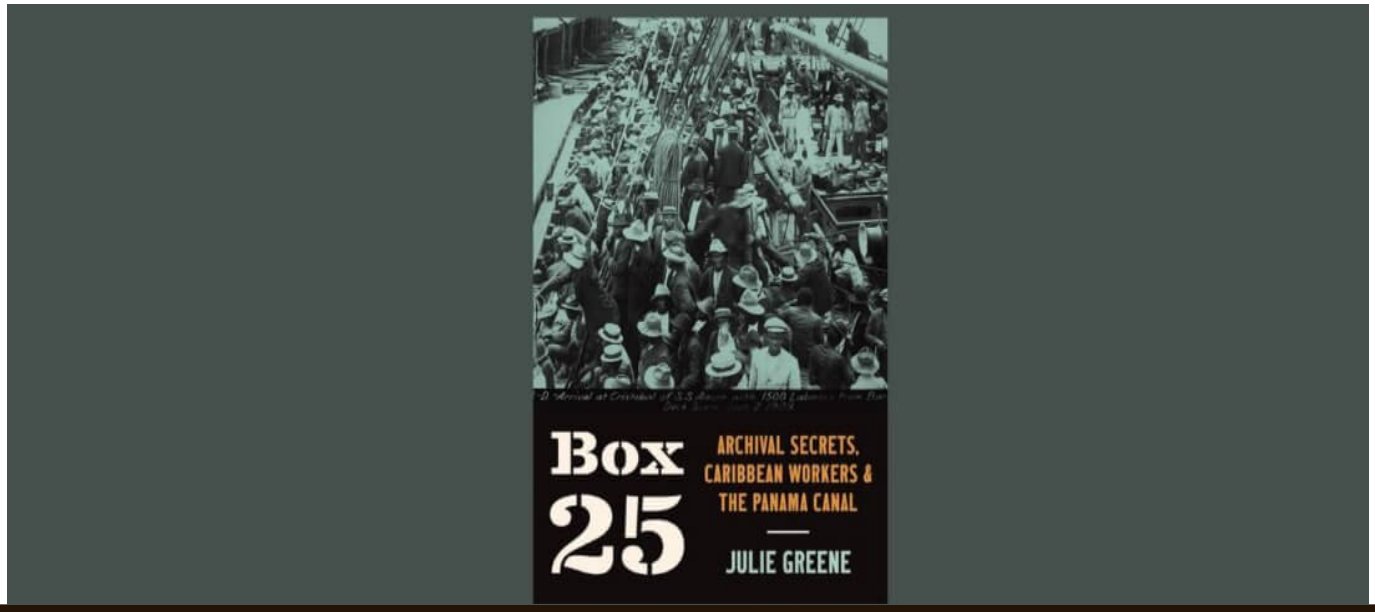

Julie Greene on Her New Book, Box 25

Posted on March 11, 2026 by John Enyeart

John Enyeart spoke with Julie Greene, editor of Labor: Studies in Working Class History*, about her new book, Box 25, based on essays written in 1963 by Afro-Caribbean canal diggers, track shifters, and domestic servants in the Panama Canal Zone. She explores in depth what it was like to be a migrant worker, how the experienced this work and the illnesses, dangerous, racism that shaped the construction.*

I remember sitting in a seminar with you in 1996 or 97 and discussing the essay in David Montgomery's *Workers' Control* where the reader gets a first-hand account of what it was like to puddle iron at the turn of the twentieth century. I was captivated by Montgomery's ability to capture what happened on the shopfloor, to write a compelling history of workers at work. *Box 25* does that as you capture the voices of real people describing their work as well as the dynamics of their workplaces. Those dynamics are enthralling because instead of white workers cultivating "manly bearing" toward their bosses and fellow workers, you illustrate how health, sexism, racism, and colonialism (to name just a few) were lived by these workers as part of their various jobs. Would you please elaborate on why you decided to write this book in this way?

When I finished writing *The Canal Builders* I wanted to know more about the Caribbean workers who faced the greatest dangers and hardship. Most historians across the decades and certainly US officials at the time showed little understanding of these complex workers from many different islands. In addition, I was eager to explore the personnel files of the 'silver workers'–which no historian had ever examined before–and to experiment with ways to bring individual working-class lives to vivid life. Using the testimonies in the Isthmian Historical Society collection at the Library of Congress–the *Box 25* of my title–seemed a great way to do that, especially if I could connect them to personnel records and create a more complete portrayal of the authors.

