Democratic Theory (2026), **13**, 61–77
doi:10.1017/S2332889426000126

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Fermented Myth of Democracy

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Abstract

Drawing on fermentation materially and metaphorically, this article argues an earthly democracy must be understood not only through inclusion and participation but through multispecies myths and transformations. Engaging *Earthborn Democracy* alongside the transdisciplinary art constellation *Fermenting Feminism*, the article develops three central contributions: it reconceives the demos as materially composed through multispecies processes; it advances exit and transformation as democratic values alongside inclusion; and it articulates a democratic necropolitics that treats death not as political failure but as a generative condition of democratic life. By foregrounding fermentation's intertwining of liveliness and decay, the article expands democratic imaginaries beyond life-centered and anthropocentric frameworks, offering a political vocabulary attuned to multispecies flourishing and dying well together.

Keywords: death; democracy; fermentation; microbiopolitics; multispecies politics; necropolitics

What fermentation shows us is the invisible connection of everything. You learn to cultivate the future.
~ Mercedes Villalba

Introduction

Begin with a vaginal swab, intimately scraping microbial life from your own internal flora. Introduce it to milk from a cow or goat. Let it sit, let it ferment. What emerges is *Vaghurt*, a novel style of yogurt produced through the live culture of bacterial feminism, which artists Alice Vandeleur-Boorer and Tereza Valentová explain as "an ongoing investigation which welcomes all vaginal intimacies to exchange and grow" (Vandeleur-Boorer and Tereza 2017, 94).

Alternatively, collect your urine in a jar. Let it steep, undisturbed, for weeks. Allow the microbial actors in that warm waste to transform it. Then, mingle it with lichen. The result? Pigment from an old-new dye technique that originated with "indigenous practice[s] in many northern parts of the world" (Hunter 2017, 31). Artist

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

WhiteFeather Hunter describes the urine fermentation, titled *Pissed (blóm + blóð)*, as "a process of scientific inquiry, as well as a methodology for self-knowledge and hands-on making (research-creation)" (Hunter 2017, 30).

Both these processes provide material for re-storying democracy through fermentation.

The ferments on which these artistic explorations depend begin as physical processes. They smell. They flavor. They stain. They rot. They preserve. Fermentation, however, is not merely physical. It is also a particularly potent process through which to think earthly politics. A primarily nonhuman process, yet one also shaped by the 10,000 years of co-evolution with human preferences, fermentation is a cultural practice only possible through the co-labor of nonhumans and humans (Evans and Lorimer 2023, 4; "Fermentation"). Ferments produce energy for the working microorganisms, and in doing so, they yield byproducts, many of which have been foundational to human food systems for millennia. Each ferment develops through innumerable microbial lives and deaths, a churning in which yeasts and bacteria proliferate, compete, expire, and are consumed by one another. The resulting tang of sauerkraut or funk of aged blue cheese can seduce and repel, sometimes simultaneously. Rather than pushing these unsettling oscillations between the cultural/natural, lively/deadly, disgusting/desired to the margins, in this article, I follow the lead of works like *Vaghurt* and *Pissed (blóm + blóð)* to emphasize, and amplify, the simultaneous lure and repulsion of fermentation as the framework for proposing a new myth for democracy.

However, I do not begin from the assumption that fermentation is always necessarily "political." Fermentation is not inherently democratic, nor does it provide a ready-made model of political life. Yet attending to its working while asking how material processes can inspire and sustain democratic practice allows for particular aspects to become visible. As such, this article explores whether and how fermentation's material processes might unsettle inherited assumptions about what democracy is, for whom, and what it demands.

Even so, to turn to fermentation when rethinking democracy may, at first, seem an odd choice. Yet as Kyla Wazana Tompkins observes, fermentation has long served as a figuration for regimes of governance, one taken up by social theorists to name "the 'crowd,' the 'populace,' the 'population,' or the 'multitude'" (2024, 54). In these cases, ferment "refers to what more recent theorists of the interpenetration of emotions with social formations have come to call 'affect': a change in the temperature of a feeling that is also collective and social, feeling that is simultaneously physiological, located between and among bodies and subjects but somehow at the edge of what can be spoken" (Tompkins 2024, 54). Fermentation enjoys an established history as a metaphor for the unrest, volatility, and generative foment characterizing the demos.

My interest, though, lies less in the familiar link between fermentation and the political agitation of affects and more in how storying fermentation might serve as a generative force for reimagining democracy. Turning to fermentation looks to earthly processes in much the same way political theorists often do with canonical thinkers—bringing their thinking to bear on questions far outside their original context.[1] If a

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task confronting political theorists today is to envision modes of political engagement and belonging that cultivate the good life in a multispecies world, then it seems only fitting to turn to those processes where sustenance emerges through collaboration across biotic difference. Yet as Ginn et al. remind, living well with others cannot be unilaterally affirmative. Collaboration "is not some 'soft' alternative to biopolitics. Flourishing always involves a constitutive violence," and as such, "makes no claims to innocence or universality, asking instead who lives well and who dies well under current arrangements, and how they might be better arranged" (2014, 115). Living well requires dying well with human and nonhuman others. And because this ethical problem is collectively posed, it presents a distinctly political question to democratic societies.

