



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

What do we know about Panama? Well, we have definitely all heard of the famous Panama Canal and the recent leaks of the so-called Panama Papers.

Panama is a narrow country and seems to consist more of water than of land; that there is land amongst all the water has been both a curse and a blessing. The isthmus had ignited dreams and held the potential for their fulfilment, with the Panama Canal being the epitome of conquering nature and of making the impossible possible.



Panama Canal

And yet, this victory over nature was marked by so many contradictory events.

Following their independence from Spain on November 28, 1821, Panama joined a union of Nueva Granada, Ecuador, and Venezuela named the Republic of Gran Colombia. When Gran Colombia dissolved in 1831, Panama and Nueva Granada remained joined, eventually becoming the Republic of Colombia. On November 3, 1903, Panama was separated from Colombia, a move directly linked to foreign interests, namely US ones.

Building the Panama Canal in 1903–1914, President Theodore Roosevelt saw the realisation of a long-term United States goal: a trans-isthmian canal that would

advance their economic power. Ultimately, Panama's independence was achieved because the United States needed a compliant nation that would not be resistant to the US's economic plans.

French engineers had originally begun work on the canal in 1881 but failed due to engineering problems and a high worker mortality rate. The US succeeded where the French had failed and built and opened the Canal.

In his novel, *The Secret History of Costaguana*, contemporary Colombian writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez evokes the period of the first canal experiment and the political turmoil that came with these new ideas. Joseph Conrad's imagined land of Costaguana (*Nostramo*) in Central America becomes Vásquez's metaphor for Panama as he highlights the revolutions, disease and escalating expenses that plagued the first canal project.

The second, and successful, canal project saw Panama's independence, but the country's dependence on the United States that followed moulded many future events and can still be felt in Panama today. The US considered the Canal its own and owned the Panama Canal Zone, which was an unincorporated territory, from 1903 to 1979. This zone consisted of the Canal and an area extending about eight kilometres on either side of the centreline. This foreign occupation expelled many Panamanians from their own land and made it impossible to travel to certain areas of their own country.

In 1977, US President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos, of Panama, signed treaties that transferred control of the canal to Panama in 1999 but gave the US the right to use military force to defend the waterway against any threat to its neutrality. The US used this right on numerous occasions, often when they felt the Panama government was not acting in the US's economic interests.

Panama City is a place where all these contradictory developments can be seen. American pensioners roam the streets of the CBD, which is defined by high-rise buildings and an atmosphere of wealth, growth and international players. One can find Donald Trump's 'Trump Towers', as well as the infamous law firm Mossack Fonseca, who have allegedly assisted dictators, drug dealers and many of the

rich and unscrupulous to launder their money through offshore companies. One of the directors, Panamanian Ramón Fonseca, was once even a consultant to the president. Crime, greed and politics seem to go hand-in-hand in Panama, with leaders like the infamous dictator Manuel Noriega, who ruled between 1983 and 1989, when he was removed from power by the United States during the invasion of Panama.

Ramón Fonseca is also a poet of note. A charismatic man, he is seen as putting himself above the law and humanity. Meeting the young poets and writers, it becomes clear that they are not only concerned about the arts – most of them are activists as well who want to create a fairer and more humane society that respects all its people and not only those with money or power.

These young poets and writers do not live in the glamorous city centre or the *Casco Viejo*. The old Spanish town has been gentrified and is today a place to go out, to dine, to drink, and to have fun. When I met with renowned poet Lucy Cristina Chau in her flat, it was a far cry from the charm of the city centre.

We talked about the role of the writer in society, and she introduced me to her colleague Alfredo Belda, who was an independent candidate for the presidency. Although he didn't stand much of a chance, his message showed young people that they have the potential to drive change. In a society dominated by money, neoliberalism and a toxic amalgam produced by Catholicism, a lot of courage and confidence is needed to challenge the current status quo.

These poets travel to international festivals and use these platforms to make their causes known. As Chau says, 'We want to lead Panamanian literature out of the quarantine into which our rulers have pushed it.'

Her colleague, Mar Alzamora-Rivera, is an incredibly versatile artist. Alzamora-Rivera writes poetry, is a musician, and organises poetry and music events that are renowned throughout the country. I travelled with her through downtown Panama and she proudly showed me beautiful murals that artists create in the city to remember victims of the system, such as the students killed in 1964 when they protested US rule in the Canal Zone. These important works bring injustice, ignorance and disempowerment to the fore.

In Panama, the art scene is very much involved in political life, despite the dangers or lack of funding. It is these outspoken people who provide us with a different view of a country known for economic injustice, drug trafficking and politics intertwined with crime. **CF**

