

KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD'S *COONARDOO* AND RACHEL DE QUEIROZ'S *THE YEAR FIFTEEN*: A SETTLER COLONIAL READING¹

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Abstract

Settler Colonial Studies is a theoretical approach being developed in Australia by Lorenzo Veracini (2010, 2015, 2016), inspired by Patrick Wolfe's (1999, 2016) precursor theories. It proposes a differentiation between "colonialism" and "settler colonialism" based on the premise that the latter involves land dispossession and the literal or metaphorical disappearance of Indigenous Others, while the former is mainly concerned with the exploitation of Indigenous labour and resources. The fact that settlers "come to stay" is a crucial element in positing settler colonialism as "a structure", whereas colonialism would be "an event" in the lives of the colonised Others. This paper adopts settler colonial theories to propose a comparative study of two modernist "social" novels by women writers in Australia and Brazil: Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Rachel de Queiroz's *The Year Fifteen* (1930). Both novels deal with exploitation, discrimination, racism and the dispossession of the Indigenous Other and their miscegenated descendants, from a non-Indigenous, i.e. "settler", perspective. Elements that are crucial for settler colonialism, such as ambivalence, indigenisation and mechanisms of disavowal and transfer in several of their guises, are examined, compared and contrasted.

Key words: Settler colonialism; *Coonardoo*; Katharine Susannah Prichard; *The Year Fifteen*; Rachel de Queiroz.

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Two writers from the margins

Brazilian and Australian literatures are far from “universal”, to use a reductionist, Eurocentric expression that, nonetheless, still has power. Not being universal means that the “literary classics” from those countries are virtually unknown outside Brazil and Australia. And as Renata Wasserman (12) observes in her assessment of Brazilian women writers, Brazilian literature can hardly be seen to belong to the canon of “world literature”, in which, to be up-to-date in the cultural circles one should necessarily have read Brazilian (and, for that matter, Australian) fiction, poetry or drama. Although in times of “English as a Global Language” Australian literature might have a much wider reach and fare better in the latter aspect compared to a literature written in Portuguese, very much like their Brazilian counterparts, Australian women writers, would be, as Wasserman (12) puts it, “at the margin of the margin”.

The double challenge of being “culturally subaltern” in relation to Europe and, more recently, the USA, and “gender subaltern” in their own patriarchal societies, might be a good point of departure to approximate the writers Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) and Rachel de Queiroz (1910-2003). Several parallels can be drawn between them in that respect: at a time when, more in Brazil than in Australia, as we shall see, men dominated the realm of letters, not only did Queiroz and Prichard manage to make a living out of writing fiction, journalistic texts and criticism, among other genres, but they also became prominent figures in the cultural milieus of their countries, living long, active and, at times, polemic lives and having their works translated into several languages.

Their achievements are impressive. Prichard's legacy includes thirteen novels, an autobiography, four collections of short stories, fourteen plays, two volumes of poetry, besides dozens of articles, critical texts, essays, pamphlets, interviews and political statements. Queiroz published, among other works, eight novels, four children's books, five plays, more than a hundred *crônicas* (sketches), an autobiography (in partnership with her sister Maria Luiza de Queiroz Salek), several works published in partnership, articles, interviews and reviews. She was also the translator of dozens of novels, plays, biographies and other works into Portuguese. Both women were awarded literary prizes and grants.

Although Prichard was well into her twenties when Queiroz was born, they published their best-known novels within a one-year period: *Coonardoo* was published in 1929 and *O Quinze* in 1930. Unlike other of Queiroz's novels, there isn't a complete translation of *O Quinze* into English. However, Darlene Sadlier (1992) published extracts of the novel under the title *The Year Fifteen*, a title I will adopt in this paper. *Coonardoo* and *The Year Fifteen* have made their authors famous and have been continuously reprinted, especially the latter, which has had more than 100 Brazilian editions in 87 years.

Under a male pseudonym, Prichard's *Coonardoo* (in a tie with M. Barnard Eldershaw) won the *Bulletin Magazine's* novel competition in 1928, a significant

feat considering that there were 542 contestants (Throssel 53), and, mainly, the fact that the novel was the first to consistently portray an Aboriginal female protagonist, whereas the *Bulletin* proudly displayed the “Australia for the White Man” motto on its first page. Queiroz was only 18 when she became a celebrity writer. The laconic style and the contents of her first novel made it very different from the sentimental (“sugary water”, as Brazilians say) plots expected from a woman writer in Brazil at the time. Those factors led some of her first critics and admirers, such as the modernist icon Mario de Andrade, to think that *The Year Fifteen* was the work of a man under a female pseudonym. Nearly 50 years later, under great clamour, Queiroz would become the first woman to be allowed into the Brazilian Academy of Letters, in 1977, one year after the regulation that permitted only men into the Academy was revoked. Queiroz’s admittance into the academy is remarkable, even to today’s standards. Out of 288 members since it was founded in 1897, eight have been women so far, that is, 3%, in a country where 51% of the population is female.

Ideologically, the trajectories of both women resemble each other’s in even more specific ways. Prichard and Queiroz were attracted to communism, both contributed to the inauguration of the Communist Party in their regions and both felt betrayed by it. When Queiroz showed the manuscript for her second novel *João Miguel* (1932) to her hierarchical superiors in the Party, they condemned, among other things, the fact that it portrayed the incarceration of a labourer for killing a workmate. They recommended that Queiroz should edit the text, making the wealthy boss the villain instead of the worker. In indignant response to this interference with her freedom of expression, Queiroz left the Party. Censured by her communist colleagues for being insufficiently communist, her work failed to please the militarist federal government for the very opposite reason, and in 1937 the Vargas administration, accusing her of subversion, sent her to prison and withdrew her first three novels from the market.

In Australia’s less truculent political context, Prichard went through similar dilemmas, struggling to maintain her political views even when their reception was unfavourable. In the 1930s she travelled extensively in Russia to gather material for her pamphlet *The Real Russia* (published in 1934). When it was suggested that she should submit the manuscript to the Communist Party prior to its publication, Prichard refused to comply. According to her son and biographer Ric Throssell “she could no more overstate the political content of a novel to please Communist critics, than omit political views which she believed to be a real part of her subject to meet the wishes of Australian and British critics” (157). In the 1950s the Menzies administration tried to dissolve the Communist Party in Australia, Australian armies joined the Korean War and the conservative mentality started to see “the Red menace” everywhere. In a 1950 letter to her son, Prichard wrote about her anxieties, joking about the “red witch” label that her Perth neighbours had attached to her, and mentioning her fear of “interference with [her] normal way of life”. Fortunately, that intervention never came to pass (Throssell 156). Unlike Queiroz, who according to her own words (1999 27,

my translation) “became a sweet anarchist” after Trotsky was killed, Prichard remained loyal to the Communist Party her whole life.

The social/documental novel in Brazil and Australia

Prichard and Queiroz's ideological commitment and disillusion seem to be, therefore, part of the *Zeitgeist* of the 1930s and the following decades. In Brazil, the period was characterised by recession, high inflation and harsh military intervention. Democracy was not consolidated, the old rural oligarchies that had ruled the country since before the republic, in 1889, still fought each other for influence. Coups were expected events of national life. As an influx of international investment encouraged the industrialisation process, long-established monocrop and pastoralist agricultural practices were challenged. However, the huge social and economic gaps between social classes remained unaddressed. Literature reflected the period's turbulences and inequalities and the 1930s came to be associated with the so-called “social/regionalist” novel.

For administrative purposes, Brazil is divided into five macro regions established officially in the 1970s: North, Northeast, Centre-East, Southeast and South. Although these regions are territorially vast and present a great deal of internal diversity, Brazilians are frequently bound to stereotypically identify them (especially if they are not their own region) with a few of their positive or negative characteristics; thus the North Region could be associated with forests and Indigenous peoples – as well as deforestation and land conflicts; the South Region with cold weather, pampas vegetation, cattle farms and European immigration – and with separatist movements, and so on.

Differing from the Australian context, in which “regionalism” seems to have mostly a political connotation, *regionalismo* in Brazil is very much related to cultural life, the fact that, as Luis Augusto Fischer (7, my translation) explains, a cultural product “has sprung from any of the [Brazilian] regions, one among a number of others (although in general, the scenery depicted is predominantly rural).”² In the Brazilian imagination, regionalist characters are instantly associated with rural (unsophisticated and easily deridable) types: the *caipira* (the country bumpkin from several parts of the Brazilian countryside), the *sertanejo* (the north-eastern “bushman”), the *gaúcho* (the southern Brazilian version of the cowboy), and so on. And as “region” is defined against “a (supposed) universalism represented only in the art of the Court, the Centre, The Metropolis, always of the City” (7, my translation),³ regionalist literature, as well as much of the 1930s fiction, have come to be viewed as minor art.

