

The Literary Labour of Ants

*Refabulation, Digression, and
Utopian Form in Daniel Sada's
Porque parece mentira la
verdad nunca se sabe (1999)*

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Abstract: This essay considers the literary labour carried out by ants in Daniel Sada's *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* (1999), considered one of the most significant works of Mexican literature in the last decade of the twentieth century. This essay takes a digressive scene within the novel, in which an ant fable is imagined, as a model of "refabulation", a rewriting of Western formic, or ant-centred, narratives that attempts to escape the total enclosure of allegory. Sada's refabulation both registers the fact of ants' radical alterity and deploys them as the axis for the articulation of a utopian desire for the potential of a collective life organized beyond scarcity, labour, and capitalism. At the same time, the essay suggests that meaningful representations of interspecies interactions might not be found in novelistic narratives per se, but in the digressions often found and contained in its pages.

Keywords: *ants, zoopoiesis, novelistic digression, animal fables, utopian form*

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Amid the overwhelming narrative of violence and corruption told in Daniel Sada's novel *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* ("Because it seems like a lie the truth is never known", 1999), considered one of the most significant works of the last decade of the twentieth century in Mexico, there is a digression, a scene that momentarily suspends the plot. It goes like this: a group of protesters gather to demand information from the local government about the recent disappearance of a group of young activists. Among them is Cecilia, a mother of two of the missing young men. She is preoccupied and anxious, but after four hours of meandering political speeches, she has still not learned anything about her sons' fate. Suddenly, a stranger catches her eye. The man has been there for as long as she has. But only in that moment does she notice he has not been engaged in the events unfolding around them. Instead, he sits on a bench, cracking his fingers, observing an anthill. The novel's omniscient narrator tells it as follows:

[El hombre] Contemplaba—desde que llegó lo hizo—una ringleira de hormigas cuyo ignoto derrotero podía ser mentira artística. Se trataba de un decurso temporal e itinerante: ordenamiento instintivo a más flexibilizado en un trazo curvilíneo apto para ideas y vueltas provechosas e inviolables. No se había perdido el tiempo. En un lapso de cuatro horas las hormigas de seguro habían traído a su reino las reservas suficientes para que su sociedad tuviera quehacer de sobra y descanso posterior ampliado a muchas más horas. Su concepto favorito sería "despreocupación", pero también "actitud" para hacer la sincronía entre trabajo y holganza, o mejor: los trabajos de la holganza: contrapeso y bienestar.

The man was contemplating—since he arrived, he had been doing so—a column of ants whose unknown path might have been an artistic lie. It was a temporal and itinerant course: an instinctive organization twisted into a sinuous line well suited to fruitful and inviolable ideas and turns. They wasted no time. In the space of four hours, the ants had surely brought back enough supplies to their kingdom so that their society would

have plenty to do and, afterwards, enjoy an extended period of rest for many hours more. Their favourite concept would be “nonchalance” [*despreocupación*], but also “attitude” [*actitud*] to bring about the synchrony of work and *holganza* [leisure, idleness], or rather: the labours of *holganza* — counterbalance and well-being.¹

A moment later, as if Cecilia’s gaze has triggered some “internal mechanism”, the man, named Conrado Lúa, stands up, and from that moment on becomes instrumental to the novel’s narrative development.² Yet before the peculiar formic parenthesis is broken, Cecilia will join Conrado in his observation of the “event on the ground”.³ This “event on the ground” [*suceso del suelo*], a paragraph-long scene in a dizzyingly neo-baroque narrative about the dissolution of a community that spans six hundred pages, is the only moment in this novel that could be characterized as utopian. It is, indeed, an idiosyncratic interruption. Its sudden fabulation, with its ambiguous point of view, has no significant repercussions in what follows. Ants make a brief second appearance, not long after this scene, but they do so reduced to superficial facticity in that they bite a distracted Conrado Lúa, and are then dismissed.⁴ Nevertheless, in this essay I will delve into this digression, reading it closely and considering it both on its own and within the context of the larger narrative. In a novel, by virtue of “not being determined by a teleological imperative, digression is free to carve out its own narrative space, to occupy the text *as irreducible difference*, no longer impelled to serve the larger whole”.⁵ Digressions free narratives from their eventual destiny as plot and, in doing so, generate spaces for other narratives that are not necessarily supplemental or equivalent.⁶ The small

1 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67. All translations are my own. Except for this fragment, I provide the English translation in text and include the original quote in footnotes.

2 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67.

3 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67. “Ligero entretenimiento para los reojos de ella entre gato y garabato, por decir más, el suceso del suelo, el cual no era interrumpido por el tránsito gigante.”

4 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 70.

5 Frederick, “Re-reading Digression”, 18.

6 Frederick, “Re-reading Digression”, 24.

literary form of the digressive narrative, like Sada's ant scene, frees itself from the threat of narrative subsumption or emplotment, and allows for speculative interpolations within a novel. Taking digression itself as a small literary form, it is possible to explore the literary labour carried out by the ants in Sada's novel and consider their generative potential within the narrative.

Ants have long played a central role in the stories that humans tell about themselves. In the Nahuatl tradition, the hero Quetzacoatl transforms himself into a black ant after seeing one carrying along grains of corn, a plant that is locked away in a hidden mountain. He breaks into the hiding place, steals some of the corn, and brings it to the gods, who, in turn, declare that the grain will be humanity's main sustenance.⁷ In the West, by contrast, insect stories were historically plotted around the relationship between intelligence and instinct, labour and idleness, or of collective living. Fables, in particular, have been crawling with ants since the very beginning. Because of the influence of the *Proverbs* and Aesop, the insects and their alternative societies have been a constant in Christian meditation and didacticism since very early in its history.⁸ Provident and industrious, Sada's ants hark back to these biblical and classical predecessors. In *Proverbs* 6:6–8, King Solomon exhorts man to “Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise: which, having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in summer, *and* gathereth her food in the harvest.” Like Sada's ants, Solomonic ants are guided in their collective provisioning of the community by a common imperative that seems to transcend the political. So too are Aesop's ants, but this classical fable expands on Solomon's maxim by infusing it with plot, or at least by furthering its combative morality. Aesop's fable goes as follows: an ant toils through the summer to store up food for the coming winter while a cicada (or a grasshopper, Solomon's sluggard) spends the warm months dedicated to song and dance. Each insect is aware of the other and their disparate approaches. The cicada (or grasshopper) tempts the ant in some versions. “Why not come and chat

