2016

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Shiamin Kwa
Bryn Mawr College, skwa@brynmawr.edu

Citation

Kwa, S. 2016. "Comics at the Surface: Michael DeForge's Ant Colony." Word & Image 32.4: 340-359.

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Shiamin Kwa
Assistant Professor on the Jye Chu Lectureship in Chinese Studies
East Asian Languages and Cultures
Bryn Mawr College
101 N. Merion Avenue
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
United States of America

Office Phone: 1-610-526-5671
Office Fax: 1-610-526-7479
Email: skwa@brynmawr.edu

Abstract and keywords

The comics artist and illustrator Michael DeForge published his first graphic novel, *Ant Colony*, in 2014. The sophisticated combination of verbal and visual storytelling in his work has earned him the admiration of readers and critics alike, and makes him one of the most compelling practitioners of the "literary comic." This essay applies surface reading theory to reading contemporary comics, also referred to as graphic narratives or novels, taking the work of Michael DeForge as its case study. It analyzes *Ant Colony* as a work of narrative art, and also as a theory of narrative art that draws our attention to the process of surface reading: whether to the surfaces of bodies, the surfaces of language, or the surface of the comic book page. Running counter to a close reading practice that assumes that a deeper meaning is hidden in the text, DeForge's work redirects the reader's eye to the form of the text itself. This redirection posits an open acceptance, and scrutiny, of the surface: close reading through attention to form.

Keywords: Michael DeForge, surface, *Ant Colony*, literary comics, graphic narratives, exoskeleton

Biographical Note

Shiamin Kwa is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures and Comparative Literature at Bryn Mawr College, where she holds the Jye Chu Lectureship in Chinese Studies. This essay is part of a larger project on contemporary graphic narratives and reading at the surface.

For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man, which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time, and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realized that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite.

Samuel Beckett[1]

To read Michael DeForge's graphic narrative *Ant Colony* properly means to reread it, and one would do well to reread it by starting in the middle. Originally serialized as a weekly web comic called "Ant Comic," the comic began on September 5, 2011, and was completed February 24, 2013, totaling fifty-four installments. It was subsequently published as a hardcover book titled *Ant Colony* by Drawn and Quarterly (D & Q) in 2014, with each web page split into two-page facing spreads of unnumbered pages.[2] *Ant Colony* continues the themes and preoccupations present in many of DeForge's shorter-form works, played out by creatures that merge the visual economy and playfulness of animated cartoons, and an aesthetic and storytelling style that is both stunning and deeply strange. *Ant Colony* dips in and out of a series of subplots involving a society of black ants whose lives are constantly imperiled by a war with red ants; a more diffuse threat of poisonous foods and predators alike; and an even more ineffable threat of spiritual malaise, uncertainty, and melancholy that haunts the protagonists of this series. Their situation playfully engages the ways that humans think of the smallness of their lives as if they were

ants, as expressed in the epigraph from Beckett. Playing on the ways that humans liken themselves to ants, *Ant Colony* likens ants to humans, giving them human faces, postures, and language.

The plot of *Ant Colony* is borne out in the peregrinations of a varied cast of black ants, with a few too many legs and a centaur-like carriage. *Ant Colony* is inhabited by a host of creatures who primarily function as threats to the ants' continued survival, such as gleefully negligent and manic bus-like centipedes that zoom through crowds, and dog-faced spiders who seek to consume anything that moves. Among them there are a variety of main characters, with the most prominent plotline concerning a prophet-like boy ant named Topher and his sociopath father. *Ant Colony* also features an emotionally incompatible ant couple (one with a red face, and the other with a white face), whose troubled relationship is creeping towards its conclusion. There is a somnolent, hungry, and enormously grotesque queen—the most anthropomorphic of all the creatures—whose whole existence is based on being fed and inseminated in order to produce more ants. Over the course of *Ant Colony,* she flourishes, then weakens, dies, and decomposes. Auxiliary members of this cast include a swarm of friendly and mystical bees, a police investigator ant who heads a crime-solving subplot, and an "infertile" handmaiden ant who may be the last hope for the revival of the colony at book's end. In addition to facing the demise of their colony when the apple core eventually falls apart, the colony also encounters a fierce battle with teeming masses of menacing and undifferentiated red ants drunk

on spider milk along the way. By the end of the book, having managed to survive the apocalyptical destruction of their colony, a few remaining ants—the prophet child Topher, the red-faced ant, and a police officer ant, muddle along towards a potential new beginning, along with the handmaiden ant and an orphaned red ant baby.

