

The Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project
Interview about Sarah Piatt with Dr. Pamela Kincheloe by Dr. Elizabeth Renker
April 28, 2021 (Columbus, Ohio; Rochester, New York)

ER: This is Professor Elizabeth Renker from The Ohio State University. I am in Columbus, Ohio, and it is Wednesday, April 28, 2021, and I have the pleasure, right now, of speaking with Dr. Pamela Kincheloe, who is speaking with us from Rochester, New York. Dr. Kincheloe is a first-wave scholar of Sarah Piatt and I'm delighted that we have a chance today to talk to her about her experience at that time when Sarah Piatt had barely been heard of and we had a group of first-wave scholars out there collecting the materials and doing the pioneering thinking about Sarah's importance to American culture. Dr. Kincheloe got her master's degree in American literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and then she got her doctorate at Southern Illinois University, where she studied with Paula Bennett [Piatt scholar]. She now teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York. For the past 20 years, her scholarship and her teaching have ranged from topics in deaf literature and culture to cyborg theory to representations of deafness in film and visual media. When I was speaking with Pam earlier, I was laughing with her about a sentence I read in her page about her work where she says, quote, "In a former life, she engaged in the recovery of nineteenth-century women's periodical poetry." So one of the situations we're talking with Dr. Kincheloe about today, is that she started her career as a scholar working in that kind of recovery project that brought her into the first wave of Piatt scholarship. And although she has moved in her scholarship to the other topics I was just talking about, she's also now returning to some work in nineteenth-century periodicals, particularly on the topics of deafness and deaf cultures. So we have a lot to talk to Dr. Kincheloe about today, and our first question as always in these interviews is: Pam, would you please tell us about when you first heard of Sarah Piatt and how she then entered your life?

PK: Okay, sure. Like Elizabeth said, we were kind of laughing. I've been laughing all along, because I feel like I am sifting back through the misty fog of time for these memories. But I remember vividly when I first heard about Piatt because I was in a graduate seminar with Paula Bennett. I can't tell you the name of the class. I'm pretty sure it was, you know, one of those special topics classes in nineteenth-century women poets, because I was concentrating in American literature. And I think I only had two classes with Paula. I think it was that seminar and another course I took with her, which was on slave and captivity narratives. But this was the one on nineteenth-century women poets. And as best as I can recall, she had come up with, she had made one—back in the olden days, teachers used to make their own packets, they would send them to Kinko's or whatever, and we'd have a little course packet. And she had Xeroxed all of these poems, and we were going through the poems. We had a couple of weeks on Emily Dickinson, and she took us through all the poets, but I remember toward the end of the course—well, maybe it wasn't toward the end of the course—but we were to choose a poet for our final research project, and I think she had some kind of a sign-up sheet where she had the poets listed and then maybe a little blurb about them, so we would kind of know what they wrote about. And I do remember just kind of looking them over and seeing that Piatt wrote

poems about children and motherhood, and I think I gravitated toward that because I had just done my master's on Lucy Lane Clifford who wrote these really bizarre children's stories. She was British. One of them was called "The New Mother." I won't even go into it, but, just really, I'm attracted to strange and kind of creepy things, kind of like Rossetti [Christina Rossetti], you know, just really weird stuff, aimed at children. So I think that's why I kind of went, "Oh, she wrote to kids. Let's check this out." So that is how I met Piatt and started reading some of her stuff in that course packet.

ER: Okay, and so you wrote essentially a graduate seminar paper for Paula's class and that first took you into Sarah's work?

PK: Yeah, but jeez, you know, I don't even remember what the paper—I'm sure it had to do with her children's poetry. But yeah, I can't remember much about the paper.

ER: So you know, another part of your story I would love for us to be able to record in this series is—and I'll share this with you as someone who's been working in Piatt studies, has always wanted to meet you and talk about your research—and, you know, I have only the most general sense of some of the things you might have done, so please correct me wherever I'm wrong. But I had the sense that on the way to writing your dissertation and maybe as part of writing your dissertation—and let me just mentioned for our audience that you did a dissertation, completed in 1997. Right, Pam?

PK: Mmhmm.

ER: And the dissertation is about a concept, a term you coin in the dissertation: "monumental discourse." And the dissertation was about issues of travel and exile and tourism as they influenced and shaped the work of a number of nineteenth-century American writers. And the writer really at the center of your dissertation, if I recall correctly, is Sarah, with two full chapters on Sarah and her years in Ireland.

PK: Mmhmm.

ER: So you talk about, you know, first encountering Sarah in a class with Paula Bennett, and eventually you wrote this dissertation in 1997, which, I want to again stress for our audience, this is one of the earliest works of scholarship on Sarah after the time of her death in 1919. So that dissertation is out there for people to acquire, probably through their libraries, and to read. And eventually Pam and I today will talk about her work on Ireland. But for now, Pam, I'd love to hear the stories. I have the sense, is it correct, that you actually worked as Paula's research assistant at some point?

PK: That is true. And I can't remember when this came about, that she did call me into her office one day and made me this offer. Yes, she offered me the chance to be a research assistant and told me what that entailed, and I said, "Sure." It would give me some money during the summer and that's how I got started on that road. And it's in the course of doing the research that I got, of course, kind of hooked on Piatt, kind of fascinated with the details of her life.

ER: Okay. Do you, by any chance—in terms of the timeline, with the dissertation coming out in 1997—do you, by any chance, recall: was it one summer that you were a research assistant for her or was it for a longer period of time?

PK: It must have been for a longer period of time. Let me see. So I went and got that research grant to go and live in Ireland. Ostensibly to do research for my dissertation, but Paula was right there saying, "Okay, go here, go there, I want you to look at this." [laughs] I wasn't technically her research assistant at that point, but I still was. I want to say, yeah, a year or two at least before then, so '95, '96, yeah.

