Three of Kate Chopin's Great Granddaughters
and Three Chopin Scholars
Discuss Chopin's Legacy

A Conversation Organized by The Kate Chopin International Society
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Bernard Koloski: Welcome to this special session celebrating the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Kate Chopin International Society. We are privileged, honored, and delighted to have with us six people who will speak with you about Kate Chopin's family and Kate Chopin scholarship. We have three of Kate Chopin's great granddaughters—three sisters who grew up in St. Louis, Kate Chopin's hometown, the town she was born in and wrote all her fiction in. Susie Chopin lives today in St. Louis. Her sister Annette Chopin Lare lives in Pennsylvania (and her daughter Brittany is also with us, at the back of the room). And their sister Gerri Chopin Wendel lives in California. We have also three distinguished early and widely published Chopin scholars, all three living in Louisiana, where most of Kate Chopin's fiction is set: Thomas Bonner, whose *Kate Chopin Companion* is an indispensible reference book used by generations of scholars; Barbara Ewell, whose critical study of Chopin's fiction has had a huge influence on the way that fiction is understood today; and Emily Toth, whose magisterial biographies are known by anyone seriously interested in Kate Chopin.

Our six guests will speak with you about how they first learned about Kate Chopin and how Chopin has influenced their lives.

You should be aware that we are recording this session and that we will post a transcript of it on our website so there is a permanent record of it.

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Gerri Chopin Wendel: My sisters Annette, Susie, and I are really honored to be here. We really are so excited. We come from a family of six girls and two boys, so it's a female-dominated family. We would love to have an afternoon to speak with Kate Chopin, and I think she would get a kick out of being with our family, because when we get together we're loud and we have great stories to tell, and I think a lot of that comes down from Kate.

We've heard a lot of great talks today about Kate Chopin. I can tell you ours will not be so academic. We are not scholars of Kate Chopin at all. In fact what we know about Kate Chopin

is pretty much stolen from this group right here. [Laughter from the audience] And we are forever indebted to them.

We all have different stories, the three of us, because we come from different places in our family and we learned about Kate Chopin in different ways. I don't recall Kate Chopin being mentioned very often while I was growing up. We knew that there was this writer in the family, and there certainly was a love of books in our home, particularly by my dad, David Chopin, grandson of Kate. I was not the same lover of books. I was a tomboy and spent most of my spare time as a child outside playing and as a teen camping and backpacking.

My first real introduction to Kate Chopin came when I was in college. I was a senior and I wasn't an English major, but I needed to take one more English elective before graduation. I must admit to you English professors that this is how I did it: I scanned the list of courses, closed my eyes, and randomly picked a course called "Women in Literature." [Laughter] It was not until the first day of class and reading the syllabus that I discovered we would be reading several short stories and one novel, *The Awakening*. The teacher was a doctoral student writing her dissertation on Kate Chopin. I do not recall her name. But my guess is she still probably recalls my name! You can imagine her shock and thrill when she read down the roster and got to my name. She said, "Marie" (my first name), looked up and slowly scanned the class, then said, "Chopin?" When I raised my hand I remember her slowly shaking her head and then kind of gasping, "No!" [Laughter] And when I told her that I was the great–granddaughter of Kate Chopin, I thought she was going to fall out of her chair. She was living and breathing Kate Chopin every waking hour.

Quite frankly I don't recall this first reading of *The Awakening* having much of an impact on me. We were a class primarily of women barely in our twenties. Marriage and raising children were still future dreams for most of us —dreams of perfect marriages and darling children! Did I mention these were dreams? I was planning my own wedding that year, and I could not relate to a marriage like that of Edna and Léonce Pontellier. My parents were the love of each other's lives. My mother, a very strong woman, was engaged in our lives and always accessible. My dad was exceptionally involved in our lives, especially for that time. After a long day at work he would come home, be greeted with squeals of joy and hugs, and then take as many as could fit into our old, banged-up car to the park, or the local pool, or walk us to the library. Actually my dad would be a very involved dad in today's world! And this was most likely the semester I was in the blissful state of planning my own wedding and perhaps not ready to entertain the idea of a woman feeling unfulfilled in her role as a wife or mother. Several years later, however, when I introduced the book to a circle of friends, I did see the story from a different angle.

When I was in my late twenties I belonged to a Moms' Club in St. Louis. I had three of my four children at this time. The club was comprised of about fifteen women, some who worked outside the home and some, like myself, who were stay-at-home moms. We occasionally read books and discussed them, though we were not a formal book club. I suggested we read *The Awakening*. The deep discussion that followed was quite different than that in my college class. We all had children, husbands, and were in that phase of our parenting where our children demanded most of our time and energy, and our identities were significantly tied to this role of mother. I had one friend who was quite thrown by the book. She was struggling with her marriage, and she cried for a week—truly a week. There was no question she was struggling with her sense of self as she

grappled with the demands of motherhood while working to make her failing marriage survive. I am sure she saw herself in Edna.

This reading of *The Awakening* by a group of young mothers did strike a chord in each of us in some manner. I had often felt the overwhelming demands of child rearing and at times questioned my own sense of self beyond that of wife and mother. (My husband is sitting in the back of the room. But he said it's okay for me to tell you that I felt like that throughout our marriage—and, he added, he said he felt like that throughout our marriage, too!) [Laughter] And while I did not really identify with Edna, I certainly was much more sympathetic to Edna's situation than I was at 22. That was a pretty powerful experience, to identify with these young mothers.

Kate Chopin's presence in the international world was made clear to me in the fall of 2001 when our family spent a semester abroad in London. Our oldest daughter, Carolyn, was taking an English class in a British sixth-form college (the two years of schooling between secondary school and university). The class read "The Story of an Hour." Again, her teacher was thrilled to have Kate's great-great-granddaughter in this class. And it was the first time I realized that Kate Chopin really was being read around the world. The experience piqued my interest in how young people were reacting to Chopin's writing, which was being read in high school classes all over the United States.

