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Keats, Higginson, and Snakes: Yang Mu's Transcultural "Courtship" of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

The paper investigates the literary connections between nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Yang Mu (1940–2020), an award-winning Taiwanese poet. As a fellow admirer of the Romantic poet John Keats like Dickinson, Yang Mu showed great enthusiasm for Dickinson, expressing his passion for her in a post-modernist poem "September 27th's Emily Dickinson" in the early 1970s. Dickinson also sought literary guidance at the inception of her poetic career, writing to the then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* Thomas W. Higginson, after reading his "Letter to a Young Contributor" in April 1862. Their works inform a shared investment between the two writers in their Keatsian aesthetics, concerns about poetic fame, and experimentation with poetic forms during times of surging national cultural sentiments. Recent scholarships by critics like Cristanne Miller, Roland Hagenbüchle, Páraic Finnerty, Paul Giles and Domhnall Mitchell, among many others, have placed Dickinson's poetry squarely in a global context. In a similar vein, critics like Lawrence R. Smith, Michelle Yeh, Stephen Owen, Anthony C. Yu, and Lisa Lai-ming Wong also perceive Yang Mu as a world poet who practices biculturalism by blending eastern and western cultures. Building upon previous scholarships, the paper examines how Yang Mu plays a role of not only an admirer and a fellow poet, but also a surrogate mentor in "September 27th's Emily Dickinson", replacing Higginson's editorial advice for and "surgical" treatment of Dickinson. Reversely, Dickinson's poem "There's a certain Slant of light" (1862)

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transmission, circulation and evolution of poetic dialogues in a transcultural context.

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Notes

1. 1.
The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

Fr The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition. Ed. R. W. Franklin. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998. Citation by poem number.

L The Letters of Emily Dickinson. Eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward. 3 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958. Citation by letter number.
2. 2.
They did not meet in person till 8 years into their correspondence in 1870, when Higginson eventually made his way from Boston to see Dickinson in Amherst. Higginson would record the meeting in his letter to his wife later, describing this experience thus: “I never was with any one who drained my

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White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Wineapple [2008](#)).

4. 4.

In an 1861 poem "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune -" (Fr256)", Dickinson's speaker claims to "see—New Englandly -" like the Queen of England, who "discerns like me -/Provincially -".

5. 5.

Finnerty's chapter on "Global Dickinson" in *The New Emily Dickinson Studies* is a good indication of the recent scholarly trend of reading Dickinson in a cosmopolitan context (Finnerty [2019](#)). See also for example, Miller's *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* (Miller [2012](#)). On Dickinson's "global consciousness", see, for example, Gerhardt's "'Often seen - but seldom felt': Emily Dickinson's Reluctant Ecology of Place" (Gerhardt [2006](#)); Giles' "'The Earth reversed her Hemispheres': Dickinson's Global Antipodality" (Giles [2011](#)). More on Dickinson's international reception, see, for example, Mitchell and Maria Stuart's *The International Reception of Emily Dickinson* (Mitchell and Stuart [2009](#)); Mitchell's "Translation and International Reception" in *Emily Dickinson in Context* (Mitchell [2013](#)).

6. 6.

As Wong notes, the Native Soil Literature Movement "was a disguised protest against imperialistic influences from the West in aspects other than the literary" by "promoting a realist and nationalist literature in opposition to avant-garde experimental writing" (Wong [2009](#), p. 164). Consequently, Yang Mu's poetry in the 1970 s received criticism "from many nationalist critics who regarded his works as alien and antagonistic to Taiwanese readers" (Wong [2009](#), p. 164).

7. 7.

On Dickinson's literary connection with Keats, see for example, Joanne Feit Diehl's *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*

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8. 8.

On Yang Mu's comparative cosmopolitanism, see, for example, Wong's *Rays of the Searching Sun* (Wong [2009](#), pp.217-218); Yeh's Introduction in *No Trace of the Gardener*; Owen's "Traditions and Talents" (Owen [1993](#), p. 40). More on Yang Mu's negotiation between the local and the global, see, for example, Wong's "Heyuan zhiyou? Yang Mu shi Zhong de bentu yu shijie" [How is it far? The local and the global in Yang Mu's poetry] (Wong [2003](#)); Songjian Zhang's "Historical Sense and Cultural Identity A Re-examination of Yang Mu's History Poems" (Zhang [2017](#)).

9. 9.

On Yang Mu's relationship with Romanticism, see also Wong's *Rays of the Searching Sun* (Wong [2009](#), p. 193); Chin-Jen Cheng, "Quiet Harmony: Discussion on Paradise Consciousness of Yang Mu's Poetry" (Cheng [2012](#), pp. 129–133); Hsieh Wang-Ling's "On Yang Mu's Romanticness and Taiwaneseess" (Hsieh [2009](#)).

