

BEAST TYPE SONG, 2019

Single-channel video (color, sound); 38:03 mins.

Courtesy of the artist, Anna Lena Films, Paris and Project Native Informant, London

Sophia: I've been having this recurring dream. It always starts the same. Familiar song is coming from somewhere, but I can't remember the words. And you step out from behind the stone pillar. You don't seem to recognise me. It's like we're strangers and then you turn and lead me around, like a tamed eye on a leash and then a voice reads from a poem, *The Arab of Apocalypse*, you know the one by Etel Adnan.

Speaker 2: The sun is a camera which operates only in black and white. White. White. White is the colour of terror. A son tattooed with our sins. Stop. He's a pearl diver. Stop.

Sophia: I use these sometimes to tell stories. Once upon a time, *Kan Ya Makan*, the time before Islam they call the ignorance. Poets used to string their verses up rhythmically like pearls, like the wet teeth in the smile of a beloved, like stars in the night hung up, hung up like the asterisks in the margins of my scripts. Black daisies on a highway leading to the crossroads where I guess I sold my soul to the devils. Black sun on white sky.

Speaker 2: Yellow boat. Yellow sun. A red. A red, blue, and yellow. A yellow morning on a green sun, a flower.

Speaker 3: (singing)

Elizabeth Peace: A Ram Sam Sam is a Moroccan children's song and game. It has gained popularity around the world as a nonsense verse. According to Wikipedia, the words have no meaning, but the movements of the game suggest otherwise.

Sophia: We've got blue revisions, pink revisions, yellow revisions, green revisions, golden rod, buff, salmon, tan, cherry and then it goes back around again to blue, double blue, double pink, double yellow, all the way back around again actually. It's a whole thing. You know you're in trouble if you get around to the doubles, apparently, although that's never happened to me.

Speaker 5: What's the script about?

Sophia: Interior, old art school, day. Yumna and Elizabeth run up the stairs of an apocalyptic ruin. They've just seen something scary. Yumna takes a wrong turn. Elizabeth grabs her and leads her down a long corridor. Still in costume, they're tired. There's nothing outside, only a dove grey sky and beyond that, solar war. They hold hands and lockstep towards what they think is an exit. But it's a dead end. They turn and see a black sun looking at them, but ignore it. Neither has ever known any other star. After all, these are actors, not astronauts. But together they have everything they need to get out and reach escape velocity. I don't know. Did I ever talk to you about structure?

Speaker 5: I don't think so.

Sophia: There's a three act structure, which is sort of the traditional one that everyone learns about. Apparently Aristotle said that story or a play has to have a beginning, a middle and an end. I was using a five act structure. It's something that you see in Shakespeare plays, for example. Catalyst is a fun thing always. What's next? So, dark night of the soul, you can consider that. Have you ever seen Aladdin, the Disney movie? Finale. That's what I'm waiting for before I leave this place. I had my palm read once by a [inaudible 00:06:03] in Morocco. She said I'd have many children, but that none of them would survive and that each of them would be a world unto themselves and I wonder sometimes if she really meant screenwriting, world-building. Actually my first screenwriting job was about an artist, Théodore Géricault and the painting of the "Raft of the Medusa." The Medusa was a French frigate that ran aground a sandbank on its way to reclaim Senegal after the French revolution. He cast a black sailor as the hero of the composition. It was really sensationalist, sort of precursor to photojournalism, the framing of disaster.

Sophia: But while he was doing that his contemporaries were off painting themselves into orientalist fantasies, smoking and fucking in Algerian harems.

Blessing (Elizabeth's Mum): Speak to you in Ibo?.

Elizabeth: Yeah why didn't you speak to me in Igbo.

Blessing: You want I say it in Igbo or you. want I say it in English?

Elizabeth: either.

Blessing: Well this thing goes back way. down the history line. they say the igbo language is not complete. It's weirded. It started with names, our names. Instead of an Igbo name. Some. of us prefer English names. Beatrice, Patience, Comfort.

Elizabeth: Blessing

Blessing: Elizabeth. The. language is kind of dying.

