Centering Black Literature and Culture in the Classroom:
An Interview with Dr. Barter
By Lauryn Cole

Did you know that the English Department has a myriad of professors dedicated to the study of African American literature and Black Studies? I thought that Black History Month would be an appropriate time to introduce you to some of them in the event you have not had the opportunity to take one of their phenomenal classes. My name is Lauryn and I have been working with the UO English Department social media for about a year now, as an English major, the president of the English Undergraduate Organization, and member of Sigma Tau Delta. Highlighting and interviewing professors invested in this type of literature is relevant not only for myself because I am constantly in search of expanding the scope of literature I consume, but because it is valuable for students interested in the department to learn about their professors' passions and projects.

Because the University of Oregon faculty has devoted a substantial portion of their time and energy not only into researching their academic passions but sharing that work and fostering it in students, these professors are eloquent beyond belief. It is powerful to read someone’s own words describing their dreams, their history, and their hopes for the future. So (besides this preface done by yours truly) I will let their voices speak for themselves.

Up first we have Dr. Faith Barter who is taking this term off to research and work on her book in this discipline. However, she will be back Spring term to teach ENG 391: American Novel and ENG 468: Ethnic Literature Top: Black Rebellions. She is brilliant, she is passionate about studying and researching Black life in literature, and she probably knows more about astrology than you. Without further ado, let us hear from Dr. Barter, herself-

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

A: My first real introduction to African American literature was as an undergrad. I took a seminar on Black and Jewish representations in literature, and it was a formative experience for me in a few different ways. It introduced me to two rich literary traditions, but it was also the first class I took that did not center white writers. And as the only person in the class who was neither Black nor Jewish, it asked me to think about my own positionality (whiteness) in ways that hadn't been required of me in other academic spaces. I spent a lot of time simply listening in that first class, but it made a lasting impression.

Formally, I began specializing in the study of African American literature years later, while I was doing my PhD. I had been practicing law for a few years before starting my PhD, and I knew I wanted to study law and racial formations in literature, but I wasn't sure what that would look like specifically. My very first seminar was on early African American print culture, and that was the beginning of my specialization in 19th-century African American literature. That era of Black literature is so rich in legal theory and legal experimentation, and the literature of that period continues to feel alarmingly urgent in our current moment. Once I started studying literature in that field, my scholarly investments all began to align around African American literature. I was very lucky that I was able to take that course so early in my graduate career. I was also very fortunate that I did my PhD at a school that had explicitly made a commitment to African American literary study, so I was able to study with and under really wonderful mentors.
Q: Do you have a favorite class or text to teach at UO?

A: I genuinely love teaching all of my classes, and they all have different gifts! Because many of my courses are heavy on 19th-century content and the literature of slavery, the content can be challenging in the forms of violence it documents and addresses. I deliberately try to construct courses that, while grappling with these violent histories, also represent Black joy, innovation, and pleasure. One of my favorite courses to teach is ENG 360: African American Writers. I have two different versions of that class: one that is focused on 19th-century writers, and a transhistorical course on representation of what we provisionally call "the Black supernatural."

The course on the Black supernatural – which is actually a course in which we destabilize terms like "supernatural" and "science" and "knowledge" as racialized, colonial constructs – is one of my favorites. We read African American and Afro-Caribbean fiction and theory from the mid-19th century to the present, and that course is always a powerful reminder for me about the historical underpinnings of movements like Afrofuturism – Black writers have always been Afrofuturists. In that class we begin with Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic work in Haiti and Jamaica, some of Charles Chesnutt's conjure tales, and Pauline Hopkins's sensational novel, *Of One Blood*, before moving on to more contemporary U.S. and Afro-Caribbean literature. One of the texts that students really enjoy at the end of that class is Alexis Pauline Gumbs's experimental ode to M. Jacqui Alexander, *M Archive*. That text, constructed as post-apocalyptic artifacts, includes lab notebook fragments, pop culture references, intricate citations to Black Feminist theory, and rearranged iterations of the Periodic Table of Elements. That book helps us bring together all of the work we have done throughout the term to think about discourses of science, ways of knowing, and non-linear time.

* A quick interjection here from me, the presenter/framer of this interview: I’ve actually taken Dr. Barter’s ‘Supernatural’ class and absolutely loved it. The texts were engaging (yes, I was enamored with *M Archive*), Dr. Barter facilitated brilliant discussions, and the final project had the opportunity for lots of creative freedom (something I really value). All this to say, you should definitely take this course! It changed the way I think about different ways of knowing in this world and had me interrogate which ones I take seriously and why. These texts were so valuable for the evolution of my thinking and the incorporation of ways of knowing informed by Black life and imagination.

