CONTESTING IDENTITIES WITHIN CULTURAL INSECURITY: THE CASE OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN COMTEMPORARY FRANCE

By

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Cultural Muslim women in Europe continue to feature prominently in public debates on immigration, assimilation and changing societies. France in particular has gained international attention for its public discourses and resulting legal measures that target Muslim women. The 2004 law prohibiting girls from wearing a hijab in public schools stands out as one example of how Muslim women are used to symbolize what is not acceptable in French society. Geographers have used various approaches to question how and why Muslim women are treated as an exception. In this dissertation, I build upon their work by developing the concept of cultural insecurity as a departure point to analyze how Muslim women are engaging with and contesting representations that characterize them as a threat to Frenchness. Cultural insecurity is first defined as the fear of losing unifying cultural traits due to the presence of another cultural group that is depicted as threatening due to its difference and perceived inability to adapt to other cultures. I argue that a large group of non-Muslim French public actors use discourses of cultural insecurity to generate discussions and debates on how the presence of Muslim women endangers French culture. Muslim women are the focus because of the highly visible nature of veiling practices, magnified by the nature of gender relations and feminism in France. These women are represented as submissive, provoking agents, radicalized and too religious for comfort. The production of cultural insecurity relies upon the circulation of narratives that represent Muslim
women as having a single threatening identity, and this emphasis on threat results in mistreatment and discrimination of Muslim women.

To understand how Muslim women engage with and contest these negative representations, I coded and analyzed data from two sites: the neighborhoods of the Parisian suburb Boulogne-Billancourt and the website Oumma.com. Through observations of the neighborhood landscapes, I found evidence not only of cultural insecurities through signs and symbols but also of a dialogue between defenders of Muslims and those participating in cultural insecurity discourses. Material, offline spaces allow Muslim women to produce counter narratives that are positive through performance art, casual interactions as well as social and civic engagement. Women reported experiencing discrimination and holding insecurities of their own which are byproducts of cultural insecurities felt by non-Muslim French. The analysis of the data collected on Oumma.com reveals that online spaces provide opportunities and support the engagement and contestation of circulating narratives in ways that would otherwise not be possible in material, offline spaces. Websites and social media allow Muslim women to cross geographical barriers, facilitating the forming of social bonds, connections and the sharing of information. This act of sharing is particularly important in the context of potential discrimination, verbal abuse and physical assault linked to Islamophobia. Women are able to not only support one another, but to also provide resources from relevant legal and social organizations to bring attention to how cultural insecurities are adversely affecting Muslim women. The results from the analysis of these two sites show that cultural insecurity is not only a useful lens through which geographers can analyze socio-economic phenomenon, but also the importance of conducting research in both material, offline and online spaces.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Over the last twenty-five years, the terms security and insecurity have increased in political and media parlance as descriptive and analytical concepts of social phenomenon. Though the events of September 11th, 2001 spurred a reworking of narratives and vocabulary associated with security (i.e. protection) and insecurity (i.e. potential harm), these concepts have arguably existed since societies first began forming. While certain ideas and policies may not have previously been explicitly connected to security, ideas of protection from uncertainty are far from new. These two terms are ever evolving as political, social and economic boundaries are reworked. Today’s use of these terms is heavily influenced by the emergence of strong narratives on personal and national security that gained traction following the end of the Cold War (Martin and Owen 2010). Some may argue that these terms are overused because of their sexiness which may be correct, but they remain powerful tools for enticing and aiding those with power to gain public attention for the support of their visions and actions.

Social scientists from diverse disciplines have investigated and analyzed the use and implications of the concepts of security and insecurity on regional, national and international scales. The emphasis on the security aspect of our lives gained considerable momentum, with lesser attention paid to insecurities as a valuable mode of analysis. Human Security (the focus on the individual) in particular has been a popular subject, though with less attention placed on insecurities as a valuable mode of analysis. Yet the presence and subsequent consequences of insecurities should not be ignored - fears people harbor in relation to their personal connections to spaces, histories and processes of being are important emotions and thoughts that influence behaviors and decision making at all scales. These behaviors associated with fears also help us comprehend the complexities of societies, especially in terms of representing and defining majority and minority experience.
The concepts of security and insecurity are intertwined, both embodying emotions difficult to approach due to their ephemeral nature (Fierke 2007) and their dependence on one another (Neocleous 2008). Security suggests emotions and actions related to safety, prevention, power, order, control and confidence (Peoples and Williams 2014). Insecurity, on the other hand, implies threats, tensions, powerlessness, anxieties, chaos, fears and uncertainties constructed in certain times and places (Huymans 2006; Weldes et al. 1999; Elias and Scotson 1994). Their interdependence is rooted in the fact that they are in many ways opposites, yet both necessary for self-definition. Feeling safe is often associated with the removal or lack of threat. Control exists only when confronted with the possibilities of disorder and chaos. Feelings of security and insecurity are both real\(^1\) and imagined which informs actions by both state and non-state actors (Booth and Wheeler 2008; Robin 2004; Klein 1998).

Due to the raveled nature of these terms, emphasis is often placed on one, while the other is taken for granted. In academia, it is security that tends to garner the most attention, while insecurity remains implied. Scholars and public figures alike once limited their use of security as a policy-making agenda within national concerns with an emphasis on protection from physical harm (MacFarlane and Khong 2006), but the drafting of the Declaration of Human Rights encouraged a reworking of the concept to address the human experience in a changing world, rooted in concerns of quality of life and protection of rights (Liotta and Owen 2006). Human Security blossomed into a rich literature on state action and protection (Buzan et al. 1998), evolving into a master narrative in which the state shapes the lives and imaginations of its citizens (Neocleous 2008). The focus on elites has overshadowed the importance of banal, everyday experiences with issues of security and insecurity formations (Dittmer 2009).

\(^{1}\) Here I use the term real to refer to threats where negative impact will be experienced and felt (e.g. crime related) Imagined threats are ones that are unlikely to come to fruition as they are not related to actual events that support their current existence (e.g. alien invasion).
Definitions and uses of the human security led academics to investigate societies at various scales with a considerable amount looking at the inter-state and global levels (Ingram and Dodds 2009) with emphasis on policy-making implications (Floyd 2007). Since the 1990s, International Relations (IR) scholars have been prolific in their contributions to analyses of security, power and the role of the state. These scholars focused on security rather than defense, social cohesion and the relationship between military and non-military threats and vulnerabilities (Buzan and Hansen 2009). Their contributions led to the creation of the sub-field International Security Studies (ISS), which originated in Europe with the Copenhagen School (Watson 2012; Stritzel 2007) and later the Aberystwyth School (Diskaya 2013). Though ISS has primarily been dominated by European, North American and Australian scholars, Latin American academics have offered their own views on global distributions of power, foreign intervention and the security of democracy (Tickner and Herz 2012).

Other disciplines within the social sciences have contributed their work in understanding security by focusing on power relations. Literature on security as it relates to race, discrimination and economic precarity have looked at power relations and resistance at various scales. Anthropologists have looked at the state’s role in conflicts and preparedness in Israel (Samimian-Darsh 2016, Debos 2014) and the relationship between security discourses and practice (Goldstein 2010). Sociologists use the lens of security to discuss issues such as social welfare and neoliberalism (Ponsaers 2012), the intervention of the state in our lives (Bennett and Lyon 2008) and experiences of racism (Hickey 2016). Geographers have contributed to and used security as a concept in various ways including as: spatial vocabulary for analyzing international relations, as an invoker of special types of politics, as a means to examine spatial concerns of mobility and border-making, network analysis, and how geometries of power are stretched and contested in spaces (Ingram and Dodds 2009).
2.1 The research problem

Although social scientists have grappled with issues of human security, insecurity has remained largely unexamined. Yet the emotions and perspectives resulting from insecurities can have serious effects on individuals and groups at all scales, from the crafting of national policies to everyday experiences. By focusing on security, social scientists spend more time on actions and reactions then on root causes. Yet it is important to understand how and why fear and anxieties occur and are represented in societies, especially when these emotions are tied to specific groups. It is through the understanding of how insecurities form and are circulated through society that social issues such as ethnicism and racism can be better addressed. This dissertation will contribute to the literature on insecurities by focusing on an underrepresented concept in geography - cultural insecurity. While culture and identities are not easily definable concepts, recent events show that state actors continue to depend on collective identities such as the nation and culture to unite certain groups and exclude others. This has certainly been the case in France where the state and public actors have used discourses on the fear of losing Frenchness due to the presence of Muslim women.

Cultural insecurities are produced over time by various discourses, experiences and events, crafting sets of malleable perceptions. The circulation of these perceptions through diverse channels represents various identities which create boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Collective identity, particularly that of the nation, becomes vital to our understanding of this process (Robin 2007). The majority of research on the general concept of insecurity historically anchors agency within the state, omitting the importance of process and participation of various non-state actors in defining who and what constitutes a threat (Neocleous 2008). Non-state actors, particularly media have an essential role to play in defining threats and sculpting narratives around fear (Bullock and Joya Jafri’s 2016). Media representation of minorities and ethnicity, race, multiculturalism and identity politics feed into discourses emanating from the state on the need for protection and bring these narratives to everyday people (Ahmed and Matthes 2017: 219). Media and other public actors define,
produce and reproduce symbols of insecurity through text, images, and daily practices (Bruns 2005).

Migrant groups often find themselves at the center of debates on societal stability and national identity (Yuval-Davis 1999), becoming targets for media attention and through daily practices, and they unwillingly contribute to the production of cultural insecurities. The contestation of these representations proves equally important as perceived acts of resistance by a minority. Muslim women in North America and Europe provide powerful examples of individuals who bear the brunt of majority scrutiny through media representations (Fetzer and Soper 2004). This is particularly true in the context of France where Muslim women are pushed to the forefront of insecurity debates due to religious practice, familial ties linked to cultures outside of France, and historical ties (Bowen 2007). Explosive debates and resulting policies surrounding the loss of French national identity in opposition to the representation of Muslim women exemplifies the violence resulting from the cultural insecurity of a majority. Though researchers have studied the policies and laws that have been created in response to the presence of Muslim women in France (e.g. the 2004 law prohibiting the hijab in public schools), very little research in geography exists in how Muslim women are experiencing cultural insecurities of the majority and how they are responding to these representations.

Given the lack of research in geography on cultural insecurities and the experiences of minorities perceived as threats, this dissertation will ask the following questions:

**Research Question 1: How are Muslim women identifying themselves as Muslim within the context of being represented as a cultural threat to French society?** I will examine how the women in this study define their identity as (French) Muslim women within the cultural insecurity context.
Research Question 2: How are Muslim women engaging with and contesting the representations of threat perpetuated by the state and public actors? I will draw upon data collected in both virtual and physical spaces to understand how cultural insecurities affect the everyday lives of Muslim women and how these circulating narratives and resulting behaviors by non-Muslim French translate into action.

I came to these research questions through personal observations of how Muslim women are depicted in French public discourse and by reviewing research in the social sciences on the experiences of Muslim women in France. While excellent work exists Muslim women in relation to immigration, ethnicity, racism and the actions of state institutions, few geographers have looked at examples of how Muslim women are reacting to the representations of themselves as a threat. The argument of this dissertation proceeds as follows: cultural insecurities in France are experienced by the non-Muslim majority who feel that their Frenchness is threatened by Muslim practices. While Frenchness is perceived as needing to be guarded from any outsider, the state and public actors (including the media) specifically represent Muslim women as a threat to the survival of French culture. This is done through representing Muslim women as challenging elements of French culture including threatening core republican values (e.g. secularism through their veiling practices) and tying Muslim women to territories that are decidedly un-French (e.g. the banlieue or non-European countries). Though several representations are used in insecurity discourses, the Muslim woman identity is essentialized. This one-dimensional representation is key to ensuring that these discourses on cultural insecurities are easy to circulate and understand. These identities and resulting insecurities become a regular part of circulating text and images throughout society, and are also imprinted on physical landscapes. While the power to generate and perpetuate these representations lies with the state and public actors (including media), Muslim women can find ways to respond and contest these negative representations in their everyday lives.

2.2 Methodology
To address the research questions, I chose two sites, one virtual and one physical. Oumma.com is a website that is created by and for French Muslims. Unlike in most research on Muslim online activities, Oumma.com is not an exclusively religious site, but rather provides articles, videos and audio files on a variety of topics and current events that effect French Muslim communities. Drawing upon discussions, text and images generated through interactions on this site, I collected data from postings between 1997 and 2014. The coded data was and analyzed for emerging themes that provide insights into how Muslim women engage with and contest the negative representations of Muslims circulating in French society. While the primary data I collected is from Oumma.com, field visits to the suburb Boulogne-Billancourt (Paris metro area), provided supporting evidence of the presence of cultural insecurities embedded on neighborhood landscapes. During four separate visits, I made observations of what signs and symbols were present that both illustrate everyday examples of cultural insecurities, but also the potential dialogue occurring in physical spaces. Events specifically geared towards Muslims and informal conversations with Muslim women both in Boulogne-Billancourt and surrounding suburbs helped shape the discussions on identity and experiences with discrimination resulting from cultural insecurities. The analysis of the data resulted in three empirical chapters.

2.3 Organization of the study

Chapter 2: Cultural Insecurity, Identities and Representation builds an argument for why examining cases such as Muslim women in France through the lens of cultural insecurities provides us with a better understanding of how minority groups are constructed, how they build identities around this position and how they find different ways to engage with and contest this position. The chapter provides an overview of literature on insecurity, culture, identities and space within the social sciences to build a definition of cultural insecurity. I begin with a summary of geography’s contribution to insecurity literature, especially its emphasis on spatiality of fears and anxieties. This is followed by a definition of cultural insecurity that borrows from Ole Weaver’s discussions on cultural security. Though culture is
a slippery term, I attempt to define it within the context of this dissertation by drawing upon Stuart Hall’s work which looks to shared traits such as values and language. French culture is a working and evolving concept due to internal and external influences, but parameters are placed by state and public actors through defining what is acceptable and what is included in Frenchess. Identity is an imperfect term when it suggests that individuals are bound or exhibit only one sense of self, but it is used in this dissertation for two reasons: in French discourses on cultural insecurity, the concept of identity is specifically used to create boundaries between those who are part of the collective and those who do not fit. Identity is also the way in which Muslim women talk about their processes of being. Touching briefly on geographers’ work on identity, I emphasize that both individual and collective identities are crucial elements to how representations are constructed in society. Representations are formed by the state and key actors, and circulate through society, producing a sense of fear attached to Muslims. I conclude the chapter with my research question on how Muslim women engage with and contest representations of themselves as threats.

In Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology, I discuss the methodology used to answer the research questions posited by outlining the research sites and population, the research design, the methods of data collection, and the data analysis and synthesis. This dissertation set out to use the concept of cultural insecurity as a means of uncovering instances of how Muslim women engage with and contest these representations in their daily lives. Given the previous research on Muslim women in France, which ranges in scale (e.g. state policies to everyday experiences) and focus (e.g. immigration, religious practice, economic precarity), it is important to think about new ways in which to approach these subjects. To accomplish this, a composite of field sites and methods was used to observe and interact with Muslim women both in virtual and in physical spaces. The combination of virtual spaces (in this case the website Oumma.com) and physical spaces (the neighborhoods in and around Boulogne-Billancourt) offers new ways of observing interactions and hearing Muslim women speak on their own behalf. The chapter also includes sections that discuss
ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, and the limitations encountered during this study. It ends with a brief chapter summary and introduces the three empirical chapters built on the analysis of data collected in virtual and physical spaces.

Chapter 4: Setting the scene: Frenchness and Representations of Muslim Women reveals that tracing the representations of Muslim women in France is not always easy. It requires an understanding of the history of immigration, mainly from North Africa. Colonialism, specifically the control over the Maghreb region, continues to play its role in cultural insecurities. This chapter begins by discussing what French culture means in general terms by looking at four main components. While there is no official definition of Frenchness, there are elements often cited by state and public actors as fundamental to creating and maintaining the nation. I then present a summary of the waves of what can be considered Muslim immigration to France. By the 1970s, the first generation of Muslims were French citizens by birth, but while they shared a legal identity with other French, they were marginalized both socially but also physically in the suburbs of large cities. The chapter explores the political identity that these youth developed (the beur generation) along with the role of the banlieue (suburb) as spaces that shaped both the sense of belonging of those living there, but also shaped the perceived identity of these individuals by the non-Muslim majority.

One of the biggest issues brought to the forefront of political and social discourses in France is whether there is an Islam of France or an Islam in France. Before presenting the representations of Muslim women circulating in society, I briefly tackle the subject of whether an Islam of France is even possible. The chapter then covers the five main ways Muslim women are portrayed in French society including: as overtly sexualized, as terrorists, as proselytizing fanatics, as oppressed beings, and as resistant. Special attention is paid to the role veiling practices play in the construction of the identity imposed on Muslim women and how secularism is used to rebut visual evidence of Islam (in the form of hijabs and niqabs). Tensions around veiling practices and the resulting mobilization by the state (through the
passing of laws) and constant reiterations of insecurity discourses by public actors first began in the early 1980s. I discuss briefly this entangled story of gender, insecurity, and identity linked to veiling practices. The chapter concludes with a short review of what was covered.

Chapter 5: Defining Cultural Insecurities Through Everyday Experiences is the first empirical chapter which shares findings from the data collected on Oumma.com (the virtual field site) with supporting evidence from exchanges in the neighborhoods of the suburb Boulogne-Billancourt. The following questions guide this chapter:

- **How do women feel implicated in the production of cultural insecurities?**
- **What are the elements and characteristics that contribute to self-identifying and identifying others as a Muslim for the women in this study?**
- **Do these women in turn feel culturally insecure in France?**
- **If so, what are the issues, events and situations that fuel this fear?**

To address these questions, I collected data in the form of text, visual and audio materials from the website Oumma.com, coded and analyzed to provide evidence of how users understand the identity Muslim woman. The first section answers the question of what elements make up Muslimness including practices and traditions, state of mind, and beliefs. In section two, I briefly explain how these women view their identity as being construed as a threat. Women on Oumma.com talk about representations circulating on veiling practices and assumptions that non-Muslim French have on violence and oppression woven into the religion. The last section of this chapter answers the question of what in turn makes these women feel insecure. With society’s focus on the threat that Muslim women pose, we easily forget that these women also have their own fears and anxieties associated with their identities. Users of Oumma.com focus primarily on Islamophobia in France but also perceptions of how other minority groups (especially “Zionists”) are anti-Muslim and have power within French society. Throughout the sections, I use examples from the observations
made in Boulogne-Billancourt during field visits. The chapter ends by posing the question of how these women engage with and contest how they are perceived by French society in material (offline) spaces.

Chapter 6: Engagement and Resistance in Offline Spaces is the second empirical chapter and draws upon two different data sets: data collected on Oumma.com and data collected through observations in the neighborhoods of Boulogne-Billancourt. The first section reviews why physical spaces are important in the production of cultural insecurity (e.g. interactions, visibility). Using discussions and comments from women online, I discuss how various Muslim institutions are implicated in the production of cultural insecurity through their presence on the landscape. The section also includes a presentation of the signs and symbols found in the neighborhoods of Boulogne-Billancourt (presented in map form generated through geocoding) which demonstrate how fears and anxieties imprint themselves on everyday landscapes. These signs and symbols (such as graffiti and stickers) create a dialogue in physical spaces that contribute both to the production of and the resistance to cultural insecurities. The second section of the chapter draws mostly on the data collected on Oumma.com to discuss what women are doing in everyday situations to engage with and resist the representations of themselves as a threat. These include: performance arts, fighting back, participating in political rallies and demonstrations, and reporting instances of physical and verbal abuse to authorities. The chapter ends with a discussion on the role of agency within physical spaces and what this might mean for the women in this study.

Chapter 7: Engagement and Resistance in Virtual Spaces, the third and final empirical chapter, focuses on how Muslim women discuss their engagement with and resistance to being cast as the main producers of cultural insecurities using virtual spaces. The chapter starts by drawing upon previous literature on Muslim women online to highlight how these communities use online spaces when living in countries where they are considered the minority. It then explores in what ways users of Oumma.com respond to how they are
perceived by the French majority. This includes: posting, authoring texts, uploading videos, and posting comments to have their voices heard. Some of these types of engagement are similar to those found in physical spaces and might even intersect with them. Women on the website also discussed certain strategies they have for coping and resilience in the face of cultural insecurities such as disengagement and retreating from the context. The discussion section analyzes what aspects of virtual spaces make them opportunities for women to respond to cultural insecurity narratives that are unique to the attributes of the spaces. Unlike physical spaces, online environments and communication platforms provide Muslim women with the ability to reach large audiences and interact with other women across geographic spaces. Websites and social media allow women to share knowledge and experiences with people with whom they would never have contact otherwise. They are also spaces that allow for women to tap into the umma (the greater Muslim community). This transnational community allows for Muslim women to share their own experiences and points of view with other Muslims, allowing them to support one another and form different identities within the Muslim woman label.

Chapter 8 concludes this dissertation with a review of the general themes and ideas that emerged from the empirical chapters. Muslim women on Oumma.com and in Boulogne-Billancourt are finding ways to engage with and contest negative representations that are circulating through French society. Though they lack consistent access to media and other platforms that would allow them to dispel many of the assumptions non-Muslim French may have, they use physical and virtual spaces to push back in everyday situations. Through this research it became apparent that many Muslim women see their identity as one based in choice, which directly opposes many of the narratives attached to cultural insecurities. I open up the discussion to what these identities might mean and what larger Muslim identities (e.g. on a European scale) could be useful to consider. The chapter then engages in a discussion on why using the lens of cultural insecurity is particularly useful and what it can uncover in other contexts.
Chapter 3  Cultural Insecurity, Identities and Representation

Cultural insecurity is an under-explored concept. As described in the introduction to this dissertation, researchers across the social sciences have focused primarily on issues of security (e.g. safety, control) either at the level of the state and supranational institutions and their policies on securing borders, property, and bodies, or through Human Security focused more on individuals and groups (e.g. food, economic and health security). The aspect of insecurity in this literature remains largely implied and taken for granted. As complements, security and insecurity are deeply tangled. If there is nothing to fear, then there is no need to think about social and environmental issues in terms of security. When insecurity is mentioned, it is generally to name the fear in question. Yet cultural insecurity, the fear of losing one’s culture due to change or in the face of another, is both a useful lens in which to explore socio-economic activities and events, but is also extremely politically topical in 2017. Cultural insecurities are being used as a guise for enacting political and economic policies that cater to specific socio-economic groups. By digging deeper into the circulating narratives of fear and anger, we can better understand how these ideas of insecurity circulate, who they reach and what is the effect.

There are many examples of the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities around the world, and such cases are used in different ways. For example, immigrants may feel cultural elements such as language and values slip away as they assimilate to their surroundings. This dissertation uses the example of the French non-Muslim majority viewing the presence of Muslim women as a threat to the survival of Frenchness. In this case, the majority fears that the practices of a minority group will dilute or alter cultural elements. These fears are articulated through circulating representations of Muslim women which use text, audio and images to paint a picture of a threat. Insecurities associated with this threat are then produced at every level of society and impact not only those who attach to the fear but also those who are associated with the representations (Muslim women themselves). While the Muslim minority of France has been the topic of much discussion by state and public
actors including the media, cultural insecurity is underused as a lens for analysis. Also, there is very little evidence of how Muslim women respond to being portrayed as a threat.

The aim of this research is to investigate how minorities (specifically Muslim women in France) are implicated in the production of cultural insecurities by the circulating narratives that construe them as a threat, and how they contest their position. These representations are built on circulating narratives that together define what it means to be a Muslim woman in France. The findings will help further define the nature of cultural insecurities which remain under-articulated by scholars. It will also tackle issues of minority experiences influenced by insecurities across scales, particularly how processes of being (identities) are shaped and contested. This dissertation will contribute to several interrelated bodies of literature in geography including research on insecurity, France, the Muslim women in Western Europe, and spatial identities. This chapter begins by laying the foundation for the definition of cultural insecurities by modifying the definition of cultural security which emerged in the early 2000s in the field of International Relations. I will argue that state and other public actors identify groups such as Muslim women as a threat by further questioning what is meant by culture, and how culture and multiculturalism act as devices for designating and identifying groups. Through the process of representation, they create an essentialized identity that is necessary for the concept of us versus them to take effect. The third section tells the story of how cultural insecurities are produced by using the concept of representation and how representations circulate through spaces. The fourth section ties together the exploration of cultural insecurities by locating how they are produced through everyday experiences and who is involved in their production, reproduction and circulation. Threaded through the chapter is the argument that cultural insecurities are inherently spatial phenomena due to being propped up by feelings of belonging anchored in territory and physical spaces. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of what has been discussed and introduces Chapter 3.

3.1 Situating insecurity
As previously explained, insecurity has not received as much theoretical attention as security, and the concept of cultural insecurity is not sufficiently explored by researchers for numerous reasons including: the difficult nature of teasing out the distinctions between security and insecurity, the historical dominance of the term security as a main focus for academics and complications in finding ways within research to discuss concepts rooted in emotions. While the large body of literature on security from various disciplines does recognize the role of insecurities within the vocabulary and use of human security as an analytical tool, only a handful of researchers explore the usefulness of insecurity as a theoretical concept (Watson 2012). Instead, insecurities are given specific names to represent social, economic and political phenomena, formulated as emotions or produced through structures. For example, risk and fear are emotions associated with insecurity, concept of risk society gained prominence thanks to Ulrich Beck (1992) who first began questioning the influence of modernity on cosmopolitanism, where risk is a characteristic of societies. Beck argued that the dangers and hazards resulting from industrialization, urbanization and globalization have increased due to the scale of interactions between and within states. These interactions spurred new types of risks, anywhere from potential of terrorism to pandemics. Beck’s musings on risk society has resulted in a variety of work on the effects of risk assessments and the resulting changes in definitions and implementations of security measures (Krahman 2011). The type of fearful emotions expressed in Beck’s theory are controlled to a certain extent, but perhaps what is most engaging is his recognition of risks being mainly a product of human activity and not nature (Mythen and Walklate 2007). In terms of the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities, it is precisely this tension between a changing world and human activity that drives these emotions linked to fear.

The concept of risk is strongly linked to fear which in turn suggests insecurity. For instance, researchers working on themes of terrorism and security do discuss the idea of fear. In addition to discussing the potentially harmful discourses of political leaders on terrorism (e.g. Baker-Beall 2014), fear is used in discussions on tenuous, unjust or violent social
interactions, such as the effects of racism in everyday practices (e.g. Hickey 2016). Security studies has also highlighted fear as a political motivator and an instigator of change (Robin 2004). The fear of the other has led to the transforming of subjects into matters of security, called securitization, a theoretical tool used in different disciplines to analyze security policies (Floyd 2007, Balzacq 2005). This tool has been used by state actors (institutions) particularly in the case of immigration. At the heart of these questions about fear is the role of the state. Much of security studies define the state as set of institutions where certain subjects are objects of policies. The securitization literature borrows heavily from Michel Foucault and his thoughts on power, territory and governance (Ingram and Dodds 2009, Foucault 1994). Here power is not considered as unilateral, residing solely in the state, but rather within different discursive frameworks emanating through society (Noxolo 2009). Researchers have presented securitization as an attempt made by political actors to use rhetoric that convinces the public that social issues are something to fear, and the public therefore accepts actions taken to ensure their safety (Baele and Sterck 2015).

Within this literature on fear, tools such as securitization illustrate the power held by the state and public actors in convincing everyday people that there is a need to regulate groups (e.g. immigrants), and how the state has a hand in defining and configuring groups. For instance, discussions on immigration policies in the US in 2017 implied that citizens from certain African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries would not be allowed to enter the country. The language used by the Trump administration framed Muslims living in these countries as a potential threat to the values and lives of US citizens. Due to violence framed as Islamic terrorism in France, there has been discussion in how to curb immigration that is perceived to lead to this violence as well.

Geographers have made strong connections between the feelings associated with insecurities (fear, discomfort etc.) and space as these touch upon fundamentals within the discipline due to strong ties to globalization, transnationalism and transculturalism across
various contexts and scales (Al-Rodhan 2006). Geographers such as Pain and Smith (2008) have looked to the spatial manifestation of fears, and geopolitics and geo-security scholars use spatial data and geographic tools to assess threats and develop solutions to demographic and environmental conditions of political territories (Wood 2003). The threat and experience of violence has been studied at various scales, from the global (conflict) to the household level (domestic violence) (Little 2016, Pain 2014). Ideas of fear and banal terrorism have also been explored by feminists across disciplines at all scales, looking at the role of the state in terms of institutions, practices and discourses that are gendered (i.e. Katz 2007). More recently, geographers have written about cyber security, a growing field. This is particularly interesting as issues of security are perceived to be moving from the territory or physical environments to virtual ones (Kaiser 2014). Space and power, particularly who controls how spaces are used and perceived, are an integral aspect of how geographers look at security.

Insecurity is central to the vast research on hazards and vulnerability looking at socio-economic (e.g. Shatkin 2009; Leichenko and O’Brien 2008; Birkmann 2006) and environmental impacts of human interactions on landscapes (e.g. Deltombe 2007; Rashed et al. 2006; Bogardi 2004; Mitchell 2003; Wright et al. 2003). Here insecurities are born from interactions between humans and environments, particularly in terms of unequal access to resources (Gaillard and Mercer 2012), issues of resilience and adaptation in urban areas (Krellenberg et al. 2016), and larger issues of health, safety, sustainability, food, rights and economic wellbeing (for example, Curtis and Oven 2012). Insecurities are presented both as individual emotions stemming from the results of human interactions but also as rooted in structures. Current discourses on vulnerability and politics (e.g. the United States pulling out of the Paris COP 21) illustrate how insecurity can be felt on multiple scales.

Urban geographers in particular have long looked to socio-economic insecurities by observing transition in neighborhoods (e.g. Gonen 2002; Godfrey 1998), economic shifts within suburban areas (e.g. Pavlic and Qian 2014), food insecurity in cities (e.g. Warchawsky
2014), ethnic enclaves and socio-economic tensions surrounding migration (e.g. Kaplan and Li 2006), issues of crime (e.g. Delmelle and Thill 2014) and gender (e.g. Joassart-Marcelli 2014, Koskela and Pain 2000), social unrest and intervention (e.g. Young et al. 2014) and economic decline of urban centers (e.g. Wood 2003). Effects of segregation (e.g. Holloway and McNulty 2003; Boone 2002), complications due to immigration (e.g. Ha 2010), and the (“newly”) formed insecurities of displaced persons (e.g. Lunstrum 2009; Mitchneck et al. 2009) also draw links between insecurities and space. Insecurities within this literature are often situated at the individual level and position others as primary factors in why individuals feel insecure.

The above examples within geography touch upon important aspects of insecurity and highlight its increased need to be used as a theoretical concept. It is possible that insecurity is not outright named or given the same central theme due to its strong connection to emotions which are challenging to theorize and analyze. While as mentioned above, there is more than one way of looking at how insecurity operates (within individuals or structurally), I look at the level of emotion for this dissertation as I think it lends itself best to exploring the context of France and Muslim women. Also, geographers since the 2000s have contributed interesting research to insecurity in terms of emotion and space (such as Pain and Smith 2008 edited volume on fear). There has also been a push to understand how emotions are implicated in geographic musings on space (most notably Davidson et al. 2005 edited work on emotional geographies). These examples attempt to bring the negative emotions of insecurity to the forefront, but the majority of scholars still turn to security as the preferred prism of analysis (Bigo 2002).

It is important and beneficial to specifically discuss the nature of insecurities as they exist in all facets of our lives. Whether Robin (2004) is right to say that fears are driving forces in our decision-making, they certainly have a role in our everyday. Insecurities manifest themselves across virtual and physical spaces, and are produced, used and felt by
actors at all scales. By investigating the production and engagement with insecurities, we learn more about the complexities of human interactions across spaces. For this dissertation, I am focusing on the fears individuals and groups express when faced with potential threats to their culture. This is what I call cultural insecurities (defined further below). Though this might seem a far cry from the literature covered above by International Relations scholars, Beck’s risk society or geographers discussing hazards and climate change, it is important to have a grasp on security and insecurity literature. When discussing Muslim women in France, I will approach insecurities mostly from an emotional stance as a) this is how it is depicted within cultural insecurities and b) because the data collected resonates well with emotions as an entry point. As this work will uncover, many of the issues and scales discussed in this body of literature intersect with, overlap and influence the production of cultural insecurities.

3.2 Cultural insecurities

While we might think that insecurity is a common-sense term given its daily use, adding culture to it can easily become problematic for social scientists. Culture is a term that is difficult to define and has potential for essentializing groups. The heavy historical burden associated with culture as a lens and the slippery, elusive nature of what community, identity and identification entail creates a tight rope effect where clear meanings are challenging to achieve. While fears and anxieties related to culture may be apparent in society, and even explicitly discussed by state and public actors, using cultural insecurities as a way of observing and analyzing behaviors requires caution to avoid falling into assumptions and generalities. It is therefore important to both clearly define what is meant by cultural insecurities for this dissertation but to also examine the larger body of work from which this term has emerged.
This dissertation defines cultural insecurities as the negative emotions associated with losing cultural elements. My definition borrows from Ole Waever's (2000) work which coined the term cultural security:

“the capacity of a society to conserve its specific character in spite of changing conditions, and real or virtual threats: more precisely, it involves the permanence of traditional schemes of language, associations, identity, and national or religious practices, allowing for changes that are judged to be acceptable”.

Waever remains one of the few scholars to look to the importance of culture as an influential element of security decision-making and securitization analysis. Waever’s work is strongly rooted in International Relations traditions of examining the role of the state in security narratives and actions when it comes to protecting culture, where the state is a set of political institutions. For Waever, this protection lies at the national level, safeguarded only by explicit interventions by the state and is best analyzed by looking at overarching political discourses. While Waever and other security scholars have produced interesting work in analyzing how the state crafts and uses security discourses, in the case of this dissertation the state is seen as a differentiated set of institutions, practices, agencies and discourses. The state contributes to the reinforcing of social practices and contributes to building commonly accepted ideas through both individual and group actions.

Before delving deeper into how cultural insecurities are produced, it is important to clarify what is meant by culture in the context of this dissertation. The term will appear throughout this dissertation in many ways, including (a) as a device used for categorization, (b) as a way to designate social separation and (c) as a way to facilitate individual and group identification. Culture in itself is a difficult concept to grasp as it relies on abstract, fluid notions of shared characteristics. Researchers from various social science disciplines have provided an array of definitions over the years. For example, cultural anthropologist Margaret

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2 Cultural elements can include a wide range of characteristics, behaviors, and stories. They contribute to a sense of the collective when shared. Cultural elements may include: language, traditions, religion, perceived shared history, philosophy, values, customs, etc.
Mead looked at culture in terms of learned behaviors while Raymond Williams saw culture as structures (e.g. family and state institutions) which govern social relationships and form ways in which societies communicate. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz simplified this by claiming that culture is an assemblage of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Their concerns with defining and analyzing culture led to the establishment of cultural studies.

Cultural studies, which emerged from the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1950s, has spread throughout the academic world, concerning itself with different topics and methodologies depending on the regional context. Cultural studies offers avenues of examining subject matters in terms of practices and relations to power and provides us with understanding of the social and political context in which culture manifests itself. Its scholars have used culture as an object of study but also as a location of political criticism and action, and have conflated theory with empirical analysis (Grossberg 2013). Within cultural studies, scholars have looked at culture in different ways and provided the social sciences with ways of analyzing important signs, symbols and interactions rooted in society. Geographers have a long tradition, starting with Carl Sauer (1948), in looking at how culture influences spaces and activities (e.g. geographers such as Donald Mitchell (2002) and Denis Cosgrove (1983)).

For the purpose of this dissertation, I rely on cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall’s (1997) description of culture. In his 1997 work, Hall described culture as a set of practices where meanings are produced and shared between people resulting in a general understanding of the world. Though Hall’s work is two decades old, his extensive investigation of how meanings come about within societies speaks directly to examples of cultural insecurities expressed around the world. As I will be using the context of France, Hall’s ideas fit nicely with how formal institutions such as the government and the education system portray what is meant by French culture (to be discussed further in Chapter Four). For Hall, meanings become important as a unifying factor - culture is an overarching system which integrates individuals into larger groups (Gardiner 2000) based upon elements that may include...
language, behavior patterns, values, symbols and other perceived shared characteristics (Gans 2010; Waever 2000).

The term practices used by Hall suggests that cultural elements are not static things. Elements such as values and language continuously evolve because of everyday exchanges, their use by different people (age, context, etc.) and their exposure to other cultures. As Hall put it, it is the practice, the actual doing that is important. The idea of cultural practices was explored by sociologists such as Max Weber and Talcott Parsons who have characterized practices in terms of ideas and values, respectively. More recently, sociologists have thought about practices as the routines of individuals and groups that are less rooted in thought and more in their actions: the way they use their bodies, their habits, sense of space, clothing, food, musical preferences and social routines (Swidler 2001 discussing Bourdieu). Cultural practices are both public and private, are material and enacted and are patterned and meaningful (Swindler 2001: 88). It is important to underline that cultural practices are intertwined with identities and practices around class/income, race, gender and sexuality as well.

The production of cultural insecurities relies on the line between cultural practices that align with established norms and practices that are perceived as threatening those norms. The simplest illustration of this is with language. Hall (1997) explains that language plays a specific role in the set of practices called culture as the privileged medium through which meanings are produced and exchanged. The position of language as a repository translates into many examples of cultural insecurities across the world. This is perhaps less surprising in the case of minorities who are often pressured to align their spoken language with that of the dominant culture. Yet, the majority can also exhibit similar fears in the presence of other languages being spoken in public spaces. Such an example periodically surfaces in the United States in connection to debates on immigration. The question of instating English as the official language began in the 1700s, and continuously resurfaces in the political arena when
media and politicians take a stance on issues of integration. The perceived increased number of foreign language speakers (most recently Spanish) gives way to concerns that English will no longer be the dominate language. For many, seeing English become a second or third language suggests a loss of history and sense of belonging and dominance of English speakers (Crawford 2001).

While as I have stated, cultural insecurity is not frequently used by scholars, the concept of culture and cultural practices has found its way into security studies. For Waever and other researchers interested in the links between security and culture, the focus remains primarily on how culture informs decision making by state actors on policy making and development of security discourses. Issues of power are central to all of these examples. Anthropologists have addressed the lack of power-laden cultural processes (where powerful actors rely on cultural arguments for their gains) as a defining element within security studies (Goldstein 2005; Pottier 1999; Weldes et al. 1999). Political scientists turn to "cultural explanations" of how and why political institutions and concomitant power structures employ security measures (Krause 1999; Stoett 1999; Katzenstein 1996). Research also exists on the retention of values (Bialasiewicz and Mica 2005), defending minority rights (Feltault 2006), threats to political power (Nemeth 2007), and tensions caused by migration (e.g. Tehranian 2004). The focus here remains on how minorities maintain their rights and culture when faced with pressure to assimilate and/or integrate.

Though not explicitly stated, geographers contribute to literature on cultural security and insecurity research by exploring tensions in urban settings, particularly in migrant or ethnic neighborhoods (e.g. Haldrup et al. 2008; Kaplan and Holloway 2001). With large numbers of minorities and migrants, urban areas become centers of insecurity (Moser 2004) but also spaces for "mixing or hybridization" of cultures, allowing for possible integration and assimilation (e.g. Little 2008; Nava 2006). Yet such contact rarely yields satisfactory amounts of interaction to overcome feelings of insecurity (Valentine 2008; Holland et al. 2007; Amin
2002; Cameron 2000) as limited time, exposure and public space etiquette may reinforce fears between groups (Valentine 2008; Cutter et al. 2003; Creswell 1996). What remains understudied within geography and the social sciences at large is how daily practices in both virtual and physical spaces produce and reproduce cultural insecurity by various actors.

As with the general discussion on security, there is also a lack of specific attention to insecurity connected to culture. The body of work on culture as an explanation or an influence on state action rarely investigates the nature and effects of the insecurities involved. The perceived threat is of course named and briefly discussed, but interest continues to lie in the process of preventing or addressing threats. Yet I argue that understanding how cultural insecurities are produced is extremely important because it not only aids in further explaining security and state action, but also addresses a host of issues including: boundary-making, minority experiences, and the work visuality and space do in forming narratives. To understand the production of cultural insecurities, I ask the following general questions: Who is labelled a threat and how are differences between groups created? How are narratives portraying groups as threats created? Finally, how and where are cultural insecurities produced? These questions serve as a guide to delve into the complexities of this concept.

### 3.3 Production of cultural insecurities

The production of cultural insecurities is both strategic and emotional. The points of insecurity are strategic in the sense that they allow the state and public actors to meet certain ends (e.g. policies), but they are also emotional because they are rooted in fear. The negative emotions associated with the concern of losing one's culture are not the result of one specific object, event or person. These emotions do not materialize in a vacuum, void of influences. Cultural insecurities are produced and reproduced due to a panoply of factors including but not limited to: the creation and circulation of narratives, the role of power and societal actors, space/context of interactions, historical and current event and scale. Cultural insecurities have their own geographies, and the elements that contribute to their production differ between
societies. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on one particular scenario, namely how the presence and activities of Muslim women who are a minority in France, lead to the production of cultural insecurities.

An essential piece to the production of cultural insecurities is drawing of boundaries to create cultural groups. In the case of France, cultural traits of the majority include but are not limited to: French language, history and Judeo-Christian values. Those who are perceived as not sharing these traits are considered to be in the minority and are designated as clearly different. In the production of cultural insecurities, it is not only the fact that traits are not shared with the majority but that the minority culture is somehow invasive. The creation of these boundaries requires a process of self-identifying and identifying others, putting people into categories and assigning them a status (examples of how this has been conceptualized are plenty including Ian Hacking 1986). The status aspect is important as not all groups are created equal. Some minorities may be perceived as posing a threat while others may be culturally different but do not illicit a sense of fear that their culture infringes upon the majority. Either way, this placing of oneself and others into cultural categories suggests the creation of collective identities, which are specifically outside of legal categories. Citizenship in France is a legal identity that brings people together, while culture can be used by certain actors as a way to pull groups apart.

Individual identity plays a role in culture insecurity as individuals can either see themselves as sharing (or not sharing) cultural traits with a group. This sharing aspect points to the importance of collective identity that is used for boundary-making by the state and public actors. A rich literature on the nature of collective identities has long debated our needs and desires to form groups (Hall 1996) as a means of locating ourselves in complex sets of history, attributes and experiences, while maintaining strategies of differentiation (Miller

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3 Chapter Four will delve deeper into what is meant by French culture and what traits make up this cultural identity.
1995). It is argued that humans have multiple identities both self-ascribed and imposed, on multiple scales often forming through negotiation (England 2011). These multiple identities are situational, and are not thought to be enacted or even useful at all times, though we are in constant negotiation as to how we identify and through the identification by others. Feminist scholars have pointed to the idea of intersectionality to show how identities of race, class, gender and sexuality may intersect as identities in which individuals both feel but also must navigate in everyday situations. The concept of the nation remains one of the most explored examples of collective identity (McKinnon 2011), as it exemplifies how boundaries are drawn and defined, and how identities shift over time. Much has been written on the nation including whether the nation is formed due to biological similarities (van den Berghe 1994), pride of a shared culture (Weber 1994; Hutchinson 1987), is ascribed (Seton-Watson 1977), or is a result of historical forces (Forster 2002; Gellner 1994; Anderson 1983). Scholars have also questioned what role ethnicity (Ferdinand 2007) and religion play in its formation (Armstrong 2007; Michlic 2007).

The nation is important in the production of cultural insecurities when it is used as a tool for defining the “us” of both majorities and minorities. It is powerful to call on these historic ties that are rooted in a (believed) shared history and/or ethnicity. Within this body of literature on collective identities, we confront the difficulty in defining cultural identity (Hall 1996) which is rooted in abstract, subjective elements of our daily lives. Identities are slippery things that social science scholars have tried to isolate, define and theorize. While identity has been a concept used in many disciplines (including cultural studies), its validity has come into question. Many scholars became critical of the term as it is too constricting (Hall 1997), because it is unable to illuminate why actors make choices (Malešević 2006; Martin 1995) and its incapability of explaining how identities are produced by power relations (Foucault 1994). I recognize that identity is an imperfect term, but in the absence of an alternative that can describe these processes of being, I will rely on identity that is both ascribed and is
imposed and identification when talking about the production of cultural insecurities (Salandha 2011; Jenkins 2008).

Identity, while a contested term, is useful when examining the production of cultural insecurities because it allows us to put into words the divisions that are created in society at all scales. It is important, however, to be clear that cultural identities are not the same thing as cultural insecurities. People may feel that they belong to a cultural group and that others do not, but this does not mean that they feel a sense of insecurity in the face of others. Both majority and minority cultural identities can coexist and do not need to tip into negative emotions. State structures can also support diversity in cultural identities without putting limits on their survival.

