

# A Case for Dairy and Grocery List Poetry

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## Abstract

In recent years, readers have revived interest in Anne Spencer, a New Negro Renaissance poet, activist, librarian and gardener from Lynchburg, Virginia. Most scholarly work on Spencer's oeuvre has been done posthumously. In this paper, I read a grocery list, found in Spencer's personal journals, for its poetics. I question my inclination to read her domestic jottings

as artistic works, and discuss how scholars may consider the collages of text in Spencer's journals, where poetry and mundanity converge. I reference thought in genre theory, food studies, and Black women's rhetorical history to argue that domestic genres of writing should be studied for their aesthetic, as well as sociological, value.

Dairy case:  
Frozen foods: 4 sugar  
Can foods: cake mix — GM flour  
Tissues — whole bl. pepper  
pancake Cinnamon  
Sears:  
solvent  
green paint & Spring Violets  
Murphy: — JR. seed-soil  
Face cream — Pond's —  
Ball brimming — yell. or orange thread

hair pins — safety  
writing pen  
blinds

The above is a transcribed page in one of the New Negro Renaissance poet Anne Spencer's many journals, housed in the University of Virginia Special Collections Library. Spencer's journals contain a plethora of notes. Some pages hold drafts of poems. Often, these 'drafts' appear in fragments; a sentence or idea occurs again and again, on different pages. Some pages have sentences sporadically spaced. Proofreading symbols insert new phrases into unpublished ideas; even when only jotting, she edited herself. Reflections after the day's news; what she may tell public figures if given their ear, or their willingness to be persuaded. Considerations of the ethics of firearm ownership. A cutting obituary draft for W.E.B. Du Bois.

Home addresses, phone messages and reminders to visit the butcher shop appear alongside these poetic drafts and intricately punctuated thoughts. On one page, a phone number, on the next: "Lilies the young shoots the old string waiting trees of Lebanon the waiting men," or "There is no tho about it. We do give our bodies to be burned. Because we must. It is what we pyre for that makes our ash value—." This juxtaposition alters a reader's interaction with the seemingly mundane; by placing multiple discourses next to one another, without starkly

differentiating their styles, Spencer elevates the mundane and humbles the profound. When political ideals and poems are drafted near grocery lists, the practice of reading all texts begins to overlap. Whether the writing practice also overlapped is a complex, likely unanswerable, question.

In this paper, I read what I call “Dairy case;” the journal entry transcribed above, for its poetics. Reading a domestic text for its poetics—particularly, a form of textual production considered inherently private and ‘functional’ as opposed to public, intentional, or artistic—opens up a series of questions: How may scholars open their inquiries outward from Spencer’s published oeuvre to the collages of text fragments in Spencer’s journals, when the art cannot be dissociated from the mundane—or, better put, when art is mundane, and the mundane is artful? When everything may be poetry in the mind of a poet?

These questions necessitate a discussion of the grocery list’s position in food studies and literary studies, alongside a consideration of the political and rhetorical potentials that may open if that positionality changes. Because Anne Spencer is an understudied Black woman poet, it is also essential to examine how her domestic writings and movement across and between textual forms relate to the history of Black women’s literacies in the United States. Both of these inquiries lead to an argument in favor of grocery lists and comparable domestic genres for their aesthetic content, not merely their sociological content. This change in interpretive register, towards an appreciation for beauty, has a potential to collapse binaries constructed between the literary and sociological, the public and the private, to yield a deeper understanding of the junctures linking labor and artistic production. These junctures and the ways they are articulated in texts create an aesthetics of domesticity which locates insights in both the sociological and literary realms, helping scholars read for historical experiences, as well as the artistic interventions a person can make within those socio-historical contexts. Broadening scholarly consideration of an aesthetics of domesticity has implications for the study of Black women’s writing in particular. When poet-activists Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith began *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, Smith said “the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate

with each other.” Domestic spaces, for many Black women in America, were spaces of mutual aid, artistic creation, and politics. Locating scholarly readings around the kitchen table centers Black women’s creative histories. As Brittney Cooper writes in *Beyond Respectability*,

if we actually want to take Black women seriously as thinkers and knowledge producers, we must begin to look for their thinking in unexpected places, to expect its incursions in genres like autobiography, news stories, medical records, organizational histories, public speeches, and diary entries (22).

