, of existence and habits. It serves up a one-size-fits-all menu, dress code, and, if possible, language.

For UNESCO, 2019 was the International Year of Indigenous Languages. But we know all too well that every single year, or half a year, another of these mother tongues, these original native languages spoken by small, forgotten fringe groups, becomes extinct. The few who still insist on remaining embedded in the land are those who were forgotten on the fringes, brushed to the riverbanks and shorelines of Africa, Asia, or Latin America. They're the riverine communities, the Amerindians, Quilombolas, Aborigines — in a word, "sub-humanity," those not even on the Humanity Club waiting list, because they live a life that is, shall we say, *romantic*. But there is a more savage, rustic, organic layer of these subhumans who cannot be torn away from the earth. It's almost as if they want to eat the earth, suckle from the

earth, sleep wrapped up in the earth, and their organicity, their “sub-humanity,” rankles us to such an extent that the corporations have been working overtime to create new mechanisms capable of separating these babes from their mother. “Let’s split this stuff up, people and earth. It’s no place for people; people are trouble. Especially people who aren’t versed in the art of dominating this natural resource called Earth.” Natural resource for who? Sustainable development for what? What exactly do we need to sustain? Because we’re certainly not sustaining life on Earth.

What is being done to our rivers, forests, and landscapes? We get so disturbed by the regional chaos we live in, and so furious over the lack of political policy, that we can’t see what really matters to people, collectives, and communities in their ecologies. To paraphrase the Portuguese legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, knowledge ecology should be an integral part of our everyday experience, inspiring our choices about where we want to live and the experience we want as a community.⁸ We need to be critical of this plasmatic idea of a homogeneous humanity that has long replaced what we once called citizenship. The former president of Uruguay and left-wing revolutionary José Mujica said that we have transformed people into consumers, not citizens. Our children, from a tender age, are taught how to be customers and clients. And no one is treated better than a consumer. Such is the adulation that they grow up to become drooling imbeciles.

So what’s the point in being a citizen? Why have civic duty, alterity, or a critical, conscious bearing in the world? Why bother being Greta Thunberg when you can be a consumer? It’s an idea that dispenses with the experience of living in a world full of meaning, on a platform for different cosmovisions.⁹ Most of us have lost that romantic idea of citizenship, and the club will do what it can to neutralize, through appropriation, the few who, like Greta Thunberg, still try to nurture that idea. And it’ll be able to do it, because they are a tribe even smaller than the Amerindians, and look what it did to us. Our reserve, the Krenak reserve, was created in the 1920s basically to function as a container, and they stuffed us inside it. It confines us. We’re shut in there and kept out of the way. We are refugees in our own land, and we can’t even use

the water anymore, because the river is in a coma (since the mining dam catastrophe). They have to deliver our water to us in trucks.

The Brazilian Indigenous leader and Yanomami Shaman Davi Kopenawa spent twenty years talking with the French anthropologist Bruce Albert, and the result was a fantastic book called *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. The work has the power to show us, the denizens of this world in demise, how it is still possible for a group of cultures and peoples to inhabit a cosmovision, dwell somewhere in this world we share, and to do so in such a special way that everything acquires meaning. People can live in the spirit of the forest — with the forest and in the forest. I'm not talking about the film *Avatar*, but about the lives of twenty-odd thousand people — some of whom I know — who inhabit the Yanomami homeland on the Brazil-Venezuela border. This territory is being destroyed by roving prospectors and threatened by the mining industry and by the perverse corporations I mentioned before, which have no tolerance for our kind of cosmos — for the imaginative capacity and existence of a people like the Yanomami.

The times we're living in are expert at creating absences: sapping the meaning of life from society and the meaning of experience from life. This absence of meaning generates stringent intolerance toward anyone still capable of taking pleasure from simply being alive, from dancing, from singing. There's still a whole constellation of little groups of people who dance, sing, make it rain. The kind of zombie humanity we're being asked to join can't bear so much pleasure, so much fruition in life. So they holler on about the end of the world in the hope of making us give up on our dreams.

