

Fictions and Frictions of the “Panama Roughneck”: Literary Depictions of White, US Labor in the Canal Zone

SUNNY YANG

I had come rather with the hope of shouldering a shovel and descending into the canal with other workmen, that I might someday solemnly raise my right hand and boast, “I helped dig IT.” But that was in the callow days before I had arrived and learned the awful gulf that separates the sacred white American from the rest of the Canal Zone world.

— Harry A. Franck, *Zone Policeman 88*

Published in 1913, Harry A. Franck’s *Zone Policeman 88* offers a lively account of the author’s three-month stint as a police officer and census enumerator in the Panama Canal Zone. A runaway success in the United States—the third bestselling book of the year, according to *Publisher’s Weekly*—the memoir was praised for its humorous but penetrating insights into the world of canal construction. In the words of a *New York Times* review, Franck “sees the amusing side of things, whether of personal foibles or human absurdities ... but he is equally ready to discuss, though with many a whimsical touch, the serious side of the methods by which things are being accomplished down there.”¹ As evidenced in the epigraph above, one such “serious side” of US governance that Franck addressed in his account was the elevation of white, American citizens over other Canal Zone employees. While popular US accounts of the construction period focused nearly exclusively on the contributions of white, American men, workers from an astonishing range of regions provided the menial labor that the “sacred white American” was spared. As a census enumerator, Franck claims to have personally enrolled workers from 67 distinct countries or colonies, from Mexico, Salvador, French

and Dutch Guiana, and Trinidad to Norway, Russia, Japan, Egypt, Spain, and Sierra Leone.²

To govern this global set of laborers, the US implemented a peculiar form of labor management that generated the “awful gulf” Franck characterized so wryly in his memoir. Known as the “gold and silver system,” this hierarchy classified workers as skilled or unskilled labor and accordingly paid them in either gold or Panamanian silver. As scholars such as Velma Newton, Trevor O’Reggio, Julie Greene, and Olive Senior have noted, “gold” employees received higher compensation than their “silver” counterparts.³ They were also granted paid vacations and medical leave withheld from silver workers. Housing, cafeterias, transportation, and even the lines in the post office were segregated along this metallic binary. Though ostensibly determined by labor expertise, by February 1908, only white US and Panamanian citizens were hired on the gold roll. The rest of the Zone’s employees, including African Americans and Europeans, were relegated to subordinate silver status.

Given its privileging of white Americans and segregation of social space into a color-coded binary, it is perhaps tempting to characterize the gold and silver system as a reproduction of Jim Crow policies. Indeed, Franck dismissed the distinction made between gold and silver as a strategic ruse that allowed the US to have “very dexterously dodged the necessity of lining the Zone with the offensive signs ‘Black’ and ‘White.’”⁴ Over a hundred years later, iterations of Franck’s argument can still be found in histories of the Zone. According to Senior, “Jim Crow, the racial segregation of the American South, took hold of the Zone with a single difference: on the Zone ‘black’ and ‘white’ signs were never used.”⁵ David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch likewise observe, “[a]lthough only a third of the US–citizen workforce was Southern, the Canal Zone reflected US patterns of segregation. Leading management and engineering experts were familiar with Jim Crow practices.”⁶

Yet to characterize the gold and silver system as a reflection or thinly veiled replica of Jim Crow ignores its crucial divergences from the black/white binary structuring US race relations. Most obviously, the gold and silver system grouped “white” Europeans⁷ in the same “silver” category as Afro-Caribbean and African American workers. In contrast, despite the precarity of their social status in the United States, even “semi-white” Europeans such as the Irish and Spanish had been included in the legal category of “free white persons” able to naturalize as US citizens.⁸ Furthermore, the gold and silver system’s consideration of national affiliation and labor expertise resulted in deviations from a strictly color-based hierarchy. As US citizens, African Americans were given benefits withheld from Europeans. Special exceptions also enabled some skilled West Indian workers to remain on the gold roll after 1906, when most other black, non-American workers were demoted to silver status.

In other words, the collision of US imperial governance, antebellum forms of racial control, and labor exigencies in the Canal Zone produced a new system of racial management during the period of construction. This system was structured by three

overlapping hierarchies: one organized by racial markers (black or white), one by labor divisions (skilled or unskilled), and one by national affiliation (US citizen or otherwise). These hierarchies did not cohere seamlessly; their convergence was in part facilitated through the rhetorical work performed by literary texts such as novels, poems, and travel narratives. Yet while studies of labor and the Canal Zone have thoroughly detailed the legal and economic policies calibrating the gold and silver system’s hierarchies,⁹ they have largely ignored the literary discourse that emerged in response to the system’s incongruous values. However, as I will suggest, this literature was not incidental to the history of US imperial management in the Zone. It provided a forum in which authors could reshape and problematize the meanings of the gold and silver system’s interlocking hierarchies.

Existing scholarship on literature of the Canal Zone focuses predominately on black Caribbean responses to US imperial management and thus centers on Afro-Caribbean archives and subjects.¹⁰ This essay expands the critical conversation on race, labor, and literature in the Zone by foregrounding the portrayal of white, US workers in two popular texts, Franck’s *Zone Policeman* and John Hall’s collection of poems, *Panama Roughneck Ballads* (1912). I argue that the representations in these texts rhetorically rationalized the gold and silver system’s privileging of white, US citizens while also producing narratives that destabilized its hierarchies. On the one hand, *Zone Policeman* and *Panama Roughneck Ballads* provided a rationale that joined the system’s separate hierarchies into a coherent, rhetorically defensible framework. Rather than conceptualizing color, nationality, and labor ability as autonomous classifications, they linked them together through a literary construct they referred to as the Panama roughneck.¹¹ A rugged, masculine American, the Panama roughneck was depicted as heroically performing the labor indispensable to canal construction. Despite the fact that white, US workmen were deemed “too expensive, too unionized, and vulnerable to tropical diseases” to be hired as unskilled labor in the Zone,¹² the image of the strapping, white American industriously digging away on the “Big Ditch” persisted in popular representations. The repeated invocations of this figure in spite of its historical inaccuracy underscore the important ideological functions that it served. Narratives touting the Panama roughneck’s hyperproductivity and Anglo-Saxon origins recast the gold and silver system’s racialized order as a meritocracy rewarding white, US citizens for their inherent abilities as workers, not their racial and national affiliations.

