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REVIEW

Luis A. Medina Cordova. *Imagining Ecuador: Crisis, Transnationalism and Contemporary Fiction*. Tamesis, 2022

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Luis A. Medina Cordova's book is a bold contribution to Ecuadorian studies, Latin American literary studies writ large, and also world literature. Comprised of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, *Imagining Ecuador* seeks to put at the center of Ecuadorian literary production to propose alternative readings of both canonical and more recent novels. At the baseline, it is a forward-looking move to focus an entire monograph on Ecuadorian fiction because of its status as a minor literature and one that is often neglected or overlooked in broader discussions on Latin American literature. These are precisely the questions that propel the author to offer a renewed and provocative take on three moments of Ecuadorian literary production starting with the 1930s, leaping toward the end of the 1990s and the twenty-first century, and arguing for why Ecuadorian fiction can become a space from which to think of alternative models to articulate world literature.

Indeed, the book's "Introduction" lays out a clear route in which the author presents three clearly defined critical and theoretical positions: 1) that fiction from the 1930s offers a "normative national model" (4); 2) that fiction from end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries demonstrates ways to think about how the national model has been transcended and given way to notions of hybridity and transnationality; 3) and that Ecuadorian literature's relative invisibility, limited circulation in global literary networks, and poor critical attention offers a pathway to think of other ways of envisioning world literature. Overall, the author presents a double move that shows how contemporary Latin American literature at once transgresses "the borders of the nation [which] also goes hand in hand with building it" (6).

Chapter 1, "Land, History, Nation," focuses on revisiting Jorge Icaza's canonical novel *Huasipungo* (1934) to present a theoretically nuanced close reading that articulates how the 1930s generation of *indigenista* and social realist writers crafted an idealized version of Ecuador and has remained a foundational moment in Ecuadorian letters. Medina Cordova is correct in arguing that *Huasipungo* and other novels written in the 1930s and 1940s have taken on a "normative position in the cultural field" as it pertains to Ecuadorian belles-lettres and that writers such as Icaza, Demetrio Aguilera Malta, and José de la Cuadra, among other authors of the Grupo de Guayaquil, have had "a consecrated status granted by [cultural] institutions including literary criticism and the education system" (16). Such a canonical status within Ecuador has indeed become a reference point for subsequent generations of authors who have either capitulated to the weightiness of the 1930s generation, recognizing them as literary forefathers, or who have distanced themselves from the themes developed in social realist and *indigenista* literature. Some of these fiction writers (Jorge Enrique Adoum, Miguel Donoso Pareja, and Ángel Felicísimo Rojas), who also wrote criticism appear across the footnotes of chapter 1. Medina Cordova turns to recognizable critics and theorists such as Jean Franco, Antonio Cornejo Polar, Julio Ramos, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Nestor García Canclini, Ángel Rama, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others to make the case that *Huasipungo* has become the quintessential model for Ecuadorian fiction, presenting a framework that defines the nation in terms of its geographical, historical, and cultural uniqueness. While this novel is perhaps the best-known example of twentieth-century literature outside of Ecuadorian borders, Medina Cordova does not fully situate the novel within a broader moment of Latin American literature that privileged ideologically inflected aesthetics under the guises of *indigenismo*, social realism, and *novelas de la tierra*. Likewise, for specialists on Ecuadorian letters, it would have been useful if the author had better argued why a novel focusing on indigeneity such as *Huasipungo* superseded and overshadowed other equally important novels at a moment when authors of this generation focused on micro-regions of Ecuador and also turned their attention to other representations of race (*cholos*, *montubios*, and afro-descendants) and class beyond the Indigenous subject. There is also a missed opportunity for the author to argue why this novel, which primarily focuses on the

Ecuadorian highlands and thus a centralized notion of Ecuador, is the *de facto* normative and all-encompassing Ecuadorian novel, precisely because intrinsic regionalism in Ecuador has more often than not resisted cultural amalgamation and unification.

Moving from a criticism of *Huasipungo* as a novel that became the normative model for Ecuadorian fiction, Chapter 2, "Crisis, Fiction, Transformation" turns to critics Ericka Beckman, Richard Rosa, Frederic Jameson, Gerald Martin, and theorists Ernst Renan and Benedict Anderson to argue that the late 1990s, marked by the *Feriado Bancario*, saw a moment that redefines the idea of the nation. As a moment of financial crisis, instability in the banking system, the hyperinflation of the Ecuadorian currency *sucre*, and the disappearance of it in favor of the U.S. dollar as Ecuador's everyday currency, the *Feriado Bancario*, which began in 1999, has had a long-lasting impact on Ecuadorian society. For Medina Cordova, this moment of crisis "functions as a re-foundational moment for the contemporary Ecuadorian nation, one that has a significant impact on Ecuadorian development today" (60-61). As the author argues, the shift toward a dollarized economy and the exodus of Ecuadorians to Spain, Italy, the United States, and other countries turned the Ecuadorian nation into a transnational space that exceeded the kind of territorialized focus that the writers of the 1930s generation had. In this chapter, Eliécer Cárdenas' *El oscuro final del Porvenir* (2000) acts as a case study that allegorizes and documents this traumatic moment in recent Ecuadorian history. Medina Cordova situates his intervention within New Economic Criticism as articulated by Mark Osteen, Martha Woodmansee, and Marc Shell, and further advanced within Latin American criticism by Ericka Beckman and Alessandro Fornazzari. Ultimately, for the author, this novel offers a model of a transnational novel that deterritorializes the notion of the nation by offering a look at both the shifting social fabric within Ecuador's borders and how Ecuadorians soon became diasporic subjects.