While I did not speak to my daughter's British class about Kate Chopin's life, it was not long after my return to the States that I began speaking to high school classes about Kate's life, giving them insights into how the life she lead, and the strong women who raised her, influenced the writing of her short stories and *The Awakening*.

For the past seven years I have had the privilege of speaking about Kate Chopin's life to many 11th grade AP English classes in three different high schools. Most of the classes read both *The Awakening* and "The Story of an Hour." Two of these schools are in my very homogeneous suburban community—one co-ed and the other an all-girls' Catholic school, I assume much like the one Kate Chopin attended. The third school is in a very mixed neighborhood in Los Angeles.

I begin my talks with a simple family tree on the board and a list of the most influential women in Kate's life, including her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother (Victoria Charleville), Kitty Garasche, and the Sacred Heart nuns. As I tell the story of her life (to which I am so indebted to Emily and *Unveiling Kate Chopin*!) I put a red X through the name of each person who dies or whom she loses (Kitty Garesche) during her lifetime, starting with her father at a very young age. Even after giving this talk nearly fifty times I am still struck, as are the students, with the number of people Kate buried in her relatively short life: her father, all of her siblings, her great-grand mother, her husband, and finally her mother. And also the devastating loss of her friend Kitty when her family left St. Louis when Kate was 13. (I am the age now that Kate was when she died and I can't even imagine having this much tragedy in my life.) After learning about her life and the strong women who raised her, both in her home and in the classroom, the students certainly have a better understanding and greater appreciation of how Kate developed her characters and where Kate drew the strength to raise issues of restrictions and feelings of un-fulfillment by women living within the expectations of her time.

The feedback from the three high schools to which I speak varies from school to school. In the suburban co-ed school there seems to be the strongest negative reaction to Edna and the choices she makes. Students are really angry with her. She is seen as selfish and highly criticized for abandoning her children. The all-girls' Catholic high school shows more sympathy to Edna's situation and argues against the restrictions placed on women. These young ladies, like Kate, are taught to be leaders (the president of an all girls' high school will always be a girl!) and strong critical thinkers. Finally, in the co-ed Los Angeles school I felt the greatest sympathy for Edna and received some thank you notes that were fairly insightful. These are students—some men but mostly women—who most likely have experienced more broken families and have been raised in strong female households. Here are just a couple of samples of the thank you letters I received from this school:

"Dear Mrs. Chopin Wendel,
Thank you so much for taking the time to come to our class. Usually I never read a book in school that has opened my eyes. Most of them are about war or killing or history but this novel has had a big impact on me. Although many people have seen this novel as a woman's rights type of theme I felt it was much simpler than that to me. It taught me that I have a right to be who I am. Everyone has a right to do what makes them happy—to surround themselves with happy people and as a teenage girl it's easy to forget that sometimes. I find myself constantly worrying about what other people think of me. So to me, Edna's a reminder that there's nothing wrong with putting myself first. I'm honestly so glad that you came to show us what Kate Chopin's life was like. It made me very happy that although she had great loss in her life, she was strong enough to overcome them and it made me even happier to know she found someone who loved her for who she was."

Another:
"Thank you for taking the time to come to our class and to talk to us about the Chopin family history. I really enjoyed your presentation and enjoyed learning the reasons behind Chopin's (Kate) desire to write books of such content. The most important thing (I think) I learned from your presentation was that everyone has a story, and they're all worth hearing."

I walk away from those classes I speak to thinking that if Kate Chopin's stories can so deeply touch this young generation of readers with issues that are timeless, it gives me hope that they will continue to be read. Also it's interesting to see how these students' circumstances, and where they are in their lives, and their perspective affected the way they communicated back to me what they thought Kate Chopin was writing about.

It's very rewarding work, I love doing it, I hope to continue it—and I thank all of you on this panel for giving me everything I've stolen from you. [Laughter and applause]

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Susie Chopin: We of course heard about Kate growing up, along with our grandparents on both sides and others in the family, and we knew that Kate was a writer. As far as her being a writer, I didn't grasp any significance I suppose because I was so young, and if anything I thought of her as my great-grandmother first and foremost. Our mother always said you couldn't have too many books or crayons in a house. That's golden, isn't it? So I read *The Awakening* when I was

12 (I know that was young, but I was one of the readers; I was a tomboy, too, but not like Gerri, so I was on the porch reading, and I loved that). I grasped no true significance from *The Awakening*'s content, so, because we always had books, I put it away and went on to the next one.

As far as I knew, even though she was a published writer, the only people in my young world who knew Kate were relatives, and when someone did recognized the name Chopin they asked if I was related to Frédéric. Even today, the majority of people when hearing my name ask about Frédéric and not Kate, and most strangers still can't pronounce the name. If I need to give my name, I immediately tell people how to spell it, because they don't pick up the "Ch."

But over the years in between work and raising kids I'd pick up her stories from time to time and read her words. I had also learned over the years more about Kate (thank you in particular, Ms. Emily), how strong she had to be raising her kids without Oscar—and I learned that she came from a very strong mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

But it wasn't until I was in my 30's that I truly began my relationship with Kate, and that came to be because it was a struggling decade for me and I needed guidance. Having come from very strong women on both sides of our family, not only on my father's side, I often sent up my prayers to God, and the universe, and to these brave females in my family [Applause from the audience] who gave me some of their strength. I thought if they could get through their struggles, then surely I could get through mine. It was also at this time that, while I didn't reread *The Awakening*, I strongly related to Edna and I drew upon her strength as well, and through this felt a very special connection with Kate.

