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“The Negro never knew”:
Emily Dickinson and Racial Typology
in the Nineteenth Century

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In the spring of 1992, I was teaching a graduate seminar in Dickinson. As teachers generally do, I took pleasure in reading selected poems aloud. In the middle of “The Malay - took the Pearl” (F451, late 1862), however, I stopped dead, unable to go on. I had read this poem dozens of times before and written on it as well; but this was the first time I saw it not as a Dickinson poem, but as a nineteenth-century text, one of many texts in which the denigration of people of color is treated so casually one barely registers it’s there. Certainly, the racism of the lines I had just read—“The Negro never knew / I - wooed it - too”—never jumped out at me the way it did then. I remember the pause so well because it went on so long. What appalled me was not the recognition of Dickinson’s racial slur but, as I told my students, that it had escaped me heretofore. Why had I been so blind? Or, put another way, what had allowed me to see “The Malay’s” racism now when I had not before?

What had changed, I believe, was that for the preceding two years I had increasingly focused on other nineteenth-century women poets, working with a group of writers who, whatever else one says about them, were directly engaged

in the great social issues of their day in ways that Dickinson was not—at least not as I had always read her. In the process, I had developed a much broader grasp of the possibilities of nineteenth-century women’s verse, one encouraging me to view Dickinson in a new way—not just as a unique genius of unequalled metaphoric power but also as one more nineteenth-century poet and a woman of her time and place. This is the Dickinson I will discuss here, not to tear her down—to me she remains the century’s most powerful poet, arguably the strongest writer of short lyrics in the Anglo-American literary tradition—but to set what I now see as much needed limits on her “greatness” in other respects. It is not simply that Dickinson held, as Betsy Erkkila has forcefully argued, her class’s conservative social values; she shared its racial attitudes also. And this is how I will engage her here, treating her racism as one small piece in a much larger cultural whole. I will then explore how the failure to acknowledge Dickinson’s racism speaks to the reading of her generally and to the risks taken when a single writer (no matter how deserving) is canonized in a field that is otherwise understudied at best.

Despite recent efforts of U.S. literary and cultural historians to deal frontally with the nineteenth century’s racist environment, it remains difficult to appreciate just how extensive,

vicious, yet at the same time absolutely casual, the period's racism was. Deployed by minority groups against each other, as well as by the dominant white Protestant population against everyone else, a fully elaborated discourse evolved around what the period frankly and ubiquitously defined as racial types: German, British, Jewish, Chinese, Mexicans, etc. Among minority groups, Jews, the Irish, Blacks, Native Americans, and belatedly, the Chinese, were subjected to the most persistent and abusive stereotyping. Periodicals and newspapers as diverse as the *Irish World*, *New Varieties* (a "humor" magazine), the *Youth's Companion*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Bazar*, and the *Springfield Republican* routinely gave space to "racist" articles, cartoons, poems, jokes, and stories, much of the material presented like the following "miscellaneous news-item" from an 1860 issue of the *Springfield Republican* with a gratuitousness that may boggle some readers' minds:

A big buck nigger eloped from Boston, a year or two since, with a white woman, leaving his black wife and children behind; and now, after living with this woman in Carbondale, Pa., he has again eloped, taking this time her white niece. The Negro is 50, the girl 17. The deserted aunt has a little milk-and-molasses baby by which to remember her sin and shame. ("Miscellaneous News Item" 2)

Since the behavior of an anonymous black man and white woman from Boston, Massachusetts, could not have direct relevance to anyone anywhere in the country, including virtually everyone in Boston itself, the *Republican's* only justification for printing this "news-item" is its cleverly salacious wit. One must assume, therefore, that the tidbit was published because someone—presumably, Samuel Bowles, the *Republican's* publisher—found it funny.

