

GEO-GRAPHIES: PERFORMING CITY SPACE AND ECONOMIC POSSIBILITY
AND THE STORYTELLER OF CAIRO

A Thesis Presented

By

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DEDICATION

To my loving husband, mother, and friends who support me and make me laugh.

ABSTRACT

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Albert Cossery, known as the ‘story teller of Cairo’, weaves tales of the marginalized living in a city of the global South whose geographies have been impacted by colonial and neocolonial legacy. Cairo’s city and economic spaces have often been theorized as determined and dominated by the forces of neoliberalism, an approach that obscures the experience of residents who contest and evade these forces daily. For example, in “Les Couleurs de l’infamie”, the main character is a robin-hood archetype that revels in observing the resourcefulness of the city’s residents. ‘Alternative’ occupations and spatial uses abound: an unemployed philosopher teaches secretly out of the family crypt and a man has created his own trade in helping old women cross dangerous streets in the city. This paper approaches literature and the act of writing as being more-than-representational. It is a literary geography that considers how the city spaces and economic possibilities of Cairo are performed by Cossery’s writings, and how this performance can be considered an act of resistance.

Key words: city space, literary geography, global south, Cairo, performance

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

My interest in literary geography comes from an interest in the importance of “how words make worlds”, the idea that the world we live in is inseparable from the discourse that goes into creating it. But the idea of the performativity of words surpasses mere discursivity and this thesis lays the task of showing how literary works have the power to break down hegemonic, discursive geographies as exemplified in the works of Albert Cossery. This introductory chapter will combine a review of the relevant literature and a combination of theoretical approaches useful in re-thinking the intersection of place, literature, and politics. In more detail than I am able to in the space limits of the main article, I explore the author Albert Cossery as an Egyptian writer living in Paris and writing in French. This introduction also situates my reading of Cossery’s work into the current academic conversation taking place within literary geography, especially to the increasing interest in the field to approach the literary text as a performative event where meaning is located, and of the transformative powers of literature to re-think our worlds. Finally, I propose the importance of considering reading a text’s geography as a performative, political, and ethical moment.

In the second chapter I present an academic article that explores the world-makings and un-makings of the subversive fiction of Egyptian Francophone author Albert Cossery. This article is to be submitted to the journal *Cultural Geographies*. I explore the ways that Cossery’s novels perform the city spaces and diverse economic

possibilities of Cairo, and what reformulations the city and economy are invented. For literary geography, the study of Cossery's fiction is an example of how literature can present openings for politics; and how the imaginary produced through the mastery of storytelling is performative. I read the works of Albert Cossery as a potent vehicle for establishing and sustaining a new and radical imaginary for political and economic alternatives.

In the conclusion following the article-chapter I assess the outcome of doing a performative and ethical reading of Cossery's fiction, and highlight the ways that such readings could help to bring the field of literary geography back into the wider academic dialog. I also address the historically important current events of the Egyptian revolution and the broader conversation that has followed. I will ask how the ideas that come about from an ethical reading of Cossery's fiction could be part of the conversation about the nation and its developing identity.

Methods

In this thesis I try-out methods of textual analysis to explore the emergence of 'radical reformulations' of city space and economic possibility in the works of Albert Cossery. My approach to the text is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) ideas about reading minor fictions, deterritorialization and reterritorialization in texts, and the open methodological approach of reader as nomad. In analyzing the text my approach will be one of experimentation. Experimentation, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is an alternative to interpretation. In the process, the reader "becomes a nomad" because "The work resembles crabgrass, a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots which can cross

at any point to form a variety of possible connections” (see Editor’s note: Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 14). Using the framework of the work as a rhizome, it is easier to acknowledge the trickiness and stickiness of the task that is reading a novel. The text becomes a geography, a realm of choice where the outcome is overdetermined by the lens we as readers bring to the text, while at the same time recognizing the singularity of literature (Attridge 2004a, 2004b), of its ability to know the world differently. These methods are currently topics of great debate and conversation in literary geography, and in my review of the debate I will make my case for this sort of open method with which to encounter textual geographies.

This approach is also inspired by work of Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b), who challenge all researchers to think ethically about their research and its consequences, removing themselves from the confines of the ivory tower. In their work they focus on creating alternative discourses because it is not enough to just critique the existing discourse. Or as Cameron puts it: “It seems that uncovering the way language constitutes power does not necessarily lead towards destabilising that power” (Cameron 2008, 6). Thus, for geographers, literature can be examined by a form of bottom-up, weak theory; not in the attempt to establish a grand meta-narrative, but as an exploration into different ways of doing, seeing, and experiencing the world.

Cossery in Context

Albert Cossery weaves tales of marginalized people living in Cairo, a city of the global South. The stories are fraught with the images of a people who are impacted by material and metaphorical legacies of a colonial past and neocolonial present in their

daily lives. While Cairo's economic and city spaces have often been theorized as determined and dominated by the forces of neoliberalism, Cossery's approach magnifies the daily contestations and evasions of these forces. The novels are characterized by a multiplicity of resistance. Resistance by the author to conform to the predominate mode of storytelling in which capitalism is depicted as an all-encompassing force sweeping across the world's poorest places. A resistance forged of mockery and irony. A resistance belonging to the people of Cairo, who carve out and redefine the physical spaces and possible livelihoods that the city affords. Alternative economic subjectivities and spatial uses abound. Cossery's last novel, *The Colors of Infamy* (1999), portrays a robin-hood archetype that revels in observing the resourcefulness of Cairo's residents, an unemployed philosopher who lives in and teaches secretly out of the family crypt, and a man who created his own trade in helping old women cross the dangerous streets of the unruly modern city. The iconic streets of the modern city become the spaces of work, and bureaucratic offices- dungeons of sleep.

In the article that follows, I consider three of Cossery's novels and one short story as an instance of the performative capacities of fiction in creating a new political imaginary of the city-economy. I focus on the presentation of different kinds of places within the city (the streets, work places, living spaces, and the city's distinct quarters), and the relationship with the everyday human (economic) actions. The actions and activities that I will be focusing on are those of work, where it happens and what kind of work it is. In Cossery the places and labors of work are inversed, which I read as a contestation of dominant discourses that attempt to order the city and economy of Cairo. In writing this thesis my desire is to bring attention to a body of literature that offers a

way of re-thinking city spaces and their economic possibilities as an alternative to the common narrative in which place and space are subsumed by the forces of globalization and capitalism.

Albert Cossery was by all accounts an Egyptian author although he moved to Paris at the age of 17 and remained there for the rest of his life. In his works, however, he never ceased writing Egypt, the Egypt of the common people. His writing started before the move, he published his first stories, those that make up *The men God forgot*, were first printed in Egypt in the magazine *al-Tatawwur* (meaning Evolution) in 1940. The magazine “printed a wide range of articles reflecting the diverse ideological visions of its contributors. The message of the magazine was the reformation of Egypt’s moral, social, and economic systems so that the majority of people would not continue to live in poverty, ignorance, and sickness” (Botman 1998, 158). The magazine, a publication of the Trotskyite group Bread and Freedom, printed Cossery’s stories in French, their original language, and in Arabic translation. Although the magazine had a leftist political orientation, according to Botman it “did not tout a doctrinaire party line” (Botman 1988, 158). This political beginning is in stark contrast to the appearance of Cossery’s following works through commercial publishing houses in France.

Written in French, his novels have been translated into Arabic and English, “15 odd languages” in all¹, although it is not evident where the author is more favored. His readership is somewhat questioned and controversial, as some have claimed that he is perhaps read more by Egyptian audiences than by French ones (Fourny 1993, 161), while

¹ According to one obituary, his works have been “translated into 15-odd languages” (France 24 2008).

other sources claim that he is more widely read in France than elsewhere (Tresilian 2008).²

What is certain is the current renewal of interest in Cossery's works: the publication of his work as one tome *Oeuvres completes* in 2005 by Joelle Losfield, and the author's death in 2008 regenerated interest in France, and the appearance of three of his previously un-translated works in English between 2010 and 2011 to favorable reviews have increased interest in the author in the English speaking world. In addition to his novels, Cossery partnered with the graphic artist Golo to turn *Mendiants et Orgueilleux* and *Les couleurs de l'infamie* into graphic novels (Golo and Cossery 2003; 2009). His works also inspired cinematic interpretations: *Mendiants et orgueilleux* twice, once in 1972 by Jacques Poitrenaud, and then in 1991 by Egyptian director Asmaa El-Bakry, who also adapted *La violence et la derision* in 2004. *La maison de memoir* after *La maison de la mort certaine* by Belgian director Samy Pavel in 1983, and *The lazy ones* was also turned into Greek film by director Nikos Panagiotopoulos in 1978, taking second prize at the Chicago Film Festival.

Though widely read, Cossery has been less-extensively studied (Parris, 2008), perhaps because of the inherent in-between-ness of his position; one that does not fit neatly into the group of Maghrebi francophone writers.³ Cossery classified himself as an "Egyptian writer of the French language" (Mitrani 1995), and while living outside of

² "Despite efforts to put Cossery's work back into circulation in his native Egypt, not least through film adaptations, his choice of language and his long residence in Paris have inevitably made his books better known in France than elsewhere." (Tresilian 2008)

³ . The title of the francophone Maghreb is used to regionalize writers of the French language from former French colonies in North Africa and includes the countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Cossery is part of a small tradition of francophone authors from Egypt, which is not commonly considered part of the Maghreb region, and therefore has attracted less attention.

Egypt and speaking in a foreign tongue, he never stopped being Egyptian or thinking in Arabic. According to the few scholarly works on Cossery that are available, there are two published interviews with the author, one written and one broadcast, (Rossi 1991; Mitrani 1995). Several scholarly journal articles and book chapters take up Cossery's works, most published within the last decade. Many of the current works on Cossery read his representation of Egypt as a third way, a way of renouncing modern life, consumerism and work for the life of the mind.

The question of language is essential to understanding these texts. Given the history of colonization, much of the body of African francophone literature is often read as a body of literature that is marginal, other, and post or neocolonial; reactionary or as projecting a certain kind of politics towards the West (or the global North). The works may not be political in a conventional sense of the term, but by the fact that they perform different ways of conceiving of, and being in, this world. Saying that works of minor literatures are political acts is different from readings political projects onto those works. This is a contentious topic, as Reda Bensmaïa, author of *Experimental Nations, or reinventing the Maghreb*, claims that African works of literature written in the French language “[have been] made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas” instead of being appreciated as “literary works *in and of themselves*” (Bensmaïa 2003, 6). In other words, any political messages disseminated by the authors of minor literatures are enacted through the mastery of writing; the ways they utilize and counter-colonize a language that is the language of the former colonizer. Does this picture change if the author writing does so from elsewhere? In *Writing Outside the Nation*, Seyhan questions what it means to write about one's country, in another language, from afar:

If language is the single most important determinant of national identity... what happens when the domain of national language is occupied by nonnative writers, writers whose native, mother, home, or community language is not the one they write in? (Seyhan 2000)

What notions of patrimony and identity, community and economy emerge from this space of in-between-ness? This is a space that Cossery's works address. This thesis is an exploration of what alternative representations come about from this space. I will argue that Cossery benefits from a type of authority that can speak across cultural divides, being in-between places and in-between worlds. Reading the works of Albert Cossery through the lens of the theories of production of space, and performance of diverse economies, will show how Cossery rethinks the political imaginary of Cairo, and new ways of thinking about how literatures can/should speak to geographies.

Geo-graphies: Writing Worlds

In literal translation geography means to write the world. It is a discipline that seeks to understand the earth, ranging from physical and scientific to literary and humanistic modes of inquiry. While many geographers employ scientific methods to describe the world; a small group of 'literary geographers' look to the world-making representations of literary texts.

It is not just geographers who are interested in this intersection. Some of the most thought-provoking examples of thinking on writing, knowledge, and geography come from authors grappling with transnational and post-colonial realities. The famous critic Edward Said is the first and most famous. His idea of 'imaginative geographies' from the pioneering work *Orientalism* sparked increasing academic interest in the spatiality of other-ness "by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close... and what

is far away” (Said 1979, 55) and the role of knowledge production in cementing such imaginings. Said was very interested in the development of post-colonial nations in Northern Africa, and said of Maghrebi writing that “literature has played a crucial role in the reestablishment of national cultural heritage, in the reinstatement of native idioms, in the reimagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities”. Said recognizes the performative power of language and narrative and his ideas inspired the works of Benedict Anderson on *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991) and countless others. And so a whole school of post-colonial studies was inspired by the potential of language and language users to consolidate or confront global and structural representations.

The interest in the confluence of place and story, *Nation and Narration* (Bhabha 1990) has continued. The representations of place in literature are important because they reveal cartographies in negotiation. But above all they seek to define something that is illusory, marginal and liminal. As Bensmaia explores in his text *Experimental Nations*, the literature of the Maghreb is an attempt at ‘inventing’ new cartographies of post-colonial nation (Bensmaia 2003). In Bensmaia’s (2003) argument, these cartographies are performative though stay within the literary realm; they are metaphor and allegory of nation. “And so we can say that our writers invent what Proust called “states of resonance”: the countries as well as the identities that they offer us to experiment with are, as Deleuze says, “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and symbolic without being fictional”(p. 208). This inbetweenness of representation and performance, or fact and fiction is furthered in the works of minor authors (those writing

in a language of a more dominant culture). Seyhan (2000) focuses on the particular inbetweenness of fictions written by exiles and how they should be approached:

Understandably, narratives that originate at border crossings cannot be bound by nation borders, languages, and literary and critical traditions...they seek to name and configure cultural and literary production in their own terms and to enter novel forms of inter/transcultural dialogue. (p. 3)

It is the unbounded nature of border-crossing texts that interests me in this thesis. Instead of seeking to demonstrate how nation and culture are reified in texts, I join in the recent conversation in literary geography that asks texts what they know that is different, and what kinds of work that knowledge does.

