Somatic Syntax: Ban en Banlieue*, Filmic Prose, and the Representation of Trauma*

GABRIELLA GRACEFFO[1]

Abstract. In her "failed" novel *Ban en Banlieue,* Bhanu Kapil claims that the text is a "novel-shaped space" that not only resists narrative but investigates the dangers of literature related to stories of trauma. In traditional, linear books that include trauma, violence is inevitable and often portrayed as a spectacle, easily leaning toward objectification. Instead, Kapil's work suggests that fragmented, non-linear narratives can be more representative of the cognitive and physical impacts of trauma while also deferring the violence to avoid trauma porn and imagine new narrative possibilities. This is especially relevant in the case of sexual trauma to female bodies. Through interrupted narration, grammar, naming, and auto-sacrifice, *Ban en Banlieue* develops a somatic syntax based on images and felt in the body. The intermedial book can be read as filmic prose: a collection of film strips from a bloody cutting room floor, visual fragments in text that embody PTSD symptoms, simultaneity, and memory patterns not usually present in literature. Yet despite the imagistic nature, the text asserts subjecthood for its characters, rather than objectification, offering a new syntax of storytelling that questions the safety of literature and asserts the necessity of new literary forms when representing trauma.

Keywords: intermediality; trauma porn; ethical representation; paratext; sexual violence

Introduction

In *Ban en Banlieue,* Bhanu Kapil posits that the text is a "novel-shaped space", a failed narrative, a piece of literature not made from literature (Kapil 2015: 20). It contains an embedded, fragmentary story about Ban – not one character but many of the same name – lying down to die, along with notes on cultural contexts intersecting this image and paratext documenting Kapil's struggle with the writing process. Kapil shirks grounding details that would orient the reader

[1] Gabriella Graceffo, Editorial Fellow at the University of Montana Press, gabi@poetrynw.org

DOI: https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2025.30.2.8

in *Ban,* offering documentation of her "failure" through the leftover materials: endnotes, a dedication, illustrations, an epigraph, and acknowledgments. But perhaps this 'failure' is an effective way to document trauma and offers a new hybrid form.

Kapil urges us to consider how literature is not always a safe space for trauma, that its representation can have "ill intent for the victim, the author, and the reader", as poet Brian Teare articulates in his review of the book (Teare 2015). We see this ethical investigation in *Ban* where Kapil directly asks, "in a literature, what would happen to the girl?" (Kapil 2015: 32). In her statement of poetics in *Atlantic Drift*, Kapil describes her desire to disrupt the "vortex or loop of traumatic memory" (Kapil 2017: 167). A linear narrative ends in only one place for Ban: death. Kapil aims to change this by crafting a new syntax of trauma that rejects conventional literary standards through interrupted, intermedial narration. Her syntax represents brutal physical experiences and psychological dissociation through passive constructions, using fragments that are more than simple stylistic choices. Heteronormative, often violent grammatical conventions intersect larger cultural structures of oppression. How might these cultural contexts collide with definitions of literature and media and their failures, and who defines them? A somatic syntax is needed for these unnamed gaps, and *Ban* supplies a possible answer: a novel that uses filmic prose, a collage from the cutting room floor.

Ban en Banlieue presents language which is physicalised, embodied, and possesses affective resonance that reaches out to readers, grips our faces, and demands we look and keep looking to imagine a different ending. Rather than move forward into "a violent future…to become an object of violence in a historical novel, [Ban] chooses to lie down to die as a subject" (Teare 2015). This happens, too, to the fictional girl walking home during a race riot in London's Southall on April 23, 1979, where, after hearing sounds she associates with violence, she "lies down. She folds to the ground. This is syntax" (Kapil 2015: 31). All the many characters of Ban – the girl in the race riot, the Hindu goddess (Banu), even Kapil herself (Bhanu) – lie down to stop time from moving forward. This is interruption. Readers must submit themselves to this fragmentary, challenging experience, to be active participants in the meaning-making process and consider the power dynamics within it. Through investigation of scholarship on intermediality and the psychological implications of literary representations of trauma, this article seeks to outline and examine Kapil's somatic syntax via close reading amid a broader consideration of the safety of literature and the possibilities of new forms to represent unnamed violence and the silence that surrounds it. *Ban en Banlieue* heralds subjecthood and embodiment through new storytelling methods based

on collapsed images and characters like layered strips of film creating new meaning through accrual. However, to explore these claims fully, we must first establish a methodological framework of intermediality and the possibilities it holds for trauma narratives in literature.

Intermediality and Hybrid Meaning-making

In recent years, literature and the humanities have made a prominent turn in scholarship toward intermediality. This concept points toward a more personal and dynamic mode of creative production that questions linear narrative, preferring meaning-making in the in-between (both physical white space and metaphorical gaps in medium and implication).

