

From Mahfouz to Mohamed Khan: On two of CLUSTER's downtown tours

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As part of its recent [Creative Cities](#) conference hosted by the American University in Cairo, CLUSTER organized six tours, each looking at downtown Cairo through a different lens – including biking, photography, architecture and passageways. Here is Rowan El Shimi with a video on the cinema tour, and Lara El Gibaly with a written account of the literary tour.

Aida El Kashef's cinema tour

Samia Mehrez's literary tour

"Café Riche is a refuge from the pain of loneliness," says Elwan Fawwaz, the doomed protagonist of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *The Day the Leader Was Killed* (1985). Today it is still a refuge, its bay windows overlooking the streets trodden by the city's great authors and their fictional characters.

We are at Riche now, an odd group of about a dozen, guided by literary critic and scholar of Arabic literature [Samia Mehrez](#), who is walking us through a selection of her favorite texts featuring downtown Cairo, inspired in part by her two-volume anthology *The Literary Atlas of Cairo* (2010) and *The Literary Life of Cairo* (2011).

We began at the American University in Cairo campus, bordered by Mohamed Mahmoud and Qasr al-Aini streets. Founded in 1919, with its looming presence occupying one of the most prominent downtown intersections, it was bound to find its way into literary texts, and has been both a character in and a location for the creation of Cairo's contemporary canon.

Our tour's earliest portrayal of AUC is found in cultural critic and literary theoretician Edward Said's autobiography *Out of Place* (2000). Best known for his 1978 cultural critique *Orientalism* (practically mandatory reading for any AUC humanities student), Said described AUC as an elite, mostly foreign community that was insulated from Egyptian society at large.

We see AUC opening up slightly to a larger community in Ihsan Abdel Koddous' *I am Free* (1952), in which Amina, the novel's middle-class protagonist, convinces her controlling father to let her attend. She sees higher education, particularly at an exclusive institution, as an avenue to freedom and a way to distinguish herself from her friends in the neighborhood of Abbasseya. When the novel was [adapted for the screen](#) in 1958, Amina was played by Lobna Abdelaziz, herself an AUC graduate and recipient of the thankfully now-defunct Miss AUC title in 1954.

We get a sense of how involved AUC has become in Egyptian affairs in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999), in which a character recalls the failed 1993 attempt to assassinate then-Interior Minister Hassan al-Alfi. As the minister's motorcade passed through Sheikh Rihan Street, a bomb went off, missing the minister but claiming the life of Mansour, the parking attendant responsible for the car keys of almost the whole AUC student body. He died instantly, leaving behind nothing but "a pale brown stain on the wall of the university. A stain that would not scrub off."

"She writes Mansour into history," says Mehrez, herself an AUC student at the time, and a friend of Mansour's. Mehrez contributed to his immortalization by including the excerpt from Soueif's novel in *The Literary Life of Cairo*. As Mehrez describes the scene of Mansour's death, we stand inside AUC's Sheikh Rihan Street gate and imagine the wall outside (security would not let us out). More walls have been set up at the entrance to the street since 2011, and parking or even driving there is now prohibited.

With a quick mention of Mai Khaled's *The Last Seat in Ewart Hall* (2005), we exit onto Mohamed Mahmoud Street, stopping nearby to recreate the moment the protagonist in Yasser Abdelatif's *The Law of Inheritance* (2005) reminisces about his early childhood spent at the then pink, now grey-walled French Lycee. When he returns in a fit of insomnia more than 20 years later, he finds no trace of the small fountain and the mosaic-tiled courtyard of his memories. He cynically reflects that the "clever painter [...] chose the right color so that I could stand there after 20 years and contemplate my early childhood. Which child inside the kindergarten now will stand here 20 years down the line and contemplate it? What color will it be painted? Black, perhaps — the most suitable color for the coming days."

As we walk over to Tahrir Square, I can't blame onlookers for mistaking us for a group of foreign tourists, enthusiastically yelling out "Welcome, welcome!" as we pass. Mehrez had expressed her initial aversion to "walking people through throbbing downtown Cairo as if it were a museum." It would have been odd to explain that we were not taking a tour of downtown Cairo in its current state, but rather its past portrayals.

Tahrir Square's literary cameos are too many to mention, almost all revolving around the square as a center for political action. From Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Return of the Spirit* (1933) and its portrayal of the 1919 revolution, to Latifa al-Zayat's daring portrayal of a young female activist in the 1940s and 1950s in *The Open Door* (1960), to Ibrahim Aslan's *The Heron* (2005), set against the bread riots of 1977, and Mahfouz's *Palace Walk* (1956), in which the middle child of the Abd Al-Jawad family — the lives of its members chronicled throughout the trilogy — is drawn into demonstrations against British occupation.

Mahfouz was a longtime patron of Ali Baba café on Tahrir Square, to which he would walk from his home in Agouza every morning to read the papers before walking to his office at the state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper on Galaa Street.