Literature across the social sciences has looked at identity on some level as researchers attempt to understand what past and current personal, political, economic, social and environmental influences and experience help form a subject/person. Geographers discuss identities by considering how processes of being express themselves spatially. Sense of place and sense of belonging (which will be discussed more thoroughly below) are used to describe how individuals and groups form attachments to local physical environments (Tomaney 2012). These attachments and identities allow human geographers to consider the relevance of unfolding events on multiple scales (Devine-Wright 2015: 529) and are said to be illustrations of social practices, discourses and power (Paasi 2004). Feminist geographers more recently have turned to how bodies inhabit and convey religious, racial and national identities (Mountz 2017), something that speaks to how Muslim women have been identified through their veiling practices. Work on cultural identities looks at how both humans shape landscape around them, and how practices, affects and physical things help form identities rooted in memory (Berberich et al. 2012). These memories/histories that are attached to
locations and imagined connections⁴ are important in the production of cultural insecurities because they help build a sense of collective identity.

Whether the terms identity, identification and culture are able to describe the components of collective rapports, certain behaviors and beliefs such as the existence of insiders versus outsiders clearly exist. Our vocabulary may be limited, but certain processes creating divisions between groups is constantly at work. Defining parameters of majority (insider) versus minorities (outsider) can be formalized and easily recognizable (e.g. citizenship) or seem abstract, but remain arbitrary. Elements that bring people together may change, evolve and become more or less relevant. In terms of cultural insecurities, the majority is often defined by perceived shared histories and attachments to territory which help construct groups. By speaking a certain language and being indoctrinated in a shared history through family and an education system, ties are formed across spaces and time. Cultural majorities tend to reside in nation-states where imagined geographies (Said 1978) help root their cultural elements to places of significance. Notions of belonging are central to defining majorities and minorities, whether they be based on emotional dimensions (attachments), formal dimensions (political), normative dimensions (everyday) and/or negotiated dimensions (Nagel 2011).

Self-identification and the identification of others through state and individual practices all play a role in the boundary-making of majority versus minority. In addition, it is not only the perception of shared characteristics that is important in defining a majority. The role of difference helps determine what is considered outside of the group - without minorities, the majority could not be thought of in these terms. Self-identifying with a group entails many things, including the emotions and importance of belonging. Geographers have

⁴ I use “imagined” here in a simplistic way to designate connections people have with one another that are based on a sense of understanding and similarities in a broad sense. These are not connections formed person to person but rather are based on larger circulating narratives.
looked at identities in terms of how belonging is associated with identities and the nation. Sarah Wright (2015) provides a useful synthesis of how geographers have looked at place, spaces, scale, site, landscape and territories of belonging and not belonging (395). The sense of belonging is emotional (e.g. nation and nationalism) but can also be categorical (e.g. through citizenship). Physical spaces but also imagined communities are sites of belonging. In physical spaces, attachments to local or region places are considered to blend emotion (e.g. home as a safe place) that help form narratives of identity but they also can have practical commitments and investments by individuals and groups (Tomaney 2015). Muslim women may be portrayed as outsiders but may feel a sense of belonging in French culture.

The process of creating and maintaining majority and minority groups is fluid and ongoing. When looking at society in terms of majority culture versus minority ones, the insecurities attached to culture are produced in a number of ways. As mentioned earlier, minority groups who see themselves as belonging to a different culture may see the majority culture as a threat to their existence. Maintaining their language and other practices can be difficult when surrounded by people who do not share these traits. Research on indigenous populations around the world has discussed this extensively, especially when it comes to language (e.g. Klimenko 2016; Chew et al. 2015). What is perhaps more surprising is when minorities become a source of fear in terms of maintaining the majority culture. As cultural elements are often sustained by the help of institutions (e.g. schools or religious organizatons), it would be easy to assume that the majority culture could easily protect itself. However, the emotions that surface when faced with groups considered as distinctly different can cause unease. Recent referendums and elections in Europe and the United States have proven that a platform of protecting the majority from minority groups is a powerful one. These fear tactics often rely on economic arguments, but culture plays a role as well.

The creation of the boundaries between the majority and minorities is an everyday process (Eskelinen 2011). The extensive work on Othering in the social sciences has analyzed
these boundaries and their effects. In the case of the production of cultural insecurities, it is often the foreigner (or the non-acceptable citizen) who comes under suspicion (Green and Singleton 2007). Immigrants can easily become implicated in the production of cultural insecurities. When new languages, religious practices or values are encountered by the majority they may be met with a range of negative feelings. It is important to remember that these different cultural elements do not stand alone; they are laden with historical and contemporary geopolitical and socio-economic contexts that make these elements meaningful to the majority. Put more simply, it is not the fact that the person/group speaks another language that is a problem. It is a slew of perceptions and stereotypes that come into play.

The identification of the self and others in this process relies on reflexivity, internal-external dialectics (Jenkins 2008) rooted in complex intersections of perceived ethnic (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) and/or cultural (Hall 1996) identities.

As stated above, migrants, especially immigrants, are probably one of the most easily identifiable types of cultural other. There are obvious differences in cultural practices that may be perceived as in contrast with the majority, and some of these practices such as wearing certain clothing, are visually prominent. These visual markers become important symbols that translate into boundaries where the majority labels the person as a foreign body (Salzbrunn 2012). Visual markers along with other practices are themselves tied to geographical contexts that often have historic and current meanings for the majority. These meanings are used to talk about groups in a variety of ways, though usually in a condensed, convenient manner. These representations contribute to the production of cultural insecurities. Practices which are spatially located (meaning occurring in specific places) raise suspicion. In the case of France, many Muslim women (who are often linked to immigration on some level) have a visuality about them because of the hijab. They also frequent Muslim institutions (e.g. mosques) that serve as examples of their difference from the non-Muslim majority.
Boundary-making through circulating discourses on difference and the importance of maintaining one’s culture leads to the essentializing of minority identities. Groups that are designated as culturally different are assigned one identity, though it can have several components. The representation of Muslim women as a threat in France illustrates the construction of one such essentialized identity. While the category of Muslim woman is one-dimensional in the production of cultural insecurities, it has two distinct elements. First, Muslim is a cultural identity, perceived as specifically religious. Second, woman, which is a gendered identity in this case. Public actors such as politicians and intellectuals, media actors and state institutions point specifically to the fact that these are women. This gendered identity in France comes with expectations, and when it is attached to the term Muslim, these women no longer fit the expectation of what it is to be a French woman. These ideas are further developed in Chapter Four.

3.4 Building narratives through representations

The creation and constantly changing categorization of what qualifies as insider versus outsiders in societies is dependent on how various societal actors choose to represent groups. The who in cultural insecurities is not only the groups that are being labeled a threat, but also includes those assigning and identifying cultural practices as threatening. Those involved include the state, public figures, various institutions, media and individuals. Society as a whole is constantly engaging in creating, perpetuating or challenging these negative representations.

Representations in visual, textual and audible forms aid in building narratives about people and places. The term representation describes a set of practices by which meanings are constituted and communicated (Johnston et al. 2000) and circulated through society. Representation is a layered concept that addresses what Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously

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5 I consider religion to be a set of practices and beliefs that are a part of one’s culture.
called the “speaking of and speaking for”, where people and places are assigned meanings and associations. Representations are not fixed, but they do build upon one another constantly. In the production of cultural insecurities, it is the representation that certain cultural practices are in direct opposition to the existence of the majority’s culture that incites fear but also action.

The portrayals of people generated through representation allow for general opinions to be formed through the help of societal actors. For these representations to gain traction and stick with people (a) public figures and key societal actors need to use these representations to talk about the group targeted and (b) a certain amount of repetition must take place. Repetition here means that these actors must talk about and visually represent the group using the same elements over and over. This circulation of negative representations is key to the production of cultural insecurities. It helps build a narrative of fear and anxiety linked to the individuals and groups being represented. The production of cultural insecurities within our minds rarely occurs with one incident but rather with the building of a story that defines and develops how we view threats.

But who is involved in this process exactly? The creation and use of representations of a group require the involvement of societal actors to generate and define their components. Not surprisingly the state plays a major role in constructing and circulating representations of minorities (especially immigrants) and defines what characteristics make someone an insider or an outsider. This is done in a number of ways. Through policy-making, the state regulates cultural practices defining what is acceptable for the majority based on interests and negotiation (Tatari 2009). Through political discourses, state actors use cultural elements and beliefs to sculpt and maintain a collective identity through defining how the majority or the nation-state sees itself or wants to promote (e.g. Hutchinson) what cultural practices pose a threat. These actors use representations of certain groups to build arguments for what should either be forbidden or at the very least frowned upon.
Rallying around cultural elements can take on a form of identity politics in which political actors, public figures and everyday people partake. Identity politics has received wide attention from gender and postcolonial scholars who have discussed issues of activism, political involvement and oppression. For example, in the 1970s, the youth born in France of parents who immigrated from North Africa took on the political identity of beur/beurette. Self-identifying beurs were politically active and rallied around issues of being Muslim and Arab but also French. This identity was also intermixed with identities emerging from the French suburbs (banlieue). While identity politics is often connected to minority engagements, the majority in a society can easily rally around issues of nationalism connected to cultural practices. In turn, though being represented as a threat can be seen as participating in identity politics when organizing around social groups that directly respond to the majority’s fears. For instance, the French government under Nicolas Sarkozy launched a campaign to define what French culture meant in the 21st century, pulling from not only cultural traits such as shared history, arts, and values but also what it means to be French politically. This will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.

State actors are not the only generators of representations. This research argues that the production of cultural insecurities is not solely a top-down or bottom-up phenomenon but rather originates, evolves and replicates through the multi-scale flow of representations and everyday interactions. Though the state and public actors who receive national attention are important in understanding how cultural insecurities are produced, actors such as intellectuals, journalists, popular culture figures and local and national institutions can all contribute. Mass media play a critical role in constructing narratives of minorities. This is due to large-scale circulation and transformation of various texts and images (Street 2001), which contributes to defining and construing individuals and groups as societal threats (Béland 2005). This circulation is dependent on time and place of when representations are used (Lukinbeal and Craine 2009; Hobbs 1998). Mass media are tools and/or autonomous powers
with opinions and motivations (Street 2001; Mancini and Swanson 1996), and aid in forming national identities as imagined communities through delicate temporal relationships between reality and representation (Mahtani 2009; Morely 2004; Anderson 1983). Various societal actors can use the mass media to further agendas and use negative representations to their advantage.

The images, texts and audible material representing different groups pull from events, fiction, history and opinions. Mass media’s participation in the production of cultural insecurities is immense. Visuality, how vision is constructed, plays a very special role in the production of cultural insecurities within a society, and it is molded through mass media and personal experiences. As pointed out by Gillian Rose (2012), we are constantly surrounded by images in our daily lives. In addition to our surroundings, we are exposed to the viewpoints and images curated by others through photography, cinema, television and online spaces. By looking, humans negotiate social relationships and construct meanings of the world around them. The images to which people are exposed build narratives both through personal experience and thanks to the curation of others. Many driving forces in society rely on images to sell, promote, inform and persuade consumers. We learn about the world through visuals, particularly in a time where technology increases our exposure to different types of visualities.

The prominence of visuals has not only increased with the introduction of new technologies, but the use of easily identifiable visual information has become increasingly important. While printed visuals (e.g. posters, billboards, store fronts) continue to have their place in our daily lives, interactive targeted new technologies (e.g. mobile devices, computers, and developing touch screen devices) have emerged as tools to convey personalized visual messages and experiences. In terms of cultural insecurities, images that link a specific group with meanings can be the difference between cultural practices that are acceptable and those that are deemed a threat. Print and new technologies are mediums that
provide moments of constructing meanings and understandings of the world through representations. The images are filled with meanings either constructed by the individual or others over time.

Cultural studies and linguists have used three interrelated concepts to analyze and discuss how text and images represent people, places and things. The sign is something that has a concrete form and refers to something other than itself. The sign can be recognized by most people as a sign. For instance, the stick figure with a dress is often used as a sign for a women's bathroom and is understood as such in wider society. The signified is what the sign refers to. Using the bathroom example, a woman is being signified using the stick figure. Finally, the signifier is the physical form it takes. Cultural studies and linguistics have used these categories to analyze text and cultural practices. These concepts are helpful in thinking about how representations can easily be understood and used by mass media and other societal actors to produce and perpetuate negative representations of certain groups.

What is also crucial in the visual element of cultural insecurities is the gaze which is imparted by groups. The term gaze is used to describe not only the seeing but also the assigning of meaning by the looker (Gökarıksel, Banu and Anna Secor 2014). Among the most visual elements of the Muslim woman identity as constructed by the non-Muslim French majority are scarves and veils (hijabs, niqabs, and other types of head covers). The fabric that covers a Muslim woman’s head, neck and sometimes face is a perfect symbol onto which to attach an essentialized identity. The practice of veiling has not emerged from France and therefore is easily seen as different. As will be explored in Chapter Four, veiling practices have come to symbolize many negative things in France including violence and submission. The gaze of non-Muslim French can easily see not only the physical fabric and the way that it is on the body, but also all of the circulating narratives that have been assigned to it. For many, it becomes a threatening symbol.
Cultural insecurities are also produced through everyday interactions. This can be thanks to the negative representations that people see/hear around them that then play out in their daily lives. It can also be through the limited contact they can have with minority groups in everyday spaces. Immigrants are easy to represent as a minority threat to the survival of the cultural majority, especially when people look, dress and speak differently. Images can be picked up by media, larger narratives on the perceived tensions caused by immigrants can be used by public figures, and personal stories of negative everyday interactions can be experienced and shared by people on a local scale.

3.5 Spaces of cultural insecurity production

The production of cultural insecurities is an inherently spatial exercise because (a) identities are in part associated with space, (b) collective ideas such as the nation are almost always conceptualized using territory, (c) their production is reliant on the circulation of narratives and (d) they manifest themselves in everyday interactions. The insecurities around losing one’s cultural identity can take shape in physical and virtual spaces. As mentioned earlier, geographers have contributed a large amount of work on tensions that occur in urban spaces due to economic inequalities, planning and difference in culture. Material spaces are the confluence of processes, daily interaction of humans with one another and with the environment (Tongkiss 2005). Daily practices of both majority and minority populations create important dynamics of how groups perceive one another, characterize and build boundaries, and interact (Valentine 2008). Through interactions within and between groups, and with the environment, spaces are performed in ways that become laden with symbols contributing to feelings of insecurity (Rebotier 2010; Hall 1997). Individuals and groups may become extremely visible, affecting ways in which those groups and others navigate spaces when driven by perceived signs of aggression or fear (Combry et al. 2010; Pain 2009).

In the literature on belonging, material spaces take on significance for people that includes as a sense of attachment loaded with emotion. Place-making of immigrant
communities can be particularly difficult for some people who feel as though spaces that belong to them are changing. In Chapter Six, this is explored through examining how the building of Muslim institutions (e.g. mosques) and shops in a neighborhood is met with resistance and anger by non-Muslims who feel that their surroundings are becoming more Muslim and therefore less French. Images and narratives surrounding these perceived negative influences on the material landscape can remain at a local level or may be picked up and discussed at a larger scale. Through the discussion, debate and visuals circulated by public actors, cultural insecurities can easily be produced and formed in political and social spaces.

Virtual spaces such as those on the internet are unique in their ability to: facilitate communication and exchange of information across various scales (Herod and Wright 2002); circulate information frequently and easily (Street 2001); and interact with degrees of anonymity (Hartley 2000). These facets are unseen in material spaces which are constrained by our physical capabilities (in terms of scale) and societal codes (Béland 2005; Lukinbeal and Craine 2009; Hobbs 1998). The internet allows for various actors to participate in the production and reproduction of insecurities by defining threats and by circulating information directly relating to those deemed as potentially dangerous (Bruns 2005; Tabachnick 1993). These virtual spaces also potentially afford individuals deemed as a threat an opportunity to interact with the visual and textual information that represents them in a negative light (Adams 2009; Mahtani 2009; Mitchell 2000). For those with access to the internet, these daily practices in virtual spaces may contribute to the production of insecurities even when attempting to reject harmful representations (Adams 2005; Dalhman 2002; Crang and Thrift 2000).

3.6 Conclusion

The above review of the literature and building of the concept of cultural insecurities provides a basic overview of the main components - identity, societal actors and space - that
help define cultural insecurities within a society and understand how they are produced. Not surprisingly, this is not a cut-and-dry process and there are many other factors that can influence, change and alter the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities. First, the concept of identity, collective and individual, presents a problem. This was mentioned in a previous section, but it should be emphasized that not only is the concept of identity flawed, it presents problems. Issues of power, identity formation and fluctuations in how we identify ourselves or others at different moments and in different contexts impact the production of cultural insecurities. It might not be as formulaic or cut-and-dry as this chapter might make it seem. Just because someone speaks a different language and practices a certain religion does not mean that they are automatically put in a “bad” category. Knowing people personally, having positive contact or impressions about other facets of the person might “interfere” with seeing them as a threat.

The concept of multiculturalism adds complexity to the discussion of cultural insecurity. The idea of coexisting cultures in one territory has been a popular way of referring to certain societies. This suggests that not all minority groups are seen the same way by the majority. It also puts into question how the majority is able to differentiate what group is being treating a certain way and why. In the case of France, discourses emanating from state institutions and public actors have always expressed skepticism and rejection of multiculturalism as it is perceived to directly challenge aspects of French political and social identities. When it comes to immigrants, discussions on assimilation and integration also affect how cultural insecurities are produced and perpetuated. This indicates that while we can think about the production of these insecurities as something that can occur anywhere in the world, specific histories and geographies of a place are vital to how and when they are produced.

As previously discussed, cultural insecurity as a concept remains under-articulated by scholars as a viable mode of analysis. Yet minorities in various societies feel the implications
of being represented as a threat to the survival and health of the majority’s perceived culture. These negative representations have real effects in their daily lives, ranging from random unpleasantness to overt discrimination. Cultural identities help make connections between individuals, but they also create boundaries. While in many contexts different cultures can coexist, there are many examples of how differences between groups can be used to cause tension and create fear. The production of cultural insecurities depends on several factors including: how boundaries are drawn between majority and minorities, what type of representations are circulated through society and how space influences interactions between groups. Cultural elements such as language and religion can contribute to boundaries, so can strong visible differences in cultural elements, all contributing to the produce differentiated cultural identities. Cultural insecurities are produced when a differing culture is portrayed as strong, domineering and threatening. Immigrants are often the most targeted as potential threats to a majority’s culture because of strong visible differences in cultural elements that are portrayed as strong enough to influence and change the majority culture. Though these tensions may subside over time, they also may gain momentum with increased circulation of narratives portraying immigrants as a threat.

By investigating the nature of cultural insecurities and its production within a society, we can begin to question how minorities cope with the challenges of being deemed a threat in their daily lives. As noted by Dittmer (2009), the bulk of research on security and insecurity privileges the national state and inter-state scales. In Chapter Four, I will outline the role of the French state and public actors in crafting the representations of Muslim women as a threat, and what these representations entail. Studies on Muslims in France have also looked at these representations and have analyzed how legally and socially Muslim women have been a target. However, there is little research on how Muslim women are reacting to these representations. The scale of everyday interactions between people in virtual and material spaces as they relate to the production of cultural insecurities needs further inquiry. There
also needs to be more emphasis placed on how minorities engage with and contest these issues of boundary-making, representation and perceptions of threat within societies.

This dissertation seeks to address these needs by putting minorities at the center of the research. I will be analyzing how Muslim women who were observed in an online environment are responding to and contesting the representations of themselves they see circulating in French society. I therefore ask:

*How do Muslim women engage with and contest representations of themselves as threats to the majority? Where do these processes take place and how do different spaces offer Muslim women avenues of engagement?*

Chapter Three will provide the reader with research design and methodology used in this study. Explanations are given for why certain virtual and physical sites were chosen, and what I was able to accomplish in each. There is an exploration of the ethical issues that were encountered, particularly when working in virtual spaces. Chapter Four offers an explanation of what is meant by French culture and traces historically the emerging representations of Muslim women due to colonialism, immigration and current events. The chapter is then followed by three empirical chapters that present my findings.
Chapter 4  Research Design and Methodology

Muslim women living in France are stigmatized as threats to French culture through representations of their religious and cultural practices circulating within public and private spaces. The previous two chapters have outlined the concept of cultural insecurity and how Muslim women have become implicated in its production and perpetuation at the intersection of a number of historical social and economic factors. Through circulating representations, Muslim women identity as it is portrayed within cultural insecurity narratives has been constructed by key actors in the non-Muslim French majority. This identity uses Muslim practices and gender to symbolize these women as a threat. Focusing on not only the differences between Muslim women and non-Muslim French culture but the “dangerous” elements of Muslims women’s identities contribute to the production of cultural insecurities. Using these insecurities as a starting point provides an opportunity to pose questions on how Muslim women understand their own identities in France and how they engage with and contest negative representations of Muslims. Though the term cultural insecurity is not readily used by researchers as a way to describe how information and opinions in textual, visual and audible forms have created negative representations, it captures the tensions around what constitutes acceptable behavior within French society.

This dissertation set out to use the representations of Muslim women as threats to French culture to uncover instances of how Muslim women engage with and contest these representations in their daily lives. Given the previous research on Muslim women in France, which ranges in scale (e.g. state policies to everyday experiences) and focus (e.g. immigration, religious practice, economic precarity), it is important to think about new ways in which to approach this topic in this dissertation. To accomplish this, I used a composite of field sites and methods to observe and interact with Muslim women both in virtual and in physical spaces. The combination of virtual spaces (in this case online) and physical spaces (neighborhoods) offers new ways of observing interactions and hearing Muslim women speak
on their own behalf. Virtual spaces provide an entry to spaces of interaction and sharing opinions, experiences and thoughts on life in France, but they also reflect and create entirely new environments. Physical spaces offer glimpses of behaviors and experiences encountered in banal, everyday moments. The differences between these spaces affords unique opportunities to gather information and gain exposure to Muslim women across France.

This dissertation contributes to the literature within geography on insecurity, identities (e.g. gendered, religious) and work on Muslim women in European societies. It also contributes to work on methodologies for online research which are still in early stages of exploration as internet spaces and behaviors are evolving. This chapter presents the methodology used to answer the research questions posited by outlining the research sites and population, the research design, the methods of data collection, and the data analysis and synthesis. These sections are followed by discussions on ethical considerations, issues of trustworthiness, and the limitations encountered during this study. It ends with a brief chapter summary and introduces the three empirical chapters built on the analysis of data collected in virtual and physical spaces.

4.1 Research population and sites

Data collection and analysis for this dissertation stems from the communication and interaction of Muslim women in physical and virtual spaces within French society. The majority of studies that have gained traction regarding Muslim women in France analyze the discourses and policies directly targeting this population. The handful of research specifically focusing on the perspectives of Muslim women and their experiences uses interviewing or ethnography as methods of data collection. These studies tend to take place in the banlieues (suburbs) of large metropolitan areas such as Paris or in the south of France (such as Keaton 2006 and Selby 2012). These suburbs usually face socio-economic hardships and the women participating in these studies are often religious, first-generation immigrants mainly from North Africa. The insight these women have offered through these studies are invaluable to
building understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, especially in relation to large public debates, mainly on hijabs in schools. This dissertation adds to the body of literature on Muslim women in France by turning to two sites of inquiry - virtual as well as physical spaces. The virtual space is the website Oumma.com, chosen for its vibrant community, and the physical spaces are located in the neighborhoods of Boulogne-Billancourt, a community just outside of the Paris city limits.

4.1.1 The role of virtual spaces

Virtual spaces, particularly online environments, are a part of our everyday lives. I use the distinction virtual or online and physical or offline when talking about spaces of data collection in this dissertation. These terms are used to create a clear distinction between experiences and exchanges that are mediated through computers and mobile devices, and those that are outside of this (what we logically know as the material world). Geographers have talked about what I refer to as virtual or online spaces using the terms cyberspace, digital, Internet or virtual worlds. It has been argued that these terms are problematic as they clearly separate on- and offline environments when our experiences and activities can be a composite of these spaces (Ash et al. 2016; Kinsley 2013; Graham 2013). I agree with this criticism and recognize that the distinction I am making is imperfect. However, I think creating a boundary between the two performances and practices shaping the spaces is important in terms of what Muslim women are doing and sharing as the politics, social interactions and structures of these spaces are different even if there is overlap.

Geographers have looked to connections between technologies and visual geographies in investigating how simulation and visualization of realities contributing to material spaces are explored and expanded in virtual settings. Some geographers have long used satellite imagery, systems and methods such as remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in their work. Virtual spaces are not new to the discipline, though online research is more recent. The digital has become quotidian; computers and mobile
devices are a portal to daily personal, social and professional use, and individuals across the world are interacting in ways that are different from other spaces (such as posting on social media sites) (Ash et al. 2016). These spaces are not bound by the same political and social boundaries as are offline spaces as the medium used to access them is specific. We type, we talk or we use videos and we share, publish and delete. Time spent in virtual spaces has meaning and is dynamic, connecting between other virtual spaces as well as with offline daily life. These interconnected spaces are increasingly important to observe and analyze as they tell us a great deal about our societies including the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities.

Though research on gaming and computer use has existed since the 1980s, the ever-changing nature of these virtual spaces requires new ways of being creative in observing, analyzing and engaging with the material that emerges. The internet is a medium, a tool, comprised of virtual spaces of social interaction and communication mediated by computers and mobile devices. This dissertation uses visual, audio and textual data gathered from internet-facilitated images, videos and textual content. As internet use has become more accessible in regions across the globe, social scientists have looked to new ways of learning about societies through this medium. Research in online environments during the 1990s was popular mostly among disciplines relating to communication and mass media, but since the year 2000 sociologists, anthropologists and geographers have started looking at communication and connections on the internet to understanding certain social phenomena. However, these social scientists depend heavily on methodologies previously applied in offline environments. When reading through recommendations of methodologies for online spaces, most of the information caters to individuals who conduct surveys/questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. More recent work shows that researchers also look to interactions between users and documents uploaded online, though these studies are less common (Hewson and Laurent 2008).
Claire Dwyer and Gail Davies (2010) note that while geographers are increasingly turning to online spaces as sites of inquiry of spatial analysis or virtual and visual technologies, qualitative research within this area remains in its initial stages. It is obvious that the rapid pace in which technologies develop influences how humans interact with them, and it is therefore surprising that little experimentation with qualitative methodologies has occurred within the field of geography. Online spaces are vital to everyday interactions of people around the world, both professionally and personally, and touch upon some of the fundamentals of geography such as the connectivity of space, importance of scale and spatial behavior of populations. Virtual environments have elements and uses that are very different from material ones due to the structure of these environments, and this gap in research needs to be addressed.

It is also important to remember that virtual spaces are not contained environments, but have real connections with offline spaces. Social scientists have begun to ask questions relating to what is happening ‘on the ground’ in comparison with what is happening online. This has led to the superimposing of classic methodologies such as focus groups and interviewing in online studies. The most popular form this has taken is with researchers observing online interaction, then conducting interviews and focus groups with the same participants, whether via a computer-mediated environment (i.e. Skype) or in person (for instance Piela 2012; Wine 2000). This approach certainly provides important information on specific questions regarding differences between on and offline behaviors. This dissertation, however, does not focus explicitly on the differences and intersections of behaviors in these spaces. It looks at the manifestations and the contestations of the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities through interactions with representations and with people, but does not limit the study to a select group (meaning the data are not from a limited group of women I observed and spoke with over a two-year period).
Certainly, by choosing field sites on- and offline there is a recognition that the data gathered in these environments tell us different things about how the nature of the space influences the ways Muslim women engage with and contest representations of themselves. However, online spaces already lend themselves to answering these questions. Oumma.com, the website used in this study, is in part a news and opinion site, and commentaries posted by women often describe what these women are doing both on- and offline. Therefore, given the research questions and the information provided by online users, it did not seem mandatory to connect how specific Oumma.com users are experiencing the majority’s cultural insecurity in offline spaces through offline interviews. This can, perhaps be studied at a future time.

In addition to there not being an abundance of qualitative research on online spaces, there is even less on the online experiences of Muslim women living in non-Muslim societies (though this is starting to gain attention - some recent examples include Hoekstra and Verkuyten 2015; Saad 2015; Piela 2012). Thanks to the notable role social media has played in recent world events (such as the war in Syria and the worldwide activity of the Islamic State), there is sure to be a boom in investigating how online activities bridge geographic spaces, and how Muslim extremism takes root. But what about work on women outside of the extremist trope? There are a handful of existing case studies on Muslim online communities, such as Gary Bunt’s prolific work on the virtual Islamic communities (his books 2009; 2003; 2000; and his blog virtuallyislamic.blogspot.com) and Anna Piela’s Muslim Women Online (2012). These resources are incredibly useful when formulating a research design for the questions posed in this dissertation.

While the work conducted on Muslim communities online is useful, it tends to focus primarily on the religious aspect of Muslim life, specifically how users talk about faith, and how they apply their religion to their lives through studying the Qur'an and other important texts and teachings. As explained by Anderson (2001), the first Muslim-specific content that appeared on the Internet in the 1980s were scanned translations of the Qur'an and ahādīth.
Much of the Muslim specific websites that have popped up in English over the years have followed in this religious tradition where discussions on teachings of famous Imams and sacred texts are central to the activity. These studies illustrate a number of important aspects of negotiating religious adherence in non-Muslim societies, but do not provide much information on living as a minority and a Muslim. Also, they do not take into account that self-identifying or being indemnified as Muslim is not limited to strict religious practice. As seen in the previous chapter, the label Muslim woman can mean many things.

Given the relevance of online spaces in our lives and their importance in understanding the role virtual spaces play in the production and contestation of cultural insecurities in societies, I turn to the website Oumma.com to address my research questions. As described in Chapter Two, the circulation of negative representations is a crucial component to the production of cultural insecurities. Online spaces aid in this circulation but they are also spaces of engagement, contestation and resistance. Oumma.com serves as an ideal point of entry for understanding more about the lives of Muslim women living in France.

4.1.2 Oumma.com

Bearing in mind the small but blossoming literature on online studies within geography, I chose the website Oumma.com as the virtual site for collecting data for this dissertation through participant observation. The website considers itself one of the most popular sites for French Muslims. Though Oumma.com does not share its analytics data, sites that provide general information on web traffic show that the website attracts primarily users from France, but also Algeria, Belgium, Morocco and Canada (Alexa 2017).

Oumma.com publishes a mixture of news and commentaries about life for Muslims in France. The website offers an array of things for users to read and watch. Managers upload content in the form of articles, quick reads, videos, images, blogs, links and advertisements.
Articles are posted under one of the following topics: Société, International, Politique, Religion, Economie, Sciences, Histoire, Culture, Humour, Blogs, and Lecture Express (quick read). Articles are written by staff members, journalists, academics and guest writers. Under each article users may post as many commentaries as they wish, provided that the comments do not violate aspects of the code of conduct.

Videos are a popular feature on the site. OummaTV is an integrated channel where videos are posted, which can also be found on Youtube, Dailymotion, and Vimeo which increases their user traffic. The topics used for OummaTV uploads are the same categories as for the articles. Oumma.com also offers groups for people to join. The categories of the groups include Sciences et Technologies, Oumma Deen/Religion, and Poésie (poetry). Users must subscribe to these groups to receive information and participate in discussions. Finally, Oumma.com offers practical information on Islam, prayer times and moderates exchanges regarding Qur’an verses.

Users are invited to create a profile providing basic background information to allow them access to the commentary section. Very little personal information is required and the only items seen by the public are the chosen username and postal code. If these locations are accurate (meaning if those who sign up use their actual postal code), users appear to be living all over France. There is also notable involvement of users from North Africa, Belgium and Switzerland. Oumma.com is also well known with non-Muslims and frequently appears in the national press under positive and negative circumstances. The national newspapers Le Monde and Le Figaro regularly mention Oumma.com as a source of information when running a story on national or transnational issues concerning Muslims. Public intellectuals have brought negative attention to the site, such as feminist journalist Caroline Fourest who often rallies against the website for its views on women and religion in French society.
Unlike the websites highlighted in other studies, Oumma.com is not an exclusively religious environment. It is not a website dedicated to discussing religious texts, though this does account for some of the content. Oumma.com touches on all aspects of Muslim life in France, from discussions on politics, media, socializing, literature and current events. The website was founded on April 15, 1998 in Paris and has grown considerably in content produced and user numbers over the years. The site has changed its format and mission since its inception and has added a Facebook page and an independent media production company. Its current mission states that Oumma.com is an information site, which without complacency or systematic malice, provides users with information on religious and cultural activities of Muslims in France.

Oumma.com states that Muslims comprise France’s second largest religious group and because of this, the site wishes to provide francophone Muslims with a virtual place of education and exchange. The way Oumma.com uses Muslim is certainly in connection to Islam. The staff sees itself as a space of reflection where users can learn and interact with the rich intellectual and theological heritage of Islam. The website claims to bear the “responsibility of prophecy, ethical conduct, and humanitarian principles” outlined by the Qur’an. They see Oumma.com as both a space of spirituality and cultural exchange as they consider Islam to be both a religion and a civilization that produces knowledge, art and design. The organization also points out that Oumma.com is pluralistic because, though Muslims are unified by faith (the ummah) they recognize the diversity within the larger community. The site notes that anyone is welcomed to participate, regardless of their religious beliefs or their geographic location. Lastly, Oumma.com specifies that it is also a secular site because it recognizes the importance of being a part of the French laïque republic.

Oumma.com has a very vibrant user community that engages with most of the materials posted by the site managers. Texts, videos, images and audio files are all given the opportunity to be commented upon. It is rare that an article does not have at least one if not 45
users exchanging their thoughts on the subject presented. As the website tends to present information on issues faced by Muslims in France (whether it be Islamophobia or the difficulty in finding halal meals for children), they know how to elicit a response from their readers. The content of the material posted by Oumma.com and the strong user involvement is one of the most important reasons why I chose this website for this study. The nature of online communities bridging locations throughout France is also an important component. Though geographers using qualitative methods tend to favor small-scale studies to examine social phenomena, Oumma.com provides an amazing opportunity to learn more about the experiences of people across France while remaining a small-scale site.

Observations and information gathered from Oumma.com comprise the majority of data collected for this research. The process of gathering data was guided by a number of research sub-questions including:

*What online mediums (blog, vlog, etc.) are used by Muslim women to engage with and contest representations of themselves? For whom is this engagement and contestation?*

*What role do technologies play in creating new sites of cultural insecurity production?*

*How do aspects of online spaces associated with anonymity contribute to these engagements?*

*How do these spaces interact and bridge physical spaces through the uploading of text and images?*

*In which ways do these sites differ from material spaces in how women can engage with and contest certain representations?*

4.1.3 The role of material spaces

Offline spaces are clearly quite different from the online world. Though there are parallels to be drawn and clear intersections between them, the ways in which the spaces are approached are different. Religion is but one aspect of issues relating to cultural insecurities, and asking women about their on- and offline experiences could be expanded beyond observing and interviewing the same 15 people. The bulk of the data of this dissertation stems
from interactions and comments posted by Oumma.com, but this does not mean that these virtual spaces are more important than offline ones. Geographers have a long tradition of observing the everyday landscape to better understand various social phenomena.

The urban environment in particular has garnered significant interest for geographers as researchers turn to locational studies to analyze the symbols visible and embedded within the physical surroundings, as well as human interactions taking place. Evidence of place-making, the effects of socio-economic influences and governance are but a few examples of the themes discussed by geographers in their assessment of physical spaces (e.g. van Riemsdijk 2014). For this dissertation, studies that focus on neighborhoods and the everyday experiences of minority populations serve as a guide for structuring the data collection and analysis. Feminist geographers in particular have directed attention to issues of public and private spaces, security, and the influence of gender on place-making (most recently Cuomo and Massaro 2016)). By focusing on a smaller scale such as neighborhoods, the physical space offers insights into the daily practices of individuals, including navigation of spaces and how the built environment reflects representations of Muslim women.

Spaces can be interpreted in many ways as they are dynamic and change in meaning depending on the context and the perspective of an individual. Studies have shown that each person brings their own meanings to a place at different times. A park may be a playground for children between the hours of 3pm and 5pm. In the evening, the park can become a place where older youth meet to pass the time. By one am the park develops an entirely different persona depending on who you ask. The production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities is embedded in urban landscapes and the neighborhood is a site where tensions are visible and can be contested. Minorities such as Muslim women may experience effects of the representations circulating about them (particularly negative stereotypes) during their everyday routines. These experiences are a vital component to cultural insecurity in the lives of minorities.
4.1.4 Boulogne-Billancourt

To address the issue of how cultural insecurities play out in everyday lives, I picked the neighborhoods of Boulogne-Billancourt. Boulogne-Billancourt (once separate entities) is a western suburb of Paris, and though it is not technically part of the city, several buses and two metro lines link it to the capital. Boulogne is one of the wealthier suburbs of the Paris metro area, with a long tradition of French bourgeois families who have lived there for generations.

Though Boulogne-Billancourt is one suburb, there are sharp divisions within creating highly localized areas. Boulogne-Billancourt is comprised of the following neighborhoods: Parchamp-Albert-Kahn; Silly-Gallieni; Billancourt-Rive de Seine; Republique - Pont-du-Jour; Centre-ville; and Les Princes - Marmottan. These neighborhoods belong to either the Boulogne side or Billancourt. The Boulogne neighborhoods are more expensive and generally more desirable while Billancourt hosts public housing and has a history of hosting minority populations (usually immigrants).
Figure 1 is an image of the official map seen on the streets of Boulogne-Billancourt. It was taken during my field visits and illustrates the divisions within the suburb. The neighborhood of Billancourt is triangular area at the southern-most tip. In the early to mid-1900s Billancourt was comprised mainly of automobile factories and housing for autoworkers. Between 1950 and 1970, Billancourt saw a continual influx of low-skilled, male workers from North Africa (mostly Algeria). These men settled in poorly accommodated apartments near their jobs and sent most of their earnings back home to their families. Changes in immigration policies brought the large influx of factory workers to a halt, only to be replaced by family reunification migrants. Billancourt changed from a mainly male dominated area, to neighborhoods of North African families. As families settled and began expanding, the first generation of “beurs” (first generation born in France of North African decent) was born. Their connections to both North Africa and France was a new element to the Billancourt landscape as it was in other parts of Paris (see Chapter Four for more on the beur generation).
Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the population of the suburb by birth country and naturalization. Census data shows that the suburb has over 13,000 people who are foreign born and not yet naturalized. Immigrants from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia continue to be some of the biggest groups. Today Billancourt continues to house the immigrant population of the Boulogne-Billancourt suburb. The religious and cultural institutions associated with Islam are all located in this area, and the densest population of Muslims resides in the Billancourt-Rive de Seine neighborhood. I carefully decided upon Boulogne-Billancourt for the offline portion of this dissertation for several reasons. The desire to escape the classic banlieue context driving the vast majority of studies on Muslim women was at the forefront of this decision. It is popular to look to poor, underserved communities in the north and eastern parts of the Paris metro area for evidence of how Muslims are marginalized in French society. These suburbs have featured prominently during times of unrest but also serve as examples of how immigration policies have failed. The topics of integration, racism and economic precarité are but some examples of how these banlieue are discussed by social scientists.
Comparative Overview of Key Demographic Statistics in 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boulogne-Billancourt (research site)</th>
<th>Paris (city)</th>
<th>Île-de-France (including surrounding suburbs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>116,927</td>
<td>2,220,445</td>
<td>12,027,565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Density</td>
<td>18,950.9</td>
<td>21,066.8</td>
<td>1,001.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in number of habitants per square kilometer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household income in Euros</td>
<td>30,905</td>
<td>26,195</td>
<td>22,522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate (in %)</td>
<td>9.8 %</td>
<td>16.1 %</td>
<td>15.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>9.6 %</td>
<td>12.0 %</td>
<td>12.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(age 15 to 64 year, in %)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Insee - RP2009 and RP2014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Comparisons between Paris, the Île-de-France (the Paris metro area) and Boulogne-Billancourt (INSEE 2017)*

The above table provides a snapshot of Boulogne-Billancourt in relation to Paris and the Paris metro area called l’Île-de-France. Boulogne-Billancourt is overall a much wealthier suburb. As seen above, the median household income is on average higher than its surrounding city and suburb. Both the percentage of households considered poor and unemployment of working age is lower than the average for both Paris and its greater metro area. It has no real history of unrest or track record with confrontations between Muslim youth and the police. It has been the home of many Muslim families over generations and continues to be a draw for incoming migrants. Muslim communities are very active in establishing cultural and religious institutions which is met with little resistance from the non-Muslim population. Perhaps the most important element in terms of cultural insecurity production is that Muslims and non-Muslims find themselves in the same neighborhoods, interacting on a daily basis. This lends itself to interesting possibilities of understanding how representations of Muslim women as a threat plays out on everyday contexts.
I made the choice of mixing data from Boulogne-Billancourt with Oumma.com during a visit to Paris prior to the research proposal-writing process. However, things changed during the data collection process (explained below). Regardless of the difficulties encountered, the following questions were asked to help guide the data collection:

What evidence can be found on the landscape that points to issues of cultural insecurity production?

How is Muslim being defined in these offline spaces? How are spaces understood as Muslim?

What types of interactions can be observed between Muslim women and with non-Muslims?

Are these interactions related to cultural insecurity production and contestation?

4.2 Research design

Creating a research design incorporating Oumma.com and Boulogne-Billancourt as field sites proved to be multi-step process as over time things shifted from the research proposal stage. Originally, the bulk of the content was to come from focus group and interviews conducted in the physical space of Boulogne-Billancourt. Observations of the neighborhood would be added to the information provided by the participants to paint a picture of how women in these neighborhoods coped with cultural insecurities. Parallel to this, I decided to collect online for evidence of how women engaged with issues of cultural insecurity online, focusing on what Oumma.com posts on this subject.

However, the information yielded from the work online turned out to be much richer and more complex than anticipated. It is undoubtedly important to think about what type of data is required before beginning with data collection (Gray et al. 2007), but this proved to be more difficult than anticipated. In addition, the access to Muslim women in Boulogne-Billancourt was more tenuous than expected and the boundless possibilities of the Oumma.com data shifted the focus of the research. This realigning undoubtedly had analytical ramifications not foreseen during the proposal-wiring process. The below section
provides information on the research population, what constitutes as data, the methods of collection and the analysis.

4.2.1 Research population - defining and self-categorization of Muslim

As explored in Chapter Three, the label of Muslim woman is vague and somewhat meaningless when one considers the complexity and diversity the term Muslim is meant to encompass. To be labelled a Muslim can have religious, cultural, ethnic, racial and even economic connotations depending on the historical and/or geographical context. After reviewing the literature and considering the importance of what Muslim means in terms of representations in France, I settled upon the idea of self-categorization, allowing women to define themselves as Muslim within the confines of this research. In most cases these women were religious, though several considered themselves culturally Muslim, or Muslim because of their origins. Relying on self-categorization was meant to be useful to the research about the participants/ those being observed. No labels would be forced upon a person, and these women could express what the term means to them but also how they have come to understand it through the circulating representations they encounter. This approach seemed to be the least invasive and lifted the burden of not knowing how to apply this complex term as a non-Muslim (myself).

While in the end this was useful, self-categorization does come with difficulties and potential inconsistencies when looking at virtual and physical spaces. The idea of self-categorization online is useful only when users explicitly state that they are Muslim. When sifting through the commentaries and uploads, many women seemed to use opening phrases such as ‘as a Muslim woman, I’ when discussing a topic. There are, however, cases where a user talked about Islam or her/ his origins in North Africa, but never specifically employed the term Muslim. In instances where this occurred, these usernames were flagged in case the topic arose at a later date.
As discussed in the section on trustworthiness of the data, the conditions of doing online work prevent the researcher from “knowing” certain things about the user. It is impossible to know whether the user considers herself/himself Muslim or even if the user self-described and is ascribed the identity of woman in offline contexts. As self-categorization is the method used in this dissertation, the most important thing is that on Oumma.com, the user presented herself/himself as female and Muslim. I considered this enough for gathering data.

Self-categorization presents certain problems in offline spaces as well. The researcher becomes dependent on religious and cultural institutions, personal contacts or physical markers that suggest a woman is Muslim. It feels appropriate to approach women affiliated with the mosque as Muslims as this tends to be a Muslim space. Approaching random women, however, can be delicate. In the neighborhood context, most of the women attending events and who were willing to speak were wearing a hijab. Though not all women wearing a hijab in the world are Muslim, their presence near the mosque or at a Muslim women’s meet-up suggested that they did connect to the term Muslim. It is also unlikely that many non-Muslims are wearing a hijab in the context of Boulogne-Billancourt. Yet relying on these symbols means that women who identify as Muslim in other ways (because of their family origins or because of their culture) go unnoticed. This became apparent when women participating in meet-ups would discuss their ideas on being Muslim outside of religion, due to cultural or family traditions.

