



Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007, 393-401

www.ncsu.edu/project/accontracorriente

Review/Reseña

David E. Stuart, *The Ecuador Effect*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

Writing and Reading in a Transnational Context: Light Fiction and Complicity in *The Ecuador Effect*

Michael Handelsman

University of Tennessee—Knoxville

El desdén del vecino formidable, que no la
conoce, es el peligro mayor de nuestra
América
—José Martí, “Nuestra América”

David E. Stuart is a professor of anthropology at the University of New Mexico who has turned his most recent efforts as researcher and scholar to writing a novel titled *The Ecuador Effect*. Although a work of fiction, this novel was inspired by Stuart’s previous experience in Ecuador where he lived and worked and, apparently, learned much about the history and cultural mores of the country. The novel takes place between January 1970 and April 1971 in Ecuador’s southern highlands and purports to reflect

“the history of a country that has had twenty-two presidents in the last thirty-five years” (x). Moreover, the author notes that based on reports from the US State Department and “a current CIA Web site,” the Ecuadorian government continues to underreport its indigenous population while a mere two percent of the population still has control over 90% of the nation’s resources. Stuart goes on to point out that “Mestizos still raid, and occasionally burn, Indian settlements to drive them away. Ownership of land is still the great arbiter of social class in rural Ecuador (x). Clearly, the tenor of these observations expressed in the “Author’s Note” that precedes the narration reveals a particular authorial attitude and perspective vis-à-vis Ecuador which gives shape to the meaning of the so-called “Ecuador Effect.” That is to say, corruption, violence, and political chaos constitute a social and cultural foundation that would seem to predetermine the fate of Ecuadorians, and most specifically, the fate of those indigenous communities located in rural areas alongside of a small and powerful group of land barons. Thus, the Ecuador effect: power gives one license to use and abuse everything and everyone.

I must admit that, as a serious reader/researcher of Latin American literature and culture, and of Ecuador in particular, I find Stuart’s fictional depiction of Ecuador troubling, especially in light of the degree to which fiction and reality often mirror one another. One will recall that Wolfgang Iser pointed out in *The Act of Reading* that “fiction is a means of telling us something about reality” (53). In that same vein, while reading the novel, I frequently found myself being torn between an imaginary story and a narration that will most certainly be interpreted by many uninitiated readers as an accurate portrayal of Ecuador and Ecuadorians. In fact, upon reading the “Author’s Note,” and the ostensibly innocent references to the US State Department and CIA Web site as sources of objective information, I already sensed that *The Ecuador Effect* was going to be unsettling for my own sensibilities that have evolved over a period of almost forty years of reading literature and social science pertinent to Ecuador. Among my initial concerns was the fact that the novel is written in English for an English-speaking audience, especially from the United States, where very few people have any meaningful knowledge of Ecuador, and thus, the

distinction between fact and fiction would surely be so blurred that readers would inevitably reinforce their many stereotypes of banana republics and Third World nations, as epitomized in this novel by Ecuador. Furthermore, readers are apt to confuse fact and fiction because the novel was published by an academic press and was written by an experienced anthropologist who is no stranger to Ecuador. Indeed, works of fiction are not innocent, nor do they lie outside of the social context from which they are written or read. As Arnold Hauser, the eminent sociologist of the arts, has taught: “El arte habla siempre a alguien de parte de alguien y refleja la realidad vista desde una posición social con el fin de que se la vea desde tal posición.”¹

At the risk of belaboring the point about the problematic nature of writing and the potential for deception inherent in an authorial voice that is often one of power and influence (thus, the relationship between *author* and *authority*), I would remind readers that these very issues are not limited to the study of fiction. In his *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), Hayden White argued convincingly that fiction and history use many of the same rhetorical devices, and therefore, the distinctions between writing fact and fiction are always blurred. With regard to the *Ecuador Effect*, a novel written by an established anthropologist, the comments made by Clifford Geertz about anthropology and writing are especially relevant to an analysis of Stuart’s novel. In his *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988), Geertz alerted readers to the following phenomenon:

The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly “been there.” And that, persuading us that this offstage miracle has occurred, is where the writing comes in (4-5).²

Surely this use of field experience as the basis for authorial legitimacy and accuracy permeates *The Ecuador Effect*. Why else would the author and the publisher make such a big deal about the author’s experiences as an

¹ *Fundamentos de la sociología del arte* (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1975): 161.

