Welcome to our third Mastheads fold held in The Berkshire Eagle, THE PLACE. The Mastheads is a literary and architectural project in Pittsfield. Our final fold, THE PRODUCT, will be released on August 25. Learn more at mastheads.org, and thank you for following along! 

Brice jelly and Chris Parkinson, Project Directors

The Mastheads Roundtable, July 17

Excerpt from conversation with Daniel L. Smith

On Monday, July 17th, David L. Smith, John W. Chandler Professor of English at Williams College, spoke at Hotel On North as part of the Mastheads Roundtable, an ongoing series of talks organized in conjunction with The Mastheads residency program. Smith spoke about writer and Berkshire County resident Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Herman Melville, Fanny Kemble, and John Greenleaf Whittier.

Smith’s scholarly endeavors include Mark Twain, Southern Literature, Nature Writing, and the Black Arts Movement, and he is editor, with Jack Salzman and Cornel West, of The Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History. In the past, L. D. Crouch-Smith, Smith has published Cowery Amok and Civil Rights, both from The Black Scholar Press.

...at this point I’d like to pause and shift directions in order to incorporate some other writers of our region, important contemporaries of Holmes and Melville: Fanny Kemble, 1809-1893, and John Greenleaf Whittier, 1807-1892. See all of these people—Melville is ten years younger, but the rest of them are all within a year of each other, both in their birth and in their death. It’s amazing.

Kemble and Whittier are both essential to discussions that I would encourage us to pursue involving Antebellum writers of our region and more broadly, of American literary culture in that period. Unfortunately they are both commonly overlooked.

Fanny Kemble is one of the most gifted young actresses there, and was a star in many productions at Covent Garden. Her parents were equally involved both as performers and on the management side of things. Fanny came to the U.S. to do a fairly performing season andeatures of Shakespeare. She enjoyed great acclaim. I think she enjoyed the acclaim but she didn’t like being in the plays. She liked doing other things on the stage, but she didn’t like the acting part. But she was a great actor and

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In Philadelphia she met Peter Butler—sounds like a name out of a movie, right? Peter Butler. He was a very wealthy man in Georgia. After a brief romance the two married. Shortly afterward, Butler inherited a pair of Georgia plantations and 300 slaves. He was already a rich man, and he inherited this from his grandfather. He becomes one of the richest men in America at that time. He moved back to Georgia with Fanny, who had no idea of slavery and plantation life. She was horrified by what she saw there. She hired her husband to try to persuade him to move back North, or at least to make changes in the treatment and in the living conditions of the slaves and he refused on both counts.

The Confidence Man, published—

It was an ongoing struggle and people in the North did not want the South seceding and forming another country. Some of them thought slavery was an abomination, some thought it was not their business, but they still wanted to keep the Union together. It was still a struggle. It didn’t end when the Southerners filed for South State. It was ongoing, so the fact that Kemble could not publish her work until 1863 does not mean that it was not a very important factor in shaping opinion in the north.

This book has a unique historical status as one detailing the abusive day-to-day life on plantations observed by a non-southerner who lived as one for fourteen years. She was married to this man from 1834 to 1840, so she saw, including—and she’s the only person I’ve seen to give an accounting of the Southerns, although this is captured a little in Gone With The Wind, the Tarantino movie—Southern men have this elaborate ruse—you’re served by the server, and, the wife of a plantation owner would be in her best Southern Belle routine—and after dinner the gentleman would have brandy and then they would go for a walk with cigars. They would go on a tour of the slave cabins. And that was a nightmare for picking out some slave woman to abuse. Even if she had a husband or whatever, they’d say “Get out of bed, you are property.” So, Kemble writes about that. It’s not something you find in other texts about life in the South during that time. It is still an illuminating book.
Also pro-slavery sentiment. There was a real debate going on about what was to be done.

With the Stowe House. With that million dollars—now I had wanted to do a lot of stu...

The Mastheads Roundtable, July 24

Excerpt from conversation with Tess Chakkalakal

On Monday, July 24th, Professor Tess Chakkalakal of Bowdoin College spoke at Hotel on North on local abolitionist circles and the importance of preserving physical ties to our literary past. The talk was part of The Mastheads Roundtable, a series of events organized in conjunction with the Mastheads residency program.

