

*Poetic Labor Project*

May 2011

ANONYMOUS

BHANU KAPIL

LARRY KEARNEY

DANA WARD

This iteration of “TER BRAAK” speaks out of a political need to stay private, a “contra-literary” need to establish a defiant anonymity, and a private, personal need to function from discreet “subjectivities.” Not to be altogether confused with the genuinely original Dutch critic M. ter Braak, who chose a brave, self-determined form of physical termination in 1940, just days before the Nazis were coming to fetch him for resistance against their regime. This iteration believes, or hopes, that if both the reader and the author are thoroughly subtracted from the proverbial equation, possibly a different (or at least differently satisfying) writing can be actualized.

---

I know a fellow who got in a big U-Haul Truck packed with 17 years of “California” and actually drove almost his entire existence and his whole cat Frankie O’Hara back to western New York in 1999, not necessarily to study under Robert Creeley at SUNY Buffalo and get his Ph.D union card, but maybe to work as a golf pro for a couple of years. He ended up relocating quite precisely in the exact spot from which he had escaped 20-plus years earlier when he had previously removed his body from the suffocating parochialism of small towns and gone off to college in Florida, then to graduate school in hippy wine country Sonoma County, CA. Indeed, he ended up right back where he had begun becoming aware of where he was (in cultural time and space) and how much his perspective could change what he saw outside and how much others’ perspectives from outside may altogether obscure what one sees inside or out as well as inside-out. He ended up right back in a fucking factory, surely exactly what he had most assuredly and, he had been convinced for several years, permanently left behind, thoroughly abandoned, thoroughly and distinctly turned away from, for his entire adult life. Wowie!

He’s been there for ten years. Works in a cubicle, possibly *Cubicle 22*. He’s still not sure what’s his number. Hasn’t figured OUT how precisely he would locate the exact latitudes and longitudes of such endlessly tropical brown, grey, light grey, dark gray, medium grey, dark gray twists of local color and universal nexuses he’s been designated yet. Much to be said for functioning as a fully expatriated non-Nationalist who GOT IT early in late teens, that is, how many nine lives a Rosy Crucifixionist, a “Ghandi with a penis,” or any other cosmopolitan and really quite angelic beat\_read free spirit in a completely invisible set of mindsets can bring to a workplace and subculture. First of all, well, the “mirrors” that one dull manager after another surrounds us with, Sir, they will indeed force us to become invisible, as they cannot reflect very much, if anything, that is truly real about one’s own true light. They can reflect back merely what they are capable of seeing and understanding, and it’s far removed from any borders of their own sanity defenses. At the same time, those very limits prescribed by such mirrors force the reflection object to manifest even greater or more concrete inner subjectivities, for the reflection object, himself (in this case), does nonetheless repeatedly feel the holes

in his own several mirrors formed by relentless attacks on a dignity that refuses such monstrous alienation and degradation.

Fortunately, any body and his or her sisters can keep a small writing tablet in a private pocket and scribble potentially public notes to reconstruct every concrete block, stain, sheen, spot, and crevice of material, physical objects nobody sees and feels when locked in the far toilet stall at the south end of some Romanticist's Stalag 17 but here more aptly, simply named Building 17 for twenty minute intervals. There, the whole world is literally within arms' reach and no supervisors can look over somebody's shoulder to espy whether anybody is revising the eight poorly written and ill-edited "Software Installation Procedures" said supervisor gives done subordinate to revise because said supervisor, lacking even rudimentary writing skills, cannot write them himself/herself; it just takes too much time or too much patience, and best of all said supervisor's done subordinate works with those operating systems and applications on a daily basis, and bestest of all, done subordinate actually taught 50-100 sections of Freshman Composition in a previous career that was much more flexible in terms of self-determination, even determining when it's time to take a powder and make an inventory of the toilet paper dispensers all said and done back in Building 17 or Stalag 17, either/or.