On the other hand, depictions of the Panama roughneck were not consistent internally or across the literature. In the process of embellishing the global superiority of white, American labor, writers like Franck and Hall promoted an image of the ideal worker that ran counter to the gold and silver system’s division of labor. By constantly reiterating the physical prowess of the Panama roughneck, these texts lionized attributes that correlated with the unskilled and devalued manual work assigned to *silver* employees. This deviation suggests that rather than colluding with or merely reflecting the legal and economic policies of the gold and silver system, literary texts like *Zone Policeman* and *Panama Roughneck Ballads* inverted their economic logic,

according to which white, US citizens were prioritized for their skilled expertise. In these fictions of the Panama roughneck, the American “earned” his privileged status not for his specialized training or skill, as the system implied, but for his inherent virility and physical superiority.

Moreover, depictions of the Panama roughneck often paired characterizations of the figure’s industriousness with indulgent descriptions of his crude masculinity and hard-drinking ways. Such positive portrayals mark a distinct shift in tone from nineteenth-century commentaries that pathologized Irish canal workers in the US for their supposedly rough and violent culture.¹³ Building on the insights of Matthew Frye Jacobson, Gail Bederman, and Frank Tobias Higbie, I locate this narrative recuperation of ethnic, working-class subjects in the Zone within early twentieth-century US anxieties over masculinity, imperial citizenship, and surplus labor. Literary homages to the Panama roughneck’s coarse manliness unveil the ways in which this figure was bound up in contemporaneous American concerns that extended far beyond the Zone.

While much of this essay unpacks the texts assembling the myth of the Panama roughneck, I conclude by gesturing to some challenges this figure and its corresponding hierarchies faced. Even as fictions of the Panama roughneck attempted to rationalize the differential treatment of canal employees, they were neither internally coherent nor were they passively accepted by the Zone’s cosmopolitan workforce. *Zone Policeman* meditates on the difficulties of definitively categorizing peoples in the multinational, multi-imperial space of the Zone, while Jamaican author H. G. de Lisser’s novel *Susan Proudleigh* (1915) inventively reveals competing understandings of the gold and silver system’s foundational racial classifications.¹⁴ Attending to these moments brings to light the multifaceted interpretations of race and racial identification that circulated in the Zone, revealing textual sites where US ideologies of race were interrogated and sometimes even undone.

“Panama is Below the Mason and Dixon Line”: A Brief History of the Gold and Silver System

The gold and silver system derived its name from the decision at the outset of canal construction to pay skilled workers in gold currency and unskilled labor in Panamanian silver. The system was based on precedent: the Panama Railroad (PRR) compensated US workers in gold and other employees in silver, while French companies divided their workers into skilled and unskilled grades.¹⁵ Unlike these earlier structures, the gold and silver system regulated additional aspects of a worker’s everyday life. An employee’s classification determined the quality of his lodgings and controlled his access to cafeterias, transportation, social clubs, and government facilities. The differences between gold and silver living conditions were substantial. Gold workers were given six weeks of paid vacation, a free monthly pass for travel within the Zone, and access to members-only clubhouses.¹⁶ In contrast, as historian Julie Greene has written, “The government paid silver employees far less, fed them unappetizing food, and housed

them in substandard shacks” (63).

In its earliest incarnation, the gold and silver system relied on labor expertise as much as skin color and nationality to determine worker status. From 1904 to 1908, “hundreds” of skilled blacks from the US and the West Indies were initially categorized and compensated as gold roll employees.¹⁷ Yet American officials always conceptualized the system as fundamentally linked to color hierarchies. In explaining the system’s binary structure to a US Senate committee, Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) chairman Theodore Shonts asserted that “the broad distinction is white and black.”¹⁸ John Stevens, the chief engineer from 1905 to 1907, similarly testified that “the ‘gold’ men there are the white men ... the ‘silver’ men are the black men” (78).

Even as American officials framed the system in black and white terms, its implementation complicated this binary formulation. In 1908, hiring policies were changed so that only American and Panamanian citizens were allowed on the gold roll.¹⁹ European workers, despite being recognized as “white,” were demoted to silver status. While African Americans were no longer hired as gold workers after 1907, their US citizenship still elevated them above other silver employees. They received a modified contract that gave them higher pay than black Caribbean workers along with benefits like sick and home leave that were withheld from Europeans.²⁰ US citizenship thus conferred advantages that overrode the black/white color line, highlighting the importance of national affiliation in the Zone’s system of management. Similarly, even as skin color and nationality appeared to dictate worker status and privileges, certain exceptions underscored the continued importance of labor expertise. Though transfers between gold and silver were prohibited in 1905 and “all Gold Roll blacks who were not United States citizens were demoted to Silver Roll” by the end of 1906, special allowances were made for some West Indian civil servants and a few “exceptional workers” (111). These cases, while not the norm, demonstrated the enduring significance attached to canal employees’ abilities.

A canal worker’s social and economic standing thus rested on a complex valuation of skin color, nationality, and labor expertise. The relative weight of each of these factors shifted according to circumstance with just one constant: white, US citizens were always classified as gold workers. While American officials glossed over these intricacies, invoking a domestic, color-based understanding of race to characterize their policies, US writers seemingly embraced the challenge of explicating the system’s hierarchies. From their attempts, a crucial figure that sutured the idiosyncratic logic of the gold and silver system emerged: the productive, tough, and perhaps most importantly, Anglo-Saxon, Panama roughneck.