How did the Indigenous peoples in Brazil deal with colonization, which wanted to put an end to their world? What strategies did they use to get through that nightmare and make it to the twenty-first century still demanding their rights and challenging the choirs of the content? I studied the manoeuvres my forebears used, and I learned from them, from the creativity and poetry that inspired the resistance of these tribes. Civilization called them "savages" and waged endless war in a bid to transform them into fine, upstanding members of the Humanity Club. They are not considered individuals, but "collective people" that can transmit the colonial worldview to future generations over time.

Sometimes, anthropologists limit the understanding of this experience of resistance, which is not exclusively a cultural one, through persistence. But I draw from the ongoing resistance of these peoples, who harbour a deeply entrenched memory of the earth, what the Uruguayan journalist and novelist Eduardo Galeano called the “Memory of Fire.” In his Memory of Fire trilogy and in his seminal work of history, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, he shows how the peoples of the Caribbean, Central America, Guatemala, the Andes, and the rest of South America were fully aware of the error of “civilization.” The Bible, the cross, a college or two, some universities, the highway, the railway — were they really worth the mining companies, the logging firms, the cattle ranchers, and the gold prospectors that went with them?

There are hundreds of narratives told by Indigenous peoples who are still alive, who still tell tales, sing, travel, talk, and teach us more than this humanity cares to learn. We’re not the only interesting people in this world; we’re just part of the whole. Perhaps knowing that can put a dent in the vanity of the humanity we claim to be, and reduce the lack of reverence we show toward our fellow travellers on this cosmic journey.

In 2018, on the cusp of being assailed by a new political establishment in Brazil,¹⁰ people asked me: “What are the Indians going to do in the face of all this?”

I said: “The Indians have been holding out for over five hundred years now. I’m more worried about the whites, and what they’re going to do to get out of this one.”

We have been able to resist because we expanded our subjectivity, refusing to accept the idea that we’re all the same. There are still upwards of 250 ethnicities in Brazil, and they speak over 150 languages and dialects.

Our friend Eduardo Viveiros de Castro likes to provoke people with the Amazonian view that humans are not the only interesting creatures that have perspectives on existence. So many other animals do too. We’re not alone in that.

My main reason for postponing the end of the world is so we’ve always got time for one more story. If we can make time for that, then we’ll be forever putting off the world’s demise.

It's important to live the experience of our circulation in the world, not metaphorically, but as friction, and to be able to depend on one another. It's a sort of *tai chi chuan*. When you feel the sky is caving in on you, just give it a push and breathe.

Singing, dancing, and experiencing the magic of hanging the sky¹¹ are shared by many traditions. Hanging the sky broadens our horizons; not in a prospective sense, but existentially. It enriches our subjectivities (our dreams and imaginations), which are precisely what the times we live in want to consume, hijack, exploit as merchandise. If there is such a hunger to consume nature, there is a similar hankering to gobble up subjectivities — our subjectivities. So let's live them with all the freedom we can generate; let's not put them on a supermarket shelf. And seeing as nature is being attacked in so indefensible a manner, at least let's keep our subjectivities alive, our visions, our poetics of existence. We are definitely not the same, and it's wonderful to know that each of us is as different from the other as one constellation is from the next. The fact that we can share this space, that we are travelling together, does not mean we are the same; rather that we are capable of attracting one another precisely because of our differences, and that it's those differences that ought to plot our odyssey. It's a real diversity we need, not an ersatz humanity.

³ Pedro Álvares Cabral, a Portuguese courtier, military man, and explorer, discovered Brazil in 1500 and claimed it for Portugal. Originally sent on an expedition to the West Indies, Cabral's fleet struck out far to the west off the coast of Africa and ended up sighting land at what is now Bahia, Brazil, coming ashore in April. They called the Brazilian natives "Indians," which was the same term used for the Indigenous tribes in the Indies at the time. Cabral's "discovery" led to 330 years of Portuguese colonization, during which an estimated 2.2 million Indigenous Brazilians, or 90 percent of the original population, perished through war, slavery, and disease. — Trans.

