

A Sense of Place

By Lili Mendoza (Panama)

Let's begin by saying – not without trepidation -- that I am Panamanian. Right off the bat, I want to pull the rug out from under your feet. Flush everything you think you know about Latin America. We're going to laugh our asses off. Please ditch the guayabera--the only man who can rock that shit's been smoking cigars in a cantina for the past forty years. Ditch the Lonely Planet. Knowledge of Central America won't be of use, neither will a look at our next-door neighbors. Warnings stated, let's get down to business.

Perhaps we should begin by explaining that Panama is not a Maíz – corn –nation but a Plantain Nation. This is essential. Located in the northern hemisphere, we are the isthmus that connects the two masses of the Americas. Ocean to the left, to the right, and all along the territory. We're hanging on for dear life to the continental mass by Colombia to the south, and Costa Rica to the north. Perhaps this could be an explanation for our cultural detachment. As a people, our behavior and attitudes are similar to that of our brothers in Cuba, República Dominicana, and that strange lost cousin down south, Venezuela. I've come to think of Panama as an island. When I speak of setting in my stories, this is the initial layer. Paradise.

Then there is the matter of transit. The isthmus has always been the go-to shortcut of conquistadores, merchants, the military. Any cat in need of reaching the Pacific in a jiffy can dock in the Atlantic, then haul-ass to the other side. We quickly became the IV drip of America, feeding the corpse - Europe. We had the gold, too. And natural wealth. We still do. My country became, and remains, the World's Duty Free. Yes, please pick whatever you can before departure.

In Panama the Gold Rush never ended. As we speak, we're being sold pound by pound-- beaches, pineapples, cheap labor, real estate. Make a killing, get out. American Baby boomers battle the heat and intricacies of the language to stretch the worth of their pension funds, upsetting our economy in ways the Economic Theory could not predict. Add a layer of political corruption, a dictatorial regime lasting from 1968 to 1989. A fucking *invasion*. *Insert urban war here*. Add another layer. The world, it seems wants our coffee, bananas, fiscal incentives, paradisiacal beaches, rum, corruption, adventure, rainforests, water. Local politicians making a killin', killing because hey, they can always retire in Tuscany, not this uncivilized tropical shithole. Welcome to Panama. If you have money, this land is yours.

My stories take place in this over-imposed landscape, from the tenements of Chorrillo - where I live--to the over-the-top Trump Tower and banking district. The bohemian district – El Cangrejo, where I lived before I was kicked out by the economic cataclysm. The gentrified Casco Viejo. The streets of Calidonia where I grew up – the downtown of Downtown. El Marañón, the tough little mecca of boxing. But my stories are not so much about the physical setting but about the psychological, about how individuals –Panameño--respond to an ever-changing environment. How individuals act, react – armed with the weapons of our mass destruction. This is the psychological vernacular, insight into the mind of Panamanians.

Celebrity expats: Paul Gaugin, John Wayne, the Shah of Iran, Mick Jagger. Yet, 40 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty. We are three million inhabitants. And no, we can't get no satisfaction. The abandonment of our situation has made me reconsider my place in society and join a sector of the population that is facing life in brave, new, challenging ways. I report from the trenches, for that '40 percent.' I write for them and as one of them. Junk diving, *Tinaquear*. Why not, there is an entire pile of goodies to be found. From the slang of our ghettos, our street smart economics, the informality and violence of our ways to our dismissal of the profound, to our predilection for the bottle, our slack. This is us. My theory is that our collective mind senses our abandonment, the fragile balance that keeps us afloat.

Damned if we do, damned if we don't, we are going to tackle life with a do-or-die approach that I have come to call the ApoCalypso: *it's the end of the world, let's drink, fuck, dance.*

I can only write about this land and of Panamanians abroad. So yes, what I do could be considered as regionalism but I believe that is not a bad thing. Literature explores and reveals the aesthetics of a people, the peculiarities of the landscape, language. The author is a sort of medium, capable and willing to transmit, to lend voice to the voices of others whose existence is as remote and unknown as the Más Allá.