Forms of Attention: Notes from Harryette Mullen's Tanka Diary

Rebecca Hamilton
The University of Texas at Austin

Harryette Mullen's Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary *(2014) advances a quotidian archive of ephemera that brings into focus the convergence of ordinary affects, environment, and racial politics. This assemblage of 366 poems conceived as part of Mullen's daily walking practice also stresses the significance of race and racism to the genre of walk poem. Mullen's writing distills routine experiences, observations, and sensations into poetic forms, and her resulting collection illuminates environmental damage and systemic inequalities based on class and race, ultimately modeling how a sharpened awareness of body and place cultivates attention to broader social and ecological realities.*

Keywords: Harryette Mullen / contemporary poetry / attention / environment / racial politics

"My tanka diary," writes poet-scholar Harryette Mullen, "began with a desire to strengthen a sensible habit by linking it to a pleasurable activity. I wanted to incorporate into my life a daily practice of walking and writing poetry.... Merging my wish to write poetry every day with a willingness to step outdoors, my hope was that each exercise would support the other" (vii). Mullen opens her collection, *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* (2013), with a short reflection on the project's beginnings: the poet's impulse to deliberately break from her sedentary routine by wedding movement to inscription. "Now," she narrates, "I look forward to this daily reminder that head and body are connected" (vii). Speaking of the project's results, she wryly adds, "I did not turn into an amateur naturalist or avid birdwatcher, but I became a bit more aware of my environs" (viii). Mullen's practice of walking and writing

Rebecca Hamilton (rebmhamilton@gmail.com) received her PhD in English from the University of Texas at Austin in 2017. Her work on Harryette Mullen is part of a larger book project, titled "Archival Poetics: Ordinary Crisis in Contemporary Poetry."

Journal of Modern Literature Vol. 42, No. 1 • Copyright © The Trustees of Indiana University • DOI 10.2979/jmodelite.42.1.09

reinforces her sense of thought and perception as embodied experiences, and it also enables her to observe her variable surroundings with increased dedication and attention. The poetry volume catalogs these outcomes by gathering together 366 notes in the shape of tanka verses (concise, syllabic Japanese poetic forms), or "a year and a day of walking and writing" (viii).

Mullen's preface, "On Starting a Tanka Diary," confirms *Urban Tumbleweed* as intentionally constructed both in form and content. Here Mullen outlines her method and materials of assemblage, describing not only the locations and focal points of her walks but also their effects: small, notational poems that record aspects of her environment and ordinary feelings, and that index the convergences between the two. Untitled and undated, Mullen's poems amass accounts of her southern California climate, dozens of botanical names and descriptions, sounds, and aspects of the built environment: fences, helicopters, limos, and freeways. At times, the poems create concise narratives that center on human or technological interactions, chronicling, for example, a walker's encounter with a police officer, the opening of an email attachment, and the experience of moving through airport security. Throughout, the focus of Mullen's poetry remains on the level of the ordinary and the ephemeral—or what José Esteban Muñoz has described as the "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things" (10). As Mullen writes, "The brevity and clarity of tanka make it suitable for capturing in concise form the ephemera of everyday life" (ix).

The poems of *Urban Tumbleweed* function as distillations of routine, quotidian experiences, observations, and sensations.[1] Through the accretion of such poetic documentation, Mullen's collection also draws attention to systemic and widely experienced conditions of contemporary culture. These conditions include patterns of information management, environmental damage, an increased technological presence, and inequalities based on class and race. Through the book's poetry, preface, and paratext, *Urban Tumbleweed* demonstrates how a sharpened awareness of one's body and of the details of place ultimately cultivates attention to broader social and ecological realities.

Urban Tumbleweed encourages awareness of body and place partly through the book's strong emphasis on form and the visual. This emphasis is exemplified by the collection's use of an adapted tanka verse and the walk as poetic frame. As Mullen describes in her introduction, her poems modify the traditional tanka poem.[2] Though Mullen models her poetry on this form—including a general adherence to the tanka verse's 31 total syllables—she departs in producing poems that each have three lines instead of the traditional single line in Japanese, or five lines in English, giving her poems the look of haiku.

In addition to adapting the tanka, Mullen demonstrates a commitment to form through the project's overall structure. In *Urban Tumbleweed*, she includes roughly one poem per day over the course of a year and a day, and she uses the frame of the walk itself as a loose but deliberate container that shapes each poem's content and composition. The book's page layout and sizing further establish its relationship to the visual. Each page includes three tanka poems—equally

separated by white space. This layout reinforces the reader's sense of these poems as notational, or as acts of reportage—instants rendered through petite descriptions. Noticeably small and squat, the book's size (in addition to its title) further suggests the intimacy and portability of the archival genres of diary and notebook.[3]

Mostly written from a first-person perspective—at times singular, at times plural—Mullen's verses stem, according to her own creative rubric, from her personal and affective experiences. Taking individual experience as the book's starting point, however, Mullen's project demonstrates how awareness of such experience pivots outward to illuminate pressing present-day issues, including those of environmental damage and systemic inequity. Mullen's writing specifically mobilizes an acute attention to the realities of one's environment—including the ecological and the social as well as the overlap between these categories—through the practice of intentionally heightening one's awareness of body and surroundings. Further, *Urban Tumbleweed* showcases how the environmental attention generated by walking hinges on an acknowledgement of the intersection between racial politics and ordinary embodied movement.

