

Taboo Ecologies: Material and Lyric Dispossession in Anne Spencer's Garden and Seed Catalogs

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Abstract

Harlem Renaissance poet and gardener Anne Spencer drew inspiration from both her garden and reading. In a poem entitled "Taboo," Spencer described reading "garden and seed catalogs, Browning, Housman, Whitman [...] oh anything..." and, in doing so, asserted the significance of her catalogs alongside literary works as inspiration for her poetry. The poem as a whole describes how Black women evade the Jim Crow South through covert activities like reading which for Spencer, importantly included garden and seed catalogs. Where Spencer's poetry and garden have been the subject of academic research, her catalogs have yet to receive the same scholarly attention. This paper argues that by placing garden and seed catalogs in the same category of taboo reading as canonical poets and conventional forms of journalism, Spencer aligns the botanical with the literary as a form of resistance. The seed catalogs Spencer engaged with reveal a long history of racism in the cultivation and naming of garden plants. This paper examines the history of seed catalogs, showing how the naming of plants is a continuation of the racist logic of possession, reflected in the naming of plants by stripping the plant of its previous context and replacing it with the names of colonial scientists and racial slurs. Spencer's poetic insistence on dispossession, the literal and metaphorical disembodiment and ejection from property, pushes against conceptions of ownership over the natural world in that it subverts the racist logic of possession. I contend that Anne Spencer actively intertwined histories by drawing on catalogs, poetry, and gardening to create new ecologies in the spaces between reading and writing, lyrical and material. The new ecology of Spencer's garden far exceeds a place where plants are grown but rather becomes a space that blooms through the material, the lyrical, and social spaces, leaving behind instead a living archive of rebellion.

Keywords: Anne Spencer, garden and seed catalogs, antiblackness.

Resumen

La poeta y jardinera del renacimiento de Harlem, Anne Spencer, se inspiraba tanto en su jardín como en la lectura. En un poema titulado "Taboo", Spencer describió leer "catálogos de jardinería y semillas, Browning, Housman, Whitman [...] oh, cualquier cosa..." y, al hacerlo, afirmó la importancia de sus catálogos, así como la de las obras literarias como inspiración para su poesía. Su poema como un todo describe cómo las mujeres negras se evadían del sur de Jim Crow a través de actividades encubiertas como la lectura, lo que para Spencer incluía de forma importante los catálogos de jardinería y semillas. Mientras que la poesía y la jardinería de Spencer han sido materia de investigación académica, sus catálogos aún no han recibido la misma atención intelectual. Este artículo sostiene que al situar los catálogos de jardinería y semillas en la misma categoría de lectura tabú que a los poetas canónicos y las formas convencionales de periodismo, Spencer alinea lo botánico con lo literario como forma de resistencia. Los catálogos de semillas con los que interactuaba Spencer revelaban una larga historia de racismo en el cultivo y denominación de las plantas de jardín. A lo largo de este trabajo se examina la historia de los catálogos de semillas, mostrando cómo la denominación de las plantas es una continuación de la lógica racista de la posesión, reflejada en la nomenclatura de las plantas al desvincular a la planta de su contexto previo y reemplazarlo con los nombres de científicos coloniales y calumnias raciales. La insistencia poética de Spencer en la expropiación, en la

desmaterialización literal y metafórica y en la expulsión de la propiedad se opone a las concepciones de pertenencia sobre el mundo natural al subvertir la lógica racista de la posesión. Sostengo que Anne Spencer entrelazaba activamente las historias recurriendo a los catálogos, la poesía y la jardinería para crear nuevas ecologías en los espacios entre la lectura y la escritura, lo lírico y lo material. La nueva ecología del jardín de Spencer va mucho más allá de un lugar donde se cultivan plantas para convertirse en un espacio que florece a través de los espacios materiales, líricos y sociales, dejando atrás un archivo vivo de rebelión.

Palabras clave: Spencer, Anne, catálogos de jardines y semillas, antinegrura

In a letter to a poet friend, Anne Spencer wrote, “Being a Negro woman is the world’s most exciting / game of taboo” (*Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum*). This game consisted of both knowing deeply the limitations imposed by racism and patriarchy and the creative ways Black women evade and subvert these limitations. Spencer further explains, “we do not climb into the jim crow galleries. / we stay away and read,” signifying that reading is not a passive act but one that circumvents barriers in the Jim Crow south. Anne Spencer reads “garden and seed catalogs, Browning, Housman, Whitman, Saturday evening post / detective tales, Atlantic Monthly, American Mercury, Crisis, Opportunity, Vanity Fair, Hibberts Journal, oh anything...” (*Anne Spencer House Museum*). As this list suggests, what would it mean to read garden and seed catalogs as and with her poetry? This paper invites readers to think of ecology existing in the permeability of the social, lyrical, and botanical spaces and in doing so lean into the co-creation of Spencer’s garden and poetry. Spencer tended to the literal garden as a space of refuge for Black social and intellectual life. Additionally, her annotations and poetry in the garden books reject the possessive history reflected in naming plants and evade a taxonomy of poetic form; her poetry resides within garden and seed catalogs as well as the literal garden. Writing within the pages of her seed catalogs, Spencer both nurtures a garden out of language salvaged from racist histories and a literal garden in the Jim Crow South. By eluding neat categorizations of poetry, catalog, and garden, Spencer demonstrates her poetics in excess, effectively turning these categorizations on their head. This poetics of excess builds from what Christina Sharpe describes as Black annotation and redaction, a way of seeing “in excess of what is caught in the frame” as a “counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see” (117). By placing garden and seed catalogs in the same category of taboo reading as canonical poets and conventional forms of journalism, Spencer aligns the botanical with the literary, cultivating new ecologies and asking us to look differently at Black life in the garden.

