Welcome to our second professor feature in my sustained efforts to introduce you to some of the University of Oregon faculty with a vested interest in African American Literature and Black Studies! This interview was conducted with a figure integral to the English Department as a whole: the esteemed Dr. Mark Whalan, Robert and Eve Horn Professor of English and Head of English. With fabulous recommendations for reading relevant to the field, a commentary on the immediate relevance of centering Black Studies during this time when banned books are experiencing a resurgence, and a poignant argument for the productive nature of discomfort in literature… this conversation has it all.

Q: Tell us a little bit about yourself (where you're from, what did you study in school, a fun fact about yourself)

A: I was born, raised, and educated in England, and grew up in a tiny village in East Nottinghamshire. I studied at the universities of Warwick, Durham, and Exeter—my B.A. was in English and American literature at Warwick, and I got really interested in the American literature we studied there. After a stint teaching high school in London, I got my Ph.D. at Exeter and then was appointed to my first faculty position there in 2002. I joined the UO as the Robert and Eve Horn Professor of English in 2011. A fun fact about me is that my grandma, who worked in domestic service for an aristocratic British family, once served tea to Mahatma Gandhi during his trip to London in the 1930s.

Q: Can you tell me about how you were introduced to the discipline of Black and African American Literature and the decision to pursue it academically?

A: African American literature is widely read around the world, and the UK is no exception. We read texts like Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor in high school. During my B.A. I became fascinated by Jean Toomer’s modernist classic *Cane*, which is a weird mix of short stories, poetry, and drama that powerfully and often impressionistically evokes Black and biracial life in rural Georgia and Washington D.C. just after the First World War.

I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the book, and continued my interest in Toomer through much of my earliest published scholarship. I’ve always been interested in writing that has high stakes in the world, and that was what attracted me most to African American writing. When Toomer published *Cane* there were no Black members of Congress; Jim Crow laws severely restricted Black access to the franchise, housing, education, and employment; and state-sanctioned violence—often deadly violence—against Black people was rampant nationwide. Writing was one of the few national platforms available for Black protest, and it was the political urgency that courses through that writing that attracted me.
Q: Do you have a favorite class or text to teach at UO?

A: I have a soft spot for *Cane*, but I also love teaching poetry by Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Gwendolyn Brooks, and anything by James Baldwin. I manage to get one or more of these authors into pretty much every class I teach at UO!

Q: For anyone interested in looking into the subject, are there people working in the field that you would recommend reading or looking up?

A: There’s exciting writing out there in Black memoir/essay/theory by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram X. Kendi, Claudia Rankine, and Margo Jefferson. Scholars I admire working on Black culture during the early twentieth century—the period I have expertise in—include Adrienne Brown and Brent Hayes Edwards; I also just reviewed a very good book on Black print culture in the early 20th century by Elizabeth McHenry. bell hooks passed last year, which was a real loss. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the amazing scholarship being produced by my colleagues Courtney Thorsson and Faith Barter, and the fiction of Mat Johnson.

Q: Are you willing/able to talk a little bit about the research you're conducting right now or do you have a favorite project you've worked on in the past?

A: I published a collection of Jean Toomer’s letters earlier in my career, and loved the experience of working in the archives for weeks digging up and transcribing letters by (or to) him that had been mislaid, or were scattered, or were in hard-to-decipher script. He was a writer physically isolated from much of the community that sustained him when he was at his creative peak, and so his working process, his anxieties, his hopes, and his ideas are very fully and vividly there in his correspondence. It was very exciting to piece that story together over the gradual course of compiling the volume.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add about this discipline or your experience researching/teaching it that you feel would be valuable for students to know?

A: This feels like such an important time to be teaching and studying Black literature, and to be defending the importance of doing so. Books like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, or Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist*, are facing an upsurge in schoolroom bans from numerous school boards, state legislatures, and Governor’s mansions, essentially for being too upsetting to students, or for being “inherently divisive.” Such attitudes are premised on the idea that racial injustice is a thing of the past, rather than a past which continues to structure and produce our present. *Beloved* is indeed an upsetting book, but it’s also a beautiful one, in part because of the paradoxical power of fiction to vitalize historical truth in a way no other medium can. So much of the current debate misrepresents the facts of history, misrepresents what we do in our classrooms, and infantilizes students by supposing they can’t critically evaluate the books they read. And after all, who would want a completely comfortable, unruffled education anyway?
Lauryn, here: Racial justice is an immediate and vitally important concept. It is equally important to celebrate radical forms of Black joy, art, and expression of life in conjunction with and outside of politics. While, as Dr. Whalan points out, Black literature is sometimes left out of the classroom on account of being too ‘inherently divisive’, the other option- to ignore it and stick to safer or more comfortable reading practices- is unproductive for empathy, change, or the pursuit of learning. Also, you’d be closing yourself off to an entire host of literature and art that is beautiful, haunting, breathtaking, etc., etc., within itself. If you foster a love of literature, it would be irresponsible (not to mention short-sighted) to close yourself off to this dynamic, rich body of texts. With so many professors at UO, including Dr. Whalan, offering avenues into this discipline in thoughtful, creative, and productive ways there’s no reason to keep African American literature on the shelf.