Even serious pieces, however, routinely employed racist stereotyping in their discussions of minorities. For example, Anna Brack-

ett's "Indian and Negro," published in *Harper's Magazine*, purports to comment thoughtfully on black and Indian students' different responses to schooling at Hampton: "The characteristics of this race [the Negro] we know sufficiently well," Brackett writes. "They are light-hearted and happy, easily impressible, ambitious to be better than they are, and as willing as a child to let that ambition be seen" (627). By contrast, Brackett found Indians sullen and relatively untrainable due to their "proud" and reserved natures (628).

Given Brackett's self-designated role as educator, it is not surprising that she writes of her subjects in the uninflected language of Caucasian superiority; but even more "objective" journalists reporting on minority affairs did no better. In an article in *Youth's Companion* describing the issuing of government beef on the Pine Ridge reservation, the author focuses relentlessly on the gulf dividing whites from those designated as the recipients of federal assistance:

White spectators, too, were there in plenty, both men and women, who came from miles around to view the savage sport. . . . [P]eople in fact of all classes, had gathered to see the barbarous contests, and silk and diamonds, squalor and rags, beauties, hags, education and refinement, abject ignorance and untamed savagery, mingled for a time in one expectant crowd. (610)

Through qualifiers emphasizing Indian "barbarism," the author implicitly establishes the superiority of his (civilized/white) perspective, turning the squalor of reservation life into a spectacle of "savage sport" that middle-class white children can vicariously enjoy.

Most often, however, as in the vicious run of anti-Semitic cartoons published in the *Irish World* in the 1870s or the anti-Catholic, anti-Irish, anti-Chinese, and anti-black cartoons swamping *Harper's Weekly*, or as in the *Springfield Republican* squib cited above, virulent

racist expression is an end in itself, having no other purpose beyond putting—and keeping—the Other in their place by, effectively, justifying any and all discrimination against them. Among the most disturbing pieces I ran into is “The Heathen Chinee,” possibly by Bret Harte.¹ Two stanzas will give the poem’s flavor:

They hash up the gristle and bones when
 you’ve dined,
 And wear a long *cue* that’s suspended behind,
 Like the tail of a monkey, and *him* they will eat,
 Pronouncing the morsel exceedingly sweet.
 The Hottentot people are bad, we’ll agree.
 But they never can equal the Heathen Chinee.

They scrape all the money they can on the sly,
 Then back to the “Flowery Nation” to die.
 A dollar’s a fortune to last a whole life—
 Tobacco will buy a John Chinaman’s wife.
 Oh, filthy is “John,” and not better is *she*—
 For “bummers” and “beats” are the Heathen
 Chinee. (12)

“The Heathen Chinee” is unusual precisely because it is so clever, giving a witty picture of the strange and arbitrary ways of the Chinese. Discursively self-contained, as this material typically is, the poem bears no relation to the complexities of Chinese culture either in the United States or in the “Flowery Nation.” But that is neither here nor there. The poem’s perspective is strictly Western. As with the *Youth’s Companion’s* “Indians,” the behavior of the Chinese is conveyed entirely through uncomprehending Western eyes, the poem’s stereotyped assumptions acting collectively as a lens whose very distortions block out all other possibilities.

Along with behavioral details, there was a wide spectrum of other specifics through which racist attitudes were mediated for each group. Speech patterns, for example, were conventionalized into various forms of identifying dialects, Southern black dialect, in particular, reaching

its greatest popularity in the fin de siècle. Even more potent were specific sets of pictorial conventions used to represent individual “racial” groups. These conventions not only made minority figures readily identifiable but also grounded their “difference” in the specifics of their physical bodies as well as in the accidental qualities of “ethnic” manners and dress. Thus, for example, the Irish are denoted by bowler hats, tobacco pipes, snub noses, and square animalistic jaws; Jews are given Satanically narrow faces, huge hooked noses, uncombed beards, elf-locks, and gabardines; blacks have thick lips, bulging eyes, woolly hair, and ragged clothing; and Indians, feathers, blankets, tomahawks, large noses, and rigidly wooden faces. As in the *Republican* squib, this use of denigrating imagery often seems intended humorously, but it clearly served less benign purposes as well, instilling and reinforcing readers’ prejudices both overtly and covertly.

