On July 3rd, 2018, Professor Meredith McGill of Rutgers University delivered the first Mastheads “Tuesdays on the Terrace” lecture at the Berkshire Athenaeum. She spoke about the Berkshire connections of Stockbridge novelist Catherine Sedgwick and offered a report on her studies of the American actress Sarah Kemble. McGill discussed how Kemble and Sedgwick challenged gender norms of the early nineteenth century in their lives and works, and provided an interpretive reading of an excerpt from Sedgwick’s short story “Catherine and Bertha.” She ended by asking what difference it would make if we took the friendship between Sedgwick and Kemble rather than the famous meeting between Melville and Hawthorne as the starting point for a literary history of the Berkshires.

McGill is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University. She is the author of American Literature and the Culture of Reproductive, 1857-1923 (2003), a study of American literature and women’s reproductive property. She has edited two collections of essays: Taking Liberties with the Author (2013), and The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange (2006). She is currently completing a study of poetry and mass culture in the antebellum U.S.

I want to begin by thanking you all for coming out on this sweltering evening. I also want to thank everyone involved with the Mastheads project—Toad Hall, Chris Pietrantonio, et al.—the legal and social doctrine whereby a woman’s rights and obligations were subsumed or “covered” first by her husband and then by her husband. Sedgwick (like Emily Dickinson after her) never made her fame as an extraordinary writer at the same time. She was an extraordinarily difficult marriage for the actress as she extricated herself from her difficult marriage; Catherine’s brothers acted as her lawyer in her notorious divorce case while Catherine and her sister-in-law Elizabeth hosted Fanny and her children for long country visits at numerous difficult junctures.

What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves. What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves. What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves. What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves. What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves. What did they see in one another? I want to suggest this evening that both women seemed to recognize in the other something they craved for themselves.
and thought, we actually have to understand the legacy of Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century—he really casts a shadow well into the twentieth century and arguably, for those of you who have read his fourth of July oration, it's really almost as if he's talking to us today.

What was the date I said I wanted you to remember? 1895. 1895 has the distinction of being the year when three important things happened. First, 1895 was the date that Frederick Douglass died in Washington D.C. 1895 was also the year that Du Bois finished his doctoral dissertation in the history department at Harvard University on the suppression of the African slave trade. And the third significant thing was the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington. In the wake of Douglass's death, Du Bois and Washington both were vying to be the heir to Douglass. Booker T. Washington and Du Bois had philosophical differences about how in their view the ex-slave population could be integrated within society. Du Bois believed that forms of educational training—secondary and also higher degrees of training—were essential. Booker T. Washington was an advocate for vocational training, technical knowledge, and in 1895 he gave a speech that sometimes is called the Atlanta address and sometimes is called the Atlanta Compromise. Washington not only spoke about what the future of the so-called Negro or black would be in America. But also according to those like Du Bois who saw the speech as a conciliatory measure, it was a problem that Washington did not critique the history of slavery or white supremacy. This led to a feud that would continue for many years. Another thing that has is less well-mind is that Du Bois had hoped to write the first biography of Frederick Douglass. This was his major project after he published The Souls of Black Folk in 1903. The editor for the press had the contract on the way. And then Du Bois got contacted by the editor who says, Oh, well, Willie—that was what he went by them—I know you promised that you could write that biography, but I sent a message to Booker T. Washington early and I didn't hear back from him, so that's why I wrote to you. And Booker T. when he found out that Du Bois was interested in writing the Douglass biography, ended up saying, I would love to do it. And so Booker T. actually has the distinction of having that first major biography of Douglass, though we now know that Booker T. used a ghostwriter. But part of this was about the competition for Douglass's legacy.

Du Bois was one of the founders of the Niagara Movement—this was the movement founded on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls right before the birth of the NAACP. Before this Du Bois was primarily an academic…But at a certain moment Du Bois was not simply interested in being an academic; he was interested in trying to influence policy. And though he never became a politician on the level of Douglass, he was interested in social movements—one of which was the Niagara Movement and one of which was the NAACP. Du Bois resigned from his post at Atlantic University and became the head of The Crisis, which was the Niagara Movement and one of which was the NAACP. Du Bois resigned from his post at Atlantic University and became the head of The Crisis, which was and still is the flagship magazine of the NAACP. This is mainly because he saw the power of something he learned from Douglass: not just the significance of magazines and newspapers as forms of writing, but also the ways in which certain issues capture popular audiences, and how popular audiences actually address these issues. In The Gift of Black Folk, arott of 1904 that I would urge all of you to please read—it's one of the least discussed texts of Du Bois—Du Bois tries to think through the gifts that blacks are giving to the world. Not only in terms of the aesthetic dimension but also in terms of ideas—talking about politics in a world in which many people think that things could not be otherwise. How can that actually be? In some sense what he's asking is, is the condition black people are facing a curse or a gift. And in many regards Du Bois thought that it was a gift. At the end of his life—I gather that one of the big reasons in Great Barrington for the resistance to honoring Du Bois is his membership in the Communist Party USA, his renouncing of his citizenship and moving to Ghana. You know when Du Bois passed away, he passes away the night before the March on Washington in 1963. So Du Bois lives this long life into his mid nineties, someone who like Douglass spent so much of his time not only thinking about negative freedom—the world he didn't want to live in—but the world that we should forge. And at a certain point he says, I've tried everything. I've written books. I've written poetry. I've edited a magazine. I've done everything I can, and he says, you know what, maybe my services are to be utilized elsewhere. So he dies in Ghana right before the March on Washington. And my last point is that I would argue that what we now see with the Black Lives Matter movement—this movement of really young people—is in many regards a new Niagara movement. It is another movement that has cross-racial solidarity, a movement of young people who are trying to think about the state of US society, asking not only about society as it is but also the society that we want it to become...
Kamea Quett wasn’t normal to us. We went our separate ways for middle school being pitied for having different dads but she’s still my sister” so when we got a new pair of shoes so it was normal to us. When we did...