4 Every year the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities, founded in 1982 to represent capital cities from the Iberian Peninsula, Central and South America, Mexico, and the countries that have received their diasporas, elects one of its member cities the Ibero-American Capital of Culture. Cities submit proposals three years in advance, and the winning capital arranges a program of cultural events showcasing the best it has to offer in the fields of the arts, culture, and hospitality. — Trans.

5 De Castro's talk was about the war being waged on Indigenous populations in Brazil — Brazilians against their will — by an “agro-industrial bourgeoisie” who consider themselves owners of the nation and its land. The original Indigenous peoples, he says, “saw fall upon their heads a ‘Fatherland’ that they did not ask for, and which only brought them death, disease, humiliation, slavery, and dispossession,” and continues to do so, despite the paper protections written into the Federal Constitution (1988). But not only did the “naked Indians” not want the Fatherland, that Fatherland never wanted them either and always thought they would somehow “disappear, and the faster the better.” — Trans.

6 The Serra do Espinhaço Biosphere Reserve was designated by UNESCO in 2005. This biodiversity-rich mountain range runs along the Atlantic plains of Minas Gerais and Bahia states, and it houses, among other key features, the headwaters of the Doce River, on which the Krenak and many other traditional populations depend. Ailton Krenak, then president of the France Libertés Brasil Foundation, was instrumental in having the area declared a biosphere reserve. — Trans.

7 On November 5, 2015, a burst iron tailings dam operated by Samarco Mineração SA, a joint venture between Brazil's Vale and the British-Australian conglomerate BHP Hilton, unleashed 43.7 million cubic metres of highly toxic mud into the Doce River, killing nineteen people and devastating the village of Bento Rodrigues. The spill, which contained heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury, and lead, polluted 668 kilometres

of watercourses as it rushed seaward, finally reaching the Atlantic Ocean seventeen days later, at Espírito Santo. The effort to recuperate the river is expected to take anywhere from thirteen to fifteen years. — Trans.

8 According to de Sousa Santos, “The epistemic diversity of the world is potentially infinite. There is no ignorance or knowledge in general. All ignorance is ignorant of a certain knowledge, and all knowledge is the overcoming of a particular ignorance. There are no complete knowledges.” As such, we need to replace the present-day “monoculture” of Western scientific thinking, which attempts to homogenize “valid” knowledge, with an “ecology of knowledge” that “opens up the dominant canon” and affords “an equality of opportunities to different kinds of knowledge.” Source: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, introduction to *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (New York: Verso Books, 2008). — Trans.

9 “Cosmovision” refers to any particular way of viewing the world or understanding the universe, its origins, and the forces controlling it. — Trans.

10 Bolsonaro is on Congressional record questioning why “stinky Indians who don’t speak our language and have no education” should possess 12 percent of Brazilian territory (April 2004; see References for link to transcript). On February 11, 2020, he described the demarcation of Indigenous Territories as “abusive” and a “veritable industry.” <https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/3540-Bolsonaro> — Trans.

11 In *The Falling Sky*, Davi Kopenawa recounts the Yanomami legend of how Omama, the creator and father of the Yanomami, hung the sky. Initially, he propped the sky up on a single rock, but that wasn’t firm enough, and the sky fell down, killing many. So he hung it up again, this time propped on more rocks, so it would hold steady. The Yanomami believe the sky will fall again only when there are no more Yanomami to keep the earth and

sky in balance. But in his book, Kopenawa says we are seeing signs of a second fall, as humankind is polluting the rivers, felling the forests, and mining out the ores and minerals that keep the earth strong and able to sustain the rocks that hold up the sky. — Trans.

**OF DREAMS
AND THE EARTH**

FROM THE NORTHEAST to the eastern border of Minas Gerais, where the Doce River flows through the Krenak Indigenous reserve, and in the Amazon, where Brazil meets Peru and Bolivia along the Upper Negro River, in all of these places our Indigenous families are experiencing moments of great tension in their political relations with the Brazilian state.

