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ARTICLE

## *The Girl Who Fell to Earth: Sophia Al-Maria's Retro-Futurism*

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This article reads Sophia Al-Maria's aesthetics of Gulf Futurism as a mode of retro-futurist nostalgia, nostalgia not for the past but for the future. Retro-futurism can be understood in terms of what Mark Fisher has called, following Jacques Derrida, "hauntology" (Fisher 2014), the project of interrogating the failure of the utopian promises of modernity on both personal and collective registers. Literary and cultural critics have long maintained that postmodernism marks a post-futurist moment in which imagined futures are pre-determined by the ideological imperatives of market capitalism. Yet, this "slow cancellation of the future" (Berardi 2011: 18) has paradoxically entailed a proliferation of 21<sup>st</sup>-century futurisms: Afro-Futurism, Sino-Futurism, Gulf Futurism, accelerationism, design fiction, climate fiction, and so forth. My argument is that, in its articulation of Gulf Futurism, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* distorts and undermines modernity's signature narrative of development and progress, holding up a mirror to its history of broken promises and thereby challenging its imagined foreclosure of possible futures.

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**Keywords:** gulf futurism; retro-futurism; hauntology; bildungsroman; modernity; autobiography

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You can't talk about the future without considering the past, and the present is less than dust. [Al-Maria in *Frieze*, 3 May 2016]

The Qatari-American artist and writer Sophia Al-Maria's self-styled memoir *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (2012) concludes with an extra-terrestrial encounter that makes good on the text's playful allusion to the 1976 film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (starring David Bowie and adapted from the science fiction novel by Walter Tevis). After climbing Mt. Sinai, one of the world's holiest sites, Sophia—or Safya, as she also calls herself—recounts witnessing a moving light in the sky which she first believes

to be that of a satellite. Revising her opinion, Sophia concludes that the light she sees must be aliens, a conviction she experiences with “an almost hysterical desire to be beamed up with the passing lights, to disappear like some crazed Heaven’s Gate fanatic” (Al-Maria 2012: 264). After her close encounter on Mt. Sinai, Sophia describes how she falls back to Earth, “like waking from a falling dream” (265). With this conclusion, Sophia’s story reverses the narrative sequence of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which opens when its eponymous character arrives on Earth with a scheme to patent and sell futuristic inventions under the guise of an anonymous technology conglomerate. *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* concludes where *The Man Who Fell to Earth* begins, implying an undetermined future for Sophia’s endeavors in lieu of a traditional fixed or closed narrative of development or progress.

A memoir of the author’s own experiences growing up between the U.S. and Qatar in the 1980s and 1990s, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* is replete with dreams of futures past. From the bright-eyed expectations of Sophia’s father on his first journey to the U.S., to the modern Qatari state’s oil-fueled modernization projects and Sophia’s own hopes for her education and career, the memoir restages the narrative of coming-of-age or *Bildung* on both personal and collective registers. In this article, I read *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* as a work of autobiography that documents the drama of migration as both personal memoir and futuristic odyssey. In Al-Maria’s work, the unredeemed promises of global modernity are closely connected with the aesthetic of “Gulf Futurism” that Al-Maria is credited with developing together with the artist and musician Fatima Al-Qadiri, a term that refers to the futuristic style of hypermodernity particular to the contemporary oil-rich Gulf States.<sup>1</sup> In more recent interviews, however, Al-Maria has clarified her view of Gulf Futurism as a brand of “techno-pessimism,” a critical vision of the Gulf’s rapid modernization and its consequences, particularly rooted in her own experiences in Qatar in the

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<sup>1</sup> Their earliest definition of Gulf Futurism occurs in a 2012 article by Al-Maria and Al-Qadiri’s published in *Dazed* which lists examples of Gulf Futurism ranging from architectural monuments such as the Kuwait Water Towers to the urban utopian masterplans of the Gulf states (*Dazed*, Nov 14, 2012).

1980s and 1990s.<sup>2</sup> My contention is that Al-Maria's autobiographical writings play a crucial role in her elaboration of the themes and tropes of Gulf Futurism. *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* thus presents in the form of an individual story the promises and failures of narratives of modernization and development as symptoms of global modernity and its contradictions. In turn, the aesthetics of Gulf Futurism should be seen as a mode of retro-futurist nostalgia: that is, nostalgia not for the past but for the future.<sup>3</sup> Retro-futurism can be understood in terms of what Mark Fisher has called, following Jacques Derrida, "hauntology" (Fisher 2014), or the interrogation of modernity's failed utopian promises. The purportedly post-futurist moment marked by postmodernism, in which imagined futures are pre-determined by the ideological imperatives of market capitalism (Berardi 2011: 18), has paradoxically generated a proliferation of 21<sup>st</sup>-century futurisms: Afro-Futurism, Sino-Futurism, Gulf Futurism, accelerationism, design fiction, climate fiction, and so forth. In *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*, a version of Gulf Futurism is articulated that distorts and undermines modernity's signature narrative of development and progress, holding up a mirror to its history of broken promises and thereby challenging its imagined foreclosure of possible futures.

