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Assistant Editors' Interview with Dr. David Gruber and Dr. Jason Kalin

Cathryn Molloy
James Madison University, molloycs@jmu.edu

Erin Trauth
High Point University, erin.trauth@gmail.com

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RHM Assistant Editor Podcast Interview with Dr. David Gruber and Dr. Jason Kalin on "Gut Rhetorics: Towards Experiments in Living with Microbiota"

CM: Dr. Cathryn Molloy, RHM Assistant Editor; Associate Professor, James Madison University

DG: Dr. David Gruber, Assistant Professor, University of Copenhagen

JK: Dr. Jason Kalin, Assistant Professor, DePaul University

CM: Hello everyone. Today, in my capacity as one of the three assistant editors for the RHM journal, I'm interviewing Jason Kalin and David Gruber on their essay titled "Gut Rhetorics: Towards Experiments in Living with Microbiota." Jason is an assistant professor in DePaul University's Department of writing, rhetoric, and discourse, where he researches and teaches rhetorical theory, visual and material rhetorics, digital rhetoric, new media studies, and memory studies as well as the rhetoric of health and medicine. His work has appeared in the International Journal for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and Visual Communication Quarterly. David is an assistant professor in the department of media cognition and communication at the University of Copenhagen. He is co-editor of the forthcoming Routledge Handbook of Language and Science and is working on a monograph titled Brain Art and Neuroscience Neurosis and Sensuality and Affective Realism with Routledge. Thank you so much to both of you for agreeing to do this interview for the journal's website, and I've got questions prepared for you on your excellent essay that I really enjoyed reading. So I'm really excited to hear sort of some of the backend and some of the other thoughts you have on these issues of Gut Rhetorics.

Excellent, so the first question I have for you is your essay foregrounds hard scientific researchers "lack of conceptual resources for studying the millions of non-human bodies and the discursive constructions of what it means to be healthy with a microbiota." You call attention to the "inadequacy of any scientific or epistemic account of how to live with in this environment." How does the concept gut rhetorics fill in this conceptual resource gap?

DG: Yeah, that's a good question. I think I would say that the term gut rhetorics is only a beginning in coming up with new conceptual resources. I think the idea that there is a conceptual resource gap around this work came out of my experience of seeing no good accounts of how probiotics research was made or how designations of health flora and healthful microbiota were determined and how they were determined in relationship with patients through surveys what exactly was the process going on there. But I also think that maybe the term gut rhetoric is asking us to search for new conceptual resources in the sense that gut rhetoric itself as a term hopefully does a little bit of work by making more uneasy these distinctions between the brain, gut, the body, and the environment thinking and emotion even emotion in affect. So saying that we need to discover more terms or have more conceptual resources is something that is done in

recognition that those dichotomies are increasingly becoming conveniences and mere placeholders.

CM: Wow, that's a great answer.

JK: I would add that in terms of like this developing conceptual resources in the sense that one of the things that we were trying to think about is not just like do rhetoric of microbes or rhetoric of microbiota but kind of like what could we learn about rhetoric from or from microbiota and how they are living within the body and the idea that bacteria are doing you know they live in the body in very different kinds of ways than we typically think of so like the idea that these microbiota are you know they can they go through new generations you know much more quickly than we do so they're constantly evolving, adapting, mutating, they're ingesting other bacteria, they're swapping genes with other bacteria, sharing genes with the environment... and so all these different bacterial bodies, organs, organisms are coming together and they're being like thrown together but it doesn't necessarily add up to anything that we would account for as scientific epistemic means of like oh this is some logical manner; oh this is how things are living and so gut rhetorics training I think is trying to get at and a little bit and say like you know one of the things I think with the term is not so much like are we getting the representation of the microbiota correct, but like how do we add to the reality and that's like the Latourian sense of like how do we how do we assemble these things differently and so like how can we think with them. Gut rhetorics is kind of trying to you know we say at one point they moved beyond representation but not just to move beyond it because we know but like how do these things are these things being thrown together? What can we do with them? And now what does that tell us about rhetoric if anything right?

CM: That's great. Those are both really robust answers and I appreciate that. Okay, good, so the second question I had for you is your essay advocates for skilled probiotic experimentation. Can you tell us more about that in layman's terms and give us some examples of the kinds of inquiries, practices, and everyday ways of being you'd say aligned with skilled probiotic experimentation?

