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Pop/Poetry: *Dickinson* as Remix

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Abstract: In its meticulous, freewheeling adaptation of the life and work of celebrated poet Emily Dickinson, the television series *Dickinson* (Apple TV+, 2019–2021) manifests a twenty-first-century disruption of high and low culture afforded by digital media, including streaming video and music platforms. This article argues that the fanciful series models a mixed-media, multimodal aesthetic form that invites a diverse range of viewers to find pleasure in Dickinson's poetry itself and in the foibles of its author, regardless of their familiarity with the literary or cultural histories of the US American 19th century. *Dickinson* showcases creator Alena Smith's well-researched knowledge of the poet and her work, while simultaneously mocking popular (mis)conceptions about her life and that of other literary figures such as Walt Whitman and Sylvia Plath, all set to a contemporary soundtrack. This analysis of *Dickinson* proposes to bring into conversation shifting boundaries of high and low culture across generations and engage with critical debates about the utility of the popular (and of studies of the popular) in literary and cultural studies in particular.

Keywords: television; poetry; multimodality; intertextuality; popular culture; high/low divide; gender; anachronism

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1. Introduction

In the episode "There's a Certain Slant of Light" of the television series *Dickinson* (AppleTV+, 2019–2021), it is Christmas morning, 1854, in Amherst, Massachusetts, and a cheerful young Emily Dickinson (Hailee Steinfeld) steps up to host her family's Christmas dinner party after her mother suffers an emotional breakdown. When her neighbors bring an unannounced guest, the writer Louisa May Alcott (Zosia Mamet), aspiring poet Emily bonds with her immediately and, typical for this show's glee in anachronism, the two women go for a run together as they discuss the 19th-century publishing industry, female authorship, and reader expectations. Mamet brings to the role of Alcott, the author of *Little Women* (1868), the same fast-talking, frantic, and pragmatic qualities that she perfected playing the New Yorker Shoshanna on *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017). Young Emily is portrayed by Steinfeld, known for the role of Mattie Ross in the cult Western *True Grit* (2010, dir. Ethan and Joel Coen). Across its three seasons, the television series *Dickinson*, produced for AppleTV+, features carefully cast cameos of literary luminaries, historical figures, and activists whom Emily either meets in person or encounters in dreams, fantasy sequences, or time travels, including Henry David Thoreau (John Mulaney), Edgar Allan Poe (Nick Kroll), Frederick Law Olmstead (Timothy Simons), Sojourner Truth (Ziwe Fumudoh), Walt Whitman (Billy Eichner), and Sylvia Plath (Chloe Fineman).

The encounter between these two literary New Englanders is entirely fictional—they moved in the same social circles, but there is no evidence that they ever met. Nevertheless, *Dickinson* credibly establishes their different orientations toward their writing (Alcott's commercial motivation and Dickinson's striving toward aesthetic perfection) as well as their shared experience of gendered discrimination as women writers. During their run,

they refer to their contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne's notorious letter to William Ticknor in 1855—a year after Alcott published her first book *Flower Fables*—in which he opines, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed" (Woodson 1987, p. 304). This comment presents popularity as a threat because it legitimates otherwise marginalized and illegitimate voices. It anticipates the perennial distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture that links popularity and purported aesthetic deficiency—parallels that are gendered, racialized, and classed. Hawthorne distinguishes between "the trash" of mass-market production and his own literary endeavors. Through his reliance upon a gendered rhetoric of commodification, Hawthorne casts popular works of successful female authors as aesthetically inferior commodities, products of a newly emerging consumer-led, feminized culture. Mamet's Alcott quickly dismisses such sexist and elitist arrogance; she quips to Emily: "Hawthorne can eat a dick, am I right?" In this scene, the series not only explicitly raises the gendered ideologies about art and commerce at the heart of highbrow/lowbrow distinctions, but it also produces comic delight by puncturing those distinctions in an anachronistic frank conversation between two young women writers in the mid-19th century using 21st-century slang to decry overt sexism. In this article, rather than merely reinforce binary distinctions between high and low culture for analytic purposes, we argue that the series itself foregrounds and complicates the way that high and low culture binaries are constructed and thus subject to change across historical periods.

As this outburst of contemporary profanity demonstrates, *Dickinson* playfully interjects current sensibilities around gender and other power relationships into its 19th-century storyworld. Code-switching between the lexicon of today's trash-talking youth and mixed-media excerpts from Dickinson's poems, interleaving hip hop music with period costumes, the series manifests the disruption of high and low culture afforded by digital media, including social media and streaming video and music platforms. The show combines poetry and popular culture as well as highbrow canonical literature and lowbrow teen television. As such, it exemplifies the critical dissolutions of high/low distinctions that this Special Issue spotlights. *Dickinson* rejects traditional literary expectations of how a female author's life should be portrayed. Instead, the show presents a kind of remix to its viewers, often for comic effect that, in its jarring dissonance, challenges the reverence often reserved for esteemed cultural figures.

