Gene Andrew Jarrett of Princeton University was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2025. In this video, Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Jarrett about how African American literature shapes the language and sources of meaning we use today, why the university has to tell its own story well, and the delightful discovery that seemingly obscure literary figures are sometimes much better known than we think.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello everybody. I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and today with me is Gene Andrew Jarrett of Princeton University, one of our members. Gene, thank you so much for being with us.

Gene Andrew Jarrett, Princeton University

Thank you for having me.

Forster

Let me ask you, what are some underappreciated ways in which the work in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Jarrett

Thank you for that question. My primary field is the study of African American literature. That means I focus on the development of literature written by African Americans or New World Africans from its beginnings in the middle of the 18th century to the present. This literature moves across a range of genres, including narratives, poetry, fiction, autobiographies and essays, and various kinds of media from the periodical to the bound novel. This literature, in my view, enables us to understand the relationship between aesthetic form, culture, politics and various kinds of historical phenomena. This literature, in particular, enables us to understand the circulation of ideas by and about African Americans or the broader African diaspora as they transitioned in the 19th century from enslavement for most of them, to freedom and franchise. These ideas give us great insight to how African Americans understood national history, as well as their civil liberties.

What is underappreciated is the degree to which African American stories are fundamental to the American story, to the national story, how this literature of African American life and thought enables a deeper insight to the human condition and ambitions in America. The books I've written, the canonical and noncanonical literature I've edited and reprinted, the courses I've taught and the lectures I tend to give probe this particular theme of how the history of African American literature can be central to our understanding of the history of the nation and thereby help us understand humanity as well as human well-being.

Forster

Thank you for that. It really prompts me to reflect on the relationships between history, literature and contemporary life. You are, in one sense, in the history business, but you're not in the history department because what you're doing is of more than historical importance. Of course, we love our friends in the history department. We think what they do is important. But I wonder if you could speak more about how this contributes to our understanding of who we are.

Jarrett

Just to say a little bit more about being a literary scholar. I focus especially on matters of cultural expression, formal expression through written texts and how these texts tend to capture a variety of strategies, whether in terms of having particular metaphors or certain themes or certain opportunities with creative language to generate meaning about humanity and the broader world in which we all live as human beings. As a literary historian, I analyze not only these literary texts in and of themselves, but also how they're situated in a continuum, or that is to say across time, and how these various forms and themes evolve over time, either within the particular career of a single author or across multiple authors in different movements or different generations of history. This literary approach provides insight to the host of experiences and thoughts and opportunities for people to come together, but also to the various conflicts that have marked the history of humankind. Through my training as a literary scholar, focusing specifically on literature provides a lever by which I'm able to deepen my sense of how humanity has evolved over time and how history is a key context through which we can understand different streams of thought, different streams of ideas.

Forster

The words that we use in the sources of meaning that we draw upon always have much longer and more complicated histories than we typically assume, because we don't walk around all day thinking about those complex histories, but they shape us whether we're thinking about them or not.

That may or may not lead into my next question: in what ways do you think the public at large has a good understanding of the mission of the university? And in what ways, maybe, does it need a better understanding of the mission of the university?

Jarrett

This is something that I think about deeply. The public has an uneven understanding of the mission of universities. This understanding is based on how they access and comprehend information about what the university is, what it does and what it has meant and how it is meant to have an impact on the world. The mission of universities, or we could say higher education more broadly to include colleges, is to advance academic knowledge in the world. The goal is to create an environment where people can conduct advanced scholarly research and teaching and also where people can learn. Our ability to progress as a society – ranging from the technological innovations that we enjoy to expressions of culture that we enjoy as well – depends on the ability of people to build upon the academic knowledge that they acquire through school and to increase their sophistication by way of colleges and universities.

This core story of the importance of higher education to society can be lost in various myths that the mainstream media propounds or of anecdotal experiences about the cost of higher education, about the partisanship and indoctrinations that occur on college campuses and about the ways in which colleges divide people from one another. However, there's much opportunity for us to explain how higher education unites people, those who are talented or those who aspire toward knowledge from all walks of life, from all sectors of society, in the moment of researching and teaching and learning. Those of us who work in higher education, also those of us who lead in it, cannot take for granted this reality of how higher education can be beneficial to society writ large. All of us have to work to tell that story to deepen the public's understanding of the benefits of colleges and universities.

Forster

The existence of the university represents a faith that there is a possible unity among humanity, that we can, by learning, experience the life of the mind that maybe builds bridges and helps us to understand not only our world, but ourselves and one another better. Yet, if it were easy, there wouldn't be a need for the university. So hence the need for that storytelling you're talking about.