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 so much exciting work happening in Black Studies! It's a capacious field with work happening in every possible area that you can imagine, with far too many scholars to name here. So instead, I'll name a few of the texts that I've read in the past few years that I have found especially energizing. Kevin Quashie’s new book, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, was probably my favorite read of the past year. His first book, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, was also a formative text for me – in both books, he's challenging readers to think beyond resistance as the primary framework for Blackness.

In 19th-century studies, Derrick Spires's book, *The Practice of Citizenship*, is an invaluable resource for studies of early Black print culture, and Jessica Marie Johnson's *Wicked Flesh* examines Black women's intimacy and kinship practices throughout the Black Atlantic. Samantha Pinto's *Infamous Bodies* theorizes celebrity of Black women in the 18th and 19th-
centuries, and Saidiya Hartman's recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, is a rich study of urban Black intimate life in the early 20th century. C. Riley Snorton's *Black on Both Sides* is a crucial history of trans identity through a Black Studies frame. Therí Pickens and La Marr Jurell Bruce have both published books on Black "madness" in the past few years, through disability studies and Black Radical lenses respectively. I think this brief list gives a sense of wide-ranging work happening in Black Studies at the moment.

Q: Are you willing/able to talk a little bit about the research you're conducting right now or is anything you want to share about your book?

A: I am hard at work finishing up my book manuscript, *Black Pro Se: Authorship and the Limits of Law in 19th-Century African American Literature*. In my book, I argue that Black writers in the first half of the 19th-century use legal forms and strategies in unexpected and innovative ways – their use of legal form might look like an investment in the juridical structures of the U.S. nation-state, but I show how these writers use these legal forms to envision radical forms of Black belonging. So, for instance, I trace the ways that these writers use forms like the appeal, the confession, or jurisdictional attack in their autobiography and fiction. Using a legal form like an appeal might seem to participate within existing legal structures, but in the hands of someone like David Walker, it is a conduit for a vision of global Black citizenship or an overturned racial hierarchy. In the book, I show how writers like Walker, Harriet Jacobs, and Nat Turner deftly leverage legal forms as part of a worldmaking project that rearranges possibilities for national and global Black belonging.

Q: If you're comfortable, can you talk about your experience teaching African American Literature as a white woman? (I know you talked about this in our class last term a bit but I think it could be valuable to start a conversation about it outside the classroom as well).

A: It is a privilege to be able to teach, research, and write about African American literature; doing so as a white woman is a privilege that comes with a specific set of responsibilities and ethical obligations. It wasn't that long ago that courses on African American literature were unheard of at colleges and universities, much less entire departments called Black Studies or African American and African Diasporic Studies. These courses and programs only exist in colleges now because Black scholars in the late 20th century demanded their creation. So at a very basic level, it is possible for me to do this work only because of those scholars—and I am far more likely to be congratulated or praised for doing work that Black scholars, even today, are punished for. These are privileges that I take seriously and name openly. Doing this work in a white body also matters when it comes to representation. Black students often sign up for an African American literature course in order to read books by and about people who look like them, books by and about their ancestors, and to spend time in a classroom with other Black scholars.

It is never my job to speak for Black writers or characters; as a literary scholar, if I am ever in the position of speaking for any writer or character, something has gone terribly wrong. But as the person at the front of the African American literature classroom, my white presence on an already predominantly white campus intervenes in that classroom space in ways that need to be named, acknowledged, and made available for critique. At the same time, I am not the subject of the course, and there is a difference between acknowledging whiteness and centering it. My pedagogy centers Black literature and culture, and I think and hope I earn the respect and trust of my students by being transparent about that as our shared project and by modeling it for
them consistently. 100% of my scholarly energy is devoted to studying, teaching, and writing about Black literature, and this means that I am often navigating Black Studies spaces in a white body—I need to be invited into many of those spaces, as they were not made with me in mind, and it’s not appropriate for me to be in all of them. Sometimes people treat this as unusual or remarkable or wonder why I would enter a professional specialization that would constantly put me in this position. It’s true that it is an uncommon experience for most white people to inhabit/navigate spaces that weren’t made for us – or to accept that we are not welcome everywhere we might want to go. For very different, and deeply problematic reasons, that experience is one that people of color, and especially Black scholars, encounter over and over again. I wish we spent more time talking about and addressing that.

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: Just to say again that the field of African American literature is vast and deep—I encourage students to take more than one African American literature/Black Studies course because we can only cover the tiniest fraction of material in a single 10-week course. And don't sleep on the 19th-century content!

If this hasn’t convinced you to take every class on African American literature or Black studies available, we’ll have at least two more professors featured this month with undeniably persuasive and passionate testimonies to their incredible academic potential. Studying these disciplines should not be confined to the month of February alone but be a priority and pursuit that is relevant to almost every area of academic and personal life. As Dr. Barter said, “the field of African American literature is vast and deep” and rife with opportunities and applications that extend far beyond the classroom.