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Searching for Grounded Normativity in the Sertão

Abstract

In this article I will put into conversation the theory of grounded normativity as described by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in the book *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* and the Indigenous cosmology described by Davi Kopenawa in *The Falling Sky* with the novels *El sertanero (O sertanejo)* by José de Alencar, *Tierra de Silencio (O quinze)* by Rachel de Queiroz, and *Vidas secas* by Graciliano Ramos. The theory of grounded normativity is an alternative to traditional “Western” academic analysis that places particular importance on place-based theories of care, empathy, and knowledge. Taking these theories into consideration it is possible to re-read these novels, placing particular emphasis on the representation of land, relations between human and other-than-human subjects, and the concept of Indigeneity. Taking into account the theory of grounded normativity, certain points in these texts can be seen to be manifestations of Indigenous knowledges, theories, and practices that challenge the patriarchal stranglehold that heteronormativity has on the physical space of the Brazilian sertão. Through this analysis I hope to address a few important questions: what does a rereading of these novels based on grounded normativity entail? In what ways does this change in perspective transform the landscape of the novel, both literally (the Brazilian sertão/wilderness) and metaphorically (the canonic readings and meanings ascribed to the novels)? Could this perspective be applied to other texts from South America and effectively

challenge the established heteronormative readings that are almost exclusively present in Latin American romanticism?

Searching for Ground Normativity in the Sertão

In this article I will attempt to trace the effects of determinism, which led to the binary relationship between civilization and barbarism, through Brazilian Romanticism to Modernism. This common literary, ideological, and cultural concept created a dichotomy between the land and its inhabitants, one in which settler moves to innocence could easily be perpetrated in order to promote a future for Brazil that erased Indigeneity. I will focus my analysis on the novels *El sertanero* (*O sertanejo*) by José de Alencar, *Tierra de silencio* (*O quinze*) by Rachel de Queiroz, and *Vidas secas* by Graciliano Ramos in three areas: the representation of land, the representation of the relationship between human beings and the land, as well as other-than human beings, and Indigenous presence. It becomes clear upon a rereading of *El sertanero* by José de Alencar that the author establishes a clear political and social ideology for the future of the country, one which stresses the inhospitable relationship between human beings and other-than-human subjects, the hierarchical relationship between landowners and the sertaneros, the need to extract capital from these previously mentioned relationships, and the necessity of mestizaje or hybridization of the population. It is evident that these themes continue to have an effect on Brazilian literature and society. In *Tierra de silencio* by Rachel de Queiroz and *Vidas secas* by Graciliano Ramos, we can see a repetition of this determinism. Human subjects become more and more alienated to their relationship with the land, and Indigeneity all but disappears completely in the sertão.

After an analysis of these works, I will make a return to Alencar, Queiroz, and Ramos, attempting to reread these novels through the lens of grounded normativity as described by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, placing this in dialogue with *The Falling Sky* by Davi Kopenawa. Again, I will focus this rereading on the representation of the land (the sertão), the representation of relationships between human beings and other-than-human beings, and Indigenous presence. Through this rereading, I hope to destabilize the referent that has limited the signification of the sertão. I wish to promote a multiplicity of significations of the Brazilian sertão, one that does not ignore the importance of human relationships with the land and other-than-human beings. What does grounded normativity look like in Brazilian romanticism and realism? What effects would such a perspective have on our own conceptualization of the land and colonization of the Brazilian sertão in modern day? With this reading I hope to establish the need for decolonial perspectives not only in the sertão, but also the Amazon and other delicate ecosystems that have systematically been destroyed by capitalistic enterprises, in which the state has robbed Indigenous peoples of their land and attempted to erase and make invisible Indigeneity in order to promote a misplaced idea of mestizaje that only serves settler's own interests.

Before analyzing the novels in question, I wish to establish the theoretical framework in which I will base my analysis. Because these frameworks are not generally considered in what is considered the "Western canon," it is important to briefly define these concepts. As previously mentioned, I will attempt to place into dialogue the theory of grounded normativity as described by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and the Amazonian Indigenous worldview described by Davi Kopenawa. Grounded normativity for Simpson is a particular way of living that is "thoughtful and profoundly empathetic, [an] ethical framework generated by these place-based practices and

associated knowledges” (Simpson *AWHAD* 22). These frameworks create different conceptualizations of place, of nation and of governance, ones that are not based on heteronormative hierarchical structures (22). The practices and knowledges of Indigenous peoples serve to inform the ways in which people interact with place. In Simpson’s concept, place has a multiplicity of meanings: “We know that place includes land and waters, plants and animals, and the spiritual world -- a peopled cosmos of influencing powers” (22).

