Strolling in Enemy Territory: Downtown Cairo, its Publics, and Urban Heterotopias

Downtown Cairo means many things to many people. To most middle-class Egyptians it is a dirty and dangerous place, associated with chaos and pollution. They extol its past glory, but rarely go there. Downtown's elegant Italianate buildings, once the heart of a colonial metropolis, betray the déclassé glamour of a central business district that has seen better times. Taxi drivers often shun taking you there, anticipating traffic jams despite the wide boulevards designed on a grid-like pattern. Walking on foot, one can hardly navigate a path between street vendors who push pedestrians onto the road. Long abandoned by its elite inhabitants – foreign and Egyptian alike – in successive waves of centrifugal urbanization, Downtown remains a business district of sorts, but for a very different clientele. Its run-down B-movie theatres maintain their popularity by offering cheap seats in the face of competition from high-end theatres in Cairo's many new malls in nearby suburbs; its wide boulevards are lined with cut-price (if not the cheapest) clothing stores with gaudy shop-windows, where lower-middle-class families come to buy their Sunday best. Downtown's streets are a magnet for young low-income males who come here in the evening to hang out, to loiter. More recently, cheap Chinese motorcycles have become popular among this crowd, adding a layer of petty crime, perpetrated by mounted purse-snatchers, to the threat of sexual harassment with which Downtown after dark has become increasingly associated over the past two decades.¹

This, however, is hardly all there is to Cairo's city centre. Downtown's patina of former glory attracts its own publics. It is well known today as the epicentre of Egypt's January 25 Revolution (hereafter referred to as the revolution), the favoured meeting-place of activists and a site of spectacular graffiti (http://www.perspectivia.net/content/publikationen/orient­institut­studies/2­2013/abaza_satire). This is not a new phenomenon. Downtown's history as the centre of Cairene bohemia and political dissent is decades old. Many of its restaurants, bars and street cafes (ahwa/ahawi), such as the Greek Club, Café Riche, Estoril, Le Grillion, Odeon, Horeyya, Bustan, Nadwa Thaqafiyya and Suq al-Hamidiyya, among others, represent de facto cultural institutions, patronized by generations of Cairene literati, artists and activists. Art spaces proliferate, as do cultural festivals big and small – though importantly, their publics may not always overlap.

¹This paper started as a talk for the Downtown Cairo Summer School, a project run by the German University in Cairo and DAAD in June 2013. My thanks go to the organizers, Barbara Pampe and Vittoria Caprese, for forcing me to think about Downtown in a more systematic way. A more advanced version of this paper was presented at the Divercities Conference at the Orient-Institut Beirut in December 2013. My thanks go to Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan; and to my discussant Anton Escher who brought Foucault's concept of heterotopia to my attention. Until then, I thought of Downtown in terms of liminality, although both terms are very close as I discuss below. I also thank Walter Armbrust for his wisdom and generosity.
There is no one cultural scene in Downtown, just as its cafes and bars don't represent a single culture of dissent, but many such cultures. When it comes to Downtown Cairo, the whole is considerably larger than the sum of its parts.

More recently (but well before the revolution), Downtown has been the focus of more tangible claims, backed by state legislation and private capital. Gentrification plans are under way, led notably by the Al Ismaelia for Real Estate company. In line with gentrification strategies globally, Al Ismaelia's urban regeneration aims to exploit the artistic vibe of Downtown. The company is a major mover behind some of the significant cultural spaces and events that currently take place in Downtown. In a parallel move, Egyptian government agencies have been contemplating the cultural rehabilitation of core parts of Downtown (see map below), although so far these efforts have been largely cosmetic. This newfound interest in Downtown Cairo, perceptible not just in its valorization through law or capital, but also in the wave of public nostalgia, stems from a wider process of neoliberal reframing of Egypt's modern history. The nostalgia represents a radical departure from earlier, post-independence models of a national historical imagery in which Downtown – the site and embodiment of colonial power and privilege – had no place. In this older narrative, the founding of the district by Khedive Ismail was a violent act of power, imposing on a subjugated country a colonial, elitist vision of what "modern" Cairo, and by extension, modern Egyptian society, should look like. The impressive Italianate buildings, which housed banks and foreign businesses, stood as silent reminders of foreign domination over Egypt's economy and the plundering of its resources. In the new recasting of Egypt's modern history, however, the same boulevards represent a "paradise lost" and the epitome of Egypt's once-held modernity; of a belle époque whose prosperity, political liberalism and cosmopolitanism have since disappeared under the combined weight of authoritarian nationalism and religious parochialism. Public nostalgia for Downtown and the growing interest in the area on the part of both government and capital should be understood within the broader framework of neoliberalism, as well as in relation to the simultaneous urban flight by Egypt's middle and upper-middle classes to newly built desert cities and gated communities. In this spatial logic, Cairo's Downtown emerges as the symbolic monument – an open-air museum – to Egypt's glorious colonial past.

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3 The situation is changing again as I write (spring 2015), and will no doubt continue to do so


Clearly, Downtown Cairo appears as an overloaded signifier. It is a place with many competing meanings and a site of multiple claims: social, cultural, political and economic. These already contested meanings gained new resonance with the January 25th Revolution and the long-running revolutionary process. While the epicentre may have been Tahrir Square, the whole surrounding area – especially the southern edge of Downtown around Bab al-Luq Square and the streets leading to the Ministry of Interior – was a crucial site of protests and battles with police. Here, urban battles took place, the most significant among them being the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in November 2011. This iconic moment, which some perceive as heroism and others as vandalism, is yet another example of how competing claims about social order play themselves out over a piece of public space.6 This struggle continues, although the forces of revolutionary change are now on the defensive. In the winter of 2014/15, several episodes of “cleansing” Downtown of undesirable elements served to demonstrate the new regime’s attempts to impose its own order. These actions targeted two demographics that, from the normative perspective, are most associated with “polluting” Cairo’s city centre: street vendors and revolutionary activists.7 The “clean-up campaign” involved closing down cafés that over the past few years had become known as the stomping ground of activists and revolutionary youth – although they really served a much larger clientele of youth from all over Cairo coming...

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6 More conventionally, this conflict over social and political order was evident in the long struggle over controlling the space of Tahrir Square itself, and especially its central roundabout, or saniiyya, and the many attempts to erect a “monument”. After much public debate, the first attempt in November 2013 ended famously with revolutionaries vandalizing the emerging structure overnight. In February 2015 a very high flagpole was erected (http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/02/08/uk-egypt-tahrir-idUKKBN0LC0C520150208), currently guarded by a metal net surrounding the saniiyya.

to hang out in Downtown. This campaign included the infamous closure of "the atheist's café" (on which more below) and the proud announcement of a number of initiatives aimed at eradicating "atheism" in Egypt. All these acts of "cleaning" were aimed at eradicating the non-hegemonic and socially porous space of Downtown, its essential liminality and heterotopic quality, which is the subject of this essay.

Heterotopia, a concept proposed by Michel Foucault and elaborated on by scholars of urban studies and human geography, describes spaces that function in non-hegemonic ways. Heterotopic space is a space "in-between", a space of otherness, simultaneously both physical and mental. It has many competing layers of meaning, and can only be understood in relation to other spaces outside of itself, to normative spaces and social roles as they exist elsewhere. I am using the concept of heterotopia interchangeably with that of liminality, which is an in-between space (or time, or behaviour) as defined by anthropologists. Both liminality and heterotopia share certain characteristics: social porosity, flexible boundaries of class and gender; celebratory and/or carnivalesque qualities. These characteristics appear to some as danger and pollution, or "matter out of place", especially when seen from the outside, while to others they conjure up feelings of greater freedom and liberation from normative social roles. I argue that Cairo's Downtown has been a liminal, or heterotopic space par excellence. It is a heterogeneous urban space, a space where everyone is a stranger de passage. This social porosity invites non-hegemonic forms of behaviour and is in turn constructed by them. It is also a symbolic location that is crucial – first by its absence and then by its presence – to Egyptian national imagery, and thus the site of competing claims on social order that extend well beyond its spatial boundaries.

In this essay, I am not interested merely in suggesting that Cairo's Downtown ought to be understood as urban heterotopia; but rather, in seeing how such heterotopic (or liminal) space has been produced and reproduced on the ground. Capital investment and government legislation aside, I will focus instead on the diverse publics that use this space, and how their spatial practices (their ways of claiming and practising the city) construct Downtown Cairo as heterotopic – practices that are, in turn, contested by others as non-

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10 The difference between liminality and heterotopia is a matter of perspective, or analytical angle. Anthropological literature on liminality is practice-centred, focusing on liminal behaviour (or time); urban studies' literature on heterotopia (building on Foucault's article cited above) is primarily concerned with urban space. Empirically speaking, in my particular case liminal behaviour conflates with a particular urban location – which invites or encourages liminal behaviour and is in turn constructed by it – hence using these terms interchangeably makes sense here.

desirable because they are non-hegemonic. These groups include: subsequent generations of Cairo's artistic bohemians, from the 1970s through the 2000s; revolutionary youths hanging in and around Huda Sha'rawi Street; young, macho, low-income males who come to Downtown to gawk and loiter.

I am equally interested in what history (as well as time) can add to the notion of urban heterotopia (or liminality), in at least two ways. Firstly, Downtown's heterotopia is also produced historically – it is made more salient by the particular historical legacies, which different social actors interpret differently. Competing imageries become increasingly contested in particular historical moments: during the neoliberal turn, or at the time of revolution. Secondly, heterotopia (or liminality) has a temporal dimension: liminal behaviour happens (or becomes more salient, and even contagious) at particular times: most conventionally this would be at night, but other forms of temporality play a role here: the dates of the 'Eid religious festivals or the days of revolutionary battles. Both are, in turn, spatialized: they are enabled, encouraged, or amplified in particular urban spaces. The nexus of liminal time and liminal space is crucial to the ways in which the three publics discussed here claim and practice this particular urban location.

Downtown's History of Heterotopia

Much has been written by urban and architectural historians about the early history of the Ismailiya quarter – the heart of colonial Downtown. It was conceived, in the 1860s, by Khedive Ismail on almost virgin land west of the then existing city, which was also undergoing rapid change. The Khedive's vision was to turn Egypt into "part of Europe," a showpiece of Egypt's progress on the road to civilization, inspired by his visit to Haussmann's Paris. Through a complex process of representation and urban planning policies, this new city came to stand for "modern" Cairo, defined against its nemesis, the older city, which came to stand for "medieval" or "Islamic" Cairo, with all the associations of backwardness and stagnation propagated in colonial imagery. More recently, this "dual city" model of Cairo's urban history has been problematized. Historians have described the self-fulfilling technopolitics of modernity, whereby state strategies of urban modernization directed disproportionately towards new elite neighbourhoods produced one part of the city as "modern." Others have focused on the previously suppressed role of Egyptians in this process, whether as financiers, dwellers, or consumers.  

