

Almost but never quite dead: A review of *Ban En Banlieue* by Bhanu Kapil

written by Meghan Lamb | October 2, 2015



Ban En Banlieue by Bhanu Kapil
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There are pieces you plan to write and pieces that defy all forms of planning, pieces you assemble from your failed plans. Some novels are written through outlines, pre-imagined and pre-structured, with a form that follows from the structure that you have imagined. In other words: these novels are extensions of their authors. In other words: these novels feel like worlds their authors own. Bhanu Kapil's *Ban En Banlieue* could never have been this kind of novel. It is not a novel so much as a birth, a death, a violent "discharge." It was born from an accumulation, a messy building up of notes which was—according to Kapil—sembled by chopping it up on a butcher's block. The body of *Ban En Banlieue* was assembled through violence, a body assembled by means of its own violent deconstruction. Even unto itself, this might seem like a self-contradiction that cannot be reconciled. Kapil's beautiful, bleeding, half-dying, half-living, anti-novel is well aware of this.

The form and flow of *Ban En Banlieue* is deeply connected with its subject, a young woman who lies down in the street as a riot approaches. This is to say, the text is not *about* this woman so much as it *is* an experience, an embodiment of *Ban* and the *banlieues*. However, *Ban* and *banlieue* are not stable subjects that can be defined, as Kapil would be first to say, and does repeatedly throughout the text. She spends most of the text attempting to describe what *Ban* is and failing.

The title of *Ban En Banlieue* reflects the slippage that occurs between the book's subject, its author, and the form itself. There are no characters, as *Ban* is no specific woman. *Ban* is everything that Kapil says and all the spaces in between. *Ban* is an anonymous woman. A *banned* woman. *Ban* is Bhanu Kapil. She *is* this trampled woman, *is* the riot, *is* the street she lies on. She *becomes* what she is from, the *banlieue*, borderland. The woman and the text (which *is* this woman, *Ban*) become the remnants of the riot. Gravel. Ash. A body on the ground.

Ban is the performance you can picture, though, of course you cannot see it, because you are reading a book and not watching a body in motion. You are reading a performance that was written, therefore is not happening, therefore is always in some ways dead and never fully living.

Kapil constructed *Ban En Banlieue* from collections of notes for performances,

thoughts on their forms and functions, their potentialities. She carried these notes with her for eight years, adding to them intermittently in the hopes they would become a book. Kapil sections her notes into similar, repetitive titles, *Notes for Ban*, *Fictions for Ban*, *Errors for Ban*. The structure feels raw. It feels like parts bleed into each other. It feels like a thing chopped on a butcher's block.

Even so, as I wandered through *Ban En Banlieue*, I wished I could see these performances, see the body—her body—stripped naked and painted in ash. It seems so important, this body. This body is all we are given to focus on. I feel Kapil's effort to focus the body into her own view. She employs this note repeatedly: "How nudity functions in the work," a phrase which resonates in many ways. "The work": a novel as performance which can't be performed, a nude whose body cannot be revealed as finished form.

"Ban is not an immigrant," Kapil writes. "She is a shape or bodily outline that is familiar: yet inaccurate: to what the thing is...By 2011, she's a blob of meat on the sidewalk. I progress her to meat—a monstrous form—but here she pauses, is inhibited, and this takes a long time...I lie down next to her and extend my own tongue to the ivy that curls down the sidewalk with its medicine and salt: so close to my own mouth. Lick it and you could die. I do all these things, but Ban does not die." She does not die, but she does not live as any definable form. She's the novel that cannot be written, that remains a body on the ground.

This body (or "bodily outline") is what remains in the novel's place. In place of poetry, Kapil reflects the poetics of the riot. She reflects the synesthesia of the riot, the poetic violence, through her repetition, slippage, words slyly becoming different words. She also juxtaposes unmarked quotes or utterances side by side to illustrate a different kind of (unsuccessful) slippage. "People are looking at you." "Animals are looking at you," she quotes. "I put out your light." "I put you in the garbage," she quotes in the same section. Kapil's assessment of this bricolage is absolutely perfect: "One thing next to another doesn't mean they touch."

For me, the most compelling aspect of this text is the strange penitence Kapil expresses, her continual apologies for writing what she has written. "The project fails at every instant," she writes. "I feel ashamed that I could not make Ban an amazing book." What is to be made from this sense of regret? What is to be made from these self-proclaimed failures? What is to be made of the fact that Kapil insists that the reader perceive this text as a failure? Most probably, nothing. Nothing can be *made*, of, from, or with this text. The poetics of a riot are, of course, necessarily, truthfully, barbaric. By insisting on its failure, Kapil acknowledges the necessity of replicating violence with violent, self-defeating language. However, she expresses that she nevertheless wishes she could write a better book, wishes this were a better world.

Thus, *Ban En Banlieue* becomes its own act of self-immolation, an "auto-sacrifice" as Kapil describes repeatedly in her notes. She surrenders this book, the body of *Ban*, to the world she must live in, the poetics of violence, the knowledge that "language does not survive death." The text

culminates with the haunting visual of a sati suicide, a woman's body broken down by flames, then swept downstream, still burning. "And now I am dead," she writes. "I am a mixture of dead and living things—all the creatures of the sea are breathing with me and for me, their mouths on my chin, my lips...My eyes flung open to the sky. To begin. To live again—affixed to the circuitry of the non-living world...Almost but never quite dead." She is the body of the book. She is body of the novel that she could not write, the body that was burned.

She is a body, burned, but not quite dead, that lingers somehow, monstrously, like words themselves, the act of writing poetry. The culmination of the book mirrors this cycling of almost births and almost deaths that endlessly occur in language: "To begin. To never begin. To begin..." she writes. The novel ends.