According to Wolf Werner, "intermediality…applies to any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct genres and thus comprises both 'intra-' and 'extra-compositional' relations between different media" (Werner 2011: 3). Though there are several forms of intermediality in *Ban en Banlieue*, with its photographs, performance notes, and stagecraft directions, it most clearly aligns with formal intermedial imitation, which Werner describes in the *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*:

> This is an especially interesting phenomenon because in this case the intermedial signification is the effect of a particularly unusual iconic use of the signs of the source medium. In fact…the characteristic feature of formal imitation consists in the attempt to shape the material of the semiotic complex in question (its signifiers and in some cases also its signifieds) in such a manner that it acquires a formal resemblance to typical features of structures of another medium, at least to some extent. (Werner 2015: 466)

Rather than simply including multiple creative forms, formal intermedial imitation requires the subject, in this case a book, to take on the structure and characteristics of a different form that becomes critical to the meaning-making process. Rather than relying only on words with standard syntax and linear organisation to make meaning in a narrative novel, *Ban* engages multiple valences through using structures from another medium, film. The insertion of filmic structures and characteristics highlights particular routes of meaning-making, forcing the reader to work in new ways to find significance. Traditional linear thinking and standard, often passive, approaches are not applicable. This creates a dynamic experience of the text that better represents trauma through jarring newness and by causing discomfort in the reader while they learn the rules of the intermedial form.

Formal intermedial imitation brings up two pertinent questions: what makes a medium, and does the intermedial product become a hybrid form or something entirely new? Karen Beckman and Jean Ma argue that medium is often "a question of history, temporality, and relationality" with parameters of homogeneity dependent on difference, a definition through negation (Beckman and Ma 2008: 7). Within a particular cultural moment, though, does material support define the medium, such as silver gelatin in the case of photography? If so, is digital photography no longer photography? Further, is "the sense modality the product presents itself in – sound for music, vision for cinema?" (Massumi 2011: 81). This nullifies any other sensory experience the product might evoke. Medium is thus a channel for communication of information both technical and emotional, but it is not limited to a single sensory path; a particular medium may already be primed for hybridity because of its multisensory nature, the edges of its definitions already hazy, less dependent on negation and thereby more inclusive.

Hybrid forms, then, are products of fusion, but some are more cohesive than others, depending on the type of intermediality. Though Kapil emphasises the segmented nature of *Ban*, its segmentation not only exists as a cohesive whole but also evokes specific cinematic structures with film cuts and directorial narration. *Ban* becomes a different medium through formal intermedial imitation: filmic prose. And this form, strange though it may be, is not altogether new, but has echoes tracing back decades.

Filmic Prose: A Collage from the Cutting Room Floor

As modernist literature evolved in the early twentieth century, cinema began slipping into major literary figures' writing and theories, particularly with Virginia Woolf's concept of simultaneity. Woolf explores this concept through her essay "The Cinema" which criticises filmmakers' adaptation of novels to the screen, something Werner names *intermedial transposition* (Werner 2015: 462). As they leaned away from early documentary films, called *actualités*, filmmakers abandoned what Woolf felt was cinema's capacity to "bring forth the world as it is" (Marcus 2015: 243). Concurrent with writing "The Cinema", Woolf was crafting *To the Lighthouse*, specifically the central section, "Time Passes"; she describes this section as a kind of "'eyeless' writing", a strong contrast to the filmic overlaying of the final section of the book (244). It is possible this shift came from her investigation of cinematic structures prior to writing this section, leading into new narrative strategies in order to show the simultaneity of time and perspective. These include "parallel editing (or cross-cutting) as a means to depict events taking place at the same moment but in different spaces,

as well as the shot-reverse-shot structure of continuity editing which has its literary correlative in the novel in the views from shore to sea, and back from sea to shore" (245). This cinematic analysis exhibits formal intermedial imitation of film in text, but how might documentary and *actualités* further change meaning-making with the requirement of truth inserted into a textual medium?

Verbal and visual arts each have their own meaning-making systems, linguistic signs trapped within *différance*. Words are inherently symbolic compared to visual signs which are inherently iconic, relaying "through resemblance, some traits with whatever it signifies" (Lehtimäki 2010: 187). One of the main differences, then, is between "the *materiality* of the photograph and the *mentality* of the written word" (186). Filmic prose creates a bridge between these semiotic systems through form: new syntax, paragraph constructions, and vignette juxtapositions that resemble film cuts set within an active, challenging *mise-en-page* with the 'director' (see: Kapil as narrator) visible in the text. Moreover, filmic prose is a useful tool in representing trauma due to its embodiment of jagged psychological processing, including its embodiment of reexperiencing symptoms (such as flashbacks and intrusive thoughts and images) and, as is the case in *Ban*, the narrator seeking integration of the traumatic content as Kapil seeks to create a cohesive book. The simultaneity and segmented cut form of filmic prose combines with the intense somatic focus of the content and affective language to embody dissociative, intense reactions to trauma.

