

"We're at the beginning of replanting words": a conversation with Antônio Bispo dos Santos (Nego Bispo)

Interviewers

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The following interview was conducted virtually with Antônio Bispo dos Santos on May 6, 2023. Edgar Rodrigues Barbosa Neto, Natalino Neves da Silva, and Walter Francisco Figueiredo Lowande participated as organizers of the Dossier "Counter-colonial perspectives and anti-racist ecologies in times of planetary catastrophes," the second Dossier published in PerCursos Journal this year, 2023¹.

Interview

Interviewer (Edgar): The dossier in which this interview will be published deals with issues related to what we call "Counter-Colonial Perspectives and Anti-Racist Ecologies in Times of Planetary Catastrophes". There are many words in this title and at least one of them is directly related to what you're thinking. With that in mind, to kick off the interview, we'd like to see how our summary aligns with your thoughts.

The emancipatory struggles carried out by various social movements show that the socio-environmental challenges presented by the contemporary world require onto-epistemological approaches produced mainly from a counter-colonial perspective. In this regard, some of the main demands made by the Black Coalition for Rights during COP 26 address the land rights of traditional populations, the implementation of land titling for quilombola communities, and the development of a zero-deforestation policy and global warming control measures. The event also featured the participation of over forty Brazilian indigenous leaders, mostly women, who advocate for issues such as land demarcation, reduced deforestation in indigenous territories, and environmental justice. Evidence that Earth's biophysical systems are changing irreversibly has been mounting at a dizzying pace in recent years. While there's no doubt today that human activities have led us to conditions unlike those of the Holocene, endangering life on Earth, there's still

¹ Fernanda Cristina de Oliveira e Silva, Elisa Sampaio de Faria, and Aline Domingos Corrêa, together with Antônio Bispo dos Santos, conducted a collective reading of the interview we are now publishing. We thank them for their availability and generosity. We are particularly grateful to Antônio Bispo dos Santos for sharing his words with us, hoping that they have found in this conversation a favorable environment for their continued dissemination.

much debate about the uneven distribution of these effects and what to do about it all. A significant portion of the reading framework guiding this discussion often seems indebted to the same ontological perspective that gave rise to the patriarchal, colonialist, racist, and capitalist worldview responsible for these global disruptions. In this special issue, we aim to gather research or literature reviews addressing these topics, focusing on their real-world impacts, such as racism, biogeophysical changes in specific ecosystems, Afro-diasporic and indigenous cosmologies, and other traditional worldviews. We also welcome theoretical perspectives on describing these phenomena, including Earth System science and intersectionality theory.

Antônio Bispo: When we write about counter-colonization, bio-interaction, organic knowledge, synthetic knowledge, boundaries, borders, cosmophobia, development, and involvement, we do so with multiple intentions. One of them, due to my involvement in the labor movement and political parties, is the need to break away from the same old rhetoric and talking points. What was happening? I was very confused because the rhetoric of the labor unions and the employers sounded quite similar. The labor movement blamed neoliberalism and capitalism, while the employers' movement blamed socialism. It was pretty much the same thing. And they both agreed that democracy was a necessary means, and that education, more than a means, was the solution. They saw eye to eye on many things. I started to wonder: what's all this fuss about? What's all this fuss about everyone agreeing on a set list, when everyone's already on the same page? And this repertoire was extremely violent, very forced. We had to pretend we were comfortable with that repertoire, even though we weren't. For instance, I've never had a boss on the farm. I had a boss when I went to the city, but I didn't like it, so I didn't stay there. So, why should I call myself a worker if my path isn't that of an employee or an employer?

I've always been fond of the word farmer. I think farming is really cool. And then I thought: if I'm bothered by these repertoires, why don't I introduce other repertoires? And so, when it came time to write the book, I remembered to introduce these other

repertoires in what I call the War of Denominations². But then I had a really cool idea. What's that? Now, if I say that capitalists and socialists won't see eye to eye, one of them has to go, or we'll need to build more Berlin Walls. Everyone has to face the world; isolation is bound to happen. So I thought: but they both claim to be human, they're very similar. Could there be a connection? Is there something going on between them? And where might this relationship be? It's possible to find common ground for dialogue with these people, while still respecting others' boundaries. May these words be seeds that grow, but not final verdicts! They sprout, but they don't define us. And that's when those words I just quoted came to me.

I thought biointeraction would be the right term. I believed that biointeraction would be a frontier, a space for dialogue among all peoples, like a germinating word rather than a dominant or determining one. She managed to handle it, but the circumstances really took care of it. And you know very well that one of the times when this connection was most evident was when we met at UFMG³. But then, anti-colonialism also emerged as a powerful concept. And now to address the issue of racism. Anti-racism is a worthwhile discussion, but it's also a very complex one, because I'll say: "You're white" and you'll say: "You're Black". You're white, you're black. How are you? But where are we going to draw the line between black and white, rather than just setting a boundary? A boundary rather than isolation. Why do we have to separate white from black or black from white? So much so that when that young man was killed in the United States, they launched the "Black Lives Matter" campaign. I don't know if you remember, but I used to answer my phone saying "What's up," and then I changed it and said: "Look, it's not just Black lives that matter, all lives matter." So I changed, so much that now I answer the phone saying "cheers". Today I greet people by saying "cheers" because I've come to understand that saying "cheers" brings enthusiasm and a sense of connection. I learned to say "cheers" because every life matters. I'm bringing this up to say that we're setting the agenda, and I've noticed that anti-racism sets a limit, not a boundary.

² Antonio Bispo refers to his book "Colonização, Quilombos: modos e significações" (INCTI, 2015 and 2019).

³ Antônio Bispo dos Santos was one of the instructors for the Quilombola Confluences Against Colonization course offered in 2017 by UFMG's Transversal Training in Traditional Knowledge program.