In its casting, too, the series makes the most of its actors' star images such that, for example, Jane Krakowski as Emily's goofy, unpredictable mother embodies an intertextual link to the famous (and quite similar) characters Krakowski brought to the screen in shows such as *30 Rock* (2006–2013) and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2020). Like Mamet's and Krakowski's intertextual casting, Billy Eichner as Walt Whitman is still clearly Billy Eichner, the fast-talking gay New Yorker of *Billy on the Street* (2011–2017) and *Difficult People* (2015–2017). Casting recognizable actors who import many traits from their more contemporary roles into the 19th-century milieu of *Dickinson* contributes to the remix sensibility of the series, which draws on not only viewers' (perhaps sketchy) cultural knowledge about the life and work of Emily Dickinson, but also on their likely more extensive familiarity with contemporary pop culture such as television and music.

We draw on the notion of multimodal aesthetics as a way to analyze cultural artifacts that span different types of media, in order to highlight similarities and specificities of different media modes. In her work on poetry interpretation in digital environments and on social media, Hessa Alghadeer (2014) demonstrates how multimodality complicates and enhances diverse processes of meaning-making (87–96), and we find that such multimodal interpretative and communicative practices are actively evoked through *Dickinson*. The terms multimodality and remix are not interchangeable but are intimately related to one another as well as to practices of intermediality, a term used to describe the relationships among different media. While each of these terms has been the subject of extensive debates in media studies and narratology, for our purposes, we employ the term remixing.

However, we agree with Mary Simonson's conclusion that "intermediality is most potently generated in performances that challenge—and at times confound—the audience's expectations and understandings of media" (Simonson 2021, p. 27). Related to this is our understanding of remixing as an active storytelling practice that draws on different cultural archives. Contemporary practices of remixing are ambiguous: "sometimes respectful of the past, sometimes insulting, sometimes uncaring, [their ambivalence] needs to be taken into consideration as participatory and access-oriented archival projects proliferate" (Waysdorf 2021, p. 1142). Arguing that remix is ubiquitous in contemporary media but also that remix culture has changed considerably over the years, Abby Waysdorf advocates for that we should "move beyond debates around the legitimacy of remix and instead focus on the contemporary state of remix as a concept" (1130). Remixing Emily Dickinson's poetry, biography, and literary and cultural 19th-century context with contemporary popular culture, youth culture, and Internet culture, *Dickinson*'s intermedial remixing occurs through modes of dissonance and anachronism.

This article argues that the fanciful series models a multimodal aesthetic form that invites a diverse range of viewers to find pleasure in Dickinson's poetry itself and in the foibles of its author, regardless of their familiarity with the literary or cultural histories of the US American 19th century. Each episode loosely adapts one or more of her poems but also serializes them by visually and thematically providing continuity and making them a part of a season's larger concerns. The first season has Emily grapple with her calling as a poet seeking to claim ownership over her poetry. The second season leads her to question whether she should publish her work, what impact it may have in the future, and if she should crave recognition or even celebrity. Finally, the third season portrays the Civil War and Emily's ongoing queer love for Sue (who is married to her brother), both of which inspire her artistic interrogation of the role of art in a brutal environment. *Dickinson* showcases showrunner Alena Smith's—and her writer's room's—well-researched knowledge of the poet and her work, while simultaneously mocking popular (mis)conceptions about Emily Dickinson's life and that of other literary figures such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath, all set to a contemporary soundtrack.

A popular television series about a poet who struggles with the significance of popularity that draws on popular culture, *Dickinson* was well-received among television critics and academics. The series tends to lead "best of Apple" lists—for example, by *Paste Magazine*, *Esquire*, and *Screenrant*—and was frequently discussed on Twitter and other social media platforms. As such, the series complicates the understanding of quantitative and qualitative popularity that this Special Issue is interested in. *Screenrant*'s David Mello finds that through *Dickinson* and the sports-comedy *Ted Lasso* (2020–), "Apple TV+ has established a reputation for itself as a streaming service that prioritizes quality over quantity. The two series most emblematic of that motto [. . . have] amassed sizable audiences and fervent fan followings, while also managing to be entirely different in terms of form, tone, and story" (Mello 2021). On Twitter, *Vulture*'s Kathryn VanArendonk jokes about the show's cachet with younger viewers: "My favorite imagined scene of the last few weeks is a bunch of execs at apple tv+ huddling over the data and conversation around *Dickinson* and wondering what the hell lessons they are supposed to learn from its success . . . . 'Is it girls having orgasms? Is it Wiz Khalifa?'"[1] One comment that *Vanity Fair*'s Laura Bradley picks up is: "Perhaps the best thing about *Dickinson*—and the thing that made it a success in the first place—is that it's so abjectly weird that anyone would be hard-pressed to replicate it" (Bradley 2019).