Traditionally, prose narratives have a continuous flow of events whereas poetry often utilises segments and the metaphorical and physical distance between them, something also reflected in film and montage. In many poetic forms such as fractal poetics, a traditional narrative from point A to point B is not necessary. Film – especially experimental works which utilise multiple exposures, layering, and split-screen techniques – is more reminiscent of poetry. A cut is "roughly analogous to the gap between one poetic segment or unit of measure and the next", and it is "when a gap opens that we [as viewers] are provoked to intervene and bridge the gap by *making meaning*" (McHale 2010: 31). Some movies make those gaps as seamless as possible whereas others, such as arthouse productions, have wider lacunae, forcing the viewer to more actively engage in the meaning-making process. Filmic prose, then, takes on the segmentation of poetry but has the additional approach of smash cuts and simultaneity compared to a linear narrative that tracks from point A to point B.

Ban is filmic prose that operates as strips of film collected from the cutting room floor, a collage of celluloid with rough edges and outlines that emphasises its physical nature through somatic syntax, enabling trauma to the body and mind to be expressed in its fragmentation and simultaneity. While this appears

across the broad strokes of the entire book, it is best expressed at the line level, where each image drips blood and each sentence speaks to the grammar of pain.

Somatic Syntax and the Collage

Kapil opens *Ban en Banlieue* with broken syntax: "A preface. Ash. A sore" (Kapil 2015: 7). From this very first line, already the syntax is clipped, denying parallelism in the absence of a second indefinite article next to "ash" and tumbling from there with dashes, colons, and phrases set off as incomplete sentences that emphasise images and the body over all else. Beyond the literal marking of the page with profuse punctuation, words themselves become extremely physical, an *ars poetica* in prose where Kapil questions her ability to write this book. Other authors slip into Kapil's collage in a bodily way: "Cha's 'dead tongue' licks the work. No. I feel her licking me. The inside of my arm, the inside of my ear. My error." This clipped, somatic syntax occupies the central stylistic space of the book, operating like cuts in film that jump from tongues to arms to ears to metaphors to images and back again. This is simultaneity. Kapil describes her desperate desire to "make a table out of the notes and smooth down its long red tail. A ribbon" like film pieces taped together before being loaded into a projector's mouth – here, the reader's inner eye (8).

Moreover, we see Kapil herself seeks to explain on the page her artistic vision to the cast of *Ban* and to us as her audience. This is more than simply a carryover from modernist and postmodernist techniques because we see the author in the space where she 'shouldn't' be, and the syntax is constantly folding in on itself, shifting in ways that intentionally defer meaning and force the reader to grasp and grasp again at understanding. This is what Genette calls *interpolated narrating* in which the author is visible on the page, documenting the writing process as she writes and rewrites the story (McHale 2011). In this case, it evokes a directorial narration that does not explain the scenes to come but rather the ongoing, simultaneous struggle of creating the scenes in the writing process, because Kapil's journey has been a traumatic one itself in seeking to tell this story of historical trauma and its fictionalised examples.

It is not a pleasant experience connecting with these jagged edges; they metaphorically cut quite deeply. This is intentional. The early sections of *Ban* explore errors and epigraphs, paratext surrounding what would have become a novel; Kapil seeks a method to create a new form of communication to transmit Ban's story. Her best approach to this is to make the writing physical through an art piece of printed pages described in the "Butcher's Block Appendix": "On the slab…I made an appendix, opening the notebooks at random and setting my fingertip down. My fingertip was like an 'extended periphery.' Cha. My

fingertip was like an animal, sensing with its delicate, representative snout. This was bibliomancy. A way to make visible something that was "no longer possible to say." (Kapil 2015: 11)

The "extended periphery" is mediated through Kapil's body, but it only functions when the text, too, is made physical. She states this more directly later when she explains that the book's "form *is* the body" (41, emphasis mine). The sentences here breathe and live as Kapil "made a theory of narrative and the nervous system for Ban…made a cadence for Ban…made a syntax for Ban" (24). Though Kapil wanted to write a novel, she instead "wrote the organ-sweets – the bread-rich parts of the body before it's opened and then devoured" (19). This idea of *before* is key: this body does not exist in time, but instead in a non-linear space where everything happens simultaneously. However, within that space there is still violence, which the "nervous system" maps in the construction of each sentence and fragment.