JK: Yeah, I think that kind of builds on that you know that first response there or the first question in the sense that what we're seeing with skilled probiotic experimentation is the sense that especially the consumer side the consumer side food marketing is that they're not waiting necessarily for all the evidence to be in because the only evidence will never be in, in that sense which is I guess the kind of definition of rhetoric right that's right I think how do we begin? You have to do something but just not anything and so that's where the notion like the skill comes in that you know what are the bacteria? What are the materials that we're working with? How do we work with them skillfully so like what would what would it look like to live skillfully with bacteria, biota? And so that might be like changing your diet taking the two-week Dannon activity challenge. Who knows... does it work? But like but what can you learn from that? And I think that's one

of the things that we're trying to think with this kind of skill probiotic experimentation is that what consumers are doing with the activity again and challenge is very similar to what the gastroenterologists are asking patients to do anyways. And so what's the difference there and like what can we learn just from changing your diet or changing your lifestyle or you know exercising? And so you know carrying out these sorts of experiments or it may be more speculative; it's not like necessarily new this or that or like try this and see what happens and so this kind of skillful living it was kind of more of like what can this thing do what kind of things does it activate or set in motion.

CM: Okay great, and so it's so literally like get different probiotics and see how your body reacts with them and maybe eat more plant-based or whatever trying to manipulate your own gut bacteria.

JK: Yeah, exactly, I think like rhetoric scholars we know consumers are doing this and so we could I think David could speak about this a little bit. We know that consumers are doing this and so one of the responses would be to critique the marketing and say 'oh we're just being susceptible to this marketing' or we could say 'well this is like no one knows; we don't know how to live right.' We don't know how to live with microbiota and so like they're trying something and is it detrimental to their health? It seems maybe innocuous so you know maybe it's worth a shot; maybe it's not maybe we're still dupes, I don't know.

DG: My feeling about it is that I'm prone as a rhetorical critic to want to look at a text or an object and deconstruct it and criticize it and try to show my first reactions to it to say it's an ideological logic of high capitalism and an extension of the state form of governance and being sort of negative about it and what the idea of skilled experimentation asked me as a critic is to try to live out live with my criticism and think about my own body and be willing to try it out in the process of criticism a little bit in the same way that an artist walks through a long process in composing an art so for me it's a way of becoming more positive actually in my research and not presuming that that the negative reading is necessarily going to be the best or only one that I might see something new if I go and try to live the experience whether it's experience in the clinic with the patients or experience of actually eating a food. Eating the food's not the point for me; the process of trying to live out what we're criticizing' if you're criticizing the far-right Donald Trump I would go to a Trump I would think going to a Trump campaign rally would be helpful and would reveal something new. So it's developing these sort of experiments where you as the critic put your body in a particular situation to rethink something that you have preconceived notions about.

CM: Oh wow, that's very specific and both of those examples really helped to bring the notion of skilled probiotic experimentations to life. I think in a way that will really complement your written article really really well but I like that idea of it sort of being like suspending disbelief in a way. So great okay. So your piece actually offers two really compelling coinages 'gut rhetorics' as well as 'skilled probiotic experimentation' as your

essay is an attempt to define and carve out space for these two new terms, do you have ideas on how you'd like others to take them up or do you know where you'll take the sign of inquiry next and certainly if you feel like you know you've given us enough unskilled probiotic experimentation maybe you want to speak more to gut rhetorics.

JK: Similar to again building on that last question what David was talking about doing the more creative criticism or going out I think got writers and skilled experimentation are both following in what we're seeing with this kind of methodological and method turn within rhetoric and rhetorical theory and trying to think like we see this with a rhetorical field methods and digital methods that are trying to get after rhetoric and action or lived or live rhetorics as they're taking place and so this kind of skillful experimentation I think is going along with that and so something like that would be again kind of living out the criticism it could be kind audio ethnography either actually challenge yourself to do adopt a sort of diet and what learn from that as rhetoric scholar. I mean I know like through this process that my diet has changed a little bit over; Dave and I were working on various versions of this paper and thinking about it for a long time it's like 'oh maybe I should drink more yogurt' or something like that and so like how does that actually begin to change you know the kind of thoughts that you have I guess in that sense. So it becomes that process and so I think I see it fitting within this and this whole kind of methodological development that you know new materialisms, object-oriented ontologies, ecological thought, it doesn't really tell you how to do anything. It doesn't actually help to how to study stuff, so you need to develop methods to actually kind of try to not so much capture but to make these relations real.

