

Introduction

Toward a Poetics of Investigation

Near the beginning of Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, a woman ascends to the roof of her house to tend to the plants and animals in the garden she has cultivated there. She waters the carnations, roses, and trellised jasmine vines, and she feeds the chickens and pigeons for whom she has built coops and cotes. The *Trilogy* is generally read as a paragon of Cairene realism, a bildungsroman focused on the intellectual development of its protagonist Kamal, often understood as a stand-in for Mahfouz himself.¹ This scene, however, focuses on Amina, the matriarch of the family whose lives the novel chronicles, and whom most accounts interpret as "the Egyptian mother of yesterday, enslaved and demeaned . . . incredibly naïve and outwardly submissive."² The text certainly supports such a reading. Mahfouz's omniscient narrator describes the rooftop garden as Amina's "favorite space of diversion in this vast world about which she knew nothing" and Amina herself as a "prisoner" of the great house, never leaving it except on rare occasions to visit her mother; even then, "the master always accompanied her in a carriage because he couldn't tolerate any eye falling upon his wife, whether she were alone or in his company."³

But let me invite you to look again at Amina in the rooftop garden she "created completely anew, from her own spirit,"⁴ as she herself looks out on and understands her world. Her position in this scene is technically panoramic, her rooftop perch akin to the "objective" position of the viewing subject in Timothy Mitchell's theory of the "world-as-exhibition."⁵ Yet the relation Mahfouz describes between the woman and the space around her is not exactly that of isolated, all-seeing subject to world-rendered-up-as-object:

How happy she felt every time she scattered seeds or set the watering dish on the ground and watched the chickens race behind their rooster, their beaks assailing

the grains with the speed and regularity of sewing machine needles, leaving tiny indentations in the dust like the pockmarks from a drizzle. How her heart opened every time she saw them returning her gaze with their tiny, clear eyes, inquisitive and questioning, cackling and clucking with a shared affection that made her tender heart vibrate like a plucked string. She loved the chickens and the pigeons as she loved all of God's creatures, and she made little noises to them, believing that they understood and responded to her. Her imagination imparted sentient, intelligent life to all animals, and sometimes even to inanimate beings. She was quite certain that these beings praised their Lord and were connected to the spirit world in various ways. Her world, with its earth and its sky, its animals and its plants, was a living, intelligent world. Its merits, furthermore, were not confined to the melodies of life; it supplemented and perfected them through worship . . .

She went to the edge of the garden and stood behind the interwoven, coiling stalks, extending her gaze through the gaps in their greenery to the adjacent open space, unbounded by any limits. How she marveled at the minarets bursting skyward and leaving a profound impression, some so close she could see their crescent moons and lamps clearly—like Qalawun and Barquq—some in the middle distance, appearing to her as a single entity without distinguishing features—like al-Husayn, al-Ghuri, and al-Azhar—and some appearing only as specters on the distant horizon, like the Citadel and al-Rifa'i. She studied them with devotion and fascination, love and faith, gratitude and hope . . . She turned away from the wall, overwhelmed by her contemplation of the unknown, both the unknown with respect to all people, the world of the unseen, and the unknown with respect to her in particular, namely Cairo . . . (MK 2:343–44)

Critics of Mahfouz have described Amina as an “emblem of the past,” “illiterate, without any education except for an oral religious one” who “obviously” represents “a culture that . . . was not only almost totally religiously oriented, but happy to be so and unaware of an alternative.” She is, finally, the “embodiment of a past isolated from reality and the true meaning of things,” a truth and a meaning these critics locate squarely outside of pious practice or affect.⁶ Approaching Amina from this perspective, the reader is invited to feel a mix of delight at her charming naïveté, pity at her captivity and coerced submission, and condescension at her ignorance about the world both within and outside her home.

To read in this way, however, is to overlook the alternative conceptions of “reality,” “meaning,” and “truth” that Mahfouz chronicles here. Looking at the passage again, we might instead notice the intricacy of the affects, attitudes, and sensibilities that are said to tie this subject to the world around her. Everything in Amina's world, from earth and sky to animals and plants, is endowed with a kind of life, and is linked in its own mysterious ways with the “world of spirit” (*‘ālam al-rūḥ*) and the “world of the unseen” (*‘ālam al-ghayb*). These are terms with Islamic resonances, yet here they serve not as theological concepts so much as everyday practices, conveying the sense that all beings—even pigeons, chickens, and jasmine vines—have a fundamental connection with an unknowable but all-embracing divine. Here

humans communicate with animals in a mutually intelligible language of “little noises,” just as elsewhere in the novel jinn “whisper” and awaken humans with their “warm breath” (*MK* 2:329). Here animals are not merely objects to be raised, slaughtered, and consumed, but “sentient, intelligent” beings who “praise their Lord” in their own way. Here the non-human is not mere passive matter waiting to be acted upon and transformed by the human, but both “animal” and “inanimate” beings have their own form of life. Although the scene takes place in the British colonial period between the two world wars, Amina’s is not the “binary,” colonial world of “reason versus force, intelligence versus nature, or the imagined versus the real,”⁷ but a world of interconnected forces, all tied to the world of spirit through invisible “cords,” “perfected and completed” (*yukammiluhā*) not by human industry and ingenuity, but by worship of God, *‘ibādah*—that is, the willed “obligation” or even “enslavement” of the human to the divine.⁸