7 Florescano, “El mito de Quetzacoatl”, 37.

8 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 9.

with me,” it asks, “instead of toiling and moiling in that way?”⁹ The ant, always industrious and focused, ignores the interloper. Time passes, the cold arrives, and the ant and its ilk thrive. The cicada/grasshopper does not. In some iterations, it dies of hunger while watching the ants enjoy the fruits of their labour. In others, it approaches the provident insects and pleads with them. In these cases, the ant turns to reprimand: “Why didn’t you too store up some provisions during the Summer?”, it asks and, after a quick back and forth, hands its death sentence with *gusto*: “since you sang in summer you can dance in winter”.¹⁰ Here too, like in the novel, there is the unrepentant industriousness, the foresight and expedience of the ant.

Throughout his career, Daniel Sada (1953–2011) was known as a writer’s writer, a consummate stylist with an eccentric oeuvre. His fiction told absurd, humorous, and yet brutally mundane stories about the lives of awkward characters living in peripheral small towns of Northern Mexico. For Mark Anderson, Sada’s “meticulous linguistic landscapes” have always been more important than the plots themselves, overrun as they are by a multiplicity of conflicting points of view which converge into “a single cultural geography that is nevertheless always open and purposefully incomplete, since no story is ever self-sufficient”.¹¹ *Porque parece mentira la verdad nunca se sabe* is widely considered to be both his stylistic *magnum opus* and his most political novel. Narratively, *Porque parece mentira* revolves around the consequences of a theft of electoral ballots sometime between 1969 and 1972 in a provincial town called Remadrín, located in the northern state of Capila (not real-life Coahuila), in “Mágico” (not Mexico). Local political youths protest and plan to take their complaints to the state capital, Brinquillo (not Saltillo). They are intercepted and massacred in a clumsy but effective conspiracy put together by the corrupt regional government. The premise is made explicit in its first lines: “The corpses arrived at three in the afternoon. They were brought in a van — en masse, uncovered — and all riddled

9 Aesop, *Fables of Aesop*, 54.

10 Aesop, *The Complete Fables*, 246.

11 Anderson, “Daniel Sada”, 199.

with bullets as expected”.¹² But the text aborts linearity soon after, and goes on to assemble itself progressively through a rambling circumlocution that accumulates an often-discontinuous constellation of anecdotes, characters, landscapes, and language games which narrate, condemn, mock, and dismantle the legitimacy of a corrupt regime. All the while, it examines the collapse of the national-popular ideological state apparatus and the social consequences that follow.¹³ Cecilia, the woman who observes the ant man, and her husband, Trinidad, open and close the story, serving as one of the central narrative anchors. They are, however, just two in a cast of around ninety characters. In a sense, their story, as well as the dozens of others the novel tells, is relevant to the extent that their individual narratives relate to a story of communal dissolution that marks a stark contrast to the harmonious sight of the column of ants.

In the novel, the scene with the ants is one of hundreds of meandering digressions. Certainly, it is the only one centred on a nonhuman animal of any kind. Still, a reader could easily miss it in the narrator’s winding discourse. Most scholars would agree, in fact, that, however interesting the scene in question, or even the story and characters, the most compelling element in *Porque parece mentira* is its omniscient narrator. As in his other works, “Sada’s narrators exploit the eloquence of partial meanings, provisional associations, and incomplete metaphors and syntactic structures”.¹⁴ Searching for a term to describe this heterodiegetic voice, scholar Marco Kunz settles on “parodic omniscience”. These narrators, Kunz argues, parody the omniscience of traditional narrators who claim “the authority of their enunciative monopoly” to speak the “truth of their fictions”.¹⁵ Sada’s narrators position themselves in proximity with their characters and

12 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 13. “Llegaron los cadáveres a las tres de la tarde. En una camioneta los trajeron — en masa, al descubierto — y todos balaceados como era de esperarse.”

13 Long, “Tlatelolco’s Persistent Legacy”, 518.

14 Anderson, “Daniel Sada”, 213.

15 Kunz, “La omnisciencia paródica”, 300. All translations my own. “[E]l narrador se comporta como una parodia de esas voces omnipoderosas que en la inmensa mayoría de los relatos heterodiegéticos nos aseguran, con la autoridad de su monopolio enunciativo, la verdad de sus ficciones.”

are as contradictory and evasive as they are; yet, at the same time, the narrators “do not renounce the privilege of omniscience”, even if they do reject “the pretensions of pseudo-divine sovereignty”.¹⁶ The slippery nature of the narration allows for a digressive impulse which, as Samuel Frederick has written of another author, “dialectically interacts with plot, negating its centrality, but not usurping its place” in an “unresolved and irresolvable dialectic”.¹⁷ In fact, for Héctor Rodríguez de la O, Sada’s narratives are often overwhelmed by an “excess of detail” that metastasizes and pushes the main threads of a particular novel to the sidelines, temporarily becoming “autonomous”.¹⁸ The scene with the ants is one such instance.

Despite its brevity, this digression stands out: it resonates and vibrates in the occlusive gloom of Sada’s magnum opus. In its brevity, the scene brings to the fore the palpating question of the possibility of a collective horizon, the dream of a life beyond labour, of a life of “*holganza*”, left untranslated to preserve the vague sense it conveys, in Spanish, of leisure, idleness, but also of the suspension or absence of work — the infinitive at its centre, “*holgar*”, is also the word that yields “*huelga*”, as in “*huelga de trabajadores*” or workers’ strike.¹⁹ More importantly, this brief scene is also a markedly zoopoetic one, not necessarily because, paraphrasing Kári Driscoll and Eva Hoffmann, it is “*about* [ants], but because the [ants] that inhabit [it] serve as a necessary and unsubstitutable means to particular, as yet inscrutable, poetic ends. Without them, it can’t be done”.²⁰ In fact, in a maximalist novel where the horizon of hegemonic politics is revealed as uninhabitable, where there is no future in the community of people, where life is reduced to exploitation and poverty, and politics is presented as degrees of corruption and abuse, the only possi-

16 Kunz, “La omnisciencia paródica”, 328. “[E]l narrador sadiano no renuncia al privilegio de la omnisciencia; incluso hace uso de su autoridad para denunciar mentiras, vicios y abusos, pero rechaza las ínfulas de la soberanía pseudo-divina y se coloca en un nivel más próximo a los humanos.”