The Panama Roughneck: Manliness, Militarism, and Race

In 1912, the Panama Railroad News Agency published *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, a collection of poems by the American John Hall, who had spent five years in the Zone during the construction period. The anthology celebrates American building efforts

and contributes to the mythology of a particular type of white, US employee: the Panama roughneck, referred to also as the “Old Canal Man.” Hall’s poems romanticize the figure as a hypermasculine Anglo-Saxon whose labor is indispensable to “making the dirt fly.” Part superior racial type, part miraculous labor source, depictions of the Panama roughneck framed the gold and silver system as the logical extension of nature’s differential organization of men. If, as fictions of the Panama roughneck suggested, the physical strength, work ethic, and abilities of men were determined by racial and national identity, then it was only natural to classify employees by these criteria and compensate them accordingly.

The literary figure of the Panama roughneck drew from an actual type of American canal worker who occupied a more working-class position relative to other gold roll employees. According to Greene, the designation of “roughneck” was given to a “vast and diverse world” of skilled laborers, including “steam-shovel and railroad engineers, crane operators, conductors, firemen, brakemen, yardmasters, train masters, electricians, teamsters, machinists, blacksmiths, miners (to oversee the drilling and placement of dynamite), boilermakers, pattern makers, carpenters, iron molders, bricklayers, painters, plumbers, pipe fitters, wiremen, and telegraphers.”²¹ These workers, while categorized as skilled rather than unskilled, had jobs more physically demanding than white-collar employees. There was also a marked educational and class divide between the two groups, though both were designated as skilled, gold workers. For this reason, the roughneck was, as Greene puts it, “disdained” by the Zone’s elites, particularly the college-educated professionals who “resented being forced to live alongside the steam-shovel and railroad men” (79).

US writers accentuated this class divide, emphasizing the Panama roughneck’s working-class masculinity and physical contributions to construction efforts. Throughout *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, Hall repeatedly asserts the figure’s hardy appearance and temperament. In “The Old Canal Man,” he declares that “rough he is, rough in countenance and speech” and “the mark of toil is upon him, and he is not ashamed of it. On the contrary, in his gruffly hearty way he takes pride in his gnarled fists and sun-tanned, seamy visage.”²² In “The ‘Rough-Neck,’” the figure is described as “bred to give back blow for blow” and “brawn their asset . . . / Rough the mould, rough the roughneck.”²³ Roughness here speaks to the inherent nature or “mould” of the figure, as well as to the labor he has performed on behalf of his country. His “gnarled fists and sun-tanned, seamy visage” are a source of pride because they bespeak his masculine endeavors.

Hall was not the only writer during this period to embellish the myth of the white, Panama roughneck. By 1913, American publishing houses and magazines were, in the words of J. Michael Hogan, “scrambling to quench the national thirst” for patriotic narratives about Americans and canal construction.²⁴ Dime novels like Ralph D. Paine’s *The Steam-Shovel Man* (1913) glorified the adventures of “self reliant and capable” US workers in the Zone, framing the territory as “sure the great place for a husky young fellow with the right stuff in him” and boasting of the “five thousand of

us Americans on the job, and you bet we’re making the dirt fly.”²⁵ Even Franck, who gleefully exposed the advantages given to white, American citizens, helped to assemble and disseminate the fiction of the Panama roughneck to a US audience. In his discussion of the figure, Franck grandly declares:

A “rough-neck,” it may be essential to explain to those who never ate at the same table with one, is a bull-necked, whole-hearted, hard-headed, cast-iron fellow who can ride the beam of a snorting, rock-tearing steam-shovel all day, wrestle the night through with various starred Hennessey and its rivals, and continue that round indefinitely without once failing to turn up to straddle his beam in the morning. He seems to have been created without the insertion of nerves, though he is never lacking in “nerve.”²⁶

Franck’s characterization underscores the Panama roughneck’s working-class vitality. The descriptions he utilizes—“bull-necked,” “hard-headed,” “cast-iron,” and “created without nerves”—reinforce the figure’s rugged and almost mechanized masculinity. Furthermore, Franck’s framing of the roughneck as skilled in riding a “snorting, rock-tearing steam-shovel all day” links the figure with other masculine, American imperialist “riding” heroes during this period, such as the southwestern cowboy of Manifest Destiny and the Rough Rider of the Spanish-American War.

While Franck’s description of the Panama roughneck highlights his unruly existence, it also emphasizes the figure’s incomparable productivity and work ethic. Though the Panama roughneck might “wrestle the night through” imbibing various brands of cognac, he can “continue that round indefinitely without once failing to turn up to straddle his beam in the morning.” The Panama roughneck may be a hard drinker, but he is still a hard worker. Able to spend all day on his machine and all-night carousing, he embodies the ideal laborer in that he apparently does not require sleep. The Panama roughneck’s masculinity and productivity are also mutually enforcing; his manliness is enhanced by his ability to work and drink without rest, and his work ethic is all the more remarkable given his red-blooded insistence on drinking the night away.

Through these kinds of hyperbolic descriptions, writers like Franck helped contribute to a fiction that aggrandized the labor of white Americans at the expense of the rest of the Canal Zone world. Narratives of the Panama roughneck idealized these workers’ abilities and contributions, giving US readers “back home” the impression that they were singlehandedly responsible for the successful completion of the canal. In his glowing review of *Zone Policeman*, for example, popular journalist and social critic H.L. Mencken praised the memoir for its evocative depictions of “the brisk young Americans who are bossing the job, the chromatic roughnecks who are digging the actual dirt, and the lazy Panamans (sic) who are watching it fly.”²⁷ Mencken’s assessment of Zone labor dynamics illustrates how texts like *Zone*

Policeman might have helped American readers embrace the “logic” behind gold and silver hierarchies. Exaggerations of the Panama roughneck’s productivity shaped impressions of the figure as being the only worker “digging the actual dirt.” This erased the substantial contributions—including the pick and shovel digging work Americans were banned from—provided by workers from a range of racial and national affiliations. In reducing all non-American workers to “lazy Panamans,” Mencken negatively contrasts them with energetic, masterful “young Americans” and thus implicitly rationalizes the preferential treatment given to US citizens.