To begin to parse out the political questions which emerge with this recognition, I propose fermentation as a process to think democracy with and through. First, though, this article examines modernity's reliance, despite its disavowals of "non-scientific" modes of knowing, on the mythic. The result is an understanding that the polycrises of today are simultaneously material *and* narratival. As such, the task becomes to find and tell *different stories* that produce *different politics*. The different story chosen for the rest of the article is fermentation. Second, the article elaborates on what happens during fermentation, outlining it as a material process that mingles microbial efforts and human desires. Third, it turns to the transdisciplinary and transmedial art of *Fermenting Feminism*, reading it as a site of multispecies demos creation. This is not a story about the creation of a speculative multispecies "we" that *could* come about, but rather a concrete case of one already existing. Finally, the article proposes a "democratic necropolitics" in which death is not confined to failure, but recognized as a fertile and necessary ground of democratic life. Throughout the article develops a myth that both extends and unsettles existing democratic imaginaries, advancing a vision of political life grounded in multispecies entanglement and the claim that collective flourishing depends on the capacity to die well together.

Democracy for the earthborn(e)

An attempt to re-story democracy through fermentation begins with the prior question of who (or what) can belong to democratic life. As Jill Frank's has formulated it, a democratic condition "confronts citizens with the necessity of developing human capacities for what Arendt calls 'building, preserving, and caring' if there is to be a common world of politics, and seems at the same time to produce a longing for an authority that will obviate that necessity" (Frank 2018, p. 49). From Carol Pateman's (1970) participatory workplaces to Jürgen Habermas's communicative rationality (1984) to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's counter-hegemonic mobilizations (1985), the demos has been demarcated as an exclusively human domain.

Yet this anthropocentric frame no longer holds uncontested. Theorists now also attend to the political force and world-making capacities of entities once relegated to democracy's periphery, such as animals (Donaldson et al. 2021), natural events (Romero and Dryzek 2021), rivers (Smith 2017), ecosystems (Winter 2019), viruses (Parry et al. 2021), public things (Honig 2017), even artificial intelligences (Alnemr 2023). From New Materialist critiques targeting the explicit disqualification

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of nonhumans from the demos (Bennett 2010a, 2010b) to scholars who have drawn attention to Indigenous worldviews that highlight the interconnectedness of humans with their ecosystems (Whyte 2017; Winter 2019), recent theorists have enthusiastically taken up John Dryzek's call to "dismantl[e] what is perhaps the biggest political boundary of them all: that between the human and the nonhuman world" (2000, p. 153).

Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Schlosser's *Earthborn Democracy: A Political Theory of Entangled Life* situates itself firmly in this latter tradition, offering a vision of democracy tailored for an era of ecological crisis by arguing that democratic renewal must center on the deep interdependence of humans and nonhumans. *Earthborn Democracy* refuses to confine democracy to human practice, rejecting the inherited fiction, now much under stress, that democracy and ecology are separable. Uniquely, though, by drawing on myth, ritual, and egalitarian practices, the authors propose that democracy must be reimagined, restoried, and remythologized not merely as a human institution but as a practice rooted in the multispecies possibilities for collective flourishing that arise from being born on and borne by the earth. By emphasizing such myths, they make clear democracy "is not exhausted by its instantiation in liberal-democratic institutions, the settler colonial state, or market economies" but can be remade as an entangled and earthly political form, appropriate to the ecological crises of our age (Aslam et al. 2024, 4).

I extend this account by proposing that fermentation provides an unruly archive from which to re-story earthly democracy as not only necessarily multispecies but also as bound together by the passage of all things toward their own inevitable decay. Whereas *Earthborn Democracy* secures its claims in the natal, in the fact that all things are "earthborn(e)," I turn toward a politics that refuses to sequester dying as its constitutive outside. In a moment marked by proliferating forms of mass death, this article suggests it is inadequate to cordon death off as the exclusive domain of punitive power or catastrophic loss. Rather, attending to death opens an aperture onto what has been undertheorized even in earth-focused accounts of democracy.

In arguing for an emphasis on dying instead of being born, I do not propose that we romanticize extinction or the violent attrition of specific lives and worlds. Rather, I mean to invite us to reckon with the way that some deaths are necessary to enable the very possibility of democratic practice on a planetary scale. The possibility of something new, of natality, depends on the decay of other things. The democratic edge emerges in the tenuous space where democracy ceases to define itself through the exclusion of death and instead acknowledges death as a charged and, at times, generative force in the political worlds we collectively make and unmake.