### **Futurist Autobiography**

As early as 2007–2008, Al-Maria began developing her formulation of Gulf Futurism while still an art student at Goldsmiths, in a blog titled "The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi" (<http://scifiwahabi.blogspot.co.uk/>). Through the blog's theoretical essays and autobiographical fragments, Sci-Fi Wahabi (SFW) emerges as the author's alter-ego

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Maria has described herself as a "doomy" techno-pessimist in interviews in advance of her solo exhibition at the Whitney, "Black Friday" (*Frieze*, May 3, 2016). In the context of the artist collective GCC, with which Al-Maria has also been active, Gulf Futurism has been described as "the all-conquering, kitschy modernism, master-planned sprawl and unbridled consumerism of the Gulf in the 1980s and '90s" (Jones 2014: 51).

<sup>3</sup> For this formulation, I am indebted to Svetlana Boym's influential work on cultural memory and nostalgia (2001). Boym distinguishes between what she calls "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia, writing, "Reflective nostalgia has a utopian dimension that consists in the exploration of other potentialities and unfulfilled promises of modern happiness" (2001: 342).

within her larger project: “You see, SFW is in some ways me. She is my gaze. She is a lens through which you can see this project” (2008). With references to Anglo-American science fiction and French theory, SFW paints a picture of the Arabian Gulf as a region in which “[o]ptimistic futurism has faded into an apocalyptic narrative” and “the boundaries between the real and unreal already exist seamlessly” (2008). To narrate the dystopian failure of optimistic futurism in which reality is collapsed into Baudrillardian hyperrealism, Al-Maria adopts SFW as a science-fictional persona, a refracted gaze from which to assess the intensifying social and cultural flows blurring the line between fact and fiction. It is significant, though, that SFW is not only a “gaze” or theoretical perspective, but a persona or figure constituted by the forces of rapid modernization. As she explains, “Sci-Fi Wahabi needs an individual to bridge the yawning heterology between cultures, technologies and time. It needs a figure to absorb the networks and translate. It needs a native informant” (2008). As we will see, the role of the “native informant” testifying to the effects of global modernity in the Gulf is central to Al-Maria’s project of articulating the effects of modernization in the Gulf on the level of an individual story.

In interviews, Al-Maria has expressed her “complicated feelings” about the “native-informant card,” while acknowledging her use of memoir in her writing alongside home video in her art (*Frieze*, May 3, 2016). In “The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi,” Al-Maria cites the pioneering work of Trinh T. Minh-ha to theorize the role of the “native informant” in challenging hegemonic narratives of modernity. In *When The Moon Waxes Red* Minh-ha develops a notion of female spectatorship as “modifying frontiers to produce a situated, shifting and contingent difference in which the only constant is the emphasis on the irresistible to-and-fro movement across (sexual and political) boundaries: margins and centers” (Minh-ha 1991: 105). Al-Maria cites this passage from Minh-ha and specifically emphasizes the role of the “bi-cultural spectator,” who, she adds, must cross boundaries not only between “margins and centers,” but also, “the real and unreal” (Al-Maria 2008). The “unreal” perspective of SFW strategically appropriates the role of the “native informant” or “bi-cultural spectator” to destabilize fixed truth claims and cultural allegiances through perpetual movement and the transgression of boundaries. Thus, while Al-Maria’s autobiographical writing in *The*

*Girl Who Fell to Earth* may be considered an example of playing the “native-informant card” in the world-literary marketplace, such an assumption would be to ignore her complicated negotiation of the role of “native informant” in the text itself.

*The Girl Who Fell to Earth* is published with the subtitle “A Memoir” and the book’s copyright disclaimer clearly marks the text as a “work of nonfiction,” though with the caveat that the author has “changed the names, identities, and other specifics of individuals who have played a role in my life in order to protect their privacy” (iv). As theorists of autobiography or life-writing have pointed out, the autobiographical mode can be thought of as a kind of quasi-legal “contract” or “pact,” where the identity of the author, the narrator and main character is guaranteed (Lejeune 1988). Al-Maria seems to uphold this pact, not just to enhance the text’s marketability for Western and Arabic-speaking readers (Al-Maria’s memoir was published in Arabic translation in 2015), but also to suggest her reliability as a “native informant.” As we have seen, this role of “native informant” is by no means straightforward in Al-Maria’s writing. In interviews, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* has been referred to as a “fiction-memoir”,<sup>4</sup> and the text itself provides indications that Sophia’s story deliberately blurs fact and fiction, complicating as well the position of the “native informant” who transparently reflects a Western ethnographic gaze.