NOTES AND ACTS OF REPORTAGE

Urban Tumbleweed playfully engages with the archival genres of diary and notebook, ultimately drawing attention to the capacity of poems to function as both descriptive notes and acts of reportage. The collection's subtitle, "Notes from a Tanka Diary," makes combined reference to both genres, blurring and yet maintaining a distinction between these formal categories. It emphasizes the parallel between the note and tanka form and suggests how an assemblage of notes may partially comprise—if not fully constitute—a diary. Mullen's preface also directly credits the "notational spirit" of the tanka form (ix). The collection further asserts poetry as a mode of personal information management through its repeated inclusion of verses that tersely chronicle what appear to be current events—news topics or local incidents that the poet encounters. The poems also report on minute environmental features, rendering these details as newsworthy stories. In addition to providing a means of managing information, Mullen's poetry thus regularly reflects on and models the processes of information collection and dispersal. Through the book's reflection and modeling, *Urban Tumbleweed* affirms that poetry writing—and potentially poetry reading—may encourage the kinds of focused attention critical to absorbing the details of one's own experiences and to avoiding information overload.

The idea of the poem as note and, further, as self-conscious reflection on note-taking inheres throughout the book, appearing in several tanka verses. The verse that most foregrounds the salience of the note form within the collection appears early in the text. It reads: "In high-school biology class my / laboratory partner took apart the frog / while I observed and took accurate notes" (22). Here the speaker recalls her own position as observer in contrast

to that of her high-school biology lab partner. The poem signals these separate roles largely through its use of sonic devices and repetition: each participant "took" something—the partner takes apart the frog while the speaker takes notes. Mullen further clarifies that the speaker not only records through inscription, but also that her notes are "accurate." Especially coming so near the beginning of *Urban Tumbleweed*, this tanka verse contributes to a reader's sense of each individual poem as a notational tool and of the poems' often first-person speaker as an astute and careful observer—one who is committed to precisely transcribing the details of all that she observes.

A later tanka verse repeats this explicit focus on the poem as both notation and as a means of reflecting on the archival process of writing. Mullen writes, "I leave traces of ink on paper. Others / can't resist spray-painting a boulder / or carving their names in the skin of a tree" (53). In this short verse, the poet both aligns her own poetic acts of inscription with other forms of marking—spray paintings and tree carvings—and differentiates between the two. While the poet's intervention appears as something more passive and discreet (she only "leave[s] traces"), the personification of the tree (with its "skin") suggests that the actions of the carver, at least, are both more lasting and more aggressive. By distinguishing between these two parallel yet dissimilar modes of environmental inscription, the poem underscores the ethics of Mullen's own archival project. While her writing, as she acknowledges here, may not be as long-lasting as other forms of environmental inscription—physical interactions with land, for example—her poetry provides a means of archiving *without doing harm* to her surroundings. Like the earlier tanka verse, this poem accentuates the collection's focus on poetry as a vernacular form of meaningful, if minute, environmental notation and a means of pointedly considering how information about the present gets recorded and relayed.

In addition to drawing such explicit attention to the poem as a notational form and to the archival process of the poet's writing, *Urban Tumbleweed* demonstrates how poetic practice can both echo and diverge from the kind of information management that contemporary news media provides. The book's first poem compels the reader to keep the idea of the news—as well as its literal and conceptual packaging—in mind: "The morning news landed in the driveway, folded, / rolled, and rubber-banded, wrapped in plastic / for protection from the morning dews" (1). The "morning news" is pointedly juxtaposed through rhyme and bookend positioning with the "morning dews"—encouraging readers to think about these two early-day arrivals in conversation with one another. While the poem articulates how the news (in the form of a neatly packed newspaper) requires shelter from the immediacy of the elements, it also signals the parallel significance of the two quotidian components: the day's current events and the material features of the morning's environment.

This juxtaposition recurs shortly thereafter in a tanka verse that reads simply: "Instead of scanning newspaper headlines, / I spend the morning reading names / of flowers and trees in the botanical garden" (2). Here the poem's first end-stopped

line break reinforces the separation between the act of "scanning" news headlines and the act of presumably more focused "reading" of botanical designations. Though "scanning" in this context announces a fast-paced and dismissive mode of attention, the term also hints at the process of determining a poem's prosody (considering and marking syllables and patterns of stress). Mullen's pun thus demands reflection on the distinct kinds of attention and analysis one brings to poetic forms in relation to those offered to contemporary events as they are depicted by news media. In this way, *Urban Tumbleweed* positions the absorption of news media coverage alongside the significance of noticing and articulating embodied affective experiences produced in part by this experience. While Mullen's poem offers a pointed distinction between a focus on news and on the physical environment, it also emphasizes the attention required to meaningfully engage with either and the parallel importance of observing the details of place and absorbing information about current events.

Mullen's verses are not only framed in opposition or contrast to the news. They also consistently emphasize the potential affinities between poetry and media reporting by demonstrating how the tanka form may encapsulate local occurrences or even global events.[4] In so doing, Mullen's verses provide their own poetic version of present-day accounting. One short verse reads: "A man disguised as a baggy cow / steals twenty-six gallons of milk from Walmart, / then gives it all to strangers outside the store" (82). Another narrates: "Incident at Hollywood and Vine: Los Angeles / City firefighters rescue a man caught / under train, struck by Metro Red Line" (77). And a third recounts: "In the aftermath of the tsunami, / the rescuers look for survivors, find in / the arms of a tree a hungry baby boy" (115). The tone varies across these poems, which, in their journalistic accounting, function as terse acts of reportage. In the first poem, the news relayed proves to be much more lighthearted; the image of the man "disguised as a baggy cow" appears as a comical, warm-spirited figure. By contrast, in the last poem, the tone turns somber; the stakes of seeking life after a tsunami are dramatically higher, and though the results of this search are positive, the poem suggests that many lives have been lost.