In adhering to Simpson’s “place-based” theorization, I include Davi Kopenawa’s Amazonian cosmology in my understanding of grounded normativity in Brazil. I do not intend to homogenize Brazilian Indigeneity and state that Amazonian Indigenous knowledges and practices represent all Indigenous Brazilian thought; there is, however, a general lack of Indigenous writings that come from the sertão. This is not to say that these writers do not exist, in fact, I am sure that they do. However, the general lack of visibility and availability in academia of these writings generally seems to reflect what we have already seen in the analysis of these novels: the attempt to erase Indigenous identity in the sertão in order to promote mestizaje and a homogenized Brazilian population and national identity. I intend to put into dialogue Kopenawa and Simpson in order to create what Daigle and Ramírez call: “decolonial geographies [or] constellations of co-resistance and liberation” (Daigle & Ramírez 79). These constellations are “embodied knowledge of Indigenous peoples coming into dialogue and relationship with those of Black and other dispossessed peoples” (79). I would like to create this type of constellation between Simpson and Kopenawa, using Kopenawa’s cosmology and Indigenous knowledge of the Brazilian spiritual world and Simpson’s grounded normativity which stresses the need for these Indigenous knowledges and practices as a form of political resistance. There are several ways to approach a grounded normative reading of these three

novels, however, I believe there are two important aspects that should be reexamined: the land itself, specifically the “naming” of the land (reducing the referent of the sertão to a single signifier/signified) and the relationships between human and other-than-human subjects.

I will now turn my attention to the figure of José de Alencar, although it would be easy to go back even further to the works of Euclides da Cunha or Alfredo d’Escragolle Taunay, in order to establish the deterministic relationship between the land and its inhabitants in Brazilian literature, in part, because it is here that, according to Roberto Schwarz, the importation of European literary models became enmeshed in Brazilian writing in a way that did not accurately represent South American social structures. “We can say that colonization, based on the monopoly of the land, produced three classes of population: the proprietor of the latifundium, that slave, and the ‘free man’, who was in fact dependent” (22). It is in Alencar’s novels that we begin to see a tripartition of the population, one in which Indigeneity is omitted. This, of course, is influenced by Alencar’s own social position. José de Alencar lived as a public figure: he was a journalist, state representative, minister of justice for two years under the Brazilian emperor Pedro II, and an active participant in the public life of the new independent Brazil.

As a shareholder in one of the country’s first railroads, he had a direct interest in Brazil’s internal and external economic affairs, and he rounded out his participation in public life as a novelist, dramatist, polemicist, and critic, who, like Cooper, considered it a civic duty to found a recognizably Brazilian literature (Mautner Wasserman “Nationality” 187).

This recognizably Brazilian literature is one that promotes mestizaje and, although there is in his works an importance of the land, this importance is one that is based on capital and economic value, rather than a spiritual value. Alencar’s literature is one that traces the political

and ideological future of Brazil. Although he defends Indigenous peoples, it seems to be with a particular political stance: “Não nos cabe razão de considerá-los [índios] bárbaros, muito menos em relação a nós, que os excedemos em requintes de crueldade” (Proença 46). He states that Indigenous people of Brazil are not any more barbaric than their colonizers because “o índio e seu descendente mestiço sintonizam com a terra, são a própria América. Altivos, corajosos, ricos de imaginação, não se temem da morte” (42, emphasis mine). There is the hope in Alencar that Indigeneity can be hybridized with white and black settlers in order to create an America, or a Brazil, that is truly unique and harmonious. This idea of mestizaje will create a homogenous population that corresponds to the homogenous sertão that is created through his and others’ literary traditions. Mestizaje is one of the settler moves to innocence described by Tuck and Yang. According to these authors:

In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there [...] For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way [...] land is recast as property and as a resource (6).

We can see how, by homogenizing and, therefore, erasing, Indigeneity in the Brazilian sertão, it becomes easier to conceive of the land as property and resource. Although I do not doubt Alencar had good intentions (he is one of the few South American authors of his time that do not decry a complete lack of humanity in Indigenous peoples) it is evident that the promotion of a nation of hybridization erases Indigenous cultures, ideologies, and understandings of the world.

I will now turn my attention specifically to *El sertanero*, *Tierra de silencio*, and *Vidas secas* in order to further develop these arguments. Most of my analysis will be on Alencar’s novel because I believe he sets the precedent of the themes to be discussed in the other novels.

