UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Review of Julie Greene's Box 25: Archival Secrets, Caribbean Workers, and the Panama Canal

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vm2s9z1

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 16(2)

Author

Zien, Katherine

Publication Date

2025-11-23

DOI

10.5070/T8.54065

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Book Review

Box 25: Archival Secrets, Caribbean Workers, and the Panama Canal, by Julie Greene
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025
184 pp., 21 halftones, 3 maps. $27.95 USD
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4696-7948-8

Reviewed by KATHERINE ZIEN, McGill University
Katherine.zien@mcgill.ca

As a long-time admirer of Julie Greene's research, I was eager to read this book. And there was another reason for my enthusiasm: When researching in the Panama Canal Zone Library-Museum collection in graduate school, I, too, had come across the cache of testimonials known as "Box 25." I remember reading with great interest these letters by largely Afro-Caribbean-descended Panama Canal workers, photographing them with my digital camera (in the time before scanner apps), and wondering what they might yield. I found the testimonials rich and lyrical, and often heartrending. I thought that they could someday become the basis for a beautiful documentary theater piece, as actors animated and gave flesh to their authors' lives and struggles. This never came to fruition, but I always recalled the evocative nature of the letters, their affecting descriptions of work in the crux of the "cut." Now, given the Trump administration's renewed attacks on the sovereignty of the Panama Canal and the dystopian déjà vu of US military bases in Panama, it is more important than ever to nuance and humanize the Canal's labor history.

When Greene's slim volume chanced its way across my transom, I was pleased to see how this work highlights Box 25 as a corpus, brilliantly disaggregating its contents from the generality of the Canal's labor pool to trace both composite and individual portraits. Working with, against, and in the recesses of the data, Greene draws upon her expertise in social and labor history to create a deft, careful, and compassionate delineation of this unique subset of profiles.

The reason for the letters' existence was a 1963 competition for the "Best True Stories of Life and Work on the Isthmus of Panama," created by a white US citizen female librarian working with the Isthmian Historical Society. This contest took place six decades after the US government began its Panama Canal construction project, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Canal's opening. Greene delves into the lives of the people who submitted testimonies, the content of what they described, and the many questions that issue from their accounts. These letters are products of memory, mediated by temporal and spatial distance, illness, poverty, and age.

In addition to tracing narratives of lives lived, new worlds made, and the ever-present risk of disease and death in Panama, Greene guides us through the process of historical inquiry. While noting patterns among the letters (such as mobility among jobs), Greene is careful not to let the connections overdetermine the details. *Box 25* is a methods course in miniature, patiently explaining how we can glean information from the letters and what they can't tell us. While Box 25 reveals detailed information, and importantly is not filtered through a white gaze, it is in many ways not representative of the Canal's workforce at large. Mostly omitted, for example, are female voices. This contrasts with the presence of thousands of Afro-Caribbean women in the Panama Canal area at the time. The writers of these letters were likely to be literate (although some may have dictated their letters), making them a more educated and possibly better-off group than those who did not apply to the contest. Moreover, while Afro-Caribbean workers frequently situated themselves (or were positioned) between the British Crown and the US government, many of these writers were living in the Republic of Panama at the time of the contest.

Greene fleshes out *Box 25* by providing a detailed sense of the labor landscape on the Canal. After descriptions of the workers' diverse countries of origin (Barbados, Jamaica, and other locales), we learn about different jobs, pay grades, and schedules. While some of the writers began as "diggers," railroad brakemen, or water boys, others arrived with skills that allowed them entry into artisan positions. Many engaged in strategic job changes, at times advancing in the ranks.

Greene examines the historiographic promise and lingering questions of Box 25 by cross-investigating its authors in the personnel files contained at the National Personnel Records Center (Chapter 5). This important expansion produces multifaceted biographical data. The textures of lives, livings, and livelihoods surface in vivid detail, as Greene traces family life and work through the government's longitudinal files. In particular, the government records' tracking of physical marks on the bodies of Afro-Caribbean workers is eerily reminiscent of nineteenth-century fugitive slave advertisements in the United States, which similarly noted scars and amputated limbs, revealing pasts of violent racial subjugation.[1]

Greene's account is particularly intense in describing the risks and dangers of the work. Working conditions were terrible in the construction site, and Afro-Caribbean and other "silver-roll" workers were subject to the worst of these. There were so many ways that death could occur: suddenly, as in the daily accidents such as train crashes and mudslides and dynamite explosions—or more gradually, given the prevalence of malaria, typhoid fever, pneumonia, and other diseases. While the dangers come painfully alive for us, the Afro-Caribbean workers' courage and creativity in coping with horrific conditions also emerge forcefully in Greene's rendering.

