



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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Rubelis | 2016 | Yuran Henrique (courtesy of the artist)



## IN SPITE OF YOU

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*In spite of you  
Tomorrow will be  
Another day*

The Chico Buarque song of my title was written during the long years of dictatorship in Brazil, between the military coup of 1964 and the “Diretas já” [Rights Now] movement and its demand for universal free elections. The song plays with the ambiguity between a dissimulated dialogue of scorned love for an authoritarian woman and a dialogue with dictatorship. Its ambiguity allowed it to pass through the censors. But it was quickly banned with the violence that dictatorships always preserve for those who oppose them. Since Chico Buarque released his song many Brazilians have had unprecedented access to education, culture and health thanks to the governments of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and, above all, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff. Yet, thinking with his music today, we can see that the dialogue the song stages is one that many Brazilians continue to have – whether through individual or collective interlocutors – with the deeply hierarchical, unequal, and authoritarian society they live in (1).

It would be wonderful not to have to refer to this song to talk about Brazil today. The country is sunk deep in an unreal, insane reality. The colonial structure through which Brazil was formed is re-crystallizing. The visceral hatred of the powerful for the most vulnerable, as well as for culture and its various forms of expression, is once again hardening. The dialogue attempted by Chico Buarque with the generals in the 1970s, during the dictatorship, would today have an obvious target. *In spite of...* the current situation in Brazil, profound cultural events are making us appreciate the concrete emergence of the other Brazil, that was always cast outside the national discourse. Indigenous people, hidden and oppressed deep in the landscape. The *favelado*, at once a source of labour power and vulnerable to a social hierarchy that crushes and invisibilizes. Today, these are more than just political bodies. They account for their situation with their own voices. They create their own language with the instruments given them by education. Their life experiences educate and interest everyone. Unforeseen characters appear on stage, in books and in films bringing their own language, knowledge, space, anger, struggle, vulnerability and dreams.

The emergence of this Brazil in places never before frequented by its denizens, with the tools which they have only recently had access to, infuriates the Brazilian colonial elite. But as Chico Buarque's song evoked, tomorrow came in the years that separate us from the dictatorship, and many other Brazilians have found their voices. I am speaking in particular of the recent books *O sol na cabeça* [The sun in my head] (Companhia das Letras, 2019), by Geovani Martins, brought up in the favelas of Rocinha and Barreira do Vasco and now living in Vidigal in the south zone of Rio de Janeiro, and of *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* [Ideas for postponing the end of the world], (Companhia das Letras, 2019), by Ailton Krenak, the indigenous leader who in 1987 protested in the Constitutional Assembly, his face painted with black genipap ink (*Jenipa americana*). Ailton Krenak demands the defence of indigenous rights and has long spoken of the fatal imbalance between humans and nature, including long before today's warnings of climate crisis. Both, with a profound sense of the present moment, evoke a centuries-old subalternization, and establish the setting for a non-subaltern dialogue.

### ***Ideas for postponing the end of the world and The sun in my head***

During the celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “discovery” of Brazil, Ailton Krenak was invited to participate in the commemorations in Portugal. But he argued that there was nothing to commemorate:

This is a Portuguese party. You are going to celebrate the invasion of my corner of the world. I'm not coming. However, I did not turn it into a feud. I thought: let's see what happens in the future. (Krenak, 2019: 9-10)

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And what happened was that, in 2017, he was invited to participate in a cycle of events dedicated to indigenous questions under the remit of the *Past and Present – Lisbon, Ibero-American capital of culture*, alongside Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who gave a presentation called “The involuntaries of the fatherland”. This cycle of events included a screening of the documentary “Ailton Krenak – The Dream Stone”, produced and directed by Marco Altberg. It was there that Krenak gave the presentation that gave the name to this book, *Ideas for postponing the end of the world*. The first question, put forward with characteristic clarity, and no less complexity, was the following:

How, across two or three thousand years, have we constructed the idea of humanity? Can it be that we did so on the basis of many bad choices that have justified the use of violence? (Krenak, 2019: 10-11)

The arguments are various, but they coincide on a single point: the rupture in the relationship between the human being and nature, understood as if it was a binary opposite and not an integrated and integral part of our humanity. This binary, generated by capitalism and the associated economic and political system of colonialism which together today drive extractivist politics, has led to the devouring of the Earth and the division between humanity and its natural setting. The author argues that those who today maintain this enmeshed relationship are forgotten minorities:

On the edges of the planet, the banks of the rivers, the seashores, in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They are *caíçaras*, quilombos, aboriginal and indigenous peoples – sub-humanity. Because there is a humanity that we might call *rich*. There is a route that is brute, rustic, organic, a sub-humanity, a people stuck to the earth” (Krenak, 2019: 21-22)

Or rather, they are those who still have not been transformed into pure consumers. In the vision of this “rich humanity”, the others stay in the landscape, outside of this world.

Thus, the proposal for *postponing the end of the world* is apparently simple: tell another history. That in itself contains a double challenge: to find listening spaces (2) and make ourselves available to understand other forms of knowledge and resistance that see the West’s civilizing process as a great civilizational mistake or as a long process of the acceleration towards the “end of the world”. They are histories of deep memory of the earth being successively “robbed”; histories of the resistance of men and women who have for 500 years reinvented a country paradoxically incapable of “welcoming its original inhabitants” (p.41). They are histories that enrich our subjectivities, the matter that our time still wants to consume (p.32) and that predispose us to remake our relation with the planet as our common home. A relation that takes up again a *desire to live in common* (3) in which the earth is not external to us, but of which humanity is a part. Perhaps thus, after centuries of accelerating towards the end of the world, we will be able to find the necessarily precarious equilibrium and meet the profound desire to postpone it. *Ideas for postponing the end of the world* is not a fable. It is a profoundly lucid parable about today’s world in which we discover ourselves to be orphans in our shared home. It is this imminent moment of becoming orphans that creates the space to listen. And it as orphans that we find interest in the history of memories of the Earth.