The evasion of categorization pushes back against ideas of ownership and domination of the natural world through symbolic and literal possession. Franz Fanon explains that “The colonial world is a compartmentalized world” (3) in reference to how Europeans organized cities within the colonies. Fanon goes on to explain that a key strategy in the struggle for liberation is puncturing these categorizations in order to find where colonial power resides. Reading Fanon alongside Spencer, we can understand the separation of poetry from the lived materials, the racialized naming of plants, and the segregation of the South all as an intentional compartmentalization of Black life with the intent of possession. This possession occurs on the literal level, the ownership of land and

the ownership of the enslaved as domination, and on a spiritual level as a haunting or taking over of the body. By writing through catalogs, Spencer refuses the compartmentalization of her poetry from her daily activities so that her poetry becomes bound up with catalogs and the garden itself. Within the content of her poetry, Spencer describes the dispossession of the body into landscapes as a direct counter to owning land. Rather than depicting ownership and control over nature, Spencer's "Requiem," for example, places the speaker's decaying body as a source of nourishment and eternal memory within the garden. And just as Spencer rejected the logic of possession in her garden poems, she sought to create a green space that resisted this paradigm. Spencer's physical garden served as a place of refuge from the physical threats of white supremacy and a nurturing location for Black social and intellectual life. This place of refuge is a continuation of what we might call, following Sharpe, Spencer's new ecologies, where the garden becomes the location of a collective ecology that exists beyond Spencer. Her garden served as connective tissue between Virginia and Harlem, rupturing the stability of a singular, isolated landscape.

This essay begins by situating Spencer's poetry, life, and home in the context of the Jim Crow South. The garden and all of its excess can be read as a site of material and social significance to Black intellectual life, and I suggest we consider Spencer's garden an archive of her poetry and a rebellious new ecology growing against the Jim Crow South. Next, considering the importance of seed catalogs to Spencer's work, I show how the seed catalogs Spencer used reflected the racist logic of possession through the use of racialized language in plant names and the occlusion of botany's essential role in colonial plunder. While Spencer's catalogs are part of this legacy, her annotations within them not only refuse to ignore the racist logics bound up in plant naming but challenge readers to see in excess of what is on the page. Establishing a relationship between Spencer's annotation practices and her poetry, I show how Spencer's oeuvre resided throughout her home and garden. The continuation between the page and the garden exemplifies Spencer's poetics of excess in that Spencer's poetry and garden nourish one another to such an extent as to render both inseparable. The way that Spencer converged the material, social and lyrical suggests that the garden itself exists in what Sharpe describes as new ecologies. Sharpe tells us that the weather of antiblackness is pervasive and "necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (106). In the weather of antiblackness, Anne Spencer grew a garden. She annotated through seed lists, wrote antagonistically to the idea of property, and nurtured an ecology where Black social and intellectual life could thrive in a dangerous and unlikely environment. The new ecology of Spencer's garden far exceeds a place where plants are grown; instead, it blooms through the material, the lyrical, and social spaces fostering intimate connections.

The Garden

While Spencer cites her early childhood outside of school as the starting point for her interest in nature, it was not until after her marriage to Edward Spencer and when they moved to 1313 Pierce Street in Lynchburg, Virginia, that she began gardening

extensively. Edward repaired and expanded their home and garden, which was formerly the location of a confederate recruitment camp, from primarily salvaged and repurposed materials (Frischkorn and Rainey 12). Spencer's garden was a place of refuge, social entertainment, and inspiration for poetry. Frischkorn and Rainey explain that for Spencer, "Experience with her own garden offered the grounding from which her expressions of ideas could take flight" (57). Many of Spencer's poems take place in the garden, which Spencer famously described as "Half my world" (qtd. in Greene 186). More than an appreciation for the natural world, we can see how Spencer's reading and writing about the garden actively challenge structures of white supremacy. Where it is true that Spencer took great pride in owning her own home and cultivating a beautiful garden, it would be misguided to assume that she was striving for the type of middle-class gardening exemplified by the segregated gardening clubs of the time. Rather, Spencer responded to the dominant mode of gardening, steeped in whiteness and class status, by framing her devotion to the earth differently.

