Termite Cities

Alfred Emerson and Eleanor Fish's illustrated children's book *Termite City* (1937) was one of only a few books published that aimed to arouse curiosity about termites and their special behaviour. With 35 woodcuts by artist Keith Ward illustrating the text, the book wasn't only an educational pursuit, but like all questions that drive good research, it was also a celebration of a topic beloved by the authors.

There are over 2,000 species of termites, all with specific habitats and behaviours. While a few species garner the bulk of human interest because of their destructive work on manmade structures, the multitudes work quietly in the background – or underground – doing earth-essential work as the only organisms capable of digesting and decomposing cellulose. This knowledge should be a consolation and an inspiration. The essential work of termites, not unlike the human work of cleaners, builders, maintenance crew, archaeologists, archivists, and even artists digging in, often goes unnoticed. But once the work is finished, it is rendered visible, and thus capable of appreciation.

Termites first captured my attention after reading Lisa Margonelli's book *Underbug* (2018). While re-introducing termites to the popular imagination, Margonelli recognizes termites as unloved insects, commonly perceived as pests and pernicious destroyers. Unlike ants or bees, termites aren't often featured in children's cartoons or books, and few adults grow to love or understand them. While they look a little like ants, live in colonies, and have many of the same behaviours, they actually depart from the same evolutionary line as cockroaches. Termites are hard to categorize, and like many social insects, they present a challenge to researchers from various fields. Amongst Alfred Emerson's contributions to science, which go well beyond the authorship of *Termite City*, he is respected for the concept of the 'superorganism', as well as the ground-breaking differentiation of taxonomic groups – where he revised existing classifications to be based more on behavioural traits of the organism (such as nest-building habits) rather than appearance. You are, to some degree anyway, what you make.

The great diversity of termite species means that some do indeed create problems for property owners because they subsist on wood structures like support beams. Meanwhile, others live underground, or in mud tunnels, and yet others build incredible air-conditioned mounds in a rather mysterious relationship with a specific fungus. As for local termite colonies in Rome, I've been told colonies are still active, and some of them do occasionally cause damage to cultural artefacts, but many landlords and officials deny their presence as a way of safeguarding the value of their property or land, giving an inaccurate picture of the local urban ecology.

What draws me to termites are not only their shape-shifting, mysterious ways, and incredible adaptations, but also the inkling that they hold the key to answering a question that Margonelli, and evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis keep circling back to: it's a philosophical question – how can we define what one termite is, when a single organism is helpless without the network of its colony and environmental resources? Dr. J. Scott Turner, biologist, termite specialist and author of *The Extended Organism* (2002), wrote about the "superorganism's fuzzy boundary", referring to the indeterminate boundary between, for example, a termite mound, the breeze blowing through it, a fungi cultivated by the termites, and the termites themselves. He asks, "where does 'animate' end and 'inanimate' begin?" Reframed in human terms, what are the borders between our residential architecture and underground metro lines, for instance – and ourselves?

Having been cautioned about drawing parallels between termite colony activity and human activity, I'm still trying to avoid making too many comparisons or taking the view that human societies might correspond to insect colony life with societal implications regarding division of labour and non-hierarchical chains of command. When the renowned ant researcher Dr. Deborah Gordon confronted this problem in the essay *Colonial Studies* (2010), she concluded that we can't expect to learn much about human behaviour by studying ants, but we can instead learn about the dynamics of networks. Her conclusion reminds me as an artist and writer, that easy or seemingly obvious parallels can't serve us in the work of making metaphors, but they can illuminate other, hidden relationships. Artistic research is a part of that equation: it is my work not only to produce images or speculative scenarios, but to create and define new, different, and unexpected contexts.

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