ER: All right, so around then. So around '95, '96—this is maybe helpful also to our audience. One of the things that I have been doing in the course of these interviews is maintaining an awareness that some of our audience is listening to maybe only one or two interviews, some people are listening to all of them. And so I kind of signpost in individual interviews, where various events stand in the timeline of Piatt's recovery. So I mentioned Pam's dissertation was in 1997 and she just mentioned doing research in Ireland around the time of '95 or '96. Did I that I get that right, Pam?

PK: Mmhmm.

ER: Okay, so the thing I want to mention here—some of you will know this from other interviews—is that the really formative Penguin edition of nineteenth-century American poets edited by William Spengemann and Jessica Forbes Roberts came out in 1996 [*Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*]. And our audience has heard me mention that before, because this was an *extremely* important publication for Piatt's recovery, and it was the first publication that introduced a cluster of poems by Piatt and made the claim for her, that others would go on to make, that she was, the kind of language being used at this time is "the great undiscovered poet of the American nineteenth century." The Spengemann / Roberts Penguin edition does that, made that kind of big claim. So just for positioning, you can hear that that Pam was out there, doing her work right at this same time, when you have all this energy of reclamation about Sarah. Okay, so yeah, thanks a lot for the signposting on the time when things are happening, Pam. So now can you take us back into like, what were some of the things you actually did as Paula's research assistant? What places did you go, what stuff were you looking at, what were your tasks?

PK: I want to start out by saying, you know, just in case there are graduate students listening in on this, which there may be. The thing that I—one of the great regrets of my life, I think, is that

I didn't realize what a fabulous opportunity I had in front of me. I was just like, okay, I'm gonna do this. And, you know, when you're a starving graduate student, you're struggling to do your own work, and then you just kind of, you're making money, and you don't really realize when you're in the middle of an apprenticeship. [laughs] That was incredibly valuable, and I think Paula tried to impress that upon me but I didn't really realize what I was experiencing at the time, so it's been a real pleasure to kind of go back and go, "Oh my God, how lucky were you that you got to do this." And I say that because Dr. Bennett pretty much took me to *most* of the premier research libraries and archives in the country. And a lot of this she funded, I think, by herself. But she dragged me along to—and I wrote down—and I don't know in what order. But we went to the Newberry in Chicago, we went to the Beinecke at Yale, we went to the New York Public Library, we went to Columbia [University], we went to the Boston Public. And I made a note: I said, "I wasn't much use to her on that trip because I managed to get so sick that I started hallucinating." I had such a high fever, I swear to God, I was hallucinating in the main reading room. [laughs] We were in there all day, and it was snowing like heck outside, I remember that. And I just got a cold or something, I don't know. But there was this bust, I think of Mark Twain or somebody, that was behind me, and I was convinced that it was a person, like moving around. It was crazy. So the next day she, you know, she had a house in Concord. And she just left me at home and I slept all day. [laughs] I was useless. But I remember going, I mean I have vivid memories of all of these archives. We went to the—the other fabulous memory, one of the treasured memories of my life, is she got me into Widener [Harvard University's library] and we both went into Widener, went into the stacks, crawled around in there, and then she took me to the Emily Dickinson room, she got me in there, I got to see the furniture, the coral [ring], you know, the books. She took me into the reading room there and had them bring out some of the poems. I saw the poems with one of the premier scholars of Emily Dickinson, you know. I think that I did realize at the time how cool that was. But just traveling all around and I learned the culture, I guess, it *is* kind of a culture: the special collections, archives. You know, learning the rules and the etiquette and back then—I don't think they do it anymore—you had to wear the gloves and they bring it out and turn the pages on the little velvet fans. I don't think they do gloves anymore. Didn't they decide that that was more damaging to some—

ER: Mostly now when I go they don't ask for the gloves, but the other protocols you're mentioning, of course, those are all still there.

PK: Hang your stuff out in the locker outside, bring in your little stubby pencil. And just sitting in those gigantic reading rooms and filling out the slips. Okay, I'm ready for this next, and they bring a little cart of stuff out and then you're just going—that was my job, was to literally take these old, ancient, musty yellowing crumbling newspapers and turn them page by page, because I was involved in that—remember, Dr. B. mentions in her interview, where she decided she had to go back and look for Sarah's juvenilia. [laughs] Well, I was going back through all of those newspapers looking for "S.M.B." [Sarah or Sallie Morgan Bryan, Sarah Piatt's initials before marriage] and trying to find those, you know, early poems.

ER: Okay, so you were listing for us some of the amazing repositories you went to. Were you with Paula Bennett, or even on your own, by any chance, at the Louisville [Free] Public Library?

PK: I remember going to—I don't think I was at the Louisville Public Library. I remember going to a historical society.

ER: In Kentucky?

PK: In Kentucky.

ER: Okay.

PK: And looking for—because I was—that was on my own, I was going for some reason, and she was like, “Go and look for this stuff.” And I'm not even remembering what it was I found, but no, I don't think that I was at the Louisville Public Library.

ER: Okay, one of the reasons I asked about that, I'm curious just if you have any memories about this, is you just used the term “juvenilia.” And so, let me just remind our audience or share with people who are unfamiliar with the term, that this term gets used in literary studies to talk about usually the earliest work of an author. The work that they produced when they were young. And sometimes the term has a derogatory connotation, that is, this is stuff that they wrote when they were still artistically immature, basically, that kind of a concept. And Pam, I don't know if you and I have had a chance to talk about this, but let me share the story with the audience that, when Paula published her edition of Piatt—the edition called *Palace-Burner*, which came out in 2001—her introduction to that volume and her selections of the poems pretty much sidelined and otherwise ignored the many, many poems that Sarah wrote before she became Mrs. Piatt, when she was still a young, unmarried poet in Kentucky who published under the name Sallie Bryan, B-R-Y-A-N, and Pam just mentioned, she often published under her initials, “S.M.B.” Paula herself has said since, including in her interview for this series, that she later realized this was what she considers to have been her biggest mistake in her role in the Piatt recovery, which was dismissing the so-called juvenilia as of minimal importance. Paula later came to believe that those poems were absolutely major poems. So that's just some background on this part of the discussion with Pam about the juvenilia and hunting for the juvenilia. Now, Pam had the incredible, formative role of being out there, looking for that stuff. And so, Pam, that's why I asked about Louisville, just to mention to our audience that the two main publication venues for Sarah's poems when she was unmarried—she begins publishing immediately as a poet who achieves national celebrity when she's still a teenager—and the two main publications we're aware of are *The New York Ledger* and *The Louisville Daily Journal*.