The trace of the signifier that Alencar creates in *El sertanero* is seen in these later novels. Although the locations, characters, and stories change, the signifier of the sertão remains, weaving its iterations throughout the novels of Queiroz and Ramos. Alencar's novel is a romantic tale about a wealthy landowning family in the sertão, the Campelo's, and their sertanero, Arnaldo, who has mystical powers. Arnaldo is helplessly in love with Gonzalo Campelo's daughter doña Flor, with whom he was raised as a child in Campelo's ranch, but his is a love, in the romantic tradition, that is impossible to realize due to the social differences between the two. Doña Flor attracts the attention of the son of another wealthy family in the area, Marcos Fragoso, but Gonzalo denies the union between the young man and his daughter due to a lack of respect shown by Fragoso. Fragoso plans to abduct doña Flor and marry her in secret, but his plans are ultimately thwarted by Arnaldo and Jó, another figure with an unknown past and mystical powers, with the help of an Indigenous group, the Jucás, that befriended Arnaldo after he helped their chief, Anhamum, to escape captivity and death.

The novel itself, structurally speaking, is not unique in that it follows the basic form and themes of the Romantic tradition in South America: an impossible love between two young individuals of different social classes, a feud between two families that ends in death, and the outline of a future nation built on the strengths and ideals of its main characters. There are, however, several elements in the novel that are noteworthy: the representation of land in the sertão, the relationships that the sertaneros and other characters have with the land, and the presence and representation of Indigenous peoples. These elements find different iterations throughout the literary canon of Brazil.

First and foremost is the representation of the land. The sertão is a dangerous place for even the strongest man (I use the word 'man' specifically here because the woman seems to be

out of place in the sertão). The sertão is an immense space that reflects the sublime; it is a space of intense beauty, but also of desolation, death, and suffering. In the beginning of the novel Alencar describes this aspect of the land:

Quien por primera vez recorre el sertón en uno de esos períodos, después de una larga sequía, siente afligírsele el alma hasta en lo más hondo ante esa ausencia de vida, ante ese inmenso holocausto de la tierra. La impresión resulta más lúgubre que un cementerio [...] aquí la vida abandona la tierra, y toda esa región que se extiende por centenares de leguas no es más que el enorme túmulo de una naturaleza extinta y el sepulcro de la creación misma (17).

The land, as described by Alencar, of the sertão is one from which springs to mind a cemetery, desolate, abandoned, and isolated. The land of the sertão in this case is presented much in the same way as the pampa in Argentina; it is not fit for agriculture on a large scale due to its inhospitable nature, but can be adapted for livestock. This is, after all, the purpose of the sertaneros, to look after and protect the livestock of the wealthy landowners. The sertanero can be compared to the figure of the gaucho of the pampas in this sense, but there is one notable difference: as the figure of the gaucho came to be reimagined and celebrated as a cultural icon, the sertanero seems to disappear, much like the figures of Indigeneity in Brazilian literature. However, this imagination of the land as an inhospitable wasteland is a tradition that will repeat itself in the works of Queiroz and Ramos.

The second element that I would like to discuss is the sertanero's relationship with the land. In *El sertanero*, Arnaldo has an interesting relationship with the land and a disdain for city life and any life in which he is forced to be of service to a master. Arnaldo prefers to sleep underneath the open skies of the sertão.

Buscó en lo más recóndito de la floresta su albergue favorito [...] Allí acostumbraba el sertanero pasar la noche al relente, en coloquio con las estrellas y dejando el alma correr por esos sertones de nubes [...] Es ésta una de las características del sertanero cearense: le gusta dormir al sereno, a cielo abierto, bajo esa cúpula azul tarareada de diamantes, sin par en los más suntuosos palacios (Alencar 43).

For the sertanero, sleeping beneath the stars is preferable to the most luxurious palaces that civilization has to offer. Alencar demonstrates an intimacy between the sertanero and the land in which he inhabits that, little by little, disappears in the novels of Queiroz and Ramos. Arnaldo is “un vagabundo que anda por los bosques y que no pide sino que le dejen vivir en esos campos donde nació” (92). Two things strike me in this fragment. The first is the word “vagabundo”. For Alencar, the sertanero has no home in the common sense of the word; he is a vagabond of the wilderness, traveling, searching, existing, but without purpose or cause. For the sertanero, it is sufficient to simply exist in the sertão, however, this creates tension between the sertanero and the capitalistic enterprises that operate within this space. The second notable element in this fragment is that Arnaldo only asks one thing of Gonzalo Campelo, his boss/caretaker. He only wishes to live in the same fields in which he was born. He does not wish to make a fortune, he does not wish to marry nor to lead a life that at all resembles that of “civilized” individuals, but rather, only desires to inhabit the place in which he was born. This aspect is very interesting when considering settler colonialism. Arnaldo has the right to live on the land, much in the same way, one could argue, that Indigenous people of the sertão, by their own birthright, deserve the opportunity to live on and off of the land that they call home, rather than being subjected to acculturation, mestizaje, or death.