Literary geography: a subdiscipline merging words and worlds

As an interdisciplinary sub-field within interdisciplinary geography, literary geography is at the meeting place of text, reader, and world. It focuses on the diverse social, cultural, and political connections between text and place (or space or landscape), and has evolved since its conception as a primary source of thick, regional description. In the past few years, there has been an up-serve in interest and debate over the place and usefulness of the subdiscipline of literary geography (Saunders 2010; Hones 2008; Sharpe 2000; Crang 2009; Kneale 2009). All authors cover an extensive view of the early development of the field, which will only be briefly covered here.

Literary geography's rise within of the sub-discipline of humanistic geography reached its apex in the 1970s and 1980s. Humanistic geographers saw in literature a "valuable storehouse" (Pocock 1981) of experiential descriptions of place. It was a time when geographers of the humanistic and environmental perception schools began appreciated literature for its ability to "plumb the depths" of human experience of place

and regions. There is a sense that this is when literary geography reached its “critical mass” within the discipline (Lamme 1996, 42). In the 1996 article “Fact and fiction: Geography and Literature a bibliographic survey” Fabio Lando reviews the history of humanist geographers’ use of literature, and is highly critical. Lamme (1996) also points out the parasitic nature of the early years of literary geography, calling “many geographers... looters of literature” (p. 41). Sharpe traces the evolution of geographical approaches to literature beginning with the regional/humanistic approach that emphasizes the importance of how literary works are able to capture the sense of a place with more feeling than traditional geographical approaches (Sharpe 1996, 2000).

Despite many of the recent history-of-the-field reviews that are mostly critical, I would like to emphasize the importance of the humanistic movement within geography, and particularly the work of Yi-fu Tuan that helped shape the sub-discipline. Humanistic geography developed as a counter-insurgence to the qualitative revolution in the field, a movement which limited geography’s once-holistic scope (Brosseau 1994). Tuan’s conception of a “narrative-descriptive approach” to literature in his 1991 article concentrated on place as a unifying concept in human geography, and the role of language in making place: “Although speech alone cannot materially transform nature, it can direct attention, organize insignificant entities into significant composite wholes, and in so doing, make things formerly overlooked- and hence invisible and nonexistent- visible and real” (Tuan 1991, 165). What Tuan was saying about language and place still resonates today. The fact that, as he says, language has the power to visibilise and organize is highlighting what academics today are calling the performative power of

language. This approach to geography and text is one of the main surges in the current field of literary geography, and it is the one with which my thesis dialogs.

Another difference in recent work in literary geography is topical. There are changing interests in the types of texts that geographers choose to write about. The balance is shifting away from texts on Victorian London or Joyce's Dublin (Tuan 1985, Kearns 2005-2006) and more generally away from the male authors of Western canon. More recently geographers have been looking to 'marginal' genres and voices, such as science fiction (Kneale 2006), post-colonial novels (ex. Sharpe (1996) on Rushdie, Brosseau and Ayari (2005) on gender and identity in the novels of Tunisian women), and feminine voices from the American south and short stories (Brady 1999 and Hones 2010). Also, literary geographers are not just interested in fiction anymore, but autobiographies, field notes, and all kinds of texts (Suanders 2010).

Today's call for further research in literary geography is focused on three distinct areas of research. Published in a broad array of geography journals, from *Progress in Human Geography*, *Transactions of the Institution of British Geographers* to *Cultural Geographies*, *Area* and *Geography Compass*, articles on literary geography "explore the current landscape of literary geography against the backdrop of a broadened interest in geography's textual traditions" (Suanders 2010, 436). The first of the three directions looks to gain geographical insight from text's places of production and consumption (to which I would add translation) and to the spatial movement of its circulation. Here reviewers cite the work of Franco Moretti (1998, 2006), a literary historian, and his work on the history of the European novel and nation-states as inspiration (Saunders 2010). The second approach is the examination of the act of writing as enlivened practice, an

event. This approach attempts to apply non-representational theory to the world of literary geography (Price 2011) (Brace and Johns-Putra 2010). Saunders (2010) talks about viewing the geography of writing as an enlivened practice in his *Progress* article, “but for literary geography a more expansive understanding of writing practice allows the lived, social process of writing- the iterative and reiterative journey from idea through revision to material form – to be more fully appreciated” (p. 445).

The third approach is the subject of this thesis: the study of literature not just as representation but more than representation, not just something that is purely descriptive but performative. Thus, works of fiction can be theorized as performing, not merely representing the world. The idea of the performativity describes the effect of words; they are not just representations but productions and enactments. In this thesis I use the idea of performance as a unifying way of describing what many other geographers and literary critics have already noted: the world-making powers of language. Tuan recognizes this when he talks about the power of language “make visible” and to “organize” (Tuan 1991, 685). When words are used to describe the world and its spaces and places, they depict places not only as they are, but as they could be. They do the work of opening up possibilities that would never have been thought of. This is what Sharpe means what she states that a geographer should “regard specific texts as containing a ‘voice’ which can speak to the geographies created by academics” and that “fiction presents the possibility of creating alternative worlds to highlight and critique present conditions” (Sharpe 1996, 119, 120).

The theory of performativity was first advanced by Austin in *How to do things with words* (Austin 1955) and greatly extended in application by the works of Judith

Butler (Butler 1995). In short the performative is the recognition of the reality that words are never mere words: “if a word... might be said to ‘do’ a thing, then it appears that the word not only signifies a thing, but that this signification will also be an enactment of the thing” (Butler 1995, 198). So the power of words then is beyond, or *more than*, representation.

The Performativity of Writing, and the Ethics of Reading:

It has become a commonplace saying in the field of literary geography that “literature knows things” (Walsh 1969; Gougouris 2003; Wood 2005). But what does it know and how? (Hoskins 2010, 259) In a recent issue of *Antipode*, a journal of radical geography, Lawson (2011) writes about stories as a way of knowing and uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope and space-time of narratives as a way to understand how stories can help understand tensions and conflicting views. Saunders points out that the type of knowing found in literature is drastically different than in other didactic sources, and in that way literary works are invaluable for questioning hegemonic structures of knowledge: “In this way novels are hypothetical, they can speak the unspeakable, they can say what they know is wrong, they expose the speculative nature of all knowledge and, in this, what they do know is unassailable” (Saunders 2010, 440). Brosseau also emphasizes this point when he highlights the “task of destabilizing certainty” that literature performs, suggesting that geographers should look to the potential “disruptive, subversive or a source of new questions in the novel” (Brosseau 1994, 348).

Complexly related to the question of what literature knows is the concept of the *work* that it does. This is one of the latest pushes of literary geography, one that Patricia

Price, editor of *Cultural Geographies* points out as one of the burgeoning interests of the larger field saying that “cultural geographers can extend a narrative approach to examination of, as well as active participation in, the work that stories do” (Price 2011, 207). In some cases the work of stories is directly associated with the performance of alternative knowledges and the work of un-doing. In Hoskins’ study of the ‘narrative economy’ of immigration stories circulating at the site of Angel Island Immigration Station, he uses an approach, inspired by the writings of Michel de Certeau, that stories “carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces” and that the work surpasses mimesis: “Narratives, therefore, should be examined for the work they do as well as what they represent” (Hoskins 2010, 260).

If, as theorist Michel Callon asserts (2007), academic’s studies in fact shape the world they describe (in his case he is interested in how economists create ‘the economy’), that those discursive realities have to be continuously performed, there is a lot of hard *work* that goes into creating the semblance of a structural phenomenon. In this way it could be said that stories also perform work, and like Brosseau claims, instead of looting literature for examples to back up what we already know, we should look for instances that “destabilize our positions” (Brosseau 1994, 121). The work that literature does is different but inextricable from the work that we call on it to do in our readings, which is why we must be careful in what kinds of work we ask it to do, to not assign our own political agendas as Bensmaia fears, that we allow works of literature to speak for themselves by focusing on the text itself. Especially when dealing with texts like that of Cossery and other ‘minor’ authors, that Seyhan emphasizes “enter novel forms of inter/transcultural dialogue” (Seyhan 2000, 3).

Geography has entered a new phase where it no longer takes an uncritical stance towards its relationships with literature, but the question remains what constitutes an ethical and responsible reading. This question is equally important in both literary studies and geography- asking the academic to remain faithful to the words and the stories of the text. The starting point of an ethical reading, then, is an openness to the text itself, to its singularity (Attridge 1994), or as Brosseau calls its ‘voice’: “To give the text a better voice is obviously a tremendously tricky task, but it is possible, as a first step, to spend more time on the text itself” (Brosseau 1994, 347). This is where I will start in the following chapter, spending more time on the incredible vision and the performative power of Cossery’s words to recreate a Cairo that is full of political, economic and ethical possibilities.

CHAPTER II

RETHINKING THE IMAGINARY OF THE CITY-ECONOMY: PRODUCTION OF CITY-SPACE AND PERFORMANCE OF ECONOMIC POSSIBILITY IN THE WORKS OF ALBERT COSSERY

Introduction

[Do you not know that all that I have written I saw or I heard- I made nothing up⁴] Albert Cossery (Rossi, 1991)⁵.

These are the words of Albert Cossery, dubbed the “Storyteller of Cairo” and “Voltaire du Nil” because the entirety of his writing (seven novels and one collection of short stories) take Egypt and the city of Cairo for material and inspiration. Cossery claimed to have ‘invented nothing’, but through the performative act of his storytelling he invents a different Cairo. The power of his stories surpasses mere representation, and can be considered as performance of a new imaginary of the city-economy in which alternate voices are brought forth from the echoing din of modern Cairo.

I draw from Cossery’s novels: *The Lazy Ones* (1948), *Proud Beggars* (1955), and *The Colors of Infamy*⁶(1999) and the short story “The Danger of Fantasy” from *Men God Forgot* (1940)⁷ as instances of the performative reframing of city and economic space of Cairo through fictional ways of knowing. Cossery penned a total of eight works

⁵ Entretiens avec Albert Cossery- was one of the only two interviews granted by Cossery. In this interview, Rossi spent time talking to Cossery about his work in Paris and Cairo, adding to the intertextuality of place in Cossery’s work.

⁶ *Les couleurs de l’infamie, Les hommes oubliés de Dieu, Les fainéants dans la vallée fertile, and Mendians et Orueilleux*

⁷ For the purposes of this paper I will shorten the titles to LF for *The lazy ones*, PB for *Proud Beggars*, LCL for the *colors of infamy*, and DF for the *Danger of fantasy*. All translations are my own except for quotes from *Proud Beggars*.

throughout his life, and each revive the same themes: beggars, thieves and poor of Cairo and Egypt resisting oppression through the power of mockery, the corruption of wealth and power, and Oriental notions of idleness and the life of the mind over Occidental busyness and profit. While the plots of the stories differ in their exploits, the cast of characters and themes remain unchanged, and Cossery himself admitted that his life work was a process of writing the same story again and again (Rossi, 1991).

Through my reading of Cossery I will explore the city spaces that are produced through the act of storytelling, and the performance of diverse identities and economic possibilities that occur in and against those spaces. Lefebvre's account of the production city-space provided me a sort of map for my wanderings through Cossery's Cairo, and Gibson-Graham's framework of the diverse economy a compass. The production of space, considered with the concept of everyday life gives way to a framework for seeing how places like its streets, cafes, homes, schools and workplaces overflow their categorical purposes and meanings. I pay particular attention to the ways Cossery re-situates knowledge of workspaces and work professions in the city, through tactics of irony, derision, and inversion.

Taking Lefebvre as my guide through the city, and Gibson-Graham its economy, I become nomad (Deleuze and Guattari 1983). I explore how Cossery's re-signification of the spaces Cairo, as a city and as an economy, exemplifies performative capacities of fiction to participate in creating a new political imaginary, questioning and deconstructing dominant (and capitalocentric⁸) views of the city-economy, nation, and

⁸ The definition of capitalocentrism, according to the Community Economies group: "This term refers to the dominant representation of all economic activities in terms of

other. A large part of this political process of meaning happens at the moment when the reader and the text meet. In their analysis of Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) lay out an epistemology of reading that I would like to propose as central to my paper:

The work resembles crabgrass, a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots which can cross at any point to form a variety of possible connections. Reading can participate in these connections; a reader makes connections as he reads. He [or She] need not interpret and say what the text means; he can discover where passages in the text lead, with what they can be connected. The result is not an interpretation but a map, a tool with which to find a way. (p. 14)

So there is not only performance on the level that Cossery has written about Cairo, but in the way that I read him, and in turn write. “The reader becomes a nomad... reading becomes “a nomadic of intensities” (p. 14). By focusing on one aspect that seems integral to Cossery’s work, the broadening of the city through a new economic imaginary, I am knowingly leaving out other facets of the works in order to concentrate on the idea of resistance that Cossery develops through his beggars and thieves.

