Space, Place and Power, Week 4: Reconciling the two approaches.

1. After exploring the politico-economic dimension of space and phenomenological approaches to space, we now turn to texts reconciling the two approaches – that is to say, texts that link the way space is perceived and conceived to the way in which it is endowed with particular functions that enable it to carry dimensions of (social, economic or political) power.
2. One’s perception of space may be altered and defined by their immediate surroundings; Fanon thus describes the veil of the Algerian woman as creating a new, specific phenomenology of space. The veil can be seen as protective; it “covers the body and disciplines it, tempers it, at the very time when it experiences its phase of greatest effervescence. The veil protects, reassures, isolates” (Fanon, 1963:59). By doing so, it separates, to a degree, the woman who wears it from the world which surrounds her, acting as a screen. The woman’s surroundings are therefore not directly experienced; rather, they are constructed through a protective layer. In turn, the presence of the woman in the street is not directly perceived by the men that surround her, but rather conceived, as her face and body are not made visible.
This way of perceiving space is fiercely defended, at first, against the attacks of French colonialism, which endeavours to make women present in the same space as men who “want to see” (Fanon, 1963:44); however, as the political context increasingly demands female participation in the rebellion against the colonial power, the veil is transformed as a means, an instrument. Deprived of her veil, the Algerian woman can pretend to be a European; she may walk through space unseen, precisely because she *is* seen and not covered. She thus gains access to a larger space, something that allows her to carry out missions for the FLN.

As the French, however, start noticing her presence, she can no longer reveal herself and once again, her appearance is transformed. From “slim and disciplined”, her body, wrapped in the veil, must be “squashed, shapeless” in order to conceal the bombs, arms, plans or communications she may be carrying. Her particular dress, despite making her visible in the streets, allows her to carry out missions invisibly, whilst pretending to be running errands; the veil becomes a weapon. Fanon thus demonstrates that the Algerian women’s capacity to articulate her visibility and the spaces she inhabits contributes to making her a link in the revolutionary machine, a political tool in itself.

1. This aspect of the woman is echoed in Elyachar’s research on phatic labour. Through examples of three different women in Cairo – Um Muhammed, Khadija, and Huda – she demonstrates the ways in which women’s phatic labour – that is to say, the work they achieve in chatting, gossiping, and outlining the relationships that surrounds them within their neighbourhood – makes them essential links in the community. Indeed, by carrying out daily lives and conversations, these very different women all create communicative channels through which flows of reputation, information, or feelings are all able to pass. This, in turn, enables the realisation of forms of economic value through the very communicative infrastructure created by these women.
These communicative channels are created through a transformative process; as Um Muhammed organises and inhabits the coffeehouse central to her neighbourhood, as Khadija creates networks through the women she employs as sex workers and the boys she uses as look-outs, and as Huda maps out data about who knows who, talk to who, trusts who for her employer, they all transform implicit code, only intelligible for the members of one same community, into explicit code that may be used by international corporations aiming to occupy and use the space mapped out by these networks and communicative channels. The anthropologist, then, instead of “condemning the practices involved as neoliberal or embracing them as an example of empowerment” (Elyachar, 2010:459), must endeavour to find the adequate conceptual tools to make sense of these situations, and to highlight the acts of visiting, moving within a megacity, chatting and consolidating friendships as a form of labour.
2. Through these two examples, we may start to see how phenomenological and politico-economic understandings of space may be reconciled and linked. However, it seems interesting that, although both Fanon and Elyachar address these two approaches through the role that women play within certain communities, they do not truly address the gendered dimensions of these ways of creating, mapping and inhabiting space.