When I read “Dairy case:,” I hear its music. The first lines lull readers into a waltz-like succession of three-syllable groupings. “Dairy case:” can be scanned as a cretic foot, or two trochees with the colon creating a caesura to replace the final syllable. “Frozen foods:” reapers the meter, but when placed with “4 sugar,” stresses propel reading across the punctuation; the line consists of a trochee, a spondee, and a trochee, split in the middle. Yet one wonders why the colon breaks the spondee at all, since sugar is not often found in the frozen foods section, nor are frozen foods located in the dairy case. The colons befuddle unless they were inserted for metrical effect, not their typical grammatical effect, which would indicate that the items following the colon are found within the category preceding it. The consonance of the line—all the f’s and r’s and z’s concentrating vocal production at the front of the mouth—seems reason enough to eschew punctuation rules, if “Dairy case:” is read for its poetic merit. But when attention to the line’s consonance is paid, another question arises: What kind of measurement is indicated by “4”? How much sugar is “4 sugar”? Are frozen foods “for” someone Spencer calls “sugar”? A scoop of ice cream for her husband Edward, perhaps? Not only are we left unaware of where this sugar is located, or why this sugar may be located near frozen cream, but we cannot be sure how much sugar Spencer needs, or whether “sugar” is the ingredient she seeks. The ambiguity of the first two lines suggests a conversation with oneself. There is a certain poetic license in private text. If Spencer

must only discern her own words, the empty grocery list contains creative potential. Thus, in the first syllables, one can observe how domestic writing becomes a space where poets operating under particular social conditions and labor expectations can exercise artistic agency and experiment with aesthetics.

The following line exhibits a similar predicament. Cake mix is not canned, but boxed. Yet it appears the need for some practical specificity intervenes, and “GM flour” appears after a dash. The list has already foregone punctuation rules, therefore it is difficult to determine whether Spencer is adding flour to the grocery list, or specifying that the cake mix bought would contain General Mills-brand flour. Across Spencer’s poetry, she seems to prefer dashes and ellipses to other units of punctuation, although in “Dairy case:” I am also unable to differentiate her deployment of the dash, from the colon, from the line break. The list unfolds vertically and horizontally. My head makes sense of it by giving each punctuation mark a different caesural length. Said aloud, “Can foods: cake mix — GM flour / Tissues — whole bl. pepper” propels reading when the colon’s pause is relatively shorter than the dash’s. “Can foods: cake mix — GM flour” is in trochaic tetrameter—the same number of stresses as “Frozen foods: 4 sugar,” but now in duple meter, ending the waltz. The duples continue into the next line, now in trimeter. Not a popular meter, and not one offering any sense of resolve. Instead, the lines run away from the reader until the trochees are broken by “Cinnamon,” marking a stressed end to the first, food-focused section. This section, listing what Spencer presumably needs from the grocery store, offers less specificity than one might expect from a ‘list’. Instead, it is an amalgamation of specific ingredients and locations, memory devices. One can observe the way memory functions in the poem’s construction. Among moments of metrical regularity and the content’s opacity are moments of necessity. “Cinnamon” becomes an interjection for the sake of Spencer’s memory, where her mind goes when she thinks of pancakes. It is an item she may forget, therefore, it must be written down.