Most importantly, Amina’s panoramic view in this scene is not, for all its detail, panoptic. That is, she can only gaze out on the city through “the gaps in the greenery” of the jasmine and hyacinth beans, just as earlier in the novel she “peeked out through the tiny, round openings of the latticework panels” in a *mashrabiyyah* window to survey a midnight scene on the street below (*MK* 2:327). Amina does not seek out this high place to parse the significance said to reside in “the space opened up . . . between a human subjectivity and the world’s inert facticity.”⁹ Far from attempting to master this unknown, this *majhūl*, by representing it in its totality, Amina remains with the partiality glimpsed through the cracks and crevices in the jasmine vines, and with the web of interconnected affects that the sight of these religious monuments prompts. Indeed, the passage is conspicuously saturated with the affective lexicon of Islamic piety, as Amina passes through “awe” and “terror” (*raw’*), “devotion” (*walā’*), “fascination” (*iftitān*), “love” (*hubb*), “gratitude” (*shukr*), “hope” (*rajā’*), “compassion” (*ḥanān*), “longings” (*ashwāq*), and “sadness” (*ḥuzn*). Amina, in other words, is less concerned with “reality” or the “true meaning of things” than she is with faith—*īmān*—and its semantic links to safety, security, and wholeness/perfection (*al-kamāl* implies both, and it is also the name of her son, the *Trilogy*’s protagonist Kamal). Mahfouz builds on the long-standing Arab literary figuration of cultural knowledge as an Edenic “garden” watered by numerous “narratives” (the Arabic noun *riwāyah* comes from the verb *rawā*, *yarwī*, “to tell,” but also “to water, irrigate, give to drink”), a garden that is also a scene of knowledge.¹⁰ He braids Islamic with secular symbolic vocabularies through the repetition of “the unknown” (*al-majhūl*), linking it both with the occulted world of the “unseen” (*al-ghayb*) and with the mundane world of Cairo itself. He saturates the landscape of Old Cairo with the holiness of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali—the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad famously martyred at the Battle of Karbala—but also with the holiness of Amina herself, who, Godlike, “created” (*khalqat*) an entirely “new world” (*dunyā jadīdah*) in her garden, but still “knows nothing” of the world outside it. He reveals the roof as an interstice between public

and private worlds, infinite and limited time, seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing. Yet because he does so in the middle of a realist novel whose main import, we are told, is its chronicling of the modern, male, literary Arab subject's formation, Amina's alternative form of knowing, her relationship to truth, meaning, and the "unknown," has remained hard to see.

This book presents a history of knowledge that takes Amina's garden seriously as an epistemological space, together with many other scenes in which truth and meaning, seeing and seeking, are staged in unlikely, surprising ways across the archive of twentieth-century fiction from the Arab world. It builds this history not from the structures of seeing and knowing chronicled in colonial archives, but rather from the epistemological practices documented and dramatized in Arabic and Francophone fictions themselves. Throughout the twentieth century, Arab authors—who were, in many cases, the most prominent thinkers and philosophers of their times—persistently thematized knowledge production as a contested, contingent process that does not reveal so much as it constructs truth through a series of authorized effects and norms. The detective plot served as a particularly fruitful experimental structure for this purpose, not only because Sherlock Holmes, Arsène Lupin, and others have been a part of the Arab literary imagination since the late nineteenth century,¹¹ but also because, as Peter Brooks has written, detection represents “the narrative of narratives . . . its classical structure a laying-bare of the structure of all narrative” in which “what is at stake is a gain in knowledge, a self-conscious creation of meaning.”¹² Building on and modifying the detective plot across historical periods and national contexts, the authors I examine in this study used fictional investigations to bracket and provincialize state-sanctioned, colonial, and academic truth-seeking practices. I argue that by staging tales of failed, framed, or derailed “investigation,” authors like Naguib Mahfouz, Yusuf Idris, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Elias Khoury, Driss Chraïbi, and Sonallah Ibrahim dramatized how particular ways of seeking after truth (or rather, certain methods for producing it) were bound up with the operations of legal, juridical, and economic power at key historical junctures in the twentieth-century Arab world. At the same time, by exploring the older, less procedural or juridical resonances of a key Arabic term for “investigation” itself—that is, *baḥṭh*—these authors simultaneously revalorized alternative, metaphysical forms of seeking that are less focused on the knowledge itself than on the ethics cultivated in its pursuit.

What I call a “poetics of investigation,” then, is grounded in the many meanings and translations of the Arabic term *baḥṭh*. Originally describing the action of an animal digging its paws or claws through the dirt, the most general definition of *baḥṭh* is “looking,” “searching,” “seeking,” or “inquiring” after something. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, *baḥṭh* also became a preferred term for official “investigations” of various kinds—from police inquests to scholarly research projects and dissertations. The word *mabāḥiṭh*, meanwhile, from the same root, has also come to refer, in contemporary times, to the dreaded