Aiming at a less reductionist and derogatory view of the 1930s novel in Brazil, Luís Bueno conducts an extensive examination of the fictional production of that decade and finds, as a common ground for most of the novels, the fact that they tend to, in a way or another, express the “problem of the observation of the other”. This 1930s “other” in Brazil, he claims, consists mainly of the poor (euphemistically called “proletarian”), but also of other marginalised people and

groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, children, adolescents, homosexuals, people with mental health issues and women. Differing from previous decades, the other who now appears in Brazilian literature is no longer characterized by his/her folk interest, or by being a mere accessory role, but he/she becomes a protagonist on his/her own right (Bueno, 16, my translations).

The 1930 decade in Australia was characterised by the shift from the popular poetry and short stories, that since the 1890s had been considered mainstream literary forms, to the novel. Unlike the Brazilian scene, where women writers were still a minority, the flourishing of the Australian novel in that period also meant a better balance in terms of gender. Drusilla Modjeska (5) surveys the novels produced from 1928 to 1939, concluding that the period was unprecedented in the history of Australian literature, as nearly half of the novels were written by women, who also stood out in terms of the quality of their work. Miles Franklin, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Christina Stead, Eleanor Dark, Henry Handel Richardson and Prichard herself are some of the novelists who became prominent in the decade.

As David Carter (370-371) points out, from the 1930s to the early 1950s, social disturbances, exacerbated by the Depression, fascism and the possibility of war, were regarded by female and male Australian authors alike as imminent threats to culture. As an opposition to traditional, “well-made” plots based on heroism and romantic interest, a new literary mode emerged, shaped by an impulse towards documentary writing. It was a time for the discussion of the role of literature and intellectuals in society: “[s]tyle and subject-matter were politically motivated as writers attempted to represent forcefully, in literature discourse, facts and attitudes which they believed literature had conventionally excluded and falsified” (371). Rhetorically based on different premises from those pertaining high modernism, the “documental novel” was shunned by some modernists. What comes to mind is Patrick White’s definition of these novels as “the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (16). Along the same line as Bueno’s argument in defence of the 1930s novel in Brazil, Carter (374) posits that the thematic and stylistic distinctiveness and diversity revealed by 1930 and 1940s novels undermines that kind of criticism. Diversity was also relevant to counteract the tendency to homogeneity pervasive in traditional Australian literary histories.

The diverse aspects of Australian life that Prichard sought to reveal in *Coonardoo* were shocking occurrences in remote areas that urban coastal Australians and traditional fiction had preferred to overlook. The novel centres on the relationship between Coonardoo, an Indigenous woman, and her white boss, Hugh Watt. Coonardoo belongs to the Gnarler (alternative spelling for Ngarla or Ngaala-wangga) People, whose ancestral lands at the time of the narrative are within the territory of the fictional Wyaliba Station in the Pilbara region, in North-Western Australia. According to The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary (1997), a station is a “tract of grazing land, usually having a discernible centre of occupation”; “an extensive sheep or cattle raising establishment.”

Wytaliba is owned and run by Hugh's strong-minded and independent mother, Mrs Bessie. The novel mixes fictional events, events inspired in actual occurrences and observations, in Prichard's characteristic anthropological/poetic style, of different aspects of station life and the life in the *uloo*, or native camp, where the Gnarler Mob attempt to hold on to their traditional ways. Prichard used her own travel experiences in the region as inspiration for the novel.

Coonardoo spends her days as a house-servant and goes back to the *uloo* in the evening to be with her people. After Mrs Bessie's death, she continues to serve Hugh's wife, Mollie. Hugh and Coonardoo have been life-long friends and have developed a strong affective connection, as well as a common love of the land. However, a single sexual encounter between them, occurred sometime before Hugh's marriage, leads to catastrophic consequences. After the marriage falls apart and Mollie returns to Perth, Coonardoo and Winni, her child with Hugh, leave the *uloo* and move permanently into the homestead. Although the common view is that Coonardoo is Hugh's "black velvet" (Aboriginal mistress), Hugh, for years, represses his sexual drives towards her. During one of Hugh's absences, Sam Geary, the lustful owner of a neighbouring station, has sex with Coonardoo. The unresolved sexual and emotional tension between Hugh and Coonardoo result in violence and Coonardoo's ultimate moral and physical degradation in exile. By the time Coonardoo returns to her country to die, Wytaliba, ravished by drought and deprived of the people who genuinely love it (since Hugh has sold it to Sam Geary and the Gnarler have left), is only a shadow of its initial grandeur.

Space is also a central element of the so-called *literatura da seca* (drought literature) in Brazil, of which *The Year Fifteen* is one of the best-remembered titles. Like *Coonardoo*, *The Year Fifteen* has a historical backdrop: the drought of 1915 in Ceará State, one of the most devastating and long-lasting occurrences of this kind in the *sertão*. The term *sertão* designates the semi-arid backlands of the Northeast region. Whilst droughts are recurrent in the Northeast, they are especially intense in Ceará, a State with 94% of its territory located in Brazil's semi-arid zone. The 1915 drought was witnessed by Queiroz herself when she was a little girl on her family's farm.

The prolonged dry spell sets two plots in motion. The first one initially points to the romance formula between cousins and childhood sweethearts Vicente and Conceição, whose families own cattle farms in the *sertão*. Conceição, a self-educated and quite erudite young woman, spends most of the year in Fortaleza, Ceará State's capital city, where she works as a teacher. Vicente manages his parents' farm but refuses to do what most of his neighbours are doing at a time of crisis: release, in order to cut costs, the few head of cattle that have survived. This action also means dismissing the live-in farmhands and their families, making them instantly unemployed and homeless.

The second plot depicts the struggles of one of these impoverished, landless families. Unable to afford train tickets, Chico Bento and his family set off on a long walk from Quixadá, in the *sertão*, towards Fortaleza, on the coast, around 100 miles away. On this journey they cross paths with dozens of other forced

migrants, known in Brazil as *retirantes* (“retreaters”). These travellers share stories of poverty, famine, disease, death and injustice. The trip takes a heavy toll on Chico Bento’s family: one of his sons, ravished by hunger, eats poisonous roots and dies, another runs away towards an unknown, probably criminal future and Chico’s sister-in-law stays behind, seemingly driven to prostitution. The two plots come together in Fortaleza, where the family, like thousands of others, seeks shelter in the so-called “concentration camp”. In 1930 the expression did not have a Nazi connotation, being used to describe encampments of people guarded by the police and built – or, rather, improvised – to stop drought refugees from entering the town. Conceição, who volunteers in the camp, comes across them and, after adopting their youngest child, helps organise their migration to São Paulo. Instead of pursuing a relationship with Vicente, Conceição chooses a path that does not involve marriage.

Although a love story between two people from similar social classes and ethnic backgrounds could be more easily fulfilled here than in *Coonardoo*, Queiroz does not provide a traditional romantic solution to the plot. While both *Coonardoo* and *The Year Fifteen* present heavy social comment on their respective societies, they also challenge the romance formula as well as the readers’ expectations.

Coonardoo and settler colonialism

In 1969, Catherine Duncan heard that Prichard was planning to destroy some of her personal papers and manuscripts. In a letter that would prove quite prophetic, she tried to dissuade her friend: “Is the writer capable of being his own critic? [...] Who is KSP after all? Not a solid, one-sided slab in any case, but with an infinite number of transparencies and obliquities which she reveals briefly in her writing and to friends [...]. In fifty years, dearest Kattie, the KSP you are will have become someone else, she will have escaped you” (Duncan, apud Bird, 2000, p. xi).

Half a century after her death, the multifaceted author that KSP has become still incites controversy. The Austlit database displays more than 880 entries of critical texts on Katharine Susannah Prichard.⁴ Examining some of those texts pertaining to *Coonardoo*, it is possible to notice that various of the assertions about the novel can be counteracted with diametrically opposed argumentation, either by a single critic or by different ones: the novel – or parts of it – is censured and praised; its degree of verisimilitude can be played up or down; it is viewed alternately as subjective or as objective, realist or romantic, reticent or bold in its assertions; it is considered strongly and consistently committed to an ideology or loosely and mistakenly so; in the cultural studies realm it can be placed at the cutting edge, supporting Indigenous and/or feminist causes, or it would be reactionary, actually doing a disservice to the minorities it is supposed to represent (for some of these readings see Bird, 2003; Corbould, 1999; Hodge, 1991; Kossew, 2004; Leane, 2014; Lever, 2000).