Even while the poems function as acts of reportage, they distinguish themselves from the forms of news media coverage they evoke. In this way, Mullen's verses echo Jahan Ramazani's observation that "the news told in poetry isn't conceived the same way as it is in newspapers and other news media since even newsy poems question journalism's language, procedures, and assumptions" (123). In the third of these reportage poems, as in one of the tanka verses referenced above, Mullen personifies a tree. This trope of personifying plants and animal life recurs throughout *Urban Tumbleweed*—especially early in the collection, emphasizing a sense of connection and even kinship between the poet and what she observes (and playing with reader's expectations).[5] Complicating expected forms of news media reporting, these instances of personification also display Mullen's attention to the quotidian. Such tanka verses also distinguish themselves from news coverage through their minimal inclusion of context. Instead, each verse distills

a singular takeaway—an angle on the story that by no means encompasses the story's totality. The formal limitations of Mullen's tanka verses—their roughly 31-syllable cap, the small space that they each occupy within a third of a page—shape the amount of information they are able to relay. These snippets of reportage are, then, like the rest of Mullen's tanka verses, notational in form. They are notes, as stated in the collection's subtitle, because they provide succinct, often partial sketches of specific aspects of everyday life—including the kinds of social and political events that the poet both figuratively and literally encounters.

Positioning poems that report current events alongside those that record ordinary affects and ecological details, Mullen affirms that the quotidian is equally worthy of consideration. Her mode of writing thus enhances poetic attention to the ordinary as a form of "news" other than what we receive from media outlets. This form of accounting is specifically interested in details, and in registering the sensations of immediate and everyday experiences. In Mullen's work, this type of poetic "news"—or notational documentation—also displays awareness of the routine experiences that both contribute to and stem from systemic environmental and social conditions that structure life in the twenty-first century US.

Urban Tumbleweed's focus on news and information management notably intersects with its attention to the proliferation and effects of digital technologies, which also punctuates the broader collection. Reflecting on the difficulty of remaining fully awake to the world outside oneself—particularly outside the loop of technological tools that enable one to listen to news programming while in motion—one tanka verse reads: "Walking along the green path with buds / in my ears, too engrossed in the morning news / to listen to the stillness of the garden" (6). The first line break here emphasizes Mullen's pun on "buds"—a term also given to headphones.[6] The poem shows the speaker only partially noticing her surroundings, focused on the sounds of news coming from her portable device. She is too distracted to be able to listen—in a somewhat synesthetic phrasing—to "the stillness" of her environment. In using the word "stillness" here, in contrast, for example, to "sounds" or even "silence," Mullen creates a contrast and an intersection of the senses. Because the sounds of the news completely engross the speaker, she is unable to attend to her environment, which requires a combination of listening and feeling. Finally, by describing "the stillness of the garden," the poem contrasts the sensory experience of one's immediate, natural surroundings with the noise of the news delivered by way of a digital device.

The collection distills observations and questions about the effects of digital technologies and the commensurate increased pace of ordinary life, ultimately demonstrating how the poem may function as an intentionally slower type of archival technology. In a later verse, Mullen writes: "Clicking through images downloaded / from your camera. Those buskers haven't finished / playing, and already they're in *your archive*" (50, emphasis added). The poem pictures the speaker reviewing the digital photographs that she's just taken—presumably downloaded onto a device. She reflects that the time between capturing these images and reviewing them is so short that her subjects—the buskers—are still

in the midst of their performance. As with the poem discussed above, the tanka verse here, too, draws attention to two different sensory experiences: seeing and hearing. While the first line focuses on the visual—the experience of looking at photographs—the second makes reference to the sonic—the unfinished buskers. The final line encapsulates the specifically archival aspect of the poet's image collection, while also doubly suggesting that the work of the tanka poem itself is to archive the experience of archiving in a pointedly digital context. Further, Mullen's writing showcases a means of self-reflectively recording present-day experiences in a way that draws attention to the limits of such a process and to the advantage of enabling readers to gradually absorb content rather than scanning or feeling overrun by it. This poem provides an opportunity to make sense of the strangely instantaneous process of information gathering and management enabled by digital technologies; it also provides a space in which to record this experience without necessarily reproducing its hurried pacing.

As notes that often reference present-day technologies, Mullen's tanka poems demand to be read in conversation with forms of social media, such as Twitter, that enable and encourage short, notational bursts of individual commentary or observation. Just as the poems both establish parallels with and divergences from news media reportage, they also resemble and differentiate themselves from notational social media engagement, such as tweets, the short messages on Twitter. The tanka verse's allotted 31 syllables recall the tweet's maximum 140-character count.[7] Like several of Mullen's puns, the designation "tweet" conflates the natural and technological, equating social media comments with a bird's chirping (and referencing Twitter's logo, a bright aqua bird). Short forms of social media and poetry, such as the tweet and tanka verse, also share in their potential to offer quotidian means of environmental and social engagement—permitting individuals to meld the everyday and the newsworthy.

At the same time, Mullen's preface frames her writing project through an acute awareness of creative pacing. While her poems remain notational, like many short-form modes of social media engagement, they are deliberately spaced out, each tanka verse representing (and presumably generated through) a single day's walking. As with social media, the notational form suits ordinary engagement in its brevity and its capacity to distill specific observations or preliminary ideas. In contrast to much social media engagement, which thrives on the capacity to create and share content both constantly and instantaneously, however, Mullen's poems are punctuated by the space of time and reflection that divides their content and composition.