“secret police” of military dictatorships. Yet, unlike another word for police investigation—*taḥqīq*—a verbal noun that, when rendered literally, means “the (re)establishment of truth (*ḥaqīqah*),” traces of less positivistic forms of seeking continue to cling to *baḥṭh*, from the Sufi mystic’s never-ending search for the divine, to the quests undertaken by the heroes of popular romance.¹³ This book argues that Arab authors figured the semantic instability of *baḥṭh* in literary form, staging fictional quests that are transformed from scholarly, scientific, or juridical “inquiries” into mystical, metaphysical “searches.” Their novels framed and destabilized authorized procedures for producing knowledge in several key historical moments, while simultaneously offering alternative histories glimpsed through the eyes of characters normally excluded from these official processes. Even as various “experts” at home and abroad were producing knowledge about their societies, histories, and peoples, Arab authors were using the tropes of detective fiction, melded with a poetics of *baḥṭh*, to ask key epistemological questions: What is knowledge? Who has it, and how is it acquired? What forms of power and coercion does it enable, and how can these forms be neutralized or challenged? The answers they articulate take the form not of prescriptive solutions but of narrative structures—moments and scenes of knowing presented, like Amina’s garden, as alternatives to the knowledge-producing mechanisms of colonial administrations and postcolonial states alike. It is thus crucial to write the history of these literary forms if we wish to understand how Arab subjects experienced the momentous epistemological transformations of the twentieth century on the level of everyday life.

Up to now, much of Middle East studies’ approach to colonial history has focused on the mechanisms of representation and knowledge production that enabled the creation and implementation of colonial (and later, US neo-imperial) authority. One of the most influential paradigms in this regard is the “world-as-exhibition” effect theorized by Timothy Mitchell in *Colonising Egypt* (1988). Mitchell analyzed how the panoptic way of seeing staged at the 1889 World Exhibition in Paris both epitomized and helped authorize the continued European colonization of the Middle East and North Africa. Such exhibitions, Mitchell argued, facilitated their viewers’ separation from the world around them, simultaneously producing a “subject” and a “world rendered up as object,” and thereby portraying that world as ripe for possessing, reordering, and exploiting. Built on foundations laid by Martin Heidegger in “The Age of the World Picture” and by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) (also at the heart of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* [1978]), Mitchell’s theory of the “world-as-exhibition” also echoes art critic John Berger’s earlier account of “the convention of perspective” in European Renaissance painting, from his similarly influential *Ways of Seeing* (1972). This convention, Berger argued, “centers everything on the eye of the beholder . . . like a beam from a lighthouse—only instead of light traveling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality* . . . The visible world is arranged for

the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.”¹⁴ The problem of the all-seeing but unseen subject of theory has also plagued later critics in the field of literary studies. Samah Selim, in a recent critique of world-systems analysis, reveals how its practitioners’ claims to universality through objective contemplation of the whole (“the world republic of letters”) actually obscure the theory’s own “scopic nature,” such that “the ‘world’ in world literature is composed into an order by the detached, invisible, commanding gaze of the distant cartographer-turned-theorist.”¹⁵

From Berger, Foucault, Said, Mitchell, Selim, and others, we have learned a crucial skill: to identify and criticize the colonial perspective that claims to see all, know all, act on the basis of this knowledge, and yet remain invisible, unmarked. How strange, then, that Mahfouz’s Amina, standing in precisely the same panoramic position as Berger’s bourgeois viewer, Mitchell’s exhibition attendee, and Selim’s detached and distant cartographer, should have such a different experience of the world laid out before her. From the pious Amina, and from countless other seers and seekers in twentieth-century Arab fictions, I argue, historians, sociologists, and other scholars of the Middle East can learn new methods of producing knowledge, ones modeled on the objects of our investigations, which often teach us ways to live with the *majhūl*, with the “unknown” world just beyond what we can see, as a kind of ethical check on our own scholarly practices.

The chapters that follow track specific narrative forms as they move through cultural networks stretching from Egypt to Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Iraq. Whether showing how Arab authors mock the sociologists, detectives, “men of letters” (*udabāʾ*),¹⁶ and other experts who serve as their protagonists, or observing as their narratives challenge the very notion of a well-bounded, identifiable, coherent subject of knowledge, my concern throughout *Ways of Seeking* is with narrative as a technique of power. How do novels know, I ask, and what do we learn from novels? What kinds of knowledge does narrative fiction create, and are these modes of knowing distinct from or identical to the knowledge-producing mechanisms of colonial administrations and post-colonial states? Can narrative fiction, as a representation rather than an enactment of knowledge production, stage, frame, and thereby contest its practices? Do novels see and know their characters omnisciently, thereby reproducing the panoptic gaze of modern discipline and summoning the reader into the position of Mitchell’s “objective” subject or Berger’s godlike “viewer”? Or is it possible for novels to record, transmit, and imagine less violent, less colonial ways of seeing, seeking, and knowing?

The question of narrative and power is, of course, not new. Many critics, particularly in English literary studies, have viewed novels—and detective novels in particular—as discourses producing societies of self-disciplining subjects in the modern era.¹⁷ Foucault himself notes how “classic” detective fiction (on the model of Agatha Christie’s works) neutralized crime writing by transforming it from a genre of popular sympathy for the condemned—often inspiring mass resistance

to public executions—into “the quiet game of the well-behaved.”¹⁸ Franco Moretti similarly argues that the genre “resolves the deep anxiety of an expanding society” by reassuring its readers that “society is still . . . a unitary and knowable body,”¹⁹ while D. A. Miller views Victorian novels as technologies for producing the novel reader as “liberal subject” and shoring up “the political regime that sets store by this subject.”²⁰ In the opinion of many critics, then, fictions of investigation function not only to entertain their readers, but also to “reconcile [them] to the spectacle of the exercise of power.”²¹ Omniscient narration is a form of surveillance for these critics; it teaches readers to consider themselves forever watched, even in their most private moments, by all-seeing, unseen eyes.