Yet in conflating the Panama roughneck’s physical prowess with his advantages as a worker, the literature of the Canal Zone resignified the gold and silver system’s valuation of labor. Whereas the system privileged a worker’s skill by rewarding him with gold status, fictions of the Panama roughneck were invested in strength, a trait more appropriate for the unskilled manual labor assigned to silver workers. The literary commitment to extoling the Panama roughneck’s manliness resulted in depictions that explicitly framed his contributions as unskilled. In a 1917 essay, F. Willard Steele defined the term roughneck as “masculinity, push, and applied common sense. It is applied to the fellow who has ‘rought it’ over the world, and who enjoys tackling a rough job, that would be avoided by a less vigorous person.”²⁸ While deploying the usual language to praise the Panama roughneck for his masculinity and initiative, Steele’s description of his duties as “a rough job” requiring vigor highlights the physically demanding nature of his tasks. In linking the Panama roughneck with “applied common sense,” Steele also grounds the figure’s advantages as a worker in his judicious *instincts* rather than in specialized *training*.

I contend that this divergence in the literary and economic interpretations of superior labor signals the additional ideological functions that fictions of the Panama roughneck served. These interests can also be traced in the unexpected literary recuperation of aspects of ethnic, working-class culture—namely drinking and violence—which had been previously shunned. As Peter Way documents in his study of North American canal labor, nineteenth-century journalists, travel writers, and canal officials condemned Irish canal workers’ carousing and roughhousing as antisocial and antithetical to productivity.²⁹ In fictions of the Panama roughneck, however, these same behaviors are not identified as causes for moral concern. Instead, as discussed earlier through Franck, the Panama roughneck’s drinking is framed as a testament, not impediment, to his prodigious work ethic.

The Panama roughneck’s readiness to fight is similarly romanticized, and in Hall’s poem “Saxon Dan,” directly linked to his genealogical and moral superiority. Hall glorifies the Panama roughneck’s Anglo-Saxon heritage through the exploits of “‘roughneck’ Dan McCree” who is “a mighty man of Saxon breed” serving as a cook in the silver roll cafeterias.³⁰ Because he “gave no favors,” a group of “Castile’s proud sons” conspire to gang up and attack him at the next midday meal (ll. 7 and 17). In the brawl that ensues:

Dan seized a chair and raised it high
And laid two foemen low;
His eyes were red; his lips were dry;
His breath came quick and low.

Again they charged—and met the chair;
The blows fell thick and fast;
“Come on, ye dogs; I’ll fight ye fair,”
Roared Dan “until the last!”

The battle raged; the camp rushed nigh;
Dan’s bloodstained foes came on.
Again he raised the chair on high;
The fight was nearly won.

Again they came, now twenty strong,
With clubs, and plates, and knives;
A maddened, bloody, cursing throng,
Now fighting for their lives.

The Saxon giant, like Goth of old
With war-club slew the foe,
By force of might and courage bold,
Laid twenty foemen low. (ll. 29–48)

Hall’s account of the fight between Saxon Dan and the Spanish silver workers highlights and amalgamates the Panama roughneck’s integrity as a worker and his racial superiority. The brawl is initiated because Dan “gave no favors” and performs his job dutifully, unwilling to engage in dishonest behavior even if it breeds resentment. His turn to violence is thus framed as a defense of, not a threat to, social order. Dan fights to maintain an idealized vision of American employment that is based on meritocracy, rather than Old World cronyism. Furthermore, even as he is being attacked by multiple Spaniards, Dan insists that he will “fight ye fair.” His incorruptibility and investment in fairness position him as morally superior to the Spaniards, who are enraged by his observance of the rules of employment and fair combat.

The poem frames Dan’s triumph despite the overwhelming numerical odds as a testament to his physical and racial superiority. During the battle, the “Saxon giant” draws strength and courage from his Germanic ancestors to overcome his Castilian adversaries. Though armed with only a chair in comparison to his twenty opponents wielding clubs, plates, and knives, Dan remains apparently unscathed while his foes are “bloodstained” and “fighting for their lives.” In this case, one Anglo-Saxon is literally worth twenty Southern Europeans. By the poem’s end, even the Spaniards recognize

Dan's superiority, and the poem concludes with their affirmation of his dominance:

Now they love him, his praise they sing;
Big Saxon Dan McCree.
He won the day; they crowned him King,
Under the Mango tree. (ll. 57–60)

Anglo-Saxon supremacy is thus reinforced with the literal recognition of Dan's sovereignty. His natural moral and physical strength power his ascendancy over the Spanish silver workers.

Though representations of the Panama roughneck's unimpeachable work ethic, superhuman strength, and dedication to canal construction clearly traded in hyperbole, they helped to justify the preferential benefits given to gold employees. Connecting the Panama roughneck and his abilities to white, American Anglo-Saxonism offered an explanation for the convergence of skin color, nationality, and labor skills that structured the gold and silver system. The Anglo-Saxon roughneck's superiority to Southern Europeans, not to mention black West Indians, linked these factors together to naturalize the system's differential organization and management of men.

The literary emphasis on the Panama roughneck's toughness along with its recuperation of aspects of ethnic, working-class culture also reveal how the literature of the Canal Zone engaged with US anxieties about masculinity, empire, and the economy. These fictions dovetailed with the racialized rhetoric of manliness and civilization that structured President Roosevelt's stance on imperial expansion. As Gail Bederman has explained, Roosevelt believed that the US was "engaged in a millennial drama of manly racial advancement, in which American men enacted their superior manhood by asserting imperialist control over races of inferior manhood."³¹ Roosevelt's beliefs extend what scholars like Reginald Horsman have referred to as American Anglo-Saxon ideology, which linked US expansion and the subjugation of non-white peoples to the innate superiority of the Anglo Saxon-descended white, American "race."³² The figure of the Panama roughneck exemplified this ideology's logic for US readers, framing the hierarchical privileging of white, US citizens as a natural outcome of their inherent exceptional abilities. Reiterations of the Panama roughneck's physical prowess, strenuous lifestyle, and racial dominance elevate this figure as a literary embodiment of American imperial manhood.