This dissonance might be rooted in the fact that Prichard is a non-Indigenous woman trying to tell a story from the perspective of an Indigenous one (her entitlement to do so is also a matter of contention). For the Wiradjuri author and professor Jeanine Leane, inconsistencies in *Coonardoo* and other Australian novels written by “whitefellas” who have attempted to look candidly or sympathetically at Indigenous characters occur because

along with their representations of Aboriginal people, these works are more significantly journeys into the interior of the settler mind and consciousness and its understanding of the phenomena of “the Aborigine” and are deeply involved with questions of authority and power. “The Aborigine” is the first renaming and therefore representation of us (Leane 1).

Because it focuses on the settler imagination and problematises the representations of the settler and the Other created by it, the recent critical field of Settler Colonial Studies is a suitable analytical tool with which to study *Coonardoo* and other complex novels. The main premise of Melbourne-based historian and political scientist Lorenzo Veracini’s seminal book *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, is that settler colonialism should be understood and analysed not as a branch of colonialism but as a separate category of European domination that shares some characteristics with colonialism (Veracini, 2010, 9). Veracini’s theories further develop Australian anthropologist Patrick Wolfe’s thesis proposed in 1999 that, while colonialism is based on the idea that colonisers will exploit Indigenous labour and resources to, eventually, go back to where they came from, settlers “come to stay” (Wolfe, 2016, 65; Veracini, 2015, 74). For Wolfe, colonialism would, thus, constitute an “event” in the history of the colonised. Settler colonialism, on the other hand, would be “a structure”:

The primary object of settler-colonization is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labour with it. Though, in practice, Indigenous labour was indispensable to Europeans, settler-colonization is at base a winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement. The logic of this project, a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Indigenous population, informs a range of historical practices that might otherwise appear distinct – invasion is a structure, not an event (Wolfe, 1999, 163).

One of the complexities of settler societies lies in the fact that settlers “uneasily occup[y] a place caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity” (Johnston; Lawson qtd. in Veracini, 2010, p. 9). Also very importantly, in Veracini’s theory (2015, 68), “settler colonialism is not finished”. European descendants in settler colonies have inherited the predicaments of their ancestors: as they aspire to escape from imperial rule and strive to establish and maintain their agency over indigenous lands, they are also ready, when convenient, to evoke metropolitan authority in their dealings with Indigenous Others, as well as to appropriate Indigenous traits when trying to set themselves

apart from the metropolitan model and safeguarding their entitlement to the Other's land. In other words, "as it is coming from elsewhere and as it sees itself as permanently situated, the settler collective is indigenous and exogenous at the same time" (Veracini, 2010, 20).

From that perspective, while in some theoretical approaches textual occurrences such as "duality", "contradiction", "ambiguity", "ambivalence", "double bind" – and other such variations – might be read as conceptual or structural defects, settler colonial theory sees them as inherent aspects of the settler frame of mind. Another relevant aspect is that settler colonial studies regard fictional texts as legitimate sources for the observation and analysis of settler colonial phenomena. In fact, fictional texts might even have the upper-hand in that respect: "As non-historical approaches sometime display an analytical sharpness that is seldom within the reach of traditional historical narratives, a fictional reconstruction can perhaps better frame an encounter that is more imagined than practiced (Veracini, 2010, 84).

Therefore, fictional plots with a factual background such as *Coonardoo* provide a rich field for settler colonial studies. The novel comprises a historically identifiable period that has been thoroughly analysed by Marion Austin-Crowe. According to Austin-Crowe's estimation, the events depicted by Prichard would have happened roughly between 1885 to the mid-1920s and the Watts would have bought Wyaliba from Saul Hardy, the first European settler, around 1877. As the settlement of the Australian North-West had started in the 1860s, Wyaliba station and the Gnarl *uloo* within it would constitute, thus, a "near-pioneering community" (Austin Crowe, 23-26). In the following conversation, Sam Geary and Mrs Bessie reminisce about the Watts' droving years, prior to the purchase of the station:

"Ted'd drive the ration cart and she'd drive the bullocks with a couple of boys — black imps — about ten and twelve," he said. "And when some of the chaps got on to Ted for letting Mrs Bessie ride after the bullocks, she said, 'Here, what are you chippin' about? When Ted's with the ration cart I know where he is, and when I'm with the bullocks he knows where I am'" (Prichard, 47).

This anecdote on the reversal of gender stereotypes foreshadows Mrs Bessie being nicknamed *Mumae* by the Wyaliba workers (whereas the word sounds like Hugh's childhood name for his mother, it actually means "father" in the Gnarl language). In a style that evokes the nationalist "Lawson Tradition"⁵, the cheerful, yarn-like account of the mateship between husband and wife disregards any conflicts that might have existed or still existed between settlers and the Indigenous custodians. There seems to be no qualms about the exploitation of the labour of Indigenous children or their separation from their families so that they can go droving with the settlers. In fact, the excuse for the exploitation of those children is at the same time revealed and softened by the adoption of the ironic term of endearment "black imps".

Hiding the sins of settler colonialism behind the guise of frontier myth, romantic narratives of conquest, or nostalgia for the “good old times” are denial mechanisms adopted by settlers. The encounter with Indigenous peoples, becomes, thus, “premised on a foundational disavowal [that] can be better described as a non-encounter” (Veracini, 2010, 84). One type of discourse that contributes to the effacement of the injustices committed against Indigenous peoples maintains that they would be dying races, doomed to disappear from the outset; another poses Australia as the “Quiet Continent”, passively awaiting the arrival of the Europeans (Veracini, 2010, 90-91). Prichard’s fictional world draws from both types of disavowing discourses. Coonardoo’s tragic demise and the disappearance of the *uloo* in Wyaliba Station are in line with Prichard’s assertions, in her foreword to the novel, that “the poor, degenerate and degraded creatures” that “the blacks” had become would be a “result of contact with towns and the vices of white people.” She also resorts to the authority of Social Darwinist theories to predict their disappearance: “In other words”, she claims in her preface, “the Australian aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended” (Prichard xxvi).

As for the passivity of the Australian Continent, the protagonist herself would stand for the quiet land, starting with her deeply symbolic name:

She could see low brown huts down there beside the well, a deep narrow well the Gnarler had dug long ago at a little distance from the creek. Coonardoo they called it, the dark well, or the well in the shadows. Coonardoo had been named after the well near which she was born. The huts were the huts of her people (Prichard 2).

The “well in the shadow” is the main *leitmotif* along the narrative. The combined characteristics of depth and darkness suggest the mysterious ontological bond with the land, something settlers are eager to possess. Forging a similar connection between the European and the colonised land would validate, once and for all, the settlers’ territorial rights, a self-bequeathed entitlement that is always shadowed by the presence of the original custodians (Veracini, 2010, 43).

Furthermore, in the harsh environment of the Western Australian outback a shadowy well could allude to a miniature oasis, a source of life and relief in the midst of extreme aridity. This connotation could be associated with the status of Coonardoo as a house servant, an occupation that implies attention to life’s basic needs in a context of near invisibility or, at least, of being taken for granted by the employers/masters. Coonardoo is both a shadow to Mrs Bessie and Hugh, always at their beck and call, and a source of care and comfort to the Watt family, especially to Molly, Hugh’s wife. Molly is a frustrated city girl whose initial dislike of station life turns gradually into hatred, and who eventually leaves the management of the household and the care of her five daughters to Coonardoo.

Although Hugh and the omniscient narrator at times express disapproval of Molly’s abuse of Coonardoo’s willingness to help, Coonardoo’s own (either

inner or spoken) voice is not made to question the pertinence of her loyalty, an exploitation that comes to the brink of slavery:

Through all the nervy restlessness and fury of Mollie's discontent Coonardoo was her slave. Silently, with slow grace and dignity, she waited on and worked for Hugh's wife, very often not getting the rest at midday with the other gins, it was so difficult for her to go without. An expression of suffering and fortitude deepened on her face (Prichard 144)

Another connotation of the word "well" is sexual. The word significantly reappears in the subtle and understated description of Coonardoo and Hugh's sexual encounter, which is also the turning point to the narrative. The episode occurs before Hugh's marriage, when he is half-crazed, mourning the death of his mother and "goes walkabout", miming, in a clumsy way, the Aboriginal rite of passage into manhood, when a boy embarks on a long, lonely walk in the outback. Coonardoo – who has promised Mrs Bessie to take her place and look after Hugh – quietly follows him from a distance and is eventually discovered:

This was a childish adventure they were on. His gratitude shook him as he thought of how she had followed and watched over him during the last weeks. It yielded to yearning and tenderness. Deep inexplicable currents of his being flowed towards her.