Within *Ban*'s somatic syntax, grammar reflects larger social systems of oppression, particularly with objectification and physical violence enacted on female bodies. Ban, in all her many faces, is "a brown girl on the floor of the world" and this prostration is her syntax: vulnerable and exposed to violence, particularly white violence (48). In the "Paranoia and the body" section, Kapil presents a scene of commonplace racialised violence featuring Stephen Whitby, a member of the National Front's youth league with a proclivity for urinating in the milk bottles of his Gujrati and Kenyan neighbours: "Once, a man was beating his wife. Stephen Whitby climbed over the wall and banged his head on the window. He spat at the window then thumped it with his hand, screaming: 'You fucking Paki!' He screamed: 'Go back home, you bleeding animal!' The man stopped beating his wife, then resumed." (59)

The syntactical construction is critical to its effect. The first sentence creates a time dynamic and uses passive syntax, the past continuous verb form emphasising the idea that this is a common event, that this is simply one moment of many. The entrance of Stephen Whitby is fully active in the verb construction, and each verb after that is a simple past form. Within English, active and simple tenses are privileged above passive and continuous ones. Kapil has already crafted a racial hierarchy within the writing before the content even comes to the fore. While Whitby's comments are startling, the quiet sentence that follows has far more weight. The wife is rendered object, never seen or described, never given a verb; she is beyond the window and beyond the veil of language. Like Ban, she is unseen, only an outline bounded by a possessive pronoun.

Kapil expresses this intent directly in her statement of poetics on embodiment in her writing. She needs a sentence that "shakes" and "takes up the

cadence of the nervous system as it discharges a fact…to map this sentence, in other words, to the gesture-posture events" (Kapil 2017: 167). The writing itself listens and shapes itself to the violence of its content as in this scene with Whitby, and by becoming a kind of body it projects a new form of truth telling. By using techniques that question language itself rather than the definitions of words, Kapil circumnavigates *différance* and finds a new access point for an embodied representation of trauma.

This is even more apparent with her broken syntax when dealing with psychological trauma. To break the "vortex or loop of traumatic memory", Kapil uses bodily grammar that is more responsive and representational of the experience, featuring clipped phrases and images in the great collage of *Ban*. The project was meant to "collect some of these fragments [of *Ban*] in an ultra-formal way that might not very easily, in turn, be encountered by a wide audience . . . [pieces that] circulate then ebb" (Kapil 2015: 22). This is apparent in the "What *is* Ban?" section where Kapil has the clearest moment in the book in relation to her intended narrative. Ban, here the girl at the London race riot in 1979, lies down to die as the violence approaches her:

> Psychotic, fecal, neural, wild: the auto-sacrifice begins, endures the night: never stops: goes on.
>
> As even more time passes, as the image or instinct to form this image desiccates, I prop a mirror, then another, on the ground for Ban […]
>
> The left hand covered in a light blue ash. The ash is analgesic, data, soot, though when it rains, Ban becomes leucine, a bulk, a network of dirty lines that channel starlight, presence, boots. Someone walks towards her, for example, then around her, then away. (31)

Though Ban has chosen to lie down, the scene is a body made electric with asyndeton. It is not a passive shape. The grammar fractures, the mirror Kapil metaphorically props up refracting through a hundred shards: single words slicing up the sentence, time skipping along the first paragraph with each phrase. The use of colons implies equivalencies; had Kapil only included commas, time would go on in a normal narrative fashion. Instead, the colons imply a recursive element grammatically which the content then matches as the auto sacrifice "begins, endures the night: never stops: goes on", somehow occupying all these states at once. This captures the element of trauma blending time via memory, inserting itself psychologically in the present through flashback, merging here and now with there and then. It also demonstrates filmic simultaneity and the utility of rapid cuts to disorient the reader yet authentically represent the dissociative processing of a traumatic event. However, this

trauma of beating, rape, and death never actually happens in the text, the film strip cut just before violence occurs in the next frame.

Within the kaleidoscope of the third paragraph's broken images, Ban breaks her trajectory and experiences an act of becoming. Kapil moves from inserting herself in the scene to describing "the left hand", intentionally not defining if this is her hand or Ban's or some other self interpolated in the text. This begins Ban's transformation, or perhaps realisation, as she becomes a "livid mixture of materials that a race riot is made from" (37). The first two sentences employ commas to show Ban's multiplicity; her many parts grouped together as shards with one change in time: "when it rains" (31). She breaks down to base elements, to leucine – an amino acid that stimulates protein synthesis, particularly muscle protein after a physical trauma – and the city's body of alleys and neural impulses that have a corporeal presence here. While this at first might seem passive with the city acting on her rather than Ban acting on the city, this moment shows a breakage Ban willed for herself after hearing violence around her: she becomes material in a space that refused to address her physical body and political existence. "She becomes" – an active, simple verb construction that gives agency as Ban plucks herself from her narrative's trajectory toward death.