Using the approach of self-definition did expose this research to a diverse group of women living in France. For the data collected on Oumma.com, approximately 145 users were involved in the commentaries coded (these are users who explicitly talked about being women or used pronouns and conjugations that are feminine in French). I coded data from 24 women authors of uploaded materials and an additional 58 women were included due to their interviews on OummaTV or videos they created themselves. There are many other (probably)
women users on the website, but they were not included in the study if I found no evidence of their engagement with issues pertaining to cultural insecurities.

Due to difficulties in getting women from Boulogne-Billancourt to participate in focus groups or interviews, I relied on informal conversations that took place in meet-ups, during Ramadan dinners and during random encounters on the street. On and off over two years, I spoke with about 25 women, 10 with whom I spent several hours at either meet-ups or other social events. This number does not comprise all of the short conversations held in various public spaces such as park benches, bus stops, in front of schools and at the mosques. Because these conversations did not fit into the structured plan set out during the proposal, I chose to use the data from Oumma.com as my primary data and will use the information collected during these encounters in Boulogne-Billancourt as support when appropriate.

4.2.2 Data collection

Participant observation and landscape study were used in both the virtual and physical spaces to obtain relevant data. Participant observation requires not only for the researcher to be aware of the intertextuality of situations but to also invest her/himself in the community being observed (Gray et al. 2007). This investment is important not only for comprehension of the context and the social dynamics but also to give research participants a more honest look at the researcher. Online data included: all relevant textual, visual and audio materials posted on Oumma.com, particularly commentaries by users. Offline data included: visual symbols on the landscape, observed interactions, data from events and gathers, and information provided directly by Muslim women.

4.2.3 Positioning the researcher

When participating in virtual and physical spaces for this study, I always presented myself as a non-Muslim not currently residing in France, emphasizing my limited knowledge
of Islam. Adrian Holliday (2007) speaks of the importance of choosing the proper behavior when researching the everyday of others. I felt it necessary to always present myself as an outsider not only because this is the truth, but because it was helpful in letting others know that whatever they wished to share would be useful and new to me. I found that this created an important dynamic between us where both the men and women with whom I spoke could teach me about a variety of aspects regarding their community. I did bring to these situations background knowledge of the larger representations of Muslims, but it was the personal experiences of these individuals that was important.

Though all interactions with Muslims were in French (or sometimes Arabic with French translation), I made each person aware that my academic background is firmly rooted in the United States. This furthered my stranger status (Holliday 2007) within many gatherings and occasionally caused friction with individuals who wanted to debate US policies with the Middle East. For instance, I attended a meeting with some women in a neighborhood outside of Billancourt just one week after the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Libya and a week before the release of the controversial trailer and short film “Innocence of Muslims - the real life of Muhammad”. Several women in the group became openly hostile regarding the idea of US presence in North Africa and the Middle East. In these situations, I did my best to remain neutral and allow the women to express their opinions freely.

4.2.4 Online data collection and analysis

All of the textual, visual, and audio data collected on Oumma.com took place over a two-and-a-half-year period, 2012-2014. I initially experimented a lot with how to collect the data online. The intention for the analysis was never to depend on counting words or how many times an issue was mentioned, but rather to determine what topics women were discussing and how these related to the engagement with and contestation of cultural insecurities. In other words, I did not intent to flag all the times hijab appeared in text and
images, but rather to highlight when users talked about being denied access to a public space because they wore a hijab or were attacked in a public space. I first tried to use the program Evernote to capture, tag, and process the relevant articles and commentaries on Oumma.com. This fell short along with attempts at using spreadsheets and word processing tools to find a way in which to organize and review the material. After many failed attempts, I came across Nvivo, the workspace for qualitative analysis. Though it can be argued that Nvivo lends itself to the tradition of counting in its coding strategy, it was possible to bend the tools to code for themes and concepts rather than words.

During this early stage of data collection, I tried the Oumma.com search option to find articles that related to the research questions. For instance, the literature associated with cultural insecurity and Muslims in France draws heavily on the national debates regarding head covering in schools. Plugging terms such as voile (veil), foulard (scarf) and hijab generated lists of articles and videos that discussed relevant topics. Though the uploaded material was not always relevant to the research questions, a snowball process took place where the website generated suggested readings based on my searches.

Snowballing and algorithm-based suggestions, however, proved to be lacking in depth and a number of issues quickly became apparent. For example, it is impossible to know all of the searchable topics that are important to discussions on cultural insecurities. The hijab and niqab are obviously important topics, but I could not have known what representations and events in France would be important and relevant to these women. Only their ideas and experiences could inform and teach me this. Therefore, I systematically went through each Oumma.com topic, starting with 1998 and worked through all the posted material to the end of 2014. This meant reading and viewing hundreds of publications and uploads, but the benefits outweighed the challenges.
I converted all of the posted material deemed relevant to the dissertation into PDFs and uploaded into Nvivo. I then coded all of the material by topics and themes by generating nodes (a theme that represents all of the coded material for one subject). For instance, the node “religion in public spaces” emerged from user discussions on the street prayer debate in French media. This node then served as a way to categorize other events, conversations and issues such as prayer rooms in professional settings. Female users were assigned their own node to flag whenever that particular user discussed a relevant topic. From the 15-year span of Oumma.com postings, a total of 468 relevant PDFs and videos were downloaded, resulting in 208 nodes and over 2,000 references.

Coding is an initial way of analyzing data as the researcher is sorting information into categories. It does not offer an in-depth view of what is being said or done by the users, but it does jumpstart the process. Once I completed the initial coding, a second round of more intricate analysis took place. I considered each node on its and compared to see what other nodes connected with it. From the coded phrases and paragraphs in the nodes, themes were generated. For instance, the node “humor” was connected to the theme “active resistance” discussed in Chapter Six as an example of how some women use humor and stereotypes to flip public narratives. The results from the analyses were also compared to the data gathered from Boulogne-Billancourt.

4.2.5 Offline data collection and analysis

The neighborhood study involved a systematic string of observations and participation over the course of 16 weeks, at four-week increments. These included: November – December 2012; April – May 2013; July – August 2013; and September – October 2013. The choice of dividing the data collection over a year’s time was to ensure that the observations were consistent and spread over different hours of the day and week, but also allowed for exposure to the seasons. During the fall months, schools are in full swing and
most people have already taken holiday. Spring and summer months meant Ramadan but also
time for outdoor cultural activities.

The first weeks of the research were spent geo-referencing symbols on the
neighborhood streets. As I was initially unclear what parts of Boulogne-Billancourt would be
most important to the dissertation, all of the neighborhoods were explored. Using a hand-held
GPS and camera, I tagged different symbols (stickers, tags, advertisements, etc.) and
important buildings (restaurants, prayer rooms, mosque, etc.) and described them in field
notes. Photos were taken of the symbols, and descriptions of the interactions were noted. I
used the geo-referenced data to generate a map highlighting the important features of the
physical landscape. Once the map was generated, I found it easier to isolate what areas would
be most useful for data collection. The map indicated an almost straight line through the
suburb, and pointed to the relevance of focusing on Billancourt. I continuously added to over
the course of each visit. Though dates were added to the newly geo-references data points,
this did complicate the map over time.

In addition to the symbols and other markers on the landscape, observations were
made about the people and places during the different times of year. How people moved,
where they went, how they interacted with one another were all consider when observing an
environment, but these elements are also challenging to document in a systematic way
(Holliday 2007). Notes were taken during random encounters and significant situations (such
as when a French woman told a Muslim bus passenger to remove her hijab). Though it might
seem as though information gathered from banal moments is unimportant, these small
encounters may have meaning and certainly can contribute to the production of cultural
insecurities.

I also attended a variety of events (plays, women meet-ups, Ramadan celebrations)
both in Boulogne-Billancourt and in surrounding neighborhoods. While I made a few contacts
during my first four-week stay, I focused less of my attention on recruiting participants for interviews and focus groups and more on attending large events, assessing the physical landscape, geo-referencing my data, and becoming overall acquainted with the daily experiences in Boulogne-Billancourt. The intention was to begin recruiting in the spring of 2013 and hold the focus groups either over summer or fall. However, when I arrived four months after my first visit, my contacts were no longer interested in participating. The mosque, though never particularly welcoming, seemed to have an increased number of skeptical gatekeepers (always men) who were less than helpful. As this was one of the main ways to meet Muslim women, this posed a problem.

I also sensed general unease that I had not previously encountered in the neighborhoods. I talked to women randomly in everyday situations such as bus stops and parks, but getting women to agree to meeting in a more formal way proved difficult. I later learned that a book had been published by a Maryam Borghée, a sociologist doing research on the niqab in France. In her work, she discussed her interviews with various niqabis in the Paris metro area, even calling some by name. One of the women named, Kenza Drider, an active member in her Muslim community, came forward and claimed that she had never met this researcher and that all of the information regarding her involvement was a lie.

Whether this book contributed to the atmosphere or if the social and political tensions around Muslims in France effected these women, I cannot say for sure. I was unable to convince more than a few women to speak with me. As noted by J.R. Bowen, author of Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves, who has conducted field work in France over many years, earning the trust of Muslim communities is not always easy and requires time. Given the difficult history of Muslims in France, it is understandable that many individuals are reluctant to participate in a study. Interestingly enough, I decided to try my luck in other suburbs of Paris, including Courbevoie. Here I came across many women who were open and willing to be interviewed or attend a focus group. They gave no impression of reluctance.
Given the amount of work and limited time for the dissertation, I decided to leave these interviews and focus groups for further research.

For the analysis of the offline data, all of the notes taken at events and in the neighborhoods, the geo-referenced materials, photographs, sketches and field-note recordings were entered into Nvivo as PDFs. I treated the data in a similar manner as with the online data. Materials were coded and nodes were created. Upon completing this process, a second round of analysis was conducted to determine the emerging themes. Once the themes were set, I compared the offline data with the online findings. Themes that intersected were joined together to discuss the similarities and differences in how these spaces are used. Unique themes were discussed on their own in one of the three empirical chapters.

Throughout the process of gathering data and analysis, it became apparent that bridging on- and offline spaces was not always the easiest scenario to maneuver. The ethical considerations and the limitations arising not only from the research questions and the researcher’s skills, but also understanding how to approach combining the information presented a challenge. The following sections discuss these issues in more detail.

4.2.6 Ethical considerations

There were a lot of issues to consider in terms of appropriate, ethical behavior in both the virtual and physical sites, though online research presents particularly interesting challenges. The topic of ethics and privacy on the internet is similar to tapping a hornet’s nest as it raises a number of open-ended, tough questions about privacy and protection of individuals in a world of near anonymity. To date, there is still no nationally or internationally accepted official guidance for ethical internet research. This leaves academics to make decisions based on personal experience and judgement as to what is acceptable in terms of consent, method of data collection and presentation of findings.
The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee has produced two reports (in 2002 and 2012) to help guide researchers in ethical decision-making during the data collection process (Markham and Buchanan 2012). Concerns regarding this subject are raised by many scholars who try to gain a foothold in a fast moving and constantly altering virtual world (Dolowitz et al. 2008). The guide attempts to give researchers a springboard for various online research, from interviews to archival work. The greatest concern of course is the potential of inflicting harm to participants or observed subjects.

The governance of internet research continues to be heavily influenced by offline social science research standards which rely on three ethical concepts: confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent (Eynon et al. 2008). While these concepts historically emerged from important lessons learnt of the dangers for research participants, the internet challenges their validity in such an open, free flowing environment. Certainly, an ethical framework must be created, but different types of research online call for different standards. There are so many angles to consider as online environments offer such a wide range of behaviors and events to observe. The computer-mediated aspect also plays a definite role. Data collection online is subtle, more difficult to grasp as it acts on both a local and global level whether the user and researcher are aware of this or not (Lee et al. 2008). Subjects and researchers are often more removed, even if they meet in physical spaces at other times.

Though it would be impossible to grasp and address all of the facets of internet research and its implications, the AoIR report provides a framework which was useful for the data collection of this dissertation. Two points in particular guided the data collection and writing phases for the content posted by Muslim women on Oumma.com. The first states: “The greater the vulnerability of the community/author/participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community/author/participant” (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 4). This dissertation argues that Muslim women are in fact a vulnerable group in French society (without negating their agency) because of their role in the production of cultural
insecurities. Their presence and activities in everyday spaces are represented as a threat, and these women in turn become targets. It was therefore important to remember that users and authors online deserved a certain amount of protection, especially since many of the women openly admitted to feeling targeted.

The second point states that “when making ethical decisions, the researcher must balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of the research and the researchers’ rights to conduct research” (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 4). The authors remind us that it is important to think about the implications of the research, particularly how it can be beneficial to participants. Though it is impossible to say whether the findings of this research will be read by any concerned parties, it is certainly a goal that it open up discussions about the diversity of Muslim communities and perceptions of how cultural insecurities expressed by the French majority affect these women.

Privacy continues to be an important aspect of protecting research subjects, which is yet again made complicated by online spaces. The notion of public versus private is shaken in this context, something that is often much easier to discern in the offline, physical world. Markham and Buchanan (2012) point out that though individuals may operate in what is considered a public space online, there may still be an expectation of privacy. As discussed by Eynon et al. (2008), users may technically be aware of privacy policies and understand that public sites mean the world can view all materials posted, but the sense of belonging to a community may give the user a sense of semi-privacy.

I decided to approach the issue of privacy in a similar manner to Bunt (2002) and Piela (2012). I aimed to ensure that the point of view and experiences of the Oumm.com user was intact, but that a certain amount of anonymity would remain. Names of women who wrote articles for Oumma.com and the women who created videos for OummaTV were used in the dissertation. I believe that these women are authors of published materials and therefore
have no expectation of privacy. They have consciously allowed their work to be published in a formal, educational environment that is free and open. There is no reason to think that these authors would be unaware that the website is open to the world and is accessible to anyone who searchers. In addition, many of these women are public figures (journalists, writers and comedians) who seek a larger audience for their work.

The commentaries, however, fall under another category. Unlike Piela (2012) who used a closed women’s newsgroup to collect her data, Oumma.com is a mixed gender, open environment. The website specifically states the material is not private or protected. In addition, Oumma.com often runs stories about how non-Muslim public figures believe that the website is harmful to French society, informing users that non-Muslims are aware and might even visit the site. However, even if it is clear that users should not have expected privacy, they are not necessarily aware of my data collection nor can I confirm that they have read the disclaimer on Oumma.com.

I believe that the risk for causing harm in the case of this dissertation is extremely low. It is highly unlikely that users are traceable offline (unless they willingly provide personal information in the comments section, though I have never seen this with the exception of one women who provided her email address). There could be a risk that users could face harassment online, but the comments and information used in this dissertation could be found by anyone visiting Oumma.com. I do recognize though that by assembling these commentaries, I am producing something new using the women users’ words. This probably has not occurred to the users and could be alarming or uncomfortable to them.

To avoid any problems for these women, I chose to never use the username chosen by the women and assigned them an alias. I also translated their comments in English instead of using the French quote. Using the French quote would facilitate the finding of the user by simply searching for the phrase online. By omitting names and providing my own
understanding of the quotes, it would be difficult for someone to reconstruct the scenario.
Having said this, I did my best to preserve the integrity of what was posted by these users,
minimized any alterations in the phrases posted and attempted to never infuse my own
meanings into the text.

Though I feel this approach of masking user identities is the best way to ensure privacy, it does take away from my abilities to properly cite the material. Citing is useful not only for the researcher but also brings validity to the document for the reader. To help with this, years were added to the quotes and the paraphrasing to put the material in context. In addition, a parallel document was created which links each section to the title of the articles coded. The quotes are not included, but if there are further questions regarding the material, I am able to retrace my steps.

Ethical data collection in the material spaces was quite different. Since the focus groups could ultimately not take place, there were no instances where names or other identifying information was used to talk about what various Muslim women talked about in Boulogne. The one exception to this is the reference to the imam and the woman working in the local mosque, but neither provided sensitive or personal information during our discussions. I also did not use any quotes by them in the dissertation.

4.2.7 Trustworthiness of the data

It is important to consider the trustworthiness of the data collected, something which is complicated with qualitative data (Gray 2007), and certainly in the case of online research. In terms of the physical environment, the nature of the elements observed (interactions, stickers, tags, etc.) pose less of a risk in their validity. There are examples of unsavory things that appeared on the neighborhood streets. For instance, some of the stickers and signs that were posted in Boulogne-Billancourt could be traced to organizations in Paris or generally in France. When visiting their websites, I discovered that some of these stickers belonged to
right wing groups calling for the expulsion of all Muslims. Though the information they are providing on their site is probably not trustworthy, evidence of this is in fact a part of the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities.

Trustworthiness in relation to the informal conversations which occurred in Boulogne may come into question. Stories about harassment in public spaces or bad experiences with other French men and women could be false, but there is no way of gauging this. I could only rely on instinct when talking with strangers and accept that there is a reason they tell a story. Narrative analysis tells us that when we narrative ourselves, stories do not necessarily fall under a truth-lie dichotomy. During the visits to Boulogne-Billancourt and surrounding Muslim communities, I never encounter an individual that struck me as blatantly lying about their experiences, though there is no scientific way of measuring validity in this case.

Trustworthiness is a bigger issue for the data collected online. First and foremost, there is no way of knowing who is posting the content on the website. Oumma.com collects very little information about its users. You simply provide a name and postal code which could be completely fabricated. Therefore it is impossible to know who is on the other end of the computer. Whether the user who claims to be a devout Muslim woman online but is in fact a self-proclaimed atheist male trolling for amusement, is impossible to know. The commentaries must be taken as they are and accepted with their claims, not unlike in the offline scenarios.

The lack of visual presence is one of the more difficult aspects of online research. Interacting with research participants gives the research some information about a person’s behavior. Interactions and communications online are not bound by the same social cues. However, after having finished the analysis for this study, I would question the necessity of knowing if the user and data is “real” or not. If a user claiming to be a Muslim woman shares her views on Islamophobia in France, this should be considered valid. Our online realities
may be different than our offline ones. There were of course a few instances when a user claiming to be a Muslim made questionable comments, but these were made by (supposedly) men. Any comments or uploaded materials by anonymous sources or users who did not reveal their gender was never coded or used in the analysis in an attempt to maintain the integrity of the work.

### 4.3 Limitations of study

Aside from the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the data, one must also consider the limitations of the research design and findings. There were many issues that surfaced during data collection and analysis that pointed to the limitations of the choices made in the research design. The most notable of these issues is the incredible differences between the physical and virtual spaces. Finding creative ways to bring together observations from Boulogne-Billancourt’s streets - where observations may be fleeting but concrete - to the commentaries uploaded on Oumma.com required a lot of experimentation. The spaces themselves are so different – one is local, the other both local and global. Ways of interacting, social norms and types of activities can be quite different in these spaces. It is important to remember that the two sites were never meant to be compared but rather were chosen to support one another with examples of what Muslim women experience in their everyday lives.

Oumma.com presented a considerable amount of logistical issues that hampered the data collection and analysis. Gary Bunt provides a laundry list of problems he encounters when researching Muslims online including: information is often not properly archived and links can easily be broken; precarious or newly developing software makes data collection challenging; finding structured, scientific ways of acquiring data in a constantly changing environment is unlikely; by nature online work is time consuming; and finally, the nature of online environments means complex levels of data mining (2007). Bunt’s list of shortcomings express well the issues encountered during this research. Information appears and disappears
online constantly. In this case, Oumma.com often censored commentaries which meant that valuable information disappeared before I could code. This is a practice that many website users found frustrating as their posts would be deleted without explanation.

In addition to Bunt’s list, I encountered a host of other issues. Occasionally links would lead to dead pages or errors. In addition, issues arose with the constant format changes to the website which altered the commentaries and user experience. Bunt states “new developments occur regularly, and it is not possible to record every element of cyber-Islamic expression. Sites, location and content change frequently. Formats have makeovers, content evolves over time as technology changes, and content providers enhance their skills” (2002). Oumma.com changed its format a total of five times between 1998 and 2015, which caused several problems in the coding process, most notably the requirements for users. The website originally allowed individuals to leave their comments anonymously (though several signed their names). This was then changed to a sign in system, which later accompanied by a point system that rated comments. The most recent change has done away with points, but users must have some sort of identification to be able to comment.

Limitations also arose during the analysis stage due to the sheer amount of data collected. Admittedly, it would have been impossible to know previous to embarking on this research just how much data would be generated from the interactions on Oumma.com. The time span of 1998-2014 is one of the biggest reasons why so much data was collected. However, even now I would argue that it was worth coding information over such a length of time as it provided a deeper understanding of the temporal aspects of pivotal meta debates such as Muslim head coverings, national identity and assimilation.

Using a smaller selection would have undoubtedly be easier, but it would lack the richness time offers. Opening the data collection to the entire site also created difficulty as women participate in every aspect of the website from the commentaries to uploading of
material. Coding became increasingly difficult because of the subtleties offered by each user’s insights. Because of this, the analysis required some generalizations and foregoing of certain insights.

Finally, coding over time also meant that my perceptions of the data changed. What first seemed like an obvious node to use in the 1998 data, by 2013 the nodes are either not specific enough or no longer useful for determining the context. This required repeated reviews of the nodes and reshuffling to ensure that no aspects of the commentaries were overlooked.

Limitations in terms of the offline data and analysis are rooted in the lack of in-depth interviews or focus groups. On the one hand this would have generated even more data that may have created greater confusion in how to analyze and distill the information. However, it would have been nice to engage women in groups to discover how they talk about issues of cultural insecurities among one another (provided that they would feel comfortable with my presence). It would also have been helpful to ask pointed, specific questions, something that I could not do online. This can be accomplished in future research when more time is allocated to building stronger relationships with Muslim women.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the research design and methodologies used in this dissertation by providing an overview of the research sites, the population, types of data collected, and the analysis. The on- and offline data was discussed at length in terms of its usefulness and possible pitfalls. The sections on ethical considerations, trustworthiness and limitations were meant to highlight that while attempting to explore how to conduct research online and bridge the information with offline experiences is exciting, it does come with challenges.
These limitations, however, did not translate into lack of interesting findings. The following three chapters of this dissertation present the analysis and discussion of how Muslim women on Oumma.com engage with and contest representations of themselves as a threat to French culture. The analysis from the neighborhood studies in Boulogne-Billancourt is used as supporting evidence to these discussions. The first empirical chapter looks at how cultural insecurities are defined in the everyday lives of Muslims women. This includes discussions on representation, their understanding of what cultural insecurity means for non-Muslim French and what makes them feel insecure in their daily lives. The second chapter discusses the ways Muslim women engage with the circulating narratives in French society and how they find ways to contest their validity. The final empirical chapter explores the disengagement of Muslim women, particularly their desire to withdraw from society when their “Muslimness” interferes with their daily lives.
Chapter 5 Setting the Scene: Frenchness and Representations of Muslim Women

In Chapter Two, the production of cultural insecurities was examined by reviewing how various societal actors, negative representations and spaces converge to create a context of tension between the majority and minority cultures. As discussed, culture is a slippery term subject to interpretation, influenced by environmental and human historical and contemporary interactions. Though it may be difficult to pinpoint and define, the idea of a collective identity is something that societies exhibit. The collective sense of belonging to a culture is fluid, but it can be strong and is often a tool for people at all scales to use. Regions across the world experience the production of cultural insecurities differently not only because of how cultures are defined but also how the concept of culture is understood. The unifying factor in cultural insecurity production lies in how groups perceive and relate to one another, whether this be the classic formula of majority versus minorities or between minority groups.

Encounters among certain groups may encourage the production of insecurities as people are given the opportunity to form opinions on perceived differences in negative ways. As described in Chapter Two, the fears associated with losing one’s culture are fluid and ever changing. Boundaries created through the acceptance of cultural elements such as language, religious adherence or race are challenged by the everyday presence and activity of those who do not share these unifying elements. Though difference does not automatically translate to the production of cultural insecurities, it is within the context of otherness that fears reveal themselves. Immigration is often a key factor in the production of these tensions as the mobilization of people increases the chances of encountering others whose religion, traditions

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6 There are of course other factors that may cause insecurities within groups that do not necessarily stem from physical encounters with others. For instance, globalization, particularly the increased influence of other languages through new technologies, may elicit similar fears around losing cultural elements even without the physical presence of an associated group. English serves as a perfect example - though there may be no significant presence of Anglophones in a region, the increased availability of cultural products through technologies may cause changes within local cultures. This can generate insecurities across generations.
or other social practices seem unfamiliar and possibly threatening. As the visibility of these foreign bodies increases, the potential for the production of cultural insecurities rises.

Evidence of cultural insecurities developing around the world continues with the increase of economic and political migration. Many European countries have experienced negative repercussions relating to the production of cultural insecurities due largely in part to their long history with immigration. France serves as an ideal context for examining the production of cultural insecurities for a number of reasons including its prolonged political tension with minority groups and the purposeful defining of the majority culture. As stated by Sharif Gemie (2010), France provides an opportunity to examine the implications of unique social interactions because it “is arguably the first European country hosting a long-term, permanent presence of a substantial body of people who may be termed Muslims” whom are considered different from the majority (3).

Despite the fact that France has regions of cultural and ethnic diversity, actors who engage with the concept of culture do not consider France to be a pluralistic society (Jennings 200: 575). Social actors have explicitly engaged in protecting French culture from the influence of “outsiders” (whether internal and external) through a number of means. Laws such as the enforcement of the 1994 Toubon Law illustrate how maintaining cultural elements such as the French language is important to people not only within the country, but how it defines itself as belonging within Europe (Māättā 2005). While France has battled against many perceived threats, it is the presence of Muslim women that has garnered the most attention from politicians and media. Muslim women have risen to the forefront of insecurity and security debates (Aitchison et al. 2007) bearing the brunt of scrutiny within European and North American societies due to a number of factors including: their visibility associated with clothing and religious practices (Mahmood 2004), perceived resistance to

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7 The Toubon Law was passed in 1994 in an effort to preserve the French language in public spaces. At the time, the law was seen as a direct response to the increased use of English by media.
integration (Freedman 2004) and/or their attachment to transnational communities (Bowen 2007a). The visibility of Muslim women in France began making headlines during the 1980s and continues to gain momentum as social actors claim that their daily practices challenge what it means to be French.

Over the years, France has shown evidence of the production and perpetuation of insecurities linked to the presence of Muslim women, not only due to political and media attention (such as election periods) but also because of events in other regions of the world (September 11th). President Sarkozy’s initiative to oppose Islamic dress as an ingredient to defining French national identity pushed the concept of cultural insecurity to new levels (Bernard 2010; Ducros 2010; Kintzler 2010). As emphasized by the former president, migration remains one of the largest factors contributing to a sense of insecurity around collective identity (Kastoryano 2002; Weil 2002). Though what is sometime referred to as the *français de souche*\(^8\) majority expressed a sharp sense of cultural insecurity throughout the latter part of the 20\(^{th}\) century, researchers refrain from using insecurity language to discuss these debates. Even within studies on the construction of Islamophobia by French mass media (Deltombe 2007), cultural insecurity remains largely implied. In addition, research tends to focus on the response of the French majority or a general defense of Muslims with less emphasis placed on how Muslim women react to being framed as a threat.

Though the term cultural insecurities is not specifically used in discourses on immigration, culture and fear, I argue that the way these debates and ideas are illustrated in the narratives\(^9\) about Muslim women fits into the definition of cultural insecurities. The representations of these women depict people that challenge French culture and threaten to overtake or dismantle it.

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\(^8\) A term used to describe what some consider to be the "real French". The definition and components of real Frenchness will be discussed in the next section.

\(^9\) I use the term narrative in this dissertation as described by Sonja Foss (1996) - “A narrative, as a frame upon experience, functions as an argument to view and understand the world in a particular way.”
To understand more about how Muslim women have come to represent a threat, this chapter provides an overview of what is meant by French culture, explains the link between immigration of Muslims and the production of cultural insecurities, and highlights some of the ways public actors have construed the image and behaviors of Muslim women as threatening. Particular attention is paid to how these representations are attached to the history of immigration, colonialism, and the idea of Islam of France and the specific role of veiling practices in the essentialized identity of Muslim woman circulating in society.

5.1 What it means to be French

As this chapter will explain, the presence and activity of Muslim women in French society is portrayed as jeopardizing the existence of the majority culture. This suggests that there is a sense of a dominant culture. But how do we talk about a majority culture when the lines between groups are blurry, dynamic and abstract? This is difficult when exploring the nature of cultural insecurities as there are unclear lines drawn during the production and circulation of representations and narratives about minorities. However, there are certain practices associated with the state, the media and other societal actors that have helped create a general notion of Frenchness in recent decades. Below I provide some examples of how the state and the media have participated in defining the important aspects of Frenchness. This section does not offer a comprehensive historical look nor does it delve into how culture is defined in everyday exchanges. It is meant to give a brief overview and set the tone for discussing how Muslim women are implicated in the production of cultural insecurities.

The slippery nature of the term Frenchness stems from the difficulty in examining any type of collective identity as it operates on many levels, from political to personal (emotional). As discussed in Chapter Two, scholars have pointed out the nearly impossible challenge of defining and quantifying emotions and opinions that form collective identities due to their subjective nature. It is impossible to know precisely how every individual
connects to a collective, what it signifies to her/him, and how she/he uses this sense of belonging in decision-making. Yet collective identities do appear to exist and thrive. In the case of France, this is made evident not only by academic research on the subject, but also due to Frenchness appearing in almost daily public conversations (Weil 2011).

5.1.1 The French language

Though we may not be able to distill Frenchness into one convenient definition, the enduring public conversations on the matter provides insight to some widely accepted components. Over the last two centuries, politicians, researchers, journalists and public intellectuals have attempted to distill the notion of Frenchness into neat categories. One obvious starting point is language. Dominique Schnapper (1991) writes “one is French through the practice of a language, through the learning of a culture, through the wish to participate in an economic and political life” (63). The French language is often cited as a crucial component to French identity, an element that became a unifying factor in the 16th century when it was first used officially by the king. In 1635 the Académie Française was established by the Cardinal Richelieu which was charged with defining the French language and grammar (www.academie-francaise.fr). The academy not only safeguards the language but champions its importance in public discourses.

Language became enmeshed with the notion of national identity after the revolution, when people were encouraged to move away from their local dialects to form a cohesive republic. French served as a tool during the colonial period (1870s to the 1960s), particularly in North Africa (Oakes 2001) as a way to civilize the perceived barbaric local cultures and to exert control. Colonial subjects were encouraged to learn French as a way of adopting the supposed superior French culture. Education in French was considered vital in transferring French values and customs, and was seen as a way to prove how colonialism was improving the lives of colonial subjects. Even today there is a strong network of French schools found throughout the world (www.anefe.fr).
In the post-Cold War era, the increasing influence of external actors due to globalization has threatened the importance and perceived purity of the language. English in particular continuously infiltrates spoken and written French through media, but the presence of non-Anglophone minority groups has also contributed changes to the French language. These changes and the influence of l’Académie Français has encouraged politicians to pass laws in an attempt to protect the language by limiting the use of others, both domestically and formally within the European Union. As Kaarina Määttä (2005) explains “they equate the French language with democracy and replaced religious uniformity as an essential component of the nation” (167). An example of such measures that directly link language to culture is the 1994 Toubon Law which states that all official documentation must be in French as this is essential to the personality and heritage of France (Määttä 2005: 174).

5.1.2 Attachment to territory

One of the most prominent ways in which Frenchness is defined relies on immigration as a backdrop or measuring stick. The phrase *français de souche* has been used off and on since the 1960s to draw a boundary between those who are real French and those who do not fully belong. There is no concrete evidence of when the term *français de souche* first appeared in the French language, but President Charles de Gaulle did use it to talk about the “real French” living in Algeria. The country was under control of the French government at the time, and de Gaulle wanted to make a distinction between the families that had moved to Algeria from France and the local (mainly Arab and Berber) population. Though Algeria was technically a Département (territorial department) at the time, the president was pointing out that not everyone was considered French.

*Français de souche* officially appeared again in a 1991 document of the census bureau. Though the term has no judicial or administrative use, the census thought it important to distinguish who was a real French person versus first, second and third generation
immigrants. As pointed out by Marc Décimo (2013), *français de souche* suggests an ethnic quality rooted in a longstanding genealogical connection to the French territory where multiple generations were born under French law (however not colonial subjects). In this regard, there should be no family memory attached to another culture.

The concept of *français de souche* is not specifically associated with citizenship, but rather with discussions of culture, ethnicity and race. It has been used by conservative and far-right politicians, but it is occasionally used by the left as well. For instance, President Holland faced criticism when he used the term *français de souche* to describe individuals that had been caught defacing Jewish cemeteries.\(^\text{10}\) The president’s critics accused him of using extreme-right sentiments of Frenchness to characterize the guilty parties. Though the term has fallen out of favor with the centrists and those of the left, you can still hear it being used in casual conversations in everyday settings.

5.1.3 The role of immigration

The phrase *français de souche* sets the stage for examining the importance placed on immigration in defining French culture. An emphasis on a shared history and generational attachments to the territory is used as a boundary maker. Language is one of the easier elements to isolate when talking about culture - it seems logical that the French would speak French and it is not unique that they would feel that safeguarding the language is important. Territory, or attachment to a homeland, is also not surprising. Many cultures feel rooted to a place due to historical significance. When these two elements act as a base for French culture, it means that populations who do not share the language and culture through multiple generations are not considered French. The easiest boundary to be created in this context is between the majority and immigrants.

\(^{10}\) [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/02/24/francais-de-souche-polemique-autour-des-propos-de-francois-hollande_4582394_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/02/24/francais-de-souche-polemique-autour-des-propos-de-francois-hollande_4582394_823448.html).
Focus on language and territory creates the link between culture and national identity. Though the concept of national identity lost traction after World War II, it picked up again at the end of the 1970s as public actors began to focus on immigration as a root of economic decline. Politician Valéry Giscard d’Estaing lobbied at the time for the mass repatriation of immigrants and news outlets focused extensively on what the French call communautarisme, a type of communitarianism (similar to multiculturalism) that generally has negative connotations (Koukoutsaki-Monnier 2010). Immigrants were portrayed as foreign groups that refused to integrate and chose to reject French culture. They are also considered to be too attached to transnational communities. Their perceived investment in other countries, whether due to traditions or social connections, is construed as a threat to French culture (depending on the country in question). This aspect of communautarisme and transnational ties are a central feature to how Muslims, especially women, have been represented in France, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Since the late 1970s, public discourses on immigration and failed assimilation feature heavily in electoral campaigns at various political levels (Koukoutsaki-Monnier 2010; Gerstlé 2004). Within these discourses are questions of national identity and French culture. For example, the meaning of Frenchness is one of the questions that Nicolas Sarkozy’s administration set out to answer. During his 2007 presidential campaign he was quoted as saying: “Je veux remettre à l’honneur la nation et l’identité nationale. Je veux aux français la fierté d’être français” / I want to restore honor to the nation and to the national identity. I want the French to be proud of being French (Bonal and Équy 2009). This sense of the importance of a citizen being culturally French figured heavily in Sarkozy campaign.11

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11 I recognize that the reliance on cultural arguments by politicians can have many angles and goals. Sarkozy’s use of promoting French culture as a campaign tool that cannot be taken as affirmation that Sarkozy himself believes in a unifying French culture that needs to be maintained in the face of others. However, I believe that his focus on this does illustrate that the Sarkozy team and the UMP in general felt (and in the case of the UMP continue to feel) that the endangering of French culture is a topic that resonates with voters.
Sarkozy made good on his promise to bring national identity to the forefront of his tenure by lumping together the question of what it means to be French with discussions on immigration. However, much like for this dissertation, Sarkozy and his administration easily recognized that discussing French culture is difficult. Therefore, his administration launched a national initiative to define what it means to be French. They created a website with questions about Frenchness and national identity, inviting users to discuss their point of view. Prefects throughout France were sent a national identity kit which included 200 questions on the subject to help spark local debates on pinpointing the elements that contribute to the formation and maintenance of collective identity and culture (Gabizon 2009).

While the exercise was deemed a failure and Sarkozy was accused of using right-wing tactics to discriminate against minorities, the debate did elicit various reactions from different sides of the intellectual spectrum. Sarkozy’s focus on French culture drove academics and intellectuals to pose these questions (yet again). Historian Patrick Weil published an essay in 2010 with Le Monde which later appeared in bookstores. This essay answered the question of what it means to be French in a manner that spoke directly to the debates on insecurity and immigration in France. In light of Sarkozy’s attempts to define Frenchness and the larger debates on the role of immigrants in society, Weil (2014) proposed four pillars of being French. These are: the principle of equality which is rooted in the code civil, the French language as a unifying cultural instrument since 1539, the positive memory of the French revolution, and laïcité (French version of secularism). Within laïcité Weil specified freedom of thought, separation between church and state, and the freedom to practice religion.

Patrick Weil’s essay was met with enthusiasm by many, but more importantly, the essay epitomizes the current structuring of cultural awareness and belonging in France. What is important to note in his interpretation of being French, is the emphasis on laïcité. Weil’s arguments are strongly connected the decade long debates on the role of immigrants and
minorities in France, particularly Muslims. The focus on secularism speaks directly to how Muslims have been characterized as communities that not only are different from the *français de souche*, but will most likely never be able to assimilate due to their religion and culture. Their adherence to Islam is portrayed as a rejection of one of France’s most revered values.\(^\text{12}\)

5.1.4 The role of colonialism

The focus on *laïcité* as a core value is also connected to the past, particularly colonialism, especially when drawing the boundaries between the French majority culture and Muslim communities because of religion. There have been attempts by the state to draw positive stories of how French culture has helped others. An example of this is found in the drafting of the February 2005 law which honors France’s colonial past. This law called for the building of new monuments and museums that would valorize “*l’œuvre colonial française*” (French colonial work). It also required schools to include within their curriculum the positive role of colonialism in the lives of colonial subjects (Bancel 2013).

Throughout the 1990s, politicians on the right but also members of the socialist party had rallied for more recognition of what former president Jacques Chirac coined the “civilizing” aspects of French colonialism. The 2005 law was passed by the National Assembly but ultimately was repealed by the Constitutional Council on the grounds that textbooks are an administrative matter. This debate, however, illustrates how the state wishes not only to invoke the importance of French history in defining Frenchness, but also that immigrants and later generations from these colonized regions are still considered different from others living in France.

\(^\text{12}\) The debate on secularism as a French value in opposition to Islam has been an ongoing debate since the 1980s. It is difficult to judge whether secularism was considered one of the pillars of French values previous to the controversy (the hijab in public schools) that really set off the current climate of defining Muslims as not French. My sense is the separation of church and state has been considered a value held by the French, but its use as a cultural marker is a result of the production of cultural insecurities around the presence of Muslim women.
These four defining elements rest heavily on how the state\textsuperscript{13}, public figures and the media define Frenchness. Though not discussed above, media plays a role in not only contributing to popular culture, but also through the coverage of how different public figures talk about Frenchness.\textsuperscript{14} From the above discussion, it is easy to see that a clear definition of Frenchness does not exist, though the elements of language, shared history, several generations ties to the territory and republican values are some of the most talked about aspects. As I have mentioned, French culture is also defined in opposition to minority cultures such as those of immigrant communities. The presence of immigrants and their children, particularly those from North Africa and other Muslim regions, have resulted in public discourses on the fear of losing French identity and culture.

In France, cultural insecurities are produced and perpetuated around the notion of losing or diluting Frenchness (Rudolph 2006; Tribalat et al. 1996). The term Frenchness is of course relative and subjective, and lacks any clear definition (despite the efforts of former president Nicolas Sarkozy or the use of the term français de souche), but nonetheless endures as a heavily discussed topic within the public sphere. The production of these insecurities occurs at all levels and is used by the state, media, other public actors and in everyday interactions in different ways. The following section provides a brief look at how these insecurities arise.

5.2 Muslims in France

The question of how cultural insecurities are produced in France is contingent on the culture that the majority perceives as a threat. There are some general observations that can be made that align with what is described in Chapter Two of this dissertation. A minority

\textsuperscript{13} Through the creation of laws, political discourse, creation of specific legal bodies to “deal” with cultural issues.

\textsuperscript{14} Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to investigate how people who are not in the public arena (sometimes called everyday people) see Frenchness. Though non-Muslim French participate in polls and different events that discuss French culture, there is no study that provides a sense of how these individuals feel, their complexities, differing opinions, etc.
population is deemed as different using the parameters of what constitutes the majority culture. This means that something in the traditions and history of this group signifies that (a) their level of French is not considered good enough or authentic, (b) they lack generational ties to the Hexagon\textsuperscript{15}, (c) their history ties them to another nation-state and/or (d) something in their traditions is perceived as challenging to French republican values. It is important to note that just because people are labelled as belonging to another culture within the context of France, it does not mean that their identity is threatening to the majority. Difference is not equal, and not all Others are feared. It seems that the seed of cultural insecurities can be both traced but is also arbitrary. I feel that it can be traced because as will be explored below, there are key elements of Muslimness (as perceived by many non-Muslims in France) that lend themselves to representations of fear (an obvious example being believed links to terrorism). The arbitrary side to cultural insecurities is that two different groups can have similar differences, but one is not considered a threat.

There can be any number of combinations of the list in the above paragraph that make it so a boundary is drawn between the majority and minority groups. The visuality and subjective sense of “too many others” can also produce a sense of cultural insecurity in the minority. These visuals associated with fear are usually rooted in ideas of race, ethnicity or traditions around dress and behaviors. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, there also needs to be the reinforcement that these fears are legitimate by the state, media and other public actors to drive the production of cultural insecurities further. It is possible that on smaller scales such as neighborhoods or even cities that different types of cultural insecurities are produced that are not evident at the national level. This, however, would still require the agreement of several local groups to legitimate these fears.

\textsuperscript{15} The word Hexagon is used in France to talk about the country and territory within Europe. The overseas departments (Les DOMTOMs) and other territories are not considered culturally French in debates on cultural insecurities.
In the case of France, cultural insecurities have remained deeply rooted in issues of immigration since the end of World War II (Ferry and Sacchelli 2005), eventually becoming synonymous with crime, poverty and racial tension (Benbassa 2005). The concerns of losing Frenchness voiced by various societal actors has raised issues of race, ethnicity and class as barriers to policies of integration and the maintenance of republican values (Noiriel 1996). Not all immigrants are perceived as a threat to the majority culture, but those that are differentiated through racial, ethnic or class labels become epicenters of narratives rippling through society. Many are grouped and designated as threatening on some level, but it is Muslim migrants, particularly from North Africa, that have been portrayed as the most threatening to the core of Frenchness (Kaci 2009; Simon 2003; Blanc-Chaléard 2001).

Immigrants have been at the forefront of discussions on cultural insecurities for decades. The representation of their differences and their desire not to integrate has been a way for the state and media to rally the French public around these fears. For instance, in 1985 Le Figaro Magazine, one of the most widely read magazines, ran a story entitled “Dossier immigration: serons-nous encore français dans 30 ans?” / Will we still be French in 30 years? This question was in direct response to the perception that foreign cultures were threatening to drown out Frenchness. This article built on tension that had been mounting for over a decade regarding the assimilation of immigrants to French culture.

This drowning out of Frenchness has been a concern throughout the 20th century. In the 1960s demographer Alfred Sauvy published research on the negative effects on French culture if an invasion of migrants from developing countries would arrive, work that he continued into the 1980s describing a submerged France (Gastaut 2015). The fear of invasion of immigrants was picked up by Jean Marie Le Pen when he formed Le Front National/the

National Front political party in the early 1970s. The party has of course endured – his daughter Marine Le Pen’s February 2017 speech to the FN was filled with a room of spectators shouting “On est chez nous”// We are in our country. As previously mentioned, the politician Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in the late 1980s and early 1990s focused his attention on immigration and the deportation of foreigners from non-European countries. Giscard d’Estaing used this imagery of invasion to push his agenda. This fear of an immigrant invasion has also permeated literature and popular culture. Jean Raspail’s popular 1973 book entitled Le Camp des saints portrayed a tsunami of immigrants arriving on French shores, demanding that France give them shelter and aid. The mounting refugee crisis in the Middle East and Africa has brought the same questions and fears in the 21st century (for example Le Monde’s article on the seven ideas on immigration and immigrants in France).

There exist of course competing voices that challenge this fear of too many immigrants diluting Frenchness. It is also not the concept of immigration in general that is a problem, but rather immigrants from developing countries and from North Africa. Over the years, immigrants and second and third generation children of parents from North Africa have become the target of cultural insecurity narratives. This is due not only to the perceived religious difference of these groups (Muslim vs secular or Judeo-Christian French), but also because of intertwined history between France and this region. Muslim women in particular have been the target of negative narratives that paint them as a threat to the survival of French culture. This is due to a long, complicated history of immigration, socio-economic conditions and cultural practices that are perceived as a challenge to the majority.