Ant Colony is intentionally episodic, focusing on the cyclical patterns of life and death that surround us. The chiastic structure of the text, resembling an X-shape, draws attention to these oppositions of time and space. One cannot be in both before and after, both above and below, both inside and outside; but one also cannot use one category to define the other. Original and copy, beginning and end, inside and outside, small and large, are all categories engaged within *Ant Colony*; but the text cautions that, in real life, we cannot access both sides simultaneously. By illustrating each of these categories from "both sides," DeForge suggests that our situatedness necessarily limits us to one side or the other of any given situation. The appropriate response to this condition is to think as closely as we can to the borders between them. We should think, that is, at the level of surface.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* in 2009 on the topic of "Surface Reading," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus formulate a deliberate movement of resistance away from an entrenched critical reading tradition ruled by a "hermeneutics of suspicion," towards "modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths."[3] This "hermeneutics of suspicion," a reading tradition that Paul Ricoeur identified as rising from the works of Marx,

Freud, and Nietzsche, has created readers who equate critical reading skill with their ability to unearth meaning from beneath or behind the text's surface.[4] The text, it is assumed, says one thing on the surface, but says something different if one were to look deeper. Best and Marcus suggest instead a different kind of reading: "Attention to surface as a practice of critical description assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them…The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself."[5] Comics, as a visual medium that harnesses the power of word and image, has a lot to say about itself. DeForge's comics, especially, compulsively test surfaces. Surfaces of terrain, bodies, and the pages themselves, are probed and explored; yet they only reveal another impenetrable surface or, worse, an inscrutable mess. The surface meaning described by DeForge is one where the meaning inherent in the text is not hidden or other than itself. Instead, it follows Gadamer's redefinition of the symbol, where "the particular represents itself as a fragment of being that promises to complete and make whole our own fragmentary life."[6]

In his call for a more bodily approach (a "somaesthetics") to the study of aesthetics that critiques the emphasis on what lies beneath, Richard Shusterman does not deny the value of excavating depths, but does assert that aesthetics has historically overplayed the surface-depth binary. He suggests an alternative approach:

> The aesthetic drive toward depth attains its fulfillment only by breaking back through to the surface…the deeper logics of culture cannot fully understand or justify themselves without recognizing the power of aesthetic experience as something that sustains and helps justify these deeper cultural structures that, in turn, ground aesthetic experience.[7]

DeForge's work in the realms of art and design represent a spectrum that incorporates the handmade, the commercially printed, and the web serial, suggesting an alternative way to think aesthetically that does not measure authenticity by tangibility or reproducibility. His works attend to the meanings that are accessible from and, indeed, are part of form itself. DeForge explicitly uses two-dimensionality to claim the predominance of the surface as site of meaning, and shows that attempts to excavate truth from depths are always only guessing games.

DeForge combines his sophisticated and complex ability to render with a choice of subject—insects—for which rendering emotion or intent is innately difficult to express. *Ant Colony* as a text mirrors the structure of the microcosmic ant world, whose activities above the surface of the earth are the only observable activities from the perspective of those living at the surface or above it. By showing the reader both inside and outside, past and future, above and below, DeForge underscores the limits of knowledge for the individuals who are characters in the text. The characters' state of being, as participants in the text, are limited by their positions. Their attempts to intuit meaning from what they see around them

highlight the existential crises that arise from their failures to find those meanings. The reader, who is not part of the text, has access to knowledge that the characters do not. Made aware of the limits of these characters, the readers are invited to contemplate his own limits as well in their own "texts," or lives, and witness how easy it is to fall prey to category mistakes.

Ant Colony examines surface epistemologically: sourcing meaning from the ways that surfaces are created, maintained, and preserved. Most importantly, it scrutinizes moments where surfaces are broached, demonstrating that the broaching of surface does not imply porousness, but rather impassability. In the short stories "Someone I Know" and "Canadian Royalty," punctures, growths, and excisions serve only to reinforce the impossibility of revelation. Removed surfaces are peeled away and replaced by more surface. These comics take a profound interest in those things that can pass from one side of a barrier to the other: food and sex imply the possibility of the transit of objects from outside to in and vice versa, but in fact only underscore how these actions rely on the necessary imaginings about the interior that take the form of acts of interpretation.

The texts discussed in this essay suggest a model of reading that does not seek to dislodge interior consciousness or meaning from beneath the surface. DeForge shows the limits adhering to claims of unmasking surfaces. If anything, his texts say, even reading what is visible at the surface itself is already full of interpretive complications. Attempts to look beneath a surface yield nothing but more surface,

whether in the case of surfaces of bodies or the surfaces of language itself. The exoskeletons of ants, or myrmicinae, make surface unavoidable. The exoskeleton is just another representative of surface, making visible the lines that divide selves from the world. This essay suggests taking the exoskeleton as a model for reading, comics and otherwise, where the exterior serves as protection, boundary, and also object of interpretation: a myrmicine aesthetic. The assessment of surface is by no means a denial of internal content, but rather an acknowledgment of the limits of our access to it, and the redirection of our attention to the surface as site of meaning instead.

Starting at the Middle

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 around here, 1 above 2]

Focus and surface are the crucial operating vocabulary of *Ant Colony,* as the panels at the midpoint of the comic reveal. At the very center of the book, the human world makes its first and only appearance in *Ant Colony* in the form of a *deus-ex-machina* light beam controlled by a human, presumably a child's, hand. The human-child's hand wields a magnifying glass to kill ants. The prophet ant-child, Topher, has earlier warned of his vision of an "upside-down pyramid" that will come down upon their heads to kill them; here, finally, the source of the pyramid is revealed. The chiastic, or X-like, structure of the narrative is literalized by placing a chiastic page at the book's center. In its original iteration as the twenty-eighth image of fifty-four in the webcomic "Ant Comic," both images are balanced across a horizontal axis that mimics and functions as the lens of the magnifying glass itself. In

the printed *Ant Colony*, the page is split to show the view from above on the left page (fig. 1), and the view below in the facing page on the right (fig. 2), and these pages appear at the center of the book. Both formats allow the panels to mirror each other as they approach the axis from each side. The first panel is a full-width panel that depicts the bees in flight observing the action below with an ant's head facing out in the foreground. The second row expands the range by splitting into three panels that reveal the magnifying glass and the source of light, the sun, which shines from above the glass (fig. 1). The third row parallels the second, with three panels that now present the light from beneath the glass as it focuses into a deadly point. Finally, the bottom row again fills the width of the page, and shows the scene on the ground, as witnessed by the ant whose head appeared in the first panel (fig. 2).