Within the context of television, such highlighting of "quality" recalls the similar slogan that another television newcomer had employed to distance itself and its productions from the "usual", mass-oriented fare of television. Between 1996 and 2009, HBO branded its uniqueness and exceptionality through a paradoxical refusal of the medium itself: "It's not TV. It's HBO". HBO sought to set itself apart from television as a "guilty pleasure" and did so in ways that were distinctly gendered, as Elana Levine and Michael Newman have demonstrated (Newman and Levine 2011). The distinction between prestigious "quality

TV" and mainstream TV's mass appeal distanced HBO's brand from the female-associated lowbrow pleasures of television storytelling and, instead, aligned it with modernist, male-associated art forms. Yet today's serial television landscape is almost unrecognizably altered from those early days of "quality TV" (Lagerwey et al. 2016; Sulimma 2021).

We argue that *Dickinson* invalidates such distinctions, despite critics' continued reference to them. Not only is "quality TV" no longer a male-dominated category, with contenders such as *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–), *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019), *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–), and *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016–) gaining critical recognition over the past two decades, but, as *Dickinson* demonstrates in its thematics and its form, "quality" is also not inherent in genre or mode. A conventional historical television series might be concerned with period details and accuracy, as in *The Crown*, or it might instead seek to instantiate another kind of truth about a historical figure while rewriting familiar yet unverifiable cultural narratives associated with her, as does *Dickinson*. Examining how the show's deep dive into the renowned poet's oeuvre and milieu is strengthened by its deployment of 21st–century youth and Internet culture's attitudes, language, and music, this analysis of *Dickinson* brings into conversation shifting boundaries of high and low culture across generations. We argue that *Dickinson* achieves its comic and critical success through literary cameos by well-known and widely recognizable actors, critical anachronism, echoes of social media tropes and memes, and frequent affirmations of queer and feminist politics.[2] Our article seeks to explore some of the narrative and aesthetic strategies the series employs through its remixing of Emily Dickinson's life, poetry, and milieu with the archives of contemporary Internet culture and popular culture. This remixing thrives on dissonance and anachronism, as we will demonstrate in two different sections, with readings of individual episodes in which Emily encounters famous literary contemporaries such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath. The following sections demonstrate the extent of the show's remixing, which encompasses visuality, musical choices, characterization, and diction.

2. Anachronistic Stories about Emily

Whereas "presentism" may serve as a death sentence for period pieces and academic writing alike, *Dickinson* demonstrates no hesitation in appropriating historical materials and personalities for storytelling purposes. Rachel Vorona Cote (2021), Stephanie Russo (2021), and Shirley Li (2021), respectively, argue that *Dickinson* is part of a trend of intentionally anachronistic period pieces, which also includes films such as *A Knight's* Tale (2001, dir. Brian Helgeland) and *Marie* Antoinette (2016, dir. Sofia Coppola), or television shows such as *The Great* (Hulu, 2020–) and *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020–). Cote aptly describes these artifacts as a subgenre she calls "feminist anachronistic costume drama", which seeks to "exploit the artificiality of any history we attempt to reconstruct and envision alternate realities in which the women we're focused on are granted more agency than is strictly accurate [. . . in order to] illuminate the lives of historical women and the patriarchal pressures to which they were subjected" (Cote 2021, p. 148; see also Russo 2021).

Cote's observation plays out clearly in *Dickinson*'s characteristic anachronistic mash-ups, such as in episode 2.1, "Before I Got My Eye Put Out", which depicts a soiree where the crowd twerks to the song "Pink Hat" (2019) by electronic music duo Sofi Tukker. However, Li points out that, unlike other films and series, the anachronism of *Dickinson* delivers much more than a "gimmicky take on the life of the poet Emily Dickinson". Instead, the show confronts viewers with the paradox of the poet's historical persona: that "a woman who so vividly captured the spectrum of human emotion with her words came to be known only as a depressed shut-in". Other recent imaginings of Emily Dickinson have already pushed back against some of these myths; the romantic comedy film *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018, dir. Madeleine Olnek) lays the groundwork for the series with its humorous take on the poet, the depiction of Emily's romantic relationship with Sue, and the use of special effects to inscribe calligraphy of her poems on the screen.