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17 Le Front National (FN) is probably most known for its hardline stance on immigration and its perceived intolerance of those they do not feel are français de souche. Jean-Marie Le Pen acted as the head of the party from 1972 until 2011 when he was ousted by his daughter Marine Le Pen. The party has seen fluctuations in its popularity over the years. In 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second round of the presidential election which was an impressive feat for a party that is often considered fringe compared to the UMP or the PS. The FN have held seats in the European Parliament and in the French government at the national, regional and local levels.

5.3 Muslim communities and immigration

This section will provide some background on what is called the “Muslim population” by situating immigration in Europe and in France with both demographic data and a brief account of “Muslim” immigration to France. However, before looking at census data and projections, it is important to clarify the term Muslim. The term has a wide range of meanings and implications across the world. Muslim as a qualifier can signify a type of self-imposed or assigned identification linked to ethnicity, culture and/or religious practices. This makes categorizing individuals as Muslim challenging but of great importance within regions that view Muslims as a fear-inducing minority. When imposed on someone in Western Europe, it does not necessarily mean that the person practices the religion of Islam. It can be a shorthand to describe race/ethnicity or family background. The term is therefore vague when used to categorize someone else.

5.3.1 Setting the stage in Europe

Despite the vagueness of the term Muslim, demographic and qualitative data on the presence and experiences of Muslims in Europe has been collected to provide insights into their experiences as a minority in Western Europe. While Europe has witnessed a fair amount of immigration from Muslim countries since the beginning of the 20th century, the presence and visibility of Muslims continues to produce cultural insecurities across Europe. The Open Society Institute’s 2010 report on Muslims living in EU cities was one of the first to comprehensively examine how policymakers understand the specific social and economic needs of Muslims and how Muslims, in turn, view the initiatives of these policymakers. The

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19 It is tricky to find a way to refer to Muslims in France because of the misunderstandings and assumptions made around the number of Muslims, the cohesiveness of communities and the challenge of finding good data that shares the opinions of self-defining Muslims.

20 The report uses Muslim as both a religious and cultural term. It specifics “This groups is diverse and although there are common belief systems and possible experiences as Muslims, this report relies on its Muslim respondents’ identification of themselves as Muslims. Furthermore, this term includes Muslims who view themselves in a cultural rather than a religious context.” (The Open Society 2010: 19)
Open Society estimated that between 15 and 20 million Muslims resided in Europe in 2010, with the number projected to double by 2025. This report made the case that it is important to analyze the experiences of Muslims both on a country by country basis and their implication in policy debates at the European level. The diversity and needs of Muslim communities are vast as exemplified by the recent refugee influx due to the Syrian war.

The Open Society report draws upon thousands of survey responses and interviews from 11 European cities to paint a general portrait of the opinions and experiences of Muslims across Europe. According to their findings, Muslims tend to be urban dwellers who are subject to economic disadvantages such as high unemployment and high numbers of low-paying jobs. The widespread debates on integration are said to stem from difficulties in accepting Muslims due to their traditions. “The greater levels of prejudice directed towards Muslims may in part reflect a perception of Muslims as a cultural threat or at least culturally different from the general population” (The Open Society 2010; 38). The report also noted that national security, policing and the fear of terrorism were concerns at the policy-making level. For example, the EU developed a seven-part action plan to prevent the support of and the recruitment for terrorism post the 2005 London bombings. Though the action plan did state that terrorism stems from an abuse and misinterpretation of Islam, it is the only religion or cultural group that is given specific attention within this domain.

The Open Society report is helpful in setting the stage for the case of Muslims in France by providing an overview of Europe as a whole, but also because Paris and Marseille were two cities incorporated in their study. Though demographic data on Muslims is largely left to estimation, France may have over half of Europe’s Muslim population living within its

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21 This figure is based off of estimates published by the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) in Muslims in the EU: Discrimination and Islamophobia, Vienna 2006. In this publication, the EUMC estimated that 13 million Muslims were living in Europe based on immigration figures and work conducted by the center. The Open Society believes that the incorporation of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 would have increased this number significantly.
borders (Boyer 1998). Many of the observations from their surveys and interviews coincide with the data and narratives emerging from France. The same issues of fear by the majority accompanied by evidence of discrimination and debates on integration have unfolded throughout France over the last three decades. To investigate how Muslim women in particular engage with and are affected by negative narratives, it is important to understand the context of Muslims in France. The following section will provide a brief look at the history of Muslim immigration to France and demographic data in order to set the stage for understanding how Muslim women are characterized by various social actors as producing cultural insecurities within the French majority.

5.3.2 Muslim communities in numbers

The production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities often involves a numbers game where the majority fixates on there being too many people of one group. Discussing population figures helps societal actors to not only structure arguments but also puts a face to fears. Numbers of minorities and their potential for growth are used to put the majority ill at ease. This has been a tactic used in France over the years, though strangely enough, France collects no census data on religion. The number of Muslims living in France is left to estimation based on immigration statistics, population growth and sometimes Muslim institutions such as mosques.

The estimation of the number of Muslims in France depends often on political agendas. Groups such as the right wing political party Le Front National often use high numbers (an estimated seven million) when describing the threat of Islam to the nation (Boyer 1998). Researchers turn to immigration data on historic and present immigration from Islamic societies, which only helps emphasize that Islam comes from the outside. Historian Gérard

While this may be useful, not all self-identifying Muslims practice their religion but rather think of themselves as culturally Muslim. In addition, some Islamic cultures encourage only men to attend mosques while women practice their religion within the home.
Noiriel (2002) states that at the beginning of the 21st century, one-third of the French population had ties to immigration within the last three generations. Others say that France has seen more immigration than any other country within the last century (Caldwell 2009). Though the numbers cited from the census data are flawed - just because someone comes from a predominantly Muslim country or has Muslim parents does not mean they consider themselves to be Muslim - I will provide some recent statistics to provide the reader with an idea of what numbers contribute to the production of cultural insecurities.

As of 2008, there are 5.8 million immigrants living in France, out of which over 2.3 million have acquired French citizenship (INSEE 2016). One vital aspect to census data in the case of Muslims in France is that the INSEE does not collect data on religion. This is why we are pushed to view statistics on country of origin as a proxy for religious affiliation. The 2013 census data reveals that around 30% of immigrants come from North Africa. More than 760,000 are from Algeria; over 709,000 individuals are from Morocco; and over 258,000 are from Tunisia (INSEE 2013). This makes the Maghreb the largest region of origin for immigrants in France. However, the traditional countries of origin from within Europe - Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and Poland - as well as Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have lost percentage share of immigration. The two regions of origin that are increasing over the last two decades are other African countries and Turkey, with over 811,000 people immigrating from other African countries, and over 248,000 from Turkey. Women are also increasing in number. In 1968, women comprised 44% of the immigrant population. This increased to 51% in 2008 and in 2013, the INSEE found that out of the 5.8 million immigrants, over 3 million are women.

The reasoning for not collecting census data on religious affiliation is that religion is perceived as something that does not define a person23 and is not part of public spaces. It

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23 A point that is incredibly confusing since Muslim women are broadly define by many based on their religion.
should therefore not be a defining characteristic of a citizen or a resident. The use of immigration data to define Muslim implies that these individuals have origins (they themselves, a parent or a grandparent) and therefore are not fully French. Unlike the often-seen representations of Muslims as recent migrants from poor Islamic societies, Muslims living in France are a diverse group. They may be first, second or third generation migrants originally from Muslim (mostly Arab) societies but also from Turkey, Pakistan or Indonesia. Their economic and cultural backgrounds are varied, and these numbers also conveniently forget about converts from other countries as well as *français de souche* who reverted\(^\text{24}\) to Islam.

As is the case in most of Europe, Muslims in France tend to live in urban areas: around 35% reside in Île de France, 20% in Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, 15% in Rhône-Alpes, 10% in the North, and 8% in Alsace-Lorraine (Boyer 1998). Though Muslim communities are diverse in their cultural and religious practices, their ancestral trajectories, and their lives in France, representations of Muslims producing and perpetuating cultural insecurities within France largely omit this richness. Instead, these negative depictions choose to focus on select moments in history, stereotypes and often misinformation to characterize these individuals. To understand how Muslim women in particular are represented, it is important to understand the condition and contextual elements of “Muslim immigration” over the last century in France.

5.3.3 Immigration in France

Before delving into the history of what is referred to as Muslim immigration, it is worth looking at the general context of immigration in France. In Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaleard (2001) book *Histoire de l’immigration*, a description of the three main waves of

\(^{24}\) I will use the term revert instead of convert throughout this dissertation. This is a choice based on how conversion is talked about on Oumma.com and how women spoke about it in Boulogne-Billancourt.
immigration in France are described. In the early 20th century, worker from Belgium and Italy came looking for employment and were soon followed by North Africans, Germans and Swiss who needed steady jobs during World War I. During the 1930s, a quota system was introduced to help curb immigration rates, though a second wave arrived from Spain and other European countries during the interwar period. The third wave of immigration began after World War II when cheap labor was needed to rebuild France. This lasted until the recession in the early 1970s, when the government chose to stop labor immigration altogether in 1974. Immigration was more or less stable into the late 1990s through the early 2000s. During this time there was an increase of immigrants mainly from the Maghreb region of North Africa, some West and Sub-Saharan Africa which accounted for over 45% of immigrants while European Union (EU) immigration fell to 32.5%, though this group has steadily declined since the mid-1990s (Thierry 2004). Immigrants from the Americas, from Asia and from non-EU European countries remained low throughout the three waves and continue at a slow pace. Today, North and West African countries along with Western Europe are the regions that send the highest number of immigrants.

During each wave of immigration, groups were categorized socially in different ways. As described by Max Silverman (2002), immigration and foreigner are terms that have always been confused in France. Immigration is often reserved for non-Europeans based on appearance, and people with links to North Africa continue to be labeled as immigrant over foreigner, regardless of the fact that they may in fact not be immigrants. Italians, Portuguese and Eastern Europeans have all been labelled as different and foreign, but they have not been labeled as a threat to Frenchness in the way as immigrants from Muslim societies. Europeans, even from the east, have faced less difficulty and scrutiny in terms of cultural practices, probably because they are European. French non-Muslims who engage with cultural insecurity discourses may feel that French culture is specific, but it does share commonalities with other European cultures.
5.3.4 Immigration from Muslim Countries

The presence of Muslims in France is mostly due to immigration starting in the 20th century. The arrival of men and women from different continents is not only important because it increased the number of Muslims, but each wave of immigration altered the narrative of Muslims living in France. What they experienced and how the non-Muslim French interpreted representations of them furnished by media and political discourses changed progressively over the last century. French colonialism, the two world wars and their aftermath, changes in immigration policy, and the socio-economic position of many immigrants are all elements woven tightly together which influence the current representations of Muslim women in France.

The first documented wave of what is now described as Muslim immigration (individuals from Muslim countries) to France was in 1912 when 5,000 mostly Kabyles25 arrived from Algeria (Renard 2006). These were poor, uneducated males who intended on returning to the Maghreb to rejoin their families. Many were Berbers that had little contact with the larger French society, though France’s colonial presence in North Africa26 did foster a connection between the countries these men were working and living between. The first large wave of North Africans (mostly Algerians and Moroccans) arrived as recruits for the French army in 1914 (Haut Conseil à l’Intégration 2000). These men played a vital role in both world wars, though particularly in World War II (Recham 2006). Nearly 100,000 of these men died fighting for France, binding them to French history. For those who survived, their services were no longer needed, and they were sent home to their families.

25 Kabyles are ethnic Berbers originating from the Kabylie region of Algeria. Berbers are not considered Arab and many communities took longer to convert when Islam spread through North Africa. This ethnic difference is often noted as setting Berbers apart from other Muslims within France.

26 France took control of Algeria in 1830, and quickly encouraged the settlement of a sizable group of migrants from France and some from the Mediterranean. These were called pied-noir (literally black foot) and were mainly Christians and Jews looking to benefit economically from the colonization of North Africa.
The second wave of immigration from Muslim countries occurred from 1950-1970 as France needed unskilled laborers for post-war reconstruction and factory jobs. Algerians comprised a large percentage of these migrants, especially between 1947 and 1964 when a law allowed for free movement between France and Algeria. At the time Algeria was not only colonized but was a territorial Département. Work contracts for immigrants during the 1950-1970 period were limited and attracted poor rural males looking for income to support their families. Their jobs were in construction or assembly line factories, particularly in the automobile industry (Boyer 1998). Due to their limited contracts and family obligations, most workers sent their income home, leaving them in situations of précarité. This initial association of North Africans with situations of economic and social uncertainty (précarité) would continue to be tightly intermeshed with other negative representations of Muslims. In addition to their small incomes, these men were placed in hastily built hostels, often poorly treated by their landlords. Despite the fact that these men were coming from Islamic societies, this wave of migrants was not thought of as Muslim. Rather, they were referred to as Arab, North African, Maghrébin, or simply migrant (Boyer 1998). Their religious practice was largely obscured by their isolation and lack of social networks, rendering their practices invisible to the French public. Their housing and strong transnational ties meant that their daily interactions with non-Muslim French were limited to other factory workers or occasional neighborhood run-ins. These men often limited their social interactions to a few cafés in their neighborhoods, creating small ethnic areas such as la Goutte-d’Or in Paris or Porte-d’Aix in Marseille (Wihtol de Wenden 2006).

This element of spatial containment would prove important in the latter part of the 20th century. The representations of Muslims disseminated through media during the early

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27 A French Département is an administrative division originally created to help culturally unify France.  
28 Précarité means that the future, the duration of something is uncertain. For sociologists, the term is used to describe individuals in unstable socio-economic situations. These individuals may be unemployed or have temporary employment, and are teetering on the brink of exclusion. Précarité is most associated with immigrants, unskilled laborers, and the poor (Delcroix 2005).
and middle of the 20th century were limited to references to the migrants’ national origin, their ethnicity, or status as poor immigrants. This however began to change in the late 1950s when members of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) became implicated in violent acts of resistance in the Paris metro area. The FLN was born of revolutionary intent to overthrow the French colonial power in Algeria, and members were active in the fight for independence both in Algeria and France. It was unnerving enough for many French non-Muslims that France was losing control of Algeria, but the violence in Paris would not only change national discourses on North Africans in France, but would burn unpleasant memories of insecurity and the end of colonialism within the collective consciousness.

Bombings and the killing of police by FLN members in Paris were met with harsh repercussions by authorities, which culminated the night of October 17, 1961. Algerian immigrants that had until this point been somewhat invisible within France, showed their anger towards colonial rule by marching in various parts of the capital. The Parisian police had ordered a curfew in hopes of restricting the movements of what was referred to as "Muslim workers". Thousands of men demonstrated throughout Paris which was met with police force including shootings and the throwing of demonstrators into the Seine River. By the end of the night hundreds were wounded, some dead (the figures are still disputed today). The October 17 massacre and the Charonne incident in February 1962 where nine demonstrators were killed outside the Paris metro, helped form opinions on this new idea of Muslims in France. The FLN and other groups had campaigned within France to gain both political and financial support of migrant workers in the fight for independence. These transnational ties to the instability within North Africa along with the violence in Paris

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29 Though Morocco and Tunisia had never been French Départments, they had been important colonial territories. The French government had encouraged French education (language included) to take root, and many français de souche had settled throughout North Africa. By March 1956, both countries had declared their independence from France. Algeria would not gain its official independence until July 5, 1962.
developed a new narrative on Muslims in France. As explained by Boyer (1998), Islam became something that needed to be policed and controlled because of its violent roots.

The end of the Algerian war brought with it an influx of immigrants called the *Harki* - Algerians who fought for the French during the Algerian war. These sympathizers were treated as traitors at home and an estimated 61,000 were tortured and/or killed in the wake of the war. This forced many *Harki* to make the difficult choice of leaving their homeland for good. The third wave of immigration was significantly different from previous ones for two reasons. First, France saw the arrival of entire families seeking refuge from the horrific realities they faced at home during the 1960s. The political motivation to migrate was entirely different from the economic ones that brought mainly men for a limited time. Secondly, the *Harki* were given the title of Muslim along with the usual ethnic and national labels used by social actors. One official figure states that around 138,724 Muslims\(^{30}\) were repatriated to France by 1968. Of this number, around 88,000 were born in Algeria (Jordi and Hamoumou 1999).

The *Harki* were arriving under difficult circumstances which only continued when they settled in France. As it was the military’s responsibility to help the *Harki*, the families were placed in “reclassment” camps until they could be relocated in towns and cities throughout France. These families were isolated from French non-Muslims communities, received poor education and virtually no professional formation. In addition, they faced racism and marginalization in their everyday experiences as if the French had completely forgotten their role in the war (Boyer 1998). Though the Harki accounted for the majority of migrants during this time period, their situation remained somewhat invisible to many French.

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\(^{30}\) The migrants at this time were labelled *Français musulmans rapatriés* (FMR) - it is interesting to see the progression in representation by political institutions and media. These immigrants had both the term French and a religion attach to them, which was the first time this occurred within the context of Muslim immigration.
It was not until the 1980s that reports brought to public attention the situation of *precarité* faced by these communities (Jordi and Hamoumou 1999).

The *Harki* were not the only immigrants arriving during the 1960s and early 1970s. Migrant workers continued to enter France as well as family members of these workers and some students looking to study in French universities. These immigrants were not characterized for their religious practices most likely because they did not have opportunities to display their attachments to Islam in public. Customs, religious holidays, and any dietary needs were practiced in private spaces, and with the support of their consulates. In 1974, however, things began to change. Official immigration lowered to a trickle due to the economic crisis which limited the available jobs. Up until this point, immigration was characterized as the *noria phenomenon*[^31], a way of describing the constant flow of migrants between France and North Africa. As mentioned earlier, some politicians and academics described this more as a flood.

The 1970s marked the first time that the French government began to push return migration for North and West African migrants through programs of reintegration. France faced an economic down turn which meant that what were considered to be useful immigrant workers were now competitors for low-paying jobs (Bowen 2013). In addition, West African migrants began to arrive in slightly larger numbers in the 1970s, only to be met with resistance from the government. The slowing of the French economy and the changing cultural landscape meant that the arrival of immigrants was less attractive. However, the push for repatriation was met with reluctance and many foreign workers applied for French citizenship to avoid this possibility (Boyer 1998).[^32] Job availability in the region was even more dismal than in France, and once they returned home the likelihood of acquiring a new

[^31]: *Noria* comes from Arabic and describes the lifting of water from a stream/river by a turning wheel or buckets.
[^32]: West African countries includes both Christian and Muslims.
work visa for France was slim. Their chances of creating a more economically stable situation for themselves and their families depended on their abilities to stay in the country.

This change in immigration patterns caused the French government to face new realities and questions. If these migrants were not returning home, authorities would need to carve out both physical and social spaces for communities to flourish, which until this point had been a non-issue. Family unification policies were put into effect, forever changing the lives and make-up of Muslim communities in France (Boyer 1998). Immigration became more feminized as mothers, wives, and children began arriving in significant numbers.\(^{33}\) Once families began to reunite, the need for spaces of religious practice became an issue at the forefront of public debate. Until this point, the limited duration of a man’s work and his isolation had created very personalized, private ways of practicing his religion and other aspects of his culture. The reunification meant that these men were building their lives in France, which logically led to a need for modes of religious practice for everyone.

In the 1970s workers began to go on strike, demanding that prayer rooms be made available within their workplaces and in housing. The location and type of religious practice occurring at that time were dubbed ‘l’islam des caves’ or Islam from/of the basement. Religious practices were improvised and hidden away from the gaze of non-Muslim French. The worker strikes demanding new spaces of worship caught the attention of media, politicians and by default, the French public. The previous noria phenomenon was considered normal by the French (Noiriel 2002), but these public demands for space suggested that roots were taking hold. The government formed a Sectétariat d’État aux immigrés to address the chafing landscape and grasp what was happening and how to control this perceived new presence (Boyer 1998). Two important things happened during this time period. First, the

\(^{33}\) There were women from the Maghreb who had immigrated to France as well, though they were characterized as often moving between France and their home country, displaying the Noria phenomenon.
concept of Muslim became linked to France. Even though colonialism brought Islam into the consciousness of many French, it was regarded as something distant that the French colonial project attempted to control. As social actors began talking about the presence of Muslim immigrants during the 1970s, the French non-Muslim majority was exposed to new considerations of how their society could change. This marked the beginning of decades of debates on what it means to have French citizens but be or considered to be Muslim.

The timing of discussions on Muslim immigrants and their potential negative impacts during the 1970s began the production of cultural insecurities in earnest. French society was just emerging from a period of social uncertainty brought about by the May 1968 strikes and changes sought by the younger generations. The practice of Catholicism and bourgeois traditions were called into question, and the economic downturn brought about higher levels of unemployment. The perceived differences between Muslims and the non-Muslim French majority were accentuated during this time for political gains.

The second important factor to consider is the birth of the second generation - the first children of North and, to a smaller extent, West African immigrants to be born in France as French citizens. There were of course children previous to the late 1960s, early 1970s that had been born in France, but the numbers were much lower previous to this period. The generations born to *Maghrebie* parents could no longer be considered pure outsiders. They were born and raised in a country they considered their own, regardless of their parents’ roots in North Africa. However, their family roots could not be ignored as many continued to have ties to the Maghreb which made them seem different in the eyes of the non-Muslim French majority. Given the uncertainty of the moment, if these Muslim immigrants and their children were to stay in France, many non-Muslim French believed they would need to adopt/assimilate to the French culture (Silverman 2002).
5.3.5 The importance of l’intégration

*L’intégration* embodies the French version of assimilation, where a person considered foreign to the majority is to align her/himself with the majority culture. This is done through the use of the French language, the understanding of French values and the observance and respect of French laws. Public actors who engage with discourses on culture will point out that cultural practices that are different from those of the French majority are of course allowed and respected in France, if they remain in private spaces (whether this is true or not). *L’intégration* is at the forefront of discussions on the securitization of immigration and is a concept entangled with the production of cultural insecurities. Individuals or groups that appear to refuse or are incapable of aligning themselves with the majority culture become suspect. Their perceived negative behavior challenges the dominance of the majority culture (whether it be through language, values, traditions, cultural practices, etc.).

Political and social discourses around immigrants assimilating to French culture gained momentum in public discourses during the 1970s, just when non-European migrants were settling in larger numbers. North Africans in particular symbolized a failed colonial project as France was not only unable to control the rising dissonance among Algerians, but the state was also incapable of erasing certain cultural elements within North Africa. The idea of civilizing North Africa through colonialism was a way to sell the notion that French culture was not only superior to that of Muslim societies, but that these colonial subjects would benefit from adopting French culture. The idea of an uncivilized culture and way of life became synonymous with the religion Islam. To a certain degree, West African immigrants were lumped into this scenario of Muslims needing to be civilized, but not to the same extent.  

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34 There are more racist and racial narratives around West Africans than with North African Arabs.
From the late 1970s onwards, immigration became synonymous with crime, poverty and racial tension because of the country of origin (Benbassa 2005). *Intégration* was less of an issue with other immigrants arriving from European countries (mostly Portuguese and Italians) because not only did they share common religious and cultural elements, but it was perceived that the second and third generations blended easily into French society.\(^{35}\) The individuals and families arriving from North Africa (and West Africans) during the early 1970s were considered ethnically different (majority Arab), who spoke a non-European language, and exhibited cultural and religious practices that were associated with a certain failure on the part of the French state to civilize.

As discussions on the importance of *intégration* heated up, attention shifted to the idea that second and third generations would be born and grow up in France. This presented a new scenario for France. Though these children and youth were legally considered French, their roots highlighted the potential for difference in France. In addition, as Gérard Noiriel (1996) notes, the scenario of the second-generation children of Muslim immigrants born in France created different circumstances than with European immigrants. He explains that they were born not only to North and West African parents but also into the *ouvrier* class culture (largely manual or mechanic work). This meant that they suffered discrimination because of their parents’ culture, their history (as children of colonial subjects) and their class.

*As intégration* became a rallying cry for the French majority, the second generation of North African immigrants developed their own culture - an overlapping of their parents’ heritage with French culture as they lived it. The term *beur* for boys and *beurette* for girls became a self-ascribed identity for non-Black children of North Africans.\(^ {36}\) During the 1970s

\(^{35}\) There are no real measurements for assimilation – being/feeling assimilated is subjective both for the individual and others.

\(^{36}\) The term comes from a type of slang called *verlan* created and primarily used by mainly suburban youth emerging in the 1970s. The original word *Arabe* was transformed into *beurs* to signify self-identifying as a French youth tied to North Africa (Orlando 2003).
through the 1990s, les beurs were a topic of fear, loathing and fascination for media and politicians. While this generation claimed the identity of beur, it took a while to take hold in the French consciousness (Barsali and Freland 2003).

Beur became both a counterculture but also a political identity, not only rooted in the intermeshing of their parents’ culture and that of the French majority, but also in the fact that they were in a specific geographical space: the suburbs. The youth used rap/hip hop and rai\textsuperscript{37} music to express themselves, sharing their experiences as poor, marginalized urban youth (Dotson-Renta 2015). Literature and non-fiction books on the experiences of beur identity and beur cinema emerged from this movement. Authors, singers, rappers and actors all talked about the difficulties of being poor, or growing up on the outskirts of French culture and of being the target of police scrutiny. Their use of verlan and the blending of gender relations between French culture and North African allowed for media and other public actors to vilify and constantly focus on how the beurs generation was challenging French culture (as described by Chouder and Barsali and Freland 2003). Identity politics is not a popular idea in France as it challenges the idea of a cohesive society where republican values make everyone the same – the idea being that politics should not be formed around cultural, ethnic and racial categories that would separate citizens. These concepts meant that the integration of a beur political identity into the mainstream proved difficult.

The banlieue, the French word for suburb, took on a special meaning attached to immigration and the beur generation - banlieue became both a place and an idea. The suburbs before the late 1960s were often portrayed as serene spaces that harbored a somewhat consumeristic population. As immigration began to increase and change in the 1960s and

\textsuperscript{37} Rai is a type of music that originated in Algeria in the 1920s. The songs were generally sung by men and often talked about social issues. In the 1970s through the 1990s, rai music was adopted by the beur generation and their children as pop music. The music not only blended French and Arabic words, but also touched upon transnational issues. Rai music still exists today, though it would seem that rap and hip hop has gained more popularity with self-identifying Muslim youth from the banlieue.
1970s, large scale, high-rise buildings and other HLM (Habitation à loyer modéré - lower income housing) sprang up on the periphery of cities to accommodate the growing population. Mustafa Dikeç (2007) characterizes the banlieue as the badlands of France. In his book on urban planning policies and the growth of French suburbs, Dikeç provides an impressive look at what the banlieue came to represent. From their establishment, these suburbs have been associated with insecurity and a lack of social order. The communities living in these cité (cohesive clusters of cheap housing) were defined in ethnic terms from the get-go, and communitarianism became a term to talk about the ethnic nightmare of the changing city. The banlieues of cities throughout the country were visual representations of failed assimilation policies. Even today there is an emphasis placed on the violence that occurs in banlieues across France. In an interview with Le Monde (2010), sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie was asked a series of questions about his by readers of the newspaper. One question was posed asking why violence had decreased in French banlieues as there had not been riots like the ones seen in 2005. Laffont answered:

“Depuis 2005, les émeutes ont été marquées par l’usage d’armes à feu, notamment à Villiers-le-Bel en 2007, ce qui n’avait jamais été le cas jusqu’alors. Il semble donc que la violence augmente. Le différence avec 2005 c’est qu’elle ne se généralise pas. C’est 2005 qui fait exception de ce point de vue.”

Since 2005, unrest/riots have been marked by the use of firearms, including Villiers-le-Bel in 2007, which had never been the case until that point. It seems that the violence is increasing. The difference with 2005 is that the violence is not generalized. This is what made 2005 the exception.

The sociologist goes on to talk about failed assimilation policies and the experience of young women and men who have been left been rendered invisible and become perpetrators and victims of violence because (in his opinion) they were never properly integrated into French culture.

Many books, articles and opinion pieces have discussed the evolution, representation, impact and the (often negative) changes that the banlieue have brought French society. This body of research is important to discussions on Muslims in France, but for the
purpose of this dissertation which focuses on the production and engagement with cultural insecurities, I will only bring up a few points. First, the *banlieue* were and continue to be represented as spaces of crime, poverty and foreign bodies. Second, the *banlieue* became racial and ethnic spaces which did/does not fit the visual idea that the French majority may have of what it means to be French (Dotson-Renta 2015). Race is an often-overlooked topic of research in France, but race has played a role in segregation and negative representations in France (Schneider 2010). Third, the *banlieue* became spaces where religious institutions (particularly Muslim) were first established. Fourth, *banlieues* became easy targets of representations of how Muslim communities were resisting assimilation and threatening the existence of French culture due to media and public figures focus on localized expressions of identity. By this I mean that cultural items such as rap/hip hop, *raï* music, North and West African restaurants and shops, the development of *verlan* and other practices were not seen as a product of France but a product of the *banlieue* - a foreign space. In turn, many of the *beur* generation and their children reclaimed some control by openly identifying themselves as *banlieusard* (Dotson-Renta 2015).

The *banlieue* continues even today to be characterized as a fearful and tragic place. There are many themes found in the coverage and representation of *banlieue* life that feed into this narrative. For instance, 2000s saw a significant amount of news coverage of gender-based violence (e.g. Berkani and Marbouk 2003, Liberation 2017). Girls and women were portrayed as stuck between old traditions of modesty and gender roles dictated by Islam compared to their lives as French women. Stories of honor killings, kidnapping of girls and forced marriages (Bleich 2009), rape by their peers and abuse at the hands of male family members were (and continue to be) some of the most covered topics. Local organizations such as the *Ni Putes Ni Soumise* (Neither Slut nor Submissive) gained a lot of attention and voiced their experiences with violence, proving that Muslim women were being mistreated by men in the *banlieu* (Dornhof 2011). Stories of gang rape and mistreatment of women continue to gain national attention. For instance, *Le Monde diplomatique* ran a story in 2003.
interviewing adolescents in a banlieue of Paris to talk about their impressions of violence against women (Berkani and Marbouk 2003). The journalists characterized this violence as banal and almost acceptable to the youth who were trying to make sense of their lives. The article covered the march that took place that year with *Ni putes ni soumises* to help raise awareness of this violence.

In addition to gender-based violence, characterizing the *banlieue* as breeding grounds for Islamist extremism has also become popular with media outlets. For example, in 2015 *Le Figaro* interviewed Guylain Cherier then member of the *Mission laïcité du Haut Conseil à l’intégraiton* (Devecchio). In the interview, Guylain was asked if he was surprised by the increase of Salafists and French Muslims who support ISIS: He replied that it was not a surprise at all given what happens in certain *banlieues* such as Seine-Saint-Denis (the north of Paris). In this response he spoke of failed assimilation policies as a reason for the number of mosques and groups who openly preach against French values. In Guylain’s view, these organizations are in support of a stricter Islam that is not compatible with France. The two examples of gender-based violence and the perceived rise of extremism in suburbs point to a specific image of the *banlieues* which are often coupled with stories and reminders of the violent stand-offs with police and large demonstrations against French authority that have occurred such as in 2005.

The riots that have periodically broken out in the *banlieues* of Paris, Lyon, Marseille and other large cities (2005 and now 2017 being the most internationally covered) are often accompanied by images of harsh masculinity and dangerous male bodies. After the 2005 riots, photographer Mohamed Bourouissa published a series of photographs entitled *les jeunes de banlieues*/*the youth of the banlieue*. Researchers and journalists have explained that these riots tend to break out due to police brutality but also stem from a feeling of

exasperation due to poor living conditions, racism from the French majority (Schneider 2010) and a sense of marginalization (Garbin and Millington 2011).

The images of failed assimilation and the difficulties of banlieue life could have remained distant or even invisible to anyone who felt a part of the French majority not living in poor suburbs. Muslim immigrant communities (North and West African), their children and their grandchildren had throughout the 1970s and 1980s been largely isolated in the banlieues or in specific areas within cities. However, certain visual elements began to creep into the everyday lives of the French majority. These images of difference fed and continue to feed the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities. These are many examples of how distinct visuals have been used to talk about threats to the continuation of French culture. One has been the veiling practices (mostly the hijab, but more recently the niqab and the “burkini”) of Muslim girls and women (beard and skullcaps for men) and the second is the French national soccer team. (I will cover the hijab in a later part of this chapter.)

In the 1990s, the French national soccer team became emblematic of the racism that anyone considered non-white faced. Jean-Marie Le Pen accused that the players not singing the national anthem were by default not participating in the national identity. He preyed upon their race, their parents’ origin and their transnational ties. These players were portrayed as foreigners or not quite French because either they were born in one of the French territories or because their parents were born elsewhere (Thompson 2015). The team was called Black-Blanc-Beur, highlighting the perceived racial and cultural differences between the players from the French majority and their refusal to assimilate. Though Le Pen can be dismissed as a right-wing outlier, racism towards football players in France is not unheard of (such as the

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39 Race has not been a large focus of this dissertation as it is my opinion that the representation of Muslim women does not depend as much on race and racism. However, that is not to say that racism does not play a role in the circulating narratives. Muslim women who are categorized as Black may have different experiences from those who are considered white or Arab. In the research on race in France, it is also unclear to me what racial category is attributed to the Arab population. This distinction feels much more like an ethnic category, but this is not always the case.
throwing of banana peels on the pitch or making monkey sounds when Black players are present). The team were (and are) representatives of the French state when playing internationally was a source of contention through the 2000s. For those who felt that France was changing too much, having men that did not fit the perceived visual image of a French person was unnerving especially at such a high profile, international level.

These images of foreigners taking over France have influenced how various groups have experienced immigration and have been accused of threatening French identity. In the 1990s, Muslim immigration became a fixation of not only the extreme right and center right politicians, but more generally. For instance, the Pasqua Laws of the early 1990s were considered anti-immigration laws targeting Muslims. Drafted by then Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, the laws were a move towards a zero-immigration policy. Pasqua not only targeted Muslims as being a specific threat, he went as far to say, “let us terrorize the terrorists” (Le Monde 2015). The terrorism he was speaking of was the threat to French society, specifically the survival of the culture.

Pasqua’s laws also created a new problem within immigrant communities. Undocumented immigrants who had children in France did not share the same legal status of their children. They could not be deported by the state but they could also not obtain permanent residency. This meant they were denied services and rights, and could not (technically) obtain legal employment. In response to this new limbo status, the Sans Papiers (without papers) movement was born which included illegal/undocumented immigrants who protested discrimination within immigration policies by marching, hunger strikes and occupation of churches. Though not exclusively tied to Muslim communities, the Sans Papiers did put into question how France was drawing boundaries within immigration policies of who was acceptable and who was a threat based on country of origin (Raissiguier 2010).
I have focused primarily on the role of the state in this review of how immigration of Muslims has been characterized and understood in France. However, as mentioned earlier, other actors contribute to the fear that is associated with Muslims. Debates linked to cultural insecurity materialized not only within the traditional institutional political spaces, but also in virtual spaces. As explored by Thomas Deltombe (2007) in his analysis of Islamophobia in French television from the 1970s to 2005, debates on insecurity are given voices, images and are reproduced by the circulation of information through media. These debates are racialized (El Hamel 2002), question the threat posed by multiculturalism (Marranci 2004) and challenge notions of the possibility of Muslims assimilating to French culture (Freedman 2004). Material on Muslims in France have been circulating through radio, printed text and television since the 1970s and now via the internet.

Day to day interactions in physical environments also aid in defining and replicating fears and anxieties as boundaries between the non-Muslim French majority and the Muslim minority are consistently altering due to interactions between groups. Most of the research on tensions between groups in physical landscapes emerges from spaces that have larger immigrant communities, most notably banlieues (Benbassa 2005; Kastoryano 2002). As discussed, the banlieue is presented as foreign and spaces of insecurity for its residents, but also for the non-Muslim French majority. Evidence of negative interactions between the majority and minority groups is sometimes used to feed into cultural insecurity narratives. Though these are anecdotal stories, they are important all the same. Negative personal experiences can be compared to what is portrayed by media and other political and public actors, helping to reinforce negative stereotypes and assumptions.

As described above, throughout the almost two decades of the 21st century, immigration, assimilation and Muslim communities have continued to be implicated in the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities in France. In the following sections I will discuss specifically how Muslim women are represented by political and public actors,
including media. While there are several ways in which they are portrayed, the importance of their gender and difference always remains. I call the representations as an essentialized identity because they leave no room for complexity or richness. However, before discussing these representations, I briefly talk about one of the enduring debates in France – how to ensure that religion is a product of French society and not something from the outside establishing itself within society.

5.4 A French rendition of Islam?

Cultural insecurity narratives circulating through public spaces highlight the differences and incompatibility of Islam with French values and traditions. As I will discuss in the next section, the representation of Muslim women is one of the key ingredients to this perception of incompatibility. However, before discussing these representations, I want to focus on the argument that stems from the fixation on intégration as the only acceptable option for Muslims in France. This argument revolves around the idea that if Muslims are to be a part of French society, there needs to be a French Islam and not an Islam in France. The clash of cultures idea attached to this rejecting of an Islam in France is not new in Europe. Samuel Huntington’s musings on this subject have left their mark on how political and public figures interpret and portray the perceived problems between minority groups and the majority. Islam is connected to lack of education and a value system that is in direct opposition with that of France. This clash of civilizations is an argument that is seen across Europe. For example, in an interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel, Bassam Tibi (a Syrian-born German academic) has talked about this on numerous occasions, expressing the need for Islam to be Europeanized, or else Europe would be Islamized.40 The narrative of fears around this Islamization has even been a part of larger discourses affecting Europe as a whole as seen during the lead up to the Brexit vote.

This clash of cultures and the need for Islam to acculturate in terms of practice but also values is sometimes addressed by the French government or organizations stepping in to solve perceived problems posed by cultural difference. There are constant efforts to inform the public of the “real Islam”, its values and history. These are ways in which the government or interest groups attempt to find a bridge between calming the French majority but reminding Muslims that certain practices both in public and private spaces are not compatible with French culture. A recent example of these types of initiatives is the establishment of La Foundation de l’Islam de France (the Islam of France Foundation) in December 2016. The former Minister of the Interior Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a leftist politician who is staunchly for the separation of church and state, is the current leader on the initiative. The Figaro newspaper writes:

Dans un pays frappé par les attentats djihadistes, qui ont électrique les débats sur la place de la deuxième religion française (4 à 5 millions de fidèles), “cette nouvelle fondation contribuera à faire émerger un islam de France pleinement inséré dans la République et à lui donner une visibilité accrue auprès du grand public” (Le Figaro.fr 2016)

In a country that has been hit by jihadi terrorist attacks, that have galvanized debates on the place of the second largest religion in France (four to five million followers), “this new foundation will contribute to the emergence of an Islam of France fully integrated into the Republic and will give it greater visibility within the public”.

Several of these types of examples are also seen in mainstream media when newspapers and television shows hope to find ways to define a French version of Islam (Deltombe 2007). They show not only how Islam is connected to a narrative of terror and risk, but they also illustrate that the cultural insecurities felt by the majority are being met with formal actions by the politicians and other public figures. This perpetual discussion of how Islam is understood and how the religion needs to have roots in France to be acceptable, begs the question of what is being asked of French Muslims. I see this as an argument for a localized or at least national emergence of Islam that has a strong foundation in French values. This would go beyond the idea of separating religious practice from public spaces, something that has been quite popular as illustrated by the famous 2004 law against
ostentatious symbols of religion in public schools. With so much attention paid to the perceived violence and injustice embedded within the religion, those who align with the idea of an Islam of France desire to see more fundamental changes. But is it even possible to have this?

5.4.1 An Islam of the world

I argue that there is no way to competently speak of a localized type of Islam even if local cultures do influence how the religion is understood and practiced. Firstly, the fact that Islam is attached to a different geographic location (Mecca and more generally the Middle East) both historically and currently affects the religion in France. This attachment to other cultural contexts is due not only to the history of Islam but also through practices - the requirement of doing the Hajj\textsuperscript{41} or the daily prayers towards Mecca are subtle aspects that attach Muslims to another place. This is not entirely special. It is true that Catholics in France could be considered to have a connection to another place, the Vatican in Rome. However, the requirements of and the representation of it in France anchor it solidly in the Middle East. Unlike the Vatican, Saudi Arabia has long been portrayed as culturally different, often times inferior to French culture.

Secondly, the majority of Muslims in France are decedents of or are themselves immigrants. Those who talk about cultural insecurities within the non-Muslim majority will press upon the point that Muslims are originally from somewhere else, even if they are born in France. Men and women identifying as Muslim may also feel connected to their family history in various Muslim countries. This can be true of any group of immigrants from another country living in France. However, families from other places such as Western Europe or Latin America are not currently implicated in the production of cultural insecurities to the extent of Muslim communities. They are not portrayed as having cultural traits that are

\textsuperscript{41} The pilgrimage to Mecca that a Muslim must do at least once in her/his life.
incompatible, threatening and strong enough to cause changed within French culture. Their history with France is different and they are not geographically associated with regions of violence and political opposition to France.

Thirdly, researchers have pointed to the social transnational space of the Meta Muslim community called the umma (Allievi 2016). The umma binds Muslims together through faith and practice, and by engaging with the religion, people are connected spiritually to all other followers around the world. The concept of the umma is used by international and national Muslim organizations to build networks. It also manifests itself in the bond that intertwines Muslims politically. Muslims living in different places may express concern or rally around Muslim-specific issues such as the plight of the Palestinians or the Rohingya in Myanmar. The umma also challenges the center-periphery model of connection, by connecting peripheries to the center but also to one another (Allievi 2016). This means that contact between places that are not considered French are constantly tapped into.

Fourthly, the nature of belonging and exchange on a local scale have changed with globalization. Stefano Allievi’s (2016) discussion on the cultural consequences of globalization underscores the idea that there is no real local for Muslims in France. Engagements between people no longer follow a center-periphery relations model, but rather illustrate an inter-relations pattern. Cultural flows are now multidirectional, where cultures are in a process of de-territorialization (29). Allievi explains that in the case of Islam in the West, there is evidence of pluriculturization, and the connections that Muslims feel through their religion may be different than those they feel with their fellow citizens. Pluriculturization is an intriguing way to think about Muslims in France as it captures a sense of multiple shared cultures that overlap constantly, in a way that multiculturalism cannot

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42 Allievi’s argument is one that several make on the de-territorialization of cultures thanks to immigration and new technologies. I agree with this only to a point. I think the need to attach cultures to places remains. They are certainly evolving and fracturing, but their attachments in the physical world (to me) do not seem to have disappeared.
capture. Given how the discourses on immigration changed over the 20th century, it is not surprising that the idea of pluriculturization directly challenges cultural security of the majority in France. As mentioned in the section on Frenchness, public figures portray French culture as something rooted in the hexagon - the mainland territory of France.

These four examples illustrate how the argument of creating or influencing an Islam of France is unlikely. This is not to say, however that there are not aspects or certain practices that are specific to Muslim communities in France. There is no one version, one global take on Islam. Islamic law is not all encompassing and other than some basic central ritualized practices (Qur’anic obligations such as the five pillars), the religion is shaped by social and ideological variations in societies. These variations unconsciously incorporate religion into social relations (El Hamel 2016). The context in which Muslims are living combined with social fluctuations mean that there is no one, global and accepted version of Islam. French culture can indeed influence the religious practices of Muslims. French culture will inevitably influence certain Muslim practices. There is the complication that Muslim practices in France are already rooted in different traditions coming from North and West Africa, the Middle East and Asia (El Hamel 2016). An Islam in France is already fractured and complex and could not easily translate to one cohesive version.

While research on Muslim communities across the world have indicated that there is great diversity within the religion, representations of Muslims in France have rarely shown these differences. Muslims (and those labeled as Muslims) have often been lumped into one general category in France, though there are degrees of scrutiny applied within the category of Muslim. In examining the production of cultural insecurities, I argue that women in particular, especially those whose practices tie them to North Africa or the French banlieue, have been used as a symbol of risk to the French majority culture. Part of the explanation for this is found in the discussions on changes in immigration as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The ways in which French culture is understood, the history of the presence of Muslim
women in France and exterior factors all play a role. There is also the added dimension of how Muslim women are specifically represented in the public sphere. The following sections discuss these representations and provide some historical context for them. Understanding how these representations play into narratives on cultural insecurities will help set the foundation for how Muslim women engage with and contest these representations in their daily lives.

### 5.5 Representations of Muslim women in France

Muslim women have risen to the forefront of insecurity and security debates (Aitchison et al. 2007) bearing the brunt of scrutiny from European and North American societies due to clothing and religious practices (Mahmood 2004), perceived resistance to integration (Freedman 2004) or attachment to transnational communities (Bowen 2007a). Men are associated with these elements as well, but women are more readily used for representing a threat. Unlike the homogenous image portrayed on these regional scales, self-identifying Muslims display a wide range of political beliefs, identities and opinions on religious practices (Modood 2003). Other identity markings such as race, class, gender or sexuality and their identity intersections (Abu-Lughod 2002) are often overshadowed by cultural insecurity debates (Valentine 2008). When looking at the specific representations in France, the components to the sculpting and perpetuating of negative representations of Muslims are not so different from what is seen in other Western European countries. Not surprisingly, these narratives have changed over the years though some themes have endured. International and national politics, major events and social interactions in the everyday have helped form and circulate these representations through society. Though the general term Muslim is problematic, essentializing the identity Muslim is a method for the majority to build a narrative of fear within society.

