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ALICE DOS REIS

**MALVA FIELD, SUBMERGED**

Discovered in 1885 by the German-Austrian physician Theodore Escherich, *Escherichia coli*, commonly known as *E. coli*, is the most diverse, prevalent and abundant of all gastrointestinal bacteria that resides within you. You find yourself suffering from a surge of hormonal disorders caused by the misuse of its bacterial cultures in the production of biodiesel. Created by the accidental multiplication of the bacteria in global seawaters with effects on several marine ecosystems, new research begins to show that these resident microbes orchestrate your immune system, influence the brain, and contribute more gene functions than your own genome. You think: perhaps humans are not individuals after all, but the outcome of ever-changing interactions with microorganisms.<sup>1</sup>

In *Malva field, submerged*, Alice dos Reis (Lisboa, 1995) has imagined a near-future scenario where a generalized *E. coli* epidemic is met by a group of women who care for the afflicted by collectively treating seemingly disparate bodies of water, ourselves and the oceans, with a genetically engineered version of mallow flower—traditionally used to appease symptoms of *E. coli* infections—gardened underwater.

Working primarily with film and photography, dos Reis debuts a graphic novel realized in collaboration with the South Korean artist Bin Koh that plays with the futurity of these vernacular knowledges, a valorisation of the various affective forms and practices that have been passed on by generations of women, from the quest for non-dualistic forms of knowledge to the attempt to develop a different language for the multispecies roots of the human. A photograph of a poem patterned in a petri dish with *E. coli* that was cultured from the artist's urine recounts a common practice of entertainment in microbial research labs tackling the idleness and slow pace of scientific observation.

Countering the negativity with which femininity is identified as corporeality, dos Reis' fabulation submerges viewers in our shared watery bodies. Thinking through and with the idea of a "hydrocommons," dos Reis opposes

1. Rees, Tobias et al. "How The Microbiome Challenges Our Concept of Self". *PLoS Biology*, vol 16, no. 2, 2018.

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conventional understandings of both the individual and the oceans as discrete, coherently bounded, and awaiting control.<sup>2</sup> This concern continues the research first presented in the film *Undercurrent / Sub Corrente* (2019) for the NOVO BANCO Revelation Prize's exhibition at Serralves Museum.

*Malva field, submerged* asserts dos Reis' commitment to the poetics and practice of 'critical fabulation,' a term introduced by the Black scholar Saidiya Hartman to reveal gaps and silences in the wake and power of the archive through the combined forces of historical research with critical theory and fictional narrative.<sup>3</sup> In the ongoing struggle against patriarchy, speciesism, and climate change, dos Reis' work contributes a broader, multidimensional understanding of what means to be human, bearing the question: how might a feminist politics look like from the perspective of the microbiome?

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2. Neimanis, Astrida. "Bodies Of Water, Human Rights And The Hydro-commons". *TOPIA: Canadian Journal Of Cultural Studies*, vol 21, 2009, pp. 161-182.

3. Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12 no. 2, 2008, p. 1-14.