Furthermore, the investment in narratives of the Panama roughneck's working-class manliness locate the figure in early twentieth-century US concerns over middle-class masculinity. According to Bederman, middle-class norms of manliness during this period centered on self-restraint, independent entrepreneurship, and authority over the self, women, and the lower classes, but were challenged by the decreasing percentage of self-employed men, the instability of the economy between 1873 and 1896, and working-class—particularly immigrant working-class—manliness.³³ Fictions

of the hypermasculine, Panama roughneck addressed these anxieties in three ways. First, by positioning the Panama roughneck as the embodiment of US canal labor, writers infused the privileged gold employee with working-class masculinity. Regardless of their actual tasks, even Americans engaged in white-collar jobs were painted as brawny roughnecks in fictions that circulated “back home.”

Second, portrayals of the Panama roughneck’s American Anglo-Saxon superiority helped to neutralize the threat of the ethnic immigrant. The figure’s dominance over Europeans in poems like “Saxon Dan” reassert US citizens atop the “natural” hierarchy of racial/ethnic groups. Furthermore, the poem stages the fantasy that white ethnic immigrants could be absorbed into the American citizenry and redeployed in the service of empire. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has observed, the expansion of American whiteness during this period was partly accomplished in a “crucible of empire-building.”³⁴ Saxon Dan’s last name, McCree, is of Gaelic origin. Yet despite the fact that he is likely Scottish, Irish, or Welsh, the poem bestows an Anglo-Germanic background upon him, describing him as “the Saxon giant, like Goth of old.”³⁵ Most crucially, Dan is cursed by the Spanish workers as “the Yankee pig,” a moment of interpellation that recognizes him as a “real” American (l. 19). Moreover, as I discussed in my reading, Dan’s willingness to physically defend his decision to give no favors to the workers marks him as the protector of an idealized vision of American meritocracy. Such scenes underscore the ways that US conceptions of whiteness were expanded in an imperial context. In fictions of the Panama roughneck, white ethnics who upheld US imperial standards are folded seamlessly into hegemonic American Anglo-Saxonness.

Franck reiterates Hall’s imaginative transformation of the Gael to the Anglo-Saxon by crediting the gold and silver system with creating what he calls a new American “type” who would export its hierarchies back to the United States. As he explains:

The bringing together into close contact of Americans from every section of our broad land is tending to make a new amalgamated type. Even New Englanders grow almost human here among their broader-minded fellow-countrymen. Any northerner can say “nigger” as glibly as a Carolinian, and growl if one of them steps on his shadow. It is not easy to say just how much effect all this will have when the canal is done and this handful of amalgamated and humanized Americans is sprinkled back over all the States as a leaven to the whole. They tell on the Zone of a man from Maine who sat four high-school years on the same bench with two negro boys, and returning home after three years on the Isthmus was so horrified to find one of those boys an alderman that he packed his traps and moved to Alabama, “where a nigger IS a nigger”...³⁶

Franck's caustic commentary suggests that exposure to the Zone's racial hierarchies shapes a "new amalgamated" American whose embrace of these hierarchies would ideologically and geographically bridge the Mason-Dixon divide. This American's free use of racist epithets and overreaction to imagined slights by blacks unifies the New Englander with the Carolinian, transforming "a man from Maine" into a resident of Alabama. By framing this metamorphosis as humanizing, Franck sarcastically highlights how the post-Civil War reunification between North and South might be accomplished not through sentimental narratives of romance and courtship, as it was staged in literature of the late nineteenth-century and onward,³⁷ but through the glue of anti-black racism. While he ultimately declines to speculate on "just how much effect all this will have when the canal is done," his anecdote speaks to the potential repercussions of US governance overseas. The types of racial prejudices enabled by the mutual exchange between Southern and "gold and silver" ideologies would not remain in the Zone, but rather, would return with American workers back to all parts of the United States.

Finally, valorizations of the Panama roughneck's ability and mobility reveal how Canal Zone literature sought to intervene in domestic, US conversations about economic instability. According to Frank Tobias Higbie, the Progressive Era (roughly 1880–1925 by his designation) was marked by "a growing perception that unemployment was a permanent aspect of industrial society"³⁸ and that the closing of the American frontier signaled the demise of a key market for migrant industrial workers.³⁹ These revelations led to a shift in how American reformers and policy makers discussed seasonal laborers. While these men were initially dismissed as "tramps" whose unemployment stemmed from moral shortcomings, by the turn of the twentieth century, they were framed as "passive victims" whose problems "were caused by the structure of the economy."⁴⁰ Their migratory nature was represented as an unfortunate effect of their precarious position in the economy rather than as a consequence of poor individual choices.

Fictions of the Panama roughneck responded to these conversations by presenting worker mobility, particularly of a global kind, as a sign of mastery over, not subjection to, the labor market. In the words of Hall, the roughneck "has hunted polar bears in the Arctic regions and wild hogs in the Tropics; prospected for gold from Patagonia to Dawson ... he is fully conscious of his power, and sells his brawn at a good price, always to the highest bidder"⁴¹ The Panama roughneck's mobility here marks him as an empowered agent dictating the terms of his employment. "Fully conscious of his power," he migrates not because he is a pawn to the market, but because he actively decides where and to whom to sell his labor. This representation presents a fantasy in which no matter what the economic situation, the independent American is in demand and in control. In celebrating the Panama roughneck's ability to jump from the Arctic to the Tropics, however, these texts invoke the imperialist dream of new labor markets beyond the continental United States. While the West may have closed, fictions of the Panama roughneck point to territories overseas as a new "safety valve,"

to borrow Frederick Jackson Turner’s term, for workers seeking to free themselves from the pressures of the American economy.

