

# CARÕ ME: Drawing Experience in the School Courtyard<sup>1</sup>

José Alecrim

(translation by Coletivo de Tradutores Berkeley-Brasil)\*



The Indigenous Profiles Exposition: José Alecrim and students of the Federal School Olga Mansur.  
(Photos by Cassia Nunes. From the author's personal collection.)

I kindly ask for your attention so that I, José Alecrim, may introduce myself, bringing along my personal narrative as Indigenous, as an artist, a designer, and an art educator.

In this conversation I hope to share experiences and speak about both my process of belonging as Indigenous, and the welcome I receive from my Indigenous Relatives, especially Sinvaldo Wahua/Wahuka, of the Iny-Karajá People, and Creuza Prumkwj, of the Krahô People.

I would like to talk about my life as an Indigenous student in the State of Goiás, having begun primary school in the 1990s, high school in the 2000s, higher education in 2010, and currently finishing my graduate studies in the Teaching of Visual Arts in the Department of Visual Arts at the Federal University of Goiás.

I am Indigenous with Mehĩ-Canela origins, from a diasporic family that emigrated from Maranhão

in the 1960s. This migration was provoked by the frequent and violent invasions of ranchers in the region upon Indigenous land – massacres that were recorded by *Cupẽ*<sup>2</sup> writings, and that continue to be held in Indigenous memory.

At the time, my family lived in the Aldeia of Escalvado, also known as the Aldeia do Ponto, located near Barra do Corda, Maranhão. With the invasions, my family was divided, with one part disappearing and the other relocating to neighboring Indigenous communities between the states of Maranhão and Pará. They eventually headed for the northern region of Goiás, today Tocantins, reaching Xambioá – that is, until the presence of gold miners in the area exploded. They then went to Gurupi, and left once again in the 1980s for the municipality of Aruanã, Goiás.

In Aruanã, my family established their home on the margins of the Córrego Garrafão stream,

<sup>1</sup> Carõ means a drawing or to design in the Mehĩ language.

<sup>2</sup> Cupẽ means us, person, Indigenous, in the Mehĩ language.

\* Derek Allen, Luiza Bastos Lages, Mônica Carvalho Gimenes, Gabriel Lesser, Ana Claudia Lopes, Isaac McQuinn, and Liam G. Seeley.

where they lived by hunting, fishing, and planting small fields that were tended to by my grandfather. He sporadically found other means of subsistence working and planting for ranchers in the area.

As my grandmother Geni says, my family always 'lived on the margins,' preferring a distance from cities and also hiding their Indigenous identity (oftentimes in fear of being identified as 'Indians' and thus captured for forced labor, for sexual enslavement, or simply in order to be killed).

In the 1980s, my grandfather Francisco knew some people who lived in Goiânia, and through them, my mom Márcia and my aunt Diacui made it to school, becoming the first people in my family to learn to read and write. Soon after, my mom began the process of searching for 'disappeared' relatives. This search happened through letters sent to the radio stations and churches of Maranhão, because in the past people were registered in church records, and radios disseminated news and messages much more widely.

At the end of the 1980s, one of my mother's letters received a response, indicating that a person had been brought by a rancher to the city of Dom Pedro, Maranhão. Curiously, this person's stories about their displacement coincided with the accounts my mom described in her letter. After hearing this news, my grandfather, with what his means permitted, organized a trip, sending my mom and my grandmother to Dom Pedro.

It was a difficult journey of about four days. They met a woman who matched the description of the letter. It was my great-grandmother Maria—the only relative found after more than 20 years of migrations. Her condition was precarious—she was blind, ate little, and lived in conditions analogous to slavery, serving a family. Together, my grandmother and my great-grandmother tenderly recalled those people who had disappeared, especially her brother.

Even today, I search for his whereabouts and any trace of where he went, in an affectionate attempt to discover something for my grandmother, who is now 92 years old. My grandmother and her mother were always discrete and careful with their Indigenous identity, not revealing it to strangers, withdrawing themselves, always thoroughly analyzing situations, and even avoiding the use of the Mehĩ language, which they gradually stopped speaking.