17 Frederick, “Re-reading Digression”, 24.

18 Rodríguez de la O, *Porque parece barroco*, 76–77.

19 *Diccionario de autoridades* (1734), “Holganza”. Real Academia Española. <https://www.rae.es/obras-academicas/diccionarios/nuevo-tesoro-lexicografico-0>

20 Driscoll and Hoffmann, “What is Zoopoetics?”, 3.

bility of escape offered by its narrator comes in the form of a minor digressive scene. This scene, in turn, engages in what will be called “refabulation”, a retelling and rewriting of Western formic fables that attempts to escape the total enclosure of allegory, catalysed by the zoopoetic encounter with the small life form of the ant.

Fabular Ants, Instinct, and the Zoopoetic Instance

Notwithstanding their continued popularity, the fable as a genre has fallen into disrepute among scholars in the past few decades, particularly in the field of animal studies, which has tended to regard anthropomorphism with suspicion, and hence to align the fable with the very same ideologies that harm or devalue real, living nonhuman animals. As José Manuel Marrero Henríquez has put it, “[t]he loquacity with which fables give voice to foxes, ants, wolves, cicadas, and lambs does not acknowledge animals in their animality but transforms them into symbols of the vices and virtues of human morality”.²¹ “Nowhere in literature,” writes Margot Norris “[have] animals [been] allowed to be themselves, to refer to Nature and to their own animality without being pressed into symbolic service as metaphors, or as figures in fable or allegory (invariably of some aspect of the human)”.²² That being said, a reappraisal of the fable is afoot among scholars in animal studies. For Chris Danta, for example, the fable “unsettles the orientational metaphor that [...] is fundamental to Western thought: ‘human is up; animal is down’”.²³ The fable thus enables a form of reorientation that invites readers to confront the existential fact of their animality, while also allowing them to imagine the sociality of other species.²⁴ Similarly, Jeremy B. Lefkowitz has noted how fables shift the attention towards the animal in that “animals have been only partially analogized to human beings, behaving in some ways like humans but retaining the outward appearance and eating habits of animals.”²⁵ Erica Fudge summarizes these positions by stating simply that “[t]he animal story is a human

21 Marrero Henríquez, “Affection, Literature”, 3–4

22 Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination*, 17.

23 Danta, *Animal Fables*, 10.

24 Danta, *Animal Fables*, 19; cf. Hartigan, *Aesop’s Anthropology*, 23–24.

25 Lefkowitz, “Aesop and Animal Fable,” 11.

story, but it is also an animal story. And the apparently human story is also animal”.²⁶ In this context, and focusing particularly on ant fables, Catherine Parry asks whether “descriptions such as ‘harmonious’, ‘hard-working’, ‘altruism’, and ‘civilisation’ [are] anthropocentric terms that obscure what ants are really doing,” or whether they are [...] “anthropomorphic terms which make the apparently unfathomable other intelligible when scientific researchers find themselves at a loss for an objective description”.²⁷ Marrero Henríquez and Norris would insist on the former. Parry and other scholars such as Danta, Lefkowitz, and Fudge, however, would consider the possibility of the latter. Parry herself wonders if the terms and concepts used to speak of the insects’ qualities are not necessarily human inventions, but rather “generated from our contemplation of creatures such as ants [...] in an effort to make sense of ourselves”.²⁸

“Literature,” writes Parry, “uses [ants and anthill figures] to analogise questions about how humans live as social creatures, for the fabular ant is not just good to think, and not just a trope, but a method for constituting and defining what it means to be human.”²⁹ Yet, Parry suggests, the ant-as-method operates well beyond the humanistic realms where metaphor is often assumed to reside. Even when interested in ants for ants’ sake, entomologists, naturalists, psychiatrists, sociologists, biologists, and taxonomists have all slouched towards the symbolic, incapable of escaping the cultural imaginaries which constitute their respective fields. This is not surprising. As Charlotte Sleight says, a scientist “reaches for a metaphor in order to describe a process in nature (indeed, that metaphor may even condition how he or she sees it)”. The metaphor, in turn, comes with baggage, with “cultural resonances that reach beyond its immediate application to the natural world and suggest all kinds of unintended connections, images, and analogies to readers (in the broadest sense) of the scientist’s work”.³⁰ In this way, a scientist’s explicatory language

26 Fudge, “What can Beast Fables Do”, 113.

27 Parry, *Other Animals*, 67.

28 Parry, *Other Animals*, 67.

29 Parry, *Other Animals*, 65.

30 Sleight, *Six Legs Better*, 14.

generates further echoes, conditioning “new exploration, experimentation, and representation”.³¹ Sleigh insists, though, that the relationship between science and culture is multidirectional, “with the culture shaping the questions posed by scientists and the scientific answers in turn directing cultural views, reinforcing or slowly altering conceptions of the natural and its significance for the human condition”.³²

For Sleigh, in the period from the late-nineteenth to the late twentieth century, the ant-as-method was “used successively to model the human mind, society, and communication”.³³ The theme of instinct, rooted in Thomist philosophy, was a constant in these accounts, structured as they were on the binary supposition that “where man has intelligence to guide his actions, animals are endowed with instinct”.³⁴ The human and the ant were imagined to be the “heads of their respective phyla, exercising respectively intelligence and instinct”.³⁵ The raw fact of ants’ complex social behaviour cemented them, along with bees and wasps, as the “acme of instinct”.³⁶ For Karl Marx, in the mid-nineteenth century, the distinction between the instinctive action of nonhuman animals and insects — spiders and bees, in his case — “and the imaginative, creative, and intentional quality of human practice [was] crucial to the theory of alienation”.³⁷ Alienated, “man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal function [. . .], and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal”.³⁸ Marx’s dismissive position was but one of many, however. Others believed that the study of insects’ instinctive life had the potential to reveal “something about evolution” and the “progress towards eusociality”.³⁹ To-

31 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 15.

