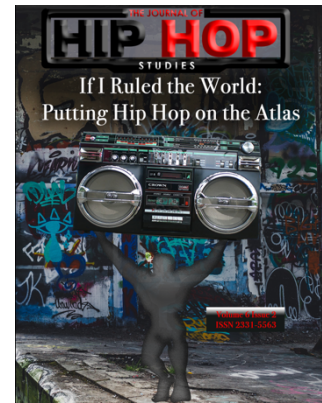

Negotiating French Muslim Identities through Hip Hop

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Abstract

In *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity*, Gérard Noiriel contends that in France, the modern idea of the nation emerged as a means to subvert the dominant influence of the nobility, whose rule was underwritten by the aristocratic idea that “the nation was founded on ‘blood lineage.’”¹ Noiriel posits that “the revolutionary upheaval discredited not only the old order but everything that harked back to origins, so much so that the first decrees abolishing nobility were also directed against names that evoked people’s origins: an elegant name is still a form of privilege; its credit must be destroyed.”² The rejection of group differences as well as the exaltation of assimilation policies that were strengthened by a social contract in the postrevolutionary political climate reflected, above all else, a contestation of the privileges that had been accorded to the nobility.³ It is from this historical background that Noiriel examines contemporary arguments regarding assimilation—specifically, which groups are deemed “assimilable” and which ones are not. This rhetoric of assimilation under the banner of *laïcité* has framed hotly debated discussions vis-à-vis the position of Muslims in France within the imagined national community. In an environment where Muslim bodies and symbols are relentlessly quarantined and prevented from “contaminating” secular spaces, this article will examine the ways in which French Muslim Hip Hop artists such as Médine, and Diam’s have employed different rhetorical strategies to navigate their French and Muslim identities through their lyrics.

¹ Gérard Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot: Immigration, Citizenship, and National Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.

² Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot*, 9.

³ Noiriel, *The French Melting Pot*, 9.

Introduction

In the summer of 2016, viewers around the world were confronted with pictures of French policemen fining and forcing Muslim women relaxing on the beach to remove their burkinis, a full-bodied swimsuit. Throughout the summer, multiple French cities enforced a ban on the burkini. The list of French towns and cities deciding to ban the burkini from their beaches was extensive. As the summer progressed, more than thirty French towns had set in place ordinances that effectively banned the burkini.⁴ The burkini ban was litigated at the Conseil d'État, France's highest administrative court, which ruled against it – prompting many French mayors, in turn, to maintain the ban despite the court ruling. Defining the burkini debate as “a battle of cultures,” Manuel Valls, the French prime minister at the time, defended the ban by declaring that “the burkini is not a new range of swimwear, a fashion. It is the expression of a political project, a counter-society, based notably on the enslavement of women.”⁵ Elaborating on his stance against the burkini at a government rally, Valls further infamously declared that “Marianne has naked breasts because she is feeding the people. She is not veiled because she is free!”⁶ As a prominent symbol of the French Republic, the feminine figure of Marianne is influenced by a classical tradition where the gender of a given noun, such as *la République*, determines the personified form of its allegorical representation. Since 1792, the idea of the French Republic was often represented by feminine figures.

Aside from Valls's problematic definition of female emancipation, his comments also epitomize the ways in which symbols, slogans, and ideas used to define the French Republic have been instrumentalized as a means to marginalize the country's Muslim population. In an interview published in *Libération*, French historian Nicholas Lebourg explains that in 1848, the French government issued a competition to choose an image that would symbolize the emergence of the republic.⁷ It was in the aftermath of this competition that two images of Marianne emerged: on the one hand, a fully clothed Marianne crowned with sun rays that harkened back to the iconography of the monarchy, a Marianne that came to represent order and patriotic duty; and a bare-breasted Marianne leading the people to social revolution, on the other hand. Thus, while the image of the subversive Marianne was later embraced by the *communards*, anti-capitalist political groups and others seeking radical social change, the fully clothed Marianne has typically

⁴ Antonia Mortensen and Angela Dewan, “French Towns Maintain Burkini Bans Despite Court Rulings,” last modified August 31, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/europe/france-burkini-ban/index.html>.

⁵ Cynthia Kroet, “Manuel Valls: Burkini ‘not compatible’ with French Values,” last modified August 25, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/manuel-valls-burkini-not-compatible-with-french-values/>.

⁶ Lilian Alemagna and Rachid Laïreche, “A Colomiers, Valls tente de raccommoder les divisions du burkini,” last modified August 29, 2016, http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/08/29/a-colomiers-valls-tente-de-raccommoder-les-divisions-du-burkini_1475346. Translated by Mich Nyawalo.