In this, Spencer was not alone. Speaking about the connection between poetry and gardening, Alice Walker asks in "In Search of Our Mothers Gardens," "How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century when for most of the years Black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write?" (368). Walker describes how Black women's creative genius has been stifled under slavery and its afterlives but how when we look toward unconventional sources, other forms of expression emerge in everyday life. In the evocative essay, Walker points to her mother's garden as the location of creative genius, inviting readers to search for other forms of Black women's intellectual contribution growing in unlikely locations. Scholarship in the last decade has further illuminated the complex histories between African American women, gardening, and the environment that predominantly white environmental history has neglected. Diane D. Glave explains,

Despite the limitations imposed by enslavement, sharecropping, and racism, including limited access to better land, agricultural methods, and plants or crops, these women took some patches and attempted to make them their own through aesthetics and conservation efforts. (116)

Considering African American relationships to nature more generally in the introduction to *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, Camille Dungy tells the story of a segregated swimming pool in Anne Spencer's hometown of Lynchburg. The pool closed after being forced to integrate and is now home to a large box elder tree. Dungy writes, "Thanks to the tree's tenacity, its remarkable, beautiful, uncompromised growth, the mechanisms that accommodate this simple form of recreation have been destroyed" (xix). What is so striking about the box elder story Dungy details is how the tree embodies what Kimberly Ruffin calls the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" (17) within one location and demonstrates nature as an active participant, a theme Spencer herself takes on in her poetry. In describing Lynchburg specifically, Dungy's introduction helps situate Spencer's poetry in conversation with the racial and botanical violence that enveloped her hometown. This is all the more interesting when we consider Spencer as a part of the

Harlem Renaissance while residing in Virginia, a complexity that highlights the significance of both Spencer's poetic prowess and the importance of her garden.

Spencer's garden provided material and social support to Black writers, activists, intellectuals, and students traveling through Lynchburg. Not only did her home serve as a safe place to stay in a city that would not allow Black people to rent hotel rooms, but her garden was often the location of social and intellectual life. Visitors to Spencer's home and garden include James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others. In her garden, Spencer also tutored Ota Benga, a Congolese man displayed in the Bronx Zoo monkey house prior to moving to Virginia. Pamela Newkirk speculates that the garden would have been important to Benga and that he might have found comfort and companionship learning with a fellow nature lover (227). The word "garden" in and of itself is an inadequate designation in that it does not account for the significance of refuge for Spencer and Black life in Virginia in the twentieth century both materially, in the form of a safe meeting space and, socially, through the intellectual and political life the garden nurtured.

In comparison to other Harlem Renaissance poets, Spencer has not received as much scholarly attention. This can be attributed, in part, to her unconventional publication history, gender, location in Virginia, or the assumption that her poetry was not as political as that of her peers (Greene 128). Additionally, Spencer does not fit neatly into poetic, political, or social categories. She drew inspiration from a variety of sources (as we see listed in "Taboo") with some scholars even going as far as to claim that Spencer wrote within the "white male tradition in which she envisioned her own writing" (Karapetkova 229). However, Karapetkova describes

Far from merely mimicking writers like Browning and Yeats, Spencer takes their tradition (and the art long held to be the province solely of white men) and uses it to protest the exclusion and neglect of voices like her own. The fact that we are still able to hear her voice clearly through her poems—the voice of a black woman continually questioning the exclusive whiteness and maleness that dominated modernist writing—marks the triumph of her art. (440)

Going further, Spencer takes gardening, a tradition more commonly associated with white women's leisure, and uses it to produce material spaces that serve as a source of poetic inspiration, a place for community, personal pleasure, political expression, and at times the reminder of generational terror associated in the cultivation of plants. Carlyn Ferrari argues that because Spencer wrote extensively about nature as a Black woman, "Spencer's poetry is highly subversive and arguably even more overtly subversive than her more critically-acclaimed contemporaries. Spencer's poems about nature serve as a counternarrative to the natural world as a 'white space'" (187). Scholarship concerned with Spencer's poetry has demonstrated her significant contributions and challenges to environmental and canonical poetry, but we also might consider how the materiality of her poetry, the literal surfaces she wrote on and about, influences both the form and content of her poems. Spencer's direct engagement with possessive plant names and her creation of a garden that was a site of refuge for herself and others inseparably influenced her poetry's content, meaning that her poetry lived among her flowers and her friends, all in spite of an atmosphere of antiblackness.

Herein, I argue, lies a form of what Spencer calls taboo. She writes that, as a Black woman, “By hell there is nothing you can/ do that you want to do and by heaven you are/ going to do it anyhow” (*Anne Spencer House Museum*). Under the violences of both racism and sexism, Spencer describes Black women as existing in an “exciting game of “Taboo” that requires both gumption and creativity to move through the world. Rather than pursuing more overt and public acts of rebellion in and against the Jim Crow south, Spencer subverts the limitations placed on Southern Black women through the domestic and intellectual space of her garden and reading. This domestic space thrives as

money did not buy- it was born and evolved
slowly out of our passionate, poverty-
stricken agony to own our own home.
Happiness. (*Anne Spencer House Museum*)

Spencer describes a domestic sphere brought about through constant struggle and passion, a place that nurtured so much life, human and otherwise. Roughly the same size as the house itself, Spencer’s garden was also constructed through salvaged materials, plants transplanted from around the region, and seeds ordered through the mail, the names of which connect Spencer to larger histories of botany and empire.