The memoir begins in 1969, fourteen years before Sophia was born, with the live-television broadcast of a performance of the Lebanese singer Samira Tewfik, whose style and appearance is described as “a clever combination evoking Bedouin girl and modern city lady at the same time” (Al-Maria 2012: 1–2). The story continues by narrating the unlikely meeting of the author’s parents in Eastern Washington, followed by her own subsequent experiences growing up between Seattle, Tacoma, Abu Dhabi and Doha. In the opening chapters, the narrator imagines the life of her nomadic Bedouin family before settling in the urban centers of Abu Dhabi and Doha, watching Samira Tewfik on a General Electric television with flickering electricity. The narrative then relates two very different images of flight. Two brothers, Mohammad and Matar, adopt Qatari citizenship and turn to the sky: one chooses military service

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<sup>4</sup> In interview for Tank Magazine with Shumon Basar (Al-Maria and Basar 2014).

and flies F 16 fighter jets in the nation's newly modernized armed forces. The other brother, Matar, studies English in Tacoma on a scholarship, uprooting himself on a Pan Am flight through ten hours of darkness, and meeting Sophia's American mother in an unlikely sequence of events. After Sophia and her sister are born, Matar returns to Qatar with a well-paying job on an oil rig to support his new half-American family.

Up until this point in the text, the memoir has been narrated from an externally focalized third-person perspective. Sophia's father leaves for Qatar, though, a subtle shift in point-of-view occurs, as Sophia's own first-person recollections begin to take center stage, thus invoking the "autobiographical pact" for the reader. When Sophia is five, she receives her first package from her father with a message recorded on video. In this video, her father stands in front of "a gleaming DeLorean parked under a palm tree" (Al-Maria 2012: 50) and introduces his family to the newly-modernized city of Doha, showing off the lobby of the Doha Sheraton which is described as "a seductive Islamic fantasy-future of hexagonal mirrors and disco-lit elevators" (50). Describing her reaction to this video, Sophia explains, "I saw it as a portal into another dimension" (51). She continues, "seeing the video permanently cracked the world in two halves for me" (51). Sophia's awareness of "[h]aving a different world to belong to" and the resultant demand "to learn to live in both worlds" (51) firmly establishes *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* in the field of migrant autobiography, exemplifying her emerging cross-cultural double consciousness.

Moreover, the "portal into another dimension" through which Sophia peers into the "fantasy-future" of Doha reflects the science-fictional aesthetics of the memoir as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Sophia's double perspective returns us to the science-fictional perspective of SFW, about whom Al-Maria writes in her blog: "SFW

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<sup>5</sup> The memoir's science-fictional elements were not lost on its reviewers, especially for their distraction from the realism expected of a coming-of-age narrative. In her *New York Times* review Dalia Sofer writes, "the memoir could have benefited from some restraint: metaphors of extraterrestrial landscapes, while evocative, are too numerous and distracting" (Feb 1, 2013). Adan Kleinman writing for *e-flux* is much more generous, writing, "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" (2013).

has been left ahead. She knows she missed a metaphysical leap that is beyond her, a rapture-like occurrence that left her stuck between the past and the future, the real or unreal" (Al-Maria 2008). As an example of "fiction-memoir" that blurs the real and unreal in its style and plot, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* reflects the perspective not just of Sophia, but also of her alter-ego, SFW, who, though not explicitly mentioned in the text, is intertextually invoked in the passages of futuristic description that punctuate the narrative's progression. *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* appears as a work of not only metafictional autobiography, or autofiction, but also the subgenre of science-fictional memoir exemplified by J.G. Ballard's *The Kindness of Women*, which Ballard has described in an interview with Will Self as "my life seen through the mirror of the fiction prompted by that life" (Self 1995: 360).<sup>6</sup> In the epigraph to "The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi," Al-Maria cites the oft-quoted opening line of a review Ballard published in 1971, just as the global capitalist order associated with post-modernity was emerging: "Everything is becoming science fiction" (Ballard 1971: 12; qtd. in Al-Maria 2008). In "The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi," Al-Maria has described the effects of modernization in the Gulf as "a shimmering warp in time" (Al-Maria 2008), or, as she puts it in interview with Shumon Basar, "a wormhole stargate mindfuck" (Al-Maria and Basar 2014). It is this science-fictional perspective over the emergence of global modernity that we see in Sophia's dawning awareness of the "portal into another dimension" when she watches her father's video message from Doha. The use of science-fictional memoir in *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* can thus be understood as an aesthetic solution to the problem of the intensified "time-space compression" of postmodernity (Harvey 1990: 284–307). That is to say, the text seeks to narrate a life in a context in which the traditional divisions of time into past, present and future are no longer sustainable, and to understand what happens to narratives of progress and development, both individual and collective, under these new conditions.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Al-Maria's own formulation of the same maneuver in "The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi": "I have also masked her in science fiction in order to create a pure screen of identity in order to 'rearrive' at the place of critical engagement unrecognized and uninhibited" (Al-Maria 2014).