Kapil inflects this with political commentary: that Ban has the particular capability to take herself out of time because as the child of immigrants she is "both dead and never living…never given: an existence…born in England, but is never, not even on a cloudy, day English", her "birth not recognized as a birth" (30). By existing only in peripheral sight in a racialised country, Ban has the power to stop her narrative, taking agency through the syntax of her body and its nonexistence. Kapil, in turn, refuses to orient the book with a cohesive narrative because doing so would "put into motion a narrative… [that] reinscribes the cultural and historical logics that lead to gendered and radicalized violence" (Teare 2015). The syntax, thus, is not only representative of trauma through filmic techniques, but gives a body and a structure to Ban, a girl who is not afforded agency because of her social and political status. The gesture-posture events mapped in the grammar play with time, disperse the truth of trauma, and collate ideologies of violence. The syntax speaks volumes, but it also feeds into larger implications of this book's structure and temporality as well as the restrictions inherent to language as a means of representing lived experiences.

Narrative Time and Auto-Sacrifice

When discussing the overall intent of *Ban*, Kapil addresses "the limits of the poetic project" because writing with all its ice slicks of meaning-making and verbal structures links bodies "to the time of the event, which is to say – unloved time, the part of time that can never belong to us" (Kapil 2015: 20). A novel on Ban would inherently lead to her death; Kapil is curious what it will "take to shed off, to be rendered, to incarnate, to never be there in the same way again" so that the narrative is not fixed. The answer to this is filmic prose and somatic syntax as they allow text to take on film's power of overlaying fragmented images which step outside of time.

Kapil's original intent for the book was to depict Ban, a young girl killed in a 1979 race riot, through the traditional approach of historical fiction. This quickly became impossible, the text fighting her at every moment, desperate to breathe in a different way. Rather than being alinear narrative, *Ban* is composed of three things: Ban lying down to die in several perspectives and moments, notes on the sociopolitical and historical contexts wrapped into these scenes, and a catalogue of Kapil's attempts to write the book including art pieces, performances, and travel (Teare 2015). The novel is never written. The text refuses to come into existence, in the same way that Ban lies down preemptively, refusing to accept the violence of its content and the violence of writing it through any method but filmic prose and documented directorial narration in a collection outside of time. A novel inherently has a predetermined route, a series of events that can only progress in one way; the story Kapil attempts to tell is not just one moment in 1979 Southall but lifetimes of micro- and macroaggressions against minorities, the afterimages of violence, and neural impulses that electrify creative productions. In other words, "a novel [is] an account of a person who has already died, in advance of the death they are powerless" (Kapil 2015: 20). The truth Kapil wants to alloy her text with cannot exist in a linear narrative because it is the truth of in-between states, of nonexistence, of unseenness that questions how meaning-making operates and who determines its operations. Grammar is on trial for harbouring violence in its construction, so syntax, not narrative, must be the central focus. Literature is a killing field, and Kapil seeks another option.

While *Ban* is itself a body (of work, of mass), Kapil uses writing "to speak from [her] organs" and this organ-speech fits itself into somatic syntax (52). Kapil references a pre-existing idea of organ-speech as "a sound or act that 'serves to halt, even as it exposes, the ceaseless dispersal of the text'" and then lineates Rose's words through paragraph breaks: "That serves to halt. // Even as it exposes. // The ceaseless dispersal. // Of the text." This further emphasises the somatic syntax, a push against *différance*, the halt correlating to Ban lying

down, effectively stopping narrative time. Part of the reason *Ban* failed in its original intent was because of its "interest in duration as the force by which – something: might become" whereas *Ban* as it came to be relies on an act of becoming by stopping time (21). The filmic prose form allows for this by modulating a new kind of meaning-making and book construction.

As Kapil amassed notes and drafted the original *Ban*, the issue of narrative time and dispelled meaning became apparent and culminated in her abandonment of the project after her performance in homage to Jyoti Singh Pandey. On December 16, 2012, the young woman was beaten, gang-raped, and tortured during a private bus ride in Delhi and left for dead, lying on the side of the road until a passer-by happened upon her dying body. Indian law forbids the press from publishing a rape victim's name, replacing Singh with *Nirbhaya*, meaning 'Fearless one', an epithet which has since come to symbolise women's efforts to end rape in India and globally, as this case incited intense action and protest (Hollingsworth, Gupta, and Suri: 2020). In 2014, for one of the many installations and performances surrounding *Ban*, Kapil recreated Singh's path from the South Delhi cinema to the bus and then got off at the spot where she lay for forty minutes in the dirt. Anti-rape protestors surrounded her as Kapil walked naked and then stretched into the outline of Singh's body on the ground: "[They] make a circle around my body when I lie down. What do they receive? An image. But what happens next? How does the energy of a performance mix with the energy of the memorial? How does the image support the work that is being done in other areas? Which hormones does it produce?" (Kapil 2015: 16).

