

## *Introduction: Dickinson Dispersed*

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The most startling encounter I've had with Emily Dickinson's poetry was in New Orleans in December 2014 at the breathtaking ExhibitBE, a massive, collaborative graffiti exhibit initiated by artist Brandan "Bmike" Odums. Graffiti artists painted the exhibit on the vast exterior and interior walls of DeGaulle Manor, an abandoned five-story, block-long public housing complex with a long history of racial and economic struggle. Over 100 families, largely African American, were evicted from the DeGaulle apartments just days before Thanksgiving in 2006. When I approached the entryway to the exhibit, I faced a brilliant orange brick wall and was surprised to see, in bright green letters shadowed in white, a line I know well: FOREVER IS COMPOSED OF NOWS. The line was painted without attribution to Dickinson, and the graffiti artist did not identify him- or herself. (Moreover, the wall stood just outside the gated area that enclosed the official exhibit, so when I recently queried Odums regarding who the artist might be, he said s/he was likely not among the thirty-five named collaborators.) Once a person walked past this wall, he or she entered the stunning scene of ExhibitBE: towering paintings on exterior walls that were awaiting demolition<sup>1</sup>; chilling installations inside apartments, memorializing evicted families; enormous portraits of and quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and other civil rights leaders.

There are many components of ExhibitBE that warrant attention, and the line from Dickinson is pretty far down the list. And, in part, I begin *The New Emily Dickinson Studies* with this example precisely because of this demotion – its placing of Dickinson in the margins, unattributed, subordinate to the urgency of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century politics that shaped both the history and the artistry of the space. Paul Crumbley has recently described Dickinson as one who sought to be a writer of memes, of phrases that anonymously enter the "linguistic stream," offering up detachable fragments of her poems to be placed in entirely new contexts

without attribution.<sup>2</sup> Herein lies the capacity for language to do its most revolutionary work, argues Crumbley: not in its transcendence of norms or in the uniqueness or personhood of its author but in its absorbability, its becoming generic, its collaborative reach toward future readers and writers, its propensity to circulate and recirculate, to fall into an ongoing stream of Nows that belong to everyone and no one. Dickinsonian details did not matter at ExhibitBE (indeed, how many of its 30,000 visitors even knew the words were hers?). The line was missing the dashes and capitalizations of the original (“Forever – is composed of Nows –”); it was pulled from its context in Fascicle 32; it was not in Dickinson’s handwriting but someone else’s; it created new line breaks (“FOREVER IS / COMPOSED / OF NOWS”); it was drawn into a new visual field, with “Q<sup>N</sup> A / =” painted in black above it among other non-Dickinsonian marks in sky blue, hot pink, purple, and yellow, all against that bright orange backdrop. But I have never thought more about what this line might mean than I did at ExhibitBE. The line’s original context – a three-stanza poem that thinks about the phenomenology of eternity – was supplanted by a graffiti exhibit that insisted on the phenomenology of racial and socioeconomic *history* and the need to attend to the real, felt, often violent Nows that compose it. The anonymous graffiti artist pulled the line into new political meaning alongside quotidian domestic spaces from which people were unexpectedly evicted (thousands of household possessions remain uncannily in the apartments, as if arrested in time); the line was made adjacent to depictions of crucial moments in civil rights history and to the entire structure’s own temporariness in the face of its impending demolition. Regardless of what Dickinson herself intended by this line, or whether she would have embraced the exhibit’s politics, or whether Crumbley is right that Dickinson wanted her poetry swept into the linguistic stream, here the line powerfully expressed the political refusal of a temporality in which Nows don’t matter in the eternal scheme of things and in which the later of Forever is a way to dismiss the socioeconomic suffering of Now. It is a call to activism that Dickinson almost certainly did not intend.

There is no question that Dickinson and her poems are the focus of the chapters that follow. But the volume blurs Dickinson in ways exemplified by this opening example. Many of these chapters find her in unfamiliar contexts – off-center, embedded in collaborative spaces, and caught in circulations she does not control. And while much of the volume situates her in the nineteenth century, the chapters also often look toward the ways she might (or might not) further our thinking about contemporary issues. Such decentering is not easy to do with a writer like Dickinson, for

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Dickinson scholarship has invested a great deal of intellectual energy insisting on her strength and exceptionality. This insistence has been a crucial project, pushing against stubborn mythologies that had rendered Dickinson isolated and deviant, an accidental writer of symptomatic poems. Over the past fifty years, scholars have productively recast her isolation and deviance, first characterizing her as a skillful proto-modernist (even if, in David Porter's terms, one "without a project") and then as a strategic, sovereign feminist.<sup>3</sup> These moves toward emphasizing Dickinson's control over her own poetics laid the groundwork for the late twentieth-century/early twenty-first-century Dickinson with whom we are familiar: a poet who is decidedly not withdrawn from the world but is attentive to many nineteenth-century American cultural, literary, and political contexts.