Detective fiction is, certainly, about the ability to know and the power to narrate—the process of searching, uncovering, and reconstructing absent narratives, as well as using these narratives as the basis for punitive action. But the evidence I have gathered from twentieth-century Arab fictions of investigation makes me disloyal to those critical theories that equate narrative omniscience with police state surveillance. Rather, precisely because these novels allow their readers to see the operations of power from the point of view of their objects, they allow us to understand aspects of colonial, authoritarian, and military rule that historical sources do not. We may well be tempted to read *Palace Walk* (*Bayn al-Qaṣrayn*) in general, and the passage cited above in particular, as yet another instance of what Miller calls the “parallel” between “omniscience” and “social control.”²² Mahfouz’s free indirect discourse lays bare Amina’s innermost thoughts and feelings in that scene, prying into the most intimate spaces of her heart and mind, and forcing the reader into the position of a police officer compiling intelligence on this pious Muslim subject. But I would argue that Mahfouz’s representation is savvier than this, precisely because Amina’s Edenic garden is echoed in two later scenes from the *Trilogy*: the first a quite literal fall from the private garden into the public streets, the second a distant echo in the mind of the novel’s young protagonist, Kamal, as he, too, ascends to a panoramic (but not panoptic) position over the city. In both scenes, Mahfouz deliberately contrasts Amina’s pious, partial, affective experience of knowledge and the unknown with the instrumentalization of knowledge for the purposes of colonial surveillance and education.

The first of these scenes transforms Amina from a seer into a thing seen. At the prompting of her children, she decides to take advantage of her tyrannical husband’s one-day absence from home to visit one of her most beloved religious monuments, the mosque and mausoleum of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali. After her visit to this emblem of the Islamic past, however, Amina quite literally collides with the modern Egyptian present: she is almost run over by a passing car on a busy street. As a crowd of onlookers helps her to her feet, she is less pained by her crushed shoulder bones than she is by the prospect of the incident’s being written up in a police report. “The words ‘police station’ came as a blow to her and shook her to the core” (*MK* 2:412). The mere mention of the police drives Amina to ignore

her wounds and get up at once, to prove to the policeman on the scene that she is all right. "She was so afraid that she no longer felt faint. The sight of the men staring at her horrified her, especially the policeman" (*MK* 2:412). Amina's horror derives mainly from her fear of being figuratively unveiled in the police report, and thereby publicly dishonored, according to the social conventions of her time.²³ But we can also read in her fear of the policeman's gaze an intuitive awareness of the colonial state's mechanisms of power, consolidated and exercised through the knowledge said to accrue in writing, in files—through being, in Émile Zola's phrase, "mise en carte," written up and laid bare in the ledgers of an all-seeing state.²⁴ By documenting for readers the panic, the fear, the recoiling that the very word for "police station" inspires in Amina, Mahfouz gives a glimpse of how the object of knowledge experiences its production. Where Mitchell's colonial exhibition rendered up the colonized world and all its peoples as objects, Mahfouz's work, as it follows Amina from the rooftop to the street, chronicles the terror of this experience from the perspective of the colonized. It records the process by which a private "garden" of faith, in which one affectively understands one's place in a larger, "sentient, intelligent world" of "interconnected forces," is transformed into a "report" or *maḥḍar*—literally, a "place where one is rendered present"—in the exclusive possession of the state.

But it is not only Amina who suffers a fall from the garden of Islamic knowledge in the *Trilogy*. Kamal, too, experiences the transition to modernity as painful and awkward, full of sadness and mourning for the emotional connections to pious knowledge that scientific empiricism has forced him to cut. In a central moment from the book's second volume, *Palace of Desire* (*Qaṣr al-Shawq*), Kamal takes a trip to visit the Great Pyramids in the company of his new aristocratic friends Husayn and Aïda Shaddad, the latter of whom he quite literally worships as his "beloved" or *ma būdah*, a word that resonates with Amina's form of Islamic worship (*ibādah*) in the garden several hundred pages earlier. By this point in the novel, Kamal has taken both literal and figurative distance from his childhood home in Bayn al-Qasrayn Street. He dreams of becoming a writer on the model of Nahda-era man of letters Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti, and of learning "from his English teachers" at the Teachers' Training College "the meaning of confusing words like 'literature,' 'philosophy,' and 'thought'" (*MK* 2:679). The transition is awkward, however, and Kamal continually struggles to fit in with Husayn and Aïda, who mock his tarboosh and short-cropped hair, his religious expressions and demeanor, his fervent nationalism, and his taste for genre fictions translated into Arabic. When Aïda asks if he's read any French novels, Kamal replies that he's read "some of Michel Zévaco's stories . . . those that have been translated into Arabic, anyway," as well as the fictions of al-Manfaluti and Oriental adventure stories by Rider Haggard.²⁵ "You won't be an author until you've mastered French," Aïda informs him in reply. "Read Balzac and Georges Sand, Madame de Staël, and [Pierre] Loti, then write a short story" (*MK* 2:679). Most of all,