CM: Yeah, wow, that's really well said, Jason. I love that I love the idea of auto ethnographic work with the rhetorics. It's really cool.

JK: We'll see; we'll see.

DG: Kalin is quite articulate. I'll add just one philosophical thought of where I'd like to see more work in the area and then maybe one concrete area I'm studying as an extension of the paper. But in the philosophical sense I would I think that gut rhetorics is contributing one way to say it would be to spreading out spreading out the ground of groundlessness groundlessness for self incognition by tying us more fully to non-human materiality and this sort of soupy miasma of psychedelic chemicals we're living in, nitrogen, and bacterial strains, and there's all kinds of new terminology in this in this world of gastroenterology that might be useful for rhetorical criticism things like feeling exclusions and copia tropes and the way the enzymes live, and I mean there's all kinds of things we can do there to help us theorize the strange condition we have where we are living with non-human things that are uninterested in our humanness and in the preservation of it. Gut rhetorics in that sense introduces a violent reintroduces violence in hiddenness into the idea of rhetoric. I mean in some ways it's a recuperation of death and interrelationality -- intra- relationality. Intra relationality is hyper focused on coming into beings and emergencies then gut rhetoric says 'well we have these things

that are required to die in order to bring about emergencies and that are agnostic to our living, so I would like to see more work that explores that and thinks about the importance of that aspect of gut bacteria. Concretely surveys that are being used to help compose affect dates and how different they can be so I'm digging into those a little bit more with Jason in a followup paper that we're still exploring where it might go.

JK: Wow, this is a side note so maybe cut this out but have you have you taken the surveys, the questionnaires?

DG: Yes, but since those are highly about stress anxiety and depression... that's a great question is on point.

JK: It's not enough to critique the questionnaires that they're using but like what if you took them themselves or if you went through the process yourself to see and then become part become a patient in the experiment that the gastroenterologist are doing.

CM: Wow, that was incredibly eloquent; David, you too were blowing me away with these answers so either you're thinking about this.

DG: Me and Jason - every conference that we've been to we have seen each other for the last three years, we've talked about this paper; just ideas at first and these ideas went all over the place.

CM: No, that's really cool, I think especially for people like contemplating the value of co-authoring and collaboration would like hearing that it took you know three years of conversations to culminate in something that's of this caliber of thought and articulation. I think it's good for people to hear. So thank you. So okay so the next question I have for you two is, in your essay, you use rhetorical ontological inquiry adopted from among other places as Scott Graham's work and specifically work with the concept of calibration; you pair that methodological focus with a phenomenological one; for readers who are unfamiliar with this method, can you offer advice for others you might want to adapt to these methodologies. Because it is abstract right the idea of rhetorical ontological inquiry is quite abstract and I think you do a good job of using it so what would be your like you know your guide for people who are new to it?

JK: Yeah I think what you really productive things that you know Scott did in his work is trying to develop this methodology of trying to think through what does it mean to study material rhetoric, what does it mean to study new material isms, and object-oriented ontologies that are trying to trying to do away what he calls 'the two world problem.'" How do you get beyond that or how do you think about that differently as he says, and so he's trying to bring rhetoric which has you know traditionally focused on the discourse the discursive aspects and the ontological so rhetorical ontological inquiry becomes a methodology, becomes an approach, a theoretical orientation to trying to study like ontological multiplicity powered things created through doings and practices

and then ecological entanglement how are things just their relations are they created through relations and so by bringing the rhetorical and ontological together he's trying to do both of those things at the same time and saying that you know rhetoric and ontology epistemology ontology phenomenology as we say are very inseparable well also irreducible to one another. And so how can you study these things and so as a methodology it's a like this conceptual theoretical approach as a method, you still don't really know what to do but he's an ethnographer and so he you know goes into different discourse communities and studies pain and how it's talked about among medical psychiatric pharmaceutical patients self-reporting how they're feeling and so he you know he talks about how he's that like kind of ethnography so he uses the methods of ethnography to do that. Again it's kind of rhetorical few methods of like looking at live practices in the field and I guess one of the things that we were trying to do is maybe lead into the phenomenology a little bit more and saying what does it feel like to live with microbiota and so what would be the appropriate methods for doing that and so there I think is where we should and think of trying to introduce this kind of skill skilled probiotic experimentation. Again like what are the methods that would be suitable or appropriate or could make allow you to bring these things into presence in a way that you couldn't have otherwise.

