Animal Acts
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In 1705 Bernard Mandeville published “The Grumbling Hive: or, Knaves Turned Honest,” a short poem about “a Spacious Hive well stocked with Bees” that transforms from a society of vice, political corruption, and economic inequality to an egalitarian order of communal virtue. Among the bees are lawyers, bankers, and soldiers, and Mandeville leaves little doubt that the colony is an allegory for British social structure: “These Insects lived like Men, and all / Our Actions they perform’d in small.” In the old order, “every Part was full of Vice / Yet the whole Mass a paradice.” A moral revolution replaces this “paradice” with egalitarian virtue, however, which leads to a colorless culture, weak and incapable of surviving “th’ Insults of numerous Foes.” The colony collapses, leaving the reader with Mandeville’s instructive maxim, an eighteenth-century Gordon Gekko turn: “Fools only strive / To make a Great an honest Hive . . . / So Vice is beneficial found, / When it’s by Justice lopt, and bound.” Two decades later, Mandeville affixed the poem to the front of his controversial polemic *The Fable of the Bees*, advocating a culture of vice so long as it is structured by a guiding hand (making it simultaneously more extreme and more constrained than the liberalism of Adam Smith). In the era of the global financial crisis and the subsequent technocratic rule of the banking class, Mandeville’s Spacious Hive seems all too familiar.

With the bee as its central object of intrigue, and the subtitle “A Fable from the Age of Daley,” Kestutis Nakas’s *No Bees for Bridgeport* subtly gestures to Mandeville’s magnum opus. But if it is a fable, what precisely is the lesson at hand, and how does the bee figure within it? In this reflection, I suggest that Nakas’s swarm, the “Apis stockyardas,” can be understood as the
spontaneous political power of mass insurgency. In other words, it is a representative of the political activation of the multitude. Paolo Virno theorizes the multitude as the political being of the many as they exist in their plurality. This “mode of being . . . is ambivalent . . . it contains within itself both loss and salvation, acquiescence and conflict, servility and freedom.” The political activation of this multitude as an insurgent, spontaneous mass of constituent power is what shatters this ambivalence. The insurgency of the multitude creates the conditions in which we might pursue freedom from the foreclosure of politics in this era of the Spacious Hive, characterized by the domination of the liberal, capitalist, international order. In Nakas’s fable, the political exigency of this type of being, the swarm-as-multitude, occurs against a mythic backdrop that could only be fictional if it were not devastatingly true: an era of machine politics and finance-capital brigandry. But in order to come to this conclusion, we must first trace the cultivation of Nakas’s swarm.

Standing before a tightly packed audience in the cozy, second-floor performance space of Chicago’s Links Hall, Kestutis (the character) is an unassuming, middle-aged man, dressed in casual clothing. At first, No Bees for Bridgeport gives us every reason to register as fiction, or fable, the next forty-five minutes of the monologue. The combination of a self-consciously theatrical frame (a lecture at the International Bee Society) and science-fiction eye transplants suggest a world that is not to be believed. But he quickly transitions into a performance mode characterized by a charmingly earnest, convincing air of disclosure. The Links Hall audience is coaxed into identifying with the character, as his story is set close to home, “planted on the South Side of Chicago, in the Bridgeport neighborhood.” Indeed, Chicago insinuates itself into the performance as the red line “el” train repeatedly interrupts the monologue, barreling by with metallic screeches and a rumbling din. It is easy to get lost in his story of urban beekeeping, and somewhere within the first few minutes, we forget all about transgenerational ocular transplants, or that we are listening to a “lecture on how [he] saved the honeybees.” It is precisely by way of this induction into Nakas’s convincing narrative that its power as a political fable is established and that the significance of the bee is made clear.

