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# Refashioning Caribbean Literary Pedagogy in the Digital Age

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## Our critical moment

**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY HAS MADE THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY** a critical moment of opportunity but also of responsibility for scholars of Caribbean literature. Digital archives and recent reprints have provided access to Caribbean literary texts dating back to the nineteenth century and, thus, have supported a paradigm-shifting expansion of the corpus of Caribbean literature commonly taught and studied. Further, historical newspapers, photographs, memoirs and postcards from the region are being digitised – many are available open-access to the public. These archival materials illuminate the significance this literature held in its original political, social and cultural contexts, and shed light as well on its aesthetics. Further, digital technology is providing new means of analysing literature (such as visualisation and data mining), of presenting literary scholarship (such as curated digital exhibits and websites), and of teaching (online and hybrid courses). Together, these have the promise of bridging institutional and geographic barriers, enabling us to teach and research this expanded body of Caribbean literature in a collaborative interdisciplinary and international digital space.

Paradoxically, digital technology is also reproducing colonial hierarchy and marginalising Caribbean literature. Digitising archival materials has the potential both to reproduce and to redress gaps and biases of colonial archives. A similar paradox pertains to digital technology. US government and corporate entities dominate the administration of the internet and an Anglo-American ‘techno-cultural bias’ shapes its language, services, and instruments. Anglo-American scholars and institutions dominate digital humanities as well.<sup>1</sup> US and British authors, particularly white ones, have a strong web presence and large-scale

digital archives and scholarly editions dedicated to them. By contrast, Caribbean authors lack such digital humanities projects, and the resulting marginal position of Caribbean literature on the internet threatens its ability to endure.<sup>2</sup> Alex Gil argues compellingly that if Caribbean literature is not made digitally accessible, and if few scholarly editions exist and little digital scholarship, Caribbean authors are at risk of disappearing in the digital age.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, as it opens new horizons, the digital age places significant responsibility on scholars to redress the marginalisation of Caribbean literature and to ensure its future. This article describes how one group of scholars, librarians and students – in the United States and the Caribbean – collaboratively designed a course that began to address this challenge. It is also an invitation to join us in building on that project to create an open-access teaching and research commons to sustain Caribbean literature through and beyond the twenty-first century.

## Teaching with the archive

When a small group of scholars started to plan the course in 2012 we had more modest goals. I taught at the University of the Florida which served as the technological hub for the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) and since 2007 had helped to build its collection in Anglophone Caribbean literature. Established in 2004, dLOC ([www.dloc.com](http://www.dloc.com)) is an open-access, non-profit, international partnership of over forty libraries, archives, universities and NGOs in the Caribbean, US, and Europe that houses Caribbean library and archival materials with the goals of preservation and access – and the inclusion of Caribbean materials in school and university curricula. As a non-commercial and non-exclusive association, dLOC facilitates collaboration with multiple institutions and works to provide a socio-technical infrastructure for Caribbean studies.

In 2012, dLOC had amassed a significant collection of early Anglophone Caribbean literature and cultural journals, including the early poetry of Claude McKay and Una Marson, nearly all of Herbert de Lisser's oeuvre, the *Jamaica Journal*, *Kyk-Over-Al*, and *Tapia*. It had, as well, a collection of historical newspapers, photographs, and other pertinent materials. Yet many scholars were unaware of the collection. Moreover, little material existed in dLOC or elsewhere to explain its significance. To address this situation, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, a leading scholar of early Caribbean literature and professor at Amherst College, suggested that we develop a course that would teach students how to use archival

materials in analysing literature and how to produce digital scholarship that would explicate the holdings and increase the visibility of the collection.

We expanded our group to include Donette Francis at the University of Miami. Over the next fifteen months, faculty, librarians and students at our three institutions worked together on conference calls and onsite visits to develop the course.<sup>4</sup> “Panama Silver, Asian Gold: Migration, Money, and the Making of Modern Caribbean Literature” was an experiment in decentralised, collaborative, blended learning using technology and open-access resources. No one institution could have produced the course; it was made possible by pooling our resources – Amherst’s expertise in videoconferencing and integrating librarians into the classroom, the University of Florida’s position as dLOC’s technology hub, and the University of Miami’s digital scholarship expertise. Modest grants from each institution allowed us to invite leading scholars to speak to our students and video their lectures for dLOC.

We began with the premise that the course would explore one of the central concerns of Caribbean writers: rewriting history to give voice to those silenced by the colonial archive. We would place this project in relation to an investigation of the colonial archive itself – its gaps and biases and the challenges these posed as colonial archives were digitised. We chose two post-emancipation migrations – that of indentured Asians to the Caribbean (1838–1917) and of Caribbeans to Panama to work on the US canal (1904–1914) – because they were critical to the formation of the modern Caribbean and its literature but their significance had been underestimated. The Panama migration was part of a larger pattern of migration. Caribbean men and women from across the region left their homelands behind to work on plantations and build railroads across Latin America, from Cuba to Brazil; the Asian migrations also formed part of a larger pattern of migration that brought people to Africa, the Pacific and the Americas to build the modern infrastructure and work the modern plantations. Lasting from 1835 to the 1920s and involving hundreds of thousands of people, these migrations were of extraordinary scale and transformed both the immigrants’ home countries and their countries of destination. Moreover, as little digitised literature and archival material existed for either, they constituted instances in which enhancing the digital archive might assist in producing more inclusive narratives of Caribbean literary and social history.