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This history is extensively covered in Abu Lughod, Janet, Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious (Princeton, NJ, 1971); Raymond, Andre, Cairo (Cambridge, MA: 2000), to mention only the better known monographs. A notable recent addition is Gallia El Kadi's historical atlas of Downtown Cairo, Le Caire: Centre en movement (Marseille, 2012).

Raymond: (see FN 12), 311.

Through the first half of the twentieth century, this new city – called Ismailiya after its founder – and the surrounding areas of Tawfiqiyya and Ezbekiyya became the heart of the colonial metropolis. This is where the elites, both national and foreign, lived and where modern businesses, services and institutions were located. It was an area of upscale shopping and leisure establishments. While in many ways exclusive, Downtown was also always heterogeneous and predicated on drawing in publics from all over the city, even if temporarily. Middle-income Egyptians flocked there to partake of the many pleasures it had to offer. Downtown's grand magasins catered equally to solvent outsiders, and middle-income families otherwise labelled as "traditional" came here for their seasonal shopping. Cabarets and cinemas along Emad El-Din Street, the city's prime entertainment district, catered to a variety of audiences, including provincial youth visiting the brothels on its fringes; and of course many a middling youth, efendi student from near or far, came here simply to wander, window shop and check out the next movie on lobby cards.

Figure 2 (a and b): **Strolling in Downtown Cairo**, photographs by ambulant street photographers, 1930s and 40s. Author's collection.

While historical debates about the Golden Age of Cairo's city centre in the colonial period have revolved around debunking the dual city model and "writing Egyptians back in", so to speak (whether through investment, habitat, or diverse forms of contingent consumption), much less attention has been paid to

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16 These categories are not unproblematic and were only taking shape at this period.

17 See Reynolds: (see FN 15). Other ways of consuming colonial-era Downtown temporarily, through window-shopping, cinema-going and strolling, are explored in an upcoming panel titled "Envisioning and Experiencing the Colonial City: Cairo's Downtown, Its Publics, and Urban Heterotopia", at the Middle East Studies Association in Denver, Colorado, November 2015.
Downtown's history after the Golden Age ended, through the second half of the twentieth century. It is common knowledge that Downtown Cairo experienced a steady "decline" throughout this period, which intensified in the 1970s. It was gradually abandoned as the site of upper-middle-class residences, business, shopping and leisure, and assumed the shabby appearance it has today. Conventionally, in the public discourse of the late-Mubarak era, this decline and abandonment was attributed to Nasser's expulsion of foreign minorities from Egypt following the 1956 Suez war and his nationalization policies of the 1960s. This interpretation is historically wrong, reflecting instead a number of agendas – neoliberal nostalgia for pre-1952 Egypt, its public bashing of the post-Independence years being one of them.\(^{18}\) Foreign minorities had been gradually leaving Egypt long before Nasser assumed power for diverse reasons, including demographic decline and shrinking opportunities during the 1930s global economic crisis; international economic "pull" factors drawing populations (particularly relatively mobile non-Egyptian communities) to other parts of the world; 1947 (pre-Nasser) Egyptianization laws affecting work opportunities for foreign nationals; and the involvement of particular communities (and/or their national governments) in wars against Egypt.\(^{19}\) Despite the many separate reasons behind the dwindling numbers of foreigners in Egypt, the fact remains that their departure affected Downtown Cairo more than any other part of the city, given the concentration of foreign elites in this area.\(^{20}\)

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The neoliberal narrative of Nasser-as-source-of-all evil, and more particularly as Nasser being single-handedly responsible for the decline of Downtown, significantly leaves out the takeover of this area by Egyptian elites between the 1930s and 1950s. As Egypt's foreign population was diminishing, upper-middle-class Egyptians, especially prosperous professionals – who had always been part of the Downtown population, if at first as a minority – had been gradually taking over this upscale urban space during the...

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\(^{18}\) For the neoliberal nostalgia synonymous with Nasser-bashing see FN 4 and 5 above; see also Ryzova, Lucie, "Unstable Icons, Contested Histories: Vintage Photographs and Neoliberal Memory in Contemporary Egypt", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8/1 (2014). This Nasser-bashing also has deeper roots. When it comes to the narrative of "expulsion" of the Greeks, for instance, it is equally rooted in political agendas of Greek governments of the 1960s, as well as in the way the punitive sequestration of British, French and Jewish interests after the Tripartite aggression (the Suez War) was portrayed in the mainstream British press. See Kazamias, Alexander, "The 'purge' of the Greeks from Nasserite Egypt: Myths and Realities", *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 35/2 (2009).

\(^{19}\) The Italian community's assets were sequestrated during World War II under British pressure, and the community never recovered; the destiny of Egypt's Jews is inextricably linked to the founding of Israel, as discussed extensively in Beinin, Joel, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* (Berkeley, CA, 1998). French, British and (remaining) Jewish assets were sequestrated as a punitive measure after the Tripartite Aggression of 1956; similarly, Belgian assets were sequestrated during the Congo crisis of 1960. The Greek community's numbers had been dwindling since the 1920s and this intensified after World War II due to the pull factor from migrant societies such as Australia and the rapid modernization of Greece in the 1950s and 1960s, offering much better life options to young middle-class Greeks. In the myth of the expulsion of the Greeks, for instance, mass paranoia and rumour (perceiving Egyptian nationalism as an enemy, regardless of actual nationalization laws that affected only a handful of owners of big businesses) coupled with their lack of integration – based on long-standing superiority and programmatic segregation – was part of the story. See Kazamias: (see FN 18), 13-34.

\(^{20}\) Foreign elites were concentrated in this area, and the place had a distinctly "European" look. Scores of less privileged middle- and lower-middle-class foreigners lived in other neighbourhoods, most notably Shubra and 'Abdin.
middle decades of the century, and increasing their share of it both in habitat and business. While many elite Egyptians lived in Downtown, others lived in Zamalik, Garden City, or the burgeoning neighbourhoods of Duqqi and Heliopolis, but their offices or clinics, not to mention their public social life, their leisure and shopping, were often located in Downtown. Added to this were the new, upwardly mobile technocrats of the post-1952 years, who sealed their social and political ascendancy by moving to elite neighbourhoods, including Downtown.

This Egyptianization of Downtown was as demographic as it was symbolic. By the late 1940s, Downtown's grand boulevards had been fully appropriated and recast in Egyptian popular culture as the site of high Egyptian modernism. Here, architectural wonders such as the Immobilia building (completed in 1940, Egypt's most spectacular and architecturally innovative skyscraper of its time) symbolized late-colonial nationalism and postcolonial pride and optimism alike. Financed by the Egyptian capitalist 'Abbud Pasha and designed by Italian architects, Immobilia was home to Egypt's foremost cinema stars and the obligatory headquarters of the entertainment industry. It was routinely deployed as background in movies and advertising of the 1940s and 1950s to conjure up images of urban glamour and national modernity. While unusually photogenic, Immobilia was only one among many daring modernist buildings erected by Egyptian architects during these two decades. This part of Downtown's history – its status as the site of high Egyptian national modernism – is less salient in public memory today than the Downtown of the colonial era. It remains known to a few aficionados, although it recently started gaining some much deserved academic attention.

See statistics in Abu Lughod: (see FN 12), 203-05.

Abu Lughod: (see FN 12), 204.

'Abbud's financial and industrial empire cannot be easily labelled as national capital; see Robert Vitalis, When Capitalists Collide (California, 1995).

Hayat aw mawt (Dir. Kamal El Sheikh, 1954) shows the centrality of this space to post-1952 revolution imagery. The movie's drama evolves around the speed, chaos and anonymity of the modern city (the first Egyptian movie to be shot almost entirely in the street, including on a tram), but also a dynamic that can be tamed by a concerted effort of order and goodwill, epitomized by a police force at the service of citizens.


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Figure 3 (a and b): **Immobilia building.**

Left: 1940s postcard.

Right: Poster showing Isma'il Yasin in *Al-Hawa malush dawa* (Love has no cure, dir. Yusuf Ma'luf, 1952), a comedy shot on location in the Immobilia building.

Figure 4: **Modernist architecture in Downtown Cairo.** *IMAGES* Magazine (French language weekly published by Dar al-Hilal), 4 October 1958.
This Egyptian takeover of Downtown during the middle years of the twentieth century did not last long. Throughout the 1970s, prosperous middle- and upper-middle-class Egyptians started favouring new pericentral areas, such as Muhandisin, 'Aguza, and (a bit later, since the 1980s) Madinet Nasr, in addition to the older but expanding Duqqi, Giza and Heliopolis suburbs. These patterns of urban reshaping were closely connected to the rise in car ownership and the overall development of greater Cairo. This process began in the 1970s, when Sadat’s *infitah* policies initiated massive social, economic and political changes. Egypt's realignment with the Western bloc and the concomitant opening up of the Egyptian economy to foreign capital brought a selective prosperity alongside widening social divisions. Although increasingly deserted as a place of upscale residence, Downtown throughout the 1970s and 1980s remained a favourite centre of shopping and entertainment. It was no longer the *only* place of quality shopping and entertainment, as similar centres around Cairo had sprung up, such as Heliopolis's Korba or Muhandisin's Arab League Street. But it remained a place for "special" visits and outings even for those who were raised or lived in the vicinity of other upscale places; and of course it remained comparatively even more "awesome" as a focus for outings for those coming from less privileged neighbourhoods. Such "special" outings included coming to buy

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27 This development is briefly mentioned in Abu Lughod's classic *1001 Years*, and in Sims's *Understanding Cairo: Logic of a City Out of Control* (Cairo, 2012), although much historical research remains to be done. On Sadat's vision for a "new, modern" Cairo friendly to tourists and to international capital, and the ensuing attempts at forced urban relocation, see Ghannam, Farha, *Remaking the Modern* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).

28 "Open door" policies, meaning the opening of Egypt to foreign capital. The term is widely used to signal a major reshaping of Egypt's foreign and domestic policy priorities, which started in the 1970s but marked the following decades: from Non-Alignment and strategic alliance with the Soviet bloc towards NATO, and from state-led industrialization towards a market economy and (eventually) to a dependency on IMF loans and USAID.

