

# “IN THE DIRT OF THE LINE” ON BHANU KAPIL’S INTENSE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

As the event unfolds both after and before. As the text of a present moves so rapidly it cannot be written. This is why immigrants don’t write many novels; only emigrants do. I write to you at night, for example, when even my body is hidden from view.<sup>2</sup>

—Bhanu Kapil

Epigraphs can speak volumes about the works they precede and to which they belong. In the case of Bhanu Kapil’s writing, it was one particular epigraph that initially piqued my interest in her work. This epigraph is from philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s *Architecture From the Outside*, and can be found on the first pages of Kapil’s *WATER-DAMAGE\_ \_ \_ \_*: *a map of three black days* (Corollary Press, 2006). It goes as follows:

The psychotic is unable to locate himself or herself where he or she should be: such subjects may look at themselves from the outside, as others would; they may hear the voices of others inside their own heads. They are captivated and replaced, not by another subject (the horror of the double I mentioned) but by space itself.

Grosz’s writing is nearly as poetic as the text it paraphrases: Surrealist fellow-travel and College of Sociology participant Roger Caillois’ writings on “legendary psychasthenia” and mimetic behavior among insect species.<sup>3</sup> In *WATER-DAMAGE*, Kapil takes-up psychasthenia (a condition ‘discovered’ by Caillois) towards the problem of immigrants who, as a study quoted in Kapil’s chapbook observes, may suffer from forms of schizophrenia and psychosis more frequently than their non-migrating counterparts in regions of the world more ‘stable’ and ‘developed’ (which is to say, richer, more powerful, hegemonic).

Box 1. Six hypotheses for the higher incidence of schizophrenia in migrant groups: 1. Sending countries have high rates of schizophrenia; 2. People with schizophrenia are predisposed to migration; 3. Migration produces stress, which can initiate schizophrenia; 5. Different symptom patterns are presented by

migrants; 6. Increased population density of ethnic migrant groups can show elevated rates of schizophrenia.

Kapil's collaborator in composing her text is her mother, Asha Kapil, who she interviews and whose transcribed speech she mines for the text of *WATER-DAMAGE*. That much of Asha Kapil's language reads schizophrenic<sup>4</sup> adds an important dimension to the book, for it would seem that the book is being written to recall her mother's immigration from the border of India/Pakistan to the UK, an event to which the "black days" of the book's subtitle likely refers.

In a way very much like her first book, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street, 2001), in which Kapil incorporates the responses to a questionnaire she provides to various native Indian women and women of the Indian diaspora, Kapil poses to her mother a series of questions which her mother answers throughout the work. These questions are both provocative and wide open to play: "1. Who Imagined You? 2. Describe a hillside, whether real or imagined, from your childhood. 3. How do you see into the heart of a flower? Do flowers have centers?" (10). Throughout Kapil's books she proceeds through questions, as she also does through numbers (as though a book of logic) and letters. In Kapil's latest book, *Humanimal* (Kelsey St., 2009), one of the ways the book is organized is by the lowercase letters "a" through "o." Kapil's alphabetic ordering of *Humanimal*'s sections seems a significant design feature of the book given that its protagonist "eat's language" (47) and the feral girls upon which *Humanimal* reflects, Amala and Kamala, lick "the dictionary off each other's faces" (13). Interestingly, Kapil describes "An alphabet to o, a kind of mouth" (8) as if to identify her book as an allegory of articulation: articulation as the primary means of acculturating what is feral and wild, thus at the purlieus of civilization.<sup>5</sup> The violence of linguistic acculturation is doubled by a doctor's resetting of the girls' feral skeletons whereby the "fascia hardend[ed] over a lifetime" is "split in order to reset it, educate the nerves." The ironic fact that Kapil performs a related violence through her practice as a Roling therapist<sup>6</sup>—a deep tissue message therapy in which the muscle tissue is practically 'reset'—is reflected in *Humanimal*'s epigraph quoting Ida Roling, whom Roling is named after: "I was changing a unique but very poorly operating girl to a normal pattern of a woman who could no longer look in the mirror and know that she was unique. I was afraid to say to her, 'You are beginning to look like other people.'"

