

Bhanu Kapil, *Ban en Banlieue*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2015. 109 pp. \$15.95

Bhanu Kapil's latest book begins with an annotated list of its contents, although some of those contents are only present in the list itself. Even "annotated list" might be misleading—each item appears on its own page, and the annotations are not just glosses but impacted narratives of each component's genesis or eventual excision. Part palinode, part overture, the table of contents for *Ban en Banlieue* reads like a draft for the work as a whole, with all the striking turns of thought, incident, and phrase that readers of Kapil's work have grown to expect. And yet this section also modulates our expectations, priming us for a series of notes and revisions within the texts that follow: "notes/instructions written into an AWP panel talk" titled "13 Errors for Ban"; "Auto-sacrifice (Notes)," the work's long central section; thirteen pages of acknowledgements labelled "End-Notes"; and a "Butcher's Block Appendix," which extracts one passage at random from the thirty-three notebooks that preceded the published work. This accumulation of notes suggests a kind of palimpsest, and Kapil shares with other contemporary writers an interest in the formal problems that emerge when an individual or collective memory overwhelms its record. But Kapil abandons the palimpsest as a visual form in favor of a practice of addition and emendation in time, translating the visual form of the palimpsest into a book of cyclical, amalgamating prose—a book that can be inventoried even as its contents resist being mapped or contained.

Describing the book this way seems necessary, since the proliferation of sections and subsections, and the repetition of ideas, events, titles, and numberings between them, can make these *banlieues* (the French term for suburbs) feel more like a maze. Still, my initial description risks casting as solipsistic a work that is anything but. The proliferation of "notes" in *Ban en Banlieue* is not a writer's reflexivity flipping over into myopia, but the product of a conviction that what her book aims to address deserves more attention, more attempts at articulation, than any one writing could convey.

*Ban en Banlieue* describes itself as a failed novel about a real race riot, but Kapil's re-visioning of the novel form, and what it might mean to fail within it, is complex. Her novel takes place on April 23, 1979, the day of a race riot in the west London suburb of Southall. Its action comprises "a brown [black] girl [...] walking home from school. She orients to the sound of breaking glass, and understands the coming violence has begun. Is it coming from the far-off street or is it coming from her home? Knowing that either way she's done for—she lies down to die." Kapil's goal in recounting this story, and expounding it at novel length, is "to write a sentence with content more volatile than what contains it. / So that the page is shiny, wet and hard. /

So that sentences are indents not records; the soulful presence of a vibrant man or girl rather than persistence. / Their capacity to touch you in the present time.” The proliferation of versions is here, from the outset, a tactic to keep the work from settling. And the novel becomes that mode of articulation that poetry is not: there will be no best words and no best order, but an unending, unfinished list.

Listing in Kapil’s work recalls the quotidian rhythms of writing, living, and thought, and she remains candid about the literal work of writing as well as the spaces and institutions that support it (MFA and AWP, university cafeterias and cafes). But Kapil’s lists also intimate a desire for social change whose urgency is the other side of dailiness. Her earlier books, *Incubation* (2006) and *Humanimal* (2009), used the alphabet to index their components, putting in line experiences that were by their very nature out of hand. There, the alphabet became the recitation or refrain with which the child guards against the fear that they are lost; the need for such a refrain was manifest in the crescendo of O’s with which *Humanimal* ends. (“I’ve exhausted the alphabet,” Kapil writes after the fifth O, “But I’m not writing this for you.”) In contrast, *Ban en Banlieue*’s numberings measure the proliferation of Kapil’s starts, yet these numbers withhold the order and direction we might otherwise expect. Restarting with each new section, these numbers recycle and repeat; unlike the alphabet, they do not promise a predetermined end. At the same time, each prose fragment in *Ban en Banlieue* seems to reach toward other, unwritten articulations. Sentences stutter, rewrite themselves, pose alternatives, digress, press on, or give up. “For example,” she writes in the contents, “I didn’t get to the part with Kapil Muni—a section [incarnate], regressed: a woman who—Ban-like—contorted [leaped] out of a sacrificial [bridal] fire and is [was] carried out to sea—the Bay of Bengal—on the backs of tiny pink dolphins.” Through systems of dashes, braces, spaces, full stops, and paragraph breaks, Kapil both keeps the moment in suspense and keeps the force of the moment separate from the surface of her text. Her sentences stop only to be extended, revised, and occasionally lamented, yet the need to write persists.