29 The movie *Hubb fawq hadbet al-haram* (Dir. Atif al-Tayib, 1986) is an excellent example of the lure of Downtown for a young downwardly mobile man in the mid-1980s. He comes here to escape boredom and a no-future situation (his "waithood" for marriage and a future that never comes), to stroll, hang out, and check out women's bodies. Despite the glitzy shop-windows featuring *infitahi* lifestyles that are the true reason of his misery, Downtown is not in fact alienating here. Instead, it offers him a refuge to dream and fantasize about women – the kind of contingent autonomy I discuss...
shoes or dresses, but most often it meant attending movies. While cinemas existed in other neighbourhoods, Downtown had by far the largest concentration. Certain films could only be "properly" enjoyed in Downtown. One could see high-school kids from Duqqi collectively skipping class to attend a much anticipated new release here. A remarkable occasion such as the new James Bond had to be experienced in a prime location in Downtown, just as it had to be properly marked by an appropriate ritual of young male autonomy: a collective *tazwigh* (truancy, or bunking off).³⁰

Clip 2: **Downtown as the site of illicit dreams.** Opening scene from *Hubb fi hadbet al-haram* (Dir. Atif al-Tayib, 1986).

³⁰ This paragraph is based on oral history interviews.

The same selective prosperity that accelerated the rise of new upscale urban centres in Muhandisin and later Medinat Nasr had yet another effect on the rapidly depreciating centre of the city. While Downtown's shop windows of the *infitah* era featured glitzy fashionable clothing that few could afford, the area also became a site for black market goods. Here, Shawarbi Street (a pedestrian area connecting two of Downtown's largest boulevards, right under the Immobilia building) became nationally famous for its black market of brand clothing, consumer durables, gadgets and video films, all smuggled either from abroad or from the newly established free-trade zone in Port Said.³¹ These goods, symbols of the newly emerging consumer culture made all the more desirable by becoming available after two decades of war-related austerity, could be bought here for affordable prices. The black market of the 1970s marks a crucial turn in the history of Downtown's heterotopia. Because it exists to undermine values and satisfy desires that are created elsewhere, a black market is heterotopic by definition.

³¹ See Abaza, Mona, *Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* (Cairo, 2006), for more on the changing consumer cultures at this period.
The Capital of Bohemia

With the decline of Downtown as the residential and commercial heart of Cairo during the last third of the twentieth century, it gradually acquired a particular bohemian quality as the prime site of independent culture, often linked to political resistance. A number of Downtown cafes, bars and restaurants emerged as famous hangouts of generations of Cairene literati, artists and political activists. While practically none of them lived there, most writers and intellectuals worked nearby, because most cultural institutions – theatres, publishing houses, newspapers and bookshops, big and small, private or state-run – were (and remain, to a degree) located either in or near Downtown. Others came here on a regular basis for culture-related activities; all of them met, hung out and discussed culture and politics in Downtown’s many establishments, which became informal cultural institutions of their own. This Downtown bohemia became quasi-institutionalized through the ways in which certain people habitually frequented particular places at regular times. They were certain to be “found” there, without fail; established writers, or icons of the rising cultural counter-elite, had “their” regular tables and times. This urban literary culture developed its own rituals, like the Tuesday night nadwas at the Atelier – an exhibition space of long-standing – after which debates were continued in nearby bars and cafes. The debates that marked the ”generation of the 1970s“ (and subsequently, the generations of the 1980s and the 1990s) were only superficially concerned with literary aesthetics. Rather, they reflected wider debates about the direction of Egyptian society and the role of intellectuals in it, concomitant with the crisis of Egyptian nationalism and more generally the end of the optimistic era of Independence after the crushing defeat of 1967. They resurfaced with vigour in the 1990s, when the ”generation of the 1990s“ formed to contest (explicitly or implicitly) both options – lingering Nasserism and Sadat's realignment.

One should not overestimate the ideological content of these debates. Indeed, it was precisely the rejection of ideology that marked a person as belonging to the generation of the 1990s, just as it would later inform the programmatic leaderlessness of the 25th January Revolution. Hanging out with others in a particular place was always more important than ideology. Here, coteries of writers or artists would form, dissolve and

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32 The café culture of Downtown is, of course, much older. Ezbekiya and ‘Emad El-Din Street – and to a large degree, the whole of Downtown – have been Cairo’s entertainment district for decades. I am, however, concerned here with the nexus of bohemia, political dissent and transgressive non-hegemonic behaviour, or the ”heterotopic turn” as discussed further below.

33 This Tuesday tradition of going out in Downtown dates back to the late 1960s, when the then-avant-garde art space Atelier du Caire (Atelier al-qahira) hosted a regular nadwa, or discussion/seminar/talk. Tuesday was the day when many stayed – or came especially – for the nadwa at the Atelier, afterwards completing their evening debating art and politics in Downtown bars and cafes. A little later, the nearby headquarters of the leftist Tagammu’ party also hosted regular meetings and debates on Tuesdays. More recently, this Tuesday tradition has continued in the form of a specific DJ playing on Tuesdays in the After 8 nightclub, cherished by (and probably specifically geared towards) those old-timers familiar with the earlier Tuesday tradition.

34 This section is based on oral history interviews with a number of people, as well as personal recollections. I glimpsed the tail end of this culture through the late 1990s and early 2000s. A number of Egyptian intellectuals have discussed this social angle of Downtown, often satirically and sometimes critically; cf. Surur, Nagib, Brutukual Hukama’ al-Rish;
realign through their shared forms of sociability; social capital was to be gained; careers and futures were made and unmade through the ways in which people congregated and socialized in one place or another, with or without others. Sitting in the company of certain people bestowed an aura on those invited to join, just as frequenting this or that place constructed hierarchies not just within this world, but on a national scale. Today, this performance of social capital is reproduced in the "new" art scene of Downtown, where the scale of this spatialization is global.

This Downtown literary bohemia constructed itself in opposition to official (i.e. hegemonic) cultural institutions; it was against the older generation of artists and literati and against official spaces of culture (which remained very near in physical terms). Projected into concrete urban locations – specific Downtown hangouts – this implicit opposition gave rise to the expression, in the 1980s, of the "triangle of horror" (muthallath al-ru'b) denoting the area between Atelier, the Grillon bar-restaurant and the Bustan café. The expression signified the danger of scrutiny (or even rejection) to which intellectuals who were too openly allied with the regime were likely to expose themselves if they breached the borders of this non-hegemonic space of alternative, oppositional cultural production. The Downtown bohemia as it existed since the late 1960s and through the 1990s could only function in relation to the very cultural institutions it purported to leave outside. While anti-regime, or more accurately "anti-older-generation" rhetoric was always an essential part of it, the boundaries with hegemonic spaces were always rather porous. These worlds did not exist in a vacuum, but were articulated with one another. While a few regime intellectuals may have been unwelcome here and even straightforwardly rejected, many others who were part of the official culture industry also hung out in Downtown, alongside younger aspiring or newcomer artists and writers, to continue old habits, meet their friends and peers, or to stay connected to the new and the vibrant. The new was, in turn, socialized into the institutionalized structures of the professional world of cultural production.

Heterotopic space is different from merely a heterogeneous urban space. During its Golden Age in the first half of the twentieth century, Downtown had been a heterogeneous space, constitutive of the capital's

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Ibrahim, Sonallah, "Cairo from Edge to Edge," in Sonallah Ibrahim and Jean-Pierre Ribiere, Cairo From Edge to Edge (Cairo, 1998).

35 Hence the foundational narrative of one of the icons of the 1990s generation, Hisham Qishta, a newcomer poet from the provinces who founded an independent literary review al-Kitaba al-ukhra, centres around tropes of "working from cafes, having nowhere to sleep." His was also a new model of distribution, powerful because it was wholly dependent on informal networks. Interviews with Hisham Qishta. For a fuller discussion, see Jacquemond, Richard, Conscience of the Nation (Cairo, 2008), 170-78.

36 Ibrahim: (see FN 34) and Jacquemond: (see FN 35); interviews with Hisham Qishta.

37 Although it built on earlier traditions of Downtown literary cafes, and continues up to a point; but the revolution also largely reconfigured things and brought in different publics, as discussed below. Many of the older pillars of the Downtown bohemia are now too old to come here regularly, but "their" Downtown (and "their" time) lives on in a regular Friday meeting in one of the cafes that is, perhaps ironically, increasingly documented on Facebook.
glamour. This glamour rested not only on the exclusive habitat, shopping and leisure on offer, but equally on its capacity to attract and accommodate audiences well beyond the elites as long as they could pay or otherwise play the game. Downtown always also had heterotopic qualities: illicit fun always existed on its fringes. Through the 1970s and 1980s, however, this mainstream glamour was gone, overtaken by the thrill of the illicit (the black market, the bars), or the anti-establishment (the bohemian world); both being non-hegemonic. Downtown's bohemia of the last quarter of the twentieth century certainly built on the earlier aura and infrastructure of the area's Golden Age: its decades-long association with fun and leisure, the proximity of cultural institutions, as well as its unique (for Cairo) concentration of bars and restaurants with alcohol licences. From the 1970s on, coming to Downtown for fun and leisure no longer unquestionably bestowed one with status in the eyes of normative society, but rather made a person socially suspect – just as this illicit (or "suspect") quality became actively sought after by some as a component of social capital in particular subcultures. Sometime during the 1970s (or 1980s), therefore, Downtown Cairo became "hegemonically heterotopic," so to speak. This "hegemonically heterotopic turn" (i.e. the rise of Downtown as predominantly heterotopic) was predicated on its downfall as the site of power and privilege. No longer a haunt of elites, it now became the place claimed and performed in by subsequent generations of bohemians, by the black market (eventually replaced by the downscale glitz of its shops) and by teenagers coming to watch movies and hang around.

In the late 1990s a new transnational art scene emerged in Downtown, connected to global art circles. This new trend began with the opening of a handful of new private galleries, which broke the monopoly of state-owned art spaces, but remained dependent on Egyptian elite tastes. These pioneer private galleries were soon overshadowed by the Townhouse gallery (http://www.thetownhousegallery.com), a hip and upscale art space which opened in 1998 in an old building in the midst of car-repair workshops and garages. Townhouse was run as a non-profit foundation supported by foreign grants, which allowed it to overcome dependency on local tastes and to orient itself, instead, to global art trends and markets. The Downtown location of this new art scene can also be read as an anti-establishment move of sorts, which confirmed its departure from the commercial galleries of Zamalek as well as from Egyptian state institutions of art. While partly liberating especially younger Egyptian artists from the confines of state institutions and the corruption and patronage of the official art world, as well as offering an outlet for new talents, Townhouse has also introduced a wholly new set of hierarchies of exclusion. Today, Townhouse still seeks to be an international-level venue and a regional and global art broker, but is largely shunned by a newer generation of artists – a generation that is.

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38 Downtown is the only heterogeneous urban space in Cairo (and Egypt, with the exception of downtown Alexandria) with multiple establishments serving alcohol. Other urban clusters also have places that serve alcohol, but they are not heterogeneous: the upscale Zamalik and Ma'adi are exclusive. Bars on Pyramids Street are too strongly associated with the sex trade.

