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Ecocritical Discourse in *Urban Tumbleweed*: Notes from a Tanka Diary by Harryette Mullen

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Abstract

The paper proposal addresses the collection of poems *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* (2013) by Harryette Mullen – a prolific African American poet and a literary critic. The research focuses on the representation of the natural and wild vs. the cultivated and civilized in urban space with a considerable emphasis on the human and non-anthropomorphic others' interaction in Mullen's book of poetry. The methodology of the research is based on ecocriticism and queer ecology.

In *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*, the poet undertakes an innovative approach of reinterpreting Nature and non-living objects of the urban space. We argue that Harryette Mullen poeticizes Nature in its interdependent relation with the human world, depicting the interaction between the human and non-anthropomorphic others. *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* by Harryette Mullen is characterized by the close attention both to the living beings and non-living objects. The humans in the book of poetry are depicted among the other species of Nature, so anthropo-centered approach is substituted by bio-centered one, thus

the man is represented as the part of the eco-system. Non-human life and object-oriented ontology are incorporated in the poetic observations of Harryette Mullen's poetry collection. *Urban Tumbleweed* represents the poetic perception of the urban world in the non-anthropocentric era: it combines and mixes life forms and non-living objects, human and non-human. Thus, the subject matter of Mullen's tanka poems becomes the coexistence of public, civilized, human and natural, wild, uncivilized in urban space.

Mullen's book of poetry is widely marked by the environmental consciousness while reflecting on ecological issues. In *Urban Tumbleweed*, the poet creates powerful images of global catastrophes and environmental disasters, like Fukushima's catastrophe or forest fires. The motif of the ecological disaster is employed by the author to show the fatal impact of the man and civilization on the Nature.

Key words: ecocriticism, queer ecology, African American poetry, Harryette Mullen, *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*, tanka.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in posthuman and post-Nature theories together with a significant turn to ecophenomenology, literary ecology and ecopoetics, critical animal studies and queer ecology. What distinguishes posthuman studies is that they undermine the epistemological and moral assumptions which have reserved the dominant position to the humans only, detriment of all non-human agents such as animals and plants. The non-human turn of the contemporary era and the object-oriented philosophy is represented in Jean Baudrillard's *System of Objects* (1968), Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), Timothy Morton's monographs *The Ecological Thought* (2010), *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013a), *Realistic Magic: Objects, Anthology, Causality* (2013b), Francesca Ferrando's research *Towards a Posthumanist Methodology: A Statement* (2012), among many other groundbreaking works in the field of posthuman

studies.

Levi Bryant, characterizing a posthuman valence, marks that this turn is significant “not in the sense that humans are excluded, but in the sense that there is an increasing awareness that the nonhuman contributes as much as the human to what assemblages are – as signifiers, signs, and as actants, in the repertoire of human intentions, articulations and actions” (Bryant & Joy 2014,iii). Levi Bryant and Eileen A. Joy underline: “Object and thing studies have seen increased vigor in fields such as film studies, cultural anthropology, literary studies, visual culture studies, and sociology since at least the 1990s. It may be, however, that newer trajectories of post-phenomenological Continental thought – such as the object-oriented ontology [...] is carving out some important new ground” (Bryant & Joy 2014, iv).

Posthuman theory contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category. As Rosi Braidotti concludes, post-anthropocentrist era focuses on the emergence of ‘the politics of life itself’: “Life, far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others, [...] is posited as process, interactive and open ended. This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for anthropos, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animals and non-human life, also known as zoe. Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is transversal force that cuts across and reconnects species, categories and domains” (Braidotti 2013, 60).

Rosi Braidotti regards post-anthropocentrism as a deconstructive move as it undermines species supremacy and boundaries between ‘Man’ and his others; it challenges the centrality of anthropos. But instead, it strikes an alliance with the productive and immanent force of zoe, or life in its nonhuman aspects. It opens up unexpected perspectives: animals, insects, plants and the environment are called into

play: “This shift can be seen as a sort of ‘anthropological exodus’ from the dominant configurations of the human as a king of creation to a colossal hybridization of species”(Braidotti 2013, 65). Post-anthropocentrism displaces the notion of species hierarchy and of a single, common standard for ‘Man’ as the measure of all things. In the ontological gap thus opened, other species come galloping in (Braidotti 2013, 67).The planetary or becoming-earth dimension brings issues of environmental and social sustainability to the fore, with special emphasis on ecology and the climate change issue: “The posthuman in the sense of post-anthropocentrism displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well-established dualisms with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals. The vitality of their bond is based on sharing this planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer so clearly hierarchical, nor self-evident”(Braidotti 2013, 67).