The final point that Alencar makes in terms of the sertanero's relationship with the land is their lack of understanding of city life, or rather, the impossibility of understanding and accepting a life in the city because, to accept a life in the city, or in the ranches of the sertão, would mean giving up one's freedom. When Arnaldo refuses to tell Gonzalo where Jó is hiding, he tells his mother: "para desobedecerle sería preciso que él tuviera poder para ordenarme [...] él no lo tiene, ni nadie en este mundo" (118). Arnaldo cherishes his freedom and does not believe anyone to be his master. Later, he compares himself to the birds that have no other "señor" than God. He is like the birds, one without an "amo". Arnaldo then goes to the city in order to spy on Fragoso and his colleagues, but the city confuses him and he is unable to blend in well like he does in the sertão by climbing and traveling in the treetops. "Si Arnaldo hubiera conocido la ciudad como conocía el desierto y sus habitantes [...] No le era posible aproximarse más al edificio por la lumbre de una hoguera que extendía más allá de la explanada una franja de luz" (123). There is a conscious effort on the part of Alencar to highlight the fact that the sertanero is *out of place* in the city, the symbol of cultural and technological progress. When considering the sertanero's place and relationship with the land, we can say that they become a liminal figure in Brazilian literature that does not fit into normative state apparatuses in the Brazilian tradition nor in what is considered the "Western canon". This figure exists outside of time and space, between the past in which they once thrived and modernity which wishes to erase them.

The final element seen in *El sertanero* that helps to solidify normativity and justify colonization is the place and role of Indigenous peoples. Alencar promotes mestizaje of the nation in order to achieve social harmony.

He gives voice to the idea that what is distinctive and good about the nation is its ability, which becomes a kind of definition, to make heterogenous elements join in harmony and

to the idea that to be fully and proudly Brazilian one has to be a little, and proudly, Indian (Mautner Wasserman “Red and White” 818).

Arnaldo is the personification of the settler that is proudly “a little Indian”. Not only does he possess mystical powers that allow him to expertly track animals and people, he can also communicate with animals and is able to deftly travel along the treetops of the sertão without being seen or heard. In one part of the novel, when the caravan is hunting the legendary bull el Dorado, Arnaldo lets out a terrifying scream to announce his participation in the hunt. “Arnaldo, arrancando a su corcel de pronto, salía disparado colina abajo, lanzando ese grito poderoso que el sertanero aprendió de *su antepasado, el indio*” (Alencar 177, *emphasis mine*). Arnaldo draws upon his ancestral past, his “indian” past, to effectively participate in the hunt for el Dorado and become “savage.”

Alencar is a chronicler and propagandist of this cultural belief for homogeneity, one that he believes will create harmony between all Brazilian people. The problem with this homogeneity, however, is that it erases important Indigenous belief systems, practices, and ways of understanding the world. In *El sertanero*, we observe the settler adoption fantasy described by Tuck and Yang that enables the settler to proclaim their innocence in the colonization and destruction of native peoples and their lands; it is a way that white identity is able to consolidate and affirm its place in colonial society; by becoming other without actually becoming, whiteness reaffirms its place in the heteronormative hierarchical power structure (13). Alencar utilizes this adoption fantasy in order to portray whiteness as the savior of Indigenous people. Arnaldo saves the life of the Jucá chief, Anhamum and becomes a “Coapara”, which translates to “amigo de corazón” (Alencar 237). Arnaldo is more than a friend to the Jucá, he is metaphorically adopted into their tribe because he, being a mestizo, is the savior of the Indigenous tribe. Later, when he

visits the Jucá again in order to ask for their help when Fragoso attacks la Oiticica, the Campelo's ranch, we observe another example of this metaphorical adoption and "becoming native". Arnaldo gives the tribe his clothing that will serve as belts and underwear for the native warriors. He does not ask Anahamum for help, Arnaldo: "exigió de Anhamum dos cosas" (243). He *demand*s that the tribe help him because he is now part of the tribe; the natives are indebted to him for saving the life of their chief, so they must comply with the desires of their white savior.