On first reading *WATER-DAMAGE*, I was struck by how rich Kapil's text is, yet also how unfinished it seems—a feeling I don't have reading her other books. As Kapil says herself on one of the first pages of *WATER-DAMAGE*, "I don't know how to continue this work in writing." Perhaps, for this reason, Kapil currently travels in India making films and installations in order to find ways to continue. I suspect she may also turn towards film, installation and performance since her project would like to enact a work of healing, and these time-based art formats can materialize aesthetic experiences that writing alone cannot: experiences of movement, of heterogeneous durations, and of inter-subjective embodiment. As Kapil also writes at the beginning of *WATER-DAMAGE* in regards to her mother's experiences of loss, violence, and suffering as a person displaced during the 1947 conflict at the border of India and Pakistan (an event which displaced approximately half a million people, as Kapil tells us): "I wanted to mark a space for healing; this text marks the space, opens the space, only" (4).

To mark such a space Kapil "put[s] [her] knib on the page" (*Humanimal*, 38) to "let motion wreck the line" (38) producing written "arrhythmias" as "record[s] of travel" (38). Through an arrhythmic writing—a writing paced by quickened heart rates—Kapil's own body leaves the traces of its lines of flight. The form of the writing—the

sentences which stutter with commas, hyphens, and periods; the syllogistic/constellative movements of the sentences and paragraphs—chart intensities rather than represent where Kapil has ‘been.’ Here, form becomes an extension of physical travel in space intermittent with writing as a form of travel—the “crossing of thresholds,” a “flight of intensities” —without moving. Making the body in-transit a site of autobiography (a la Thoreau’s “Walking” or Kerouac’s *On the Road*), Kapil’s body also extends writing as a means of mourning, where mourning is successfully negotiated through itinerancy. “In the quick, black take of a body’s flight, a body’s eviction or sudden loss of place, the memory of descent functions as a subliminal flash” (*Humanimal*, 26). Although travel and motion result in perpetual loss, in Kapil’s work they also accomplish an unforeclosed work of healing.

To read all five of Kapil’s books so far, plus her prolific blog, “Was Jack Kerouac a Punjabi?,” is to recognize the ongoing working-through of a series of traumas which have touched Kapil’s life deeply, shaping many of the facts of her biography. In *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* the questionnaire Kapil offers her collaborator-participants, while they act heuristically to generate raw materials for Kapil’s lyrically intense prose poem series, may also allow the women who answer them an opportunity to exteriorize/exorcize experiences otherwise consigned to their inner life by the repressive domestic situations and social environments in which they find themselves. Similarly, in *Autobiography of a Cyborg* (Leroy, 2000) and *Incubation: a Space for Monsters* (Leon Works, 2006), Kapil mines her own autobiography in order to work through her experience of being a second generation Punjabi immigrant to England, as well as a first generation emigrant to the United States.<sup>8</sup> Through *Incubation: a Space for Monsters*, Kapil writes about many of her formative experiences. Though trauma lies at the heart of the book (the traumas of immigration/emigration/travel, of being a woman and a single mother, of being, in other words, multiply displaced), so is a genuine desire to give birth to herself as a singular being beyond both assimilation and multiculturalism. To be a monster or a cyborg is to take on, by necessity, a subjectivity radically resistant to normativity and to the various social processes which construct ‘abnormality’ as a category of the subaltern.

As in the work of the self-described Lebanese visual artist, thinker, and writer Jalal Toufic, who locates his own figures of both loss and cultural survival in the vampires of American and European vampire films, transposing the qualities of the Sufi, Yogi and Zen master through the figure of the vampire, Kapil locates herself and others through the non-human subjectivities of the monster, cyborg, humanimal, and schizophrenic. While Toufic and Kapil are obviously not the first ‘others’ to identify with the animal, monstrous, psychotic, and non-human,<sup>9</sup> Kapil and Toufic are perhaps most unique in the ways they link so explicitly figures of the non- and post-human with their own autobiographies. Whereas through Toufic’s work he imagines encounters with others where Jalal Toufic<sup>10</sup> is undead, schizo, or vampire, in Kapil’s *Incubation* she is alternately cyborg and monster: the cyborg trying to ‘pass’ for human; the monster wearing its inassimilability on its sleeve.

Significantly, Toufic and Kapil both emigrated to the United States as students around the same time (mid 80s to early 90s),<sup>11</sup> and have since lived both in the United States and their countries of origin, and so can be said to be multicultural or international persons in the most literal senses of these terms. While we can (and perhaps should) take these non-human identities as mere metaphors, they do a very specific work. And this is to make legible the dilemmas of actual, historic entities who have “tunneled” through what Kapil calls the “concave warp in the dirt of the line” (*Incubation*, 3).<sup>12</sup> The figures of this cartoonish, topographical line, a line I take to be a line of flight, unlike many of the figures whom Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari hold

up as resistant intensities in their collaborative *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* volumes, have not elected their deterritorializations as a force of 'outside,' so much as they are surviving it. Or, we might rather say that they are electing it retrospectively in order to overcome.