Posthuman theorists unanimously assert that subjectivity is not the exclusive prerogative of anthropos and the challenge for critical theory is primarily the necessity “to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole”(Braidotti 2013,82).

Posthuman studies investigate the wide range of spheres from cybernetics, artificial intelligence, technology and engineering to queer ecological, geopolitical and biopolitical realms. In recent decades, ecocriticism has become a powerful scientific theory and a methodological tool of investigation of literary texts from an ecological perspective.It is defined as “the study of literature in relation to physical environment” (Glotfelty1996, xviii), or as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert 1996, 107). There exists an extensive published material on literary ecology. The anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*(1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm laid the foundations of ecocritical theory. After this seminal collection of works on ecocriticism, soon appeared scholarly publications such as *The song of the Earth* by

Jonathan Bate (2000), *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard (2004), *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* edited by Neil Astley (2007), *The future of environmental criticism* by Lawrence Buell (2005). At present inside ecocritical theory, there have appeared various critical studies like ecofeminism, bioregionalism, ecopoetics, queer ecology, to name only a few. Timothy Morton takes a critical approach to the existing ecocritical theories, claiming that “much American ecocriticism is a vector for various masculinity memes, including rugged individualism, a phallic authoritarian sublime, and an allergy to femininity in all its forms” (Morton 2010, 274). Praising ecophenomenology for the experiential view of Nature as a process, not a product, Morton introduces the concept of queer ecology – ecology without nature, focusing on the life–nonlife forms. According to Timothy Morton, “any attempt at queer ecology must imagine ways of doing justice to life-forms while respecting the lessons of evolutionary biology – that the boundary between life and nonlife is thick and full of paradoxical entities” (Morton 2010, 276). Queer ecologists prove that there is no rigid, narrow boundary between life and non-life (Dawkins 2005, 582), although people still habitually assume that the life – nonlife boundary is tight and thin. Thus, Timothy Morton adds that “queer ecology will worry away at the human – nonhuman boundary, too” (Morton 2010, 277).

Our research turns to the methodologies of ecocriticism and queer ecology in interpretation of Harryette Mullen’s *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* (2013). The objective of the article is to investigate the representation of non-human bodies such as animal, plants and material urban objects in Mullen’s tanka diary. Such a slant of the research is predetermined by the non-human turn in the book of poetry *Urban Tumbleweed* and the poet’s close attention not to the social or human-driven, but to natural and material things which independently, or in alliance with humans, constitute the poetic universe of *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary*.

Harryette Mullen (b. 1952) is an African American poet,

a literary critic, the author of eight books of poetry, who is renowned for unusual poetics and integrational approach to poetry as “she wants her poems to bring both black and white readers into the same room” (Hoover 2013, 575). Mullen’s poetic creed is as follows: “I aspire to write poetry that would leave no insurmountable obstacle to comprehension and pleasure other than the ultimate limits of the reader’s interest and linguistic competence. However, I do not necessarily approach this goal by employing a beautiful, pure, simple, or accessible literary language, or by maintaining a clear, consistent, recognizable, or authentic voice in my work. My inclination is to pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyncratic, trivial, debased, or aberrant in the language that I speak and write” (Mullen 1999, 199).

In *Urban Tumbleweed*, Harryette Mullen undertakes an innovative approach of reinterpreting Nature and non-living objects or things of the urban space. Primarily, the poet reads the space’ of various districts of Los Angeles, Venice, Santa Monica and also Marfa, Texas, Stockholm, Sweden since parts of the tanka diary were written there. Mullen captures the near and the far, the collective and the scattered or the dispersed, thus catching the moment and reflecting on the Man, Nature, incorporating the layer of the non-human – objects and things in the poetic universe. Thus, the city becomes what Michel de Certeau called ‘readable city’, speaking about the practice of walking the city as the practice of reading or rewriting the literary text (De Certeau 1984, 91). Harryette Mullen comments in the “Introduction” that *Urban Tumbleweed* is rooted into her experience of living in Los Angeles: “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 of motor vehicles with drivers who regard, and are regarded by, pedestrians and cyclists as road hazards. Walking instead of driving allows a different kind of attention to surroundings. Each outing, however brief, becomes an occasion for reflection. Los Angeles, however urban, offers

everyday encounters with nature” (Mullen 2013a, viii).