If you look closely, you'll find diversity in every life. However, colonialism only exists in so-called human lives. For instance, as someone older than you, I've tried a wide variety of mangoes. And mangoes of different species did not fight among themselves. As incredible as it may seem, humans were the ones who colonized mangoes. When you go to the supermarket, you'll be lucky to find more than a couple types of mango. But it wasn't the mangoes that disappeared, they didn't set the limit, it was humans who interfered with life. And so it was with most of the vegetables. We had a variety of each plant species, including bananas, mangoes, cashews, pequi, and everything else - there was diversity in all of them. But humans gradually turned this into a universal approach, a singular method. Colonialism affects more than just humans; it's not limited to human interactions. He touches every life and every experience. That's why countercolonialism is a call from the borderlands.

I think this summary you made is good because it's diverse, not one-dimensional. There are many ways to engage in decolonial practices. Colonialism is indeed one-sided. But anti-colonialism did not. You can decolonize by diversifying your orchard, or in my case, by diversifying my goat herd. We used to have a wide variety of goat breeds, but there's a push to narrow it down to just one. All sheep must have white bodies and black heads, without horns or tails. They're even born with horns, but people go and burn them off and dock their tails. It's like making an exact copy, as if it were cloned. The act of creating diverse sheep - black, white, red, woolly, hairless - is also a form of decolonization. It's about allowing other animal species to thrive, not just the black-headed ones. That's it, discussing anti-racism is valid, everyone discusses what they can handle, but I think counter-colonialism is more borderline and anti-racism is more limiting ⁴.

⁴ In the second revised and expanded edition of their book "Colonização, Quilombos: Modos e Significações" (see note 2), Antônio Bispo dos Santos distinguishes between "limit" and "frontier" as follows: I arrived with you all, walking alongside you, respecting the boundary. This is the issue. Organic knowledge goes hand in hand with synthetic knowledge, respecting boundaries. Organic knowledge reaches the frontier, and the frontier for organic knowledge is a space for dialogue. So, whenever we come across a different perspective, we engage with it openly. If necessary, we'll figure it out. But learning that other knowledge doesn't mean we've lost our own; we've expanded our knowledge. We've struck it rich, and now we're aiming even higher. It's all about keeping up appearances. Synthetic knowledge is different. When he reaches the boundary, he encounters limitations rather than borders, and he struggles to engage with different perspectives. So our knowledge is dialogic, while synthetic

Interviewer (Edgar): I think your mastery of language is reflected in your attention to vocabulary. When you observe that one of the colonizer's weapons is naming, you make a distinction that I find very important, which is the difference between living words and empty words, lifeless words. But you argue that even in the case of this lifeless word, this name created to attack, ancestry enters into it and can mobilize it in a positive way. And now you tell us that you like the word "till" and "tiller." I recall you once saying that you cultivate words, that all words already existed, but that you managed to replant some of them. Decolonizing also means replanting words with ancestral power, doesn't it? Is decolonization also about reclaiming and repurposing even the language that was meant to destroy us?

Antônio Bispo: Yes! During the last election, I experienced a rather shocking incident. I was in Canindé, a district of Cachoeira municipality in Bahia. And there I was, staying with a family I'd met online. We'd even worked together on a magazine, but we'd never actually met in person. Now for the exciting part. When I got there, they had some booze, but no beer. I asked a family member to join me for a drink at a local bar since I wasn't familiar with the area.

When we walked into the bar, I went up to the counter and ordered a beer. At that moment, an old man stood up from his usual spot in the corner of the bustling, old-fashioned pub. He came up to me and said, "Listen, I'm a truck driver, a Bolsonaro supporter, and I think you look a lot like Lula." Are you as corrupt as Lula? I scanned the bar, taking in the faces around me. Some looked tense, while others forced smiles. There were local fans rooting for the hometown guy, and others who just wanted to see the spectacle.

knowledge arises from conflict. When he encounters a different perspective, poof! He doesn't recognize it, doesn't engage in dialogue, and reaches his limit. So, how did I end up here with all of us [in this UnB classroom]? You can see how these concepts are developing through our discussions. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to arrive first and wait for the others who haven't shown up yet. But sometimes I arrive and you're already here, and I respect those who came before me" (Bispo, 2019, p. 91).

I turned to him and said, "Dude, Lula got his butt kicked by me." Lula was convicted of corruption and sent to jail. I'm a thief and I'm on the loose. He said, "Let me see your hands." I quickly crossed my fingers, put my hands on the counter, and said, "Look, Lula lost again." He cut just one finger, but I cut two. Then he said, "You're quite the character. Mind if I join you for a drink?" I said: Hey, could you give me some space? You're a bit too close. At that distance you're standing, if you've got any cash on you, it'll be gone in a minute, 'cause my fingers are itching. Don't say I didn't warn you. So, if you want to drink with me, you can, but please keep your distance. The guy left. When he walked away, I thought to myself, "Well, I've got the upper hand now, so I'd better leave before things get out of control."

So I asked the bartender how much the beer cost. "Seven reais," he replied. I said, "If you want some decent cash from the mint, I'll pay seven, but if you want some good money from my place, I'll pay fourteen." No, just pay seven. I turned back to the young man and said, "You see?" Lula lost again. Lula is nothing but a crook. I learned how to steal and how to get things done. Check, please. The guy said, "But I wanted to buy you a beer." Do I look like a one-beer guy to you, son? Hey, put two beers on this guy's tab, seven on mine, and see you later. I grabbed the beer from the bag and left.

