

On a wet Sunday, we walk around a field of wildflowers outside the home of Herman Melville just after sunset, staring into our studios as fireflies sparkle around us. We are five writers, and we'll spend three weeks here in the Berkshire. Each of us have each been assigned to a studio named for an American Renaissance writer with a connection to the area. The structures are eight-by-eight, black on the outside and pine on the inside, with the smell of a sauna when you open the door. Mine is Hawthorne.

Later, one of us asks the others, "So do you like the work of the writer your studio is named for?" Partially recovering from a cold, partially jet lagged, and full of imposter syndrome, I couldn't think of Nathaniel Hawthorne's work in that moment. "Well, a commercially successful writer, that's something," she fills in my silence.

A hundred and fifty years earlier and on the other side of the state in Salem, Charlotte Forten flipped through *Houses of American Authors*, a book her friend and teacher Sarah leant her. Charlotte loved writers and imagining herself in far-flung places. She might have longed to be in a book like this someday, although she could barely admit that to herself. It was the mid-1850s, and Charlotte wrote in her journal that she wanted to be a teacher, which was aspirational but realistic for a middle-class, free Black woman. She hoped her life as a teacher would help her "in fitting myself for laboring in a holy cause, for enabling me to do much towards changing the condition of my oppressed and suffering people," she wrote. She came from one of the most prominent abolitionist families in Philadelphia and one of the wealthiest Black families in the country. In Salem, she was living at the home of Charles Lenox Remond, a Black anti-slavery lecturer.

Being an abolitionist meant being informed, intelligent, and well-read. Charlotte knew she must aspire to this. So every night when she finished with school, the sixteen year-old read the poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Lord Byron, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels, John Milton's epics, and the current editions of abolitionist newspapers including *The Liberator*. She was a writer, too. Soon, William Lloyd Garrison would publish one of her poems in his newspaper.

I'm reading Charlotte's journal because I'm writing about the children of abolitionists, how they grew up entrenched in this ideology, and how they had to find their own path, which sometimes meant telling their parents their generation wasn't radical enough. Charlotte's mother and aunts were founders of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and her grandfather, a sailmaker and businessman, gave Garrison the money to print the first issue of *The Liberator*.

By the time I enter my studio on the first full day of our residency, I remember that Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, a book I haven't read since high school.

I begin reading about Charlotte and Salem, and in her journal, she writes of her love of Nathaniel Hawthorne. I smile in my pine box. In June 1854, she read his "thrilling story," *The Scarlet Letter*. The next year, she was surprised she'd never walked to the Customs House in her adopted home of Salem, the building that provides the title for the essay that begins *The Scarlet Letter*. Charlotte read *Tanglewood Tales* and *House of Seven Gables*. She socialized with Hawthorne's sister and, a few years later, was surprised at the beauty of his daughter's writing. It doesn't matter if I like Hawthorne or not.

Charlotte never mentions reading work by Herman Melville, which might not be surprising. He wasn't commercially successful like Hawthorne, and wouldn't be recognized as a great American writer until the 20th century. *Homes of American Authors: Comprising Anecdotal, Personal, and Descriptive Sketches*, the book that Charlotte's friend Sarah lent her, is reserved for the most popular American authors in the mid-1850s, and so, there's no Melville, no Arrowhead. If he had been included, the book might have said that he looked out onto Mount Greylock and this field and wrote.

A week into our time at the residency, we joke that maybe we can conjure Melville with a seance in his studio. We can light candles and sit in a circle and he can bring us brilliance.

Maybe places can do more than inspire. Maybe they can bring strange, disparate things together. Would I have been as touched by Charlotte's love of Hawthorne if I wasn't in a studio bearing his name?

Hawthorne is in *Homes of American Authors*: "Hawthorne has himself drawn the picture of the 'Old Manse' in Concord," a home that is described as gloomy and melancholy. A home that inspired him, with his probing of guilt and his exploration of morality.