² I am grateful to Humberto Robles, emeritus professor at Northwestern University, for having brought to my attention this book written by Geertz.

anthropologist in Ecuador when presenting and promoting the novel? Moreover, the fact that the narrator/protagonist is also an anthropologist who is writing an eyewitness report that will eventually be presented to a United Nations committee on human rights is one more reason to read this novel cautiously and critically. Indeed, David E. Stuart's novel is problematic on numerous levels.

But first things first. The protagonist is John Alexander, a freelance human rights investigator who uses his Masters degree in anthropology as his cover while he investigates the implementation of land reform in Ecuador. He explains his presence in Ecuador's southern highlands by telling everyone that he is now doing his dissertation research on the popular and folklore music of the region. John Alexander's résumé, however, is everything but that of an enterprising doctoral student. He has been a "field agent who has investigated the international sex trade, agribusiness scandals, shady elections, and political murders for various foundations' boards," and as the University of New Mexico Press release continues to explain, "Alexander is a single guy with two American passports, a British residency card, a master's degree in folklore from Edinburgh, and an attitude."

The Ecuador Effect is an entertaining novel. It has lots of action, plenty of violence, some scenes that approach being sexual, just enough intrigue, and loads of suspense. In many ways, David E. Stuart's novel evokes a John Grisham thriller: it is light, but engaging; the novel moves quickly, but never approaches any substantive notion of social, ethical, or esthetic significance. In short, *The Ecuador Effect* could be adapted very nicely to an entertaining Hollywood screenplay for a Harrison Ford-type Indiana Jones movie. Thus, one could argue that the novel is an example of light literature as opposed to literature: this classification is not meant to be disparaging, but rather descriptive.

When all is said and done, perhaps it is John Alexander's "attitude" that makes this novel so problematic, especially since it transcends the fictional character and lays bare a too-generalized notion of cultural superiority still held by too many pretentious gringos. After all, it is John Alexander, the gringo anthropologist, who takes it upon himself to protect

and defend the helpless Indians against a vicious landowner. While Ecuadorians of all social classes are portrayed as having resigned themselves to the Ecuador effect (i.e., power justifies all actions and is the basis of all social relationships), Alexander emerges as a kind of savior or moral compass. It is he who denounces the abuses of exploitation, rape, murder, and oppression while everyone else awaits his leadership and inspiration. In fact, it is John Alexander who decides to take action and destroy the Veintimita clan, which for generations has held Indians, and the rest of southern-highland society, hostage. In effect, this outsider almost single-handedly takes on a social order that has supposedly defined life in Ecuador's Southern Andes for generations. One might read in John Alexander a kind of metaphor for the US Marines who have a long history in Latin America, and whose missions have generally been defined as righting the wrongs inherent in the Ecuador effect—which on other occasions has been surely referred to as the Guatemalan effect, the Nicaraguan effect, the Mexican effect, the Panama effect, *ad infinitum/ad nauseam*.

Despite the images and characterizations that make up *The Ecuador Effect*, it is John Alexander's "attitude" that obscures the simple fact that Ecuadorians have not sat by passively waiting for some gringo to save them from the many ills that define their society. Indeed, Ecuadorian intellectuals, among other social actors, have a long history of combating those very same evils that John Alexander calls the Ecuador effect, and today's indigenous movement which has proven to be a major international force in defending land rights, ethnic heritage, and environmental reform, has not emerged from a vacuum. It is worth mentioning that Xavier Andrade and Fredy Rivera, two Ecuadorian anthropologists, have reported that the level of political resistance and activism carried out by various peasant and indigenous organizations in the early 1960s was intense and effective.³ To be sure, abuse and exploitation have deeply marked Ecuadorian history, but so too have they defined US history, and the history

³ Their article is titled "El movimiento campesino e indígena en el último período: fases, actores y contenidos políticos," and can be found in Enrique Ayala Mora, ed. *Nueva historia del Ecuador*, tomo 11 (Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional y Grijalbo, 1991), 258-81.

of every other country in the world. Consequently, the novel's insistence on Ecuadorianizing those social ills tends to skew that harsh reality.