39 The first private galleries in Downtown included Mashrabiyya, Cairo-Berlin, Espace Karim Francis; on the wider context of the Egyptian art scene, institutions and practices, see Winegar, Jessica, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Egypt* (Stanford, CA, 2006).
both fully global and rejects brokerage in order to access the global.

Importantly for my argument, the hype surrounding the Townhouse gallery throughout the early 2000s was responsible for bringing a new kind of crowd into Downtown: a young, elite, globalized crowd, raised in other upscale areas of Cairo. This new art scene of the late 1990s and early 2000s tapped into Downtown’s heterotopic infrastructure: its many bars, cafes and restaurants; its patina of decay and past glory; its trademark feel of a “free zone” derived from its characteristic social porosity. This young globalized crowd had newly discovered Downtown. The Townhouse gallery and the subsequent cultural festivals (the first two Nitaqs in 2000 and 2001, several runs of Photo-Cairo, and the three D-CAFs between 2012 and 2015) made Downtown Cairo cool again. It is worth noting that this new crowd's discovery of Downtown came at the height of the neoliberal turn, with all that this implies in terms of the growing valorization of Cairo's colonial city centre mentioned above.

All of these circles represent separate although casually overlapping publics, enabled by Downtown's heterotopic qualities and in turn constitutive of them. The diversity of Downtown's cultural scenes in which the whole is larger than the sum of its parts, is evident, for instance, in the very different currents represented by the two major festivals of the post-revolution years. D-CAF and al-Fann Midan each catered to, or attracted, largely different audiences, just as their aims – and publics – were differently spatialized, so to speak. D-CAF aims to put Cairo on a global map by bringing in artists from around the world and specifically encouraging artistic cooperation with local artists; al-Fann Midan (held simultaneously in other regional cities across Egypt) strives to spread revolution-infused cultural production into the depths of the country.

From one perspective, this cultural geography of Downtown in which different generations of artists, literati and activists hang out in different places, often only metres apart, reflects a salient – if rarely made explicit – conflict over the ownership of political resistance; or indeed, of “culture”. Particular cafes may be associated with one coterie or another, but this will only be known to the initiated – the inner group. To anyone else, such circles remain largely invisible. And among those to whom such geographies are visible, the

40 Only in Downtown one can attend an independent art production and then have a beer in a dingy bar sitting next to a taxi driver. The Downtown landscape of baladi (here meaning “local and cheap”) bars, popular among younger publics (many of whom are foreigners) has its own dedicated website: http://www.baladibar.com.


42 El Shimi, Rowan, “A Beginner's Guide to Downtown's Alternative Art Scene” Mada Masr, 8 March 2015 (http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/beginners-guide-downtowns-alternative-art-scene). This is one among many examples of the “discovery” of Downtown by young globalized crowds, for whom Cairo's alternative arts scene started with Townhouse.

43 “Art is a [public] Square” – a title intentionally linked to the symbolic capital of Tahrir Square in the wake of the January 25th Revolution.
interpretation of what these crowds mean may differ substantially. Indeed, different coteries of the initiated may also stay invisible to one another. It is therefore not surprising that the younger publics who come to Downtown to attend a show or to hang out are largely ignorant of the long legacy of Downtown's bohemia, its protagonists and its antics. But this is precisely how Downtown's heterotopia works.

This new Downtown cultural scene works in very much the same way as the earlier bohemia of the 1960s to 1990s. Few of the protagonists and their publics (or indeed, few of the investors who have stakes in the gentrification process) are willing to actually live there. Downtown is a site of cultural pilgrimage: people come to hang out, and then they leave. This applies as equally to independent artists and literati of the older generation as it does to the youth activists of the revolution. It also does to the hip and jet-setting art-lovers who come to attend shows at Townhouse, and then have dinner at Yunani or Estoril, consuming a bit of decadent Downtown thrill and constructing their reputation as habitués of Downtown among their refined peers. To some, hanging out in particular bars and cafes marks their belonging to an urban subculture, to which Downtown's aura of decay is key (an aura that already has a neoliberal twist to it). Others come here to enjoy the relative freedom and autonomy afforded by its characteristic social porousness. To others, from a very different social spectrum, Downtown has retained its association with upscale festivity, and they come here to hang out, stroll, and gaze at shop windows and women. Downtown has always been a heterogeneous place predicated on drawing in different audiences from all around the city, temporarily, and only in certain moments. This non-hegemonic space also encourages a heightened performance of social roles – it works as a theatre stage. Social porousness does not mean the absence of rules; rather, this space of improvisation has rules (or scripts, or codes) of its own.

As in any liminal condition, Downtown has its own tricksters fishing for strangers to deceive: al-khirateyya (sing. khirti). While everyone is technically a stranger in a liminal space, in the Egyptian context such strangers are especially foreigners. The khirateyya seek to profit from them by offering a range of services, which is a colloquial expression meaning a liar, cheater, trickster.

Although newcomers from the provinces can be equally easy prey, and ports of arrival are other spaces where khirateyya operate. In the comedy Ragab foq Safih Sakhin (Dir. Ahmad Fu’ad, 1979), a country bumpkin coming to Cairo for the first time (played by ‘Adil Imam) falls prey to a khirti at the train station as soon as he gets off the train.

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inserting themselves as middlemen and fixers of various kinds. They can be men or women, from a range of social backgrounds, operating on the principle of gain; the services they offer are often framed through friendship or favour, not as a business. The most common way of describing a *khirti* would be as someone whose ultimate aim is to marry a foreigner in order to obtain a visa; but they offer a variety of services ranging from finding an apartment or a rental car, to drugs and sex. Their favourite hangouts in Downtown Cairo used to be cafés Riche, Bustan and Horeyya.49

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The *khirteyya* were a phenomenon of the 1980s, the effect of *infitah* and its combination of rapid growth of tourism and a sense of sudden opening to the outside world coming after years of deprivation and relative closure of the country because of wars. Today, they are a kind of urban myth in Downtown, though some people still claim their existence in Horeyya café (as the *samasra*, or apartment brokers, who frequent there). But the social type of trickster as a form of behaviour created by liminality persists; Downtown's liminality may invite trickster behaviour and is in turn affirmed by it. It could well be that some otherwise "respectable" people can behave as a *khirateyya* if such an opportunity presents itself; more likely, they become labelled as *khirateyya* by others. I witnessed this process when two of my acquaintances clashed violently over their right to use an affordable and charming studio in Bab al-Luq, something that is as much in demand among younger Downtown publics as it is hard to find. Both have a similar social profile and move in overlapping social circles in Downtown; but when they turned into bitter foes over the use of the studio, one tried to damage the other's reputation by saying that he was "the new *khirateyya*." This was meant to throw doubt on him as someone profiteering from the opportunity. Similar profiteering is sometimes implied when a Downtown character marries a foreigner, especially if the marriage leads to some form of gain. "Downtown invites leeches; one has to be careful. You can usually only trust one out of ten people here" intimated a friend. The point is that certain behaviour may get read as profiteering, and trickster personalities may be imprinted on people, and that this is located in Downtown.

**Enter Huda Sha'rawi Street: A Young Middle-Class Revolutionary Heterotopia**

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Perhaps the final episode of the abandonment of Downtown by Cairo's grandees took place in 2008, when the main campus of the American University in Cairo (AUC) moved from its pride of place next to Tahrir Square to one of the new suburbs in the desert. This move reflected, in part, a growing unease by its students to being exposed to the chaos, traffic (zahma) and pollution of the city's heart. The *zahma* here means not just physical traffic (both pedestrian and cars), but rather a human pollution of sorts. Every day a heterogeneous mixture of people comes to Downtown for diverse purposes: to run errands and shopping in its (low-to-middle level) offices, or to shop or hang out after hours. Except for

49 Another spot used to be where Champollion Street leads into Tahrir. This area, today the location of the Mashrabiyya gallery, used to be lined with foreign currency exchange shops in the late 1970s and through the 1980s. The *khirateyya* are also the subject of an independent movie, *Romantika* (Dir. Zaki Fatin 'Abdel Wahhab, 1996).
some of the global art-lovers discussed above, none of these Downtown users belong to the elites.

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But which area really constitutes Downtown? Among Downtown habitués and those who have stakes in the area, there are two overlapping spatial definitions. One is the definition espoused by architectural historians, heritage professionals and investors. To them, Downtown means the historical area of Ismailiya, the grand boulevards defined by Tahrir Square on the west, 26 July Street on the north, and 'Attaba (formerly Ezbekiya) Square to the east. To historians, this central core is known as Khedivial Cairo. To it is sometimes added the immediately adjacent Tawfiqiyaa, Ezbekiya and Faggala districts, given that scores of heritage-worthy buildings are located here.

Map of Downtown Cairo illustrating some of the significant art and cultural spaces, vintage hotels, cinemas and cafes. Courtesy of CLUSTER's ongoing mapping and research project. clustercairo.org

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50 There is a third, broader definition. Seen from the outside, by those who do not count among its publics or users, "Downtown" is used to denote a much wider area including adjacent neighbourhoods, such as Bulaq Abu 'Ela, Garden City, 'Ataba, Sayida Zainab and others. It may thus also mean simply "the inner city."

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The second definition of Downtown is social. From this perspective, the colonial-era Ismailiyya appears rather marginal, with some of its boulevards effectively deserted after nightfall, and others being the exclusive hub of loitering, low-income males and street vendors. Downtown's "social scene" starts south of Ismailiyya's borders. While the pedestrian area of the Borsa, renowned for its many outdoor cafes, lies along the southern limits of the Khedivial Downtown, other social hubs are outside of it: the Townhouse Gallery is located in Ma'ruf, an area that includes downwardly mobile middle-class housing and a number of working-class alleys with garages and car repair shops, hiding behind a row of belle époque buildings. The majority of cafes with an alternative vibe are concentrated at some distance from Khedivial Cairo: in Bab al-Luq, along Bab al-Luq (or Falaki) Square and on Huda Sha'rawi Street.

Crucially, Downtown has no homogenous inhabitants of its own. Despite the proverbial beauty and spaciousness of colonial-era buildings, many apartments are closed up and unused. Largely as an effect of the rent-control laws of the Nasser era, many apartments were converted into offices, workshops or storerooms decades ago. The actual inhabitants of Downtown fall into a number of separate groups, partly
depending on the geographical definition of the area. In the colonial core, these groups include: a dwindling
group of old-timers or their offspring (typically rather older people); locally resident foreigners, all of whom
are young and living temporarily in Cairo for a couple of years;° a handful of Egyptian intellectuals or artists
who rent here and often have a family home somewhere else. The fringes of colonial Downtown such as Bab
al-Luq or Ma'ruf are more densely populated by a downwardly mobile middle-class population whose failure
to move out marks their social decline. To these should be added a substantial, mostly male population of
workers and small business owners who do not technically live in Downtown but who account for most of its
social density during the day and often a large part of the night. These five categories of Downtown dwellers
do not interact among themselves. Passing each other like ships in the night, they do not form a local
community. It is the fractured character of its local inhabitants that accentuates Downtown's character of a
heterogeneous assemblage of strangers de passage, its trademark feel as a place belonging to no-one but
available to everyone, which may be interpreted as chaos and human pollution by some, but also harbours
possibilities for autonomy for others.

