TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Indigenous Storytelling and Early American Literature with Sarah Rivett

In this episode, Fred Lawrence sits down with Sarah Rivett, Professor of English and American Studies at Princeton University and the 2026-27 PBK Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholar. Professor Rivett reflects on her upbringing surrounded by lore in Sleepy Hollow, New York, to interrogate how religion, colonial archives, and early translation efforts shaped the American imagination. Moving beyond traditional paradigms of American exceptionalism, she discusses her archival research into missionary linguistics and the enduring power of Indigenous languages. Rivett also shares the story behind her forthcoming book, *Raven's Land*, exploring how Northwest Coast Raven narratives, museum collections, and partnerships with Tlingit scholars are reshaping our understanding of the American literary canon.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today, I am delighted to welcome Professor Sarah Rivett. Professor Rivett is a professor of English and American Studies at Princeton University, and we're proud to say she is the 2026-27 Phi Beta Kappa Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholar. She's the author of *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* in 2011 and *Unscripted America: Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation* in 2017. She is currently completing *Raven's Land: Indigenous Literature and the American Canon*. Her research explores how religion, archives, and Indigenous traditions have shaped American literature and culture with a particular focus on recovering voices and stories forgotten or worse, obscured in colonial archives. Welcome, Professor.

Sarah Rivett: Thank you very much, Fred. It's great to be here.

Fred Lawrence: Before we get to your distinguished career and all the really interesting things you're working on, you have the great origin story of growing up in Sleepy Hollow, New York, known to most of us for Washington Irving and Ichabod Crane and the legend of Sleepy Hollow. So was that in fact not just a place to grow up, but a set of stories and issues and legends that influenced you as a young girl?

Sarah Rivett: It certainly was, though I don't think I knew it at the time, but for whatever reason, beginning at a very young age, I was fascinated by thinking about the colonial past through places like Philipsburg Manor, which is an 18th century milling and trading historic town and Sleepy Hollow itself. I heard *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Washington Irving's famous story from a very young age, and I was mildly obsessed with the novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Fred Lawrence: Did there come a point when you began to think this is more than just something of interest that if I can swing it, I would love to make a living doing this?

Sarah Rivett: Actually, not really. I think retrospectively looking back, what fascinated me was imagining myself living in a different historical moment, imagining what it would've been like, how it would've been different, and how some of the experiences also would've felt familiar, but I didn't really influence a career choice. In fact, I didn't really have a plan as a young child for what I wanted to do when I grew up. When I was an undergraduate, I went to UC Berkeley, so pretty far from the Eastern Seaboard and its colonial past. But at UC Berkeley, I was very influenced by a professor named Jenny Franchot, and she had a thesis, which was that American literary studies had left out a key category, and the key category was religion. So she published an article called The Invisible Domain back in the 1990s right before I was her student, and I became fascinated in religion through her, and her training was also in this field of early American literature. So by taking her classes, I developed an academic interest in some of the aspects of the past that had fascinated me as a child.

Fred Lawrence: For many of us, we think of American literature and origins, Hawthorne is one of the first great authors many of us think of, but of course there were American writers before that. But then the last decades have been times of opening that canon wider and wider and wider. When I was in high school and even college, we were just beginning to talk about slave narratives, which was not part of the standard curriculum and now Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, but even before that, *Life of William Grimes* in the early 19th century. So you're doing that even further with Indigenous writing. So what do you think of the origin story of American literature?

Sarah Rivett: When I was trained, that is as a graduate student, I went to University of Chicago and chose the fields of early American literature because I found it fascinating and loved to read strange things like Puritan sermons and kind of immerse myself in that theology, and the history of the field was really developed in the early to mid 20th century, and it developed through a paradigm that can be summarized through a paradigm of American exceptionalism. So if you think about a kind of iconic book published first in 1975, it would be Sacvan Bercovitch's *Puritan Origins of the American Self*. You can intuit the argument through the title that it's an origin story that locates the origins of the 20th-century American Puritan people who came over in the 17th century. Of course, they came over not imagining that their religious errand would end up developing into a revolution and a fledgling nation in the late 18th century, but Bercovitch and others made that case for a telos or a through-line from Puritan settlement to the present day.

By the time I was in grad school in the early 21st century, the fields had been critiqued for that for a long time. So beginning really in the 1980s, there were criticisms of the exceptionalist paradigm efforts to revise the canon in the 1990s in the way that you described by including other voices, voices of African Americans, voices of Native Americans, voices of women, the people who were left out of the origin story in the mid 20th century, and so that's when I entered the conversation, and so it's always been part of my thinking. What's been occupying my thoughts now, at least since my last book came out, so over a decade, is that the origin story is what people find fascinating and compelling. So it's very hard to dismantle it through a critique that doesn't offer something in its place, and so my work now is trying to do that, to think about a different way of constructing a literary genealogy, of thinking about American literary history that is neither the exceptionalist paradigm or merely critical of one, but that tries to inhabit and present a different way of telling the story.