“Panama Silver, Asian Gold” introduced students to the digital humanities through an analysis of the historical archive, the historiography, and the literary representation of these two overlooked migrations. It was adopted as a pilot

course for library-supported digital humanities teaching at our three campuses and dLOC. In the fall of 2013 we taught the course collaboratively across our three campuses and in spring 2016 we were able to include Evelyn O'Callaghan's class at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados and to expand the digital humanities and collaborative components. (I also taught the course without collaboration in 2014.)

## Objectives

In addition to teaching students the key themes, tropes, and aesthetic concerns of Caribbean literary discourse, the course sought to teach students to:

1. integrate primary historical sources into their literary analyses;
2. strengthen dLOC's holdings concerning Asians in the Caribbean and Caribbeans in Latin America, and to contribute to its pedagogical collection;
3. recognise the limitations of the colonial archival records of subaltern subjects in post-emancipation Caribbean migrations;
4. analyse techniques Caribbean scholars and writers have used to redress the archive's limitations; and
5. counteract limitations in the colonial archive and the marginalisation of Caribbean literature by producing enhanced metadata, Wikipedia pages, and digital guides and exhibits.

## Collaboration and assignments

The classes met at the same time and teleconferenced for guest lectures and group projects. The campuses shared a Wiki for students to share their assignments, for faculty and librarians to post notes, comments and other materials, and for students to collaborate. We devoted the first half of the class to assignments that taught students how to analyse specific types of archival sources and their construction of immigrant identity, and to use these in analysing Caribbean literature about the migrations. Because all students posted their assignments on the shared Wiki, the insights and the primary documents they included began to form an archive too, and one which students could use in two final projects which were explicitly designed to contribute to the public archive and to allow students to

think critically about what it means to contribute to a digital archive from their differing positions in regard to Empire. In the first, students analysed an archival item and made recommendations for enhancing the catalogue record; the second was a digital humanities project that illuminated aspects of the marginalised history and literature they studied. These student projects are now accessible within dLOC (<http://dloc.com/digital/panamasilver>). They include numerous enhanced catalogue records and a number of digital humanities projects, such as Andre Yilin's "Mapping LGBT Caribbean Literature", which provides a bibliography, timeline, and map of Queer Caribbean literature, and the only reference guide to Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*<sup>5</sup> based on a group project by fifteen students and edited by Kayli Smendec, Christine Csencsitz and Berta Gonzalez.

## Interventions

The significance of these migrations has often been obscured in dominant narratives of Caribbean literary history which have focused on slavery and the post-World-War-II migration to England as defining events in modern Caribbean history. Thus, our project aims to intervene in the way scholars write about Caribbean literary history. First, we insist that post-emancipation migration was central to nation formation in much of the Caribbean. Despite their super-exploitation, West Indians in Panama and Asians in the Caribbean accumulated savings that bankrolled their entry into the middle class. The cultural practices and political aspirations that Asian immigrants and returning Caribbeans introduced to the region spurred the growth of the labour movement, anti-colonial nationalism, and national literature. The migrations coincided with and contributed to the formation of cultural nationalism in the Anglophone Caribbean. As a consequence, the transnational nature of West Indian identity and the presence of Indian and Chinese immigrants were intrinsic to the construction of both national identities and national culture.

The Panama and Asian migrations coincided in time and space, influencing one another. The British brought the first indentured Chinese, albeit a small number, to Trinidad in 1807 to produce a buffer class to prevent rebellion among the enslaved population. After slavery ended, indentured Asian workers were brought in to work on plantations to ensure adequate labour supply and undermine the wages and power of freed people. Nearly as soon as indentured labour arrived, West Indians began to emigrate to Latin America, and the two migra-

tions intersected and influenced once another. Thus, between 1850 and 1855, five thousand Jamaicans emigrated to Panama to build the Panama Railroad to replace Chinese workers. In the Caribbean, the situation was reversed for much of the rest of the nineteenth century; planters negotiated to have colonial governments import indentured Asian labour to replace Afro-Caribbeans who were leaving plantations in large numbers to work across Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

Both groups found themselves in similarly disempowered positions, in that most West Indian workers in Latin America and most Indian and Chinese workers in the British Empire were third-country nationals, labouring for a colonial company in a country where they had few rights.<sup>7</sup>As the large-scale migrations appeared to pass each other, moving in different directions, individuals of all groups inevitably crossed paths: Chinese, Indians, Afro-Caribbeans met along the canal, on plantations, in shops, in festivals, and in domestic spaces. However, literary historians seldom consider the two migrations as different aspects of a single historical event – the massive global movement between the mid-nineteenth century and the First World War, as Britain and the United States transported millions of workers from China, India and the Caribbean to produce the major infrastructure projects that made the expansion of Anglo-American military and economic power possible. This includes not only the Panama Canal but also railroads in East Africa, and across the United States and Latin America. Thus, these immigrant groups were at once central to nation formation in the Caribbean and part of the heterogeneous, transnational modern proletariat necessary to modernisation, empire, and capitalism.