Factotum-22 also gains great freedom in an 8-5 (or every other week 7-5) Information Technology "day job" in the factory by embedding somebody's writing even more securely right under the company's nosiness. Quite in matter of fact directly assigned to create and edit documents, including web pages, for the company's Auditing Systems, it's really a quite, quiet, and small matter, via the immaculate invisibility of transparent fonts, to blend into the more obscure documents all kinds of poming too dense and impenetrable for even the Language writers to appreciate, much less recognize as "Poming." Of course, yes, surely it's written in all manners and forms of computer and networking jargon and behind the surface appearance of ostensibly technical data of the HTML pages that render yet something else altogether, underneath there, in little pockets of "Comment tags" neatly or haphazardly encoded in java scripts and the eighth or ninth page of the crew's cascading style sheets, there it is, an entire playground nearly permanently inscribed right beside the company's bottom line legers and legal documents, yet essentially eternally invisible. There one can register remarkably crude, direct, and quite challenging chess-game-long logics and logistically superior attacks on the government that the company owns and on the actually relatively few underwhelmingly conscious executives in the company who control that ownership or find such ownership, unwittingly or criminally, gratifying. And nobody will ever know that it's even there unless they really, really must, and then Factotum-22 may well reveal it to them eagerly and gladly, but for now, it's just relaxing and sleeping there, pretending to be comatose, as it probably needs to stay there awhile.

But this is all terribly smarmy and phony. Let's be real! The workplace can be tirelessly, genuinely alienating for writers, but so what? Who are they, anyhow, some spoiled bunch of buffoons who've inherited not only wealth but some kind of delusion that "the World" (for "the World," choose from your own abilities to make and create such a concept," Reader-X) owes them "a Living." No law against what goes on inside one's mind, though, and if one has to steal away to the waterclosets like any other average Joe/Lulu, Sir – to jot things down or otherwise reflect on what one really thinks meaningful – so be it. If one has one's work done, and if one can in fact "multi-task" quite well, and most writers/"dreamers" have taught themselves to daydream since Kindergarten, what's wrong with writing a book or two or three on the so-called "company's time" that is left over from THE COMPANY'S TIME SAVED because one has gotten one's "work" done with greater efficiency and speed and conscientiousness than the professional and accomplished delegators alluded to above can muster and for which they get "the big bucks" though they DO little more than assign unloved win-win labor to their subordinates. Yeah, maybe it's a factory, sure, it is, but even Persig observed that one can begin with a brick in the wall and travel light-years and eons and galaxies without straying from that initial, nominal 10 mm mortar joint which circumscribes such lush English bond between Capital and Wobbly-head. And pomers just "talk to walls," anyways, usually walls that reflect blank slates, but that the pomer wants to turn into a big house of mirrors in order to feel secure and happy in life.

BHANU KAPIL lives in Colorado, where she teaches at The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics and maintains an integrative bodywork practice. Her most recent book is *humanimal* [a project for future children] from Kelsey Street Press.

---

*Bhanu Kapil: A Poetics of Labour*

1. How do you navigate your employment life and your poetic life energetically?

As soon as I step over the boundary of Naropa's campus, I put it out of my mind. If something particularly intense happened -- an insitutional crisis or interaction -- I give myself until Route 66 to let it circulate in my mind. When I cross the intersection of Highway 287 and Route 66, that's it. I don't think about it anymore. Much the same thing unfolds after a bodywork session. When I cross the threshold of the room in which a session has taken place, I forget what I learned or knew. This is complicated in cases where, for insurance purposes, I have to write up my SOAP notes. In those cases, when I have finished the notes, I wash my arms to the elbow with salt and hot, then cold, water. And when I close the door to the space for the night, I turn around and bow to it. At the end of classes, too, we bow out. It is simple bow. We meditate, then I indicate the bow by saying: "We end with a bow to the space between us, which is the space of writing and the writing to come." The energetics are about sealing these spaces, perhaps because what unfolds inside my work environments is invariably volatile, interesting, and intense.

2. How does your employment life relate to poetic form in your own work, or in poetic work generally?

From bodywork, I derive a language of the nervous system -- of the carapace of fat, light and electricity that surrounds or packs a nerve -- and I apply this to the sentence. The sentence, in this formulation, becomes a site for memory processes and pathologies, but also speed. The speed at which something might pass from one site to another, below the level of conscious reflection. From the work with the fascia, I derive the "diagonal line" as the axis of release, a phrase I also encounter in the post-colonial essays of Gayatri Spivak. In classrooms, I encourage my students to work upon this diagonal, and to translate between the flows of a body, and a text.