### Auto-ethnographic Hauntology

One of Al-Maria's earliest explorations of material that would find its way into *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* is a short memoir-essay published in the magazine *Bidoun* in 2007, "The Way of the Ostrich: Or, How Not to Resist Modernity".<sup>7</sup> Collected in a special issue on the topic of "Failure," the short autobiographical reflection briefly refers to Al-Maria's family history in terms recognizable to readers of *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*: her nomadic Bedouin family, her father's journey to the Pacific Northwest, and the author's own experiences studying at the American University in Cairo. Here, she recalls her astonishment at discovering an academic monograph on the topic of her family's own Bedouin tribe, written by a researcher who would also turn out to be a professor at the same university. As she writes in "The Way of the Ostrich":

We are a fierce and honorable people, we Al-Murrah, at odds with the world and the desert and the people of the towns. I know this to be true, because I read a whole book about it. About us: *Nomads of the Nomads: The Al-Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter*. Though by the time I found the book, browsing the picked-over offerings in the library at the American University in Cairo, many of us, including my siblings and our extended family, were living in Qatar. By the time I read the book, in fact, many of our men were in jail in Qatar. Or, like my father, in exile. (Al-Maria 2007)

The author's experience of uncanny self-recognition in the Western researcher's ethnographic gaze is experienced as too late in at least two senses. First, as legitimated by the discourse of Western anthropology, the Al-Murrah Bedouin are already "at odds with the world," permanently out-of-sync with the rhythms of urban life, and by necessity latecomers to modernity. Second, by the time Al-Maria has made this discovery in

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Exell has also discussed Al-Maria's memoir as a recent example of challenging narratives of modernity in the Gulf. Exell describes the project of Gulf Futurism as a whole as a critical commentary on the Gulf's rapid modernization: "The framing of Arabian Peninsula contemporaneity as a dystopian future interprets the rapid shift from traditional lifestyles to modernity as the region's awakening in a future it has no memory of creating" (2016: 203).

the library, the Bedouin's nomadic desert lifestyle was already permanently disrupted and her family members themselves subject to political persecution.

As she documents throughout the remainder of the essay, the Al-Murrah Bedouin were, ambivalently incorporated into the Qatari state's own nation-building endeavors which saw the Bedouin tribes as emblems of, as she puts it, "an authentic Qatari experience" (Al-Maria 2007). Despite their cultural symbolism, Bedouin tribes ultimately became the losers of modernity in Al-Maria's narrative due to their political opposition to Qatar's modernization and nation-building projects:

It is difficult to say what would have become of my family in the Doha of the Future, had we embraced it. Although what remained of Bedouin ways would likely have been further eroded by the gale winds of progress unleashed by the new sheikh, in retrospect things could not have gone much worse. (Al-Maria 2007)

Cast aside by the progressivist ideology of the new nation, the Bedouin tribes, including Al-Maria's Qatari family, remain on the outside of modernity and development. The title of Al-Maria's narrative refers to the example of the ostrich, which has gone from a source of nourishment for the nomadic Bedouin to a caged animal in the zoo, a symbol reflecting the Bedouin's own cultural and political "irrelevance" (Al-Maria 2007). This "irrelevance" is emphasized for the contemporary Bedouin who live "in government projects just west of the wretched Doha International Zoo" where they "spend their days looking toward the Saudi border, dreaming of the past" (Al-Maria 2007). For Al-Maria, the Bedouin appear as objects of nostalgia both in an historicist narrative which sees them as traces of an authentic past, and in their own longing for the past in the face of the failures and disappointments of modernization. Yet, crucially, Al-Maria's narrative remains focused not on the dream of the "Empty Quarter," the desert spanning the southern quarter of the Arabian Peninsula, but on the dream of futures past, an alternative vision of the "Doha of the Future," foreclosed for the Bedouin tribes.