Now in my 50's I've re-read *The Awakening* and most of Kate's complete works and loved, by the way, *At Fault,* which I heard for years was a bear to get through and avoided it like the plague! In fact if I had to choose my favorite, which gratefully I don't, I would pick *At Fault* with its more raw appeal for me. While I've always enjoyed Kate's writings and am very proud of her, admittedly I think I've never given her the credit she deserves and sometimes have felt as her great-granddaughter that her profession overshadows the person. But I also know and understand and am truly grateful that her writings and she herself have brought happiness and inspiration to so many people.

Where Kate is Buried and Gifts Left at her Grave:

Taking a turn, I'd like to tell you a little about where Kate is buried. There's no way to say this so it doesn't sound . . . I'm sure very strange to some . . . but this is where I love her most, out of the spotlight and just another Chopin resting in a very lovely place. Our great-grandmother resting where she belongs. And I love that.

Calvary Cemetery is in North St. Louis and is gorgeous with rolling hills and beautiful trees. Ours is a modest-sized plot with others in the family buried in various other areas of the cemetery.

I find it humbling when I go up to Calvary, and in particular when I see something placed on Kate's grave because the public does find her there. I've seen everything from fresh roses and plastic roses to paper cigars [Laughter] and poems which were laminated by school kids—so sweet. While I did take one of the poems because there were a few and I wanted to preserve it, in

general I take nothing. I feel it's not my place to take what's been left. Someone took the time and obviously was showing great respect for Kate with their gift. It's hers and theirs alone. Those were their moments with her and I see those moments as sacred, whether the intent was light-hearted or more profoundly felt. And each time I see something I try to imagine what compelled the person or persons to leave their gift. I think the one to date that has made the largest impression on me was a note that simply said "Thank you Kate." I wondered what this person had experienced to say that, perhaps someone who simply loved her colorful writing or maybe someone who saw the strength of her characters and was able to find courage to change something in their life.

But no matter what's left, I feel respect and love for Kate because she in turn gave them a gift through her writing, and that's what's so amazing to me. Writers can touch so many lives and we never know how or when or at what moment that happened in their experience with the author, but somehow they were touched. That's the humbling part. Our great-grandmother touched—and continues to touch—so many lives. [Applause]

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Annette Chopin Lare: If I talk too loud, excuse me because I teach high school. [Laughter] As you know by now, Kate Chopin was my great-grandmother. She died in 1904, more than 50 years before I was born and more than a dozen years before the birth of her grandson, my father, David Chopin. As my sisters have noted, Kate Chopin was not a huge presence in our house; she was simply too far removed in time. Dad never knew her, and we never knew our grandfather, Kate's son, Doctor George Chopin. Still, we were aware of her existence.

The earliest recollection I have of Kate was posing for a photograph at Maryville College in St. Louis with my sister, Francie, and our cousin, Kate Chopin, holding a copy of *Bayou Folk*, Kate's first published collection of short stories. As a young child, I marveled at seeing the name of this famous relative on a real book. My parents were civil rights activists, and I remember them talking about the story "Désirée's Baby" and its sad, ironic ending. This story was the first Kate Chopin work I ever read.

Because race was such a central topic in our house, I was aware very early on that Dad's parents and grandparents—at least his grandfather—did not share his passion for racial equality and justice. While both he and my mother adored the warmth and humor of his father, Doc, they made no bones about the fact that Doc and his father, Oscar, were racist. I knew that Oscar had been a member of a white supremacist league in New Orleans during Reconstruction. When my sister dated and then married an African-American in the early 80's, Dad joked with a sparkle in his eye, "That loud thud you just heard was my father turning over in his grave in Calvary Cemetery. And that louder thud was his father turning over in his grave." [Laughter]

Ours was a very large, close family. I'm the fourth of eight kids, the third of six daughters—and, in case you're wondering—I'm the oldest of these three daughters up here. My dad loved the city of St. Louis and took us to every major city event, including the Veiled Prophet Parade, St. Louis's rather bizarre and bad imitation of Mardi Gras. [Laughter] A highlight of the parade was seeing the Veiled Prophet's "Queen of Love and Beauty" and her court of new debutantes. While we never lacked for necessities growing up, my parents lived paycheck to paycheck; their

finances and values were far removed from the debutante world. Nevertheless, the family was considered part of St. Louis's elite. My parents were in the social register. Every debutante season my mother would joke about how we sisters could make our debut, serve hot dogs and grilled cheese sandwiches, and invite the press. [Laughter] When I questioned Mom about the social register membership, she said that, "Kate Chopin had arranged for her descendants to be perpetually included on the list." This sounds far-fetched to me, but it was something my mother mentioned often. She must have heard from someone in the family that Kate cared a great deal about the social status of her progeny. As Emily Toth noted in her first biography of Kate, amidst the scandal and rejection of *The Awakening*, the debut of her only daughter, Lelia, was a bright spot in her life.

Late in the sixties, I became aware of Per Seyersted's biography of Kate Chopin and his compilation of her complete works. My parents were given copies of both. I was still a young girl. By the time I went off to college in the mid-70's, I had read *The Awakening* and knew of its controversial reception. Kate had been resurrected. The early feminist movement embraced her. She was rapidly becoming a staple in American literature classes all over the country, including my alma mater, Macalester College, in St. Paul, Minnesota. You could find her in bookstores large and small. I never knew Kate, but her legacy was part of my life experience, and I thought of her often as I tried to figure out my own place in the world.