Annotations

The seed catalogs that Spencer used reflect a long history of western colonial powers laying claim to global natures. Naming, far from a passive action, asserts a claim or ownership over an entity. What we see listed alongside illustrations of perfect specimens is an assertion of ownership. Creating poetry and life within the naturalized racism of garden catalogs takes seriously the consequences of a name. Jamaica Kincaid, tracing the history of colonial plunder through the naming of plants, writes, “The naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away— that it is a murder, an erasing...” (122). This possession refers, in part, to the way European botanists named plants after themselves or their peers and in doing so completely stripped plants of their cultural significance, specificity, and history, creating instead a commodity to be extracted. Many scholars have written extensively about the relationship between colonialism and botany. For example, Londa Schiebinger argues, “The botanical sciences served the colonial enterprise and were, in turn, structured by it. Global networks of botanical gardens, the laboratories of colonial botany, followed the contours of empire, and gardens often served its needs” (11). Empire required the possession of plants from the colonies to be made into gardens for imperial use. Further, the “global botany of empire” has relied on slave labor since its inception in the Caribbean and South American sugar plantations (Batsaki, Cahalan, and Tchikine 4). In short, botany and gardening are far from neutral traditions, and their colonial afterlives leave traces in the seemingly cheerful seed catalogs.

Garden and seed catalogs in the United States date back to the late eighteenth century when D. Landreth Seed Company sent out the first catalog exclusively for seeds in 1784. However, likely due to technological gardening advances, the development of the post office, and the expansion of empire, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a remarkable expansion in catalogs. Westward expansion drove many white settlers away

from their usual, local suppliers for both seeds and information, which, in turn, prompted a new demand for seed catalogs. This demand also coincided with both a growing interest in gardening after a boom in the middle class and the shipment of newly “discovered” plants following the 1893 World’s Colombia Exposition in Chicago (Smith 109). Additionally, Judith Farr explains how, while gardening existed across class divides in the nineteenth century, catalogs marketed themselves in accordance with upper-class tastes, suggesting an ideal audience.¹

The agricultural advances of the twentieth century greatly impacted garden and seed catalogs in that the plants ordered were often new cultivated varieties (cultivars) as opposed to heirloom varieties. Liberty Hyde Bailey coined the term cultigen in 1918 and cultivar in 1924 in an attempt to categorize specific changes in plants that have occurred through domestication. He proposed cultivar to explain “a botanical variety, or for a race subordinate to species that has originated and persisted under cultivation...” (Bailey 113-114). What is important about cultivars for our purposes is that the naming of plants far exceeds species and spills into what Bailey describes, tellingly, as race. Further, where Bailey expressed an emphasis on binomial nomenclature or an insistence on a consistent scientific language, the connection between botany and horticulture was beyond scientific control. Put differently, where the idea for naming cultigens followed the scientific classification into “race,” the explosion of horticulture in the early twentieth century eclipsed scientific classification and instead used names more aligned with marketing rather than science. While catalogs had some illustrations of plants, these did not account for every variety sold, so the names of plants had to convey a message about the product. Considering that naming practices were used to market a particular plant and that gardening was primarily a white, middle-class activity, it can be inferred that these names were reflective of white, middle-class tastes and fantasies.

We should consider the connections between naming practices and the marketing of plant varieties in conjunction with the historical whiteness of gardening as a practice. The 1920s saw a paradoxical interest in gardening. On the one hand, plant breeding and hybridization were incredibly specialized and reflective of cutting-edge technological manipulation of plant life, but, on the other hand, the garden and especially its flowers were seen as a return to a simpler, and whiter past likely due to moral panics surrounding urbanization, racism, and xenophobia. Plant patents that formalized the ownership over specific varieties of plants as intellectual property were established in 1930 and expanded in the 1950s, opening up unprecedented debates over who owns, creates, and names nature. We can infer how these debates were reflected in circulating garden and seed catalogs.

It is crucial to consider where Spencer fits in this history. It is fair to assume women like Spencer were not considered as the audience for these catalogs. The Jim Crow laws legally segregating the South were in place for almost all of Spencer’s life, and she lived through and was profoundly impacted by extrajudicial white terrorism present throughout the United States but concentrated especially in the South. Considering the

¹ Farr’s attentive book *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* provides excellent contextualization for gardening in the nineteenth century, including the discussion about class and taste in garden catalogs cited above. Where there are obvious similarities between Emily Dickinson and Anne Spencer in that both women shared a passion for gardening and wrote poetry in unconventional forms, I hesitate to discuss Dickinson at length because of the specificity of Spencer’s experience as a Black woman in the South.

pervasiveness of white supremacy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the names within garden and seeds catalogs uphold the same racist logic.