Result: I took the man's words, the ones that suited me, and immediately replanted them. He didn't come with mere words, but with fully formed ideas, with words that were already taking root. I just needed to replant. So I took advantage and, using his own words like "thief," I ended up getting two beers on his tab. Decolonizing is, in essence, replanting words. Now it's time to replant wisely! It's not just about replanting, it's about planting in places where you know it will grow. It's about replanting in areas where you know someone will take care of the plants and manage them. But you're right: it's one of the most incredible ways to decolonize, precisely by sowing and resowing words.

Interviewer (Natalino): Along these lines, we've been seeing at universities today, and you're well aware of this because you move in these circles, a growing number of black youth gaining access to higher education through affirmative action policies and socio-

racial quotas. And this younger generation, unlike ours – and I started university a bit later – has been seeking to revive these ideas, demanding a new approach from us teachers in the face of the colonial situation, this colonialism that's ingrained in our own minds. I wanted to hear a bit more from you about a demand that these young people have been making, closely tied to the discussion that social movements, specifically the Black movement, have been raising, which is the issue of environmental racism. This new generation is also, in various ways, seeking to revive and reinvent forms of activism and advocacy, recognizing that environmental racism impacts lives, especially since many of these university students come from quilombola communities, villages, and favelas, often affected by poor health and sanitary conditions. There are, as we know, issues of body, locality, residence, class, and so on. I wanted to hear a bit from you about this new way of replanting words, especially in relation to these new young people who are arriving with great energy and posing questions for us, questions linked to this environmental dimension.

Antônio Bispo: Today I can tell you that I'm not a historian, because I'm really not, but I am a person who straddles boundaries. I'm a trajectory analyst. I'm not a historian, but I often find myself chronicling people's journeys. And I had the pleasure, starting in 2015, of beginning to visit universities. Until 2015, I was unfamiliar with the university system. I've started visiting and have witnessed history firsthand. I've been chronicling the journeys and feel like a witness to history. What did I see? I witnessed an incredible event that was, in many places, the end of the world. In 2002, I received a book as a gift titled "Erosion, Technological Transformation and Corporate Power Concentration" by Pat Roy Mooney⁵. This book discussed the impact of emerging technologies on the world at large. The author of this book is a researcher who writes about the impact of technology. And when I read that book, I was blown away by what he wrote about nanotechnology and whatnot. He said that what he had written would happen in thirty years according to some scientists, fifty years according to others, and even a hundred years according to

⁵ MOONEY, Pat Roy. *The 21st Century: erosion, technological transformation, and concentration of corporate power*. São Paulo: Popular Expression, 2002.

yet others. Much of it happened in 2020. Much of what he wrote has already come true, and it happened before he turned thirty.

When I talk about the apocalypse, it's because up until 2015, wherever I went, people were constantly debating land reform, democracy, socialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism. There was a lot of talk about Cuba, the Soviet Union, Germany, Brazil, the United States, and whatnot. It was a debate within the same society based on the same principles, centered around the fascinating concept of the world of work. Because both Marxism and neoliberalism, as well as capitalism, are rooted in the world of labor. Criticism is how you engage with the work. But Marxism never rejected work, just as capitalism never did either. And who refused to work? It was the quilombolas and indigenous people who refused to work. Those with polytheistic cosmologies or worldviews were the ones who rejected the work. Starting in 2015, universities began debating a radical shift away from work-centric values, focusing instead on life stability and prioritizing personal fulfillment over material possessions.

That's when these young people come into play. These young people enter through affirmative action programs, get a degree, but the degree is pretty much the same for everyone. When young people enter graduate school, that's where they develop their academic identity and seek to establish their own unique identity. But they lacked the necessary elements to form this identity and they will compete. And it is when our budding words arrive. Believe it or not, our emerging ideas are reaching the university now, and these young people are embracing them. And today I can tell you, without a shadow of a doubt, that counter-colonialism, which began as a topic, then became a term, and later, for many, came to be established as a concept, counter-colonialism is now a concept for many people... In short, he's been through it all, and today countercolonialism is a full-fledged movement. And it's an incredible movement, because it's not an offensive movement, it's a defensive one. I came across a psychologist who said: Bispo, your writing on cosmophobia cuts to the heart of the matter, as you humanize the colonizers. You're not aliens, you're people, you're the very thing you criticize. You just need to take a hard look at yourselves. They dish it out, but can't take it. In her opinion, I called on the colonialists to engage in self-criticism. But I also called on us

to engage in self-reflection. Self-reflection is necessary. And people caught on. Today I receive numerous messages from people who haven't read our physical book, as the print run was only 4,500 copies and I'm currently seeking funds to print another 1,000. However, since it's available as a PDF, we have no idea how many people have actually read it. I think it's one of the most popular books among affirmative action students in academia, but not everyone reads it. I believe that today's major academic debate, a lively and irreversible one, is largely shaped by the works of Nego Bispo, Ailton Krenak, Conceição Evaristo, and several other Black women, such as Ana Mumbuca and others. People with a polytheistic worldview are driving today's great debate, the debate about existence. Some are searching for concepts like "good living" or "ubuntu," but regardless of the term, what matters is that we're discussing our existence: how to be, what to be, where to be, and why to be. Having is on the decline while being, in my understanding, is in a state of growth and consequence.