Kate Chopin focused on women and the constraints society placed on them. We all know that. In her most famous works—*The Awakening* and "The Story of an Hour"—the central women characters tragically die at the end, unable to live authentically and independently in the world. We all know that. Modern feminists embraced Kate because she wanted to liberate women from the dictums that mandated how they should live. Women have always been faced with a set of "shoulds." Kate challenged the "shoulds" of her time. She wanted women to be free to think for themselves and follow their hearts.

I came of age in the early 1970's, at exactly the time of the Kate Chopin revival. I had grown up with Donna Reed and *Good Housekeeping* magazine. By the time I went off to my very liberal, very feminist college in 1975, Gloria Steinem and *Ms* magazine defined what modern women should be like. For many women my age, this was a time of confusion and uncertainty. The late playwright Wendy Wasserstein captured this tumultuous period brilliantly in her play *Uncommon Women and Others.*

While I certainly lauded the feminist agenda of equality and the rejection of women as objects, I felt frustrated by what I perceived to be a new set of dictums, a new set of constraints, a new set of "shoulds" for women. The modern feminist movement was supposed to be about women having choices, but to me the message was loud and clear that only certain choices were right. We were told that women should postpone marriage, if they married at all; that they should postpone having children, if they had children at all; and most important, that they should work outside the home, no matter what. The new code demanded that women should aspire to be like men: to be doctors, not nurses; to be principals, not teachers; to be CEOs, not middle-level managers and, god-forbid, secretaries. Women's success was measured by their salaries, by their titles, by the boards they served on, and by the number of employees beneath them. I did not find this message to be radical or liberating, as it was based on the male definition of success, which focused on power and money. Women even adopted the "successful male" dress code,

wearing "power suits," in which ridiculous large bows replaced the necktie. There's a reason why Hillary Clinton wore pantsuits as she campaigned for president.

The feminist movement allowed women to climb the proverbial ladder side by side with men; this was good. But there was no apparent consideration that maybe what was at the top, wasn't worth the climb; that there was something tarnished about achievement at the top if it depended on others remaining at the bottom; or that perhaps no one should be on a ladder to begin with. I recoiled at feminists' call for equal pay as they hired nannies and "cleaning ladies" at a fraction of the salaries they themselves earned. The result of this new feminist code was that many women that made traditional choices—as I did when I married at 21 and later spent a decade at home with my children—felt inadequate, defensive, marginalized, and invisible. This dismissal, especially coming from other women, was very painful.

I felt confident though about my choices. I had defied the "shoulds" of my generation. I had the support of my very strong mother and my very strong sisters, and because my decisions were passionate and compelling choices of the heart, I knew that I also had the support of my very strong great-grandmother. As the late historian and Chopin scholar Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observed, Kate was neither a feminist nor a suffragette. Clearly, though, she was a non-conformist and a free thinker. To Kate Chopin freedom transcended the political. It was about being true to your ideas, to your desires, to your feelings, and to your soul, whatever these may be. In the 1890's this message was a gift. It still is today. [Applause]

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Thomas Bonner, Jr.: It's wonderful being here with you. This is really a treat. The circumstances of my first reading Kate Chopin were typical of my generation. Her most anthologized story "Désirée's Baby" prior to the revival in 1969 appeared in many school and college textbooks across the South and in some other regions of the country, as well. As a freshman in 1956 at Jesuit High School in New Orleans, I was taking an appreciation of literature course that included the story. I lived at Jackson Barracks, a military post at the downriver edge of the city, over an hour away by streetcar from the school. Although the vibrations of the car prevented any writing on my commutes to school, I could read assignments and memorize Latin declensions and vocabulary, lots of those which I did religiously, so that I had some time for playing ball and exploring the Mississippi River batture.

On one occasion I was reading "Désirée's Baby" when I had—what I would not have described then as—an epiphany. Public accommodation laws in the Civil Rights legislation had not passed yet, and I was aboard a racially segregated streetcar sitting in front of a small wooden sign, reading "For Colored Only," which would move to the front or back depending on the racial population. It was a seating situation that I had grown up with and with which I then had few questions. The Chopin story as all here know has a Maupassant-like ironic denouement—in my vocabulary then, a surprise ending. When I concluded reading it, I was shocked at the racial elements of the story and excited by it as well. It was as if I had been in public scanning a *Playboy* and had been observed by an adult. [Laughter] I recall looking around the streetcar, for like most teenagers I figured everyone was observing that I had done something socially or morally risky. [Laughter] Of course, all the riders were involved in their own lives, completely unaware of me.

In looking about the streetcar furtively, I was suddenly struck that people in front of the Jim Crow sign were often darker than those behind it. For a moment and subsequently for a short while, the situation of color distinctions and seating locations raised questions, but like most fourteen year olds, I was soon back to my own adolescent world of high school life. In my adult years of reading, I came to have empathy with Mark Twain's character Huck Finn, whose lack of a lasting epiphany regarding race in the eponymous novel was the target of a number of scholars and critics. Occasionally, the Civil Rights demonstrations at nearby public schools and discussions at home would remind me of what I had read in the story. For many years the story stayed with me for its exotic quality, long after I had forgotten its author. Today, one hears much about what children read, see, and hear with many erroneously claiming that the subjects and their treatments make little difference in the lives of the young. Without my realizing it at the time, my first reading of Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" ultimately changed my life.

My second encounter with Kate Chopin's writing like the first is chronicled in the book on the Chopin revival [*Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival*] to which four of us here have contributed essays. It occurred in 1969 in Donald Pizer's seminar at Tulane on the American 1890s. What distinguishes this encounter is that I came to Chopin's writing as an adult with professional academic training and as a result vastly different expectations of her writing. Although Chopin's revival was closely allied with the beginnings of the women's movement, my major interest then and now lay in the formal aspects of her writing, i.e. the aesthetics of her fiction—more precisely what makes it art.