Myths for modernity

This reorientation toward death exposes a condition of the present: modernity likes to present itself as having vanquished myth. And yet one of modernity's most enduring achievements is the production of "a myth so successful that its mythic nature goes unrecognized" (Aslam et al. 2024, 107). It is mythless myth. According to *Earthborn Democracy*, rationalism and realism, ostensibly opposed to the mythic, are in fact its most powerful contemporary forms, disavowing their own narrative force while quietly organizing how reality itself appears.

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Myths and reality are never separate, never opposite. Rather, as William Connolly (2010) suggests, every worldview emerges from an "existential creed," or the fusion of mythic elements, unprovable convictions, and structures of feeling that shape the perceptible. Reality is mythic just as the mythic produces reality. With myths woven into every orientation we have toward the world, what matters is *not whether we live with myths, but which myths we inhabit*.

And yet, the modern recoding casts rationality as pure, complete, and transparent. It knows how the world is ordered, and it knows how to order the world. This view, however, has produced disastrous consequences. Under it, domination is redescribed as meritocratic ordering, control appears as a set of "best practices," and an energy regime based on extraction comes to seem inevitable (Daggett 2019). The result "is both decreasing confidence in democratic ideals and corresponding decline in democratic practices, norms, and institutions," signaling "the dwindling prospects for democracy's survival" (Aslam et al. 2024, 2). These intertwined crises of ecological devastation and democratic erosion consequently appear as a *crisis of myth*, in which humans stand apart from the earth and above one another, and where democracy has been cast as a mythless order of sovereign, self-possessed human individuals governing themselves through purified reason and institutions dedicated to preserving life, stability, and control. Said otherwise, humans now suffer from having denied their dependence on earthly entanglements, nonhuman worlds, contamination, and death.

The collapse of democracy and the destruction of ecological systems, then, are "symptoms of failing politico-cultural *stories*" (Aslam et al. 2024, 4). As such, our current planetary crisis requires not only political and material interventions but also narrative ones. *Earthborn Democracy* responds to the crisis by introducing, self-consciously, a new myth in which it is *life* which "brings something new into the world—a miracle" (Aslam et al. 2024, 106). For the authors, natality grounds a central vision which

> insist[s] that the demos consist[s] of all creatures *born* of the earth—both human and nonhuman. These creatures share the status of being *born of and borne* by the earth. … They *emerge* from the earth and are *carried* or *sustained* by it. In both senses, power is an earthly phenomenon: the earth *gives birth* to earthly creatures whose *lives* depend on it. Being earthborn(e) denotes an earthly mutualism and interdependence: all earthly creatures are conditioned by *living in* the earth. (Aslam et al. 2024, 15, emphasis added)

Birth, on their telling, is both biological and political. It names a condition of mutual dependence in which democratic belonging emerges through an earthly autochthony. Recognizing this shared origin, as well as our continuously shared dependence on the earth, makes it more possible, the authors insist, to promote livable futures on a planetary scale. They are not presenting this myth for neutral reasons. Rather, they are invested in finding solutions to the crises that confront us. Their aim is explicitly political. They believe that the new story they provide will better equip us for what is happening *now*.

I largely concur with the authors' diagnosis of the crises that confront us. And I agree that new ways of thinking, feeling, and living must be opened up, and that emphasizing our shared natality may go some of the way toward doing so. However, the story

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they tell has not entirely dispelled the prejudices that have led the prevailing narrative toward planetary and democratic collapse precisely because the extent to which it focuses on birth and emergence, neglects death and decline.

To complement the story they offer, I propose a new, additional myth that thinks democracy with and through the material process of fermentation. Fermentation too creates something new. There is a natal aspect to its process. Yet, at the same time, it only does so to the extent it breaks something else apart.

The fermented myth of democracy created here is composed through the material processes of microbes as much as through human storytelling. This myth recognizes that humans do not compose myths alone; even our composing is quite literally shaped by microbial influences on our sensations, tastes, moods, appetites, and aversions. As Donna Haraway (2016) suggets, this *sympoiesis* or worlding always makes-with. Never purely self-made, resisting sovereign authorship in favor of collaborative, interspecies processes, sense-making and world-building are always collective. Fermentation accentuates this, dramatizing myth as embodied, material, and multispecies rather than merely an idealized anthropogenic story. Mythmaking, then, need not return humans to the position of sole author even as we narrate our world.

Fermentation as material process

However, before fermentation can be taken up as a resource for democracy, it ought to be understood as a biological process. Across foods as varied as cheese and pickles, chocolate and charcuterie, coffee and wine, fermentation unfolds when microbes—bacteria, yeasts, and others—metabolize organic substances such as sugars and starches in low-oxygen environments, transforming them into acids, alcohols, and gases. Although fermentation takes many forms, even occurring within human bodies, two principal types have been especially foundational to human food systems: lactic acid fermentation and alcoholic fermentation ("Fermentation"). Lactic acid fermentation, driven largely by *Lactobacillus* bacteria, begins when these microbes consume lactose and produce lactic acid. As acidity increases, the environment becomes inhospitable to competing or harmful microbes, a self-protective defense that makes yogurt sour and preserves brined vegetables (Battcock and Azam-Ali 1998).