At this point, we might wonder what distinguishes Al-Maria's own auto-ethnographic reflection on the situation of the Bedouin in the modern nation of Qatar from

the knowledge gained from a Western ethnographic gaze. From both perspectives, the Bedouin are seen as “at odds with the world,” backward remainders of a process of modernization painfully out-of-sync with the contemporary world. The purpose of Al-Maria’s self-reflection in this autobiographical fragment is not so much to disprove the knowledge collected in Western ethnographic research, but to recast and reorient it. If the Al-Murrah Bedouin have become “irrelevant,” Al-Maria’s text suggests, it is the result of an historical process that has produced, and produces, winners and losers in the construction of a modern nation-state. In this narrative, the Bedouin’s “irrelevance” is not an inevitable result of an inexorable modernizing process, nor a trace of an “authentic” cultural past. Rather, the Bedouin’s presumed authenticity is a result of a discourse authorized as much by postcolonial nation-building as Western anthropological fieldwork. When Al-Maria narrates the moment of encountering her family’s Bedouin tribe in an academic monograph, it produces a kind of uncanny recognition. After stating the received wisdom about the Bedouin, that “We are a fierce and honorable people...,” she continues in the first-person: “I know this to be true, because I read a whole book about it” (Al-Maria 2007). The “truth” of Bedouin culture is revealed to be the product of a Western anthropological discourse. Al-Maria finds herself in the position of a subject whose truth claims are subject to the legitimating effects of a discourse preceding her own existence (the text to which she refers was published in 1975, before she was born). The essay-memoir’s first-person narrative, far from disavowing this knowledge, instead serves to ironize its conditions of production. Grounded in the actual political and historical incorporation of Bedouin tribes in projects of nation-building and modernization, the historicist notion of a people who are spatially and temporally asynchronous with global modernity is revealed to be the effect of an unfulfilled promise of development and progress. In Al-Maria’s narrative, this unredeemed hope continues to haunt the present in the form of the text’s insistent nostalgia for the future.

Understood as a mode of auto-ethnography, Al-Maria’s memoir attempts to “write back” to Western historicist and anthropological discourses of modernity and development, while also presenting a “hauntological” reminder of these very discourses’ unfulfilled promises of progress. In contemporary cultural

criticism, the association between retro-futuristic aesthetics and hauntology has been most convincingly articulated by Mark Fisher. Fisher, following music critic Simon Reynolds, elaborates on the Derridean concept of hauntology in the context of popular culture, especially music. A characteristically Derridean pun, hauntology is meant to refer to the haunting of presence with the ghosts of absence in Western metaphysics (Derrida 1994). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to the arguments of Fisher and Reynolds, the orderly progression of youth subcultures and styles in popular culture has been replaced by what Reynolds has called “retromania” (Reynolds 2011), a kind of “dyschronia” in which culture is dominated by anachronism, retrospection and pastiche of earlier forms. In this context, one possibility for artists is to adopt an aesthetic of hauntology, described by Fisher as a “sensibility” characterized by “an overwhelming melancholy” and “a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down” (Fisher 2014: 21). Defying pop music’s “waning of historicity,” as Fredric Jameson might have called it (Jameson 1991), the sensibility that Fisher calls hauntological revives outmoded media technologies in an attempt to disrupt “the illusion of presence” by reminding us “that we are listening to a time that is out of joint” (Fisher 2014: 21). As Fisher summarizes:

In hauntological music there is an implicit acknowledgement that the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible. Yet at the same time, the music constitutes a refusal to give up on the desire for the future. This refusal gives the melancholia a political dimension, because it amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism. (21)

Understood as a signature 21<sup>st</sup>-century aesthetic, hauntology involves a retrospective glimpse of a future once longed for but which has not yet arrived. Hauntology can be thought of as a mode of nostalgia for the future—melancholic, but only in the Freudian sense of a refusal to give up the object of a loss, in this case, the dream of a lost future.

Hauntology's political horizon is described by Fisher as a refusal of "capitalist realism," a term he has elsewhere used to refer to neoliberal capitalism's sense of itself as "the only viable political and economic system" to which "it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative" (Fisher 2009: 2). In the context of capitalist realism, hauntology confronts global capitalist modernity's inexorable logic of development and progress with the history of foreclosed futures and failed utopian promises that have been cast to the wayside in what Berardi has called "the slow cancellation of the future" (Berardi 2011: 18), leading to a post-futurist moment. If it is no longer possible to imagine a coherent alternative to global capitalism, hauntology provides one aesthetic solution by haunting contemporary culture with the ghosts of earlier dreams of the future. In Al-Maria's critical artistic and literary practice, Gulf Futurism becomes an aesthetics of hauntology plumbing the depths of personal and collective memory to rearticulate the desire for a future foreclosed by the developmental narratives of both the West and the modern Gulf states themselves.