CM: So do you think Jason that auto ethnography is one of the methods that that fit.

JK: I think for me probably I think it's one of those things that fit because if you're you know phenomenology is kind of that feeling so you would have to you can't ordinary allows you to get in it to. At the same time it's limited because you're limiting it to your own experiences and so I think one of the things that David wants you know think about is how do you set experiments rhetoric that would get at like a phenomenological experience through experiments.

CM: Okay, interesting.

JK: So how can rhetoric scholars set up experiments to get at I like that. Am I getting that right, David?

DG: Absolutely. I love experimentation and the idea of experimentation and other than form of experimentation yeah I think Jason summed it up in that comment trying to lead with phenomenology instead of just seeing it as one piece that's maybe been more valued in rhetorical scholarship. We're just privileging it a little bit more.

CM: Okay I like that. I think that's a really nice distinction. Okay so your piece takes up the connection between microbiota and emotions; are there examples of this connection that don't make it into your essay; what is the current popular wisdom on the connection between the content of one's gut and their mental health status and how do gut rhetorics extend, complicate, or challenge that connection? DG: I think maybe I'll pick up on the idea of current wisdom and where we might go with that. I think that

maybe my feeling is by reading through a lot of this literature and I'm not going to pretend to be a gastroenterologist here but I think that the current wisdom is suggesting that the gut and the brain are interconnected more than we realize; it does even suggest that the gut is like a second brain because you know it's connected to the brain through the spine the vagus nerve the bloodstream there's efferent signals there's chemicals going back and forth the brain might grow in some regions better as a result of certain micro biomes than others so outside of any of the details there, I think that that rhetorics can you ask to whether it can extend or complicate something in this literature. I would just like to see more thinking about the body as a brain as a thing that becomes brainy because of the environment another way to say this may be that we are privileging emotional relations that are environmental relations.

CM: Interesting ok; no that's very clear actually like that.

DG: Kalin what do you wanna add to that?

JK: You know thinking about that we say at one time Elizabeth Wilson in her book Gut Feminism and she said something like the gut she's not making the argument that the gut contributes to minded states but that the gut is an organ of mind and so I you know we're thinking through our entire body here and you know to have you know the you know thinking a question like the connection between microbiota and emotions you know that presumes that you know that's kind of setting out that there's microbiota and then there are emotions and that they're somehow connected to but that question like it's not like we're not trying to like connect the dots but in like a new materialist approach like how are these things just their relations are they interacting right and so they're bringing each other it's being so it might not be the case that you have an emotion it might but it's like the microbiota and the emotion are tied up into one another and so the kinds of emotions that you are at or might somehow influence the kind of microbiota you have and the kind of microbiota might influence the kind of emotions you have so like what do you do with that and so this kind of they're not again it's not just these things like microbiota and emotion they're just not things to be studied like you just don't study microbiota you just don't study affect states or emotions they're actually things to live with too - and so how do you live with them that when when you you know they say I think Thomas Ricker talks about this and the rhetoric more like when you are depressed the whole world appears colored by that depression right and so in the same kind of way like your it might be the case that your whole body is conditioned by the microbiota to experience certain things so what you do again like where do you go from there how do you make if that's the case then how do you actually treat someone with depression.

CM: Wow, okay that's a great that's a great answer because then it insinuates that you could do those skilled probiotic experimentations in an attempt to have some impact on your affect states.

JK: So yeah thinking about it and it seems like if you're not if you're not eating a healthy diet all of a sudden then it you're the cause or something that's wrong with you know you're not doing something right and so I think that's maybe one way that we have to be careful about you know the kind of skilled probiotic experimentation in the sense that if you're not doing these things then and somehow you're not living correctly; we don't want to imply that; that's often what happens. Throwing it back on the individual either.