Equally depressing, children’s literature was also saturated with racial stereotyping, some of the most offensive appearing in *Youth’s Companion*, a long-lived children’s periodical that treated all social and racial groups except Protestant Euro-Americans as exotica. The use of such stereotypes spared authors the labor of putting the complexity of “Otherness” in terms still comprehensible to the young. But using them carried a price of its own. When Lizzie W. Champney attempted to move from stereotype to heroic image, in “That Small Piece Boy from China,” the weight of the pre-existing literature—that is, the racism already embedded in the representational conventions she deploys—confounded her. Trying to give her small protagonist a voice to explain why he wants so desperately to fly home, she turns him, intentionally or not, into a miniature Heathen Chinee, blotting out his particularity—and fundamental humanity:

“Speakee you too much fool pigeon,
 Better China home than here.

Me no likee English junkee,
English chowchow too no nice.
Why no can some roasted monkey?
What for not some piecee mice?" (157)

Champney clearly wanted her young readers to sympathize with this little boy, who braves white folks' mockery to make a kite that flies him home. But her use of dialect and her reliance on stereotyped details laces her poem with moments of condescension and mocking contempt. Far more famously, the same problem plagues Mark Twain's portrait of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. The author may want to invest his or her character with a more complicated humanity, but once invoked, the racist stereotype has a signifying power of its own. At the least, its presence hopelessly muddies whatever message the author is seeking to convey—as the large body of literature devoted to Jim's status in Twain's novel makes clear (Leonard).

Most seriously for me, this same difficulty infects the writings of almost all post-bellum white women writers, Dickinson included. Whether because she enjoyed their gimmicky appeal or because she was, in fact, self-consciously racist, Dickinson, whose use of language was never careless, invokes a number of conventional stereotypes, making coy references to "Bridgets," "Jews," and "Malays," whom she willfully conflates (presumably on the basis of skin color) with "Negro[s]." Precisely because these references are so brief, they are also irredeemable. That is, their very brevity signals Dickinson's readiness to trade on the stereotyped assumptions they encode. She does not interrogate or challenge these assumptions. Thus, the "Bridget" in "The Spider as an Artist" is typed by both her name and broom (F1373), while in "I Came to buy a smile - today," "Jew" is used as in the expression "to Jew someone down" to stand for a rapacious bargainer, slimeily intent on getting the best deal: "'Twould be 'a Bargain' for a Jew! / Say - may I have it - Sir?" (F258. See also, F418, F572, and F451).²

Equally disturbing, Dickinson's tone in her early letters to her brother Austin, when she told him to whip his Irish students (L43, L44), comes uncomfortably close to that of the *Springfield Republican* in its moments of gratuitous cruelty: "So far as I am concerned I should like to have you kill some—there are so many now, there is no room for the Americans," she declares with mock ferocity; "I don't think deaths or murders can ever come amiss in a young woman's journal . . ." (L43). In an essay on Dickinson's "Poetics of Whiteness" to which this essay is in part a response, Vivian Pollak tries to confine Dickinson's use of this tone to her early letters. But in August 1881 the fifty-one-year-old poet wrote to Elizabeth Holland of a black laborer, "We have a new Black Man [Dickinson's capitals] and are looking for a Philanthropist to direct him, because every time he presents himself, I run, and when the Head of the Nation shies, it confuses the Foot—" (L721). For Northerners like Dickinson who had little personal acquaintance with blacks, the post-bellum black male was a figure more likely to inspire fear than the desire to offer sympathetic assistance. In August 1860, twenty-one years before, the *Springfield Republican* had predicted as much, taking a sneering swipe at "dainty philanthropists" who believed otherwise: "The inexorable law of civilization, work or starve, is one that Sambo, from the very tropical sensuousness of his being, is exceedingly slow to learn," a squib opines. "If these liberated children should seek to exchange their stern nursery discipline [that is, Southern slavery] for the holiday ease and plenty they hope for at the North, who among our dainty philanthropists would give them the patient training, the persistent culture requisite to develop their dormant self-reliance?" ("The Ebony Idol"). Certainly not Emily Dickinson. This "Head" wanted nothing to do with the "Foot."