The racism found in the garden and seed catalogs is part of a Lost Cause narrative in which gardeners are encouraged to fantasize about and cultivate memories of the Antebellum South. Given that gardening was a form of moral restoration for white women in response to an increasingly urban and non-white nation at the same time that the Lost Cause narrative yearned for a return to a racial order, we can see how these two strands converge within the pages of these catalogs. By the twentieth century, the proliferation of cultivars meant that plants were named with a marketable signifier of their appearance or other characteristics. The act of naming frequently evoked racialized language toward Black people to describe plant color in particular. For instance, seed catalogs in Spencer's collection included lighter colored flowers named "Quadroon" or "Pretty Quadroon," while darker varieties are "Nigrette" and "Sambo" (Spencer *Collections*). Such references were not isolated to Spencer's catalogs and reflect the larger logic of naming plants. Matthew Roth explains that the phenomenon of naming soybeans after confederate soldiers

was not simply an invasion on paper. It pointed to a dramatic transformation of Southern agriculture, in which new soybean varieties played a major role once held by cotton. It was also a vivid indication of how this transformation largely excluded African American sharecroppers, who were being actively pushed off the land. (np.)

Roth points us to historically situate plant names at a moment of extreme disparity in land access that rendered itself visible through open threats of racial terror as well as by dispossession from land ownership like sharecropping. By naming cultivated varieties of soybeans after confederate soldiers, farmers were acting out the Lost Cause desire to (re)cultivate a racial order dependent on making property out of other humans.

But perhaps more disturbingly, the catalogs Spencer read were not usually from the South and were sold for home gardens rather than commercial crops. What then were readers being invited to cultivate? Rather than viewing these plant names as an isolated act, how might we consider the afterlife of colonial possession through a name within these plant catalogs?

Often, racialized plant names were used to indicate the color of a plant, usually in shades of purple, where the name corresponded to the relative lightness or darkness of a particular plant. By tapping into the racially charged lexicon, nurseries did not have to offer a detailed explanation of a plant's appearance but instead knew customers would infer characteristics of a given plant via the name. It is important to emphasize that this racialized language existed in and contributed to what Sharpe has called the "pervasive climate of antiblackness" (106), meaning the entire atmosphere of social, political, intellectual, and material circumstances in which these plants were cultivated. Sharpe's weather describes how "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate" (106). By evoking Sharpe's weather, I want to highlight this pervasiveness even in spaces seemingly "natural" or neutral like plant nurseries.

In response to this climate of antiblackness, Sharpe asks "what must we know in order to move through these environments in which in which the push is always toward Black death?" (106). Part of the violence in the push toward Black death is the suppression and erasure of Black history, which Spencer actively resists through knowing and making known. Whereas nineteenth century catalogs frequently identified points of origin for

plants, celebrating the far reaches of empire, Spencer's catalogs tell a different story. The histories of botanical naming, classifying, and abstracting are absent from the pages of Spencer's catalogs so that the places plants are from and where their names come from are forgotten, in effect flattening the differences between plants and places and creating an inventory out of what was once an ecosystem. Spencer, however, refuses this erasure with her signature, soft annotations. Sharpe describes Black annotation and redaction as examples of "wake work," which is a "mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (18). Concerning annotations in particular, Sharpe writes, "I want to think about what these images call forth. And I want to think through what they call on us to do, think, feel in the wake of slavery- which is to say, in an ongoing present of subjugation and resistance" (116). Spencer, through Black annotation, calls on us to do, think, and feel in the wake of slavery. In her copy of "Hardy Plants by Wayside Garden " from 1935, Spencer wrote over top of the "Shortia" catalog entry in pencil: "Native N.C. named for Horticulturist Short circa 1700" (Spencer, *Collection*). Where the shortia can be grown somewhat easily in the twentieth century garden, it was extremely elusive to botanists in the nineteenth century. The shortia was named by New England botanist Asa Gray after Kentucky botanist Charles Wilkins Short in 1839 (not the eighteenth century, as Spencer suggests). Gray himself never saw the shortia bloom in person and spent years searching for the plant only to find it in the 1870s without flowers. In fact, Gray named the shortia while he was residing in Paris,² relying on dried specimens collected by field botanists. Similarly, Short never saw the flower in person despite being from the same habitat as the flower. Considering neither Gray nor Short ever saw the flower bloom in person, it is all the more audacious that Gray named the flower after Short, laying claim to a flower neither knew. The history unfolding in this catalog annotation is filled with the unknowns about which we can only speculate.