Punctuation and line breaks appear almost arbitrary, if not to indicate caesuras, and Spencer’s use of capitalization contains similar

ambiguities. Brands and the beginnings of some lines include capitalization, but “Cinnamon” and “Spring Violets” are lent unexplained significance. Granted, it is difficult to determine capitalization intent when deciphering Spencer’s handwriting, and it is impossible to determine whether capitalization occurred with intention, or letters expanded in a flurry of thought. Yet in Spencer’s published poetry, she often used intentional capitalization in a Classicist fashion, to indicate allusions to Classical mythology or introduce allegorical elements. For example, in her poem “Lines to a Nasturtium (A Lover Muses)” Spencer hearkens to a long tradition of love poetry comparing lovers to plants. She gazes upon a nasturtium, naming it “Flame-flower, Day-torch, Mauna Loa” before watching a bee enter its petals in pursuit of pollination. “Then did I hear the crisp, crinkled laughter / As the furies after tore him apart?” she writes, rendering her influences explicit (Spencer, lines 4–5). Capitalizing a specific ingredient or flower would fit well within Spencer’s aesthetics—and if she did do so intentionally, would provide more evidence in favor of reading her ephemera for its artistry. Handwriting is the only barrier to clarity, and thus, it makes sense to experience the terms as they appear upon each reading.

While some lines demand attention through capitalization and dense punctuation, other lines are simply whispers—like the final stanza, set apart and all lowercase, miscellaneous items unattached to location. It is worth noting that the stanza “Cinnamon” leads into, the list of items Spencer needs from Sears, is rife with soft sonics. Much of the vocal production occurs through soft consonants, at the front of the mouth, the tips of the teeth and tongue. Even when necessity once again intervenes in the poetics, and “Pond’s” must modify “Face cream,” softness remains. It also reminds a reader of Spencer’s racial and temporal context. Pond’s face cream was patented in the United States, and marketed as “Pond’s Vanishing Cream” at the beginning of the twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century, the company also sold Pond’s Angel Face Powder, currently marketed to produce a “pinkish glow” on the skin. Unilever, which owns Pond’s, did not remove racialized language from their products until 2020 (Ayora and Maheshwari).

With this in mind, one cannot help but find resonance in “hair pins — safety / writing pen / blinds.” Similar to earlier lines in the poem, one can witness Spencer’s cognitive associations at work. Maybe Spencer uses safety pins for her hair. Maybe, once Spencer wrote the word “pins,” she realized that she needed safety pins too; the poem then begins to emulate the process of perusing a store, the shopper reminded of what they want or need when they encounter displays. Maybe Spencer did not need safety pins, but the hair pins lend Spencer the safety of respectability in public, where southern Black women are scrutinized for their appearances (Cooper). When Spencer re-enters her private sphere, she needs blinds to separate her from that public gaze, and a writing pen to reflect upon it. Therefore, the poem continues to be a site where the poet documents her desires, and through the artistic project figures out what she needs. “Dairy case:” becomes not only a capitalist artifact or a tool for remembrance, but a writing exercise through which the poet approaches what she may seek in the process of building her suburban home: to be safe, to achieve domestic privacy. “Dairy case:,” thus, is informed by Spencer’s position as a middle-class Black woman in twentieth century Lynchburg, Virginia. The interior and exterior domestic work that must have been done to maintain appearances and class status in response to racialization and the threat of violence necessitate tools of remembrance such as lists, and Spencer uses even this site of textual necessity as an opportunity to work through poetic problems.

I could continue this reading for pages, but every line presents the same tensions between the necessity of practicality and the apparent impracticality of beauty, my projection of intention and the learned unintentionality of the ‘grocery list’ form. When a scholar’s eyes notice that practicality has been abandoned for sound, the grocery list becomes something other than what it appears to be, almost a poem—something the list may or may not have been for Spencer. It is possible that, for the poet, language merely shapes itself this way. So what if Spencer thought in spondees? After all, if the list is intended for Spencer’s future eyes, linguistic flourishes that jog her specific memory are most practical. And if her memory is trained enough not to require interpretable reminders,

the grocery list becomes a literary form open to beautiful subversion. The interpretive spiral continues without end.