however, the Shaddad children mock the Old Cairo neighborhood where Kamal grew up, with all the popular beliefs, practices, and politics it imprinted on him. “You always attribute everything either to God or Saad Zaghloul,” Husayn tells Kamal at one point.²⁶ “But of course that’s how you are, since you’re from the place where religion lives” (*MK* 2:676–77). Kamal’s feast of whole roasted chickens, country cheese, local bananas, and oranges looks crude compared to the elegant cucumber sandwiches the Shaddads have prepared for their picnic, and he is “shocked and disturbed” to see the Muslim Aïda, whom he has transformed into the object of near-religious passion, drinking beer and eating ham sandwiches. “Don’t be a Hanbali,” she scolds him. “Ham’s very tasty. Try it” (*MK* 2:684).²⁷ Bayn al-Qasrayn Street, as well as its proximity to al-Husayn’s shrine, once a source of love and pride for Kamal, is now a source of embarrassment, as he longs for the affection of his Khedive-worshipping, ham-eating, Parisian-perfumed, Liberal Constitutionalist beloveds. Looking down on Cairo from the vantage point of Giza, Kamal wonders: “Where was Palace Walk amid all of this? Where was his mother, feeding the chickens beneath a trellis of jasmine?” (*MK* 2:676; *CT* 867).

As he did in *Palace Walk*, Mahfouz again mobilizes a panoramic gaze here—this time from the pyramids, that view sought after by European tourists and colonial adventurers alike—not to chronicle the subject’s creation through its seamless separation from a world rendered up as object, but rather to narrate the awkwardness, the embarrassment, the “astonishment,” and the “alarm” of Kamal’s struggle to fully sever himself from “the place where religion lives” (*hayy al-dīn*) and enter the dispassionate, secular, European world of “literature, philosophy, and thought.”²⁸ Mahfouz stages Egyptian modernity as a jumble of overlapping, out-of-joint beliefs, practices, and alphabets. When Husayn Shaddad jokes that they are performing a pious visitation (*ziyārah*) to the pharaohs’ tombs, as one might visit the shrine of an Islamic saint,²⁹ Kamal picks up the thread of the paradox: “to recite the Fatiha in hieroglyphics” (*MK* 2:676). The modernization of Egypt’s education system, transformations in class politics, and British colonial dismissals of faith, custom, and legend are here given not as large-scale structural changes marked by clear, definable ruptures, but as intimate experiences of affect and awkwardness, figured in the push and pull between Kamal’s devotion to the pious practices of his mother, his disillusionment and loss of faith on discovering al-Husayn’s head does not reside in its Cairo shrine, and his resultant desire for objective, scientifically verifiable “truth,” with all the social status that access to such truth implies. To neglect the literary on the grounds of its imaginative distance from “real” historical sources is to miss out on this and other stories of messy, tangled affects and selfhoods in the complex narrative of Egypt’s modernization.

Mahfouz was, in short, acutely conscious of the way colonial practices of knowledge production were transforming the inner lives of Egyptians like Amina and Kamal. That he laces the figure of Amina’s rooftop garden through the *Trilogy*’s many hundreds of pages prevents me from seeing that scene as yet another

instance of narrative surveillance. Here and throughout this book, what I am calling the “poetics of investigation” mobilizes the semantic instability of *baḥṭh* to force a recognition of state power’s historicity and contingency, and to open our eyes to other ways of seeing and seeking staged on the pages of Arabic fiction, to overlooked moments of unstable representation, unpredictable divisions between subject and object, meaning and materiality, knower and thing known. I trawl for the remains of nonhegemonic forms of knowledge scattered within Arabic novels themselves, even when these forms are presented as irrelevant, traditional, or outdated, and I reanimate them as key sites from which to construct an alternative, anticolonial history of knowledge in the modern Arab world. What if we thought of the novel as a space in which such moments, affects, and ways of seeing jostle for space and recognition, even as other voices deem them “traditional,” “backward,” or belonging to a “past world”?

True to the method of Amina’s seeking, I have chosen to look more closely at traces, remnants, and echoes than totalities—to peer through the gaps in the greenery of the Arabic novel and construct a history of knowledge from what I found there. The corpus examined in the chapters that follow is thus selective rather than exhaustive: I dwell at greater length on fewer texts, highlighting the subtle moments, figures, and structures that a more broad-sweeping study of “the Arabic novel” might, of necessity, merely mention. As I returned to the well-trodden archive of modern Arabic fiction looking for narrative structures of investigation and knowledge production—detective or otherwise—I was surprised to discover how many fascinating epistemological plots and figures have been hiding in plain sight on the pages of otherwise exhaustively studied novels. My task, then, was not to uncover forgotten or neglected texts, but rather to reopen novels that have begun to molder in the dusty vaults of their labels (“realist,” “socialist-realist,” “post-67,” “60s generation,” “90s generation,” etc.), with a spirit of openness and surprise, tracing how narrative forms that stage, satirize, and defamiliarize the modern era’s sanctified forms of knowledge production have consistently crossed national borders and historical periods. The quest for knowledge—its perils and possibilities, its uses and misuses—has been a recurring theme in Arabic fictions throughout the twentieth century, in no small part because the scientific restructuring of knowledge was such a salient feature of colonial modernity. Yet this restructuring was fluid rather than seamless, and Arab fictions register this fluidity—the persistence of the metaphysical in the midst of the scientific—in ways that other archives often do not.