Taking the lead from geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham’s post-structuralist⁹ critique of capitalocentric discourse and exposition of the diversity of economic forms, in the first part of this thesis I propose a way of reading ‘minor’ fiction that recognizes that the traditions of literary critique commonly used to read francophone authors recreate the reality they as critics the intend to resist: the realities of colonial/ neo-colonial relations and capitalist hegemony. The reconstitution of city space through writing speaks out against a greater global order of ideas and representations that enact cities of the global

their relationship to capitalism—as the same as, the opposite to, a complement of, or contained within capitalism.” <http://www.communityeconomies.org/Home/Key-Ideas>

⁹ Post-structuralism is defined as “a social theory that starts by recognizing that language and discourse are constitutive of social reality, it highlights the shaping of social experience through meaning & representation, as do social facts with important power effects” as by Arturo Escobar in *Place, Power, and Networks in Globalization and Post Development* p.166

south as helpless victims of post-colonial and or economic re-structuring. In the second part of this paper, inspired by the work and ideas of J.K. Gibson-Graham and Timothy Mitchell in their action and historical research, I will discuss how Cossery's tales of everyday life in Cairo craftily invert and dissolves city space and conventional representations of the 'economy' by subversively bringing alternative practices to light. Through his fiction we will see how "Place, like the subject, is the site of becoming, the opening for politics" (Gibson-Graham 2006b, p. xxxiii).

Storytelling and the Political Imaginary of the City-Economy

Although Cossery pens his work instead of passing it along orally, he is a storyteller in the sense that the inspiration and material for his tales come from his memory and early life in Egypt. In his capacity as the storyteller of Cairo, Albert Cossery employs his memories of Egypt, his experiences of the city and his youth and relates them in a witty and radical fashion.

Walter Benjamin has suggested that storytelling is a dying art in a modern world that is ruled by information.¹⁰ Whether tales of local lure or yarns from afar, stories are embedded in places. Along with the importance of place, Benjamin asserts that great storytelling is inextricably tied to the author and the people it is about (Benjamin 1968).

For Benjamin, storytelling:

does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him

¹⁰ He traces the decline of true storytelling- (for him the recitation of tales from memory) on the rise of the novel, and the technological and economic revolutions that have caused its form and accessibility to spread. He identifies the geographical nature of the origins of stories from two classical archetypes: the peasant and the sailor. The peasant tells stories about native places and the sailor tales of far away lands.

again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (p. 5)

The capacity of the narrative form, then, hinges on its performance. Leaving behind the problematic notions of fact and reality, and working in and against form and genre, discourse and language, Cossery's fiction communicates a space of possibility for Cairo and the people that live there.

Cossery valorizes the act of storytelling above the 'news' in his political imaginary. In the novel *Proud Beggars*, Cossery utilizes the literary device of a story-within-a-story, or *mise-en-abyme*, to reflect on the power and tradition of storytelling as a way of knowing. *Proud Beggars* is a tale of a man who commits the pointless crime of killing a prostitute in order to steal her bracelets so he can buy hashish, only to find out that they are of no value. The story-within-the-story occurs at the beginning of the novel when Gohar leaves his dwelling and comes across a beggar. Gohar asks the man how his business is going and the man replies "God is great!... But business isn't important. There are so many joys in life. Do you know the story of the elections?" Gohar replies, "No I never read the paper", disdaining this way of knowing. Thus the beggar tells him a story about elections that took place in Lower Egypt- where the people voted overwhelming for a man named Barghout, and when the election officials could not figure out who that man was and in asking around the village discovered that Barghout was actually a donkey. The moral (and punch line) of the story, according to the beggar, is: "naturally, he wasn't elected. What do you expect? An ass with four feet? The high officials wanted an ass with two feet!" (PB 13-14).

The function of the *mise-en-abyme* is multifold. In a metafictional sense, this is a validation of storytelling over other forms of information, that in a sense, 'stories know

things'. It is metafictional because it is a story within a story that comments on the power of stories, inserting the question of how knowledge is produced, and by whom. Along with the obvious satirization of Egyptian politics, the story helps frame Cairo from its hinterland. This beggar, a characteristic part of Cairo's landscape and economy, is described as an atypical member of the profession, for :

He was a special kind of beggar, for he made no lamentations and suffered no infirmity...Amid so many real absurdities, the act of begging seemed like any other work—the only reasonable work at that. He always occupied the same place, with the dignity of a bureaucrat behind his desk. (p. 13)

I begin with this one instance because it encapsulates many themes that I will be analyzing from the novels. Cossery describes the *work* of the beggar as legitimate, comparing him to a bureaucrat, and Gohar, who is also a beggar, asks him how his *business* is fairing. The beggar *occupies* the street, insisting on transforming the passageway into a desk of sorts. Cossery accomplishes his willful inversion of city-space by mapping alternative livelihoods of Cairo through the manipulation and colonization of language, specifically the discourse of capitalism to produce and perform a new political imaginary. Spivak says we hang on to old words to express new ideas, taking “resources of the old language, the language we already possess and which possesses us.” (p. xv) Using this linguistic strategy, Cossery uses the language of capitalist discourse to describe non-capitalism and creates a rupture. He manipulates the discourses of capitalism and orientalism¹¹ “but ask[s] them to do different work” (Richardson 2008, 40). Through his portrayal of the margins of Cairo, both its city and economic spaces, Cossery creates a tension that undermines notions of what is inside/outside of the economy, the city, and the state.

¹¹ and one could say neo-colonialism

Living in Paris and writing in French, while still retaining his Egyptian identity, Cossery classified himself as an “Egyptian writer of the French language (*l’expression française*)” (Rossi 1991). Because of this position of marginality, of inbetweenness of place and identity, scholars situate Cossery within *francophonie*.¹² Cossery’s works are exemplary of what Deleuze and Guattari call a ‘minor mode of becoming’. According to the theories in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, a ‘minor literature’ is a literature written by a person in a minority position with respect to the language in which they write. The minor mode of becoming of Cossery’s novels is thus a deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the French language; it is an inherently political act that creates a space for new voices to emerge and speak to broad audiences (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1985). In other words, any political messages Cossery’s works disseminate are enacted through the mastery of his writing, and the ways he ‘re-colonizes’ the French language as well as the language of capitalism or the larger notion of the realm of economy.

To say that a work of literature is performative means that it must do something besides represent the world. The question of the political aspects of literature has become

¹² The geography of Francophonie includes all places/peoples that speak French, but are considered to be outside of France. Outside-ness can be physical, as an author living in a French speaking country that is not France, or in the case of Cossery it can even be an author living in France and writing in French, from a minor position. Somewhere in between the worlds of writers of the romantic tradition like Gerard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, and Lawrence Durrell who traveled to Egypt and wrote exotic stories on their return, and Egyptian writers living in Egypt and writing in Arabic like Naguib Mafouz, Alaa Al Aswany, and Nawal el-Saadawi, lies a small group of Egyptian Francophone authors. Egyptian by nationality and origin and French speaking as a product as a legacy of French influence in Egypt, especially in the realm of education (Gazio 1999), these authors are part of a contested tradition- held at arms length by the French until recently, and relegated to the ‘world literature’ sections of book shops, and seen as elitist and as traitors by the Arabic writing/speaking population of their homelands.

a contentious topic in academia. But according to Madeleine Dobie, a literary scholar working in the field of francophone literature, the separation of literature and politics has become yet another ‘false binary’ and that it is as important now as ever to pay attention to the intersections of politics and literature, especially in the works of ‘minor’ authors (Dobie 2010). So how can one effectively analyze the political¹³ nature of texts, or understand the performative nature of “how novels intervene in society” (Ortiz-Robles)? And do so in an ethical way? To pose the question differently, and from within the field of literary geography, and what would it mean for geographers to read these works ethically?

A first step in answering that question is leaving behind the treatment of literature by geographers as description and explanation. An important contribution of literary geography and the geographic veins of literary studies is the assertion that ‘literature knows things’ (Saunders 2010, 439), claiming that “literature gets us to think anew, it knows about the ‘other’ and motivates us to contemplate different spatial and social orders, which would otherwise remain concealed or repressed” (Saunders 2010, 441). This suggests that works of literature produce, embody, and perform knowledge that is different and valuable.

The places of Cossery’s Cairo are the places that the marginalized people that he writes about would frequent in their daily lives. Cossery describes a Cairo that defies ordering and expectation, blurring the lines between public/private spaces, places of work/ repose, places of death/life, those of learning/indoctrination, and the kinds of spaces and activities that constitute the economy. Each space production is questioned

¹³ politics as way of being in world, particularly of interest to geography

and re-performed in his writings, from specific types of city space like streets, cafes, work places, prisons, homes, schools, and places of commerce, to more broadly defined concepts and comparisons such as different quarters of the city, the city as opposed to the country, and ideas of patrimony and the space of the economy. Through the production and contestation of space as it pertains to the city of Cairo and especially through the mapping out of the space of the economy, we will see how Cossery constructs a Cairo in literature that is a ‘radical reformulation’ (Rushdie, 1992) or an ontological reframing (Gibson-Graham 2006).

Re-producing Cairo’s City-space

First and foremost, the space that Cossery’s writing performs and reproduces is the space of Cairo. Cossery is certainly not the first to write the city of Cairo- many authors have done so- from visiting colonists and geographers in the time of Napoleon’s expedition and the exoticism movement in art and literature in Europe, to famous Arabic writers like Naguib Mahfouz and Khitat al-Ghitani. But as their versions of Cairo privilege some places over others and some people over others, Cossery’s writing of Cairo goes beyond mere representation, redefining and recasting the city. Semia Mehrez discusses the process of literary re-signification of city topologies in the chapter of her book “Re-writing the city: The Case of Khitat al-Ghitani” in *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*. According to Mehrez “Cairo is not simply a physical presence that...writers reproduce. Rather, the city is a construct they continue to reinvent...The city becomes a text that is constantly rewritten; a space that is continuously reconstructed/deconstructed through its ever-shifting, ever-changing signs” (Mehrez

1994, 61). This quote emphasizes that the Cairo of fiction are no mere representations, but imaginaries that prod the reader to see the city differently.

But more importantly, while the ‘neoliberal’ forces push against the poor, beggars, and thieves of Cossery’s narratives, it is the latter that win in their subversive attempts to redefine the spaces of their city. Using ideas from the works of Henri Lefebvre on the production of space in the city in *The urban revolution* and focusing especially on the production of differential city space by human actions in the *Critique of Everyday life*¹⁴, I analyze Cossery’s version of Cairo with an eye for spaces pregnant with the potential for resignification through everyday acts. As such, city-space is not a container to be filled but “a highly complex field of tensions, a virtuality, a possible-impossible that attracts the accomplished, and ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence” (Lefebvre 2003, 40). Although much Lefebvre’s work is capitalocentric in that it mostly concentrates on how city spaces are transformed and produced by the forces of capitalist mode of production, the moments and notions of everyday life as a tool of defiance, resistance, and creation opens up city-space to new possibilities. Under the notions of everyday life, the concept of a gridded city space gives way to overlapping areas of meaning, heterotopias¹⁵ and isotopias, other spaces and same spaces that are “simultaneously excluded and interwoven.” (Lefebvre 2003, 128).

¹⁴Lefebvre’s *The Urban Revolution* was the germinating soil for his subsequent *The Production of Space*

¹⁵ According to Neil Smith “The archetypal heterotopias for Lefebvre are the places of renegade commercial exchange, politically and geographically independent from the early political city: caravansaries, fairgrounds, suburbs”(Smith 2003, xii). However, Cossery’s are not geographical independent of the city but depend on it. His heterotopias resemble more Foucault’s, places like prisons, brothels and cemeteries.

I will now begin my “nomadic of intensities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) of the various and interconnected spaces of Cossery’s novels, to show how Cairo, its streets, cafes, homes, and workplaces are produced, and how the performative aspects of the stories, from the level of language to the literary plot work to create a new imaginary of the city. Reading Cossery in this light, the resulting imaginary is one of a Cairo that is full of possibility and potentiality, where city spaces are rewritten and transformed, where the economy is a realm of ethical negotiation, and economic difference is powerfully visible.

The streets

The isotopia of the city par excellence for both Lefebvre and Cossery is the street. The street is isotopic, or a same space, because it is a space that is multifunctional, has multiple employments and ever changing significance. The novels of Albert Cossery present the street as “more than just a place for movement and circulation” (Lefebvre 2003, 18). The street is a place of endless iterations for the people of Cairo whom he so famously portrays. The street is simultaneously a place of revolutionary action¹⁶, “meeting place”¹⁷, and a place of business (and living and working) as well as being a thoroughfare. The multiple and simultaneous meanings and uses of the streets of Cairo become a symbolically rich field in which inversion and subversion occur through the production of city space in the text. Cossery writes the streets of Cairo and recognizes them as places of possibility where the overlapping multifunctionality is created and

¹⁶ The basis of one story in Cossery’s first book deals with a revolution of street sweepers on strike in the roads of Cairo.

¹⁷ “serves as a meeting place (topos), for without it no other designated encounters are possible (cafes, theaters, halls)” (Lefebvre 2003, 18).

produced by the people who inhabit them. Streets are the birthplace of creative “professions” or “métiers”, where characters survive through alternative livelihoods, and the different functions of the streets begin to blur into each other.

The Colors of Infamy (1999), Cossery’s final novel, opens with an exposition of Cairo’s streets and its inhabitants. It introduces the built environment of Cairo, the ancient and “formerly brilliant” city, and with more than a hint of satire compares the buildings themselves to the tombs of the pharaohs. Architecturally, the representations in the novel create a stark contrast between the iconic ancient Egyptian ruins and the present day slums with which they are compared. The dwellings of the city’s unfortunate are compared both to ruins and tombs: “The dilapidation of its [Cairo’s] houses is reminiscent of the images of future tombs and gave the impression, in the highly touristic nation, that all of these ruins in the making had acquired by tradition the value of antiquities” Both the memory and history of the ancient tombs (what readers from the West generally associate with Egypt) are both over shadowed by the present day ruin and squalor in which so many of the city residents live.