32 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 11.

33 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 11.

34 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 16.

35 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 49.

36 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 16.

37 Peterson, “Zoological Marx”, 20.

38 Peterson, “Zoological Marx”, 20

39 Sleigh, *Six Legs Better*, 40. That is, that the complex social organization of certain insects, which seemed to imply cooperation, distribution of tasks, and generational cohabitation, all of which are taken as hallmarks of eusociality, could be used to explain human collective life.

wards the end of the nineteenth century, this interest in the instinctive life existed within a cultural horizon in which an appreciation of primitive forms of life flourished, and had the potential not only to illuminate the evolutionary history of life on Earth, but also buttress and complement the search for modes of perceptions “surpassing that of the human”.⁴⁰ Ultimately, as Jussi Parikka writes, “[s]eeing insect life as an instinctual folding with its environment hints at interesting subject–object couplings in which the inventive modulation of the living environment on the insects’ part proceeds via an immanent engagement”.⁴¹

In Sada’s novel, the ants’ “instinctive organization”, their impulsive yet focused collective activity, is what catches the eye of their accidental audience and, in Danta’s phrase, “reorients” the perspective. For the narrator, the peculiar way in which the insect collective traverses its “unknown path” *instinctively* is so remarkable and surprising, that it “might have been an artistic lie”.⁴² The ants’ instinctive collective forces the narrator to default to the language of falsehood, artifice, and artistic practice. The language of creative artistry seems to be the only linguistic arsenal he has at hand to refer to an activity that is formally complex, aesthetically remarkable, but not fully *reasonable*. Only by framing it thus can he conceive the alterity of these small lives. Once framed in such a manner, as by association, the insects capture the narrator’s imagination and catalyse the diegetic instance of zoopoiesis, a “creation *by means of* the animal”.⁴³ To be sure, the narrator’s zoopoetic instance takes place only on the realm of the hypothetical, of the subjunctive (“the ants had *surely* brought back enough supplies to their kingdom so that their society *would have [tuviera]* plenty to do”).⁴⁴ That is, the narration distances itself from the truth and becomes lodged in a subjunctive mode that does not seek to fix and determine the ants. In this way, it avoids what John Drew calls an “anthropo-allegorical erasure”,

40 Parikka, *Insect Media*, 24.

41 Parikka, *Insect Media*, 44.

42 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67.

43 Driscoll, “Sticky Temptation”, 223.

44 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67. Original quote?

which obfuscates the nonhuman animals in animal representations and recasts them “as mere resources for (literal and symbolic) human consumption”.⁴⁵ Beyond the basic indicative description of the column of ants moving across the ground, everything else the narrator proclaims is explicitly conditional, understood as a suggestion, as unambiguous fantasy. As Carolyn Fornoff has recently written, the subjunctive foregoes “commitment to a singular or fixed truth”, and “encodes the speaker’s uncertainty or opinionating about the state of things”. Fornoff argues that “subjunctive aesthetics are less invested in accuracy and reportage, and more in the desires and fears that the real provokes, as well as the as-of-yet unrealized possibilities that percolate around the given”. She continues: “[t]hinking in the subjunctive explodes the fixity of the way things are, suggesting, even against all odds, that the status quo can be transformed”.⁴⁶ In this same spirit, Sada’s zoopoetic vignette, written in the subjunctive mode, recasts the ants’ instinctive order as the slight crack through which, as Leonard Cohen had it, the light gets in.

Sada’s formic digression echoes the classic anthill metaphor, which “proposes a society of diminished autonomy, individual identity, boundaries, and motivations, and emphasises socially beneficial altruistic behaviour”.⁴⁷ Yet, in Sada, this fantasy registers as ironic because of its subtle implication of an inversion of the intelligence–instinct binary. That is, the fabulation emphasizes the apparent wisdom and harmony of ants, which stands in contrast to the messy and meandering political gathering that surrounds it, and which seems to be driven by unthinking instinct. This contextual irony, in turn, pushes the digression into the realm of the exemplary, the allegorical, and, thus, of the fable. Sada’s fabular ants, however, differ from their Solomonic and Aesopian lineage in one key respect: Solomon and Aesop’s ants reside in an agonistic world defined by scarcity; Sada’s do not. If anything, the labours of Solomonic and Aesopian insects are given meaning by the prospect of an imminent, wintry death. By contrast, in the immediate frame of the novelistic

45 Drew, “Re-Animalizing *Animal Farm*”, 167.

46 Fornoff, *Subjunctive Aesthetics*, 3.

47 Parry, *Other Animals*, 72–73.

narrator's idle fabulation, which filters the idle vagrant's fantasy and Cecilia's boredom, there is no threat, no external drive. The ants in Remadrín are motivated — or are imagined to be motivated — by their collective prioritization of what Sada calls “the labours of *holganza*”. Here, Solomon's fable would be phrased differently: “look to the ants thou sluggard [Conrado, Cecilia] — consider their ways and be wise: which, having no guide, overseer, or ruler, gather the harvest for four hours, so they can rest for longer”. Thus, it is *holganza*, as opposed to the threat of scarcity and death, that is the fabular insects' driving principle. Labour not for labour's sake, but for the social reproduction of the collective *and* its right to *holganza*. In other words, Sada's narrator short-circuits the West's formic fable through a description that reboots the traditional interpretation of the insect's continuous activity. In doing so, it clears the way for the potential of a new subjunctive *refabulation* that, at the same time, does not erase the ant itself as another life form.

Collective Life, Remadrín's Impossible Community, and the “Column of Ants”

On the one hand, the contemporary scientist explains the social and collective life of the ant as as random, instinctive behaviour resulting from evolutionary adaptation. “To lay observers [like Sada and his narrator] and natural historians across the centuries”, on the other hand, writes Parry, there has “always seemed to be the potential for more exciting or mysterious explanations for ants' innovation, organised cooperative behaviour, and sheer achievement in tasks such as nest building and garnering of food supplies”.⁴⁸ Sleight holds that the “particular identification of instinct with *social* insects, gives the trope an additional characteristic: it is essentially constituted by the mass”.⁴⁹ The question of the ant as a social insect could be deployed in various ways. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, ants were regarded as models of collective social responsibility. Before and between the two World Wars, however, the ant collective pessimistically came to suggest unthinking crowds,

48 Parry, *Other Animals*, 68.

49 Sleight, *Six Legs Better*, 16–17.

mass manipulability, and the devaluation of the individual life. Later, towards the mid-1950s, the ant collective was rehabilitated into a positive model of group intelligence and complex task-solving machines.⁵⁰ Instinct played a role in all of these images; as expression of a prelapsarian, communitarian impetus; as proof of inherent herd impulses; or as teleological, purpose-driven action.