First, Mullen explores public places as the terrain of the cultivated, constituent of non-living objects, and second – Nature which is incorporated in public space. As for the first domain, the author’s object-oriented approach by no means expresses a failure to engage with Nature, neither it becomes anti-environmental. *Urban Tumbleweed* represents her poetic perception of the urban world in the non-anthropocentric era: it combines and mixes life forms and non-living objects, human and non-human. So, the subject matter of Mullen’s tanka poems is the coexistence of public, civilized, human and natural, wild, uncivilized in urban space.

Human-beings in tanka diary are represented in broad categories and introduced by collective or plural nouns (the homeless, pedestrians, rescuers, survivors, the neighbors, the California family, parents, children). By contrast, there is a specified enumeration of fauna (grizzly bear, hummingbird, rattlesnake, bobcats, coyotes, lizards) and flora species (California buckeye, bottlebrush, Kentucky coffee tree, flametree, jacaranda, honeysuckle, eucalyptus, ginkgo tree, bamboo, tangled vines, marigold flowers, cactus and thorny bougainvillea, lavender, fig and citrus tree). Plants and animals are meticulously specified and presented via precise designations. This technique allows the author to include a wide variety of life-forms and instead of reducing everything to sameness, Harryette Mullen advocates ecological interdependence, multiplying differences. While people are represented as isolated units, natural bodies – animals and plants – are depicted as one body in their harmonious unity:

As one beauty encounters another, how lovely
to see the butterfly powder itself
with the flower’s dusty pollen (Mullen
2013b,49).

In one of her tanka poems, the poet’s instinctive reaction to the question ‘Do you hear me?’ turns out to be a misunderstanding: the passer-by is talking on the phone and is addressing some distant speaker via the gadget, not the heroine who’s passing by next to him (Mullen 2013b,116).

In *Urban Tumbleweed*, H. Mullen focuses on the coloration of the urban space juxtaposing it to the colors of the natural objects and creatures. The flamboyant coloration of plants is supplemented by colors of the artificial objects: the red summer dress was mistaken for the giant hibiscus flower by the hummingbird (Mullen 2013b,26). The poet underlines the plain colors of the city space and its objects: “yellow fire hydrants are marked with graffiti signatures” (Mullen 2013b,102), “pink styrofoam peanuts” (Mullen 2013b,13), “red summer dress”(Mullen 2013b,26). H. Mullen is rather economical with colors while describing urban civilization, but when it comes to descriptions of plants and animals the coloration becomes flamboyant. The poet gives preference to compound adjectives to portray the richness of nuances and shades: “opulent purple velvet of Mexican sage” (Mullen 2013b,120), “sapphire-blue peacock” (Mullen 2013b,86), “purple jacaranda blooms” (Mullen 2013b,4), “the total blue of the sky”(Mullen 2013b,12), “orange and yellow marigold flowers” (Mullen 2013b,14), “green torches, oily eucalyptus trees, bursting into flame” (Mullen 2013b,16), “green-gold fans of the ginkgo tree” (Mullen 2013b,17), “buttery yellow center of creamy white petals” (Mullen 2013b,37).

Colors become the focal points in the book of poetry, thus reviving the impressionists’ techniques. Moreover, the author opted for the tanka form to record fleeting impressions, captured during the daily practice of walking, and to combine them with the reflection on the human being’s place in the world. Traditional Japanese tanka focuses on the human’s place in the natural world, whereas Harryette Mullen’s tanka poems depict the situation when the natural world has been substituted by the urban space for the contemporary city dwellers. The encroachments of the wild (or Nature) are represented as undesirable acts, which cause bewilderment in the civilized and cultivated urban world:

Southern California family surprised
to discover uninvited black bear, taking
a dip in their suburban pool (Mullen

2013b,118).