## A feminist anti-MOOC

Though we did not plan it as such, “Panama Silver, Asian Gold” became a feminist and anti-imperialist alternative to massive open online courses (MOOCs). MOOCs use faculty and technicians from one first-world university to commodify and disseminate information to students across the globe as a means of saving and making money through education. By contrast, “Panama Silver, Asian Gold” produces knowledge collectively across institutions and among faculty, students and librarians, and makes that knowledge, along with newly available primary historical documents, available for free to anyone with internet access. Using the resources of our metropolitan institutions, the course is expanding an open-access archive about colonised subaltern groups and building collaborations

among colleagues and organisations in the United States, the Caribbean and Panama. At the same time, the critique of the power dynamics of digital humanities and of digital archives is a central thread in the course. In these respects, the project mirrors FemTechNet's Distributed Online Collaborative Course (DOCC) which was formulated self-consciously as "a feminist rethinking of the MOOC".<sup>8</sup>

The course is grounded in black feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw's conception of intersectionality as it focuses on the complex interrelation of national origin, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and colour in immigrants' lives, in narratives by and about them, and in their archival traces. The course examines, as well, the ways in which these categories influence access and power in regard to digital technology, and is committed for these reasons to open-access resources and minimal computing. Thus, its practice of digital humanities is intersectional, investigating and intervening at "the intersections of multiple axes of difference, recognising the need for attention to the complex power relations that serve as barriers to achieving inclusivity within the digital humanities".<sup>9</sup>

## Our archive

The most important lesson I learned from the course was that we were not teaching students to critique the colonial archive as a fixed object; rather, we were in an ongoing relationship and negotiation with the archive which supported the class in manifold ways even as it imposed its imperial framework and gaze on the subjects we sought to make visible. The University of Florida Libraries was able to dedicate so many resources to our project because it had just acquired the collection of the Panama Canal Museum of Seminole Florida (the PCM collection), comprised of over twenty thousand items, and had, as well, received a large grant from the US government to support its incorporation. Funding for the PCM collection paid for digitising books, photographs and other documents we used in our class.

The irony is that the Panama Canal Museum was established by former employees of the canal, who formed a community in Florida when the United States turned control of the Canal Zone over to Panama. These were members of the Gold Roll, and thus white US citizens; their museum comprised possessions they brought with them to commemorate the Panama Canal, a quintessentially imperial US project. The US grant received by the University of Florida



Libraries coincided with the centennial of the canal's completion and was used to support a large-scale celebration of the canal. It was literally an imperial archive, while our class was anti-imperial in its perspective. The vast majority of its contents pertained to white US citizens; however, it also contained rare photographs of West Indians and documents relating to their experiences. Moreover, as Margarita Vargas-Betancourt has explained, once the collection became part of the University of Florida Libraries, acquiring and digitising materials concerning West Indians became a priority because the mission of the University Libraries is to serve the entire university community and the state of Florida.<sup>10</sup> Thus it was Judith Russell, Dean of Libraries, who secured permission to digitise perhaps our most important addition to dLOC, first-person accounts of the canal construction by West Indians (The Isthmian Historical Society Competition for the best true stories), and who initiated our relationship with the Society of the Friends of the West Indian Museum of Panama, which owned the manuscript.

### The power of metadata

By far students' favourite task was the "metadata" assignment which asked them to examine a photograph in the PCM collection and make recommendations for improved metadata. Their suggestions when valid were included in the metadata for the item in dLOC. The PCM digital collection is a sub-collection within dLOC; much of its metadata was created by the Panama Canal Museum and reflects its perspective. This proved to be a practical exercise in how archives construct and obscure identities and how we have some, but limited, powers in making changes.

The "greatest engineering feat" was obsessively documented by photography. Many thousands of photographs of the Panama Canal were produced for the US government and for commercial sale in stereograph sets, postcards and books.<sup>11</sup> The US government was invested in warding off charges of corruption and incompetence and in celebrating US ingenuity and power. Most commercial photographs were similarly invested in portraying the greatness of the construction. Thus government and commercial photographs focus on machinery and often feature dramatic images of excavation and building. However, in contrast to written accounts, which could simply omit mention of West Indians or rehearse tired clichés about their laziness and stupidity, photographs could not hide West Indians, who made up 60 percent of the workforce during

construction.<sup>12</sup> Photographs of the locks, dredgers and steam shovels included West Indian workers, though they often appeared as small figures, included as props to indicate the size of machines. These men, however, were rarely mentioned in the titles or elsewhere in the metadata. For instance, stereographs entitled “The Indispensable American Steam Shovel” and “The Great Panama Canal” prominently feature black workers. Yet, because they are not mentioned in the title and no archivist had included them in a description or keyword, the men are invisible to most researchers. Making these men visible seemed simple: all students needed to do was to add “West Indian” or “black labour” in the keyword field and anyone could search and find them. The PCM photograph collection, of more than ten thousand photographs, would begin to shift from an archive of construction, to one of race, labour, and construction. However, because the individuals in the images were never documented, we could not know if the men were West Indian. All we could say was the majority of workers of African descent in Panama were from the Caribbean and that, as a result, the men who appeared to be dark-skinned in any given photograph were likely to be Caribbean. Some would have been Afro-Panamanian, Afro-descended individuals from other Latin American countries or the United States, or would have belonged to other groups. The students and librarians compromised on the phrase “possibly West Indian or African American” which was then included in the descriptions of images. Thus, Afro-Caribbean workers are becoming keyword-searchable and therefore visible.<sup>13</sup>

### “Natives on Back”

If our first lesson in imperial metadata was that it could make people invisible, our second was that it had the power to define them in dehumanising ways. When captions mentioned black individuals, they often referred to them as “natives”, a term that reduced them to the quintessential “Other” of modern man but communicated little if anything about them. In Panama, almost anyone who was not a white US citizen might be referred to as a “native”: anyone born in Panama, the Kuna and other indigenous peoples, anyone not perceived as white. The class had a powerful illustration of the problems inherent to this term when two students chose a photograph titled “Natives on Back” (Figure 1) for their assignment. They selected the photograph because it features what appears to be a family. Two women are seated side by side; a man stands behind them