This tension is nothing new, but it has worsened because of recent political changes that have severely affected Indigenous communities. For decades now, we have been pressing the government to honour its constitutional pledge to protect the rights of our peoples over the ancestral territories that the prevailing legal framework calls “homelands.”

I don’t know how familiar the reader is with the language used to describe the relationship between the Indigenous peoples and their ancestral lands, or the functions the Brazilian state has ascribed to these territories down through its history. The truth is, since colonial times, the issue of what to do with the remaining tribal pockets that survived the first tragic encounters between the European conquistadores and the tribes inhabiting what we now reductively call “Indigenous homelands” led to a terribly wrong-headed relationship between the state and these communities.

Of course, we have since ceased to be a colony and become the Brazilian state, and our tribes have made it into the twenty-first century, when most predictions said we could never survive the occupation of our territories, at least not in any autonomously organized and self-sustaining form. It may not have materialized, but that gloomy prognosis was not unwarranted, given the way the state machine works to undermine our communities and subsume us into wider Brazilian society.

The political bind our surviving communities have found themselves in is to have to fight for the last remaining swaths of land where nature still prospers, where our needs for food and a home can be met, and where our societies, however small, can make their own way in the world, without excessive reliance on the state.

The Doce River, which we, the Krenak Nation, call Watu — our grandfather — is a person, not a resource, as the economists like to call him. He is not something you can own or appropriate; he is part of our construction as a collective society that dwells in a specific place into which we have been gradually corralled by the government, forcing us to live and breed in bubbles subject to increasingly crippling external pressure.¹²

Taking the Krenak as an example in speaking about the relationship between the Brazilian state and the Indigenous societies came to us as an inspiration, a relatable way to reach those who perhaps don't know how Brazil actually treats these communities — an estimated nine hundred thousand individuals across 250 tribes, a population far smaller than found in many Brazilian cities.

What lies at the root of the nation's incapacity to embrace its Indigenous peoples — who have seen ways of life they have maintained for thousands of years relentlessly and inhumanely attacked by ferocious colonial attitudes that endure to this very day — is the idea that the tribes ought to be contributing to the success of modernity's nature-depleting project, just like everybody else. Watu, the river that has nurtured and nourished our life along a six-hundred-kilometre stretch of the Doce River, from Minas Gerais to Espírito Santo, finds itself today sunk under toxic mud from a burst tailings dam that orphaned our tribes and plunged the river into a coma. It's been a year and a half since this crime — *accident* just doesn't cut it — sent our lives into a tailspin and conjured a real end-of-the-world scenario.

Here, the intention is to broach the impact that we, humanity, are having on the living organism that is the earth, which some cultures still consider to be our mother and provider, not only in terms of subsistence and sustenance, but also transcendently, as the wellspring of all meaning in our existence. In many places today we have become so uprooted from our homelands that we cross oceans as if we were merely popping across the street. We give little thought to making continent-size journeys. While technological

advancements mean we can travel easily between places, moving around the planet in vast numbers and at incredible speeds, this has also stripped our journeys of real significance.

We feel today as though we've been cut adrift in a cosmos devoid of meaning and shorn of any shared ethic. It weighs upon our lives, and at every turn we are reminded of the consequences of these choices. If we could only heed some vision beyond the blindness that has descended upon the world, perhaps it would open our minds to some form of cooperation among peoples, not so we can save others, but so can save ourselves. For the last thirty years, I have built an extensive contact network so as to spread the word to other peoples and governments about the realities we are facing in Brazil, and my goal was always to trigger bonds of solidarity with other Indigenous peoples.

What I have learned over these decades is that we all need to wake up, because whereas before it was just us, the Indigenous peoples, who were facing a loss of meaning in our lives, today everyone is at risk, without exception. As our planet Earth teeters on the verge of collapse beneath our impossible weight, none of us can ignore this reality. As the Yanomami Chief Davi Kopenawa says, the world today believes that everything is merchandise, and it projects upon those goods the full range of its experience. Everything must be product, resource, commodity. This tragedy has been avoided in some places, where politics — political power, political choice — has provided temporary safe havens for communities that, though already drained of any real sense of shared space, are still protected, for want of a better word, by an apparatus that is becoming increasingly dependent on sucking the life out of our forests, rivers, and mountains. An apparatus, in short, that puts us in a disastrous position where it seems the only way we can survive is at the expense of all other forms of life.

