Fanon, Elyachar and Claudio’s texts led me to think primarily about how power enables subjects even as it disables them. What, in the case of Algeria, was the productive power of the French occupation? What forms of transgression and resistance, what “new attitudes…modes of action”, did its particular mode and form of oppression make possible?

Fanon’s article in particular echoed the Foucauldian assertion that how we resist and even what we resist in the name of – what we desire – is enabled by the very thing we are resisting; the shape of our confrontation is conditioned by that which we are confronting; our transgressions are shaped by the conditions that limit us. The veil, the body of the Algerian woman and the resistance evolve and transform in conversation with the occupation.

But Elyachar and Claudio’s works importantly show that, while subjected to and conditioned by the historical, socio-economic, cultural and political conditions that envelop us, we must also participate in our own making. Our practices have what Elyachar calls “potentia” and the phatic labour she and Claudio describes allows, in the latter’s case, the “circulation of people, goods, as well as ideas through the urban landscape and into the larger landscape of the country” (3), potentially assisting discourses in their process of becoming hegemonic, desires in their process of becoming popular, norms in their process of becoming naturalised.

I was also particularly interested in Claudio’s challenge to arguments about the inauthenticity of particular desires. My own work attempts to challenge conventional anthropological approaches to so-called secular-liberal subjectivities in the Middle East. To quote from my transfer paper: Edward Said’s *Orientalism* ushered in a practice of post-colonial critique that problematised essentialist perspectives on the Middle East. In anthropology, scholarship developed that took its subjects seriously, attempting to understand them on their own terms. This critical generosity, however, while extended to the pious, has often been denied to the region’s so-called ‘secular-liberals’, analyses of whom tend to focus on the Western roots of their discursive assumptions.

While important, by employing epistemological critique as the sole tool with which to engage such subjects, only unmasking the colonial and imperial roots of their criticisms of Arab cultures and religions, their desires and beliefs, doesn’t the scholar run the risk of engaging in a violence similar to the one she has critiqued these liberals for? Doesn’t she explain away their lifeworld? In addition to highlighting the constructedness of certain desires and norms, isn’t it also important to ask *how*, in a particular time and space, they are being used to grapple with particular problems? How certain practices intervene in a specific ‘problem-space’ (Scott, 2004)?[[1]](#footnote-1)

I was also struck by Claudio’s discussion of the “temporal contradiction between, one the one side, the village as a discursive space of the past and phenomenological site of slow pace and dense social interactions, and on the other side the village as the location of their aspirational future – a future whose realisation hinges on productive time in the city that, in turn, erodes that future through the adoption of faster rhythms and urban lifestyles” (107). This made me think of the violence, often overlooked, that progressive discourses perform on subjectivities, and the tragic nature of the often uncomfortable and anxiety-ridden dispositions that ‘modernity’ and hegemonic understandings of it have enabled – the inability to feel at home in the world or, at least, at home in the present, that has come to characterise many ‘modern’ lives.

1. Scott, D. (2004). *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Durham: Duke University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)