At the end of this scene, Arnaldo becomes fully native. Because he gave his clothes to the jucá, "El 'Estaca' tuvo que envolverse en hojas de plátano para entrar decentemente en la casa" (243). He symbolically disrobes and rids himself of the clothing of civilization and dresses in banana leaves when he returns to la Oiticica in order to enter the home with some semblance of decency. Interestingly in this scene is the idea that decency is not necessarily something that the native population possesses. In order to exist in society, one must metaphorically disrobe themselves of Indigeneity because it is out of place in civilized society. That the Jucá tribe helps and can even be seen as the saviors of the Campelo's at the end of the novel is notable, however, only when taken out of context. It is only through Arnaldo's demands, due to him being adopted into the tribe, that the Jucá agree to help, and only then, it is because Arnaldo saved the life of the chief. The native tribe is obligated to help the white man because the white man first helped them.

I will now turn my attention to the works of Queiroz and Ramos in order to demonstrate the ways in which these three concepts, the representation of the land, the representation of human relations with other-than-human subjects, and the concept of Indigeneity, are perpetuated and reinforced by these two authors. In *Tierra de silencio*, Queiroz describes the sertão during

one of its droughts that caused huge numbers of its inhabitants to migrate toward the city in order to look for work and to survive. Queiroz takes the funereal description of the sertão established by Alencar and adds to it; now, *everything* in the sertão emanates danger and death.

Vicente marchaba a través del camino rojo y pedregoso, orlado por los ramajes muertos del desierto, de aquella caatinga aplastada por el sol. Los cascos del animal parecían sacar fuego de los guijarros del camino. Los lagartijas daban carrerillas intermitentes sobre las hojas secas del suelo, que estallaban como papel quemado (Queiroz 13).

In Queiroz's novel, the sertão is more than a cemetery, it is hell itself:

Alrededor de ellos, el eterno paisaje del sertón en verano: ceniza y fuego. Y el sol poniente parecía más próximo, más cálido, quemando cada vez más intensamente aquellas pobres tierras calcinadas (117).

The land is now not only inhospitable, it is a place of ash and fire, scorched by the summer sun and intensified by the drought that plagues the land. It is a place in which humanity can play no part, a place empty of human subjects and, therefore, apt for exploitation by capitalistic enterprises.

The concept of liminality in the relationship between the sertanero and the land is even more evident in Queiroz's novel. In *Tierra de silencio*, the sertanero has no place in society and their relationship with the land has been completely lost. The family of Chico Bento is completely dependent on the promise of creating a life in the city. They are unable to live off of the land because the drought has caused the landowners to rid themselves not only of their workers but also their livestock. The sertanero is forced to abandon their land and their livelihoods. We also see a duality in the relationship between the land and its inhabitants; the sertão has the capacity to give life, but also to take it away. One of Vicente's sheep dies after

eating “hierba-loca”, and, later in the novel, one of Chico Bento’s sons dies after he eats the root of the mandioca, or cassava, raw due to his extreme hunger and starvation during their travels to the city. The sertanero is completely dependent on the land in order to survive, but the land is not capable of sustaining them and, in the case of Chico Bento’s son, can even become the enemy of the sertanero. Vicente is another sertanero in the novel, but he is lucky enough to have inherited his land and, therefore, attempts to remain and keep his ranch and livestock alive during the drought. We observe his liminality in Queiroz’s description of him: “Vicente siempre había sido así, amigo del desierto, del sertón, de todo lo que era inculto y rudo [...] tan distinto de su hermano doctor y no quería ser civilizado” (16-17). In Queiroz’s description of the sertanero, we observe the reappearance of the trope of civilized versus barbaric, but with one striking difference. Instead of the binary describing the difference between white settlers and Indigenous peoples, this time barbarism lies in the interior of the sertanero.

In *Vidas secas*, Graciliano Ramos presents a more modernist style in describing the sertão. Ramos also tells the tale of migration of a family of sertaneros due to the devastating droughts that plague the land. The style of the novel itself, minimalist and dry, represents the land in which the sertaneros try to survive. It is sparse, bare, a wasteland. However, Ramos also includes another danger of the sertão, the cold of winter and the threat of floods.

Doña Vitória movió el abanico con fuerza para no oír el ruido del río, que se aproximaba [...] El río subía la ladera, estaba cerca de los juazeiros [...] Doña Vitória agitaba el abanico para sostener las llamaradas en el ángico mojado. Los niños, sintiendo frío en un costado y calor en el otro, no podían dormir (78-79).

It is interesting here that the land is not only inhospitable because of its extreme heat and drought, but that in winter, the extreme cold and unceasing rain also present dangers to its

inhabitants. What Alencar begins, Ramos finishes; the sertão is an endless series of misfortunes and dangers made manifest by the weather which makes the land uninhabitable.