Sada's narrator subscribes to the affirmative school of ant fabulation. As we have seen, in the novel, the ant collective's instinctive organization and coordinated action are positively imagined to be guided by the common, collective horizon. The brevity of the fragment belies its dramatic weight precisely because the ants are spotted right amid a messy, noisy, and disorganized political gathering.⁵¹ In the midst of this confusion and boredom, Cecilia spots Conrado looking at the ants. He seems so calm and preoccupied that she cannot but focus on him and the object of his attention, "as if she were casually observing an augury".⁵² She goes on to look back and forth, from man to insects. But then Conrado, the stranger, jumps to his feet, and the reverie is broken, the insects fading into the novel's noise. The augury is, of course, the stranger himself, who will provide the information that can lead to the discovery of the fate of the young protesters. Yet, even if we accept this reading, the ants' collective cannot be denied a portentousness of its own. *Porque parece mentira* is, all things considered, very much a novel about the formation and dissolution of collectivity within a socially fragmented and isolated community. The novel's plot, in fact, is structured around three instances in which attempts are made to create a collective horizon, such as that of the ants. Chronologically, the first of these collective moments is the surprising resonance the three opposition parties' platforms find among the people of Remadrín, which spurs an unprecedented interest in the coming elections, and politicizes the town's youth. As the narrator tells it, "[n]ever before in the history of electoral campaigns has what is happening now occurred. The

50 Sleight, *Six Legs Better*, 17.

51 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67.

52 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67. "[P]or no encontrar más que hastío en los devaneos de allá, prefirió observar al hombre como si viera a sus anchas un augurio."

propaganda of the three most influential [opposition] political parties managed to penetrate the most unexpected of places, as did their candidates”.⁵³ The collective horizons promised by these parties are vague, and their details obscure. When Cecilia’s soon-to-be vanished sons argue with their father and defend their political beliefs, which are those of the opposition parties, they find themselves at a loss for words and can only mutter: “Poverty, tremendous and irremediable. Alms-wages, a mere pittance, for now and forever. For such purposes, democracy in suspense is beneficial”.⁵⁴ The narrator summarizes the mobilization thus: “Seen in another way: poverty binds people together. The filthy philosophy of necessity. Herds are formed. There is no lack of opportunity. Any reason will do”.⁵⁵ Here, the political platform of the opposition itself does not matter. In the impoverished present of Remadrín, it is heroic enough simply to oppose the status quo. The political reawakening is so noteworthy that the regional ruling party concocts a series of cascading tactics to suppress the vote. Despite these obstacles, the citizens of Remadrín and its environs show up on voting day in unprecedented numbers. The line barely moves, though, because the officer in charge of the polling station, corruptlike the others, employs a “sinister but expedient strategy: DELAY”.⁵⁶ Eventually, there is movement, and more and more people cast their votes. Alas, it is all for naught: “Suddenly, some masked men got out of the three peculiar vans. A flourish of machine guns, such that the police did nothing but shrink back and then it was: ‘Hands up, everyone!’”⁵⁷ The masked men fire their guns into the air to scare the “now ex-voters”,

53 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 113. “A lo largo de la historia de las campañas electorales jamás ha sucedido lo que ahora. La propaganda de los tres partidos políticos de mayor arrastre logró penetrar en los sitios más impensados, al igual que sus candidatos”.

54 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 20. “La pobreza tremenda y sin remedio. Los salarios-limosna y por todos los siglos de los siglos. Para tal fin ayuda la democracia en vilo”.

55 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 28. “Vista de otra manera: la pobreza aglutina. Mugre filosofía de la necesidad. Se forman manadas. No falta la ocasión. Cualquier motivo sirve”.

56 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 103. “Figura inamovible, sin embargo, porque el jefe de casilla demoraba el proceder. Una siniestra estrategia, lúcida para los suyos: ¡LA DEMORA [...]!”

57 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 165. “De pronto, de las tres raras camionetas se bajaron unos tipos que andaban enmascarados. Gala de ametralladoras para que los policías no hicieran más que encogerse y: ¡Arriba las manos, todos!”

and “with great speed and efficiency, another three masked individuals grabbed five ballot boxes and loaded them into the idling vans, ready to make a quick getaway”.⁵⁸ Thus, corruption and the threat of violence dissolves this common and unprecedented attempt at inaugurating a new, collective horizon through the electoral process.

Nevertheless, the most ardent citizens of Remadrín persist. They organize themselves once again, led by members of one of the parties, and resolve to march in protest, first, to the state capital and, later, the country’s. This second collective instance, moved by the belief in the possibility of political change, is, again, interrupted. Early in the novel, the narrator proleptically reveals the eventual fate of the protesters, on which the text will later expand extensively: “the army repressed that protest with an abundance of violence”.⁵⁹ Sada never makes clear how many of the mobilized citizens were murdered. A witness, who appears only briefly in the text, speculates that “eighty percent of the protesters must be safe and sound [...]. Most of them hightailed it into the desert”.⁶⁰ But regardless of how many participants survived — and, at the end of the novel, it is revealed, in passing, that Cecilia’s sons are, in fact, alive, although she will never know — they can never return to Remadrín, caught as it is in an inescapable web of corruption.

The final bid for a collective horizon — which begins with the protest in which Cecilia sees the stranger and the ants — is driven by a shared sense of mourning and indignation:

The widespread movement of margins moving towards the centre: people: since the early hours: the clamour rushing towards the cruel vortex of the main square, where the movement of hundreds halted and the whirlpool of common indignation gathered new momentum. The elections had to be denounced,

58 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 165–166. “[A] hora ex votantes”; “con gran rapidez técnica otros tres enmascarados cargaron con cinco urnas y se treparon con ellas a los muebles encendidos, ya listos para arrancar”.