When one of the women students in the seminar indicated that she had not been allowed to work on a woman writer at Tulane, it struck me as a real surprise. I had never made distinctions of writers by gender. A good text was simply a good text and its writer good as well. What affected my perception was that women in my family were talented in the arts and in other areas through several generations. All at one time or another had jobs from teaching to accounting. The impact of the women's movement and its causal realities came to me slowly as a result of knowing their accomplishments and assuming that was the norm for most women. Later the feminist nuances of Chopin's fiction and subsequent life-experiences did touch me academically in significant ways, one of which being the acceptance of the subjective in literary criticism, the first person having unexplored potential when it came to the applications of personal experience to texts. At the time the role of the subjective made me uncomfortable as a reader trained to value objective treatments of biographical and literary subjects, many of which, of course, were only postured as objective.

While I always felt that only a few of Chopin's stories were limited to the local color tradition, I came to see her fiction as having far more universal qualities. Initially, I began finding stronger connections in her novels and stories with the symbolic fiction of the American Renaissance. Negative space, incomplete details, and isolated images—similar to the rose at the prison door in *The Scarlet Letter*—suggested that Chopin was exploring larger questions, ones not limited to the specific character or scene or time. Furthermore, I felt a close relationship between her writing and that of French literature and culture, a point clearly made in Cyrille Arnavon's early essay and introduction to his translation of *The Awakening*.

While I have not been surprised by the world-wide reaction to Chopin's fiction—even her poetry—I have been overwhelmed by the rapidity of her presence in translations and scholarship

far beyond the United States. My experience with Chopin and her writing has been marked by change. And now I await my next encounter, wondering what it will be. [Applause]

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Barbara Ewell: It is indeed a pleasure and an honor to be here. Although I think I might have read "Desiree's Baby" at some point in college or high school, it was my encounter with *The Awakening* that made Kate Chopin central to my consciousness. It was an accident. I was applying for my first full-time job as an academic—at Newcomb College in New Orleans. During my interview with the department chair asked if I would be interested in teaching a course in women's literature—in addition to the usual composition courses the English department needed. I must have demurred a bit (knowing that I knew nothing about women's studies—my doctorate was in Renaissance poetry), when, the chair, chuckling at his own humor, commented: "You certainly look qualified to teach the course!" [Laughter] That was one of my first conscious lessons in professional sexism, but I was thrilled to be able to teach a literature class.

I'm pretty sure that my friend and mentor at Loyola, Dawson Gaillard, was the one who suggested I take a look at *The Awakening*—along with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. That summer, reading Chopin and Hurston and Doris Lessing and Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf—I became a card-carrying feminist and women's studies specialist. [Laughter] For the next several years, "Women in Literature" became central to my teaching repertoire, and *The Awakening* became its pivotal text. Students responded so passionately to Edna and her dilemmas, making class discussions very lively and rewarding for me.

As for my own reactions, I knew from the first time I read the novel, that it was special—a writer who had been almost forgotten and who was writing with such poetic grace and economy about issues that we women were still struggling with—marriage, having children, sex, choosing one's own path, being trapped by personal circumstance and social convention. I was also thrilled to help recover another lost woman writer, to confirm that it wasn't quality that had determined which writers survive in the literary canon and which don't—a recognition that helped to explain my own vague sense of exclusion as a woman reader and a woman scholar. But I was also taken by the fact that Kate Chopin was a southerner, writing about Louisiana, my home state, and about places I knew—Grand Isle, New Orleans, the Cajun country—and about people with beautiful names like Azema and Athénaïse, who were part of my personal heritage. A point I often like to make is that while one of my grandparents had a very Anglo-Welsh name—Ewell—the other three were Landrys and Guidrys and Robins—all Cajuns. Chopin was teaching me about my own people, my own past.

A few years later, needing to write a book to get tenure at the University of Mississippi, I secured a six-month fellowship at Chicago's wonderful Newberry Library, where Stone and Kimball, the first publishers of *The Awakening*, had deposited their extensive archive. And then, in the spring of 1984, I met Emily when I attended the Southeast Women's Studies Conference in Colombia, South Carolina, someone else who was "into" Kate Chopin. Emily was extraordinarily generous with her own research, sharing delicious tidbits from her discoveries about Chopin's relationship with Albert Sampite and steering me toward some of her informants in Cloutierville and Natchitoches. We became friends—one of the many Chopinists I've met and befriended since

then—including Tom and Bernie Koloski, and the British scholar, Helen Taylor, all of whose work I have learned from and who have shared my passion for Kate.

In 1986, I published what I believed to be the second critical monograph on Kate Chopin—Peggy Skaggs having completed her Twayne edition just a year earlier. But I was hooked—and my scholarly career profoundly changed, as I found myself increasingly identified as a Kate Chopin specialist—invited to give lectures, to participate in film projects (notably the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities 1999 film on *The Awakening*) and to expand the contexts of Chopin by further research into southern local color. And while my remarks here are focused on *The Awakening*, I must hasten to add that Chopin's skill as a short-story writer and her remarkable body of short fiction may well have contributed even more to American letters than her famous novel.