DG: I think to build on that Jason I think that gut rhetorics can also really complicate those popular.. by calling something gut rhetorics we're not highlighting for celebration the popular rhetoric of the gut that's selling this probiotics. We're highlighting the living with the gut so studying that but also turning it back around to to live it out. But what I'm trying to say here is that the popular rhetorics of probiotics will say something like buy this, eat that, feel great. I think that by enacting by living with probiotics you actually really complicate that narrative to think about how you do feel differently if you do it all if it's even detectable and discernible and then thinking about your larger environments and the discourses of your region and how all these things are blending together. I'll stop there so don't ramble. Is that Jason you know was trying to say we're not encouraging necessarily an ethical impetus for individuals to go out and therefore you have to go buy probiotics because it's the right thing to do; we're actually trying to rather complicate that narrative.

CM: Okay. Yeah very good. Okay. so last question and I think that it's actually in the response to the previous question; you sort of addressed this a bit but I'm very intrigued by your suggestion that gut rhetorics suggests an approach that investigates what does not line up or feel quite right and can you say any more about this idea you know in terms of what you said before of course I think it fits quite well but so gut rhetorics suggests an approach to investigating what does not line up or feel quite right do you do you want to say more?

DG: That was the beginning of the paper actually; that was the core idea from the get-go. It was the idea of exclusion as a complement to attunement. My feeling was that rhetoric has focused a lot on coming together and or on attunements and fair enough I mean there's lots of reasons for that one of which is because maybe when we look at human and non-human networks we look for the salient relations of things that are coming together as opposed to the things that are pushing away or falling apart excluding or dying so we wanted to say something about that and gut rhetorics seem particularly useful especially because when we started to look at the cases we realized that the arguments in the particular probiotic studies that we talked about in the paper; the arguments are based on saying that certain probiotics engage in a competitive exclusion of pro-inflammatory elements in the body which cause inflammation. And so we took a methodology that that followed in kind which as we looked at the gaps between the studies or across studies that were being interrelated as support for the probiotic so how they didn't line up looking at the ways the surveys were different, the way that the participants were asked to do different things, the different times that the participants had to engage in this probiotics. So we took not only the idea of exclusion as inspiration

from the get-go but then we found it in the text and then we use that to drive the way in which we talked about the difference led.

CM: Interesting, okay.

JK: Yeah I you know to frame that differently would be that like the body and microbiota, they've been evolving together for millions of years but they're also evolving like microbial also evolving for life within the body, so they're both creating the body and adapting within it in that kind of way but it's an agonistic; it's definitely an agonistic relationship; you know studies suggest that you know the presence of some microbiota, you know this microbiota, might cause low level information that instigates you know the immune system right which can be a good thing but too much or those microbiota in the wrong locations in the body and they're no longer beneficial, and there's some sense that these microbiota are trying to eat you. And so the body actually divides it you know tries to keep them at bay and it's at the same time so the you know the mucous membrane, the epithelial skin between the intestines, kind of keep keep the microbiota in their place wherever that place is at the same time there's like you know the immune system might be sending out cells to kind of check in on these and are these friendly are they not and so it's creating these kind of inflammatory responses within the body and so it's definitely an agonistic relationship and it's not about how all these things are coming together are lining up or and so it's about all these other things that are happening - and so what does that again to come back the idea like what can about rhetoric from that?

CM: I think that's it's a it's really such a cool concept to think about rhetoric through these these sort of unpredictable bodily phenomena and I'm thinking just as you're talking about like ulcerative colitis another autoimmune you've got inflammatory bowel conditions yeah and what they have to do with that delicate balance maybe being tipped off in some way. Well these were amazing answers so I have a gastroenterology question for you guys. Have you ever heard of h pylori this bacteria?

JK: Yes.

CM: Okay I think that's such an interesting thing and I hope rhetoricians take it on at some point and I wonder if it's you guys so I'll just throw it out there for you.

JK: Why don't you?

CM: Maybe I will and guess what I definitely would be a citing gut rhetorics because conceptually it's just incredibly rich and and I think that the nice thing about your essay is that it offers a way of thinking about how to do our rhetoric health medicine research that is incredibly generative and so the coinages are actually some of the most helpful parts of the essay and I guess you've probably meant it that way; like it's making a real contribution methodological, so I really appreciate your work and I'm excited for it to

get out there in the world and I do think that the interview will be a nice sort of complement to it as people think through ways that they can be citing and using the this work as a jumping-off point for their own inquiries. So thanks for your great contribution to the journal, and it was great talking with you guys.

JK: Thank you!

DG: Thank you!