In contrast, alcoholic fermentation is driven largely by *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, a yeast species that consumes the sugar glucose, converting it into ethanol and carbon dioxide. It usually begins when "you add the yeast to a warm sugary solution" and only "stops when the yeast runs out of sugar or dies of alcohol poisoning" (Sheldrake 2020, 208). Ancient observers watching the frothing effervescence of escaping gas likened it to boiling, a resemblance preserved etymologically from the Latin *fervere*, or "to boil" (Katz 2020). It was not until the nineteenth century, through Louis Pasteur's work, that the boiling was redefined as the collective activity of millions of microbial lives ("Fermentation"; Tompkins 2024).

Yet fermentation is rarely a purely microbial affair. Instead, it straddles the "cultural" and "natural." Most fermentation occurs through human influence as "microbial ecologies without any sort of direction often end up closer to rot" (Drain 2021). Through practices both "ancient and staggeringly diverse," culinary ferments have been selected and cultivated for their taste-enhancing and food-preserving qualities

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(Evans and Lorimer 2023, 4). While ubiquitous—nearly all human societies of the past and present have "some fermentation tradition"—the unique and often pungent flavors produced "make them beloved cultural artefacts, frequently playing a role in the formation of cultural identities and functioning as potent culinary shibboleths" (Evans and Lorimer 2023, 4). Fermentation is an anthro-microbial collaboration in which human cultivation, desire, and care guide microbial labor toward producing certain flavors, textures, and intoxicants. Even so, it remains a mode of production in which humans take a backseat. We do not produce ferments. We can provide sources, intervene gently, and hope for delicious results, but ultimately, we depend on the nonhumans we have invited to do the work of fermenting.

Ferments, though, are not only what Haraway (2003) calls naturecultures; they are also categorically unstable objects. Fermentation is at once a practice of preservation and a process of putrefaction, yielding materials that can be delicious, intoxicating, nourishing, or dangerous, sometimes at the same time. The very same ferment can slide from delightful to disgusting. "What is fermented for some is rotten for others," and the power to determine what counts as edible has long operated as a technique of racial, colonial, and cultural authority (Evans and Lorimer 2023, 4–5).[2] And while political effects emerge through the never-neutral sorting of the delicious from the repulsive, fermentation is taken up as political here through the recognition that the labels deployed—preservation or putrefaction, delicious or disgusting, helpful or harmful—do not merely reflect "reality" but shape the real.

Fermenting feminism: stories of multispecies demos

Even in describing fermentation as a biological process, we are already mythmaking with microbes. The artistic collection *Fermenting Feminism* has dramatized this understanding, cultivating the material and metaphorical pungency of fermentation to produce an expanded demos. A "transdisciplinary and transmedial project," *Fermenting Feminism* is comprised of "a series of art exhibitions, screenings, performances and listening sessions, colloquia and artists' talks, out-reach programming, and digital and print publications" (Fournier 2020, 90). At the start of this article, we encountered two projects from the collection: *Vaghurt*, the wild vaginal yogurt, and *Pissed (blóm + blóð)*, a natural dye created with fermented urine. These and the other works that make up *Fermenting Feminism* cohere not along lines of medium or discipline but through a shared commitment to fermentation as both metaphor and method. In these projects, fermentation is positioned "as a potentially vital and viable space to re-conceive of feminism's past, present, and futures," one where the artists can "reinvigorate questions of health, materiality, canonicity, community, consumption, ritual, and tradition" (Fournier 2017, 1). For a fermented myth of democracy, I suggest *Fermenting Feminism* offers more than metaphor, providing a living political formation that already stories itself as a multispecies demos produced through fermentation.

The multispecies demos generated through *Fermenting Feminism* unsettles the anthropocentric assumptions that structure much democratic theory. These artistic practices expand the boundaries of "the people" by enacting "ecological innovations for broadening inclusion, representation, and/or participation of the more-than-human"

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(Celermajer et al. 2025, 20). In doing so, *Fermenting Feminism* participates in a wider intellectual and political tradition that imagines interspecies forms of collective life and governance. This tradition ranges from proposals for cities redesigned to host "animal agoras" where nonhumans exercise their own forms of spatial freedom (Donaldson 2020), to a parliament of things (Latour 2004; Bennett 2010), to recent calls for an entangled, earthly democracy (Aslam et al. 2024). These inclusions move toward equalization without effacing the essential differences that make inclusion a problem in the first place.