One poem specifically encourages readers to consider the stakes of structuring time to contemplate and write (as Mullen does in her combined walking and writing practice) by positing questions about how time and surroundings are now felt, and by suggesting that slow consideration and reflective observation are increasingly difficult to cultivate. Mullen writes: "Do they lie down still in soft grass / to gaze up at a sky of roaming shape-shifting / clouds? Do children still have time for daydreaming?" (57). The poem asks: is there any longer space

in the present day for tranquil lingering and imagination—especially, we might read, for those who grow up surrounded by digital technologies that encourage rapid, divided attention? This poem echoes the concerns of Rebecca Solnit, who writes: "The multiplication of technologies in the name of efficiency is actually eradicating free time by making it possible to maximize the time and place for production and minimize the unstructured travel time between. New timesaving technologies make most workers more productive, not more free, in a world that seems to be accelerating around them" (10). As Solnit notes, while technological proliferation enables increased productivity, it diminishes the experience of restfulness between activities. Mullen's own writing and walking practice draws attention to the pressures of contemporary technologies and works to counter some of their negative effects.

ENVIRONMENT AND INEQUITY

Attention to felt experience and to the materiality of self and environment is central to *Urban Tumbleweed*. Not only does Mullen's poetry catalog the ephemera of the everyday, it also links this practice to developing an intentional awareness of one's physicality and surroundings. In contrast to the scattered, fragmentary, and often sedentary attention that digital technologies may produce (and often require), Mullen's tanka diary focuses and cultivates the poet's consciousness of self and environment. This heightened attention enables (and is enabled by) archival writing that focuses on a wide range of quotidian experiences: from the particular feelings of an individual walker on a given day to the evidence of pollution and climate change to specific observations of signs of systemic social inequities. Mullen's poems bring into focus how practiced attention to the small-scale details of one's everyday life facilitates both the perception and articulation of widespread and systemic forms of US crisis, at the same time substantiating these conditions as grounded in ordinary, quotidian experiences.

Mullen's tanka verses demonstrate the poet's heightened attention to her surroundings through the book's depiction of environmental components that muddle the borders between the purportedly natural and unnatural. *Urban Tumbleweed* often catalogs the ways in which these aspects of the poet's surroundings appear to intermix or bleed into each other, registering both the complexity of place and the ways in which moving through space enables the poet to identify such environmental patterns. For example, in one verse Mullen notes birds fighting for food scraps just outside two corporate chains: "Two seagulls face off in the parking lot / between Costco and In-N-Out, / quarreling over a half-eaten hamburger bun" (19). In the poem from which the collection takes its title, she likewise writes: "Urban tumbleweed, some people call it, / discarded plastic bag we see in every city / blown down the street with vagrant wind" (32). In this poem—and in the book's title—Mullen combines seemingly opposed elements (the "urban" with the plant's diaspore or "tumbleweed") to form a more apt descriptor for a flying piece of trash. The designation also metaphorically signals the broader integration of

distinct environmental features that the book registers as well as the collection's framing focus on movement as a means of more alertly inhabiting a place.

Building on this intersection of the natural and built environment, the book's poems succinctly record contemporary evidence of environmental degradation such as air pollution and species endangerment. In one of the relatively few poems in which Mullen employs second-person address, she writes as if speaking informally to a southern California newcomer of the region's resident smog: "Los Angeles isn't always this smoggy, you know. / There are days the sky is so clear / you can see the HOLLYWOOD sign from here" (25). Mullen's casual address lends a cavalier tone, and the poem's end-stopped rhyme gives the short verse a light-hearted and even playful melody. Yet the content of the poem contrasts these elements—emphasizing not just the regularity of air pollution but also the commercialization of place that may reinforce environmental damage and depletion. Even when the "sky is so clear," the payoff is simply a view of further development. In a surprisingly hopeful turn, another tanka poem highlights both the human causes of species endangerment and the promising return of one animal: "Trapped and hunted to the edge of / extinction, gone for nearly ninety years / when a lone gray wolf appears in California" (96). Mullen's first line break bolsters the content of the poem's opening idea—the way in which human activity so diminished the number of gray wolves that the species reached the very "edge of" complete annihilation. While certainly hopeful, the description of the reemerged gray wolf as "lone" signals to the reader that however promising this appearance, there is no guarantee of easy recovery from this specific history of species endangerment.

A mounting collection of Mullen's poems provides evidence that her surroundings include class-based inequalities, demonstrating the prevalence of economic disparity particularly in the greater Los Angeles area. A couple of poems suggest the relative privileges of the speaker—and potentially the reader. One verse reads: "A 'valet' parks your car at the supermarket. / A 'beach butler' reserves your plot of sand / with folding chair and bright umbrella" (84). Here the momentary second-person address points to the potential complicity of the reader in systems of social inequality or privilege at the same time that it may substantiate the self-address of the speaker. Through its use of quotation marks, the poem lingers on the language used to designate service industry positions in connection to the specific—and strangely basic seeming—labor that both a "valet" and "beach butler" do for those who can afford their assistance. A later poem similarly recognizes the exclusivity of the speaker's community: "At night our tidy-clean, green park is locked / to keep out rough sleepers who bed down on sidewalks / next to shopping carts full of rubbish" (94).[8] Here, as in the earlier verse, the second-person address potentially includes the reader as subject—like the speaker, someone who might live in an area where parks are locked to prevent anyone from staying there at night. Another poem emphasizes the archival work of an itinerant woman—fleetingly suggesting a small parallel between her and the speaker, but then affirming their differences: "A homeless woman spends her

days collecting / odd scraps of paper, then sits in front / of the all-night drugstore, poring over them" (102). Like the woman who "spends her days collecting," the poet creates and gathers together these notational recordings of her surroundings through focused observation. As these particular archival materials amass, they constellate specific examples of class-based inequity to substantiate an illustration of the systemic nature of societal divisions.