Elizabeth: What's the Igbo word for dove?

Blessing: Nduru

Elizabeth: Nduru

Blessing: Nduru Yeah

Elizabeth: Nduru.

Blessing: Yes. Nduru.

Elizabeth: Nduru.

Blessing: Right. Okay.

Sophia: Ever since I was little, I always loved sci-fi. I even tried to write a trilogy of YA novels before I was paid to write a memoir instead. So, when I got offered the chance to adapt this amazing post apocalypse, sort of climate science fiction novel last year, I surprised myself when I turned it down. Something superstitious was stopping me, almost as if writing the future might give it the evil eye or something, might make all that horror come true. I mean, I have panic attacks over the thought of these things happening to fictional characters. So, now I know that history as we're taught it, is a disaster story. But lately I've been wondering what if instead the future were a love poem, like the ones strung like pearls in the desert, never wrote down, only memorised, branded on the brains of the beloved, recited in a rhythm to help navigate, to follow fixed stars in the finding of new families and lost lovers? I think I want a red revision mode asterisk somewhere.

Speaker 7: So just a red star.

Sophia: Yeah, for your blue eye to wink at. I think there is probably the spot.

Speaker 7: You know when white people they get Arabic tattoos.

Elizabeth Peace: Oh my God.

Speaker 7: They think it says something like, "You're beautiful." Ends up saying 'I'm rotten' (in Arabic)

Elizabeth Peace: Never get a tattoo in a language you don't know how to curse in.

Sophia: That's a good rule. What about this one?

Speaker 7: This? It's a lyric from a rap song in a language I don't speak.

Elizabeth Peace: What about this one?

Speaker 7: It's a translation.

Elizabeth Peace: Of what?

Speaker 7: Palestine.

Elizabeth Peace: Palestine?

Speaker 7: Mm-hmm. Just a name for a place.

Sophia: What's in a name?

Elizabeth Peace: A lot. To name is to control.

Speaker 7: What's your name?

Elizabeth Peace: Elizabeth Peace Nnenna-Nwakaku Onwuka-Okoye. What's yours?

Speaker 7: It used to be Safya Mohamed Amer Jaber Al Dahabeb Al Awer Al mursa al Marri. There's some in there I'm probably forgetting. But I changed it.

Elizabeth Peace: You?

Speaker 7: No name.

Sophia: Anonymous. Shakespeare.

Elizabeth Peace: Shakespeare. Oh no. It is an ever fixed mark.

Sophia: What happened here? Is that a bite mark? What the hell? You got into a fight with a beast? It's like a human.

Speaker 7: It's a secret.

Sophia: Oh.

Speaker 2: Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds or bends with the remover to remove. Oh no. It is an ever fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken. It is the star to every wandering bark whose worth unknown, although his height be taken. Love's not times full though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickles the compass come. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks. But it bears out even to the edge of doom. If this be air and upon me proved I never read nor no man ever loved.

Sophia: There is a child who was chosen as was I to represent the coloniser's worlds to pedal the coloniser's values, ideas, notions of what is real, alien, other, normal, supreme, male, female, to apotheosise his success a civiliser, enabling the chosen wild child to speak, albeit in a tongue this child does not own. This is all by way of explaining that part of my purpose as a writer of Afro Caribbean Indian Carib and African European experience and heritage and Western experience and education has been to reject speechlessness, a process which has taken years and to invent my own peculiar speech with which to describe my own peculiar self. To draw together everything I am and have been sometimes civilised, sometimes ruin it, both Caliban and Ariel and underneath it all the granddaughter of Sycorax, precolonial female landscape island, Iceland, Island. Whenever I pull that drop down menu to put revisions mode on, I know that it's the beginning of the end at least to a certain version of history. I've been writing period drama for a while now and to borrow a word from Shakespeare, it's really unreal.

Sophia: Some of the revisions to, for lack of a better word, my visions, just a few months ago, a black character I wrote was cast with a white actor, a sex scene deemed unsavoury, replaced with a suggestive food fight. Queer love stories replaced with hetero plot lines, deemed more audience friendly, whatever that means and a line I wrote that read the boys smile at one another, was warped to read two Moroccan youths pull their lips back over their teeth and grin at one another like chimpanzees and even though I write fiction, I could not make this shit up.