In *Vidas secas*, we also observe the loss of the sertanero's relationship with the land of the sertão and the state of liminality in which they live. The most obvious example of this liminality or loss of importance of the sertanero is the fact that Fabiano's two sons are never named in the novel. They are only "hijo menor" and "hijo mayor", while the family dog, Baléia, is actually named. The sons of Fabiano, representing the future or destiny of the sertanero, are completely anonymous and without agency. This subtle detail demonstrates the process of invisibilization of the sertanero. Through Ramos's stream of consciousness style, we get a glimpse of the internalization of the idea of liminality, inferiority, and barbarism that lies in the sertanero Fabiano. There is an objectification of the sertanero: "Se movía como una cosa..." (Ramos 36). In this example, it is only the movement of Fabiano through space that is compared to an object, however, later on in the novel, Fabiano himself describes his *body* as an object. "Fabiano, una cosa de la hacienda, un traste; sería despedido cuando menos lo esperara. Cuando fue contratado, recibió el caballo, perneras, jubón, pechera, y zapatos de cuero crudo, pero al irse dejaría todo al vaquero que lo reemplazara" (43). In this example there is an objectification of the sertanero as a direct effect of their relationship with capitalism. The body is a machine of labor, it only serves a purpose if it is able to extract capital from the land. When there is no work, or when another drought arrives, these human machines are disposable.

Later in the novel, when the family goes to the city to celebrate a winter festival, we see more evidence that the sertanero is out of place in both time and space. The time for the sertanero is long past and the space of the sertão has proven inhospitable and uninhabitable. However, in the city, Fabiano still does not belong.

Comparándose con los hombres de la ciudad, Fabiano se reconocía inferior. Por eso temía que los otros se burlaran de él [...] Vagos, ladrones, charlatanes, miserables. Estaba convencido de que todos los habitantes de la ciudad eran malvados (86-87).

These thoughts stem from the fact that Fabiano and, indeed, all other sertaneros, have been abandoned in their times of need and taken advantage of by the capitalistic system of the sertão when they have been able to find work in an hacienda. The important thing to consider in this novel is that the relationship with the land seen in *El sertanero* is gradually lost in the novel of Queiroz, and then this liminality is even further intensified in Ramos.

The mestizaje that Alencar strives to create in his novels is apparent in *Tierra de silencio* and *Vidas secas* in that there is no longer any Indigenous presence. It is as if the sertanero takes the place of Indigeneity. In *Vidas secas*, Fabiano thinks to himself when considering his place in the world: “Tenía los ojos azules, la barba y los cabellos rubios pero como vivía en tierra ajena y cuidaba animales ajenos, se descubría, se encogía ante la presencia de los blancos y se consideraba mestizo” (39). We can observe here that the hybridization for which Alencar was a major and early proponent did not result in cultural harmony for the nation, but rather, along with erasing Indigenous identity, it also created alterity in the sertanero; in the heteronormative system, there must always be the presence of the “other” upon which normative structures can circumscribe their ideologies. In the absence of Indigeneity, the sertanero, the mestizo of lower social class standing, becomes the other. We find here what constitutes the major mistake of Alencar. In the same way that Schwarz’s formulation of “misplaced ideas” necessarily led: “to the projection of a definite place as the place of *Truth* (and reduces all the rest to the level of mere ideologies” (Palti 157). This misplaced desire of Alencar to homogenize the population of Brazil created a single referent for the signifiers of the sertão and the sertanero. The sertão

became a place needed to be dominated, tamed, and exploited for capital, while the sertanero became the barbaric other that did not have a place in modern society. The multiplicity that was once the sertão became limited to one signification.

Alencar's novel begins with a fire, a fire that destroys the surrounding areas of la Oiticica. Fire is a symbol for the destructive force of nature, but also nature's ability to care and heal itself, to be reborn in its own ashes. Perhaps, instead of reading the novels of Alencar, Queiroz, and Ramos in the traditional heteronormative sense, it is possible to search for traces of defiance and resistance. "Resistance marks a union of forces that seeks to out-manuever the policing of legitimate parameters, that moves to negate suppression" (Martineau 2016). It is here that I will turn my attention to Leanne Simpson's theory of grounded normativity and Davi Kopenawa's Indigenous Amazonian worldview. Hopefully, through a reexamination of these works, the sertão can be vindicated. The settler moves to innocence seen throughout these novels have been unmasked and now, perhaps, true decolonization efforts, Indigenous resistance and knowledge can come to the forefront.