How much was Dickinson influenced by Bowles's attitudes, this man some believe to have been her adored "Master?" Was she, with

her tenacious memory for words, echoing Bowles's contempt for "philanthropists" twenty years later in the Holland letter? Certainly, we know that she had no interest herself in, as she famously put it, "extricating humanity from some hopeless ditch" (L380). Even more to the point, was "The Malay - took the Pearl -," identified by Pollak as possibly Dickinson's "most extended dramatic meditation on race" (Pollak 92),³ a conscious or unconscious reworking of the *Republican* squib cited earlier? "The Swarthy fellow swam - / And bore my Jewel — Home - / Home to the Hut! What lot / Had I - the Jewel - got - / Borne on a Dusky Breast - / I had not deemed a Vest / Of Amber - fit - / The Negro never knew / I - wooed it - too" (F451). Obviously, without harder evidence one cannot say for sure. Just as obviously, however, one cannot rule out the possibility. Both poem and squib deal with white-black amalgamation. Both depict a black man stealing a white woman and taking her home to his "Hut." Both represent him as physically intimidating in "the very tropical sensuousness of his being," his (animalistic) sexual desire (the "Dusky Breast" of a "big buck nigger"). Finally, albeit in different ways, both suggest that this man is too crude to value properly his treasure—the immaculate pearl, the white woman.

Whether one turns to casual cartoons or to major writers, one finds, in short, stereotyped racist assumptions pervading late-nineteenth-century U.S. literature top to bottom, with minority writers themselves as likely as anyone else to evoke them. The period, as Peter Gay notes, cultivated hatred (68–95). If, as nineteenth-century people did, one identified the national body with a racialized body, the need to keep the Other in their place would understandably have been felt intensely. But this did not make the racism itself any less ugly. The "Pearl" at stake was of very great price and, as in Dickinson's ever-so-loaded poem, ethnic/racial/class rivalry drove each group to claim possession at some Other's expense. Long ago I

argued that the Malay poem dealt with Dickinson's rivalry with her brother Austin for Susan Gilbert's love (*My Life* 52–53), but this same (sibling) dynamic underlay racial conflict in her society generally. If, as in the *Republican's* squib, it was woe unto the white woman who took a black man as mate, in the end all this material came down to controlling who came home to dinner, and, once invited in, who got the biggest slice of the great American pie. In suggesting that it might be preferable that some Irish be killed to preserve room for "Americans," Dickinson, facetiously or not, was summing up the way many Americans felt—and still feel today.

Yet even if we take Dickinson's youthful proposal for the extermination of the Irish seriously—which I would not recommend—still, given the relative sparseness of her racial slurs, not to mention their privacy, how should we weigh them? Does it matter (really matter) that Dickinson used stereotypes if she did not follow through on them in concrete ways? Clearly, in any meaningful sense, Dickinson was not actively racist. She burnt no crosses on anyone's lawn, lynched no black men, sent no Jews to gas chambers, whipped nary a single Irish "serf" (L195). Nor did she, like Louisa McCord or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, develop theories that could justify such acts of oppression. Indeed, if anything, her racist moments, while consistent, are few and far between, not worth a nod when compared, say, to those of her dear friend, Bowles, whose abuse of editorial privilege in the years leading up to the Civil War does deserve outright condemnation.⁴ Why make anything of them, then, especially when, given Dickinson's social background, it would have taken close to a miracle for her to have escaped her period's racism altogether? Just because we admire her art so greatly, must she be morally superior as well, transcending both her own time and place and (let us face it) ours? Put another way, why did so many in my audience at the conference get so upset? Indeed, why was

I so upset on first taking in the racism in "The Malay - took the Pearl," upset enough to stop reading Dickinson for close to two years while I sought to adjust to my new understanding of her?