The transformation of Dickinson from alone and idiosyncratic (for better or for worse) to avidly engaged and often exemplary in her critical and poetic acumen has crucially deepened our understanding of Dickinson's canny attention to her nineteenth-century world. Given the mythical versions of her biography and the feminist politics at stake, it has been important to outline not only Dickinson's cultural engagement but also her agency, to see this woman poet *choosing*, even when her choice is, as Sharon Cameron argues, not to choose.<sup>4</sup> We have turned symptom to skill; recluse to citizen; a confined feminine body to a capacious human mind. As we often know her now, Dickinson thinks and writes firmly *in* the world; she is firmly in control of her engagement with the world; and she is engaged with everything: nineteenth-century religion, war, politics, literary culture, philosophy, music, art, science, Darwinism, trains, and telegraphy. She is war critic, legal analyst, political theorist, wry lampooner of transcendentalism, William Jamesian philosopher, and avid reader of popular and journalistic discourses.<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on agency and engagement remains important – anyone who has taught Dickinson's poetry knows well that cultural myths about her still shape initial tendencies to read her poetics as unwitting and symptomatic. At the same time, while the attention to her intellectual sovereignty has given us a more sophisticated, saner Dickinson, it also to some extent perpetuates a notion of bounded, controlled selfhood and authorship that we resist (indeed, deconstruct) in many other critical contexts in the wake of post-structuralism. If we have celebrated Dickinson's own penchant for yielding to the unpredictable play of meaning and for destabilizing centers of meaning, we have often proceeded to insist on a stable Dickinson, one who may think through a variety of

competing thoughts about faith, war, womanhood, and so on but who nonetheless thinks those competing thoughts with a coherent, conscious mind. When we insist, however, that she is sane, not mad; able, not disabled; mind, not body; agent, not victim, we uphold a kind of old-fashioned humanism. In other contexts, we have come to understand that such humanist notions of autonomous subjectivity rely on binary structures of exclusion that reinforce the very problematic cultural categories from which we have sought to rescue her.

Both building on and pivoting from this deliberate, engaged Dickinson, the new Dickinson that has begun to emerge in scholarship, and that this volume explores, does not just engage the world actively from her lookout but is inextricably embedded in a very physical world, deeply susceptible to and permeated by it, caught up in unceasing circulations of organic and inorganic material, sounds, printed texts, technologies, identities, and physical sensations. She is decentered, embodied, and not necessarily exceptional. She is enmeshed in changing environments and co-evolving with others (human and nonhuman) within intellectual, political, and material networks and ecological systems.<sup>6</sup> More, the *poems* themselves are caught up in material circulations and contexts, in nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century reading formats and locales that draw the poems away from Dickinson-as-center and away from even our own reading conventions: we find the poems not just graffitied but also online, in braille, described aurally, in contemporary verse, photocopied in Baghdad, and translated into Arabic. Such material processes exert many kinds of pressures on Dickinson's thought and experience, on what her poems can mean and for whom. To recognize the contingencies of reading is to undermine the sovereignty we have so often attributed to her.

I opened with an example that explores this decentering in relation to US racial politics, and without leaving that behind, I would like to add a second way of articulating this blurred Dickinson. Many of the chapters in this volume engage, explicitly or implicitly, the various lenses of twenty-first-century posthumanism, defined by Pramod K. Nayar as the "radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines."<sup>7</sup> The human of posthumanism cannot be separated from material environments, nor can consciousness be separated from either the body or the environment with which the body interacts. Consciousness, rather, emerges through these material interactions and is even distributed among multiple entities. Posthumanist discourses derive in part from

new developments in computer technologies, biology, science studies, and environmental studies that variously undermine the notion that the human is unique and bounded. Moreover, posthumanism focuses on demonstrating the erroneous ways we have relied on discourses of animality, monstrosity, and disability to define the human against a marginalized nonhuman Other (whether animal, machine, or non-normative human).<sup>8</sup> These discourses are coextensive with new materialism, a set of emergent theories across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities that variously emphasize matter's primacy and the ongoing processes of materialization: the self-organizing power, material force, and dispersed processes of non-human agents and systems both within and without humans.<sup>9</sup>