3. How do class relations play out in the poetic sphere or how do they appear in or affect your poetic work?

They played out for me in England as almost zero access to arts administration culture. The arty world. In the U.S., I don't read as working class - race stuff, too, is different - and so bypass what might otherwise circulate around my body as a member of a class. Or race. Is this true? In my writing, I return, inexorably, to the world I am from. Currently, I am writing a novel of the race riot, set in Southall and Hayes, the working class area of north-west London I lived in; a part of London that perhaps someone from another part of London would not call London. For example, I once went with my friend Mickey Cooke to his guitar class, and we went back to his friend L.'s flat. Turns out L. was an EARL. L. was a bit flirty. I went to the bathroom. It had white shag carpeting and lightbulbs around a mirror above the bathtub. When I came out, L. and Mickey were drinking Pimms and Lemonade, but it was time to go. I said: "Nice to meet you. I have to go." L. said: "What part of London do you live in?" I replied. He said: "That's not really London though, is it?" I left and waited for a bus. It was a double decker bus, the old-fashioned kind with an open deck. As the bus pulled away, L. came running along beside it in the traffic. He shouted: "When can I see you again?" But I still felt ashamed from his remark and did not respond.

4. Contemporary working and living conditions and their effect on writers. (Vs. other times, other locations).

House with garden and chicken coop. \$800 mortgage, though I live an hour out of town. Gas money. I cannot afford to live in Boulder: \$1900 for a two-bedroom apartment. I support myself, my mother (recently emigrated from India), and a ten year old son on my salary from Naropa University, which was, until recently, in the 30s, but is now in the low 40s. My home is also the family home for my sister, who is completing a degree at CalArts. I supplement my income by working in a low-residency program at Goddard College, but Naropa is about to require that we do not "moonlight," presumably so that we can be more present on campus, which would support retention. I also work part-time as a body-worker. For this reason, I try to enjoy my work and take as much pleasure in it as possible, and to make it into something that nourishes my writing. I try to live creative life every day because I do not take holidays or have a private space of any kind. How does this affect my writing? If I was not a single parent/care-giver with one to three jobs, perhaps I would be a South-east Asian novelist!!! But I am not. I am not a novelist. I think part of becoming an experimental writer was that it was a mode that allowed me to think about, collate and theorize fragments. What makes life liveable for me is the daily happiness afforded to me by the stability of my home, and the kindness of my neighbors. I also feel very nourished by my encounters with other writers, in places that are not, typically, the place where I live. I try to live a life of daily adventure, and to appreciate the freedom to write or perform towards the race riot scene, something I can't imagine doing, or having done, in the UK or India. (Though perhaps I'm wrong.)

5. The stance of the institutionally unaffiliated artist or intellectual in relation to the academy.

I was unaffiliated. Now I am affiliated. Sometimes I fantasize about being unaffiliated. This will have to wait until I an Argentinian businessman on a skiing trip to Colorado falls in love with me and says: "Bhanu, I want to build you an adobe house in the hills. But I'm allergic to cats. Brenda will have to go." Also, the places where I teach -- two outrider or alternative writing schools -- don't have much money or funding, so -- I don't know about how much of an academy I am a part of. Perhaps I am deluded on this point; perhaps that is a ridiculous statement. Yes, I think it is. I have the privilege to choose my stance. What else? I rarely talk about writing with my core faculty colleagues (we don't have tenure at Naropa); but rather, with writers who are, in the institution, "staff." This is a difficult one. Am I corrupt? Yes, I am corrupt if I am a part of an institution that has practices I don't agree with, especially as they affect staff. That are dodgy or inequitable in some way. I am corrupt if I don't protest them. Anne Waldman has been a mentor to me in this regard, though on some level, if I lost my job through an anarchic resolution, I then worry about my mum. I am her immigration sponsor, so I have to have a stable job. This is a strange country. Health care, immigration status and economic forces converge upon the question of affiliation. As for my status within the academy itself, nobody seems to care what I do. I feel a great creative/experimental freedom at Naropa, for example, which balances the crap pay and the need for financial stability. I say it is crap pay, but it is really not. It is pay. It is about ten times more than what my uncle, an electrical engineer, earns in India. Also, let's face it, if I lived in England, it is almost unfathomable to imagine being a professor of any kind. I am so grateful to this country for the gift of intellectual and practical work: teaching experimental writing. And the writing of it too.