But, descriptions of the people of Cairo soon upstage the material spaces of the city. Filling the streets are the “human multitude”, people going about their daily business of living “impervious to the tragedy and devastation” that surrounds them. It is through the eyes of Ossama, a dandified thief (as well as the self-portrait of Cossery)¹⁸, that the reader is introduced to this “summer’s saunter” (*flânerie estivale*). Ossama is taking in the city and its people from a pedestrian walkway above the bustling Rue Talaat

¹⁸ Many of the anti-heroes of Cossery’s works are actually the portrait of himself.

Harb¹⁹. Cossery populates the material spaces of his Cairo (and one would be amiss not to find verisimilitude in his description) with the multitudes, presenting Cairo in metaphor as an anthill.²⁰ The bustling of the insects represents the over-urbanization (I refrain from saying over-population) and under-employment “of hordes of migrants coming from all of the surrounding areas- bred on insane illusions of a capital so prosperous it is changed into an anthill” (LCL 8). But the metaphor of the anthill is doubly appropriate: in one sense an anthill represents ideas of overpopulation and unemployment-- negative views of the city often focused on by the West (as discussed in Mitchell, 2008), in another sense the anthill, a natural structure where every ant works hard to achieve a common goal, really an allusion to migrants? There is an ambivalence in this metaphor which highlights the different ways in which Cairo, and other cities of the ‘global south’ can be envisioned.

The tension of the anthill metaphor is extended as Ossama describes the people composing the crowded Rue as a variety of workers who are in fact not working, or unable to work, “people pacified by their idleness”, among them:

unemployed workers, artisans without clients, intellectuals weary of glory,
administrative civil servants chased from their offices by lack of chairs,

¹⁹ Talaat Harb street is the main artery connecting Talaat Harb Square and Tahrir Square. It was built as part of Ismail Pasha’s modernizing and Europeanizing campaigns of the 1800s and is one of the principal commercial streets in Cairo. It was renamed in the 1950’s to honor the Egyptian economist Talaat Harb. Talaat Harb founded the Bank of Egypt: “The centerpiece of both triumphalist (nationalist) and exceptionalist (neomarxist) accounts of Egyptian economic history is the story of Bank Misr and the industrial investment group led by its outspokenly nationalist chairman, Tal‘at Harb”. As historians of the Egyptian labor movement Beinun and Lockman (1987: 10–11) summarize the story, the Bank Misr group “symbolized the organizational consolidation of an aspiring Egyptian industrial bourgeoisie,” which allegedly “took on itself the task of creating a purely Egyptian-owned industrial sector.”

²⁰ The metaphor of the anthill also features prominently in the opening of *The jokers* (1964), one of Cossery’s novels not analyzed here.

academics burdened under the weight of their sterile science, and finally, the eternal satirists, philosophers in love with shadow and quiet, who considered the spectacular deterioration of their city as especially designed to sharpen their critical senses. (LCL 16)

However, among all of these workless workers, we are introduced to a man who has created his own trade, materialized out the chaos of the urban framework. Ossama remarks that the man has ingeniously created a new ‘métier’: that of helping people cross the road. The valorization of a kind of inventive urban subsistence is recognized in the work through the character of Ossama: “The man who had come up with this surprising function in order to live deserved his admiration and his eternal friendship” (LCL 15). The ‘*passeur des rues*’ is a métier that is a response to, or resistance of, the uncontrolled process of urbanization and uneven development²¹ of Cairo depicted in the text. Not only does Ossama respect this man for seeing the street, even as dangerous as it is, as a place of possibility, but he compares it to his own profession as, “a thief; not a legalist thief such as a government minister, banker, businessman, speculator, or construction promoter; he was just a modest thief with random and uncertain revenues”. Thus the street is treated as a place of work, and that work is not presented as somehow ‘alternative’, part of the ‘informal economy’ but described as legitimate and creative form of subsistence. Cossery locates these subversive economic actions right in the midst of commercial Cairo, on Talaat Harb street, a monument and symbol of the

²¹ The theory of ‘uneven development’ takes a neo-marxist approach to the spatiality of the effects of capitalism, and was proposed by geographers Neil Smith and David Harvey. The theory is derived from the observation of the inconsistencies of capitalism that tend to homogenize place and annihilate space, at the same time as the movement of capital accumulation necessarily creates unevenness. According to Smith, “The lowest common denominator, in a geographical sense, is not just the spacelessness implied by an equivalence of wages or of prices, but the ubiquitous degradation of the landscape. Spacelessness here is the obverse of utopia” (Smith 1984, 20).

nationalization of the Egyptian economy. Cossery uses this not-so-subtle setting to subversively undo the policed boundary between the official economic and the informal one.

In addition, the (illegal) utilization of the street space introduces the theme of work as a process of ethical negotiation. This concept of work proceeds throughout and determines the events of the narrative. There is a sense that the street is a place to which people flock. This is accompanied by an ironic inversion of space where spaces that are meant for work where no work occurs, and the space of the streets teem with everyday life and provisioning.

Not all streets are the same however. Lefebvre sees not only the possibilities of the streets as a place of continuous reshaping and exploring of boundaries between public and private, commercial and revolutionary, but also lays out an argument “*against the street*”. Streets, as they are most often portrayed as spaces produced by capitalist modes of production, become a superficial world of merchandise and display that is “flanked by stores”; where the spectacle is not the revolutionary actions but “merchandise”. As opposed to the radical possibility created by the alternative and revolutionary use of streets, streets produced by the activities of capitalism are “nothing more than the necessary transition between forced labor, programmed leisure, and habitation as a place of consumption” (Lefebvre 2003, 20).

Lefebvre argues for but against streets, bringing out their dualities as places of both tremendous possibility and of consumption and policing; Cossery makes the distinction between the streets of Old Cairo (*le Caire indigène*), which are full of possibility, and the streets of the European quarters, which are stymied by

commercialism. Cossery's politics surface in the description of the Rue Talaat Harb- one of Cairo's main commercial thoroughfares:

Up and down the street, the store windows displayed the panoply of consumer society, a society still very closed off, but firmly determined to profit from its pillages...the reigning absurdity, the travel agencies exhibiting snow-covered landscapes by a kind of inverse exoticism. (LCL 16-17)

This description of the European quarter of Cairo, with its architecture, sites of consumerism, and references to tourism and the ruins, hint at the irony of capitalist spaces in Cairo. The 'inverse exoticism' of travel agencies promoting northernmost vacation spots, is paralleled by the inversion and reversals that occur in Cossery's work where the peripheral and liminal parts of the city and its economy become central, and the spaces of capitalism and capitalist professions are marginalized.

Cossery makes a point of describing both the native and "European" quarters of Cairo. In *Proud Beggars*, as in all of Cossery's works, the European quarter is a sterile place that the characters avoid at all cost (except in the case of Ossama in *Les Couleurs*, who disguises himself in the clothes of a rich man to decrease the risks associated with pick-pocketing from wealthy inhabitants). The European quarter is characterized by its wide avenues, busy looking individuals, and showy storefronts; it is depicted as a different city altogether:

Avenue Fouad opened onto the center of the European quarter like a stream of lights. El Kordi strolled along the avenue with the disturbing feeling of being in a strange city. In vain did he tell himself he was still in his native country; he could not believe it. All these busy people, who looked as though they had just come from some catastrophe and whose sullen faces denoted mediocre preoccupations, seemed singularly hostile...inhumane...He already missed the muddy streets and the dirty hovels where a banished people mocked their oppressors. There was more hope in the tin huts of the slums than in this opulent city...The citadel of oppression was not gay. The riches displayed in store windows, the dull majesty of the buildings, the rectilinear rigor of the sidewalks—all this seemed to forbid the least frivolous thought. (PB 136-137)

This passage draws a clear division between the two cities. One is imposture, and the other a source of hope. It claims the people living in the native quarter are a 'banished people', recognizing their unfortunate history, but also giving them the weapon that Cossery holds above all others, mockery. El Kordi uneasiness with the 'European' areas of the city touches on the feeling of deterritorialization associated, and exemplifies how economies become engrained onto the city also a play into the narrative space of patrimony.

In comparison, Cossery describes the native quarters at the outset of all of his books, as a place that is full of life and revelry. This joyous presentation of old Cairo is consistent across Cossery's writings. In *Proud Beggars* (1981), El Azhar, a quarter of native Cairo is described as:

a wide street teeming with a motley, carefree crowd... This was his [Gohar's] familiar world, among this lazy crowd that spread itself indifferently on the sidewalks and in the street, despite the busy traffic of cars, cabs, donkey carriages, and even street-cars that sped by literally like meteors. (PB 11)

As one can see, this is a difference of night and day from the previous description of the European quarter of the city. A mix of modern and traditional worlds, with the traffic competing for right of way with donkeys and the people who express ownership of the streets by holding their own against the street cars. The crowd is described as 'carefree' and 'lazy' (which as we will see is the ultimate compliment for Cossery), as compared to the harassed, lifeless, inhumane workers of the European quarter. The *ville indigène* is described as a misleading margin, or 'deceptive periphery'. Places that appear to reside on the boundary, in the writings of Cossery, are actually the center of Cairene life.

The decentering of city space in *The Colors of Infamy* involves an inversion of the margins, and it is the first of many such inversions. Cossery's writings make the liminal spaces of Cairo come to life. In *The Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre argues that the power of decentering is the ability of seeing, or of turning, the world upside-down. (Lefebvre 2003, 85). The streets are the realm of the 'informal economy', the world of wandering street vendors, beggars, and thieves, and in this sense the streets of Cossery's Cairo are also heterotopias (according to a capitalocentric epistemology): they are the product of renegade economies, heterotopias.

While the streets may be important places of inversion and open up new possibilities in Cossery's writings, they lead to other city-spaces that are similarly rethought and recategorized: cafes, places of business and places of rest (as well as places of rest where business happens and places of business where rest happens). Importantly, it is not just that the streets of Cairo lead to other public and private domains, but the boundaries of the street, just like ideas of work and leisure are blurred and even reversed. It is difficult to determine distinct boundaries for the street, to say where the space of the street begins and where it ends.

The cafe

A good example of the streets function as isotopia and its nebulous boundaries is the famous Café des Mirroirs²², which not only uses interior spaces privately owned by the café but also overflows onto to the alleyway, obscuring the line between public and

²² which is famous in Cairo (also known as the al-fishawi)

private, street and café, formal/informal economy and through the tension of these dialectics, subverts their discursive power:

The Mirror Café was located at the junction of two alleys; it occupied most of the dirt street, forbidden to heavy vehicles, where only the handcars of strolling merchants ventured. Immense awnings stretched over the winding terrace like a covered market. An impressive number of mirrors in sculpted and gilded frames hung everywhere, even on the facades of the neighboring hovels. The Mirror Café was famous for its green tea and the eclecticism of its clientele, composed of carters, intellectuals, and foreign tourists thirsting for local color. (p. 15)

This description of the Mirror Café is from the novel *Proud Beggars*, where it is a focal point of conversations between the main characters of Yeghen, a hashish dealer, Gohar, a former university professor turned beggar by choice (who makes a little money on the side by providing a service of literacy at a local whorehouse, writing letters and keeping accounts), and El Kordi, a self-proclaimed idealist who works for the government in the ministry of public works but farms out his work to other workers so that he can spend time thinking about the revolution). In this description, the location of the café in Old Cairo is important. The narrow dirt roads being inaccessible to modern traffic, the café is physically a space apart. Its perimeter overflows the footprint of the building and takes over the street with its awnings and mirrors.

Just as the café space in the novel is written as physically overflowing its boundaries with the street and other properties, it is the portrait of everyday life that so strikingly dissolves categories. It would be impossible to identify which realm of the *economy* the café inhabits, for it is the site of monetary transactions between café owner and client, but more importantly, Cossery's imaginary is most often the space of alternative forms of subsistence. Besides the strolling merchants who sell their wares in the ally/café, Cossery introduces us to a young army of recyclers, the humorously dubbed

“tribe of cigarette-butt scavengers” whose vocation is accepted by the people at the café, and distinguished and legitimized through the niche they have found. Later on in the passage cited above, the cigarette collectors are described as slum-dwellers who go “about their work with debonair indifference; they weren’t afraid of competition” (PB, 15). Cossery sharpens his ironic wit by describing these young recyclers as unafraid of ‘competition’, reappropriating the language of capitalism and applying it to an activity that is most often thought of as part of the informal economy. Even the distinction between isotopia and heterotopia is corrugated, folded together and bent, contingent. The space of the café is at once a same space and an ‘other’ space. It defies ordering.²³

This is one of the linguistic devices that add to the satirical and ironic register of the works. In the imaginary that Cossery performs, thieves have ‘clients’, begging is a ‘profession’, and street urchins form part of an economy that is intertwined and inseparable from the legitimate business purposes of the cafe. Through his description of the overflowing café, chairs and mirrors, and the actions that the citizens of Cairo accumulate there, Cossery problematizes the ordering of the city into discrete spaces, and the difference between the formal/informal economy.

Cossery is not the first author to describe the revolutionary nature of city-street space, nor is he the first to comment on the special place of the café as a place for acts of social reversal. Set against this backdrop, the depiction of the Café des Mirroirs is reminiscent of the importance of the café as a place of class confrontation in burgeoning modern cities in the work of Charles Baudelaire. Through an intertextual layering with

²³ The ordering that Cossery defies is in the sense that Timothy Mitchell (2002) talks about the attempts at ordering life in Egypt by the disciplinary forces of the government and foreign aid.