COURTESY OF THE PANAMA CANAL MUSEUM COLLECTION AND THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA GEORGE A. SMATHERS LIBRARIES



**Figures 1 and 2:** Davis Stevenson, “Natives on Back” (c.1904–14) (front and back)  
<http://ufdc.ufl.edu/PCMI003554/00001>

and children sit at their feet. They are dark-skinned and are living in a building whose walls are constructed of wattle. The students found the photograph important because it featured women who rarely appeared in canal photographs, because it was one of the few family portraits they had found, and because the photograph is intimate – the camera was so close to its subjects that their facial expressions are visible as well as the type of housing, their ages, and their attire. It was the most complete image of how non-white people lived. It was therefore with some consternation that they could find no information about the photograph, the photographer, the subjects, the date, the location. When they looked into its peculiar title (“Natives on Back”), they noticed a blurred pencilled word on the reverse side that could be definitively identified as “natives” only if one expected to see the term (Figure 2).

The metadata defines the subjects as “natives” potentially in perpetuity on the

basis of a blurry word, whose author, meaning, and accuracy were unknown. This impressed students with the power of metadata and its ability to reinforce colonial racial categories. It impressed them, as well, with the fact that the colonising elements of colonial archives were entering the digital archive unchallenged. These lessons may seem more appropriate for students of history than of literature. However, in illustrating to students how thoroughly the US photographs and books erased and distorted West Indian immigrants, the imperial archive taught them the importance of Caribbean authors such as Herbert de Lisser who published books that depicted Caribbeans in Panama as full-fledged human beings.

We found also that the archive gives us glimpses of Asian and Caribbean immigrants who were yet more powerful than Caribbean writers imagined. We had begun with the assumption that we would be studying how Caribbean writers gave voice and visibility to subaltern subjects in the colonial archive. However, we found that even as writers challenged race ideology of the colonial archive, the colonial archive also illuminated the omissions and conservatism of Caribbean literature's representation of history, not only in the early and mid-twentieth century but also in more recent texts. Thus, for instance, Caribbean novels not infrequently presented Indo-Caribbean women as docile or victims of patriarchy, but oral histories, memoirs and newspaper records make clear that Indian women sometimes defied patriarchy, controlling their own property, movement, sexuality, and children. It was necessary to study the relation between Caribbean literature and the colonial archive, as dialogic, rather than as a straightforward opposition.<sup>14</sup>

### Reassessing Caribbean literature: *Susan Proudleigh* as modern national romance

The story of a working-class Jamaican woman who emigrated to Panama and got rich, Herbert de Lisser's 1915 novel *Susan Proudleigh*<sup>15</sup> is one of the first Jamaican novels and one of the only West Indian literary portrayals of Panama from the Construction period. Almost certainly, it is the only one with a female protagonist, which is significant because there are few historical depictions and scant scholarship on the over forty thousand West Indian women who immigrated to Panama. Yet with the exception of Rhonda Cobham-Sander and Rhonda Frederick,<sup>16</sup> *Susan Proudleigh* has received little scholarly attention, and the brief discussions have focused on Susan's womanhood and love life, not

Panama. The novel has never been reprinted, and until it was digitised it was available in roughly twenty libraries throughout the globe.<sup>17</sup> This is despite the fact that scholars have since the 1970s heralded it, along with de Lisser's first novel *Jane's Career*,<sup>18</sup> published two years earlier, as one of Jamaica's first competent portrayals of the working class.<sup>19</sup>

*Susan Proudleigh's* obscurity is not simply a reflection of the absence of scholarship on West Indian women in Panama or lack of digital access to resources; studies of West Indians in Panama, such as Bonham Richardson's *Panama Money in Barbados*, have foregrounded the scale and impact of the migration since the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> Rather its obscurity results in large part from the fact that scholars have considered Jamaicans' participation in the Panama Canal construction as a sidebar in Jamaican national history rather than an essential part. Thus, scholars, myself included, have overlooked *Susan Proudleigh* but read *Jane's Career* as a national novel.<sup>21</sup>

Though she is a little older, a little more vain, her skin slightly lighter, Susan's path up the socioeconomic ladder is remarkably parallel to Jane's. Jane moves from an impoverished village and subsistence farming to Kingston where she rises from domestic service to factory work and, ultimately through a shrewd choice in men, to become a housewife and member of an emergent middle class. Susan's story begins in a Kingston yard, not unlike the yards that Jane inhabited. As he had in *Jane's Career*, de Lisser depicts working-class living conditions and culture in detail that exposes and thus presumably protests the lack of sanitation, wealth and education. When the novel begins, Susan has just learned that Maria, another yard resident, with darker skin and less wealth, has gained the attention of her white-collar beau Tom. Though Susan has little love for Tom, his support over the past year has allowed her and her family to rise from abject poverty to the "two tiny rooms" that constitute the yard's best living quarters.<sup>22</sup> The rivalry over Tom leads the women to fight and Tom to lose his job. He migrates to Panama in search of work. With the money he leaves her, Susan becomes a successful shopkeeper. However, she relinquishes this to migrate to Panama with the arrogant but good-hearted Samuel Josiah Jones, a mechanic recruited to work on the canal. In Panama, Susan tires of his neglect and marries his dull but steady friend, MacKenzie, an older Jamaican engineer, who drives a steam shovel at Culebra Cut. Bored by MacKenzie despite her elevated status, she is tempted to return to Jones but resists. When her husband is killed in a mudslide, she is left a wealthy widow. The novel ends as she and Jones return to Jamaica, planning to marry. Susan's adventure in Panama has brought her wealth, pleasure and

respectability, and transformed her and Jones into modern, cosmopolitan subjects.

