

**Communicating With the Microbial Other:
Reorienting humans and microbes in polylogue**

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Abstract:

What does it mean to communicate with the trillions of microbial beings that comprise our bodies and surroundings? Microbes are incomprehensible—or so the narrative has been to sidestep an engagement with them. Additionally, microbes are “invisible,” and unlike other organisms, they are ubiquitous, unruly, and necessary for our thriving. This paper uses other examples of communicating with incomprehensible others (e.g., machines, infants, and other species) for insights on how to still engage in communicating with microbes. To theorize human-microbe communications, this paper specifically focuses on fermentation practices to disentangle the material-discursive and ethico-political aspects of human-microbe encounters through food (e.g., pickling, bread-baking, sake-brewing). It draws on the work of John Durham Peters to reorient human-microbe communications towards polylogue, where many speak, and many hear simultaneously. Doing so shifts the problem away from assessing the accuracy of the intended microbial message (“what are they saying?”) and towards one of assuming a self-reflexive disposition (“how can I position myself to best ‘hear’ what is being said?”). It is a reorientation of how we-humans might attune to and listen for others’ cues. The issue of incomprehensibility, then, might be better held as a reality to accept than a challenge to overcome, and that accepting this reality comes with a set of responsibilities for living in an imbricated, more-than-human, highly microbial world. This paper contributes to both food studies and communication studies by expanding the analytical frame beyond representations and significations of food/microbes in media to instead analyze how ferments mediate relations.

Keywords: human-microbe relationship, microbes, fermentation, food as media, material practices, incomprehensibility, sensory cues, John Durham Peters, polylogue