⁷ Dominique Albertini interview with Nicholas Lebourg, “Il y a une Marianne sage et une Marianne subversive” last modified August 30, 2016. http://www.liberation.fr/france/2016/08/30/il-y-a-une-marianne-sage-et-une-marianne-subversive_1475452.

served the purposes of militarists, xenophobic nationalists, and other proponents of intrusive state power. In the interview, Lebourg notes that Manuel Valls's own political positions align more with the historic symbolism of the fully clothed Marianne rather than the bare-breasted one.⁸ If Manuel Valls's cooptation of the bare-breasted Marianne exemplifies the instrumentalization of republican symbols in order to satisfy xenophobic sentiments, then the rhetorical dimensions of Nicholas Lebourg's response also mirrors how French Muslim rap artists, like Médine, have deployed similar strategies to answer the growing tide of islamophobia—primarily, by historicizing, reinterpreting, and appropriating French republican concepts such as *laïcité* (secularism) as an integral part of their French-Muslim identity. In the process, these French Muslim rappers question the antagonistic roles they are forced to occupy in mainstream political discourse by presenting themselves as the true heirs of French republican ideals. This article will henceforth tackle how two French Rappers, Médine and Mélanie Georgiades, who goes by Diam's, have responded, through their works, to growing concerns and debates surrounding the presence of veiled Muslim women in public spaces. While there are many French rappers who are Muslim (Kery James currently being one of the most famous ones), Médine and Diam's are two artists who have been prominently involved in debates concerning the polemics of the veil in contemporary French politics. However, before examining the manner in which Médine and Diam's navigate the politics of French islamophobia in their music, I will first briefly historicize French debates surrounding the significance of religious symbols in public spaces.

Historicizing Debates about Secularism in France

In his analysis of "Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe," Ahmet Kuru contends that current acrimonious debates about French Muslim women's right to wear the hijab in public spaces must be historicized in terms of the ideological struggle between *laïcité de combat* (combative secularism) and *laïcité plurielle* (pluralistic secularism).⁹ As Kuru defines these two terms, "combative secularism aims to exclude religion from the public sphere and confine it to the private domain, whereas pluralistic secularism allows for the public visibility of religion."¹⁰ Combative secularism emerged from a revolutionary antagonism concerning the alliance between the Catholic establishment and the monarchy. Despite the execution of three thousand priests as well as the expropriation of land belonging to the church in the aftermath of the 1789 revolution, the church's influence and power were not completely eliminated.¹¹ It was during the Third Republic that the republicans managed to significantly curtail the church's power by using *laïcité* as a central part of their anticlerical agenda. As Kuru contends, "the main battlefield between secularists and conservative Catholics was education, since both aimed to shape the world-views of the young generation. Jules

⁸ Albertini interview with Lebourg, "Il y a une Marianne sage et une Marianne subversive."

⁹ Ahmet T. Kuru, "Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe: Analyzing French Exceptionalism," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 1 (2008): 1-19.

¹⁰ Kuru, "Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe," 4.

¹¹ Kuru, "Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe," 5.

Ferry, the republican minister of education (1879–1885), played a vital role in the establishment of ‘free, obligatory, and secular’ education.”¹² In the aftermath of these education mandates, fifteen thousand Catholic schools were closed and thousands of clerical teachers were removed from their positions as educators. More secularization laws emerged in the 1900s. In 1905, the secularists passed a bill separating church and state; years later, the Catholic Church’s attempt to undermine secularism during the Vichy regime strengthened the hand of combative secularists in the aftermath of the Second World War.¹³

The growing presence of Muslims in France during the 1980s redefined the battle between combative secularists and their conservative counterparts. Indeed, as Kuru points out:

Regarding the Muslim question, the majority of leftists refreshed their combative secularism and allied themselves with the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rightists. On the other side, multiculturalist leftists and rightists came together to formulate a new, pluralistic secularism that respects cultural and religious diversity in France.¹⁴

Thus, in 1989, when a middle school principal expelled three female students for refusing to remove their head covering on school property, combative secularists strongly advocated for a ban on headscarves in public spaces. They argued that the headscarf was a symbol of ghettoized communitarianism that went against the unifying and emancipatory mission of republican institutions, including public schools.¹⁵ From their perspective, religious identities were to be confined to the private sphere; public spaces, which they conceived as “neutral,” were supposed to level all traces of ethnic, cultural, and religious difference. However, as Joan Wallach Scott posits in *The Politics of the Veil*, French schools had also increasingly turned into spaces where “individuality was encouraged (even as republican values were being taught), and students were granted the right to express themselves, to define their identities through distinctive clothing and hairstyles,” thus “in this context where jeans and rasta hairdos were acceptable, many students (who themselves did not wear them) saw headscarves as another form of self-expression” motivated by both religious and non-religious reasons.¹⁶ Indeed, many students who wore headscarves often did so against the expressed wishes of their parents.¹⁷ Opponents of the ban also argued that far from assimilating Muslim women into the cultural norms of French republican ideals, “the expulsion of girls with headscarves would not emancipate them but drive them to religious schools or into early marriages, losing forever the possibility of a different future.”¹⁸ Those who supported the

¹² Kuru, “Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe,” 6.

¹³ Kuru, “Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe,” 7.

¹⁴ Kuru, “Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe,” 8.

¹⁵ Kuru, “Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe,” 11.

¹⁶ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 111.

¹⁷ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 126.

¹⁸ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 33.

ban on headscarves, nonetheless, for the most part, refused to consider the full spectrum of reasons why some students opted to wear them to school; neither did they fully contemplate the counterproductive results that might emerge from such exclusionary policies.

