Article

Space and secularism: *Laïcité*, spatial governmentality, and exclusion in French hijab stories

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Abstract

The article frames current practices of French *laïcité* in terms of spatial governmentality. It builds upon this notion to explore spatialised representations of religion and secularism in 'hijab stories' (narratives of the self that focus on the daily experiences of women who wear a hijab). The analysis of Fatimata Diallo's *Sous mon voile* and Nargesse Bibimoune's *Confidence à mon voile* reveals an ever-expansive reach of an exclusionary reading of *laïcité*. This phenomenon has severely restricted the spatial practice of hijabi women in French society favouring adaptive strategies that include the creation of counter-spaces of subjectivation and self-expression.

Keywords

France, gender, hijab, Islam, *laïcité*, space

Résumé

L'article inscrit les pratiques actuelles de la laïcité française dans une perspective de gouvernementalité spatiale. Il s'appuie sur cette notion pour explorer les représentations spatialisées de la religion et de la laïcité dans des « *hijab stories* » (des récits de soi qui se concentrent sur les expériences quotidiennes de femmes voilées). L'analyse de *Sous mon voile* de Fatimata Diallo et de *Confidences à mon voile* de Nargesse Bibimoune révèle la portée toujours plus étendue d'une lecture exclusive de la laïcité. Ce phénomène

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a sévèrement restreint la pratique spatiale des femmes musulmanes voilées dans la société française favorisant des stratégies d'adaptation qui incluent la création de contre-espaces de subjectivation et d'expression de soi.

Mots-clés
espace, France, genre, hijab, Islam, *laïcité*

Introduction

In its multiple and often conflicting meanings, French *laïcité* is frequently represented through images of space and distance. Among these tropes, perhaps none is better known than that of 'separation' – an eminently spatial notion that continues to shape our understanding of church–state relations in France and other countries considered as secular in the sense of having witnessed some form of disestablishment. A glance at some of the debates France has experienced on the sense and scope of *laïcité* in the recent past suggests that spatiality is not just a metaphor but an essential and perhaps even defining feature of French secularism (a term I will henceforth use interchangeably with *laïcité* while recognising that this synonymity is debatable).

The sequence of controversies over the wearing of hijabs in state schools between 1989 and 2004, for example, can be interpreted as a struggle to impart specific meanings to the space of schools. Among the different conceptions of how the schools of the Republic should be defined in relation to society as a whole, the view that the former should be shielded from the realities of the outside world – a 'republican sanctuary',[1] as then-President Jacques Chirac (2003) declared – was one of the arguments used to justify a ban (Laborde, 2008: 69–71). The ordering of space was also at the heart of debates on full facial veils which rose to the top of the French political agenda in the late 2000s. Although the law that introduced fines and citizenship courses for women covering their faces in public did not officially build on *laïcité*, but on an expansive conception of public order, the debate was very much about visibility and the nature of public space.[2] The ubiquity of spatiality in contemporary debates over French secularism begs the question of how *laïcité* can be framed in terms of spatial governance.

The present article delineates the contours of a spatial approach to the study of *laïcité*. I argue that the social production of space – to borrow Henri Lefebvre's terminology – is a crucial dimension of French secularism and that this process has come to involve a multiplicity of actors beyond the state. The introduction of religious neutrality rules in private spaces, such as a growing number of work environments, compels us to reflect on how secularism is reproduced through rationalities that go beyond the exercise of sovereign authority. I address this problem by drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality in order to lay out some key issues in the analysis of the spatial dynamics of *laïcité*. Based on Lefebvre's (1974) seminal conceptualisation of space as produced through official representations, daily routines, and symbolic appropriations, the main body of the article explores representations of *laïcité* as a spatial order in two 'hijab stories': Fatimata Diallo's (2015) *Sous mon voile* (*Under My Veil*) and Nargesse Bibimoune's (2016) *Confidences à mon voile* (*Confidences to My Veil*). In these narratives,

the author–protagonists describe how their will to wear a hijab impacts their quotidian movements in French society. The analysis highlights the centrality of spatial practices in the way veiled women experience *laïcité* and negotiate their religious commitments.