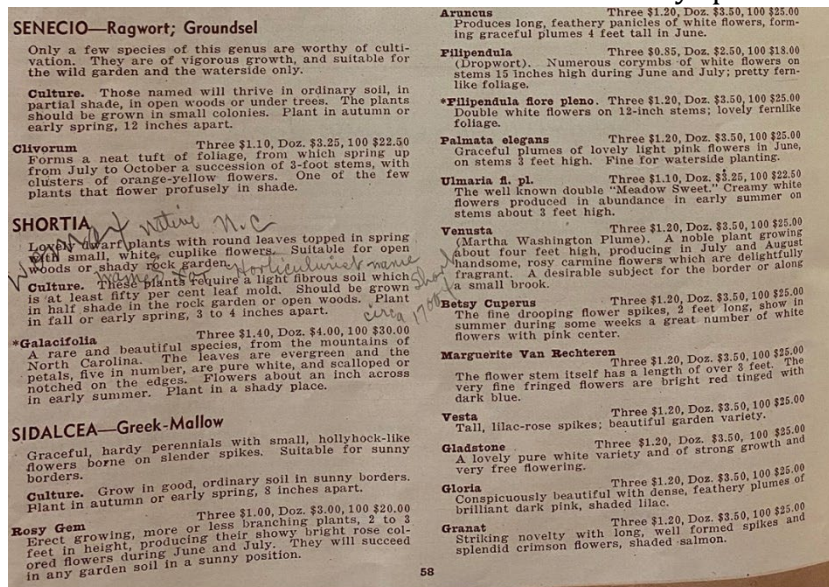


Fig. 2 Courtesy of the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum, Inc. Archives

² The "discovery" of this flower made the Southern landscape where Spencer's family lived as enslaved people a point of intrigue to 19th century scientists. The environment was described uncritically by historian A. Hunter Dupree- "the southern Appalachians, like the southern Rockies, stood out as a region ripe for botanical conquest" (86).

Spencer wrote in catalogs beyond what was necessary to purchase for her garden; instead, her annotation points us toward animating histories otherwise abandoned. Sharpe, referencing Black authors' manipulation of images and texts, tells us that

Redaction and annotation toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visibility...I am imagining that the work of Black annotation and Black redaction is to enact the movement to that inevitable—a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see. (117)

The photograph of botanists in Gray's biography includes a list of names and the note that "The other members of the party are unidentified" (Dupree 256). One of the only unidentified members is the Black man appearing at the edge of the frame carrying a white cloth and pot of what we can imagine might be coffee or tea. Where we are not able to know to what extent Spencer knew about Asa Gray and his botanical parties, Spencer's attunement to botanical history is reading "in excess of what is caught in the frame" in that her writing into the catalogs of listed plants counters the abandonment of plants seemingly existing outside of time and place within the pages of the catalog. She invites us to "try to look, to try to really see" who is in between all of these lists and names, refusing the orderliness of inventory that is so bound to the logic of possession.



Gray in the field. La Veta Pass, Colorado, 1877. Left to right, seated, Sir Joseph Hooker, Professor Asa Gray, Mrs. Strachey, Mrs. Asa Gray, Dr. Lamborn, General Strachey, and Dr. F. V. Hayden. Mr. James Stevenson is standing between Dr. Lamborn and General Strachey. (The other members of the party are unidentified.)

Fig. 3 Gray in the field 1877. *Asa Gray 1810-1888*, by A. Hunter Dupree, 1959, p. 256

Spencer demonstrates thoughtful movement through and engagement with the pages of her garden and seed catalogs. Now housed at the University of Virginia, the poet's catalogs from 1935 to 1975 contain numerous examples of racialized or colonial language (Spencer, *Collection*). The catalogs themselves are from New York, Kansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Holland and contain plants from across the world. Usually, the back cover of a given catalog will have a printed sticker addressed to Mrs. Spencer at 1313 Pierce Street. Within their pages, there are photos and illustrations, both black and white and in color, of exotic flowers in between lengthy lists of plant names. In a 1951 Iris catalog, there is a list of flower names, "Purple Crescent, Purple Giant, Purple Moor,

Quadroon, Quinda, Rabahere, Radiance, Radiant,” appearing with a pencil check mark next to Rabahere (Spencer, *Collection*). This page is typical of many other pages within this collection in that innocuous plant names appear alongside racialized names describing the plants. Also typical are Spencer’s soft check marks and notations of how many seeds the poet might order and what season she might plant them, reminding us that there was a woman leafing through the pages of these catalogs, reading the lists of names that are at times unwelcoming or hostile to Black and non-white people and imagining how they might color her garden.