PK: Mmhmm.

ER: So, also just for our audience, the Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt Recovery Project hosted by The Ohio State University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library has created a website of all the

known poems of Sallie M. Bryan's in *The New York Ledger*. So Pam, I'm wondering, this maybe was some of the work you did at the New York Public Library, perhaps? Do you know if you were working on the *Ledger* poems?

PK: I'm pretty sure. I mean, it's a blur because—but yes, I'm fairly certain that we were looking for those.

ER: Okay.

PK: I *know* we were looking for the early poems.

ER: Okay, so the other thing I'll just mention for the audience is that those *Louisville Daily Journal* poems, right now, with the current state of scholarship, the *only* reason that any of us has access to those poems is because in the Paula Bennett Papers in special collections at The Ohio State University, *someone*—this question might come to you, Pam—*someone*, including Paula Bennett—Pam, I don't know if you were there or not—*someone* looked at those poems in Louisville, at the Free Public Library and made transcriptions of them from the microfilm. And the reason I mentioning that is because *no one* has print copies of that newspaper. It has vanished. Unless it's in somebody's attic somewhere. No library has it. So to actually see those poems on microfilm you have to go to Louisville. This is how *scarce* these poems are and how important it was that *someone* wrote them down. So, Pam, those are in Paula Bennett's papers and you know, one of the things I'm always thinking about when I work through Paula's papers, is, I know that you were out there doing a lot of these projects with her. And it's one of the reasons I was excited today to hear your memories about, you know, for example, you listing all the libraries that you went to when you were there on the ground with her doing that recovery work.

PK: You know, maybe I was in that place, because I definitely did do the typed transcripts.

ER: Aha!

PK: So I was typing these up. So that may have been me.

ER: That may have you been you. All right.

PK: I was trying to—and I was laughing because I was remembering, I had to do a lot of that. And I can't remember when she did this, but at one point, Dr. B. bought this amazing little gadget, which was a handheld, basically a Xerox machine, a little copier. They probably don't even make them anymore. But you could—and it was about, it could scan just about a newspaper column's worth of, you know, the width of the column. And what you did was you took the little device. I don't know where she got it, but we were just like, "Oh, this is the best!" Because then, when we saw the old papers, we could just kind of make these, you know, you could scan it and then you'd have this little grocery receipt slip of paper. And we took all of

those and pasted them onto regular paper, and then I typed those up. I remember typing those up.

ER: Ookay, that is great information. That is the kind of thing that if I saw those strips of paper somewhere, I would have no idea what they were.

PK: Yeah, that's what it was. I can't tell you the name of the device, but it was like the bee's knees, because before that, yes, we had been just kind of transcribing by hand or—I honestly have no memory of the microfilm, but she may have done that. She may have done that.

ER: Okay. Well, hey, that's it that's a great story, because sometimes it is true, as you know, as someone who also has worked in a lot of archives, you encounter some sort of object and it's just uninterpretable at some level. You're like, what is this thing? [Pam laughs] How on earth did it end up looking like this, right? And it's part of the detective quest and right now—

PK: Yeah, I'm glad I could clear that up for you. Because yeah, there's those Xeroxed pages and the little strips of paper, yeah. That's what it was.

ER: I mean, I'm even trying to visualize that, Pam. So basically, it was serving sort of the function that today might be, well, I'll just take a picture with my phone?

PK: Yeah. *Exactly.*

ER: Okay, but you could print it out, get a paper record somehow? Or did you print it, did you then type them up from a screen of this device?

PK: It was this little—so I would have the newspaper, like this [holds a piece of paper flat]. And a little black machine had a, seriously, I think it was basically like cashier's tape in it. And you turn it on and go [makes scanning sound and moves hand across the paper] like that, and then the strip [that then came out of the machine] copied it. And it was this little strip.

ER: Wow, and it would come out of the machine, then? The strip of paper?

PK: Yeah, it would come out of the machine, and then we would gather those and tape them onto an 8 x 11 piece of paper, and then I'd type them up, and we had them on those things we used to call floppy disks [laughs].

ER: Yes. We have some of the floppy disks, actually, in our collection. Thank you so much for that story. I mean, I am sure someday that that is going to answer some really bizarre question I have about stuff that's in those folders somewhere.

PK: [laughs] Okay, good.

ER: Yeah, that's fantastic. So, yeah, *The Louisville Daily Journal* is very important and very hard to get one's hands on. And another story I'll share before we hear more of your archival stories is that, three years ago this summer, I went and worked in the collections at Yale. So I was in the Beinecke and I was in Sterling Library working in the Piatt Family Papers. And one of the things that was so delightful about the collection in Sterling, Piatt Family Papers, is that every time I went to a box, I would notice there were still some flags in the box from a prior user. And just for our audience I'll add that there are 3,000 pieces of paper in the Piatt Family Papers. I know because I took a picture of every single one of them. And most of those pieces of paper or not by or about Sarah Piatt. They're about her husband's family. So it's a very, very valuable collection, but the reason I mentioned the flags—and for people who don't know this, it's a piece of colored paper you use when you're in archives to mark something in the files that you are going to ask the library staff to make a photocopy of for you. You need permission to do those things. It's still the case that not all archives let you take pictures. Some do and some don't. But Sterling Library does let you make photographs now. This is one way I knew that the flags were old. The flags predated when you could take your own pictures. But every time I looked at a flag, the flags were *all* for items by or about Sarah Piatt, so I knew they were yours and Paula's.

PK: Mmhmm. How funny!

ER: Yeah, so I felt like I was just stepping back in time. The last time someone had used that collection was you guys.

PK: Yep. And I remember that library, it's a beautiful, beautiful library.