59 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 16. “[E] ejército reprimió aquella marcha con lujo de violencia”

60 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 17. “[E] ochenta por ciento de los manifestantes ha de estar sano y salvo [...]. ¡A todo lo que daba huyó la mayoría al desierto[!]”

and hence: the killing, the violent and repulsive despotism. They needed to organize for it once again, with more people, and to see if this time it would really be worth it.⁶¹

Newly energized, the people of Remadrín organize a committee and send it out through the region to find out more information about the fate of the protesters. When they fail, the citizens become disheartened but persist in their demands. If they cannot get answers outside of the town, they will do so right there. So they organize a permanent sit-in in front of the corrupt mayor's office. They are certain that, with time, he will crack. The sit-in begets a community, a constant festival of sorts, despite the serious demands that drive it. A game keeps the citizenry engaged: every day, there is a contest for the best new slogan and banner. The system works, and Remadrín's cohesion outlasts the early enthusiasm. "But the game did not last more than four months because the object, in truth, was something else, namely the original demand: that the government answer for the disappeared honestly, goddamn it, and of that there was no chance, really".⁶² The sit-in disbands and, eventually, the regional government—the very same government that ordered the massacre—sends its men to arrest Remadrín's mayor, accuses him of masterminding the whole thing, and replaces him with a new, young, and naïve interim mayor pulled from the official party's ranks.⁶³ This new administrator goes on to undo the former mayor's complicated infrastructure of clientelism and corruption, and, without the protections of yore, Remadrín's wealthy citizens leave, condemning the town: "The fat cats up front, followed by the middle-class, and trailing behind them, the poor masses with no jobs, hungry, tearful, because

61 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 52–53. "El movimiento generalizado de orillas que se mueven hacia el centro: gente: desde temprano: el barullo apurón hacia el vórtice cruento de la plaza de armas adonde se frenaban las correrías de cientos y adonde el remolino de indignación común cobraba un nuevo impulso. Había que repudiar las elecciones, en consecuencia: lo de la matazón, el despotismo airado y asqueroso. Había que organizarse para ello, de nuevo, con más gente, y a ver si ahora sí valía la pena."

62 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 433. "Pero el juego no duró más allá de cuatro meses porque el objeto, en verdad, era otro, por decir: la demanda original: que el gobierno respondiera por los desaparecidos sinceramente, caray, y eso no, ni para cuándo."

63 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 513.

without money the people are ruined".⁶⁴ To whoever is left in town, the new interim mayor promises a round of honest and fair elections. On the day, though, nobody shows up to vote because there is barely anybody left. As Marco Codebò has argued, all of the key characters in Sada's novel are "forced to leave the locality where their existence is situated", condemned to a permanent displacement.⁶⁵

Against this bleak landscape, Sada offers us the alterity of the ants: free from individual identity and characterized only by the collective and instinctive. Cecilia and Conrado Lúa's encounter with the ants occurs not between the internal consciousness of individuals and external entities or environments, but rather through their interaction with a network of bodies. As Parry has written, it is an encounter that is of "a nature entirely alien to the metonymy of the face that identifies the human individual".⁶⁶ It is in the subjunctive zoopoetic instance of refabulation catalysed by the encounter with the plurality of the ants that the novel's narrator posits the only community capable of sustaining any common project. Everything everywhere in the town of Remadrín, in the state of Capila, in the country of Mágico is a communal dead-end. Everything except this projected alien ant formation, where all individualism has melted into the plural mass, where scarcity and poverty do not register simply because all action, always already collective, is predicated not on permanent accumulation, but on the provisioning of "enough reserves to their kingdom that their society would have plenty to do, and afterwards an extended period of rest for many hours more."⁶⁷

It is the smallest of utopias, undoubtably, and it could be argued that this formic dreamland is put into question the very moment it appears in *Porque parece mentira*. Its singular appearance is brief, almost parenthetical. Its very articulation in the subjunctive mode as a speculative digression by the narrator and the fatalistic cascade

64 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 515. "Los ricachos por delante seguidos por los medianos y hasta atrás, como en arrastre, la pobre bola de gente sin jale, hambrienta, llorosa, porque sin dinero el pueblo está tirado a la ruina."

65 Codebò, *Novels of Displacement*, 128.

66 Parry, *Other Animals*, 94.

67 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 67.

of events that follow it, in the novel, renders it sardonic; the people's future is so dim that utopia can only be projected by a vagrant and an exasperated mourning mother, onto the smallest of life forms. Yet, it is also for all these reasons that Sada's ants are so noteworthy, as I have been arguing up to this point. It is precisely because it is subordinated against all these odds that the digression in question begets utopian form. Kathi Weeks writes that

[a]s a source of provocation as well as estrangement, the utopian form can potentially animate the desire for the possible, as opposed to simply the vindication or restoration of what has been lost; stimulate the imagination of what might become rather than nostalgia for what once was; and also mobilize on the basis of hope for a different future, rather than only on outrage and resentment over past and present injustices.⁶⁸

Sada's fable of the ants registers the existence, however fleeting, of a desire for another reality, which haunts the novel as a provocation, and almost as a red herring. It is the only such case of utopian demand in all of Daniel Sada's oeuvre, and it is achieved only through zoopoiesis.

Utopian Ants and “the labours of *holganza*”

Porque parece mentira paints Remadrín's labour panorama in just a few strokes. What little promising work exists locally is in public employment and, insofar it is distributed and appointed by the town's mayor, comes at the price of wholly submitting to and abetting his corrupt ways. Outside this, all other waged work pays so little that Cecilia's sons consider it no better than charity, and it is this lack of economic prospects that mobilizes them politically.⁶⁹ Conrado Lúa, the ant man, is himself a disgruntled ex-employee of a local political leader. He comes to Remadrín to shed light on the nature of the massacre at the heart of the novel out of vengeance and resentment at being pushed out into this dire landscape. Beyond political employment and exploitative wages, the only stated promise of work

68 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 207–8.