10. 10.

Wong argues that Yang Mu's "outsiderness" or "diasporic consciousness"—outside the notion of "Chineseness"—provides the poet with a critical distance to be explorative of his literary identity as a poet of the world (Wong [2009](#), pp. 199–200).

11. 11.

On Yang Mu's use of dialogic forms in his works, see, for example, Wong's *Rays of the Searching Sun* (Wong [2009](#), pp. 29–74); Zheng-Zhong Liu's "The Dramatic Monologue in Yang Mu's Poems" (Liu [2011](#)).

12. 12.

According to Wong, while "Yang Mu has been less influenced by female poets," Dickinson "seems to hold some sway over his writing" (Wong [2009](#), p. 230). Indeed, this essay belongs to one of the very first attempts to discuss such a literary connection.

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Dickinson family house), after one of his visits to the Dickinson family home—the Homestead (now the Dickinson museum). It was also the time when Yang was completing his PhD degree of Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley (1966–1971), before he was offered a teaching position in Seattle at the University of Washington.

14. 14.

Yang Mu, *Selected Poetry of Yang Mu: 1956–2013* (Yang Mu [2014a, b](#), pp. 84–85).

15. 15.

Yang Mu could be considered as a “diasporic” poet in the sense that Taiwan lost its United Nations seat as “China” in 1971, breaking up ties with the US (under Richard Nixon’s reign) in 1971 and Japan in 1972 (Wong [2009](#), pp. 197–198).

16. 16.

Dickinson makes a similar comparison in “The Bible is an antique Volume” (Fr1577), claiming that “Eden” is “the ancient Homestead”.

17. 17.

In “The Autumn”, Keats’ speaker appeals to listen to the “music” of autumn despite its indication of impending death: “Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they? /Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—” (Keats [1994](#), p. 232).

18. 18.

Mabel Loomis Todd, the mistress of Dickinson’s brother Austin and one of Dickinson’s first editors after Dickinson’s death, described Dickinson thus in a letter to her mother after she came to Amherst in 1881: “I must tell you about the *character* of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people call the *Myth*. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson, & seems to be the climax of all the family oddity ...” (Sewall [1994](#), p. 216).

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66–67); Margaret Homans's *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Homans [1980](#), p. 169); Finnerty, "A Dickinson Reverie: The Worm, the Snake, Marvel, and Nineteenth-Century Dreaming" (Finnerty, [2007](#), p. 99); Li-hsin Hsu, "Thomas De Quincey's "Serpentine" Writings and Emily Dickinson's Reptiles" (Hsu [2014](#), pp. 8–9).

21. 21.

Midori Asahina sees slowness as a strategy for immortality, and the proof of her ability to publish (Asahina [2005](#), pp. 105–106). Here I suggest seeing it also as a potential response to Higginson's comment on Keats.

22. 22.

Collins also uses the poem's title for his collection of selected poems *Taking off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* (Collins [2000](#)).

23. 23.

According to Baihua Wang, Yu's biographical introductions of Dickinson in the 1960s and 1970s, being "[i]nfluenced by the early American biographies", would "foreground[ed] the hypothesis that a thwarted romance in her twenties led to Dickinson's later withdrawal from society and decision not to marry or publish" (Wang [2014](#), p. 96). A recent and updated introduction to Dickinson in his 2012 book *Modern English and American Poetry* will be translated by my colleague Min-hua Wu and published in the 2020 November special issue in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* on "International Scholarship in English Translation".

24. 24.

It is also a direct quote from Dickinson's poem "In many and reportless places" (Fr1404).

25. 25.

In chapter 12 "Form and Content", Yang Mu juxtaposes this poem of Dickinson along with the works by the Taiwanese

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he is drawn to Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light," which also explores a certain spiritual scepticism that characterizes her late-Romantic and proto-Modernist poetics.

27. 27.

The English translation is from Wong's *Rays of the Searching Sun* (Wong [2009](#), pp. 137–139). The four poems are later collected in Yang Mu's ([2001](#)) poetry collection titled *She shi* (*Intervention*). The Chinese quotation of the poems here is from Yang Mu's *Collected Poems III: 1986–2006* (Yang Mu [2014a, b](#)).

28. 28.

More on Yang Mu's intertextuality, see Wong's *Rays of the Searching Sun* (Wong [2009](#), pp. 75–106) and "Epiphany in Echoland: Cross-Cultural Intertextuality in Yang Mu's Poetry and Poetics" (Wong [2004a, b](#)).

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Ethics declarations

Conflict of interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Additional information

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the writings of Emily Dickinson:

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