Speaker 8: This island's mine Sycorax my mother, which though takest from me and thou came as first. Thou strokest me and made much of me. What has given me water with berries in it and teach me how to name the bigger lights and how the less that burn by day and night and I love thee and show thee all the qualities of the isle, the fresh springs, brine pits, [barren] and fertile. Curse the eye that did so. All the charms, toads, beetles, bats, lights and you for I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own king and here you stymie in this hard rock whilst you do keep me from the rest of the island. What is this place? It used to be an art school.

Speaker 9: Hello Sophia. It's mom. You asked me what your first word was. Well, it was picture. We were living in the Polynesian apartments on Sixth Avenue in Tacoma. You were about seven or eight months old and I was rocking you to sleep and you had your head on my shoulder and you picked your head up and you looked at the wall and said picture and then you smiled. I was really surprised because you hadn't said mom or baba yet. But I had read picture books to you since you were ... practically since you were born and I'd point to the pictures and say pictures. So I'm not surprised it was your first word. You asked me to describe the picture. Well, it was actually a poster. It was a Palestinian poster from the 80s and your dad's friend had given it to me before he went back home and I hung it on the wall to take up some space and it was a great talking point, although it didn't really reflect my politics. But it was

a good talking point and a very interesting picture. Yeah.
So I love you darling.

Speaker 9: Peace to you and good health and I love you.
Bye.

Speaker 7: (singing)

Speaker 11: Of the 11 Palestinian guerrilla movements, the most radical of all is the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the PFLP. The Beirut leader of the Popular Front is Ghassan Kanafani.

Ghassan Kanafani: What I know really is that the history of the world is always the history of weak people fighting strong people.

Speaker 7: I think here he means the oppressed and oppressors maybe.

Ghassan Kanafani: -a correct case fighting strong people who use their strength to exploit the weak.

Speaker 11: Turn to the fighting that's been going on in Jordan in the recent weeks. It's your organisation that's been one side of the fight. What does it achieve?

Speaker 7: He looks a lot like my grandfather here and actually he has my father's same exact eyes.

Ghassan Kanafani: We achieve teaching every single person in this world that we are a small brave nation who are going to fight to the last drop of blood. It's a people defending their self against a fascist government which you are defending. It goes just without saying. It's not a civil war.

Speaker 11: Or a conflict.

Ghassan Kanafani: It's not a conflict. It's a liberation movement fighting for justice.

Speaker 11: Well whatever it might be called-

Ghassan Kanafani: It's not whatever because this is where the problems start because this is what makes you answer all your questions, ask you all your questions. This is exactly what the problem started. This is a people who is discriminated, is fighting for his rights. This is a story.

Speaker 7: See he's so just frustrated and tired of using words and having to constantly explain himself even though he knows that it's important that this guy listens to the correct words.

Speaker 11: Why not just talk?

Ghassan Kanafani: Talk to whom?

Speaker 7: Ghassan was a poet. He was a writer of fiction and then he became a writer of other things, press releases for the freedom fighters.

Speaker 13: Terrorist.

Speaker 7: Freedom fighters.

Speaker 13: Terrorist.

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Speaker 7: Freedom fighters.

Speaker 13: Terrorist.

Speaker 7: Freedom fighters.

Speaker 13: Terrorist.

Speaker 7: Terrorist.

Speaker 13: Freedom fighters. Hey.

Speaker 7: I was always good at playing war of the words.

Sophia: Exterior, island, day. The sounds of a rebel star ship coming into dock. Sophia goes out to greet Yumna, a freedom fighter who's just returned from battle out on the

bigger light. They embrace and call out to one another by code names. Yumna. Slug. What you still doing on the island? Sophia. Waiting out the storm. How's battle? Yumna. Long. I haven't seen you since what? Sophia. Since the Sycorax. Yumna. Is it that long? What happened? Pitch said she got dishonourable discharge. Sophia lights a cigarette and doesn't answer. Flatly, that mission got aborted. Yumna lights up too. When? Sophia. The night after you read to me. Yumna. So you still write? Sophia. Nope. You still read? Yumna. Sometimes, but never in translation. Sophia. Hey, before this whole thing ends, would you read to me again? Cut to.