Dickinson depicts glowing, golden handwritten lines of poetry superimposed over the images onscreen in crucial moments, which create an interesting tension between poem, accompanying music, and visuals, as will be discussed in the next section. The unfurling lines are read in voiceover by Emily or other characters with whom she has shared her work, remaining visible only briefly, denoting the ephemerality of the written word (Figure 1). In practical terms, such a combination of animated calligraphy and voiceover aids contemporary audiences who may be unaccustomed to the relatively old-fashioned cursive. The series' inclusion of lines of poetry in a mixed-media format thus affirms the beauty and artistry of Dickinson's poetry, while at the same time, its audiovisual representation also parses the poetry for today's viewers as a kind of less accessible, antiquated high culture.

Figure 1. Handwritten lines of Dickinson's poetry denote the ephemerality of the written word.

Many critics note approvingly that the show not only portrays queer desire but expands the previously reductionist view of Dickinson as an isolated, reclusive figure constantly clad in white dresses. *The Mary Sue*'s Stefania Sarrubba finds that the show "has been working relentlessly to do right by Emily Dickinson, leaving some of the most outdated, sexist myths about her behind" (Sarrubba 2021). Academic viewers tend to agree. Writing for *Slate*, literary scholar Johanna Winant explains that the show's "version of Dickinson is pretty close to my Emily Dickinson: the one I know not through her biography but through her poetry. The show isn't entirely accurate, but that doesn't mean it's not truthful" (Winant 2019). Indeed, we argue that *Dickinson* must be understood as a mediation of the poems and the poet's biography, filtered through contemporary popular culture, social media-informed humor, and celebrity feminism, which makes it more accessible and entertaining for a wider audience. Such an understanding of the show answers the question of how a canonized poet and her work can be popularized via televisual adaptation and become a part of popular culture.

A show such as *Dickinson* envisions a 19th-century Amherst much more suited to the vivid poetry of Emily Dickinson. In her research on the existing lore about anarchist writer Emma Goldman, feminist theorist Clare Hemmings develops the notion of an imaginative archive:

> "[I]t foregrounds the gaps and fissures in the existing archives and positions the historian as a deeply serious writer and reader of fiction. That archive represents the straining to hear the voices that have never been heard, the attachments that cannot be given meaning, [. . .] it grapples with the relationship between the

dead and the living in order to enact the future one wants to bring about in the present." (Hemmings 2018, p. 8)

Hemmings highlights that fictional stories and storytelling offer modes of analysis and engagement for the making of alternative historical meanings that speak to contemporary audiences. Whereas showrunner Smith and the *Dickinson* writers' room incorporate meticulous research and archival work in their creation, their reimagining of Emily Dickinson also draws on an imaginative archive of popular culture.

This resonates with how current literary criticism, media studies, and popular culture studies are approaches that understand popular culture as an archive. For instance, Abigail De Kosnik explores the archiving and remixing practices of media users as a "rogue archive" that thrives under conditions of availability, accessibility, and Internet affordances. Such media users (re)create "content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution", such as museums, libraries, and literary canons (De Kosnik 2016, p. 2). Such practices transform

> "'archives' and 'archiving' from terms that signify exclusivity into terms that signify commonness, so that instead of locked rooms, the word 'archives' connotes websites that operate as information commons, and instead of the concealed workings of a rarified circle of experts, 'archiving' refers to acts of database design and maintenance that 'anyone can do', that are commonplace." (De Kosnik 2016, p. 3)

Whether described as "common" or "rogue", the everyday, digital archives that De Kosnik describes operate along similar lines as Hemmings' imaginative archive. Both conceptions allow for an understanding of how a popular show such as *Dickinson* approaches a historical author such as Dickinson and her literary legacy.

The show consciously crafts an irreverent, at times ludicrous, version of Dickinson and her family, signaling this artistic freedom in storytelling to its viewers and asking them to take pleasure in it. *Dickinson* exemplifies this Special Issue's definition of the popular as a question of attention; to be popular is to be noticed by many (Werber et al. in this issue), for instance on social media. "*Dickinson* appears to know exactly how Twitter will respond", writes critic Laura Bradley, and continues, "more importantly, the series wants its viewers to know that it's in on the joke—that it's always, always in on the joke" (Bradley 2019). The show's engagement with the imaginative archive of received wisdom about Emily Dickinson, combined with its winking mobilization of anachronism to foreground ideological shifts between past and present, constructs a knowing viewer ready to laugh at the incongruities and paradoxes inherent in the very idea of the great American poet twerking.