"These few streets, this quadrangle here, this is what we gained from the revolution, and this is what remains
of it" a friend told me in the summer of 2014, as the new military regime was tightening its grip on public life
and the revolution seemed all but defeated. She was pointing at the area around Huda Sha'rawi Street, and
the two smaller streets, Falaki and Mazloum. This quadrangle is lined with a number of cafes, most of them
known as favoured hangouts especially (if not exclusively) for young people who took an active part in the
revolution's many events. Her comment expressed the latent sense of freedom palpable in this quadrangle, a
feeling that is not simply a product of the predominantly youthful and revolutionary demographic of its
patrons, but rather of the kind of performative behaviours that become temporarily hegemonic here.° This is
a very relaxed place, where young men and women frequent cheap street cafes, or simply hang out on
street corners.° Here, the omnipresent need for women to be constantly on guard that becomes second
nature in Cairo’s public spaces is effectively absent. It was impossible to be harassed or catcalled in this
quadrangle in the first three years after the revolution. It was possible to smoke a joint in the street with
minimal discretion. Hanging out on a street corner and smoking joints does, of course, happen everywhere in
Cairo, but it is strongly gendered. Every neighbourhood, affluent or poor, has its own street corners where
local male youths cluster and smoke joints after dark. Such places and practices are essential to
performative masculinity and they work as turfs – spaces demarcated by socially legible signs. They are

° No long-term resident families of foreigners live here, as there are no schools and family-friendly facilities nearby; also,
the formerly vibrant market in accommodation for AUC foreign students has now gone.
° The heyday of the radical autonomy of Huda Sha'rawi had diminished by the spring of 2015, although it had far from
disappeared.
° Young unmarried men and women hang out together in many other areas in Cairo, but their freedom is both enabled
and policed by capital: it is always a freedom for those who can afford it, the global upper-middle class, as described in
De Koning, Anouk, Global Dreams (Cairo, 2009), 97-130. See also Peterson, Mark Allen, Connected in Cairo (Indiana,
2011).
made possible by, and are in turn constitutive of, notions of masculinity contingent on performative "ownership" of a given hangout spot. In Huda Sha'rawi Street, this local turf-ness is not constitutive of masculinity, but rather of a social (and political) identity whose politics works by its inclusion of both genders, and, ideally, by a denial of class. This was (and partly remains) simply the turf of the revolutionary camp, where conservative, or constraining, forms of social behaviour were effectively absent and/or actively discouraged.

The revolutionary heterotopia of the Huda Sha'rawi quadrangle has a history. For decades, the Suq al-Hamidiyya and Nadwa Thaqafiyya cafés have been popular among particular circles of the Cairene literati, such as the independent theatre crowd. These two cafés are located on the corner of Bab al-Luq Square, near the legendary Horeyya (a shabby vintage café famous for serving beer, and which to many outsiders – Egyptian elites from other places and tourists alike – "really" represents Downtown; unsurprisingly perhaps, Horeyya is also a prime location for tricksters). During the revolution, however, the centre of social gravity moved away from Bab al-Luq Square and towards the smaller streets behind it. Huda Sha'rawi Street, a relatively wide street boasting fine neo-Venetian buildings, used to be a quiet, unremarkable area lined with car-repair workshops on one side and overpriced antique stores on the other. For decades, it served as the main temporary parking spot for those on errands to nearby offices by day, and to shop or dine by night. This temporary parking usage gave it a kind of non-space quality. Its character changed during and after the revolution. Holding Tahrir Square during sit-ins was often a matter of high pressure, something that necessitated alertness especially at night, when attacks were possible. Tahrir was also full of people, and thus, in some sense, "too public". People often took a break from occupying Tahrir to relax in nearby Huda Sha'rawi, which was as deserted as it was relatively safe. Some came here to roll a joint and to discreetly smoke it with friends, others to grab a quick nap in their car before returning to Tahrir. The rise of Huda Sha'rawi's revolutionary heterotopia through 2011 to 2013 (as distinct from, but also enabled by, the earlier kind of car-park non-space heterotopia) is thus entirely related to the revolutionary function of Tahrir Square.

54 Huda Sha'rawi Street, in its heyday back in 2011 to 2013, was theoretically classless: the affordability and simplicity of its cafes created the illusion of classlessness. Walking through it with my working-class friends, however, I noticed that they felt uncomfortable (just as they did in Tahrir). Its identity as a revolutionary turf entailed a performative/implicit exclusion of those (working class) people who were unwilling to discard their social norms deemed conservative. In other words, the absence of capital (i.e. affordable prices, and the apparent simplicity of the cafes and the whole area) made the more privileged revolutionary actors feel that this space was classless. The truly unprivileged, however, felt excluded not by prices but by culture: their forms of achieving contingent autonomy are very different, though they also take place in and around Downtown, as discussed below.

55 While some people did sleep in Tahrir, the encampment was more about a constant stream of coming and going, of consecutive spontaneous "shifts" of comers and goers. I often heard people make the following calculation: I'm off home now (to shower and rest), there are enough people holding it for tonight. But I'll call (friends) and check on them by 2 am, and if the numbers dwindle, I'll come straight back.
class, gender and ideology were temporarily suspended, creating a utopic community of initiands. This anti-structure also became, temporarily, a new utopic norm, an alternative community. If, temporarily, Tahrir became a new norm, then Huda Sha'rawi Street worked as the liminal underbelly to this momentous and utopian Republic of Tahrir – in other words, it became Tahrir's own little heterotopia. After the era of Tahrir's major sit-ins was over, Huda Sha'rawi became an attempt to perpetuate Tahrir's utopia – an attempt that was as radical and memorable as it was flawed and doomed.

Huda Sha'rawi's function as the extension of Tahrir's utopia grew through 2012 and 2013. Little cafes (and even bookshops) started to spring up where car-repair workshops had been. The cafes literally followed where revolutionary crowds had established their turf. The transformation of Huda Sha'rawi from a socially dead non-space into a leisure destination strongly associated with revolutionary publics worked well spatially: it inserted itself in between two older areas known for their cafes: Bab al-Luq Square on the south (associated with older bohemias), and the relatively newer Borsa area to the north. In its heyday through 2012 and 2013, this revolutionary hinterland thus encompassed wide areas of Downtown. Using an older analogy, one could speak here of a new "triangle of horror" representing opposition to the rule of SCAF: a triangle delimited by Tahrir Square on the west, Borsa on the north and east and Muhammad Mahmoud Street on the south (on which more below).

Huda Sha'rawi Street was the epicentre of radical autonomy within this larger revolutionary hinterland. On Huda Sha'rawi itself, one particular corner gained notoriety, at the intersection with Falaki Street where a large nineteenth-century building stands partly abandoned. This is the location of the so-called "atheists' café" closed in 2014 with much media publicity, in another blow to the vestiges of revolutionary autonomy.


56 Or it became part of the splitting of the communitas into parts; in his later writing Victor Turner observed that as the liminal phase persists, initiands who had been in a state of communitas start to calculate resources and take sides. Huda Sha'rawi as representing such a splinter community from the "original" communitas of Tahrir fits the false classlessness mentioned in FN 53; and even more so the salient absence of pious persons in this urban area. Muslim Brothers or Salafis could feel neither comfortable nor welcome here. I thank Walter Armbrust for pointing out this dimension of communitas to me.

59 The Borsa area emerged in the early 2000s with the pedestrianization of three smaller streets around the old Stock Exchange. To outsiders, this area is sometimes understood as the principal nightlife area of Downtown.

60 SCAF: Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Egypt's interim ruler between President Mubarak's resignation in February 2011 and the election of Muhammad Mursi in June 2012.

61 Stretching as far east as Rushdi Street, previously known as the market for bicycles and medical supplies. Here, new cafes emerged in 2012 as the extension of the then-overflowing Borsa area. As I write, and with the recent forced closure of Borsa's cafés by the authorities (in March and April 2015), this eastern fringe of Downtown has seen a renewed social life. Many of the cafes evicted from Borsa have relocated to the nearby Gawad Husni Street, which – like Huda Sha'rawi earlier – serves predominantly as a parking street by day.
But this was no café: rather, it was an idea (that of radical autonomy) and a practice (of enacting such autonomy) manifested in a physical place, a street corner. An actual café (a number of such establishments sprang up here between 2012 and 2014) was an attempt to institutionalize this autonomy into a concrete establishment; an effort that remained largely irrelevant to those who participated in the practice. The notoriety of this particular corner had its roots in the days when Huda Sha'rawi Street functioned as a place of respite for Tahrir protesters. When the difficult days of Tahrir sit-ins were over, people continued to congregate on this corner; music was played, young men and women hung out and smoked joints, and the building soon became covered in graffiti. The institutionalization of this revolutionary autonomy into an actual establishment came during the fall of 2012 – the golden era of post-revolutionary freedom and creativity, enabled by the Muslim Brotherhood government's lack of control and because the police, defeated and humiliated in the revolution, were still both weak and unwilling to cooperate with the government. An anarchic, squatter place opened in the abandoned part of the building, known as "G'z corner" (the predecessor of the "atheists' café") populated by young dreadlocked men. "We rented it," says 'Abdo, who was part of this crowd from the beginning, "but we never paid the rent," he adds with a wink. Defaulting on rent was entirely political and consistent with their sense of victory; it was a kind of positive anarchy in which old structures were considered corrupt by definition. "The owner sent the police a few times on us, but they were too weak. We just chased them away. It was like a game of cat and mouse," he recalls, reversing the order of revolutionary battles (and earlier engagements with the security forces) when they were the chased and the police were the pursuers. 'Abdo continues: "This was 'free land.' The police feared us then [meaning the original G'z corner founders and publics.] Eventually they just walked past us and only ID'd the people they did not know, to the extent that some thought we actually work for them!" "It was fun," he adds. "This was the year we fucked the SCAF, do you remember?"
What some saw as the very materialization of radical autonomy, a "free land" (and an extension, a continuation of Tahrir's utopia), others saw as pollution and danger. The demise of the original G'z corner remains shrouded in mystery. Voices complaining about the unruly crowds that congregated in Huda Sha'rawi came from at least two directions: from a handful of old-timer inhabitants of the building across the street and the business owners nearby (although it is hard to imagine that they would have any effect on closing it down); and also from the older bohemia of Downtown, middle-aged intellectuals to whom this extension of youthful autonomy appeared out of bounds and who emerged as the policemen of the "cleanliness" of their own Downtown heterotopia. "The wrong kind of people hung out there," people often said. The "problem" seems to have been that it was not just the unruly joint-smoking and loud-music-playing youthful middle-class Tahrir veterans, but that the place started attracting other kinds of revolutionary veterans – working-class youths turning up on motorcycles, who had different ways of engaging with Downtown and with the revolution, as discussed below. 'Abdo does not deny it: "It was 'free land.' We did not kick out anyone."

