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"Microbial Geographies at the Extremes of Life"

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Salazar, Juan Francisco. "Microbial Geographies at the Extremes of Life." *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2017): 398-417. doi:10.1215/22011919-4215361.

This article explores world-making processes through which extreme frontiers of life are made habitable. Examining how notions of life are enlarged, incorporated, and appropriated in complex geopolitical contexts, the article argues that microbial worlds are becoming part of worlding processes and projects that further these frontiers. The emphasis on "microbial ontologies" is designed to draw attention to the increasing expediency of conceptualizing extreme earthly ecologies as analogues for other planetary worlds, as a way of tracing the relational trajectories of Antarctica and outer space, and to reflect on emerging modes of an extraterrestrial mode of thinking Earth. This article is informed by short-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Antarctic Peninsula with Chilean microbiologists engaged in the bioprospecting of extremophiles, to account for how extremophile organisms are made part of a market-driven search for bioactive components in areas highly sensitive to geopolitics at the same time as they become meaningful as proxies for extraterrestrial life. The article combines analysis, description, and fieldwork material, tracing the relational trajectories of Antarctica and outer space in very general terms and then discussing the intricacies of bioprospecting in Antarctica, where the question of who owns the microbial diversity existing outside of national territories remains ambiguous and contested. (Text from author's abstract)

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