I earned my graduate degrees in English from the University of Pennsylvania (“Penn,”*NOT* “Penn State”!) before starting work in Boston College’s English Department in 1998. I was honored to accept a joint appointment with our African & African Diaspora Studies Program (AADS) in 2006, and I am still honored. Under the leadership of Prof. Cynthia Young, AADS has become one of this university’s most distinguished interdisciplinary programs; this is a distinction I hope to solidify and extend as AADS Director (2009 to the present).

In addition to teaching courses on Afro-Caribbean, African Diaspora, and pan-Caribbean literatures and cultures, my research interests include contemporary popular fiction (speculative, horror, detective, and mystery fictions), Post-colonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and narratives of migration. If you take a look at my research, you’ll see an interesting combination of personal, intellectual, and political interests.

The origins for my book, “Colón Man a Come”: *Mythographies of Panamá Canal Migration*, were very personal. My maternal and paternal grandparents were from the Caribbean (St. Lucia with a dash of Jamaica), but both of my parents were born and raised in Panamá. These histories drew me to the literatures of the English-speaking Caribbean, where I began to notice frequent references to workers on the Panamá Canal. That is where my research began.

This is how my book opens: “Armed only with a reference to an enslaved West Indian woman and a brief transcript of her witch trial ‘confession,’ [author] Maryse Condé [writes] the protagonist of *I, Tituba Black Witch of Salem* a family, culture, and spiritual life that exposes the paucity of the official record. Condé thus imagines and inserts Tituba’s story into the history of the Salem Witch Trials as well as that of slavery in the Americas. In doing so, the author foregrounds the diverse but effaced *histories* and *stories* that coexist with the history that has been commonly told. In piecing together Tituba’s fictionalized narrative, Condé does not merely celebrate a self that has been excluded from mainstream versions of history; instead she identifies the simultaneity of different, sometimes divergent, and always multiple stories.

“Literature, songs, histories, and memoirs about the 20th century migration of Caribbean
people to the isthmus of Panamá mirror the [process] set by Condé in I, Tituba. With railroad and canal construction occurring soon after the end of slavery in the Anglophone Caribbean (1838), Panamá migration and the singular nature of canal work (non-agricultural, labor-intensive, and modern) distinguished Colón Men from other intra- and extra-regional migrants, thus giving them the space and tools to construct a new vision of themselves. In spite of this, contemporaneous canal histories typically cast Caribbean workers as minor players within the drama of the construction—that is, if they reference them at all. When depicted in this context, migrants’ denigration within the Caribbean because of race, slavery, poverty, and (for some) lack of education are featured. While living on the isthmus, Colón Men were additionally subjected to exploitation, color/race prejudices, and anti-foreign propaganda. While these characterizations of Caribbean laborers are accurate, Colón Men who appear in more recent narratives, as well as in popular and creative genres, are rendered more diversely. Given the groundbreaking nature of the canal project and the chaos that distinguished its execution, Colón Men portrayed in early histories were lost among the compelling details of engineering achievements. These laborers were obscured, as well, by the political force of US concern with its foreign policy and position among world powers. However, since “bottom up” histories and creative genres [offer] a range of Colón Men’s experiences, it is clear that they draw on workers’ realities that resist standard explication. The Colón Man has therefore come to embody diverse responses to foreign powers, migration, and modernity, and to express multiple and complex constructions of a Caribbean identities.”

I enjoyed reading literature that featured Colón Men, but these workers’ letters were the best! George Martin, a canal worker from Barbados, remembered his time in Panamá like this: “what to do with $10.00 in those days? Here is a story, it caught me once. I bought some of everything, shoes also, to do away with it, $10.00 would not finish. I bought a ham, at that time it look as big as I were, I paid $2.21, talking about ham, real lean, I took ham to work every day in order to have it finish, and my associate and I ate ham for days.” I finished writing my book in 2005, but still laugh out loud when I think about some of these workers’ stories.
My second book, tentatively called “Pop-Fiction: Popular Genres, African Diaspora Writers,” grows out of my love of popular fiction. It is an interdisciplinary project that begins with the premise that literature’s gothic tradition might be a suitable vehicle through which to explore the conflicted issues of race, gender, location, and diaspora in the Americas. In thinking about what “haunts” these discourses in Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean, the popular genres of science fiction/fantasy, thriller/adventure, and mystery/detective—specifically those recently written by African Diaspora writers Barbara Neely, Colin Channer, Nalo Hopkinson, Colson Whitehead, Steven Barnes, and Patrick Chamoiseau—are rich resources for examining the “mysterious perversities” of contemporary thinking about concerns of peoples in the African Diaspora.

That’s it about me, but if you’re intrigued and want to learn more, stop by! You can find me in Lyons Hall 301 most days …

1 “Colón Man” and “Panamá Man” are the names given to Caribbean laborers who traveled to work on Panamá railroad and canal. The names derive from the country’s largest, northeastern city and the country itself. This worker has also been called a “Silver Man,” denoting the currency in which he was paid and the euphemism for “black” and “unskilled worker” used by North American railroad and canal authorities. In addition to canal migration being mainly comprised of men, it was largely a phenomenon of the Afro-Caribbean. Although East Indian (1845-1917) and Chinese (1853-1879) peoples were moving into the region, very few migrated to Panamá. In addition, while a small number of men from China were conscripted to work on the canal, for a number of reasons, they died in large numbers. Many of the Chinese workers who survived were then sent to Jamaica. See “The Chinese in the English-Speaking Caribbean,” Encyclopedia of World Cultures, Volume 3: Middle America and the Caribbean, volume edited by James W. Dow (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1995): 56 and Olive Senior’s “The Chinese Who Came from Panama,” Jamaica Journal 14 ([1980): 78-79. See Patrice C. Brown’s “The Panama Canal: The African American Experience,” Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration 29.2 (Summer 1997) for references to East Indians in Panamá.