Interviewer (Walter): Master, I've been trying to raise issues lately about global warming, about the apocalypse, as you mentioned, in light of discussions related to the problem of colonialism. I've noticed about three clearer trends in this movement. One perspective, which could be called post-colonial, argues that today, with the supposed end of traditional colonialism, countries like Brazil, China, and others formerly part of the Third World should also be held accountable for global warming. It wouldn't be a matter of North versus South anymore, but rather everyone needing to get involved. There's no point in discussing this difference between northern and southern peoples anymore. Another school of thought, which could be called decolonial, critiques monotheistic, Eurocentric thinking, but in a more abstract and general way, without drawing on specific experiences or localized struggles. And a third current that, if you'll allow me, I'd like to call counter-colonial, as it stems from the experiences of activists and indigenous and Afro-diasporic intellectuals. There are many indigenous intellectuals from the United States and the Caribbean who are proposing discussions on global warming and the Anthropocene from their unique worldviews and struggles, offering localized solutions

and critiques. I felt that in this dossier we proposed, we received fewer proposals from this perspective I'm calling, inspired by your work, counter-colonial and more from a decolonial perspective. I was wondering if this reflects a uniquely Brazilian approach to dealing with these issues. I'd like to hear your thoughts on whether you think it's important to strengthen this anti-colonial perspective in academia or if you don't consider this an urgent battlefield. But also consider why this decolonial perspective has still prevailed, in the sense I'm describing, rather than a counter-colonial view in works like the one we're proposing, which aims to invite people to suggest new words, germinating words, as you mentioned. I feel like there's a more decolonial, broader perspective that's dominant. What do you think is causing this? Do you think it's also important to bring this debate into academic circles? I'd like to hear your thoughts on these matters.

Antônio Bispo: I could focus on quilombismo rather than discussing counter-coloniality. I could just talk about quilombismo and say: "Look, we're quilombolas and that's that. You're not going to be a quilombola, that's your problem and all." I grew up hearing about doomsday and the apocalypse. Not in churches, but in informal gatherings, with elders philosophizing about it. At first, I struggled a lot. I was terrified, and there were times when I wanted to go to sleep, but the elders would say, "No, you're going to listen." And there was so much nasty talk, it's gonna be hell, it's gonna be this and that, and it really bothered me. But then I realized there isn't just one world, there are many worlds. And I began to realize that there are many forms of apocalypse. But the apocalypse is a Eurocentric Christian concept. The apocalypse is unique to monotheistic Euro-Christianity. It doesn't exist in other worldviews or belief systems. And the apocalypse is indeed happening, because the Euro-Christian world is a world based on scripture, a theoretical world. The Bible is a book of purpose, a book of intentions. People developed worldviews and wrote the Bible, reflecting their ideas about how the world could be, how part of it had been, how part of it would be, as a reflection of what had come before. It's a very well-written book. But it's a book that declared its own end. And this is happening, many of the theories are coming true. You can see that in the past, people would write before speaking and speak in order to write again. Nowadays people talk before they write and write to talk again.

So what happened? Decoloniality was already being debated when we wrote about counter-colonialism, which was just yesterday, in 2015. When decoloniality arrived, countercoloniality was already underway. He was strutting around like he was hot stuff. Suddenly, an independent book appears out of nowhere, not published by any company or sold in any store, only available at events or through partnerships, with just 4,500 physical copies in existence. And how has this book, since 2015, already shaken things up to the extent you just described? Anti-colonialism is trending today. He/She is a member of a quilombo community. He/She is indigenous. It's a polytheistic religion. And I was the first person to write extensively about this term, this germinal word, or this concept, however one chooses to call it. There aren't many books in Portuguese that address counter-colonialism before ours. There might not be any. Countercolonialism has now become a quilombist concept, a concept that was replanted by a guy who only has an eighth-grade education. Now picture this: those self-absorbed academics, vain as they are, presenting work on counter-colonialism when they can comfortably discuss decolonialism instead? It took me a while to establish a dialogue between decolonialism and counter-colonialism. At first, I scoffed and said, "I know what anti-colonialism is, but I have no idea what decolonialism means." Those who advocate for decolonization are the ones who need to explain, because I don't know. Show an instance where decoloniality had a decisive impact. And I would ask: "What nation in the world has solved its problems using decolonial theory?" I kept asking these questions, but they were disrupting the conversations and making dialogue impossible. I finally found my groove.

If you feel colonized and it bothers you, you might be a decolonial person. You can decolonize yourself. That's fine with me, I'll respect that. I'm not going to waste my time educating you about colonialism; that's your job. I'm going to focus my efforts on resisting colonization. And since I wasn't colonized, I can't be decolonized. How can I undo something that never happened? I need to decolonize my mindset. The key distinction between being decolonial and countercolonial is that one was colonized while the other wasn't. Those who have not been colonized will act defensively to maintain their independence. And what was colonized will have to figure out how to stop being or continue being. I like to say that counter-colonialism is a trajectory and decoloniality is a

theory, just like Marxist theory and various other theories. There's no historical connection; it's a theoretical reference, not a historical one. But I think everyone should do what they can handle. I think it's possible. Decolonial thinkers are more radical, believing there's no need for counter-colonial approaches, but I think they're necessary. It's so accurate that it must be true. And there can also be decolonial ones. I think it's fine until they consider themselves decolonized, because then they'll fight to avoid being recolonized. And in this they'll have to be anti-colonialists.

But one of the most beautiful insights I've ever seen came from Ana Mumbuca. Ana Mumbuca is from the Mumbuca Quilombo in Jalapão. She wrote and defended the first anti-colonial thesis in Brazil. She discovered our book in 2016 while pursuing her master's degree and promptly wrote a dissertation titled "A Countercolonialist Writing of Quilombo Mumbuca."⁶ As far as I understand, it was the first one. From then on, several took place at UFMG. Just at UFMG, I've been on Fernanda's thesis committee, which references counter-colonialism, and I was on Joviano's committee too, which was fantastic and also mentions counter-colonialism.⁷ I served on several examination committees at UFMG that addressed decolonial studies. Today, through our book, countercolonialism is part of the curriculum for the Anthropological Theory II course at the National Museum. All public universities in Brazil are discussing our book, whether brought up by students or professors. I want you to know that I understand the decolonial perspective. It's not a walk in the park for them, you know? It's painful to admit that a quilombola, born in Piauí, considered Brazil's most backward state, in the caatinga, the most discriminated biome, who only studied up to eighth grade, introduced such a powerful concept as counter-colonialism. Many people don't write due to shyness, and sometimes out of embarrassment. Yes, some people are afraid of change. It's not

⁶ SILVA, Ana Claudia Matos da. *Uma escrita contra-colonialista do quilombo Mumbuca Jalapão – TO*. Master's thesis (Sustainable Development) - University of Brasília, 2019.

