
‘Odd Secrets of the Line’: Emily Dickinson’s Border Poetics

Wendy Tronrud*¹

¹CUNY Graduate Center – United States

Abstract

Martha Schoolman, in her recent book *Abolitionist Geographies*, details the increasing importance of the Great Dismal Swamp and the geography of marronage to abolitionists leading up to the Civil War. Considering this antebellum period of both delimiting and shifting boundaries, from the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, the 1857 Dred Scott decision and the growing tensions building between North and South, my paper considers a few of Emily Dickinson’s poems in relation to her family’s collection of maps in order to further historicize her aesthetics of the line. Given her particular interest in geographic liminality, sometimes represented through a prophetic lens, other times through one of captivity, how can one understand Dickinson’s explorations of not only border crossings but her interrogations of the border or line itself in relation to slavery and fugitive slave pursuits of freedom? When a speaker of one her poems, like in “Just lost, when I was saved,” (1860) claims to have “odd secrets of the line to tell” (8), what kind of geographical boundary crossing does this poem try to imagine? Given her well-documented relationship with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, along with his own abolitionism and interest in the Great Dismal Swamp, I hope to elucidate how Dickinson’s poetic explorations of borders, boundaries and lines are very much rooted in the contentious debates around slavery and race during the antebellum moment.

*Speaker