In my interpretation of the literature on Muslims in Europe, and with what I have observed through my research, it seems that there are five major themes that emerge from the
representation of Muslim women in France. These representations were crafted and are used by the state, most notably by political actors, and also used by media, various public figures and by others in their everyday lives. These representations include in no particular order: (1) Muslim women as overtly sexualized; (2) Muslim women as terrorist; (3) Muslim women as proselytizing religious fanatics; (4) Muslim women as oppressed beings; and (5) Muslim women as resistant. These themes did not emerge in a vacuum. They are the result of factors on various scales from everyday interactions to transnational communities and they have strong links to political changes over the 20th and 21st centuries. These representations also do not stand alone. They are intertwined and more than one of these representations may be assigned to a woman/scenario at any given time.

5.5.1 Overtly sexualized

Previous to and during colonial times, Muslim women were represented in several ways. Since there was not a large number of Muslim women living in France prior to the 1970s, the representations were largely rooted in colonialism. Acceptable practices attached to public versus private spaces was portrayed by many artists and media during France’s control over North Africa. In public spaces, women were represented as hidden figures under veils but as overtly sexual in private spaces. This was primarily depicted in text and images of harems (Yeğenoğlu 1998) and these representations were also used for women in other regions such as the Middle East and Turkey. These depictions are less popular today, though many non-Muslims and Muslims writers have commented on how Europeans have difficulty in understanding the role of sexuality in Islam (Kealhofer 2013). Europeans can find it extreme to see a woman covered from head to toe in public spaces but then dressed in popular, revealing clothing in private spaces.
5.5.2 Terrorism and proselytizing fanatics

Given that the representation of Muslim women as overtly sexual yet secluded was rooted in the harem and colonialism, she was seen as a part of a far-off culture and not a part of France. It was not until the 1970s that representations of Muslims in France began to consistently creep into French consciousness through media coverage. The political discourses on excessive immigration, the construction of mosques and cultural centers, images of men and women in foreign/traditional clothing in public spaces created a new visual narrative used by media. It was not, however, the practices of Muslims in France that raised curiosity then concern during this period, but rather political struggles and events emerging from the Middle East and North Africa. That is to say that narratives on Muslims in France were being attached to what was happening in the Muslim countries. These events were generally discussed using language associated with risk and instability and helped develop the narrative of Muslims as dangerous, as religious fanatics and/or as terrorist.

The perception of a “Jihad culture” (what was understood at the time as holy war) gained traction throughout the 1980s when the political and social changes in Muslim countries were being represented as a wave of new ideological incarnation called fundamentalism. The revolution in Iran was the first indication that things were changing. Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Western Europe watched news coverage of such developments as: the rise of Hizbollah in Lebanon, the activity of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt by militant group Tansim al-jihad, the establishment of Islamic law in Sudan, the founding of Hamas and the intifada in Palestine, the rise in popularity of the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria and the power struggle with the former Movement de la Tendance Islamique turned Renaissance party in Tunisia (El Hamel 2016). These developments could have been seen as distant problems if it were not for Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa on Salman Rushdie after the publication of The Satanic Verses (Tsagarousianou 2016). This added a new layer to the perception of Islam’s intolerance but also raised questions of (a) how the religion challenged
Western Europe’s belief in individual expression and (b) that Islam extended its reach to Europe. These “problems” were no longer contained in one geographic area.

The portrayal of women as instigators or complicit in this violence and instability was discussed during the Iranian Revolution, though this was not an entirely new concept. The French had been exposed to the idea of dangerous Muslim women during the war for independence in Algeria when women were reportedly entering into French non-Muslim neighborhoods in Algiers with bombs. The clothing they used to cover their heads and bodies to conceal these bombs and given that they were women, the French authorities did not think of them as dangerous. The famous film *Battle for Algiers* created lasting images of these women wearing full black covering (a version of the niqab) which rendered them invisible to the French authorities. This connection between veiling and violence was etched in the memory of the French and helped build the narrative that Muslim women were capable of just as much violence as men.

The Jihadi culture and the threat of terrorism still seemed distant in the 1980s and the 1990s, but glimpses of how media, politicians and other public actors would build a bridge between religion and terrorism could already be seen. The 1986 Paris bombings by the group that supported the release of Arab and Middle Eastern political prisoners showed that groups in France were strongly connected to transnational politics. This was again echoed in the 1995 metro and RER bombings claimed by an Islamic group. This second incident was more difficult for the French police and government to characterize as a foreign problem. *Beur* identity politics showed that they were sympathetic to this cause on some level. This was troubling as, even though many French felt that these *Maghrébins* youth were not quite French enough (definitely not *français de souche*), they were somehow a part of society. They were born in France, spoke French and were educated in French public schools. These complexities fed into the connection of Islam in France with violence in the *banlieues* of
major cities, terrorism and recruitment with the religion. These connections were only strengthened in the early 2000s (Tsagarousianou 2016).

The attacks on September 11th, 2001 affected the narratives of cultural insecurities and physical fear in France. Researchers have pointed to a period of Islamalgame that has followed terrorist attacks both in France and abroad. Because Muslims are associated with this violence and insecurity by public actors, they are subject to being lumped together in a negative way. This technique of associating different communities to create one unit for the purpose of discussion is called an amalgam, and is a way to refer to essentialization of identities. This is a word often heard in connection to Muslim communities when people object to the lazy generalization between jihadists/terrorist and Muslims in general. Islamagame was a term specifically used by academics in the early 2000s to talk about how all Muslims in France were being linked to fanaticism, delinquency and terrorism (De Cock and Du Font 2016). The representation of Islam as a religion of terrorists has only gained momentum with the attacks in Paris in 2015 and in the 2016 attack in Nice. These events are not only linked to the Muslim religion, but they were also specific that the perpetrators had links to both North Africa and ISIS. Coverage of the events also emphasized the incompatibility of Islam with French values. The Charlie Hebdo murders are another recent example of how Islam is portrayed as both foreign and harmful to French culture. On January 7, 2015, what is now described as “fanatical Muslims” attacked the satirical newspaper and killed the editorial team. The attackers claimed to be motivated by the persistent use of the prophet Muhammad as a satirical subject, something that in French culture is considered to be

43 This was multi-staged attack in Paris that include suicide bombers at the Stade de France, gunman opening fire on restaurant patrons and in bars in several locations in the city, and gunmen opening fire in a packed concert hall. There were hundreds wounded, 100 people in critical condition and 130 reported dead. The attack was claimed by ISIS: [http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994).

44 A truck driver drove into a crowd celebrating the 14th of July. A reported 86 people were killed as a result of the attack and hundreds were wounded. ISIS claimed that the driver was one of their followers: [http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36801671](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36801671)
permitted. These attacks influence how media across Western Europe represent Muslim communities.

Men have mostly been found to be responsible for these acts of violence, but women are still lumped into these narratives. Media studies scholars have analyzed how newspaper coverage of Muslims in France and French speaking-Belgium have depicted Muslims - following topics are the most common to be raised: politics, terrorism, war, religion, justice, crime and economics (Macdonald 2016). This is similar to studies conducted in other countries such as Germany (EUMC 2006) which found that the most common stereotype of Muslim women was suppression of women and terror. The image of women as suicide bombers (Macdonald 2016) or as playing a role in conspiracies is a part of these representations. Fanaticism and the role of women in the recruitment and activities of ISIS are currently central themes in media coverage of the group. In 2016, Le Monde reported on the first ever female-driven terrorist plot in Paris. These representations of Muslim women as terrorist or religious fanatics are rooted in depictions of Islam as fundamentally violent and women as active and proselytizing agents throughout Western Europe.

5.5.3 Oppressed beings

The representation of Muslim women as terrorists or fanatics is also lumped in with narratives on oppression or passivity. Islam is characterized as oppressive to women. This is a popular way of depicting Muslim women in European media (Mishra 2007a, 2007b, Rahman 2007, Roushanzamir 2004). In 2011, the PEW Center found that in Britain, France, Germany and Spain, that the lowest ranking positive characteristic associated with Islam was “respect for women”. French media using representations of the oppressed woman either cite the tenets of Islam or the beliefs and practice of Muslim men as structures of control. These can include practices such as forced marriages and honor killings. Edward Said in 1985 described

this idea of the submissive or oppressed Muslim women in his theories on Orientalism. Said and others have noted that Western European and North American scholars, media and other public actors draw on symbols such as the hijab or customs attached to public versus private spaces as an indication that Islam gives women a lower status than men (Gill 2007; Kahf 1999). These representations instill both intrigue and fear within non-Muslim majorities (Heath 2008; Shaheed 2008).

The depiction of the oppression of Muslim women has been used by politicians and other public actors as reasons for political interventions. The need to save Muslim women from their religion and the men around them is a narrative long used by politicians and other actors to gain support for their agenda. In Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2013) book on challenging the saving narrative of the West, she points to how the perceived oppression of Muslim women was used by Western cultures to defend their decision to intervene in Afghanistan. Scholars and media figures have also discussed the differences between French feminism, its ideals of empowerment and liberation in comparison to Islam. Many French feminists have objected to perceived gender relations in Islam (e.g. covering the hair, modest dress, expectations of motherhood and roles in the home). Perceptions of these gender relations are not only considered negative, they are also seen as backward and in need of civilizing (for example see Guénif-Souilamas and Macé 2004). There is also an edge to these representations that draw on the fear of losing French culture in the face of Muslim practices. The spread of this oppressive religion puts into jeopardy the freedoms of French women in both public and private spaces. As mentioned earlier, oppression of Muslim women has also been clearly connected to life in the banlieue where working class North African families (and their descendants) live. Stories of sexual violence and forced wearing of a hijab feed into these narratives that French women should fear that they one day will be like Muslim women (Dornhof 2011).
Within the discussions of oppression and religion in public spaces is the complicated narrative surrounding visualities of Islam (such as the hijab and niqab) and their potential to threaten republican values. This is a part of narratives on the role of religion in public spaces and French values of secularism and freedom. Research shows that representations in public and media discourses have talked about the practice of the religion Islam as the main hindrance to Muslims integrating, that it is a threat to social cohesion and to the secular nature of Western societies (Tsagarousianou 2016). Throughout the 1980s to today those implicated in and discussing cultural insecurities have called into question how Islam challenges the societies Judeo-Christian values and secularism. As mentioned in the section on defining French culture, laïcité, the French version of secularism, holds a special place in debates on Muslims in France. It serves as a way of separating those who belong to the majority culture and those who threaten it.

In cultural insecurity narratives, secularism is both a tool to liberate the oppressed Muslim women but also is a way to unmask resistant. Women who refuse to remove their scarves and veils even when laws demand it are labeled as provoking French society. Laïcité has a long history in France, though it seems as though it was in the 1980s that it began in earnest to be a tool in the production of cultural insecurities. As the reader can note, this coincides well with tensions around Muslim immigration and discourses on intégration discussed earlier. In 1791 the freedom of religious belief and practice was officially recognized and the right to a secular school system was voted on in 1882. Laïcité is the concept that society is founded on the separation of church from the state, and that churches are prohibited any political or administrative power, especially in the realm of education (LaRousse 2013). The strict separation of the church and state was outlined in the 1905 law (Lagarde 2012), and the solidifying of the state as secular but respectful of religious beliefs was reiterated in the constitution of the Fifth Republic (Assemblée Nationale 2013). In the 1980s and onwards, laïcité became about gender equality and saving’ women from situations
of oppression and control deemed in opposition to French republican values (Rochefort 2007).

Secularism is a cornerstone of republicanism in France and is a universal principle governing the relations between the government and the people (De Cock and Du Font 2016). This is an idea brought up by politicians and the media constantly in relation to Muslim women and is a basis for pointing to cultural difference between the "real French" and Muslims. Given that Islam is portrayed in France as in most Western European countries, as unitary in culture, politics and theology, there is little nuance to be found in representations of laïcité versus Islam. In addition to issues of secularism, Islam is often represented as a monolithic culture that does not tolerate the arts, and displays cultural authoritarianism that will always be hostile to technologies and creative forms of expression (van Nieuwerk et al. 2016). The visible cues that bring Islam into public spaces, such as the hijab or men dressed in what is considered traditional clothing, is picked up by media, politicians and other actors as an indication that Muslims are imposing their religion in public spaces. These perceptions of the culture as intolerant of the arts and technology and of its treatment of women build damaging narratives of fear for the majority. The arts are seen as an important aspect of French culture, whether it be painting, writing or performance. The history and place of the arts in forming and maintaining French culture are not only a part of public discourse but are taught at a young age in public schools. While art is often discussed in terms of history, technology is the present and future. Representing Muslims as intolerant of technology suggests that they cannot easily assimilate into a culture that values progress in the sciences.

Discussions on the role of religion in public spaces, the oppression of veiling practices of Muslim women, assimilation, resistance to removing veils and secularism are all important ingredients in the debate on Muslim. There are many entry points to discussing the representation and discourses of the practice of using a scarf or veil by Muslim women in France, and debates over the wearing of hijabs in public spaces remains the most explosive
example of cultural insecurity in France (Bowen 2007; McGoldrick 2006; Scott 2005; Thomas 2005; Killian 2003; Wihtol de Wenden 1998). I have briefly touched on the tension around the veil as a representation of failed assimilation policies and indications of transnational ties, but it is certainly worth delving deeper into the topic. The hijab and the niqab have been the subject not only of scholarly research and journalist musings, but also have encouraged the drafting and passing of two laws. In the following section, I will summarize some key events and discuss why the hijab and niqab are such significant parts of the production of cultural insecurities.

5.5.4 The exception of the veil

Employing images that represent threats and risks helps to easily convey emotions and narratives of fear and loss of identity and history. Threats become recognizable in visual material that circulate in public and private spaces. This is one of the reasons why the hijab and the niqab have been instrumental in the production of cultural insecurities in France. They are visible pieces of clothing but also signify practices that embody the representations of terror, oppression, fanaticism, transnational spaces, difference, failed assimilation and a variety of other issues raised around cultural insecurity. They give cultural insecurity discourses an obvious example of how Muslim traditions and beliefs are not considered a part of French culture and/or identity. But how did this come to be? And why, after so many years of Muslim women living in France, has the hijab and the niqab failed to integrate itself into Frenchness? The answer to these questions is once again intertwined with issues of colonialism, immigration, transnationalism and politics at various scales.

The hijab and niqab\textsuperscript{46} have become inflammatory topics within the public sphere since the 1980s. Before reviewing how this became the case, it is worth clarifying what is meant by the terms related to veiling practices in Islam. These practices are varied, from the

\textsuperscript{46} These are the two types of veiling practices most commonly seen in France.
fabric and designs to what parts of the face, head and neck are covered. These differences are embedded in the history of societies in Asia, the Middle East and in Africa. They are the cultural spin on an interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad’s words. There can be confusion in Western media on what vocabulary and meaning is assigned to these practices. The hijab is the most common form of veiling seen in Western Europe and North America. Different colored scarves are used to cover the hair and neck. Historically, the different colors and styles of tying a hijab depended on the region, and between rural and urban populations. Now, the hijab in Europe and in North America has become an opportunity to express personal style, and an entire industry has established itself to provide women with hipster hijabs, formal hijabs and even hijabs for playing sports.

The hijab is the most common form of veiling in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria as well as in West Africa. The tchador though sometimes used as a term in France, is a tradition found in Iran and is rare in Europe. The niqab is another form of veiling which originated in the Arabian peninsula (though niqabs are now seen all over the world) though it is often conflated with the burqa. Though public actors will talk about the burqa in public spaces, there is no evidence that anyone in France wears a burqa. There are some women (both tourists and not) who have been seen wearing the niqab - a black or sometimes white, long fabric that has an attachable piece that covers everything but the eyes. Politicians and media outlets turned their focus to the niqab and its perceived dangers post-2004. The term “le voile” or “le voile intégral” is used to talk about the niqab. There is also what has been

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47 When the French use the term “foulard”, they are speaking about the hijab.
48 Hijabs have become a big business, and even Nike has gotten on board by launching their Nike Pro Hijab which they hope will allow more Muslim women to participate in sports. [http://www.nike.com/us/en_us/c/women/nike-pro-hijab](http://www.nike.com/us/en_us/c/women/nike-pro-hijab)
49 To be clear, the burqa is a full-body covering which originated with the Pashtun in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The burqa is often blue and covers all of the body and the face, including the eyes. It came into European consciousness when women in Afghanistan were said to be forced to wear the burqa under Taliban rule - the burqa dominated media in Europe and North America as a symbol of oppression that needed to be stomped out in the armed intervention in Afghanistan (Macdonald 2016).
50 The balck niqab is a tradition from the Gulf States and carries with it connotations of strict interpretations of Islam.
labeled the “burkini”, a type of modest swimming outfit that covers most of the body, neck and hair, which became an inflammatory topic from 2013 onwards.\footnote{These variations are described in French here: \url{http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/06/11/niqab-hijab-burqa-des-voiles-et-beaucoup-de-confusions_4651970_4355770.html} and a more fun visual representation can be found here: \url{https://niqabanana.wordpress.com/2014/04/21/made-in-france/}.}

In general, academics have examined three types of religious headcovering scenarios in France: older traditional women (often immigrants), teenagers and 18 to 25 year olds raised in French culture who identify as Muslim French (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995). It is largely due to this practice of wearing the hijab or the niqab that two major discourses on Muslim women have formed within non-Islamic societies (Western Europe and North America). There is the discourse of Orientalism, expounded upon by Edward Said and others, where Muslim women are oppressed, uncivilized, invisible and in need of saving by White men. This has wormed its way into important international debates around military interventions (Bickel 2003). Women need to be shown their oppression and liberated from the subjugation by both the men in their lives and the patriarchal state.

5.5.5 L’affaire du foulard

The tension around the hijab in France kicked off with what became known as \emph{l’affaire du foulard} (the scarf affair) in the late 1980s (Scott 2005). In the Collège Gabriel Havez in Creil, a city north of Paris, three young girls were suspended for refusing to remove their hijab. The principal of the school deemed their practice as incompatible with French values of \emph{laïcité} and asked them to remove them in the classroom. The young girls refused and the principal took this as a provocation and a deliberate desire to cause a culture clash within the public school (Tsagarousianou 2016). When the case was presented to the \textit{Conseil d’État}, the council officially stated that any form of headcovering was a religious practice and therefore could not be allowed in state-run schools. This was followed by more suspensions in other schools and a lawsuit by the parents of one of the girls. Creil was a city of a little
more than 32,000 residents, though the school system at the time had about 500 Muslim students from 25 different nationalities, though not all of the female students wore a hijab. It was, therefore, not a case rooted in any evidence of provocation by these girls but rather a sense that the teachers and principal had in relation to there being "too many" Muslims for comfort.

The three girls suspended from school became emblematic of what some French felt was the changing landscape of the majority's culture. The fact that publicly their hijab was wrongly called a tchador in itself showed that there was little understanding of the diversity of Muslim traditions and that these practices were being attached to foreign spaces deemed dangerous (Iran). It is important to point out that l'affaire du foulard was a culmination of what had already been brewing in terms of immigration in France. Attaching fear to the visible symbol of the hijab was not new. In the section on Muslim immigration in this chapter, a 1985 article from Le Figaro Magazine entitled Dossier immigration: serons-nous encore français dans 30 ans? was mentioned. On the cover of this magazine was the image of Marianne, the female representation of the republic and the goddess of liberty. Her marble bust was enshrined with an Iranian tchador, covering her hair, face and neck. This image relayed not only the idea the Muslims seemed to be too many in number for comfort, but that French women were in danger of being forced to veil themselves.

L'affaire du foulard mobilized many groups from across the political spectrum. The Front National gained traction in Creil and other cities that felt threatened by what the hijab could mean. On the other side, organizations such as SOS Racisme stepped in to defend the rights of the girls and argue that freedom of religion included the right to wear the hijab. There were also debates on beur identity and the right of these girls to express their heritage.

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52 Le Parisien, 10 octobre 1989, « Leila, Fatima et Samira iront à l'école en tchador »
53 The image can be seen here: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/263156251_fig4_Figure-4-Marianne-on-the-cover-of-the-French-magazine-Le-Figaro-1985.
In October 1989, thousands protested the decision of the school in Creil to expel students who refused to remove their hijab. L’affaire du foulard sparked one of the greatest controversies in the 20th century on religion, the state and culture (Huysman 2006), but it did not end there. The debate around rights and veiling practices in schools forced politicians, media and public figures to take a stand on what it meant to be French. The discourse shifted from the fear of immigration in the 1980s to importance of preserving laïcité and the role of religion in public spaces.

When the media got ahold of the story, it was treated as an exception (Allievi 2016), a sensational story that would define the future of the French republic. In 1994, the François Bayrou Memo began the conversation of how to define a religious symbol and what would be deemed acceptable in public spaces. By using laïcité as a framework, girls and women wearing a hijab became a test case for pushing legal boundaries, and the argument around why the hijab tested secularism needed to be well thought-out. The Bayrou Memo decided to approach the argument by pointing to the hijab's visual nature. The memo stated that a hijab was too ostentatious of a representation of religious practice when compared to the kippah or a cross necklace. This visuality is important to the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities. Bayrou was essentially saying that seeing too many hijabs in one space challenged the existence of French culture.

The Conseil d'État at first rejected the memo, saying that the argument put forth was not solid enough to expel the girls from public schools. In the meantime, girls wearing a hijab not only became a media fixation, they also suffered at the hands of their teachers and principals. In schools throughout France, girls were being asked to remove their scarf before entering the classroom. Those who did not were sometimes punished, mostly because this was required by the school. The representation of Muslim girls during the 1990s was a

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54 As of 2015, over 100 girls have been reprimanded or suspended for covering their hair in public schools (Tsagarousianou 2016).
mishmash of how Muslim women had been represented up until that point. These girls were portrayed as oppressed by their families, particularly their fathers and brothers. Narratives of economically poor, unassimilated girls from the banlieue were used to reinforce these ideas. Those who came from wealthier, educated families were represented as not wearing the hijab, indicating that they were a part of French culture.

Yet, at the same time, these girls were also painted as resistant given their refusal to remove their hijab. The term “provok” (provocation) was and continues to be used to describe the choice to wear the hijab in the face of expulsion from school. This description of women as provoking the French majority would later be connected to discussions on terrorism and the Orientalist fantasy that women are manipulated into engaging in harmful activities (Piela 2012). The idea that these students would not remove the hijab when required by their schools was unnerving to media and other public actors. Even if they were trapped and controlled by their parents, there was the expectation that they would comply with their schools’ demands. The rebuttal to this defiance was that wearing a hijab actually allowed the girls to attend school, otherwise their culture would not allow the teenagers to be with boys at school (Zancarini-Fournel 1995). This, however, was not convincing to many as many in the French majority could not accept that the girls actually wanted to wear the hijab.

It was during this time that feminism became a focal point in these discussions, particularly how veiling spoke to the lack of sexual liberation of Muslim women. While French and European women in general are said to be in control of their bodies and their choices, the hijab and other forms of veiling practices were seen as denying agency associated with sexuality and gender. The codes of modesty are seen by many French feminists (and more broadly in Europe) as trapping women and narrowly define femininity (Macdonald 2012).

It is questionable whether the representations included the idea of agency. It is my impression that news stories, opinion pieces, political discourses on the subject viewed the girls as being resistant but not because of their own convictions or because they had the power to do so. Rather, these girls were painted as either brainwashed or forced by their families.
2016). It is worth noting that feminism and France is its own debate in and of itself, which only complicated the debate on the hijab in public, both then and now. The role of femininity within the French context is something capitalized on around the world. Claire Humphrey (2012) tackled this issue in her work on the Parisienne, the ideal women from Paris. The author argues that through visual representations we have come to see the Parisienne as a woman of luxury, easy beauty and innate style that performs her gender through consuming fashion and carrying herself in specific ways. This woman is seen in print and video media across the world, representing the essence of French femininity. Though not every French woman can identify as the Parisienne, Humphrey states that this visual representation shapes views on citizenship which guide discussions on the Otherness of Muslim women in France. In opposition to the chic Parisienne, the hijabi or niqabi neither embodies the French citizen nor Western feminism (Humphrey 2012: 258).

During the 1990s and into the 2000s, the representation of the hijab and niqab were connected to other places perceived as dangerous. Stories and images of women in Algeria forced to cover their heads and bodies post-independence from France was described as the country reverting to uncivilized traditions (Deltombe 2007). Images of Iranian girls in miniskirts during the time of the Shah were juxtaposed with the women under Ayatollah Khomeiny who made the tchador compulsory for women, showing the religion’s desire to use antiquated tools for maintaining inequality between genders (Lambin 1999). The tensions at home and the fear of threats abroad finally led to the passing of the 2004 law on ostentatious symbols of religion. The Stasi commission was established to determine how to deal with the mounting pressure and tension around hijabs in schools. The commission found a way to frame the debate as one of secularism and not about a specific religion. It noted that obvious signs of religion such as the hijab could be considered proselytizing, which is unacceptable in

56 A commission set up by Président Jacques Chirac to investigate how the principle of laïcité was being used in society. The commission dealt almost entirely with the question of hijabs in schools. Surprisingly the commission did include and consult some Muslims, such as the scholar of Islam Mohamed Arkoun.
a secular public school. Try as they may, French politicians who drafted and passed the law
were seen as directly speaking to Muslim girls (Bleich 2009) and by default
disproportionately impacting minorities and their rights (Bancel 2013). It is interesting how
much attention the passing of the 2004 law receives even today within academia but also in
European and North American media.

Muslim girls were by default being accused of threatening republican values, but also
for representing the violence in the aftermath of September 11th (Wing and Smith 2005).
Though many French were in support of the banning of hijabs in schools, they may not have
anticipated the international attention paid to the passing of this law. Suddenly, the country
that saw universal human rights as one of its core values was seen as engaging in
discrimination against its own citizens. Muslim girls wearing hijabs were pushed into political
and legal conflict. Interviews with girls during this period showed that they faced immense
pressure from all sides. They faced hostility from their teachers for challenging the French
law and dealt with pressure from their parents to remove the hijab to be able to finish their
education. Many of these girls were sequestered in schools, causing them emotional
difficulties (Chouder et al. 2008).

The representation of Muslim women on the international scale also became an
important component to how these girls and women were perceived in France. During the
lead-up and passing of the 2004, Khadija ben Gana (sometimes written Khadija Benguenna),
a journalist and symbol of the Algerian and Muslim community in France, became critical of
the French government. She fled Algeria in the 1990s because she refused to wear the hijab
and had often spoken about her decision as a practicing Muslim to forego the hijab. However,
while working for Al-Jazeera she decided to start covering her hair. She even chose to wear a
hijab during an interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin, a move
that was unheard of for Al Jazeera anchorwomen at that time (Cherribi 2016). The journalist
spoke openly and critically about France’s decision to criminalize Muslim women for their
Veiling practices. Journalists, academics and political figures in other countries, especially in North Africa and the Middle East, openly shared ben Gana’s opinions and emphasized that the 2004 law as a message that Islam was not welcomed in France.

5.5.6 Veiling practices today

Since the 2004 law, the hijab has continued to be a source of conflict in France. While there has been evidence of activism at the grassroots level of women fighting both the laws and inquiries around veiling practices and against the representations more generally, the state, media and other public actors continue to harp on the threatening nature of veiling. There was a move to outlaw the presence of hijabs in universities. It also encouraged the opening of private Muslim schools, which was met with suspicion by the non-Muslim majority. In 2009 President Sarkozy expressed that the niqab needed to be banned from all public spaces and a parliamentary inquiry on the subject was launched. Women wearing the hijab were either represented as terrorists or as symbolizing the ultimate oppression of the female body. Politicians claimed that obscuring the face was a security risk. Stories of women refusing to lift their veil for identification purposes were construed as an act of resistance but also suggested that they may have something to hide. On the other hand, public actors often questioned whether the women wearing the niqab had a choice in the matter. By 2011, the niqab was outlawed in public spaces.⁵⁷ Women found wearing it would be fined up to 150 euros, and if there was evidence that someone had forced her to veil, that person would be fined a much higher amount. By 2016, the police had reported 1,500 verbal warnings or issuing of the fine (Le Figaro Madame 2016).

Debate around Muslim veiling practices continues to be central in French political and social discourses. There have been discussions on whether caretakers and teachers in

⁵⁷ The law was passed in 2010 and consolidated in 2011.
https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=AEB0522ED2344F4677CB773A2BC9C66A.tpdjo07v_3?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000022912210&dateTexte=20110411
nurseries and kindergartens have the right to wear the hijab. In 2016, municipalities in various parts of France wanted to outlaw the “burkini”, swimwear that covers most of the body and head (Le Figaro Madame 2016). France’s fixation on how Muslim women dress has served as an example for other European countries that are engaged in their own debates on cultural insecurities in relation to religion and immigration. When summarizing the evolution of these representations of women as a threat, it becomes evident that there is not only a lack of understanding of what these practices mean but also that Muslim women (a) do not have strong advocates in positions of power and (b) that French society has been more or less stuck in the same discourses on immigration and cultural insecurity since the 1980s. The information above shows that there has been a progression and change in how Muslim women are implicated in insecurity discourses, but the root idea stays the same: Muslim women are a threat to Frenchness because they are not integrated and they impose their cultural practices on the majority.

5.6 Conclusion

After reviewing public discourses on French culture, its meaning and how it has been portrayed in relation to immigration, it is easy to see in what ways Muslim women have been depicted as challenging the culture’s existence. Representations of these women as terrorists, oppressed beings, religious fanatics and resistant actors have been used at various times to support arguments on immigration reform, integration policies, feminism and the role of French institutions in building and maintaining French values. Though researchers have questioned the term culture, its meaning and use, within French public discourse, it is a term that has significance. There might not be one definition of what it means to be French, but the concept that there is a unifying history, language and set of values (especially laïcité) is often talked about as a given in public debate.

The production of cultural insecurities implicates various minority groups (e.g other groups such as Roma), but Muslim women have been swept into these narratives more than
others. I used the term implication not to say that Muslims are responsible for cultural insecurities but rather are made a part of these debates because of their presence. It is not necessarily that Muslim women do anything to contribute to fears others may have but their presence and activities are portrayed as problematic. The summary provided touched upon key elements that comprise the Muslim woman identity constructed and represented in cultural insecurity discourses. Women are a threat because they are (a) openly practicing their religion in public spaces, (b) their religious gender identity directly opposes gender equality in France and (c) their identity prevents them from sharing French values and traditions. Though women have been represented in different ways (e.g. as terrorists or as oppressed beings), the representations of their identity are always essentialized with no room for complexity and certainly no acceptance that their identity includes Frenchness.

During the 2017 presidential election, first round winners Marine Le Pen and Emanuelle Macron spoke often about national identity and what it means to be French. Le Pen not surprisingly spoke of the *français de souche* and their need to protect themselves from Islamic radicalism. She not only drew upon a nostalgic vision of France steeped in tradition, but she clearly used immigration and religion as boundary markers. Macron, on the other hand, positioned himself as having an inclusive view, claiming that French culture was about openness and understanding (Bommelaer 2017). Le Pen’s success in the first round is said to be a product of the rise of populism in France. Her party the Front National and her success in the 2017 French election are worthy of a dissertation in themselves, and careless analysis of her role in politics is not useful. However, given her family legacy within the Front National and her reliance on representing Muslims as a threat to French culture makes has contributed to her success. Though she talks often about Muslim extremism, she is known as feeling that Islam is not compatible with French values.

This chapter has set the scene for understanding the components and production of cultural insecurities in France. Le Pen’s electoral success can be attributed in part to this
production. She is able to tap into these narratives of losing Frenchness due to the practices of a cultural minority. It is one of her strengths, and she is able to elicit a response from people, whether they agree with her or not. This election is just one example of how cultural insecurities affect society at various levels and occupies a significant part of discourses on minorities in France. This chapter also helps set up the question of how Muslim women engage with and contest these ideas. There are some studies from the perspective of Muslim women (e.g. Chouder et al. 2008; Keaton 2006) on issues of race, class and gender in France, but few specifically on how they deal with their implication in cultural insecurities. This leads to the following questions, which will drive the next three chapters:

*How do women define themselves as Muslim women? How do Muslim women engage with and contest representations of themselves as threats to the French majority through daily practices in both physical and virtual spaces?*

Using data collected from the French Muslim website Oumma.com and using supporting observations from field visits to Boulogne-Billancourt, I will attempt to answer these questions. Chapter Five will begin by analyzing how women online interpret the identity as Muslim women, both as something self-ascribed and as a label imposed by others. The chapter will also look at what events and issues in France make Muslim women feel insecure in France. Chapters Six and Seven will then discuss the findings of how women on Oumma.com describe their engagement and resistance in physical and virtual spaces.
Chapter 6   Identifying as a Muslim and defining cultural insecurities in everyday experiences

Muslim women have been represented as a threat to French society because of a gendered religious identity constructed through circulating narratives. Immigration, colonialism, spatial segregation in urban areas, assumptions made on the place of Islam in France and the behavior of Muslim women in reaction to certain laws affecting them have contributed to this construction. Narratives portray these women as threatening French culture because their practices do not fit with French history, traditions, laws and values. Public discourse root Frenchness in the territory of mainland France, tying it to elements such as a positive memory of the revolution, the development of society through the code civil and the French language as a unifying element since the 19th century (Weil 2014). Muslim women are portrayed as a threat to these values because, as described in Chapter Four, they look and behave in ways that are not shared by the majority. Difference leads to fear because of the specific visuals and behaviors pressed upon by these representations. They are characterized as potentially eroding Frenchness because Muslimness is represented as a strong identity where conversion (both religious and more generally) is a key feature. Women are willing to defy laws (e.g. wearing that hijab in schools), incorporate Muslimness into their political identity, to bring religion into public spaces and to maintain connections to cultures not are not French. It is impossible to know where the tipping point is between allowing culture to be dynamic and evolving to wanting to safeguard cultural elements in the face of others. However, while other non-French groups have settled in France, the emotion of fear associated with them has not taken on the same public momentum.

The emotion of fear that emerges from the discourses of Muslim women can serve any number of purposes, whether it is to make claims about a declining/stagnate economy or a rise in crime (Caldwell 2010). Through the discussions, debates and narratives circulating about Muslim women in public spaces, a homogenous image of Muslim women has emerged and while representations used by public actors might differ, the essentializing of the identity
of “Muslim woman” remains. This distilling of identity is important for the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities as it creates one simplified entity to fear. The insecurities stemming from the presence of Muslim women manifest themselves across multiple scales, from tense daily encounters to crafting of national policies targeting the supposed fear-producing group.

Yet the way French society portrays Muslim women is only a piece of the larger cultural insecurity puzzle. Muslim women (like other minorities deemed a threat) find themselves at a disadvantage as the objects of fears defined and circulated by those with power and influence. Without people in place to rally for their cause, these women become easy targets of discrimination and have little ability to change the perceptions of those in the French majority who fear them. The perspectives, engagements and reactions of Muslim women to the majority’s negative perceptions are critical to understanding aspects of cultural insecurity production and its weight on French society more generally. Muslim women’s experiences and opinions shed light on how cultural insecurities affect daily human interactions among different communities, helping us further understand critical socio-spatial issues affecting both minorities and majorities such as urban planning policies, placemaking and everyday experiences in public and private spaces.

Specific examples of how Muslim women interpret and react to the circulating narratives about Islam and Muslim women in France deserves more attention. It is, of course, impossible to know just how Muslim women as a group view these negative representations, just as it is inappropriate to claim that all French people feel culturally insecure in the presence of Muslim women. The terms “Muslim” and “French” have multiple meanings and significance in and of themselves, given the range of possible geographic, historic and contemporary contexts they intersect. It is therefore important to clarify precisely how women observed for this dissertation use the terms in order to explore how some Muslim women
engage with and contest negative representations of themselves. This chapter will address the following questions:

*How do women feel implicated in the production of cultural insecurities?*

*What are the elements and characteristics that contribute to the women in this study self-identifying and identifying others as a Muslim?*

*Do these women in turn feel culturally insecure in France? If so, what are the issues, events and situations that fuel this fear?*

This chapter provides a map of how women on Oumma.com describe their Muslim identity. I will begin by analyzing how women on the website understand the term “Muslim woman,” its personal meaning for themselves but also the circumstances under which they ascribe it to others and how they think about “Muslimness” in a larger sense. Occasional examples from Boulogne-Billancourt and its surrounding neighborhoods will provide some support for the analysis. This exploration of Muslim identity will be followed briefly by a summary of the issues that women on the site connect to cultural insecurity in France. This section will provide a handful of examples of the Muslim practices and representations of Muslim identity that feed the fears expressed by the non-Muslim majority. The third section of the chapter questions what makes these Muslim women, in turn, insecure about living in France. Much is made about the risks Muslimness poses to France, but less is known about what Muslim women implicated in cultural insecurities fear themselves. The chapter concludes with a discussion and synthesis of what women in this study define as Muslim identity.

### 6.1 Being a “Muslim woman” in France

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58 Oumma.com is the virtual site examined for this study. For more information on why this website was chosen and who the users are, see Chapter Three.

59 Boulogne-Billancourt is a suburb of Paris where I collected data for evidence of cultural insecurities on the landscape and observed interactions between Muslim women and non-Muslims. For more information about the demographics and why this suburb was chosen, see Chapter Three.
As discussed in Chapter Four, the understanding by French non-Muslims of a Muslim identity has evolved over the decades, influenced by both external and internal factors. The chapter focused almost entirely on how non-Muslims have constructed a narrative based on immigration, suburban representations and religious practice. There is, however, less information on how Muslim women self-define. We may assume that at its core, the word “Muslim” refers to the followers of the Islamic religion, which has ties to North Africa, the Middle East and Asia. However, when the term is gendered—as in Muslim woman/women—its meaning becomes nuanced and complex because of the addition of specific social expectations and constraints. Identifying as a Muslim woman could be due to a number of factors such as habits, practices, spiritual beliefs, family history and/or daily routines.

The research questions for this dissertation first took shape based on observations I made of how the word Muslim was used by French people in everyday conversation. It struck me that the term was used differently depending on context. Researchers have primarily looked at how Muslim is defined in state discourse (usually as religious adherence) or how visible symbols such as beards for men and hijabs for women are used to categorize people in everyday situations. Yet in informal conversations, French people use Muslim in a variety of ways to describe people they perceive as part of this minority. They may link Muslim to ethnicity (and race to some extent), to geographic origin, to religious practice or visible markers. There are also several words related to Muslim, such as but not limited to, Islamist, Mahométiste, Arab, and Salafist, that may be confused with Muslim or used to describe a

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60 Islamist is a 16th century term which continued to be popular until the late 1990s, early 2000s to describe individuals that are seen as more rigid, often extreme, in their views and adherence to Islam. It has religious connotations, though I have heard many people in public settings use Islamist to speak of any Muslim, regardless of the Muslim’s view on religious practice and traditions. More recently it has taken a religious-political element.

61 Mahométiste is also a term that emerged in the 16th and was used often in the 1980s and 1990s during the first “affaire du foulard”. It was used to describe people following Muhammad’s religion and is considered a pejorative term.

62 I include Arab in this category because I have often heard people lump Arab with Muslim. This flippant connection between ethnicity/geographic origin and religion appears far less in the written form, though many people take for granted that an Arab is Muslim.

63 Salafist is a term that has gained popularity within the last ten years. It is most often used by the media to describe individuals in North Africa who believe in returning to the original values and
person thought to be Muslim. These words are gradients, all spanning from religion, but suggesting important differences. Potential sloppiness in describing someone by interchanging these words can result in further misunderstandings between the majority and minority groups, and contributes to the production of cultural insecurities.

6.2 Muslim identities explained

Research in online spaces has revealed that Muslim women talk about identity on social media, in closed groups and in various spaces on websites. Scholars find that women discuss their religious identity by forming groups to talk about practices but also to exchange experiences in their daily lives (e.g., Piela 2012). The Internet has proven to be an important space for connecting everyday practices with authoritative scriptural interpretations of Islamic text (Leurs 2012) and therefore attracts younger people who are searching for ways to incorporate their religion into daily life. Studies of online habits show that in Western Europe and North America, the Internet is a highly relevant medium for studying personal experience of Muslim identity because it bridges geographic spaces, offers information and a safer platform to discuss issues attached to a religion that is still in the minority (Hoekstra and Verkuyten 2014). This is not surprising as members of religious and other minority groups are disproportionately more involved in online communities than the majority (Kozinets 2010). While a handful of sociologists, media studies scholars and anthropologists have published work on Muslim women online, my choice of Oumma.com as a field site is somewhat unusual. It is not a closed group for Muslim women—the focus of earlier work on Muslim women online (see much of Gary Bunt’s work in 2002, 2007 and 2009 and work by Anna Piela 2012). Many online Muslim groups are segregated by gender as this is customary within religious institutions but also because women face different practices and rules than

traditions of Islam during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Salafists are described as extreme and dangerous. In September 2012 Salafists demonstrated in front of the US embassy in Paris, garnering much media attention in France, their presence causing considerable unease for many journalists and politicians. Salafists tend to wear all black and have a reputation of being extremists.
men. Furthermore, Oumma.com is not an online space solely dedicated to religion, unlike the sites examined in other research (Myrte Hoekstra and Maykel Verkuyten 2014). Oumma.com is open to everyone and has active non-Muslim readers. It covers topics relevant to the religion, but also discusses more general themes pertinent to life in France.

Before diving into how women on Oumma.com define the term “Muslim woman,” it is worth explaining the data collection process, specifically how it was determined that users were women. This is important as I coded material based on the premise that most of the material was produced by women. The exception to this was relevant information posted by contributors and editors at Oumma.com which spoke to the environment in which comments by women were made. One of the challenging aspects of conducting research online is the uncertainty attached to who is the “real” person behind the words appearing in chats, forums and in comment sections. Negotiating the importance of offline and online identities can be somewhat perplexing for researchers. Someone might claim to be a woman online, but she/he might not identify as a woman in offline spaces. In theory, this could be fine as online spaces allow for people to inhabit identities to which they feel strong attachment. However, in studying how Muslim women contest being represented as a threat, it is important that they are experiencing this from a position of being assigned this identity in public spaces by the majority. Having someone comment on the experience of being a Muslim woman when that person is in fact a man, or a woman who does not consider herself and is not considered Muslim offline would not be useful.

There is also the question of motives behind an individual identifying a certain way online. There is the risk that the person writing from the perspective of a Muslim woman is not, in fact, someone who identifies as such but rather someone with ulterior motives—a desire to troll, cause problems, pretend to be someone else, or simply try out something new. This uncertainty about the authorship of online comments needs to be considered for all Internet research. However, I do not feel that these risks lessen the validity of the data.
collected for this study (for more on this, see Chapter Three). The Oumma.com editor and the community polices itself and members will flag contributions that seem inaccurate or suspicious. In addition, I excluded material from posts I found questionable (e.g. strange comments from one-time users, information that was inconsistent with previously shared details).

I identified users as Muslim women based on their names (generally Arabic names used only for girls), their use of feminine pronouns to refer to themselves or because they directly referred to themselves as women. I also included users who had typical French names but explicitly stated that they were Muslim. Other researchers such as Fazila Bhimji (2016) have used similar clues to identify users as Muslim women, including their icons/avatars, their screen names (such as Shia Sister) and their use of Arabic terms. After having noted that a user was a woman, I created a node for her, using her name. I included women who were active in the comment sections and those who authored articles and produced videos. After the coding process was finished, I gave each of the women who wrote comments an alias. I used the real names of women who authored material.

While some users were very active on Oumma.com, I chose not to draw conclusions about specific user behavior. For instance, Aisha often writes comments on the representation of Muslim women or other topics that are related to cultural insecurities. One approach to data collection would have been to “follow” her through the website to see each instance of interaction. Given that she has opinions on topics relevant to this dissertation, this would have been a viable option. I chose not to do this for two reasons. One, online spaces are interconnected and contextual just as much as offline spaces. Experiences build upon one another, shaping how we interact with the virtual environment both socially and individually. Using the search function for specific topics or users on Oumma.com will yield results, but it supplies only a partial picture. There would be no account of what publications came before and after the searched item. (To avoid this, I consistently read through all publications...
chronologically.) This context is important because it shapes the user experience. While I do not know Aisha’s user behavior, there is a chance that she reads lots of material on the website, much of it not relevant to this dissertation. When she does interact with text, audio files and visuals that are connected to the production of cultural insecurities, she is drawing upon not only her personal offline life, but also on her interactions with the Oumma.com community and her previous reactions and opinions on other online material.