There, in the dirt, Kapil felt the distinction of icon from language. She stopped the project shortly after, *Ban* falling away into its raw materials rather than maintaining a linear narrative that only progresses toward death, that keeps Ban and her many faces on a predetermined path toward trauma, rape, and silence. Instead of repeating the story, particularly through language's encoded violence, Kapil makes an assemblage of materials that disrupt narrative time. This echoes the work of Daniel Heath Justice, a Cherokee literary scholar, who coined the term *wonderwork* to conceptualise texts that offer "Indigenous writers and storytellers something different and more in keeping with our own epistemologies, politics, and relationships" and to "imagine a future beyond settler colonial vanishings, a future where we belong" (Justice 2018: 152–53). Featuring many spiritual and ceremonial traditions connected with the land and other-than-human personhood, they complicate the Western labels of nonfiction and fiction and imagine "beyond the wounding now into a better tomorrow" (156). Wonderworks seek equity and justice through imagination grounded in personal lived experiences but looks beyond them into either

imaginary scenes or spiritual experiences that Western audiences may write off as fictitious. *Ban* is itself a wonderwork, one that uses its language and form to embody the trauma of those current wounds while also seeking equity and a new path forward by stopping narrative time and giving Ban agency through subjecthood and a new ending to her story. Nonetheless, narrative time is also simultaneous as trauma cuts back again and again into scenes, though that ultimate trauma of death has been deferred indefinitely. It is a wonderwork in its reimagined ending, but also one that does not ignore the body in pain and its many fractures.

Interruption is the core of *Ban*. The fearless body of Singh cuts into and melds with the fearful body of Ban in Southall, but where Singh was thrown from a moving vehicle and unable to move her prone body, Ban chooses to lie down, to submit herself to violence on her own terms. Kapil asserts that the "double is grotesque" as it continues a life when the original cannot, the fault with her performance (Kapil 2015: 103). She centred herself in Singh's outline in her performance, calling attention to her own unviolated, whole body; the process was both painful and perverse as she realised her own entanglement in the cycle of violence and quickly stopped. This conflict is visible in the interpolated narrating, with the director of this literary project rewriting the approach and the story itself in pursuit of a less grotesque ending while also rescuing the violated bodies in the way she feels she can.

Kapil uses *Ban* to layer moments, to use the collage of film cuts to allow different stories to inflect one another but not subsume or make a hierarchy. By dissolving time, corroding before and after, there are no doubles, only versions and motifs, the same frame repeated across multiple film strips, the light shining through to show the same gesture-posture events in language and image. Here, the auto-sacrifice takes shape, giving agency to the fearless girls on the floor of the world by making it their choice to stop, to lie down, accepting the violence that is already embedded in the body and the violence that is surely about to arrive but doing so as a grammatical subject. Ban chooses to destroy herself, grabs onto the active, simple sentence construction rather than becoming the object of violence. She becomes rough edges and fragments in the chrysalis of *Ban*, recombining and transforming after offering herself up. Imagery is what's left behind, iconic shapes in filmic prose that uses "somatic inquiry [as] a vantage point" from "an afterwards that hasn't happened yet, and yet has always already happened *right now*" (Kapil and Mixon-Webster 2020: 116–17). At the end of *Ban*, Kapil includes a paragraph of temporal hedging, questioning if her life, and *Ban*, are "to begin. To never begin. To begin. To never begin" (Kapil 2015: 82). She then breaks this ouroboros with a series of fragments and language cuts, expressing how the film strips of this trauma

exist outside of time, the auto-sacrifice galvanising a new selfhood that is physical and true in its representation, but not without cost. It is a paradox: Ban decides to submit to the oncoming trauma to maintain subjecthood and agency, but the trauma is endlessly deferred, the wonderwork giving her a new ending. Traumatic reactions such as reexperiencing symptoms still exist in the fragmentation and moments of activating images, but the actual traumatic event does not appear. A new ending is achieved through filmic simultaneity and interpolated narrating to invoke the author and her own experience of this traumatic vortex of racialised violence.

Kapil herself engages in auto-sacrifice, inserting herself in the narrative in her confession of faults and errors, her misplaced doubling of Singh, and while she claims that this is a failed novel, it in fact engages in far more accurate meaning-making to communicate trauma. *Ban* is a testament to Kapil's realisation that she cannot separate her own writing and actions from oppression and continuing the cycle of violence if she adheres to linear time and narration. By not orienting *Ban* in a single definitive timeline, Kapil ensures that the racialised violence cannot occur, the inevitable end of the race riot cannot happen; in short, she shirks death. The act of lying down is an assertion of her agency, her refusal to participate in a state of coercion and endless fighting for survival; it is an acceptance of death, but it is an assertion, a political statement, despite the deadly consequences which may ensue. Kapil witnessing the trauma and pain of others and recognising her own history as a child of immigrants, with a connection to linguistic oppression, and then choosing to write through fragmented, filmic prose, is her own auto-sacrifice. The *auto* of auto-sacrifice is key: the method of destruction suggests "the methodological necessity of subjectivity, representation, and death, and their interdependence." By performing the sacrifice, new possibilities outside of time are born that represent trauma truthfully without representing violence against female bodies as inevitable. Kapil "lie[s] down next to [Ban] and extend[s her] own tongue…but Ban does not die" (Kapil 2015: 21). The pieces are adjacent to make associative meaning from deep in the organ-speech. But despite how affecting this book is, how deeply it cuts into the reader, a question remains: is this kind of representation ethical, and if so, how is it different from trauma narratives that use violence as spectacle, that use rape as plot development? Where is the line, and when is it crossed?