Speaker 7: [foreign language]

Sophia: Okay, so ever since the storm, there's been this crazy reflection thing going on here in this bank of windows and the birds that are left fly into the glass and die and I was just sitting up here working and a pigeon came and kamikaze'd itself into the pane of glass that was closest to me and left this ghost image of itself. Anyway, I went to go see where it had landed and this fucking bruiser of a dove came walking up to it and just pecked right into the middle. I've been up in this writer's room for a long time and I know that it's harsh out there, but ... The first [verse form the quran] I learned was the verse of the blood clot. The first revelation whispered in the prophet's ear by an angel in a cave in [Jabal Nur]. It goes by different names, the pen, the clot, the burst of the embryo and sometimes people just call it [foreign language], which means read. They

say, if you recite it on the day you die, you're a martyr in a holy war and will be resurrected on the day of judgment.

Speaker 14: (singing)

Sophia: At the end of all this, I feel kind of like Caliban from *The Tempest*, talking to Prospero, direct to power like I learned your language. Now I'm going to fucking curse you with it. I remember the first time that I heard the word drone, it was really surreal because I had only ever heard that word in the context of, I don't know, *Star Wars* or the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica* or something. I had some friends who had gone to Bethlehem and they had ended up in a siege situation in the church within the nativity and I just remember this very intense shift in my perspective or a split I guess in my understanding of the way that reality works in language and they had been in the church for several days. There was a television with cable news on the monks' side of the complex and they saw one of the Palestinians in the courtyard hanging up some bloody sheets and a drone came over the wall and sniped him down. They then immediately saw on the news that it was being reported as if this person had been shot in a crossfire. So that was my sort of Neo red pill, blue pill moment that I will never forget.

Speaker 2: The sun is a camera, which operates only in black and white. White, white, white is the colour of [Terror]. In the eyes, nothing remains but egg white and cheese. Blackness and underground, black room, always

black is experience. The sun is counting assertions, automobile wheel and on the Palestinians head rolls a truck. A concrete roof collapsed on 500 bodies and the son took a picture for the CIA's archives. Sun camera, majestic lens, prints of the gaze. White, white, white is the result of the son's clicking.

Speaker 7: (singing).

Sophia: I just had the dream again. Usually I wake up before the doves. But this time they were sitting on a TV covered in shit. Someone was singing in the sunshine and the doves were trying to turn the TV off. They were complaining about humans can't sing. They reminded me of the Etel Adnan - where a pink dove shatters a human face. Anyway, they were gossiping about solar warping over and one of them like, "Hey, Coo, you see the metal angel fall out the sky today?" And the other one's like, "Yeah, mother ships Sycorax. There weren't any survivors," and the other bird's like, "Nah, I heard that there is a survivor she came back without a tongue," and the other one's like, "What kind of a monster would do that?" And they sing and the other dove's like, "No," and the other bird's like, "Damn."

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Book References:

The Arab Apocalypse by Etal Adnan
As read by Tosh Basco

“On Battle of Algiers” from *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism in the Media* by Ella Shohat
As read by Farida Khelfa

“On Jane Bowles” from *In Tangier* by Mohamed Choukri
As read by Yumna Marwan

Caliban’s Daughter by Michelle Cliff
As read by Sophia Al-Maria

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare
As read by Wu Tsang

“Verse of the Embryo,” *The Holy Quran*
As recited by Unknown

Film and Video References:

The Tempest by Derek Jarman

The Battle of Algiers by Gillo Pontecorvo

Pierrot Le Fou by Jean-Luc Godard

PFLP Spokesman Ghassan Kanafani interviewed by Richard Carleton

“My Pigeon’s Bird” sung by Unknown

Music

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“Beast Song”

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