⁷ SILVA, Fernanda Cristina de Oliveira. *A gente vive é rodando: movimentos quilombolas que educam com os saberes da confluência*. Doctoral dissertation (Graduate Program in Education) - Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2020. <https://repositorio.ufmg.br/handle/1843/58458>.
MAYER, Joviano Gabriel Maia. *De pé na encruzilhada: por uma cartografia contra-colonialista*. Thesis (Graduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism) - Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2020. <https://repositorio.ufmg.br/handle/1843/35771>.

that they disagree, or that they don't like it. Malcolm Ferdinand himself, we talked a lot, and he wasn't familiar with this debate about counter-colonialism⁸. He wrote the foreword to our book acknowledging countercolonialism as a necessary debate at this time.⁹ It's good to have multiple debates. We're not exclusive. If another debate arises, as long as it challenges colonialism, that's good enough.

Now, those folks debating post-colonialism will take ages to establish themselves, because post-colonialism is a real headache. It's not a revival of colonialism. Post-colonialism marks the end of colonialism. So, when the time comes, there will be no need to talk about colonialism anymore. But I don't think we'll ever truly move past colonialism. We're going to reach a meeting point and a shared space. We won't be able to fully align with colonialism, but we can share some things, because nobody is entirely good or entirely bad. As long as the colonizers have money to pay me to give lectures criticizing them, I think they're making significant progress, since they're willing to pay for me to speak against them in their own spaces. And as long as I speak affectionately too, because I may speak badly, but I do it with love. I think we're lacking compassion even when we criticize. But I agree with you: counter-colonialism is now a trend and an irreversible one at that.

Interviewer (Edgar): I was listening to Walter and then the Bispo, and it reminded me of something that happened recently in one of my classes. Someone in class mentioned doomsday, the Anthropocene, or something like that. I couldn't help but wonder: "Where else in the world could someone just show up and casually talk about the end of the world, which is no small matter, right?" The university is a place where you can listen to someone talk about the end of the world, go home, and come back the next day as if nothing serious had been said. It's a consequence of synthetic knowledge, turning the end of the world into something mundane, as if it didn't demand from us in academia any

⁸ An example of these dialogues between Antônio Bispo dos Santos and Malcom Ferdinand can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RCuzE6b83k>

⁹ Texto de orelha de Malcom Ferdinand em SANTOS, Antônio Bispo. *A terra dá, a terra quer*. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2023.

radical change in what happens within the university. We keep going back to our old routines. It's turning this into a kind of grand abstraction, into something that offers very little in terms of solutions. I recall the Bispo at Queen Belinha's house in the Kingdom of May 13th, saying something I never forgot: "I am not a thesis." When I hear some people talking about the end of the world, I see the idea of doomsday turning into a thesis. They fail to draw strength from this to change what needs to be changed in the situated ecology of the academic world. Synthetic knowledge has the ability to turn everything into abstractions, preventing ideas from taking root or bearing fruit.

Antônio Bispo: Just a quick note on that. I remember the first time I said it wasn't a thesis was in Goiânia. We were at an event, the International Congress of Ethnomathematics, and during the first few days I was hanging out with José Jorge Carvalho, Kabengele Munanga, and a bunch of influential people, just like our crew back in Boa Vista. And on that first day I mingled with everyone. They left and I was all alone. It's as if I had vanished from the event. Even though I was staying at the same hotel, taking the same bus, going to the same restaurant, and attending the same meetings, I was completely invisible and ignored. I was giving my speech, and when I finished, a young woman said, "How selfish of you to spend all this time among us, yet isolate yourself and deprive us of sharing in your knowledge!" I said, "What do you mean, miss?" I was in the same places.

But earlier that evening, there was a get-together. The party expenses were covered. I got here first. My friends had already left and I was alone at the table. The situation was so bizarre that even the waiters became concerned. The waiter approached and said, "Sir, is everything okay?" "How are you?". Sitting alone at a table. Then someone from Amazonas stands up and says: Nego Bispo, why are you sitting by yourself? That's when the phrase came up: "because I'm not a thesis, because the other tables are made up of theses and their theorists, their advisees and their advisors." Since I'm not a student or advisor, I'm on my own. This story came to mind while I was sitting at a table with Ailton Krenak. When Ailton Krenak talks about ideas to postpone the end of the world, he's not referring to the end of the world, but rather the end of a world. These are ideas to

postpone the end of our world¹⁰. You have no idea, but Krenak and I have already made a deal. He works on ideas to postpone the end of our world, while I focus on ideas to hasten the end of the colonialist world. He liked it so much that he quoted it in his book: "The world whose end I want to postpone is not the world of these scoundrels; that one I want to end at midnight" (laughter).

Interviewer (Edgar): It's a confluence.

Antônio Bispo: We end up creating that abstraction ourselves, but then we backtrack. You're absolutely right. Synthetic knowledge must abstract everything, even the end of the world. But I'm telling you this apocalypse is really happening. These conspiracy theorists have too much time on their hands. And we are the chosen people, because we chose ourselves, we self-selected. What's going to happen? From now on, there will be increasing discussions about cosmology, diversity, and polytheism, and relationships will continue to evolve. As Mother Joana and many wise women used to say: "Everything will end as it began." But this ending isn't about reaching the finish line. It's wrapping up. Because when we say things like: "So-and-so just finished planting the crops, So-and-so just finished building the fence, So-and-so just finished constructing the house," we don't ask – "Has So-and-so already finished building that house?" This "finishing" our people talk about is all about taking the Portuguese language and playing around with it. It's not about finishing the destruction. It's not over yet. It's the final stretch. Got it? "Everything will end as it began" suggests that things will come full circle. It's back to square one. We're at the start of something new. We're at the beginning of a new chapter. We're at the dawn of a linguistic rebirth. We are at the dawn of new relationships, diverse connections, and mutual respect. Let's face it, there's a lot of violence going on, but these same acts of violence have always occurred. What changed was how this violence was communicated. Everything that happens today is news. That wasn't the case before.