Urban Tumbleweed similarly emphasizes the politics of contemporary immigration, acknowledging the formative ways in which the places where the poet walks (as well as the poet's own presence in her home state) are constituted by histories of migration. In Mullen's preface, she remarks: "Like many inhabitants of Los Angeles, I am not native to this state of elemental seasons: wind, fire, flood, mudslide, and earthquake. Like ice plant, eucalyptus, and nearly all of LA's iconic palm trees, I too am a transplant to this metropolis …" (viii). Comparing herself to the non-native plant life of southern California that becomes "iconic," Mullen emphasizes both her own history of travel and the capacity for environmental and cultural integration. In one tanka verse, her focus on wildlife shows the suspicion and animosity with which immigrants may be treated in the US. Mullen writes: "A bird flew across the border / and when it came to rest, was suspected / of being an alien and possibly a spy" (100). Again, though her tone is playful, the message of the poem remains starkly pressing; when the border-crossing bird lands, notably "to rest," it is met not only with mistrust but also with the suspicion of wrongdoing. Contributing to a notable cluster of verses that politicize the stakes and effects of present-day US immigration, these poems draw attention to the inequalities that mark and organize contemporary public culture on a scale much larger than any one of these examples can alone record.

As *Urban Tumbleweed* progresses, Mullen's verses increasingly present notes on contemporary inequity in combination with an awareness of environment and ordinary life—emphasizing how the cultivation of attention to each of these aspects of experience and surroundings may be mutually reinforcing. This collection thus counters what Evie Shockley describes as the harmful "false dichotomy that says one has to choose between writing about nature and writing about socio-political subjects" (730). *Urban Tumbleweed* consistently undercuts such an understanding, positioning Mullen as an environmental writer who does not leave behind questions of identity politics when considering the experiences and locations about which she writes.

RACE AND WALK POETRY

The paratexts in Mullen's collection, including the preface and epigraphs, frame her project through explicit reference to the quality of environmental awareness rooted in the process of traveling by foot. Mullen notes, "Walking instead of driving allows a different kind of attention to surroundings. Each outing, however brief, becomes an occasion for reflection" (vii). From the outset, the tanka poems are advanced as archival writing shaped by this mode of attention, which, in turn,

is produced by quotidian bodily movement. The frame of each of Mullen's verses is twofold: the poems are limited by her amended tanka form whilst shaped by her walks, a double constraint emerging as a component of Mullen's stated quest to write poetry that archives the ordinary. The verses in *Urban Tumbleweed* may thus be read as what Roger Gilbert calls "walk poems": poetry that is composed by walking and that takes the experience of walking as a key focal point. Situating the collection within this tradition, Mullen notes in her preface that *Urban Tumbleweed* is not tethered to a particular path or location but to the activity of navigating various environments:

> This is a record of meditations and migrations across the diverse terrain of southern California's urban, suburban, and rural communities, its mountains, deserts, ocean, and beaches. In the greater Los Angeles my walks can range from downtown streets and alleys to spectacular natural landscapes to outdoor shopping malls. (viii)

Mullen's writing develops the inherently archival dimensions that Gilbert ascribes to the walk poem: "In its purest form, the walk poem presents itself not as a written record of a walk, composed after the fact, but as a linguistic event occurring simultaneously with the walk itself, and therefore absolutely coextensive with it" (23). Many of Mullen's verses accord with this description—suggesting the immediacy of an experience by depicting it as if the time and space between the poem's content and its composition were entirely collapsed. For example, one tanka verse reads: "I follow the bloody red footprints back / to their source—casual mayhem of smashed / ketchup packets smearing the gritty sidewalk" (56). Others disavow such immediacy, representing instead the poet's reflection on past experiences—several of which do not explicitly connect to walking at all. For example, in one poem the speaker recalls: "Those many years ago I imagined green hair / of fir tree, handshake of friendly palm, / melancholy tears of weeping willow" (27). Still, as a collection of poetry shaped by a range of walking experiences, Mullen's poems centrally rely on what Gilbert calls the "closure" provided by the walk as formal frame (6).

Throughout *Urban Tumbleweed*, Mullen's poems intermittently signpost the poet's act of walking, recalling for the reader the project's framing aims and the tradition of walk poetry. In one verse, she writes: "The day I notice, returning from my walk, / a hole worn through the heel of one sock, / my thoughtful sister has sent me a new pair" (69). This poem does not represent Mullen's walking experience as immediate, as Gilbert suggests that the "purest" walk poem would—reflecting back on "the day" as opposed to simply asserting in present tense "I notice." Another poem more directly affirms the convergence of walking and poetic composition, though it accomplishes this through the conditional tense. Mullen writes, "When you see me walking in the neighborhood, / stopping to admire your garden, I might be / composing a tanka in my head" (95). As the poem claims, both "walking" and the correlated step of "stopping to admire" might spark the poet's process of "composing." Another explicit walk poem references the type of movement that the poet undertakes: "Meandering through

hill-top neighborhood / of splendid old mansions, I loiter at wrought-iron gates / picketing the senator's home" (95). In contrast to the tanka verse before, the starts and stops of the poet's walk chronicled here are pointedly political. As Mullen meanders through what appears to be an established and wealthy area—a "hill-top" with "splendid old mansions"—she comes to "loiter" outside a senator's home. While the poem leaves ambiguous whether she's alone or accompanied, her lingering is framed as an act of protest, underscoring the attention to everyday class divisions. In this case, too, the tanka verse's present tense relays not only the walk poem's specificity but also the potential immediacy of this walking experience.