Kopenawa speaks in his book *The Falling Sky* about names. In his tribe, individuals' names are never spoken in their presence. To even speak one's name in their presence is a sign of great disrespect. Children are not given a name until they earn one; this name generally is a description of the individual's physical appearance or a behavioral characteristic that describes the individual (Kopenawa 17). The missionaries that named Davi Kopenawa were not aware of this fact, nor did they care. The importance of this anecdote, I believe, is to show that outsider normativity does not translate to Indigeneity, either because it is unwilling to understand Indigeneity, or it simply does not care. I believe the same can be said about the sertão; the obsession of authors like Da Cunha, Alencar, Queiroz, and Ramos to name the space of the

sertão, to provide the signified with a stable, unchanging signifier that categorized and limited the meaning of the sertão is a mistake because in “naming” the sertão, we lose the multiplicity of meanings of which it is capable, we lose the Indigenous presence, and we lose the individuals’ relationship with place, with the land and with other-than-human subjects. What we are left with is the idea that the sertão is a vast, desolate landscape, devoid of human life, one in which capitalistic enterprises such as monoculture agriculture and deforestation can be perpetrated.

Victoria Saramago discusses the creation of the Grande Sertão Veredas National Park in 1989 and other conservation efforts in the sertão that were inspired by Brazilian author João Guimarães Rosa. In this park there is a “desire to make the park’s landscape represent the one in Guimarães Rosa’s fiction as closely as possible” (Saramago 53). However, in this park and many others inspired by this novel, the representation of the space of the sertão, the representation of the past, is juxtaposed by a modernity which has transformed the landscape into vast areas of monocultures such as soy and palm. We can see here the importance of space and of the attempts by capitalistic enterprises to limit the space by naming it, by reducing the sertão to a singularity. By naming the sertão, we have done it a grave injustice and allowed heteronormative meaning to take hold.

Kopenawa and Simpson place particular emphasis on the idea of empathy and care concerning the other-than-human world. Kopenawa describes the *xapiri*, spirits that dwell in all of creation. These *xapiri* are the spirit forms of everything that exists, animals, land, water, humans, etc (60-61). According to his Indigenous belief system, animals are the ancestors of humans.

We also know they are ancestors turned game! [...] They took the appearance of game and live in the forest simply because this is where they became other. Yet in the

beginning of time they were as human as we are. They are not different. Today we give ourselves the name of ‘humans,’ but we are the same as they are. This is why in their eyes we still belong to their kind (61-62).

There is a respect for the other-than-human world in this Indigenous knowledge system because humans and other-than-human subjects are the same, they are equals. There is also a reciprocal relationship between the two. The other-than-human world belongs to the human world, and the human world belongs to the other-than-human world.

Turning specifically to the works of Alencar and Ramos, we can see the importance of empathy and care with the other-than-human world. Instead of attributing mystical powers to Arnaldo because he speaks with and is able to control animals, why can we not instead look at the importance of such relationships with the other-than-human world? Why can we not attribute these so-called “powers” to Arnaldo’s recognition that the other-than-human world has a spirit and a life, and that Arnaldo is one of the few people that can appreciate this fact? Alencar describes Arnaldo’s intimate relationship with the flora of the sertão. “Para el sertanero la floresta es un mundo, y cada árbol un amigo o conocido a quien saluda al paso” (66). The trees, plants, and flowers are their own world; they are friends that Arnaldo recognizes and speaks to upon passing. Later in the novel, during the hunt of el Dorado, we see in Arnaldo a recognition and appreciation of the sovereignty of other-than-human subjects. When the bull gets caught in brambles and brush in the forest, he allows the bull to gather its composure before continuing to pursue it, and then, finally, once he captures the bull, he speaks to it as if it is a fellow being and allows it to go free.

Arnaldo creyó que el Dorado lloraba. El célebre corredor que desde hacía siete años desafiaba a los más valientes vaqueros, lamentábase porque al fin fué vencido, e iba a

verse trocado, él, toro libre y brioso, en un toro de corral, o quizá en buey de tiro [...] ¡Tranquilízate, camarada, que no te avergonzaré llevándote de la punta del lazo para que te vea aquella gente! No; nadie se burlará de tu desgracia. Eres un toro valiente y audaz; voy a dejarte en libertad (185).

There is a fraternal relationship between Arnaldo and other-than-human subjects in the novel in which, I believe, if we resist imposing the same analysis and mystification of Indigeneity and instead focus on the themes of care and empathy with other-than-human subjects and the world, we can arrive at a conclusion that instead celebrates and normalizes these types of relations; grounded normativity is possible even in these examples of Romantic and Realist literature in which, as already stated, so much settler colonialism and heteronormative perspectives have traditionally dominated.