Fred Lawrence: One of the things that I think you bring to light very powerfully, Indigenous stories, Indigenous narratives, the Indigenous world, it's so easy to look at that time, even 17th, but 18th century American literature in this, what I'll describe as subject object setup where the Westerners are the subject and the Indigenous peoples are the object. The very idea of a conversion narrative suggests that there are people doing the converting and then there's an object being converted, but of course that's not how it feels on the ground and that's not how it works with the actual people there. So how do you find in archival material a way to regain, shine a light on the subjectivity on all sides of this and indeed the interactive subjectivity, how they're affecting each other?

Sarah Rivett: So it's been a process. It's not easy. I think that there is an arc of struggle to do that. That's recorded on the pages of my published work. In my first book, I was thinking a lot about this question of how from this material, which was essentially material recorded by Puritan missionaries, can I hear the voice of a native person on Martha's Vineyard giving the account of their religious conversion? And I thought about one way of answering it in that book, which essentially had to do with the missionary's own desire to hear something authentic. And so there's a commitment on the part of the missionary to record honestly what they're hearing to the best of their ability. So we can read against the grain of the archive in that way.

In my second book, *Unscripted America*, I delved into a vast archive of missionary linguistics, which includes everything from Jesuit dictionaries of Indigenous languages to language keys to *Grammar* by John Eliot and even the full translation of the Bible into the Massachusetts language in the late 17th century. I was fascinated by this archive precisely because what I noticed about it is a real struggle on the part of Europeans, French as well as English, to even understand the languages that they were encountering and what to do with them, so what I ended up realizing and argued in that book is that these language encounters had a tremendous impact on Western language philosophy. That was a very different way of thinking about, say we would assume that a lot of Indigenous languages died out as a result of colonization, and of course they did, but these are texts, this is an archive of a struggle on the part of mostly missionaries to understand these languages, to communicate. Through the process of studying them, it actually shifted what enlightenment philosophers from John Locke to Humboldt thought language even was structurally.

Fred Lawrence: Does this fit into the overarching narrative of the need to translate? You talk about translating the Bible into native languages, but of course it wasn't that long before that, translating the Bible from Hebrew, Greek or Latin itself was a pretty major move. The King James Bible, known to us now as a beloved text and to some as a religious text was pretty contested as a project at its time, not all that long before this. So does this whole idea of translating Christian scripture into native language rise in that context as well?

Sarah Rivett: It does. I mean, I think it's born out of the Protestant concept of *sola scriptura, sola fides*, by scripture and faith alone. So the Puritans, especially in New England, believed strongly that every person of the Christian faith, the Protestant faith, should have access to scripture and should be able to read it on their own, and that's in fact why it's difficult to convert people to their faith because they had to figure out how to translate Massachusetts from an oral to a written language and then translate scripture into that language. Then they had to teach native children how to read in their own native tongue, which they did at Harvard in the early 17th century. So it was incredibly difficult as an intellectual and conceptual task, but that was the undergirding belief. It's a theological one that everyone of this faith should have access to scripture.

Fred Lawrence: But what a remarkable way to do it because, of course, another way to do it would be to say they all have to learn English or French and then we can teach them the Bible in English or French. So the decision not to do that is really astonishing in some ways. Why did they choose to proceed this way? There's something actually quite empowering, I think, about saying that if we're going to convert these people to Christianity, we have to first enter into their culture, into their language to do so.

Sarah Rivett: It certainly has the potential to be empowering, and I think the French and the English case are slightly different in that the Jesuits were quite organized about it. So they had a whole apparatus for how you go into a different language environment and learn the language. The Jesuit relations, which were recorded through the 17th into the early 18th century, would describe a Jesuit missionary sitting in a wigwam for six hours and listening to the language as it was spoken, and through that process of listening, they would then begin to slowly learn the language and then produce

dictionaries and texts that would teach that language to others so that they could spread the Word of God.

The Protestants were less organized about it. I think it predominantly came out of this necessity of *sola scriptura, sola fides* that it had to be by scripture alone that native people would convert, Massachusetts mostly. They did give up because it was so hard. By the early to mid 18th century, a lot of missionaries were recording, especially when they're trying to learn Mohawk, that it's just too challenging. There's a shift that takes place and increasing instruction within the English language, though the translation of scripture into Indigenous languages persists. It's really the moment of the boarding schools in the late 19th century that does the most damage to the preservation of Indigenous languages in the United States.

Fred Lawrence: Let's talk about the current project, the Raven stories. How did you find your way into that, and what worlds are going to be open to us in this new book? Our guests can't see the huge smile you have on your face when I've asked you this question, so obviously this is a project that, like any project by this point, I'm sure has its frustrations too, but obviously has given you a great deal of joy.