Trauma Porn and Scopophilia

While a large portion of this analysis can operate without the term filmic prose, putting aside the formal intermedial imitation with syntax, another key element of this term is the integration of looking and its capacity to implicate the reader, something critical to *Ban's* successful form. Kapil's performances, particularly her recreation of Singh's journey, rely on being seen and what she calls the associated "quality of threat to – undoing the body, like that, exposing it (to view): in a public space" (Sanders 2011). The spectatorship is critical because the discomfort of watching creates meaning, and the viewer is implicated in the act by being present at the scene; the threat is less directed at Kapil than at the viewer. However, "the body of the witness discharge[s] something too", and that something was destructive in the case of the Singh performance. Filmic prose allows for an authentic representation of trauma in its syntactical, cut-based form to embody simultaneity, but it also allows Kapil to question the idea of trauma porn and scopophilia without continuing the cycle of violence via iconic images.

Trauma porn largely operates as reporting media and creative productions that use excessive presentation of brutality, pain, and violence as entertainment, often featuring the trauma of marginalised communities. Closely related to body horror, reporters and artists use it to bring in viewership rather than enlightening an audience about the subject of the production. Featuring graphic photographs and vibrant gore as clickbait, it often depicts police brutality against people of colour. Trauma porn coheres with Laura Mulvey's analysis of scopophilia as sexual pleasure involved in looking, particularly when mediated by the male gaze in camerawork and chosen visual foci (Mulvey 1998: 270). The viewer unconsciously – or in some cases consciously – takes pleasure in looking at visual trauma and objectifies the body surrounding it, effectively silencing voice and subjectivity. This emulates tropes in *Ban* of encoded violence in syntax and the threat of the double, both forms of muzzling and killing the subject. *Ban* walks a fine line of trauma porn with its somatic syntax and its uncomfortable bodily language and violence, but the principal aim is to free Ban from narrative shackles and to represent her, through interpolated narrating, as subject, not object.

Kapil implicates the reader throughout *Ban*, involving them as another subject rather than allowing them passively to take in the project as an object to be consumed. Kapil demands the reader engage directly with auto-sacrifice. She tells us that, if we are tired of running away, we are to "lie down. // Invert yourself above a ditch or stream beneath a bright blue sky. // Then pull yourself up from your knees to clean" (Kapil 2015: 28). She later compels us through anaphora to "think" about the sky, then Blair Peach (the anti-racism

campaigner killed in the Southall riot), then cyborgs, then colony (37). While film might also inspire viewers to think, the process of reading allows the reader to insert themselves into the white space of the book, to take time to consider their own role without restrictions from runtime and the constant pressing forward of the film reel. Kapil's commands are also fragments and based in the present tense, characteristics of the interactive mode of documentary film. In this mode, the viewer is made witness to events but also implicated in them as the interviewer is off camera, asking questions of interviewees with the camera as the eye and thus the viewer coalesces with the interviewer (Magi 2014). This is a threat in Kapil's performances, but *Ban* avoids the trauma porn of film while using its wonderwork form to avoid a narrative predestination in death. The reader is made complicit but not perverse; like Kapil lying down beside Ban, the reader lies down and watches, becomes part of *Ban*'s hybrid body even though the "different parts of *Ban* do not touch. They never touch at all" (Kapil 2015: 100). Invited in, the reader is forced to look and see the damage at play, to question the aestheticising of violence which here is made with brutal somatic syntax, and to consider their own complicity in the process through Kapil's overt directorial comments. Kapil is seeking integration and critique rather than spectacle or easy resolutions, as with sensational violence in television and film or misery memoirs, respectively. The text is about trauma, is deeply affective, but it is not trauma porn because it is so deeply centred on the subject of representation and literary production. The core trauma and violence are ultimately deferred, with only associated memories and traumatic reactions present.