As previously mentioned, anti-immigrant rightists found it useful to adopt secular positions in order to further marginalize immigrant communities. A poll conducted for the French newspapers *Le Monde* and *La Vie* revealed that while seventy-six percent of French educators (outside of higher education) supported the headscarf ban, ninety-one percent of them did not have a veiled student at their institution and sixty-five percent of them “admitted that they had never seen a veiled girl in any school during their career.”¹⁹ The draconian response to the hijab, therefore, appeared to be a xenophobically driven overreaction to a phenomenon that was not widespread. Furthermore, if French immigrants, unlike the Anglo-Saxon model, were expected to disavow their hyphenated identities in order to become French, then far from being an expression of Islamic fundamentalism or a rejection of French citizenship, as some have argued, many French Muslim women wore the hijab as a counter discursive desire for integration without assimilation, as a way to highlight their hyphenated identities, “as an aspiration to be French *and* Muslim.”²⁰

The discourse surrounding the veil is part of a larger debate about the boundaries of French national identity. In the twentieth century, migrant workers from North and Sub-Saharan Africa were heavily recruited to work in France as a way of compensating for severe labor shortages. Between 1790 and 1914 the birthrate in France plummeted by fifty percent.²¹ This plummeting birth rate was further exacerbated by the millions of French soldiers who died during the First World War. Between 1913 and 1929 France experienced a forty percent increase in industrial growth, becoming the second largest global producer of iron and aluminum.²² Immigrants who arrived to fill the labor shortage in French factories were subsequently isolated from the rest of the population by being cornered in ghettoized suburbs known as the *banlieues*. After the Second World War, more migrant workers from the African continent were encouraged to find employment in France in a period of industrial growth known as *les trente glorieuses* (the thirty glorious years). However, in the aftermath of the oil crisis in the 1970s as well as the onslaught of capital flight to countries providing cheaper labor, the shrinking employment opportunities were primarily given to citizens of French ancestry. As a result, unemployment rates in the *banlieues* are often significantly higher than in other

¹⁹ Caitlin Killian, “From a Community of Believers to an Islam of the Heart: ‘Conspicuous’ Symbols, Muslim Practices, and the Privatization of Religion in France,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2007): 308.

²⁰ Jeremy Jennings, “Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France,” *British Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 4 (2000): 593.

²¹ Gérard Noiriel and Dominique Borne, *Population, immigration et identité nationale en France: XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1992), 52.

²² Noiriel and Borne, *Population, immigration et identité nationale en France*, 137.

parts of the country. People residing in the *banlieues* also have to contend with underfunded schools, increased delinquency, as well as recurring incidents of police brutality. It is therefore not surprising that Hip Hop music emerging from similar socioeconomic circumstances in the United States and addressing the same realities resonates with Black and Arab French youth from the *banlieues*. In French political discourse, socioeconomic problems plaguing *banlieues* residents are often blamed on their supposed inability to assimilate, on their propensity to hold on to their immigrant traditions, as opposed to the systemic government policies that have disenfranchised such regions. Thus, the controversy surrounding the veil, the impetus to forcefully “assimilate” Muslim women by criminalizing religious headwear in public spaces, also gestures towards broader social policies targeted at immigrant communities, who are treated as second-class citizens and are often socioeconomically excluded as such.

Debating the French Secular State and the Veil through Hip Hop Music

The desire for integration without assimilation pervades many politically conscious rap songs, especially those written and performed by Médine.²³ Born in the French city of Le Havre, Médine (born Médine Zaouiche) is a French-Algerian rapper whose songs have typically generated a significant amount of controversy in the French media. Médine has emerged as a spokesperson for disenfranchised banlieu youth. As a public figure, he has frequently been invited to current affairs television shows and programs that debate the situation of Muslims in France. Médine often attempts to legitimize the coexistence of both his French and Algerian background in his works. His song, “Alger pleure” (Algeria Cries), for example, seeks to dramatize his bicultural identity:

<p style="text-align: center;">[Song introduction]</p> <p>J'ai l'sang mêlé, un peu colon un peu colonisé [...] Médine est métissé, Algérien-français Double identité, je suis un schizophrène de l'humanité De vieux ennemis cohabitent dans mon code génétique [...]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[His French self]</p> <p>Lorsque ma part Française s'exprime dans le micro d'la vie “On n'voulait pas d'une séparation de crise De n'pouvoir choisir qu'entre un cercueil ou une valise [...] Pourtant j'me souviens ! du FLN qu'avec Panique et haine Garant d'une juste cause aux méthodes Manichéennes</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">[Song Introduction]</p> <p>I have mixed blood, part colonizer part colonized [...] Médine is mixed, Algerian-French Dual identity, I am humanity's schizophrenic Old enemies cohabit my genetic code</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[His French self]</p> <p>My French side expresses itself in life's microphone “We did not wish for a separation in crisis To have to choose between a coffin and a suitcase [...] Yet, I remember the FLN [National Liberation Front] with panic and hate Owners of a just cause but malevolent methods Cutting the noses of those who refused the trenches [...]</p>
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²³ More information about the background and continued sociopolitical relevance of Médine can be found in the *New York Times* article entitled “Médine: The Pugnacious French Rapper Who Hits Back at Critics.” The article can be accessed online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/arts/music/medine-france-rap.html>.