Laïcité as spatial governmentality

In the past two decades, the idea that *laïcité* should be understood as a set of norms that inform the governance of religion has come to be a guiding theme in scholarship. Bowen (2007), for example, argues that French secularism must be approached in its *longue durée* as a tradition of affirming the supremacy of temporal power over religious authority. In an insightful account aptly titled 'Trying to understand French secularism', Asad (2006) proposes a reading of *laïcité* as a phenomenon embedded in the genealogy of the modern state. From this vantage point, French secularism appears as an expression of the state's power to define what religion is and how it ought and ought not to manifest itself (Asad, 2006: 501). It is based on this way of thinking about secularism that Mahmood (2016) explores the relationship between secularism and the construction of religious difference in modern Egypt. She defines political secularism 'as the modern state's sovereign power to reorganise substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religious ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices' (Mahmood, 2016: 3). This perspective allows Mahmood to develop a challenging critique of secularism as a legal–political discourse and of secularity as a range of beliefs on what religion should be. She thereby highlights the centrality of boundary-drawing practices to secularism. I suggest that it is precisely in the notion of boundaries and, more specifically, in that of spatial governmentality that we should seek to root our understanding of *laïcité*.

Foucault famously introduced the notion of governmentality to qualify those techniques in the exercise of political power that are concerned with what he referred to as the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault, 2004a: 192). In his account on the rise of classical political economy, Foucault distinguished governmentality from sovereign and disciplinary power, both in terms of the methods employed and of the definition of the subject upon whom power is exerted. The emergence of governmentality built upon the awareness that the repertoire of sovereign state action, while theoretically unconstrained in scope, was practically very limited in its ability to produce norms of appropriate behaviour. Foucault considered both disciplinary power and governmentality as rationalities that seek to use multiple sites of power beyond the confines of the state apparatus. While their object differs (the deviant subject vs self-governing individuals), they both build upon the premise that this object must be made knowable in order to be governable (Foucault, 2004b: 280), hence the rise of new knowledge formations such as population surveys in the late modern period.

As the French case illustrates, such knowledge formations also extended to the field of organised religion and religious practice. While the government only gathered census data on religious affiliation during very short periods (essentially between 1851 and 1872, and during the Vichy Regime), late modern France witnessed the emergence of several official and unofficial forms of monitoring and data collection such as the detailed

reports of the *Police des cultes* or the surveillance system revealed by the *Affaire des fiches* in 1904. The intensity of this scandal that erupted over the control of army members' beliefs and churchgoing practices so vividly described by Larkin (1995: 29– 52) can be read in Foucaultian terms as symptomatic of the complaints against excessive government. In a simplified manner, one could argue that the reading of *laïcité* that imposed itself in 1905 built upon a tension that remains unresolved more than a century later: On one hand, it reaffirmed the state's right to regulate and police the forms religion may or may not assume (over half of the 44 articles of the 1905 Law on the separation of the Churches and the States deal with such matters). On the other, however, as Poulat (2010: 108) notes, it was guided by the idea that the state should refrain from interfering too much with the religious life of its citizens. I argue that this tension has been a driving force in the emergence of new techniques of statecraft that seek to regulate religious behaviour. In line with a modest, yet growing body of research that seeks to understand political secularism through the governmentality approach (Amir-Moazami, 2016; Martínez-Ariño, 2021; Oztig, 2018), my goal is to further our knowledge of the spatial dimensions of *laïcité* beyond state-centred policy making.

Understanding *laïcité* in terms of spatial governmentality involves two important changes in perspective. First, it means departing from an approach that conceptualises secularism exclusively in terms of sovereign power in order to understand secularism as enforced, reproduced, and potentially transformed by multiple actors. To a large extent, this change in perspective has already begun. Whereas twentieth-century scholarship tended to define *laïcité* from a state-centric perspective as a stable framework necessarily derived from the founding principles of the Republic,[3] scholarly debate has increasingly come to understand *laïcité* as an indeterminate and contested construct (Bowen, 2013; Portier, 2016). Building upon this premise, there has been a growing interest in studying the conflictual nature of French secularism by focussing on actors seeking to promote their own conceptions of *laïcité* (Almeida, 2017a; Nilsson, 2019). Approaching French secularism as something that is not unproblematically shared, but eminently contested, is of utmost importance for understanding how certain populations – most notably those whose religiosity is visible – experience *laïcité* in their quotidian lives.

The second major change in perspective that ensues from understanding *laïcité* as spatial governmentality is, quite logically, the focus on space. While the spatial turn has proved valuable for exploring religious place-making dynamics (Obadia, 2015), research on how secularism relies on the social production of space has only recently begun. In a study of municipal policies towards religious communities in the city of Montreuil, Berg (2019) introduces the concept of 'secular place-making' to analyse how practices of spatial ordering, such as the construction of boundaries between public and private space, shape religious presence. Building upon Agrama's approach to secularism as a 'problem-space' with the boundary between religion and politics as its major stake, Müller (2021) pleads for a topological turn in critical secular studies. In an analysis of the project for the Munich Forum for Islam, he argues that secularism is not simply a manifestation of power that unfolds in space but an ensemble of practices that produce spaces 'shaped along the lines of parochial religious, racial and cultural hegemonies' (Müller, 2021: 18). This research attests to the fascinating possibilities for exploring contemporary conflicts over religion and spatiality that result from framing secularism as the social production

of space. For the purpose of this analysis, I concentrate on three general aspects I consider to be of utmost importance to grasp the spatial dimensions of *laïcité*.