Tess Chakkalakal has published widely on nineteenth-century African American and American literature. She is the author of Novels of Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America (Urbana, 2010), winner of the John Hope Franklin Prize. Her most recent book is a long-awaited anthology of American literature from the Canadian Association of American Studies. She is also the author of Becoming Americans, The Jews of Letter, and The Fellowship of the Air—studies of Yiddish and English at Rutgers University and Director of Research for The Mastheads. A free copy of Excerpt by Jeffrey Lawrence from The Mastheads Reader may be picked up at The Berkshire Museum, The Lenox Library, or The Litchfield Union Library.

And most importantly, I work—or I’m not sure, and I want to hear your responses and questions—what I think is most important about the house is how it changes the story of the novel.

So, Whittier became a very popular poet, and he was a Quaker, not just somebody who was influenced by the Quaker sensibility that you cannot commit violence. Avoid conflict. So there is a kind of elegance to it.

But so the black people in the Abolitionist Movement, of whom there were many in the Hudson Valley, set off from here, including Douglass himself, who came as a part of its program in its organization, to beg for that example, that he knew perfectly well that’s not the way to get black people out of slavery. So there was this internal battle—struggle, I should call it—over the strategic outcomes. The fact that the North, the Constitution itself was a corrupt document because it sanctioned slavery. And so, what should happen is that the North should secede from the South, rewrite the Constitution, and make itself a sanctuary for escaped slaves. Now, that’s kind of hopeful, indirect way of trying to achieve the abolition of slavery, but I reflected the Quaker sentiment that you cannot commit violence. Avoid conflict. So there is a kind of elegance to it.

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are as sonorous, and the silence the same, too, that the first peep of a strange house, rising beyond the trees, is for all the world like spring, on the Barbary coast, an unknown sail." His eye roamed from the scene before him to the vast ocean of his recollection to the classical volumes on his bookshelf. He ratches glimpses of Shakespeare scattered all around him ("two sportcoats, creased and settled back-seat cloth, seemed guilty Mahfelt and foregoing Banquet") and glimpses insights from Spenser and Cervantes. The very name of the woman in the cottage (Marianne) invokes a character from Memoirs for Meuse, as well as Lord Tennyson's well-known 1833 poem. Indeed, by the last paragraphs of the story, we begin to suspect that the entire Greylock encounter may be a flight of fancy emanating from the narrator's overheated brain. Like so much of Melville's fiction, "The Pianist" evinces the style of a man who had traveled widely, read deeply, and imagined even more.

Before his arrival in Lenox in early 1830, Hawthorne, too, led an itinerant lifestyle, though his journeys had largely been confined to New England. Born in the coastal seaport of Salem to a family whose Puritan roots stretched back far into the colonial era, Hawthorne spent most of his adult life moving from place to place. In the early 1830s, he was one of the original stockholders in the utopian community Brook Farm, and he remained close friends with Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller. Emerson. In 1840, after briefly moving into his childhood home in Salem, he wrote the novella "Old Saint in the Stairs," and his periodic stays in Pittsfield influenced the writing of his 1849 novel, "The House of Seven Gables." Hawthorne was a prolific writer, producing short stories, novels, and collections of essays that spanned his lifetime.

Hawthorne's "A Wonder Book" has a more obviously Berkshire setting, though even in the Shorter Notebooks of the Boston district hills glided away. Everything was unfixed from its age-long rest, and moving and whirling and shifting in a direction opposite its own. Art from his own foundations while composing "The House of Seven Gables." Paul Revere acts as the House of Seven Gables. Hawthorne has dramatized the lives of those who literally see their social universe being whirled away.

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In 1844, Henry David Thoreau hiked to the top of Mount Greylock, and in a Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, he documented his Berkshire impressions. A lifelong resident of Concord, Thoreau's experience with the Berkshire region is mirrored in his later works, such as Walden; or, Life in the Woods. The period he spent on Williams College's mountaintop observatory suggests that he may have been inspired by his Berkshire encounters. In the words of the narrator, "The Old Clock on the Stairs" is a fitting homage to God gathering the burial ground’s inhabitants into his celestial fold.

For more famous in their time than in ours, Pitfield’s two summer residents, the poets Longfellow and Holmes, were a major draw for the city’s summer literary culture. Born into an illustrious Massachusetts family, Longfellow was by almost all accounts the most famous American poet of the nineteenth century. His epic poetry "The Song of Hiawatha," set in the small New England town of Fairmeadow, is for all the world like spying, on the Barbary coast, a more obviously Berkshire setting, though even in his Shorter Notebooks the Boston district hills glided away. Everything was unfixed from its age-long rest, and moving and whirling and shifting in a direction opposite its own. Art from his own foundations while composing "The House of Seven Gables." Paul Revere acts as the House of Seven Gables. Hawthorne has dramatized the lives of those who literally see their social universe being whirled away.