Baudelaire's poetic writings (1987) on the birth of modern Paris, Cossery creates a palimpsest where Paris of the era of Haussman is metafictionally overlaid onto modern Cairo. Just as Cossery makes reference to Baudelaire earlier in the novel through the figure of the urban flâneur, the café represents another reversal of the Baudelairian prototype. Like the prose poem "The Eyes of the Poor", the café becomes a place of confrontation between social classes. While Baudelairian café of 19th century Paris brought social classes together and opened the eyes to unevenness present in society, the Café des Mirroirs, as Cossery remembers it, reveals less about class status. For Cossery, the primary function of the café is the acts of ethical negotiation that take place there.

It is the café as a site of ethical negotiation that is especially important in Cossery's last work *The colors of infamy*. After introducing us to the streets and people of Cairo in the opening passage discussed earlier, Ossama makes his way to the Café Cosmopolite across the avenue from a ritzy club. While the café is often represented as a place of leisure, for Ossama it is a place that is crucial for his profession. The upscale Club des Notables is described as a lucrative source of business for the thief which had "already many times been for the young man the source of profitable appropriation" shortly provides the intrigue that sets the structure of the narrative: Ossama pickpockets a wallet from a rich man leaving the club, finding inside a letter incriminating the man in a political scandal. Suleyman (voleur legaliste), the 'client' who has had his wallet nabbed is the head of a large building corporation responsible for the deaths of over 50 residents from the collapse of one of their buildings as the result of skimping on materials, and paying off the government agency responsible for regulating building safety. With this letter in his hands Ossama feels as if he were holding a 'bomb,' or an

‘amulet’ against danger, and the story unfolds as he searches for the appropriate use of his appropriation. Ossama then finds his former teacher Nimr, who taught him the art of thievery, at a café near his father’s dilapidated apartment. In the café they argue about the ethical states of different types of thieving. The main contention is, which type of thieving is more ethical?

Cossery uses the café as a revelatory space, where economic practices are opened up as sites of ethical decisions. Unlike his mentor, Ossama guises himself as a wealthy man and pursues clients in the wealthy quarters, while Nimr claims to practice the art in its ancient form, looking like a thief and thieving in the expected places. Nimr accuses Ossama of practicing immoral thievery because his version of the profession lessens the risk of being sent to prison, while Ossama understands his occupation in a Robin-Hood like fashion, comically stating that “thieves make money circulate, and without their industry it would always stay in the same pockets” and that “His ethics forbid him to exercise his *métier* on the poor (*des miséreux*) (LCL 57). In contrast to these two different illegal forms of theft identified by Ossama and Nimr, there is the classification of the *vol legale*, or legal theft²⁴ which Cossery defines as “the theft legalized under the patronage of the government”(LCL 64) which is the kind of theft that Suleyman perpetrates. They discuss the various benefits of the different types of thieving, in which principal points were made for illegal acts of theft because of the two observations that “have you ever seen a thief out of work? and that it is “a profession as old as humanity”,

²⁴ While in the context of this story, the primary form of legalized theft can be read as capitalist theft, it also implicates corrupt government officials. If you were to do a class process analysis based on Resnick and Wolff (1989), legal theft would be any manor of surplus appropriated and distributed someone other than the worker that is recognized as legitimate by law.

and that (legal thieves) *voleurs-legaliste* “must lie even on their days off” (LCL 65-75). The conversation in the café shows an ethical process through operative irony- there is dissonance and tension between, on the one hand, the discussion of corrupt capitalist and state individuals, and thieves who are shown to be in a process of theorizing their way of being and flows of goods and value in relation to other ways of being.

The café is also the place of confrontation and revelation. The café is also the space where, incriminating letter in hand, Ossama, Nimr, and Karamallah confront Suleyman, the corrupt builder. The three have decided that the most powerful way to use the letter is not to bribe Suleyman but to ridicule him for their own amusement. In this confrontation, the café is the space where the contested nature of Suleyman’s dangerous building practices is questioned, and the power of derision and humor is elevated to the highest form of resistance. Nimr’s laugh upon this realization is described as “The laugh of one who has just discovered the vile and ridiculous face of the powerful people of this world” (LCL 133).

The café in Cossery’s work is a place where the narrative’s plot often begins, develops, and ends. Through this literary use of city-space, where place and everyday action intertwine, Cossery performs a different knowledge of Cairo, a new political imaginary. As a thief disguised as rich person, Ossama is able to practice his *métier* in the wealthier quarters of the city, just like the “legendary bandits” of folk tales. Ossama’s uses of the café as a place of work, and the way he is able to navigate the streets of Cairo subverts the notion of a monolithic, official and ordered economy. Cossery instead shows a proliferation of economic difference that is inextricably tied into the spatial imaginary of Cairo.

Homes and the politics of dwelling

Like the streets and cafes, dwelling spaces in Cossery's novels are central to the narrative and the up-ending of the political imaginary. I will look at how the homes are performed through Cossery's writing, again through the materiality of their presence in the novels but also where they fit into the character's practice of everyday life. In Cossery, the home is not considered outside the realm of the economy- not theorized as a space of social (re)production of labor power, or even subjugated to being part of an 'informal' economy. The home is a site just like the streets, and cafes: heterogeneous, multiform, diverse. The living spaces in the novels encapsulate many of the themes of the cafes and the streets: they are a material site of struggle, and expose possibility. They are the most intimate and revealing kinds of spaces.

The material manifestations of homes in Cossery's novels show the dire circumstances in which many of the people in Cairo live. I have already mentioned that the first description of Cairo in *The colors of infamy* is that of a city in ruin. Many of the homes are in danger of falling down, including the apartment in old Cairo where Osamma's father lives. He goes to see his father in an old run down neighborhood after finding the incriminating letter. His father is "an old factory worker who was blinded by the blow of a club wielded on his head by a policeman during a riot following the inflation of food product prices" (LCL 43). He is living in a house that is standing "thanks to its inhabitants repeated incantations" (LCL 44). And it seems like a certainty that the houses will fall. Cossery describes the housing slums of Cairo as "hécatombe[s]", a word with double meaning of massacre, and ancient sacrificial tomb. The reference to a hécatombe unites the houses of all Cairo's poor to the victims of Suleyman building.

As much as Cossery mocks and inverts the expected values of all city spaces, the sheer materiality of his descriptions of homes in ruin is truly horrifying. The reality of Cairo's housing problem leaves millions living in shantytowns. A poignant example is the mausoleum home of Karamallah in *The colors of infamy*, set in Cairo's City of the Dead.²⁵ After publishing an unfavorable opinion about a Western ruler²⁶, Karamallah loses his work and home and is left with nowhere to go than the family mausoleum. Compromising letter in hand, Ossama and Nimr seek out Karamallah's wisdom as a prophet on satirically sacred ground. They find him in the midst of a tutoring session, defiantly making a living from within his family crypt: "he crossed the threshold of the mausoleum with the impression of entering into and completely different universe" (LCL 95). The complete otherness of the cemetery home is imbued with magical qualities, being outside and marginal (although at the same time a quite real representation of the way many Egyptians live) and a place of resistance.

²⁵ The fascinating anthropological study of the communities who live in the cemeteries of Cairo provide relevant background to Karamallah's story. There is a long history of cemetery spaces as integrated into the city of Cairo, unlike Western ideas about separation of society with such places, the cemetery has long played a role in the life of the city. Families would live in the structures above underground tombs during periods of mourning and on special saints and feast days., wealthy families would pay people to occupy the rooms permanently, protecting the grave/shelters from being taken over by the poor, beggars, and thieves. Today over half a million people live there in illegal and informal slum conditions. However, they are "involved in a variety of economic activities" low paying jobs in formal sector, small informal business such as "kiosks, food stands, coffee shops" inside the cemetery. Many are unemployed. "In most cases, the people of the City of the Dead (as they have done in their search to find shelter) find creative means of employment in the informal economy. They sell tissues or vegetables in the streets, wipe the dust and dirt off of car windshields, shine shoes at coffee houses, or hawk newspapers" (Nedoroscik 1997, 65-66). Although Cossery's Cairo is in part pure memory and imagination, I thought it appropriate to have this background in reading the importance of Karamallah's story.

²⁶ "Dans un article il a assuré que le président d'une grande puissance étrangère était un débile et un illettré" In an article he assured that the president of a powerful foreign country was daft and illiterate.

As another space that Cossery mines for possibility and difference, homes can be related to the concept of dwelling. More than any other space, homes show our connection to the realm of the possible. The notion of dwelling and habiting is central to Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space, the most basic of needs "notion of inhabit, that is, the plasticity of space, its modeling and the appropriation by groups and individuals of the conditions of their existence" (Lefebvre 1996, 79). In the very act of dwelling, Lefebvre suggests, that "The human being cannot build and dwell, that is to say, possess a dwelling in which he lives, without also possessing something more (or less) than himself: his relation to the possible and the imaginary" (p. 82) . Cossery performs the cemetery communities in Cairo's City of the Dead on acts of defiance and resistance- describing the communities in this way: "The cemetery of world renown since thousands of homeless moved in without asking anyone's permission" (LCL 95). Instead of representing the poor as pitiful with no options, Cossery gives their willful occupation of the cemetery tombs a defiant political act.

Home spaces in the novels provide means not only to expose corruption and poverty, but also open up possibilities and individual choices. The notion of dwelling and the way that the characters are actively involved in negotiating where they live as political and ethical acts of resistance is just as important. Take the presence of simple living that is valorized (and practiced by almost every Cossarian anti-hero). They all live in simple spare apartments, taking joy in minimalism. The beggars that are so central, and perhaps the most highly prophetic of Cossery's stories are also homeless, some by choice.

Schools and education: resituating knowledge

The representation of spaces and institutions of learning in Cossery's novels complies with the writer's overall project of rethinking the spaces of Cairo. By foregrounding practices of local knowledge that counteract the hegemonic role of information at formal institutions, Cossery's trickster heroes create an informal economy of knowledge that is useful within the Cairo in which they live. In Cossery's novels schools are sharply ridiculed through the exalted weapons of mockery and derision, strategies for overturning, and seeing through domination. Although the streets and the café are the most important thematic places of Cossery's novels, schools always serve as a launching point for questioning dominant idea structures and highlighting possibility in the margins.

In *The colors of infamy*, Cossery overtly ridicules the institutionalized form of the practice of education, and then delights humorously in its informal form. Characters pronounce their disdain of formalized education but at the same time utilize those very skills, creating a performative tension that acts on the level of the utterance (Austin, 1975). Ossama proclaims that school teaches nothing of value, "School taught me nothing but to read and to write, for me the fastest way to die of starvation" (LCL 69). In a biographical aside in the novel, Ossama reveals that he was drawn into the thieving trade after his father died and he failed to find gainful employment. The prophetic philosophe Karamallah holds formal education in complete disdain, calling 'anything that resembles a diploma' the "The most assured path to slavery" (LCL 84). These two utterances work on a performative level to create tension: there is a rupture between the official purposes of institutions of education to hail both national and economic subjects,

and the actual economic subjectivities that are formed when the characters' experiences with education and their place in the world deviate from the expected path. In the end, however, it is this skill which enables Ossama to out-wit the corrupt Suyleyman: he reads and uses to his advantage the incriminating letter found in the stolen wallet.

Similar upheavals are found in the story of *Proud Beggars*, where Gohar, a former university professor thinks back on his career as a life of indoctrination and lies. In coming to the realization that the production of knowledge is never without its political bias, especially within those disciplines that claim to expose scientific truths, Gohar casts doubt upon the disciplinary nature of knowledge and its performative powers to reshape the world:

History! Yet you could misrepresent history, granted. But geography! How could you lie about geography? Well, they had managed to pervert the harmony of the terrestrial globe, by tracing on it borders so fantastic and arbitrary that they changed from one year to another... Was it his destiny to be a respectable professor teaching the foul lies with which a privileged class oppressed an entire people? (p. 121)

In this moment of self-realization, Gohar grasps the performative power of knowledge production, and his complicity in creating the world that he describes as an academic.

While schools are peripheral yet important places in the works above from a material standpoint (they surface as topics of conversation, but do not function as sites of narrative framing), I would like to consider the significance of the school of beggars in Cossery's short story, "Danger de la fantaisie" or, "The danger of fantasy", which he published in the book of short stories *Les Hommes Oublies de Dieu* (The Men God Forgot), preceding his relocation to Paris. The story describes the ideological conflict that arises between Abou Chewali, a professor of begging who runs a school of beggars in the derelict Sentier de l'Enfant-qui-Pisse (the path of the pissing child), and Tewlik

Gad, a failed academic with bowel problems who espouses a more fantastical method of begging.

Everything about Abou Chewali and his school for beggars is a mirror image of a traditional schoolhouse. Standing in front of his pupils he calls, “come one and wake up, the lesson is starting” (DF 80). One by one, he calls his students to the front of the room to inspect or recite the previous day’s lessons, such as “How would you proceed with a client wearing a new suit?” and admonishing those who had washed their faces. Even in this first novel, Cossery de-centers traditional economic views, to the lives of the beggars and poor. Abou Chawali hears that Tewlik Gad has been promoting a new philosophy for begging which would use sympathy and acts of spectacle instead of the traditional school in which beggars are taught to use pity, filthy clothes, physical dismemberment and abjection.

Through the physical alley and schoolhouse of the beggars, Cossery illustrates two very different schools of thought. The two very different ideologies towards life are embodied by the two characters: Chewali, a self-declared realist, offended by what he sees as seeks out to find and put an end to “inhumane and fantastic way of begging, having no link to reality” and Tewlik Gad, who prefers to live in a world of fantasy:

The milieu where he lived filled him with horror. He has a distinctive disgust for the whole real and miserable world. He preferred to entertain himself with extraordinary situations, the domain of the imagination is diverse. There are fantastic things in life, and those are the things Gad loved.

