

**The Biology and Community Structure of CO₂-Reducing
Acetogens in the Termite Hindgut**

Thesis by
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

California Institute of Technology

Pasadena, California

2009

(Defended September 25, 2008)

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Acknowledgements

Much of the scientist I have become, I owe to the fantastic biology program at Grinnell College, and my mentor Leslie Gregg-Jolly. It was in her molecular biology class that I was introduced to microbiology, and made my first attempt at designing degenerate PCR primers. The year I spent working in her laboratory taught me a lot about science, and about persistence in the face of experimental challenges.

At Caltech, I have been surrounded by wonderful mentors and colleagues. The greatest debt of gratitude, of course, goes to my advisor Jared Leadbetter. His guidance has shaped much of how I think about microbes and how they affect the world around us. And through all the ups and downs of these past six years, Jared's enthusiasm for microbiology—up to and including the occasional microscope session spent exploring a particularly interesting puddle—has always reminded me why I became a scientist in the first place.

The Leadbetter Lab has been a fantastic group of people. In the early days, Amy Wu taught me how much about anaerobic culture work and working with termites. These last few years, Eric Matson has been a wonderful mentor, endlessly patient about reading drafts and discussing experiments. Xinning Zhang also read and helped edit much of this work. As for the rest of the crew: Jean Huang, Yajuan Wang, Jong-In Han, Paul Orwin, Suvi Flagan, Andrew Hawkins, Abbie Green, Nick Ballor, and recently Adam Rosenthal; thanks so much for being there to bounce ideas off of and just hang around with!

Another amazing group to work with has been my collaborators in microfluidics. The last two chapters of this thesis wouldn't exist without the support and advice of Dr. Steve Quake. Both Steve and my coauthor Jong Wook Hong stuck with me and with the work all the way through the long early days before we finally managed to make it work. In later days, Luigi Warren helped a great deal with on-chip molecular biology and data analysis. More recently, Paul Blainey, Yann Marcy, Christina Fan, and Rick White have been great to work with, and endlessly helpful about negotiating the logistics of long-distance research.

Finally, I need to thank my family. There's no question that I wouldn't be where I am without my parent's support and the sacrifices they've made to give each and every one their children the best opportunities life can grant. Particular thanks are also owed to my sister Jen, who is yet another valuable member of my proofreading crew. The rest of my siblings—well, they're more likely than not to roll their eyes and ignore me when I start to talk about science (except for Eric, whom Jen and I have finally managed to lure to the scientist side of the force) but I wouldn't be the person I am without them. Last but certainly not least, this is for my grandfather, Alfred Hieronymus, and his insistence that if I wanted to claim there were three domains of life then I'd better get used to calling my work *Triology*.

Thank you, to everyone who has made this work possible.

Abstract

In the guts of wood-feeding termites, CO₂-reductive acetogenesis serves as the dominant sink for H₂ generated during the fermentation of wood polysaccharides. This activity can generate up to 1/3 of the acetate that powers the energy metabolism of the host insect. The gene for formyl-tetrahydrofolate synthetase (FTHFS), a key gene in the acetyl-CoA pathway, can be used as a genetic marker of acetogenic capability. The dominant FTHFS types in the guts of wood-feeding termites are known to cluster phylogenetically with those from acetogenic *Treponemes*. In this work, we present the discovery that the guts of wood-feeding roaches are also dominated by *Treponeme*-like sequences. Phylogenetic analysis of roach-derived FTHFS sequences reveals a cluster that forms a basal radiation of the termite *Treponeme* cluster. This suggests that the *Treponemes* found in roach guts represent an ancient divergence, present in the last common ancestor of these insects, rather than a modern lineage acquired by cross-species symbiont transfer. The FTHFS sequences present in the guts of higher termites were also examined. Wood-, palm-, and litter-feeding termites were found to be dominated by acetogenic *Treponemes*, while subterranean soil/grass feeders were found to be dominated by a novel cluster of *Firmicute*-like FTHFS types. Also presented herein is the development of microfluidic digital PCR for molecular characterization of individual bacteria from environmental samples. We used this technique to retrieve FTHFS and 16S rRNA gene sequences from single bacterial cells, thereby discovering the 16S rRNA sequences of uncultured acetogens in the termite gut. This technique should provide a valuable tool for molecular analyses of termite gut acetogens, and can potentially be adapted for the characterization of uncultured bacteria that carry any metabolic gene of interest.

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