Attentiveness to the microbial moves beyond inclusion and toward a recognition of the inseparability of the human subjects that comprise a demos from the nonhuman worlds with which they are entangled. As made explicit by Maya Hey in *Fermenting Feminism:* "We are not—and never have been—separate from microbes; to continue to believe so perpetuates the assumed primacy of certain beings above others" (Hey 2017, 25). Indeed, the human population, often taken to constitute the entirety of the demos, survives only through its dependence on innumerable tiny, "alien" bodies. As Haraway observes, "human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists" (2008, 3–4). When the sovereign self dissolves into millions of elements—a reminder "that the individual self is a silly notion, that we are made up in context/community/communion" (Maroney and Nash 2017, 87)—we can no longer easily limit the demos to human participants.

However, fermentation also discloses a demos in which the microbial does not recede into the human, nor is it included in a prefigured demos, but instead acts alongside human bodies as "the people." The artists Stephanie Maroney and S. E. Nash describe a version of this configuration in the *Fermenting Feminism* publication:

> The boundaries of human and microbial embodiment became eroded by purple cabbage stains on our hands, tongues buzzing with effervescent liquids, and crevices teeming with the dank living smells of microbiota we learned to identify in the thick, wet Tennessee August. We embraced a tactical connection to the creative activities of microbes by caring for miso, sourdough, pyment, sauerkraut, milk kefir, and many other living foods. The range of ferments and diverse cultural histories therein provided the context and a sense of temporal alignment with the billions of years of symbiotic relationships that comprise life itself—inspiring scientific and mystical marvel (Maroney and Nash 2017, 83).

Maroney and Nash's sensory-saturated account of fermentation stages the emergence of a multispecies collective life. As "the boundaries of human and microbial embodiment became eroded by purple cabbage stains on our hands" (Maroney and Nash 2017, 83), a new myth emerged, on whose narration outlines both metaphorical porosity and the material dissolution of the distinction between body and environment, human and microbe. The stains, tastes, and smells figure fermentation as an intimate redistribution of agency, where bodies are no longer discrete political units but permeable sites of multispecies traffic. The demos that forms here is not assembled through institutional recognition, procedural representation, or participation in speech but through the shared world that draws together.

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When they "embrace a tactical connection to the creative activities of microbes by caring for miso, sourdough, pyment, sauerkraut, milk kefir, and many other living foods," *Fermenting Feminism* cultivates both food *and* a form of collective life, one in which humans respond to microbial needs (Maroney and Nash 2017). Ferments require specificity in care from humans to ensure they have the right types of food, that the temperature, salinity, and pH are correct, and the presence or absence of oxygen is appropriate (Drain 2021). "And the care-giving is reciprocal. We benefit because many of the microbes involved in fermenting our food have found ecological niches within our bodies" and now perform vital functions without which we become sickly (Drain 2021). Decisions regarding whether to provide or deny care, selecting where limited resources should be distributed, is fundamentally political. The existence of both ferments and the collectives that produce them depends on how these choices are made. By working across species to maintain livability, fermentation, as described by Maroney and Nash, becomes political.

These practices are not the inclusion of nonhumans within a preexisting demos. Instead, "the fizziness and explosive possibilities of fermentation both energize and challenge transnational feminisms to conceive of languages, frameworks, experiments, and practices for living (and dying) that are expansive enough for the human and the more-than-human in all their complexity" (Fournier 2020, 109). Storied by Lauren Fournier, curator of *Fermenting Feminism*, these practices cultivate a demos in which the "we" is not defined in advance, not confined to the human, but is experimentally sustained through the symbiotic and distributed co-labor of fermentation.

This demos comes into being by "obscur[ing] the line between illness and well-being, between science and witchcraft, between human and non-human, and between sentient and non-sentient," to generate mythic practices that are not wholly knowable, wholly safe, or wholly human (Fournier 2017, 4). Neither the tactile and tastable process nor the narratives that make it thinkable simply adds to a preexisting group. Rather, it brings into being a collectivity that did not preexist the processes carried out. In so doing, it demands a reworking of what counts as presence, participation, and political contribution. It reveals a demos whose members do not deliberate, vote, or contest in recognizable ways but who nevertheless co-produce the material conditions of shared life. *Fermenting Feminism* is mythmaking, through these embodied, pungent, and leaky practices making tangible a new storying of the demos.

Democratic necropolitics

Fermenting has taught me so much about time, about death.
~ Zayann Khan

There is, then, an incipient sense in which fermentation is always democratic. A collective, more-than-human, multispecies, entangled, co-constitutive parliament of microbes, jars, sugars, gases, and even humans, collectively producing an undefined future. Not yet, though, does this tell us *how* turning to fermentation can help us rethink democracy to navigate the multiple crises afflicting its current mode. It does, however, allow us to ask *what becomes visible when fermentation is approached as a figure for democracy. What does it allow us to ask that other political myths cannot?*

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Fermenting Feminism demonstrates how fermentation can make visible an expanded "we," enacted through the union of material practices and their storying. Though it composes a "we," this togetherness is not necessarily harmonious. While bubbling with liveliness, fermentation is also "domesticated decomposition—rot rehoused," equally constituted through growth and decay (Sheldrake 2020, 299). In the strata around ferments, "putrefaction, rot, and death well up … creating a dis-ease" (Maroney and Nash 2017, 87). Much of fermentation can be deeply off-putting to the humans who participate in it: the processes smell and bubble as they generate slimy, viscous matters. However, rather than something to turn away from, this welling up of death and rottenness is a generative site for thought, drawing us toward questions of dying well in addition to living well, and toward what a good death might mean alongside a good life.

