

Adam Kleinman

On Sophia Al-Maria's *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*

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e-flux journal #42 — february 2013 Adam Kleinman
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Remember the early 1990s, the years that “punk broke” in Washington State. It’s late spring there, and the lilac bushes are beginning to bloom. Although the first Gulf War has ended with a “victory” for the American-led coalition forces, the USA, and most of the West, is facing yet another financial downturn. To make ends meet, Gale, a young mother from Puyallup, Washington, is forced to take on several jobs. Sadly, Gale’s elderly mother has just been moved to a home, and Gale must sell her childhood farm to cover these additional costs. One of Gale’s two young daughters, Sophia, now reaching adolescence, has just returned from visiting Grandma. It was a strange visit; although Grandma is senile, she mentioned that her lilacs must be flowering about now. Touched by this moment of clarity, Sophia decides to sneak back on the farm, now in a developer’s hands, to pick a few bushes to bring back. But to Sophia’s surprise, the house in which she herself spent some of her youth and the entire farm have been bulldozed and paved over. Now it’s Sophia’s turn for clarity: no matter where she travels, the slow grey march of concrete urbanism is always just around the corner. No, this is not some nostalgia story. This is just one of the many tumbles our protagonist Sophia Al-Maria takes in her alluring new memoir *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*.

Sophia, or in some instances in the book, Safya, is not your average “girl.” In fact, she is the product of an unlikely union. Her father, Matar, is a Bedouin from the Gulf who, after a healthy dose of TV, yearned for far-off travel. Piqued by the mysteries of space after staring up at the desert stars, Matar decides to go to Seattle, the home of the “Space Needle.” Instead, he lands in nearby Tacoma, which is no substitute utopia. Soon lost in a rainy metropolis, and dressed in a secondhand suit that is “pink” and “spongy” like the feel of a “goat’s tongue,” Matar finds himself accidentally eating a box of laundry detergent he mistook for a box of Corn Flakes. Gale, a Washington farm girl, spies this “very, very lonesome” “spooked horse” and is quickly endeared; the two share a drink, head out on a road trip, and the rest is history. Differences between the two are quickly reconciled; Gale learns Arabic and the teachings of Islam, while Matar learns to swim. But Matar again feels the pangs of wanderlust, and returns to the Gulf to work on an oil rig. Although at first Sophia stays in Washington, she later ping-pongs between the Pacific Northwest and the Gulf, affording the memoir the stuff of a “cultural whiplash” journey, leaving Sophia feeling like a “deep-sea diver, adjusting constantly to the pressures of the two very different environments.”

These pressures are what the reader expects, but they are also a bit surprising. On her



Still from Fatima Al Qadiri & Sophia Al-Maria's video *The Desert of the Unreal*.

first visit to her paternal homeland, Sophia is thrust into a byzantine labyrinth of tribal relations and social codes as she tries to draw a star map of her new-found “cousins,” numbering in the dozens. Even more jarring is the realization that Matar has taken on not only a second life, but also a second wife in addition to Gale. At various points in the memoir, Gale’s nuclear family tries to coexist with these extended relatives – at first by moving with Matar’s second family into a high-rise in the Gulf that is well beyond Matar’s means – but they ultimately fail. Sophia is whisked back to Washington, only to be later sent back to the Gulf to learn some discipline in what Gale regards as a conservative society. Ironically, Sophia finds that many of the films, games, and music banned by her mother are not restricted in her “other” residence.

Fans of both film and music might hear an echo in the book’s title of Nicolas Roeg’s 1976 sci-fi film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* – starring Sophia’s first crush, and the source of her first profound thrill for creation, David Bowie. Through reading various passages, we learn that reconstitution is what attracted Sophia to Bowie, who, through his stage persona Ziggy Stardust, suggested the way toward “creating an alter ego or curating one’s own personal mythology.” And it is with this idea that the memoir makes its first of several moves toward another genre, that of the *bildungsroman*.