The natural and wild, as Mullen depicts it, tries to intrude into the civilized but this unwarranted intrusion is swept by the man:

With a vigorous push of a broom,
a worker sweeps enterprising squirrel
out of the front door of the natural food co-op
(Mullen 2013b,118).

Nature is a mysterious phenomenon, which resists cultivation and all the man's efforts to civilize it and "the plants that no one planted [...] sprout in crooked cracks"(Mullen 2013b,117). The poet depicts the vain attempts of humans 'to tame' or to appropriate Nature, which escapes cultivation. The urban garden can't be protected by the locked gate or chain-link fence as "fugitive fragrance of honeysuckle escapes to tempt the passing stranger"(Mullen 2013b,5).

Everything touched by civilization in Mullen's poetic universe can't be compared to and compete with Nature:

Plain colors we wear, compared to
green-shimmering wings of hummingbird
stroking opulent purple velvet of Mexican sage
(Mullen 2013b, 120).

Every stroll of the poet becomes the discovery of the natural world which presents its miracles either via "sapphire-blue peacock promenading down Waco Street in Marfa, Texas" (Mullen 2013b, 86), or tumbleweed, which, surprisingly for her, "had roots attaching it to the land"(Mullen 2013b,121). The plants are depicted as animated beings, deferentially bowing their heads in the presence of wind (Mullen 2013b,51). Thus, the collection of Harryette Mullen's tanka poems represents a brilliant example of the ecological texts, which "could begin with open appreciation, for no particular reason, of another's enjoyment, beyond mere toleration"(Morton 2010, 280).

Harryette Mullen notices and values all the irregularities of Nature. In *Notes from a Tanka Diary*, everything which is

distorted, of unusual shape, or dusty and not pristine, tends to be wild, therefore it's natural. Vice versa, everything which is marked by regular lines, pristine, well-tended – smacks of civilization. It resonates with the philosophy of queer ecology that firstly, "regards beings as people even when they aren't people" (Morton 2010, 279) and secondly, visualizes the unbeautiful, the 'lame', the unsplendid. Timothy Morton coined the term 'queer ecology' for the fields of ecological criticism and queer theory which he sees as interdependent, accentuating that "scholarship must research the ways in which queerness, in its variegated forms, is installed in biological substance as such" (Morton 2010, 273–74). Timothy Morton asserts:"Queer ecology must show how interconnectedness is not organic. Things only look as if they fit, because we don't perceive them on an evolutionary or a geological time scale [...]. Nature looks natural because it keeps going and going, like the undead, and because we keep on looking away, framing it, sizing it up. Acknowledging the zombielike quality of interconnected life-forms will aid the transition from an ideological fixation on Nature to a fully queer ecology" (Morton 2010, 181).

For Harryette Mullen irregularities and distortions of Nature are inspirational. Nature is where the source of inspiration comes from, so cherry blossom can turn into a tanka:

Visiting with you that spring in Maryland,
how often I wished I could gather
those bright cherry blossoms into a tanka
(Mullen 2013b,106).

Nature is represented in images of beautiful, often exotic flowers, rare birds and animals, while the civilized or related to the human is introduced via images of trash, garbage and waste: "plastic buckets and battered metal canisters" (Mullen 2013b, 8), "shopping carts full of rubbish" (Mullen 2013b,94), "a homeless woman spends her days collecting old scraps of paper"(Mullen 2013b,102). or "a scruffy old teddy bear wedged between bars of a metal fence, looking as if it's breaking out of jail"(Mullen 2013b,51).

Urban Tumbleweed by Harryette Mullen turns into a thorough investigation of the Nature's manifestation amidst the cultivated urban locus. Being a skillful stylist, the poet plays on words, combining pun and rhetorical question:

As you have forgotten, so one day
might you remember how to be wild
and bewildered, to be wilder and be wilder -
ness? (Mullen 2013b,109).

Harryette Mullen creates powerful visual images depicting urban spaces such as gardens and well-tended parks. But her tanka poetic miniatures express poignant irony when it comes to human's attempts to redesign or replicate natural phenomena:

Why accept what nature gave us?
We're designing our own vegetables, so
no regulator can make us eat broccoli(Mullen
2013b,92).