The conclusion or understanding that we are living in a time that can only be identified as the Anthropocene ought to set alarm bells ringing in our minds. If we're leaving such a deep mark on the earth that it defines an epoch — a mark that runs so deep it may well outlast us, given how quickly we are depleting the resources that allowed us to prosper and feel at home — it's because we are once again faced with that same bind. We are excluding all local forms of organization that are not integrated into the world of merchandise, thus threatening with extinction all other ways of life — at least those we used to recognize as such, to which we ascribed some co-

responsibility and respect for shared spaces and fellow beings, not just this *single* humanity, an abstraction we've allowed ourselves to create to the exclusion of all other creatures. This humanity refuses to recognize that the river, now in a coma, is also our grandfather; that the mountains mined in Africa or South America and transformed into merchandise elsewhere are also the grandfather, grandmother, mother, brother of some other constellation of human beings that want to go on sharing the communal home we call Earth.

The name *Krenak* is formed by two words: *kre*, which means "head," and *nak*, which means "land." *Krenak* is the legacy of our forebears, the memory of our origins, which we identify as our "headland," as a humanity that cannot understand itself without this connection, this deep-set communion with the earth. Not the earth in the sense of a property, but as the place we share and from which we, the *Krenak*, feel increasingly disconnected. I'm speaking of the earth as this place that has always been sacred to us, but which our neighbours are ashamed to admit could ever be seen in such terms. When we say that our river is sacred, the response is always the same: "That's just their folklore." When we say that the mountain is telling us it is going to rain and that today will be a prosperous day, they say: "Mountains are just mountains. They don't tell us anything."

When we depersonalize the river, the mountain, when we strip them of their meaning — an attribute we hold to be the preserve of the human being — we relegate these places to the level of mere resources for industry and extractivism. The result of our divorce from our integrations and interactions with Mother Earth is that she has left us orphans — not just those termed, to a greater or lesser degree, Indigenous peoples, Natives, Amerindians, but everyone. I hope that the creative encounters we still manage to muster can nourish our practice, our action, and give us the courage to step back from this negation of life and toward a commitment to it, wherever it and we may be. I want to see us move beyond our incapacities to extend that vision to places beyond those we call home, and not only the vision, but forms of sociability and organization from which a large part of this human community is excluded; those who burn up the earth's energies just to feed their demand for merchandise, comfort, and consumption.

How can we find a point of contact between these two worlds, which share the same origin but have drifted so far apart that today we have, at one

extreme, those who need a river in order to live, and, at the other, those who consume rivers as mere resources? Regarding this notion of “resource” attributed to a mountain, a river, a forest, where can we possibly find this intersection between our opposing visions that might save us from this state of blindness toward one another?

When I said I was going to speak of dreams and the earth, what I had in mind was a place and a practice that is perceived in so many different cultures, by so many different peoples, not merely as part of the daily experience of sleeping and dreaming, but as the disciplined exercise of deriving guidance for our actions in the waking world from the dreams that visit us in our slumber.

For some people, to dream is to step outside of reality, relinquish the practical meaning of life. For others, however, there is no meaning to life unless informed by dreams, the place we go in search of songs, cures, inspiration, and even solutions to practical problems that befuddle and elude us in the daytime, but which are laid out in all their possibilities in the realm of dream. I was very content this afternoon when more than one colleague mentioned the institution of dreaming, not as mere oneiric experience, but as a discipline related to our formation, to our cosmovision, to the traditions of different peoples who approach dreams as a path toward learning, self-knowledge, and awareness of life, and the application of that knowledge in our interaction with the world and other people.

[12](#) According to the National Indian Foundation, FUNAI, Brazil currently has 117 million hectares of Traditionally Occupied Indigenous Territories, with a further million in the process of regularization, and somewhere in the region of ninety thousand hectares of Indigenous reserves (often lands donated for this purpose). These territories are constantly encroached upon and often violently invaded by illegal logging, mining, and wildlife extraction operations. — Trans.