We briefly step into the newly reopened Café Riche — one of the axes of "the triangle of horror," the name bestowed by Sonallah Ibrahim on the area between Riche, the Grillon restaurant and Cairo Atelier in his 1998 *Cairo from Edge to Edge* — and I feel self-conscious at coming into a space not as a customer or an anonymous pedestrian, but as a curious observer. But Riche is well equipped for and used to this voyeurism, with portraits of its famous patrons, which the new manager proudly shows us, flanking the walls of its back room. The café used to be a hub for Cairo's intellectuals and literati, but they have since migrated to other, cheaper locations, including "this place up there somewhere..." — Mehrez gesticulates across the street.

"Lotus?"

"Ah yes, Lotus. That's where they go now."

Behind Riche is Zahrat al-Bustan coffeehouse, the site of a chance encounter between the protagonist of Mekkawi Said's *Cairo Swan Song* (2006) and a glue-sniffing street kid, whose involvement in his life proves pivotal as the narrative progresses. Although we gloss over *Cairo Swan Song* due to lack of time, it is rich in downtown references, with the nihilistic

narrator meeting his foreign love interest at Mashrabia Gallery on Champollion Street, spending “happy hours sitting on the sidewalks of Qasr al-Aini Street,” and enjoying those rare public holidays when “downtown Cairo is once again like the downtown of the 1930s we read about,” when he can “[walk] down its streets, a hash cigarette in hand, smoking it with relish, enjoying the quiet and the cracking echoes of children’s distant fireworks.”

We stop to catch our breath in front of Groppi, which is closed but has been adorned with a new and unappealing underwater-themed mosaic on its façade, I assume as part of its renovations. The cafe, overlooking Talaat Harb Square, is the scene of an endearing moment recalled in Alaa Al Aswany’s short story *Mme Zitta Mendes — A Last Image*, in his 2009 collection *Friendly Fire*. Aswany fondly recalls his father taking him along as a child on clandestine visits to Madam Zitta, his foreign mistress. Years later, as a grown man, he spots Madam Zitta on “the foreigners’ table at Groppi’s, [the one which] never changes, next to the window.” Aging but made-up, she remembers him, and almost as a gesture of thanks for momentarily returning her to her lost youth and beauty, says nothing but plants a kiss on his weathered forehead.

We move on to the Greek Club. Its breezy terrace is a regular summertime haunt for a younger crowd, and in its indoor hall, still heavily draped in layers of crimson, older patrons slow-dance to bad renditions of Enrique Iglesias songs, and on a good evening, Fayrouz. The Greek Club features repeatedly in Ehab Abdel Hamid’s *Failed Lovers* (2005), with the protagonist, a mediocre writer, coming to drink alone, pensively, in the early afternoon. At one point, despite going to the Greek Club to find that “the lights were dim, the music loud, and the young crowd was ready to dance all night,” the protagonist ends his evening a drunken mess with no one to console him but the establishment’s four-fingered waiter. “I tossed my head on his shoulder and wept,” wrote Abdel Hamid. “I could not stop myself from throwing up on his trousers. I cannot remember what happened later, but I decided that I would commit suicide next time if this drama were to reoccur.” This work has never been translated into English in its entirety, and the only translation that seems to exist is that carried out by Mehrez for inclusion in her anthology.

We end our tour in the Automobile Club, the namesake of Aswany’s 2013 novel. Unlike the Greek Club, the Automobile Club has retained its members-only policy, but because Mehrez is a member, we’re treated to a rare glimpse of its plush interior. Downtown establishments seem to be in a perpetual state of renovation, and the Automobile Club is no different, with sections on the ground floor closed off. Nonetheless, we’re shown into the library (devoid of books, but possessing a very large flatscreen TV) and given treatment fitting for a place this grand.

Despite the fact that we had to skip a few tour stops listed on the map due to time constraints — the original Yacoubian building, for example, located on Talaat Harb Street above Cinema Miami, and the entire Maarouf area, which is the setting for Khairy Shalaby’s darkly comic *The Hashish Waiter* (2009) — the tour is a multilayered exploration of a specific section of downtown and its literary representations.

But there are layers and layers more to be explored. I would have loved to visit the original snooker club (it’s on 26th July Street, in case anyone is interested) in Waguih Ghali’s *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964) in which the unemployed, western-educated Ram spends his afternoons drinking at the “cosy bar with deep leather armchairs [which] impresses with its subdued luxury,” or the lesser-known Groppi’s garden on Abdel Khalek Tharwat, which Ram describes as “perhaps one of the most beautiful places to drink whisky in.”

But his and other literary ghosts will have to be resurrected at another time, on what I hope will be one of many more literary tours.

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Correction: Edward Said never attended AUC, as this article previously detailed. He was escorted by his parents to attend concerts in Ewart Hall.