While I can thus only begin to count the ways that I have relished and learned from Kate Chopin's work, a more recent—and in some ways, more personal—connection has been our shared experience of storms: Hurricane Katrina in 2005 for me, and for her, the Great Storm of 1893—a storm that devastated Grand Isle and obliterated Cheniere Caminada, taking nearly 2000 lives. Emily was perhaps the first to recognize the impact of this hurricane on Chopin's fiction. Indeed, the storm was national news, and within days, relief efforts were being organized in many cities, including St. Louis. Just a few weeks later, on October 21, Chopin, evidently quite moved by the loss of these places that she had known well and fondly, composed a short story, "At Cheniere Caminada," her only other work set on the Gulf Coast. The tale introduces several characters that later reappear in *The Awakening*—Tonie and Madame Antoine, Robert and the LeBrun pension, suggesting that Chopin might already have been pondering Edna's story of love and loss. Looking more closely at the chronology, Pam Menke (my collaborator in a new Broadview edition of *The Awakening*) and I noticed how the novel's internal evidence (particularly the February 1892 founding of the New Orleans Folk-lore Society) establishes the novel's temporal frame. Edna's awakening begins on Grand Isle in the late summer (her Sunday trip to Cheniere Caminada with Robert takes place on August 28: "Didn't you know this was the twenty-eighth of August?) and ends on the solitary beach of Grand Isle in the early spring of 1893, barely six months before the Gulf had actually swept away all those places where she and Robert had briefly dreamed of "wild, impossible things"—"the waves and the white beach of Grand Isle; the quiet, grassy street of the Cheniere Caminada; the old sunny fort at Grande Terre."

In 2007, I was invited to speak at Berry College's Southern Women Writers Conference about "homecomings," and I had the chance to explore further Kate Chopin's encounters with storms and floods during her early years in New Orleans—as well as with the 1893 storm that destroyed a place she loved and make some connections with my own experience of living through the losses of Hurricane Katrina. Those connections greatly sharpened my appreciation of the impending loss that underlies Chopin's narrative. In 1898, when she was composing those final scenes of *The Awakening*, Chopin knew that not only were Edna's dreams of self-possession well beyond her character's limited grasp, but also that the warming ocean was already brewing the great storm that would sweep away any remnant of that possible world about which she and Robert had fantasized. But it was also sweeping away her own past in Louisiana and many of the places that she had also lost.

From my own first "meeting" with Kate Chopin and her amazing fiction, I have felt a private kinship with her—her rebellious spirit, her affection for Louisiana places and people, her passion for writing, her deep insight into women's lives and our struggle to be whole in a culture that prefers to limit us to its own requirements. I have never looked back—except with gratitude and pleasure that I "looked like" I could teach women's studies! [Laughter and applause]

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Emily Toth: I want to thank everybody here—and everybody not here. You can't be too careful. [Laughter] I first met Kate Chopin when I was (I realize now) rather young and unformed. I thought I knew everything. I was a few years younger than Edna when my friend Annette handed me a copy of *The Awakening* at an antiwar march and said, "You should read this."

I did, and had the well-known reaction, as Barbara mentioned: "How did Kate Chopin know all that in the 1890s?" We were struggling with the Sexual Revolution and figuring out women's place in the universe. And here was a woman who'd asked those questions nearly a hundred years ago. That her book was banned (we thought) made it even more thrilling. [Laughter] It was not banned.

My life's epiphanies have mostly come through the intervention of Kate Chopin. *The Awakening* inspired me to write my dissertation on Chopin and to pursue her life for most of my life. I have spent a lot more time on her life than she did, actually. [Laughter] I continue to gain on her. In the 1980s my friend Susan Koppelman happened to meet a St. Louis neighbor named Kate Chopin—who was the cousin of the great-granddaughters on the panel today. That Kate Chopin, "Young Kate," they called her, connected me with your family, which is how I met your parents, David and Ann Chopin, and since then most of their children—all of whom seem to have wit, charm, and a commitment to social justice. I know the original Kate Chopin would have enjoyed their company.

Meanwhile, Kate Chopin has accompanied me at every stage of my life. She's always told me, "Don't trim your ambitions." When I was looking for my first academic job, she encouraged me to apply in Louisiana—someplace I'd never been. I fell in love with Louisiana, as she did, and I stayed.

She also indulged my love of secrets. Even as a teen, Kate O'Flaherty had figured out how to make herself popular (You act interested no matter what. You look into people's eyes and ask, "What did *you* think?"And, she said, you would be reported as being one of the most intelligent people they had ever met). [Laughter] As a young wife and mom, she did imitations of animals, birds, and priests, and her husband egged her on. After his death, she had a merry widow-ish kind of fling—something that's turned out to be very popular among women I know. [Laughter]

Writing about her life put me in touch with a whole cadre of widows in Cloutierville, Louisiana, the small town where she lived, who told me many things my mother didn't teach me. I'm grateful to them every day.

Kate Chopin did warn me against people like Mademoiselle Reisz, who say, "Let's you rebel against the system!" But she also told me not to listen to the most conventional voices: "It's not seemly, it's not nice, you'll make enemies if you say what you think."

Kate Chopin enabled me to be an independent and obnoxious academic, and I'm grateful for that. She taught me about Catholic and Unitarian ways—and I used to go to mass, and now I belong to a Unitarian church. You can find Unitarianism in *At Fault*, one of the few novels of the time that has that. She encouraged me to fall asleep when anything got boring—and that got me through a lot of faculty meetings with minimum guilt. [Laughter]

I wouldn't have created my Ms. Mentor, my academic advice columnist on the net, if Kate Chopin hadn't made fun of the pompous ass academics of St. Louis.

I used to identify with Edna. Then, as I got older, I identified with Kate Chopin, but I outlived her. Now, though, with the kind of androgyny that comes with age, I find my favorite character in *The Awakening* is Dr. Mandelet. He knows "Youth is given over to illusions," and that's true. I'm glad Kate Chopin told me that when I was young, so I learned to be ironic.

She's been my guide, my voice, and my foremother. Some years I have a birthday party for her. I have a feeling she'd like us to eat cake.