**THE HUMANITY
WE THINK WE ARE**

PERHAPS WE'RE TOO conditioned to a certain idea of the human being and a single type of existence. Perhaps breaking that standard would send our minds into collapse, as if we were being swallowed by an abyss. And who says we can't be? Who can say we haven't already been? There was a time when all the continents on the planet we call Earth were joined as one big Pangaea. If we'd looked down on that from the sky back then, the world would have appeared very different indeed. Who knows, maybe when the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first person to journey into space, gazed out the window and said, "The Earth is blue," his description was more ideal than literal. Maybe he was looking through the eye of humanity, and saw what humanity wanted to see. Were we able to stand outside our own experience for a moment, we would probably realize that our perceptions of a great many things resemble more closely what we think about them than what they actually are. The earth has had countless other configurations, many of them without us on it, so why is it that we cling so stubbornly to this idea of the earth as humanity's backyard? The Anthropocene plays such a dominant role in shaping our existence, our collective experience, and our idea of what humanity means. Our adherence to a fixed idea that the globe has always been this way and humanity has always related to it the way it does now is the deepest mark the Anthropocene has left.

This mental configuration is more than an ideology, it's the construction of the collective imaginary — various generations in succession, layers upon layers of desires, projections, visions, whole cycles of life inherited from our ancestors, which we have honed and chiselled into a version we feel really fits our purpose and aspirations. It's as if we've Photoshopped our collective

planetary memory, fusing the ship into the fabric of its crew until they look like one and the same organism. It's like we've settled on a memory that is comfortable and pleasant to us — say, we're snugly suckling at the breast of our prosperous, loving, caring, ample mother, feeding us *forever*. And then, one day, she plucks her nipple from our mouth. We look around wildly, cry because we can't find Mother's breast. There's no sign of that maternal being who has always sated our hunger for life, and it makes us shudder, horrified by this "new world," convinced that it's the end and we're about to fall off the edge of the earth. But, of course, no such tumble comes, and the apocalypse is not nigh. Mom's just shuffled a little where she sits, angling to catch the sunlight. But as we're so used to suckling, so happy doing it, any interruption is nothing short of a catastrophe.

The end of the world might be just that, a brief interruption in a state of ecstasy we can't bear to lose. It seems to me all the artifices we and our ancestors have pursued have had to do with that sensation. And when we graft that sensation onto merchandise, goods, external fare, it materializes in the fruits of our technologies, in the whole apparatus that we have gradually layered over the body of Mother Earth. All the ancient civilizations referred to the earth as Mother, Pacha Mama, Gaia. A perfect, endless goddess, overflowing with grace, beauty, and abundance. Take the Greek goddess of prosperity, with her cornucopia forever brimming with all the earth's bounty ... In other traditions, such as those of China and India, as well as the Americas, in all the ancient cultures the reference is always that of a maternal provider — never the father or any such masculine figure. Every time the image of the father breaks onto the scene, it's always to prey upon, destroy, dominate.

The discomfort generated by modern science, technologies, and the migrations deriving from the so-called "mass revolutions" was never local, never pooled in any one region. On the contrary, it split the world down the middle, as exemplified by the Cold War in the twentieth century, when we had one half of humanity on one side of the wall, and the other half on the other side, seized by fear and tension and ready to punch in the launch codes at any moment. The end of the world is never so close as when you have worlds on either side of a divide, each trying to guess what the other's doing. *That* is an

abyss; *that* is a fall. So the question we need to ask is: Why are we so afraid of falling when fall is all we've ever done?

We've fallen to different degrees and in different places across the planet. But we're still terrified of what will happen when the next topple comes. Why do we hate the sensation of falling? It happens that's all we've been doing of late. Falling, falling, falling. So why are we so upset over it now? We feel insecure, paranoid even, because all the other outcomes we can see require the implosion of the house we inherited but live in fear of losing. Let's put our creative and critical capacity to use making some colourful parachutes to slow the fall, turn it into something exciting and edifying — after all, we like nothing more than fun and games, enjoying our time on this earth. So we've got to stop trying to dodge our vocation for falling and, instead of spinning yet more parables, accept the basic truth and stop deluding ourselves with our technical wizardry. In fact, science is dogged end to end by this thing called technology.