The public/private distinction

The first aspect concerns the much-discussed notion that the separation between public and private space is at the core of *laïcité*. In its most extreme form, this idea manifests itself in the claim that the private realm is the sole legitimate sphere in which individuals may express their religious identities. Currently, the radical right leaders Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour are the most prominent defenders of such a position as they pledge to outlaw the wearing of hijabs and kippot in public. However, the idea that *laïcité* somehow implies a form of religious neutrality in public space has long made its way into the political mainstream. Thus, until 2016, the introductory text to the integration contract foreigners had to sign after obtaining a residence permit explained *laïcité* with the sentence: 'In France, religion falls into the private realm' ('En France, la religion relève du domaine privé', quoted in Almeida, 2017b: 19).

Arguably, such expressions are not always meant in the sense of strict spatial boundaries, but rather as a public/private distinction in terms of what Steinberger (1999: 307) refers to as 'manners of acting in the world', or, in a Rawlsian sense, as the use of secular arguments as a condition for participation in public debate (Cesari, 2013). Yet, it is not rare to see this situational differentiation being projected onto spaces. One of the best examples to illustrate this is the type of argument deployed during the summer 2016 to ban the use of 'Islamic' swimsuits on certain beaches. The municipality of Cannes, for example, justified its anti-burkini decree with the following reasoning: It began by identifying the beach as a public service subject to the principle of neutrality applicable to public service providers. On the basis of this claim, it then characterised beachgoers as public service users, arguing that the latter were subject to the same obligation of religious neutrality as the former (Almeida, 2018: 22). More candidly, Prime Minister Manuel Valls defended the burkini bans by stating that '[b]eaches, like all public spaces, must be protected from religious claims' (La Provence, 2016).

The notion of a secular public realm echoes Simmel's (2006) portrayal of the *Metropolis* as a space of impersonal abstraction in which individual biographies are obscured. From this vantage point, the conception of *laïcité* as a religiously neutral public space could be seen as a functional equivalent to other institutions that depersonalise social relations. That being said, in the French context, the idea that visual expressions of religious belonging must be suppressed is linked to an approach to citizenship that views membership in intermediary bodies as a threat to national cohesion (Zwilling, 2020). The fear that religious signs may hide a subversive will to opt out of the national community explains why current debates on *laïcité* are often framed in terms of the fight against '*communautarisme*' and, more recently, 'religious separatism' (Bizeul, 2019).

The privatisation of *laïcité*

The second aspect I consider fundamental for understanding the spatial dynamics of *laïcité* is the question of who has the legitimate authority to define spaces as 'secular', in

the sense of excluding certain manifestations of religiosity. Regardless of whether one follows a definition of secularism as disestablishment or as the power to define and police the forms religion may or may not assume, the focus lies on the state as the sole rightful source of authority. In recent years, however, several cracks have appeared in the state's monopoly over the production of secular spaces. Martínez-Ariño (2021) shows, for example, how local authorities have come to play an essential role in shaping how secularism applies to local contexts. Another significant development concerns the issue of *laïcité* at work.

After debates over the hijab in state schools and the controversy over face veils, the third major debate over the permissibility of Islamic veils concerned the dismissal of an employee from a privately run nursery for refusing to take off her hijab. What became known as the *Baby Loup* affair (the name of the association running the nursery) was a complex controversy that extended from 2008 to 2018. Much ink has been spilt in legal commentaries on this affair (see Hennette-Vauchez and Valentin, 2014). In a nutshell, the issue at stake was whether *laïcité* could be extended to private citizens to limit their religious freedom in private workspace contexts. Ultimately, the plaintiff's appeal was rejected on the grounds that such restrictions were legitimate if justified by employee's tasks. As Daly (2016) notes, the legal treatment of this affair challenged the traditional demarcation between a liberal reading of *laïcité* usually upheld by courts and an increasingly restrictive interpretation in certain segments of the political landscape.