The perils of Canal construction drove many away quickly. Greene demonstrates that the Canal labor force was composed of thousands of temporary, itinerant workers who frequently moved on to new labor sites or returned home, daunted by the omnipresence of death. Amid this larger and more amorphous group, a smaller

core comprised those who were employed by the Panama Canal Company for longer periods, sometimes several decades. From these came the testimonials of the "Old Timers" in Box 25.

While Greene focuses mostly on the physical laborers and work- or family-related topics, she does not explore some other facets of life among the Afro-Caribbean–descended population in Panama. For example, she mentions briefly the small group of Afro-Caribbean (and Afro-Panamanian) workers who performed white-collar work, whom I discuss in my book, *Sovereign Acts*.[2] This group created a dynamic social scene over multiple decades, with church groups and entertainments and civil rights organizations that reporters chronicled in *The Panama Tribune.* Additionally, Greene mentions the lack of social entertainments for West Indian workers. My second chapter examines the entertainment landscape for "silver-roll" (that is, nonwhite and largely Afro-Caribbean) workers in the Canal Zone. In fact, silver-roll clubhouses and entertainments did exist, but not to the same extent as the "gold-roll" (i.e., white) clubhouses and entertainments. They were also established later than the white clubhouses, after extensive petitioning of the Canal Company by members of the Black workforce. Once they came into existence, they were often staffed by African American directors, to the frustration of some Afro-Caribbean members who felt that their community should be directing the clubhouses. Often, silver-roll clubhouses and social events did double or triple duty, functioning as educational, religious, and community-strengthening sites in the face of multidirectional forms of racism, xenophobia, and oppression. This is but a partial glimpse into more complex questions of the politics of popular entertainments among the longer-term populations of Panama Canal employees. A greater focus on recreation and workers' cultural lives beyond labor and family could further expand our understanding of Afro-Caribbean legacies in Panama.

Greene's final chapter offers an effective culmination of this beautiful book. Chapter Six guides us through historiography and public-facing accounts of the Panama Canal that have shaped the discourse on the engineering feat and its labor force. In particular, Greene undertakes a bravado revisionist rereading of several important texts, including David McCullough's *The Path Between the Seas*.[3] Unspooling the sources behind McCullough's milestone work, Greene reveals how McCullough both breaks with and reiterates racist, illogical, and romanticized assumptions about West Indian laborers. While McCullough also drew upon Box 25 in his social history components, he assigned the letters a rosier tone than emerges in Greene's rereading of this archival collection. Greene's reassessment of the laborers' plights and negotiations explodes many myths about West Indian laborers' treatment by the US government. This chapter closes on a hopeful note, cataloguing the many recent correctives—including community organizations, films, books, and digital collections—that have ameliorated archival silences around Afro-Caribbean–descended workers' histories and contributed to our better understanding of this past.

Box 25 is fine-grained, illuminating, and eminently readable. I could see this book assigned to a range of students, from first-year undergraduates to advanced doctoral candidates, and it would also appeal to a general audience. Greene's writing is clear, accessible, and straightforward. The contents of Box 25 offer a profound record of Canal labor, flecked with subjectivity and nuance, that humanizes the Panama Canal workforce. Greene's reading of this corpus pays homage to the grace of the collected testimonies and lends appropriate gravity both to the transformative impact of the Panama Canal and to its workers' almost unimaginably tenacious, courageous, and persevering endeavors. Now we know much more about those who truly built the Panama Canal.

Notes

1 Amy Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 107–10.

2 Katherine Zien, *Sovereign Acts: Performing Race, Space, and Belonging in Panama and the Canal Zone* (Rutgers University Press, 2017).

3 David McCullough, *The Path Between the Seas* (Simon and Schuster, 1977).

Selected Bibliography

Hughes, Amy. *Spectacles of Reform: Theater and Activism in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Michigan Press, 2012.

McCullough, David. *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870–1914*. Simon and Schuster, 1977.

Zien, Katherine. *Sovereign Acts: Performing Race, Space, and Belonging in Panama and the Canal Zone.* Rutgers University Press, 2017.