For our students, *Susan Proudleigh* was a foundational novel for Jamaican and Caribbean letters because it presented Jamaicans' experience of migration to Panama as the means by which the Afro-Jamaican working class and Jamaica as a whole attained modernity. From their perspective, it constituted as well an important historical record of the canal construction because it represented two important groups obscured in the archive and in scholarship: West Indian women, who numbered roughly forty thousand, and skilled West Indian workers and entrepreneurs, who comprised a small but significant component of the immigrant community and who were disproportionately Jamaican, as de Lisser's portrayal suggests.<sup>23</sup>

My students and I came to read the novel as a modern romance in our discussion of the assignment for which they compared de Lisser's depiction of the Panama migration with two historical sources.<sup>24</sup> The reading gained clarity and depth in the second term I taught the course, as we marshalled insights and documents from student assignments in both semesters. This also illustrated the power of students to create knowledge and of our shared Wiki to help us do so.

Our new assessment of the novel depended entirely on the digitised sources as students chose to compare *Susan Proudleigh* with materials dLOC and the PCM had added for the class: Joan Flores Villalobos's unpublished honours thesis, "West Indian Women in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904–1914" which at the time was one of the few studies of West Indian women in Panama; popular US imperial accounts of the canal construction such as Ralph Emmett Avery's *America's Triumph at Panama* (1913);<sup>25</sup> white women's memoirs that include lengthy relationships with West Indian women as employees and entrepreneurs, such as Winifred James's *A Woman in the Wilderness*;<sup>26</sup> and photographs of the canal construction.<sup>27</sup> As a result of our modest intervention into the digital archive, our students became some of the first scholars to access the scholarship and the historical documents necessary to evaluate de Lisser's portrayal of Panama.

Students were divided in their opinion of the novel – some finding it a powerful anti-imperial text and others criticising it for historical inaccuracies that undermined the autonomy of West Indian women and silenced the experience of the working-class majority of West Indian immigrants to Panama. Ultimately, we came to see the validity of both views.

Students who compared *Susan Proudleigh* to popular US accounts, such as

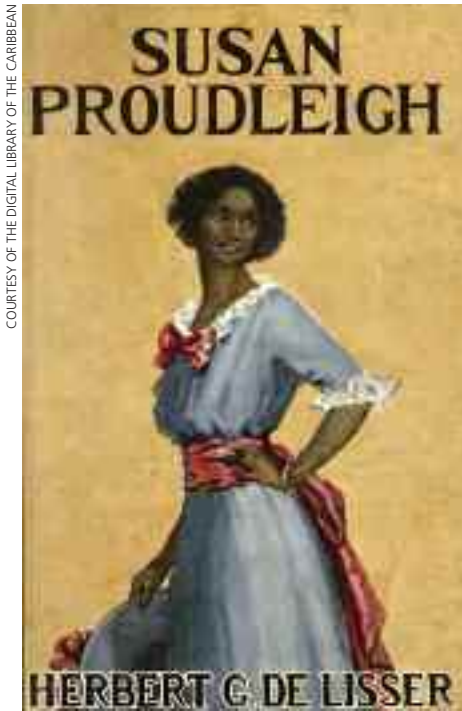


Figure 3: Front cover, Herbert G. de Lisser, Susan Proudleigh (1915)



Figure 4: Front cover, Sue Core, Maid in Panama (1938)

John Foster Fraser's *Panama and What It Means*,<sup>28</sup> found de Lisser's portrayal of industrious Jamaican engineers and labourers to be an effective counter-narrative to the US accounts. These barely mentioned West Indians and when they did, denigrated them as comically primitive and lazy, incapable of modern labour.<sup>29</sup> Students who read white women's memoirs came to a similar conclusion. Pointing to the sharp contrast between the well-dressed Susan directing her own gaze from the cover of de Lisser's novel and the plump uniformed woman on the cover of Susie Pearl Core's *Maid in Panama*<sup>30</sup> with her basket of fruit, they asserted that de Lisser's spirited heroine served as a powerful counter to white women's caricatures of West Indian women as "poor servants, indifferent mothers, and disloyal companions to their men" (see Figures 3 and 4).<sup>31</sup> These students viewed de Lisser's novel as anti-imperialist because its portrayal of Jamaicans as modern and central to the canal construction undermined the dominant US narrative that held that US whites were the only moderns, deserving full credit for the canal, then the ultimate symbol of humankind's progress.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, students who compared the novel to historical studies such as Julie Greene's *Canal Builders* tended to criticise de Lisser for downplaying the diversity, danger and discrimination that West Indians experienced and thus obscuring their accomplishment and sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> They noted that in de Lisser's Panama, nearly every West Indian is Jamaican, despite the West Indian community being comprised of people from all regions of the Caribbean. His protagonists appear unrealistically healthy, wealthy and privileged, and only three men die. In contrast, many thousands of West Indians died in industrial accidents and from disease, so many indeed that many Afro-Antillanos now treat the canal as a grave and make a pilgrimage there to honour the ancestors. While most West Indians lived in basic and unsanitary conditions, Susan lives first in a spacious apartment, and when she marries MacKenzie moves to a four-room, "neat verandaed wire-screened cottage".<sup>34</sup> The US imposed strict segregation between silver (non-white and non-US workers) and gold workers (white US employees), sometimes with fatal consequences: gold housing had screens while silver housing did not, despite the fact that screens were the central defence against mosquitoes and thus against yellow fever and malaria.<sup>35</sup> The rate of death and illness among West Indians was at a minimum three times higher than that of gold workers during much of the construction.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, de Lisser minimises the impact of segregation, suggesting that sensible Jamaicans should overlook it and making fun of Jones and others by portraying them as protesting, not racial discrimination, but the prohibition against co-habitation in workers' housing.