Even far away from their original territory, my family never lost their Indigenous identity; to the contrary, living through the margins, they affirmed it even more – they resisted, survived, and with this, maintained their ancestrality. My birth occurred amidst this diasporic process, and I learned of the culture and customs of my grandparents with my mother, my aunt, and my great grandmother, who *ancestralized* at 98 years old.

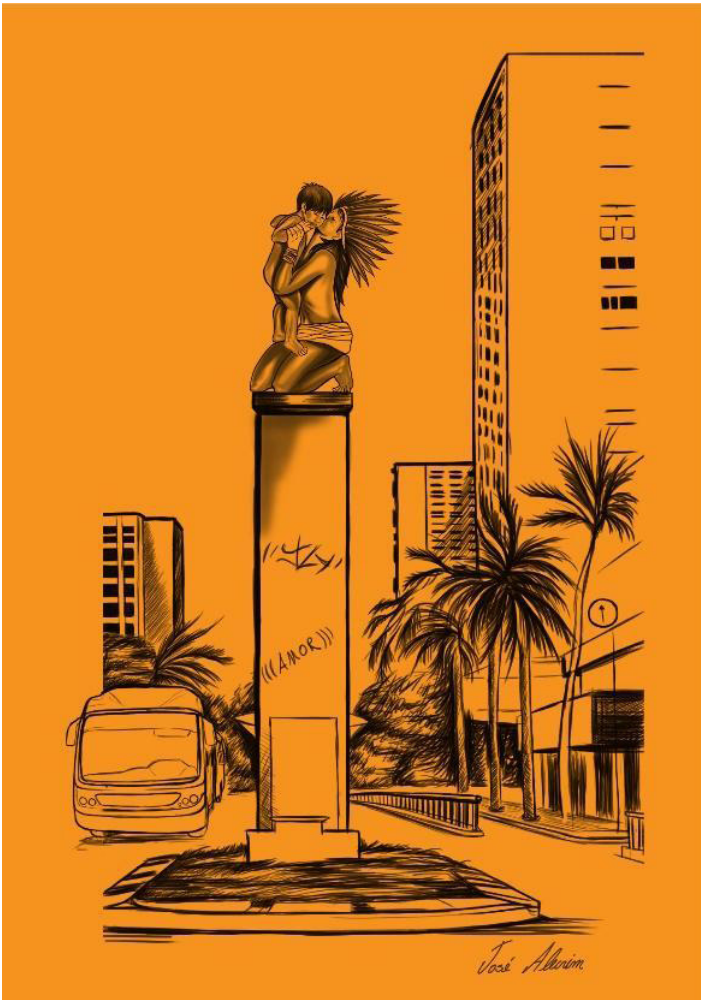
Education has held a special place in my life, and always much beyond spaces of formal teaching and institutions. Just as we, Indigenous peoples, see nature as an ancestor, a dear being, I see education as a friend, one that has helped my family in re-encountering the disappeared. Through education, as well as the many Indigenous relatives who continue to welcome me warmly, I have gotten closer and closer to Indigenous knowledge and life, and have also helped other people.

As a professor and artist, I study the past in order to develop my work. I reflect upon artistic representations, those that form the conceptions and stereotypes into which Indigenous populations were put. We are treated merely as "Indians," in an archetype distant from the cultural diversity that we possess. We are represented in Art as underdeveloped peoples, easily manipulated and tricked by the "heroic colonizers," who, on the other hand, were iconographically constructed as fearless, intelligent, victorious figures.

In the recent past, in the world of books, our culture and diversity wasn't represented. In these texts we were neither authors nor artists. Today I'm able to identify that these narratives that used to reach my school had a euro-centric and colonizing vision.

Back then, I, an Indigenous child, was in the 'underdeveloped' condition that the books purported, making me feel a strange feeling, a discomfort. The books disputed the struggle and the knowledge of my family, and I felt different from the other kids. Sharing this feeling, Djamila Ribeiro, in the book *Short Anti-Racist Guide* (2019), recalls the beginning of her school life, writing: "at around six years old I understood that being a Black woman was a problem for society. Up until then, in my family life, with my parents and siblings, I wasn't questioned in that way" (Ribeiro, 2019, p. 10).