What the monster, the cyborg, the vampire, the schizo, and the humanimal risk, is the affirmation of subjectivities unwelcome by official cultures, national narratives, and hegemonic ideational structures. Arguably, what survives through these affirmations is not just the singular—the account Toufic or Kapil would like to give of their own bodies, or the bodies of those torn by the Lebanese Civil War or the crises of the stateless and displaced everywhere. What Kapil and Toufic are documenting through their work, thus making legible, are entire histories of non-experience—experiences largely submerged by cultural disaster. Likewise, what may survive their work are concepts endemic or appropriate to their cultures direly in need of transmission, if only through objects *inappropriate* to the concepts themselves. Which is to say, it is very unlikely the figure of the vampire in Western vampire films was intended to embody the imagination of Sufi literature or mystical Islam, and yet through Toufic's work one finds those images everywhere across the genre, from F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula (Love Never Dies)*. As Jawad Ali has written of Toufic's contemporary, the video artist Jayce Salloum, "ideas too have their biography."<sup>13</sup> If ideas have a life of their own and are nothing without the vessel of culture to carry them, how should they survive through writing across the culturally incommensurable, ruinous, catastrophic?

A major question for me, returning specifically to Kapil's work, is how autobiography can create conditions of possibility independent of chronological affiliation. Kapil challenges procreative essentialisms by evoking the power of desire and cultural contact as a means by which one selects the future (rather than procreation selecting us 'naturally'). So Kapil writes, "I want to have sex with what I want to become" (*Incubation*, 4), and "I am not sure if mating is something that happens before someone is born or after, in the space of the future" (40). Kapil also subtitles *Humanimal* "a project for future children," by which she of course refers to children who have yet to be born, but also to children like Amala and Kamala whose potentialities have yet to be acknowledged by the dominant culture. As in Kapil's *WATER-DAMAGE*, *Humanimal* attempts to invent spaces where the real and imaginary, future and past are co-native (they give birth to each other). To do so is not only risky, but frightening because it admits one to the freak-show of the submerged, non-existent, and occluded:

There are two spaces in which I took notes for feral childhood. I am not sure if childhood is the correct word. The first space was a blue sky fiction, imagining a future for a child who died. The second space was real in different ways: a double envelope, fluid digits, scary. I was frightened so I stopped. There were two kiosks like hard bubbles selling tickets to the show. A feral child is freakish. With all my strength, I pushed the glass doors shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this. (5)

As the anthropological project of Modernity coughs its last gasps on account of the shrinking, if not already exhausted, resources of our planet and the incomprehensible greed of the rich and powerful, the human must embrace the non-human as that by which it may transform its current condition. This transformation would not be regressive, but ideally an evolution, which is to say an act of transcendence within phylogenetic immanence; a movement that will produce a new means of being beyond our challenged human condition. Can a poetics help to accomplish this? If Kapil demonstrates nothing else it is precisely this.

When I was a graduate student at SUNY-Buffalo in the fall of 2001, Elizabeth Grosz posed a radical proposition through her “Becomings” seminar: what if what we considered most noble about the human was that which was most animal about the human, which therefore was not human at all? In the animal, in the discursion of natural facts, in the non-organic and limit-organic, in the non-normative ‘human’ lies not human salvation, but the fact that if traces of the human will remain at all they will be born across (i.e. metaphorized) through non-human materials. Our present is burdened by the mistakes of history. It is burdened by despicable colonial histories—histories intertwined with the submission of women, the exploitation of labor power based on skin color and class status, the devastation of whole ecologies. To return to these mistakes, to reset them as one would the deep muscle tissue in Roling therapy, would be to reshape them into the futures we most desire.

How to affirm the monstrous, the humanimal, the schizo as that which is trying to find a way out of this mess we’re in—a mess created by anthropocentrism aligned with human malice and short-sightedness? How to heal ‘monstrous’ bodies while preserving their uniqueness—thus affirming their difference as a creative phenomenon? This irresolvable play—between a desire to heal bodies made monstrous by disparate social traumas and to prioritize non-normative bodies which may, through their submerged experience, found new subjects if not wholly different beings—Kapil offers up as a problem for whatever will remain of the human in a future in which the continuation of human being as we know it seems increasingly doubtful all the time.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Réda Bensmaïa, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pg. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from a work-in-progress called *Schizophrene*.