Perhaps the necessity for such critical anachronism becomes most obvious in the episode "The Future Never Spoke" (3.7), when Emily and her sister Lavinia accidentally travel to the future (through a magical gazebo) and find themselves in 1955—terrified of cars, lawn sprinklers, and airplanes. The simple fish-out-of-water anachronistic humor quickly complicates, however, as the two women are astonished to find their home turned into a museum dedicated to the memory of Emily as "the great American poet". They meet a local Smith College student in scarlet lipstick and saddle oxfords who sneaks them into the house, even though she takes them for wacky method actors (Figure 2). This student quickly reveals that she is also a poet: Sylvia Plath (Chloe Fineman). Plath expounds on her fascination for Dickinson and her feeling of "kinship" with the poet, and the sisters are awestruck by the contradictory ways that Emily is remembered. Yet, despite her admiration, Plath also becomes a mouthpiece for the many myths that accrued around her over the hundred years or so since Dickinson's life, some of which seem suspiciously parallel to Hawthorne's disdain for women writers:

> Lavinia: Look, in the future, you are actually famous.
>
> Sylvia: Well, not that famous. More of a local legend. An obscure, strange female poet who lived a sad, miserable life [. . .] The only thing Emily Dickinson did was wear white and cry.

> Lavinia: That's not accurate. She almost never wears white.
>
> Emily: Emily Dickinson is not depressed. She does not want to die. She wants to live and connect with the world through her words.
>
> Sylvia: Nah . . . . I would argue she died alone in her bedroom.

Emily and Lavinia challenge many of her assertions about the historical Dickinson, "Where do you get your information?!" to which Plath replies, "It's common knowledge". The preposterous device of time travel allows two of the most famous US American women poets to meet and, as with Emily's encounters with Alcott, discuss writing and disagree frequently. With its anachronistic humor, too, this scene is rescued from being too didactic as Plath dramatically intones, "Emily Dickinson was the original Sad Girl!".

Figure 2. Emily and Lavinia Dickinson time travel to 1955, where they meet young Smith College student Sylvia Plath at their former home, now the Emily Dickinson Museum.

Plath enjoys the argument and reveals to the sisters the "scandalous" interpretation of Dickinson as a lesbian—an unfamiliar word to the 19th-century women ("No, she was an American", insists Lavinia). The Plath interlude doubles down on the series' interrogations of popular literary biography by presenting yet another famous US American woman poet whose personal life—in this case, her mental health and suicide—have deeply influenced how her work is remembered and taught. Seeing young Plath as a college student, honing her own intellectual and aesthetic talents, extends the work of the series as a critical intervention into what we think we know about famous women writers and what might be missing from that knowledge. The episode also ominously underscores the continuing relevance of feminism for both women's timelines in Plath's closing warning: "Don't you know? The future never comes for women".

Interestingly, unlike the series, the site of the fictional conversation between Emily and Sylvia Plath (the Emily Dickinson Museum) itself remains curiously silent on queer framings of Dickinson. Bartram, Brown-Saracino, and Donovan explore the contradictory ways cultural institutions such as museums manage the gendered histories and sexual orientations of historical figures. Through participant observations of tours, they find that the Emily Dickinson Museum supports three different narratives about Dickinson's sexual orientation: as lesbian in a relationship with Sue, as heterosexual romantically involved

with men, and as the asexual "Virgin of Amherst". While disregard for her potential bisexuality goes unchallenged in these narratives, Bartram et al. find that the museum presents "Emily's same-sex relationships as speculative, while offering evidence for her (also uncertain) heterosexual relations" (Bartram et al. 2019, p. 8). Overall, the museum depicts Dickinson as a remarkable, "unusual woman" transgressing gender norms; a depiction conflating gender identity and sexual orientation, the museum employs "the unusual woman as a categorizing schema, aimed at rendering uncertainty manageable" (Bartram et al. 2019, p. 13). Rather than employ silence as a means to manage unverified sexual orientations and omit potential queer histories, *Dickinson* unambiguously depicts Emily's queerness. Interestingly, Plath's gossipy comment about lesbianism leads Emily to come out to her sister, who reacts with understanding and support. Although, by the end of the episode, the time travel is revealed to have been Emily's dream and thus not shared by her sister.