The affair left a lasting imprint on the question whether *laïcité* could apply to private work environments. In 2016, a substantial revision of the Labour Code expanded the possibilities for private companies to limit the expression of their employees' beliefs. Workplace regulations may now mandate religious neutrality if this 'is justified by the requirements of the proper functioning of the company and proportionate to the aim pursued' (Code du Travail, Article L 1321-2-1). Although it is still early to assess how courts will weigh this article against provisions that protect employees from discrimination and restrictions of their fundamental rights, it is not far-fetched to argue that this development has increased the spatial reach of secularism. In this context, Hennette-Vauchez (2017) describes the evolution of the law as a continual rolling back of a frontier towards an ever-wider spatial reach of *laïcité*. This, in turn, subverts the public/private distinction, as it implies that logics of surveillance and disciplinary power may legitimately extend to the most private spheres. Thus, in her analysis of court cases in which Muslim women were compelled to justify intimate bodily and spiritual practices, Fernando argues,

> secular government is undergirded by the two competing imperatives of privatization and surveillance: the political, legal, and institutional discourses and practices that attempt to separate private from public have as their effect the contravention of the public/private distinction that subtends both normative religiosity and normative sexuality, rendering public the ostensibly private spiritual and sexual lives of Muslim women in order to regulate them. (Fernando, 2014a: 688)

The social production of secular spaces

A third aspect we need to consider when analysing secularism through the prism of spatiality relates to the ways in which space is 'produced'. In his groundbreaking work

that paved the way for the spatial turn, Lefebvre (1974) introduced the idea that the social production of space consisted of three 'moments' dialectally related to one another – what Soja (1996: 10) later popularised as the 'trialectics of space'. According to Lefebvre (1974: 43–52), this process results from the interplay of how space is conceived and ordered by technocrats and politicians (representations of space), how it is structured by daily movements and interactions of inhabitants and users (spatial practice), and how it is represented in symbolic meanings that overlay material environments (spaces of representation).

Understanding *laïcité* in its spatial dimension implies paying particular attention not only to how secular spaces are produced by policy makers but also to how they are shaped by routinised movements and imagined geographies. A Lefebvrian inquiry into the secular spaces of state schools would therefore not only engage with a conceived space ordered by norms and restrictions such as the 2004 law, but it would also, and perhaps more importantly, explore how a legal provision is interpreted, practised, and possibly subverted by users in their spatial practice and symbolic (re)appropriations. Such a focus would fruitfully complement analyses that explore how *laïcité* and other national secularisms are lived, represented, and contested by citizens (Fernando, 2014b; Keaton, 2006; Yeğenoğlu, 2012).

A Lefebvrian perspective on the spaces of French secularism requires a critical engagement with sources that can provide insights into spatialised representations and practices of religion and *laïcité*. To reach a better understanding of how *laïcité* is experienced in daily life, I rely on narratives generically referred to as 'hijab stories'.

Spatialised representations of *laïcité* in hijab stories

Texts in which Muslim girls and women describe their experiences wearing a veil are a fascinating source to study spatial representations of *laïcité* because they address how religious identities are negotiated in everyday life. My reading of these texts is inspired by the notion of geocriticism theorised by Westphal and Tally. Westphal (2007) builds upon an expansive conception of intertextuality and sets out to deconstruct the distinction between the poetics and the practice of space. He argues that textual representations of space do not exist independently of spatial referents but are tied to them by a web of intertextual threads. Echoing the works of geographers who have sought to build cross-disciplinary bridges between humanities and geography, such as Denis Cosgrove or Derek Gregory, Westphal pleas in favour of transcending the boundaries between the study of textual and extratextual realities. As for Tally's conceptualisation of geocriticism, it draws from Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping to argue that all narratives 'constitute forms of literary cartography' and that every writer is, 'in some ways, a cartographer' (Tally, 2014: 1). Among the many aspects that make Tally's approach interesting from a critical spatial perspective is the fact that his conception is not framed as a specific method of literary criticism. It is rather a sensibility for how texts can be read as cognitive maps that allow us to grasp an otherwise unrepresentable reality. Like Lefebvre's approach towards the social production of space and Soja's idea of 'thirding-as-Othering', geocriticism seeks to eschew the prevailing modes of thinking about space either as perceived or conceived, to embrace a third logic that focuses on lived spaces of representation.

I use the generic identifier 'hijab stories' to characterise narratives by female authors whose main topic are quotidian experiences related to wearing and/or not wearing a veil. The term 'hijab stories' originally refers to video testimonies shared on social media by women who explain why they decided to veil. Pahwa (2021) describes these stories as narratives of self-realisation that allow women to present themselves as protagonists of their own ethical journeys. The term 'hijab stories' is problematic for at least two reasons. First, it tends to reduce a complex ethical quest that involves a series of bodily and mental practices to a single visible sign. The term 'hijab' in 'hijab stories' must thus be understood metonymically in relation to a wider reflection on belief and belonging. Second, the will to dress modestly by covering specific body parts can find innumerable expressions, from turbans and bandanas to hoodies and caps. As epitomised by the *hijabista*, the multiple creative ways in which Muslim women cover parts of their heads cannot be subsumed under common Western images of a hijab. Bearing these caveats in mind, I now turn to how space and secularism are represented in two hijab stories: *Confidences à mon voile* by Nargesse Bibimoune (2016) and *Sous mon voile* by Fatimata Diallo (2015). These two stories were selected because, among the numerous works focussed on the lives of Muslim women in France, they are arguably the only ones that specifically focus on the protagonists' relationship with their veil.