Chewali, ever the realist, becomes a conspiracy theorist, thinking that Gad is going to open a school to rival his own, and take away his students, and end a legitimate occupation that has stood unchallenged for centuries. He confronts him one night as Gad is leaving his hovel and heading towards the public latrines farther into the city, accusing

his ideas of “sowing in us the harmful seed of fantasy”, the thought that life could be different for them. The fantasy that is dangerous underneath the story is the danger of each man’s approach to the world, one who thinks reality will never change, and the other who prefers not to think about it at all. The short story undermines the duality between the real and the imaginary and its association with modernity and progress. Cossery accomplishes his non-dualistic performance of Cairo through mapping different ideologies and their associated economic practices onto the space of the city. Abou Chewali’s urgency to confront and dispel notions of progress for the poor people of Cairo is met with the urgency with which Tewlik Gad is running towards the public toilets in the center of town, “The future is in the public latrines, at least for the moment”.

Cossery’s texts highlight the marginal and heterotopic places where knowledge is produced through the performative utterances of characters distancing themselves from hegemonic forms of knowing, and through the city spaces that materialize their resistance. Even prisons are presented as places of knowledge production for Ossama, because “It seemed to him that doing time in prison was an urgent necessity needed to fill a hole in his view of the world” (LCL 75). Contesting hegemonic knowledge structures seems to be the central task of Cossery’s work, through the medium of re-signified language. And when all the spaces of Cairo have been rewritten and reconfigured, the resulting imaginary is one that is the starting ground of possibility.

Performing Economic Possibility: Cossery and the ‘Capitalist’ Economy

Speaking from a vantage point that is conceptually between worlds, Cossery rearranges typical views of Cairo in order to challenge readers onto new political and

ontological ground.²⁷ This ontological reframing originates in the political imaginary of the city as a place of economic possibility, which is unearthed through practices of reading for difference.²⁸ In the following part of the paper I will show how, read through the lens of diverse economies, Cossery's stories can be seen as a resistance to hegemonic (and Western) forms of performing the world (and in particular, cities of the global South).

On work and idleness

Published in 1948, Cossery's fourth work and second novel *The Lazy Ones* (in the fertile valley)²⁹, is a surreal account a family living in a house that is steeped in sluggishness and sleep that destabilizes the values underpinning activity and inactivity. There is a rumor circulating in the village that one son of the lethargic patriarch, Galal, sleeps for months at a time. Only Serag is fascinated by the concept and problem of work, and the story unwinds as these opposing philosophies, sleep and work, collide in an effort to undo the dormancy that is protecting the house from the outside world.

The Lazy Ones is also Cossery's first and only novel that deals with Egypt's countryside, which is set in opposition to the city of Cairo, framing and countering the

²⁷ Ideas of political ontology taken from Mol, where ontology is "the real, the conditions of possibility that we live with. If the term 'ontology' is combined with 'politics' then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term politics works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested". p. 75

²⁸ Reading for difference is one of the fundamental tools wielded by Gibson-Graham in their project of re-thinking the economy. (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b)

²⁹ Les fainéants dans la vallée fertile- translated as "The Lazy Ones" in English by, the full title literally translates to read "The Lazy Ones In the Fertile Valley".

city from its margins. The novel opens with a scenic panorama, there are fig trees, crows, and a road on which pass both cars and mule carts, representatives of two worlds. The rural/urban comparisons throughout the book relate to the sleep/work duality, both of which become undone in Cosserien fashion. The landscape itself represents inactivity: “An implacable and weird solitude dominated all the countryside... congealed in a distressing torpor. Everywhere the earth was at rest...giving no sign of life” (LF 9). This image of the country at rest is soon troubled by the following confrontation. Serag is on his way to contemplate a factory at the edge of the village but is overtaken by the fatigue of his expedition and stops to rest. He is taken aback by a young boy, dressed in rags, ferociously hunting birds with a sling-shot. The scene disrupts his attempts at somnolence and stirs him to philosophize about the meaning of work:

But how to sleep before this absurd and annihilating vision? At the bottom, the thing that terrified him the most in this mad agitation was the mystery that it seemed to conceal – the mystery of a monstrous universe, filled with men overwhelmed by work and succumbing under the strain... (p. 9-10)

His thoughts first turn towards the negative side of what it means to work, for the majority of people living in the world. For an onlooker who does not have to work to be comfortable in life, as Serag and his family, observing the work, the fight of survival of the “labouring and trapped humanity”. In this vision, work is something that reflects the worst parts of life, it is absurd. Work appears as something that one does against all reason and all odds. It shortly becomes apparent, however and as always with Cossery, these musings on the part of Serag are laced with the utmost irony. For Serag, work is an abstract notion, and he spends his few waking hours philosophizing it into the world:

Serag had heard that men worked, but these were only stories that one told...He felt the desire to see one of those men who worked arduously with their hands, and who carried the stigmata of painful labour... But was this enraged child a

worker? Serag tried to decide in which category of workers he belonged. But the child's behavior escaped all classification; he belonged to a sort of desperate and fallen humanity, more tenacious in its battle for subsistence... he found his whole conception of the world shaken ...To sell birds! Certainly it was a business as worthy as any other. Serag realized this perfectly. But even so, it seemed a little fantastic to him, a little too frivolous...(p. 10, 14)

In this opening passage, Cossery sets up the primary dualism, which the story will proceed to unravel: the differences between work and sleep, activity and inactivity, life and death. Serag is fascinated by what it means to work, but grapples with the concept as it is presented to him by the allure of the factory. This turn in philosophy represents a refutation of the absurd, the realization that work must have some meaning, and that the definition of work is expansive, including even things like selling birds- an occupation that Serag admits with surprise. The occupation of selling birds troubles Serag because it defies all system of categorization and classification, unlike formal occupations that happen in sanctioned spaces, like the factory. The humor with which Cossery describes Serag's mental love affair with factory work rivals his praise of inaction:

For Serag could only conceive of serious work in the inspiring atmosphere of machinery in action. He had a completely romantic idea of the operation of a factory... awed by the grandeur of work accomplished in common by thousands of men. (p. 11)

This factory is emblematic of many of the themes of the novel in that it is never built; just like Serag, for all of his valiant and noble efforts, succumbs to the numbness of sleep.

A typically Cosserien inversion, the opening scene juxtaposes an incomplete factory where no work is done, and the work of a young boy who kills and sells pigeons. The first instance deconstructs the space of the factory as a place of work. In textual analysis, the factory is a symbol that can be said to represent the type of work pushed by

Western forces of capitalism, or the worker and the state in communism.³⁰ In this passage, Cossery works the “slippage and excess” (Roelvink 1999, 333) of the factory signifier through Serag’s fantasies. In this story, the work of capitalism remains stagnant at the outskirts of Cairo.³¹ The city is produced as a space in opposition to the marginality of the factory and the village in the country. In *The Lazy Ones*, the specific location of the country hamlet is not given; rather the location is defined against the city. It is not a place in its own right but only in relation to that which it is on what it borders. Against the somnolent backdrop of the countryside, or perhaps a kind of bedroom community on Cairo’s periphery, the tiring work of the rag-boy with the slingshot creates a rupture in both Serag’s and the reader’s mind about what constitutes “real” work and where it occurs.

Albert Cossery himself was a self-proclaimed city man, claiming that the country did not interest him because “I can not critique trees”(Rossi 1991). The countryside that is the setting for *The Lazy Ones* does not just represent a remote location of subsistence workers, but a place on the margins, on the cusp of the outward moving city. When Serag and the young boy reach the factory, only to find out that it is still not being worked on, the boy asks him, “why don’t you look for a job in the city if you want to work so much?” (LF, 21). But even the journey to the city proves too much for Serag’s weak and tired body. The city is figured as a place where jobs are more abundant than in the small

³⁰ Roelvink (1999) makes a similar interpretation on the role of the factory in the film *The take*, “the take forcefully gives presence to an alternative economy through an economic discourse that is already well known and, ironically, has been made powerful through capitalist representations: the discourse of factory production...this dramatization of factory production, so strongly associated with the capitalist economy, is full of slippage and excess, not adding up to or contained by capitalist discourse” (332-333).

³¹ this in itself is an inversion of the depiction of the city (and of its capitalist economy) as an outward-exanding, landing devouring entity.

town, but what of work? On his way home to rest after his taxing excursion, Serag observes commuters getting off a bus after a day's work in the city, but questions whether they look miserable enough to actually have been working:

A bus passed, stopping at a nearby station. Some men got out and walked without haste toward their homes. No doubt they were coming back from work, but from what sort of work? Serag observed them with a certain contempt. They didn't seem harassed, but rather sad. They must have been sleeping in their dusty offices at the bottom of some corporation. (p. 28)

So in this first chapter of Cossery's surrealist novel, in addition to an incomplete factory with no workers, we are introduced to the imagined space of a corporation in Cairo where employees sleep, rather than work. This enlargement of Cairene city space by calling out its hinterland subversively explodes the cities boundaries, an expansion of his previous treatment of downtown Cairo. Serag's conversations and inner monologues as exposed by the narrator erode the location and activities that can be considered "real" work, dispersing the notion of the city as economic epicenter of the country.

Back in the comatose confines of the family home, the notion of work is subjected to further surreal dispersion and de-territorialization. Rafik, Serag's brother (who is *almost* an engineer) comically suggests to his Uncle Mustapha that he should sell his sighs to the radio industry so that "your sighs would be heard around the world. I like your sighs; it's as if the world should be bored along with you...I'm sure the radio would pay you well" (LF). The fanciful thought of making money by sighing on the radio is risible- parodying at once the dualism of labor and listlessness. Another typical trope on work spaces in Cossery's novels is the empty shop. From the description of shopkeepers in Old Cairo in *Proud Beggars* to this following conversation between Serag and an owner of an empty shop in *The lazy ones*, the empty shop is an insurgent image that

contextualizes and prefigures “spaces of lack”. Serag approaches the owner of the empty shop and asks him how business is going (overstated irony, given there is nothing in the shop), to which the shop owner replies “Allah curse business and those who invented it!” (LF 25). They move onto the topic of the empty shop and discuss different possibilities of things that could potentially fill it: “What do you think of selling radishes? They’re beautiful—radishes! But it’s still not right. Just the same – think of filling this shop with radishes. It would be amusing.” (LF 27-28). Just as the idea of selling sighs on the radio broadcasts a global snicker at notions of work and commodification, the commentary of filling an empty shop with radishes can be read as destabilizing the boundaries that define the space that constitutes work, and thus the bounded spaces to be filled with things that can be counted (such as radishes) that are thought to constitute the space of the economy.

Alternative spaces: city, economy, and nation

The underlying economic themes in Cossery’s novels are impossible to ignore. Just as Cossery undermines and inverts the way we imagine Cairo as a city, his stories lend to a drastically different picture of Cairo as economy and Egypt as nation. Through linguistic and narrative deterritorializations of Cairo’s city-spaces, deconstructing traditional readings of the city and of the economic exchanges (different modes of production) that take place there, reterritorialization of that space as a site of diverse choices, Cossery opens a field of incredible possibilities and potentialities. Cossery’s subversive engagement with the discourses of capitalism and Orientalism creates a strong imaginary of economic difference that could help undermine their grip on Western imaginations. Through the portrayal of the margins of Cairo, both its city and economic

spaces, Cossery undermines notions of what is inside/outside of the economy, the city, and the state.

Through an examination of the diverse economies present in Cossery's tales, and their relationship to city spaces, we can attempt to locate a new political ontology for reading Cossery where economic possibilities exist. Turning the inside out, in a sense, in a process that undoes the work that made the economy to begin with, as Timothy Mitchell states, that "to create the economy meant also to create the non-economic" (Mitchell 1998, 92). In the imaginary resulting from Cossery's fiction, 'the economy' is emptied of its categorical contents- subversively decentering dominant practices of capitalism, and centering 'other' ways of doing economy. The result is that instead of reading the landscape of Cossery's fiction as being ravaged by "some faceless, nameless thing that spreads its domination; in one fell swoop it produces factories from the bowels of the earth; it digs mines; it allows cities to be criss-crossed with the scars made by vehicles" (Fourny 1993,165), the reader encounters the omnipresence of the people of Egypt who cleverly trump crazed traffic with creative entrepreneurship set against the capital of incomplete factories of unknown ownership. For the reader, Cairo is no longer synonymous with the nation of Egypt, or economic statistics of the city, but as a place of diverse practices and possibilities, as well as a site of ethical negotiation.

If the economy is discursively graphed onto the city, it is even more certainly fettered to the national realm. Timothy Mitchell, one of the leading experts on Egypt's colonial and neocolonial economic history, analyses the connection between how economy becomes 'fixed' in discourse, and as a result the actual bounded territory that it encompasses in his book, *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, and modernity*

(Mitchell 2002, 209). The idea of fixing the economy is an important one, because it shows how the discipline and idea of something called the ‘economy’ is a relatively recent invention and how it necessitates bounded space and things to count. The problem with the idea of the ‘Capitalist Economy’ is that it subsumes any economic practices that do not fit the description of the capitalist mode of production; it counts certain economic acts, while necessarily excluding others. Mitchell expounds upon how exactly this happened in the case of Egypt, describing the political process in which the idea of a capitalist economy came to exist in Egypt without telling the “story of capitalism”:

The politics of economic reform was based upon a fabrication. It depended on the idea that the economy existed as a space that could be surveyed and mapped... It imagined the economy as a territory located, transcribed, enumerated, and reorganized... The numbers representing national income and output, consumption and savings, employment and productivity, deficits and debt, whatever their degree of reliability, were taken to refer to processes that in principle formed a finite and mappable object. (287)

Mitchell hones in on the construction of the realm of the ‘economy’ as Cartesian space that is an empty container to be defined by the economic ‘things’ that fill it up, thus revealing the produced nature of the economy and the problems that accompany it:

Some of the problems with this fabrication are well known. The most frequently mentioned is the impossibility of measuring what is called the informal or parallel sector of the economy. In Egypt the household- or neighborhood-based production and distribution of small-scale goods and systems of revenue and regulation, represents a large but unknown proportion of the country’s productive life. (p. 287)

The economy of Cairo is a realm that overlays, or gets mapped onto, the spaces of the city.³² If, in this sense, the city is articulated as a geographic space that can be filled with political or economic actions, Cossery’s re-written Cairo performs the overflow, the

³² In an explanation on the early development of cities, Lefebvre argues that the mercantile city “was grafted onto the political city” (Lefebvre 2003, 13).

informal and not-yet-counted parts of the economy. It makes those parts visible and directly opposes the assumption that the informal or parallel sector are small scale, or that they are in fact outside of the capitalist economy.