### **Becoming-Alien**

In *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*, the encounter with the author of *Nomads of the Nomads: The Al-Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter* is framed as one of Sophia's major formative moments, culminating in her desire to be "beamed up" by aliens. In the memoir, the author of this work has been given the name Dr. Harold Stark, or "Abdul Hayy" (Al-Maria 2012: 249), as he tells Sophia he prefers to be called. Dr. Stark attempts to enlist Sophia as a "native informant" in his anthropological fieldwork, "one who could use a camera and, most importantly, one who was a female" (250), a position she accepts as a summer job during her studies at the American University in Cairo. This fieldwork brings Sophia to the desert in eastern Sinai between Egypt and Israel, giving her a glimpse of "Sinai's forgotten dreams" in the form of "half-finished hotels and summer lodges that had been abandoned in the mire of bureaucracy and zoning as the Israeli-Egyptian border passed back and forth over the years" (250). Here, she will work closely with a Bedouin woman named Kawthar in an attempt to record her oral history. Sophia abruptly cancels this undertaking, however, when she deliberately destroys the videotapes containing the documentary evidence she has collected during her fieldwork—specifically, her interviews with Kawthar. Through this

destructive act, Sophia refuses the neo-colonial gaze of the Western anthropologist Dr. Stark. Yet, what prompts Sophia's rebellion at this moment is her realization that the tapes documented her as much as Kawthar, the purported object of Dr. Stark's study. As Sophia discovers when reviewing the tapes at the conclusion her fieldwork, "Kawthar had systematically turned my questions to her into a question about me" (260). Significantly, Sophia's refusal of the position of "native informant" in the text is predicated on the tactical resistance to representation of a subaltern Bedouin woman who cleverly dodges the ethnographic gaze of the camera.

After leaving the desert and destroying the tapes, Sophia seems to have access to only one remaining identity position: that of alien. Sophia tacitly accepts this identity when it is attributed to her by Kawthar's husband when Sophia refuses to open up to him about her origins. "The way I see it," he tells her, "you must be an alien!" (Al-Maria: 259). Sophia replies, "Yes. That's it," thinking, "Why disappoint him?" (259).<sup>8</sup> Later, on Mt. Sinai, Sophia experiences her "hysterical desire to be beamed up" as a "need to reach escape velocity from myself," which she refers to as her "identity crisis" (264). Narrating Sophia's crisis of identity at the end of the text rather than the beginning, the memoir disrupts the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, which, in its traditional form, presumes the main character's arrival at a stable identity position as a guarantee of narrative closure. Franco Moretti refers to this convention as the "principle of classification" through which the hero or heroine of the *Bildungsroman* brings youth to an end by finding a secure position in the "normative culture" of bourgeois society, typified by the marriage plot (Moretti 1987: 7–8). The ending of Sophia's coming-of-age narrative suggests instead her refusal of any identification other than alien, supported by the text's intertextual reference to David Bowie's character Thomas Jerome Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.<sup>9</sup>

As I have been suggesting, the critique of progressivist narratives of development in *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* is nowhere more apparent than in its deviation from the

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<sup>8</sup> Earlier, Sophia describes filling in her ethnicity as "Other" with the specification "Klingon" on "official documentation" at her American high school (Al-Maria 2012: 199).

<sup>9</sup> Al-Maria cleverly sneaks a reference to TJN onto the back cover of *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* by crediting the copyright holder of the author's photo as "Thomas Jerome Newton."

conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. In her “hysterical desire to be beamed up,” Sophia does not so much attain a status of development or education, or even embark on a career as an artist, as much as she rejects all identifications or pathways for development typically associated with the young protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*. By narrating Sophia’s lack of development, the text emphasizes the multiplicity of choices available to the young protagonist as well as the inadequacy of any stable frame through which to contain those choices in a closed narrative of growing up or “coming of age.” Throughout the final chapters of the memoir relating her teenage years in Doha and Eastern Washington, and her university studies in Cairo, Sophia’s reflections on “the way I saw myself and my future” (Al-Maria 2012: 228) become increasingly pressing, culminating in her desire to “reinvent myself in a room of my own, begin from a blank page” (228–229). The chapters recounting her arrival in Cairo begin with a startling intertextual reference that in many ways overdetermines the progress of Sophia’s coming-of-age narrative. Despite her family’s lack of means (or even interest) for providing for her continued education beyond high school, Sophia benefits from the support of an anonymous patron who assists in her continued development, a striking parallel with one of the most famous *Bildungsromane*, Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. This parallel is not by any means lost on young Sophia who recounts: “A week before graduation, I was extracted like Pip Pirrip from my home and given the message that *someone* had great expectations for me” (207). Sophia continues at the beginning of the next chapter, “If I felt like Pip being rescued from my lot in Doha, arriving in Cairo made me feel like Luke Skywalker entering into Mos Eisley— fresh off the moisture farm” (209). In the *Bildungsroman*’s narrative of development, the trope of a shadow-patron is not just a convention of the genre, but also a necessity for the class mobility that often coincides with the hero or heroine’s journey through a rigidly stratified society.<sup>10</sup> The narrator does not reveal the identity of her shadow-patron, leaving an aporia at the center of the text that renders her