"Coonardoo! Coonardoo!" he murmured.

Awakened, she came to kneel beside him, her eyes the fathomless shining of a well in the shadows. Hugh took her in his arms, and gave himself to the spirit which drew him, from a great distance it seemed, to the common source which was his life and Coonardoo's.

They slept beside the fire near the clump of dead mulga until it was morning. Hugh started up to find Coonardoo stirring embers of the fire. They had walked back into the camp then. (Prichard 81-82)

The sequence of the death of the mother, followed closely by a sexual encounter with her surrogate (to be later followed by guilt, rejection and rage), has clear psychoanalytical inferences. The sexual act and its outcome, the "half-caste" Winni, ("the son of the whirlwind"), become, for Hugh, both a source of guilt (since he has sworn he will never behave like Sam Geary in relation to Indigenous women) and a confirmation of his own deeper connection with the land.

The ambivalent feelings of guilt and desire to own the land are pointed out by Veracini as characteristics of the settler mindset. Therefore, when Hugh compares his feelings towards Coonardoo and Winni to those towards Molly and their eldest daughter Phyllis, the former seem to him more "rooted" into the earth:

Mollie's baby, fresh and pink-and-white, was a fairy creature. Hugh loved her; but she was less real, much less his own than that son of a whirlwind. Always as he leant over, played with and held the baby, he thought of Winni. His affection for the boy plagued him. Was it because he reproached himself for the existence of the child? Perhaps. Hugh could not tell. Did he reproach himself really?

Coonardoo had been the one sure thing in his life when his mother went out of it. He had grasped her. She was a stake, something to hang on to. More than that, the only stake he could hang on to. He had to remind himself of her dark skin and race. Hugh had never been able to think of Coonardoo as alien to himself. She was the old playmate; a force in the background of his life, silent and absolute. Something primitive, fundamental, nearer than he to the source of things: the well in the shadows. (Prichard 140-141)

Hugh's attempt to (sexually) hold on to Coonardoo, something "nearer than he to the source of things", as well as his secret attachment to their child, is a movement towards what Terry Goldie (13) calls "indigenization". The need to "become native" and "to belong" is one more of the complications posed by the settler situation. Goldie (12), using White Canadians and the Canadian "Indian" as paradigms, puts it in the following terms: "The White Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?". White writers, Goldie goes on, have tried to solve that impasse "through writing about the humans who are truly indigenous" (13). Veracini also drawing from Goldie's definition, develops the idea of "indigenisation" as the "crucial need to transform an historical tie ("we came here") into a natural one ("the land made us") (2010, 21-22).

Another attempt at indigenisation is discursive. In this respect, the novel seems to be following the period's ethnographic and anthropologic trends, as W.B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen's book, originally published in 1899 as *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* is re-launched as *The Arunta* in 1927, followed by *The Vanished Tribes*, by James Devaney in 1929 and David Unaipon's *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines* in 1930. In *Coonardoo*, the Gnarler language appears in songs, in expressions used by the Indigenous characters and in sparse words along the text, for which Prichard provides translation and a glossary. The novel opens with Prichard's transcription of an Indigenous song (about kangaroos coming over to feed and making a devil dance with their feet), while, alone at dawn, the nine-year-old Coonardoo laments the imminent departure of her playmate Youie (Hugh) to school in the city, "[a]way and away, farther than Coonardoo could think, beyond the blue backs of the hills, mulga scrub, and again away, and away, to the sea":

"Poodinyoover mulbeena, mulbeena, mulbeena!" she wailed, while yellow moths beat the air before her, black markings of their wings flickering, jiggling with little feet of the kangaroos, and white threads of the blossom which were falling. Little feet, fluttering wings, threads of falling blossom wreathed a cobwebby sleepiness over her. Very drowsily, the faint reedy voice twanged. Coonardoo's head drooped, the fine silky jet of curled lashes swept her cheek. Her singing ran out, and started again in a flurry (Prichard 3).

The effect of these lyrics, woven into the narrative voice's own poetic prose, is slightly surrealist, materialising Coonardoo's sleepy state and providing a glimpse

into her world. However imperfect and idealised, Prichard's attempt at depicting the Indigenous consciousness was a new development in Australian literature in the 1930s. For Goldie (54-55) the innovation in *Coonardoo* was not thematic, as many critics claim, but it would lie in the omniscient narration concentrating on different characters, an Aboriginal woman among them. The song works as a frame to the novel, reappearing in the final chapter, about 40 years later, with a new connotation. Lonely and dreamy once again, but also nostalgic and broken by venereal disease and the hostile conditions of the life she's led since Hugh banished her from Wyaliba, Coonardoo goes back home and the kangaroo song of her childhood becomes her requiem.

Prichard uses Coonardoo's tragic fate as an allegory for the demise of the Indigenous Other in Australia, a clear settler colonial strategy. Settler colonialism is a project based mainly on land appropriation and the subconscious, ambivalent or earnest desire for the disappearance of the Indigenous Others. This is a crucial object for settlers, as the presence of Others brings forth a moral dilemma and causes permanent anxiety. Indigenous Others "challenge with their very presence the basic legitimacy of the settler entity" (Veracini, 2010, 33). To secure its implementation and perpetuity, settler colonialism relies on varied strategies. Although the first ideas that come to mind regarding Indigenous disappearance are bloodshed and genocide, overtly violent means are not always the case. Veracini (2010, 33) uses the expression "transfer" to refer to several strategies that settlers can adopt to make the Other vanish, in literal or metaphorical terms.

One of Prichard's objectives in making Coonardoo a protagonist seems to be to try to counteract the effects of what Veracini (2010, 37) has called "perception transfer", or the attempt to ignore the (present or past) presence of Indigenous peoples. By bringing to the surface at least two situations urban coastal Australians were willing to ignore – the possibility of interethnic love and the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women – Prichard stirred Australians out of their complacency and disturbed what the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner (189) in the 1960s called "The Great Australian Silence", or white Australia's unwillingness to discuss the moral consequences of dispossession. Critical response and the stacks of complaint letters that the *Bulletin* received after the publication of the story attest to the successful outcome of this aim.

The ambivalent attitudes of the novel's main landowners Mrs Bessie and Sam Geary also make them "agents of transfer". Mrs Bessie tries to come to terms with her own ambiguous feelings towards some of the practices that would be instantly considered taboo by Western standards – and thus, subject to transfer – such as the early sexual initiation of girls, which Prichard describes in some detail in chapter 3:

Mrs Bessie had fits of loathing the blacks. Although she had lived and worked like a man, so long in the Nor'-West, without the least respect for conventional ideas which hampered her in anything she wanted to do, her white woman's prejudices were still intact. She was disgusted by practices she

considered immoral, until she began to understand a difference to her own in the aboriginal consciousness of sex. She was surprised then, to find in it something impersonal, universal, of a religious mysticism (Prichard 26).

She likes to see herself as the benign, open-minded, culture-sensitive settler and she is aware of the damage caused by what Veracini (2010, 44) has called “transfer by coerced lifestyle”, a type of transfer that does not necessarily involve geographical movement, being a way of removing (transferring) the Indigenous Others’ lifestyle and/or social and political organisation.

In several instances, Mrs Bessie’s positioning seems to be uncharacteristically tolerant for the time: “Mrs Bessie would not allow any Christianizing of the aborigines on Wyaliba. She had never seen a native who was better for breaking with his tribal laws and beliefs” (Prichard 16). The continuation of the paragraph, however, counteracts that open-mindedness by revealing the impossibility of maintaining those traditions in settler societies reliant on Indigenous labour, as well as Mrs Bessie’s deep-seated value judgement regarding the primitivism of Indigenous customs: “although all day Coonardoo was Mrs Bessie’s shadow, and learned to wait on and do everything for her, bring her tools, make her baths and her camp-fires, always at sunset she went off with her people and slept with the dogs by her father’s camp-fire” (Prichard 16).