As one of many scholars who helped secure Dickinson's canonization in the 1970s, let me be clear. I do not question the basic validity of her star status. As a lyric poet, Dickinson's "greatness" (if one must use that word) is inarguable; she attained the "taller feet" (L238) for which she strove. But it is also clear by now that her canonization has worked to legitimate a treatment of her which has come at a very high price both for our reading of other nineteenth-century American women poets and, just as important, for our reading of Dickinson herself. In concluding this essay, it is to these problems that I want to turn, looking at how Dickinson's canonization has both been predicated upon and justified her highly problematic separation from her place and time.

Despite the increasing attention paid to numerous American women writers from Phillis Wheatley and Harriet Beecher Stowe to H. D. and Toni Morrison, only one woman writer currently enjoys what I would call a state of full canonization, namely Emily Dickinson. By this I mean not only that her place in high school and college curriculums is secure but that the complete apparatus of scholarly research and interpretation can now be brought to bear on her texts. This apparatus includes two variorum editions, facsimile editions of her poetry, concordances to her letters and poems, an elaborate hypertext web-site, an exhaustive reception study, multiple bibliographies updating criticism, her own scholarly journal, bio-graphies galore, along with encyclopedias, "hand-books," introductions, and collections of critical essays, and an international society bearing her name and holding conventions in exotic foreign locales. Even her home, long used by Amherst College as faculty housing, is now in the process of being transformed into a shrine, its importance as a site for pilgrimage no longer denied.

Like Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville, Dickinson has become an industry, providing jobs for scholars and laypersons alike, her elusive texts the engine that keeps the entire show running. With the aid of this scholarly apparatus, a constant stream of articles, books, and papers (not to mention paintings, plays, novels, poems, post-cards, postage stamps, CDs, films, and videos) inundate the market every year.

For someone like myself who first encountered Dickinson's poems in 1951 in the lowly and modest Todd-Higginson versions, it is impossible not to be awed by the speed and thoroughness with which her star has risen. As someone committed to the recovery not just of Dickinson but of many other American women poets of her period, most of whom still languish in library stacks, uncommented upon and unread, it is also impossible not to feel frustrated. It is as if Dickinson is sucking up all the oxygen, leaving little or nothing for anyone else. Dickinson's success is *Dickinson's* success; less and less does it seem to benefit women writers as a whole. On the contrary, insofar as the material instantiation of her canonical status has diverted attention and resources (including money and graduate students) from other women poets of her period, it has, if anything, stalled their recuperation even at the moment when interest in them was beginning to awaken. Most depressingly, Joanne Dobson excepted, scholars who have treated other nineteenth-century women poets along with Dickinson have done so—as I did in *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (1990)—to set off Dickinson's greater glory, her "taller feet" (17–18). They have treated the relationship between Dickinson and her peers, that is, as a zero sum game, using the weaknesses of the latter as irrefutable proof of the former's strength.

But Dickinson's relationship to her fellow American women poets is not in fact a zero sum game; and we do ourselves and Dickinson a great disservice when we treat it as if it were. To put it baldly, stylistically speaking, Dickinson

was a very great poet, one whose depth and complexity of language fully justify, indeed, necessitate, the development of the critical apparatus now devoted to her; but this does not mean that she is—or need be—“great” in every way. Dickinson was what she was, a well-heeled woman of brilliant wit, extravagant verbal ability, and a genius for ambiguity few Anglophone writers other than Shakespeare have matched. Coming from an elite family, she used her privilege and her leisure to pen amazing verse. Her principal topics were those one would expect from a woman so sheltered: life, death, nature, God, love, and, above all, poetry and her own psyche, as her early editors recognized, not war, except indirectly (as Wolosky argues, as a theodicean issue [64–98]), not “social” causes, as she herself made very clear, and certainly not slave revolts—as one Dickinson scholar has recently suggested (Wardrop).⁵ No. They are the same topics with which her letters deal: “My business is to love”; “My business is circumference.” Her business was writing, as she said not once but many times (L268, L269, F466).