Reflecting upon the past, upon behaviors and social relations, is necessary both in society and



José Alecrim. (2022). *Renascimento e Continuidade* (Rebirth and Continuity).



José Alecrim. (2022). *Vento (Wind)*.

in educational spaces. Many daily, naturalized practices are generational and ignore the perspective of the “other,” provoking violences in ways of speaking, in the content of discourse, and in actions.

For example, I would like to identify some common phrases that we can educate ourselves and inform others about, so that we don’t reproduce them. Some include: “Many chiefs for few Indians” (minimizing the fundamental role of Indigenous leadership); “Indian activity” (making an insinuation about a bad, tedious or negative activity, minimizing Indigenous populations and the importance of their encounters, festivals, and rituals); “Tabajara” (using the name of an Indigenous population to insinuate that a product is of low quality or of doubtful origins, bringing negative connotations to that name).

The naturalization of these violences was and continues to be reflected in curricula, reaching schools, educators, and ultimately students. Buchmann (2014) brings forth the idea of Arendt

(2005) when speaking about the mediation that exists between spaces of instruction, the social world, and cultural spaces. For Arendt, school is a space of rehearsal between the private and public world, a space in which the students can rehearse while being mediated by someone who already has experienced this old world.

The perspective offered by Buchmann about instructional spaces reinforces the need for actions and educational projects that are anti-racist, in the pedagogical as much as the administrative spaces of institutions. A welcoming and inclusive instructional space – with educators that represent multiple voices of society – can combat racist practices of the “old world,” training students that might ultimately coexist with, appreciate, and respect diversity.

The former “Day of the ‘Indian,’” which used to be on April 19<sup>th</sup>, was celebrated in many confusing ways in the time of my childhood, and many strange ‘celebrations’ are still seen today, given the distance of the school community from

the topic and society's prejudices. A common activity in the 'celebration' of that day, principally in my time, were the 'portrayals' carried out by the children.

I'd like to describe my first memory of this day at school: it began with the making of paper feathers that were placed on children's heads; followed by painting of two lines below the eyes with gouache paint. The teacher would then organize the children into a circle and lead them through a dance, where they would produce the sounds "uhhh, uhhh, uhhh" by quickly tapping their mouth with their hands. The activities would end with a speaker playing the commercialized music of Xuxa, Mara Maravilha or Grupo Carrapicho.

I spent my childhood and adolescence on the outskirts of a metropolis, in a region that at the time was called "neither-nor," because neither the city of Goiânia nor the city of Aparecida de Goiânia wanted to claim it within their municipality. Among the reasons for this rejection was its isolation – it was more than 20 kilometers away from both city centers – as well as the poverty and marginalization of the people who found their way there. The construction of the GO-040 highway split up this peripheral zone and created the following neighborhoods: Garavelo (Aparecida de Goiânia); Jardim Tropical (Aparecida de Goiânia); Garavelo B (Goiânia); and Jardim Caravelas (Goiânia), where my family began to live.

There is a notable presence of Indigenous peoples on the outskirts of urban centers. This presence is almost always associated with diasporas and various other types of migration, which is written about, for example, in Kaká Werá Jecupé's books, *A terra dos mil povos (The Land of A Thousand Peoples)* (1998), and *Oré Awé Roirua Ma: Todas as vezes que dizemos adeus (Oré Awé Roirua Ma: All The Times We Say Goodbye)* (2002).

Jecupé is one of the precursors of Indigenous literature in Brazil. In excerpts from these two works he recounts his process of discovery as an Indigenous person living in the city, his encounters with his ancestrality, and his return to the Guaraní people in São Paulo and to other Indigenous peoples. As a child, my school community was made up of those who lived in my neighborhood. Because of our daily interactions, many of them knew that my family was Indigenous. We were children, and we used Mehĩ regularly in our household – which is to say, we didn't know what

"Indian" meant. People in our neighborhood noticed differences in our elders, who some referred to as "Maranhão," and others as "Indians from Garavelo."