Strolling in Enemy Territory: Young Male Working-Class Heterotopia

Nevertheless, the above story is not quite all there is to Downtown. Very different crowds equally claim this urban space as their own. They are young low-income men who come to Downtown to attend a movie in its many cinemas, or just to hang out, stroll and loiter. They come from near and far; some of them often, others more rarely, on special occasions such as weekend nights or the ‘Eid holidays. They are well dressed and well groomed, often sporting elaborate hairstyles involving quantities of hair gel. Like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, they saunter along the Downtown boulevards in a manner that approaches dancing, checking out shop windows with fashionable clothing. They also check out women, and may engage in
verbal flirtations and ritualized comments on the women's appearance. Such moments may sometimes lead to violent escalation, especially if the particular codes of low-income performative masculinity are not known, upheld, or tolerated by the women in question. Most commonly, however, this dressing up and parading, of gazing and being looked at, is directed at others within and among the coteries of young men, and involves lots of posing for photographs taken with mobile phones. Young male loitering is not limited to Downtown, but represents the major reason why this area is most commonly associated with danger and human pollution, and specifically with gender-related violence. As one observer recently put it, Downtown is "harassment-land."  

![Young men strolling in Downtown](image.jpg)

Figure 7: Young men strolling in Downtown. First days of Eid al-Fitr. Photographs by author, 2014 and 2015.

In public culture and state policies alike, this young out-of-work loitering male has been consistently constructed as an "internal other", as the social monster, epitomizing danger to normative social order, national modernity, and middle-class morality. Salwa Ismail and Patrick Haenni, among others, discuss how

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the principal internal other in the 1980s was the Islamist; a politics that has since evolved to include the poor out-of-work male, whether religiously mobilized or not. This wholesale criminalization of working-class men is also embodied in legal codes and police practices, through the ishtibah wa taharr ("suspicion and investigation") aimed especially at low-income youth, who – picked on and searched at whim – are subjected to routine humiliation and persecution. In mainstream Egyptian middle-class culture the young out-of-work male is thus perceived either as an Islamist or as a petty-criminal drug addict, and located in a particular urban space, the 'ashwa'iyat, or informal neighbourhoods that are criminalized en bloc. The "spilling out" of young loitering males from "their" places – their spatial habits that involve ritualized strolling in heterogeneous and often upscale neighbourhoods, and more recently, the deployment of cheap Chinese motorcycles for joyriding – is perceived as dangerous and polluting, and promotes the vilification of the inner city as a whole, underpinning the flight of prosperous Egyptians to new cities in the desert (like the relocation of the American University). One might also point to the growing fashion among middle- and upper-middle-class women for self-defence courses, fuelled by the necessity to protect themselves from the low-income, male social monster who lurks in the streets. The fear of the baltagi (here meaning a thug for hire) was famously intensified through the 2011 revolution; however, the revolution has also altered this representational economy by making it possible (as well as appealing and marketable) to imagine the unemployed young male from marginalized urban spaces – including his motorcycle – as a potential hero.

Hanging out in the street, on particular corners (the turfs discussed earlier), is key to the performance of young low-income masculinity. In their everyday lives, young men remain subordinated to senior males; they obey their fathers and remain deferent to them. This subordination is balanced by rituals of asserting

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64 Law 6 on thuggery (known as "the Baltaga Law") of 1998, together with the Emergency Law, gave police extensive powers to search and detain individuals deemed threatening to society. See Ismail: (see FN 63), 120-23; and Ismail, "The Egyptian Revolution Against the Police," Social Research 79/2 (2012).

65 For critique, see Sims: (see FN 27).

66 Lachenal, Perrine, "Beauty, the Beast, and the Baseball Bat: Ethnography of Self-Defence Training for Upper-Class Women in Revolutionary Cairo (Egypt)," Comparative Sociology 13 (2014).

67 On the uses of the term baltagi during the 18 days of Tahrir, see Ghannam, Farha, Live and Die like a Man (Stanford, CA, 2013), 124-30. Throughout the revolution's many urban battles, the low-income male emerged also as a hero, through his presence as the intrepid front-line fighter, protecting middle-class protesters in Tahrir from police attacks. See Ryzova, Lucie "The Battle of Cairo's Muhammad Mahmoud Street," Cultural Anthropology Hotspots 2012 (http://culanth.org/fieldsights/232-the-battle-of-cairo-s-muhammad-mahmoud-street). Motorcycle cavalry, until then associated with petty crime and harassment, was dubbed the "people's ambulance". There emerged, over the past five years, a palpable romanticization of the low-income hero evident in the middle-class (and even global) infatuation with mahraganat music and blockbuster film productions, notably those of Muhammad Ramadan.

68 On the diverse acts and processes through which low-income masculinity is produced in contemporary Cairo, see Ghannam: (see FN 67), and Ismail: (see FN 63). Both stress the importance of state (police) violence in this process. "Working class" or "low-income" is crucial here: middle-class gender identities are constructed through the rejection of the street as a space of socialization, and the importance of clubs, cafeterias and cars. See De Koning: (see FN 53).
manhood contingently. Men will accrue fuller autonomy with age; when their fathers die, they may become patriarchs in their turn. But they will also assume the seriousness and responsibility that comes with it. Being a young man thus entails a kind of "patriarchal bargain": young men are not fully autonomous, but they can achieve a much greater degree of (radical) autonomy contingently, in specific times and places, such as through the ritualized enactment of being "bad boys" far away from home.  

Leisure practices, such as strolling, parading, joyriding, or ritualized flirting, represent moments of achieving contingent autonomy, conceived in gendered terms as full masculinity. Time and space are crucial. This becomes more effective away from home and thus away from social control and the kind of normative hierarchy that perpetuates subjugation. These ritualized and territorialized patterns of low-income sociability are structured around coteries of friends (shilal, or cliques), and include their own scripts; their own language and codes of honour. Every neighbourhood has such turfs, but some areas are more popular (or more socially productive) than others. Similarly, certain moments are more important than others, and require more elaborate rituals. Such (liminal) times can be any night, or more often weekend nights; or indeed, religious holidays such as the two ‘Eids which, like carnivals, are traditionally marked off for (or "properly celebrated" with) transgressive behaviour.

On such occasions, attention to appearance is key. To look "cool", enacted through dress codes and hairstyles, serves to insert a young man into a hierarchy of coolness – or "princeness" – earning the playful title of "Prince" among his peers. There is a particular economy behind clothing: often whole wages can go to buying neat-looking, fashionable clothes. This excessive attention to appearance has yet another reason: it stems from an acute awareness of being constantly judged and "classed" by others once such young men venture beyond their street and neighbourhoods; of being constantly read as either "clean" or not, "respectable" or not, and treated accordingly. This includes not just strangers, but crucially the state, embodied in the police.

Different urban spaces matter differently for the construction of class-inflected masculinity and its possible valences. For young low-income males, "urban space is mapped out in terms of zones of relative safety and relative danger," observes Ismail. But this geography can also be subverted at specific times and places. A

70 See also Elshestawy, Yasser, "Urban Transformations: Social Control at al-Rifa’i Mosque and Sultan Hasan Square," in Singerman and Amar: (see FN 4).
71 This coolness is defined against other sartorial codes: as not ghalban (meaning visibly poor), and not socially conservative (in terms of both religion and generation).
72 Ismail: (see FN 63), 122-23.
relational understanding of urban space is needed. A number of heterogeneous spaces of leisure imbedded with a liminal quality exist around Cairo. On the western side, Arab League Street in the upscale Muhandisin is a favourite "special" hangout for youths from Bulaq al-Dakrur, one of Cairo's largest informal neighbourhoods, immediately adjacent to Muhandisin but famously isolated from it by a railroad track with few overpasses. But many youths from Bulaq also hang out in Downtown, and many took part in the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud Street (see below). On the eastern side, youths from Manshiet Nasr and the surrounding cluster of informal neighbourhoods come to saunter or joyride on motorcycles in the boulevards (and some malls) of Madinet Nasr.

Downtown is Cairo's heterotopic zone par excellence, given its heterotopic infrastructure, which in this context (or from this class-based perspective) means less the bars and the cultural institutions than its almost century-old tradition of movie theatres, shopping and strolling. Its pleasant wide boulevards and the absence of strongly territorial locals make this area both truly public as well as "nobody's zone". Its semi-anonymity presents an attractive stage on which to perform masculinity and to achieve full autonomy because the senior males in these young men's lives are absent, while at the same time there is a large audience of their peers. What I have earlier called Downtown's hegemonically heterotopic turn in the 1970s (following its abandonment by elites, the reorientation of its shops and leisure establishments to less privileged publics, and the area's association with either illicit or oppositional practices) saw the rise in the district's importance as the preferred spot for young low-income or downwardly mobile men to indulge in transgressive behaviour – or to dream of doing so while enjoying moments of personal autonomy, as the 1986 movie al-Hub fawq Hadbat al-Haram shows. Downtown cinemas in particular became a prime place for unsanctioned fun. Here, coteries of youths in the back seats came to watch B-movies hoping for the occasional flash of nudity (manazir), drinking beer and smoking joints. To cite Walter Armbrust (describing the 1990s), "the liminality of the movie-theatre space between the audience and screen was expanded to encompass the entire district. The theatre district itself became like a theatre where, once the lights were down, behaviour unsanctioned by the authority structures governing the lives of youth – a modernizing state, parents (especially fathers), or moralizing Islamists – could be indulged." This spilling out of the theatre space into the streets, which was always present up to a point and especially during the 'Eids, was accelerated by the closure of many theatres in the early 2000s, both the cheap second-run establishments

73 Interestingly, while the universe of young low-income males is saturated with drugs, including alcohol, hashish, and pills, drug consumption is never undertaken publicly. Their participation in Downtown's heterotopia entirely excludes its many bars. Older working-class men (shop owners from neighbouring areas) do patronize Downtown bars, but youths rarely do. There is one important exception to this rule: on yawm al-waqfa, the first day of the Big 'Eid, Downtown's many alcohol-selling shops are invaded by working-class youths from all over the city, and beer is occasionally drunk openly in the streets.

74 See FN 29 above. Let us also bear in mind that Downtown saw young male strolling during the Golden Age as well, as discussed earlier.