It's been a long time since there was anyone who really thought with the freedom of what we've learned to call a scientist. There are no more scientists. Everyone capable of innovating is swallowed up by the thing-making machine, turning out more merchandise. Before these people can make a contribution in any real sense toward poking open a window of meaning in our stifling fear of being denied the mother's breast, along comes some artificial apparatus to cause us even more grief. It's as if all discoveries were preconditioned to make us distrust all discoveries, certain they're out to deceive us. We know that scientific discoveries, cures for this and that, are a cinch. The laboratories create markets just to fill them with their breakthroughs and keep the wheel turning. And it's not a wheel that opens up new horizons and brave new worlds, but the same world, one that reproduces our experience of loss of liberty, loss of what we call innocence, in the sense of something simply being good, with no other goal beyond that. Goalless delight. Suckling without fear, without guilt, without design. We are living in a world where we have to keep explaining what we are suckling for. Our world has transformed into a factory for consuming innocence, and it is equipped and fine-tuned to ensure that none of it remains anywhere on the face of the earth.

Where do we go to design parachutes? We go to that place beyond this hard earth: the land of dreams. Not of dreams as we usually speak of them when we wake up from a nap, or the kind we banalize in the sense of "my dream job" or

“my dream car.” I mean dreams as the transcendental experience in which the human chrysalis cracks open onto unlimited new visions of life. Perhaps it’s another word for what we generally call “nature.” But, in fact, it has no name as such, because we can only name what we know. The dream of which I speak is the experience of those initiated into the tradition of dreaming. Just as you go to school to learn something — a subject, a meditation, a dance — you can learn this too, earn initiation into this world of dream. Some Shamans and magicians dwell in these realms, or can visit them—places of connection with the shared world. It’s not a parallel world, but the world in another register, another potency.

When people speak of imagining a new possible world, it’s in the sense of rearranging relations and spaces, introducing new understandings of what we recognize as nature, as if we were not nature ourselves. In truth, all they are invoking are the same old ways people have always had of coexisting with the metaphor of nature, which they created for their own consumption anyway. All other human beings who fall outside of the established “we” can be eaten, beaten, broken, packed off someplace else. The state of the world we are living through today is the very same one our recent forebears ordered for us.

In fact, we spend our lives complaining, but the world we have was made to order. It arrived gift-wrapped and labelled “non-returnable once opened.” We’ve been waiting two hundred, three hundred years for just this world, and now all these people are moping and moaning: “This is the world they lump us with? *This?*” What sort of world are you boxing and wrapping for future generations? You keep talking about another world, but have you asked the generations of tomorrow if the world you’re building is the world they want? Most of us won’t be here when the package arrives. It’s your great-grandchildren and grandchildren, your elderly sons and daughters, who will have to sign for it. If each of us were to imagine a world, there’d be billions of worlds and they’d be delivered to specification in billions of places. But what world, and what mode of delivery, are you asking for? There’s something deeply insane about the way we gather to grouse about the world our ancestors envisioned for us; we are more than a little bratty in our contention that, if it had been up to us, we’d have done a far better job.

We ought to recognize nature as an immense multitude of forms, each and every piece of ourselves included, for we, too, are part of the whole: 70 percent

water, and a host of other minerals. We created this abstract idea that humankind is the measure of things, and we go out into the world like so many little steamrollers, safe in the general assurance that we belong to one big humanity for whom the world was made, and that we are therefore entitled to stomp around taking whatever we want. Engagement with any other possible mindset means hearing, feeling, smelling, inhaling, and exhaling layers of all the stuff that is not “us” and so must be “nature,” but which isn’t quite nature because it’s too much like us. There’s something quasi-human about these layers, something we recognize, but which is disappearing from the earth, being exterminated from the interface of totally-human humans. These quasi-humans are a motley crew in their thousands who insist on declining to join this dance of civilization, technology, and planetary control. And as their dance is a strange one, it has to be stopped, and the dancers eradicated through epidemics, poverty, starvation, and violence.