A remarkable example of this seemingly mundane violence occurs in Spencer’s 1935 Wayside Garden catalog with a red phlox named “Africa.” The phlox is described as “Brilliant carmine-red with blood-red eye. Well shaped flower heads composed of large florets. Good strong stem and not subject to mildew” (Spencer, *Collection*). This description makes readers examine a flower like a body, taking stock of their blood-red eyes and well-shaped heads. By comparison, the other varieties of phlox on the page include ten named after specific people. The only other red phlox, “Leo Schlageter,” is named after a World War I German martyr whose flower is described in the following manner: “Seldom one has seen a shade of red such as is produced by this fine new Phlox. Its brilliant scarlet blooms seem to glow with fire... The best red Phlox in existence today” (Spencer, *Collection*). Recalling Roth’s soybeans, we can see a pattern emerging with the connection to soldiers and plants, suggesting yet another invitation to participate in violence via flowers. The shocking difference between describing an “African” flower through blood and its ability to withstand disease alongside a specific soldier’s brilliance is an example of how the garden is already bound with violence. Further, the creators of these cultivars, which Bailey described as race, use the name to equate plants with Black people and make them objects for sale, while also valorizing specific soldiers and making them memorials. The centuries-long entanglement of race, colonialism, and botany continues in these examples. As Spencer notes, she read these catalogs in the company of poetry and journalism, and, by reading the lists of names like literature, we become attentive to the violence held in plant names.

Pointedly, on the same page as the phlox, Spencer marks the cultivar “Daily Sketch,” writing “one” in the margin (Spencer, *Collections*). We can imagine Spencer picturing where this flower might grow in her garden and how it might complement her other plants, but we can also imagine Spencer playing with the flower’s language. A straightforward reading of this notation would suggest that Spencer planned to order one packet of phlox seeds. However, given that there are no photos of the flower and that Spencer would be selecting this variety explicitly through the description provided, it is worth examining this description in closer detail. This particular phlox is described as “A splendid and worthwhile English novelty” (Spencer, *Collection*). The name “Daily Sketch” suggests that reading descriptions of “African” blood and hardiness alongside descriptions of soldiers and their beauty reflects a mundane still life sketch. Further, the description “English novelty” works to invert the colonial gaze by making an English flower Spencer’s specimen. This is a particularly fascinating choice given the English dominance of colonial botany and the implementation of a relationship to plants that

Kincaid describes as motivated by “their need to isolate, name, objectify, possess various parts, people, and things in the world” (143). One might also consider how Spencer herself wrote about English gardens in her poem “Life Long, Poor Browning,” where the speaker laments that Robert Browning never saw Virginia, but instead “Primroses, prim indeed, in quiet ordered hedges” (qtd. in Greene 185). There is a quiet subversion here in taking an English novelty and growing it not in an orderly prim garden but in the new ecology of a Virginia garden full of Black social and political life.

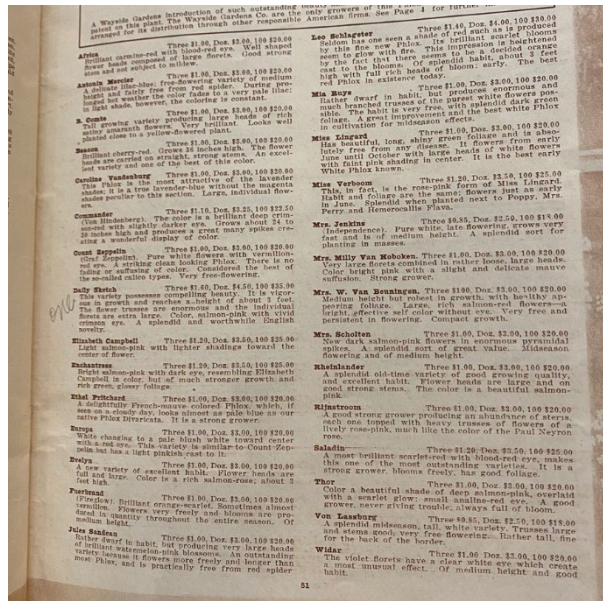


Fig. 1 Courtesy of the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum, Inc. Archives

New Ecologies

Moving away from the logic of possession that is static and totalizing, Spencer turns toward lively surfaces to counter the stability of categorizations. In addition to narrating and circling in seed and garden catalogs, Spencer also explicitly used the catalogs to write more recognizable poetry. Perhaps most beautifully, we see this in Spencer's copy of *Dreer's Garden Book of 1931*, where the poet composed a poem alongside cornflowers (qtd. in Frischkorn and Rainey np). Spencer situated her poetry in everyday life through writing on lively surfaces: books, catalogs, walls, and scraps of paper. She wrote on materials that were part of her abundant life, materials that now reside in the University of Virginia's Special Collections, a university that did not admit Black students until the 1950s when Spencer would have been in her 60s. Saidiya Hartman describes looking for her enslaved relatives in the archives, writing, “The archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the person cataloged, embalmed and sealed away in box files and folios” (17). While Spencer wrote prolifically about her life and her materials have been preserved, we might think with Hartman about how archives embalm, exclude, and abstract a once-living person. Entering the archive (what Hartman calls a mortuary), one must take seriously the materials as a vital form and artistic expression. Spencer's poem written in the

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cornflowers was from a 1931 Dreer gardening guide on a colorful illustration. Tellingly, only a few pages out of the nearly 100-page catalogs are in color, suggesting that Spencer did not write the poem here because it was the only piece of paper that she could find but rather as an intentional artistic choice.