ER: Yeah. But I felt like I stepped right back into your footsteps and in a sense, stood on your shoulders. So that was really fun for me, and that is such a great collection. So you know, you mentioned all these libraries you went to. We'd love to hear any memories or stories you have about what it was like working in these materials and hunting for them. You mentioned your surreal, sort of Gothic experience with having hallucinations [laughs] in one of the libraries. Is there anything else about that work that comes to mind now or that you think of as surprising or especially interesting?

PK: Ah, just that it's funny coming full circle, but remembering how one *used* to have to do these things as compared to how one does them now.

ER: Yeah, yeah. Great point.

PK: But I know that for sure that I'm *really* allergic to dust mites. [laughs] I used to get incredibly—and I don't know if that causes, that wasn't causing the hallucinations, but every other time that we went in there, I was just definitely allergic to the dust mites. But just that smell of the, you know, that we all, scholars still love. The smell of the old libraries, the smell of the paper in the stacks. It does make me sad, though, because, you know, what was this, 30 years ago? How these artifacts were deteriorating, even then, so it doesn't surprise me that we

have some papers that are only on microfilm. You know, they're gone. One of my favorite memories is actually going to the Piatt Castles with Dr. Bennett and we—I may have gone there a couple of times with her. I remember going with a fellow graduate student whose name is Joe Fulton [Dr. Joe B. Fulton, English Dept., Baylor University]. He actually ended up being quite a Mark Twain scholar. He's published a couple of books. And I don't remember where he ended up teaching. But I remember Dr. Bennett taking us out to dinner, and I had my first ostrich burger, so I have a vivid memory of that, but the Piatt Castles—I *love* old homes, and you know, old creepy mansions, and this was definitely, I guess, there were two, wasn't there? There's Castle Mac-O-Cheek and then the other one [Mac-A-Cheek]. We did most of our research in the one place and I met Larry Michaels because I have a signed edition of this book, which I got there. And that was another—I *do* remember using that little device on *The Capital* [Washington, D.C. newspaper], because I was going through page after page of *The Capital* and looking for—

ER: Okay, yes. Yeah, tell us about *The Capital*. Were you using it in the attic or what part of the—do you remember the space?

PK: I was not in the attic, so she must have been, because Paula wasn't with me, so she must have been up in the attic. I remember being kind of in the, on the main, somewhere on the ground floor. And I always think of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" [by Herman Melville], because I think I was on some kind of slanted desk. And *The Capital*, if I'm remembering correctly, was one of those really huge papers, you know. And there was no one watching me, so this wasn't—there was no archival special "air" or anything. We're just dragging these big, old volumes out and I was turning pages, and you know, all the spores were flying everywhere. But I was not in the attic, I was downstairs. But one of the only supernatural experiences I've ever had in my life, I did have going *to* the attic. [laughs]

ER: Really?

PK: Yeah, I just had, I was just overcome by this extremely creepy—I just wanted to get out of there. Just like, you know, they show in those shows, like you just get this overwhelming sensation, the hairs on the back of your neck go up. I just remember being really, really, severely creeped out. [laughs]

ER: Wow, that's intense. You know, there is an interview in this series with Margaret Piatt. It's not posted yet, but it will be soon [add the posting date once we have it]. And I don't know if you know this, Pam, but when you went there, there were two castles, Mac-O-Chee and Mac-A-Cheek. Mac-O-Chee, which is the castle that has Sarah's portrait painted on the ceiling of the library, was sold last fall. So Margaret Piatt and the archives and the museum and the public tours and so on are now in the one Piatt Castle, where the attic is, the archives, and the attic that you're talking about. So you know, that's really interesting about your stories about working in *The Capital*, and it leads me to another question. Earlier you mentioned the initials, "S.M.B."

PK: Mmhmm.

ER: So I think one thing that's hard for, often my undergraduates, for example, who are unfamiliar with archival projects and I try to educate them about those. And I always say to them, you have to remember that no poet is born great. No author is born great. At some point their culture or a later culture defines them as great. And then you have this phenomenon where people go hunting for their material. What did they write? Nobody knows, necessarily, everything they wrote, right? And so, this is one reason why these stories like your story are so important to the story of Sarah's recovery. So I try to get them in touch with the fact that, look, at this time—and I'd love to hear your thoughts about this, Pam—at this time, one of the big projects, all the first-wave scholars, including yourself, had, was just to *find* Sarah's stuff. Like, what exactly did she write? No one has done a complete bibliography at this stage of her recovery. So for you to say something like, "Well, first of all, we were just reading *The Capital*, looking for her poems." But also—this is another turn of the screw—at some point you and Paula must have realized she didn't always sign her poems. They didn't always say "Sallie Bryan."

PK: Oh yeah. Yeah.

ER: And you mentioned, okay, some of the poems are published with the initials, "S.M.B." So can you talk to us a little bit about your experience. How did you figure out what names to look for? How did you think about things like initials or maybe anonymous poems? Like, how did you find the stuff, in other words?

PK: Well, as you were just talking, I was thinking back about how this is all like a treasure hunt. It's a detective—you know, and that's what makes it so interesting and satisfying and why I'm still doing this kind of thing. It's absolutely like a treasure hunt. So we started out knowing that she had these books that John J. [Piatt's husband] had published, and most of them, I think most of them, actually, when she was in Ireland. So, later on in her career. And Dr. Bennett talks about how she came across her in the periodicals and realized, oh my God, she's publishing all this stuff, pretty much in advance of the books. I don't remember the "aha moment" where we were thinking, oh jeez, we got to start looking for "S.M.B." or "Sallie." You know, that just, again, you're looking at Donn Piatt [the first cousin of Sarah's husband John James who published her work in his newspaper, *The Capital*], you're looking at the family tree, you're looking at where they lived. We found out, you know, he was publishing *The Capital*, he was in Washington, so you look at publications coming out of DC. You just kind of follow all of these different trails, you know, who she married, where they lived, and then you check out the places where they lived, and...I don't know if I'm making any sense whatsoever [laughs].