Bibimoune (born 1991) is known for her acclaimed debut novel *Dans la peau d'un Thug*. In contrast, *Under My Veil* is the first and so far only work published by Diallo (born 1995) – a Malian woman who came to France on a scholarship to attend university. The book was written in collaboration with the historian Pauline Peretz and was published in a series edited by Pierre Rosanvallon who describes his initiative as a means to give voice to ordinary citizens to allow the emergence of otherwise silenced narratives (Rosanvallon, 2014).[4] The authenticity put forward here must be regarded as a form of branding that seeks to convey an image of the text as unadulterated life writing. The same applies to Bibimoune's narrative, which she presents as a text based on her diaries as a child and teenager (Bibimoune, 2016: 7). Rather than viewing these texts as emic ethnographies, my reading is informed by a Foucaultian understanding of these texts as discursive practices that produce subjectivity and reveal strategies of power and resistance.

Both books are constructed as journal-like narratives centred on the daily experiences of wearing a veil. The action in Bibimoune's *Confidences* extends from 2002 until 2016. It begins when the narrator is 11 years old and chooses to veil, despite her mother's concerns that her choice may make her life more difficult. As the title suggests, the narrative takes the form of an intimate diary written to her veil – a veil she addresses with phrases such as 'My little veil of love', 'My poor hijab', or 'My most beautiful struggle'. Diallo's *Under My Veil* focusses on the first 2 years the narrator spends in Paris as a student between 2013 and 2015. Hence, both texts also cover the period immediately after the January 2015 terrorist attacks and include reflections on how the protagonists were affected by growing anti-Muslim sentiment. The narrators pay particular attention to intersectional forms of marginalisation: in Diallo's case, as a Black West African Muslim woman living in a precarious socioeconomic situation, and in Bibimoune's narrative, as a Shiite woman, a 'minority within a minority' (Bibimoune, 2016: 85) confronted both with anti-Muslim prejudice in mainstream society and with the anti-Shi'a sentiments among a predominantly Sunni Muslim community.

The stories narrate the experiences of wearing a hijab through the theme of a contraction of space, both in terms of spatial practice constituted by routinised movements and of what Lefebvre refers to as 'spaces of representation' – the spaces lived and re-signified through emotions and images. Depending on whether the protagonists wear a veil, the spaces available to them are significantly restricted. Bibimoune links this contraction of space to the concentration of visible 'Muslimness' in low-income suburban areas (on this relation, see Selby, 2014). She captures this spatial dynamic eloquently in the following passage:

> My veil,
>
> I think about you every day, every time I have to meet new people, whether at work, at school, in the street, for an association, in a carpool, in the administrations, at the gym... Actually, every time I decide to go out of my comfort zone family/friend/mosque/faculty, I am afraid that you will be noticed a little too much and that I'll have to pay for your presence on my head. [...] Staying in the same neighbourhoods, the same cities, the same places where diversity is not feared, where our presence is tolerated... I have the impression that our possibilities of integration in this world are shrinking by the day. (Bibimoune, 2016: 90)

For the then 13-year-old protagonist, the 2004 law banning conspicuous signs of religious belonging in state schools marks the beginning of a quotidian unveiling. This ritual is structured by a series of spatialised practices. Of particular salience in Bibimoune's narrative is the matter of where the boundaries that enclose the secular space of her school begin. Immediately after the coming into force of the law, students unveil and veil in front of the glass doors of the school, using their reflections to adjust their hair and hijabs, in a way subverting the material space of the school for intimate bodily practices. Bibimoune recounts how, in the following years, tensions with the school administration escalate due to what she sees as a more and more exclusionary interpretation of the law. She describes how the boundaries that regulate the appearance students are expected to have in order to claim access to school premises are redrawn. Thus, 3 years after the passing of the law, students are no longer allowed to enter the school's car park without having previously unveiled (Bibimoune, 2016: 44). This process also takes the form of a strict policing of dress. Bibimoune specifically refers to how a chief education adviser measures the length of a bandana she wears sporadically in order to assess its ostensibility. In one of her confidences, she complains how her veil has allegedly 'Islamised' her favourite skirt ('Tu aurais soi-disant islamisé ma plus jolie robe' 37), when the school principal argued her skirt was too 'ethnical' and thus 'ostentatious' ('ostentatoire').[5] The uncertainties the protagonist faces over what constitutes a secular appearance attest to the importance of considering the application of the 2004 law in the wider context of disciplinary power exerted over Muslim girls. Bibimoune describes, for example, how the fear that Muslim girls could be using certain garments as substitute hijabs culminates in pupils known to wear a veil outside of school being asked not to wear a bonnet on the schoolyard during the winter. This, in turn, favours a dressing behaviour among Muslim schoolgirls that anticipates possible sanctions – an anticipation that attests to the enforcement of an illiberal reading of *laïcité* through governmentality.