Fables use the anthropomorphized animal as a means of imparting a morally determinate lesson. Mandeville’s fable only thinly disguises the bee as a stand-in for British social culture, and there is nothing really beelike about his Spacious/Grumbling Hive. In other words, the fable is not interested in the animal, on its own terms: the animal becomes a screen upon which we—the readers and writers of fables—can project the exigencies of
human political and social being. As such, the animal within the classic fable is exemplary of what Giorgio Agamben describes as humanity’s conception of itself as “the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a logos, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element.” For Agamben, it is within and by means of this distinction that humanity emerges as a unique, political being.

Where human opprobrium and revulsion is cast upon most phyla of insects, the bee has been given a unique place of reverence within Western thought. Political theory, from antiquity to the present, has called upon the bee colony as representative of human industriousness and social organization; it is a screen onto which we both project the ideals of humanity and understand its limitations. In Semonides’s typology of women, for example, women are described (unflatteringly) as ten different animal-beings, with the bee (or melissa) set aside as the one, ideal form for the wife. But the melissa is articulated at the precise moment of its foreclosure because, as Nicole Loraux reminds us, “perhaps she is an ideal figure, and we know that perfection is not of this world.” Semonides’s bee is thus deployed to impose a patriarchal and impossible ideal upon women. This impossibility tautologically justifies the exclusion of women from politics.

If Semonides describes the melissa as an impossible ideal in order to mark the political foreclosure of women, others have painted portraits of the bee as the ideal laborer in order to illuminate the political nature of humankind. In Marx, for example, the bee makes visible the difference between the labor of man and animal: “A bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.” It does not matter that the bee’s product may be formally ideal, because it is the imaginative capacity, unique to humankind, that elevates the value of human labor. Marx’s bee is the figure through which what Agamben calls the “political mystery of separation” is clarified. Unlike the bee, humanity is not limited by human nature; instead humanity is defined by its very ability to imagine, transform, and construct alternatives to that nature.

At first, Nakas’s monologue deploys the bee as a screen for human ideals and as the point at which humanity divides from the animal. In one moment the bee reflects the cruel violence of a natural world in which a bee, in stinging a human, “disembowels herself.” In the context of a “Fable from the Era of Daley,” this image might neatly represent the ethos of Chicago politics, as the specter of a figure like Rod Blagojevich, tearing himself apart while injecting venom into the political bloodstream, surges into conscious-
ness. Later, the bee oscillates between a cartoonish portrait of heteronormative romance in “Honey Land” and the less ideal mating ritual in which a “drone’s penis is ripped out of his body after mating, staying inside the female while he drops away and dies.” With shades of Semonides, here Nakas’s bee might first be understood as a receptacle for patriarchal anxieties about both the castrating woman and the impossible “good wife.” But Nakas does not develop this sentiment further, and while the character of Kestutis’s wife remains peripheral to the narrative, she is hardly a castrating harbinger of death. If anything, this anecdote serves to remind us of the radically nonhuman nature of the bee. It also introduces us to the trope of foreignness.

The penis, now lodged inside the mate’s body, is not the only foreign object that gives rise to anxiety; now the bee—as that which Kestutis has identified as different from and foreign to human life—comes to represent a foreign presence among the human beings of Bridgeport. Historically, Bridgeport has been a largely segregated, ethnically white neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. In recent years, racial tensions have increased with demographic shifts introducing significant Latino/a and Asian American populations to the neighborhood. The presence of the swarm draws the xenophobic, racist, anti-immigrant sentiment that has long structured civic life in the United States into Nakas’s narrative. First, he aligns the bees with the figure of the “old Chinese man,” the only neighbor who “loves the bees” alongside Kestutis. Kestutis’s fellow assimilated ethnic-Lithuanian neighbor, in turn, represents the bees in a fashion similar to her dislike of “when her Chinese or Mexican neighbors don’t speak English.” Her resentment reflects the racist characterization of Asian Americans and Latinos/as as perpetually foreign, abject figures who are shuttled between the interior and exterior of the community of the nation. Indeed, much of the anti-bee rhetoric shouted during the town hall meeting is reminiscent of the anti-immigrant sentiments common to political discourse today. The “beaming smile” and approving “nods” of the “old Chinese man” might thus signify a subtle solidarity between two beings who are cast as a foreign and threatening presence that is “lodged” in the body politic.