<p>Tranchait les nez de ceux qui refusaient les tranchés [...] j’refuse qu’on m’associe aux généraux dégénérés mes grands-parents n’seront jamais responsables du mal généré” [His Algerian self] lorsque ma part Algérienne s’exprime dans le micro d’la vie “Pensez-vous qu’on oublierait la torture? [...] Electrocuter des Hommes durant six ou sept heures [...] on n’oublie pas! les djellabas de sang immaculé la dignité masculine ôtée d’un homme émasculé [...] Et les sexes non-circoncis dans les ventres de nos filles” [Synthesis of Voices] J’ai l’sang miellé, aux trois-quarts caramélisé Naturalisé, identités carbonisées</p>	<p>I refuse to be associated with the degenerate French generals My grandparents are not responsible for all these evils” [His Algerian self] My Algerian side expresses itself in life’s microphone “Do you think we would forget the torture? [...] Electrocuting men for six or seven hours [...] We will not forget the immaculate blood-stained <i>djellabas</i> The lost dignity of an emasculated man [...] And the uncircumcised genital in our daughters’ bellies” [Synthesis of Voices] My blood is honey-dewed, three-quarters caramelized Naturalized, carbonized identities²⁴</p>
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In this song, Médine’s bicultural identity is situated in the colonial history between France and Algeria. The historical antagonisms emerging from this colonial history form part of his split personality. While acknowledging the struggle for Algerian independence as a just cause, his French side, nonetheless, highlights the brutal methods of the FLN (the anticolonial National Liberation Front) and seeks to distance itself from the atrocities committed by French soldiers in the name of France during the Algerian war. His Algerian self, meanwhile, bears the marks of the humiliation, rapes, and tortures perpetrated by French forces. Thus, while one side seeks to distance itself from this history, the other manifests the horrors of French colonization in its accusatory posture. If both selves appear to be diametrically opposed to each other, Médine, who was raised in France but is of Algerian heritage, culturally embodies the synthesis of this contradiction. His doubled-voiced ventriloquy, his ability to speak from both perspectives, allows him to legitimize his hyphenated identity as an extension of French history. From this perspective, France’s ability to integrate, rather than efface, the cultural visibility of its Muslim minorities also means confronting and including the dark history of the country’s empire as part of its republican legacy. Médine’s song therefore tacitly highlights the contradictions of republican universalism, whose hostility to hyphenated particularisms that expand what it means to be French tends to instead facilitate policies that are exclusionary and reinforces the very communitarian identities that combative secularists seek to dismantle. As Elisa Camiscioli documents in *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration Intimacy and Embodiment*:

²⁴ Médine, “Alger pleure” [video] YouTube, (2012), retrieved January 28, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgPigYk-YCI>. Unless otherwise indicated, all the songs have been translated by Mich Nyawalo.

In the case of immigration, the uneasy incorporation of Enlightenment concepts of Man into a national and hence particularist system necessitated a distinction between citizens and foreigners which was, strictly speaking, antithetical to its universalizing project. Because the nation—a bounded entity composed of like people—required citizens and laborers from outside its realm, their particular nature had to be transformed into one which was unitary, homogeneous, and French. In imagining the transition from foreigner to potential citizen, the immigrants' proximity to a biocultural essentialized notion of Frenchness became the standard by which assimilability was measured.²⁵

Following this biocultural essentialism, anti-immigrant rightists and non-intersectional feminists in France have often made use of headline stories, emerging from immigrant communities, in order to further demonize minority groups through a discourse of human rights. Troubling stories about forced excision, forced arranged marriages, and sexual violence directed at women who reside in the *banlieue*, have often been employed to homogenize immigrant communities, including their religious practices, and describe their inassimilability.²⁶ The feminist group *Ni putes ni soumises* (Neither Whores Nor Submissive), which emerged as a reaction against gender-based violence in the *banlieue*, has over the years become one of the most ardent supporters of the secular ban against the hijab, which they argue is a symbol of patriarchal violence and domination. As an organization seeking to combat gender-based violence, *Ni putes ni soumises* have tended to solely focus on incidents emerging from immigrant quarters; they have also demonstrated a propensity to caricature all Muslim men as either unrepentant misogynists or dogmatic violent jihadists in the making.²⁷ *Ni putes ni soumises* has also exhibited a patronizing attitude vis-à-vis French Muslim women proclaiming to wear the hijab as a personal choice. When Diam's, a militant politically conscious French female rapper, converted to Islam as an adult woman, the organization proceeded to question the artist's commitment to feminism by painting her as a terrible role model to young women who looked up to her (I will elaborate more on this incident later).

It is in response to the Islamophobic discourse of *Ni putes ni soumises* that Médine wrote "Ni violeur ni terroriste" ("Neither rapists or terrorists"), a song that sought to problematize the ways in which Muslim men are caricatured in the French media. Nonetheless, far from condoning the sexism that exists in his own community, in songs such as "À l'ombre du mâle" (In the Shadow of Masculinity), Médine outlines and condemns permutations of patriarchy in both Islamic and secular communities. Médine's critique of the instrumentalization of secular and human rights discourse to undermine French Muslim communities is especially dramatized in his song "Don't Laïk":²⁸

²⁵ Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.

²⁶ Trica Keaton, "Arrogant Nationalism: National Identity Politics and African-Origin Muslim Girls in the Other France," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2005): 411–412.

²⁷ Pascal Boniface, Médine, and Esther Benbassa, *Don't panik: N'ayez pas peur!* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 114–120.

²⁸ Médine (2015). "Don't Laïk" [video] YouTube Retrieved January 28, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-CmuB4euD4>.