While posthumanist discourses do not explicitly inform more than a handful of the book's chapters, these discourses have triggered much interest in environments, blurred identities, complex interactions, and new kinds of embodiment that provide a range of ways to consider Dickinson's poetry anew. They invite us to resist hyperbolizing Dickinson's agency and exceptionality and thus to resist inadvertently reinforcing the dualistic construction of an unexceptional Other against which our notion of a sovereign Dickinson depends. (Such an unwanted effect has been evident in the way we have marginalized so many of the not-Dickinson women poets of the nineteenth century as we underscore Dickinson's genius; as Jennifer Putzi and Alexandra Socarides argue, with "the rise of Emily Dickinson to a position of exceptional prominence . . . you quite quickly have a deeply entrenched perception of nineteenth-century American women's poetry as unsusceptible to study.")<sup>10</sup> To take a more positive tack, posthumanist discourses suggest rich ways of approaching a Dickinson whose body, consciousness, politics, and poems are inevitably enmeshed in environments and interactions. In terms of the state of Dickinson scholarship, we are perhaps especially ready to make this particular pair of decentering moves now for a couple of reasons. Once marginalized (decentered in the decidedly negative sense), Dickinson's centrality to literary studies is no longer in question. Because we have successfully emphasized her poetic power, we can now think of destabilizing her without losing her to the margins of literary study and without impugning her literary genius. But, to put it another way, we have perhaps overemphasized her power and agency and thus would *do well* to destabilize them now, to reconsider her authorship in light of theoretical developments (both long-standing post-structuralist theories and still-emergent posthumanist ones) that we readily apply to other authors and subjects. We would also do well to be more willing to critique the racial and class politics that

emerge in her writing, which an investment in Dickinson's exceptionalism has made hard to do.<sup>11</sup> The fact that we have accrued a wide understanding of Dickinson's interest in many historical and intellectual contexts means that we are poised, indeed have begun, to think in new ways about how context functions and how it forms subjectivity, embodied experience, poetics, and the political scope of her poems.

The book is divided into four sections: Poetics and the Imagination; New Theoretical Frameworks; Nineteenth-Century Histories; and Receptions, Archives, Readerships. The first section gathers essays that consider new ways of thinking about the literary imagination in terms of environments and systems, arguing for the need to move away from models of authorship that focus on isolation, genius, and agency in favor of such concepts as collaboration, media networks, generic conventions, non-public circulations, and historical readerships. As Socarides argues in Chapter 1, "Collaborative Dickinson," many of these frameworks have been hard for us to apply to Dickinson but are in fact very much aligned with the ways nineteenth-century poets and readers encountered poems. These models of literary creativity allow us to consider interactions that fall beyond the writer's control and that either deliberately or unwittingly include other agencies and influences. In part, this is Dickinson's creative process seen through the lenses of historical poetics, which aims to understand genre, prosody, and other elements of form in terms of historical-political readerships and conventions. It might also be seen as a poetics Wai Chee Dimock has described as a "cumulative reuse . . . [that is] profoundly unoriginal" and that prides experimental reception over originality or exceptionalism.<sup>12</sup> In Chapter 2, "Generic Dickinson," Michael C. Cohen argues that Dickinson's notion of what poetry is and does, which we have repeatedly cast as unique, is profoundly conventional. Both Socarides and Cohen build on Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery*, which radically rethinks Dickinson's relationship to genre by asking us to historicize reading practices and consider audience and address in terms of actual historical circulations rather than contemporary notions of lyric.

In Chapter 3, "Dickinson, Media, and Imagination," Eliza Richards looks at Dickinson's own ways of figuring the imagination as a faculty that works less like an inspired solitaire and more like part of an external network or circuitry: her poems experiment with tracking the mind's movement through complex layers of human media networks and "elemental media" (the weather, for example), obliterating the boundaries of individual thought and perception. Chapter 4, Christina Pugh's

“Dickinson and Sound,” joins emerging scholarship that supplements long-standing critical attention to the visual features of Dickinson’s manuscripts by attending both to the sonic features of Dickinson’s poems (meter, rhyme, and so forth) and to the extra-poetic sounds that filled her nineteenth-century physical surroundings (technology and music, for example); Pugh argues that Dickinson’s poems embrace sound as a crucial component of prosody and daily life, even as the poems issue sharp critiques of sounds that risk captivating the ear at the expense of reason and complexity.