As I began the research, I quickly realized that this would also be a story about archives–what they tell us, what they hide, the power relations that create them and that they reflect, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot discussed in *Silencing the Past*. The 'archival turn' has resulted in a lot of great work, by Jennifer Morgan, Marisa Fuentes, and many others. I thought it'd be interesting to consider those issues in a book on early 20th century global labor history.

Isn't the "archival turn" done well just good dialectical history? A main point you make in Box 25 is that the "torturous history of racial discrimination and colonialism in Panama and the Canal Zone, and protests against both, directly shaped the creation and maintenance of archives related to the canal construction's history"(33). You give numerous examples that support this analysis. In this particular instance you were writing about tensions that spilled over into violence after white students at Balboa High School in the canal zone in 1964, refused to allow the Panamanian flag to fly beside the U.S. flag. The parallel flags were intended to signify the eventual transfer of the canal to Panama. The white U.S. students displayed their commitment to colonialism with their protest, and when Panamanians took to the streets to oppose the white students' actions, and then set fire to buildings, we witnessed an instance of the depths of their anticolonial outlook to their national identity. You noted that the situation escalated with Panamanian snipers firing at U.S. soldiers and then the US Army mobilizing and sending 14,000 soldiers to confront the demonstrations, declaring martial law, and killing twenty-one Panamanians. The Flag Riot continues to be memorialized by Panamanians as "Martyr's Day," further shows how every action by the US in the canal zone was an affront to Panamanian self-determination.

I found this example especially fascinating because of when it happened, a year after the Isthmian Historical Society held the "Best True Stories of Life and Work" competition that

resulted in letters from the former canal workers that comprise Box 25. This example highlights the fact that your book is simultaneously dealing with the nuts and bolts history of the work and life of the canal diggers in the early twentieth century, and the politics of memory that shaped relations after the canal was completed.

So, back to my question: is the "archival turn" just good dialectical history? Also, when you started writing did you have a clear strategy for writing about colonialism and the legacy of colonialism at the same time?

Interesting. Certainly historians have always been aware of the archive's complex origins–it comes with the training we receive, to question our primary sources and consider how and why they emerged. Yet I think the contribution of Trouillot and others–and, I hope, *Box 25*–is to take those questions to a deeper and more systematic level by making the archive itself a central agent in the analysis. In my book, for example, we see the ironies involved in that the testimonies created by Afro-Caribbean workers came into existence only because of the concerns of a white Zonian female librarian. To understand the documents, we must examine her world and perspective, then the testimony authors' perspective as agents of their own lives but also as inhabitants of a racialized neo-colony dedicated to ruthless labor exploitation. We need to shift back and forth in time as well to comprehend their testimonies from the period they're describing to fifty years onward when they wrote them. And then the book plays off other archives, most notably the government's personnel records, to create a three-dimensional portrait of their lives.

The health of the canal diggers is a subtheme of *Box 25*. Workplace injuries and deaths from "landslides, dynamite explosions, train accidents, steam shovels toppling over, and falling from the gigantic lock gates" were just some of the concerns canal workers faced (72). Malaria too was a constant threat to workers' well being. Can you elaborate more on how the poor health care workers received highlighted the everyday racism these workers experienced and what it tells us about how imperialism operated in the canal zone?

Wherever there is an empire, some people's health matters more than others. Isn't this a universal truth in the global history of imperialism? And so it was in the Panama Canal Zone. Labor needs combined with racism to make it imperative that white U.S. workers and their families remain healthy–the skilled work those individuals carried out was in short supply. They needed to be kept happy and healthy, not only so they'd get the work done but also to keep public relations at home in the US favorable. So officials and doctors deployed a sort of medical racism to justify the much worse working conditions for people of African descent. Doctors would say well, the Caribbeans are 'naturally' more susceptible to malaria,

or it's brought on by their poor sanitary habits. Even though the shacks built to house Caribbeans lacked screens to keep out malaria-spreading mosquitos, doctors talked instead about the individuals' sanitary habits. And engineers studied ways of preventing premature dynamite explosions which wounded and killed many Afro-Caribbeans and Spaniards–but never with the same zeal or efficacy they applied to making the industrial workplaces safe for the skilled US workers.

At various points in *Box 25* you give examples of how the workers remembered themselves. Specifically, they often wrote about the various jobs they worked, which meant they focused on their social mobility, not just on the period of their lives when they were canal diggers. How did their stories of learning various skills shape how you thought about their agency and identity?