Additionally, film could not possibly capture Ban as a large part of her character is her unseenness and her unfinished nature, so she can only exist in the simultaneity and flashes of images in filmic prose. Kapil urges the reader to understand that even if Ban is unseen – the brown girl on the floor of the world, now one making the active choice to be there – that *Ban* as a text, Ban as a character, and Ban as an idea is in flux. Ban is never fixed into one definition or state, just as trauma breaks apart identity and results in ongoing processing, seeking integration to a new, hybrid whole. Through organ-speech and somatic syntax, Kapil asks explicit questions about the safety of literature for trauma narratives, for the people who house trauma in their bodies, and the idea of inevitability. And while violence is present, the very nature of *Ban* prevents us from engaging in scopophilia because Ban is never fully seen, and the spectacle of violence is in her control, the narrative of the failed novel prioritising the characters interests rather than our own. Instead, we as readers are involved in the meaning-making process in an attempt to understand, in a desperate plea for connection that forces us to look inward and to recognise the violent habits of literature.

Conclusion

Literature is not a fully safe space for representing trauma, but there are routes of creative representation that offer new ways of communicating violent experiences without verging into trauma porn. To do so, the violence must be deferred. Not ignored, but removed, focused instead on the physical and psychological impacts of the trauma to prioritise the character as subject rather than object. The fragmented narrative is imagistic and bodily, imagining new possibilities and endings other than death through simultaneous narratives and multiplied characters. Violent images, somatic syntax, interrupted narration, and collapsed narrative time emphasise emotional experiences and reclamation of the body, conveying the reexperiencing symptoms of PTSD without the objectifying act of violence.

Kapil's project is the result of her desire for "a literature that is not made from literature", a written form of transmission that calls attention to language's inherent oppressive structures by dipping into filmic structures (Kapil 2015: 32). *Ban* asks the reader if they "would…smear [a nude image] with soot from a car's diesel pipe or dirt from the asphalt…and *let* this, this dirty page, be the page [that is *Ban*]", considering the definition of literature and who defines it (17, emphasis mine). Kapil presents a trauma narrative that fights narration, resulting in a hybrid form of filmic prose based on somatic syntax which makes each sentence "like a nerve or tendon – extracted, still living, for a few moments: in the air", a vibrant image that leaves an afterimage on the retina in the jump to the next section of text (101).

The nervous system of the bodily grammar allows for a more accurate representation of trauma that skirts the dangers of trauma porn while at the same time interrogating the reader's role in the voltage and violence. In short, *Ban* offers a new way of looking and reading that communicates the unseen, that resists the violence of literature, and that gives Ban a space to live outside of time where death is not the only ending to this story.

References

Beckman, K. Ma, J. 2008. Introduction. – K. Beckman, J. Ma, eds., *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822391432

Hollingsworth, J., Gupta, S., & Suri, M. 2020. 7 years after bus rape and murder shocked the world, attackers hanged in New Delhi. – *CNN World*. https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/19/asia/india-rape-execution-intl-hnk/index.html (21/11/21).

Justice, D. H. 2018. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. https://doi.org/10.51644/9781771121774

Kapil, B. 2015. *Ban en Banlieue*. New York: Nightboat Books.

Kapil, B. 2017. Poetics. – J. Byrne, R. Sheppard, eds., *Atlantic Drift: An Anthology of Poets and Poetics*. Todmorden: Arc Publications 166–68.

Kapil, B., Mixon-Webster, J. 2020. A Dialogue on Somatic Practices. – *The Yale Review*, 108 (4), 112–119. https://doi.org/10.1111/yrev.13691

Lehtimäki, M. 2010. The Failure of Art: Problems of Verbal and Visual Representation in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. – M. Grishakova, M.-L. Ryan, eds. *Intermediality and Storytelling*, 24. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 183–207. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110237740.183

Magi, J. 2014. Poetry in Light of Documentary. – *Chicago Review*, 59 (1/2), 248–275. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24770460

Marcus, L. 2015. Film and Modernist Literature. – G. Rippl, ed., *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature–Image–Sound–Music*. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 240–248. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110311075-014

Massumi, B. 2011. *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*. Cambridge: MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7681.001.0001

McHale, B. 2010. Narrativity and Segmentivity, or, Poetry in the Gutter. – M. Grishakova, M.-L. Ryan, eds. *Intermediality and Storytelling*, 24. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 27–48. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110237740.27

Mulvey, L. 1998. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. – L. Goodman, J. de Gay, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*. Routledge, 270–275. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203143926-54

Sanders, K. 2011. Bhanu Kapil. – *BOMB Magazine*. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2011/09/22/bhanu-kapil/ (13/11/21).

Teare, B. 2015. On *Ban en Banlieue* by Bhanu Kapil (Nightboat Books). – *On the Seawall*. https://www.ronslate.com/guest-review-brian-teare-on-ban-en-banlieue-by-bhanu-kapil-nightboat-books/ (15/11/21).

Werner, W. 2011. (Inter)mediality and the Study of Literature. – *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture,* 13 (3), 2–9. https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1789

Werner, W. 2015. Literature and Music: Theory. – G. Rippl, ed., *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature–Image–Sound–Music*. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 459–474. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110311075-026