As our intention here is to look at the Anthropocene as an event that brought into contact worlds sequestered into this pre-existing nucleus of civilization — during the cycle of navigations that set sail from Europe bound for Asia, Africa, and America — it’s important to recall that most of those worlds vanished without their disappearance being seen as an elimination. Simple contagion through contact with people from *over here* was enough to make most of the population *over there* succumb to a phenomenon called epidemia, with thousands upon thousands of people killed by illness. A European adventurer arriving on a tropical beach left a trail of death in his wake, and he did so without knowing he was a walking plague, a two-legged weapon of mass destruction, an angel of the apocalypse. He had no idea, nor did his victims.

For those visited by these wayfarers, the world ended in the sixteenth century. I’m not exonerating anyone from blame, or relativizing the gravity and brutality of the machine that drove the European conquests. I’m merely pointing out that the events that ensued were the great disaster of that time, much as the conjuncture of factors labelled the Anthropocene by a select few is the disaster of ours. For most of us, however, that abyss goes by other names — social chaos, generalized misgovernment, loss of quality of life, degraded relationships — and it’s swallowing us whole.

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“Of Dreams and the Earth” was a lecture given at the Teatro Maria Matos in Lisbon on May 6, 2017, and transcribed by Joëlle Ghazarian.

“The Humanity We Think We Are” is a text based on an interview Ailton Krenak gave to Rita Natálio and Pedro Neves Marques in Lisbon in May 2017, transcribed and edited by Marta Lança.



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AILTON KRENAK was born in Minas Gerais, Brazil, in the Krenak homelands along the Doce River, a region where destructive mining operations have severely affected the ecology. A socio-environmental activist and campaigner for Indigenous rights, he organized the Alliance of Forest Peoples, which unites riverine and Indigenous communities throughout the Amazon. He has consistently been one of the best-known campaigners in the movement set in motion by the Indigenous Awakening in the 1970s and was a key figure in the formation of the Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI), bringing together 180 different Indigenous groups across the country in a unified front to push for their rights. In his capacity as a journalist, producing videos and making television appearances, he has pursued an educational and environmental agenda. His struggles in the 1970s and 1980s were instrumental in the inclusion of Chapter VIII of the Brazilian Constitution (1988), which guaranteed Indigenous rights to ancestral homelands and traditional cultures — on paper, at least. He was co-author of the UNESCO proposal that led to the creation of the Serra do Espinhaço Biosphere Reserve in 2005, and remains a member of its managing committee. He was awarded the Order of Cultural Merit by the president of the Republic in 2016, and holds an honorary doctorate from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais. He is the author of four books, including *A vida não é útil (Life Is Not Useful)*, the follow-up to *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, and he was recently featured in the Netflix documentary series *Guerras do Brasil.doc (Wars of Brazil)*.

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HOUSE OF ANANSI PRESS was founded in 1967 with a mandate to publish Canadian-authored books, a mandate that continues to this day even as the list has branched out to include internationally acclaimed thinkers and writers. The press immediately gained attention for significant titles by notable writers such as Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, George Grant, and Northrop Frye. Since then, Anansi's commitment to finding, publishing and promoting challenging, excellent writing has won it tremendous acclaim and solid staying power. Today Anansi is Canada's pre-eminent independent press, and home to nationally and internationally bestselling and acclaimed authors such as Gil Adamson, Margaret Atwood, Ken Babstock, Peter Behrens, Rawi Hage, Misha Glenny, Jim Harrison, A. L. Kennedy, Pasha Malla, Lisa Moore, A. F. Moritz, Eric Soblin, Karen Solie, and Ronald Wright. Anansi is also proud to publish the award-winning nonfiction series The CBC Massey Lectures. In 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011 Anansi was honoured by the Canadian Booksellers Association as "Publisher of the Year.