A fermented political makes visible the fault lines that open when nonhuman presence is not merely acknowledged but taken seriously as constitutive of the political. Inclusion here unsettles anthropocentric hierarchies, multipling vexed questions of allocation and sacrifice. Questions of resource distribution—the "who gets what?" of human politics becoming the "what gets what?" of multispecies politics—simultaneously serve as questions of existence. What lives? What dies? What will be sustained, and at whose existential expense? In this process, humans and nonhumans help and hurt, aid and repel, one another. Recognizing as much forecloses any easy fiction of a being-with scrubbed clean of injury or revulsion. However, a fermented democracy refuses to turn away from this messiness, instead, asking how collective life must transform itself when earthly others are truly, and troublingly, counted as present.

Entanglement, fermentation makes clear, is never purely harmonious. It binds together the good and the bad, the nourishing and the poisonous, the livable and the unsurvivable. Recognizing as much opens difficult questions for political democracies, asking us to consider the disgust, conflict, and misrecognition that structure some modes of living-with. It calls to the fore that to work toward a more earthly and entangled democracy requires attending to the rotting underside of entangled life—dying with others.

Making this turn toward death and decay may seem politically counterproductive in a moment when "it's an open question as to which will die off first, the human species, democracy, or the ecosystems supporting life as we know it" (Aslam et al. 2025, 23). As such, *Earthborn Democracy*'s emphasis on natality might seem the better path forward for responding to the crises threatening our multispecies flourishing. But as fermentation makes clear, natality and fatality cannot be so easily held separate. They are not discrete stages taking place at different moments, such that birth could occur without death needing to follow. Rather, fermentation requires "putrefaction" as the constitutive "underside of fermentation's productive and life-making possibilities" (Tompkins 2024, 52).

Foregrounding fermentation as both effervescing with life and steeped in death suggests that a politics inclusive of the more-than-human must attend not only to what is born on the earth but also to what returns to it. *Just as life entangles us, so too does death.* And while an emphasis on shared liveliness (Bennett 2010) and born(e)ness (Aslam et al. 2025) works against human exceptionalism and affirms an earthly politics, it can also obscure the dependence of democracy on disintegration. Democratic

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imaginaries and practices are enacted not only through life but also through death. Turning to fermentation, emphasizing the necessity of the nonhuman, all the way down to the microbial level, makes this especially clear.

As such, fermentation offers one way to grapple with this inclusion of death in democracy. It can serve as the ground for a democratic necropolitics—not in the familiar sense elaborated by Achille Mbembe (2003, 2019), where death is conscripted into the service of sovereign power and colonial domination, but in a way that reorients the political toward the inescapably shared conditions of dying and decomposition. In this way, death is made legible as not merely subordinated to life, exceeding the ways it is taken up in biopolitical projects that manage populations toward vitality and productivity (Foucault 2003). Instead, death appears as a consequential force in its own right. If democratic theory has long been organized around the preservation of life, fermentation invites us to consider more reflectively how democracy must orient itself to the material processes of breakdown and decay that sustain multispecies worlds.

A democratic necropolitics, then, does not embrace destruction, nor does it replicate colonial necropower. Rather, it recognizes how earthly politics must take shape within ecologies where living and dying are mutually constitutive, where the vitality of some depends on the dissolution of others, and where the boundaries between nourishment and necrosis are always porous. Attending to these dynamics opens conceptual room for modes of collective life that acknowledge decomposition not as a failure of democracy but as one of its earthly conditions.

Death

Death is one of the most intimate registers through which human and nonhuman lives are knotted together: with nearly every act of eating, we take the dead into our bodies, just as our own bodies will one day be taken up by others. Structuring the very conditions of our earthly existence, these quotidian intimacies of death and decay are neither exceptional nor rare.

Death in the political, though, often shows up as a form of punishment and exclusion. In dominant political imaginaries, death most readily appears where sovereignty hardens into its most coercive expressions like the death penalty and militarized borders, or where biopolitical strategies of governance generate slow violence by removing the necessary means of subsistence, managing populations through conditions of slow attrition (Agamben 1998; Brown 2010; Foucault 1978). In these configurations, death is a technique of rule, a means through which political power makes itself known by deciding who may be killed, who may be left to die, and whose lives are rendered administratively disposable.