Second, while I was a participating member on Oumma.com, my goal was not to track the behavior of users nor was it to count the number of times a user said something worth coding. I was focused on collecting instances where women express their views and relayed their experiences with cultural insecurities in France in meaningful ways. The frequency of their posts or random, small references to issues that held no additional value or new information was neither counted nor coded. There would no doubt be a place for this type of data collection in an online study. Observing long-term user behavior is a method used in media studies and could be considered in the future for an additional study using Oumma.com as the field site.

The findings presented in this and the two chapters that follow draw upon data collected using a download and code method. Every item that was downloaded from Oumma.com (articles which include comments from users, videos, images and audio files) was immediately coded using a set of nodes. None of the nodes were predetermined - they emerged from the data. This caused some problems initially as it took some trial and error to find node titles that were general enough but also conveyed a relevant theme. Of the Oumma.com users, 119 women over the 17-year span tackled issues relevant to my research questions through their interactions in comment sections. \(^{64}\) The engagement of these women

\(^{64}\) There are more than 119 women who contributed insights that were coded - creating nodes for each of the women is something that was adopted later on in the coding process. However, during the analysis phase, it was easy to catch the contributions of other women that were not previously given
varied greatly. There were women who have been active on Oumma.com since the comments section opened in the late 1990s and there are those who only began commenting towards the end of my data collection period. Some women have only one reference coded in a node while others have over 110. There were also over 30 women who published articles and videos that addressed my research questions. Some of these women only published once while others contributed more often.\textsuperscript{65}

6.3 Defining Muslim woman on Oumma.com

Women on Oumma.com reflect on what it means to be a Muslim by commenting on information and discussions and sharing stories from their daily lives. This is done usually in response to something that speaks directly to Muslims - a topic such as the passing of new laws in France and abroad that affect Muslims, current events that touch upon Muslim experiences, or material on a specific aspect of the religion. Women contribute their thoughts either by publishing material or more often, by leaving one or more comments below articles, videos and images. The material uploaded is either written/created by Oumma.com editors or by external contributors. Early in the coding process it became evident that the way in which Muslim women talk about their identity within the comment sections is important. The node Defining Muslim was used to capture all instances where women spoke directly to this issue. It is important to point out that many of the emerging themes from the nodes are intertwined and therefore difficult to isolate. This created challenges in the coding and analysis stages, as many of the topics and comments left by users covered multiple topics and could be coded in different nodes. For instance, users discussing the media representations of Muslim women could, in the same paragraph, cover topics that might be coded under Defining Muslim and

\textsuperscript{65}The analysis of the data came in three phases. The first phase consisted of reading the material and deciding what node would apply to the content. As mentioned, nodes were a result of finding ideas, opinions and information that directly related to cultural insecurities. In the second phase, I looked through the nodes and found connections and themes within the text and images associated with one node. The third phase came during the drafting of the chapters as rereading and writing about the themes generated more subtle connections within the coded material.
Calling out Community Members. Cross-coding was the best way to deal with this issue (as opposed to only allowing for information to be coded under a single node), and this method illustrates how stories, explanations and ideas from users’ daily lives are intertwined

The comments, articles and audio-visual files coded under the node Defining Muslim, include users’ personal insights on what they feel is important for defining the boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. There were no articles or debates specifically dedicated to this topic on the website (no article entitled, “What does Muslim mean?”), but women volunteered their ideas and explanations during various discussions. The comments and explorations coded in this node appeared throughout the 1997-2014 research period and revealed several themes both in terms of describing what it is to be Muslim but also what this specific identity entails. There were 83 sources (articles, videos, etc.) downloaded from Oumma.com and over 125 references coded for the node Defining Muslim. Though this was the node dedicated solely to this topic, the nodes Insecurity - defining issues, Feminism, Religion in public spaces and other nodes contained information relevant to this topic as well. Also, not every comment that defined Muslim was captured—sometimes the content of a post seemed relevant but not entirely clear or was too general to be useful.

The editors of Oumma.com have defined or commented on what the term Muslim means over the years through their mission statements and articles. The website illustrates how Muslim is a dynamic term that is contextual. For example, in an article published in 2012 on the French election, Oumma.com divided the Muslim community into categories by using the terms religion, belonging and culture (“Electeurs musulmans! Quel choix en 2012? “21 April 2012). This summarizes well how Oumma.com currently sees the Muslim community—it believes that people self-ascribe as Muslim through religious practice, community identification, or because they feel part of a separate culture from that of the French majority. This last category is used to describe people who have family members who are from Muslim countries but do not consider themselves practicing Muslims.
These categories are more or less in line with the way users talk about being Muslim, although lacking in nuance. Women discuss what it means to be a Muslim woman by sharing stories, reflecting on current events and engaging in debates with fellow users. There are times when users talk about being Muslim in France more generally, and other instances where they explicitly talk about a gendered aspect of their Muslim identity. The themes that emerge from this analysis include: cultural practices (particularly religious adherence and spirituality), feminism, sense of community and transnational ties. The following sub-sections provide a summary of the findings.

6.3.1 Cultural practices and traditions

Several users on Oumma.com employ the term “culture” to explain why they identify as Muslim. Like the editors of Oumma.com, these women link cultural practices to their family histories, which are lined to Muslim countries rather than France. These practices connect them to the larger Muslim community, often the umma\(^{66}\), even if they are not practicing Muslims. Religious practice is one aspect of culture, but sometimes users separate their cultural identity from the practice of Islam. They also might consider a practice that is rooted in religious tradition to be a non-religious act because they do not identify as religious. Several women made the connection between their religious practice and a shared culture with people who “have origins” in North Africa. The link through culture is most often discussed by women when Oumma.com publishes articles on Islam, its practice and its place in France. These are articles about theological texts, observed changes in Islam, variety in practices from around the world, or how being a religious Muslim is affected by the opinions and actions of French non-Muslims.

\(^{66}\) Considered the spiritual transnational community of Muslims around the world.
When linking religion to a broader cultural identity, users allude to the universal nature of Islam or specific cultural practices. For instance, Malika explains that Islam is a global social project that knows no boundaries (15 February 2013). Some practices such as circumcision were talked about as being in direct opposition to French traditions, and something that is vilified by the majority only because it is associated with Islam (Qodra, 29 June 2012). As stated by Qodra, if the French will not accept these practices, then she and the rest of the Muslim community will have their children circumcised in North Africa or in other places that share their traditions. The killing of a sheep/lamb for Aïd al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) is another such tradition seen as shared by all Muslims. Though this is a religious holiday, many Muslims in France who do not consider themselves to be religious still take part in the celebration. These practices are not described as religious obligation, but are rather attached to geographic spaces/ethnic heritage). As with the example of Qodra and circumcision, they are practices that women see as setting them apart from the non-Muslim French majority.

Shared values such as charity to the poor were also discussed as a part of being a Muslim woman. Marrying a man who shares the same values was discussed on numerous occasions. There were, however, many comments about life as part of a Muslim couple, the importance of marrying a Muslim man or questions about how to meet a Muslim man. Psychologist Farida Kaced, a self-identifying Muslim woman, created a series of videos for Oumma.com called La pause psy avec Farida where she answers questions and provides advice about relationships and health from a “Muslim perspective.”

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67 Aïd al-Adha is the celebration of recognizing Abraham’s sacrifice of his son to God and Muslims traditionally slaughter a lamb using specific procedures dictated by halal standards.
68 It is a holiday that gained national media attention because Muslims in some communities were killing sheep in their bathtubs. This was treated as something barbaric, unhygienic and incomprehensible by the non-Muslim majority.
69 None of the women observed talked about being married to a non-Muslim. This of course does not mean that there are not cases of this among Oumma.com users but rather that the women did not talk about it.
Marriage is used to define what it means to be Muslim because it influences the choice of a partner and the ways in which problems are resolved in the couple. Several women talked about the desire to marry someone who shares their culture, sometimes a man from “le bled.” One video in the series called “Le mariage avec une personne du ‘Bled’” (1 December 2009) addresses questions women on Oumma.com had about marrying someone from the same country as their parents. Kaced’s work as a psychologist has exposed her to many couples that fit this model and she draws upon this to provide some general advice. In her video, she recommends that women ask themselves if they want to marry someone from “le bled” because (a) she wants someone who shares the traditions/culture that she cannot share with someone from France or (b) because there are no suitable Muslim options in France. In the comment section of the video, women share their feelings about and experiences with marrying someone from their parents’ native country. For Amira, marrying someone from Morocco was important because she felt such a man would not share the materialism rooted in French culture. Others joined in giving reasons why a man from North Africa was a better choice for them.

A fair number of female authors, directors and artists are interviewed on Oumma.com. Much of their work deals with the experience of being Muslims in France both currently or historically. For example, Leïla Babès shared a summary of her book *L’islam intérieur*, an ethnography that explores the differences between a lived Islam and an Islam that is constructed within France. Babès tells Oumma.com that she wanted to investigate religious practices from a female perspective and shed light on the plurality within Islam from an anthropological point of view (“L’islam intérieur, passion et désenchantement” 20 September 2000). For her, a woman’s Muslim identity is grounded in her adherence to religious laws and expectations, but this does not mean that she is traditional or blinded by

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70 *bled* is a slang word borrowed from North African Arabic dialects and is used to signify a village. It usually has the connotation of being a small, traditional village. In this case, bled is used more generally to talk about the country and region of origin of North African families.
aspects of the religion, especially when they approach religious practices from a gendered perspective. Babès sees great diversity in the women that she observed and interviewed; her explanations illustrate how there is not just one type of Muslim woman living in France.

The editors of Oumma.com occasionally publish more controversial material that challenges interpretations of religious texts or teachings by famous imams. For instance, in the article “Critiquer l’islam est salutaire!” (roughly translated as “Critiquing Islam Is Healthy”), the author shares his views on how questioning and criticizing aspects of Islam can in fact benefit the community (19 October 2012). A regular commentator called Naila responded that this type of argument leads to an Islam without Muslims, as opposed to France’s desire to have Muslims without Islam. Naila went on to list traditions such as not eating pork, fasting during Ramadan, and praying as essential parts of being Muslim. For her, without these traditions, one loses her/his Islamic identity. Naila’s comments were met with rebuttals from other women on the site. One woman notes that these traditions are fleeting and it is only the belief in God that makes someone Muslim, while another felt that being Muslim means being open to the world and to change. In response, Salam stated that there is no one version of Islam, and that if people want to eat whatever meat or choose not to participate in certain practices, that is their choice and right and they can still be Muslims (30 November 2012). Salam’s comments about the variety of approaches women have to adapting their practices to the context of France is important and realistic.

6.3.2 Hijabs and niqabs

While users and women interviewed occasionally talk about the gender component of the Muslim woman identity, it is through veiling practices that gender becomes most important. Given that so much is made of the perceived connection between cultural insecurity and veiling practices, it is not surprising that veiling is a big topic on Oumma.com. In Maliah Masood’s (2008) work on representation she states “the Muslim veil is full of meaning. At any given period of history, time or place, the idea and practice of veiling have
led to clashing viewpoints - inclusion, exclusion; progressive, regressive; emancipating, humiliating: erotic, vulgar: trendy - the list goes on and on” (213). This spectrum of meaning applies in France, and though debates have shifted from terrorism, to oppression, to feminism, to provocation, the intensity of the focus on the symbolic act of veiling has endured.

Oumma.com has hundreds of articles, videos and images that report on and analyze these debates. It has also shared stories about the everyday experiences of women who engage in these practices. The node “Religion in public spaces – veiling” was used to code all relevant discussions on this topic. This node draws upon 151 sources and has 461 references. However, not all of these references are cross-coded with defining what it means to be a Muslim woman.71

Discussions and opinions on the role of veiling practices as part of Muslim identity take many forms. Users talk about the so-called “myth of the veil,” that it is something only to be attached to oppressive Islam. This myth is in fact inaccurate for these women, at least in terms of the hijab.72 One of the more prominent ways of challenging the exception of the hijab and pointing to its gendered aspect is to point to its universality. Women cite historical examples of cultures and religions that have included head covering in their practices (e.g. Catholic nuns, Orthodox Jews) that illustrate this common thread through religions. Granted the type of head covering varies in degree, and the practice and rules around it are not the same across religions, but this is never recognized by women using this argument on the website.

Researchers have argued that the obsession by certain public actors with veiling practices is firmly rooted in colonialism (Macdonald 2016). This unveiling or civilizing of a

71 Also, there are many other sources and discussions on the hijab and niqab on Oumma.com, but only the ones that related to the research questions were coded
72 With the exception of age. When there are discussions of young, preadolescent girls being asked to wear the hijab, there are usually women users who protest and say that it should always be a choice and not imposed.
barbaric, oppressive culture reverberates through French representations of Muslim women. From observations and coding of comments, articles and videos on Oumma.com, it is evident that many Muslim women feel that the debates around these practices are linked to France’s history of seeing Muslims as colonial subjects. For instance, in the article *L’alibi féminin du colonialisme* (2011) (roughly The alibi of feminism within colonialism), Youssef Girard provides an argument of how liberation of women was used as an excuse for colonialism by the French and later by the United States during the war in Afghanistan. Comments on the article by various users point to how non-Muslim French see their role in colonialism (specifically North Africa) as a time of freedom for women as the hijab was not required. The perspective that hijab and colonialism go together also emerged from informal conversations with women in Boulogne-Billancourt and surrounding neighborhoods. These women noted that the hijab should not feel foreign to Christians or Jews. They also could not understand why French people would fear it. One woman, who did not herself wear a hijab, noted that when she sees a nun in the street she is not scared of her veil. In fact, the woman said she wants to kiss the nun on the cheeks and thank her for the good she brings to the world.

Though the editors of Oumma.com have published material about the hijab since the 1990s, there was an especially strong correlation between peaks in French society’s focus on the topic and postings on it on the website. Anytime socio-political issues arose related to the government or journalists vilifying hijabs and niqabs,73 commenters on the website engaged more heavily in their own discussions of the topic. The Muslim practice of wearing a hijab or other forms of head covering is a difficult theme to tackle not only because of wide scrutiny of these practices and the reaction of non-Muslims. This practice also blurs the lines between religious practices and regional traditions that are not decreed by Islam. In physical spaces, it is easy for the French majority to assign the label of Muslim to a woman who wears a hijab as this is not a traditional French practice. Yet wearing a hijab might not be as cut and dried as

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73 For example, 2003-2004 for headscarves in schools, 2009 onwards regarding the niqab in public spaces.
the non-Muslim French majority think. It is also tempting to say that French society makes too much of the connection between these practices as fundamental to Muslim identities, especially when discourses on fear and insecurity use simplified images and thoughts on the hijab.

However, the insights shared by women on Oumma.com show that wearing a hijab/veiling is in fact an important part of identifying as Muslim for both those who wear it and those who do not. Views range enormously on this topic. Users of the website showed diversity in their opinions about the role of the hijab and the niqab in religion, in their practices of wearing or not wearing one and in how they felt about the practices of their fellow Muslims. For instance, some women believe that it is a choice, others believe it is a requirement. As Qodra wrote during an argument with a fellow user, “where do you get that the hijab is not mandatory in the Qur’an: I suggest you reread it…the hijab is OBLIGATORY for Muslim women” (15 February 2010). Such comments about requirement versus choice led to many heated discussions in comment sections - this was the case throughout the timespan of the coded material.74

There are women who do not say whether they wear a hijab or not, but rather talk about being implicated in the debate on Islam in France through the hijab. They feel that wearing the hijab is a religious act that in and of itself makes a woman Muslim. Others feel that because they or other women around them cover their hair, they automatically become part of the fight against the opinions and representations of the French majority. Being associated with other Muslims who wear the hijab helps these women identify with the community because they share an identity even if they do not share the same practices. For example, Charlotte says, “as a Muslim that is not veiled, I feel solidarity with women who suffer discrimination because they wear the hijab.” (30 November 2012) The discrimination

74 Male users (identified by their names or pronoun use) sometimes join in on this back and forth discussions, but it is mainly women within the coded material who talk about their views.
that hijabis\textsuperscript{75} feel in France also seems to bond users together. There are also those who wear a hijab because their mother does, those who start wearing one once they have children, and those who choose to wear one later in life if they never married. Their comments suggest that they feel Oumma.com is a Muslim space which provides a sense of safety but they also exhibit a willingness to debate with one another about what the practice means for identity, even in criticizing the practice of wearing a hijab.

Women vocalized how the hijab defined a Muslim woman in terms of religious adherence from several points of view. For some, the hijab is a fundamental part of Islam and acts as a spiritual protection. There were comments that stated the hijab or other forms of veiling were compulsory for any woman claiming to be Muslim, though these comments were often met with debate on what the religious texts really say. Some users said that head covering was important, but not at all stages of life. Others felt that the hijab and related forms of head covering are not necessarily a defining feature of a Muslim women, and that spirituality is found within. The definition of what makes a good Muslim woman is entangled with the hijab in these discussions, as some women (and men) said that good people respect the decree that in public women must cover their heads. Women who do not feel that wearing the hijab automatically makes one a good Muslim often said that it was a tradition rooted in certain regions, not something that comes directly from Islam. For these women, the hijab is simply an exterior marker and not an indication of a person’s values. For example, one commentator wrote: “Personally, I respect all of my fellow Muslims, veiled or not, the essential in my eyes is their personality, their behavior, what’s on the inside, their desire to make things happen. Muslims are rich in their diversity, and this difference within is a blessing.” (Ketifa, 12 Feb 2013)

\textsuperscript{75} I use the term hijabi or its plural form in various parts of this dissertation. I first became aware of it through social media. Many “famous” YouTube stars call themselves hijabis because it is a cool term that encapsulates their identity as Muslim woman who engage in veiling practices, but also as women who are part of a larger community. I use niqabi in the same way.
Ketifa’s comment illustrates not only how some women accept that there are Muslim women who choose not to wear a hijab, but that they also feel the label of Muslim has multiple meanings. They recognize that difference is an important aspect under the umbrella term of Muslim woman, and even see it as a strength. This suggests a rebuttal to the French depiction of Muslims as a cohesive, closed group that does not tolerate more than one way of doing things. There is also a big difference within the coded material between how the hijab and the niqab are treated. While there is general support for women who choose to express their identity by wearing a hijab or for those who see it as compulsory, most users seemed much less supportive of the wearing of the niqab. This lack of understanding by non-Muslims is something that the editors at Oumma.com seem to understand and use to illustrate the diversity within the Muslim community. In 2009, the website published its own survey on the niqab in France, most likely in response to the government’s establishment of a special inquiry on the niqab’s place in public spaces. In the introduction to the results, Oumma.com stated:

“Désireux d’apporter un éclairage équitable, dans une démarche résolument citoyenne et républicaine, nous avons le plaisir de vous annoncer que nous publierons mercredi la photographique révélatrice de l’opinion de 1,545 personnes, représentatives de la pluralité socio-culturelle et cultuelle qui caractérise la communauté musulmane française” ("En exclusivité, découvrez mercredi les résultats édifiants de notre grande étude sur le port du voile integral!", 21 August 2009)

We are pleased to announce that, on Wednesday, in the spirit of democracy and in citizenship, we will publish the photograph (charts and results) revealing the opinion of 1,545 persons, representative of the socio-cultural and faithful majority that characterizes the French Muslim community.

This quote reflects that the editors of Oumma.com are not only aware of the tensions within France regarding the niqab but also recognize that there is a range of opinion within Muslim communities on its meaning. Interestingly enough while I did not come across many women who had positive things to say about the niqab online, the results from the

76 During one of my last visits to Paris, I was invited to a women-only gathering at the Muslim cultural center in the 17ème neighborhood of Paris. There were around fifteen women there, between the ages of 30 and 50. Though all of the women there identified as Muslim on some level, none of them wore a hijab.
Oumma.com survey indicated that of the 1,545 participants of the survey, over 80% felt that the French government should not have a say in its use in France ("Etude sur le port du voile integral: Des enseignements edifiants," 2 September 2009). However, there is a difference between supporting a woman’s right to wear what she wants, and agreeing with the ideology behind the niqab. There was occasionally a half-hearted defense of women if stories emerged regarding discrimination and violence because of the niqab, but very few women support this practice. Nevertheless, users feel strongly that the choice of whether or not to wear it should be left to the individual.

By 2009, the debate on whether to outlaw the voile intégral in public spaces was in full swing. Oumma.com published various articles on this topic, which sparked debate within the online community from 2009 until the passing of the niqab law in 2011. For instance, journalist Naïma Bouteldja published an article on Oumma.com about the study she conducted for the Open Society Foundation on niqabis in Europe ("Ce qui fait le plus mal…c’est la communauté", 11 April 2011). Bouteldja was asked to interview more than thirty women wearing the niqab about their thoughts and experiences as niqabis in France. While Bouteldja openly shared that she found the niqab confrontational and negative, she perceived the law to be a media-political maneuver to once again render Muslim women invisible in French society. It showed outright discrimination and an attempt to stomp out the identity of Muslims perceived as a threat to national identity. Bouteldja found that during her interviews with the thirty-two women, most of whom were French citizens, she was struck by the amount of abuse and discrimination these women faced when moving in public spaces. These women, many of them quite young, also indicated that they faced anger and incomprehension from their own family members, who accused them of becoming terrorists (all of the women came from families who did not have relatives that participated in veiling practices). Several of the interviewees felt that the Muslim community was just as

77 Which the Open Society mistakenly called the burqa.
opinionated and harsh about the niqab as the French majority. They rarely found other Muslims who supported their decision to wear it, which was by far the hardest part of being a niqabi.

Bouteldja’s article on Oumma.com was met with a flurry of responses, many deleted by the Oumma.com staff during the first few days after publication. Several commentators, both men and women, discussed the gender inequality that the niqab represents and how it was used to represent Islam as a belief system that cannot be reconciled with French culture. One woman said that while she did not want to tell others what to do, she felt taken hostage by women who choose the niqab because she finds herself implicated in a debate on a practice that has nothing to do with Muslim traditions. Salam, an active member of the Oumma.com community whose comments were often coded for this dissertation, categorically denied the validity of the niqab. She views that niqab as a political tool for Salfists, and as a way for women to put themselves in a position of disadvantage/inequality. While other commentators in the thread spoke of Islam’s universality and acceptance in making the choice to wear the veil, she emphasized the niqab’s ability to cause Muslim women to look down on others or discriminate within their own community. Salam does not say specifically what she means, but I interpret the comment to mean that niqabis feel that they practice the right version of modesty and piety. This anger towards the “real path” taken by niqabis was picked up by Aisha, who pointed out that there are plenty of good Muslims who go to top schools and still live their lives according to their values without wearing the niqab. Aisha recommended that niqabis stop complaining, stay at home, pray all day and leave the rest of French Muslims and the larger society alone.

Maisha, another active member, attempted to find a middle ground by claiming that Muslim women have the right to choose whether to wear a niqab or not. For her, being a

78 I could tell this because at the time, the website would leave a blank space where content had been removed. This changed in later versions of the website.
Muslim woman means being part of a community and accepting the choices of her sisters. She openly characterized herself as a Muslim woman who does not wear any type of scarf/veil. Maisha stated that the ongoing debate on Oumma.com on this topic illustrates how within Muslim communities, women are the ones subject to scrutiny and attacks from within. She argued that any polemic in the wider French society finds its way into Muslim communities and women suffer the consequences by being targets of discrimination. Maisha also accused mosques and cultural centers of letting down women who choose to wear the niqab. She feels that organizations and religious institutions should be raising awareness and educating Muslims about the meaning and desire to wear a niqab.

This string of commentaries continued with women voicing their anger, their compassion and their overall confusion about women choosing the niqab. This was just one example of how intense the conversations are on Oumma.com regarding what it means to be a good Muslim woman. Opinions on the niqab are found in published material that is not solely dedicated to this topic. For instance, in a 2012 article on the political career of then minister of culture and communication Aurélie Filippetti, frequent user Catherine shared her thoughts on the niqab. For Catherine, being Muslim means being modest in public spaces, but it does not mean that a husband can seclude his wife or force her to cover herself completely in public.  

I did not speak to anyone in Boulogne-Billancourt who outright told me that the hijab plays a role in defining oneself as Muslim. I never explicitly asked the women I spoke to casually what they thought of the term “Muslim women.” Rather, after having talked about my research and interest in cultural insecurities, I let the women talk about what they thought about my topic. However, I attended a few talks and conferences during 2012 and 2013 in various parts of Paris where Muslim identity was the main subject. For instance, the Union

79 The is one of the few times in the coded material that there is mention of men forcing women to dress a certain way, which is a big part of discourses of fear around the niqab.
des organisations Islamique de France (UOIF) holds an annual conference in the Paris metro area. I attended the event both in 2012 and 2013. At both meetings, the hijab was discussed as a key element of Muslim identity for women, in terms of spirituality but also as belonging to the larger umma. I mostly heard men claim that the hijab is an obligation, but some women alluded to it as a requirement in their talks.

6.3.3 Reversion

Another aspect of identity in relation to Muslim women is reversion (conversion). The node Reversion was created towards the end of the data collection period. Prior to its creation, the comments and material seemed to speak more to Defining Muslim - a revert would talk about what being Muslim meant for her or how she understood the position of Islam in France. It was not until I spoke to a woman in a neighborhood outside of Boulogne-Billancourt that I started thinking of these comments as intertwined but also separate in the context of the production of cultural insecurities. I had known Mariah socially for a while and over tea one day she casually spoke about how Muslims are often perceived as crooks in France (something that was new to me). She voiced that this was an unfair representation as Islam requires you to be honest and hardworking. She then said that it was reverts that were more of a problem - specifically French men and women who convert. Mariah used the example of her Tunisian neighbor who married a French revert. The wife wears clothing that Mariah finds silly (a slightly less covering version of the niqab) and at the time, the couple was illegally using a neighbor’s cable television subscription without approval. Mariah repeated that this was not a fair representation of Muslims, but that French people would only see this example.

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80 I use the terms reversion and revert because I was told by a few women I spoke to in person that this is the more accurate way of talking about conversion in Muslim circles and in Arabic. Women may use the term conversion in French, but the concept within the religion is that all people are born Muslim. They may stray, but when they decide to convert they are actually reverting to a community that they were a part of to begin with. Whether this is what everyone believes or is accurate in all Muslim traditions, I cannot say. I will, however, defer to these women in this case.
Discussions on reversion on Oumma.com play a part in defining the term Muslim women because they speak to plurality but also to how women take on new identities within French culture. Reverts talk about their experiences finding their Muslimness or having to interact with non-French Muslims. They report experiencing discrimination or verbal abuse from the police (“Le mari de la femme voile interpellé à Trappes dément la version policière deviant les cameras” 24 July 2011) or being estranged from their families. There are also videos and articles on famous reverts such as Isabelle Eberhardt81 (“L’islam dune scandaleuse” 6 February 2010). For many French reverts, being a Muslim woman is strictly a religious identity because any ties to traditions or experiences in Muslim countries is either introduced to them through the religion or their partner’s family ties.82

When reversion is mentioned by a user she is usually met with congratulations by others online and the occasional reversion of a public figures attracts a lot of attention. One particular case exemplifies how the term Muslim is discussed by many of these women. The reversion of the famous rapper Diam’s (Mélanie Georgiades) was covered in an in-depth interview with the artist by Television France 1 (TF1) in September 2012. Diam appeared for the interview wearing a North African inspired dress, her hair and neck fully covered by a light-colored fabric. For many in France, this was a shock. Diam rose to fame in the late 1990s and early 2000s with her working-class, tough-girl image and lyrics that tackled not only issues of immigration, politics and race in France, but also the empowerment of women. Though born in Greece, she grew up in a Parisian banlieue, and her experiences as an immigrant influenced her desire to speak on class and economic precarité within urban areas. Her appearance - cropped hair, tank tops, make-up - helped create the image of a streetwise, independent woman.

81 Isabelle Eberhardt was a Swiss explorer and writer who moved to Algeria in 1897 when she was 20 years old. She converted to Islam and was outspoken against the French government and a strong advocate for decolonization.
82 The exception to this could be women who have family from Muslim countries but were either Christians or atheists, though I did not find examples of this on Oumma.com.
This image of Diams was shattered when she was checked into a facility for depression and attempted suicide due to bipolar disorder. In 2012, she resurfaced with an autobiography describing her journey from music to Islam. Her first appearance in front of the cameras showed a completely different Diams, covered from head to toe, little make-up, talking about spirituality and healing through the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. The shock of this change was felt throughout France as Diams had been one of the nation’s top-selling rappers and an anomaly in the business because she is a woman. This is perhaps one of the highest profile conversions to Islam during the period of this study and many online users felt a strong connection to Diams’ story. Non-Muslim French journalists and public figures questioned whether Diams was being controlled by her new husband or had joined a radical Islamic group. Her hijab and dress was one of the biggest issues raised by people covering the story and her new image was used as an example of the dangers of Islam in France. Never mind that the younger Diams had often been cited as a problem or a negative example of the French banlieue - suddenly she represented the production of cultural insecurities.

Oumma.com featured several clips of the TF1 interview and posted a few articles about Diams’ reversion, inviting readers to react. Some women were touched by the singer’s transformation and positive words about Islam. Diams spoke of peace, understanding, dignity and respect as essential to Muslim identity. Commentators also took the opportunity to discuss the role of women in Islam and to challenge the French notion that women are subservient - for them, Diams continues to represent a strong, outspoken female particularly because of her conversion, regardless of her dress. In December 2012, Oumma.com asked readers to pick the most influential and inspiring person who had appeared on the website for a kind of person/story of the year award. Muslim intellectuals, activists, writers and feminists were nominated. Diams won the title. Those who voted said that her journey was not only inspiring but important for French Muslims. Comments talked about her ability to pave the way for Muslims to be respected and admired within the broader society.
It should be noted that reversion is not always met with great enthusiasm on Oumma.com. In some cases, reverts, particularly French women who would be considered *français de souche*, are seen as extreme or too religious by the site’s users. They occasionally share stories about reverts they “know” who are engaged in something objectionable. Stories are shared of reverts who became extreme in their views on French society, the importance of covering one’s body and the definition of a good Muslim. As mentioned above, to some users, reversion and wearing a hijab does not automatically mean a woman is a good Muslim (Lily, 25 October 2012). These women are portrayed as judgmental and too easily influenced by what they hear around them. There is similar skepticism and conversation about what the *beurette* and third generation Muslims view as being a good Muslim. These women and girls are accused of being too focused on identity politics and the sense of belonging that may come with being a Muslim.

6.3.4 Gender and feminism

The meaning of feminism within Islam is another layer of the site’s discussions on Muslim identity. As mentioned in Chapter Four, narratives circulating on Muslim women include characterizations of them as oppressed and submissive. French feminism has advocated liberation and emancipation in a patriarchal system and Muslim women are encouraged to ignore or even fight against the dominance of male family members who are believed by non-Muslim French to be the source of the oppression. Some French scholars, journalists and politicians go so far as to say that Islam in and of itself is sexist, as it encourages the control of female bodies (e.g. feminist writer and journalist Caroline Fourest who is often mentioned on Oumma.com as anti-Muslim). Several feminist scholars have commented on the misconceptions and critiques of Western white feminism regarding traditions that arose in developing countries or minority groups in the West. Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) indicates that, because of its focus on patriarchy, feminism rooted in emancipation from the West is not applicable to feminism in Muslim societies. In Abu-Lughod’s extensive
work in Egypt, she finds that patriarchy is not the main concern of Muslim women, nor are
the supposed constraints within the religion. Women in Egypt talk about poverty and politics
(specifically corruption of politicians and socio-economic policies) as being their main
oppressors. There is also a rich tradition of feminism in Muslim societies that study religious
text to explore gender relations within the religion (e.g. Amina Wadud’s (1999) reading of
Qur’an or Fatema Mernissi’s (2011) look at the suppression of women through politics).
Feminist thinkers from the “Muslim world” are diverse and each region has its own
preoccupations and concerns for women.

The node Feminism was created to capture what became consistent mentions of the
connection between feminism and Islam. This connection is made by Oumma.com editors in
the articles they produce and the contributions they upload from other authors. It is also a
connection made by users in the comment sections. Feminism within Islam is a topic that has
been covered since the early 2000s on the site. Many user comments on relevant material
construct arguments using feminism to underscore issues of equality, the right to wear what
they want, and the need for more political choices. The node Feminism includes 41 sources
and 84 references. As with all the other nodes, not every mention of feminism was counted,
only those that used it in a way that spoke to defining the term Muslim woman or related to
the research questions. Data collected for the node Feminism were from two types of
engagements. There were women who published or were interviewed for articles and videos
specifically speaking about feminism. The editors and several male contributors also wrote
about the role of women in Islam. There were articles that talked about historic figures that
some users felt were feminists for Muslims (e.g. Kadija’s comment on Isabelle Eberhardt 6
February 2010). Feminism is also talked about when feminists from the French majority
speak out against Islam, Caroline Fourest being one of the more popular examples. Caroline Fourest’s blog (found at https://carolinefourest.wordpress.com) offers many examples of
articles she has written about feminism and the threat of Islam. She is often written about by others because of her frequent criticism of Islam. An example can be found here:
has even accused Oumma.com of being complicit in the oppression of women and having radical interpretations of Islam.\textsuperscript{84}

In general, women active on Oumma.com seem to feel that it is important that a discussion of whether feminism is part of being a Muslim woman be public to fight misconceptions. Users agree that feminism is possible within Islam and they feel a part of this type of feminism. They often disagree with French feminist opinions that Islam is oppressive, though they will speak about cultural practices linked to the Middle East that they do believe are oppressive to women (such as women being denied the right to drive cars). Many women also are interested in exploring what feminism means for Muslim women in France. For instance, Asthma Lamrabet published an article entitled “Féminisme islamique?” (26 May 2003) which argues for a national version of feminism within the religious context. Lamrabet believes that the French notion of femininity\textsuperscript{85} is not useful for Muslims, but the idea of rights within French feminism is an important way to frame her argument. She proposes a feminism that is rooted in Islam, which she feels is fundamentally egalitarian. Here Lamrabet skirts an important line that many women on the website negotiate—presenting Islam as essentially supportive of gender equality, although the ways it is interpreted can be to the detriment of women in societies that have favored men. This is a complicated and nuanced way of talking about feminism within religion, as non-Muslims easily pick out examples and details that challenge this line of thinking.

Author and sociologist Zahra Ali was interviewed by Oumma.com about the content of her book \textit{Féminismes islamiques} (20 October 2012). Ali’s book is an anthology that compiles excerpts of essays from Muslim regions and includes her thoughts on how these

\textsuperscript{84} This might be a question of perception, but I personally have not seen any of this type of propaganda published by Oumma.com.

\textsuperscript{85} Here I separate femininity from feminism because of the notion in France that women can be feminist but still fit into certain ideals of femininity prescribed by society. Camille Morineau recently spoke about this at the Albertine Festival in New York. To see the video, visit www.albertine.com/events/festival-albertine-2017/.
readings can help inform and develop a French Muslim feminism. Ali highlights how feminists from developing countries feel that the Western concept of feminism is not compatible with the experiences of Muslim women and that its core is attached to colonialism and racism. Muslim feminism, on the other hand, is based on interpretation of religious text and how the Prophet Mohammad outlined gender equality. Unlike Abu-Lughod, Ali sees the possibility of using the concepts of emancipation and patriarchy, but that France poses its own problematic scenarios for emancipation that Muslim societies do not.

Cecilia Baeza, former president of the feminist association at the Parisian university Science Po was also interviewed by Oumma.com about whether a hijabi or a niqabi could also be a feminist (2 June 2010). Baeza explains that feminism in France was born out of opposition to the Catholic church and its support of patriarchal structures. Since the church no longer has the same standing in society, Baeza sees an opening for reevaluating what secularism means today in France and how religious plurality and multiculturalism should be accepted. In her association, they debated whether a Muslim girl wearing hijab could be a feminist. They decided that wearing the hijab is a way to remove gender and to present oneself as an individual in a way that French feminists have tried for a century. She feels that this is an opening for Muslim feminists to find common ground with non-Muslim feminists because in a way, they want to same things. Baeza notes that Muslim feminists in France seem less dedicated to changing society as a whole but that she has seen many of these women and girls defend the rights of women as a group.86

Also posted were videos and articles about feminism in daily life. Karima talks about feminism within the household both as a mother and as a wife. As the mother, a Muslim woman is responsible for the education and the spiritual and intellectual growth of her

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86 This video was met with angry comments from many users who present themselves as men. They complained about feminism being a brainwashing, anti-men campaign that destroys society. The few women who defended Baeza’s video pointed out that feminism has improved the lives of both men and women in France.
children. Karmia explains that the freedom and responsibility of being a mother is a form of feminism (27 April 2009). In an earlier video, she talks about the freedom women have within marriage, as the Prophet Muhammad outlined specific gender roles in his teachings (23 March 2009). For Karima and the users who commented, separate gender roles mean equality, contrary to what French society says. This emphasis on gender roles appeared also in a heated discussion over the news that a woman was leading prayers in a Canadian mosque. Oumma.com editors uploaded an article about Jamila Ezzani as the third woman to lead *Aïd el Faitr* prayer (4 September 2012). This instigated a complicated and heated discussion between users. For example, Khalida and another user felt that this was a step towards a progressive and modern Islam that they had been waiting for. Nabeela stated that being a woman or reciting those prayers in anything other than Arabic meant that the prayer was nulled. Both men and women also pointed out that the Prophet Muhammad taught that men and women should not pray together, that women should cover their heads and arms and that women should never bend down in front of men. Comments ensued on whether these laws within Islam were anti-woman or if they had a legitimate use.

What is striking about this discussion is that the idea of gender roles protecting women does not seem to be incompatible with feminism for these women. There are some exceptions to this. In an article entitled “One day my prince will not come,” Farida Kaced talks about the expectations women have of men (9 October 2009). Users in the comment section discuss the disappointment of not finding a suitable husband. Amina states that what does not work for women in Islam is that it is inevitably the man that chooses the woman because even if a woman wants to be with a man, only he can decide on marriage. There were also discussions of how gendered practices can be used by the French majority to discriminate against women, such as outlawing the hijab in public schools (7 October 2003). It is not the

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87 The reason that women are always behind men in mosques.
practice of wearing a hijab that these women consider sexist but rather the desire of the state to control women’s bodies ("Nous sommes toutes des femmes voilées” 30 April 2013).

Finally, there were instances of Muslim men, such as the scientist Nidhal Guessoum, weighing in on Muslim feminism, particularly as it relates to education. Guessoum encourages women on Oumma.com to take on more prominent intellectual roles (7 May 2010). In his video on the role of women in Muslim culture, Guessoum says there is still a lack of women scientists at the graduate school and professorial level in Europe and the Middle East. He and the Oumma.com users who commented on his video feel that there need to be more public intellectuals that are Muslim women who can engage in discourses and share their experiences in French society.

6.3.5 Sense of community

Women on Oumma.com did discuss the idea of a Muslim community and what it means to be a part of it. Some women such as Naila expressed a strong opinion that the Muslim community was not a necessary part of Muslim identity (1 April 2013). During an argument that took place between Naila and a non-Muslim man in the comments section, she clearly stated that Muslims have no obligation to some unknown Muslim community. For her, there are only individual choices; no one is required to consider the community in relation to their practice of Islam. This sentiment was voiced by other users responding to different articles. However, the transnational ties women talk about do seem to help them define their sense of being Muslim.

One of the reasons given by media and politicians as to why Muslim women pose a threat to French culture is their connection to other places. As discussed in Chapter Four, allegiance to France alone and generational proof of ties to the Hexagon (mainland territory in Europe), is considered one of the more important aspects of French culture. Most Muslims living in France do not fit this description because they (a) have more recent ties to
immigration and (b) connect to a larger community of Muslims that spans different regions. Stefano Allievi (2016) finds in his research on social networks within Islam that Muslim networks cross national, physical and political boundaries and include many elements such as parental links, friendships, symbolic and imaginary relations. They are an innovation of what he calls “European Islam” and help to produce communities in different ways. These connections are important aspects of daily life that help women on Oumma.com identify as Muslim. Articles on human rights violations, trips to Mecca, current events in Muslim countries and general information about Muslims across the world inspire many women to provide their point of view on the umma and their place in it. They also help women build a sense of place within France.

While there was evidence of transnational ties in the neighborhoods that I visited (e.g. events focused on the Maghreb), the online space was where debate and exchange really took place. Many women participate in discussions and actions that bridge transnational spaces, which is something that will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. The node Transnational ties includes four sources and 21 references that capture examples of how stories from North America, other parts of Europe, North Africa and Israel-Palestine engage with problems that Muslim women feel are important and are a part of their lives. More coded material was included in Defining Muslim and in the node dedicated to Islamophobia. Muslim women define themselves through the ties they have to the umma not only because of spiritual beliefs but also for practical reasons. The vast majority of women online express strong emotions and opinions on the social, economic and political circumstances of various communities outside of France. Issues faced by other Muslims link these women to one another and to other transnational communities through personal experiences.

The conversations observed both in physical and virtual spaces had little to do with whether the women are first generation immigrants or only have a vague family connection to other countries. Their understanding of themselves as Muslim women, even as reverts,
connects them to other national and cultural spaces. The coded material shows that women are not only interested in what is happening to other Muslims, but they also feel affected by it. When analyzing the data, I understood the interest in and emotions felt for Muslim communities outside France as ways of connecting to others but also as an indication of their own fears and insecurities within French society. These women see other Muslims as culturally similar, and strife experienced by anyone in the larger Muslim community is a concern. For example, the plight of Palestinians in Gaza, Israel and the West Bank preoccupies many of the Oumma.com users. Feelings of anger connected to the struggle of Palestinians are deeply embedded in the sense of belonging to the umma. Users and writers of website content often criticize the French government and people for not supporting Palestinian efforts for autonomy more openly. Oumma.com also encourages users to think about Palestine through supplemental content including banner ads, requests for donations and videos that stream along the right side of the screen.

There are many women in associations and the government who are proactive in drawing attention to the various political, social, and economic issues faced by Palestinians. For example, in December 2008 Leïla Shahid, the then delegate from Palestine to the European Union published an open letter on Oumma.com asking that Israel be forbidden to participate in EU talks because of its harmful practices on the West Bank (namely the continuous building of settlements). On October 9, 2000 the Jeunes Musulmans de France (JMF), published an open letter on Oumma.com calling for Jewish institutions in France to remember that they are French first and Jewish second, a model that women on the site also apply to Muslims in France. As French citizens, they believe they should denounce Israel’s torture and killing of Palestinians.

Though the struggle of the Palestinians is a sort of rallying cry for Muslims across France, there are other issues faced by the umma that women spoke about on Oumma.com. On 11 June 2001, an article on human rights violations in Egypt was published by Un
collectif d’intellectuels Musulmans, a group of intellectual Muslims living in France (which includes several women). The collective published an open letter stating that the arrest of Nawal Al-Saadawi in Egypt was a crime. Al-Saadawi is a women’s rights activist, physician and writer who since the 1980s has fought against laws that disinherit women, require the wearing of the hijab and allow for unjust divorces. Al-Saadawi’s work to defend women and the poor resulted in accusations of apostasy and imprisonment for it (she served a prison sentence in the 1980s as well). The collective called for her immediate pardon and claimed that her rights were being violated. Al-Saadawi’s work is often in conflict with how French media, politicians and other public actors have characterized Muslim women (defending women’s rights, the choice to wear the hijab, etc.). The letter illustrates not only how the members felt implicated in this story but also their belief in Al-Saadawi’s convictions.

While more often than not Muslim women in France sharing a sense of solidarity with other Muslims, some also express a fair amount of animosity towards certain countries. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are often cited as instigators of social conflict and bad representatives of Islam. Stories about human rights abuses and the unfair treatment of women tend to elicit strong responses from online users. This was seen on numerous occasions when women spoke out against wearing a niqab as it seems too Salafist, too Whahabbi. In March 2013, Oumma.com reported that around 30 women walked the streets of Algeria’s capital wearing white from head to toe with a piece of lace covering part of their faces. They were heard chanting “vive l’Algérie algérienne” rallying against the Saudi tradition of wearing all black. Several users debated the nature of this intervention and its usefulness not only in Algeria but for French Muslims in terms of representation. There is a desire to move away from all that is Whahabbi not only because it suffocates cultural practices of Muslims throughout North Africa and beyond, but also because it gives others a

88 Whahabbi is a term often used to describe the traditions emerging from Saudi Arabia based on the teachings of Islam followed there. “Whahabbi” is used in Europe and North America mostly to talk about Saudi Arabia—Saudis would not use this term.
false impression of Muslim communities. Many users on the website do not want to be associated with Saudi Arabia and do not want French non-Muslims to think that all Muslims are the same.

6.3.6 The context of France

The ways in which users on Oumma.com define the term “Muslim women” is strongly linked to the context provided by France. Within the stories and opinions, they share in these online spaces it becomes apparent that this identity that they ascribe to (just one of many) is influenced by French culture that is not attached to Islam, as well as their religious beliefs and family traditions rooted in other cultures. The theme of choice emerged as one of the most important aspects of the Muslim woman identity. The gender component of this identity appears to be important, but only in some instances. To call this a gendered identity would only tell part of the story. Another important point is that the conversations that these women have online about Muslim identity are often accompanied by discussions about how this identity is implicated in the narratives of cultural insecurities. In the next section I summarize how the women on Oumma.com understand how they (in the sense that these women are self-identifying Muslims) are portrayed as a threat to society.