<p>Ta barbe, rebeu, dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk Ton voile, ma sœur, dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk Ta foi négga dans ce pays c'est Don't Laïk Madame monsieur, votre couple est Don't Laïk On ira tous au paradis, tous au paradis on ira On ira tous au paradis, tous au paradis incha'Allah On ira tous au paradis, tous au paradis on ira On ira tous au paradis, enfin seulement ceux qui y croient [...] Je scie l'arbre de leur laïcité avant qu'on le mette en terre Marianne est une femén tatouée « Fuck God » sur les mamelles [...] Nous sommes épouvantail de la République Les élites sont les prosélytes des propagandistes ultra laïcs À la journée de la femme, j'porte un Burquini [...] [Exorcism] Que le mal qui habite le corps de Dame Laïcité prononce son nom Je vous le demande en tant qu'homme de foi Quelle entité a élu domicile dans cet enfant vieille de cent dix ans ? Pour la dernière fois ô démons, annoncez-vous ou disparaissez de notre chère valeur Nadine Morano, Jean-François Copé, Pierre Cassen et tous les autres, je vous chasse de ce corps et vous condamne à l'exil pour l'éternité Vade retro satana!</p>	<p>Your beard, Arab man, in this country it's Don't Laïk Your veil, sister, in this country it's Don't Laïk Your faith, nigga, in this country it's Don't Laïk Sir, Madam, your couple is Don't Laïk We'll all go to heaven, in heaven we'll go We'll all go to heaven, in heaven we'll go insha'Allah We'll all go to heaven, in heaven we'll go We'll all go to heaven, at least only the ones who believe in it [...] I cut into the tree of their secularism before we plant it Marianne is a Femen with "Fuck God" tattooed on the breasts [...] We're the scarecrow of the Republic The elites are the proselytes of ultra-secular propagandists At International Women's Day, I wear a Burkini [...] [Exorcism] May the devil who lives in Dame Secularism's body pronounce its name I'm asking you as a man of faith Which entity has made its home in this one- hundred-year-old child? For the last time o demons, proclaim yourselves or disappear from our cherished values Nadine Morano, Jean-François Copé, Pierre Cassen and all the others, I'm chasing you out of this body and condemn you in exile for eternity Vade retro satana!</p>
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The title of the song merges the French word *laïcité* with the English verb “to like.” Thus, “don’t laïk” becomes a portmanteau that seeks to differentiate *laïcité* from *laïcism*—in other words, it differentiates secularism, as a republican concept, from the discursive xenophobic use of the term to discriminate against religious minorities in public spaces. *Don’t laïk*, henceforth, encapsulates the rhetorical dimensions of islamophobic secularism, while attempting to safeguard the values of republican secularism at the same time. In his book, *Don’t Panik*, Médine contends that secularism is a value that he cherishes, a value that allows him to freely exercise his religion. Médine further explains that Muslims “who recognize secularism and republican values as their own are obliged to deconstruct all the prejudices that people make against them.”²⁹ It is by pointing at the hypocrisy of criminalizing and forcing Muslim women to remove the hijab or the burkini in the name of women’s rights that his song seeks to deconstruct such prejudices. Médine, henceforth, makes a reference to Femen, the activist group whose slogan, “nudity is freedom,” offers a reductive way of framing female agency; one that ignores the multifaceted and nuanced ways in which the naked or covered female body can equally be used to either contest or

²⁹ Boniface, Médine, and Benbassa, *Don’t panik*, 74.

reify the patriarchal cultural logic of a given society. As previously mentioned, this reductive interpretation of female nudity has given birth to a debate about the contested symbolism of the naked-breasted Marianne.

Some of the more controversial aspects of Médine's song relate, not so much to the lyrics, but rather the images and concepts that he juxtaposes for dramatic effect in his music video. For example, several segments of the song's music video feature a veiled Catholic nun carrying a sign that says "no burqa." Images of the veiled nun are henceforth also juxtaposed to those of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab. In this way, Médine seeks to highlight the hypocrisy of those who, on the one hand, tolerate the image of a veiled nun as an expression of religious fortitude but, on the other hand, seek to eradicate the visibility of veiled Muslim women from the public sphere by insisting that this particular veil can only be interpreted as a symbol of female subjugation.

As an advocate of *laïcité plurielle* (pluralistic secularism), Médine seeks to secularize secularism, by presenting xenophobic iterations of *laïcité* as a form of religious dogma or fundamentalism. It is in an attempt to secularize secularism that he humorously uses his identity as a man of faith to exorcise *laïcism* out of *laïcité* in his song. He therefore proceeds to name prominent French personalities – the demons occupying secularism's body – who have publicly and systemically employed the discourse of *laïcité* to criminalize the display of Muslim religious symbols in public spaces. Far from positing an irreconcilable dichotomy between his Muslim faith and the secular state, this act of exorcism enables him to articulate and defend the values of *laïcité plurielle* through the prism of a religious discourse. In other words, it is through his religious faith as a Muslim that he is able to salvage the egalitarian ideals espoused by *laïcité plurielle* from ethnonationalist impulses that threaten to shape French secular ideals into an instrument of exclusion and intolerance. It is through this rhetorical strategy that Médine is able to posit his French-Muslim identity, not as two contradictory elements or concepts, but rather as overlapping identities that reinforce each other.