Although, in thesis, settler societies do not rely primarily on Indigenous labour or slavery, as Austin-Crowe’s study (65) concludes, settlers in North-Western Australia were very historically dependent on Indigenous peoples for the running and maintenance of both their stations and homesteads, adopting a labour system that would be today seen as akin to slavery. Through Mrs Bessie, Prichard implies that even for the most well-meaning of station owners, respect for the Other’s lifestyle seems to go only as far as it does not interfere with the settlers’ own comfort and profit. By “exchanging” Indigenous labour for clothes, rations, blankets, knick-knacks and occasionally a horse or other livestock, Mrs Bessie helps promote the permanent “sedentarisation” of a society that is partly nomadic. She also makes its members dependent on her own “benevolence”, hence Indigenous characters’ half-starved, dirty and ragged state when Hugh returns to the Station after his long recovery period in the city (Prichard 101). Giving the impression that Indigenous people cannot survive without the settlers’ kindness is another strategy to justify dispossession.

At first sight, Sam Geary would be on the opposite side of the virtue spectrum when compared to Mrs Bessie, and yet his depiction by Prichard is no less complex. On the one hand he is the abject sexual predator type, always trying to negotiate with Indigenous men in order to acquire new women. He offers “old Joey Koonarra, Coonardoo’s father, a rifle, blankets and tobacco for the girl” (Prichard 32), but is stopped by Mrs Bessie. Invoking the Bible to justify his polygamy with eleven Indigenous women, he also treats miscegenation lightly, having fathered several half-caste children, who will not, obviously, acquire any inheriting rights of his property, Nuniewarra. On the other hand, his outspokenness about racial relations and the fact that he defies interethnic taboos

(which are apparent in his dealings with Indigenous women, such as his current lover, whom he calls “The Queen of Sheba”), contrast greatly with the hypocrisy sustained by the supposedly benevolent settlers:

Sheba had been with Geary two or three years now. She kept the keys of the store-room. Before Sheba there had been Sarah and Tamar. Now Sheba and Tamar both had corrugated-iron huts on Nuniewarra, although Sheba spent most of her time at the homestead with Sam. She made tea for visitors, and Geary took her with him when he went into Karrara, engaged rooms for her at the hotel and gave her money to buy silk dresses. She went to the races with him. But here in Wytaliba, Sheba had to eat at the kala miah [wood heap] with the other gins [Aboriginal women] (Prichard 65)

But Coonardoo refuses to become Sam Geary’s “black velvet”. And yet, single, puzzling, half-consensual sexual intercourse with the abject settler results in metaphorical and literal transfer, which takes the form of banishment, exile and physical and moral decline.

In Prichard’s telluric but tragic view of interracial relations, Coonardoo’s approximation to the abject settler and distancing from the virtuous one result in the deterioration of her own and Hugh’s connection with the land, and, ultimately, in the decay of the land itself.

The Year Fifteen: an attempt at a settler colonial reading

Rachel de Queiroz’s reception, like Prichard’s, has been highly controversial. Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda (2016, my translation) ascribes that to the fact that Queiroz “always excelled in driving against the traffic of History”.⁶ Several interviews given by Queiroz reinforcing again and again her ideas seem to suggest that she did not mind and even felt a certain satisfaction in the polemic her statements could incite. Hollanda (2016) and Wasserman (2007 57) believe that her personal views have had too much influence on the critical readings of her work. In relation to the regularity of these critical readings, Hollanda (2016) observes that from 1930 to 1960 there was a great wave of criticism on Queiroz, an interest boosted by the novelty and quality of her work. With the proliferation of graduate literature degrees, after the 1960s (high times of military dictatorship in Brazil), a new generation of critics, involved with and/or influenced by the establishment of an “academic canon” started to consider Queiroz an awkward object of study. Hollanda (2016) attributes that rejection not to the response to her fiction itself, but to the apprehension created by her conflicting relationship with feminism, her acquaintances in places of power, her free traffic through the backstage of Brazilian literature and politics, and her contentious, sometimes inconsistent, political ideas and public statements. Scholars did not know how to juggle Queiroz, the writer of fiction, and Queiroz, the outspoken persona.

Queiroz’s outspokenness was notorious. Albeit one of the most important modernist writers in Brazil, she used to baffle her interlocutors by claiming that

she “didn’t like writing”, that she “wrote only for the money”, that she thought of herself more as a journalist than as a novelist (Hollanda, 2016), and so on. Not only did she try to disengage herself from any gendered views of her fiction, but she declared, more than once, that she “hated” feminism. She found it a “badly-oriented” movement, so much so that, if “a feminist gave an interview bad-mouthing a man; [she] found a way to claim that [she] liked him, just to keep [her] position” (Queiroz, 1997, 26, my translation).⁷ And yet, her fictional work, filled with what Queiroz herself classified as “extraordinary women” (Queiroz, 1997, 26, my translation),⁸ is an invitation to feminist readings. In Hollanda’s assessment (2016, my translation), her protagonists “are all strong, self-sufficient women, who obstinately follow the paths that lead to destinies marked by independence and power.”⁹ Invariably, for Queiroz’s young protagonists, marriage is not a formula for female happiness. And among her older female characters are the matriarchs, rural women who are widowed or whose husbands are frequently absent, and who “managed, with an iron grip, the large sugar and cattle farms in the [Northeast] region” (Hollanda, 2016, my translation).¹⁰ Feminist readings of Queiroz’s novels, however, are still infrequent.

In relation to her political views, Queiroz’s positioning is even more contentious. Having been persecuted, arrested and censured during the Vargas presidential term for her communist ideas, and considering his successor, João Goulart/Jango, a continuator of Vargas’s policies, she ended up, as she herself puts it (long after she had abandoned communism), “conspiring with the generals for the overthrowing of Jango” (Queiroz, 1997, 29).¹¹ Her justifications for this position are based on the fact that she had many friends and family among the military and their sympathisers, who even gathered in her home to articulate their moves. General Castelo Branco, Jango’s successor, was her friend and called her “cousin” (Queiroz, 1997, 29). A recent example of the controversy that Queiroz’s positions still incite happened on 17 November 2017. To mark Queiroz’s birthday and targeting students of Brazilian literature preparing for university entrance exams, the Facebook page *Lítera* re-posted a photo of Queiroz with the following subtitles: “At 17 I wrote for newspapers, at 18 I published my first novel, and I was the first woman to enter the Brazilian Academy of Letters. Nice to meet you. Rachel de Queiroz” (my translation). The post had been shared by more than 800 people. Among the comments, fans, some considering her a “Northeast Diva”, and critics discussed the relevance (or not) of her collaboration with dictatorship to the appreciation and evaluation of her fiction.¹²

For Hollanda (2016, my translation), Queiroz’s “deep intimacy with power” was inherited from the tradition of *compadrio*, or “godparenting”,¹³ a profoundly ingrained trait in Brazilian personal and familial relations, especially in the Northeast, a society historically dominated by archaic, oligarchical, landed gentry. *Compadrio* derives from Catholic baptism rites, a compromise that the godparent assumed to provide for a child in the case of the parents’ absence. In the large landed estates, that practice was extended to an “almost feudal relationship between godchildren and their godparents, who were the land-owners or the

educated elite.” The objective was to “develop, within the family, strategies of power distribution and ways of safeguarding the protection of household members and godchildren” (Hollanda, 2016, my translation). The expressions *compadre* and its feminine version *comadre* also have a more widespread, non-religious, meaning, being used all over Brazil as a term of endearment to express esteem or friendship (Houaiss).