69 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 20.

exists at the other side of the border, in the United States. But even this is not readily available. One of the novel's many characters, Dora Ríos, crossed the border once, but, after struggling to get there, it all came to naught: "They couldn't find work. They begged and otherwise — with anguish — they slept out in the open wherever they felt tired. Besides: illegal immigrants dodging border patrol, with no English, what could they really expect?"⁷⁰ As Codebò has noted, in the novel, "[p]owerless characters who plan to emigrate to the United States experience all the difficulties of crossing the border illegally, while [characters with political and economic power] seem to encounter no problem whatsoever."⁷¹ Despite this lack of opportunities, in Remadrín, like everywhere else, work continues to be the primary means by which individuals are integrated into economic, social, political, and familial systems.⁷²

Even the novel's main sluggard, Cecilia's husband Trinidad, who has avoided work his whole life and inherited all that he has, hypocritically preaches the importance of industriousness to his sons at one point, falsely claiming that it had cost the family "a lot of work" to overcome poverty, build their house, and open their corner store ("tienda de abarros").⁷³ Everybody in the room, including Trinidad himself, is aware of the fiction, and yet he cannot avoid reproducing the moralism of industriousness.⁷⁴

Sada's ants, guided by their labours of *holganza*, interrupt this dogma of work. Their presence captures the joint imagination of idle characters — the distracted narrator, Conrado, recently fired from his job, and Cecilia, a bored, distraught citizen — and offers a brief and minuscule utopia. In its brevity, the ants' labour of *holganza* hints at a particular strain of the expansive and variegated archive of what Weeks calls the tradition of the refusal of work. Paul Lafargue

70 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 93. "No conseguían trabajo. Pordioseaban y aparte — con angustia — dormían al aire libre donde les daba sueño. Además: ilegales huyendo de la migra, sin mascar el inglés, ¿qué podían esperar?"

71 Codebò, *Novels of Displacement*, 120.

72 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 8.

73 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 113.

74 Sada, *Porque parece mentira*, 32.

(1842–1911), Karl Marx’s son-in-law and co-founder of the first French socialist party, was an early precursor. In his most famous pamphlet, *The Right to Be Lazy* (1898), he condemned all work performed in capitalist society, which was but “the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity”.⁷⁵ Against the imperatives of industriousness and productivism, he offered the practice of the “virtues of laziness”, and posited laziness as the “mother of the arts and noble virtues”.⁷⁶ Lafargue’s pamphlet insisted, however briefly, on the need to “return” man to his primitive animality, conceptualizing the human as, essentially inoperative and without purpose, or, in the words of Giorgio Agamben, “the Sabbatical animal par excellence”.⁷⁷ Whereas Marx saw animals “as instinct-driven, uncreative, and unselfconscious—the mirror image of unalienated humans”,⁷⁸ Lafargue’s pamphlet did the opposite, casting the animal as the outside of capitalist consciousness. Lafargue argued that the moral obfuscation with labour “atrophied” “the primitive animal”, and short-circuited its capacity to understand that laziness was the natural state of man.⁷⁹ It was up to proletariat, he insisted, to “make of the human animal a free being”.⁸⁰ For this reason, he yearned for the day when the working class would free itself from the vices of work and rise up, “not to demand the Rights of Man, which are but the rights of capitalist exploitation, not to demand the Right to Work which is but the right to misery, but, to forge a brazen law forbidding any man to work more than three hours a day”. If that day were to come, he writes, “the earth, the old earth, trembling with joy would feel a new universe leaping within her.”⁸¹

The world of laziness envisioned by Lafargue is pleurably purposeless, teeming with entertainment, with the killing of time, “which kills us second by second;” a world with “shows and theatrical

75 Lafargue, *Right to Be Lazy*, 11.

76 Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, 58.

77 Agamben, *The Kingdom and The Glory*, 246.

78 Peterson, “The Zoological Marx”, 20.

79 Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, 12.

80 Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, 13.

81 Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, 56.

performances always and always”.⁸² For Kathi Weeks, Lafargue’s refusal of work is not a call for the abolition of productive activity *per se*, but a refusal to make work “the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production”.⁸³ Such refusal, in Lafargue and others, entailed “a reduction of work, in terms of both hours and social importance, and a replacement of capitalist forms of organization by new forms of cooperation”.⁸⁴ Sada’s ants, in their stated nonchalance (“[t]heir favourite concept would be ‘nonchalance’, but also ‘attitude’”, the narrator tells us), are very much creatures that are imagined to exist within a context similar to this refusal of work. Far from the “atrophies” of capitalist imperatives, they are committed to the notion of *holganza* in its most active sense, as a suspension of work, as a condition closer to idleness than to leisure.

Yet, before moving to the question of *holganza*, it is important to note that Sada’s emphasis on the *how* or the *means*, on the “nonchalance” or “attitude” of formic activity is not tangential or secondary to the *what*, or content, of the labours of *holganza*. In his subjunctive formulation, Sada could be said to approach Agamben’s modal ontology, according to which a life “cannot be separated from its form”, a life in “which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself”.⁸⁵ For Agamben, understanding human life necessitates, on the one hand, acknowledging its essential inoperativity, its purposelessness, the “radical being-without-work of human communities”.⁸⁶ On the other, it requires appreciating that “the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all, *power*”.⁸⁷ The ants’ labours of *holganza* are not articulated through a combative or oppositional stance, but through their nonchalant attitude, the casual and calm acknowledgment of the facticity of the how and what of these labours.

82 Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, 53.

83 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 99.

84 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 99.