The page uses the panel form to economically present a major thematic motif of *Ant Colony*, that of the limits of any individual's perspective; and it also gives the reader visual instruction on how to understand the entire text. The panels are spatially symmetrical. The lens surface seems substanceless in its transparency, yet it is utterly transformative. The hand that manipulates the glass suggests the powerful hand of a Creator who, like the artist, determines which characters will live or die. The book follows this chiastic structure as well, and continues around this central magnifying glass tableau, with the uncanny matching of scenes at equal distances from the center page.

Beyond the juxtapositions shown on the page level, the chiastic X-structure is apparent at the level of the book itself, with corresponding pages at the same distance from the center. A prominent example of this formal quality occurs when, early on in the text, an ant dies in front of the red-faced and white-faced ant lovers. He has fatally ingested a large crystal of the deadly Sweet N' Low, which DeForge imagines is fatally poisonous to ants, mistakenly taking it for sugar ("Ant Comic 4"). This scene is echoed in the page exactly corresponding to it across the central axis of the narrative, near the end of *Ant Colony* ("Ant Comic 51").[8] Now the white-faced ant himself cannot resist the allure of the crystal, even as he knows that it will kill him. He takes a bite, and falls down dead as well. The two scenes are not causally linked, and the only link is the sameness of their mirrored deaths. By suggesting a relationship between one side and the other, and also thwarting efforts to make meaningful associations from it, the structure issues a warning to proceed cautiously in reading correspondences. This is also a strategy deployed in thinking about the obvious correspondences made between ant and human bodies, suggesting that the impulse to make connections is natural, while insisting that the meanings created from these impulses are largely speculative.

Their Bodies, Our Selves

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The microcosmic ant world in DeForge's narrative fulfills Gadamer's conception of a fragment of being that bears the promise of providing completeness

to our fragmented lives. *Ant Colony* draws attention to the scale of ant bodies that take part in a thriving and varied society, that exists beneath the largely unseen human world above them. The cover of the book presents the image of the apple, on which the ants first appear to us, which is linked to the rise and fall of their colony. It also introduces us to some of the creatures that inhabit this world: the dog-headed spider lurking in the title's lettering, the head of a red ant, and the humanoid black ants, one of whom is shown divided into his constituent parts (fig. 3). The first panel of the comic also shows an apple swarmed by ants, and the second shows the apple now reduced to a core, before finally approaching the level of the ants themselves engaged in conversation (fig. 4).[9] Already, by the third panel, we are able to see DeForge's gestures to scale: whereas the first and second panels present the ants as nothing more than a mass of seething black dots, the third brings us to their level. To the ants themselves, their world is proportionally sized—beside the conversing ants, a slice of pizza lies on the ground behind them—showing how smallness may trick us into confusing closeness with depth. Seeing the ants as having individual subjectivities and personalities is not a trick of seeing *under* the surface, but actually one of seeing at their level. Yet, the first sentence uttered in the comic, in the second panel, references how tininess is an existential state more important than one that is actually visually verified: "Why does everything have to be so tiny?" asks a disembodied voice.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Beckett employed the metaphor of the termite to comment on the diminution of human subjectivity in response to the overwhelming largeness of the universe; DeForge takes contemplation of scale as a point of departure. Smallness is not a mark of meaninglessness, but yet another iteration of the absurdity of existence. Indeed, the tininess of the ant works on the level of the semaphore: when seen from a distance, its visual characteristics appear to be a readable message. The tiny dots of a line of ants resemble the ellipsis mark: three dots used in texts to tell the reader that the content replaced by them was superfluous and can be understood through context. By looking closer, and focusing in on the dots themselves, one finds that they are in fact ants, each with individual and distinct subjectivities. DeForge uses this narrative to question what can be gained from engaging with the surface if one proceeds without seeking the meaning behind or within it: look closer, not underneath or behind.

In addition to showing the tininess of their world, *Ant Colony* draws attention to the anatomy of ant bodies, whose skeletal structure is the outside casing of their body rather than an internal structure covered by flesh and skin. DeForge plays with this idea as well, showing the organs of the ants as if their black bodies were transparent, which is to say, functionally for the viewer, on the surface of their exoskeletons. By making this dystopic ant world the setting for his comic, DeForge economically articulates the question of surface and depth. The viewer, when confronted with these bodies, has to accept the role of interpretation in how these

visible organs are perceived. The bodies could be transparent, thus revealing what is "inside;" or, the bodies are not transparent, and the organs on these creatures are actually on the surface of the exoskeleton. The fact that the reader cannot tell the difference between these two possibilities, that she must come to terms with the fact that knowledge is based on interpretation of what she sees, again reinforces that "seeing inside" is an illusion facilitated by the artist. We are already so limited in our ability to understand what we can see, it suggests. Why are we already trying to look beyond that?