In interviews it is possible to perceive how *compadrio* affects the way Queiroz sees herself, her family and her family’s social position and function in Ceará:

I was born into a family of farmers, but our farms were always poor, cattle farms, we never had the abundance of the farms in Bahia or Pernambuco [neighbouring States to Ceará], where the [sugar cane] mill owner was a dignitary. In spite of any ideologies, we were always friends with our employees, we were “compadres” of our stockmen [godparents to the stockmen’s children]. In our midst there were never any land problems, because we always gave land for our tenants to cultivate. I may have a lot of defects but I never charged for a grain of bean from a worker of mine. (Queiroz, 1997, 28)¹⁴

Landlessness and inequalities that were (and still are) happening in the Northeast become, for Queiroz, not a political matter of land distribution, but a personal question of lack of generosity on the part of the large landowners who do not “give” (an obvious euphemism for “loan”) land for the tenants to cultivate, who do not become godparents to their children or who charge for all the “benefits” they concede to them. Queiroz also transposes this idealised view of the relationship between the landed gentry and the landless in Ceará, a manifestation of what Veracini calls “disavowal”, into her fiction. In this paper, these relationships will be approximated to the ones between the settler and the Indigenous Other. This type of idealisation serves as a screen to profound power and economic inequalities, evoking one of the disavowing settler strategies described by Veracini (2010, 14). Analogously to *Coonardoo*, idealisation in *The Year Fifteen* is emphasised by the contrast between the benevolent and the abject landowners. The former are represented by Vicente and Conceição’s families, and the latter by Mrs Maroca, the matriarch of the Aroeiras Farm and Chico Bento’s boss, who is described as a “disgraceful” old rag and a miser (Queiroz, 2011, 90, my translation).¹⁵

The wide social gaps in Brazil are – as much as their disavowal – deep-rooted, as Queiroz’s statement above makes clear. Social class profiling goes hand-in-hand with racism and often overpowers it as a criterium for exclusion and discrimination. According to sociologist Darcy Ribeiro, social inequality in Brazil started to take shape in the sixteenth Century, when Portugal, a country with few inhabitants, even for European standards, found itself in need to populate (and therefore, protect from the grasp of competing powers, such as the Spanish, the French and the Dutch), a huge mass of land overseas (in its current configuration, Brazil is 92 times larger than Portugal). The Crown’s solution was to grant huge

allotments of land (dozens of craggy leagues), the so-called *donatarias*, to a few individuals considered loyal and wealthy enough to be able to settle on the land with their own financial means:

The grantee was a high nobleman invested with feudal powers by the king to govern his estate for thirty leagues in every direction; with the political power to found villages, grant pieces of land, and license artisans and merchants; with economic power to develop his lands directly or through intermediaries, and even with the right to impose capital punishment. (Ribeiro 54)

This method, put into practice as early as 1532, can be seen as the inception of the land and income distribution problems that have plagued Brazil since then. The *donatarias* system is also the root of the abusive political power that the landed gentry have maintained along the history of Brazil, especially in the Northeast, where some landowners would become known as *coronéis*. In spite of the military term, *coronelismo* can be defined, according to the *Houaiss Dictionary*, as a “social/political practice, characteristic of rural environments and small interior towns, that flourished during the First Republic (1889-1930), a form of bossism in which an elite, symbolically embodied in a landowner, controls the means of production, detaining the local economic, political and social power”. Add slavery to this system of privileges and we have a society that, although still resembling a settler colonial one in important ways, departs from the settler colonial paradigm in others.

Some of the characteristics of the Portuguese venture in Brazil are clearly those of settler colonialism: the Portuguese came to stay, they made a point of eliminating the Indigenous Others and introduced African and, later on, Exogenous Others of different nationalities. However, Veracini (2010, 30) and other scholars have acknowledged the difficulties of applying settler colonialism theories to South American countries. According to Michael Goebel (139), *mestiçagem* (miscegenation) and the colonisers’ primary intention of exploiting labour for a profit, leaving the settlement itself as a secondary benefit, would make it more difficult to fit the Spanish and Portuguese-origin societies in America into Veracini’s model.

Mestiçagem is indeed a very complex matter in Brazil. When comparing ethnic categorisations in Australia and Brazil, Wolfe (2016, 203), finds the Brazilian system “extravagant” and “baroque in its excess”. While a division between black and white (and, at most, “half-caste”) might generally suffice in Australia and many other hybridized societies, in Brazil there can be up to 500 different terms to describe racial types (although many of them are highly specialised and localised in specific micro-regions). And yet, Wolfe (2016, 204) ponders, most of those terms refer to African + White variations and very few to the admixture Amerindians + White. *Caboclo* is the main term to refer to the latter (although *mameluco*, *caiçara* or *curiboca* are also sparsely used). This disparity serves settler colonial purposes especially well. Settlers, as Veracini

(2010, 26) points out, rely on the presence of Exogenous Others to feel entitled to the land. Wolfe (2016, 204) explains the usefulness, in Brazil, of the one-drop rule in creating and emphasising distinctions among African-Brazilians to foster the social exclusion that comes from those distinctions. As a constant reminder of the injustices of land appropriation, however, the presence of Indigenous Others – and the political conflicts that they might inspire – causes discomfort and insecurity for settlers. Their elimination/assimilation into mainstream society through miscegenation (and a much more limited range of terms to describe their specific ethnicity) becomes very much desirable.

Historically, miscegenation started as early as the arrival of the first Portuguese settlers. Ribeiro (49-50) observes that the establishment of the Portuguese colony in South America was only possible because settlers took ruthless advantage of the Indigenous practice known as *cunhadismo* (“in-lawism”). Many Amerindian societies considered it a sign of esteem to “give” a male visitor a wife from their clan. In taking the woman, the settler was no longer a foreigner and became immediately an “in-law” to all her relatives on her parents’ side. As polygamy was also a standard practice, a Portuguese man could easily form a complex network of “relatives” to serve and work for him. More importantly, he could quickly produce dozens of children. While settler violence and European diseases rapidly decimated the Amerindian populations, it was this “widespread class of people of mixed blood, who effectively occupied Brazil” (Ribeiro 50).

In spite of the demographic significance that they soon achieved, these *caboclos* or *mamelucos* were displaced individuals, becoming victims of two types of rejection:

First was that of their fathers, with whom they wanted to identify but who looked down on them as impure sons of the land, taking good advantage of their work while they were children and youths and later integrating them into the *bandeira* expeditions [16th and 17th century colonial expeditions into the interior of Brazil to search for precious metals and gather slaves among the Indigenous Peoples] of which many made a career. The second rejection was that of their maternal people. The Indians’ concept was that a woman is simply the sack into which the male deposits his seed. The one who is born is the child of the father and not of the mother, as the Indians see it. Unable to identify himself with either of his ancestral lines, which both rejected him, the *mameluco* fell into a no-man’s-land out of which he shaped his identity as a Brazilian.

So it was that by means of *cunhadismo* carried to extremes, a new human breed was created, which was not recognized or seen as such by Indians, by Europeans, or by blacks. (Ribeiro 70)

In the official Brazilian historiography, until recently heavily influenced by Gilberto Freyre’s 1933 thesis that miscegenation had created in Brazil a less cruel and racist society than the ones in North America (Freyre 1956), the fact that the first Brazilians after European settlement were displaced half-caste children enslaved by their own fathers and turned into enslavers of their Indigenous countrymen (sometimes of their own mothers’ people), is easily “forgotten”.

Furthermore, a lot more emphasis is placed on African rather than on Indigenous slavery. Self-perceptions of miscegenation say a great deal about Brazilians' attitudes towards race and social class.

Miscegenation has not meant the integration of the hybridised individuals into a more privileged social stratum. As Deborah de Magalhães Lima (10) elicits, the permanence, in Brazilian society, of the use of the term *caboclo* as an expression of contempt in relation to the Other evinces that. There is a contemporary generalised meaning to the term *caboclo*, current not only in the regions with higher Indigenous demographics, but all over Brazil, that detaches it from Indigenous associations, relating it to a person considered "more rural, indigenous or rustic in relation to the speaker" (Lima, 1999, p. 7, my translation).¹⁶ *Caboclo* is, therefore, a regional (in the Brazilian sense) derogatory term that is not usually self-attributed. In fact, when using it to describe someone, the speaker is implicitly asserting his superior status as a "non-*caboclo*". Significantly, the *caboclos*, taken collectively, are not a social group found in real life, neither are they a distinctive entity that could, like the *Indígenas*, or the African-Brazilians, fight for political rights. Rather than a social group, *caboclo* is a social category, "an abstraction, a unit in a classification system intended to portray differences between people in a society" (Lima, 8, my translation).¹⁷

Miscegenation and variation in demographic estimation criteria make it very difficult to determine the populational progression of the *caboclos* in Brazil. *Caboclo* was a category in the official censuses of 1870 and 1890, but was encompassed by the umbrella term *pardo* (a term that refers to an indefinite brownish colour rather than to a racial category, used to designate any combinations between White, Black and Indigenous), from 1940 on. However, it is safe to say that the two regions with the largest proportion of Indigenous peoples, respectively North and Northeast, are also the ones with the largest number of *caboclos*. The complex character of Brazilian miscegenation makes it hard to establish the triple structure of settler colonialism in racial/ethnic terms, as Veracini's theory claims. Yet, it is still possible to detect settler colonial traits in the dynamics of the relations between the descendants of the white landowning settlers and the hybridised descendants of Indigenous Others and *caboclos*, a racial/ethnic phenomenon turned into a social-class matter in Brazil. While far from claiming to come to a solution to the problem of settler colonialism and the Portuguese settlement in South America, this paper will attempt to conduct a settler colonial reading of *The Year Fifteen* based, as already asserted, on an analogy between the settler/Indigenous Other relationship and that of the white landowner/landless *caboclo*.

