

## Situating Microbes

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## Abstract

Issue 11.1 includes the thematic collection “Situating Microbes.” The collected essays on microbe studies in STS aims to situate microbes in complex ecologies beyond their pathogenic formations. All the articles in this issue render invisible microbes visible by walking us through different sociomaterial contexts. These detailed explorations not only provide a deeper understanding of “situated microbes” but also addresses how location matters. This resonates well with and contributes to *ESTS*’s endeavors over the last five years.

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## Keywords

transformation; microbes; situated knowledges; transnationalism

## Introduction

In issue 11.1, we host a thematic collection on the role of microbes in society, and alongside this discussion, open a reflective space to rethink what it means and why it matters to hold a transnational open-access space for recording multiple forms of life and life forms that are constantly in transformation.

Our previous editorial underlined the moment of editorial transition in *ESTS*, marking the threshold that refers to the end of a period and opening of a new one for the journal ([2024](#)). Transitions are then not ruptures but indicate an interlude, where/when things get started to *transform*. Nothing is lost but forms change. This is perhaps the most important lesson microbes teach us as they actively change life forms from one thing to another. Without judging as good or bad, this is what happens, and most of the time, microbes make us face the vulnerabilities of humans as beings as well as of human societies.

At the very beginning of the tenure of our editorial collective (EC), we together witnessed the happening of the COVID-19 pandemic across borders, and over the past five years, EC members have also gone through divergent crises and disasters in their own localities. We were able to witness each others' realities in this collective space, which has always been an invitation to see how an event occurring in one place is also affecting others in their own places considered to be so far away, culturally and geographically. To be affected is part of the story of being connected, and across national borders, we are all connected through divergent asymmetries. The transnational scope of the journal aimed to render this visible, and constantly searched for grounds to be able to continue producing knowledge in a creative and equal manner. We have sometimes succeeded in this, sometimes failed. Nevertheless, what we learned is the importance of holding transnational collective knowledge production spaces especially at the times when the grounds shake a lot, and indeterminacy fills the atmosphere. *ESTS* will continue these efforts at this year's 4S annual conference, with journal editors organizing meetings and roundtables aimed at nurturing and strengthening ties between STS networks transnationally.

The impending editorial transition echoes differently for each EC member, but at the same time pushes us to reflect on the transformation our societies currently go through, as we all agree on the unsustainability of human-centered understandings and interventions on the earth. STS scholars have already been collecting materials and establishing grounds to imagine naturecultures differently than today's mainstream approaches. Microbe studies is one among them.

## Issue 11.1

The collected essays on microbe studies in STS aims to situate microbes in complex ecologies beyond their pathogenic formations. In the introduction to the special issue, Jose A. Cañada, Salla Sariola and Matthäus Rest ([2025](#)) draw attention to the relations between microbes/nonhumans and humans, which have been widely studied in STS on the basis of various topics including soil formations, fermentation, marine



ecologies, gut microbiota, and viral threats among others. Guest editors and authors of this special issue approach microbe as an object of analysis, and explore their situatedness in divergent and specific historical, socio-economic, ecological, and material contexts. The notion of “situated microbes” proposed by the guest editors therefore works as a container for all articles in this issue, addressing why and how it matters to see microbes not only in ecological and, relational terms but also with reference to the material-semiotic contexts in which they play an active role. As the editors’ note, such an approach helps us address microbes “not as friends or foes to humanity, but as actors in their own rights” ([ibid., 9](#)). The introduction also works as a critical survey of microbe studies in STS, and therefore, plays a pedagogical role by providing a topography of this sub-field of study.

All the articles in this issue render invisible microbes visible by walking us through different sociomaterial contexts. For example, Andrea Butcher ([2025](#)) discusses the production of specific countries (low-income countries)—Bangladesh and Benin— and regions (mostly global south) as AMR hotspots within the asymmetrical economic relations in the global health sector, reproducing colonial logics. Victoria Koski-Karell’s ([2025](#)) analysis of cholera outbreaks in Haiti deepens our understanding of microbes beyond their pathogenic character and in relation to the specific historical and geopolitical contexts. These two articles directly address how particular asymmetries between North-South shape “the emergence of pathogenicity as a key characteristic of the interaction between humans and bacteria” ([Cañada et al. 2025, 12](#)). Maya Hey’s ([2025](#)) discussion draws our attention to another empirical context and from health sector to food sector, by analyzing sake production in Japan. This discussion reiterates the active agency of microbes in sustaining human lives as we learn from the brewers work with them as lively beings. Similar to Maya Hey ([ibid.](#)), Luísa Reis-Castro ([2025](#)) explores deeply what it means to *work with microbes* in controlling epidemics in an urban setting in Brazil. Ritti Soncco’s ([2025](#)) article with its particular focus on Lyme disease opens another window to see the COVID-19 pandemic (in the context of Scotland) with the help of the notion of “geographies of tolerance,” and questions mainstream understandings of risk by underscoring why and how location matters. Lastly, the study of microbiome research by Louise Whiteley, Nikoline Nygaard, and Cecilie Glerup ([2025](#)) adds an affective dimension to the material-semiotic contexts largely addressed in the other articles. This discussion teaches us how affective tensions play a role in situating microbes, opening a space to re-think questions over humans’ response-ability within racialized and colonial contexts. Overall, through divergent contexts, all these articles unpack the complex relations between microbes and humans by providing a slow and layered analysis. These detailed explorations not only provide a deeper understanding of “situated microbes” but also addresses how location matters. This resonates well with and contributes to *ESTS*’s endeavors over the last five years.

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