75 Armbrust, Walter, "When Lights Go Down in Cairo," in Singerman and Amar: (see FN 4), 416.
as well as the increasingly dilapidated first-run theatres. The diminishing number of theatres in Downtown coincides with, and is conversely proportionate to, the increase in street harassment in this area, especially during ‘Eids. As Armbrust commented, the street itself became a theatre, a liminal space for transgressive behaviour.

‘Eids in Downtown are the perfect combination of liminal time and liminal space where normative social roles become temporarily cast aside or reversed, and where radical autonomy can be achieved. Young low-income men are not the only ones to enjoy it; romantic couples and families with small children come here as well to stroll, dressed in their Sunday best. So do coteries of teenage low-income women, although their proportion diminishes later at night (perhaps less due to their fear of harassment, which is the domain of privileged women, and more in line with the imperative to be home at a certain hour; they are well equipped to deal with ritualized flirting and may even provoke it sometimes). The young low-income and heavily groomed men that take over Downtown’s boulevards at night fall into one particular demographic: they are ashbal, or “lion cubs”, a term used to design 14-to-16-year-old teenagers. It is these lion cubs that my twenty-something working-class friends (who may sometimes be their neighbours and acquaintances) always warned me about, whether in the context of Downtown or of Tahrir, perceiving them critically as out-of-control fools, dangerous because they are most eager to virulently assert their inchoate manhood, while not yet able to assume the honour that is its essential part.

The many families I see strolling in Downtown on ‘Eids are young families with young children. Here, I think, they see this strolling within the framework of their earlier romance, not yet faded by years and by the worries of having teenage children. I have never, I think, seen a family with teenage kids: this would be seen as inappropriate, both because of its reference to parental romance and for the imperative to keep one’s own maturing kids “in their proper place.”

During the revolution’s many sit-ins, and especially its festive and crowded Fridays, my twenty-something working-class friends from the popular neighbourhood of Bulaq al-Dakrur seemed to always know when “their” ashbal were coming, and warned me to not go on these days.

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Figure 8: Strolling in Downtown Cairo on Eid al-Fitr. Photographs by author, 2013, 2014, 2015.
Without diminishing the seriousness of sexual violence in urban Egypt, a more nuanced and contextual understanding of what forms sexual harassment is needed. Incidents that routinely get labelled as sexual harassment include three different types of acts: 1) politically motivated, pre-meditated gender violence; 2) "genuine harassment", physical or verbal engagement with women that is intended to harm or as a provocation, and not expected to be welcomed by the woman; and 3) *mu'aksa*, a class-inflected and often highly ritualized form of flirtation, which is ideally both welcomed and reciprocated. These acts are associated with Downtown Cairo, albeit not exclusively, and therefore warrant a brief discussion. Attacks on female protesters by hired thugs intensified during the revolutionary process, but had been a staple weapon of the regime long before January 2011. Genuine harassment (unlike *mu'aksa*) is intended to harm or hurt, and usually happens in crowded, anonymous urban spaces filled with strangers (or on public transport) when the man expects he can get away with it. Given the inherent difficulty of studying the topic, it is not always possible to distinguish between these categories, and they also have blurred boundaries. But the

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*78 It is nearly impossible to know, for instance, which incidents of group sexual violence and gang rape during the Tahrir Square protests were perpetrated by hired men; those which were done gratuitously by the same men (every neighbourhood has its *baltageyya*, men who use violence gratuitously for their own gain or pleasure, see Ghannam: (see FN 66), 122); and those which may have been moments in which *ashbal* – teenage lion cubs intent on grabbing what they can of women they perceive as "available" – had got out of hand.*
boundaries are not always illegibly blurred. It is important to insist on analytical clarity whenever possible,
given the discursive production of "sexual harassment" over the past decade.\(^{79}\) Catcalling, for instance, can
be ambiguous. It can be intended to annoy the woman in order to assert dominance (i.e. manhood) in front
of an audience of male peers; or it can be envisioned as a potentially welcome flirtation, \textit{mu‘aksa} (especially
if not performed obviously for an audience, expressed in gentle voice and/or with flattering expressions).
Many non-bourgeois Egyptian women are skilled in decoding its valences, and choose to respond or ignore
accordingly. They do not perceive themselves as victims of harassment; they may welcome it or, indeed,
even instigate it. As Aymon Kreil puts it, \textit{mu‘aksa} is a highly ritualized acknowledgement of female sexuality
through the public assertion of male virility,\(^{80}\) a performance in which both men and women participate.
\textit{Mu‘aksa}, however, can lead to a violent escalation when it is directed at the wrong person, who is ignorant of,
or unwilling, to deploy its codes.\(^{81}\)

Increasingly, in public and academic discourse, \textit{mu‘aksa} is always labelled as "harassment." This is because
its codes rest on class-specific notions of femininity, or what Paul Amar calls "unwanted femininities".\(^{82}\)
These may be misunderstood, feared and despised by bourgeois Egyptian women, academics and
foreigners alike, who deem the forms and codes of femininity implied in \textit{mu‘aksa} as backward, vulgar,
unsophisticated or un-feminist. This is a historically constituted process (as any gendered identity is), of
which two related aspects are worth briefly mentioning here. The first is that the denial of \textit{mu‘aksa} as a
legitimate form of cross-gender communication signals the disappearance – both from public culture and
academic discourse – of any possibility of female sexuality. Women are acknowledged through their pious
selves, as struggling heroines making the survival of low-income households possible, or as victims of male
oppression. A substantial part of their agency as socially and historically constituted feminine subjects,
however, remains absent as long as we refuse to engage with how they may also be constituted as sexual
subjects on their own terms.

\(^{79}\) For the discursive production of sexual harassment over the past decade, see Klaus, Enrique, "The Ayd Sexual Rage
doctoral dissertation, MMSH Aix-en-Provence 2015; Abdelmonem, Angie, "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment in
Egypt: A Longitudinal Assessment of \textit{el-Taharrush el-Ginsky} in Arabic Online Forums and Anti-Sexual Harassment

\(^{80}\) Kreil: (see FN 79). Two older ethnographies acknowledge \textit{mu‘aksa} as ritualized female sexuality in public places:
Messiri, Sawsan, \textit{Ibn al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity} (Leiden, 1978), and Rugh, Andrea, \textit{Reveal and Conceal: Dress in Contemporary Egypt} (Cairo, 1986); in addition to scores of novels and films from the middle decades of the
twentieth century.

\(^{81}\) This resembles what Bourdieu describes as the game of challenge and riposte between (ideally) social equals, which
escalates into potentially dangerous violence because of the involvement of a social actor who isn't familiar with the
rules, and therefore overreacts to slights from unworthy challengers. Bourdieu, Pierre. \textit{Algeria 1960} (Cambridge, 1979
[1960]), 95-132.

\(^{82}\) Amar, Paul, "Middle East Masculinity Studies: Discourse of 'Men in Crisis', Industries of Gender in Revolution" \textit{Journal of Middle East Women's Studies} 7:3 (2011).
Secondly, the denial of *mu'aksa* as a legitimate practice constructs the working-class male as always a *baltagi*, a criminalized offender. Masculinity is most crucially constructed around notions of honour; possession of honour, or conversely the lack of it, marks the kind of man one is. Working-class (or low-income) masculinity is constructed around two poles, the *gad'a* and the *baltagi*, marked by the possession of honour or the lack of it.\(^{83}\) *Mu'aksa* can be understood as the property of the *gad'a*: as a highly ritualized assertion of male virility, public and therefore honourable, it obeys widely agreed upon codes and is intended to be perceived positively by the woman (whether she responds or ignores it, and ignoring is a form of response); whereas harassment in crowded places often coupled with violence is cowardly, the property of masculinity with no honour.\(^{84}\) The denial of *mu'aksa* as a legitimate, class-inflected and highly socially situated form of cross-gender communication thus simultaneously denies both men and women certain forms of agency; this is consistent with the ongoing process of wholesale criminalization of working-class men – and the urban spaces they come from – in Egyptian public culture, as mentioned earlier.

**Chemical Fusions: Downtown Heterotopias in Revolutionary Time**

Downtown was also the stage for other, more momentous, forms of radical autonomy. One was the legendary era of Huda Sha'rawi Street heterotopia in 2012 and 2013, regarded by many as socially disturbing. Another occurred in the moments of certain urban battles, especially the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud in November 2011. This battle lasted for five days and nights and claimed over 37 dead and many more injured. It evolved spontaneously from the brutal dispersal of a small sit-in of families of those injured in January 2011, when many came to their aid from all over Cairo. What followed was a replication of the January encampment in Tahrir, with crowds setting up camp and holding the square for days. An adjacent battle zone emerged in Muhammad Mahmoud Street, one of the avenues leading to Tahrir Square. The Ministry of Interior lies a few smaller streets to the south-east. Blocking Muhammad Mahmoud (making a human barricade of vigilant, fight-ready protesters) was thus initially meant to protect the peaceful crowds in Tahrir from further police and military raids that would (and did) come from that direction.\(^{85}\)

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\(^{83}\) See Ghannam: (see FN 67), 121-24, for a discussion of masculinity constructed around the poles of *gad'a* and *baltagi*. Ghannam stresses the legitimate and illegitimate use of force as the key marker, and the respect granted to women and elders; one might add that this is really about honour.

\(^{84}\) Salwa Ismail's concept of "injured masculinity" may be relevant here: it refers to a class-inflected construction of gender shaped by the everyday experience of subordination and injury (Ismail: (see FN 63), 96-97; 123). This concept has its problems, notably in presupposing a pristine, uninjured masculinity; its incapacity to see how masculinity is performed contextually and changes with age; and most importantly, the crucial role that honour plays in the construction of different types of manhood. But Ismail's concept also poses an important historical question, in particular about the role of the neoliberal economy and police state in making the achievement of adult/mature masculinity (men as providers) more difficult. Her concept may be productive in understanding the rise in some forms of gender violence. It remains very relevant to understanding urban battles with police during the revolution, as discussed below.


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This particular geography soon crystallized into two distinct zones, differentiated by the type of action as well as a distinct demography. Tahrir Square itself represented a perfectly safe, "liberated" zone, populated day and night mostly by middle-class protesters of different social groups and ages, including families, who had articulate political demands. South-east of the square, however, Muhammad Mahmoud Street and its environs developed into a battleground. Here, the demographic was predominantly young male and socially marginal. Many of those who took part in the fighting understood it as the continuation of the battle for and around the Ministry of Interior, which took place in the early days of the revolution (January 28th). The Muhammad Mahmoud battle of November 2011 was then replicated (or continued) again in February 2012 following the massacre of 74 football fans in Port Said, widely believed to have been orchestrated by the security forces as a payback for their defeat earlier in the revolution. A particular alliance, both unique and temporary, emerged between the articulate middle-class crowds in the square and the mostly young low-income fighters in Muhammad Mahmoud Street. The fight-ready youths on the battleground protected the peaceful crowds, who would otherwise have been vulnerable to attacks from the security forces. The articulate political demands of the square gave the low-income fighters a mantle of legitimacy, without which they would have been swept away and dismissed as vandals and thugs.