Just like Médine, the former French rapper, Mélanie Georgiades, also known by her stage name Diam's, has similarly sought to validate both her French and Muslim identities. Her 2015 book, *Mélanie française et musulmane (Mélanie, French and Muslim)*, written in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attack – an incident in which French cartoonists were murdered by Islamic terrorists for drawing a caricature of the prophet Muhammad – seeks to contextualize such acts of terrorism as being antithetical to the foundational principles of her faith. As previously mentioned, Mélanie Georgiades created a storm of controversy in the French popular press when pictures capturing her wearing a veil were taken without her consent and exposed to the public. The controversy surrounding the images of a veiled Georgiades partially stemmed from the fact that as a successful female rapper in a male-dominated music genre she had often been considered an icon of female empowerment. Songs such as "Ma souffrance" (My Suffering)³⁰ and

³⁰ Diam's (2007), "Ma souffrance," [video] retrieved January 28, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-CjJS7IQdw>.

“Ma France à moi” (My France),³¹ which respectively tackled subjects such as domestic abuse and the popularization of ethnonationalism in French political discourse, propelled her not only as a fierce opponent of hate and bigotry but also as a feminist icon and model for young women residing in France’s ghettoized suburbs. Many French commentators and women’s rights activists felt that she had betrayed her feminist principles by converting to Islam as an adult as well as opting to veil herself in public; they considered Islam to be an inherently patriarchal and oppressive religion that was fundamentally incompatible with the feminist principles they espoused. To make matters worse, the veiled pictures of Mélanie Georgiades which were put in circulation in the popular press also featured her new Muslim husband beside her. Her veiled appearance was henceforth interpreted as a decision that had been forcibly imposed on her by her new husband. Additionally, Mélanie’s Georgiades’s public ethnic identity as a “white” French woman, albeit originating from the ghettoized French suburbs, but whose parents were not Muslim, further spoke to a growing paranoia, often peddled by the extreme right, regarding the Islamization of French society; in this sense, as a popular public figure, her conversion dramatized the ways in which even French citizens from non-Muslim backgrounds could be “contaminated.”

In her autobiography, Georgiades affirms that her decision to wear the veil was purely voluntary; it was merely an expression of her newly acquired religious consciousness.³² Her subsequent decision to divorce her husband after a short marriage also surprised those who thought that Muslim women were incapable of such independence. In many ways, this propensity to think of Muslim women as helpless victims, devoid of agency, and needing to be rescued by the French state, stems from a tradition that was particularly honed during the French colonial occupation of Algeria. As Frantz Fanon documents in “Algeria Unveiled”:

Taken as a whole, colonial society, with its values, its areas of strength, and its philosophy, reacts to the veil in a rather homogeneous way [...] The officials of the French administration committed to destroying the people’s originality, and under instructions to bring about the disintegration, at whatever cost, of forms of existence likely to evoke a national reality directly or indirectly, were to concentrate their efforts on the wearing of the veil, which was looked upon at this juncture as a symbol of the status of the Algerian woman [...] The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered...it described the immense possibilities of woman, unfortunately transformed by the Algerian man into an inert, demonized, indeed dehumanized object. The behavior of the Algerians was very firmly denounced and described as medieval and barbaric.³³

Here, as Fanon contends, the rhetoric of women’s rights provided a platform from which the French colonial administration could not only justify their sense of superiority over the native population whose land they were occupying, but also, to a larger extent,

³¹ Diam’s (2012), “Ma France à moi,” [video] retrieved January 28, 2018 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU0qq4_3jGY.

³² Mélanie Georgiades, *Diam’s, autobiographie* (Paris: Éditions Don Quichotte, 2012).

³³ Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Charlesbourg, Québec: Braille Jymico, 2010), 37–38.

interpret the violence of colonial conquest as a benevolent humanitarian endeavor. Furthermore, as Fanon explains, the French colonial administration assumed that Algerian men would “oppose assimilation, so long as his woman had not reversed the stream. In the colonialist program, it was the woman who was given the historic mission of shaking up the Algerian man,” and this was to be accomplished by converting her and “winning her over” to “foreign values.”³⁴

The discourse surrounding the veil was henceforth instrumentalized as way of putting into effect the forced assimilation of colonized subjects, as a way of denying them an indigenous culture from which proclamations of self-rule might be voiced. Of course, French soldiers and colonialists also had their own patriarchal reasons for wanting to unveil Algerian women. As Scott reveals, “the subjugation of Algeria was often depicted by metaphors of disrobing, unveiling, and penetration.”³⁵ French phantasies of colonial conquest also abounded with images of native concubines and prostitutes. In this context, the eager gaze of the French soldier seeking to apprehend the Orientalized body of the “conquered” Algerian woman is frustrated by the veil she wears.