Though the poems do not always directly invoke the poet's body or explicitly reference the experience of walking, many emphasize embodied movement through the inclusion of directional cues and geographic features. In one tanka verse, for example, Mullen details the movement of her own seemingly incarnate shadow, indirectly emphasizing her body's movement and the surroundings through which she walks: "My reckless shadow, landing on the twelve-lane / freeway down below this pedestrian bridge, / playing chicken with oncoming cars" (25). Here the shadow's "landing" and "playing chicken" both contrasts and indicates how the pedestrian poet remains in motion on the bridge above the wide, busy freeway. In one of the few tanka verses that employ the first-person plural, Mullen highlights the range of sensory experiences encouraged by the act of walking outdoors. She writes: "We smell the rain coming, see dark clouds / and lightning before we hear thunder, watch / storms arrive, wait to get wet before running indoors" (57). The speaker underscores the felt experience of weather—the smell, sight, sound, and ultimately the touch of rain.[9] In advancing accounts of sensory experience and physical movement, these poems foster attention to embodiment on a range of scales and through a variety of locations—rooted in the act of walking. As Solnit writes: "Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world" (29). Walking and the poetry spurred by this practice activate—for both the poet and the reader—an awareness of the shifting relationship between one's body and the world through which one moves.

While Gilbert traces a history of walk poetry that is predominantly white and male, Mullen's tanka verses unsettle such a narrow picture of the genre. Her work demands that the category of walk poem be considered in the context of an expansive tradition of black environmental poetics.[10] Camille T. Dungy writes in her introduction to the edited collection *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009),

> we don't see much African American poetry in nature-related anthologies because, regardless of their presence, blacks have not been recognized in their poetic attempts to affix themselves to the landscape. They haven't been seen, or when they have it is not as people who are rightful stewards of the land. They are accidentally or invisibly or dangerously or temporarily or inappropriately on/in the landscape. (xxvii)

Black Nature addresses the paucity of anthologized black environmental poetry, bringing "to light the myriad ways African American poets have engaged the conflicts and confluences between their environments and their daily lives" (xxxiv). As a black, female poet whose tanka verses intentionally address the intersection of the environmental and the quotidian, Mullen both fits into and extends the tradition of black environmental poetics that Dungy's anthology recognizes.[11]

Mullen's two epigraphs, which punctuate the page between preface and poetry, frame the book's focus on the racial politics of walking by invoking the words of two celebrated black intellectuals, Richard Wright and George Washington Carver. Both epigraphs are instructional—appearing to simultaneously address the poet, the reader, and the walker. Their brevity and lineation also preview the short form of Mullen's own tanka verses to come. The first epigraph, by Wright, is notably a haiku. It directs: "Keep straight down this block, / then turn right where you will find / a peach tree blooming" (xi). The second, by Carver, guides: "Look about you. Take hold of the things that / are here. Let them talk to you" (xi). Wright's words commence as routine directions might—signaling through second-person address the path one should take presumably through a city space, walking straight, turning right—but close on the promise of environmental discovery, the image of a tree in bloom. Carver's instructions seem to continue where Wright's left off, speaking not to the trajectory of one's movement but to the quality of one's awareness and sensorial experience. In directive prose, he advocates for the intentional use of one's eyes, the literal and figurative embrace of and receptivity to one's surroundings. The book's framing emphasis on these instructional words on walking from two distinguished black intellectuals whose work bridges racial politics with the literary and the scientific, affirms Mullen's project within a lineage of black environmental engagement, writing, and invention. The epigraphs also foreground how attention to the racialized dimensions of ordinary movement structures Mullen's collection as a whole.[12] In combination, the book's epigraphs highlight the poetry's concern for the awareness one should bring to bear on environmental navigation, and the implications—to use Garnette Cadogan's phrasing—of "walking while black" (142).

Mullen's verses also indicate how the act of walking cannot be separated from considerations of race and racism. The two poems in *Urban Tumbleweed* that encapsulate encounters with police imply racial profiling. The first reads: "A cop guards the bridge I cross to catch / my bus. He watches as I slow my walk / to stare at the president's car passing below" (37). The second states: "Visiting with us in Los Angeles, our friend / went out for a sunny walk, returned / with wrists bound misapprehended by cops" (94). Both of these poems foreground the embodied experience of the walker: the poet in the first, and the visiting friend in the second. They both also highlight how police presence (or direct interference) affects the experience of that walker. And, finally, while neither poem explicitly signals racial profiling as the cause for police scrutiny or intervention, they both suggest the possibility of experiencing such racially motivated policing—especially while simply walking (and looking) around.

To be clear, *Urban Tumbleweed* does not specifically describe the constraints of walking as a black woman in the various terrains Mullen's tanka poems reference. Still, as the first of these two poems records, for example, how the officer guarding the bridge pointedly observes the poet's slowing body, it underscores the racial (and potentially gender) politics of walking. Likewise, the second poem emphasizes just how extreme the disparity is between one walker's intentions to take "a sunny walk" and the results of that walk being "wrists bound." The fact that both poems indirectly address racial profiling emphasizes that walking is not simply a pleasurable, exploratory act, but one that always compels negotiation of structural forms of inequality. Read together, the epigraphs and these two tanka verses underscore the collection's merged awareness of individual movement and racial politics. Mullen's writing illustrates the argument that ephemeral and embodied sensations of place are always inseparable from the realities of race and racism. It also stresses that the possibilities of ordinary environmental attention remain tethered to identity categories and to the realities of experiencing identity-based inequalities, specifically anti-black racism.