ER: Yeah, no, that makes sense and is very, very helpful to hear you talk about this as the treasure hunt, and you have to follow the trails.

PK: Yeah. Well, and you find all of these crazy interconnections, and this is something that I wrote down when I was writing notes about how it was to do this kind of research, compared to how it is now, and I talked to my students today about this. Is that there's a lot of serendipity involved. Which doesn't happen as much anymore, because, like I said, you're crawling around in the stacks and you're just looking at all these books and journals, or leafing through them. You know, hands on the paper, physically in the room with the thing, and sometimes that's the only way you find other related things when you're doing research. You find the book on the shelf that you came to the library for, but then you look around on the shelf and you see, like, five other books: oh jeez, I gotta check those out. That's the kind of serendipity that doesn't really happen anymore. Or you're in the box, right? Of the stuff in the archives and you're kind of sifting through and maybe it doesn't, it isn't flagged, but you're looking through all the materials anyway, and maybe *you're* making connections that someone else didn't make. It's just different, it's just the hands-on experience. Just even, you know, shopping for books. I mean, going to an actual bookstore compared to Amazon. That's what we're talking about. I *love* the digitization. I do. I'm not complaining. But there's something missing. There's an element missing.

ER: Yeah, I agree with you absolutely that—

PK: And I think it's that kind of serendipity that led us to figure these, you know, connect the dots and go, "Oh, wait a minute. Oh, she's 'Sallie.'" I think, sometimes, didn't she just have "Sallie"?

ER: Without a last name, you mean?

PK: Yeah, I don't know. I can't remember.

ER: You know, maybe. I don't think I've seen a poem that just says "Sallie," but that doesn't mean they're not there and—

PK: Right.

ER: —it's great that you raised that, because you have to say even, you know, what about poems that are not signed?

PK: Well, okay, yeah. I remember just kind of keeping an eye out. And after you've seen, after you've read a lot of her poems and the poems of other people, you *do* kind of get a sense of her voice and her motifs. So there would be poems that were not signed that I would go, "Dr. Bennett, what do you think of this one?" So I would make note of them and have her look at them. I don't know how many she accepted into the canon, but I do remember doing that. Just kind of having, after spending that many hours looking at the stuff, I feel like I did eventually get kind of—and I *know* she had a highly developed sense for figuring out what— and also what's good and what wasn't as good and what was worthy of further scrutiny, you know, that kind of thing, but—

ER: That's also a great point that I find it's helpful in teaching undergraduates to really go deeper into explaining this to them, and the way you told that story is a great example. That is, that there are things you learn through experience, through repetition and exposure and experience and careful reading. And one of the things, Pam, you were just conveying is very important—that is, that you do have this phenomenon, as we both know, in the newspapers and magazines, where there are a lot of poems that are published without an attribution or just with initials. So again, going back to this pioneering work that you did, to say at a certain point, we realized that poems of hers were being published without her name on them. Now undergraduates—and it makes perfect sense—will say, “Well, how did you know?” And the answer for them is, you couldn't possibly know because you don't have the experience yet. But when you talk about someone like Pam Kincheloe or Paula Bennett, by this point they have spent so much intensive time reading Sarah's poems that they recognize what we call her “voice.” She has certain characteristics and habits that you don't see in other poets. And you can only make that kind of judgment if you're a scholar and you have a lot of experience, right? And you know, Paula does tell a story somewhere of you turning to her and saying—I might get this story slightly wrong—but something like, “Dr. Bennett, I think I just found a poem by her that doesn't have her name on it.” And you know, this is just like a great scholarly archive story. And Paula just said, “And then I just realized, we had to start all over again and go back through every issue looking for poems without her name on them.” Does that sound familiar at all?

PK: Yeah, yeah. And again, just sitting here thinking back about serendipitous events like that. The other thing that—and I don't know if we have as much of this going on today. The other thing that was really important to—I mean, we were really, at least *I* was, I *really*, really got into Sarah Piatt. I mean, it's an obsession, and I think you have to become obsessed. I know, Dr. B. was obsessed, maybe to an unhealthy degree [laughs]. But you do, you become completely immersed and obsessed. And another really key component, at least for me, and this goes toward my dissertation work, is actually being in the places that she was in. So, being in Castle Mac-A-Cheek, and I don't know, there's just something about that, inhabiting the space. Seeing her face on the ceiling, you know. [Sarah's portrait was one of four painted on the ceiling at Castle Mac-O-Chee, the home of Donn Piatt, first cousin to John James Piatt. The second Piatt Castle, Mac-A-Cheek, was the home of Donn's brother Abram. Mac-A-Cheek remains a public history site owned by Abram's descendants.] These are all other kinds of texts that kind of feed into that experience, and also, I think, allows you to maybe recognize her, you know? When you're that embedded in it. I have a question for you, real quick.

ER: Sure, yeah.

PK: Because this is like the Holy Grail. I think I mentioned it in my last email to Dr. B. I think I remember at some point, because I was transcribing letters, too. We were finding all the letters and I remember typing them up, and I still have a folder of some of them somewhere. But I remember reading somewhere—we both picked up on this—there were a couple of trunks, I believe, that were coming back from Ireland. They had all their journals. She and J.J. kept extensive journals from what we can tell, and that the trunks were lost. Or that they went up in

the fire that burned their house in Cincinnati. So that's just always haunted me. Like, I *know* there's more stuff out there. I always wanted to write her biography. I wanted to write up a biography of her life in Ireland, because I had gone to The Priory, I'd been to these places, I'd been to Clonmel parish churchyard and seen the bones in the crypts, you know. Like, I could really write this up and make it interesting, but never felt like I could, because I didn't have that, it just felt like I needed her diaries, and it just haunts me that maybe they're out there, somewhere. You know what I mean? But have you ever come across any clues or anything like that? Do you remember what I'm talking about? [The Priory was the name of the house that the Piatts lived in during their residence in Queenstown, County Cork, Ireland, now called Cobh, while John J. Piatt was U.S. Consul, Cork. Sarah Piatt published a poem called "In Clonmel Parish Churchyard: At the Grave of Charles Wolfe."]