Spencer's poem in the Dreer guide portrays the garden not as a space where the speaker becomes a proper, singular human, but rather as the location of her dispossession. The poem reads as follows

not many things I know nor do,
but one!
This my poor heart
so vacant and so frail
can love you
can love you
and dispossess
itself of content
and of strength (qtd. in Frischkorn and Rainey np).

Written on top of a white cornflower, Spencer explains that her heart *dispossesses* itself of content. By loving another so entirely, Spencer's heart no longer remains its own. If to name something is to possess, what might it mean then if to love someone so fully the heart dispossesses itself? More significantly still, Spencer writing a love poem in a garden catalog intended for instruction and possession destabilizes the authority of gardens and their separation from lived experiences. The purpose of the garden book is, in theory, to sell goods and teach one how to cultivate a garden efficiently, but instead, Spencer disrupts notions of order and propriety to express a love that dispossesses. In this sense, we can see Spencer ejecting her heart from possession through loving another person and surrendering her heart from her own possession. Importantly, Spencer does not describe her heart's dispossession as the possession by another. Rather, her heart appears to be without possession entirely. Moreover, Spencer uses the image of colorful cornflowers and exposes the "fundamental relation between pictorial or figurative representations and the written sign systems that represent language" (Shockley 500) by dispossessing her heart along with a literal list of possessions for sale. In doing so Spencer highlights the beauty and vulnerability but also the pain of loving someone without ownership which is further inflected through the juxtaposition with the cornflowers.

Spencer makes a similar move in her poem "Requiem." This poem is not written in the garden and seed catalogs, yet these materials make us read the poem in a new light. A new ecology would have us consider the relationships between the catalogs, the garden, and the poem and reject the categorizations that would hold Spencer's thought as separate. Rather than just a metaphorical or ideal garden for the speaker, we consider the garden as Spencer's own, a real place steeped in history. In the poem, where the speaker describes the irony of "I who so wanted to own some earth, / am consumed by the earth instead" (qtd. in Greene 197). The first line in Spencer's poem can be understood as a desire for possession through ownership. The speaker expresses the futility of this desire as she becomes "Blood into river / Bone into land.... Breath into air / Heart into grass" not only dispossessing (ejecting from ownership) herself from the land but becoming possessed by the land instead. Ferrari describes Spencer's poetry as pushing against the notion of possession, writing "Just as the various elements of her garden were not to be consumed, black womanhood is not to be co-opted or corrupted" (186). Interestingly in

this poem, Spencer's consumption by the earth works to transcend the kind of consumption Ferrari is concerned with. Rather than being used and consumed under patriarchy and white supremacy, Spencer is consumed by the earth as a source of nourishment. The act of being fully consumed by the earth gives way to "My heart bereft / I might rest then." Describing the act of being fully consumed or possessed by the earth gives way to a rest Spencer cannot know as a human.

The poem then becomes, like the cornflower poem, an act of dispossession through the poet's own disembodiment. Both the cornflower poem and "Requiem" share the words "possess" and "bereft," creating a sonic resonance. Additionally, the two poems emphasize the heart in direct connection to dispossession, emphasizing the role of the body as material. In the cornflower poem, the heart dispossesses itself through love. In "Requiem" Spencer writes the word heart twice, one "Heart into grass" and the other "My heart bereft- I might rest then" (qtd. in Greene 197). Reading the two poems together it becomes clear that dispossession is connected to the heart, insinuating that the act of dispossession is attached to the body rather than property. Spencer's articulation of dispossession as a bodily act becomes all the more impactful when she equates rest with decomposing into the landscape. Rather than finding rest through the accumulation of property in an act of possession, Spencer finds solace in losing the singularity associated with personhood and nourishing an entire ecosystem with her flesh. In this sense, Spencer rejects the human in the liberal sense, one associated with property ownership, as aspirational and instead posits the obliteration of a singular existence, an afterlife in the literal and material land.

Toward a New Ecology

Visitors can walk through Anne Spencer's Lynchburg house and garden, now a museum, and see the remnants of her life and the ecology she tended to extending into the present. The climbing wisteria, planted by Spencer herself, provides shade while the vibrant red phlox continues to reseed itself. As Spencer demonstrates at multiple points in her poetry, the garden exists far beyond her own life, suspending the past in the present moment. The often quoted line from "Any Wife to Any Husband," "This small garden is half my world" is followed immediately by "I am nothing to it-when all is said / I plant the thorn and kiss the rose / But they will grow when I am dead" (qtd. in Greene 186). The poem goes on to describe the speaker's husband in the garden with another woman but still sensing the dead gardener as a "shadowy third." And Spencer's garden has continued to grow, tended to by Lynchburg local Jane Baber White and her garden club. Couples take engagement and wedding photos under the blue trellis, and graduate students like me read her poetry under the shade provided by her wisteria. Spencer instructs us "toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame. A counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to try to really see" (Sharpe 117). Reading seed catalogs in excess of literature, seeing histories unfolding in the excess of a name, and a garden growing in excess of the social structures of white supremacy, Anne Spencer shows us how to really see.

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