Ways of Seeking thus returns to the twentieth-century novel at a time when the field of Arabic studies is pushing away from this period in either direction—delving into the disremembered archive of the nineteenth century and the Arab *Nahda*, on the one hand,³⁰ and pressing ever further into the contemporary period and new media, on the other.³¹ The excitement in the scholarly projects examining these periods has reinvested Arabic studies with a new, postnational outlook and

a diverse range of theoretical tools; paradoxically, these tools have yet to be trained back on the twentieth century, whose once apparent hegemony is now a scene of neglect. There is still, I wish to argue, a good deal of historical and epistemological material that has been overlooked or reduced to political or biographical allegory in criticism on this period and these texts. Reopening these works as investigations—rather than representations—of specific historical junctures allows us to break them out of the referential and politically overdetermined narratives to which they have generally been confined. I offer up the forms of seeking dramatized in the fictions under consideration here as new scholarly and readerly methodologies. From these sources, we can better understand not only how knowledge has been produced by states, scholars, and governments about the Middle East, but how this production was contested by Arab thinkers and writers themselves, who interrupted the mellifluous functioning of intelligence-gathering mechanisms with their resistant practices of representation, edging every panorama with a *majhūl*, every totalizing theory with a figure who remains just outside its frame.

It is important to clarify that this book is not a comprehensive history of Arabic detective fiction. I am not concerned with simply identifying those Arab novels that neatly exemplify Western paradigms in the genre; nor do I delve into the history of Arabic pulp in any specific historical or national context.³² Rather, while never losing sight of the historical and social circumstances of each work under consideration here, I am more interested in uncovering the forms of critique that specific characteristics of *baḥṭh* enabled for Arab writers across historical periods and national borders, and what their fictions might in turn enable for scholars of the modern Middle East in many disciplines. My aim, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, is “to make the traditional linguistic sophistication of Comparative Literature supplement Area Studies . . . by approaching the language of the other not only as a ‘field’ language.”³³ From area studies, I draw the “quality and rigor” in studying “the language of the other” that Spivak identifies, but I work outside these disciplines’ beginnings in a Cold War politics of management, manipulation, suspicion, and control. I argue that Arab fictions of *baḥṭh* themselves criticize such instrumental approaches to knowledge, inviting scholars and historians to occupy different, even multiple or ambivalent subject positions with respect to their textual and cultural objects.

Each of the chapters that follow focuses on a different connotation of *baḥṭh* as it has been staged in twentieth-century fictions from the Arab world. I move from a strict definition of *baḥṭh* as “criminal investigation” in novels by Tawfiq al-Hakim, Driss Chraïbi, Yusuf Idris, and Yusuf al-Qa‘id, to a larger orbit of novels that steer this term’s epistemological insights in new directions: the missing persons narratives of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Naguib Mahfouz, the detective-dissolving mysteries of Fathi Ghanim and Elias Khoury, and the simultaneously epic-heroic and noir-inspired “questing” at the heart of Egyptian author Sonallah Ibrahim’s *The Committee* (*al-Lajnah*, 1981) and *Zaat* (*Dhāt*, 1992). Each chapter also reads

across the historical and political ruptures that have conventionally marked the so-called “development” of the Arabic novel throughout the twentieth century—showing, for example, how the politics of Yusuf Idris’s sensation fiction in *The Sinners* (*al-Harām*, 1959) resonate with those of Yusuf al-Qa’id’s postmodern, metafictional *Yahduth fi Miṣr al-Ān* (It’s happening now in Egypt, 1974, hereafter *Yahduth*), despite the aesthetic break typically associated with the military defeat of the Arab Forces in the 1967 June War. Following the threads of baḥṭh woven throughout the Arab novel of investigation in this way deemphasizes common strategies of organization based on national origin or historical moment, prioritizing instead questions of literary form as a window onto social epistemology. Novels that dramatize investigation and the search for truth interrogate the present by revisiting the past, not as a lost utopia but as a reminder of other ways of being in the world. To neglect or ignore these moments of temporal eruption, as scholars and readers, is to be little better than the policemen, government officials, and hubristic intellectuals who are mocked and satirized on the pages of these novels.

Chapter 1, “The Detective as Conscript: Tawfiq al-Hakim and Driss Chraïbi on the Margins of the Law,” begins the book with a consideration of baḥṭh in its strictest definition as “detection” or “police investigation.” I focus on two texts concerned with the geographic and figurative peripheries of the nation and the law—the *pays* of Chraïbi’s *Flutes of Death* (*Une enquête au pays*, 1981) and the *aryāf* (countryside) of al-Hakim’s *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (*Yawmiyyāt Nā’ib fi-l-Aryāf*, 1937). Though separated by national borders, language, and nearly five decades of history, both al-Hakim and Chraïbi wrote at times of political transition and disillusionment: the cynical tone of al-Hakim’s *Diary* rhymes with the political mood of interwar Egypt, while Chraïbi’s tragicomic treatment of Moroccan police brutality parodically responds to and criticizes Morocco’s Years of Lead (*les années de plomb/sanawāt al-raṣāṣ*). These disillusionments imprint on the form of each novel in surprisingly similar ways. On the one hand, each text exposes the “backwardness” underlying modern processes of police interrogation and satirizes the hypocrisy of a modernity enforced through such violent means upon the bodies and livelihoods of peasants whom it claims, ironically, to “civilize.” On the other hand, through surprising narrative eruptions, *Diary* and *Enquête* also explore the broken subjectivities of their protagonists, both native officers of the law who have undergone training designed to sever their affective ties to the communities they must police. These severances prove to be incomplete, however, and each novel—even as it criticizes the violence of official legal investigation—also explores the possibility of native alterities and solidarities, of subjects who remain inscrutable, indecipherable, and unscriptable into the ledgers of the state.