This is not the house Charlotte Forten wanted. Yes, she dreamt of a home where she might live with her father, stepmother, and half brothers. But no, not in a gloomy country meadow. "I love the water, and sometimes think I could live 'on the ocean wave,'" she wrote, but a home with a view of the water might do. If she was really honest, the home might be abroad: "Oh! England my heart yearns towards thee, to dwell in one of the quiet homes far from the

scenes of my early childhood; far from the land, my native land—where I am hated and opposed because God has given me a dark skin.” Charlotte had little time for those who didn’t participate in the anti-slavery cause, and no time for those who were bigoted.

She deeply admired the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who was committed to abolitionism and in 1862, encouraged Charlotte to travel to South Carolina and teach newly freed people in Port Royal. He wrote a hymn called “The Contraband of Port Royal” that was set to music.

The image displays a musical score for the hymn "The Contraband of Port Royal" by John Greenleaf Whittier. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, with a tempo marking of quarter note = 120. The music is presented on five staves, with measure numbers 6, 11, 16, and 21 indicated at the beginning of their respective lines. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals, ending with a double bar line.

Would Charlotte have been invited into Hawthorne's home had she found herself in Concord or in the red farmhouse in the Berkshires where he spent the summers?

Would Charlotte have even entered Nathaniel Hawthorne's home if she'd known his views on slavery?

His most damning statement, he wrote in a letter in 1851: *I have not the slightest sympathy for slaves*. A fan of Andrew Jackson, he also wrote (before the Civil War): "...the laboring whites...are ten times worse off than the southern negroes." He wrote other things, things I don't want to write here, nor do I want to speak aloud.

Hawthorne was different than many of his New England contemporaries. After a man named Anthony Burns was sent back to slavery in Virginia from Boston in 1854, Henry David Thoreau was so upset he wrote of his "thoughts to murder the state" and later penned a poem that was read at a memorial for John Brown. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow published *Poems on Slavery* in 1842 to bring attention to abolition. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. wasn't as fervent and thought slavery could be ended peacefully, but later wrote a hymn for the Union Army. Hawthorne, on the other hand, believed Black people to be inferior to whites and that they would never achieve full citizenship even if slavery were to end. It wasn't that Hawthorne didn't think slavery was wrong per se, it was just that some *deus ex machina* would be the only end to it. Writers like Thoreau, Longfellow, and Holmes were foolish to think their work could help end slavery.

I tell my editor about Charlotte's love for Hawthorne and his views on slavery and race, and he says, "Oh, she has a problematic favorite, that's interesting." This I can explore, can call it

character development or make a connection with the reader. We read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school. We have problematic favorites. We think Jonah Hill is hilarious until we see the screenshots of the psychological abuse he inflicted on his girlfriend. We love Alfred Hitchcock until we understand the torture he put female actors through. We find David Foster Wallace a savior of the contemporary novel until we hear he pushed Mary Karr out of a moving car and pondered to a friend if “his only purpose on earth was ‘to put my penis in as many vaginas as possible.’” I could go on, but I won’t.

A few more days into the residency, one of the writers says that the men our studios are named after would all hate us. A trans man. Women. Bisexual women. People of color. Children of immigrants. You might come to your own conclusion.

I don’t love *The Scarlet Letter* or *The House of Seven Gables*, so it is easy for me to see Hawthorne as a racist. But could I keep coming to a studio named for him everyday for three weeks?

Well, I did. I googled “Hawthorne and abolition” five days into the twenty-day residency and read academic papers about his lack of abolitionist sentiment and his racial bias. And most days, I sat in his studio.

I wasn’t, to use the cliché, separating the art from the artist. I’ve worked in the historic homes of what amount to forced labor camps. I’ve visited the dark cells where Nazis kept those who rebelled against them, cells that after the war became the basements of government office buildings. I’ve written about a Black burial ground that was paved over outside of our nation’s capital. I’ve seen that our present and historical landscape are always full of racism, xenophobia,

sexism, and anti-queerness. And I hope that when we acknowledge these boxes, question their construction, we slowly make their structures less stable.