In *The Year Fifteen*, Chico Bento as well as other people, men and women, who work for the farmers or live on the farm premises, are referred to as *caboclos*. The depiction of Chico's knowledge of the land and skilful dealings with the livestock (a familiarity with nature that he could have inherited from his Indigenous ancestors, however distant they may be), and which secures him the job of head stockman of the Aroeiras Farm, could be part of Queiroz's project,

if we consider her as a 1930s regionalist writer, to “focus on the dry interior as the traditional space par excellence that gave the Northeast its originality and identity” (Albuquerque Jr. 78). Despite Chico’s knowledge of the land, he reveals poor social skills in dealing with upper-class people. In the following episode, Chico approaches Vicente in the hope of selling him his traditional *sertanejo* leather garment and his remaining head of cattle, so that he and his family can set off on their migration:

The horse stopped under the dried piece of white wood that served as shade. The owner dismounted, with the same clumsy indolence [...]. Vicente, sitting on a hammock, the cigarette in between his hands, watched him come closer and replied to the *caboclo*’s babbled greeting: – Good afternoon, *compadre*. Sit down! The stockman sat on a wooden bench, close to the window. He’d come to propose a deal... a few head of cattle he had in the Aroeiras and wanted to sell... – So, is it true that you are going away? The *caboclo* wailed in a mournful tone –Yes, sir... The owner gave orders for the cattle to be released... Today I opened the gates... (Queiroz, 2011, 28, my translation).

Vicente, pitying the cowboy, buys the cattle and the garment, although he bargains for a lower price for the former. Not only in this passage but in his interactions with the other characters whom he sees as figures of authority, Chico is inarticulate and displays humbleness bordering on submission. In settler-colonial terms, the stereotypical portrayal of the *caboclo* in his dependence on the generosity of the benign landowner can be viewed as a disavowing technique to justify landlessness and social inequality.

Like Hugh Watt, the white landowner Vicente is characterised as the benevolent boss who has developed a special connection with the land and who not only looks after his own employees, but also cares for other farmers’ neglected workers (he is also godfather to Chico’s youngest son). He is pictured both as a typical *sertanejo* and as a *caboclo* by Conceição:

All day on horseback, cheerful and hard-working, Vicente had always been like that, a friend of the bush, of the *sertão*, of everything that was uncouth and rough. She had always known him wanting to be a cowboy, like an unambitious *caboclo*, in spite of the displeasure that that caused to his family (Queiroz, 2011, 21, my translation).¹⁸

Conceição, as will be later revealed, is ambivalent about Vicente’s lifestyle, while Vicente’s family openly disapprove of it.

The tensions between the city and the country, between modernity and tradition, which in *Coonardoo* are personified by Hugh’s girlfriend’s and wife’s inadaptation to life at Wytaliba, are voiced here by Vicente’s family’s disappointment in his choice of being “a nobody”,¹⁹ when compared to their pride in his brother’s career as a small-town judge. This evokes the settler’s predicament. As a white landowner and, thus, inheritor of settler privileges, Vicente aspires to indigeneity, in the form of the *caboclo* lifestyle; meanwhile his family consider *caboclos* subhuman and unnoticeable. Both movements, contradictory as they

may seem, contribute to the same effect: the disavowal of Indigenous/landless people's rights and the justification for the historical land dispossession practices that have created the huge social gaps in Brazil. Vicente represents the North-Easterner who likes to see himself as "made by the land" (Veracini 2010, 21-22) and whose rights and privileges are not questioned, even when in the face of the forced exile of the "true" *caboclos*. The combination of European and *caboclo* characteristics – Vicente's sex appeal revealed in his sunburnt skin, horse-riding skills and typical *sertanejo* attire – excite Conceição's interest in him.

Conceição, in turn, is a compelling female character. A self-made twenty-two-year-old intellectual with writing ambitions at the beginning of the twentieth century, she is criticised by her grandmother for her lack of interest in marriage and, mainly, for her readings, which include socialist and proto-feminist authors, and which would generate "the worst of [her granddaughter's] strange and absurd" ideas (Queiroz, 2011, 14, my translation).²⁰ Conceição makes a point in holding a teaching job, even though there is no evidence that she depends on it financially. She also works for the well-being of the community, volunteering in the concentration camp. In Chapter One Queiroz describes Conceição as a young woman who "was used to thinking for herself [and] to living isolated, having created her own prejudices and ideas, which were sometimes large, sometimes daring" but also very much rooted in her own time and place, in spite of her avant-gardism (Queiroz, 2011, 14, my translation).²¹ This warning becomes meaningful further along the novel, mainly in the episode where Conceição hears rumours that Vicente might be involved with Josefa, the daughter of one of the farmhands. This triggers an assessment of Josefa as a "lowly, slutty *cunhã* [Indigenous girl] with kinky hair and rotten teeth" (Queiroz, 2011, 64, my translation).²² She also talks about it with her grandmother:

- [...] There has been a lot of talk about Vicente with Zé Bernardo's Josefa... The grandmother raised her eyes:
- I had heard of it... A young man's foolishness!
- The girl became irritated [...]:
- It's not foolishness! So, do you think it's foolishness for a white man to dirty himself with black women?
- Mrs Inácia smiled, in a conciliatory tone:
- But, my dear, this happens to everyone... A white man, in the *sertão*
- there are always stories like that... Besides, she's not black; she's a light-shaded *cabocla*...
- Well, I think it is shameless! And Vicente, with that saintly façade, is worse than the others! (Queiroz, 2011, 66, my translation).²³

Even after discounting the fact that Conceição is clearly jealous, these judgements that demean at once social class, race and gender may be disappointing for contemporary readers, who would expect a different attitude from a heroine who seems to be, otherwise, sensitive and open-minded. Later on, Conceição will reconsider her reaction, and her final decision not to reciprocate Vicente's love interest will be based on her desire to have a "room of her own", in Virginia

Woolf's terms, i.e., to have her own space to develop an intellectual life. It is clear that in spite of Queiroz's contempt for feminism, Conceição's reflections echo some of Woolf's ideas in her famous 1929 essay. The girl imagines herself married to Vicente (who, she ponders, in terms of reading, is only interested in "cattle account books") and realises how incompatible their interests would be, and the traditional role that would be expected from her as his wife. And yet, from a settler-colonial perspective Conceição's ambivalent behaviour in the excerpt above makes sense. As a white upper-class woman who forms a connection with the *sertão* and its people, her plight, as Bueno (128, my translation) puts it, is feeling "squeezed between opposing requests: life in the country and the city, intellectual achievement and maternity".²⁴

As a member of an older generation, however, her grandmother's lack of surprise and more unyielding attitude in measuring the gravity of Vicente's "normal" indiscretion according to skin colour variation is a clear remnant of the historical sexual exploitation of female Indigenous and Exogenous Others in colonial Brazil. It was in the countryside that the culture of slavery, abolished only 27 years before the events of *The Year Fifteen*, survived more openly. Slavery and its contemporary effects in terms of race and social class are jokingly implied in the novel in the episode in which Vicente's family's employees are sent to fetch the matriarch at the station and bring a litter (sedan chair), to carry her to her farm:

Mrs Inácia came to sit on the sedan chair and exclaimed: – Where are the donkeys? Don't you know that I only like to ride on a chair carried by donkeys? The cowboy answered: – Dear godmother, don't you have your *caboclos* to carry you? Why would one use animals if we are here? Mrs Inácia retorted: – But I don't like it. It doesn't do any good to my nerves. It looks like they [the *caboclos*] are tired to death... The men laughed: – Of course, my godmother's weigh can kill eight men! The cowboy added: – The pitiful donkeys that have survived [the drought] are no good...they fall down for nothing...²⁵ (Queiroz, 2011, 150, my translation)

To disavow basic human rights and conceal the immorality of slavery, its promoters turn to the reification of Indigenous and Exogenous Others. Although, taken figuratively, Mrs Inácia's statement can be read in a mock humanitarian sense, her words literally suggest that the reason informing her preference is the *caboclos'* alleged laziness when compared to donkeys.

