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Microbial Allies: Opening up to Microbes in Alice James's Diary

While scholars like Nancy Tomes and Laura Otis suggest that the germ theory of disease inspired exclusionary practices to protect one's body, home, and even nation from microbial threats, literary works from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century present microbes as more than an enemy. Despite the scholarly narrative of the germ theory producing fear and anxiety, I suggest that there is a "flexible vocabulary," as Justine Murison would call it, in the American popular imagination that simultaneously describes microbes as both friends and foes. I will explore creative interpretations of microbes as allies in Alice James's diary (1889-1892). Already positioning her diary as the product of fermentation, or the product of microbes,—it is an outlet for everything "which *ferments* perpetually within my poor old carcass" (25)—James imagines disease microbes as potential allies in ending her life, if only she could "[sow] a microbe," or aiding the memory of her parents as "ghost microbes" (78). Her diary calls into question the unilateral classification of microbes, even disease-causing microbes, as enemies. Moreover, the presence or absence of microbes impacts how James shapes her identity, suggesting that, in some cases, individual identity is not shaped by exclusion, but rather permeability and relationality.