ER: Yeah, I absolutely do, and you know, we're connecting at the level of this obsession now, which is a whole other story. [Pam laughs] You know I think I shared with you that I'm now working on writing a biography, and so there are a lot of stories to tell but, as you say, there are a couple of things that are very tantalizing. One is, first of all, I agree, you're absolutely right—there is definitely still stuff out there that has not been found. And what I usually say to my students about this is, you have to realize that still most people have not heard of Sarah Piatt. On my recent visit three years ago to the Yale archives, one of the things I was doing—and I know that you and Paula did it before me—was stressing to them that she had become important and should be more prominent in their finding aid. [A finding aid is a guide to an archival collection created by librarians to assist researchers.] That has happened just recently, which I'm delighted to see. When you check the finding now, she is prominently listed as an important keyword in the collection. Which is great, right? So first of all, the idea that there is still stuff out there, it's probably in people's attics, they probably have materials that they have no idea are of any current literary value, so we have to keep looking. But also, as you say, there are these stories about very important journals that were lost. And so, you know, there's always a question, Pam, as you and I both know in archives. There's a question: could they possibly turn up? Obviously not if they were destroyed in the fire. But if they were stolen, they could be somewhere.

PK: I know, and I remember reading at some point, at least in their house in Ireland, J.J. collected autographs, and I think they had them on the walls or something. He was an autograph collector. And I always wonder, well, what happened to that?

ER: Yeah, so this might be a great time to ask you if you would tell us more about your six months in Ireland. I went to Ireland myself a few years ago and I didn't get to spend as much time there as you did. I hope to go back and I *completely* feel the vibe you're expressing when you say when you go to the places, and you read those poems that are rooted somehow in those places, you see them in a whole new way, right? I mean, don't you just learn things?

PK: Oh God, I mean I—it was an exchange program, so I was in Galway, affiliated with UCG Galway [University College Galway, now called National University of Ireland Galway] so had to

make—it was just so horrible [sarcastically]: had to go on the train to Dublin, had to go to Trinity. But again, like I said in the very beginning, I underestimated what I learned from Dr. Bennett. I was able to go by myself to this other country and take myself to these, you know, the National Library there in Dublin. And I knew exactly what to do, because I had been doing it. I think back and I'm like, that's pretty damn cool.

EK: It sure is.

PK: You know, I was a graduate student, but I went right in there, and knew exactly what to do, I knew what I was looking for. Dr. B. always told me I wasn't very professional, but—and I probably wasn't, at that point—but I was learning. [laughs] But, how cool is that? And then, making the trip again on the bus or the train down to Cobh and standing on the pier at Queenstown. And then going to her house, and seriously, just walking up the country road. Now I'm still mad that I didn't go to the door and get into The Priory. I just kind of wandered, skulked around the property. But it's a beautiful, beautiful place, and you can see, you know, the river and all of these things that she writes about. And it just, when you go back to the poetry, it just gives you another level. And this is also something that I've discovered since talking to you. Like, hey, you know, I should read "Giving Back the Flower" again. I haven't looked at that poem in a long time. Oh my God, since being a mother, it's a completely different poem for me. [Cobh was named Queenstown when the Piatts lived there during John James Piatt's tenure as U.S. Consul, Cork. Sarah published a poem called "On the Pier at Queenstown.]"

ER: Yeah, I agree.

PK: *All* of her poems.

ER: The motherhood poems, they hit very hard, don't they?

PK: With age and wisdom, man oh man. [laughs]

ER: Did you, by any chance, did you have a chance to go see Louis's grave [son of Sarah and J.J. who died in a boating accident in 1884] grave?

PK: No. I found her grave, Sarah's grave. Where's Louis?

ER: In Ireland.

PK: Oh yeah, I didn't. Is it in Clonmel [Parish churchyard]?

ER: It is.

PK: Okay. Yeah, I don't think I found it. I remember wandering around over there, but—

ER: Yeah, it's hard to find it. There was no available list, the day I was there, helping you locate the grave. So finding it just meant walking around for hours, reading gravestones.

PK: Oh God.

ER: It's another one of those things that, you know, just really hits hard to see that.

PK: What does it look like? Is it just a little stone or?

ER: Well, you know, offline, Pam, I'll send you a picture.

PK: [laughs] Okay.

ER: The stone is very, very degraded. It's worn away, so you also have to work hard to read it. But it's a small, rectangular stone right off one of the walking paths.

PK: I think I found Charles Wolfe [Irish poet]. I found that one.

ER: Ah, yeah. Okay. Yes, Clonmel, right. Now, did I understand correctly, you were, for the six months, you lived in Galway? So your trips to the Piatts', the immediate area where they lived, involved commuting?

PK: Yeah, and that's kind of a bummer, because again, I'm a poor grad student, so I couldn't really afford to go traipsing around, you know. I went to Dublin several times, but I only got down to Cobh and Cork one time. So I was kind of limited in that way. I would, if I had had the time and the money I would have gone back and done some more work in Dublin, because I did find out where her son [Arthur] Donn, had lived in Clontarf. I'm *sure* that there were things, papers, there had to be something there, but I never got to them.

ER: Okay. Now, did that material make it into your dissertation or notes, about what you discovered about Donn, Jr.?

PK: I don't think so, you know, because I was so focused on her. And I also would have traveled to more of the monuments that she visited. Like, I never went to the Hill of Tara or any of those things. That would have, I think, enhanced my study of the poems.

ER: Yeah. So you know, because I'm an archive rat like you, Pam, the next question is one I have to ask, which is: did you save all your notes from the trip?

PK: Uh, no. I have a diary, a journal. I don't have the notes that I took in the in the library, though. And you know what, I was so into this. I'm such a geek, but this is where I can express my geekdom without judgment. I got really good at translating Gaelic. Gaelic dictionaries. And I got to the point where I swear I could actually kind of make out what was being said, because I was looking in some of the papers at the National Library [of Ireland, in Dublin], looking for Piatt

to see if she published anything there. And—who was it, was it one of her sons who ended up kind of being either a translator or he wrote in Gaelic?