If my perception of Dickinson has so radically altered, it is because, after ten years spent studying other nineteenth-century American women poets, I now know much more clearly what she could have done and, therefore, what she did not do. Like other feminist Dickinson scholars, I believed when I wrote *Woman Poet* that there were strict limits to what nineteenth-century women could say in their verse and that part of the reason Dickinson chose not to publish was to give the radicality of her themes (not just her style) full play. As with her language, so, I believed, with her thinking, she went out beyond “the Dip of Bell” (F633; see *Woman Poet* 24–50). I no longer believe this. Dickinson’s exploitation of formal ambiguity made her a radical stylistic innovator; but her religious apostasy is no greater than that of Sarah Piatt, who went unremittingly public with her rage against God, and, homoerotic or not, Dickinson’s treatment of eroticism is, if any-

thing, less bold than that of Harriet Prescott Spofford, who published texts like “Pomegranate-Flowers” and “The Amber Gods” in the *Atlantic* in the early 1860s. When it came to the political questions of gender, race, and class, not only was Dickinson not radical, she weighs in, as Erkkila argues, on the conservative side of the ledger. Read against Piatt or Fanny Osgood, Dickinson’s treatment of gender relations seems naïve—a poor sort of mid-Victorian romanticism. Read against Lydia Sigourney, Lucy Larcom, Adah Menken, and, of course, all writers of color, her position on race is downright unenlightened. Read against the Cary sisters and Dora Goodale, her approach to class is little better. Although I agree with Pollak that Dickinson consciously labors under the burden of “whiteness,” I do not agree that she deals thereby with “the racial exclusions on which her own class privilege also depended” (92). Piatt dealt in anguished detail with her complicity; Emily Dickinson does not. Indeed, I find no evidence anywhere that she knew she was complicit. Nor should her envy of the sexual freedom of “races - nurtured in the Dark” (F436) be read as admiration for them in other respects. As noted earlier, “tropical sensuousness” was a nineteenth-century given where “Sambo” was concerned.

Pollak concludes her essay on Dickinson and race by eloquently celebrating the poet’s decision to fight her “war” with “words,” not deeds (92). Approaching Dickinson this way, one can pass over all sorts of troublesome things: her failure to contribute materially to the war effort, even, say, by rolling bandages or darning socks,⁶ her flippancy contempt for “philanthropists,” and her equally flamboyant parade of disinterest in (democratic) politics (“George who?” L950),⁷ not to mention the cruel way she treated one black laborer. However salient as evidence of the bedrock conservatism in her life and letters, such moments are not part of Dickinson’s “war of words.” But if the only test we apply to Dickinson’s politics is what her poems

say, what cannot be proved? This is precisely what makes her poetry—with its “omitted center” (Leyda I, xxi)—so fascinating: one can never know what her tenor is because the founding gesture of her poetic—her refusal to supply the occasion about which she writes—turns all to vehicle, making possible a theoretically infinite number of interpretations. This is also why her poetry is “alive,” why she could say, as she did to Elizabeth Holland in 1878, “‘It is finished’ can never be said of us” (L555). More mundanely, it is also why she refused to title her poems. Ambiguity was the air her poetry breathed. It is perfectly possible that “The Malay - took the Pearl” is not “about” race at all—nor about her love for her “Sister Sue” either.