Within the intimacy and isolation that my family sought by 'living on the margins,' 'Garavelo' as well as Aruanã-Goiás – a city where my grandfather still had ties and that we used to visit frequently – were essential places. At the time, this area and its surroundings were commonly mythologized as "backwards." For us, it was certainly "advanced": there were streams, dirt roads, and small forests, which allowed for walking and planting, which was part of my family's daily life.

I had the opportunity to share in the teachings and knowledge-actions, access memories, draw with my grandparents on the floor, sit on my great-grandmother Maria's lap, hear stories of the Aldeia, and even learn the few words in Mehĩ that my great-grandmother's fear of teaching me allowed.

My great-grandmother Maria never spoke Mehĩ when she was around non-Indigenous people or strangers. Due to her suffering – having been kidnapped, 'disappeared' by farmers, and having seen her relatives die – she believed that it was very dangerous to be labeled an "Indian." My grandmother Geni tells us that her grandmother Carmosina shared the same tendency, and that, in this way, the two of them protected and worried about us.

I still remember the smell of the pipes at six in the afternoon and the story circles of my grandmother Geni, my great-grandmother Maria, and my grandfather Francisco. Today I am closer to our language thanks to Relative Creuza Prumkwj Krahô, who took me in during this process.

Talking about my experience as a student is fundamental to understanding my artistic education and my work as an art/educator at the Ciranda da Arte Study and Research Center at SEDUC-GO. There, I work on literacy and anti-racist education. I am one of the Indigenous teachers in the state education network.

I am still incredibly grateful for the experience I had with my Iny-Karajá Relatives and my great friend, brother Sivaldo Wahua/Wahuka. He is very dear to me because I grew up near his territories in Aruanã. I find in this relative the figure of an older brother who teaches me, and I materialize this friendship in my drawings. As an Indigenous person, I also have been welcomed

by and experienced friendship alongside the nearby Tapuia do Carretão people. I also express my enormous gratitude to the leaders Dr. Eunice Pirkodi Tapuia, Wellington Tapuia, and the entire community who always welcome me into their Aldeia and make me feel at home.

My drawing process is rooted in deconstructing stereotypes and in the need to promote Indigenous multidiversity and visibility.

My decolonial production intends to create distance from the images that construct the concept of "Indian," which non-Indigenous people produced throughout these centuries of Brazil. Those images were always used to discriminate against us and to stereotype us as "real Indians," an allusion to an idealized Indigenous figure who is trapped in the past and considered by non-Indigenous people as "inferior." That stereotype

Indigenous Profiles. Cultural Vila Cora Coralina, 2022. Artwork by José Alecrim.  
(Photo from the author's personal collection.)



erases the contemporaneity in which we live—our diversity, our knowledge, and our epistemologies.

At Ciranda da Arte, I travel with the artistic-educational exhibition “Indigenous Profiles: Pencil Portraits of an Ancestral Brazil,” which originated from my experiences and research with my dear Indigenous Relative Dr. Mirna Kambeba Omágua Yetê Anaquiri. She has always welcomed me, sharing teachings as an Indigenous person, inspiring me, and walking alongside me in the fight for an anti-racist education.

By going from school to school with this Traveling Gallery, I mediate and bring the school community closer to Indigenous issues. My objective, through conversation and Indigenous presence, is for all communities, teachers, family members, and society at large to share a view of diversity and reevaluate their attitudes and habits to understand multiple identities and collective memory. I also hope that, through this project, other Indigenous children and peoples do not feel estranged. My goal is for school to be an environment that welcomes and learns from Indigenous peoples, as opposed to harming them.

The Indigenous Profiles exhibition first went to the Tenda Multiétnica, an event that ran concurrently with the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Environmental Film and Video Festival (FICA). The festival was attended by the Peoples of Iny-Karajá, Avá-Canoeiro, and Tapuia do Carretão, who are native to Goiás, as well as groups from other states such as the A’uwẽ Uptabi-Xavante, Kariri-Xocó, Guarani-Kaiowá and Kaingang Peoples.