Mbembe (2003, 2019) names such regimes "necropolitical," marking the ways modern politics exceeds the management of life (the biopolitical) to organize exposure to death as a central modality of governance. Mbembe reads "politics as the work of death," emphasizing that sovereignty is "expressed predominantly as the right to kill" (Mbembe 2003, 16). Here necropolitics describes how states, colonial systems, and modern regimes exercise power by creating "death worlds" where people live in conditions of constant danger, deprivation, and slow destruction, while active violence, abandonment, and militarization function as governing techniques. Within such a logic, death can only appear as weaponized negation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, thinking democracy through fermentation allows for an exploration of death in politics outside the sovereign, punishment, control, or an understanding that "terror is not on one side and death on the other. Terror and death are at the heart of each" (Mbembe 2003, 16). Death need not belong exclusively to the languages of discipline, extermination, or abandonment. In fermentation, it instead appears as an intimate, distributed, and collaborative process through which bodies are unmade and remade across species and scales. Attentiveness to this suggests a different type of question, one which asks: If making death is a labor of life that cannot be avoided, are there modes in which necropolitics can operate as, rather than opposed to, democracy?

No project could absolutely redeem death, and attempting to resituate its workings ought not be taken as a denial of the brutal asymmetries through which death is unevenly distributed. But emphasizing the centrality of death does unsettle the assumption that death can only ever be the outside of democracy. Fermentation intimates the possibility that death might be one of the conditions through which entanglements emerge, not just dissolve, beginning to pry death loose from its exclusive tethering to annihilation and opening space for an account of democratic life that also reckons with democratic dying.

Demos

With millions of dead microbes a part of every ferment, fermentation makes legible the possibility of a democratic necropolitics by troubling the boundary between political presence and political absence and refusing the assumption that death cleanly marks the end of participation. Instead, political afterlife is part of a democratic theory which questions not only who counts as part of "the people" but how those constituents change, decay, and redistribute themselves as they die.

In this way, fermentation suggests that death does not remove beings from the demos but instead marks their transformed mode of participation within it. Naming a change in how beings participate in democratic life, death here is a transformational shift in the manner through which beings remain entangled in collective life. As fermentation revivalist Sandor Katz observes, "Fermentation is never a dead end. Whatever breaks down gives rise to new forms. And these too shall break down, and on, and on" (2020, 24). If what dies continues as memory, matter, energy, microbial food, soil, or atmospheric exchange, then the demos cannot be constituted exclusively by the living. Its composition would necessarily include the presence of the dead, folded into the conditions of life for others. Understood this way, the demos is altered not only through the arrival of new members but also through the ongoing transformation and redistribution of those who have died.

However, death does mark a way in which something, some vitality, leaves. As such, democratic necropolitics presses us to consider *exit as a democratic value* alongside the more familiar good of inclusion. Exit here is neither sovereign refusal nor a euphemism for exclusion. Exit as a democratic good is neither sovereign refusal nor a euphemism for exclusion. Unlike the liberal conception of exit as the choice to withdrawal, this account understands exit as a material and temporal transformation in how beings participate in democracy. And whereas exclusion marks a decision imposed from outside the demos, here exit describes a process through which constituents cease to appear

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as political subjects even while continuing to shape the material conditions of collective life. As such, if democratic theory has largely equated justice with inclusion, fermentation reveals a parallel democratic value in departure, asking how political life redistributes itself when inclusion is no longer possible or appropriate.

Reckoning with exit, then, does not require retreat from democracy. Aligning with Jean-Paul Gagnon's observation "that radical democracy reaches … toward becoming through loss," the myth of fermented democracy emphasizes that "to lose many things and become something else through those losses is to create an assemblage of entwined values, materials, and destinies" (Asenbaum et al. 2023, 590). Exit, here, is not the negation of democracy but one of its generative reorganizations. Practically, democracy through exit is already underway in processes that require undoing rather than expanding, such as exits from extractive animal diets, disposable material cultures, carbon-saturated mobility, settler ownership of land, and presumptions of unrestricted access to every place on the globe (Asenbaum et al. 2023, 591). Rather than failure or abandonment, exits here are political decisions oriented toward flourishing and produced through "agitating for undoing, voting for retreat, campaigning for restrictions, and creating public policy for loss" (Asenbaum et al. 2023, 591). Democratic necropolitics, then, makes visible democracy as constituted through ongoing processes of rearrangement. It suggests a multispecies democracy is not simply a democracy that includes more beings; it is a democracy where exiting is a political value.

Debt

Death thus unsettles not only who belongs to the demos, but how democratic life is sustained over time. Pressing too insistently on how the planet carries and sustains all life (Aslam et al. 2024) centers what the earth does for the lively but risks obscuring what the lively must do in return to sustain the earth. Stressing the earth's capacity to bear and nourish others threatens to render it extractable, reduced to a resource for human and nonhuman flourishing. This logic is familiar, underwriting the myths of endless growth and accumulation that structure extractive capitalism and enacting what Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) warns against as the "dishonorable harvest," a taking without giving back, an extraction without reciprocity. Said otherwise, even if expanded to the multispecies register, to be sustained by earthly entanglements is not enough; we (human and nonhuman alike) must also sustain the earth. One obvious but viscerally uncomfortable way we do so is through our own death and decomposition.