Section 2 brings Dickinson into conversation with theoretical developments in feminist theory, disability studies, queer theory, posthumanism, animal studies, and ecocriticism. In all cases, it is not only that these frameworks help us say something about Dickinson’s poems but also that the poems help us, to echo Jed Deppman, “try to think” about these twenty-first-century discourses in all their urgency. My own essay in Chapter 5 enlists object-oriented feminism (a wry off-shoot of/retort to object-oriented ontology) to elicit new readings of Dickinson’s poems that resonate with twenty-first-century feminisms and feminist politics, shifting attention from individual subjectivity to camaraderies with objects, human and nonhuman. In Chapter 6, Michael D. Snediker reads chronic pain and its relationship to figuration within the context of queer phenomenology and disability studies. Resisting Sharon Cameron’s long-standing account of Dickinson’s lyric pain as “atemporal,” he attends to the *chronicity* of pain in “chronic pain,” arguing that time is in fact the medium of pain. Figuration, he argues, is the mode of language most akin to how chronic pain works because the two share a similar temporality; Dickinson’s work exemplifies this relationship. Snediker’s chapter is one of several in the volume that help us consider the way making poetry is an embodied activity: how, these chapters ask, do Dickinson’s poems register the unavoidable, ongoing force of the body’s being-in-the-world?

Whereas Snediker focuses on the *body’s* being-in-the-world (as does Clare Mullaney in a later chapter on disability and editing), Colleen Glenney Boggs’s Chapter 7, “Emily Dickinson’s Posthuman Worlds,” stresses the way meaning-making is fundamentally tied to being-in-the-world. She situates Dickinson’s poetry within conversations about biosemiotics, arguing that Dickinson was preoccupied by how relationships to the nonhuman world fundamentally shape subjectivity and produce meaning. In her Chapter 8, on “Dickinson and Historical Eco-poetics,” Gillian Kidd Osborne similarly argues that locale matters for the production of texts, though she ultimately lands on a historical eco-poetics attentive to the environmental context of *reading*. Poetry, she argues, is “comprised of

relation . . . [I]ts own nullifications, absences, holes, can guide us to read both through and with a text, towards both the time and place in which it appeared and into the time and place where it is received.”

Chapters in Section 3 turn to various nineteenth-century contexts in ways that are new both for the histories they address and for the ways these histories come into view differently via twenty-first-century perspectives on science, new materialism, globalization, and race. In Chapter 9, “Dickinson’s Physics,” Cody Marrs explores Dickinson’s treatment of force and matter in light of nineteenth-century physics and twenty-first-century posthumanism; Dickinson, he argues, might help us theorize the latter anew. Grant Rosson, in Chapter 10, examines Dickinson in relation to geography, a nineteenth-century school subject and popular discourse that has received scant attention from Dickinson scholars; he demonstrates her surprising pattern of using specific geographic methods and lexicons not to refer to foreign places but to map out for readers the space of her own home and of heaven.

By contrast, Páraic Finnerty’s Chapter 11, on “Global Dickinson,” comprehensively explores Dickinson’s references to foreign places and their entanglements with the United States. Drawing on Dimock, Finnerty argues that Dickinson folds this global expansiveness into the compressed space of her poems, intensifying her depiction of global interdependence and its shaping of nineteenth-century subjectivity. Finnerty also considers Dickinson’s use of racial and ethnic stereotypes and notes how much more work remains to be done to understand her racial logic and politics. In Chapter 12, Faith Barrett’s essay “Dickinson and George Moses Horton” brings Dickinson’s poems into surprising conversation with Horton, an enslaved poet; Barrett argues that reading Dickinson’s references to confinement alongside Horton’s underscore the whiteness of her feminism. Desirée Henderson’s Chapter 13, on “Dickinson and the Diary,” considers Dickinson in relation to a nineteenth-century archive that seems to be on Dickinson’s periphery at best and has thus not been seen as an important context for interpreting her poems. Henderson’s chapter offers not only a reading of Dickinson’s poetic treatment of diary-keeping but also a meditation on how such peripheral archives might enrich Dickinson scholarship and, conversely, how bringing Dickinson into the conversation might inform our understanding of such archives.