¹⁰ KRENAK, Ailton. *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019.

Things would happen and we had no idea. But the world is moving towards much more harmonious times, towards more interconnected times.

Interviewer (Natalino): Great! Following this perspective, to wrap things up, I'd like to revisit what you mentioned earlier about your background as a union activist. Back then, during the sixties, seventies, and eighties, there was a strong Marxist, revolutionary perspective that saw the working class as the key to achieving universalism, uniting people, and ultimately bringing about the end of capitalism and the world as we knew it. I'd like to hear more about your thoughts on decolonial border thinking, and whether this shift from having to being can encompass various emancipatory struggles. When we created this summary, we tried to include various emancipatory movements, such as those of quilombolas, indigenous peoples, black communities, and many others, though I'm not sure if we were successful. I wanted to hear more about when you mentioned earlier that you were a union member and weren't satisfied with the repetition and limited scope of that work. Finally, I'd like to hear more about whether this counter-colonial frontier thinking, focused on a dimension of being, can encompass the various emancipatory struggles that each of us is involved in today.

Antônio Bispo: Great. I'm part of the state coordination for quilombola communities in Piauí. I just got an invite to meet at a quilombo on the 10th for the board election of our state association, which is a registered nonprofit. I said, "Listen guys, I'm not going." I'm no longer part of the system. I experienced that during the trade union movement. And at this age, I'm no longer on the cutting edge, I'm more of a traditionalist. I'm here to help. I don't need to take on certain tasks anymore, because if I do, I'll end up doing more harm than good. If I were involved in the labor union movement, I couldn't say that. Because in the union movement there are statutory and institutional rules that would require me to accept the invitation. And if the movement thought I should be on the front lines, I had to be there, even if I didn't feel comfortable. In the quilombola movement, no. That's the million-dollar question.

Why do quilombos still exist today? Why do indigenous peoples still exist? Because we are diverse peoples, not universal ones. Our strength lies in diversity, not uniformity. We don't want to fix the world, because if we try to fix other people's worlds, we'll end up being colonizers too. The greatness of being anti-colonial lies in wanting to fix only your own world, because fixing someone else's world is colonizing. As far as we're concerned, it doesn't matter if the nearest quilombo is negotiating with the power company to run transmission lines through their land. They're the ones who know what that's going to mean. Now, if they approach me saying: "Hey Nego Bispo, we don't want the power line to go through, and we'd like your support" – then I'll go because I've been invited. But if I'm not invited, I won't show up uninvited. As quilombolas, we respect each other in that way. Anticolonialism is a diverse movement. It's a diversity movement. It's a movement spanning multiple worlds. What we want to fix is simply our world.

For instance, Edgar has a complexion I'd call yellowish, as do Zé Jorge and Júnia Torres, while Makota Kidoiale, Belinha, and Gil Amâncio have dark skin. I engage with people of all skin colors, because for me it's not just about appearance. Skin plays a role too, but everyone's skin feels different. Yesterday a young person asked me about my learning experience. And what did I tell him? Look, I was taken to the fields before I could even crawl. Out in the countryside, folks would go about their business while I lounged in a hammock. The older kids played around me, always keeping an eye on me and reporting back to the adults. But why would I go to the countryside when I was so little? To practice listening skills. At that age, I couldn't talk or walk, but I could hear. So I was going to sharpen my sense of hearing. When I first started crawling, scooting across the floor, and making my initial movements, I would touch the ground, feeling the earth on my skin. I'd grab anything within reach and either put it in my mouth or smell it. I was engaging all my senses at once. In other words, I had already trained my hearing and now I was continuing to hone my listening skills, along with my sense of taste and touch. And when I started talking and walking, I became much more active. In addition to continuing to work on all these feelings, I was also developing my relationships.

When children see another animal, they approach it. Depending on the animal's reaction, they either run away or pet it. Kids are drawn to anything that moves. This is a

relationship exercise. All living things do this. It's an amazing creative process. So, by the time you reach a certain stage in life, you've experienced it all. Children raised in gated communities don't get this kind of exercise. She doesn't develop her sense of touch, hearing, relationships, taste, or smell, partly because mothers don't let children put just anything in their mouths. In the countryside, it's okay. Believe it or not, it's possible. The kids will be fine. They'll figure out whether it's safe to eat or not. They try it once, and if they don't like it, they never do it again. But they'll figure that out through relationships, not education. I'm saying this to point out that relationships happen in our world, in our environment.

When you talk about environmental racism, I approach it from a different angle, considering its impact on various living beings together. What do I call environmental racism? It's like saying the Amazon is the world's most important biome and forgetting about the Caatinga. Why is the Amazon more significant than the Caatinga? If you consider the Amazon as the world's most crucial ecosystem, you're essentially saying that all life there is more valuable than elsewhere. This is what I call environmental racism. It's not just because I'm from the ghetto or the slums that I'm treated a certain way. No. I'll go even further, as racism should also address other lives. Racism must also include plants. For instance, the umbu fruit, native to the Caatinga region. Everything you can do with grapes, you can do with umbu. In fact, umbu is even more versatile than grapes. But why does the grape receive special treatment while the umbu doesn't? Why umbu can't be globalized. The umbu tree won't thrive everywhere. Grapes are ready. Colonialism is also like that. We have leguminous plants in the Caatinga that are richer in protein than many others worldwide, but they're not commercially viable because they only grow in the Caatinga. When discussing environmental racism, it's crucial to first examine ecosystems and then consider the communities living within them. And then you'll have a real discussion about relationships, and in that discussion you'll start figuring out who should live where, how, and for what purpose. That's kind of it.