3. Of Cottagecore, Mermaids, and Suffering

In the third season, Emily and her family try to cope with the Civil War that, despite geographical distance, dominates their lives and thinking. In a subplot, Emily's acquaintance Henry (Chinaza Uche) makes his way south to join the First South Carolina Regiment comprised of African American soldiers, the so-called Beaufort Boys, led by Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson (Gabriel Ebert). Based on their actual historical correspondence, Emily writes letters to Higginson, who became a kind of editor and mentor for her. The season raises the question of whether Dickinson can be remembered as a war poet, considering how her poetry resonates with the traumatic experience of the war in complex ways. Emily grapples with the question of what role art, specifically poetry, can play in hard times. In the fourth episode, "This is My Letter to the World" (3.4, 2021), Emily's anxiety about the war and feelings of inadequacy about her role as a poet lead her to escapism, and she retreats to her conservatory with a book of poetry, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Emily immerses herself in her newly arrived copy of *Leaves of Grass*, ensconced with her blue and white teacup and saucer in the conservatory surrounded by plants, including a 2020 pandemic favorite, the fiddle-leaf fig.

Surrounded by greenery, velvet pillows, blankets, and equipped with a steaming cup of tea, Emily's reading session looks remarkably like current social media posts by influencers celebrating self-care and bookish retreatism. However, this mise-en-scène revels in an alternative Internet aesthetic: "cottagecore": "an aestheticized, nostalgic yearning for a life of contained coziness, accented with vases of wildflowers, doilies, long flowing dresses, and delectable desserts" (Schollaert 2021, n.p.). Like dark academia, popular memes valorizing cottagecore tend to be understood as a Western European visual tradition, rightfully criticized for its white-centric focus.

Jeannette Schollaert even coins the expression "Dickinson-core" to describe how biographies and scholarship of the poet emphasize her domesticity, her long flowing dresses, gardening, and flower-pressing—all of which lend themselves to this feminized aesthetic appreciation: "The phenomenon of idealizing and romanticizing an aestheticized version of quaint cottage domestic life is not new, but the most recent #cottagecore trend bears striking similarities to the life and leisures of Emily Dickinson" (Schollaert 2021, n.p.). Cottagecore flourished during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, coinciding with the release of *Dickinson*'s second and third seasons. Hence, when the show visually references the cozy aesthetic in this scene, it not only hyperbolizes the stereotypes of Dickinson's biography, but also participates in a meme aesthetic of spectacularized self-care and self-soothing widespread in pandemic popular culture. Emily's retreat from a family argument about the war into her new book initially conforms to the recent social media conventions of what comedian Bo Burnham gently mocked as "White Woman's Instagram".[3]

However, instead of consoling and distracting her from the tumultuous world of war and her questioning of artistic motivations, reading *Leaves of Grass* transports her in her imagination from her cottagecore conservatory to a field hospital in New York City where she is overwhelmed with the many suffering soldiers. Here, Emily meets a bearded white man nursing the injured: Walt Whitman himself, played by comedian Billy Eichner, whose performance lends the poet a rambunctious and unruly quality. Eichner's Whitman is fast-talking, esoteric, and all over the place bordering on barely coherent, yet firm in his connection to space: "I am everywhere. I am everything. I am the paving-man, the canal boy, the deck-hands, the clean-hair'd Yankee girl, the conductor, the s****. I am the rattlesnake, the alligator, the panther, the black bear. I am Walt Whitman, cosmos, democracy, Manhattan. I am New York". This list is loosely paraphrased from sections 15 and 33 of Whitman's poem "Song of Myself"—which is part of the collection that Emily is reading. It recalls the poet's penchant for anaphora and lists, and the mystical multiplicity of his famous poems. Surprisingly, the series does not employ its characteristic anachronism in one moment of this scene. *Dickinson*'s Whitman reproduces a racist and misogynist ethnic slur for Indigenous North American women from his poem, without pausing to reflect upon the inappropriateness of the usage (for contemporary audiences), despite the show's seeming self-awareness of contemporary discursive norms.

Emily identifies herself as a poet to Whitman right away. She asks him about the question of artistic production that she struggles with: "someone told me that if I want to write great poetry, then I need to be like you, and I need to go out into the world and confront its pain". Offering little concrete advice, Whitman points to their surroundings, the injured soldiers: "what is pain to me but just another side of pleasure? What is a poet but just one facet of the all-powerful universe itself? You are not just Emily Dickinson, you are everyone. You are every man here. So you must not just ask the wounded person how he feels. You yourself must become the wounded person". Humorously, Emily oscillates between fangirling disciple eager for advice and dead-pan New Englander sarcastically responding to Whitman's exaggerated enumerations and puzzled by his cryptic exclamations.

While Emily is following Whitman around the hospital, they encounter yet another literary figure even more sarcastic and pragmatic than Emily in response to Whitman's ramblings. Again, there is Louisa May Alcott in a return performance by Zosia Mamet.