The mythic nature of the fable comes late to No Bees for Bridgeport. If we are, at first, seduced into believing Kestutis’s story, this is in part because its anxieties about neighbors and domestic harmony are all too familiar. Even as the story enters the twisted world of Chicago politics, we are inclined to endorse the overall believability of the narrative because Chicago politics are nothing if not mythical. For the audience in Links Hall, Nakas’s stylized embellishments (his caricatures of aldermen and mayors) don’t detract from what is ultimately an entirely possible story. As elected representatives barge
in on town hall meetings to dictate to constituents the outcome of their democratic process, we are all the more inclined to believe the story because its outrageousness confirms the daily parade of unbelievables that characterize the Chicago machine. Or perhaps, even beyond the confines of this specific polity, Nakas’s story seems acceptable because the unbearable truth is that US democracy in the twenty-first century has finally admitted that it was rigged against the people to begin with. “You heard da mayor. We’re votin’ for da bees,” seems an appropriate summary of the democratic process. In the era of Bush v. Gore and Citizens United v. F.E.C., power mandates the people’s will, rather than the other way around.13 “Democracy wins again!”

But the story finally explodes into the not-to-be-believed domain familiar to the genre of the fable. The bees attack Kestutis and his son before installing themselves in the stockyards. Lukas, the hero’s son, loses his sight in the attack only to have it restored beneath a Kentucky “moonbow.” “Mobs of bankers and financiers,” the true children of Mandeville’s vice-ridden hive, wreak havoc on a country that they’ve already destroyed once. And the political machine that should—according to reactionary apologists from Mandeville to Eduard Bernstein to Larry Summers—keep the destructive force of Capital in check fails to protect the people of Bridgeport. Here, then, the political significance of Nakas’s fable of the bees makes itself known.

The people come together in the form of a spontaneous insurgency. But this insurgency realizes itself as powerful insofar as it occurs beyond the limits of the contemporary political imagination. In this moment, the bee as that which is counter to (or politically and mystically separated from) humanity signifies the radical possibility of a political uprising that is, to use the prescient language of Rosa Luxemburg, “outside of and beyond the present society.”14 This South Side insurgency is articulated outside of language in the form of a “buzzing sound.” It emanates from the people, first, but grows into the fierce fighting anthem of the bees. The swarm emerges from (or at least signifies) the insurgent rage of Kestutis’s mob. The bees deftly demonstrate the power of the multitude, once activated, as they “descend on the marauders” en masse. The swarm eviscerates the “long lines of blinded financial experts and bankers” that are always already blind to the power of the multitude that they terrorize. In one spontaneous uprising, the bees remind us of the potency of the masses once they are politically activated. This is a power that can only emerge from the plurality of the many.

Today, the left finds itself facing the seemingly insurmountable obstacle of global capitalism and its partner, US American imperialism. As Gopal Balakrishnan observes, “At best, the alternative to surrender or self-delusion
has seemed to be a combative but clear-eyed pessimism, orienting the mind for a Long March against the new scheme of things.” For Balakrishnan, philosophical affirmations of the multitude offer a “spectacular break” from this tradition, one that posits the possibility “for another world.” But this project can only be “politically effective” if it is grounded in the “realities of this one.” Nakas’s fable affirms the power of the politically activated multitude, in the form of the swarm, but does so by grounding it first in the realities of Kestutis’s South Side world. His fable is not a blueprint for an emancipatory politics. Rather, it is a powerful affirmation of political possibilities that seem otherwise impossible in the long era of the Spacious Hive. In achieving this affirmation, Nakas demonstrates the potential for performance to be a lab in which we can imagine—and to some extent activate—the horizon of a coming politics, one that is finally and definitively geared toward the realization of freedom for the many.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 69.
4. Ibid., 75.
5. Ibid., 76.


16. Ibid., 31.

17. Ibid. Balakrishnan’s argument is articulated as both a celebration and a critique of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).