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<sup>10</sup> According to Jed Esty (2012: 52), the role of the shadow-patron exemplified by Magwitch in *Great Expectations* must remain outside the narrative’s sphere of action in order to maintain the veneer of bourgeois respectability legitimating the protagonist’s rising class status.

upward mobility all the more magical and precarious. As it turns out, Sophia's "great expectations" are immediately dispelled as she is thrust into the sprawling city of Cairo to meet her future.

While the hero or heroine of the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century *Bildungsroman* was closely identified with a specific national space, Sophia's narrative is circumscribed by a remarkably transnational sphere of action. From the desert of Saudi Arabia, to the United States, Qatar and Egypt, no singular national frame defines the circumference of Sophia's journey. When Sophia arrives in Cairo, she reflects, "At seventeen, I'd never been to a real metropolis before. Tacoma, Seattle, Abu Dhabi, Doha—although they were technically cities, they were all quaint hamlets in comparison to this" (Al-Maria 2012: 210). Each of the novel's urban settings are in fact peripheral to an implied global metropolitan center elsewhere. Even Cairo appears to Sophia as a substitute for her original dream of attending university in New York, which she refers to as her "big New York dreams of a new career in a new town" (203), a dream that is thwarted after her uncle "neglected" to mail the application on the way to Doha from a winter holiday in the desert.<sup>11</sup> If, as literary critics have argued, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Bildungsroman* relied on an identification between the development of the hero or heroine and the development of the nation, the feasibility of the narrative of development or *Bildung* in a period of global migration is much more ambiguous. According to Jed Esty (2012), in the context of late-imperialist and postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, with an increasingly receding national framework to circumscribe the hero or heroine's development, the narrative of coming-of-age risks running wild, illustrated most fantastically by the perpetual youth of Dorian Gray or Peter Pan. Modernist and postmodern narratives of the failure of development such as these tend to focus on "autonomized youth cultures and subcultures" which are "taken as a running symbol of capitalism's endless transition, and stripped of the moralizing and dignifying rhetoric of national progress, civilizing mission, or even

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<sup>11</sup> Sophia explains her choice of New York in this way: "Like it did for every 'other' kid in the world raised on American media, New York had always glowed distantly in my mind as *the* place to go" (Al-Maria 2012: 199).



human rights" (Esty 2012: 210). In this sense, it is significant that Sophia "fails" to fulfill the traditional *Bildungsroman's* requirements of narrative closure while wandering in one of the world's most politically and culturally contested sites, the Sinai desert between Egypt and Israel.

Becoming-alien in this context suggests more than a refusal to accommodate the discourses of identity (ethnic, national, cultural, gendered, sexual, etc.) thematized in many contemporary coming-of-age narratives. Rather, Sophia's identification as alien at the end of the text underscores the insufficiency of national and international discourses of citizenship and identity to guarantee personal or political development. In the context of a 21<sup>st</sup> century memoir of global migration, becoming-alien is at once a literal rejection of the framing of "human rights" as a horizon of intelligibility for the narrative of *Bildung*, as well as a gesture towards an emergent xenofeminist sensibility.<sup>12</sup>

### **Retro-Futurism**

Sophia's narrative of her first encounter with Dr. Stark in *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* presents a more visceral account of her reaction to discovering his monograph in the library than the one briefly described in "The Way of the Ostrich." Common to the two accounts is Sophia's critical distance from the text's ethnographic gaze, despite its undeniable influence on her:

As with everything else in this corner of the library, the book was written by a white male, was an account of his travels with an untamed people, and was full of fulsome observations and eulogies for a way of life that had no hope of resisting modernity. There was nothing to signify how precious it might actually be to me. (Al-Maria 2012: 248)

As Sophia is aware, the framing of uncivilized, pre-modern people with "no hope" in a future of modernization is a construction of Western anthropology. In both

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<sup>12</sup> There has been a recent turn to speculative accounts of race and ethnicity, particularly in African American studies. See in particular Weheliye 2014; Carrington 2016. For xenofeminism, see the manifesto of the feminist collective Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics of Alienation" (2015).