6.4 Identifying key cultural insecurity narratives

Woven into the descriptions of what it means to be a Muslim woman is the added element of what it means to live within the context of France. As the material published on Oumma.com usually deals with current events or relevant topics, the articles and videos tend to focus on the debates happening in the most popular media outlets (e.g. Le Monde, TF1, Radio Inter) which cover Muslim communities both within the country and abroad. Chapter Four of this dissertation provides an overview of the representations of and narratives about Muslim women circulating in French society, and discussions of these same issues are found on Oumma.com. It is therefore natural that users are providing their opinions and sharing personal stories that speak directly to their lives in France. Through these comments and
contributions, it is apparent that these women know that they are implicated in the production of cultural insecurities because of the representations they see circulating around them.

The conversations and comments about these representations hover around four main topics: allegiance to other cultures, essentializing Muslim identity, the visual presence of the hijab, violence associated with Islam and traditions that interfere with laïcité. Oumma.com regularly publishes material that attempts to show the diversity and openness of Islam. I often came across articles that would say something similar to the following:

“Bien que la culture musulmane implique le respect d’autrui, certaines personnes s’attachent à nous faire croire que l’islam est une religion dangereuse qui va à l’encontre des droits de l’Homme. C’est malheureusement ce type de préjugés qui resurgisse en France et qui tente d’opposer l’islam à la laïcité à la française.”

Although Muslim culture implies respect for others, some people try to make us believe that Islam is a dangerous religion that goes against human rights. It is unfortunately this kind of prejudice which resurfaces in France and which tries to place Islam in opposition with the French version of secularism. (“L’islam put-il s’adapter à la société française,” 27 January 2004).

This quote is just one of many attempts by the Oumma.com editors and contributors to try and make sense of Islam’s place in France. They feel that the religion itself has been misrepresented but also that the discourses around Islam in France are confusing and irrelevant. Aside from the negative stereotypes of violence and oppression, powerful actors in French society have painted a picture of a religion that is rigid and domineering of its followers, particularly of women. Editors and users of the website often speak of this falsehood and that Islam is adaptable to contexts. If there is misunderstanding at the level of government and media, how can they compete with or rectify the misrepresentations? The desire for the French majority to see a version of Islam that aligns with French culture can be confusing for Oumma.com users.

I challenged the feasibility of creating an Islam of France in Chapter Four by using four examples that would prevent this. These examples are all tied to other spaces and
include: territorial ties through the practice of the religion, territorial ties through immigration, the transnational space of the umma and interconnectivity brought about by globalization. I also pointed to research that has shown the diversity of understanding, faith and practices of Muslims from different countries. As Muslims in France often connect their religious beliefs to either their own country of origin or that of their parents or grandparents, there are already differences between Muslim communities within France. The conversations on Oumma.com show that many women identifying as Muslim in France feel that they belong to multiple, diverse communities that have ties to other spaces.

Connected to the essentialized Muslim identity represented in French society is the uneasy feeling of French non-Muslims that Muslims have allegiance to other states and people. Women described their irritation in seeing the French media and politicians portray Islamists in parts of the “Muslim world” and the support they receive from communities in France. There is, however, little data to support the claims that families living in France would/do vote for religious parties in other parts of the world. This narrative may have emerged from the post-colonial period (1970s and 1980s) when North Africa and the Middle East saw religious parties take root in their governments. It is also possible that the visibility given to political and militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS and the Taliban, who are often portrayed as religiously motivated, feeds into this narrative of Muslims supporting religious fanatics abroad due to news coverage of “home-grown terrorism” in France, the UK and the US. Humorist Yemma Zouina uploaded a video on Oumma.com discussing this issue. Shot in her home, wearing hijab, Zouina discusses how it bothers her that the French media makes a big deal of Islamists being elected in Muslim countries. She points out that in North Africa no one liked Nicolas Sarkozy, but they never accused the French of being crazy for electing him. Why should the French care who is elected in North Africa? (“Ils veulent qui je me cache” 14 Dec 2011).

Islamist is often used as a label for fanatical or, at the very least, very conservative religious parties.
The visual symbol of the hijab is another factor in the production of cultural insecurities that Oumma.com users discuss. The vast majority of users who talked about the hijab or niqab mentioned something about the overarching debates in France. For instance, the rapper Diams’ reversion to Islam struck a nerve with French audiences. Her TF1 interview was met with a wave of French non-Muslims claiming that her new visual appearance (the hijab) sent a bad message to girls in France. Her conversion and adoption of traditional clothing represented, in their eyes, extremism and the oppression of women by their husbands. Hafida Bouadi published an article on Oumma.com vehemently defending Diams’ choice to revert and to wear the hijab, calling for an end to what she calls Islamophobia and an obsession with presuming that all women wearing the hijab are terrorists (“Laissez Diams tranquille!” 2 October 2012). The author’s points were reinforced by users such as revert Karen, who feels that the rapper’s choice was one of inner strength, conviction, and also to some degree resistance. Diams did not grow up Muslim but rather took on this identity even in the face of skepticism and discrimination. (Choosing the hijab as a form of resistance is something that will be discussed in the next chapter.) Karen voices how difficult it is for someone to choose the right path when she/he was not previously a Muslim.

When public figures from the French majority speak out against wearing of headscarves and veils, women on the website pick apart the reasons why this symbol scares them. Some users feel that it is simply a question of difference or seeing Islam as foreign. Racism is also a topic that is brought up, not only in terms of anti-Arab sentiments but that racism is something that can be applied to religious groups such as Muslims (example Salam, 4 October 2012). At times women confront the discourses on oppression or radicalism associated with the hijab. For instance, when commenting on an article about free speech and Charlie Hebdo in France, Lily said this about the hijab and French men:

“what is intolerable to many of them when seeing a woman in a scarf, it’s that it challenges their idea of what they call a liberated woman - someone who is available. The fact that some women are not available to them, it challenges their
desire to control and dominate the world. The quintessential Occidental view. In Islam, certain men have their own version of wanting to possess women, and the scarf can be a way of men protecting what is theirs and making it private. But Muslim women know how to turn that idea on its head by making the hijab a symbol of freedom, thanks to God that releases them from the control of men.” (4 October 2012)

Lily’s comment shows an underlying understanding that French people fear the hijab. It is not only a question of anger or finding it unattractive. This underlying sentiment is voiced by many other users. They cannot necessarily reconcile why these fears and emotions are attached to the hijab but they are well aware that if they choose to wear it, they face fear and anger.

Muslim women on Oumma.com are aware that French media and politicians connect Islam with violence, especially in terms of terrorism. Whenever the editors post an article about terrorist attacks or fundamentalist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, users are quick to disavow these acts or attempt to bring more complexity to the stories. One of the more heavily covered events on Oumma.com in early 2012 was the police shooting of Mohamed Merah. The 23-year-old was accused of killing seven people (including three children) that he gunned down while riding a scooter. The media and police dubbed him the scooter terrorist and, after a 32-hour standoff, he was eventually killed by the authorities. His family was also picked apart for their supposed connection to Salafist groups and violence within their home. After Merah’s death, Oumma.com and its users questioned the accusations against him of terrorism and anti-Jewish and anti-French sentiments. The community felt strongly that just because he was a Franco-Algerian and Muslim, the media, police and other public actors were making the connection between him and violence.

One example that is not linked to terrorism is the violence that erupted after the release of the short film The Innocence of Muslims in 2012. The film, written and produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula (an Egyptian Coptic Christian), was an anti-Islamic piece of propaganda that insulted the Prophet Muhammad (Hélène Sallon 2012). The release of the
film on YouTube in September of that year sparked violent demonstrations in Egypt and Libya. Much of the media coverage during that time was confusing, with images of total chaos and reports of thousands of people demonstrating, looting and setting fire to American flags. Much like the caricatures printed in European newspapers of the Prophet Muhammad, this film was seen as a direct insult to Islam. Oumma.com published an article about the film and the fallout (“Film anti-Islam la shine indignation plutôt que la violence dévastatrice” 14 September 2012). While the author condemned the film and its origins, the women active in the comment section took a different approach. Catherine, Salam and Khalida among others, all criticized that violence that erupted in North Africa. They clearly stated that violence has no place in Islam and that anyone engaging in violent behavior, especially for political reasons, is not a Muslim.

This desire to distance Muslims in general from violence was also brought up in my conversations with women in Courbevoie. I was attending a women’s meetup the day after the film The Innocence of Muslims caught the attention of the media. Though the women in the room knew that I am a US citizen, they still voiced their disgust with US culture and its desire to sully the reputations of Muslims. However, several of the women also criticized the violent protests in North Africa. They felt that it was not a suitable response and worried how it would reflect on Muslims in France.

The last main way in which Muslim women feel that they are constructed as a threat to French society is through the depiction of women challenging secularism. Laïcité is an organizing principle for public and private spaces, helping to define the acceptable citizen. Unlike multicultural models seen in other European countries such as the United Kingdom, the French Republic demands that private identities (such as cultural ones) remain separate from public spaces (Bassel and Emejulu 2010). The visibility of hijabs and niqabs is an

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90 At the time Nakoula Basseley Nakoula called himself Sam Bacile and claimed to be denouncing Islam for Israel’s sake.
obvious example of how traditions attached to Islam are seen as a threat. Though this traditional practice is the most talked, it is not the only one that non-Muslims find objectionable. Users talk about the traditions of halal food as one of the ways in which the French majority sees them as a threat. There was the infamous “affaire du pain au chocolate” in 2012 when UMP member Jean-François Copé reported that French children were having their chocolate bread ripped out of their hands by young Muslims under the pretext that they should not eat during Ramadan. This enraged both Muslims and non-Muslims, and the users of Oumma.com wrote about the insanity behind these claims (e.g. 15 January 2013). There are also periodic stories about schools demanding that Muslim children eat the meat that is given to them (sometimes pork). The claims made by the schools and politicians are almost always around secularism and how Muslims insist on challenging its existence by bringing religion into public spaces (e.g. “La directrice de l’école maternelle de Bondy s’en prend aux écoliers qui ne mangent pas de viande…” 23 April 2013). While users object to this link, they do recognize how this implicates them in the production of fears.

6.5 Insecurities experienced and felt by Muslim women

The women in this study are painfully aware that they are implicated in the production of cultural insecurities as indicated above. They may not frame the discussion specifically using the language of cultural insecurities, but they know that they are being characterized as threatening to the survival of Frenchness because of representations associated with religious and traditional practices. Aside from the fatigue, irritation and sometimes confusion that surrounds their understanding of this position they are pushed into, they also face their own insecurities. Most of their insecurities show a paradox—they are constructed as a threat by French society yet they face discrimination and threats to their physical safety because of their implication in the process. To capture instances of insecurity felt by Muslim women, several nodes were created. Insecurity - Defining issues was used to gather general comments and contains over 124 sources and 346 references. More specific topics such as racism, Islamophobia and measuring fear were also nodes that emerged. The
following section of this chapter will discuss some of the fears and anxieties these women face in their daily lives.

6.5.1 Being invisible

The threat of being rendered invisible is complex within the production of cultural insecurities. In some ways, Muslim women are made visible through the attention and representations of them circulating within public spaces and the visual nature of certain practices. Yet these are one-dimensional, simplistic views of women who self-identify as Muslim. The individual, complex person becomes invisible as she is engulfed in these discourses of fear. Women on Oumma.com talk about this invisibility in many ways. French media periodically pick up instances of violence in different banlieue and terrorist attacks. However, Oumma.com and its users often complain that the deaths of individual Muslims that are not attached to cultural insecurities are ignored. For instance, an open letter written by Le Collectif des musulmanes de France states:

“Le summum de la violence a provoqué la mort d’un jeune homme de 32 ans dans le métro lillois dans la nuit de jeudi à vendredi. C’était un citoyen français « lambda ». Son meurtre n’a suscité aucune réaction médiatique nationale (uniquement locale) et aucune réaction politique.”

The height of this violence resulted in the death of a young man of 32 years in the Lille metro during the night of Thursday to Friday. He was a French citizen and progressive Muslim. His murder resulted in no national media coverage (only local) and no political reaction. (“Des excuses publiques!” 16 July 2014).

This invisibility of death or harm to individual Muslims is seen as scary by many women. So is the denial of basic services because of the assumptions French non-Muslims have towards this identity. These women are often denied services because they wear a hijab or a niqab. In 2009, several women reported being asked to leave their bank because hijabs were not permitted inside. (“Les femmes voilées sont interdites d’accès à la Société Générale de Viry-Chatillon”, 18 August 2009). Nadia Bounouara, an assistant pharmacist, gave an interview to Oumma.com after she was mistreated in her doctor’s office (“Elle ne m’a pas auscultée à cause du voile!” 14 December 2012). Upon her arrival for a checkup, the
receptionist asked her why she came to the office in her hijab. Meeting the doctor was no
different. The doctor refused to give her an exam, told her that she would not accept her as a
patient, asked her where she was from and why she wore the hijab in the office. Bounouara
answered that it was her choice to wear it, which was met with the comment: “Well, I have
the right to uphold secularism in my country.”

Shocked and humiliated, Bounouara left the office in tears. Her family convinced her
to register a complaint with the police regarding the doctor’s discriminatory behavior. In the
comment section, both men and women expressed their disappointment and compassion for
Bounouara, except for one man who felt that her choice not to remove her hijab was the
problem. What comes through strongly in their comments is a certain expectation that these
painful events will happen to Muslim women and through this kind of denial of services, the
women are marginalized and pushed out of view. This denial and mistreatment because of the
hijab makes these women both highly visible in terms of how the French majority thinks of
Muslims but also obscures their individuality. It masks them in a dangerous way that leads to
mistreatment and discrimination.

The niqab brings additional complications in terms of visibility. Up until the early
2000s niqabs were associated with other geographic locations, but with renewed conflicts in
the Middle East, terrorist attacks in the United States and the UK, the few hundreds of women
who do wear the niqab in France were suddenly the topic of debate in France. They were (and
are) represented as physical representations of Muslim women’s intolerance and rejection of
laïcité. Again, the complex discussion of visibility versus invisibility was debated publicly.
The niqab was and is seen by many as an oppressive practice that makes women invisible.
However, outlawing the niqab means that some women will choose to stay home, isolating
them from public spaces, rendering them invisible.91

91 This will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.
There are many discussions on Oumma.com of women being forced out of public spaces because of their veiling practices. A comedy sketch filmed for Oumma.com illustrates how many Muslims interpret the production of cultural insecurities associated with the niqab. In “Fatima arrêtée pour port de burqa” (8 July 2009), comedian Nabil Zerrouki pretends to be a police officer interrogating a woman who has been arrested for wearing a niqab. He uses the wrong terminology (burqa), asks her what country she is from, tells her that feminism has liberated her, that she no longer has to be submissive to her husband and that it would be better if she wore a bikini thong as no one would notice. Zerrouki uses most, if not all, of the arguments that public actors have used in France to outlaw the niqab. His video inspired a good amount of debate between men and women in the comment section. Qodra argues that forcing women to remove the niqab is in fact rendering them invisible because their choice to be a part of society is taken away. These women will most likely stay at home because their religious convictions will trump French law. This type of retreat for Qodra is not one of choice, but one forced upon Muslim women.

6.5.2 Islamophobia

The most common way for Muslim women to talk about the insecurities they feel in their daily lives is through the lens of Islamophobia. The term is used on the website to describe how the non-Muslim French perceive and treat Muslims at all levels, whether it be through daily interactions or through policy-making. The node Islamophobia was created fairly early on in the coding process, once it became apparent that users see the concept as both a way to describe the negative behaviors they see from non-Muslim French but to also represent what they fear. The node includes 71 sources and over 150 references, and while the

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92 Islamophobia is defined by the French dictionary Larousse as hostility towards Islam and Muslims. After reading through hundreds of uploaded materials and comments on Oumma.com, I would say that hostility might not be a strong enough word for how women describe examples and issues related to Islamophobia. The same dictionary defines a phobia as an anxiety-ridden fear that is not justifiable given the situation. This seems much more in line with how women think of the Islamophobia in French society.
focus is almost always on discrimination, the topics and scenarios change. Articles on Oumma.com dealing with Islamophobia will often be accompanied by an image of a family with an overlaid sniper target. The mother wears a hijab and the parents are holding hands with one child on either side of them. The image is used repeatedly and captures the sense that Muslims feel that while they are busy going about their lives, they are targets of discrimination due to the anxiety of the French majority.

Islamophobia is discussed in different ways on the website. The editors of Oumma.com track instances of Islamophobia and studies that are conducted about it, especially by l’Observatoire contre l’islamophobie-CFCM (e.g. “Augmentation inquiétante des acts islamophobes en France.” 3 May 2012). Topics discussed using the lens of Islamophobia include difficulties in the workplace and with gaining employment due to being Muslim (e.g. Halifa, 2 March 2008); racism and anti-Muslim sentiment (e.g. Salam, 23 August 2012); being the target of anti-Muslim laws and the work that organizations must do to combat them (e.g. Sarah, 16 July 2012); harassment for wearing certain clothing (e.g. Nadia and Khalida, 14 December 2012); reprimands of students from school staff for dietary restrictions or clothing; and negative representations or pressure to change by the mainstream media (e.g. Fatiha K, 5 February 2003).

Islamophobia touches Muslims of all ages. For example, Oumma.com staff reported that an 8-year-old girl was called a dirty Arab by her classmate. This led to a discussion in the comments section of how children are facing Islamophobia in public schools. The user

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93 The majority of stories written about either verbal or physical abuse against Muslim women are usually backed up with other news sources or with interviews with the victim. However, I did come across a story about a boy from Yemen who was allegedly beaten up by five American non-Muslims at a university in Texas. I tried to verify the story and could not find it reported in US news. This does not mean it did not happen, but it does cause me to consider that not everything reported on Oumma.com can be fact-checked. There have been other suspicious stories such as the claim that the pop singer Katy Perry used anti-Islamic images in her music video Dark Horse. I could not find any evidence of the images mentioned by the author of the article.

94 It is interesting that though this is a reference to her ethnicity (for the lack of a better word), her parents, Oumma.com writers and users almost all referred to her Muslimness as what was being attacked.
Nabila stated, “it seems that the term Muslim has now replaced Arab.” ("Confrontée à l’islamophobie dès 8 ans" 24 April 2013) This phrase is particularly interesting because Nabila is touching upon an important aspect of how circulating discourses around Muslims in France are very much linked to racism or ethnocentrism. These examples of one-on-one discrimination reach across the Oumma.com community. Salam, in a response to a male user’s comment about how Islam is revered, says “the world, at least in the case of Muslims living in the Occident, is fundamentally hostile towards us (Muslims). Your comment gives the impression that Muslims are playing the poor victims for no reason. Have you turned on the television, read the newspapers, and visited websites lately, to get an idea of the level of hate and anti-Muslim sentiment? It’s become irrational and is very scary.” (19 October 2012)

Contributors and users of Oumma.com feel that Islamophobia takes on many faces and forms, and is sometimes subtle, other times blatant. When in its subtle form, it affects the everyday lives of Muslim women. In 2012, Oumma.com and several blogs reported that a woman in Toulouse, Nora Ait Bella, was asked to leave when she offered to volunteer for Restaurant du Coeur. ("La position des Restos du Coeur au sujet de la discrimination de Nora Ait Bella", 30 November 2012). This national organization provides food and other forms of help to those in difficulty. Ait Bella approached the organization to help distribute food and prepare materials for the homeless, but upon seeing her, the staff initially thought that she was the one in need of assistance.95 When she clarified that she was there to help, the staff told her that if she wore a hijab, then she was not welcome. This type of incident is not only shocking and hurtful, it interferes with important aspects of women’s lives. Charity is a part of Islam and of personal conviction.

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95 She attributed this assumption that she needed social assistance because she identifies as a hijabi.
6.5.3 Violence against Muslims and against institutions

The threat of violence by the French majority is another issue raised, whether it be a woman wearing a hijab that risks being insulted or even physically assaulted, to mosques being defaced with graffiti or pork products. Experiencing discrimination is far from uncommon. The stressful, unpleasant feeling that they can experience hatred at any moment is shared by the majority of women whose comments and opinions were coded for this study.

“Today, we, Muslims of Europe, can all say that we have been assaulted in some way. Assaulted by hateful looks in the streets, in stores, when we ask for help from a salesperson and she makes it plain that she doesn’t want to help us. Assaulted when we watch the TV and the subject is Islam based on the criticisms of journalists, politicians…assaulted in our everyday circumstances. They are cowards for assaulting women. Besides until now, it is usually women who are assaulted! Cowards!” (Kaki, 24 October 2012)

There are also more insidious forms of violence that women on Oumma.com speak to. One recurring issue was the representation of the Prophet Muhammad in cartoons and periodicals such as Charlie Hebdo. Prior to the tragedy that took place in 2015 at its editorial offices, articles on Charlie Hebdo routinely appeared on Oumma.com due to the magazine’s cartoons on Islam. Depicting the Prophet Muhammad is frowned upon, even forbidden in some countries, and the mocking of his image is an offense not tolerated. Satirizing the Prophet is not only hurtful, it is considered an act of violence by some Muslims (e.g. “Caricatures du Prophète pourquoi nous devons nous indigner et défendre notre sacré”, 29 September 2012). For many of the women, it is incomprehensible that French media would purposefully hurt their fellow citizens for little reason.

6.5.4 Misrepresentation by community leaders

While Muslim women have sustained media and political interest from the wider society for decades, there are few nationally recognized and respected voices that can rally and debate on their behalf. Some Muslim scholars, journalists and public figures such as Tariq Ramadan are featured by mainstream media to provide an opposing view to discussions on cultural insecurities. This is often a tactic to inspire debate or ensure that a counter
narrative has been heard, without truly confronting the negative representations of Muslim women. The fact that Muslim women have not been able to gain a foothold in public discourses on cultural insecurities puts them at a severe disadvantage and can easily push them into relying on less than perfect representatives; these voices are described by Roza Tsagarousianou (2016) as “stifled moderate Muslim voices that did not manage to compete with their radical counterparts who enjoy public visibility and audibility, thus reinforcing the perception of an irreconcilable cultural rift in European societies” (9).

The women on Oumma.com are of the opinion that they do not have enough solid, respected advocates who can defend their interests in meaningful ways. They are also critical of some of the more well-known community leaders that have a voice in French society. Hassan Chalghoumi, imam of the mosque in Seine-Saint-Denis, is a regular guest and spokesperson approached by media. For instance, after the Charlie Hebdo murders, Chalghoumi was one of the first Muslim representatives at the scene, talking to television and newspaper journalists. He is seen as a moderate voice that can interpret Muslim-specific issues for the French majority. Chalghoumi is also often featured on Oumma.com, though rarely in a positive light. In 2012, the website even called for his resignation (“Hassen Chalghoumi, hué à Paris, superstar à Tel Aviv,” 5 June 2012). He is accused by both men and women on Oumma.com of being two-faced and weak due to his desire to work with Israel, and shameful in what he represents—a version of Islam that is domesticated, colonized and submissive to French Islamophobic politicians (as stated by Salam, 5 June 2012).

Other figures such as Nora Berra (who presents herself as a beurette) are accused of leaving Islam behind in attempt to gain positions of power and respect from the French public (Delphine, 2 February 2012). Organizations who are working with Muslim women also come

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96 Seine-Saint-Denis is a suburb of Paris and one of the most nationally recognized Muslim areas of France. It is represented using the Badlands characteristics described by Dikeç (discussed in Chapter Four), meaning an area with a high concentration of poor immigrants and individuals who identify as minorities whether racially or ethnically.
under fire. Saïda Kada, president of the organization *Femmes française et musulmanes engagées*, gave an interview on how she viewed the work of the famous feminist group *Ni Putes Ni Soumise* (NPNS) (“Les femmes doivent définir elle-même leurs féminités,” 1 October 2004). As mentioned in Chapter Four, NPNS gained considerable media attention in the 1980s and 1990s as a feminist movement born in the *banlieue.* NPNS brought national attention to the daily violence and difficulties Muslim women were facing at the hands of their male peers, which was then amplified by cultural insecurity narratives. In a video interview with Oumma.com, Kada explains that during the 1980s the *beurettes* had figured out their place in society, their culture and their political identity within the French context. There was a strong political identity that was emerging, but NPNS broke it. The group put forward a very crass look at the *banlieue*—gang rape in particular was discussed—making it seem as though this was a common experience. By doing this, they made the violence that was occurring against *beurettes* different from what other French women were experiencing. Kada feels that NPNS took a neocolonial image of the Muslim woman and gave French politicians a license to discriminate against Muslim communities. She feels that they also imposed a view of feminism and emancipation which does not coincide with the women in the *banlieue* that Kada knows.

For Kada, associations like NPNS have taken Muslim/Islamic feminism hostage, something that is occasionally raised by users in other discussions. For instance, sociologist Zahra Ali was interviewed by Oumma.com in 2012 about her book on Islamic feminism (*Féminismes Islamiques*, 2012). Website user Salam stated that it was refreshing to see an intelligent woman talk about feminism, unlike the members of NPNS, and that Ali’s use of “anti-racism scholars” such as Angela Davis clarifies and develops a French Muslim feminism. Other users also agree that NPNS’ work has led to more racism and vilification of Muslims in France. The organization is also accused of not being able to accept that women can be religious and feminist (Collete, 20 October 2012).
There are also concerns about how Muslims are being misrepresented by people outside of France. This is usually in regard to terrorism, but also media coverage of things in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. For example, Oumma.com featured a story about pre-adolescent girls being forced to wear the hijab in Algeria. Ketifa commented “leave those little girls alone! Later, when they are adults and they are free to make the choice, ok perfect they can wear it, but don’t force them at an age when they are building their character. And it just happens to be a man from Kuwait behind this!” (12 February 2013). Comments such as these are peppered throughout the articles coded and usually object to the stereotypes these countries bring upon the rest of Muslims.

6.5.5 Reversion

The insecurity experienced by reverts both within Muslim communities and in French society at large is specific to their trajectory of once being an outsider to the religion. For most of the research on Muslims in France, reverts are not much of a topic. The focus is more on Muslims with familial ties to other countries, an identity rooted in immigration. In discourses on cultural insecurities, reverts are painted as fanatics or symbolizing the threat of French women being forced into submission (usually by a romantic partner). Reverts who have familial ties to Muslim countries are completely ignored in this context, though there is evidence that women from Islamic societies do not necessarily identity as Muslim but rather around political or national identities.

In an article on reverts in France, Marie Bastin talks about the issues faced by French women who revert (“Panorama des conversions à l’Islam en France,” 23 March 2001). The article describes the experiences of French reverts collected through one-on-one interviews. Bastin finds that her interviewees face different issues and fears than other Muslims. If a revert chooses to wear a hijab, she faces confusion and even hostility from the

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97 Bastin is a sociologist and researcher at l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes pratiques en Sciences Sociales, whose primary work is on conversions to Islam.
men and women around her for choosing to wear something they find to be oppressive and counter to their culture. As a defense, some of these women choose to have jobs where they are mostly surrounded by Muslims who understand their choice. Bastin explains that reverts have a need to be accepted by French society in a different way than other Muslims. They have not faced the type of discrimination and rejection that comes with being a Muslim woman prior to their reversion. It is foreign and destabilizing, often causing great upset in their social circles. They also feel the need to do more and prove themselves within Muslim communities regardless of how well they are received. Their insecurities around culture are framed by finding a new space of acceptance that may not be available to them.

6.5.6 Women and sans-papiers men

It is not surprising that the topic of sans-papiers (literally without papers) surfaced on Oumma.com, but the content of the discussions was unexpected. Sans-papiers is both a legal term and a movement. As described by Catherine Raissiguier (2010), most sans-papiers enter France legally and have familial ties to the country, but because of immigration laws, they do not have access to legal work or to social and civil protections (16). They eventually fall into legal limbo. As a movement, the sans-papiers have gained support from a large portion of French citizens thanks to their outspokenness and heavily media-covered protests. Members of the sans-papiers movement come from North and West Africa, Eastern Europe and East Asia. Given that quite a few Muslims living in France are undocumented, it seems likely that this would be a topic discussed on Oumma.com. However, the only time the situation of sans-papiers was raised in connection to articles and videos on cultural insecurities, was within the context of marriage.

In the comments section of an article on relationships with significant others from North Africa, Ayat told her story of falling in love and marrying a man from Algeria who had been without legal status in France for four years. While things were good at first, she describes a spiral downward as her husband worked illegally, never contributed financially to
the household, and threatened her with divorce if she did not stop showing her arms and wearing makeup. As the relationship deteriorated further, she began to realize that he only wanted the financial and legal security she brought to the relationship. Ayat insists in her post that men from North Africa that are without papers are users and poor examples of Muslims (7 March 2010). Latifah told a similar story of falling in love with a sans-papiers from Tunisia who changed once they married, becoming violent and confiscating her paychecks. One of her friends found herself in a similar situation—she married a sans-papiers, he took her money and disappeared. Sari contributed by saying “let’s be honest—men from North Africa only want to marry French Muslims because they want access to papers and our money.” Four more women shared similar stories. An anonymous user said that she faced difficulties with men from North Africa in general. She found that they are willing to marry a Muslim woman from France for the possible perks of legalization, but then find beurettes to be too difficult and headstrong.

6.5.7 Cultural insecurity and Zionism

While there are many reasons why Muslim women feel insecure in French society, one of the most surprising was the threat of Zionism. The terms Zionism and Zionist are used by both the editors and users of Oumma.com. While researchers have discussed the role of the Palestinian struggle in forming a larger Muslim community that spans across national borders, at the time of data collection most of the research understood the point of view of Muslims in France as anti-Semitic. There is little on why Muslim communities might speak out against Jewish communities in France beyond an argument of racism or ethnocentrism ultimately linked to Israel. However, women (and men) on Oumma.com convey a deep sense of anxiety, approaching paranoia, that Zionism influences policy decisions and media

98. These examples are, of course, not to be considered as representative of all sans-papiers men from any region. However, I was not able to find examples of positive experiences or a defense of sans-papiers in the coded material.

99. Given the comments made, I take the term to mean those who ascribe to or support the movement, but also as a general term used to describe Jewish people that are perceived to be anti-Muslim.
coverage in France. While this has always been the case on Oumma.com, the fears and anger towards a perceived Zionist influence increased significantly in 2012. This I classify as a type of cultural insecurity felt by Muslims who perceive a leaching of Zionist agenda into French society from both within and outside the country as adversely affecting Muslim populations in Israel, Palestine and France.

Users displayed a fear of physical threat, especially for Palestinians, but also the notion that Zionism is an instigator for debates and policies regarding cultural elements such as clothing and religious practice in France. Approximately seventy-four of the coded sources from the website had either authors or users expressing concerns about the role Zionism plays in these instances. For example, in 2003 contributor Fatiha K posted an article asking Muslims to boycott the national television channel TF1 for airing a documentary about Israeli Special Forces fighting terrorism. Fatiha K outlines all the instances of aggression towards Muslims found in the program and what she believes to be examples of Zionist propaganda meant to influence the French public in a pro-Israeli manner. Her fears are that TF1 convinces viewers that Palestinians are in fact the violent enemy of democracy because of their religion and that this opinion will be transferred to the French context. Fatiha K’s comments are poignant and passionate, revealing her distrust of French media as being co-opted by Zionists.

The fear for the safety of Muslims as selected targets of Zionist influence is a popular theme. In 2012, Oumma.com posted an article about Jérémie Louis-Sidney, a revert arrested in Strasbourg for suspected links to terrorist activities. In both the article and comments section, individuals discuss the unfounded connection French society makes between Islam and terrorism because (they argue) of Zionist influences. Interestingly, in several instances users and authors point out that the insecurities resulting from representations of Muslims as terrorists are perpetuated by Zionist groups, not Jewish people in general.
The Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France (CRIF) is viewed as a powerful force behind French government and media. Not surprisingly, as solidarity with the Palestinian people is such an important part of Muslim identity for many living in France, the CRIF is viewed as aggressive and dangerous. In Fatiha K’s 2002 article on antisemitism, she states that the CRIF is able to bend statistics and personal stories to influence public opinion regarding the supposed antisemitism expressed by Muslims in France (the claim of antisemitism she believes is unfounded). A similar position was taken by Oumma.com users in 2012 when the Consiel français du culte musulman (CFCM) reported their concerns that young Muslims are unfairly labeled as antisemitic and often accused of crimes they did not commit. Users again blamed the CRIF of using tactics to vilify Muslims and paint Zionists (sometimes Jewish people in general) as victims of an aggressive culture. Because of the power the CRIF is perceived to have, these women fear that their children and husbands will be found guilty of crimes they have not committed. Fatiha K covered a story in 2004 about a Jewish woman who claimed to have been physically and verbally assaulted by a group of young Muslims for being Jewish. After the media hysteria that followed it was proven that the woman had not in fact been assaulted by the accused.

Politicians and journalists who work with the CRIF are labelled as Islamophobic, and Muslim leaders who build relationship with CRIF leaders are even called traitors. For example, Imam Hassen Chalghoumi participated in a trip to Tel Aviv in June 2012 with CRIF members. This trip’s goal was to encourage dialogue and peacebuilding between Muslims and Jews by showing support of Israel from French Muslims in the process. Several of the active Muslim women on the website called Chalghoumi a traitor, a Zionist, a liar, and a poor representative of the Muslim people (2012). Another example occurred earlier in 2012 when the prominent rabbi Daniel Farhi was accused of sexual assault of a minor. Farhi was

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100 The CRIF, founded in 1943, states its mission as the fight against totalitarianism and oppression of all kinds, and the unwavering support of the state of Israel (http://www.crif.org).
101 Journalists and public actors even accused Oumma.com as supporting antisemitism and fueling discrimination within Muslim communities.
decorated as a Knight of the *Legion d'Honneur*, one of the most prestigious awards in France. When news broke of the allegations on Oumma.com, users voiced their dismay in the power of the CRIF to bury the story and ensure that his knighthood in the *Legion d’honneur* would remain intact, unlike Cheb Mami ("*Un influential rabbi français mis en examen pour plusieurs viols et aggressions sexuelles,*" 19 January 2012). Cheb Mami, the Algerian *rai* singer who gained wide popularity in France in the 1990s, was given the same honor but it was taken away when he was charged with the battery of his ex-partner.

It is also popular for users to make connections between what they refer to as a Zionist agenda and the United States. In a 2012 article outlining how former president Nicolas Sarkozy made commonplace the police profiling and arrest of practicing Muslims, users make the connections between Zionist and US influences. One user states “Sarkozy, the American-Zionist agent who senses he will lose the elections put all of his strength against a community that is weak, divided, poor, to cause a diversion from his mediocre performance” (10 April 2012). Her reference to Muslim communities as weak, divided and poor is in relation to the perceived strengths of Zionist and US interests. Comments on articles (e.g. “*J’ose Marine malgré son islamophobie ?*” 1 March 2012) also accuse former president Sarkozy of being a Zionist. This feeling of power imbalance was echoed throughout the 2012 presidential election period. Many women on Oumma.com expressed fear and disappointment regarding the perceived financial influences of Zionists and US citizens on the *Parti Socialiste* (PS).

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*Raï* is a type of music that originated in Algeria in the 1930s. It is influenced by Arab folk traditions, reggae, Spanish and French music. *Raï* gained popularity in France during the early and mid-1990s, exposing the general public to songs in Arabic and subject matter rooted in North African traditions. The widespread popularity of the music was a departure for France, as songs in Arabic had never before had mass appeal. As noted by journalists and scholars at the time, *raï* contributed to new conversations about second and third generation Muslims who clearly had strong transnational connections to the homelands of their parents/grandparents.
In one of the debates on Islamophobia hosted by the website, journalist Elisabeth Lévy and feminist politician Clémentine Autain heatedly hashed out issues faced by Muslims in France. Upon watching the segment, one commentator states “we are increasingly aware of the domination of Zionism, those who want us to submit to their point of view (the new world order)” (“Débat sur la Islamophobie,” 18 November 2012). Her comment is met with others chiming in, expressing the need to fight public figures such as Elisabeth Lévy who spread a Zionist message through her work in media. Given the increased number of responses on Oumma.com raising the alarm about the influence of Zionism on French society, it is possible that this viewpoint is gaining momentum in everyday spaces. An illustration of this rising fear was expressed in the media coverage of comic Dieudonné’s ‘quenelle’ in late 2013 (Le Monde 2013). Though the comic has garnered a lot of attention over the years, the perception that this gesture embodies antisemitism was picked up by media outlets across Europe, including Oumma.com. He went as far as stating that these accusations were nothing more than Islamophobia by the media but particularly by the Zionists. Dieudonné was arrested in 2016 for hate speech when, during one of his routines, he used inflammatory language to accuse the Jewish people of mistreating “Black people” and mocked the Holocaust.

The anti-Semitic portrayal of Muslims in France is complicated, and raises questions of whether French non-Muslims feel that Jewish communities within France are less culturally different than Muslims (this could be a dissertation in itself). Muslims on Oumma.com clearly link certain Jewish identities to Islamophobia and in turn voice their dismay that while Muslims and Jewish people have the same legal stature, they are not be

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103 The ‘quenelle’ is an arm gesture where one hand is placed beneath the opposite shoulder and the other arm is extended flat against the body. The quenelle is associated with Nazi Germany and continues to be used by the comic during his standup routine.

104 Dieudonné gained a following of young French Muslims over the last ten years as public figure who denounces the stigmatization of Muslims, ridicules Muslim figures he believes to be misrepresenting communities, and challenges the elites in French society (Le Bars 2014). He also holds fast to his anti-Zionism convictions which he sees as advocacy for Palestinians, a cause he considers to be at the heart of Muslim culture across France.
treated equally. This feeds into the larger discussions of discrimination that are at the root of the insecurity that Muslim women on Oumma.com feel living in France.

6.6 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter set out to analyze how Muslim women on Oumma.com define the term Muslim women, whether they are aware of how French society represents them as a threat and what in turn makes them feel insecure. The analysis of the data collected on the website and the examples from casual conversations in Boulogne-Billancourt and other neighborhoods, clearly show that the identity of Muslim woman is rich in complexity, something rarely portrayed by representations circulating in society. The identity is never seen as in conflict with Frenchness from their point of view, though women recognize that cultural insecurity narratives directly make this claim. As expressed by Avril: “Your story touches me sister, because it is one that we and many young Muslim girls have lived. ‘You take yourself for a French woman,’ there’s a phrase that kills and that we have all heard at one point…it’s like French society slapping you.” (Avril, 23 March 2010)

One of the key aspects that emerged from the discussions on Oumma.com is that Muslim identity is built around choice. This is reflected in discussions of whether or not to engage with veiling practices, choosing which traditions to follow and defending how other Muslims live their life. Reversion is also a choice.\(^{105}\) as is the open expression of Muslim identity in the face of Islamophobia. The emphasis on being a good Muslim also resonated throughout the years of Oumma.com’s existence. Users present various ways a woman can present a good version of a Muslim, which does not necessarily reflect what outsiders might think. Goodness is not wrapped up in veiling, marriage or following strict interpretations of religious text. It also includes living an ethical life and participating in society.

\(^{105}\) I am making the assumption that the women on Oumma.com who converted to Islam did so by choice and not because they were coerced.
The gender component of a Muslim woman identity is also not cut and dried within the data collected. Women clearly connected gender to veiling practices and occasionally to their role within the household, but they mainly discussed being Muslim more generally. Being a woman comes into play when she is faced with the negative representations circulating through society. This is a point that is clear to these users—Muslim women are clearly the target of representations in a way that men are not. This emerged from discussions on feminism in French society. Users voiced their confusion about how narratives on liberation and emancipation found in “French feminism”\(^{106}\) seemed to conflict with Muslim women identities. It is within this framework of choice and rights that women are able to engage with veiling practices and voice their opinions on religion. Feminist scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod have emphasized that within the religious identity of Muslims are inherent rights for women and it is through religious practice that women have agency. This idea was touched upon by some women on Oumma.com, but mostly when explicitly defending gender equality within Islam in the face of cultural insecurities. Women also talk about the values of humanity and acceptance structured within the religion in response to more conservative or rigid comments by fellow users.

In writing this chapter, two overriding question kept creeping into the analysis: how much of the discussion of Muslim identities is influenced by French society? How much of the discussion of these identities is shaped by the context of online publication and comments?\(^{107}\) The first circles back to the production of cultural insecurities. Many of the women on the site noted that their identity as French people can override their identity as Muslim women. Others specifically identify as being French Muslim women, whose religious

\(^{106}\) I use quotes as it does not seem accurate to claim that French feminism as it is today would not be influenced somehow by the identities and experiences of French Muslim women and beurettes.

\(^{107}\) It is important to remember that I have focused solely on issues and discussions that relate to being Muslim women in France. Though Oumma.com covers Muslim interests, the women and men on this site do not solely talk about this identity and the issues that relate to it. Like anyone else, they talk about diverse subjects such as French politics, arts, current events and activities that are not specifically connected to being a Muslim.
identity is also informed by being born/raised or residing in France. This addresses the constant debate in France regarding how to ensure that an Islam of France is propagated and not an Islam from outside of France. Given how Muslim women talk about being French on the website, it would seem that an Islam of France already exists. These women blend their religious identity with elements of French culture, and while they do not specify what elements of French culture are a part of their French Muslim identity, they express that they do in fact feel French. However, even if they identify as French, they continue to be marginalized. These French Muslim identities are therefore part of Frenchness, whether non-Muslim French recognize the influences and contributions of Muslims to society.108

The second overriding question asks to what degree the discussions on Oumma.com are influenced by the published material. When a website user talks about her identity as a French Muslim woman, she is doing so either in relation to an article or video posted by Oumma.com staff on a specific subject or as a response to another user. She is not talking about identities in a vacuum but rather is influenced by the material to which she is responding. Users are also addressing the larger discourses on cultural insecurities circulating in society when they are contributing their point of view. It is therefore possible that these identities are strongly shaped in contrast to the circulating narratives or that certain aspects of these identities become more important because of the construction of women as a threat. The representations and discourses circulating are too intertwined in daily life to determine their effect on individual senses of personal and community identity.

In addition to these questions of influence, it became apparent that the value of looking at online spaces is not only the amount of data one can collect (due to the time span selected and variety of material) but also the ability of online communities to reveal subtleties.

108 There is also very little mention of a European Muslim identity, though many scholars such as Tariq Ramadan have discussed its possibility and existence. This will be discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation.
through their long-term discussions of various issues. For instance, the distinction that is made between the appropriateness of the hijab versus the niqab is revealed in subtle ways. While there was some disagreement as to whether Muslim women are required to wear a hijab, I never came across a user who thought that restricting its presence in public schools or other spaces was acceptable. These women used the arguments of laïcité and human rights to argue that Muslim women should in fact have the choice to wear one. The niqab, however, is a different story. Among community members, the niqab was overwhelmingly talked about in negative terms. Yet they defended the right to choose to wear it. The real questions for them are (a) what is the motivation for wearing it and (b) why would you subject yourself to it? I am not so sure that in a focus group setting or during an interview that this distinction would be made given that my research questions are more broadly about cultural insecurities. The building over time of discussions and revelations online about the lives of these women and their opinions is rooted in the structure of these online spaces.

This chapter has provided a glimpse of how Muslim women on Oumma.com understand the label of Muslim woman and identify as such, how they understand the representations of Muslim women that produce and perpetuate cultural insecurities, and what in turn makes these women feel insecure in their daily lives. Chapter Six will delve into how users on Oumma.com engage with and contest the representations associated with cultural insecurities. The chapter will cover how everyday physical/offline spaces becomes battlegrounds between non-Muslim French who feel susceptible to cultural insecurities and Muslim communities that are expressing their identities on the landscape. This section includes the observations made on the streets of Boulogne-Billancourt. This discussion is followed by a presentation of how Muslim women respond to the negative representations they encounter. Though the data collected is from an online space, the evidence shared draws from what these women do in physical spaces. Chapter Seven will then bring the discussion back to online spaces by discussing how Muslim women on Oumma.com use virtual spaces to engage with cultural insecurity discourses.
Chapter 7  Engagement and resistance in offline spaces

The previous two chapters of this dissertation have laid the foundation for discussing how Muslim women react and respond to the representations of themselves by the state (especially political actors), public actors including media, and others as a threat to French culture. Building upon the definitions and discussions around identity and insecurity discussed in Chapter Five, this chapter presents evidence of cultural insecurities in daily life and also focuses on the engagement of these women in offline spaces. Offline spaces are the everyday material spaces in which we move and interact. They are comprised of both public and private spaces and in the case of this dissertation, are important sites for producing but also responding to insecurities. Material spaces are not only sites of interaction but also are imbued with layers of culturally informed signs and symbols that have evolved in meaning over time. Together with social interactions, these elements appearing on everyday landscapes produce and aid in circulating cultural insecurities. They also provide Muslim women with an opportunity to confront these insecurities in various ways, potentially leading to changes in their lives as self-identifying French Muslim women.