The ant extends the comics tradition of "funny animals," in accord with the recent post-human attention to animals, to those creatures whose distinction from humans is marked by the way that they "live on the surface" in all senses of the phrase.[10] DeForge's hybrid ants, with their distinctly human preoccupations, challenge the reader to consider less how ants are human-like than how humans are ant-like and, therefore, also "living on the surface." *Ant Colony* proceeds from a framework that recognizes Agamben's use of animal lives to draw our attention to the relationship between knowledge and the creation of an inside-outside dynamic as conceived between human and animal:

> To let the animal be would then mean: to let it be *outside of being*. The zone of nonknowledge—or of a-knowledge—that is at issue here is beyond both knowing and not knowing, beyond both disconcealing and concealing, beyond both being and the nothing. But what is thus

> left to be outside of being is not thereby negated or taken away; it is not, for this reason, inexistent. It is an existing, real thing that has gone beyond the difference between being and beings.[11]

DeForge prevents us from forgetting the body, by consistently referencing the bodily mechanisms of his characters. Making the friability of the living body the focus of its inquiry, these works scrutinize a "creaturely poetics" of the animal as "living body—material, temporal, and vulnerable" in order to push the argument that humans are more creaturely than they are willing to accept.[12]

If words are signs, do pictograms carry the same level of representation, or are they a half-step closer to the object that they represent? *Ant Colony* responds to this question implicitly, by suggesting the body's own potential as pictogram. The ant bodies, with the exception of the queen's, are uniformly sized and shaped, with only slight variations that distinguish them; yet their subjectivities are vastly different: they *mean* differently. Such speaking bodies manifest Genette's sense of *immanence,* as something that occurs within the text, rather than *transcendence,* something that occurs beyond or beneath its surface.[13] Deleuze's *immanence* articulates the model of ant life: "Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject…substance and modes are in immanence."[14] This finds its most grotesque realization in the bloated form of the subterranean queen ant, whose body is both living being and landscape, protruding with a network of passageways. As if to highlight her physical difference from the

rest of the colony, her body is explicitly presented as if glued together from disparate parts; yet, in spite of its differences, it also expresses the limits, and potential, of form (fig. 5).

The representation of the black ants' "interiority," demonstrated by human-like language and conflicts, is undermined by the parody of "interiority" that finds slapstick visual expression in bodies that simultaneously display their contents while repressing differentiation. Unlike the mutant superheroes explored by Bukatman, whose "bodily torment…expresses a desire, a need, to transcend the confines of the body, to exist as pure spirit" and "bear overdetermined inscriptions of marginality revealed in every bodily trauma and transgression," the ant bodies are the site of both spirit and self.[15] The faces typically give ants their individuality, though not via features so much as by different colors and expressions. These round visages peer out from the carapace of each black ant's head, viewing a world of seemingly limitless dangers that await at every turn. At the novel's end, when the queen and the majority of the colony are dead, the remaining ants are left to contemplate starting over as a new colony. The book closes on a note of existential inquiry. The future, that most abstracted version of the other, is unknowable, unpredictable, unreliable.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Reckless bodies are transplanted to the myrmicine world and even then disrupted and re-assembled into new bodies, enacting an "indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like."[16] Word

bubbles spring from the puzzlingly constructed body of the queen ant that coos "Mmmmm" and "Service your queen." The source of those words is unclear: the queen's head is an arrangement of an animated wide-eyed and open-mouthed grey face nestled into a much larger yellow version of a face which appears to be inanimately at rest. All of this rests atop a garishly colored body that resembles that of a naked human female more than any of the other ants in the book (fig. 5). Which is her "real" face? From whence the speaking voice? The answer is withheld. When the queen dies and her body eventually succumbs to decomposition, it is transformed again, and the remains suggest an alternate arrangement of parts that vitality had disguised. The viewer discovers then, that this body has been a construction too. Her body most resembles the spider statue constructed from the bodies of black ants killed by a rival clan, used as a decoy to lure spiders to feed their addiction to the narcotic "spider milk." Its inanimate and broken constitution simulates the vertiginous disequilibrium of imminent collapse.

In a wholly different contemplation of royalty, in one of a series of stories that dabble in fantastical Canadian creation myths and lore, DeForge again uses surfaces as site of meaning. "Canadian Royalty," featured in the *Lose* "Fashion Issue" purports to detail baroque customs of initiation for members of the Canadian aristocracy, and the rituals attending to assuming the throne.[17] Here too, as he does with the queen in *Ant Colony*, DeForge scrutinizes the multiplicity of exterior structures that transmit meaning to those who perceive them; and, again, precisely

the deliberate manufacture of those structures of meaning. Clothing and exoskeleton are functionally interchangeable here, ostensibly protecting the insides, but actually the reason for the interior's vulnerability. The inside is in danger, because the inside is actually nothing. While royal blood is the necessary initial condition for permission to attain the throne, it is clear that the subsequent processes are all the result of manipulation, dissolution, and reconstruction of the royals' exteriors.

[Insert Figure 6 around here]

As with the ants in *Ant Colony*, the mythical royals of "Canadian Royalty" are identified by their very unidentifiability. Not only are they barely differentiated to begin with, they are also then subjected to the intentional and continual stripping of their bodies that removes any residual distinguishing characteristics (fig. 6). The comic describes a deliberate procedure where physical features are planed and smoothed such that the bodies are rendered completely featureless. The lack of features is then replaced with a royal garment "unique to its wearer [that] can only be removed upon death," which are highly ornamented confections of exoskeletal textile. The faces are naked, but they too are stripped of all expression. The delightfully outlandish variations that result remind us of the mundane ways that we inhabit our own costumes, costumes that we construct by manipulating textiles as well as musculature. "Canadian Royalty" demands consideration of the expectations we apply to royal bodies, celebrities, and indeed ourselves, influenced by "fashion issues" that are perhaps less direct and honest about how we rely on these outer

selves as substitutes for self-generated subjectivity. The argument is most explicit here in "Canadian Royalty": the costume, the exoskeleton, *is* the person, giving the appearance of individuality to the questionable substance within. As the text later explains: "If a royal ever undresses, he or she is stripped of his or her title."[18] DeForge postulates bodies as chrysalids: hard exteriors purporting to contain a life *form*, but in reality containing nothing except life-rich but anomic liquid in a state of becoming, rather than of being.

In *Ant Colony*, the young child Topher is goaded by his father into taking an earthworm as a pet. Significantly, the father's sociopathic behavior is demonstrated with behavior that has to do with two related themes: what one does when no one is watching, and the willful trespass of boundaries. In "Ant Comic 16" while exploring the underground tunnels with the red-faced ant, who stays behind when his lover joins a search party to investigate a murder, he suggests: "Most of the cops are out in that party, too. We could commit a crime and nobody would know. We could tear these egg sacs and let the pupae die…thousands of future ant workers snuffed out in an instant, and nobody could stop us."[19] Two panels later, when he is alone, that is precisely what he does. Later in the novel, he again broaches a boundary when he sucks the liquid from a cocoon. This behavior is one that we learn, on the penultimate page, has been a lifelong preoccupation. The father describes Topher as an infant, confiding in a monologue as he rides away into the horizon on the back of an earthworm: "I remember him as an infant, watching him sleep—so tranquil and

relaxed. I'd get frustrated seeing him like that. I'd shake him awake in half hour intervals. I'd like to think he's now tougher for it. He began to look different asleep…his body was coiled, alert, reactive."[20]

The directive to cut up the earthworm precipitates the conversion of the son from innocent child to innocent prophet. The child is encouraged to slice an earthworm into eternally smaller pieces, and discovers that the pieces have each become individual earthworms. Told by his father to carry a piece around with him, he quickly becomes frustrated by the constant "Ha ha ha" huffing of the earthworm he has brought home, which appears to laugh at him. The child pulverizes it in a blender and inadvertently inhales a whole host of earthworm particles, each particle, his father explains, with its own individual life force. The child attracts the interest of a bee, who rescues him and brings him to his friends, who all participate in decorating him with pollen. The new identity renders the boy alien to his father, and precipitates their estrangement. DeForge asserts how surface transformation, though perhaps related indirectly to an internal transformation, is definitive: the different face *means* differently.

"Canadian Royalty" and its undifferentiated royal children, is suggestive of the ways that underneath our carefully constructed exteriors, we are infinitely neutral, lacking distinctiveness or meaning. The beauty generated on the surface evokes Agamben:

> That nudity and beauty cannot be clarified does not…mean that they contain a secret that cannot be brought to light. Such an appearance would be mysterious, but precisely for this reason it would not be an envelopment, since in this case one could always continue to search for the secret that is hidden within it. In the inexplicable envelopment, on the other hand, there is no secret; denuded, it manifests itself as pure appearance.[21]

The hopefuls for the throne are subjected to a battery of tests and competitions in preparation for selection to hold both title and the decoration that combines both nudity and surface ornament. DeForge renders the competing royals in a way that visually recalls the icons of running children on street signs or the rounded figures on restroom signs, blankly devoid of distinguishing feature. The limited indications of individual characteristics paradoxically facilitate the viewer's identification: we identify with them because of how little they look like anyone specific. If the lack of specificity increases readability, and the baroquely individuated costumes of clothing or body manipulation that are aspired towards in "Canadian Royalty" signal the exclusiveness of individuation, the implications for communication with the other are stunning: surface is meaning's repose, and the viewer's interpretation is all there is.

On Consumption and Excretion

DeForge's preoccupation with surface frequently manifests as attention to the way that substances enter and exit the body, marking the inevitability of surface

barrier. In his story titled "Someone I Know," the protagonist, David, eats a strange fruit at a club and wakes up with his head shaved and a steel stud growing from his forearm.[22] An x-ray at the doctor's office reveals the doctor's diagnosis: that a kind of fungal infection has transformed his insides to resemble nothing less than the S&M costumes worn by the clientele at an exclusive nightclub he had attended the night before with a new girlfriend. The doctor informs him that his organs are now coated with a "thin layer of armor." The moment of transformation is again deliberately obscured. What is clear is that David has somehow participated in an experience that has taken the metaphorical and made it literal: the transformation of knowledge, the eating of strange fruit, reverses the constituent parts of the previous night.

The club experience of putting on black leather bondage gear that masks identity morphs into the converse state of having one's entire interior wrapped with a protective surface. Now the body becomes the mask that covers the leather insides. In both cases, David struggles with the unknowability of experience: he struggles to understand what has happened to him, he struggles to recognize an ex-girlfriend, he does not comprehend the hostility of the new girlfriend. When he rescues a similarly leather-covered dog at the end of the story, the dog's zipper catches on David's friable skin, revealing the leather and studded surface beneath. This moment may be read as a lyrical, literally ornamented, manifestation of the other more quotidian experiences of revelation and mystification that David has encountered in his hypnagogic state. Our perception of others is limited to those things that we can see,

and yet we are so frequently unsure of what we have seen. We the readers see David eat the fruit—DeForge depicts the moment of entrance of the fruit into the body with a cross-section of a mouth with the fruit between the teeth—but whether or not it was the fruit that enacted the transformation is impossible to verify.

The eating, the inhalation, the sexual exchanges of fluid, are all elementally charged with the most dramatic kinds of transformation, but the mechanics of those transformations are not outwardly visible. We read only the signs and intuit the relationship between those signs and what has gone in. The threat of disease, the creation of a child, the degenerative and the regenerative, all include the mystery of something passing from the outside world to interiors. The exact moment when the infection takes hold, or when the cells become a body, are submerged by a thickness that is less affected by the physical, although the physical does apply, than it is affected by the experiential. We feel the transformations as instances, but only because we are not able to witness the process itself; we may witness the substance's entrance, and later witness the changed exterior, and the meaning we give to that sequence is interpretive.

Ant Colony is a record of such ingestions, from the swarmed apple that begins the novel, to the chunks of meat harvested from a recently killed centipede, to the fatally irresistible crystals of Sweet n' Low scattered about the ground. The transformation of the small ant-boy after his inhalation of earthworm particles, discussed above, may be immediately followed by a violent physical reaction, but the

more significant changes to his subjectivity are gradual. This is a version of the anxieties attached to disease and aging. Breathing, eating, and sex are essential to survival, but are also highly dangerous, as they expose the most vulnerable and unseen parts of ourselves to perils that conduct their business out of our sight. They operate using the same mechanisms, in that they involve permissive entrance. The diligence and careful calculations with which we regulate what we allow into our bodies betrays not only the fear of letting in microscopic intruders, but also a confirmation of how little we know about what happens once they have entered. We may be small, it says, but there are not only always dangers larger than us, but always dangers that are smaller, too.

The monstrous body of the Queen Ant in *Ant Colony* is the ultimate site of consumption. Mother to all, but immobilized by her vocation, she relies on a series of sterile handmaidens and workers to see to her needs. They feed her, entering her outspread body with edibles like freshly discovered centipede carcasses. The ants fertilize her as well, dutifully depositing semen to continue producing more of themselves. Near story's end, when the depleted population fails to feed her and she begins to deteriorate, she becomes their source of nutrition, too. The boy's sociopath father defies the queen's authority by depositing urine instead of semen on her, then exposes her to a group of deformed children that he has discovered and freed during his explorations. He taunts her: "I brought these kids! They don't have anyone to take care of them either. They're going to eat you a little bit! Ho ho ho ho ho!"[23] The

total reversal occurs, however, only because of the constancy of the axis on which it can be reversed: the boundary of the body's surface remains, even as the actions against it are upended.

The same preoccupations apply with *Ant Colony*'s observations about what bodies produce: vomit, excrement, milk, semen, and pheromones all combine to demonstrate the limits of our understanding of what might be on the other side of the creature in front of us. Our predictive faculties of interpretation are exercised when we consider the potential effects of putting something into the body; excretions from the body are conversely taken as omens, indicators of what might be happening inside. Sex is frequently rendered as tangled threads that surround mating creatures, a visual trope employed by DeForge in other works. The mechanics are crudely and efficiently diagrammed, and protruding tubes find harbors in receptive orifices. Rather than simulating a sense of intimacy, these scenes are firmly mechanistic. Parts are fitted together wordlessly, spindly appendages are extended, intertwine, and fit into orifices; surplus liquid oozes on to the ground. The connection between sex and death becomes even more pronounced in the juxtaposition of sex between the bees and the decomposition of that most sexual creature of the colony, the queen, with each panel as a full facing page in *Ant Colony*.[24] What comes out must rightly be thought to be a part of the one who created it, but how the relationship between exudate and originating source is measured is unclear. After the boy ant inhales the earthworm smoothie, he vomits on the ground.

When the bees cover him in pollen, they too regurgitate substances to coat him. Is the exudate part of the being that created it or its own individual being and, if the latter, at what point does it become an independent being?

[Insert Figures 7 and 8, 7 directly above 8, around here]

Departures from the body frequently take liquid and solid form in these comics, but *Ant Colony* reminds us of the varieties of invisible things that both carry meaning and that exude from bodies. When the boy's father encounters him after he has been decorated by the bees, he not only notices that he looks different, but that he smells different. Similarly, in a scene between the two lovers, they have a conversation where the spoken words do not carry the emotional freight that literally hangs in the air, unspoken, as they balance precariously on the cusp of a breakup (fig. 7). While they discuss the one's intense pursuit of justice against a recent spate of red ant crimes, the red-faced ant squirts pheromones that spell out feelings that he does not verbalize.[25] His is an invisible gesture, the sign that can only be known if received; but the signals are ignored, intentionally or not, and neither sound nor smell are acknowledged by his partner. The last three panels on the page slowly document the absorption of these particles into the air, as they become smaller and smaller (fig. 8). These pages mirror the disintegrated earthworm particles that were inhaled earlier; perhaps here, too, one might optimistically surmise that though the feeling is lost, it never really goes. Nevertheless, the void between the two ants is made literal in this scene, pointing to how much is lost between two who are

physically capable, but psychologically incapable, of communicating with each other. Even when they face each other, the Levinasian apprehension of the other is emotionally oblique.

Towards a Myrmicine Aesthetic: Ant Comics as Reading Lesson

The comics form creates an intimate relationship between artist and reader by merging the mechanical with the tactile experience. Combined in this medium are remembrances of facture and the artist's hand with a readerly phenomenology that includes page-turning and book-holding.[26] The text is mechanically reproduced, in large volume, yet it unquestionably bears the visible traces of the artist's hand all over it. It still has its aura. The "depth" of its facture is removed by the facts of its reproduction, and yet we recognize the readability of this text. Comics, recognizable not just for the style of plot or language as one would expect from a book, but also for the visual style that is accomplished by the artist's representational style and hand lettering, has the quality of the handwritten message. That is, the content of the message and the way that it is written are both functionally identifiable. Like a signature, comics attend to material surfaces and reinforce our attention to surface form. Thierry Groensteen writes in the final chapter of *Comics and Narration*:

> Comics and contemporary art differ in their *essence* [*essentiellement*]. The works of visual artists, hung on walls, generally produce an effect of monumentality…in comics, the drawing never reigns supreme and does not

> pursue its own ends; since it serves a higher *design*, it is bound by a narrative project, by some kind of story.[27]

Groensteen's claims about genre have been complicated by David Herman and Bart Beaty, who do not draw the same lines of distinction between comics and art.[28] The small format, the invitation to keep looking and, most significantly, the emphasis on an insistently two-dimensional surface, define comics and, significantly, the everyday visual culture of our age. Discussions of the relationship between image and word that attempt to parse a hierarchy neglect a fundamental claim in process here: word and image operate on the same plane.

The readings in this essay suggest a way to read that is modeled on ant bodies. The paraphernalia of our age is telegraphed in "more or less explicit and codified ideograms (on road signs, maps and tourist guides), sometimes in ordinary language."[29] The language of road signs, maps, and tourist guides deploys the language of comics, which readily facilitates international communication, and expressly considers the work of the viewer in creating meaning, "complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it."[30] Scott McCloud call this mode of collaboration "closure," and defines it as "the agent of change, time and motion…comics panels fracture both time and space [and] allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality."[31] The form has become enough of a convention that it has been adopted as an internationally recognized format for texts ranging from furniture assembly diagrams to airplane

emergency instructions. It is not only the wordless panel style, but other conventions of the comics that are assumed: the passage of time or action, for example, or the text's assumption that the reader will fill in the "gaps" when faced with multiple frames.[32] Reliance on the narrative power of a fairly stable set of icons is so conventional to us that a contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing, can exclusively use sequences of codified ideograms to narrate a 112-page novel that redefines our ideas of literacy and, indeed, language.[33]

But while the comics form certainly enables the simplification of communication, artists like DeForge have also pushed its limits to create sophisticated and intricate texts that take advantage of the different valences of address that comics allow, and use the form of the page and the arrangements of the page as a system of communication as well. The texts by DeForge are works of narrative art that also theorize narrative art. Fulfilling Mieke Bal's claim that "a theoretically strong work of art (one that proposes its own theory) has something to contribute to the way we look at art—at this particular piece, at others 'like it,' at art in general,"[34] Deforge's comics art challenges and deconstructs the process of reading by focusing on the borders of bodies: bodies that he draws in the text, as well as to the surfaces of the comics pages. The ant, whose exoskeleton functions both to protect interiors and to physically describe itself, is an analogue for this process of sourcing meaning at the surface, with no access to the interior and no assistance from the beyond. The myrmicine aesthetic represents a direct rebuke to

surface-depth hierarchies, in favor of an embrace of surfaces as the location for interpretation.

The phenomenology of reading comics is understood best as a communication between surfaces, and those surfaces, whether word or image, are freighted with meaning. In short, we might reconsider Groensteen's proposed differentiation of *essence* between comics and contemporary art. Surface is the territory of our lives, and meaning does not reside in a subterranean unseen. What if there is no access to unmediated, interior, truths? What lies beneath are mere concatenations of surface. The result does not index temporality or hermeneutic difference; it only reminds us of how much we remain strangers to each other. Put another way, it may also remind us of how much we remain discoverable to each other. In the introduction to her book *On Meaning-Making*, Bal claims "that a sign is not a thing but a function, an event. A sign does not exist but *occurs*. A sign occurs, then, when something is perceived, for certain reasons or on certain grounds, as standing for something else to someone. It needs interpretation."[35] Whereas the sign once existed to replace the object it represented, and required that the perceiving eye interpret its presence as a representation of the absent object, comics like DeForge's suggest how the language of signs might instead familiarize us with these challenges and present us with a question: how do we pay attention to the sign alone, and not consider it as a substitute for something else?