The city as Cossery performs it, a “field of tensions”, displays what Gibson-Graham call the “diverse landscape of the economy” (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b). It is a universe where non-capitalist livelihoods are valorized and where the economy is exploded to become a “site of ethical decision-making and practice” (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010) through the dilemmas of practicing different of economic subjectivities. Writing Cairo and in the process un-writing Cairo’s ‘economy’, Cossery accomplishes a rethinking that aligns with the work of Gibson-Graham: “Rereading the economy does not mean simply investigating the interstices and bringing minority practices to light; it involves *opening up the entire economic space to resignification*” (Community Economies Collective 2001, 95). And this is exactly what Cossery does through the use of role reversals and highlighting the alternative economies thriving in the margins. The imaginary is so subversive because it questions all classification into formal/informal livelihoods by undoing the performative work that went into creating them, showing every category to consist of extreme variation.

In addition to thieves, creative traffic entrepreneurs, and sigh sellers, Cossery also presents Cairo as the place of work for beggars, wandering merchants, barbers, and cigarette butt scavengers. The ubiquity of alternative economic actions and subjectivities problematizes the space of work in the city. Across the board, work-spaces are represented as unstructured, occupying every space of the city and transcending all efforts of categorization. Every possible part of the city is imbued with new meaning

through the diverse livelihood practices: from begging, thieving, and garbage collecting in the public spaces, to the alternative forms of teaching that take place in unusual private realms, and the sphere of the home. Karamallah's informal tutoring in the family mausoleum is one example, as are the houses of prostitution that function as another common topos throughout the novels.

The central places of work are economic heterotopias in Foucault's sense of the term: prisons, brothels, and alleyways. Foucault describes heterotopias as "counter-sites" which are "effectively enacted utopia[s] in which the real sites... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 24). This is an effective description of the sites of Cossery's imaginary. For example, in *Proud Beggars*, the brothel stands out as an alternative economic microcosm: "Naila's bedroom was like all the other bedrooms where the girls carried on their work of prostitution..." and where the scribe Gohar went to offer services of letter-writing and account keeping in exchange for small payments (PB 94). Cossery's performance of the city space as heteropia to the formal economy, and of all city spaces as multiple and isotopic, resonates with J.K. Gibson-Graham's project of reading the space of the economy for difference.

Even the language Cossery uses to describe different forms of work and workspaces is a counter-penetration of capitalist and orientalist discourses. In Cossery's imaginary, beggars have 'clients' and can also be 'professeurs de mendicite' "professors of begging". Thieves have clientele, and the ability to take 'jours ferries' (holidays), as opposed to capitalist thieves and government ministers who are obligated to 'Lie everyday, even on holidays'. (LCL 71). In *Proud Beggars*, Gohar reflects that "Amid so many real absurdities, the act of begging seemed like any other work—the only

reasonable work at that. He always occupied the same place, with the dignity of a bureaucrat behind his desk” (PB p. 13). Also in *Proud Beggars*, El Kordi (a bureaucrat in the Government’s Ministry of Public Works), farms out his work so that he can spend his days fantasizing about a revolution that will never happen. For “How could he reflect at ease on problems of universal importance in front of these dusty, congealed figures devoted to unending slavery? To protest against this injustice, El Kordi abstained from practically all work...” (PB 85).³³ Cossery juxtaposes these two idle bureaucrats, one who performs the work of begging, and the other who does not work at all, in a similar way that he creates thieving as a category that transcends the divide of legality. Further, El Kordi’s inaction coalesces multiple latent subjectivities, one as a legalized and institutionalized beggar, living off of the government dole, and that of a capitalist entrepreneur, who “farms out” his work for a “moderate payment” (PB page 86).³⁴ Just as Mitchell shows how the economy came to be through the performative work of categories and control, by counter penetrating the discourses of capitalism and orientalism, Cossery’s wields those same discourses in order to perform “different work” (Spivak 1974).

Unsurprisingly, it is through the performance of diverse economic actions in his novels that Cossery finally deconstructs ideas of patrimony. For present day Egypt, Cossery paints the picture of a nation whose frontiers (social, political, and cultural) have

³³ The role of fantasy, especially political fantasy and obsession with revolution is another important theme in Cossery’s novels and is another article altogether.

³⁴ Further proof of his reluctance to conform to the discursive hegemony of Capitalism, Cossery never actually uses the word to describe the economic relationships that his character’s actions confuse. However, In *The Jokers* (not included in the works studied here) a revolutionary figure questions “did you think I would bring my shoes to a capitalist cobbler?” pg. 111.

been exploded by neocolonialism and state capitalism, but eroded even more so from below, as with the defiant beggars and the triumphant thieves of *The colors of infamy*. If the economy is, as Mitchell states, defined by bounding “the geographic space of the nation-state” (Mitchell 1998, 89) and counting certain exchanges there within, both ideas are interrupted by the work of performing economic difference in Cossery’s Egypt. Heroes like Ossama’s father wait for government medals in solidarity with the people as their homes fall ramshackle around them, and legalized thieves or *voleurs légalisés* like Atif Suleyman, are complicity tied to the powers of the state. However, Ossama, Karamallah, and Nimr learn through their mockery of Suleyman that “infamy has neither borders, or frontiers” (LCL 104). In the final episode of the text, after Suleyman has been coaxed into a discussing his beliefs about how buildings ought to be built for only limited lifespan (unlike the pyramids whose “*place est prise pendant des cycles*”), he says : “I am only but a simple servant of the nation” to which Karamallah responds “and the nation will thank you for it”, intimating that the people are not duped, and that the power alliances that support people like Suleyman can be unmade in an instant, through deconstructive thought.

Reading Resistance: Politics of (In)difference; Politics of Possibility

In part one of this thesis I make the argument that geographers encounter fiction and its world making representations differently. Like those in the field of literary studies who are seeking to understand the ways that literature makes political interventions in the world, literary geographers should be at the forefront in recognizing fiction as a constitutive part of how we understand, perform, and write the world (hence

geo-graphies, world-writing). Not only does literature know things, but it also questions what it is to know, or as in the words of Saunders, “Literature gets us to think anew, it knows about the ‘other’ and motivates us to contemplate different spatial and social orders, which would otherwise remain concealed or repressed”. In this way I consider Cossery’s works as fictional rereadings (*reproductions*, *representations*) of Cairo, of how the Western readers relate to the ‘other’ (or so-called developing cities and economies) in thought, and indeed the result is a vastly different spatial and social/economic order. His humorous, lively, and at once *vraisemblable* and surreal depictions of the diverse economies of Cairo act as a form of resistance. But resistance to what?

Although Cossery is widely read, there are only a handful of scholarly publications addressing his work. Among these, *Lazyness and Technology with the Storyteller of Cairo* by J.J. Fourny at from the journal *Yale French Studies* special issue on “Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, and Nomadisms” is the only one available to Anglophone audiences. Fourny reads the predominance of sleep in Cossery’s novels as his development of a “politics of indifference” that “resists modern technology and consumerism” (Fourny 1993), but that offers nothing to combat them except mockery and idleness: “Cossery’s characters do not indulge in the aggressive rejection of the West, nor in campaigns for ‘liberation,’ and even less in those of ‘progressive’ regimes; rather they express indifference and even disdain” (Fourny 1993, 163). Instead of reading indifference and sleep in Cossery’s work as part of a dualistic representation created to breakdown common structural readings of Egypt, Fourny sees sleep as *the* dominant theme and work as only conflated with modernity- and modernity conflated

with capitalism (Fourny, 1993,164). He sees the main question as ‘nothing less than that of technology and of the responses that dominated peoples can offer’ (Fourny 1993, 165).

I would argue that for Cossery, laziness is potently and politically charged. That the question of work is as an important question as sleep. Many have commented on how the typical Cosserien antihero is without a doubt another version of himself. Cossery, lived in a hotel room in Paris from 1951 onward, with only books and a few pairs of dandified clothing, living the philosophy he espoused, a “philosophy of minimal effort”.³⁵ The resistance found in Cossery’s work is not simply a resistance of Western powers, or something called ‘neoliberalism’, or even a resistance of “the modern technological world and its consumerism.” although there are elements of all the above (Fourny 1993, 163). It is a resistance against Western totalizing ideas of the economy, and offers a profoundly subversive way rethinking the other.

In fact, an earlier title for Cossery’s last novel, *The Colors of Infamy*, was “The Latest News from Cairo” (Gazio 1999). This title, although ultimately changed, relates facets that set this last novel apart from his previous works. The ‘latest news’ restates the slippage between the news as stories, and stories as a way of knowing. This is significant in several ways. First, it is his last novel, whereas all of his previous works seem to be set in the Cairo of his youth, the last is most undoubtedly set in (or nearer to) modern day. Secondly, centering on the idea of Cairo, as he hears of it from afar, in the news, searches through the form of this story to rework the ‘news’ or question the knowledge that is too often seen as solely possessed by those with power. Just like the *mise-en-abyme* in the opening of *Proud Beggars*, the “news” and storytelling are directly compared. He

³⁵ “philosophie du moyen effort”

presents his fiction as a sort of literary-knowing of Cairo, with the story a way of passing on knowledge that is completely different from the varieties of fact, factoid, and fiction in the news.

Unmooring and un-graphing the economy and nation from the spaces of Cairo of everyday life, Cossery puts forth a political project that is not so much about indifference as difference. There is indifference at the level of recognizing structures, choosing not to attack certain ‘powers’ and world orders such as neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, and instead focusing upon the openings, the overflow, the informal. In undoing Western notions of economy, Cossery reverses the direction of Orientalism, and contravenes in our imagined geographies of the East as a place that is either in need of, or being swallowed by development.³⁶ The inverse exoticism performed in Cossery’s fiction does not try to dissolve or deconstruct otherness, it instead performs the Oriental nature of Cairo and Egypt as a ground full of potential because of those differences. In 1991, the French journalist Rossi conducted a televised interview with Cossery in his haunts in Paris, but also took him back to Egypt and filmed interviews in the Mirror Café and on the streets. Pierre Rossi asks Cossery to expound on the political nature of his works, calling them social-political novels, books of revolt. Cossery answers that he wrote revolt into,

every phrase- because I could not write one sentence without a dose of rebellion. Without it, it would not interest me. But I have said all this in my books- the *l'imposture universelle* [universal masquerade/deception]- I show this so that those who read my books can free themselves [disengage] from this masquerade, and all of my characters are disengaged- outside of the circle.

³⁶ The romantic authors have been analyzed by Edward Said (Orientalism, 1979) as part of a Western discourse that creates ‘imagined geographies’ of the Orient, in effect ‘othering’ the East.

Cossery's works challenge readers to new political and ontological ground, to rethink their conceptions of Cairo, Egypt, and in turn their own subjectivities. Through his performative reformulations, Cossery puts forth a theory of resistance by non-cooperation, refusing to give discursive and explanatory power to ideas of the economy and the Orient.

By reading his fiction alongside ideas of the production of space, everyday life, and diverse economies, Cossery's fiction challenges readers to become different kinds of economic subjects, and by extension different kinds of national subjects. In closing, I leave the reader with this final fictive instance from *Proud Beggars*. It is a conversation in a café between El Kordi and Gohar, who debate the merits of revolution. El Kordi questions Gohar's political indifference, to which he replies: "I simply refuse to collaborate with this immense charade." El Kordi responds, "But an entire people cannot allow themselves this negative attitude. They are obliged to work for a living. How can they not collaborate?" To which Gohar retorts, "Let them all become beggars. When we have a country where the people are composed entirely of beggars, then you will see what will become of this arrogant domination" (PB 148). In Cossery, place and subject are not just static formations but sites of becoming, and often it involves becoming a beggar, which is offered as a path of resistance and peace.

For literary geography, the study of Cossery's fiction is an example of how literature can present openings for politics, and how the imaginary produced through the mastery of storytelling is performative. Cossery's each sentence is a performance of revolt and an enactment of breaking down hegemonic discourses and should be read as such. It begs of the literary geographer to approach reading fiction in an ethical way. In

his fiction, Cossery proposes stories as a way of decentered knowing of the city, for as de Certeau claims “where the map cuts up, the story traverses”.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Introduction

If literary geography is to be a meeting place of place, story, and politics, then it is essential that the process of reading a text's geography be considered a performative, political, and ethical moment. My reading of the works discussed in this thesis was influenced by a specific, geographic interest in the importance of Cossery's representation of the city and economic spaces of Cairo. In the introduction to my article on Cossery, I summarized the current state of scholarship in literary geography as opening new directions for scholarship, regarding literary texts as word-events with their own geographical knowledge and spatial labors.