But I must stress again that we can't try to fix other people's problems. How am I supposed to fix China? If I don't know what Chinese people like, let them be. Whether China is a dictatorship or a democracy, let their own people sort it out. What's that got to

do with me? What's this war between Russia and Ukraine got to do with me? No, let them handle it. While they're off fighting that war, I'm here, lounging in a nice hammock, chatting with you all, strengthening our relationships, and deepening our friendships. Let them be, but if they call us, I'll go. But I'm gonna say: "Hey man, put those guns down, let's hug it out and move on with our lives." I'm not bringing another gun. If that means bringing another gun, count me out.

When we've exhausted ourselves praising our own lives and talking ourselves up, we'll move on to praising our friends until we're tired of that too. Then we'll start speaking well of our acquaintances, until we're tired of speaking well of our acquaintances, and then we'll start speaking well of our enemies. When everyone only speaks well of everyone else, evil will cease to exist. Some people make a habit of criticizing others instead of focusing on their positive qualities. Today I'm saying that we need to nourish our roots, honor our journeys, and celebrate our paths by speaking well of them.

Interviewer (Edgar): Great. Listening to you now reminded me of something Chief Babau Tupinambá from Serra do Padeiro said (and I know you've been meeting with them). In a conversation about "living well," he said something like "true well-being only exists when not just you are happy, but everyone around you is too." He's talking about animals, birds, people, and so on. In other words, happiness must be shared by all. If you're happy while your neighbor is upset, what kind of happiness is that? Unlike in the colonial context, where happiness was fragmented, separated, and privatized, I believe there's a counter-colonial understanding of happiness here.

Antônio Bispo: That's right. I'm living in the moment, I've always lived life to the fullest. At present, my grandson Norberto Máximo is studying business administration at the Federal Institute of Piauí, IFPI, which is about three miles from our community. I handed over a small bar we own in the quilombo countryside for him to manage. He's fifteen. I told him, "Since you're going to study business administration, you'll soon be running the local pub." Here you go. And I don't want to get involved in almost anything, unless you call me. He said to me: Well, the bar was managing to stay afloat, but during this period

now it won't be able to survive. I told him: I had a feeling. This is a very critical time right now. He replied: Well, you see, we need to talk because I'm learning at school that an employee, after working half a month, should have already generated enough to cover their salary, since they'll have to work for the boss during the other half of the month. I said, "But you know that's exactly what I'm fighting against, right?" He said, "Yeah, that's just how it is under capitalism." I said, "In the quilombola system, it's the other way around." In the quilombist system, when an employee works half a month, they must have generated their salary for that month and the salary for the month they don't generate anything, because they can't go hungry. So it's different here. Save for a rainy day. Because as the manager, you need to generate your own as well. The employee will generate their own, and you'll generate yours. I was chatting about this with a customer at the bar yesterday and he was thrilled. That's why we love coming here, it's just different. We need to gradually start agreeing with Babau.

My dear, I can tell you that today there are some noteworthy events. The Kilombo Tenondé in Valença, Bahia, led in part by Mestre Cobra Mansa, is an incredible place that's definitely worth visiting. This story of the Terra Vista Settlement, with Joelson leading one of the coordinating teams, and the Network of Peoples, is truly remarkable. Chief Babau is extraordinary, not just him personally, but the entire land reclamation struggle he's involved in. And there's a debate I've heard from Joelson, but I've also heard it from others. What these folks are doing in southern Bahia, in the Atlantic Forest, is truly remarkable! I heard Joelson saying that once they manage to harness only what nature provides in the Atlantic Forest, they'll triple Brazil's GDP. This is no small matter. This calls for a meeting with Brazil's economic advisory board, as he's not kidding around. He's saying: Bispo, don't sell cocoa beans, sell chocolate; don't just sell palm oil, sell all the products and byproducts. These are the movements we need to talk about. Instead of talking about the war in Ukraine, let's talk about Terra Vista, Kilombo Tenondé, land reclamation, those beautiful phrases from Babau, let's talk about the good things happening all over the world. Hey buddy, let's find a cozy spot to hang our hammock on one of these little islands and let the big world take care of itself. We don't have to fix the whole world because it's too much work. Let's start small and work our way up.

Interviewer (Edgar): At Terra Vista Settlement, they are decolonizing cocoa and chocolate production. Joelson discusses the geopolitics of chocolate.

Antônio Bispo: Yeah, exactly.

Interviewer (Walter): I was reflecting a bit on Edgar's question about university, about how it represents more of a synthetic type of knowledge. There's also a term in your book that really caught my attention, which is festive biointeraction. You talk about biointeraction, but you also mention its festive aspect. To what extent could the university, in order to overcome the trivialization of these discussions we're having, as Edgar mentioned, become a bit more celebratory? I'd like you to discuss the party as an aspect of counter-colonization.