Suspecting that de Lisser was hiding something important with this rosy picture of life on the canal, students turned to the digital archive. In narrative accounts and historical photographs, they found a sharp contrast between the small, unsanitary barracks provided for married silver workers and the orderly, sanitary homes provided gold employees (see Figures 5 and 6). De Lisser foregrounds this contrast. When Susan arrives in Colón, she admires the screened housing for gold employees in Cristobal and tells Jones, "I would like to live here, Sam . . . more than in the other part of town."<sup>37</sup> Then, the couple spends the night in a fetid room built over a swamp. However, by the time she marries MacKenzie, Susan is installed in a smaller version of the homes for gold employees she so admired. Students criticised de Lisser for misleading his readers about the living conditions of silver workers and the impact of segregation.

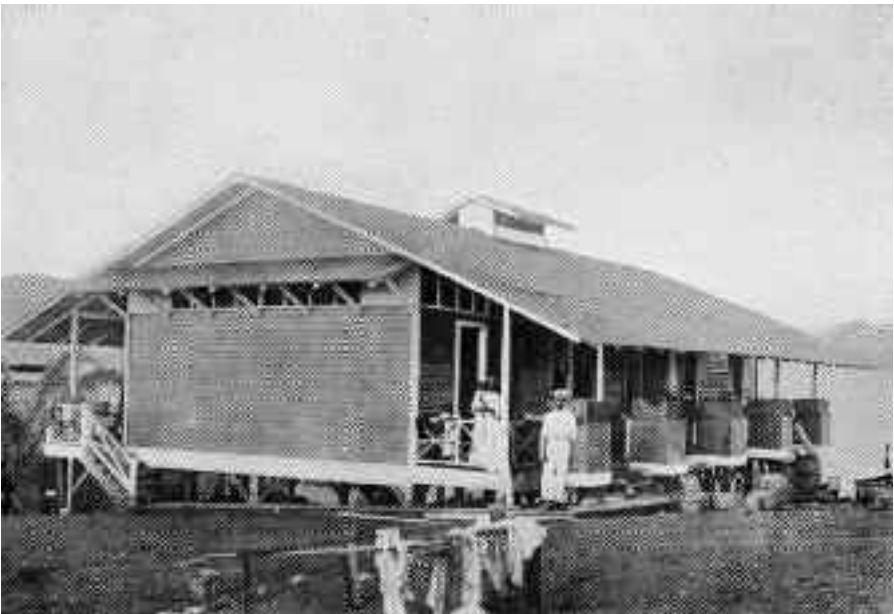
They also criticised de Lisser for making his heroine a housewife, when so many West Indian women, of all classes, worked outside the home and had at least some financial autonomy. Stephanie Dhuman, for instance, complained



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**Figure 5:** “292 Type No. 17 – One Family House – Empire”, depicting housing for gold employees/ The Patricia Hall Collection, Panama Canal Museum Collection, Box 82, Folder 7, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/PCMI008046/00001>.



**Figure 6:** “Typical Family Quarters for Negro Workers”  
Source: *Hugh C. Weir, The Conquest of the Isthmus (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 40.*

that de Lisser “took away [West Indian women’s] autonomy because he focused on Susan who was dependent on men and . . . not in fact important to the canal construction”.<sup>38</sup> Susan was not merely atypical, she also approximated in status and occupation white US women married to canal employees.

What, students asked, could de Lisser gain by whitewashing US racism and presenting Susan as if she were a middle-class white US woman? Dhanashree Thorat suggested that these instances of whitewashing were part of de Lisser’s strategy for presenting Panama as a site of Jamaican modernity and achievement. She had compared de Lisser’s depictions of the canal construction with those of US stereographs and found de Lisser’s perspective mirrored the perspective of the US photographs. When Jones walks from the train station in Culebra to Susan’s house, he stares in awe, “watch[ing] curiously” from above as “the trains were passing up and down, powerful engines dragging twenty, thirty, forty dump-cars laden with the stones and dirt . . . and at the bottom of the ditch and along the sides of it steam shovels were at work”.<sup>39</sup> The stereographs Thorat examined similarly position the viewer as gazing down at the construction from above. She identified this perspective as “evok[ing] the trope of what Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘the Monarch-of-all-I-Survey’ gaze which recurs in colonial travel writing . . . and subjugates landscapes”. Thorat found this gaze most clearly manifest in a 1913 stereograph, captioned “Culebra Cut at Its Most Interesting Point” (Figure 7), which is shot from just behind a white man, from the angle of his gaze. His status above the workers is manifest in his white shirt and hat, and in the leisure time he has available to look down on the “interesting” spectacle below. US citizens, the primary audience for such stereographs, shared his gaze, looking down the vast Culebra Cut with a sense of pride. Ostensibly the accomplishment of US engineers and tax dollars, it was theirs.<sup>40</sup>