85 Agamben, *Means Without End*, 4.

86 Agamben, *Means Without End*, 141.

87 Agamben, *Means Without End*, 4.

For Agamben, inoperativity also has a use. In fact, what is in question in “inoperativity” is the “capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative—a power, function, a human operation—without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them”.⁸⁸ Sada’s formic parenthesis suspends, for a subjunctive moment, the functional logic of the productivism of capitalist imperative; it renders it inoperative, and offers the labours of *holganza* as a new logic. The ants’ nonchalance could, perhaps, offer a position from which to articulate what Agamben has called “a form-of-life”, “the revocation of all tactical vocations, which deposes them and brings them into an internal tension in the same gesture in which it maintains itself and dwells in them”.⁸⁹

Agamben writes that if idleness “return[s] ceaselessly in the dreams and political utopias of the Occident”, it is because it functions as an enigmatic relic that gestures towards the inoperative essence of humankind.⁹⁰ Sada’s “labours of *holganza*” are an articulation of this tenacious idleness—as opposed to productive or contemplative leisure—which Western philosophical traditions have consistently interpreted as moral disintegration, non-productivity, self-alienation, and so forth. To speak of idleness freed from these restraints, while preserving its currency as a functional concept and a phenomenological experience, philosopher Brian O’Connor suggests a threefold approach focusing on its phenomenological features, its effective dimension, and its structure. Described phenomenologically, idleness can be understood as a state “experienced as unfocused and only vaguely, if at all, as purposeful”; as “restful and pleasurable”; and as a “sense of freedom throughout the duration of idle behaviour: a feeling of noncompulsion and drift”.⁹¹ Approached with an eye to its effective dimensions, O’Connor holds that the activities which happen during an idle period are, by definition, non-productive. “Should an interesting thought, of value to ongoing or future projects, arise

88 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 273.

89 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 277.

90 Agamben, *The Kingdom and The Glory*, 246.

91 O’Connor, *Idleness*, 5.

during idleness it is a serendipitous outcome”, he writes.⁹² In this sense, it is not a moment of irrationality or mindlessness. Idle drift allows for conceptual components, judgements, as well as an awareness of action even if accompanied with a disregard for overall ends and purposes. The emphasis on the effective dimension of idleness makes it possible to address the ways in which it is ultimately inoperative in that it is not bound to the imperative to “make something of oneself, even in bad faith”.⁹³ For O’Connor, idleness jettisons any structure of choice, any reflexivity, and is experienced not as autonomy, with its social injunctions, but as “freedom in a context, a knowing indifference — and an implicit resistance — to specific recommendations about how one ought to live”.⁹⁴

Beyond individual choice, beyond the laborious work of self-determination, the zoopoetic encounter between Conrado/Cecilia and the ants offers the novel the possibility to conceive, “by means of the animal”, an estranged, collective reality in which the seemingly contradictory concept of “the labours of *holganza*” serves as a sort of instinctive and inoperative organizational norm, as a potential form-of-life. The ants’ existential activity, in this sense, is neither irrational, mindless, or alienated, as Marx would have it. But neither is it essentially productive, inspirational, or reproductive. It just *is*, even if it seems like a lie. In other words, “the labours of *holganza*” become, then, a kneejerk and desperate attempt at fleetingly and subjunctively conceptualizing freedom as an activity, a freedom that is beyond the political freedoms peddled by the novel’s politicians, beyond liberalism’s individualistic conceptions of freedom, and beyond “philosophers’ freedom” understood as rational self-determination.⁹⁵ The subjunctive refabulation catalysed by the zoopoetic encounter with the ant indexes the utopian possibility of the potential fact of a collective life organized beyond scarcity, labour and capitalism, beyond what so far has constituted human sociality.

92 O’Connor, *Idleness*, 6.

93 O’Connor, *Idleness*, 6.

94 O’Connor, *Idleness*, 180.

95 O’Connor, *Idleness*, 172.

A Conclusion

For Catherine Parry, it might be the case that the “form and narrative strategies of the modern novel” are inextricable from a “particular conception of the modern human” and, thus, “anthropocentric by nature”, incapable of reaching “non-anthropocentric animal protagonists”.⁹⁶ But she also believes in and considers the possibility of novelistic narratives that forego the attempt to render authentically “non-human sensory worlds”, and instead articulate a “critical [form] of anthropomorphism” to engage with the multispecies cohabitation of the world and undo exceptionalist anthropocentrism.⁹⁷ Sada’s scene with the ants belongs to the critical strain of this tradition. It articulates its critical anthropomorphism by embracing a subjunctive mode that both records the indicative existence of the ants, its process of zoopoiesis, and, only then, launches into an anthropomorphic fabulation lodged and contained within the limits of its subordinate clauses. In so doing, it suggests that, perhaps, the literary indexing of interspecies interaction, the “event on the ground” of zoopoiesis, is not necessarily found in the novel *per se*, i.e. in its plot, but rather in the brief, autonomous digressions often found and contained in its pages. Plot, in the words of Frederick, is the “regulatory system that assures any digressive deviation is accounted for”.⁹⁸ The (plotted) novel is inevitably “dominated by the superego of continuity, a superego of evolution, history [and] filiation”, which semantically and psychologically impoverishes all incident to the pull of the story, the imposition of character, and the coherence of the whole.⁹⁹ It might indeed be the case that plotted narrative is anthropocentric by nature, as Parry says of the novel form, in that the gravitational forces of intention, identity, and teleology cannot help but anthropomorphize all life.

As such, digression offers a tool to suspend and pry open the anthropomorphic force exerted by plotment. Taken as a small literary

⁹⁶ Parry, *Other Animals*, 66.

⁹⁷ Parry, *Other Animals*, 66.

⁹⁸ Frederick, Samuel. “Re-reading Digression”, 16.

⁹⁹ Barthes, *Grain of the Voice*, 132.

form, it allows for an encounter, however brief, with non-human sensory worlds. As a result, it has the potential to beget utopian form, as it does in Sada's novel. In *Porque parece mentira*, once this brief zoopoetic instance ends, the narrator once more reduces ants to their alterity and facticity and forgets them, but not before making them bite Conrado. That bite, a humorous resolution typical of the novel's narrator, registers the insects' existence beyond fabulation precisely at the point when they are left behind by a narrative that once more gives in to the gravitational pull of plot.

In *Porque parece mentira*, the slippery nature of the digression, the fact that it is not immediately clear to whom the brief daydream can be ascribed — to Conrado who observes the ants, to Cecilia who observes Conrado observing the ants, or to the loquacious narrator, who permits and indulges in the distraction — generates the sense that, for however long, the “event on the ground” *happens* to all of them. The sudden, strange sight of semiotically unencumbered miniature life seizes all three in an instance of zoopoiesis that forgets story, suspends the pull of plot, and brackets the corruption and murder and *ennui* which portend a life without respite or future. This moment becomes utopian simply because it cuts through all of the contextual darkness and noise, and acknowledges the existence of other lifeforms and, with it, the existence of other inoperative forms of living.

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