Sarah Rivett: Thank you for noticing that. It is. It's been a wonderful project and the story of it is interesting. I set out to write my third book on the prehistory of Poe's Raven and the famous poem, and the idea was to trace the history of Poe's "Raven" from the Book of Genesis in 8:7. So Noah sends out a raven to see if the waters had receded enough to make the world habitable and the raven does not come back. So then he has to send the dove, and that's the story many people remember.

Fred Lawrence: The dove has a better press agent than the raven does, but the raven was the first one sent out.

Sarah Rivett: That's right. Exactly. Yes. The raven takes a bit of heat through early biblical commentary and later for being disobedient, for procrastinating, for not listening to Noah, and that's part of the story of how the raven gets a connotation of a supernatural omen or a sort of bad character in relation to the dove in Christian literature. So I was going to write this book, and then I was at the art museum at my university, at Princeton University, and there was a curator there who showed me a bentwood box from Southeast Alaska, and the bentwood box contains a carving of a raven. I was fascinated by this raven, and I wanted to know as much as I could, and it turns out that we have in our art museum's collection close to 800 pieces of Tlingit art from Southeastern Alaska collected by a missionary in the late 19th century. Many of these pieces feature ravens, which are hugely important to Tlingit culture and to a lot of Indigenous cultures on the Pacific Northwest.

Fred Lawrence: You were in Alaska this past summer?

Sarah Rivett: Last spring break.

Fred Lawrence: Last spring break.

Sarah Rivett: I took students to Alaska, yes.

Fred Lawrence: So tell us a little bit about that Alaska trip.

Sarah Rivett: So I wanted to develop a partnership with artists and scholars in Alaska who work on this literature, and I was fortunate to connect with the dean at University of Alaska Southeast, who was interested in working with me and put me into conversation with their performing arts professors and I've worked with a couple of professors, Judy Ramos most extensively, to learn as much as I could about the art of the Pacific Northwest and the stories that I'm studying. Last spring semester, I co-taught a course with a colleague in the art department, Rachael DeLue, and it was really about the collection at Princeton and about the politics of collecting and the responsibility of museums today, and we wanted the students to have these kinds of connections with living Tlingit artists and the context from which the objects came. So that was the point of the trip.

Fred Lawrence: Art, literature, culture, language, knowledge is not disciplinary; we're disciplinary. The projects lead us on if we listen hard, if we're willing to let ourselves do that, as well as you say, be willing to go a little past the comfort zone and say, "Here's something I don't know or I don't know how to do." And instead of saying, "So I'm going to stay away from it," you say, "So I'm going to learn that, or I'm going to try to learn that. I'm going to do my best to enlighten it."

One of the things I like to ask my guests on Key Conversations is to help us build our reading lists. There are so many topics that you and I have talked about, and we've only touched on the range of your scholarship. I know that some of our listeners are interested in this generally, but don't have too much background particularly in it. The serious general reader as editors like to describe it. So I wonder if you have a couple of book recommendations for the serious general reader, but some of our listeners will be people with some significant background in some of our fields, so a couple of recommendations for that as well.

Sarah Rivett: Sure. There's a book that just came out by an American literature professor at Columbia, Branka Arsić, called *Ambient Life: Melville and the Ethereal Enlightenment*. I think it's wonderful. I think it's one of the best books of American literary criticism that I've read in a while. So that's one. There's one by Barry Sanders called *The Manifesto of Herman Melville*. It's less scholarly. It's a little bit more playful and expansive, but it's thinking about Moby Dick in relation to ecology and environmental concerns today, so I think it's really timely and a great read. Then one that I just picked up by Debra Magpie Earling, a Salish author, called *The Lost Journals of Sacajewea*, which is about the translator that traveled with Lewis and Clark during their 1805 journey and about which little is known. This is a novelistic attempt to reconstruct Sacajewea's experience.

Fred Lawrence: And of course, she was not known to practically any of us for a long time, and then finally was, it's a funny term to say, rediscovered. I mean, she wasn't rediscovered. We rediscovered her. She's always been there, but known to us. This is a great opportunity in using this form of historical fiction to read into some of the interstices to help imagine that story.

Sarah Rivett: Exactly.

Fred Lawrence: We are delighted that you are the Frank M. Updike Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa this year. I know that the students and the community members who have a chance to interact with you and the faculty members in those campuses will be as thrilled as all of us listening in today to hear

the range of your interests and the topics and the sheer delight that you bring to the study of these topics. Very old and yet still ever fresh, ever new. Thank you so much for that, for joining us as part of the Phi Beta Kappa family this year and for being my guest today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Sarah Rivett: Thanks very much, Fred. It's been a pleasure talking to you and it's an honor to be a Visiting Scholar.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is the lead producer and mixed this episode, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "Indigenous Storytelling and Early American Literature with Sarah Rivett" *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa,* The Phi Beta Kappa Society, November 2nd, 2026. www.pbk.org.

Produced by:

