

*On the Eastern Tent Caterpillar*

- 1 On his website “Social Caterpillars”, Terrence D. Fitzgerald informs us that “in terms of complexity of interactions, eastern tent caterpillars stand near the pinnacle of caterpillar sociality.” Continue to surf through the chunky green boxes and bright blue hyperlinks and there’s a sizeable amount of information on the eastern tent caterpillar (*Malacosoma americanum*). There are small, oddly placed images of the lifespan of this caterpillar. There’s an image of the brown mother moth, who lays 200-300 eggs aid in the fork of a rosaceous tree (such as an apple tree), and then an image of the caterpillars, newly hatched, writhing over each other as they build a silk tent.
- 2 There are sections entitled *Shelter Building*, *Thermoregulation*, *Anti-Predator Defence* and *Trail Making and Recruitment*. It’s all fascinating and there’s something comforting in knowing that there’s a website dedicated to archiving this information so anyone can brush up on their knowledge of social caterpillars. There’s an interest in both empirical and aesthetic in the study of caterpillars and moths. What’s relevant for us here is the information in *Thermoregulation* that states the metabolic heat the caterpillars produce amplify within the many layers of the silk tent.
- 3 It’s an act of communion, a social undertaking of mutual benefit. This is what tents are, a coming together to build a shelter that provides a brief moment of respite from the exterior expanse.
- 4 It’s this temporary nature that allows the tent to enact a moment of occupation and not a definitive spatial claim. The silk constructions of the eastern tent caterpillar are left as soon as the caterpillars enter the last stage of their larval life and the silver tents are abandoned across expanses of apple and cherry orchards.
- 5 Tents are places of transition, a stillness that can’t last between periods of activity. The caterpillar continues to its cocooning stage. They disperse, leave the tent, and in two weeks become moths. The tent was always just a temporary occupation, a social space that briefly refuses whatever is on the outside of its walls. It provides a roof for its inhabitants and a space for them to grow.
- 6 Lastly, the layers upon layers of spun-silk in which the caterpillars nestle open up at the tent’s apex like a hole in the sky.