An earthly democracy must concede that every life persists beyond its death by serving as appropriable matter and energy sustaining other existences: human, mineral, plant, animal, microbial, atmospheric, aqueous. Death is the moment when what we have borrowed since birth is released back into the circulations that made living possible initially. Without an account of death, breakdown, and return, this reciprocal dimension of earthly relations disappears, and the demos is miscast as a body that only takes, never giving back.

To be earthly is, therefore, necessarily also to be earth-returning, taking part in the cycles of decomposition enacted through the multispecies labors of decay. When fungi break down lignin, bacteria metabolize organic matter, and detritivores turn bodies

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into soil, decomposition unfolds as a kind of metabolic reckoning with the historical and relational debts of living, a redistribution of our material selves into the ecologies we once drew from. Including death and decay in the myths of an earthly democracy makes visible that the demos is not solely composed of the living but is shaped by the continual transformation of the dead into the conditions for new life. A fermented myth stories democracy as not simply about coexistence in the present but about ongoing entanglement across time, species, and scales, where the act of decaying is itself a way of giving back to the more-than-human commons.

Conclusion

Putrefaction, death, and decay are not inherently governmental, beneficial, or salvific. Moreover, they often archive histories of harm, loss, and destruction. Yet neither are they inherently or exclusively undemocratic, injurious, or corrosive. It is precisely because death is at once destructive and nutritive that a thriving earthly democracy requires sorting through the difficult political questions of not only what living well together entails, but also what dying well together entails. These are distinctly political questions. They ask how human and nonhuman should hold together death's devastations and its generative capacities without allowing its nourishing effects to legitimate extermination or to slide into the logics Mbembe names. The challenge instead is to recognize death as a condition of democratic possibility, even while refusing its conscription into expanded or normalized horizons of violence.

Re-storying democracy through fermentation is, at heart, an effort to develop a lexicon and imagistic repertoire adequate to such a task, working to recognize the realities that come into view when the nonhuman can be consciously seen as a constitutive presence in democratic life. We could also turn to compost, following Katarina Saltzman's (2005) exploration of the constructive possibilities of "composthumanism" or Donna Haraway's (2016) storying of multispecies and multigenerational entangled life in "Camille Stories: Children of Compost." Yet while compost decomposes in order to produce matter which might, eventually, fertilize new growth, fermentation undertakes a lively undoing that creates something new simultaneously with breakdown.

Such a reframing stretches our existing political imaginaries, insisting that multispecies and planetary flourishing rests as much on breakdown as on birth, on forms of exit as much as on inclusion. All the while suggesting democracy ought to be thought otherwise, not because existing theories are wrong, but because their anthropocentric conceptual architectures are ill-equipped to grapple with the earthy, leaky, death-suffused forms of coexistence that characterize multispecies politics. Fermentation does not and cannot replace the democratic tradition, but it can expand our democratic vocabulary and bring to the surface the unruly materialities existing theories have obscured.

The concepts put forth here remain far from exhaustive, but this article has suggested that fermentation—materially, metaphorically, and mythically—provides a powerful way to rethink democracy during our era of multispecies ecological crisis. Thinking-with microbes helps us imagine, and thus cultivate, a new myth to shape

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press

our world. This myth of fermented democracy helps develop attunement to ecological interdependence, multispecies entanglement, and the reciprocity of death. It offers no guarantees, but it does provide a sensibility for inhabiting planetary crisis without retreating into fantasies of purity or control. A democracy grounded in such lessons may prove better equipped to navigate the uncertain futures ahead, futures in which living and dying well together will be among our most urgent political tasks.

Notes

[1] This is not to suggest that politics modeled after the biological are without a long and harmful history. Biological metaphors have long furnished political thought with a seductive vocabulary of naturalization, and it is precisely this seduction that has often rendered them so dangerous. Invocations of the body politic, for instance, have repeatedly been marshalled to depict societies as organic wholes whose "health" requires the excision of those cast as pathological such as immigrants, the poor, dissidents, racialized others. Evolutionary language, too, has been conscripted into social Darwinist projects that redescribed domination as the outcome of natural competition, recasting hierarchies of race, class, and gender as the inevitable triumph of the "fittest."

[2] Throughout imperial histories, the power to define edibility has functioned as an exclusionary mechanism, denying the legitimacy of Indigenous, localized, or diasporic foodways while elevating European norms of flavor, preparation, and sanitation. To designate something as inedible is not simply to reject it but to render it culturally unintelligible, intelligible only in its material abjection. Edibility, then, becomes a border enforced by force disguised as neutral hygiene (Evans and Lorimer 2023, 3–4).

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Cite this article: Croteau, Jessica. 2026. "A Fermented Myth of Democracy." Democratic Theory 13 (1): 61–77. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889426000126 Published online by Cambridge University Press