6. Additionally, we are interested in specifics of everyone's job or trade that might be invisible to many.

At Naropa, I drink tea in the biodynamic green-house on campus, then lie down next to the strawberry bed. In my massage space, when a client leaves, I do a back bend over the table. At Goddard, I film Douglas Martin climbing a tree. I fall over in the snow. I walk into the surrounding woodland with a drum, at dusk, for Shiva Pooja, which no-one sees. To prepare for a facial, I gather rose hips from the foothills and mascerate them to a fine paste; I mix this paste with cream. During a reading, I see the violet outline of an accompanying presence, and sometimes, I feel the awareness of an ancestor turned upon me in the room.

LARRY KEARNEY was born in Brooklyn in 1943. Publications include *Dead Poem* (White Rabbit), *FIVE* (Tombouctou), *KIDNAPPED* (Foot), *Oz and Damaged Architecture* (Smithereens), *Streaming* (Trike/O Books), *Passion, Transmission, and The Only Available Substance/Please Keep My Word* (with SARAH MENEFEE) from Worm in the Rain Publications, a personal press through which he has published a large number of titles.

---

### *Jobs*

Lathe hand, Kearney Engineering  
Draftsman, Kearney Engineering  
Brooklyn Public Library  
Postal worker  
Poet  
Architectural model-maker  
Machinist, Franklin Machine Works  
Power Room installer, Western Electric  
Postal worker  
Editor, Sierra Club  
Landscape  
House painter  
Knife-case maker  
Bookbinder  
Truck driver  
Manager, David Wold International  
Ghostwriter  
Desktop Publisher, Nadja  
Correspondent, Latin American Trade Finance  
Teacher, New College  
Teacher, Dunham Academy for Gifted Students

My father was working class independent. In the thirties he'd organized a strike and while everyone had supported the action, no one turned up on the line. He was a tool and die-maker and designed and produced numerous machines for Naval Research and the chemical thermometer industry, among others. He ran a one man shop, except for me, and in bidding on jobs filled out forms that asked whether he had five hundred employees or less.

He was disappointed that I didn't want to go into the business, and felt I had a certain talent for it. I could have pointed out that the books he read to me, and the stories he told me, and the fact that he once sat on the side of my bed in the dark and told me that he'd always wanted to be a writer and live in San Francisco, had something to do with the way my mind was. But the topic never came into the open, and he acquiesced gracefully to what I chose to do.

When I say he was working class I mean that as a complete definition. He had no desire to move up in social status. All he wanted to do was be the best at what he did and be paid for it appropriately. He found that being the best at what he did, and solitary, didn't automatically translate into appropriate pay. As a matter of fact, it was something of a drawback. He struggled all his life with the middle-men, and the glad-handers.

He was literate, and particularly well-read in history, and he once told me that the reason he didn't argue politics with the people in our building was 'you can't argue with people who don't read.'

After making a pilgrimage that involved climbing a hill on her knees in the rain to reach an officiating priest, his mother had died at their home in Galway. He was nine then, and an altar boy. He never went to church again. He was sent to live with an aunt in Gourock where he was persecuted daily as a Paddy, and where he finally escaped into a torpedo factory during World War One where he worked as a thirteen year-old lathe hand.

As a teenager, he traveled around Ireland with a fair, putting up and taking down the tents, and in his early twenties, he went to England then shipped out on a United Fruit Company steamer. There's a confusion of passports from the time, with subtly different names on them, and my impression was always that he'd had to get out of England fast. On the way back from Central America, after a bout with malaria, he jumped ship in Delaware and took a job at the Wiimington Hotel, where he was a table captain.

He met my mother in Brooklyn where she'd been living for four years after her arrival, with family, from Glasgow. She was seventeen, and her father had been a welder and steam-fitter in the Clydeside shipyards.