When Bibimoune graduates from high school, one of the things she is most excited about is being able to wear her hijab to university. While there is no formal ban on religious signs for university students in France, the subject remains contentious with frequent appeals being voiced for a stricter form of *laïcité* in higher education. Indeed, both Diallo's and Bibimoune's narratives show how Muslim students who wear a veil are confronted with boundary-making practices. When visiting the University Panthéon-Assas, Bibimoune hears the following remark coming from a group of men: 'I didn't know we accepted Batman here' (Bibimoune, 2016: 67). In other instances, she describes how wearing a hijab disqualifies her in the eyes of her instructors and fellow students from engaging in discussions over *laïcité* (e.g. Bibimoune, 2016: 119).

Diallo's account of her life as a student differs significantly from that of Bibimoune. This is due both to her status as a Malian student having to learn how to navigate through a very different university culture and to her more pious religiosity (she is an avid follower of the Salafi preacher Nabil al-Awadi). The way these factors shape her understand of *laïcité* show the importance of what Barras (2018: 3) referred to as 'the politics of location in writing on secularism' to underline the local contingency of secularism. Significantly, the word '*laïcité*' does not appear even once in Diallo's narrative. Instead, it is evoked through impersonal bans the narrator does not quite understand such as 'They tell us that, at university, it is forbidden to pray. For me, it's difficult to understand' (Diallo, 2015: 51).

Following the example of a fellow Muslim student whom she admires, Diallo seeks to avoid direct contact with male faculty members. Her practice of the five daily prayers also leads to a number of tensions – for example, when she leaves the lecture hall during classes to pray. Attempts to conciliate religious practice with her studies lead to the production of Lefebvrian spaces of representation that function as counter-spaces to hegemonic spatial arrangements. Diallo describes how secluded spaces in the stairwell are used by certain Muslim students for praying. Her own strategy for performing daily prayers involves a series of practices guided by the fear of being spotted by security personnel and possibly expelled. These practices involve performing *wudu* by quickly sprinkling her shoes with water in the restroom so as not to attract attention or searching for a place with a piece of cardboard on the floor which may indicate a safe space for praying (Diallo, 2015: 52).

Both texts provide rich qualitative insights into the difficulties veiled women face when seeking to enter the labour market. As discussed earlier, the 2016 revision of the Labour Code made it easier for companies to introduce neutrality clauses. The experiences of Bibimoune and Diallo suggest that, even before the law was passed, access to the labour market was already severely limited for veiled women. The argument of neutrality makes it all the more difficult for the affected women to claim that they were victims of discrimination.

Faced with repeated rejections of their applications, Bibimoune and Diallo develop strategies to accommodate their religious beliefs with their financial needs. These strategies involve coming unveiled to a job interview or restyling their headgear by concealing any potential religious connotation (e.g. by wearing a turban-style hijab or a hoodie). Bibimoune describes the way she plays with her appearance as a form of deception:

> To get a job, I have to 'swindle' [*gruger*], come to the interview unveiled and then use my stylistic skills to make you look like a fashion accessory. I devise actual strategies. No more jilbabs, I wear hammer pants [*sarouels*]... and Che Guevara T-shirts to give me a hippie look [*un air baba cool*], and to be able to cover my hair as good as I can in my 'gigs' [*tafs*]. (Bibimoune, 2016: 58–59)

Ultimately, however, even with the most creative headgears (in one instance, a sorceress's hat), she loses her job as a childcare worker.

The experience of discrimination in the labour market gives rise to two distinctive spatialised coping strategies. The first involves seeking employment in jobs that are relatively secluded from interactions with customers, which leads to further limitations in terms of spatial practice. Diallo gives up her hope of finding a job in a clothing retail store and concentrates on her work as a nanny. Even so, she feels her status as a Black veiled woman caring for two White children is the object of gaze whenever she enters public space. Karaman and Christian's analysis of the racialisation of Muslim women in the United States suggests that Black hijabi women face 'overlapping forces of domination' through which they must navigate in their quotidian lives (Karaman and Christian, 2020: 531). Testifying to the intersectionality of Blackness and visible religiosity, Diallo describes how a Black woman came to her saying she had never seen a veiled woman with White children and asking 'How could you get this job? How is that possible?' (Diallo, 2015: 68). As for Bibimoune, after being fired from her job as a childcare worker, she has to take a position as a cleaner where she is allowed to wear a hijab. She bitterly comments on this relegation with the words: '*Laïcité* does not count when we are confined to an invisible and unappreciated occupation' (Bibimoune, 2016: 60).