The politics of the gaze also feature prominently in Mélanie Georgiades’s reflections on not only the veil but also the Hip Hop fashion aesthetic that she appropriated for herself. This is especially evident in her recollections of a traumatic incident in which a paparazzo took an intimate picture of her in her bathing suit while she was vacationing in Guadeloupe:

Unfortunately, it was true; they had taken a picture of me vacationing in Guadeloupe in my bathing suit during my Caribbean tour. I could not believe it, and most of all, I felt shame. Shame to such an extent that I locked myself indoors for five days, convinced that the whole world was laughing at me. They had taken a less than flattering picture of me; revealing me in intimate ways that I never wanted my public to see—that is, in a bathing suit. At that point in my life I was young. I did not like to exhibit my body, even when going out. I certainly loved clothes, but the fashion I liked the most were joggings, baggy trousers and sweatpants, not because I wanted to dress like a boy but because, in a way, I felt more protected when I wore such clothes. I do not like when I am accosted by people’s gaze.³⁶

Here, it is significant to note that the Hip Hop fashion aesthetic she selected for herself served the same functional role as the Muslim veil she later decided to wear. In fact, even after her conversion to Islam, she continued to find that this particular Hip Hop fashion remained compatible with her new religious convictions: “We started talking about video clips of my image. Everybody had noticed that I now tended to cover myself more than usual. My hair was always covered with either a hat or a bandana. My clothes were baggy. I told them that I no longer wanted to use my body to sell albums. I wanted people to listen to me and not just look at me.”³⁷ In this way, both the baggy Hip Hop attire as

³⁴ Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, 38–39.

³⁵ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 55.

³⁶ Georgiades, *Diam’s: Autobiographie*, 66–67.

³⁷ Georgiades, *Diam’s: Autobiographie*, 276.

well as the veil enable her to embody and deploy a corporeality that seeks to distance itself from the public’s intrusive gaze (a gaze that had once violated her sense of privacy) while drawing attention to the substance of her words. While symbols of hypermasculinity, including toxic masculinity, permeate many aesthetic and lyrical dimensions of Hip Hop culture, Georgiades (like many female Hip Hop artists) instrumentalizes Hip Hop aesthetics as technologies of the self that provide her with a sense of agency.

It is not just through her sense of fashion that Mélanie Georgiades decided to express her new religious conversion; she also opted solely to respond to her critics through her music. Indeed, during the veil controversy, Georgiades declined all requests for interviews, judging that such a platform was not the most effective way for her to deliver her message; instead, she asked the shows that had invited her for an interview to give her space for a 10-minute rap session, on live television, where she would respond to her critics. The rap song she performed as an answer to her critics was titled “Si c’était le dernier” (“If This Was the Last One”)³⁸; it describes the circumstances that led to her religious conversion:

“Si c’était le dernier” (“If This Was the Last One”)

<p>A l’approche de la trentaine j’appréhende la cinquantaine, Mais seul dieu sait si je passerais la vingtaine, Mon avenir et mes rêves sont donc entre parenthèses A l’heure actuelle j’ai mis mes cicatrices en quarantaine J’écris ce titre comme une fin de carrière Je suis venu j’ai vu j’ai vaincu puis j’ai fait marche arrière [...] J’ai posé un genou à terre en fin d’année 2007 On m’a dit Mel soit on t’interne soit on t’enterre Qui l’aurais cru moi la guerrière j’ai pris une balle en pleine tête Une balle dans le moral il paraît que j’ai peté un câble Paraît que j’ai fait dix pas vers dieu depuis que j’ai sombé [...] Car je l’avoue ouais c’est vrai j’ai fait un tour chez les dingues Là où le bonheur se trouve dans des cachetons ou des seringues Là ou t’es rien qu’un malade rien qu’une putain d’ordonnance Au Vesinay à Saint Anne t’a peut-être croisé mon ambulance</p>	<p>As I approach my thirties, I contemplate my fifties But only god knows whether I will finish my twenties My future and my dreams are in parentheses At this time, I can count about forty scars I write this song as an end to my career I came, I saw, I conquered and then I went back [...] I took one knee to the ground at the end of 2007 I was told “Mel, either we institutionalize you or we bury you Who would have believed it? Me the warrior, I took a bullet in the head A bullet in my morale, it is said that I went crazy It is said that I took ten steps towards God since my fall [...] All this is true, I admit it, I took a journey to the crazy house Where happiness is found in pills or in syringes Where you are nothing more than a mad person, where you are nothing more than a fucking prescription At Vesinay at Saint Anne, you may have crossed the path of my ambulance I saw shrinks pretending to be God, pretending to read what was in my heart [...]</p>
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³⁸ Diam’s, (2012), “Diam’s en live dans ce soir ou jamais” [video], retrieved January 28, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3f53c-qe8s>.