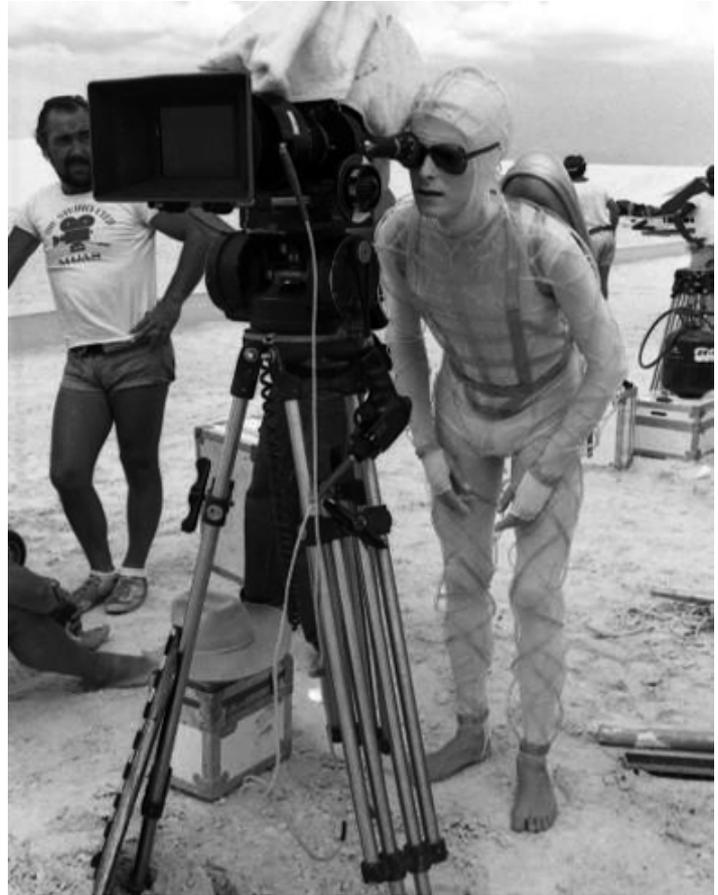
Throughout the book, Sophia is asked to check boxes, like when she applies to college and is asked to identify her ethnicity. Not content with the prescribed fields, she ticks “other” and insouciantly specifies herself as an “alien.” Status is again put into question in a later scene; when asked which name she goes by, “Sophia” or “Safya,” Sophia replies curtly, “whichever.” Sophia has the ability to surf both worlds, and it is this ambiguity that provides the grounds for her to be somewhat liberated, even though it takes her a few more pages to truly realize what this means.

In an episode near Mt. Sinai, Sophia suspends her journey; she actually just needs to go to the bathroom. Out of necessity, she relives herself at St. Catherine’s Monastery. There, she encounters a plaque that reads, “I am that I am,” which is the Hebrew god’s explanation of his own identity. Sophia, who has never been able to describe her own identity without ambiguity, believes this statement echoes her own plight. Substituting herself for a god, Sophia must come to terms with the fact that she is ultimately responsible for her own boundaries. But then, at this moment, when the possibility for change appears, a very real boundary asserts itself: the book more or less ends here. We don’t learn what she does at this moment of clarity, if she does

anything at all.

Turning to the blurb on the back cover of the book, we learn that after all this, Sophia has become an artist. Cleverly, this is left well beyond the scope of the book, and as such, the whole story becomes the best form of self-promotion, as it stirs a genuine curiosity – what comes next? But more importantly, something else is shared here: through continuous adjustments and reinvention, Sophia shows us that we should not try to control our situation; instead, we should control our continual adaptation.

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David Bowie on the set of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

Thankfully, this conclusion only completes Al-Maria’s toying with the coming of age genre, just as her delicious imagery teases us with the subjective retellings of her autobiography. Yet, sitting like a nefarious viper underneath these lines is the book’s third and final genre game, that of the dystopic sci-fi film. This game takes the form of a series of soliloquies woven throughout the book.

Bucking a journalistic style, *The Girl Who Fell To Earth* is delightfully punctuated with countless literary devices. Key among these is the recurring imagery of space and space travel. Sometimes the imagery makes direct reference to space travel, as in the case of a Neil