However, Thorat argued, Jones’s gaze differs significantly from the imperial gaze of the stereograph and so many US accounts because West Indian workers draw his attention. Jones sees that “thousands of men were earnestly at work; groups of West Indians were manipulating the air-drills which bored the holes for the dynamite charges”. He sees these men as at the heart of “the impressive scene”.<sup>41</sup> Jones is in awe of the men’s fearless attitude and earnest labour; the extraordinary nature of their contribution had the potential to give West Indian readers a sense of pride and ownership similar to that offered US viewers of “Culebra Cut at Its Most Interesting Point”. Thorat’s analysis of perspective in the novel taken together with other students’ observation that de Lisser presented Susan as enjoying privileges of white US women suggested that de Lisser

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**Figure 7:** “Culebra Cut at Its Most Interesting Point”

Stereograph (Meadville, PA: Keystone View Company, 1913), <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00015282/00001>

fashioned his depiction of Panama in such a way that allowed Jamaicans to experience pride and ownership over what was heralded as the pinnacle of modernity. He reproduced a US imperial gaze, but by insisting that black and brown West Indians manned the machinery that made America great, he refuted the race ideology underlying it, that this US accomplishment was evidence of white and US supremacy.

We concluded that *Susan Proudleigh* is a national romance because Susan’s social and economic ascent figuratively represents the means through which Jamaica could claim modernity and the historical process through which Jamaican individuals and businesses enriched Jamaica with their Panama Gold. We considered it a romance rather than a realist novel because it imagines a successful future for its protagonists and the nation by suppressing inconvenient



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**Figure 8:** “East chamber of Gatun Lock after filling, showing Gatun Lighthouse, Panama” (New York; Underwood and Underwood, n.d.), <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00015186/00001>.

truths: the harsh experience of the majority of working-class Caribbean men and women in Panama, and their relative economic and political power on their return. Susan is an atypical representative of the Panama migration because she gets rich without having to make money. Her wealth is gained through the labour of her husband and made accessible to her through his death. Jamaica’s elite, which profited by supplying Panama with goods during the construction, similarly gained their Panama Gold through others’ labour; they could control the country and its wealth not through the death of the working class, but by a similar method, by denying decent wages, fair tax policy, political rights, and dignity to the black working and peasant majority.

While many may criticise the novel’s politics, *Susan Proudleigh* remains an important contribution to Jamaican and Caribbean literature and to the archive of the Panama Canal. *Susan Proudleigh* is housed in dLOC alongside the PCM collection; it comes up in searches alongside imperial texts, and its depiction of West Indians as skilled workers has the potential to counteract the imperial gaze.

Having read *Susan Proudleigh* prior to exploring the historical photographs, our students saw West Indians as protagonists even of photographs that rendered them as tiny anonymous figures and omitted them from captions. Chelsi Mullen, for instance, described a stereograph entitled “East chamber of Gatun Lock after filling” (Figure 8) as a powerful representation of West Indian pride and achievement. For Mullen the photograph records “the achievement of the Panama Canal [not only] in the eyes of Americans, but in the eyes of the workers as well”. In it, a black man stands at the edge of the canal, looking over the partially constructed locks. Chelsi saw him as “look[ing] out over his, and his people’s great effort, and assess[ing] the final product”; the canal, locks, even the many electric lights over which he looks were likely built in large part by West Indians.<sup>42</sup> The explanation on the reverse side of the stereograph renders Mullen’s reading yet more powerful. It explains that when the locks are completed, “one man in a power building on top of the locks, with a view of every part of them, will direct the passage of the vessels with the aid of a complete replica of the locks”. Reading from Mullen’s perspective, that one powerful man directing ships into the canal would likely be the anonymous black man in the image; her way of seeing profoundly subverts the dominant narrative of the archive, that of the canal as white America’s triumph.

## Next steps

The materials from the course, videos of guest lectures, syllabi and assignments are being added to dLOC, available to anyone who wishes to teach any part of the syllabus. We are now exploring the possibilities for developing dLOC as a shared teaching commons and expanding its support for instructors of Caribbean literature. I am working with scholars, particularly those based in the Caribbean, to ascertain what resources and format would be most helpful, and I welcome collaborators.<sup>43</sup> 

## Acknowledgements

This article is a product of work by the faculty, librarians and students who worked on “Panama Silver, Asian Gold”; Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Donette Francis, and Laurie Taylor are at a profound and conceptual level co-authors. Considerable thanks are due to Olive

Senior, Rhonda Frederick, Melva Lowe de Goodin and the Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afroantillano de Panamá, whose pioneering work on West Indians in Panama and intellectual generosity made the course possible.