<p>J'ai vu des psys ce prendre pour dieu prétendant lire dans mon cœur [...] Ces putains de médocos sont venues me couper les jambes Au fil du temps sont venus me griller les neurones Ces charlatans de psy on bien vu briller mes euros Tous des menteurs tous des trafiquants d'espoir [...] Dis-moi t'aurais fait quoi si t'étais moi? [...] Acheter un plus grand plasma? Impossible vu que chez moi j'ai déjà un cinéma. [...] Tu veux devenir célèbre? Sache que la vie de star est une pute. Elle te sucre ta thune, te sucre tes valeurs T'éloigne de la lune dans des soirées vip sans saveurs Considère moi comme une traite j'ai infiltré le système Aujourd'hui je suis prête à me défendre que sur scène Et peu importe si je vends beaucoup moins de disque Ouais je prends le risque de m'éloigner de ce bizz ouais ouais Je veux redevenir quelqu'un de normal qui se balade sans avoir 10 000 flashes dans la ganache [...] J'écris ce titre comme si j'étais toujours en bas Besoin de cracher mes tripes Besoin de te conter mes combats Je suis guérie grâce à dieu j'ai retrouvé la vue J'ai péri mais j'ai prié donc j'ai retrouvé ma plume Moi qui est passé 2008 sans écrire un texte J'ai retrouvé mon équipe et l'amour des kilomètres</p>	<p>These fucking doctors came to cut my legs After a while they even fried my neurons These charlatan shrinks saw my shiny Euros They are all liars, trafficking in false hopes [...] Tell me, what would you have done if you were me? [...] Would you have bought a huge plasma TV? Impossible, since I already own a movie theatre at my place [...] You want to be famous? Know that the life of a star is a bitch. It gives you lots of cash but takes away your values Removes you further from the moon in VIP events without savor Consider me a traitor, I infiltrated the system Today I am only willing to defend myself on stage I don't care if I sell less albums Yes, I am taking the risk of distancing myself from show business Yeah Yeah I want to become a normal person again who can walk the streets without being attacked by 10 000 flashes in my face [...] I write this track as though I was still buried Needing to spill my guts Needing to count my fights I am healed thanks to God I have regained my sight I perished but I prayed and so I regained my pen Me who spent 2008 without writing I regained my team and the love of long journeys</p>
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In her song, and later in her autobiography, Mélanie Georgiades reveals her battle with depression, including the fact that she was institutionalized for brief periods at a mental hospital where she was subsequently diagnosed with bipolar disorder. She also later discloses in her autobiography that she had long been struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide, even before the advent of her successful career as a rapper. While her devotion to rap music and the acclamation of fans enabled her to function for a while, she eventually succumbed to her depression once the benefits of fame no longer satiated her. Written as a farewell to show business, "Si c'était le dernier" outlines the circumstances that led to her conversion, while offering a critique of various institutions in which Georgiades felt confined. In the song, psychiatrists are portrayed as traffickers peddling false hopes, dealers who overmedicate their patients. The trappings of conspicuous

consumption that dominate in a celebrity-driven capitalist system, trappings that she is able to access as a result of her fame, are also taken to task. From her perspective, neither the material rewards of celebrity culture nor the antidepressants she receives are able to give her the fulfillment she needs, leading Georgiades to eventually find solace in religion. Far from being a patriarchal imposition, as many French commentators had assumed, the song presents her conversion as a personal choice made by an individual undergoing a period of great hardship. In some respects, while the veil, on the one hand, enables Georgiades to distance herself from her public (her autobiography documents how, in some circumstances, she is able to hide her celebrity from the prying eyes of the world when she veils herself) her songs, on the other hand, allow her to share intimate details about her life. The veil in combination with her songs offer her tools through which she attempts to construct a non-intrusive, carefully measured, and controlled intimacy with her audience – one that veils Georgiades with a cover of anonymity in her nonprofessional life, while allowing her to share intimate thoughts on stage as well as in her albums. Of course, the anonymity the veil is supposed to provide is also subverted when paparazzi recognize her and reveal proof of her recent religious conversion to the public; a revelation that occurs before she is even given the opportunity to disclose her new faith to some of her close relatives.

Conclusion

Both Médine and Mélanie Georgiades dramatize the contradictions of French republican values that promote universal brotherhood and equality. Médine's song "Don't Laïk" highlights the manner in which contemporary interpretations of *laïcité* have been instrumentalized, not to protect citizens from religious coercion, but, instead, to render invisible the presence of specific ethnic minorities that demarcate themselves by their religious practices. In this way, for some, discourses about *laïcité* have become a way of drawing and restricting the boundaries of French national identity, of identifying who is or is not "legitimately" French regardless of their official citizenship status. Mélanie Georgiades provides striking examples of such attitudes by documenting personal experiences of xenophobic encounters in her second book. Elaborating on one of these encounters she notes, "even though I do get recognized from time to time, the veil gives me some anonymity. So much so, that I have even experienced unpleasant encounters because of it. For example, one day I was shopping at a commercial center next to my place when a woman, who was passing by, screamed at me: 'Belphegor! Go back to your country!' [...] but I am French. In my case, what does it even mean to 'go back to my country?'"³⁹ While Mélanie Georgiades was born as the product of a culturally mixed marriage between her Greek Cypriot father and her French mother, throughout her life, or at least before her conversion to Islam, she had always been identified as a white French woman (albeit originating from the ghettoized French suburbs). In this instance, it is primarily the veil, with its symbolism and negative cultural capital, that transforms

³⁹ Mélanie Georgiades, *Mélanie, française et musulmane* (Paris: Éditions Points, 2016), 102–103.

Georgiades from a French woman into a foreigner, regardless of her citizenship status or ancestry. Thus, while the veil gives her a cover of anonymity, which she long desired as a result of her celebrity, it also has the effect of racializing her as a noncitizen. As Médine highlights in his songs “Alger pleure” (“Algeria Cries”) and “Don’t Laïk,” the discursive politics surrounding the veil gesture towards France’s inability to effectively cope with the multicultural contemporary realities engendered by its colonial past. The republican claims of universal brotherhood generate anxieties when the country’s former colonial subjects and their descendants – workers who formed the backbone of France’s industrial growth – now demand to be recognized as equal citizens.

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