In Mullen's tanka diary, it is Nature and natural phenomena that give life and creative impulse to everything people do. For instance, the wind, metaphorically substituted by the poetic phrase 'a breath of air,' "helps our folded paper boats and origami airplanes travel farther"(Mullen 2013b,122). Meditation on Nature, which the lyrical 'I' of *Urban Tumbleweed* indulges into, can be productive for creating poetry:

When you see me walking in the
neighborhood,
stopping to admire your garden, I might be
composing a tanka in my head(Mullen
2013b,95).

The imagery of Harryette Mullen's poetic miniatures brings back the ideas of American transcendentalism and concepts of the Divine Nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau's views on Nature as the embodiment of Spirit are reflected in poems from the tanka diary. According to Emerson, "only through communion with the Divine could a man identify himself with other men, since they too possess

divinity within them" (Quoted in: Hochfield 1975, 167). Harryette Mullen's *Urban Tumbleweed* is the apology of the wild and wilderness rather than the civilized. The poet explicitly expresses the view in one of the tanka poems:

As you have forgotten, so one day
might you remember how to be wild
and bewildered, to be wilder and be wild
erness?(Mullen 2013b,109).

In Mullen's book of poetry natural phenomena are personified: "a bruised banana peel"(Mullen 2013b,9), "a curious dragonfly"(Mullen 2013b,11). Plants are represented as animated beings, and animals acquire characteristics of homo sapiens: they are capable to make jokes, or, "turtles think of traveling" (Mullen 2013b,93), or, humorously, Harryette Mullen portrays the mother of octuplets, who "turns down the lead role in a porn film, but agrees to pose tastefully nude for a tabloid magazine"(Mullen 2013b,93).

The book of poetry *Urban Tumbleweed* is characterized by metaphorical and paradoxical images. Thus, after the tsunami the tree can save a hungry baby boy by its arms (the poet uses the word 'arms' instead of 'branches') (Mullen 2013b,115). Harryette Mullen's poetic lexicon is marked by metaphorization – readers can find a wide range of metaphorical epithets, like "fugitive fragrance of honeysuckle", "riotous dandelions"(Mullen 2013b,5), "audacious squirrels", "the chipmunks are so shy"(Mullen 2013b,50), "the curly cloud, [...] when brushed and combed it still looks tangled"(Mullen 2013b,52) thus, the poet assigns human qualities to plants or animals. The lexicon of the book is rich on personifications: "green hair of fir tree", "handshake of friendly palm, melancholy tears of weeping willow"(Mullen 2013b,27).

The poet creates analogies on the principle of mixing the sphere of the natural with the domain of the cultivated and civilized ("a curious dragonfly – the helicopter"(Mullen 2013b,11), "network of tree roots"(Mullen 2013b,13), "anorexic palm trees"(Mullen 2013b,8), "each raindrop a silver bullet"(Mullen 2013b,44), "self-guided missile striking its

target in the eye: bee landing in the buttery yellow center of creamy white petals”(Mullen 2013b,37), “squirrel, [...] do you wish your fur coat had a zipper?”(Mullen 2013b,15). Species of flora and objects of nature can acquire characteristics and features of artificial, produced things: in one of the tanka poems Mullen compares the scent of rainy, spicy leaves of the California laurel to a chewing gum(Mullen 2013b,14). Harryette Mullen’s vivid imagination creates the poetic image of “the strange green and blue honey the bees made after snacking on candy from the M&M’s factory”(Mullen 2013b,115).

Respectively, material things and objects are represented as animated ones due to the metaphorical parallels with the natural world:

Encyclopedia set with a few missing
volumes, snaggleteeth in enormous
jaws of a prehistoric fossil shark(Mullen
2013b,29).

Often objects and non-human agents of flora and fauna become inseparable and one can hardly decide whether Nature imitates the material world or objects were created as the analogies of the natural world: “purple clustered flower look like a burst of fireworks, but of course it’s the fireworks that imitate the flower”(Mullen 2013b,30).

Natural phenomena, animals and plants are depicted as mischievous and even tricksterous in Mullen’s poetry collection: the dark bird is capable to produce rowdy laughter ‘ha-ha-haw-haw’ but people are unable to get the joke (Mullen 2013b,115). The mockingbird can imitate the clock-radio alarm (Mullen 2013b,4).