Whereas the previous chapter delineates the shift from the national toward transnational representation, Chapter 3, "Reimagining Ecuador Transnationally" turns to three novels, namely Leonardo Valencia's *Kazbek* (2008), Carlos Arco's *Memorias de Andrés Chiliquinga* (2013), and Gabriela Alemán's *Humo* (2017) to offer different ways of looking at Ecuador as a transnational space. Critics Jahan Ramazani, Sylvia Molloy, Stephen Clingman, and Rosi Braidotti, among others, serve as interlocutors for Medina Cordova to provide a succinct close reading of each of these three disparate novels. In his reading of *Kazbek*, Medina Cordova traces how the novel's protagonist, a native of Guayaquil living abroad in Spain, returns to Ecuador to meet a German painter for a collaborative creative project. This brief novel takes *Kazbek*, the novel's protagonist on a journey of constant flux and border crossings that takes him to "different cities in Ecuador, Peru, Portugal, Tunisia, Spain and Switzerland" (112). Nomadism, as articulated by Rosi Braidotti, becomes the critical lens through which Medina Cordova analyzes the novel. Furthermore, the critic argues that this novel "frustrates the relationship between territory and belonging, the connection of the novel with contemporary Ecuador stands out by reflecting the need to dissociate territory and belonging in a comprehensive view of the nation in the twenty-first century" (116). Arco's novel, on the other hand, focuses on border crossings by pursuing a metaliterary angle that connects the present with the early decades of the twentieth century. *Memorias de Andrés Chiliquinga* focuses on its namesake protagonist, an indigenous character from Otavalo in Northern Ecuador, who travels to the U.S. with a Fulbright fellowship to attend a course on Latin American literature at Columbia University. Here he learns that he shares his name with the protagonist of *Huasipungo*. The twenty-first-century version of Andrés embarks upon a journey of self-discovery and zooms-in on Ecuadorian history and politics through literature. Medina Cordova goes on to argue that Arco's version of Andrés is no longer "an indigenous subject attached to the land" (109), as was the case in *Huasipungo*. Instead, the twenty-first-century Andrés becomes a

nomadic subject whose "cultural identity is defined by navigating borders" (109). The third case study in this chapter is Alemán's *Humo*, which does not focus directly on any Ecuadorian characters nor does it make any direct references to Ecuadorian history or culture. Instead, this novel narrates the story of Gabriel and Andrei during the final years of Alfredo Stroessner's dictatorship in Paraguay in the 1980s. In this section of the chapter, Medina Cordova links his reading to Gabriela Alemán's own biographical and nomadic subjectivity as an author who was born in Brazil, who has Ecuadorian citizenship, who lived in Paraguay, and studied in the United States. Even further, this novel becomes a prime example of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, following Deleuze and Guattari, have called "minor literature," arguing for the "study of minor-to-minor networks that circumvent the major altogether" (118). In sum, Medina Cordova argues that these novels serve as case studies that articulate hybridity in Ecuadorian letters, while also becoming prime examples of the kind of minoritized literature that provides "further insights on issues of globality for scholarship on Latin American and World literature" (140).

Continuing with this line of inquiry, Chapter 4, "Latin America, Ecuador, the World" makes a critical intervention into theoretical discussions on world literature as articulated by David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter, and Héctor Hoyos, Gesine Müller, Jorge Locane, and Benjamin Loy for the Latin American case. In this chapter, Medina Cordova argues that "novels like the ones studied in this book circumvent standard parameters for identifying world novels, yet they present us with articulations of globality" (145). This type of globality, however, does not align with Eurocentric or Anglophone articulations of literary circulation, translation, and reception. Instead, this minoritarian approach to globality adds a nuanced dimension from a position of relative invisibility as is the case with Ecuadorian literature's place within Latin American and world literature alike. In the rest of the chapter, Medina Cordova traces how Marcelo Chiriboga —a fictional writer and character that José Donoso and Carlos Fuentes created to signify Ecuador's absence from the boom— is emblematic of Ecuador's invisibility and absence in broader discussions on Latin American literature and world literature. When thinking about the contemporary authors discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Medina Cordova concludes that such

> fictions help us make the case for a study of World Literature that need not be the study of the global exclusively, where national historiographies are overcome and buried; rather, they show us that it can also be the study of the global by thinking through the nuanced experiences of national historiographies. (167)

It is the interplay between national and global frameworks that leads the author to rearticulate in the "Conclusion" the overarching points he has made throughout the four preceding chapters. It also leads Medina Cordova to suggest that after the *Feriado Bancario* crisis and its impact on the development and expansion of Ecuadorian literature, a study of women's writing [that would include contemporary Ecuadorian authors such as Mónica Ojeda and María Fernanda Ampuero, among others] after the crisis that takes into consideration its cultural consequences regarding gendered structures and strengthening of transnational frameworks is yet to be done. (174)

Overall, this book offers a rich and thought-provoking way of framing Ecuadorian literature by highlighting the structures that sedimented the place of canonical works like *Huasipungo*, while also occluding its presence in broader discussions on Latin American literature. Equally important is Medina Cordova's intervention in timely debates on how to situate Latin American literature in the broader and often problematic frameworks of world literature. This book will indeed be an invaluable reference for specialists and non-specialists alike, as well as for undergraduate and

graduate students. *Imagining Ecuador* leaves an open-ended challenge to Latin American literary scholars to reassess inherited assumptions and blind spots that render some national literatures invisible and understudied. This, in itself, is perhaps Medina Cordova's most lasting contribution to the broader field.

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