To close the spiral, it helps to examine how domestic writing has been taken up in literary spaces. Food writing, in particular, is often considered through genre theory. On the linguistic level, scholars of vernacular rhetoric have used Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism to argue for increased valuation of language use occurring outside institutions of formal literacy, and food studies scholars have taken up genre studies as a crucial analytical framework for the study of "vernacular literary practices" such as recipes and cookbooks, gardening primers, memoirs, and commodity histories (Tigner & Carruth 3). Food writing entered literary studies through feminist recoveries of domestic genres: particularly recipes and cookbooks. These inquiries began with M.F.K. Fisher's "Anatomy of a Recipe" and Susan Leonardi's "Recipes for Reading," yet Black American food writing remains an understudied site of textual production. Erica Fretwell writes of the ways in which Black women's cookbook writing countered controlling images, such as the 'mammy' myth, helped Black women secure financial independence, contributed to respectability discourse through the demonstration of expertise, and in response, provided a literary space in which a multiplicity of discourses could converge to approach a diasporic aesthetic (Fretwell).

The grocery list, with its particular privacy, tendency to be discarded, and resistance to publication and commodification, remains an obscure genre of inquiry in food studies. When the grocery list is taken up as a genre, its study is often in service of the historical and sociological contexts the text may demystify, not its affective value—for example, works by Stephen Witte and David Russel, which use the grocery list to exemplify sociocultural theories. Witte, in 1992, described grocery lists as "fairly concrete examples of what has been called 'genre as social action'" (254).

Yet the grocery list's heretofore incompatibility with publishing emphasizes its fitfulness as a site of literary and sociological inquiry. If the writing many women and working-class people were compelled to produce without compensation is deemed inadequate for artistic interpretation, attention is refocused upon texts written by individuals

unburdened by that compulsion, and thus, theories of domestic aesthetics are confined to readings of reproducible, edited, commodifiable texts. To take domestic, potentially-private writing into account is to take the conditions structuring artistic production into account; it is to sit at Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith's *Kitchen Table*, and understand the power of their self-naming. Though Anne Spencer did have a dedicated space for writing in her garden house, Edenkraal, the poems and notes adorning the walls of her home indicate that she did not distinguish domestic space from intellectual space.

I question whether scholarship reproduces contextually inappropriate distinctions between domestic and intellectual space, whether an emphasis on the text's rhetorical significance undermines its potential as a site of aesthetic value, and suggest that a grocery list's possible poetics can be as fruitful a site of attention as its historical context. Poetic readings may even help reveal these contexts, beget increased understanding of a particular poet's lived experience. In her study of domesticity in the American novel, Ann Romines argues that domestic ritual is the "medium in which women worked to distinguish themselves as distinctively gifted housekeepers, as artists" (Romines 14). Yet this thesis, confined by the novel form, primarily attends to white women's relationship to the artistry of domestic ritual. Expanding aesthetic study outward allows us to theorize the ways in which particular forms articulate a Black woman's relationship to domesticity and art—a historical relationship often denied articulation within produced and published literary forms, which does not distinguish between public and private space, and which considers the tensions of economic necessity within its multipurpose aesthetics. Understanding a person, and a text, as operating in multiple critical spheres breaks down the ideologies confining individuals to socially-contingent spheres of identity.

One cannot fault prior scholars for focusing on Spencer's published or pre-approved poems. The delineations between the multiple genres of writing in Spencer's oeuvre are difficult to parse, and though the public-private dichotomy is faulty when considering Spencer's textual production, her documented tendency toward perfectionism asks for a certain conscientiousness in scholarship. Yet there is plenty of value in