The demands in Tahrir Square were political: swift retribution for those killed and injured in January, and more concretely the rejection of the Salmi Document, a constitutional draft granting the military complete autonomy over its own affairs, and also of the upcoming Parliamentary elections. More generally, however, both the Tahrir encampment and the adjacent battle expressed widespread frustration with the stalled transitional process and a rejection of the rule of SCAF.

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86 The demands in Tahrir Square were political: swift retribution for those killed and injured in January, and more concretely the rejection of the Salmi Document, a constitutional draft granting the military complete autonomy over its own affairs, and also of the upcoming Parliamentary elections. More generally, however, both the Tahrir encampment and the adjacent battle expressed widespread frustration with the stalled transitional process and a rejection of the rule of SCAF.
The battle was both highly ritualized and intensely physical. It consisted of two rows of protesters and police facing each other, constantly shifting back and forth (karr wa farr) and occasionally spilling into the adjacent streets. The police used teargas canisters and live ammunition; the protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails. The crowd of fighters on the frontline included middle-class activists, but only as a minority. The bulk of the fighters were young low-income males. These classed demographics were well known to the police, who replicated the same modes of engagement that they have long deployed towards this working-class universe: physical force and sexualized humiliation. The police used gestures involving genitals, intended to humiliate the protesters' manhood; and in an effort to inflict long-lasting physical harm they aimed their guns at the eyes of the protesters, whose class-specific masculinity had long been used to dehumanize them in the eyes of the state and its middle-class police and army officers. Thus, classed and gendered forms of governance and subject formation structured the nature of the battle.

Low-income young men came here to hit back at the police, the hukuma (a term in which the state, the regime and the police are conflated), in an act of instinctive resistance articulated as masculine bravery (gad'ana). The purpose of their fight was not "politics" in the articulate, middle-class sense represented in nearby Tahrir Square. They had no political demands such as democracy or freedom; and they did not necessarily think that anything "positive" would come out of this fight. Life had taught them that nobody would do anything for them unless they took it with their own hands. They were oblivious to danger because they were no strangers to it. Rather, the battle offered something that was unique, and worth life itself: radical autonomy, a complete control over one's life and body, and the chance to avenge the structural subordination of normative time. The battle represented liminal time, in which normative social roles and relationships were reversed: it was the police, the state, who were getting justly beaten here. The baltaga of the police state (its illegitimate use of force in normative time under the Mubarak regime) was here countered.
by the *gad'ana*, masculine bravery articulated through the legitimate use of force.\(^{87}\) This fight allowed low-income men temporarily to fully restore what Salwa Ismail termed their "injured masculinity,"\(^{88}\) reconstituting themselves as fully autonomous subjects and, crucially, as *honourable men*.

Not everyone came to Muhammad Mahmoud Street with the intention of fighting. At first, many had come to just look, to see the spectacle of the police getting beaten, but they soon got dragged into the celebratory atmosphere of the battle. Many a middle-class protester got dragged in as well, for the feeling of radical autonomy was contagious. The Muhammad Mahmoud battle brought both publics together in an ultimate celebration of Downtown liminality as a space-time of radical autonomy.\(^{89}\) Certainly there were other moments of revolutionary battles with a similar character, but the Muhammad Mahmoud battle was unique, and hence it has since emerged as the most cherished and symbolic revolutionary moment in the memory of those who participated in it. The battle could only have happened the way it did because of its location. The proximity to Tahrir, and its genealogy as a Tahrir sit-in, is what created its cross-class alliance and mutual legitimation. The area south of Bab al-Luq, the neighbourhood around the Ministry of Interior, is also the location of government offices and of the then-abandoned campus of the American University, which accentuated its aspect of being both "public" as well as "nobody's zone", and the ensuing possibility of taking over and appropriating this space.\(^{90}\)

**Conclusion**

Downtown's heterotopic character as an anonymous, socially porous and celebratory space enables and encourages non-hegemonic, oppositional or transgressive behaviour and is in turn constructed by it. Whereas a young male strolling in Downtown is substantially classed in a known category, the battle of Muhammad Mahmoud was a unique moment where Downtown's many heterotopias momentarily came together. This does not normally happen; heterotopias also have their normal times, and Downtown Cairo is about those separate circles of publics who rarely overlap. But there may have been other moments of chemical fusion, barely noticed, although vividly remembered by a few. One that we know of was at the height of Huda Sha'rawi Street's radical autonomy in the winter of 2012 to 2013, when these disparate crowds – educated, middle-class revolutionary youths and macho working-class youths on motorcycles – mixed together around G'z corner. The effect was similarly explosive: nobody could quite tell what was

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\(^{87}\) Notions of *gad'ana* and *baltaga* were widely deployed to describe violent encounters between protestors and the police and/or the military during this time. This is partly discussed in Ghannam: (see FN 66), 124-30; and Lachenal: (see FN 7).

\(^{88}\) Ismail: (see FN 63), 96-97; 123. See FN 84.

\(^{89}\) In Foucault's original formulation (1986: 27), heterotopia is often linked to "slices in time".

\(^{90}\) This aspect became evident in comparison to urban battles that took place in other neighbourhoods, most notably the two 'Abasiyya battles of May and July 2011, where the involvement of locals (*ahali*) played a negative role: the "locals" sometimes turned against the revolutionaries, and sometimes their presence was exploited by the police.
“really” going on there, but the unprecedented social mixture and the unsanctioned and transgressive behaviour was widely perceived as socially dangerous. G’z corner disappeared in the summer of 2013, but a series of “clean” cafés was established in its place, trying to capitalize on the corner’s popularity among younger Tahrir-goers. One was a cafeteria called Hikayetna, opened by the star revolutionary Jihan Fadel, a film actress. This “clean” café was an utter failure. It remained empty while crowds gathered casually just outside.

Some habitués of Downtown believe it is important to look at capital to understand the economy behind Downtown’s cafés – and it is certainly true that many seem to have changed owners, or upgraded their premises, over the past four years. From this perspective, the current campaign to close down many of Downtown’s cafés (especially the shocking closure of dozens of them in the well-established pedestrian Borsa area in March 2015) is merely a show; it may be the effect of an in-group conflict between the various power interests that have a stake in controlling the area, or it may be simply tactical. Some reckon that the recent "cleaning" of Downtown – by far the most thorough yet, including not just the shutting down of popular low-to-middle budget cafes and the complete clearing out of street vendors, but also the parking prohibition on all major Downtown avenues and the whitewashing of select facades – may be the first stage in bringing in more lucrative business projects, or wholly new publics.

But Downtown's recently expanded café culture appears to be stronger than any attempt to stifle it. As I write, in spring 2015, Borsa may lie deserted, but scores of new cafes have emerged in neighbouring streets such as Gawad Husni, Mahmud Bassiuni and others. This current crowd is more varied and inclusive, and much larger, than the previous crowds, local bohemia (of both old and new vintage) and the global art crowd. While the "free land" of Huda Sha’rawi may have diminished over the past year, pockets of revolutionary autonomy remain – if only because Downtown’s non-hegemonic quality is emphatically not simply the product of the revolution, and therefore more resilient than any of its enemies are able to imagine. General

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91 Some believe that many of the Downtown cafes are in effect owned by military capital, or that their staff works for the Ministry of Interior. In this way, activists are either controlled (observed) or evicted from specific places by a tactical raising of prices. E.E. interview, January 2015.

92 Plans that some see as the possible revitalization of the old regime’s Cairo 2050 project, which envisioned a violent gentrification of Downtown – "violent" in contrast to the "gentle" gentrification by the Al Ismaelia company working through encouraging and exploiting the artistic vibe. In addition to the physical changes mentioned here – enforced by police action – a number of reports alluding to the liberalization of the "old rent" laws and predicting an upcoming skyrocketing of prices of Downtown apartments has recently (Spring 2015) appeared in the Egyptian press. TV reports from the Economic Conference held in Sharm al-Sheikh in March 2015 also pointed to Gulf investors' interest in colonial Downtown as a potential leisure and short-term residence destination. This, in fact, is the only urban group whose settlement in this area would not be impeded by links to other places in Cairo, and whose business and leisure interests are located nearby. Links to other places of residence and, therefore, the problem of facing notorious Cairo traffic always appeared to be the major obstacle to Al Ismaelia’s plans.
'Abd al-'Ati, also known as "Kofta Basha", has recently experienced Downtown's heterotopia the hard way. In December 2014, 'Abd al-'Ati happened to visit Hagg Shalabi's much renowned hole-in-the-wall baladi eatery (the best pigeon restaurant in town), located off Huda Sha'rawi Street right opposite al-Nadwa al-Thaqafiyya café, one of the most notorious hangouts of revolutionary youth. Crowds sitting in the café spotted him, humiliated him and rejected him from the area with loud jeers and catcalls. Another similar incident occurred later in the Spring of 2015 in the After 8 nightclub, a favourite hangout of revolutionary youth (known, for instance, for providing refuge from curfew during the hard months after the Rab'a massacre, when partygoers would be locked in until the morning). Coming to celebrate the release from prison of a friend, the DJ played revolution-related songs, to which the crowd responded by chanting anti-military slogans. An officer in civilian clothes, who happened to be drinking there, showed them a "fuck you" finger and heaped insults on them; no doubt he felt empowered by the military's pervasive grip on power. His authority, however, was worthless in this place. A fight erupted, in which the officer ended up badly beaten.

In both incidents (and likely many others that remain unreported) little did these military men know that they were trespassing into the Triangle of Horror, a space where non-hegemony imposes its own rules.

Downtown's heterotopic infrastructure is likely to ensure the continuation of this culture, just as the historical legacies discussed above are likely to ensure that the struggle over control of Downtown – its symbolic or real ownership – will remain ongoing for the foreseeable future.

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General 'Abd al-'Ati is the proud inventor of "the Complete Cure for AIDS and hepatitis C," which he famously described as like feeding the patient on AIDS: "I take AIDS from the patient and feed him AIDS. I give it to him like a piece of kufta [a meatball cooked on a kabab skewer] to feed on"). This Army-endorsed stunt ended with a massive global scandal for the post-revolution regime. See here (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/10665410/Egypt-army-embarrassment-after-it-cures-Aids.html) and here (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/world/middleeast/disbelief-after-egypt-announces-cures-for-aids-hepatitis-c.html?_r=0).