Now I will turn this over to those of you who want to ask questions or to make any comments, but I would like to tell the Chopin sisters that I'm actually a member of your family. You don't know this. When I was researching Kate Chopin's life, I was trying to find birth certificates for her children. And at that time in New Orleans, you couldn't get birth certificates for other people if you were not a member of their family. That was because of racism. There were white people who got annoyed in discovering they had black ancestors. I was told I couldn't get birth certificates for Kate Chopin's children who were born in New Orleans. So I asked your dad, Dave, could he write me some kind of permission slip, and he said, "Why don't you just write to them again and sign your name Emily Chopin Toth?" [Laughter] So I did, and I got the stuff. [Laughter]

So I want to say to everybody here, "From now on, your middle name is Chopin." [Applause]

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Bernie Koloski: We have a little time for questions and answers. May I just say that a lot of you have been at American Literature Association sessions for years, and you know that this has not been a representative ALA panel. [Laughter] I think all of us are extraordinarily grateful not only to the Chopin sisters but also to our scholars for making this so superb. We wanted to do something special to celebrate the founding of our Kate Chopin International Society ten years ago, and I think you'll agree that, thanks to them all, this has been rather successful. [Applause] Are there questions?

Question: When I opened *Preservation News* a few years ago, I read about a disastrous fire at the Chopin historic site. There are many people here who are interested not just in American literature but also in American studies—material culture, architecture, and so forth. What was the family's reaction? How devastating was it in terms of material effects left by Kate Chopin. Is there anything left?

Annette Chopin Lare: I actually did visit the house before it burned down. That news did hit me hard. I got the news from a history professor at the college where I was working in Pennsylvania. I saw that just the chimney remained. So, yes, it just hit me in the gut. So far as I could tell, everything was gone. I had been in the house, and my daughter Brittany was in the house, and I remember that there were photographs that went up in smoke, photographs from Oscar Chopin's plantation where he had been raised. There was an original watercolor of my aunt Marjorie, who was a painter—she became a painter in her old age. She had done a painting of the house, and that was gone. It did hit me hard, because, you know, we are getting farther and farther away from Kate's life and there are fewer and fewer artifacts. So to have that giant artifact go up in smoke was devastating.

There is one house in St. Louis that's still standing. I keep hoping that there's some benefactor somewhere who will decide that there needs to be another Kate Chopin house, so that something can be re-created somehow.

Emily Toth: There's also one house in New Orleans still.

Annette: Two houses. Yes, we need two benefactors. [Laughter]

Emily: Barbara actually spent the night in that house, the one that is gone.

Barbara Ewell: Yes, I did. And it was wonderful. But it is my sense that mostly it was destroyed, but that there were very few original pieces from the house. The house had been emptied of anything that belonged to the original Chopins, but still, a lot of people had donated nineteenth-century furniture and there was a lot of period stuff in the house, as well as these unique artifacts.

Tom Bonner: I think there was some family silver. . . .

Audience member: Three tablespoons, three silver tablespoons.

Tom: Judith and I had visited the house just before it burned, and, I don't know why, but I made of list of everything Chopin that was in the house. [The list that Tom made is posted on the "Kate Chopin's Family Today" area of the Kate Chopin International Society website—KateChopin.org]

Annette: I had heard that an original copy of *The Awakening* was rescued. Is that wrong?

Tom: I don't think there was an original copy of *The Awakening* in the house. There was a *Bayou Folk,* I believe.

Emily: There was another book that I had donated to the house that went under.

Barbara: And there is still the archive in Natchitoches which has some of the paper. . . .

Emily: And the Missouri History Museum [formerly the Missouri Historical Society] in St. Louis has artifacts.

Bernie: I've been in the house, too, and I think what was so devastating about the fire was the house itself, the loss of the symbolic power of the house. It isn't so much the contents. I think the archives, as you would agree, are more or less safe.

Barbara: Yet people donated paintings, and there were all sorts of other things like that.

Emily: There is still a table that belonged to her lover/boyfriend in Cloutierville that is in someone's house. I know it's there, and I can't get the people to agree to take it somewhere. I don't know where to take it, but I know where it is.

Susie: I think the fire was hard on me, because that was a road trip that someday I was going to take, and then that wasn't an option anymore. So. . . .

Question: I have a question for the family. Readers all know Edna, but they don't know Kate as well. Do you identify more with Edna or with Kate?

Gerri: Are you asking your wife? [Laughter]

Gerri: Are you asking me really? . . . I actually . . . Hum . . . I think both. Absolutely both. I think that Edna did feel that she had lost her identity, in her role, or that she struggled with that loss of identity in her role, and we, as mothers, we do—and we willingly do, and we must, for a while, I think—give that up. And so in that sense we identify as mothers with those struggles. "Who am I?" we ask ourselves.

It wasn't until I took a job where nobody knew I had kids that all of a sudden I was Gerri Chopin. I wasn't Paul or John or Carolyn or Kristin's mom. I really remember when that switch happened, because for many years I was that mom. And in that sense I identify with Edna.

I actually wouldn't want to identify with the losses that Kate experienced. I thought her life was . . . devastating.

Susie: I identify with both, and with Kate. . . . I think we have a strength that she had. We are all survivors. Kate was kind of gutsy and seemed like a really strong, happy woman. And I think that's what we feel.

Annette: You know, she did have all that loss, but I look at the loss she *didn't* experience. She did not lose her children—at a time when children routinely were lost. Even our grandparents lost two children, and yet Kate gave birth to six children, and they all lived. So she had that.

I would like to say, too, that [turning to Emily] you've written about how she craved, how she wanted approval. She wanted success in terms of her writing. She wanted success. I'm now beyond that age where she was. Gerri's at her age. Susie's a little younger. She had so much life ahead of her. She did die so prematurely. And she would be so darn pleased. She would be so gratified to know that people were reading her books. If there's an afterlife, I hope that she's aware of all this.