<sup>3</sup> Caillois’ writings about “legendary psychasthenia” can be found in his books *The Necessity of the Mind* and *Mask of the Medusa*, as well as in his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” originally published in *Minatoure* 7 in 1935, and republished in *October* 31, Winter 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Such as in the following passage: “UK means United Kingdom but since I was married into the KAPIL dynasty, I think it means something like this to me. That is U means You are untied [sic] with a K and go to a country called UK in your adulthood. USA, it means the United States of America. But I have a different version of my third and last habitat. U stands for You have been stupid, Asha. S stands for A Stupid Old...A stands for Aroo, a peach. You Stupid Asha. That’s how I was imagined” (11; my brackets).

<sup>5</sup> Also interesting is the recurrence in Kapil’s books *Incubation: a Space for Monsters* and *Humanimal* of a “perimeter” at the edge of forests: “The question of home dissolves into the question of trees” (*Incubation*, 93); “Fused forever with the trees of the perimeter, she can’t. The branches fill her mouth with leaves” (*Humanimal*, 49); “Perimeter space transfuses moonlight” (30). The recurrence of perimeters in Kapil’s work makes me think of Giorgio Agamben’s etymological treatment of the term ban in his book *Homo Sacer*. Here, Agamben’s central figure of ban is the mythical werewolf, rumored to live where town ends and forest begins. Hence the terms abandoned and bandit: “What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in

its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf (the expression *caput lapinum* has the form of a juridical statement) is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to the law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither" (Agamben, 105).

<sup>6</sup> Kapil qualifies her bodywork as follows: "The bodywork is not rolfing proper—I would describe it as integrative bodywork focusing on soft tissue dysfunction and injury [this is basically a form of structural integration which shares elements of the rolfing process, but cannot be said to be the same thing]—but I also include Ayurvedic/energy work too" (from personal correspondence with Kapil, August 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.

<sup>8</sup> Kapil emigrated to the United States as a student, and has since divided her time between India, England, and Colorado.

<sup>9</sup> One recalls Franz Kafka's Red Peter, Gregor Samsa, and the countless other liminal beings which amplify and articulate the writer's own situation as a Prague Jew in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One may also think of Donna Haraway's famous work on cyborgs and monsters which Kapil quotes as an epigraph to *Incubation*.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout Toufic's texts Toufic eschews use of first person pronouns preferring to refer to himself through his full name, a curious choice given the recurrence of Nietzsche's proposition "every name in history is I" throughout his oeuvre.

<sup>11</sup> According to Kapil: "I came as a grad student in 1990, then went back to the UK in 1991—I was a grad student again for a year in 1994, but dropped out, and after that lived in New Mexico, then London, then Chile, then London, then India. I returned in earnest in 1998, and earned my living through a private bodywork practice, though started teaching in a minor capacity too, at Naropa, from the Summer Writing Program of 2000 onwards—though recently became an Assistant Professor" (from private correspondence with Kapil, August 2009).

<sup>12</sup> In Toufic's work he uses the notion of "quantum tunneling" from Quantum Physics to describe one of the essential movements of the vampire in vampire films. In doing so he accounts for the vampire's ability to cover large distances in a short time. As Toufic explains: "The dissolve or cut between two shots of the vampire, in the first of which he or she is far away, for instance at the end of a long corridor (according to the mirror, he or she is not at that location), and in the second of which he or she is next to the victim (according to the mirror, he or she is not at that location either), may either indicate that the future victim of the vampire has just undergone a lapse or that the vampire has tunneled through the intervening space" (Toufic, 20). That both Toufic and Kapil imagine the surpassing of various thresholds (both geographical, biological, and ontological) in terms of a being "in transit" may offer compelling ways to think about their work in relation to the displacement of people within and without national boundaries as well as the relative porousness of international borders. Toufic makes this connection explicit in *Vampires* where, in the section of the book titled "Transit Visa in the Labyrinth," Toufic asks: "Does the ghost, who does not stay in place but haunts it and who is thus the in-transit being par excellence, need a transit visa?" (Toufic, 101)

<sup>13</sup>Quoted from "Sans Titre/Untitled: The Video Installation as an Active Archive//2006," in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, Cambridge/London: The MIT Press/Whitechapel, 2006 pg. 187.

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