*The Girl Who Fell to Earth* and “The Way of the Ostrich,” Al-Maria uses her personal and family history to portray the “failure” of her family’s Bedouin tribe to resist the nation-building and modernization projects of the Qatari state. Far from disavowing the anthropological view of the Bedouin as a people with “no hope,” Sophia regards it as “precious” to her.

By the conclusion of *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*, Sophia has come to see herself as also in a position of “no hope,” not unlike the Bedouin tribes with whom she is related. With no hopes for romance, future study, or Egyptian national passport to protect her from police harassment (let alone from random men on the street), Sophia finds her position in Cairo to be increasingly precarious. As I have been suggesting, Sophia’s recourse for her experience of hopelessness is a critical retro-futurism. When five-year-old Sophia arrives in Doha to meet her father, he arrives to meet his family in a car that “was not, to my dismay, the DeLorean” (Al-Maria 2012: 54). Recalling the science-fiction blockbuster franchise *Back to The Future*, the DeLorean is a powerful symbol for a science-fiction dream of progress and development imaginatively foreclosed both in the West and globally by the presumed triumph of capitalist realism. Through the majority of the narrative, Sophia’s father Matar is a barely visible presence, punctuating her life at irregular intervals. Likewise, the text provides numerous recurring glimpses of precarious migrant laborers on the margins of social space, in part as reminders of Gulf Futurism’s material and economic foundations in petromodernity, a condition Stephanie LeMenager has defined as the “modern life based in the cheap energy systems long made possible by petroleum” (2012: 60). Sophia’s retro-futurist gaze suggests not only the failed promises of the Gulf’s oil-fueled modernization but also the contradictions of petromodernity on a global scale.

The haunting awareness of the ongoing erasure of the future follows Sophia throughout the text. Having returned to Eastern Washington to briefly attend American high school, Sophia discovers that the home she had grown up in has been demolished and paved over by redevelopers: “it felt as if the house had just been beamed up, leaving a cement-block outline like chalk around a corpse. I kicked some broken glass into the hole. The place we called home had been erased right

out from under us" (Al-Maria 2012: 176). Later, again in Doha, Sophia chooses to attend an American-style high school where she feels out of place in a school for the children of the *nouveaux riches*. Attempting to evade the strict gender conventions of Qatari society, Sophia is able to escape momentarily with her boyfriend Suhail to an abandoned compound left over from "the early days of oil expatriation in the region" (201). Here, Sophia describes the uncanny architecture of the compound's villas: "Even though it was brand new, the villa had the feeling of a ruin. It was the same spooky quality of a nuclear test house—still as a tomb, the pool empty, air clogged with suspense like a noxious fume" (201). Throughout her narrative, Sophia encounters a landscape haunted by lost dreams of the future, unfulfilled hopes and expectations left over by failed narratives of modernization and development on a global scale. Rather than give in to hopelessness, Sophia reassesses these ruined landscapes from the stance of retro-futurist nostalgia.

Al-Maria's Gulf Futurism employs retro-futurist nostalgia, plumbing personal and collective history to provide a record of futures past. As manifest in Sophia's longing for the DeLorean, her identification with David Bowie, and her recognition of the *Star Wars* planet of Tatooine in the desert of the Gulf, Al-Maria's retro-futurism insistently recollects the lost dreams of modernity's failed progressive projects, both in the Gulf and in the West. Sophia is told by Dr. Stark, "The life your father led was premodern, elemental; it must seem irreconcilably foreign to a digital native like yourself" (Al-Maria 2012: 249). In response, Sophia reflects, "I suddenly felt inadequate and uninteresting. At ten-years old I had played *Oregon Trail* on a computer, shooting squirrels with pixel bullets and getting virtual dysentery on a wagon train" (249). Sophia does not at any point in the narrative explicitly cast aside her feeling of being "uninteresting," but I would suggest that the retro-futurist aesthetic is itself a powerful contestation of this sensibility.<sup>13</sup> What could be more "interesting" than

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<sup>13</sup> Sianne Ngai has described the interesting as "an aesthetic specific to capitalist modernization at the broadest level" (2008: 793). I would suggest that by not repudiating the feeling of being uninteresting, Sophia does not give into the same aesthetic of global modernity that would demand she serve as a "native informant" for the Western reader of world literature. Instead, the text itself serves as an evidentiary record to refute this assessment.

growing up playing computer games, using email, mobile phones and listening to David Bowie, in a childhood spent in migration between Eastern Washington and the Gulf?

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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