ER: Yeah, I think that was Donn [Sigerson Piatt (1905-1870), the son of Arthur Donn Piatt (b. 1867) and thus the grandson of Sarah and John James, was a well-regarded expert in the Irish language and Celtic languages more generally. Outsiders often mistakenly refer to the Irish language as “Gaelic.” Irish is a Celtic language one of whose sister languages is Scottish Gaelic. Arthur Donn Piatt remained in Ireland when Sarah and John James returned to the U.S. in the 1890s].

PK: Yeah, I remember going off on kind of a separate rabbit hole looking at his stuff. I don’t think I came up with anything interesting. You know, and that’s what you do you, just kind of go off in these other strange directions.

ER: Yeah, that’s really interesting. My next question was going to be, if you can tell us about—you were saying you didn’t have that much as a graduate student—you didn’t have that much money for traveling around Ireland. Was most of your labor when you were there centered in libraries?

PK: Yeah, yeah. I spent a lot of time in, yeah, I would go to the library in Galway and I got some, you know, stuff on loan and—

ER: Yeah. Can you tell us about what, you know, what was your vision at that time of what you were looking for? Were you looking for the Piatts to turn up in the local news? Were you looking at consular records? Like, what was it you were mostly focused on when you were in Ireland for six months?

PK: When I look back and, you know, thank God Paula went and did this because I didn’t even *think* to go to the consulate and—because I wasn’t actually to be honest, that interested in J.J.—John James—but I guess I should have been, but I was so focused on the monuments and the places. And then, like I said, I went off on this rabbit hole looking for the sons and what happened to them, because they stayed behind when the parents came back [to the U.S.]. But yeah, I didn’t go to the consulate, and there were probably a lot of other places I could have delved into when I was there and I didn’t. But again, dumb young grad student. I didn’t know.

ER: I hope to be able to get back, and another thing, it sounds like you didn’t make it to Scotland.

PK: No, I wanted to do that.

ER: Yeah, because the son—I’ll mention for our audience—another one of the sons who stayed behind, they essentially became Irish, the sons who stayed behind, and Frederick became an American consul in Edinburgh, and he died there. So I mean, this goes back to our discussion about the treasure hunt, Pam, right?

PK: Exactly. There may be things there.

ER: Yes, and what you said about Gaelic. You know, there are materials in Gaelic. [People in Ireland generally use the term “Irish” for the language of Ireland. See the note above on Celtic languages.] There are the Irish descendants. You know, there’s so much still to be done. It’s one of the things that makes this area of scholarship so vibrant. And there are so many opportunities for doing really valuable work. And I agree with you. Like, I’m so glad that there are all these digital sites, you know, giving us access to newspapers and so on. But finding that stuff in paper is a completely different experience, and I agree with you, there’s stuff you can see there that you just cannot see looking at stuff that’s digitized. So, you know, I am so grateful for all the work that you did, and I know that there are so many traces of your first-wave work in all the collections that I’m now going to as a second-wave scholar, you know, all those all those tracks that you and Paula walked before me, and just really opened the doors, and we’re all very grateful to you for that.

PK: I love that image, you know, that Paula and I are kind of chasing after Piatt and traces of her. And then, here you are, kind of chasing further down the line, and then so on and so on, right?

ER: Yeah, and you know, one of the things she said to me when I really started focusing my scholarship on recovering Sarah: I had several conversations with Paula where I would say to her—I’d finish up one thing and I’d say to her—“What, in your view, what is the most important thing to do next?” And, at one point, she said to me, “Get *The Capital*.” And that’s when the Ohio State project began of digitizing *The Capital*, so thank goodness that is now digitized—

PK: She’s right, because that thing, like I said, was literally crumbling into dust, so—

ER: Yeah, yes, thank you for reminding our audience of that. That’s one of the things about newspapers, they don’t last that long. So it’s great that that was done. But there was another point where she said to me, “Someone needs to redo everything I already did.”

PK: [laughs] She did? What did she mean by that?

ER: Well, I think what she just means is that, when she talks about it, she says, “You have to realize I had very limited time.” So I would like to hear your thoughts about this, Pam, maybe as we start wrapping up our hour together, is, she just said, the time urgency of finding lots of things, first of all, finding them, as we’ve said. Second of all, traveling and looking at them. That’s just—that’s like several lifetimes’ worth of scholarship to do, as just a couple of people. And so, she just said, you know, “Someone needs to go back and redo each of those stages, with more time and going into deeper detail.” And you know, in a way, I think this is partly what we see with the recovery of other major authors like Melville. People have to blaze the trail and then everyone has to go back and do everything kind of with more time and more scope and

dive deeper into each thing. I mean, what are your thoughts about that, based on your experience in the first-wave treasure hunt?

PK: You know, I couldn't agree more, actually, because I was just kind of flashing on some stuff I did on my own. And just driving, I have this memory of driving. Maybe I was going to Louisville, I don't know, but I went through Versailles. No, not Versailles. I was over in Kentucky [laughter; Sarah wrote a poem titled "Over in Kentucky"] and I found the place where she went—what was the name of the seminary she went to?

ER: Henry Female College.

PK: Henry. Yes, I found the site. I think I saw the building. I saw the plaque for sure. Didn't stop, you know, didn't make any inquiries. There's probably a little local library in that town [New Castle, KY], you know. Just going back, and I always wanted to look more into the Daniel Boone connections. There's all kinds of interesting things over in Kentucky that haven't been worked on or looked at.

ER: Yeah, yeah.