The literature of the Canal Zone thus participated in conversations that ranged from the domestic to the imperial, which in part explains some of their internal inconsistencies. Yet the messages it generated, particularly about race, could not remain uncontested in the diverse space of the Zone. Narratives of the Panama roughneck were challenged on a variety of levels by peoples whose identifications complicated or directly contradicted the gold and silver system’s undergirding assumptions.

Alternate Perspectives: Racial Ambiguity and Black Anglo-Saxons

While the myth of the Panama roughneck centered on his efficient, white Anglo-Saxon dominance, this construction and its underlying racial narratives faced many challenges. To begin with, the racial hierarchies legitimated by the Panama roughneck rested on the assumption that a person’s skin color and national identity corresponded to an easily classifiable type. In the Zone, this was not always the case, and Franck’s depictions of his time as a census enumerator expose the difficulties of racially categorizing the Zone’s cosmopolitan workforce. While there were “negroes blacker than the obsidian cutlery of the Aztecs,” there were “blonde negroes with yellow hair and blue eyes whose race was betrayed only by eyelids and the dead whiteness of skin, and whom one could not set down as such after enrolling swarthy Spaniards as ‘white’ without a smile.”⁴² Though Franck ultimately maintains that a person’s eyelids and shade of whiteness could reveal the “truth” of their race, he notes the inconsistencies of a system that classified “swarthy Spaniards as ‘white’” while labeling people with “yellow hair and blue eyes” as “negroes” (19).

In addition to being confounded by unexpected physical appearances, Franck recalls the misleading cultural signs of certain Zone inhabitants. He mentions:

Chinese merchants, of whom there are hordes on the Zone, cueless (sic), dressed and betailored till you must look at them twice to tell them from ‘gold’ employees, the flag of the new republic flapping above their doors, the new president in their lapels, left off selling crucifixes and breastpin medallions of Christ to negro women, to answer my questions. (22)

Franck’s description of these Chinese merchants highlights the potential difficulties of correlating a person’s race with expected cultural markers. The merchants that he encountered did not have stereotypical “queue” hairstyles and were dressed in modern, Western-style garb. Nor did they have the cultural accessories of the unassimilable, “heathen” Chinese. Rather, they willingly hung the flag of Panama

above their stores, supported the Panamanian president with lapel pins, and sold Christian ornaments rather than exotic curios. Though Franck cannot resist using the racially loaded term “hordes” to describe their numbers, his admission that they were practically indistinguishable from white American gold employees speaks to the cultural ambiguity of some of the Zone’s inhabitants.

Franck also writes about the challenges he faced in determining a worker’s national origin. He recalls in particular the following exchange with an elderly black railroad employee:

“Where you born, boy?” I had run across a wrinkled old negro who had worked more than thirty years for the P.R.R.
“Deed ah don’ know, boss.”
“Oh, come! Don’t know where you were born?”
“Fo’ Gawd, boss, ah’s tellin’ yo de truff. Ah don know, ‘cause ah born to sea.”
“Well, what country are you a subject of?”
“Truly ah cahn’t say, boss.”
“Well what nationality was your father?”
“Ah neveh see him, sah.”
“Well then where the devil did you first land after you were born?”
“Deed ah cahn’t say, boss. T’ink it were one o’ dem islands. Reckon ah’s a subjec’ o’ de’ worl’, boss.” (54)

In this rich interaction, Franck is thwarted at every attempt to pin down the black worker’s nationality, as the man refuses to engage with the terms that Franck deploys to determine his origins. Territorial sovereignty does not provide the answer, since the man was born on a ship. Citizenship is similarly unhelpful, as the man claims that he does not know what country he is subject to. Even genealogy fails, as the man has never met his father. In the end, the black worker asserts his universal belonging, speculating that his position is closest to “a subjec’ o’ de’ worl’.” In claiming this global, cosmopolitan citizenship, the man frustrates Franck’s efforts, and by extension those of the US government, to affix a national identity to him and interpellate him into gold and silver hierarchies. While Franck does not mention how he ultimately resolves this case, his anecdote demonstrates one provocative way in which workers may have resisted US classifications reliant on the nation-state, the exercise of state power, or biological genealogy.

Even the meanings of “established” racial types were challenged in the Zone. In particular, narratives of Anglo-Saxon superiority were unexpectedly problematized by some West Indian laborers. To begin with, their status as British colonial subjects challenged the logic of withholding certain constitutional rights in the Zone because its inhabitants were supposedly unfamiliar with an Anglo-Saxon legal system.⁴³ The US

Supreme Court case *Downes v. Bidwell* (1901) did not extend trial by jury to noncontiguous territories because the practice was deemed “peculiar to Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, as historian Lawrence Ealy points out, the legal system of the Zone was historically a modification of a “mixture of Roman codes and ancient Iberian laws.”⁴⁵ There was no precedent for jury trials, and consequently the right was not initially implemented. As more and more serious criminal cases were tried, however, objections to the lack of jury trial mounted. According to Ealy, “There were many who were critical of this situation, especially when the death penalty was meted out in murder cases and some of the defendants were colored British subjects from the British West Indies, Bermuda and other places where trial by jury was a long established right.”⁴⁶ West Indian laborers’ familiarity with a jury system, gained from their status as British colonial subjects, challenged US assumptions about which kinds of people could understand, and thus have access to, Anglo-Saxon principles of law. The head of the Department of Civil Administration in the Canal Zone, J. C. S. Blackburn, eventually recommended to President Roosevelt that trial by jury be extended to the Zone, and in 1908, Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing the right “in criminal cases where the penalty might be affixed at death or life imprisonment” (103).