Harryette Mullen also employs metaphorical periphrasis and ‘wind’ is substituted by the poetic ‘breath of air’ (Mullen 2013b,122). Often the lyrical ‘I’ of *Urban Tumbleweed* addresses the living creatures directly speaking to them and creating the connection between the human and the natural worlds: “and to you, bird, I also remain anonymous” (Mullen 2013b,122).

The human-beings in Mullen’s tanka diary are portrayed as mechanical creatures preoccupied with technology, dissolved in the novelties of the civilized world, but machinery often causes discomfort:

It alters the mood of our calm conversation
when we have to shout to be heard
beneath the roar of jets and helicopters
(Mullen 2013b,110).

In addition to the eco-centered imagery and tropes, Mullen’s book of poetry is widely marked by environmental consciousness while foregrounding ecological issues. In *Urban Tumbleweed*, the poet draws attention to global catastrophes and environmental disasters, like Fukushima’s catastrophe or forest fires. The motif of the ecological disaster is employed by the author to show the fatal impact of the man and civilization on Nature:

A year after the triple disaster,
a ghost ship crossed the Pacific,
but farmers may never return to Fukushima
(Mullen 2013b,92).

Among other ecological concerns, highlighted in the tanka diary, Harryette Mullen writes about the disruption of the population of whales (Mullen 2013b,78), smuggling of exotic birds (Mullen 2013b,82), water and air pollution. Thus, she mentions city gutters, which drain to the ocean (Mullen 2013b,14) or carbon dioxide pollution:

If I could hold this bowl of blue to cracked
lips, if to quench this desert thirst
I could swallow the sky, would I choke on
carbon clouds?(Mullen 2013b,20).

Harryette Mullen might sound rather skeptical and ironical about some environmental issues, like recycling, which is advertised as “toilet to tap”(Mullen 2013b,23), nonetheless, she advocates natural way of recycling:

Several species of elegant butterflies
are known to be attracted to mountains
of dung and decomposing garbage (Mullen

2013b,35).

Nature remains a miraculous and undecipherable phenomenon for the lyrical 'I'. Harryette Mullen teaches the reader to catch "a quick glimpse of bright eyes, yellow feathers, dark wings" (Mullen 2013b,122), to become aware of the divine natural world around us, even if we are deeply rooted in the urban world. The two epigraphs, preceding the tanka diary, introduce the key motifs of Mullen's *Urban Tumbleweed*: a peach tree blooming amidst the city blocks and things, which can talk to us if we take hold of them:

Look about you. Take hold of the things that
are here. Let them talk to you.
George Washington Carver (Mullen
2013a,xi).

Unlike in Walt Whitman's urban poetic writings, Harryette Mullen in *Urban Tumbleweed* portrays urban space primarily as oikos (space associated with the sphere of private), not agora (space connected with society). She traces and maps organic public spaces, which might not be representative of Los Angeles. These are the places which are neither landmarks nor monuments, though Mullen's lyrical 'I' finds organic spatial sphere which becomes Nature's locus in urban surroundings. Harryette Mullen poeticizes Nature in its interdependent relations with the human world, depicting interactions between the human and non-anthropomorphic others. The human species is represented among other species of Nature, so anthropo-centered approach is substituted by bio-centered. Human and non-human life coexist and they are represented as an eco-system in *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* by Harryette Mullen.

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4

"This earth, hot like burning coals": Alchemical Transmutation in *Animal's People*

Sarah Bezan

Abstract

I argue that British author Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* presents a harrowing fictionalization of the Bhopal Disaster of 1984 through alchemical tropes that fuse together historical eco-trauma, postcolonial strife, and magical realism. As such, the essay addresses the constellation of research questions which foreground issues of environmental devastation and social oppression. As a work of postcolonial ecocriticism, *Animal's People* makes an important contribution to the archive of literature that creatively engages with ecological trauma.

thou art an animal fierce and free
in all the world is none like thee
in fire's forge thy back did bend
my bitter fire be thy end¹

Forged in the scorching flames of chemical fires, *Animal's People* is a harrowing fictionalization of the Bhopal disaster of 1984 – a catastrophe deemed the "Hiroshima of the chemical industry."² From the twisted, smelted spine of the four-legged narrator, Animal, to the Khaufpurians's burning thirst for justice against the Kampani, images of fire and