PK: The thing that sticks with me about Piatt that continues to make her interesting to me is that—and I did talk about this in my dissertation—is that she's just so liminal, and I think Dr. Bennett's the one that introduced me and the other students to that idea, of liminality. Marginalized but also liminal in that, you know, she's southern. Wait, she's northern. She's American. Oh well, she was, you know, basically Irish for a while. She has all of these—and it's just this oscillation between these different—she was a mother, she was a young woman giving back a flower to a suitor, and apparently dated a soldier. You know, she's all of these different, shimmering things, and I just find that so, so interesting. And you can see that in the poetry, too. How she's vacillating between, I always called it dialogism, I don't know if Dr. Bennett ever used that term, but I was also into Bakhtin [philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin] at the time. But just how she uses conversation in a way that you *really* don't see in other poets of the time. Maybe Whitman dabbles in it. But everyday, real life people conversation, dialogue back and forth and there's nothing ornamental about it, especially in the dialogues between the mom and the kids, it's just so real. It's realism before realism even happened. But, anyway—

ER: That is *fantastic*, that is a *fantastic* way to begin wrapping up our interview. Just, you've said so many things in these concluding remarks that are extremely compelling. I mean, I love the way you talk about her, you use the word "shimmering" in her liminality—

PK: Yeah, but it ticks me off [laughs] because I'm like, oh jeez, there's all this work left to be done on her, and I don't have the time. My time is petering out, you know. And this happens, but this is the joy of a life of the scholar, right? You keep seeing these things, you're like, oh, I wish I could major in that, I wish I had time to read everything that person ever wrote. I love it, because it means I'm a curious person and I hope to always be that way. I did want to mention how this one interesting thing, and kind of going back over the stuff is how I've come full circle,

like I told you. Because I'm working on a project now about deafness in American culture, focusing on the use of ASL [American Sign Language]. How ASL has been used and continues to be used in really weird ways. ASL and listening devices as objects and the use of silence, primarily in film, like movies, but television. And once you start looking at this stuff, it's everywhere. But I'm working on this chapter about the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis because they had deaf children on display behind bars at the World's Fair. So you know, gotta check that out. So I'm back into the newspapers looking at these old clippings from 1904 and contacting the Missouri Historical Society and doing all of these things. [laughs] And then that took me back to melodrama and I'm writing about this now. Did you know that one of the very first plays ever put on in America in, like, I want to say in 1801, was called *Deaf and Dumb? Deaf and Dumb: The Orphan Protected* and it's a play about—well, I won't go into the details, but anyway, there's ASL involved. So now I'm looking you know in newspapers from the turn of the century, 1801-1810, looking for mentions of these plays. So I'm like, here I am again.

ER: Wow, yeah. Well, you know, going back to something that you said and I *completely* connect with about the serendipities of research and the obsessive qualities of finding a topic that you love and, you know, we've shared that in the Piatt scholarship. And I will just share with our audience that I said to Pam earlier, I have a feeling that at some point her work on deafness and deaf cultures in nineteenth-century America is going to collide somehow with her Piatt scholarship. And you know, I'll just mention as we're closing that Pam has also done work, for example, on performances and uses of Shakespeare by deaf people in the nineteenth century, and we know that Sarah loved Shakespeare. And so, as you know, all these cultures are shared, right? And so I'm really going to look forward to hearing, Pam, where these synchronicities take you as you go forward with your specific work in [the] nineteenth century and deafness, although your work extends well into the present day as well.

PK: I'm looking forward to seeing the stuff you're going to be coming up with in regard to Sarah, because, yeah, it's not going to come to an end anytime soon. [laughs]

ER: Well, I'll mention one thing in closing before we say goodbye, and then ask you if you have anything you'd like to say in closing to our audience about our topics. There is in my neighborhood still a quote "school for the deaf" that goes back to the early nineteenth century. And one of the oddest synchronicities in my research on Piatt—and I stumbled on this at Yale—there's no reason anyone else would notice it, but it just so happened when I was paging through all the family correspondence, I started noticing that the family lived originally in the neighborhood where I now live.

PK: [laughs] Doesn't shock me at all.

ER: So, first of all, J.J.'s father, when J.J. was a boy, moved to my actual neighborhood. And I don't mean the city of Columbus, I mean the neighborhood where I live, when the first wave of white people came and lived here after the Indigenous people were moved out and transported. John Bear [Piatt], J.J.'s father, moved here at that time. J.J. was a boy, and they lived right up the road, near my grocery store. [Pam laughs] And the other thing I noticed is that

the land I live on now—and here I mean my actual street—slightly later, like 10 years later, was owned by J.J.'s sister. Right? I mean—

PK: Yeah, now I'm getting the chills. Now I'm getting the chills.

ER: One of the reasons I mentioned that, Pam, is that when we talk about these synchronicities is, so you know, there's that deaf school up the road. And I say, well J.J. was here visiting his sister, Sarah likely was with him. I have to find actual, concrete proof of that. I *know* he was here visiting his sister. But you know, there was that deaf school up the road, and so you know, this was all part of daily life, right? And how did they think about the fact that the Indigenous people had just been cleared out for the whites? How did they think about the deaf school just up the road? I mean, super interesting questions, right?

PK: Yep. And that reminds me, at one point in my research, I found that, there was a Morgan, excuse me, Bryan's Station which was a fort over there in Kentucky. And I found out that downstream from this fort was a place called Kincheloe's Station.

ER: Nice. Are you aware of any of any ancestors in Kentucky? Do you know of any direct line to those Kincheloes?

PK: My Kincheloe people come from West Virginia and they actually landed in Virginia in 1695. So we've been here a while, but yeah, I don't know that any, I think. No, I do know there were some Kentucky Kincheloes because I found some of them in the historical society. Yeah. It's just, it's all interconnected. [laughs]

ER: Yes it is. Yeah. So let me just conclude by thanking you once again, Pam, for making all this time to talk with us today. It's been so great hearing your stories. I've always wondered about what it was like for you on the ground there in the first wave. I appreciate the fact that you took the time to talk with us and share your stories with the public. And also I want to express my gratitude on behalf of all students and scholars and teachers who are working on Sarah, for really blazing the trail for the rest of us. So thank you very, very much.

PK: I have to thank you, because this was really—I was nervous about this, but I appreciate the trip down memory lane, it was wonderful. Wonderful.

ER: All right, thank you so much, Pam.

PK: Thank you.