Chapter 2, “Murder on the ‘Izbah: Spectral Legality and Egyptian Sensation Fiction, Yusuf Idris to Yusuf al-Qa’id,” continues in the vein of police investigation, but moves from the margins of the law and its official representatives to a zone of legal exception, the ‘*izbah* or “estate farm” in Egypt. Samera Esmeir has referred to

the 'izbah as a realm of "spectral legality," a space in which the arbitrary, sovereign form of power associated with khedival rule in Egypt not only survived, but was in fact constituted by the British-colonial implementation rule-of-law in the nineteenth century.³⁴ This chapter examines how reform-minded Egyptian fictions of the 1950s through the 1970s opened up the otherwise "spectral," silenced zone of the 'izbah for public scrutiny, refocusing their metropolitan readers' attentions on the unregulated violence that continued to govern peasant life there despite the nominal implementation of land reform laws under President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Although they are conventionally read as belonging to discrete eras of Egyptian history, I illustrate how both Idris's *The Sinners* and al-Qa'id's *Yahduth fi Miṣr al-Ān* use surprising shifts in narrative perspective to simultaneously assert the reader's complicity in systems of labor exploitation on the 'izbah and invite them to view things differently, from the perspective of the laborers themselves. These novels' visceral, graphic descriptions of rape, birth, infanticide, and murder do much more than cater to popular tastes for melodrama. Their narration of sensation and scandal works to dispel the rhetoric of the "ordinary," the *'ādī*, long associated with peasant suffering in Egyptian cultural production.

Chapter 3, "Bureau of Missing Persons: Metaphysical Detection in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Naguib Mahfouz," shifts gears from the sensational to the experimental, and from questions of law, justice, and sovereignty to questions of self, language, and subjectivity. Reading Mahfouz's experimental novellas and short stories from the 1960s alongside Jabra's *In Search of Walid Masoud (al-Baḥth 'an Walid Mas'ūd*, 1978), I show how both authors crystallize the rhetorical indeterminacy of baḥth in literary form by causing the objective, rational, and empirical research methods their characters use to break down as soon as they take inscrutable figures like the eponymous missing Palestinian, the mysterious shaykh Zaabalawi, or the absentee father Sayyid Sayyid al-Rahimi as their objects. Both authors transform their detective-like narrators into mystics and poets despite themselves, such that at the end of each tale, the reader is sent back to the beginning, urged to maintain seeking and searching—rather than uncovering, seeing, and grasping—as modes of being in the world. And yet for all their desire to overcome the limits of their own subjectivities through unity with a perpetually absent, mystical figure, still the characters in these works ultimately remain trapped in the limits of their own atomized subjectivities. Whereas *Walid Masoud* represents an exception to Jabra's otherwise career-long devotion to the figure of the liberal individual floating free of petty political commitments, Mahfouz's "Culprit Unknown" ("Ḍidd Majhūl"), "Zaabalawi" ("Za'balāwī"), and *The Way (al-Ṭariq)*, I argue, continue in new literary forms the asymptotic questing figured through the *shawq*—the "lovesick longing" often associated with mystic desire for the divine—in *Palace of Desire (Qaṣr al-Shawq)*.

Chapter 4, "Effacing the Author, or the Detective as Medium: Fathi Ghanim to Elias Khoury," revisits the struggle to overcome the limits of the literary self

but focuses on two novels that actually achieve some measure of success (at least, formal or imagined success) in the endeavor. Both Ghanim's *al-Jabal* (The Mountain, 1959) and Khoury's *White Masks* (*al-Wujūh al-Baydā'*, 1981) center on fact-finding investigations that ultimately eclipse the voices of their narrators and thereby allow others—specifically those historically marginalized by Arabic literary establishments—to speak in the space of the text. Garbage collectors, building caretakers, and Upper Egyptians take over the task of narration in these works (written in various registers, dialects, and accents of Arabic), as the authors stage their detective-narrators' gradual disappearance. The novels' very different historical contexts and settings admittedly yield different thematic concerns. Still, in both works, a police-like “investigator” (*muḥaqqiq*) stands in for the figure of the author, and his quest for the “truth” (*ḥaqq*) behind a given case ironically blinds him to the more pressing truths in the stories of the marginalized communities he has been sent to investigate. In such contexts, Khoury and Ghanim wager, the author-investigator's task is to eclipse his own privileged, literary voice and allow others to speak through him, altering and interrupting his narrative subjectivity with heterogeneous forms of popular expression. (Ghanim uses the Egyptian “narrative ballad,” or *mawwāl*, while Khoury plays with the storied Arabic “proverb,” or *mathal*.) The resulting texts ultimately teach their readers how to read less like a *muḥaqqiq*, like a “truth establisher,” and more like a *bāḥith*, a “seeker” or listener invited to participate in the communal performance of a *mawwāl* or the transgenerational transmission of a *mathal*.