Those stories, especially when combined with the personnel files, exploded one of the main myths about Afro-Caribbean workers: that they were all unskilled diggers. The truth is that even during the canal construction era, many Caribbeans achieved occupational mobility. I explored this in my previous book, *The Canal Builders*, as well. Towards the end of the construction project, as many as one-third of all Caribbean workers possessed some skill and the higher wages that accompanied such positions (those wages however were a fraction of what white workers received for the same work). In the years after construction ended, the proportion of Caribbean workers with some skill increased. So, to answer your question, this quest for better jobs and wages became one of the most important arenas for understanding Caribbean workers' agency and identity.

Who is this book for? Among other audiences, it seems perfect for an advanced undergraduate course. It allows one to discuss the key issues noted above, and the importance of using primary sources to write history are ever present, from the title through the last sentence of the book.

I see this as a book for many different audiences. From the beginning I liked the idea of writing a shorter book. That makes it more useful for graduate or undergraduate history courses, and I wanted it to be useful in methods courses as well as courses on labor, migration, or empire. A shorter book has other virtues too, it's helpful for the general public's access too. I learned from my last book that there's a great hunger in the public for books about the Panama Canal. Not every book needs to be 300 (or 1200!) pages. Equally important, I hope it will reach people of African descent across Central America and the Caribbean. I'm doing what I can to promote the book there–for example, I'll give a talk on it in Panama next month. People of Afro-Caribbean descent in Panama often feel their history is ignored and their culture endangered. I hope this book will increase understanding of

struggles their community faced throughout 20th century Panama and onward to today.

Since you are the editor of *Labor*, I want to ask how would you describe the state of the field at this moment and where do you see the field headed? More specifically, (and as always you can reject my characterization that follows) books such as *Box 25*, as I noted above, echo and improve upon the "History from Below" revolution that swept the discipline so long ago by offering glimpses into everyday people's lives in relation to their jobs. Do you think as the struggles of working people in the US and globally become more pronounced in public consciousness–the price of groceries, stagnant wages, nativism, racism, sexism, overthrowing countries for oil etc-labor history will have a revival?

There's a lot we have to think about to answer that question! Our field is profoundly shaped by everything around us. For example there's the ever worsening crisis in higher education that predated President Trump but has been tremendously intensified since he began his second presidency–we have an excellent roundtable on that in the next issue of *Labor*. Relatedly, our field is affected by the struggles of the labor movement and the crisis of democracy that we're all confronting.

At the same time, I'm excited and optimistic about the field of labor and working-class history. Since taking on the editorship of *Labor*, I see so much incredible talent and creativity all around me. I think the greater interest in the history of capitalism, the very obvious radical inequality surrounding us and the oppression of workers (and so many others) is making labor history a key interest for historians. The dramatic rise of the Far Right, painful as it is to witness, is inspiring people to ask new questions about labor history, the role of white workers, their stance on race, immigration, etc. At *Labor*, I'm working with an amazing team of historians and the submissions reflect the creativity of our field. We're seeing work that breaks new ground: e.g, problematizing labor's role in turn of the 21st century neoliberalism, or examining workers in nuclear energy, new approaches to 'the wages of masculinity' among 19th century railroad workers, and more. We are working now on forthcoming special issues: one is on the legacy of Marcus Rediker and Peter LInebaugh's *Many-Headed Hydra*; another will examine workers and capitalism across the last two centuries.

So much we used to take for granted about life is now a radical act of resistance in the new world the White House is seeking to impose. And that includes writing and teaching the evidence-based history of this country, especially when it comes to oppression based on class, race, gender, and/or immigration status. I see so many people rising to the challenge and finding new ways for lessons from the past to inform our understanding of the present.

Thank you John, for these questions and a great conversation!

Authors

John Enyeart

John Enyeart teaches at Bucknell University and has written two books: Death to Fascism: Louis Adamic's Fight for Democracy (2019) translated into Slovenian, 2020; and The Quest for "Just and Pure Law": Rocky Mountain Workers and American Social Democracy, 1870-1924 (2009).

Julie Greene

Julie Greene is a historian of United States, transnational, and global labor and immigration. Most recently, she is the author of Box 25: Archival Secrets, Caribbean Workers, and the Panama Canal (UNC Press, 2025), which explores a set of remarkable memoirs written by canal workers (and held in Box 25 at the Library of Congress). Greene has also authored The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal (2009), and Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917 (1998). She has co-edited two books with Eric Arnesen and Bruce Laurie, Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Diversity of the Working-Class Experience (1998); and with Eileen Boris, Joo Cheong Tham, and Heidi Gottfried, Global Labor Migration: New Directions (2022). Greene has also published numerous articles and book chapters.