Jarrett

That's right. I view the college and the university as an example of the benefit of higher learning. Think about higher learning as construed, let's say, at the turn of the 19th century with the development of the Library of Congress. There was then discussion about higher learning as being the disposition for acquainting people with a democracy, at least in the United States, with social or democratic engagement with one another. That was not necessarily dependent on going to school at that time, because there were only a few in the country of renown. But it was an opportunity for people to achieve greater heights in terms of their well-being intellectually and socially for them to define their ambitions at that time in the New World. With the development, the proliferation of colleges and universities created formal contexts in which higher learning can be manifest.

There's a benefit to instilling in everyone the importance of *learning* just in general, and then that higher learning that could occur in advanced ways beyond certain primary and secondary schooling. If there's a way to address the importance of literacy in society, the ability to read and write, the ability to comprehend complex ideas, these are attributes of human development that are important in general for us to be able to thrive in society. There are some famous people who are especially educated who did not finish college or who did not go to college. I can appreciate the ways in which they've had an impact in society, but I also would view colleges and universities as a compact and accelerated way of accessing a diversity of ideas to give you momentum in your early life and also in your interactions with others. Explaining the value of colleges and universities has to be in the context of an appreciation of learning and human development, and colleges and universities are a special way of achieving that broader goal for all of society.

Forster

Democracy depends on a well-educated citizenry at every level, because in a democracy everybody gets to vote, so we need them to be voting in a way that reflects understanding. But colleges and universities in some way institutionalize the highest level of that learning, which gives it a social role that is unique.

Let me ask you my last question. What has pleasantly surprised you in the last five years?

Jarrett

I'll focus on this book that I recently published. It's a biography of Paul Laurence Dunbar, published in 2022. It was the 150th anniversary of Dunbar's birth. Paul Laurence Dunbar was a Dayton-born African American poet who was born in 1872 and died in 1906. He was a prodigious African American author. He published fourteen books of poetry, four collections of short stories, four novels and over 700 poems in syndicate, and he also published many essays and librettos and even drama. His prolific life and his access to societies of the poor and the wealthy, the subaltern and the influential, and his also being the child of former Kentucky slaves and husband to Alice Ruth Moore (they had a rather tempestuous marriage, as I talk about in the biography), these are all the qualities of a sensational and informative story.

When this book came out, I went on a small book tour. I have a day job, so it couldn't be extensive. I was surprised during this tour how many people had heard of Dunbar, how many remembered him because his was the name of the high school that they attended. Obviously, these high schools commemorated him with their name. Or the fact that they read his poems or recited his poems in church. Dunbar's impact had permeated all different corners of society. He was born and reared in the Midwest. He talked much about being in the Midwest, in Ohio, and he had traveled through the Northeast and Europe, which was almost unheard of for an African American writer in the late 19th century. What surprised me, especially, was not only the extensive influence he's had on people even today, but an earlier theme that I have, which is how it's the specific story of an African American writer who was only a stone's throw from the emancipation of slaves. He was able to demonstrate a general story of the complexities of personal and professional ambition of being an American at the turn of the 20th century. He wanted to go to Harvard, but he never went to college. He learned about how to render the human condition so beautifully in his literature through the pluck of intense practice and also of reciting his works to various people in society. He made his way to being well known, to being great, but it was a tough journey. The challenges of that journey, the complexities of his life, resonated with a lot of people. That's based on my firsthand experiences in reading sections of the book or talking about the book in readings and also based on the letters that I received from readers across the country.

Forster

It's always so heartening to discover that other people have seen what you have seen and take the same encouragement from it that you do, and that they did not write the book before you did.

Jarrett

Yes, that's right!

Forster

It's great when other people have seen it, but they didn't get to press before you got to press.

Jarrett

I must say that the book took me almost 15 years to write. That's a lot of time for someone to jump right in. But the book was based on a lot of in-depth research, archival research. I had primary access to this material. So even if something did come out, it would not, in my view, have been strong enough to proclaim that it's a definitive rendition of his life. I'm fortunate to have had access to this material. Despite my day jobs, I did my best to come out in a timely way. Fortunately, the 150th anniversary of his birth was the perfect moment to do so.

Forster

Great to hit those anniversary marks. And those human stories really help us recognize one another as fellow humans and when we're in the same community as fellow members of the community, fellow Americans.

Gene, thank you so much for being with us. I really appreciate it.

Jarrett

Thank you for having me.