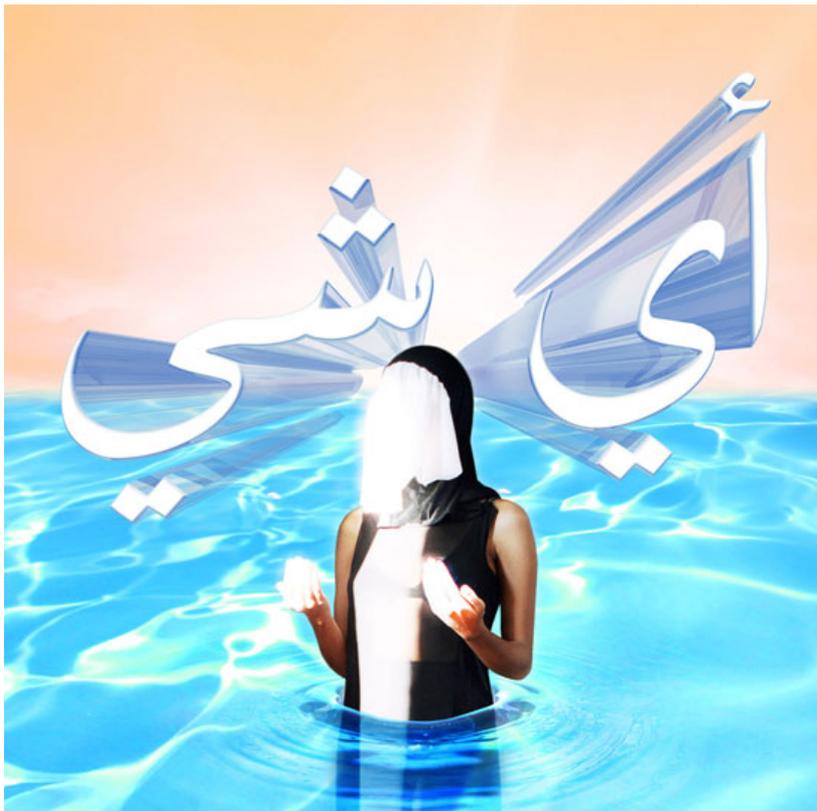
Armstrong photo on the cover of a magazine in one mise-en-scène, or in the case of the Space Needle. Other times the imagery can be found in a set of *aperçus* that take up the metaphor of transmissions from space. For example, the book begins with an epigraph lifted from one of the tracks on the Voyager Golden Record – a “message in a bottle” sent into space on the eponymous satellite. (The tracks on the record were chosen by a team lead by Carl Sagan.) The track in the epigraph is the Arabic greeting “may time bring us together.” And yet, any sort of monist unity of everything – one that might expose Sophia’s dualistic position of American/Arab as contradictory, arbitrary, or imposed – is put into question just after, as the book begins.

Delaying the story of how her father meets her mother, the book opens with an unusual prologue. In it, we learn of a 1969 trans-Arabian broadcast of “Lebanese songbird” Samira Tawfik signing “Oh Eye, Oh Night,” telecast so that it breaks the call to prayer. More than a mere historical account, Al-Maria inserts a fictitious director who pushes Tawfik to stare into the camera so as to make the illusion of her telecommunicated reality “work.” Surrendering further to filmic devices and their seductive

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means, Al-Maria often places her little space reveries between plot developments like transitional cross-cuts, so that we find Sophia up there, alone, floating with her thoughts. Through these thoughts a new landscape, not of space, but of a wildly contradictory present, is traced.

Like the gray subdivision blocks that destroyed her home in Washington, Sophia later puzzles on the massive building projects scattered about the Middle East. Are they simply modernist towers, or harbingers of an “Islamic fantasy-future” replete with “disco-elevators” that “hum of invisible machines running the mother ship of the building”? Instead of mirroring Sophia’s own narrative development, this transplanted fantasy-future presents a lack of unity that Al-Maria riffs on through her use of crosscut rumination. Upon seeing these buildings, Sophia is sent not adrift, but instead “plummeting” from their vertiginous heights. With little way to connect these phantasms to the past, such temporal jumps force Sophia to wander in a perpetual present characterized by such images as “trees [dying] still girdled in their shipping mesh” and grass dying everywhere in a truly alien setting. Even though this lack of connection points to the fact that there is no



Cover image for EP by Fatima Al Qadiri / Ayshay entitled *Warn-U*.

conceivable future on the horizon for the Gulf States, Sophia is herself saved by their collective delusion, as she is cast again skyward, “plunging up into the sky.”

Like the sudden ending on Mt. Sinai, this dissolve prefigures Al-Maria’s current work as a filmmaker invested in her own, self-styled Gulf Futurism – however, as an additional teaser, readers will have to go elsewhere for this. Within the pages of the book, however, readers are reminded of Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “all great works of literature either dissolve a genre or invent one: they are, in other words, special cases.” Although it is premature to call someone’s first book a “great work,” *The Girl Who Fell To Earth* deftly succeeds in creating a decentered genre. Wisely billed as a “memoir,” this book hinges on not just its own content, but instead begs you to follow the main character after she, like Icarus, has flown away.

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Adam Kleinman Born in New York City in 1978, Adam Kleinman is a writer and curator and former dOCUMENTA (13) Agent for Public Programming. He was Curator at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, where he created the interpretative humanities program “Access Restricted.” Kleinman also developed LentSpace, a cultural venue and garden design by Interboro Partners, which repurposed an entire vacant Manhattan block. There, Kleinman curated “Avenue of the Americas” (2010) and “Points & Lines” (2009). Kleinman is a frequent contributor to multiple exhibition catalogs and magazines including *Agenda*, *Artforum*, *e-flux journal*, *Frieze*, *Mousse* and *Texte zur Kunst*. Kleinman is currently Editor at Witte de With, where he is working with the team to launch a new publishing endeavor.

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