attending to the writing Spencer considered ‘informal’ or ‘unfinished’. First, attending to Spencer’s unpublished works may yield insights about her published works, inviting the scholar in Spencer’s personal tastes and processes. This is particularly important, as only one biography of Spencer was completed during her lifetime (Greene). Second, the division between public and private writing, like public and private work, can be weaponized to undermine the study of writing by women and other marginalized individuals. Only in recent history have the personal jottings of Black women been recuperated and considered for their academic and artistic value. In this history, practical, domestic jottings have more often been the focus of social sciences than literary studies, if they are preserved and reread at all. Due to the centrality of Black women to American labor history—particularly labor performed in private spaces—sociological study of these texts is undoubtedly crucial. Yet opening up scholarly inquiry to domestic writing in as many cases as possible may fracture these binary distinctions and broaden inquiry across various intersections of identity and genre. For example, “Dairy case:” tracks the poet’s cognitive associations, illuminating how store-bought items serve a home building project that can be both emancipatory and necessary for safety. The particular items and associations drawn in “Dairy case:” provide insight into the domestic and artistic work done to maintain middle-classness as a Black woman in twentieth century Virginia. Last, these ‘private’ or ‘domestic’ genres contain aesthetics left largely unstudied by the academy—aesthetics that contain potential insights about the nature of a particular life, the artistic interventions a person can make within an ascribed social condition. The study of these aesthetics opens ethical questions: What does one make of the lyricism of Spencer’s grocery list? In Evie Shockley’s reading of Spencer’s “Lines to a Nasturtium,” she writes “that masculinist constructions of the black community tend to obscure black aesthetic practices that take black women’s experiences as their starting point” (Shockley 132). I ask whether the literary study of domestic genres opens scholarly opportunity to considering aesthetics grounded in Black womanhood in particular, and whether the study of Spencer’s domestic writing counters claims that her poetry lacks Black aesthetics.

For example, does “Dairy case:” ask us to consider how Black women use indirectness and awareness of competing ideologies, not only as public rhetorical strategies, but in one’s private dealings with the self and her necessities (Morgan)? Does it inform our understanding of Spencer’s relationship to unpaid domestic labor? Does the collage of literary forms present in Spencer’s personal journals both hearken to long histories of Black women crossing textual forms, and reveal her particular relationship to the consumption of her creative work?

If we change the way we consider domestic writing, and allow aesthetic appreciation into our interactions with the genre, Spencer’s extra-poetic writing can be appreciated for its aesthetic value. We can understand affective responses as indications of a text’s significance, and address other questions: What does this text teach about humanity, creativity, history?

“Dairy case:” affects me with its lessons about the connections between art and undervalued labor. My lived experience diverges drastically from Spencer’s; I am not a Black woman in mid-twentieth century Lynchburg, but a white genderqueer graduate student in twenty-first century Charlottesville. I am not building a home with my domestic work, but renting a room in a townhouse, taking care of only myself. Yet Spencer’s writing shows me that there are models for my restlessness, that there is poetry in the domestic, and that the poetics of domestic space may yield politics. For these reasons, I am inclined to believe that this text’s reading and reproduction is valuable. But I must admit that the inclination to lend significance to creative domestic production is self-serving. I want to think of domestic writings as poetry. I am a ‘product’ of modern global capitalism, but I am inclined to write. The twitching of my fingers resists the training of my brain. And I, like many contemporary writers, feel some guilt for not wanting to ‘produce’, or choosing an intellectual occupation that cannot sustain continual production. Most days, I write little, wish I could write more, and instead, cook an elaborate meal, crisp individual shallot rings for my sweet potato, check on the status of the neighborhood tree that changes color each time I walk outside. I want to read Spencer’s grocery list as poetry, and to think about myself as an artist, even when I am

not publishing ideas but seeing a dog on my walk, and writing a line of poetry in my Notes app about how it seeks escape from its leash. I want to think about myself as a writer, and wonder, in these moments, if Spencer thought about herself this way. If, while listing groceries, she arranged colons and dashes for their breathtaking effect, because the hair pins should be safety pins, but also, to pin one's hair as a Black woman in mid-twentieth century American South was to ensure the safety of respectability. Because these domestic moments are inextricable from what eventually yields art. Because there is beauty in every arrangement of words, regardless of its supposed mundanity.

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## Biography

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