## NOTES

1. Domenico Fiormonte, "Towards a Cultural Critique of the Digital Humanities", *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 37, no. 3 (2012): 59, 62–63.
2. Examples of large-scale digital humanities projects devoted to Anglo-American authors include: Walt Whitman Archive (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>); the Charles Brockden Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition (<http://brockdenbrown.cah.ucf.edu/>); the Melville Electronic Library (<http://mel.hofstra.edu/>) and most of the digital humanities projects federated in NINES (<http://www.nines.org/>).
3. Alex Gil, "Can Aimé Césaire Survive the Twentieth Century?" (paper presented at the "Diaspora and the Digital" Workshop, Beinicke Library, October 2014).
4. Our team included the following persons: at Amherst College – Missy Roser, Head of Research and Instruction at the Frost Library, and Kimberly Bain, the course TA; at the University of Miami – Beatrice Skokan in Special Collections, Vanessa Rodriguez in E-learning and Emerging Technologies, and Paige Morgan, Digital Humanities Librarian; at the University of Florida – Dhanashree Thorat, PhD candidate, Laurie Taylor, Digital Scholarship Librarian, Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, Caribbean Archivist Rebecca Fitzsimmons, Archivist, Hélène Huet, Modern European Studies Librarian, and Judith Roberts, in curriculum design.
5. Ramabai Espinet, *The Swinging Bridge* (Toronto, Ont: HarperFlamingoCanada, 2003).
6. Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 9.
7. *Ibid.*, 5.
8. "FAQs for FemTechNet", FEMBOT Collective, <http://fembotcollective.org/femtech-net/faq-for-femtechnet/> (accessed 28 June 2016).
9. Roopika Risam, "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities", *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (2015): 10.
10. Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, "Finding the Silver Voice: Afro-Antilleans in the Panama Canal Museum Collection at the University of Florida" (paper presented at the 13th International Conference on Caribbean Literature, University of Panama, 13–16 November 2013), <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00003593/00001> (accessed 28 June 2016).
11. Ralph Emmett Avery, *The Greatest Engineering Feat in the World at Panama: Authentic and Complete Story of the Building and Operation of the Great Waterway – The Eighth Wonder of the World. With a Graphic Description of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition*, ed. William C. Haskins (New York: Leslie-Judge Co., 1915).
12. Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914*

- (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1984), 42.
13. Catalogue records enhanced by students include their names and are listed here: <http://dloc.com/digital/panamasilver>.
  14. See Anna Mahase, *My Mother's Daughter: The Autobiography of Anna Mahase Snr., 1899–1978* (Union Village, Claxton Bay, Trinidad: Roydon Publishing Company, 1992) for an example of an immigrant Indian woman in Trinidad at the turn of the twentieth century, who exercised more autonomy than many Caribbean novelists, including feminists, have attributed to women in her position.
  15. Herbert George de Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1915).
  16. Rhonda Cobham-Sander, “Cuba and Panama in the Writings of Herbert George de Lisser”, *El Caribe y America Latina* (1987): 173–80, and “The Creative Writer and West Indian Society” (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 1982), in which discussion of the novel is woven into several chapters; Rhonda Frederick, “*Colón Man a Come*”: *Mythographies of Panamá Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 201–10. See also, Donna-Marie Urbanowicz, “Representations of Women in Selected Works of Herbert George De Lisser, (1878–1944)” (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2013), 81–127.
  17. The WorldCat database lists seventeen libraries has having copies of *Susan Proudleigh*, but it lists no Caribbean libraries, though the National Library of Jamaica and the University of West Indies Library (Cave Hill) own the book and perhaps others. The absence of Caribbean libraries in the ostensibly worldwide catalogue of books indicates the marginalisation of the Caribbean in digital scholarship.
  18. Herbert George de Lisser, *Jane's Career: A Story of Jamaica* (Kingston: Gleaner Company, 1913).
  19. See, for example, Kenneth Ramchand, introduction to *Jane's Career*, by Herbert George de Lisser (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), ix; Mervyn Morris, “H.G. de Lisser: The First Competent Caribbean Novelist in English”, *Carib* 1 (1979): 25.
  20. Bonham C. Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900–1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986). See also Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914* (Kingston: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, Mona, 1984); and Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: West Indians in Panama, 1904–1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1983).
  21. Readings of *Jane's Career* qua national novel can be found in Kenneth Ramchand, *Introduction to West Indian Literature* (London: Nelson Books, 1973); Natasha Barnes, “Representing the Nation: Gender, Culture, and the State in Anglophone Caribbean Society” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1995); Belinda Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Leah Rosenberg, *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Urbanowicz, “Representations of Women”.
  22. De Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 2.

23. Joan Flores Villalobos, "West Indian Women in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904–1914" (honour's thesis, Amherst College, 2010), 20; Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 29. Jamaica's Emigrant Protection Act (1905) required that emigrants have a permit and pay a 25-shilling deposit – see Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), 124, 121.
24. The assignment "Representing West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone" can be accessed at: <http://www.dloc.com/AA00021230/00001>.
25. Ralph Emmett Avery, *America's Triumph at Panama: Panorama and Story of the Construction and Operation of the World's Giant Waterway from Ocean to Ocean*, ed. William C. Haskins (Chicago: Regan Printing House, 1913).
26. Winifred James, *A Woman in the Wilderness* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1915).
27. Villalobos, "West Indian Women", 1.
28. John Foster Fraser, *Panama and What It Means* (London/New York: Cassell, 1913).
29. *Ibid.*, 50.
30. Sue Core, *Maid in Panama* (New York: Clermont Press, 1938).
31. Mrs Ernest von Muenchow, *The American Woman on the Panama Canal: From 1904 to 1916* (Balboa Heights, Panama: Star and Herald, 1916), 15.
32. Frederick, *Colón Man a Come*, 78–85.
33. Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
34. De Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 211.
35. Senior, *Dying*, 228–29.
36. Newton, *Silver Men*, 142.
37. De Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 140.
38. Stephanie Dhuman, "Representing West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone" (Assignment #3 for "Panama Silver, Asian Gold", Spring 2014).
39. De Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 272.
40. Dhanashree Thorat, "Representing West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone" (Assignment #3 for "Panama Silver, Asian Gold", Fall 2013).
41. De Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 273.
42. Chelsi Mullen, "Representing West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone" (Assignment #3 for "Panama Silver, Asian Gold", Spring 2014).
43. Any interested persons should contact the project director or digital scholarship librarian for dLOC at [dloc@fiu.edu](mailto:dloc@fiu.edu) and [ufdc@uflib.ufl.edu](mailto:ufdc@uflib.ufl.edu).