Some will object strongly to the above criticism on the grounds that I am reading a work of fiction as though it were intended to be an accurate account of social relations in Ecuador. Moreover, one would be right to warn against the dangers of prescribing topics to authors of fiction, or to anyone involved in the creative process. But, despite the author's stated intentions, the simple fact of the matter is that ECUADOR does exist in a complex social and historical reality that should not be ignored or carelessly reduced to egregious stereotypes. That is to say, the very choice of Ecuador as the theme of the novel, and as the defining term of the "effect" around which the entire novel revolves, behooves everyone to proceed with the utmost amount of caution and skepticism. In that regard, the renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz cautioned his readers with the following observation: "Every man has a right to create his own savage for his own purposes. Perhaps every man does. But to demonstrate that such a constructed savage corresponds to Australian Aborigines, African Tribesmen, or Brazilian Indians is another matter altogether."⁴

Unfortunately, Stuart's novel does not offer satire or parody as a means of projecting a critical portrait of Ecuadorian society; there is nothing nuanced to suggest that one is to read between the lines in this formulaic novel. In short, fact and fiction become the same thing in *The Ecuador Effect*; there is nothing below a narrative surface that is meant to entertain, but which also lends itself to fomenting a distorted imaginary among many readers who, regrettably, will want to emulate John Alexander's "attitude." One would do well to recall the comment made by the literary critics René Wellek and Austin Warren in their classic study titled *Theory of Literature*: "The writer is not only influenced by society: he influences it. Art not merely reproduces life but also shapes it. People may model their lives upon the patterns of fictional heroes and heroines."⁵ Surely, the same can be said about attitudes and perceptions learned from reading.

⁴ *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 347.

⁵ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd. edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956): 102.

In many ways, *The Ecuador Effect* recreates the “civilization vs. barbarianism” and “Love Boat” mindsets that have done so much to distort the complexity and humanity of Latin American nations among their United States and European neighbors. John Alexander explains to a United Nations Commission on Human Rights that he was retained by a “private philanthropic foundation to determine whether or not the Republic of Ecuador’s land reform law of 1964 was in full implementation, as had been represented by that government to the World Bank” (324). With the help of Alexander’s testimony, readers will certainly understand who is the standard bearer of civilization and who represents barbarianism, especially in light of such descriptive pearls found throughout the novel as:

But the truth was that my first weeks in Ecuador...were both an eye-opener and an initiation into daily realities that were rawer than anything else I’d experienced. The country had a remarkable way of getting past one’s defenses, embedding itself under the skin like a bloodsucking tick. The resulting malady seemed to either make people mean and calculating or grind them down into nothingness. So far, Ecuador offered no compromises (97).

It struck me that the line between realists and cynics simply might not exist in Ecuador—a place where facing reality itself required one to be a cynic (102).

Ecuador, I decided, was right in there with parts of Africa on the human rights issue—in other words, off the charts (184-5).

...the Ecuador Effect was remorseless, unremitting, merciless. “There will be no free will” (331).