Question: Would you three want to say anything about Catholicism? Because I always think of Kate Chopin as a Catholic writer. Calvary is a Catholic cemetery. So you've grown up in a Catholic household, all three of you . . .

Annette: A radical Catholic household, though. . . .

Emily: You know, the first time I ever went to Calvary Cemetery, it was with your dad. He took me there to show me the cemetery, to show me where Kate was buried. Then we went around and looked at other people, at all the other people's graves. But he talked about them as if they were people. He said Kitty Garesche was Kate's best friend. I can understand your love of that cemetery.

But I don't get the impression about Kate's life—you can all speak about your lives—that Kate was really all that interested or committed to Catholicism, anyway. There were Protestants in her family, she stopped going to church when she didn't have to anymore, and she hung around Unitarians.

Bernie: Well, if you look at this panel, all six people on this panel have Catholic backgrounds. . . .

Emily: Not me, really. . . . [Laughter] My father left the Catholic church. . . .

Annette: Divorce. You know, some people think that divorce isn't a big deal. Divorce *was* a big deal. When we were growing up, I knew one family. . . . We did grow up in a Catholic neighborhood where it was common to have six or seven or eight kids. There was only one family that I knew of where they were divorced. That was a little weird. And my parents, our mother especially, stressed that whatever you do, you try to make it work, you don't get divorced. Susie mentioned the divorce she went through. My daughter . . . she got divorced just in the last few months, and I know it was the right decision, but it's still so hard, and I think that's surprising. It's maybe those Catholic roots . . . marriage is sacrosanct.

And I can understand why. . . Well, one, I think Edna was bored. [Laughter]

Emily: And she was not a Catholic, anyway. [Laughter]

Annette: They had nothing to do. Even if you were a mother, they didn't take care of their children, they didn't nurse their children. Divorce was devastating. It was a disgrace. I certainly don't feel that way about Susie, I don't feel that way about my daughter, and yet it's just still. . . .

Barbara: It's a tough one.

Bernie: And it's maybe partly why Susie likes *At Fault*. I love that book, too. I've loved it for twenty-five years. It's a very powerful book. For those of you who have not read it, it's a book about divorce, and about the effects of divorce on the mentality of people . . .

Susie: When I was going through my divorce, I went to my local priest, and I said "Look, I just need to know where the church stands on divorce right now, because this is my safe haven. I

want to be able to come, sit in the pew, rest my brain, and be able to pray. . . . Where do you stand?"

He said we've really given people who need to get out of marriages a bum rap. He didn't come out and apologize, but he kind of apologized. I wasn't looking for that. . . I just wanted to feel okay inside the church. If there's one place I need to go right now where I can sit and rest and pray and feel safe and peaceful, I just want to be able to go and do that. And he said "Come on in." I loved and appreciated him for that.

Gerri: I would credit the nuns who educated Kate. Our daughters went to Catholic high schools, and I tell you, nuns do wonderful work. And so just in response to where Kate was influenced in the Catholic church, I would give credit to the Sacred Heart nuns who educated her.

Emily: She got the best education girls could have at that time with the Sacred Heart nuns.

Question: Well I would follow that up by asking Emily about the Unitarian influence as you see it, because as a Unitarian speaking to a Unitarian—I am one also—how do you see that being influential in Kate's life?

Emily: There are at least three Unitarians in this room who identify themselves. Actually, it's funny you asked that because the last couple of years, I've proposed to give a paper at this conference on Kate Chopin's Unitarianism. It's always turned down. [Laughter] So no one cares except you and me. I do think *At Fault*, which has some Unitarian characters has some Unitarian principles, such as the inherent worth [?] and dignity of every individual. The book hasn't been looked into from that point of view. It's clear that some of the people Kate Chopin was friendly with in St. Louis were very big in Unitarian circles. Unitarianism was brought to St. Louis by T. S. Eliot's grandfather, and T. S. Eliot's mother was a friend of Kate Chopin's, and so there really are connections there.

Audience member: One of the biggest Unitarian churches in the Midwest is in St. Louis.

Emily: Yes, so I think there was a competing religion, if you consider Unitarianism a religion. In some ways it may have replaced Catholicism as a creed [for Kate Chopin], as a way of looking at the world.

Bernie: Let's do one more question.

Question: I do have another material-context question. The area that Kate Chopin wrote about. . . . I can't think of another major American writer whose terrain has been so devastated. The bayou country is disappearing, the Gulf is eating into the world she wrote about, New Orleans has been repeatedly lambasted—it was once the third-largest city in the United States. How do you feel about that, and how do the scholars feel? The world that she wrote about is very fragile. It's not just her house.

Barbara: Well, I would say, first of all, she wasn't the only writer, and in fact that whole area, especially New Orleans, has attracted a lot of writers, and yes, New Orleans is disappearing, but I think of New Orleans a little bit like Venice. It's been disappearing for years.

Question: What do you think about a hundred years from now?

Barbara: I think that it is true that that is disappearing and that does add some of the poignance to her fiction, and maybe it's important that it does record that space in the world. [?]

Emily: I want to add to that, too, that anything we write—and by we, I mean everybody here, all you Chopin people—anything we write draws on our life experience, and it might be worthwhile for you all to know that in Katrina, Barbara was evacuated, I lost the apartment that I had, and Tom lost his house, lost everything. And so for us, Katrina and the disappearing South Louisiana is not an abstraction.

Tom: I think in many ways there is sort of a metaphorical quality to the actual life there, of the extremes of life, that we are constantly reminded of the brevity of life, we are constantly reminded of the value of life as a result of that.

Emily: I think *The Awakening* has that, that sense of mortality.

Bernie: I guess we'll have to stop now.

Anybody who thinks that fiction doesn't touch people's lives in a very personal way should read the transcript of this session.

Thanks for coming. [Applause]