I proposed the practice of reading for performance and the idea of ethical reading as a way to re-invigorate the conversation between literary geography and a wider academic community. Through my in-depth reading of Cossery, I would like to consider how this approach could give new meaning, insight and energy to the different interdisciplinary worlds it interacts with, namely to the diverse economies school within Economic geography, and to literary studies. And finally, if Albert Cossery's fiction can be read as performing a Cairo that is full of resistance and possibility, I address how I see his works becoming part of conversations about the current events that have transpired since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution in January of this year.

First and foremost, my reading challenges one traditional reading of Cossery in which Egypt is but a memory and ruin of the author's past, where what is meant to be

resisted is modernity under all of its guises, and the preferred method of resistance is idleness and sleep. By focusing on how Cossery inverts and cross-fertilizes all areas of the city of Cairo and its citizens' everyday economic practices through his subversive use of language, the resistance that emerges is completely different and full of possibility. The streets, cafes, homes, and places to study and work in Cossery's Cairo are both isotopia and heterotopia. The meaning of each is contingent upon the other because it is the diversity and layering of actions that creates both. Cossery's transgression of boundaries and categories radically re-orders all parts of Cairo.

Considering city spaces as sites of production (of space) reveals unremitting flows of economic plurality, blurring boundaries between livelihood, indolence, somnolence, and industry broadly represented. The effect of this linguistic slippage, accomplished through action and idleness, is a complete unmooring of economic and political categories, an utter subversion of the capitalocentric and orientalist imaginaries. Framed theoretically by Gibson-Graham and Lefebvre, I read Cossery's resistance as a refusal partake in dominant discourses, refusal by "non-cooperation". Instead of reading this as a politics of indifference, my ethical reading sees it as a portrayal of economic possibility, which undergoes complete re-signification at every level – from the subject- thief (or beggar) to state.

Intersections with Literary Studies

One obvious area of relevance for this study is a continued engagement of literary geography with literary studies. Ortiz-Robles is one author whose work on the performativity of the novel has really resonated with my project on Cossery. Reading

Ortiz-Robles' (2007) article "Local Speech, Global Acts: Performative Violence and the Novelization of the World" contributed heavily to my thinking about the performative power of novels being "its power to do *anything* with words" (p. 14). In this article Ortiz-Robles queries what it means to say that a novel is performative, especially in the case where novels have been said to perform communities and gather national identities. If we agree novels are in some sense performative, meaning they create the world that they describe and not just represent it,:

the questions arises as to what or who renders them inactive or, if indeed still capable of performing acts, who or what endeavors to make them remain "unacknowledged" in their capacity as world-historical agents. What or who limits the novel's agency? What or who determines the exact purview of its performativity? (p. 14).

And it seems to me that it is partially our readings, the readings of academics, that decide the power of literature to create the possibility of other worlds. This is where the act of ethical reading comes into play.

It was these haunting questions by Ortiz-Robles that signaled to me that it was not enough to just recognize and conduct a performative reading of Cossery, but an ethical one as well. As I understood it, an ethical reading would in part resist what Ortiz-Robles calls "the performative violence of novelizing the world". As geographers, continually fascinated by globalization and other twentieth century phenomenon, we should carefully attend to the stories that we tell about the rise of the novel, and how those stories influence our readings of a text's content. Ortiz-Robles draws from the example of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) and Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998), ironically pulling one example from each field: literary studies and literary geography (although Moretti is technically a literary historian, his works are adopted by

literary geographers as one way to do literary geography). Ortiz-Robles juxtaposes the project of these two authors, saying, “while Anderson may be said to novelize the nation, Moretti attempts to nationalize the novel” (p. 2). He points out the very specific dangers in proclaiming the novel as performative, especially when making claims linking the rise of the novel with colonial and post-colonial rules and then capitalism:

From its “origins” in Britain and France, the novel travels around the globe in step with capitalism: where there burgeons a local bourgeoisie, there the novel (and the modern nation-state) will thrive. In this scenario, the novel enters into an all too familiar narrative of economic development in which “advanced” and thus presumably global Western culture provides a ready-made form that “underdeveloped” or “developing” non-Western cultures can then adapt to local content. (p. 4)

He warns against common conceptions of the novel as a literary form that is bound with (a particular metanarrative of) Western history and the violence this type of reading performs against literary works.

This critique seems particularly poignant for geographers interested in world literature. In my discussion of Cossery as a storyteller, I referenced Walter Benjamin (1968), who ties the rise of the novel with modernity and the fall of storytelling. Joanne Sharpe (2006), a literary geographer working with the exilic fiction of Salman Rushdie, theorizes the novel as a form that is “associated with a particular period of Western history, that of modern nation-state building” and reads the relationship between Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* form and content as an act of:

subvert[ing] the novelistic style, forcing it to represent the hybridity that his protagonists display...Rushdie recolonises the Western mode of representation to tell of the ambiguity, rather than the singularity, of subjectivity. The structure of the text therefore mirrors the structure of the world that Rushdie has created. (p. 123)

The ethics of responsibility that guides our readings is the most prominent intersection of literary geography and literary studies that I explored in this thesis. It is also a terrain could be explored in greater detail in future works.³⁷

Intersections with Diverse Economies Scholarship

The approach of performative and ethical reading of Cossery's fiction also intersects with the growing body of work in the diverse economies scholarship. This field was pioneered by economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham's work on rethinking the economy (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006). One of the major projects of Gibson-Graham's work was to develop a language of economic diversity, "This language expands our economic vocabulary, widening the identity of the economy to include all of those practices excluded or marginalized" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 60). In order to arrive at this point, it was first necessary to deconstruct the language of capitalocentrism, which they did in *The End of Capitalism (as we know it)*(1996). This thesis obviously intersects with the diverse economies studies by showing the usefulness of Gibson-Graham's work not only for economic geographers looking to rethink the economies of places, but for literary geographers and other literary critics looking for a language of diversity with which to read world literature in an era of globalization.

The work of Gibson-Graham balanced my use of Lefebvre in reading Cossery's Cairo: where the latter sees Capitalism always everywhere producing the city's spaces, the former are interested in everything that *is not* capitalism. Lefebvre's (1991) obsession

³⁷ Derek Attridge (2004a, 2004b) is one prominent academic working in this field.

with seeking out specific ways that capitalism produces city spaces leads him down a rabbit hole of capitalocentrism, where, Orientalist in nature, he theorizes the forces of capitalism as transforming the world and completely ridding it of magic, diversity, and possibility:

What used to spark of beauty—the primitive diversity of everyday man, the generosity of his nature, the many faceted local eccentricities, the brutal, swarming tumult—that beauty has disappeared. It has become congealed into so many museum pieces floating on the muddy ocean of destitution. What disappointments await the naïve traveler to the famous cities of the fabulous East! Were all those old story-tellers lying? Did they see things differently then? Can things and people have changed so much? The eagerly awaited wonders, the marvelous surprises, the ruins, the monuments, the stories from the Thousand and One Nights, the folksongs and dances- they are no longer enough to colour the spectacle and transform it for us. Naples, Baghdad, Calcutta: the same sun shines down on the same rags, the same running sores. The myths have disappeared, the rituals and magic spells have lost their glamour. All we can see now are the destitute masses, and the ignoble apparatus of domination which lies over them, the unlovely art of power. There is nothing left to seduce us. (p. 44)

Lefebvre's focus on capitalistic production of space in cities has a limiting effect, othering the 'famous cities of the fabulous east' and proclaiming them dominated by the "ignoble apparatus" of capitalism. When ideas are given explanatory power and the ability to make the effects they name, the result is erasure of difference and alternatives. Yi-fu Tuan recognizes this danger when he lays out a narrative-descriptive approach for literary geography: "Indeed, in social science, a theory can be so highly structured that it seems to exist in its own right, to be almost 'solid,' and thus able to cast (paradoxically) shadow over the phenomena that it is intended to illuminate" (Tuan 1991, 686). These ideas resonate with the project of ethical reading I have proposed for literary geographers.

Cossery's Cairo and the Cairo of the Arab Spring

In approaching Cossery's work, I have been reluctant to call on the recent events of the "Arab Spring" taking place in Egypt and across North Africa and the Middle East. For one thing, the novels were obviously written a significant amount of time before the events. And for another, they have had limited influence in Egypt (despite movie makers efforts). Also, in an attempt to stray from geography's use of literature as examples or explanation for events and processes we see in the world and instead focus on the possibilities it opens into other worlds, any foray into recent events could be read as an explanatory or representative reading. But despite this, and given the timely resurgence of interest in Cossery's works in French and in English translation, there is still great resonance between the Cairo of Cossery's fiction and today's Cairo of revolution and reform.

Cossery (and other Egyptian authors) have already been dragged into the popular conversation of the uprising. Robyn Creswell (2011b), an editor of *The Paris Review*, and popular critic has been one of the prominent voices to bring Cossery into the conversation:

Now seems like a propitious time to rescue Cossery's writings from oblivion. A novelist who belongs to two cultures at once is not such a rarity, and even seems increasingly the norm. And the themes of Cossery's later fiction—political violence, paranoia, real estate—strike a contemporary chord.

So, even if I am reluctant to call on Cossery to partially explain the mood of Egyptians leading up to the revolution, that does not mean other readers are so cautious. In fact, I would hope that my own reading of Cossery could add to this conversation. Creswell's article even generated this reader response: "Thankfully, Creswell has given us the literary context for the upheavals in the society that [Sonallah] Ibrahim and Cossery have

addressed for years, and that the wider world now needs to understand” from Annan Ben Abdullah in London.

Cairo’s revolution was encouraged by the successful ousting of Tunisia’s repressive government, but the frustration and contempt that the people of Cairo displayed for their government’s years of corruption and repression can clearly be seen in Cossery’s political satire of government ministers at all levels the hierarchy. Cossery’s condemnation of the corruption of those in power is plain in his works, and he benefited from his position of writing outside Egypt in freedom to critique. The plot of *The colors of infamy* revolves around a corrupt government minister who is complicit in the killings of citizens by the shady buildings of Suleyman. There is verisimilitude in Cossery’s depictions of the unemployed masses in Cairo, especially youth with university degrees unable to find jobs. Another theme in Cossery’s novels that strikes a chord with Mubarak’s presidency is the only thinly veiled presence of an authoritarian police state that uses torture to rule. In the novel *Proud Beggars*, Nour El-dine and the police use torture methods to try and find the culprit of the prostitute’s murder. An article from *Harper’s Magazine* February issue addresses the works of Egyptian authors Sonallah Ibrahim and Albert Cossery in light of the revolution. Creswell (2011b), points exactly to these same grievances:

The problem with the regime’s slogans is that for too many Egyptians “modernization” means endless traffic jams and gated suburbs; “democratic reform” means bribery and fraudulent elections; and “social order” means the policeman’s club, or the interrogator’s electric prod.

Even if what interested me in Cossery’s works was his representations of the possible and the performative, it seems as if the Egypt that he wrote displays a great amount of verisimilitude. In an article for the New York Times, Creswell points out that the

protestors took inspiration from the nation's literary heritage, especially from the poetry of the poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, recognizing the importance of the revolution's cultural inspirations other than Twitter and Facebook (Creswell 2011a). If I cite Creswell's work to exclusion of others it is because he is the most prominent intellectual bringing Cossery's work up in a public forum.

Another parallel one could draw between Cossery's works and the protests for democracy in Egypt is that of the importance of alternative tactics to violence, such as humor, derision, and mockery. Along with calm civil obedience (and some violence), the crowds mixed in heavy doses of taunting their maligned ruler. A common theme in Cossery's works is the superiority of ridicule to violence in the face of domination. The peaceful crowds of Tahrir square "specialized in the invention of slogans that are witty, abusive and aimed directly at the president, e.g., "Mubarak, you rhinoceros (*kharteet*), / get out, get out, you pest (*ghateet*)" (Creswell 2011a). This taunt could have come straight out of one of Cossery's stories, where he uses puns on donkeys and asses to satirize public officials.

But in Cossery, revolution always comes as a cautionary tale, even when it is waged with wit and words. The last line of flight that begs to be made when considering Cossery's Egypt and current events is well exemplified in *The jokers* (1964), where the main characters plot to remove the governor of a small seaside town of lower Egypt by a derisive campaign of over-the-top praise. The governor is a corrupt authoritarian, who had the audacity to outlaw begging in the town. The wise schoolteacher Urrfy points out that the militants' tactics of excessive exaltation may actually result in ousting the governor from power, "But I wonder if Heykal really wants to take down the governor, I

wonder if, to be happy, Heykal doesn't actually need the governor. What do you think?" (Cossery *the Jokers*, need page). Cossery recognizes the role of desire to take down specific individuals as a somewhat exhaustible gathering point for revolutions. What will happen now that Mubarak is gone?

The most poignant way that Cossery's project of resistance could speak to the situation in Egypt and elsewhere is to acknowledge the productive role of 'inaction' in changing the world. For the Egyptian people to oust the Mubarak regime from power, they had to bring the country's formal economy to a screeching halt. And that halt was productive, but not a productivity measured by econometrics. In a sense, this can be said to follow Cossery's philosophy of resistance, where non-cooperation is the answer to arrogant domination, calling on Egypt to become a country of beggars: "I always said that I write so that the ones that read my works will not show up to their offices the next day" (Cossery and Laye 2001). Just two days before I drafted this conclusion, on March 23 2011, the Egyptian cabinet passed a new law outlawing any protests and strikes "that hampers or delays work at any private or public establishments" (New Egyptian Law). As certain factions of the country try to go back to business as usual, perhaps some will decide to continue to occupy the city's public spaces, and not show up for work.

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