The whole of my father's political perception, and he never told me anything that didn't turn out to be absolutely true, was in, "They all talk about how they care about the worker and all their patriotism, and they wrap themselves in the bloody flag, but everything we've got we had to fight for and as soon as they get the chance they'll take it back and kill anyone who gets in the way. They're the same people, Lawrence, and don't ever forget it."

What he gave me was an abiding love, and a built-in bullshit detector, and a standard—a view of the world quite apart from any notion of upward mobility, or tugged forelocks. There was room in his world for the arts (he took me to see Renoir's *The River*, and Olivier's *Henry V*, and Powell's, the *Red Shoes* when I was five and six and seven). and laughter, and courtesy. He offered me the world, such as it was.

Things got tough in the late sixties, and he was working longer and longer hours. The war in Vietnam enraged him, and he became president of the local democratic Club and turned it toward Gene McCarthy. He marched with my mother in DC, where they got tear-gassed for their presumption.

The world as it was and will be, and the power of those who cared about power, created the conditions that prevailed and ate his life entirely, finally. He died in '74, poor and very sick.

He gave me a solid place from which to view the world, and a solid sense of what you needed to do, no matter what your job, in order to see things accurately and behave as a gentleman. He believed in that, gentleman, and to him it meant someone who will never choose to damage you for his own gain.

In the evenings, when he sat on the edge of the bed talking, every nuance and meaning and choice of phrase was imbued with who he was—working class and independent—and everything that's kept me alive against considerable, self-inflicted odds, came out of those evenings.

There was, too, an occasional, mysterious and aloof savagery in him. I could feel it floating somewhere. What it said to me was "If it slighted me, I'd burn down the universe." and I understood it somehow, instinctively, as the prop that was holding up his kindness.

I'm very much like him though not nearly as good, and I work as hard as he did because I owe it as part of a simple, working-class contract.

To pay attention, and not be taken in, and to do what you do as well as you can, you know?

DANA WARD is a poet & works (gratis) as a full time childcare provider for his daughter Vivian. They go to malls & parks together in Cincinnati, OH. You wouldn't believe some of the weird & interesting things they've seen in the mall lately, wow!

---



*From Things The Baby Likes (A-Z)*

Delirium Tremens: I worked at a liquor store in coastal Maryland when I was nineteen. My boss had worked there since he was nineteen, &, because he fondly remembered the privileges bestowed on him by his boss he allowed me to not only buy bottles from the stock but more extravagantly to run up a tab, which meant every night, since I was young I longed for sugar, I'd settle on a pint of E&J or Southern Comfort, & an airplane bottle or two of Yukon Jack, the latter I'd pour into a fountain Mellow Yellow & nurse on the long commute inland, getting home by nine or so half drunk to find Brandon

painting or reading or looking out the window, at which point we'd share the other bottles, talking some, or working in our rooms. Mornings at the liquor store some of the regulars would come in with a look of pleading shame in their eyes, dt's flaring badly, & we'd try to make jokes to deflect the abjection but it was like being an apothecary, all of the colorful bottles in the sunlight.

Quitting Your Job: On my last day at my previous job I was given a watch stopped at 4pm ("Quittin' Time"), as a farewell gift. It's beautiful to be in possession of a broken clock that's right not only twice a day but always, or more precisely, never, with an intimation of always. I have it on the windowsill beyond my computer & I move my eyes from the face of that watch to whatever I'm doing on the screen, just as I once flashed my eyes from the screen to the working clock above the office door.

Winning the lottery: There must be some kind of Marxist numerology one could employ to uncover a secret yet meaningful ratio between the current price of gasoline & that day's lottery jackpot. Their physical proximity on gas station signs suggests a deeper,

occulted significance, some mathematics of extraction, risk, fantasy & labor, which, if discovered, might turn out to be the phantom denominator long thought to have been scribbled beneath Debord's famous graffiti "Never Work". Examined by experts in 20th Century insurrectionary forensics, the ink in which this ancient graffiti was written has been revealed to be the same ink used to print lottery tickets today.

Composed by Andrew Kenower  
<http://labday2010.blogspot.com/>