A second strategy deployed for securing employment while wearing a veil is concentrating on finding a job in Muslim-owned businesses or in the provision of services to the Muslim community. Diallo, for example, attempts (and ultimately fails) to be hired at a halal fast-food restaurant. At the end of her *Confidences*, Bibimoune narrates how she found her dream job in an association active in the field of popular education just when she had resigned herself to breaking the promise she had made during her Hajj never to take off her hijab. Attesting to the diffusion of disciplinary authority theorised by Foucault, even in an association committed to fighting discrimination, Bibimoune is excluded from activities involving partnerships with public institutions for fear that her presence may pose a problem. Referring to the efforts of veiled Muslim women to claim access to the labour market as a fight for free spaces, she confides to her veil: 'And even when we "scratch out" a few spaces of freedom, they are always challenged by this system that sees you as a problem to be eradicated' (Bibimoune, 2016: 134–135).

A major topic in Bibimoune's narrative is the right to access spaces of physical activity and leisure. In fact, her activism begins with a protest against a fitness centre in which she is denied entry because of her hijab. Bibimoune recounts how the gym's employee tries to explain that the ban does not specifically target Islamic veils, but any form of headgear. Eventually, however, the employee tells her: 'This is a place where people are free and liberated' (Bibimoune, 2016: 87). This doubly performative utterance draws a

boundary that encloses a space Bibimoune may not cross and, at the same time, proclaims her status as an unfree person. She is confronted with similar situations when she is banned from swimming in a lake with a burkini or from working as a volunteer in a soup kitchen. Her account of these exclusions concentrates on what she sees as a self-reinforcing feedback loop whereby veiled Muslims are denied access to spaces of sociability to then be stigmatised as antisocial beings who refuse to interact with mainstream society – a representation which, in turn, is used to justify further restrictions.

In contrast, Diallo's narrative does not entail any experience of discrimination in spaces of leisure and sports. On the contrary, she plays basketball in a university team and describes her coach's attitude as being supportive of her will to accommodate sport and religious practice. Diallo's worries her sporting activities may lead her to commit acts she considers sinful are less focussed on her hijab (which she is allowed to wear), than in the direct physical contact with male teammates during mixed gender trainings. However, as she points out, the issue is quickly forgotten in the heat of the game (Diallo, 2015: 54). Diallo's reflections testify to the importance of the sportsground as an arena in which religious and secular identities are negotiated. Exclusionary practices in this space are therefore particularly damaging for women striving to balance religiosity and social inclusion.[6]

Both narratives address the issue of how online space is used as a site of complicity and resistance among women facing discrimination because of their veil. Discussion forums in which Muslim women share advice on how to find a job without being forced to unveil prove especially useful for Diallo who has to learn to live in a society she barely knows. Online space also allows Diallo to cultivate piety by watching video preaches, a routine that reminds her of the private Koranic lessons she received in Bamako (Diallo, 2015: 28). For Bibimoune, online space becomes essential for her activism and for her career as a writer (her first novel was initially published in serial instalments on Facebook). The disembodied and delocalised character of online interactions allows her to negotiate a new feminist subjectivity. Thus, her exchanges with women in rural Algeria who fight for the right not to wear a veil incite her to reframe her struggle in terms of self-determination (Bibimoune, 2016: 124).

However, as Saeed (2017) points out, social media are not insulated from social reality, but mirror existing tensions and hostilities both among Muslims and within wider society. Indeed, the hijab stories analysed here suggest that online space is a new battleground where conflicts over secularism and appropriate expressions of religiosity are fought. Diallo, for instance, faces criticism from other migrants for her 'un-African' practice of Islam that allegedly results from her having been 'bamboozled ["*embobinée*"] by the Arabs' (Diallo, 2015: 59). Similarly, Bibimoune is regularly confronted with criticism from other Muslims who accuse her of stirring up anti-Muslim prejudice by politicising her hijab. After the publication of her first book, she describes how she became the target of hate speech. Reactions over her first appearance on television featured sexist and racist slurs about the 'scandal' of letting a veiled woman speak out on a public channel (Bibimoune, 2016: 102) – implying that the hijab should be banned from the secular audiovisual space of public broadcasting. These violent responses appear to be linked to the expectation that the only acceptable public expression for a hijabi woman is one that denounces female suffering under patriarchal rule (Mahmood, 2008).