With all of its palimpsestic layers, there is, after all, a real historical event at the book’s center. In its approximation of the historical novel, *Ban en Banlieue* reaches through the time of its own shifting composition, but it also reaches backward to Kapil’s childhood in the UK. Like *Schizophrenie* (2011), a book Kapil called her failed epic “on Partition and its *trans-generational* effects,” *Ban en Banlieue* touches on the social history of domestic violence in diasporic Indian and Pakistani communities. Scenes and figures repeat within and between these works as a kind of social trauma. In the “Partition” section of *Schizophrenie*, Kapil broaches an archetype for the imbrication of racism

and domestic violence, an image that is literally crystalline: “An economy is a system of apparently willing but actually involuntary exchanges. A family, for example, is really a shopfront, a glass plate open to the street. Passers-by might mistake it for a *boucherie*, splashed as the customers/butcher are with blood. Transactions frozen in place beneath a chandelier of the good knives.” Kapil frames this scene in order to expose it as the confluence of economies both psychic and otherwise, international and domestic. But the image also refigures this symptom as an institution, one continuous with and determined by the greater institutional order of the English state.

In this scene and elsewhere, *Schizophrenie* foregrounds the position of a normative spectator who is able to sustain their coherence—the white neighbor, the “passer-by.” Yet *Ban en Banlieue* attends almost completely to black or brown bodies that metamorphosize, disintegrate, and decay. Kapil’s skinhead neighbor attempts to contain and reject this disorder with a slur, “*you bleeding animal*,” yet the transformations witnessed in *Ban en Banlieue* continually alert us to other forces, other actors, and other scenes, which challenge the spectator’s separation from a violence whose origin cannot be thus contained. Both Kapil and her neighbor engage language as an anthropological machine: a way of seeing that produces humanity by denying it to others, that subtracts humanity from a figure and leaves its edges undefined, so that that body begins to leak into a landscape. Kapil’s ongoing project is to present the wavering, overlapping figurations that attempt to contain or articulate this inhuman leakage. Immigrant, monster, animal, child, schizophrenic, brown girl, wolf—this is a partial account of a growing and recursive vocabulary through which she charts the network of social violence that overtakes the bodies she describes. But rather than repudiate those terms, Kapil insists that we inhabit them for the way they spill onto other people, places, and structures, moving within this network of violence from husband to wife, spectacle to spectators, parents to children to wallpaper. It is not that there are no victims here, nor is it that everyone is a victim, but that everyone (and everything) ends up covered in blood.

As episodes repeat, as the figures within them threaten to become interchangeable, and as the people they describe must bear the threat of *being* interchangeable, Kapil appeals to other systems (biological, alchemical) in which the threat of exchange is not an impediment to living. *Ban en Banlieue* also adds to this economy new substances that promise, through a kind of mysticism, to break the banality of the cycle: pink lightening, peacock ore, a butcher’s block, smoke, bitumen, ash. “Flowers, electricity, and even herbs. I place them in a vase. I flip the switch. A foreign body is a frequency. It’s a body flaring with violet light when you look away from the sheet and its matching pillow,” writes Kapil. “These are notes, so I don’t have to go there. I don’t have

to lie down with you. And I don't." For Kapil, to lie down on the ground is "to assume a sovereign position," to willfully abandon a power one might not otherwise possess. "I wanted to write a book that was like lying down," she writes elsewhere in *Ban en Banlieue*, as if the writing itself might live out the action of its protagonist, abandoning its claims to autonomy and coherence in order to expose the social forces that act upon it. Yet Kapil remains aware throughout that the parallel and its execution are imperfect, that this abandonment of agency is paradoxical, and that its ethics are far from assured. Her "failing" as a novelist is a way of negotiating these contradictions—imparting agency to her readers while resisting the imperative to abandon her own, adding reagents to a complex system so that the activity of other components might be manifest in turn.

"I want a literature that is not made of literature," Kapil writes in the opening sections of *Ban en Banlieue*, and surely part of what she has in mind is an escape from literature's history as a tool for colonialism, patriarchy, and the capitalist state. But Kapil's claim also revives for contemporary writing something of Duchamp's legacy in contemporary art. While Duchamp's literary inheritors have tended to identify that legacy with appropriation and the readymade, those experiments were only two ways of presenting the kind of experience he characterized as "infra thin," like "the possibility of several tubes of color becoming a Seurat." By leaving her book discomposed, Kapil takes this possibility more literally than most, yet *Ban en Banlieue* also outstrips other conceptual texts by effacing the author-function on which the readymade depends for its artistic (or literary) status. The catalog of performances, the exchanges with other writers, the thirteen pages of acknowledgements, the documenting photographs, the almost compulsive gestures to the ways the text itself could be rewritten—all dismantle Kapil's claim to be a novelist while foregrounding the work and scale of an aesthetic community in which her readers too are participants. And it is here that *Ban en Banlieue*'s elaborate architecture comes to seem like a necessary form. At a moment when conceptual writing seems singularly unable to address our political problems, *Ban en Banlieue* seems to promise the kind of "social turn" in poetic production that Branden W. Joseph has documented in the performance-based arts. What moves this book beyond both conceptualism and post-Language writing is that it conjoins its abandonment of agency with a drive to candidly represent the aesthetic community that occasioned it, and that it refuses to deracinate that community from the world it represents.

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