*The sun in my head*, by Geovani Martins, speaks to us from different territories, people and languages. It speaks to us of people who, in Ailton Krenak’s vision, were taken from their lands by migratory

processes linked to poverty and the lack of development. They went to live on the edges of big cities, where they found work. In Geovani Martins' reading, born and living in Rio's favelas, this was the destiny from which he needed to escape – to serve, to serve others and to be part of what the Brazilian oligarchic elites see as an urban sub-humanity.

Everything was so good that I wanted to carry on working forever, thinking it all through at home. When I got to the apartments, I picked up the bucket that I used to collect the tennis balls and stepped on to the court. I felt the sun heating the top of my head. I felt the obligation to serve these people who never looked me in the face. In those hours I wanted never to depend on anyone else again in my life. (Martins, 2019: 100)

*The sun in my head* brings together thirteen stories that take us into the everyday lives, language and subjectivities of young people living in favelas. The territory and the people that move through it are fundamental. Across the 13 stories we understand clearly that the pairs hill/asphalt, favela/house are not dichotomous categories but profoundly dialectically combined, as parts and expressions of that other pair imposed by colonial order – unite/divide. This is not a question of oxymorons, but of a system that is based on the dialectical union of apparent opposites. This is today the foundational configuration of a country in which there was no effective rupture between colony and nation, and in which the image of masters and slaves, which fascinated the imagination of Jean Baptiste Debret, is eternally resuscitated as constitutive of Brazil.

For Geovani Martins the central characters of Brazil are the people of the favela, with their sense of belonging to a territory, with their language and imaginaries, as seen by the young narrator. It is the favela of working mothers and fathers who disappear, of the children of the hills and the drug trade, of the religious folk who go from D. Iara to the evangelicals, of weapons, of the terrors of “first infancy”, of adolescents, school, first jobs and first buys, of lovers and drugs bound up in the everyday of commerce or consumption, of joys, but also of fear and damnation. But it is also the space of the drug dealers, of the “post office” that works at the entrance to the favela, of the militias and the corrupt, violent police who with their weapons, their words and the performative power of their uniform violate the bodies of the favela's vulnerable people. Just as in the literary context of the narration of colonial Luanda's informal urban space in *Luuanda* (1965) by the Angolan writer José Luandina Vieira, in the favela space is threatened by the invasions to which this territory is vulnerable, and by the frontier where everything is negotiated. Risks are created within the community, come from outside – police invasions, for example

– and are found at borders and crossings. Risk lives at the entrance to the hill where the “others” come to get the “services” of the favela, and in the rich city, where the favelados are not citizens, but objects of labour or of potential danger. Everyone seems to be playing a predestined role in a scene in which fear, vulnerability and chance form a circuit from which it is impossible to escape, in territories marked by boundaries of influence and domination linked to the drug trade and social hierarchies.

This is the circuit of survival in a climate of aggression, made up of the solidarities and joys of subalternized communities who are the target of violence and terror. Between an everyday of drugs and errands, of small jobs and reflections, the subjectivities of the characters emerge through situations of desire, work or violence. Feeling seen by the inhabitants of the rich city, they toy with the fear they inspire, and administer the very fear they feel. Thus Geovani Martins returns to everyone the humanity that they all seem to have lost. In the end, everyone is afraid, and a society whose central point of unification is fear destroys itself. The accounts of this self-destruction – environmental, in the case of Ailton Krenak, and social in the case of Geovani Martins – have been calculated many times in Brazil, a country in which, as Geovani Martins said in an interview with the newspaper *Expresso*, the death penalty does not exist, but death sentences are handed down every day (4).

Based on these two living landscapes of a Brazil which excludes the vast majority of its population from citizenship, Geovani Martins and Ailton Krenak ask questions about the possibility of another Brazil in the offing. A Brazil in which, in the era of computers, a young favela resident like him no longer has to write a book like this on a typewriter bought by his mother at a flea market. But this gesture – like that of Ailton Krenak in 1987 in the Constitutional Assembly – reveals to us an irresistible energy. It gives us the confidence to believe in a “community to come”, “in spite of you”, in spite of everything.

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(1) See Lília Moritz Schwarcz, *Sobre o Autoritarismo Brasileiro*, Companhia das Letras, 2019; e Jessé Souza, *A Elite do Atraso: da escravidão à Lava Jato*, Rio de Janeiro: Leya, 2017.

(2) See Lílina Coutinho, “Cuidar de espaços de escuta”, *Jornal Memórias – Público*, Setembro 2019, p. 20.

(3) It is not by chance that the title of this cycle of presentations was *Passado e Presente – Lisboa Capital Ibero-Americana da Cultura* [Past and Present – Lisbon Capital of Ibero-American Culture] and that the book organized by António Pinto Ribeiro was called *O Desejo de Viver em Comem* [The Desire to Live in Common], Lisboa: Tinta-da\_China, 2019, 2 volumes.

(4) Geovani Martins interviewed by Bernardo Mendonça: “Before, my greatest fear was to spend my life serving someone. Now it is to be arrested. I live in a favela, but I am frightened of the police” *Expresso*, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and podcast “[A Beleza das Pequenas Coisas](#)” [The Beauty of Small Things]. The audio edition is by Joana Belez, the jingle is based on original music by Luís Severo, the artwork is by Tiago Miranda.

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