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Savor the subtle tastes of wild edibles. Chickweed looks like clover. Maybe it's a kind of clover. Pigweed is wild amaranth. You need to cook it, but it actually tastes good. Goosefoot—also called lamb's quarters—grows in hot disturbed places as well. It's a creep. Dandelion greens have gotten pretty bitter this time of year, but they're everywhere, and there's a puritan righ about them that makes up for the unpleasant taste. Coneflower—also called lady's quarter—grows in hot disturbed dusty places, like parking lots or construction sites. There's often a pink blaze at the base of each leaf. It's related to the writing about eating wild edibles for a long time. I never knew they were edible until I learned that. I think it's a good idea to do something similar for our Masthead's writers. After all, becoming a writer means sitting down at a desk and writing, but it also means learning how to be a writer. By which I mean learning to endure humiliating privations. A writer who knows that he or she can find nourishment in an open field or flower garden has a clear advantage over the writer eating Fig Dinges under a bare bud. At least in the summertime.

Here's a warning. Don't eat anything you can't identify.

Don't take my word for anything either. Do have a handy Berkshire County foraging guide. Violets are gone by mid-June, but violet leaves are available all summer.

July is a good time for blackcaps, which are wild blackberries. They grow at the margins of woods.

Wild blueberries are ripe too. You're more likely to find them on top of a mountain than outside your studio. But you never know. Dandelions have gotten pretty bitter this time of year, but they're everywhere, and there's a puritan righ about them that makes up for the unpleasant taste.

Coneflowers—also called lady's quarter—grows in hot disturbed dusty places, like parking lots or construction sites. There's often a pink blaze at the base of each leaf. It's related to a certain of violets, and I said so. No small number of violets either, but something like two or three hundred individual flowers. Luckily, they approved of this meal on rhetorical grounds; the phrase “though it be only a dandelion” so appeased her that she had substantiated objections.

Conewig eating violets and other weeds for a long time. I grew up in the Berkshires, and I know just what's out there. I might have had to take this from me, so that I haven't stumbled upon eat every wild plant I see, but he pays close attention, and he's inclined eat every wild plant he was anybody. I decided that the best thing was to teach him what I know, so that he grows up with an understanding of this environment.

And think it's a good idea to do something similar for our Masthead's writers. After all, becoming a writer means sitting down at a desk and writing, but it also means learning how to be a writer. By which I mean learning to endure humiliating privations. A writer who knows that he or she can find nourishment in an open field or flower garden has a clear advantage over the writer eating Fig Dinges under a bare bud. At least in the summertime.

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I've been eating violets and other weeds for a long time. I never knew they were edible until I learned that. I think it's a good idea to do something similar for our Masthead's writers. After all, becoming a writer means sitting down at a desk and writing, but it also means learning how to be a writer. By which I mean learning to endure humiliating privations. A writer who knows that he or she can find nourishment in an open field or flower garden has a clear advantage over the writer eating Fig Dinges under a bare bud. At least in the summertime.

The World is your chemical cocktails in your brain. It's your hand, if it helps, is a dandelion storm that you need to go looking for new ideas. I make the following claim as a denizen of a wild flower: it may not be a real claim, or that it's really, or that it is, may be purely rhetorical—but it seems true to me. Writing is a little bit like foraging.

Ideas, in any case, are really like weeds. They flourish in disturbed places or at the margins of things. You don't always know them when you see them. Sometimes they're invisible, and sometimes they're visible, and some require careful preparation to make them palatable. Aaron Thier is the author of three novels, The Ghost Apple, Mr. Eternity, and Godspeed (forthcoming 2013).

Walking the Baby Our Reflection

Sarah Trudgeon

It is a cyborg shadow in endless unincornered circles. It is smeared windows all buckeye petals is all wavy terrain is a cyborg shadow in endless unsentenced circles. I am my house. I am dark.

I see the world. I am dark.

I live in a white warm in the world and in the world and in the world.

I am a cyborg shadow in endless unsentenced circles.

I am my house.

I am the world.

I am dark.

I am my house.

I am the world.