Emily Dickinson lived in an age of great political verse; but she did not write it. Other women poets did; and what they wrote is as complex and powerful in its way as Dickinson’s writing is in hers. I would not willingly give up either. But one can sustain both sides only by accepting each side’s limitations. Dickinson’s racial slurs are not the measure of her greatness, but they do point to its limits. What I would like to believe, however, is that in establishing these limits, they also open space for the study of other writers who, however lacking in Dickinson’s verbal ability and metaphoric power, have virtues of their own that make them complex and worthy of study too. Certainly until this happens, we as readers will continue to exploit Dickinson’s ambiguity in ways that allow us to get from her what other poets could freely and far better give, making of her what she is not instead of accepting her for what she is, her “racism,” such as it was, included.

NOTES

This essay is dedicated with affection and respect to Vivian Pollak, who has never allowed our disagreements to derail our friendship. In this same spirit, I hope that other Dickinson scholars will understand that my criticism of them in this essay is

entirely local, pertaining only to the specific issues raised here, not to the general quality of their work.

1. *New Varieties* published “The Heathen Chinese” before Harte published “Plain Language from Truthful James,” from which his renown as author of “The Heathen Chinese” sprang. Since, taken in the aggregate, Harte’s poems on the Chinese are only minimally less vicious, he could therefore have written this earlier poem also.

2. Only one Dickinson poem appears to defend social equality, “Color - Caste - Denomination” (F836). However, this poem’s deployment of the Medieval trope of death-the-leveler, which locates equality in the afterlife, does nothing to disrupt the status quo here. If it could, then Medieval and Renaissance Monarchists would hardly have reveled in the trope as they did.

3. Pollak uses a variety of strategies trying to recoup the passages I have cited, arguing Dickinson’s need to puncture her brother’s balloon in her letters to Austin, her de-emphasis on Jewish greed in “Your Riches - taught me - Poverty” (F418), and what might be called “positive Orientalism” where blacks are concerned. I find the last the most troublesome since the identification of the “darker races” with sexuality has historically served racist interests.

4. Unfortunately, the reverse is happening. Judith Farr, for example, asserts that Bowles “bravely supported the antislavery movement.” In point of fact, Bowles in the early 1850s savagely attacked abolitionists, changing his position only when the combined effect of the fugitive slave law and the events in “bleeding Kansas” made supporting slavery an untenable position for any Northern publisher wanting a hearing by the mainstream (see Weisner 16–20). More to the point, however, whether or not Bowles opposed slavery itself, his newspaper, especially its daily version (the *Weekly Republican* was notably more sober) kept up an intense racist patter, including in its editorials, until the outbreak of war itself. Bowles’s position on blacks did ameliorate with time, but my sense is that he would have been happiest if all blacks had simply disappeared. (See, for example, his 1860 editorial, “What Shall be Done with the Darkies,” wherein black leaders are casti-

gated for wanting to remain “where social equality can never be acceded to them.”)

5. Wardrop’s argument, which rests on Ken Price and Ed Folsom’s identification of “Domingo” as a code term for slave revolts throughout the century, has in my opinion no merit whatsoever. Dickinson consistently uses exotic place names as signifiers of luxury in her poetry, and all of her allusions to Domingo fit well within this pattern.

6. As Pollak notes, when a soldier came to Dickinson’s door asking for a nosegay in 1862, her response was unsympathetic (92). Writing to Bowles, she comments that “[i]t is easier to look behind at a pain, than to see it coming,” suggesting that her discomfort with the soldier’s presence led her to reject his request, a surprisingly petty reaction even for Dickinson (L272).

7. Sewall says of this passage, which traditionally has been read as Dickinson’s statement of disinterest in all politics, “Actually, she seems merely to be indulging here in a bit of skepticism about the American democratic process, where the vote of an ignoramus counts as much as a Dickinson’s” (II, 620). That is, Dickinson was speaking politically but her politics were conservative, making Sewall’s comment an anticipation of Erkkilä’s more elaborated argument.

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