
**Reviewed by** Camille Dungy (Colorado State University)

**Published on** H-Environment (November, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

In *Do Not Separate Her From Her Garden: Anne Spencer’s Ecopoetics*, Carlyn Ena Ferrari offers a thoughtful contribution to the study of this key figure in American letters. Ferrari expands readers’ understanding of Anne Spencer, her work, and her legacy. Furthermore, Ferrari’s book challenges limited and limiting perceptions of the source materials that should be considered viable and revelatory when studying the lives of Black women in America. Ferrari argues that “for Spencer, writing was a process devoid of circumscribed beginnings and endings” (p. 18). Therefore, this study of Spencer’s life eschews the common boundaries that circumscribe many life studies. Instead, the author takes into account aspects of Spencer’s life as disparate as her bathing schedule, her personal theology, the means of her “self-fashioned pleasure” (p. 39), and “the literal space-making she performed in her garden” (p. 18). Doing so, Ferrari situates Spencer as a germinal figure in Black ecofeminist writing, theory, and practice.

There is a glaring error on the cover copy of the edition of *Do Not Separate Her From Her Garden* that I hope the University of Virginia Press has corrected in subsequent printings. I raise the issue here because it seems to be in accord with one of Ferrari’s larger arguments in the book. The original jacket copy claims that “Anne Spencer was a pioneering African American poet, teacher, civil rights activist, and librarian at the all-Black Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C.” (italics my own). Every part of that statement is true until the location of the particular Dunbar High School where Spencer devoted her career. Paul Laurence Dunbar was a frequent namesake of schools in segregated African American communities. While there is a Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, which boasts several prominent African American poets as alumni and faculty, the Dunbar school connected to Anne Spencer is down the road about 180 miles, in the relatively smaller and less star-studded town of Lynchburg, VA. It is almost as if the people who wrote and edited this jacket copy could only conceive of a Black person of such magnitude coming from a major urban center. This
feels in line with the way that Spencer is often described as a Harlem Renaissance poet, despite the fact that she never visited the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. This error in the promotional copy, though certainly unintentional, highlights one of the main points of Ferrari’s book. Similar inaccurate revisions, oversights, and omissions are part of the reason that deeper and more robust scholarship on Anne Spencer’s life and career is only beginning to emerge nearly fifty years later. For Spencer, Ferrari argues, subverting norms and expectations often came at the cost of wider recognition and cultural inscription.

Among the modes of cultural inscription that Ferrari integrates are identity markers connected with being Black, female, and environmentally conscious. Much of *Do Not Separate Her from Her Garden* asks readers to interrogate assumptions about the nature-writing canon. Ferrari undertakes the necessary project of disentangling several overlapping concepts about nature. Over the course of several chapters, Ferrari clarifies Spencer’s views about the ways that white supremacist culture created a hierarchical society that benefits white men in particular. This encouraged a belief that Black people were or needed to be alienated from nature in order not to be conflated with the parts of the natural world over which white men claimed dominion. Spencer’s work, Ferrari argues, rebukes hierarchy and embraces “a sense of unity and harmony” with the earth (p. 43). Further, “Spencer embraces the conflation of ‘woman’ and ‘nature’ but she departs from the reductive notion of woman as ‘mother nature,’ and instead presents Black women’s engagement and identification with the natural world as liberatory and as a means to transcend circumscribed notions of Black womanhood” (p. 5). In short, Spencer proves she can be engaged with the natural environment without debasing herself in the process. In conversation with leading scholars in fields related to Black American literature, twentieth-century women’s literature, and ecopoetics, Ferrari articulates these ideas clearly and compellingly in chapters on Anne Spencer’s eccentricity, her ecopoetics, and her ecotheology.

As the book continues, Ferrari describes Spencer’s whole life as a kind of ecopoetic, arguing that her means of space making in the garden as well as her daily schedule is worthy of scholarly attention. Spencer, according to Ferrari, “was not concerned with public legibility” (p. 81). As a result Ferrari and other have had to study her archive differently in order to reconstruct the relevant components of the author’s life. Some of the most interesting aspects of *Do Not Separate Her from Her Garden* are the times when Ferrari weaves unexpected elements such as Spencer’s bathing schedule or hair-brushing routine into the analysis of the writer’s literary and cultural legacy.

The book ends with a broad overview of ecopoetic elements in books by other Black women writers: namely Alice Walker, Dionne Brand, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Zora Neal Hurston. This section reads more like a general literature review required for a dissertation than the deeper insight available in the rest of the book. I’d welcome a longer monograph from Ferrari on the subjects relayed in this final chapter. Though Ferrari does write that “working with Spencer’s poetry and experiencing her archive has taught me to listen to Black women’s poetics on their terms,” this chapter felt rushed (p. 118). I would have appreciated if each of these writers could have had the kind of attention Ferrari was able to offer to Spencer. As it is presented, this final study felt insufficiently integrated into the rest of the book’s focus on Spencer. But perhaps this is less a critique of this chapter than a commendation of the compellingly informative nature of the rest of *Do Not Separate Her from Her Garden*.

In *Do Not Separate Her from Her Garden: Anne Spencer’s Ecopoetics*, Carlyn Ena Ferrari situates Spencer’s as germinal force in Black women’s ecopoetical writing. Ferrari’s arguments advance the study of Anne Spencer’s work and expand approaches to Black feminist ecocritical
scholarship. This book is a welcome addition to the study of twentieth-century American letters.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58842

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.