Like Whitman, Alcott too volunteered to serve as a nurse in a field hospital. And in contrast to Whitman, the novelist offers a different take on artistic production. While Whitman treats the injured men around him as an esoteric inspiration, highlighting their cosmic interconnectedness and generalizing from their lives as yet another point in his many lists, Alcott leans into the specificity of their situation. She explicitly expresses her pragmatic writerly motivations: "I get so much great material from doing this [. . .] great fiction is always based in fact, and this place is chock-full of specificity and detail, [. . .] how wounds actually smell bad. Honestly, when some of these guys show up here, it is the vilest odor that has ever assaulted the human nose. It's kinda gross, but, you know, facts are facts". Neither Alcott's obsession with facts and the materiality of the war, nor Whitman's cosmic connectivity confirm Emily's suspicion that she needs to experience suffering in order to produce art (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Emily meets her literary hero Walt Whitman and her previous acquaintance Louisa May Alcott in a New York City field hospital. Neither of her fellow writers' approaches to artistic inspiration and suffering satisfies her questions about art in times of crisis and war.

Sensing her confusion, Whitman takes her on an escapade to the city: "Ah, so you're into pain, huh? Um, yeah? Well, then you've come to the right place! This is New York City, baby. The Bronx is up, the Battery's down, and pain is everywhere. Follow me, Emily Dickinson. Let's go hurt ourselves". He leads her to one of Greenwich Village's most iconic subcultural spaces in the 19th century: Pfaff's beer cellar. In the 1850s and 1860s, this vaulted-ceilinged saloon was a meeting spot for the literary, artistic, and bohemian scene, especially for queer men such as Whitman. At Pfaff's, Whitman and Dickinson encounter a roaring party with a diverse crowd of different body types, gender identities, and sexual orientations drinking, dancing, and flirting. In this setting, Emily discloses her deep romantic and sexual love for Sue and realizes that this love may serve as much better artistic inspiration. In an emotional confession, she yells at the excited Whitman: "I love Sue! And I . . . I want her and I can't get enough of her. And if I was on my deathbed right now, all I would want is Sue!" While Emily is still trying to understand the implications of this revelation, she is pulled onto the dance floor by a mermaid played by Beth Ditto, the glamorous queer performer known for her work with the indie rock band Gossip. At the bar, Whitman marvels at the sight before joining the dancing crowd himself: "Drink with the drinkers. Dance with the dancers. Come on! New York is back!" Whitman's declaration

is a clear allusion to the declaration resounding around the city after COVID-19 killed almost 44,000 New Yorkers in 2020, signaling not only an affirmation of life emerging from the horrors of the Civil War, but also the contemporary reality of the show's viewers and their desire for a return to a pre-pandemic dance floor amid their own twenty-first-century grief over such staggering loss of life.

Although, visually, Ditto's golden mermaid costume, topped with an extravagant crown, stands out on the dance floor, she does not perform in the scene, and the characters dance to another song. Acoustically, the scene layers Dickinson's poem 441 with the lyrics of the deep house song "One More Time" (2021).[4] The song was the much-awaited collaboration by two of the most prominent commercial German EDM DJs and musical producers, Robin Schulz and Felix Jaehn, featuring the voice of Norwegian singer-songwriter Alida. The song has been extremely popular, as the 13 million clicks of the official video on YouTube indicate. Though the series also features lesser-known independent musical artists, the inclusion of such a popular song in this scene is remarkable. Dickinson's elaborate poetic voice stands in stark contrast to the song's straightforward, repetitive, and clichéd lyrics. Yet both reinforce the sentiments of the other, demonstrating the possible affective connections between something as "lowbrow" as commercial electronic dance music and as "highbrow" as Dickinson's poetry. The following quotation demonstrates how the scene weaves the lines of the poem 441 (left column) and song (right column) into one another.

Poem 441	Song
This is my letter to the World	
	You can shut the light
	But you can't take the sunshine from me
That never wrote to Me—	
	I'll be up all night
	Making fire with every heartbeat
The simple News that Nature told—	
	Dancing
	Watch me dance the night into the morning
With tender Majesty	
	Darling, hold me
	Like it was forever, darling, hold me
Her Message is committed	
	This is our last song,
To Hands I cannot see—	
	last night, last sunset
	Last kiss goodbye ain't done yet
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—	
	Last song, last night, last sunset now
Judge tenderly—of Me	
	Then we'll do it one more time

Dickinson's poetic voice laments the lack of response of the world that she writes to; her letter is as easily understandable as the poem itself. And yet the lyrics of the song insist that such a lack of response would never diminish the speaker herself, as evident in the sunshine that cannot be taken from her. While the poem's "letter" is inspired by the "News" told to the speaker by "Nature", the song's lyrics are addressed to a beloved "darling" with whom the singer's poetic persona shares a "last song" on the dancefloor. The notion of this being the "last sunset" projects an impression of carpe diem or YOLO (you only live once), while as a punchline, the song's last line betrays this last song to not actually be the last ("we'll do it one more time"). Meanwhile, the poem's request to be judged tenderly by the members of one's community ("sweet countrymen") hence becomes situated in the present

and allows Emily to express herself free of the consideration of others, both in her own poetry and there in the queer space of the club dancefloor.