Bibimoune's recounting of the media framing of her debut novel is revealing of the spatial dynamics involved in the representations of the hijab. Media portrayals presenting her as a poor *banlieue* woman trying to leave her ghetto or journalists' inquiries on whether she had ever been the victim of a gang rape suggest that her hijab functions as a cognitive shortcut for hegemonic fantasies about the underworld of urban marginality and female oppression. These semantic associations show the extent to which exclusionary readings of *laïcité* are rooted in racialised, gendered, and class-based representations of otherness.

Discussion

From its onset, the very idea of *laïcité* has been tied to the production of spatial boundaries. In this context, it may be useful to re-read Ferdinand Buisson's much-quoted definition of *laïcité* in his *Dictionnaire de pédagogie* through the lens of spatiality. After explaining that the principle of a secular state resides in the idea of a 'deep delimitation between the temporal and the spiritual' (Buisson, 1888: 1469), he goes on to argue that the only way to avoid dissent is to establish clear boundaries that define the legitimate spaces in which the state and the churches may exercise their respective dominion. In Buisson's words: 'The teacher at school, the priest at church, the mayor at town hall. None can say he has been banished from a domain in which he has no entrance' ('Nul ne peut se dire proscrit du domaine où il n'a pas entrée'; Buisson, 1888: 1472). Buisson's words are, of course, an allusion to Victor Hugo's famous 'l'État chez lui, l'Église chez elle'. Although this phrase had become a rallying cry for proponents of *laïcité*, there was no consensus on how it should translate into specific policies. Questions such as which spaces should constitute the dominions of the churches and, by extension, of religion, or whether the right to occupy these spaces was to be defined in terms of ownership, usufruct or toleration would prove particularly divisive. The issue of boundaries continues to haunt debates on the meaning of *laïcité*. However, while in the Third French Republic the question was framed in terms of institutional authority and only rarely touched on individual spatial practices (for instance, the right for priests to wear a cassock in public), current debates on space and secularism focus on the individual as a subject whose movements can be limited according to displayed religion. This is legitimised by the idea that religious neutrality, rather than being a principle restricted to state authorities, is applicable to any individual entering public space.

Diallo and Bibimoune's narratives offer valuable insights into this new spatiality of *laïcité*. They allow us to grasp how the proliferation of spaces to which hijabi women are denied access affects their quotidian lives. Not only has this reading of *laïcité* made the integration of an already vulnerable population more difficult, it has also had the pernicious effect of weakening those voices within the Muslim community who seek to balance religiosity with full participation in social life.

As the spaces to which they have access become scarcer, hijabi women attempt to create new spaces of subjectivation and agency. Karimi (2020), for example, shows how discrimination in the workplace has favoured the emergence of networks of self-employed Muslim women. In the case of Diallo's prayer routine at university, adaptive strategies lead to the creation of new spaces of representation that function as underground

sites of resistance. Both narratives analysed in this study suggest that online space has become a counter-space of self-expression for hijabi women living in France. Further research is needed in order to understand how expressions of cyber-religiosity (such as the increasingly popular hijab stories on social media) are linked to secularism. While this article has focussed exclusively on France, many of the dynamics evoked here, including labour market restrictions, can also be observed in other countries and regions. Understanding secularism as spatial governmentality opens up new perspectives for the comparative study of political secularism and has the potential of placing the subject and its quotidian practices at the centre of our inquiry.

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Notes

1. All translations are mine. In cases where the translation fails to convey the connotations of the text, I add the French original.
2. Razack eloquently brings out the importance of space and visibility in the so-called niqab debates, noting that '[a]s she moves through public space, the niqabi threatens and disturbs, and she introduces foreignness into what is imagined as an otherwise pure landscape' (Razack, 2018: 182).
3. An important early exception here being Weill's (1925) *Histoire de l'idée laïque*.
4. Peretz reflects on the process of helping Diallo write her story in a separate text (Peretz, 2016).
5. These incidents echo the uncertainties in the application of the 2004 law. The law banned symbols through which students manifest a religious affiliation in a particularly visible way ('*ostensiblement*'), thus avoiding the more subjective term '*ostentatoire*', which would have made it necessary for authorities to inquire into students' motives for wearing certain items. Ultimately, however, assessing the permissibility of skirts, bandanas, or other garments has involved an individual examination of intentions and beliefs. This approach has been confirmed recently in a handbook issued by the Ministry of Education (Ministère de l'éducation nationale, 2021: 25–27).
6. As Toffoletti and Palmer (2017) point out, the social capital approach towards Muslim women in sports is reductive as it assumes that participation in a mainstream sporting culture is the sole path of empowerment through sports. However, the issue at stake here is that the tendency to define the spaces of institutionalised sport as secular limits the opportunities for women who wear a hijab to engage in physical activities and to find ways of conciliating religious practice and participation in society.

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