Where Ghanim and Khoury destabilize the rhythms of their narratives with popular voices, forms, and registers of speech in the hopes of democratizing or popularizing the Arabic novel, the Egyptian Sonallah Ibrahim, I argue, plumbs the depths of his era's isolation, alienation, and despair—the misery of individualism—as the negative image of possible future communalisms. This book's fifth and final chapter, “Epic Fails: Sonallah Ibrahim's Modern Myths of Seeking,” examines the legacy of noir in two of Ibrahim's most famous novels, *The Committee* and *Zaat*. I read *The Committee* as an object lesson in Marxist critique: the “research method” (*manhaj*) developed by the unnamed narrator of that novella is concerned with both totality (what the narrator calls the “interlocking connections” between large-scale socioeconomic phenomena and individual experience) and futurity (the inexorable movement of history in favor of the poor and disenfranchised).³⁵ But while the narrator of *The Committee* fancies himself a working-class hero along the lines of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or the Arab popular epics' ‘Antarah ibn Shaddad, his attempts to confront the ruling classes fail because they are conducted in isolation from any kind of public. This concern with the “public,” in both senses of this term (the commonly owned; the audience), spills over into *Zaat*—Ibrahim's epic of Egypt's neoliberalization under presidents Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak—yet now serves, I argue, as a principle of composition rather than a thematic concern. That is, where the narrator of *The*

Committee shouldered the burden of “investigation,” in *Zaat* it is the *reader* who is summoned to the task of apprehending Egyptian totality, asked to connect the political corruption, the public mismanagement, and the police violence reported in the novel’s docufictional chapters with the tales of polluted food, social climbing, and alienation recounted in its narrative ones.³⁶ As the country’s “self” or *dhāt* was suddenly and rapidly transformed, and as the terms of anticolonial nationalism were suddenly repurposed for an era of neoliberal privatization and Americanization, Ibrahim makes one last attempt at revitalizing the utopian, popular “public” of Egypt’s nominally socialist, Arab nationalist era. He does so not by staging this public’s imagined presence in fiction (as Khoury and Ghanim did), but by calling on readers to become that public—to step into the role of the investigator who understands the unbearable atomization, alienation, and isolation of the present as products of an unsustainable system of economic and social organization.

Wherever and whenever they thematize investigation, *baḥṭh*, or the objective, panoramic (or panoptic) gaze, Arab fictions become mimetic of research itself. In looking at characters who are themselves looking, we are reminded that, at every point in our scholarship, we too are engaged in acts of critical “seeing” equally as subject to the blind spots that form the intrigue of dramatic irony and epistemology in these novels. Noticing and analyzing the knowledge gaps in these and other characters’ ways of seeing, we too—the readers, the scholars, the experts—are invited to reject approaches that assume a “view from nowhere,” the unmarked Eurocentrism of abstract theory.³⁷ We are encouraged, instead, to look with “soft eyes,” to remember the conditions limiting our own ways of reading and determining what we can see.³⁸ These reminders are crucially important in the field of Middle East studies, I wish to suggest, because in the field’s rush to deduce and analyze totalities elsewhere, and then to present these realities as narratives to readers in the United States and other metropolises, it can overlook the many resonances and possibilities embedded in small places—in a single word like *baḥṭh*, for example, and the methodological, epistemological lessons it offers. “Soft eyes” are equally as important in comparative literary studies, where the demand that scholars adhere to theoretical lexicons imported from continental philosophy can cause us to overlook the idiomatic in the languages we study, to let a theory of *baḥṭh* remained unelaborated.

I do not mean to overstate the significance of the fictional works I examine by making them identical with actual challenges to material, social, and economic conditions, but I do aim to highlight within these fictions an unwillingness to be marshalled into a modernity policed by a politics of knowing and control. Nearly every novel in this book features a madman or a shaykh, a mystic or a seer, a friend of God or a poet who stands opposite the rational detective, revealing the supposedly exceptional modern quest for truth as yet another asymptotic approach to unsolvable mysteries. Considering the form of fiction allows us to see more clearly the forms we ourselves invest with authority in the pursuit and exposition

of scholarly knowledge, meaning, and truth. Every panorama is hemmed with a border of *majhūl*; Arab authors engaging with “investigation” as plot device, narrative structure, and allegory of reading constantly remind us of this truth. From them, we can learn to revalorize the search, the puzzle, and, by extension, “theory” more generally, as an asymptotic process rather than a totalizing rubric. We can learn—like Amina—to live ethically with the unknown, to prioritize baḥṭh over *tahqīq*, the humility of searching over the hubris of attaining and explaining truth. This is a lesson that extends far beyond the academic communities of Middle East, Arabic, or comparative literary studies. By revealing how Arabic fictions mirror the very practice of reading back to their readers, we can animate and enliven texts that many of us might assume to be utterly “distant” or “other” to our own experience, seeing the literary as “our teacher as well as our object of investigation.”³⁹ The obstacles, setbacks, and comic failures encountered by the seekers in these works estrange us, as readers, from the practices of truth- and meaning-making that we might normally take for granted. As Arab authors reveal the mechanisms of power undergirding the specific truths and knowledge systems governing their own times, so too they teach us to look behind the scenery of our own epistemologies, to see “our” world as a construct of such mechanisms, equally as much as “theirs.”