Antônio Bispo: One of the necessary and urgent issues is to remove the commercialization from festivals. We need to separate art, for instance. Art is the methodology, the instrument or the means, but art is a component of the celebration. Art is an integral part of the celebration, while craftsmanship is a key element of the marketplace. We need to distinguish between art and craft. Art is joy, craft is commodity. We need to teach singing and playing instruments more and more, so that people don't have to sing for money. So that people can sing for entertainment, satisfaction, and communication, and that they can do other things to make a living. You don't need to sell the music, you need to share the joy of singing. That's how it used to be. There are still places in the Caatinga that look like this. In some parts of the Caatinga, you might invite one accordion player to liven up the party, but five or six show up, and they all take turns playing. And the one who plays to keep the party going doesn't need that much money, because they'll also dance, eat, and celebrate. He's going to the party. He plays for others and they play for him. That's how birds do it. Birds sing to each other in a melodious exchange. He sings for himself and others. The others sing for themselves and for him. It's way too simple. It's about decommodifying knowledge. Gradually, too. We don't need to decommodify everything

at once, but we do need to decommodify. And decommodify those that are easier to decommodify.

The first step is to break away from the linear approach to art. I have a recitation that was prepared for UFMG's winter festival that goes like this. When we chatter away and misspell words, when we sing off-key and dance out of rhythm, when we paint messily and draw crookedly, it's not because we're making mistakes, it's because we haven't been colonized. This idea that everyone should dance the same way just doesn't work. You've got to move with the groove. Every voice should be true to your own vocal cords and personal style. We need to break free from rigid notions of right and wrong in art. By breaking down the notions of right and wrong, we free art from commercialization. By taking the commercialism out of art, we create a celebration. Biointeraction is the sharing of lives, celebrations, and festivities.

Interviewer (Edgar): I heard you telling the story of the countryside, how you went to the farm before you could crawl, and I remembered you saying that the rural area is the place where you most enjoy thinking, imagining, and creating. I've also heard you say that many of these images, these words, like confluence and transfluence, have a more curved, winding path, and that they're words that came to you while observing the waters, the river, the river's course. I wanted to ask if you'd agree that your way of speaking and thinking is deeply rooted in the land, yet also flows like water? When I talk to some friends who know you, I also get the feeling that you're often not where we expect you to be. There's a movement that reminds me a lot of Jucá's style, an art form that, from my perspective, is very similar to your style, your way of speaking. In that sense, I'd say your book is like Jucá's movement.

Antônio Bispo: I agree with you and there's something interesting. The first book, a little-known yellow one, was titled: Maroon Communities: Practices and Meanings But I wrote it in a roundabout way. People were turning the book around trying to figure out where the title started. It all started in quilombos, in ways or in meaning. I kept saying: "meaning, ways, and rebel settlements; rebel settlements, ways, and meaning; ways,

meaning, and rebel settlements". And it was all a big mess. The other one is titled "Colonization, Quilombos, Methods and Meanings". But I find it funny that even today, especially those event organizers, when they introduce me at events, they say: Ways, Colonization, Maroon Communities, and Meanings It's a trick. This saying tends to catch people off guard.

You're right about that, Edgar. Wherever I go, my roots go with me. And when he doesn't go, I keep visiting him all the time. Here, in this conversation, I've already been to the Berlangas River Valley several times. When I talked about the little ranch, I pictured a small thatched hut made of babassu palm, with six forked posts and tucum palm fiber ropes. Images play a big role in my life. I'm speaking off the top of my head. So I'm always nurturing these memories, revisiting them. Forever and ever. I have trouble thinking outside the box.

To give you an idea, this book we're working on with Companhia das Letras, discussing it with Taís, Taís Garone - I enjoy writing with her - I said: Taís, let's outline the book. Let's picture a building. The original text will serve as the foundation for a house. The walls up to the ceiling will be the existing livestreams, which will be transcribed. Lives will be like building blocks. And the final result will be an original text, but it will be the best it can be. It'll be a mix of live streaming and original text, that's the plan. Take it easy, it'll be alright. I wrote the original text and we started transcribing the livestreams. The book was nearly finished. I bumped into Taís the other day and said: Taís, I have a question. We built the foundation, raised the walls, and now we've put the roof on. The house is ready. The question is: "Who's going to live there?" It's too controlling. I built a house and now I'm looking for someone to live in it. Let's start over from scratch. Now let's start with the countryside. The original text is preparing the land for planting crops. It's soil preparation. Even the right foot, lives are the seeds. One part of the ceiling made of wood represents cultural traits, while the other part represents fruits. Now the question is: "who's going to reap the rewards?" Now we're talking! I'm up for planting a field and inviting folks to harvest it, but building a house and asking people to live in it is a step too far. You can see that I couldn't move forward when looking at the image of the construction, but as soon as I switched to the image of the countryside, things started flowing. I can't think beyond

my rural roots, beyond the waters, the land, beyond nature. I can't. I need these natural connections to be able to think.

Interviewer (Natalino): Great. Great! Considering our memories and the challenge of thinking beyond our rural roots, we often say in our small world that our future is rooted in our ancestors. In that light, considering your contributions to this small world, how would you like to be remembered, Bispo?

Antônio Bispo: I said it once with flair, but now I'll say it plainly. There's an indigenous book called "Cartas para o Bem Viver"¹¹. The indigenous peoples asked everyone they knew and liked to write a letter. They published a book of letters. And I wrote a letter from my grandmother's generation to my granddaughter's generation. I loved this letter. It's in the book. When I was a child, I used to write a lot of letters for other people. Love letters, all kinds of letters. I thought: I'll write a letter from my grandmother's generation to my granddaughter's generation. I've been saying that if a child has never pretended to be you, you need to rethink your lifestyle. I really enjoy being remembered by children pretending to be me. And I've experienced that a lot. But, when I'm no longer here, I'd really like it if my grandchildren's generation quoted me. If my grandchildren's generation quotes me, I'll feel fulfilled.



¹¹ COSTA, Suzane Lima; XUKURU-KARIRI, Rafael (orgs.). *Cartas para o bem viver*. Salvador: Boto-cor-rosa livros, arte e cará; paralelo 13S, 2020.

"We're at the beginning of replanting words": a conversation with Antônio Bispo dos Santos (Nego Bispo)
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