The same other-than-human relations can be seen in *Vidas secas*. Fabiano's own conceptualization of himself alternates between that of human subject and other-than-human being: he is an "armadillo," "cabra," "víbora," "res." When looking at this animalization through a certain perspective, we can certainly attribute these thoughts to Fabiano's own sense of inferiority. He even says in the novel: "No, probablemente no sería un hombre: sería aquello mismo toda la vida; mestizo, mandado por los blancos, casi una res en la hacienda ajena" (Ramos 42). There is certainly a lack of humanity felt by Fabiano, however, can we look at this in another way? Seen from a different perspective, being 'other' or 'animal' is almost certainly a positive thing. Let us think for a moment about the 'civilized society' in which Fabiano finds himself. He is cheated out of money by his bosses, he is imprisoned by a corrupt soldier because he wins a game of cards, his children are doomed to repeat his own miserable existence as a sertanero in the sertão, living without any certainty of the future; tomorrow is never promised to

the sertanero, and neither is today for that matter. The human beings around Fabiano are all, in fact, more “savage” than he. Perhaps comparing himself to an animal in this case is a sign of resistance to heteronormative power structures that exploit humans for their own gain. Perhaps being other-than-human, in this instance, is in some way being more-than-human, or, at the very least, more human than those individuals surrounding him.

There is certainly an argument for this perspective when considering the dog Baléia. One of the most interesting aspects of Ramos’s novel is that the reader not only observes the inner thoughts of the human characters, but also the other-than-human character Baléia. “Todos lo [el hijo menor] abandonaban, la perrita era el único ser que le mostraba simpatía [...] Baléia detestaba las expansiones violentas: estiró las piernas, cerró los ojos y bostezó. Sólo tenía un medio de evitarlos: la fuga” (71-73). In many ways, Baléia is the most human character of all in that they consistently demonstrate empathetic character traits; in Baléia we see unconditional love, loyalty, sympathy and bravery. Even when Fabiano must kill Baléia because he fears that the dog has rabies, the dog wants to bite him, but cannot because they have too much love for Fabiano. Baléia dies silently, never knowing why, but never wavering in their love for their family. The concepts of understanding, love, and empathy that are traditionally reserved for human subjects manifest themselves in an other-than-human subject. It does not come as much of a surprise that once Baléia dies, the unity of the family begins to deteriorate more and more. Once again, there are certain elements in the novel that allow us as readers to reevaluate the text using these theories of grounded normativity, care, and empathy with the other-than-human world; we must allow ourselves to do so or risk losing productive analyses that can reshape our understanding of our own relationships with the land and with place, as described by Simpson.

In this article I have discussed the ways in which Brazilian Romantic literature defined the sertão and how this definition has survived into modern day. In analyzing the works of José de Alencar, Rachel de Queiroz, and Graciliano Ramos, I have identified three areas (land, the relationship that humans have with said land, and Indigenous presence) in which settler normativity takes hold of the imagination of the Brazilian sertão. After this analysis, I returned to these authors with a different perspective, that of grounded normativity and place-based Indigenous knowledge systems, in order to reexamine the works. I identified two important areas in these novels in which we can explode the sign. When looking at the land itself and human beings' relationships with other-than-human beings, I believe that we can give the sertão a multiplicity of meanings that helps to challenge and resist these settler narratives that have dominated traditional analyses of these works. The question of Indigeneity still permeates this text and begs to be addressed. I will quote Simpson in order to address this question because, I believe, Indigenous identity in Alencar's novel and the subsequent erasure of any Indigenous presence in the novels by Queiroz and Ramos is a clear indication of the state's intention to silence those voices and create a homogenous Brazilian identity based on "mestizaje".

Indigenous thought systems conceptualize justice differently. We have experienced four centuries of apocalyptic violence in the name of dispossession in the part of the Nishnaabeg nation I am from and live in. White supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy have targeted and continue to murder, disappear, attack, criminalize, and devalue our bodies, minds, and spirits. Several of the plant and animal nations we share territory with have been exterminated (Simpson "Indigenous Resurgence" 21).

There are clearly settler colonial narratives which I have already discussed previously in this text that describe these intentions to exterminate Indigenous representation in the sertão. The

white savior myth is clearly seen in Alencar's novel and then becomes adapted in Queiroz in such a way that the white savior is no longer saving the Indigenous subject, but the mestizo, represented by the sertanero. This is the sad truth of the matter; however, Indigeneity is not dead. Reexamining these texts using Simpson and Kopenawa has proven fruitful in our ways to understand both the land and our own relationships with land, place, and other-than-human subjects. This, in and of itself, is a form of decolonial resistance, albeit a small one. In order to truly understand and reopen the positionality of Indigeneity, one would probably have to turn back to colonial texts. I do believe, however, that examining the land and relationships between being as I have done in this text is a way to open that door, however slightly, for future studies.

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