SLOWING DOWN

Central to the content, form, and archival stakes of *Urban Tumbleweed* is the poet's deliberately slow-paced and detail-oriented engagement with her various environments. As Mullen notes above, the act of walking generates a form of ordinary attention distinct from that available to those driving (or, presumably, those engaged in other types of passive movement). Additionally, as the epigraphs of Mullen's collection suggest, even the most quotidian navigation of public spaces on foot produces affective experiences and practices of attention that vary based on the appearance of one's body. Across the space of *Urban Tumbleweed*, Mullen's tanka verses amass as notational documentation focused on the specific, often minute or ephemeral aspects of ordinary life. They model for readers the capacity for meaningful embodied attention to the interplay of self and environment through short-form and movement-based poetry. Mullen's archive also avails readers the chance to reflect on their own habits of focus and information management—notably the significance of attunement made possible by slowing down.

The book's recurrent references to digital technologies and the increasing speed of daily life compel readers to consider how their own reading habits accord or contrast with this accelerated pacing. *Urban Tumbleweed* is, after all, comprised of such breezy short forms that it seems rather easy to read through quickly. Since each three-line tanka verse is rendered as an almost ephemeral note, one might spend relatively little time engaging with each poem or with the poetry volume as a whole. In other words, it is possible to replicate the short, notational qualities of the poem by breezing past the material presented. While there is no inherent form of awareness brought to, or generated as part of, poetry writing or reading, as

I have argued above, the verses in *Urban Tumbleweed* seem themselves to caution against swift dismissal by a reader.

In this way, Mullen's verses participate in what Dale Smith describes as "slow poetry," a generic category that carries the expectation of close, formal observation. Slow poetry, in Smith's words, values "meaningful descriptions of the world" and can "be a way to help orient attention again in art to the world" ("Slow Poetry: An Introduction" n.p.).[13] For example, one of Mullen's poems seems to orient such focus on the world by indirectly addressing reader as it chronicles the poet's encounter with a command to pay closer attention to her environment: "At the entrance to the botanical garden, / a sign hung on the gate forewarns: 'Slow down. / Watch for turtles on the roads and paths'" (47). Here the poem's first line acknowledges the specificity of the poet's location, while the second line, noticeably end-stopped after the words "slow down," encourages contemplation of slowing the very process of poetry reading. The final content of the sign also suggests that what accompanies a decrease in pacing is the ability to look out for (and not do harm to) the otherwise potentially unnoticed elements of one's environment.

Another tanka poem echoes the importance of slowness by urging the experiential possibilities born of stillness: "If you are perfectly still when it hovers near, / you'll hear it hum; small engine with rapid / wings, a bird no bigger than your thumb" (48). The rhyme (of "hum" and "thumb") underscores the hummingbird's sound and miniature size, which the observer may experience if "perfectly still." The poem's second-person address also reflects the text's potential to be read as an instruction directed toward the reader. While slow reading won't enable readers to physically bear witness to turtles or hummingbirds, Mullen's verses suggest that the willingness to focus and examine information or surroundings without hurry develops both an environmental ethics and more intricate sensory experiences.

Mullen's writing ultimately models a mode of poetic engagement that both fosters and indicates the cultivation of an embodied attention to the details of one's surroundings. Given the book's emphasis on the relationship between racial politics and the quotidian movement of walking, *Urban Tumbleweed* demonstrates how practices of attention—including those that generate notational writing as a form of contemporary documentation—must be considered in light of differences of race (and arguably gender). Mullen's poetry pushes us to acknowledge the ongoing crises of racial and other social inequalities alongside ecological damage. Further, her work highlights the urgency of developing forms of attention capable of actively observing and making change in the American present.

Notes

1. Mullen's tanka poems partially reflect what Samantha Pinto has described as an "aesthetics of accumulation" (176) in her writing on the poet's broader—and earlier—body of work. This mode of poetic composition "refuses allegorical reading … [and] its parts can only and at best offer fleeting connections to one another, with no characters or narrative to flow through the book-length form" (Pinto 176). Unlike much of Mullen's work—such as *Muse & Drudge*, which Pinto focuses

on—individual tanka verses are often quite narrative, and it's possible to read more than "fleeting connections" between them (including between speaker and content). Still, the idea of a *book-length* aesthetics of accumulation resonates with *Urban Tumbleweed,* since the book functions as a gathering place for often disparate (and *sometimes* fleetingly linked) observations or experiences rendered in verse.

2. There are two types of traditional tanka forms, "both of which are externally alike in that they are quintet poems with lines, in this order, of 5–7–5–7–7 syllables" (Turco 360). The first of these addresses one subject in the opening two lines, a second subject in the next two, and then offers a final refrain or restatement (Turco 360). The second type of tanka form makes an observation in the first three lines and then provides a "comment on the observation" in the last two (Turco 360). Though Mullen's poems are often very observational, and they certainly mix attention to distinct subjects, her adapted tanka verses by no means conform to either of these two traditional rubrics.

3. For an account of notebook keeping, see Joan Didion's "On Keeping a Notebook," in which she suggests that those who keep notebooks do so out of some inherent urge to take stock, reorder, and make sense of what is fleeting (132–133).

4. The demonstration of such generic affinities between poetry and the news loosely undercuts William Carlos Williams's famous estimation that "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" (318). For a discussion of Williams's poetry in relation to news media, see Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry and Its Others* (2014).