Ailton Krenak and the festival prize committee selected my piece entitled “Wind” to be the trophy for the *Special Ailton Krenak Award: Films to Postpone the End of the World*, launched during FICA 2022. “Wind” is a meditation on what the face of a Goya Indigenous person might look like. It is also inspired by the Indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire of the Kayapó ethnic group. At the ceremony, the Indigenous leader, writer, and environmentalist Ailton Krenak awarded it as the 1<sup>st</sup> place trophy to the documentary anthropologist Vincent Carelli for his body of work.

Vincent Carelli (left) and Ailton Krenak with the Indigenous artist José Alecrim’s piece “Wind.” FICA 2022.





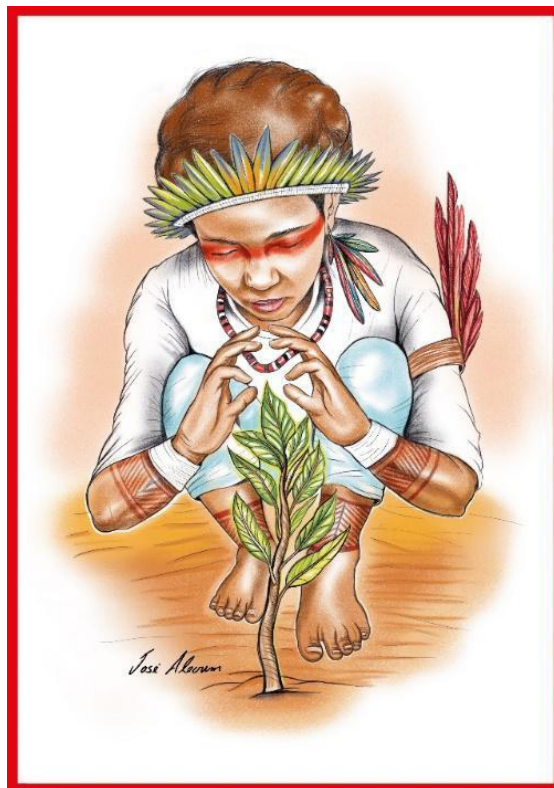
José Alecrim and students from the State School Gracinha de Lourdes. (Photo by Artur Amaral. From the author's personal collection.)

Drawing workshop with José Alecrim and Tapuia do Carretão children at the Literary Festival of São Patrício Valley.



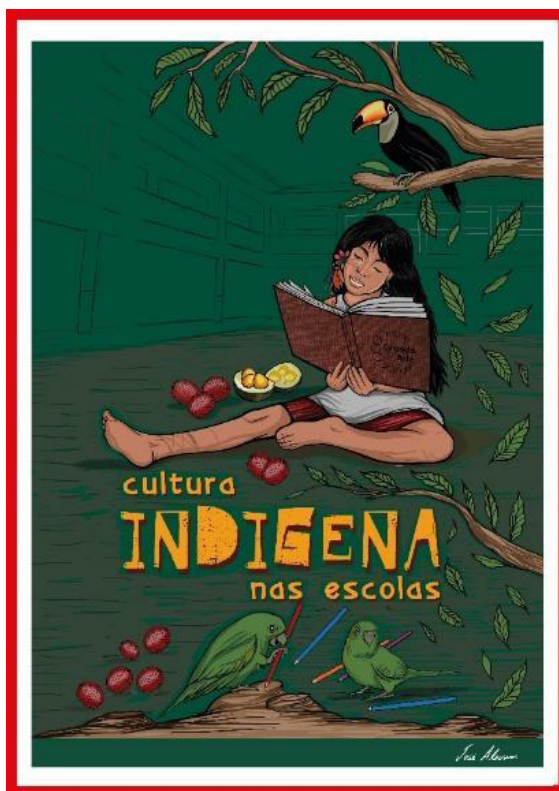


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José Alecrim. (2023). *Semente (Seed)*.

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MINISTÉRIO DA  
CULTURA