Although one finds sporadically throughout the novel a few concessions in which the narrative voice acknowledges that corruption and violence occur in other places such as in the United States, and at one point, Alexander tells a young woman that perhaps he has judged Ecuador too harshly (237), the proverbial exception only proves the rule. That is to say, rather than leading readers to a broader view of Ecuador, these concessions create a false sense of the protagonist’s objectivity and, in the process, strengthen his credibility and the notion that the larger-than-life gringo embodies knowledge and righteousness while the hapless Ecuadorians reaffirm their multiple ineptitudes and their need for outside assistance. There are other components in the novel that also create the

illusion of our reading an accurate portrayal of Ecuador, and thus, confirming the validity of Alexander's testimony about the Ecuador effect. For example, there are authentic maps of Ecuador reproduced in the novel, the narrative contains precise geographic references as readers follow the adventures of their hero, words that are unique to Ecuador are interspersed throughout, and in many respects, the text takes on the character of a kind of travelogue and tourist guide book.⁶ Once again, we confront the dilemma of readers not discerning the difference between fact and fiction precisely because *The Ecuador Effect* feeds their self-fulfilling fantasies that are at the core of more than two hundred years of US/Latin America relations, and which are poignantly described in José Martí's comment cited in the epigraph that opens this book review.

Clearly, there is a marked difference between writing and reading *about* another culture and writing and reading *from* that culture. *The Ecuador Effect* falls prey to many of the pitfalls inherent in "othering" people who are different from us. The apparent criticism of human rights violations in the novel is devoid of any thoughtful reflection; John Alexander dwarfs everyone around him, and consequently, everything that is actually Ecuador is relegated to a supporting role in a background devoid of compelling subjects and social agency. Indeed, the Ecuador effect exists only to aggrandize the readers' perception of their gringo hero, which for many also feeds their fantasies about their own importance and superiority, especially with regard to their poor *latino* neighbors. Entertainment at someone else's expense would seem to capture the "effect" of this particular novel.

In contrast to David E. Stuart's work of fiction about Ecuador, one can read numerous historical novels written by such Ecuadorian social scientists as Santiago Páez, Luis Zúñiga, Alejandro Moreano, or Carlos Arcos, for example. Each of these writers' works of fiction is unwavering in its criticism of societal abuse, and frequently they all champion, at some point, the human rights of a diverse array of social groups heretofore

⁶ One obvious error in this recreation of Ecuador is the confusion between "una lora" and "una ayora." The author mistakenly refers to the national coin, the *sucre*, which locals frequently called "una ayora", named for the president Isidro Ayora (1928-31), as "una lora (a tear)." Of course, the *sucre* no longer exists now that Ecuador's economy has been completely dollarized.

marginalized and exploited by Ecuador's traditional elites. But unlike Stuart's penchant for expressing his narrative world almost entirely through stereotypes and cardboard characters, his Ecuadorian counterparts—all social scientists, as well—avoid formulaic constructions so that their readers can probe the complex causes, consequences, and “effects” of the social relations of power. In fact, despite the absence of a John Alexander—or some other *deus ex machina*-type character—, their novels are no less entertaining than *The Ecuador Effect*.

In 1967, the Ecuadorian sociologist Agustín Cueva published his seminal study on Ecuadorian literature and culture titled *Entre la ira y la esperanza*. Among his many comments about the dialectic relationship between literature and society was the belief that

...en cada período se aceptan o se rechazan—se escogen, en una palabra—las producciones literarias y artísticas, atendiendo no sólo al criterio de calidad—el mismo históricamente condicionado—, mas también de acuerdo con los intereses de los pontífices de turno y de la clase social a la que ellos pertenecen, sirven o acuerdan sus simpatías.⁷

Although Cueva wrote the above observation at a different time and for a different readership, his point continues to be relevant today as it transcends national and disciplinary boundaries. Our choices about what and for whom we write, on the one hand, and what and how we read, on the other, are socially determined. Consistent with that premise, I hope my comments about *The Ecuador Effect* have contributed to elucidating some of the underlying interests that are served, consciously or subconsciously, when one reduces the creative process to a seemingly innocent expression of entertainment. It is imperative that we understand the implications of writing and reading in a transnational context. To ignore those implications is tantamount to being complicit in the preservation of a colonial social order that is firmly embedded in the so-called “Ecuador Effect,” or in what Edward Said has described as “Orientalism.”

⁷ Agustín Cueva, *Entre la ira y la esperanza* (Cuenca: Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, Núcleo del Azuay, 1981): 10.