5. Examples include: "Each sweeping branch of California buckeye / extends a wide green hand, / presenting to the air a feathery white bouquet" (Mullen 2); "Flame tree, I must have missed your season / of fire. All I see are your ashy knees, your kindling / limbs, branches of extinguished blossoms" (3); "Paparazzi snap snoozing celebrities / in stretch limos cruising down Hollywood / Boulevard past anorexic palm trees" (8).

6. Mullen's poetry is famously innovative, especially in the poet's use of linguistic play—including punning, examples of which show up across *Urban Tumbleweed*. See Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy* (2001), pp. 89–118, on Mullen's later poetry (not including *Urban Tumbleweed*) and its connections to what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. names as the African American tradition of signifyin(g). Spahr notes: "Mullen concentrates on the syncretism of things—holes both breathe and swallow, sleeves are both opened and hemmed, and trimmings are things both added and taken away—and thus presents an example of [Hortense] Spillers's call for a semantic field/fold that is not absolute" (102).

7. Fady Joudah's poetry collection, *Textu* (2014), which was published in the same year as *Urban Tumbleweed*, provides a compelling contrast to Mullen's book in its central consideration of digital technologies and its production of short-form poetry using a technological platform (and its constraints). In Joudah's introduction to *Textu*, he writes: "All the poems here were composed on a cellular phone's text message screen. The Textu [text + haiku] poem has only one hard rule: that it be exactly 160 characters long, specific to text-message parameters. The textu poem also suggests a meter in character, not syllable, count" (xi). As projects such as *Textu* (among numerous others) demonstrate, there is certainly no hard and fast line between digital technologies and the kind of careful attention that Mullen connects to poetic engagement—the one can, of course, facilitate the other. In *Urban Tumbleweed* specifically, Mullen's poetry emphasizes the likeness of the tanka form with notational modes of social media engagement *as well as* demands awareness of the contrasts between her practice of poetry writing and the patterns of attention that she depicts as associated with the use of digital technologies.

8. Other related tanka verses reference homelessness: "The homeless woman who hated my shoes / last week—now lets me buy her / a cup of her favorite mango frozen yogurt" (Mullen 85); "Standing his ground in a pair of elegant / leather shoes, offering each passer-by / a chance to buy the homeless newspaper" (Mullen 94).

9. Gilbert identifies the significance of sensory experience to the designation of the walk poem: "the central aim of the walk poem as a genre may be said to consist in a desire to erase the difference

between text and experience, to assert and sustain an absolute coincidence of language and bodily sensation" (4). Though Mullen's verses do not solely present poem and experience as concurrent, they do at times portray "bodily sensation."

10. Mullen's poetry is absolutely by no means alone in making such a demand. There are countless black poets whose writing may be read as walk poems. For a few specific (and contemporary) examples catalogued in *Black Nature* (2009), see Evie Shockley's "you must walk this lonesome" (42), Gerald Barrax Sr.'s "Barriers" (75), and Marilyn Nelson's "My Grandfather Walks in the Woods" (298–299). C.S. Giscombe's collections *Giscombe Road* (1998) and *Prairie Style* (2008) also provide many examples of walk poems.

11. Published before *Urban Tumbleweed*, *Black Nature* does include an earlier poem of Mullen's. "European Folk Tale Variant" reimagines the story of Goldilocks as a trespassing intrusion by a pre-adolescent vandal against whose "criminally negligent parents" the "Ursidae family" ultimately files suit (Dungy 225).

12. Wright's writing (notably various in form: novels, stories, nonfiction, and poems) centrally focused on US racial politics. Carver was famed as an agricultural researcher (botanist, inventor, and early environmentalist), who for almost two decades, spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, directed the agricultural department at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.

13. See also Smith, *Slow Poetry in America* (2014).

Works Cited

Barrax, Gerald, Sr. "Barriers." Dungy, p. 75.

Cadogan, Garnette. "Black and Blue." *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, edited by Jesmyn Ward. Scribner, 2016, pp. 129–144.

Didion, Joan. "On Keeping a Notebook." *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968, pp. 131–141.

Dungy, Camille T., editor. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. U of Georgia P, 2009.

Gilbert, Roger. *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry*. Princeton UP, 1991.

Giscombe, C.S. *Giscombe Road*. Dalkey Archive P, 1998.

———. *Prairie Style*. Dalkey Archive P, 2008.

Joudah, Fady. *Textu*. Copper Canyon P, 2014.

Mullen, Harryette. *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*. Graywolf P, 2013.

Muñoz, José Esteban. "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1996, pp. 5–16.

Nelson, Marilyn. "My Grandfather Walks in the Woods." Dungy, pp. 298–299.

Pinto, Samantha. "Impossible Objects: M. NourbeSe Philip, Harryette Mullen, and the Diaspora Feminist Aesthetics of Accumulation." *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic*. New York UP, pp. 175–200.

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres*. U of Chicago P, 2014.

Shockley, Evie. "On the Nature of Ed Roberson's Poetics." *Callaloo*, vol. 33, no. 3, Summer 2010, pp. 728–747.

———. "you must walk this lonesome." Dungy, p. 42.

Smith, Dale. "Slow Poetry: An Introduction." *Slow Poetry: An Introduction*, edited by Dale Smith. Big Bridge. http://bigbridge.org/BB14/SLOWPO.HTM.

———. *Slow Poetry in America*. Cuneiform P, 2014.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Viking, 2000.

Spahr, Juliana. "'What Stray Companion': Harryette Mullen's Communities of Reading." *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*. U of Alabama P, 2001, pp. 89–118.

Turco, Lewis Putnam. *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*. UP of New England, 2012.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume II, 1939–1962*. Edited by Christopher J. MacGowan. New Directions, 1988.