Accordingly, the general structure of the secondary plot implies the reification of the *caboclo*. While the natural phenomenon of the drought affects all the characters in the novel, during the worst periods the landowning families take refuge in urban areas, where many have real estate or can afford to rent a second home. Unlike their impoverished workers, these landed gentry have the prerogative of returning to their farms to recover their heritage and their *status quo* after the crisis is over. It is not a coincidence that Chico Bento's family's perilous journey to Fortaleza is portrayed as analogous to that of the hungry

cattle, which lacking water and pastures, are released by the farmers to survive or perish on their own. The members of the family who survive find only the concentration camp at the entrance to the city. Historically, the Alagadiço camp was set up by the Ceará State government with the supposed intention of giving assistance to the waves of migrants fleeing the parched *sertão*. According to Frederico de Castro Neves (105), however, the government fell very short of its goal, and the camp became popularly known as a human “corral”, aimed at hiding thousands of bedraggled people from the view of city dwellers by stopping them from entering the newly gentrified city of Fortaleza (Ponte 27-70).

With very little government assistance and at the mercy of the community's charity, not that much different from their future Nazi namesakes, the camps became huge depositories of malnourished people in very precarious sanitary conditions. Along the history of the camps, thousands of people died of hunger, smallpox and other contagious diseases. But managing to leave the concentration camps behind did not guarantee a much better prospect. In Queiroz's re-creation of the drought of 1915, Chico Bento's family's final destination, like that of thousands of other landless people in the first half of the twentieth century – historically *caboclos*, *mulatos* and other miscegenated individuals in their majority – are the large metropolises, such as the city of São Paulo, where, it is implied, they will become one more family to swell the wretched shantytowns today known as *favelas*. Suggestive of *Coonardoo*'s trajectory, Chico's forced migration results in permanent geographical transfer and transfer by coerced lifestyle, as the family members lose their connections with the land – along with their identities – along the way.

Although in highly hybridized Brazil – unlike in the near-pioneering society depicted in *Coonardoo* – it becomes difficult to pinpoint the Indigenous Other so that he/she can neatly fit the settler colonial scheme, oppositions and veiled conflicts between the white landed gentry and miscegenated landless social categories very much resemble those between the settler and the Indigenous Other.

Conclusion

Due to the problematic position of European settlers in between two worlds and the eagerness with which they attempt to legitimise their claims to the land and exploitation of Indigenous labour, societies created by settler colonialism are sites of permanent insecurities, contradictions and paradoxes. As Veracini has observed, those complexities appear not only reflected, but amplified in the production of fictional writers. This paper examined the representations of the settler and the Other produced by two authors writing from almost opposite corners of the world. Despite their geographical distance, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Rachel de Queiroz felt analogous needs to incorporate to their fictional plots turbulent events in the rural history of their countries and the conflicting transitions from pastoralism to urban modernity that modified the ties of people with the land. In the process of fictionally recreating these occurrences, as white, middle-class women talking about the Indigenous or

miscegenated Other, they reveal, directly or indirectly, the marks of their settler colonial heritages.

Both the white landowners and the landless Others in *Coonardoo* and *The Year Fifteen* are ambivalently portrayed. The characterisations of Mrs Bessie, Hugh, Vicente, Conceição, and even Sam Geary move between benign and perverse, fair and exploitative, tolerant and racist, modern and reactionary. Attempts at indigenising the white settler by conferring him/her with Aboriginal and *caboclo* traits are a recurrent manoeuvre to justify their entitlement to the Other's land. And if, on the one hand, some transfer tactics described by Veracini as settlers' subterfuges to make the Other disappear – such as perception transfer or transfer by coerced lifestyle – are poignantly exposed and condemned by both authors, on the other, the landless Indigenous peoples or *caboclos* display accommodating natures and submissiveness that seem to confirm Prichard's evolutionist beliefs and Queiroz's paternalistic views on social strife. The comparison of the novels demonstrates that the settler imagination is a compelling apparatus, able to create, manipulate and disseminate representations of the settler self and the Other that at the same time justify and question settler hegemony.

Notes

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2. “obra haver brotado de uma região qualquer, uma entre outras (se bem que em geral se trata de cenário com dominância rural)”.
3. “(suposto) universalismo, que estaria representado apenas na arte da Corte, do Centro, da Metrópole, sempre da Cidade.”
4. Austlit.edu.au. Web. 01 Dec. 2017.
5. Although the atmosphere here is very different from the gloominess that is Barbara Baynton's trademark, this passage evokes the irony of the gender role reversal in the opening paragraph of “Squeaker's Mate”. See SCHEIDT, Déborah. “Mateship and the Female Body in Barbara Baynton's ‘Squeaker's Mate’”. *Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies*, v. 68, 2015. pp. 67-74.
6. “sempre primou em andar na contramão da História” (Kindle edition).
7. “às vezes uma feminista dava uma entrevista falando mal de um homem; pois eu achava um jeito de dizer que gostava do atacado só para marcar minha posição.”
8. “mulheres danadas”
9. “mulheres fortes, autossuficientes, que percorrem com obstinação, os caminhos que levam aos destinos marcados pela independência e pelo poder.”
10. “dirigiam com mãos severas as grandes fazendas de gado e açúcar da região.”
11. “eu conspirei com os generais para a derrubada do Jango”
12. Web: <https://www.facebook.com/LiteraBrasil1/photos/a.352148138280656.1073741828.349691378526332/823920297770102/?type=3&theater> . 10 Dec. 2017.

13. “relação quase feudal entre afilhados e seus padrinhos que eram donos da terra ou doutores” / “desenvolver, no interior do quadro familiar, estratégias de distribuição de poder e formas de garantia de proteção aos agregados e afilhados”).
14. “Nasci em família de fazendeiros, mas as nossas fazendas sempre foram pobres, fazendas de gado, nunca tivemos aquela fartura das fazendas baianas ou pernambucanas, onde o senhor de engenho era uma personalidade. A despeito das ideologias, sempre fomos amigos dos nossos empregados, éramos compadres dos nossos vaqueiros. No nosso meio nunca houve esse problema de terra, porque a gente sempre deu a terra para o morador plantar. Eu posso ter muita coisa, mas nunca cobrei um caroço de feijão de um trabalhador meu.”
15. In the original version: “– Aquela velha é uma desgraça! Tenho fé em Deus que o dinheiro que ela poupa ainda há de lhe servir pra comer em cima duma cama...”
16. “mais rural, indígena ou rústica em relação ao locutor ou à locutora”.
17. “uma abstração, uma unidade de um sistema de classificação social projetado para retratar as diferenças entre as pessoas na sociedade.”
18. “Todo o dia a cavalo, trabalhando, alegre e dedicado, Vicente sempre fora assim, amigo do mato, do sertão, de tudo o que era inculto e rude. Sempre o conhecera querendo ser vaqueiro como um caboclo desambicioso, apesar do desgosto que com isso sentia a gente dele.”
19. In the original version: Vicente *teimava em não querer ser gente*, or “Vicente insisted on not wanting to be a person” (Queiroz, 2011, 22).
20. “as piores das tais ideias, estranhas e absurdas”
21. “Acostumada a pensar por si, a viver isolada, criara para seu uso ideias e preconceitos próprios, às vezes largos, às vezes ousados”.
22. “Uma cabra, uma cunhã à-toa, de cabelo pixaim e dente podre!...”
23. “ – Diz que estão falando muito do Vicente com a Josefa do Zé Bernardo...
A avó levantou os olhos:
– Eu já tinha ouvido dizer... Tolice de rapaz!
A moça exaltou-se [...]:
– Tolice, não senhora! Então Mãe Nácia acha uma tolice um moço branco andar se sujando com negras?
Dona Inácia sorriu, conciliadora:
– Mas, minha filha, isso acontece com todos... Homem branco, no sertão - sempre saem essas histórias... Além disso não é uma negra; é uma caboclinha clara...
– Pois eu acho uma falta de vergonha! E o Vicente, todo santinho, é pior do que os outros!”
24. “espremida entre diferentes solicitações: a vida no campo e na cidade, a realização intelectual e a maternidade”.
25. “Dona Inácia veio se sentar na cadeirinha, admirou-se: – Que é dos jumentos? Vocês não sabem que eu só gosto de andar de cadeirinha levada por jumento? O vaqueiro acudiu: – Minha madrinha não tem os seus caboclos pra carregarem a senhora? Por que se havia de botar animal, tendo nós? Dona Inácia teimou: – Mas eu não gosto. Faz-me mal aos nervos. Parece que vão morrendo de cansaço... Os cabras riram-se: – Está-se vendo! o peso de minha madrinha mata oito homens! O vaqueiro ajuntou: – Mesmo porque os jumentinhos que escaparam não dão pra nada... Ainda estão caindo...”

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