This essay began with the image at the center of *Ant Colony* of a symmetrical structure around the midpoint of the story. The reader could imagine a pyramid resting above this line, beginning with a point of origin and widening as it approaches; and an inverted pyramid beneath that line, narrowing and coming to a fine and deadly point at its bottom. These pyramids can extend all the way in each direction, from the first page to the last. What can be made, then, of everything in between? Although *Ant Colony* suggests the characteristics of a journey narrative, the journey has produced neither resolution nor evolution. On the first page, readers are introduced to the unanswered question, and to its questioner. The dialogue is between the moribund red-faced ant and his white-faced ant lover who are part of a swarm of ants taking part in rapidly reducing the apple to its core. Standing on the surface of the apple, the red-faced ant asks, "Why does everything have to be so tiny?" and then complains: "I get so sick of this itty bitty lifestyle." His lover replies, "What are you talking about, man" (fig. 4).

[Insert Figures 9 and 10 around here]

On the last page of the book, surrounded by toxic Sweet N' Low crystals and spider web, the red-faced ant again asks a version of the question, this time of the prophet child: "So you must know how the colony turns out, right? You can see if everything works out? So what do you see?" Although he is not met with confusion, the answer is equally ambiguous:

> I dunno. Buncha stuff…maybe the cop goes crazy and kills us all. Maybe you two shack up and go gay together. Maybe we become really close and you become a father figure to me. Maybe you realize starting this whole second colony thing was a big mistake and you can't take the responsibility and you leave in the middle of the night. Maybe the red ant grows up and becomes my lover and we have weird babies together. Maybe it grows up and resents us for killing its parents. Maybe the female in the coma dies tonight. Or maybe the royal jelly we're feeding her works and she turns into a queen—fertile and fat…and we fill her with semen and she fills the colony's tunnels with new ants…and they burst out from the soil and spread across the land, just like before. Maybe the spider that's been sleeping about a metre away from us will finally walk over and eat us…or maybe it'll pass by without even noticing we're here…yeah, a bunch of stuff. Say, what's your name anyway?[36] (figs. 9 and 10)

The series of hypotheticals refuses to give way to a definite resolution at story's end, suggesting that both sides of the axis yield the same ambits of knowledge with respect to understanding what it means to be alive: from the apple—that biblical gateway to knowledge—in the beginning, to the patiently waiting spider's web at the end. The forces that create the thing and the places where the thing may go are

ultimately beyond our control, but the myrmicine aesthetic argues that looking past the surface for the answer is a conceptual error.

What if what prevents us from truly understanding another, what keeps us separate from the other, is nothing more than ourselves? We may exist as bags of fluid, or symbiotic polyps, or viral spores awaiting release, or ample reserves of purely felt love, but all that others can see are the casing. And there is nothing we can do about it. The condition is not the problem; the true problem is thinking that the condition was ever otherwise. The challenge, then, is to treat reading as an ethical choice, one that attends to the other, fully apprehending it, and to give it its full due. Unless we commit ourselves to becoming better readers, readers willing to engage with the surface, we remain completely alone.

Notes

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Grove Press, 1959), 77.

[2] Michael DeForge, *Ant Colony* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2014), n.p.

[3] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21 (at 1-2).

[4] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 1970), 356.

[5] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," 11.

[6] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32.

[7] Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3.

[8] DeForge, *Ant Colony,* n.p..

[9] Ibid. n.p. Originally on web as "Ant Comic 1."

[10] Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*, Posthumanities 17 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi.

[11] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 91–2.

[12] Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 5.

[13] Gérard Genette, *L'Oeuvre de L'art: Immanence et Transcendance* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 17.

[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2001), 26.

[15] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 71–2.

[16] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17.

[17] Michael DeForge, *Lose No. 4* (Toronto: Koyama Press, 2012) n.p..

[18] Ibid.

[19] DeForge, *Ant Colony,* n.p..

[20] Ibid, n.p.. Originally on web as "Ant Comic 53."

[21] Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 89–90.

[22] DeForge, *Lose No. 4* n.p..

[23] DeForge, *Ant Colony* n.p..

[24] Ibid., n.p.

[25] Ibid., n.p.

[26] Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[27] Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, trans. Ann Miller (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), 171–2.

[28] David Herman, "Multimodal Storytelling and Identity Construction in Graphic Narratives," in *Telling Stories: Building Bridges among Language, Narrative, Identity, Interaction, Society, and Culture*, ed. Anna de Fina (Georgetown: Georgetown University

Press, 2010), 195–208; Bart Beaty, *Comics Versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[29] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 77–8.

[30] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980), 106.

[31] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 65–7.

[32] Barbara Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* (Rochester, New York: RIT Press, 2013), 29.

[33] Bing Xu, *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

[34] Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), Preface.

[35] Mieke Bal, *On Meaning Making* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1994), 9.

[36] DeForge, *Ant Colony,* n.p.. Originally on web as "Ant Comic 54."

Acknowledgements

Parts of this essay were first shared at the Annual IAAS Conference held in April, 2015, at Trinity College, Dublin. Yvonne Chireau, Ken Koltun-Fromm, Sharrona Pearl, Nadine Knight, Brian Cremins, and Robert Roses each contributed valuable feedback on early drafts of this essay. Alicia Walker generously assumed the role of

ideal reader with her astute eye and sound judgment. I would also like to thank Michael DeForge, Koyama Press and Drawn & Quarterly Press for the generous access to the artwork.