4. Conclusions

By examining the popular television show *Dickinson*, this article explores how contemporary television may exceed distinctions between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" cultural productions—as well as previous valorizations of specific television shows as "quality TV"—through a particular remix aesthetic form. This remixing practice develops through dissonance and anachronism. It strengthens the cultural understanding of the life, oeuvre, and milieu of Emily Dickinson through overlapping it with contemporary popular culture, Internet culture, and youth culture. Such remixes range from visual overlaps (such as the cottagecore aesthetic) to sound (the use of contemporary commercial music such as EDM) to characterization (through the paratextual star texts of actors performing as literary or historical celebrities in the cameos) to language (current slang or profanity employed by 19th-century characters). These remixes appear to selectively modernize the 19th-century poet and her oeuvre, hence updating a literary history and group of poems deemed high culture and making them appealing for contemporary audiences. However, what *Dickinson* undertakes is much more than a mere update of Emily Dickinson's life and poems to didactically make them palatable for a new generation of readers.

Understanding such remixes as what Clare Hemmings calls an "imaginative archive" and Abigail De Kosnik, a "rogue archive", we have argued that the series remixes Emily Dickinson's biography and poems via social media memes, celebrity culture, and feminist popular culture, allowing viewers of *Dickinson* to question the ways the famous poet is remembered and appreciate alternative stories about her. Looking at episodes in which Emily Dickinson encounters other prominent literary figures, such as Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, and Sylvia Plath, our readings tease out some of the show's deliberate anachronisms. These encounters enable deeply gendered conversations about memory, collectivity, artistic production, and commercial reception. The series *Dickinson* imagines its viewer as in the know, if not necessarily about the particulars of literary figures and their work, then about how gender and race will impact how we remember famous historical figures and what might be missing from that memory.

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Notes

1. The rapper plays the personification of Death, who literally "kindly stopped for" Emily several times over the three seasons. Death whisks her away on glamorous carriage rides to discuss her life, art, and his at times frustrating profession.
2. The show equally affirms antiracism through its representation of abolitionism, black characters like Henry (Chinaza Uche) and Betty (Amanda Warren), as well as the depiction of white characters' inability to fully understand and appropriately respond to racism. For instance, in one of the episodes discussed in this article (3.4. "This is My Letter to the World"), abolitionist Henry has a job interview with Union Army Colonel Higginson (Gabriel Ebert) to teach the members of the African American regiment that Higginson oversees to read and write. The white man Higginson is eager to be an "ally" to Henry and the other African American soldiers. He goes on a rant employing current social justice and critical race terminology to a humorous extent in this Civil War context: "the standards that are being applied, well, obviously those are the standards of white supremacy, the very system we're trying to dismantle. [. . .] I'm really trying to police my language. Not 'police!' . . . patrol . . . No, that's problematic as well. Damn! I'll do better . . . " Higginson's absurd performance of white allyship leaves Henry bewildered and confused, yet accepting the position that he is offered.
3. Part of his comedy special *Inside* (Netflix 2021), the song "White Woman's Instagram" by comedian Bo Burnham evokes common visual motifs of cottagecore: "An open window, a novel [. . .] Latte foam art, tiny pumpkins/Fuzzy, comfy socks/Coffee table

made out of driftwood/A bobblehead of Ruth Bader Ginsburg/A needlepoint of a fox". As the song title indicates, Burnham ridicules these elements of a particularly gendered and racialized social media performance enacted so repetitively to have become a cliché—yet also poignantly providing the women enacting them with a means to express feelings of loneliness online. In the second half of the song, Burnham describes the consolation or self-soothing that such social media posts create for their originators even as they flaunt white privilege. *Dickinson*'s visual enactment of cottagecore can be understood to allow for similar affective communication with the audience through the easy recognizability of Emily's cozy self-care reading session.

[4] Emily Dickinson not only published none of her approximately 1775 poems, except a few anonymously, but also did not title them. Her poems are generally known by their first lines or by numbers assigned to them by editors to describe an assumed chronology. For example, "This is my letter to the World" is referred to as either poem no. 441 in the collection *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955) edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Dickinson and Johnson 1955) or as poem no. 519 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1998) edited by R.W. Franklin (Dickinson and Franklin 1998).

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