Section 4 includes essays that newly address a range of receptions and the bibliographic contexts for those receptions. But reception and context become (or require) intervention in each case. Taking up the reading context that has perhaps seemed the least subjected to editing, Seth



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Perlow's Chapter 14 examines the online Dickinson archives from Amherst College and Harvard University, arguing that our long-standing desire for experiential contact with Dickinson's manuscripts, paired especially with the entrenchment of Harvard's print editions, shapes these archives in ways that limit access to productive scholarly research, including the most promising forms of digital research. In Perlow's estimation, the new archives are more old than new and warrant significant rethinking. Evie Shockley's Chapter 15, "Coloring Dickinson: Race, Influence, and Lyric Dis-reading," examines why and how women-of-color poets choose to engage Dickinson's work despite the racism (or elision of race) they may find there: Gwendolyn Brooks and Marilyn Chin engage in what Shockley calls *lyric dis-reading*, a process by which poets neither embrace nor oppose their white canonical forebears (who did not write for readers of color) but rather perform creative labor that racializes their forebears' work. Such dis-reading makes Dickinson's poetics of use to poets of color while also leaving open the possibility of exposing, or at least not excusing, Dickinson's exclusion of non-white readers.

Clare Mullaney, in Chapter 16, "Dickinson, Disability, and a Crip Editorial Practice," takes up another problem of exclusion, asking how we might edit the poems with disability in mind. Mullaney argues on one hand that we should use editorial restraint to avoid erasing textual manifestations of fragility and eyestrain (she questions, for example, the way Marta Werner and Jen Bervin "liberate" the brittle envelopes into the thick, glossy *Gorgeous Nothings*). On the other hand, Mullaney considers the kinds of editorial interventions needed to make the poems accessible to readers with disabilities. Her chapter grapples with the tensions between these two sets of concerns and seeks to establish the ethics and principles of what she calls a crip editorial practice.

The volume concludes with "Emily Dickinson in Baghdad," a striking narrative from Iraqi poet and translator Naseer Hassan, who in Chapter 17 tells the story of finding and translating Dickinson's poems in Baghdad during the 1990s under the threat of political violence from Saddam Hussein's regime. Hassan's narrative, which includes an interpretation and Arabic translation of "Because I could not stop for Death," in many ways resists Western ways of reading Dickinson, circumventing familiar academic pathways and theoretical frameworks – even as Hassan finds that Dickinson's poetry registers as utterly, even uncannily, familiar to Iraqi readers: "it expresses exactly the feeling of a whole people which she almost didn't hear of."<sup>13</sup> Hassan's framing of the way violence might shape writing, reading, and accessibility – and of the way texts resonate across

time and space – is an apt conclusion to a volume that aims in part to think in new ways about our contexts for reading Dickinson. If, as Virginia Jackson has argued, contemporary approaches to lyric reading are so much the critical air we breathe that we cannot see our reading practices as the product of our own constructions, then perhaps Western readers would do well to startle themselves by finding Dickinson’s poetry elsewhere and thus to be thrown off-center themselves.<sup>14</sup>

I began this introduction with a focus on US racial politics and then pivoted to posthumanism, enlisting these two frameworks to cast Dickinson into environments that exceed her control and our expectations. Hassan’s closing essay invokes a third frame that might help us further reconfigure Dickinson along these lines, in this case to think more cross-culturally and trans-temporally about the relations Dickinson’s poems can enter and how they do so. Hassan describes Dickinson as “reaching out to other worlds [she] doesn’t know about”; upon reading her, he felt “a friendship of two worlds distant in space and time.” As Hassan and I corresponded about his essay during the drafting process, I asked him to do more to emphasize cultural or linguistic differences that come to the fore during the translation process. No, he responded after some thought; Dickinson’s poems, particularly those about death, pain, and loss, matter to him and to the Iraqi readers he’s talked with because the poems’ disposition is similar to theirs – astonishingly and comfortingly so. (As he told me in an exchange, one of his Iraqi readers reports that she carries his translations of Dickinson in her purse, a permanent companion wherever she goes.)

This friendship across space and time is akin to what Dimock posits in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, where she aims to upend the national and temporal borders of literary scholarship. She urges us to think not primarily of American literature but of the literature of a “global civil society.”<sup>15</sup> “[T]hink of the planet as a plausible whole,” she argues: a “crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures . . . input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment . . .”<sup>16</sup> Such pathways “thread America[n] texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Just as Pramod K. Nayar radically decenters the “traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human,” Dimock’s crisscrossing of cultural networks and entanglements radically dissolves the boundaries of “sovereign, coherent and autonomous” national literatures that continue to shape our discipline