West Indian laborers also contested the connection between Anglo-Saxon superiority and the United States. More specifically, they emphasized the preeminence of the British Empire that *they* belonged to rather than the US one in charge of the Zone. “As British subjects,” Canal Zone labor recruiter William Karner wrote of Barbadians, “they think they are close to royalty and quite superior to white laborers from the United States.”⁴⁷ These workers would point out that the British Empire was still the most powerful in the world, and as its colonial subjects, they “were as much a part of it as anyone” (388). The pride that some West Indian laborers took in their connection to British Empire even resulted in the refusal to submit to what they saw as unfair treatment by Americans. The “standard response of the black worker to bullying or abuse, according to virtually every American account of the construction period, was to straighten himself up and say to the foreman ‘I wish you to understand, sir, that I am a British subject, and if we can not arrange this matter amicably we will talk to our Consul about it’” (387). As this anecdote illustrates, narratives of American Anglo-Saxon superiority did not cow West Indian workers into quietly submitting to US abuse; rather, they confidently invoked their rights as subjects of a superior empire. Throughout the period of construction, West Indian workers called upon their status as British subjects to protect their rights and petitioned the British Consulate when they felt they had been mistreated.

Jamaican author H. G. de Lisser dramatizes this West Indian faith in the unassailable status of a British subject in his novel *Susan Proudleigh* (1915), which centers on Jamaican migration to the Zone during the construction period. As the character Jones prepares for his departure to Panama, he is warned by the titular character’s father, Mr. Proudleigh, about the US racism he will likely face. Mr. Proudleigh, attempting to dissuade Jones from leaving Jamaica with his daughter

Susan, tells him that he has “been hearing dat Panama is a dangerous place for a young man” and “dat the Americans don’t like Jamaica people at all, an’ that the first word you say to them, them shoot y’u.”⁴⁸ While Mr. Proudleigh’s general assessment of US attitudes towards black workers does not deviate from other accounts,⁴⁹ Jones staunchly rejects his understanding of the situation:

“The Jamaica people couldn’t have been Jamaica people at all,” he answered. “For a British subject can’t be touched.”

“I don’t see how dat can be,” said Mr. Proudleigh doubtfully, “for those Jamaica people did really born in Jamaica.”

“Then they were a set of fools,” replied Jones shortly. “Most Jamaica people is foolish; they have no cranium whatsoever. I bet you those men never told they were British subjects. Now, if it was me, I would have made everybody to understand that I was an Anglo-Saxon, an’ that if they touch a hair of me head, war would be declared. That’s the way to talk in a foreign country.”⁵⁰

Jones has supreme confidence in the cache of his status as a British subject and the British government’s willingness to initiate an international conflict on his behalf. In this way, de Lisser’s character resonates with historical records of West Indian laborers who invoked their affiliations to British Empire in response to US mistreatment. However, the novel deviates from merely reflecting historical events by imaginatively taking the imperial relationship one step further with Jones’ remarkable claim that he is “an Anglo-Saxon.” While writers like Hall relied on this term to construct a virile, white American identity tied to US empire, de Lisser subverts these narratives by interpreting Anglo-Saxon as instead indexing a belonging to British Empire. His contradictory interpretation highlights the ways in which the malleability of the term Anglo-Saxon enabled competing understandings of belonging to emerge. While the term’s instability allowed for the fashioning of a postethnic, white imperial identity known as the Panama roughneck, it also opened the door for other imaginative reframings. Through the character of Jones, de Lisser applies the logic of an expanded Anglo-Saxon identity to create a parallel narrative of the black imperial Anglo-Saxon.

Conclusion

In recent years, scholars like Gretchen Murphy have argued that Americans generated knowledge about race “by both drawing from and revising domestic prejudices and identifications.”⁵¹ Forms of racial knowledge crossed US borders into territories overseas and produced new understandings of race that could potentially return “back home.” In this essay, I have focused on two texts, *Zone Policeman* and *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, to show how their depictions of white, US canal workers modified

“domestic” understandings of race through a literary construct that they referred to as the Panama roughneck. Characterized as an amalgam of whiteness, US citizenship, and superior labor abilities, this figure expanded domestic American understandings of race to incorporate nationality and physical prowess. By portraying white, US gold workers as hypermasculine, hyperproductive Panama roughnecks, these texts conveniently rationalized the gold and silver system’s hierarchies as a meritocracy rewarding the inherent abilities of US citizens. Moreover, their celebrations of the Panama roughneck’s hard-drinking and brawling virility co-opted a historically-maligned ethnic, working-class identity to bolster an American masculinity perceived to be in crisis. In so doing, Franck’s and Hall’s texts stage a postethnic consolidation of white, American identity that foregrounds skin color, nation, and masculine vigor over ethnic differences. Their writings suggest that closer attention to literary depictions of white, US workers in the Canal Zone can offer a new locus for theorizing how early twentieth-century US conceptions of race and masculinity were shaped in and through sites of American empire.

Notes

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¹ “A Zone Policeman: Mr. Franck Gives the Panama Canal’s Human Side,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1913.

² Harry Alverson Franck, *Zone Policeman 88: A Close Range Study of the Panama Canal and Its Workers* (New York: Century Co., 1913), 54.

³ See Velma Newton’s *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914* (1984; reprinted Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randall Publishers, 2004); Trevor O’Reggio’s *Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama, 1914–1964* (1997; reprinted Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006); Julie Greene’s *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009); and Olive Senior’s *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal* (Mona, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2014).

⁴ Franck, *Zone Policeman 88*, 14.

⁵ Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves*, 106.

⁶ David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in US History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 104.

⁷ As for the national breakdown of these Europeans, Major Robert E. Wood, who served in the Zone during the decade of construction, estimated that workers from Spain made up 8,298 of the 11,873 European workers imported to work from 1906–1908; 500 additional Spaniards were recruited from Cuba (as cited in Senior 184). For a more detailed discussion of these Spanish workers' experiences, see Julie Greene's essay, "Spaniards on the Silver Roll: Labor Troubles and Liminality in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904–1914," in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 66 (Fall 2004): 78–98.

⁸ See Ian Haney Lopez's *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). In other words, even Europeans of "suspect" whiteness had access to spaces and facilities designated as "white" in the Jim Crow South. In the Canal Zone, they were forced to use "silver" accommodations and were barred from gold facilities.

⁹ See Greene, *The Canal Builders* (2009); Noel Maurer and Carlos Yu, *The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran, and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference* (2014).

¹⁰ See in particular Rhonda Frederick, *Colón Man a Come: Mythographies of Panama Canal Migration* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005) and James Davis, *Eric Walrond: A Life in the Harlem Renaissance and the Transatlantic Caribbean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹¹ The term "roughneck" first appeared in the mid-1830s and referred to a rowdy, uncultivated or uneducated person, but by the turn of the century, it was used to describe any laborer "engaged in any hard, rough, or poorly paid work ("roughneck," *Oxford English Dictionary*, def. 1 and 2a). While I focus on literary representations of this figure, my thinking has been shaped by Julie Greene's chapter "As I am a True American" in *The Canal Builders*, which focuses on the experiences of, and rhetoric surrounding, the white, US canal workers referred to as roughnecks in the Zone.

¹² Matthew Parker, *Panama Fever: The Epic Story of the Building of the Panama Canal* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 277.

¹³ See Peter Way's *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780–1860* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ de Lisser's novel narrates the "rags to riches" story of its titular Jamaican heroine, whose upward mobility is facilitated through emigration to Panama and her romantic relationships; see de Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, London: Methuen & Co., 1915.

¹⁵ Parker, *Panama Fever*, 382.

¹⁶ Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 63.

- ¹⁷ Maurer and Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 111.
- ¹⁸ John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States Government and the Panama Canal, 1903–1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 78.
- ¹⁹ Parker, *Panama Fever*, 435. Historian Michael Coniff suggests that this policy change, issued by Secretary of War William Howard Taft, “seemed designed to win the support of the American unions” as Taft began his campaign for the presidency; Michael Coniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904–1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 32–33.
- ²⁰ Maurer and Yu, *The Big Ditch*, 118.
- ²¹ Greene, *Canal Builders*, 81.
- ²² John Hall, “The Old Canal Man,” in *Panama Roughneck Ballads* (Panama Canal Zone: A. Lindo Panama Railroad News Agency, 1912), 12 and 14.
- ²³ John Hall, “The ‘Rough-Neck,’” *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, ll. 2, 5, 7.
- ²⁴ J. Michael Hogan, *The Panama Canal in American Politics: Domestic Advocacy and the Evolution of Policy* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 45.
- ²⁵ Ralph D. Paine, *The Steam-Shovel Man* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 7.
- ²⁶ Franck, *Zone Policeman* 88, 38.
- ²⁷ Henry Louis Mencken, “Getting Rid of the Actor,” *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness* 41, ed. George Jean Nathan (September, 1913): 158.
- ²⁸ F. Willard Steele, “The Panama Canal Stenographer—A Character Sketch,” in *The Phonographic Magazine* 30, ed. Jerome Bird Howard (Phonographic Institute Co., 1917), 10.
- ²⁹ Way, *Common Labour*, 148; 165–67.
- ³⁰ Hall, “Saxon Dan,” *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, lines 1–2.
- ³¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 171.
- ³² Reginald Horsman. *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).
- ³³ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 12–14.
- ³⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 222.
- ³⁵ Hall, “Saxon Dan,” *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, l. 45.
- ³⁶ Franck, *Zone Policeman* 88, 89.

³⁷ For a discussion of this trend, see Nina Silber's *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). For specific texts that depict reunification through North–South romances, see John DeForest's novels *Miss Ravenal's Conversion From Secession to Loyalty* (1867) and *The Bloody Chasm* (1882); William Gillette's play *Held by the Enemy* (1885); David Belasco's play *The Heart of Maryland* (1895); and Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902).

³⁸ Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 86.

³⁹ Frank Tobias Higbie, "Crossing Class Boundaries: Tramp Ethnographers and Narratives of Class in Progressive Era America," *Social Science History* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 562.

⁴⁰ Higbie, "Crossing," 562.

⁴¹ Hall, *Panama Roughneck Ballads*, 12–14.

⁴² Franck, *Zone Policeman* 88, 19.

⁴³ Most West Indian workers in the Zone came from the Commonwealth Caribbean (Barbados and Jamaica in particular), rather than the French islands.

⁴⁴ *Downes v. Bidwell* was initially brought to the court by US merchant Samuel Downes over the import duties he was forced to pay on oranges imported to New York from the newly acquired territory of Puerto Rico. The case boiled down to the question of whether not the full provisions and protections of the Constitution applied to US territories. The Court ruled that they did not, suggesting that while certain "natural rights" in the Constitution (freedom to personal liberty, religious expression, and property, etc.) applied to all spaces under US sovereignty, other "artificial or remedial rights," such as trial by jury, were distinctive to the US proper.

⁴⁵ Ealy, "Development," 94. For a more detailed discussion of the history of law in Panama, see Theodore C. Hinckley's "Canal Zone Laws and the Judiciary," *Case and Comment* 17, no. 1 (1911): 220–22, as well as Lawrence Ealy, "The Development of an Anglo-American System of Law in the Panama Canal Zone," *The American Journal of Legal History* 2, no. 4 (October 1958): 283–303.

⁴⁶ Ealy, "Development," 102.

⁴⁷ Parker, *Panama Fever*, 388. Parker attributes these fascinating quotes to the publication of a Proceedings of Symposium held at the University of the West Indies, date and title not given.

⁴⁸ de Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 101.

⁴⁹ Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* contains a short story entitled "Subjection" that speaks to the violence of the racial system in the Zone. In this story, a young black worker is murdered by a white American G.I. for simply speaking out against the soldier's cruel treatment of another black worker.

⁵⁰ de Lisser, *Susan Proudleigh*, 102.

⁵¹ Gretchen Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man’s Burden: US Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 12.

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