Material spaces have long garnered interest from geographers as they reflect and convey the ongoing social, economic, political and natural processes in societies. Geographers have investigated how insecurities (e.g. related to immigration or crime) influence behaviors and perceptions of different groups. While this dissertation is drawing upon the thoughts, discussions and activities of women online, the users’ lives outside of virtual environments inform their reactions, comments and opinions shared online. It is their everyday experiences in both private and public spaces offline that shape conversations on Oumma.com.

Several questions guided the data collection and analysis for this chapter, including:
How do representations of Muslim women as threats manifest themselves in material spaces?

What types of visualities and interactions implicate Muslim women in the production of cultural insecurities in everyday spaces?

How do Muslim women understand and engage with representations of themselves as threats to the cultural stability of French society in offline spaces?

And finally, how do women contest these through actions?

Guided by these questions, this chapter begins by discussing the production and perpetuation of cultural insecurities in material spaces using examples discussed by users on Oumma.com and from my observations collected in Boulogne-Billancourt. The chapter then provides examples and reflects on the ways in which Muslim women engage with and contest their implication in cultural insecurity narratives in material spaces. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings.

### 7.1 The manifestation of cultural insecurities in everyday spaces

The literature review and chapter that set the scene for exploring the representations of Muslim women in France focused largely on the role of political and other public actors (including media) in sculpting and circulating negative narratives. The production of cultural insecurities is reliant on voices that receive widespread attention. This generally means politicians, public intellectuals, journalists and a variety of media outlets that give voice to the opinions and experiences of a wide range of people. As narratives painting Muslims as a threat build and cultural insecurities are produced, formal actions such as legal measures (e.g. laws targeting Muslim women) are taken. However, there are also more subtle and insidious ways in which Muslim women are stereotyped and then treated (often poorly) on a daily basis as a result of these representations. While it is easy to find examples of how public figures and politics contribute to the production of cultural insecurities, everyday interactions are also important to consider.
Material spaces take on meaning for different individuals and groups. These spaces are constantly changing due to a number of factors, including time of day and who is present. Studies on material spaces reveal complexity in terms of use and place-making linked to different activities, institutional structures, events and perceptions. Studies on Muslim women’s spatial practices have looked at how women living both in Muslim and non-Muslim societies use public spaces functioning within cultural contexts (e.g. Ehrkamp 2013). In non-Muslim societies, women who self-identify or are labeled as Muslim may use and experience material spaces in ways that are specific to this identity. For instance, wearing a hijab can influence not only how they interact with and within spaces (Mohamidi Johnson and Miles 2014), but also how others react to their presence, which can lead to finding some spaces aggressive (e.g. experiencing verbal and physical abuse) and others welcoming (e.g. neighborhoods that have a large number of hijabis).

Everyday landscapes are sites of production of cultural insecurities because they are spaces where Muslims and non-Muslims are interacting and influencing the physical environment. The tensions that play out in media coverage of opinions and events shows how cultural insecurities are woven into discourses on a variety of issues such as urban development and housing (e.g. representations of the banlieue), changes in the job market (e.g. narratives around Muslims benefitting from social programs or taking away French jobs) and national security (especially in relation to immigration). In public spaces such as neighborhood streets and commercial areas, Muslim women easily become targets of fears and anxieties in France not only because of what certain non-Muslims hear around them but also how they interpret habits and behaviors of Muslim women that may feel unrelated to Frenchness. In turn, these spaces are also important sites of creating self and connection to both place and other people, and this connection to space can be especially important for minorities (Bolaños 2011). Muslim women living in France may experience the negative and often frightening effects of cultural insecurities in everyday spaces, but they can also create
and interact in spaces that they consider safe. In some cases, Muslim women can even influence the landscape around them to their benefit.

In addition to interactions between people, physical landscapes are filled with signs and symbols that facilitate the production of cultural insecurities. These signs and symbols can include small things such as a bumper sticker and larger things such as religious institutions, which can illicit negative reactions from non-Muslims who feel that their environment is becoming less French. They are also spaces where Muslim women can feel a certain responsibility to represent a positive image of Islam. Users on Oumma.com talk about the issues they face in public spaces on a daily basis. Some women feel the pressure of being a good Muslim in public spaces because of the burden of representing all Muslims: “As said by Tariq Ramadan during a talk, when speaking about Muslims: ‘You are all TVs.’ So, we must play the role of the media on our small scale if we cannot be representatives on a bigger scale.” (Yasmina, 23 April 2012).

For this dissertation, a number of institutions, events, symbols and signs were observed that are linked to the production of cultural insecurities in material spaces but also as sites and ways in which Muslim women can engage and contest representations of themselves. In the sections that follows, I blend together examples and findings from the discussions on Oumma.com and my personal observations of Boulogne-Billancourt to provide a look at how the physical landscape plays a role in producing and engaging with cultural insecurities. This will set the stage for a more in-depth look at how women then engage, cope and react in these spaces to evidence and feelings associated with these insecurities.

7.2 Impact on neighborhood spaces

As described in Chapter Four, though migrants from Muslim countries have been present in France for more than a century, it was not until the 1970s that Islamic cultural signs
were visible in urban landscapes (Cesari 2005). Religious practice throughout the twentieth century occurred mainly in discreet prayer rooms or basements of worker housing. North African inspired cafés existed, but given France’s colonial control of the Maghreb, this was not necessarily seen as evidence of immigrants taking hold of a neighborhood. With the exceptions of a few areas in Mediterranean cities, and in Paris where a high concentration practicing Muslims resided, there was very little indication in material spaces of the presence of individuals and communities identifying as Muslim. This began to change in the 1980s and today there are areas of French cities that visibly reflect the presence of Muslims in different ways. Boulogne-Billancourt offers interesting examples of how Muslim communities influence the landscape and show their presence in subtle ways. This influence is also part of the push and pull created by cultural insecurities, as the physical environment allows for a dialogue to take place.

To understand how these tensions can evolve and imprint themselves onto the landscape through institutions, interactions, events and signs and symbols, I gathered observations in the neighborhoods of Bouglone-Billancourt, a suburb of Paris. Observations were recorded in increments over 2011 and 2012. As discussed in Chapter Four, Boulogne-Billancourt was chosen for several reasons. This suburb is the home both of Muslim families that are first generation immigrants and of families where at least two generations were born in France. North African workers settled in Billancourt starting in the 1920s, mainly because of the Renault car factories (which closed in 1992). Until the 1980s, this Muslim community was relatively invisible in terms of religious practice because prayer

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109 It is important to note that while these men were usually seen as immigrants, they were in fact French citizens because of the colonial system, which continued until the early 1960s.

110 Boulogne and Billancourt were two different communes which joined in 1924. Billancourt has always been thought of as the industrial, less desirable area of the suburb because of its factories (car and aircrafts), making housing cheaper and more accessible to immigrants working for these companies. Since the 1980s, Billancourt has hosted most of the lower-income housing that all city suburbs and quarters are required to offer. When speaking to different people, there is often a distinction made between Boulogne and Billancourt as two different neighborhoods. The separation allows people to not only describe the location of something but also appears to have meaning in terms of what groups live where for the people with whom I spoke.
rooms and get-togethers were not obvious to outsiders. They were housed in nondescript buildings and were somewhat segregated from the wealthier non-Muslim French living in the suburb. More recent immigrants have found housing in Billancourt through support programs or have moved there to be with family.

Though Boulogne-Billancourt does have an active Muslim community, it is somewhat atypical when compared to existing research about Muslim women in France. Much of the work that has been published on Muslim communities focuses either on areas that have a large Muslim population or that fit the stereotype of a banlieue (see Chapter Five). Boulogne-Billancourt is technically a banlieue, but it does not fit into the imagined impoverished, violent, isolated immigrant stronghold that became the norm in representations of the French banlieue that began in the 1980s. Boulogne-Billancourt is a wealthier suburb, and is well connected to Paris, in terms of transportation, through a metro line. Crime statistics are low, schools are good and there are many child-friendly areas. It is because of the differences from the stereotype of a banlieue that Boulogne-Billancourt offers an opportunity to think about how cultural insecurities can play out in areas where Muslims are seen and present but are clearly in the minority. This socio-economic context in which Muslim women are living and interacting is less studied by social scientists. In addition, Boulogne-Billancourt has a thriving Muslim (religious and cultural) community which is mostly comprised of families with familial ties to North Africa. Though the Muslim communities are not always visible, there are certain markers that show their presence. Below is a mixture of observations from Boulogne-Billancourt, as well as stories from articles and reactions by users on Oumma.com, that provide examples of cultural insecurities manifesting themselves on everyday landscapes.

111 I use the plural here to indicate differences between how Muslims self-identify in this context. It would be easy to assume that there is one Muslim community that practices in the suburb’s mosque, but as mentioned throughout this dissertation, there is not just one definition of Muslim. I therefore assume that there are people living in Boulogne-Billancourt that identify as Muslim but do not feel a part of the community linked to the mosque.
7.2.1 Religious institutions

One of the more obvious examples of how Muslim communities have influenced the landscape in urban areas is through the establishment of religious institutions, mainly mosques. This is the hub of religious activity, and can be a tense topic for those who feel that Islam is not compatible with French culture. The building/convert[ing of buildings into mosques brings visibility to Muslim communities in new ways. As explained by Jocelyne Cesari (2005), mosques in Western Europe are a hub of communal life, and are visual representations of Muslim practices moving from private spaces (hidden prayer rooms) to visible public spaces. There are several examples of how mosques trigger cultural insecurity narratives, which use the threat of proselytizing and the demise of France’s Christian culture as central themes. A good example of this was seen during the debate on the referendum on minarets in Switzerland. Politicians such as then President Sarkozy, other public figures and journalists took this moment in Swiss history to manipulate the discussion, widening it to address how Western European countries needed to control Islam in their societies to ensure that it “fits.” UMP members opposed to minarets in France invoked a debate on culture within a national identity framework, an identity that did not include this symbol of incompatible Islam. They claimed that their constituents did not want their countries to be modified or deformed (in terms of architecture and urban planning) by the presence of mosques, nor did they want to see their secularism challenged (Seelow 2009).

The establishing/building of a mosque is an important step in Muslim communities’ efforts to integrate into French public spaces. While the mosque is the most obvious sign of Muslims living in the area, l’Olivier is not exactly a classic Islamic institution in terms of

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112 Just as there is no specific data on the number self-identifying Muslims in France, there does not seem to be official data on the number of mosques or other types of sites for religious practice in France. A handful of articles from major news outlets covered a story in 2015 where the imam of the Grand Paris Mosque claimed that there were not enough sites for religious practice for the number of Muslims in France.
architecture. Boulogne-Billancourt offers a good example of a neighborhood which houses an active mosque. The Centre Culturel et Cultuel Musulmane de Boulogne-Billancourt was first formed in 1981, and the recognition of a specific location was granted in 1983. After much negotiation and lobbying, in 2007 the outgoing mayor Jean-Pierre Fourcade (a UMP member), agreed to allow the building of a cultural and religious hub. This was met with some resistance from the non-Muslim community and when it was announced that funding would be provided from interested parties in Saudi Arabia, national media took interest in the story.\footnote{For example, see http://www.leparisien.fr/boulogne-billancourt-92100/l-arabie-saoudite-au-secours-de-la-mosquee-19-09-2009-643848.php.} Thanks to these funds, the Muslim community reached its goal of 4.5 million Euros and began building. In 2011, the mosque, with the support of town hall, was able to open its doors as La Grande Mosquée l’Olivier.

L’Olivier is a very modern building that fits nicely into a renovated area of Boulogne-Billancourt. It is surrounded by mixed-use development, with new office buildings, housing and an elementary school nearby. There are high rise buildings for lower-income families that make up a sort of small cité, though they too underwent some improvement in the last few years. On any given day, you can walk by the mosque and not even notice it is a religious institution, except at prayer times. One can observe women in hijabs and men wearing long white tunics and skullcaps heading to or from the mosque. There are. However, no minarets, no arches, no audible call to prayers and, as of 2013, no sign outside providing the name and purpose of the building. When I inquired about this, I was told that this blending into the landscape was both an agreement that the Muslim community had with the town hall and something it wanted to do. Non-Muslims occasionally stopped and looked at the building or talked to someone outside of it in a random way, but during the period of my observation it seemed to be most frequented by Muslims attending classes or prayer. I was able to enter the mosque on two occasions, once when a group of women were reading the Qur’an and once to
meet one of the leaders. On both occasions, the community was incredibly welcoming, though not necessarily at ease with my research.\footnote{I also had a few experiences with what seemed like gatekeepers during my last few visits. There is a bench conveniently placed outside the mosque facing the entrance. I often sat on this bench to observe interactions or to have casual conversations with women waiting to enter. When seated on the bench during the month of Ramadan 2012, I was questioned by two men as to what I was doing there. They asked me about my intentions and when I explained that I hoped to meet some women with whom I could speak, they respectfully but firmly told me that their mosque was not a tourist attraction. One of the men even invited me for coffee, but I declined as the offer felt odd given his defensiveness of the mosque.}

At the time, there did not appear to be any sign of non-Muslims objecting to the presence of the mosque in the neighborhood. However, mosques are battlegrounds within the physical landscapes of other parts of France. Graffiti and other defacing of the exterior of these buildings take place periodically throughout the country (ex. “\textit{Diminution des acts anti-musulmans après la champagne présidentielle},” 16 July 2012). There are also periodic public protests against mosques. For instance, the \textit{Bloc Identitaire/Génération Identitaire} is a political group, usually described as extreme right, that surfaced during the early 2000s as a reaction to multiculturalism. It has been accused of being anti-foreigner, anti-immigration, anti-semitic and anti-Muslim. Urban neighborhoods have become a place where the \textit{Bloc Identitaire} can express its ideology, and mosques are often the target. This can range from defacing property and throwing haram foods such as pork into mosques, to co-opting them for the purpose of protest. In October 2012, members of the \textit{Bloc Identitaire} climbed to the roof of a mosque in Poitiers and occupied the building. A large banner with the words \textit{732 Génération Identitaire}\footnote{The number 732 is a reference to the year that Charles Martel and his army were credited with defeating the Arab troops around Poitier who were battling northward.} was held up by members and flares were set off.\footnote{To see footage, visit \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv1crpnZUYI} and an article (\url{http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2012/10/20/01016-20121020ARTFIG00354-des-identitaires-occupent-une-mosquee-de-poitiers.php}).} Women on Oumma.com report knowing about similar instances in various parts of France that are ignored by larger media outlets.
Local governments also voice their concerns about what mosques may mean for French culture. Jocelyn Cesari (2005) finds that arguments against the building of mosques at the local level are the same across Europe and include: potential increase in noise and traffic, incompatibility with urban planning and not conforming to security measures. When L’Olivier began its plans for building, the imam and the group in charge of the association went through months of negotiation to obtain a permit. They not only had to convince the city that the site would conform to all regulations, but also that it would be more of a cultural center for Muslims and non-Muslims living in Boulogne-Billancourt. This strategy of toning things down and placating French politicians is important when requesting permission to establish a mosque, but does not mean that communities must remain quiet about their religious practices. In 2013, L’Olivier officially changed its name from Centre Culturel et Cultuel de Boulogne Billancourt to La Mosquée de Boulogne L’Olivier.¹¹⁷

7.2.2 Commercial goods and services

Mosques are not the only visibly Muslim institutions/buildings. Neighborhoods are constantly changing, and Muslim-friendly shops and restaurants take root in cities across France. There are stores that are run by Muslims such as halal butchers and there are stores that are not exclusively Muslim but carry halal products or clothing geared towards Muslim women. During the

¹¹⁷ Muslim communities put certain strategies in place to obtain permits. During a gathering that I attended in another suburb of Paris (Courbevoie), a group of self-identifying Muslims had approached City Hall about establishing a cultural center. This was a carefully chosen term as they ultimately wanted a mosque, but felt this term was too loaded with misunderstanding.
observation period in Boulogne-Billancourt, there were periods when Muslim products were heavily advertised. For instance, there was an obvious increase in advertising for halal products during Ramadan. The national grocery chain Franprix began advertising specials during the holy month in their stores around Billancourt (pictured here). One of the cashiers explained that their store began heavily pushing these products in 2010 when management realized the increase in revenue during the month-long holiday was significant enough to dedicate window space to certain products. The cashier was asked what products were popular with Muslim women, and how best to attract them. She suggested specific foods that would appeal to families to break their fast and to celebrate in large groups.

Halal foods tend to be grouped together in grocery stores and always have signs written in a font that suggests a fantasy view of the Middle East/the Orient (as seen in the figure above). The stores reserve a special place for these products; they are not mixed with “normal” products. Interestingly enough halal products were only available in the stores in Billancourt—the neighborhood that has historically housed immigrants and where the mosque is located. Outlets of the same chains in other parts of Boulogne did not sell any halal products.

While there was no evidence in Boulogne-Billancourt or on Oumma.com that non-Muslim French have expressed anger towards halal products being sold in national chains, halal foods are a source of tension in two major ways. In the 1980s, stories about sheep being slaughtered in bathtubs during the month of Ramadan outraged many French and were sensationalized by the media. Muslims were represented as barbaric and dirty for butchering animals in household bathrooms. While it is possible that this did happen (due to a lack of halal butchers), the myth of the bathtub butchers took hold in cultural insecurity narratives.

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118 When I returned in 2014, these products were being advertised outside of the month of Ramadan as well.
119 I did not ask her if she was Muslim, but the store owner/manager either assumed or asked her if she identified as such.
The second issue around halal foods is connected to schools. Some politicians, public school representatives, parents and students have expressed their discomfort and irritation with the incorporation of halal foods in public school cafeterias. The process of “halalization” in schools periodically produces stories of stalemates between school administrations and parents/students where arguments that laïcité is being challenged by these practices are used. Halal foods are dubbed as “multicultural” or foreign and therefore have no place in French public institutions. Tensions can rise between school administrators and parents who feel that their children should have a choice in their own diet. The request that Muslim-appropriate meals be served is perceived as a desire not only to force an outside culture on non-Muslims but also suggests that concessions should be made for minority groups. Staff in different schools use this line of argument to show that multiculturalism is not compatible with French culture.

Other issues around food have been raised during Ramadan. Typically, Muslims fast during daylight for 40 days, which can inflame cultural insecurity narratives around job/scholarly performance as well as discomfort of coworkers and peers. Muslims are sometime also portrayed as aggressive around food. In 2012, UMP representative Jean-François Copé set off “l’affaire du pain au chocolate” (the chocolate croissant affair) when he claimed to have heard stories of Muslim children stealing chocolate croissants from non-Muslims during Ramadan. This act of stealing was linked to intolerance of French traditions, the violence within Islam and the desire to convert all French to Islam. Users have varied opinions on what this tension around the presence of food may mean, though it is generally seen as an indication of Islamophobia, but one from which the French majority can profit (ex. user Kaki, 10 Oct 2012 stating that French bakers would make a large profit from Copé’s speeches). Stories such as this one not only build negative narratives of Muslims, they also

\[120\] For an example of the news coverage visit http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2013/04/23/01016-20130423ARTFIG00535-bondy-une-directrice-d-ecole-veut-oblier-les-eleves-a-manger-de-la-viande.php also covered by Oumma.com, “La directrice de l’école maternelle de Bondy s’en pend aux écoliers qui ne magnet pas de viande” 23 April 2013.
define Frenchness. In the case of the chocolate croissant, it was no longer a generic snack but a symbol of introducing children to French traditions. The story of Muslims forcefully interfering with this transfer of tradition was used by public actors to capitalize on representations of Muslims as intolerant and imposing their own cultural practices on the majority.

7.2.3 Educational institutions

Other Islamic institutions that have popped up on the French landscape are private Muslim schools, something many women on Oumma.com have requested since the passing of the 2004 law outlawing religious symbols in public schools. The first private Muslim school in the hexagon, Lycée Averroès, was established in the northern city of Lille in 2003. Not surprisingly, the opening of the school was met with criticism by those who feel culturally insecure. When the school opened, there were only eleven students and nineteen teachers, but thirty-four journalists (including the international press) were waiting to cover the story (France 24 2013). France’s reputation of being intolerant of multiculturalism and its tenuous relationship with Muslim communities meant that this opening had the attention of a global audience.\textsuperscript{121} Government statistics show an increase in Muslim schools since 2005, and today around fifty such schools exist in France and its territories.\textsuperscript{122} Though public actors have denounced these schools as purely religious, the head of the Fédération national de l’enseignement pour les musulman (FNEM) states that private Muslim schools are not based on the Qur’an but are dedicated to the same academic disciplines and standards of other French schools.\textsuperscript{123}

These schools always face an uphill battle when it comes to establishing themselves.

The Al-Kindi Association (affiliated with the Union des Organizations Islamiques de France

\textsuperscript{121} Today the school has over 330 students and has moved to a facility that can accommodate over 600.
\textsuperscript{122} Unfortunately, statistics on these schools are not separated between schools in the Hexagon versus abroad. More information can be found at \url{http://www.senat.fr/rap/r15-757/r15-75718.html}.
\textsuperscript{123} Information on this organization can be found at \url{http://www.fnem.fr/}.\n
- UOIF) requested to start a Muslim school in a suburb of Lyon in 2006. The regional jurisdiction representing the Ministry of National Education denied the request, citing violations to republicanism and secularism, accusing the association of reinforcing communautarisme and therefore the ghettoization of Muslim communities. It also hid behind claims that the proposed school did not meet safety standards and permission would therefore not be granted. Some of the arguments used are similar to those described by Jocelyn Cesari (2005) in her work on Western European societies and the building of mosques. Al-Kindi and its supporters protested the decision which resulted in months-long debates by the local government and in the media. When Muslims and other communities protested the decision, the representative of the Ministry of Education claimed these protests were attempts at intimidating the French government, and called it a “plot against the Republic and its laws” (Mazawi 2009). The school was finally established without any state help.

Schools that are linked to Islam and specifically for Muslims in France are seen as moving students away from Frenchness. For instance, in 2013, then mayor of Orléans Serge Grouard used the government’s right to preemptively take land away from groups through claims of laïcité; In this particular instance, the group that planned to use the land to build a Muslim school. Grouard specifically said that Muslim schools did not have a place in French society because Islam is something brought from outside and is not compatible with French values. Though the news story was not heavily covered by national media, Oumma.com and its users reacted to the news. Users such as Saba have encouraged their non-Muslim friends to send their children to Muslim schools because they have higher than average baccalaureate scores, and due to Islam’s principles of equality, non-Muslims are always welcome to attend. Saba also recommended that her fellow Muslims make voting for politicians that support the building of schools a priority (11 April 2013).

124 For an example of the coverage visit http://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/centre-val-de-loire/2014/06/02/une-ecole-musulmane-en-projet-la-chapelle-saint-mesmin-loiret-489671.html.
125 It is true that in 2013, the Lycée Averroës in Lille ranked in the top three at the national level for quality education.
The presence of Muslims also affects the landscape within public schools, and the reaction from many non-French Muslims is often one of rejection. The obvious example of this is the 2004 law which prohibits the hijab in the classroom. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation, this is clearly a topic that generates a lot of interest on Oumma.com. In the lead up to the law, public schools saw internally an increase in tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. Some schools even separated Muslim girls who declined to remove their hijab from the rest of their classmates. Oumma.com editors and users have periodically accused schools of harming not only these girls, but the student body as a whole: “Les exclure de la sphère publique, c’est leur réserver un ghetto à la marge fin qu’ils ne viennent pas gâcher le paysage des ‘bien-pensant’”/ “Excluding them from the public sphere, means reserving a ghetto for them at the margins so that they do not spoil the landscape of ‘right-thinking people’” (“Port du voile à l’école: Pour one liberty de conscience définitivement reconnue et respectée,” 30 June 2003).

Schools are a central element to understanding the production of cultural insecurities in France because they are considered fundamental in conveying aspects of French culture. Arguments surrounding the importance of laïcité to building a general cultural identity point to public schools as the vehicle for not only transferring these concepts but also allowing schools to set an example for what secularism means in society. It is also here that children learn about the history, the language, the arts and the important values of liberté, égalité and fraternité which encapsulate French republican values. It is argued that Muslim schools result in the segregation of Muslims from their (culturally) French peers which prohibits them from “benefitting” from French values. This point is not only shared by non-Muslim French but also by some Muslims. In 2013, the imam Hassen Chalghoumi was quoted in Le Figaro

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126 This is usually the school staff - I never came across a story of non-Muslim students bullying or fighting with Muslim students.  
127 Stories of what Muslim girls and youth experienced in the wake of the 2004 legislation have been shared through different mediums including a book entitled Les filles voilées parlent.
saying that he took his children out of public school after seeing his daughter’s class photo which included too many Blacks and Beurs. The imam felt that his children were no longer benefitting from a French education. The blatantly racial component of the imam’s comment paints an image of multiculturalism as harmful and provides a strong visual component for the production of cultural insecurities. Hearing that a prominent imam objects to this circumstance is powerful and reinforces the fears that French non-Muslims display. Users on Oumma.com such as Collette pointed out that Chalghoumi was revealing what some call the “apartheid” (here the separating and building/reinforcing of inequalities along racial lines) that is happening in French schools (5 April 2013).

7.2.4 Recreational and everyday material spaces

Public spaces have always been places of collaboration but also competition between groups. In the case of the production of cultural insecurities, the presence of signs, symbols and certain people can cause some non-Muslims to notice that things are changing in a way that makes them feel anxious or even angry. As the majority has more administrative and usually financial control over public spaces, conflict resolution is often at a disadvantage of minority groups. There are many examples on Oumma.com of situations where people have objected or spoken out against the visual cues and interactions of Muslims on the landscape. Women have experienced harassment and violence because of their hijab or because of their perceived identity as a Muslim. There are also examples of fighting for the use of public spaces as illustrated below.

In 2012, the French newspaper Les Échos published a story about a village in Provence that removed all of its public benches. When some community members inquired about this change, a representative responded, “Avant les travaux, les bancs étaient toujours occupés par les Arabes; ça gênait les riverains. Alors la mairie a décidé de supprimer les

bancs. Ça règle le problème”/ Before construction started, the benches were always occupied by Arabs; this bothered those living by the river. So City Hall decided to eliminate the benches. This fixes the problem.”

Oumma.com published an article commenting on this story, and several users responded with dismay of how French racism leads to changes in the environment. Suggestions such as “I think Arabs should stop paying taxes” (Qodra, 18 June 2012) or sit-ins were made by users. Others said that the presence of beards and the hijab often elicit angry stares from people in parks and other recreational areas. Many users feel uncomfortable when they are in public spaces as they are unsure of what people might say or potentially do if they are Islamophobes.

There are also periodic stories of women asking the municipality to offer women-only hours at public pools or the right to wear what has been called the “burkini,” an Islamic-values inspired swim suit. In most of these stories, the request is met with resistance, using the argument that French society does not promote the separation of genders in public spaces or that the wearing of the burkini is not hygienic. The resistance to forms of dress that are associated with Muslims are not limited to areas that are predominantly filled with non-Muslims. Interestingly enough, Oumma.com reported that a family was denied housing in a habitations à loyer modéré (HLM), a type of public housing (“Une famille interdite d’accès à un HLM pour port de la burka,” 8 April 2009) because the mother of the family was wearing something similar to a niqab. The fact that a woman would be denied housing because of her niqab is perhaps not surprising in the context of cultural insecurities in France, but it is

129 For an example of national coverage of this story visit https://www.lesechos.fr/14/06/2012/LesEchos/21205-064-ECH_les-bancs-publics-ont-soudain-disparu.htm.
130 For an example of national coverage of such a story, visit http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/04/12/les-horaires-de-piscine-reserves-aux-femmes-continuent-de-faire-polemique_1684488_3224.html.
131 The incident happened before the parliament passed the law against “le voile integrale” in public spaces.
surprising this occurs in the context of HLM banlieue housing. In Mustafa Dikeç’s (2007) depiction of the banlieue, he analyzes how the banlieue has been characterized as a foreign, throwaway area, housing poor, uneducated and unassimilated families (whether they are immigrants or not). Controlling the banlieue HLM landscape to make it more French is potentially a departure from the role these spaces are supposed to play—containing unwanted Muslimness.

7.2.5 Symbols and signs on the landscape

The religious and educational institutions, shops, food and presence of Muslims on the landscape are all topics that are discussed on Oumma.com in relation to cultural insecurities. However, there are other types of symbols and signs visible in Boulogne-Billancourt which are not as heavily discussed online. These are stickers, posters and graffiti that convey different messages and ideas through their text and images. Oumma.com occasionally covers stories about store fronts and graves being defaced with racist or anti-Islam graffiti. These elements are sometimes subtle but many of them illustrate the tensions associated with either immigration, Muslims and/or Islam, or they convey a general sense of losing Frenchness.

Stickers and posters appeared on poles, railings, streetlights and the sides of buildings expressing a variety of political opinions, supporting certain causes and political candidates or advertising products, such as newly released music. To capture my observation of these symbols and signs, I used a GPS to record their location on the streets of Boulogne-Billancourt. This method was chosen to have a better idea of a) the location of these imprints related to cultural insecurities and b) to reveal if any patterns and evidence of dialogue imprinted on the landscape (through symbols) emerged from the locations. Figure 4 is a map entitled Fieldwork Map of Geocoded Spaces and Activities that shows the initial plotting of reference points of amenities, landmarks and interactions observed on the streets of
Boulogne-Billancourt. It also includes the location of relevant stickers, graffiti and posters seen during the first field visit in 2011.

From this map, I surmised that though there were some interesting symbols in the Boulogne portion of the suburb (the northern part), most of the symbols and activity were taking place on the border between Boulogne and Billancourt and in Billancourt more generally. In the field visits that followed, I concentrated more heavily on the areas where the initial map showed the most activity. Figure 5 shows the resulting map entitled Engagement
and Insecurities (2012) which illustrates both the location of relevant signs and symbols but also the layering of geocoded data from the second visit in 2011, and the two visits in 2012. There is always movement and change in physical environments, and the stickers, posters and other symbols in the streets are constantly altered. Some are ripped off or covered by newer ones, while others degrade over time due to weather.

Figure 5: Engagement and Insecurities Map (2012)
This map does not account for these changes but rather presents the points gathered over the two-year period\textsuperscript{132} and shows the following information: symbols and signs of engagement and insecurity which are labeled anti-halal, anti-Islam, discrimination and pro-Islam. These titles reflect the coding that was done during both the data gathering and analysis. As illustrated on the map, there is almost a line designating where these symbols and signs begin. The streets that are most heavily populated with these dots are busy shopping boulevards with heavy foot and car traffic. These are also streets where you more often see women in hijab and other forms of scarfs and veils.

Stickers and posters flagged as insecurity ranged in their ideas and objectives. There were a handful of FN slogans about speaking French when you are in France and leaving France to the French. But the FN is not the only political right party that is active in Boulogne-Billancourt. A slogan seen in the area was \textit{La France aimez-la ou quittez-la}”/“France love her or leave her.” This was on a sticker from the \textit{Mouvement initiative et liberté} Initiative and Liberty Movement (MIL), a right-wing party that associates itself with one of the biggest parties of France, UMP. The MIL sees itself as defending common civic values and feels that communitarianism, immigration and Islamism threaten French culture and national identity. Other stickers included images of mosques with a line through them with the slogan “\textit{Stop A l’Islamation}”/“Stop Islamization.” There were other stickers that express cultural insecurities such as “\textit{Laissez la France aux français}!” and the “\textit{Hollande n’est pas mon président}” group that objected to President Hollande’s ideas on the right for non-citizens to vote and the legalization of clandestine migrants.

\textsuperscript{132}It was my intention to track changes over time, but due to technical issues with the GPS, this did not work. If this type of data were to be collected in the future, it would be well worth tracking changes over time.
Because the presidential election took place in May 2012, during both years of data collection there was evidence of considerable political activity on the landscape. During this period, women on Oumma.com were also heavily engaged in discussions on who was the best candidate for Muslims in France (usually preferences were for the least Islamophobic and the most socially-conscious). On physical landscapes, candidates from the socialist party, the Green party and other left-leaning parties were the most common in Billancourt. There were also some posters showing support for Marine Le Pen of the FN and the UMP incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy. Though it is impossible to know the intentions of people putting up these political posters, Le Pen certainly ran on an anti-immigration, anti-Muslim and pro French-culture platform in 2012, and then-president Sarkozy did his fair share of contributing to the production of cultural insecurities (e.g. speaking out against immigration, questioning what an Islam of France would look like, launching a debate on national identity and French culture).

\[\text{Figure 7: Sample Poster}\]

\[\begin{align*}
133 & \text{It is true that there were more articles on Oumma.com about political candidates because of the election, but users on the website tend to be political more generally. They make comments and discuss among one another the current politics in France, what politicians they like or dislike, and what they would like to see changed in various articles.}
\end{align*}\]
Anti-halal stickers advertised a website and explained that killing animals for halal purposes is cruel and not acceptable in France. Images of sheep with their throats slit decorated several traffic stop lights and poles in various parts of the neighborhoods. As mentioned earlier, the killing of animals by halal means has been used as a way of representing Islam as a barbaric religion and culture that does not have a place in France. These stickers drew on those narratives (sometimes extending them to kosher foods as well).

The map also shows points where I observed tension or discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims. A handful of times I witnessed Muslim women being harassed or mistreated because of their hijab. In these short encounters, someone would say, “We are in France, take off your veil” or “Salafist” in passing. In one store, the cashier visibly seemed annoyed and agitated by a woman wearing a hijab. She even asked. “Why do you were that?” in front of a line of customers. I never saw Muslim women respond to these harsh words. They may have looked uncomfortable or intimidated, but instead of defending themselves verbally, they chose to turn away or ignore the situation. What I observed was a casual violence and a sense of being in the right as non-Muslims.

There was also evidence of some of the insecurities that Muslim women and men discuss on Oumma.com. For instance, this photo was taken in 2011 at a construction site on a side street on the line between Boulogne and Billancourt. This tag was spray painted during the spring of that year and shows a composition of the crescent moon shape for the letter c and a star within the letter r. While the intention of the tagger cannot be known, when I asked
someone about it, he referenced the rapper Médine’s song “11 Septembre” (2004) which has the lyric “Palestine, ou la terre du suicide/ ils remplacent les croissants par l’étoile de David” / “Palestine, the land of suicide, where they replace the crescent moon with the stars of David.” The interpretation given by this man connects well to the fear that Zionists control the politics of France (as referenced in Chapter Five). Another interpretation of the graffiti is that it draws upon famous Muslim French street artist Combo (aka Combo the culture kidnapper) who famously spray painted the word “coexists” using a crescent moon, the star of David and the Christian cross with a life-size photo of himself next to it. Combo was beaten by four young men after having spray painted this art piece on the wall of a public space in Paris.134

The rapper Médine was also referenced in parts of Boulogne on stickers that showcase his lyrics. This particular image references Médine’s introduction to the album table d’écoute, which talks about different aspects of life in France. There are also references to the song Blockk Identitaire released in 2012, a title that plays off not only the right-wing political group Le Bloc Identitaire but the general debates around identity in France both on a national scale and within minority communities. In terms of the response this phrase might elicit from a person passing by, one would have to be aware of Médine’s work or be inspired to research what this phrase means online to understand its significance. It also does not necessarily convey anything about being Muslim in France to someone who does not know his work, which usually includes insights on the difficulties of living in France as an Arab and a Muslim. In his song Blockk Identitaire both he and the rapper Youssoupha discuss the role of Islam in identity among Arabs and Blacks, and vis-à-vis other French communities.

Evidence of pro-Islam representations or support for Arab and Muslim communities were also seen in Boulogne-Billancourt. Several stickers for the *Fédération nationale des anciens combattants en Algérie, Marco et Tunisie* (FNACA) were visible. This association is for those who participated in the 1952 and 1962 wars in Algeria, and those who participated in the fight for freedom in Morocco and Tunisia. The group’s headquarters are also located in Boulogne-Billancourt, though it is poorly advertised.

7.2.6 Dialogue through signs and symbols

These stickers, posters and graffiti create a visually rich environment in which people are constantly moving. The competing political and social messages are there for everyone to see. Many of these messages contribute to the production of cultural insecurities, but can also lead to a type of engagement or changing of narratives through alteration of the material. There were indications on the landscape of Muslims responding to representations of themselves or using the landscape to voice their own concerns, which creates a type of dialogue on the physical landscape. For instance, this sticker showing a mosque with a line through it was hanging prominently on a busy street corner. At some point, another person who saw the sticker decided to change the message. Using a silver pen, the person drew a line through the term STOP to make the sticker say “l’islamization.” Within the section where the mosque has a line through it, the person with the silver pen wrote “*Vives les islamistes*”/“Long live the Islamicists.” In another torn version of this sticker, someone had drawn hearts all around the mosque and added words encouraging people to love Islam. The impression of the silver pen drawings over the original message shows a dialogue occurring between the person(s) rallying against what they see as the Islamization of France and those
who support the presence of Islam in France. This dialogue is not necessarily about the two individual parties, but rather a conversation that anyone in Boulogne-Billancourt can see when passing by the pole.

Other ways in which a dialogue develops are through the ripping down of posters and stickers and the layering of content (stickers places over others). In the case of layering, people are creative in using the stickers below to create new phrases and ideas. For instance, a sticker for one of Medine’s albums was placed on top of a MIL sticker that says “France love her or leave her.” The person left the phrase, “France love her” visible, so that it rested on top of the name Medine. Understanding the motivation and impact that these symbols might have on people is difficult to analyze. Unfortunately, the mere presence of the stickers, posters and graffiti cannot tell us when, who and why these symbols and signs were placed on the landscape. The intentions cannot be determined without having access to the persons who placed them there. However, what can be surmised is that the items are placed in busy, obvious places where may people can see them and that they probably elicit a reaction from others given that they are torn down, covered with other things or written upon. These signs and symbols are opportunities to communicate and exchange ideas in public spaces.

135 The possibilities are endless. Maybe one person had a stack of FN stickers and spent a drunken night decorating parts of Boulogne-Billancourt. It is possible that very active members of the MIL placed their stickers throughout the neighborhoods over a long period of time with the intention of recruiting people. Maybe some stickers were placed after a specific incident in reaction to an event. There is no way of telling.
Observations of these signs and symbols in Boulogne-Billancourt offered a useful and important look at how everyday landscapes are used and reflect cultural insecurities. There is also evidence of similar interactions and elements in other neighborhoods around France. Articles on Oumma.com and its users’ comments have discussed the issue of fighting for neighborhood spaces a handful of times, though they are not discussing what type of signs and symbols they place on the landscape but rather expressions of cultural insecurities by (presumably) non-Muslims. For instance, graves are covered with swastikas, Nazi-inspired crosses or racists words are written on storefronts such as “sale biko”\(^{136}\) (“Sale Biko des tags racistes et nazis recouvrent la boucherie Halal de Saint-Germain-en-Laye,” 2 Oct 2012). As is often the case, users feel that French media do not cover these incidents and that online resources are the only way to raise awareness of the hatred imprinted on the landscape.

“The retraction of politicians has clearly given wings to right-wing extremists in the area, who have seen their victory in claiming that there is a halalization of France, it’s a safe bet that the emergence of this halal butcher was perceived as a new bastion of Islamisation of the neighborhood by the Nazism that resides in the soul, which is elusive and undetectable.” (Samira, 2 Oct 2012).

The above examples illustrate how cultural insecurities affect the landscape of material spaces by conveying ideas, messages and building narratives on the impact of Muslims (and immigrants) in France. These activities and ideas produce and help circulate cultural insecurities in everyday spaces. There are also indications that people are responding to images and text. In material spaces, there is room for Muslim women to express themselves and respond to the narratives painting them as a threat. But how is this done? What are Muslim women doing to engage with and contest negative representations floating through French society? Using data collected from Oumma.com and some observations from Boulogne-Billancourt, the following sections address these two questions. While the data emerged mostly from online discussions, the section presents the themes that emerged from the actions and experiences of Muslim women in material spaces.

\(^{136}\) Biko is slang for “dirty Arab.”
7.3 Engaging with and contesting cultural insecurities in material spaces

Women on Oumma.com tackle representations of themselves in French society and behaviors of non-Muslim French associated with cultural insecurities in a number of ways. This can be done through direct action as individuals or as a group, through different strategies and contexts and in both obvious and subtle ways. The following subsections present the themes that emerged from the coded data.

7.3.1 Creativity and artistic expression

Women use their creativity to directly address negative representations and challenge them, on both large and small scale. The node Creativity has 64 references and includes the sub-nodes Humor, Music, Performance Art, Theatre, Video and Visuals.\textsuperscript{137} Art as a form of resistance for Muslims living in a context where they are the minority has been explored by a number of scholars (e.g. Buller 2007). Music is one of the most explored mediums in this research, especially raï and rap has figured prominently in storytelling by Muslims, Beurs and immigrants more widely. While raï music is anchored in North African traditions, rap\textsuperscript{138} has allowed youth to blend pop culture and influences from the US and other European countries to convey resistance and take on a type of activism (Jouili 2013). However, both raï and rap have been historically dominated by men and while they may talk about the experiences of women, female voices rarely get a chance to tell their stories on a regional or national scale through rap and few if any female rappers that have gained visibility.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{137}I have separated literature from this category because books, articles, etc. fit into this discussion less because of the material that is produced but more because of the activities women undertake in material (offline)material spaces to promote and feature their work. The act of creating text and images will be discussed in the next chapter on virtual spaces.

\textsuperscript{138}Since the 1980s, rap in France has been connected to the banlieue, to poverty, to multiculturalism, to youth with familial ties to North and West Africa and to difference.

\textsuperscript{139}I do not count Diams in this category because she was not a self-identifying Muslim during her years as an active rapper. She reverted during a hiatus and there has never been a period since her reversion where she has openly returned to the form.
Artistic/expressive mediums are an opportunity for Muslim women to tackle negative representations in front of diverse audiences. Oumma.com has uploaded a number of articles and videos showing the work of Muslim women artists who use performance art to challenge circulating narratives and to present an alternative view of Muslims. Women also use creativity to voice discontent and resistance towards the narratives and resulting laws around veiling practices. Throughout their work, there is a strong use of humor and satire to ridicule stereotypes. There have been a handful of street artists, such as Princess Hijab, whose work addresses larger narratives of Muslims in France and have gained public attention. Yet Muslim artists remain somewhat underrepresented in mainstream art. Anthropologist Jeanette Jouili (2014) finds that there is an emerging Islamic art scene that seeks to offer an alternative to popular culture which has until now not fit the needs of religious Muslims. The scene comprises artists who identify as Muslims because of religious practice, and who desire to use audio and visual mediums to not only create work that draws upon Islamic themes, but also to convey what it means to be a Muslim in France.

Actress and stand-up comedian Samia Orosemane has contributed to and been interviewed by Oumma.com a number of times over the years. She is part of the emerging Islamic art scene and has gained a considerable following since the early 2000s. Orosemane began acting at age 12 and was selected to attend the prestigious acting conservatory in Paris while at university. During her time there, she felt the pull to start wearing a hijab, which she knew would result in the end of her acting career, as there were few to no roles available to women who veil. It was not until she met the playwright Abdasamad (another prominent figure in the Islamic art scene), that she found a place where she could be Muslim, wear a hijab and work as an actress. The acting troupe that she joined found that Muslim communities throughout France were thirsty for the stories they were telling, and that there were almost no professional Muslim theatres in France. In 2008, Orosemane became a stand-up comedian as part of a duo called Humor Oreintale, and spear-headed an initiative to bring Muslim-positive comedy to the French public. She went on to create a tour called “Samia et
les 40 comiques,” which reflect what she felt were Muslim values (such as no expressions of vulgarity). In 2013 she was interviewed by Oumma.com about her one-woman show, Femmes Couleurs, that draws upon her experiences as a Muslim woman in France to shed light on issues in a humorous way (“Samia dévoile son humour,” 17 April 2013).

Ososemane uses her voice, body and ideas to confront representations of Muslim women. The hijab figures prominently in her shows as she feels that the day she decided to wear one, life around her changed. She challenges the preconceived ideas that French people have (such as the belief that male family members stalk her to ensure that she does not remove her hijab). In 2013, she participated in a televised competition for comedians in front of a live audience. After her routine, Ososemane was told by one of the French judges that her veil/turban was distracting and did not make sense. It prevented French audiences from knowing who she really is and the judge felt that it took away from her humor. This moment is such a strong representation of cultural insecurities and the suspicions non-Muslim French can have towards Muslim women. Because she covers her hair, the judge (a famous French personality) felt he could not really know who she is even though she only had her hair covered. When recounting the story, Ososemane told Oumma.com that she was so surprised by the feedback that she was left speechless on the stage. She feels even today that her lack of response validated the judge’s comment.

Oumma.com users have commented that Ososemane’s brand of comedy pushes forward a positive, different vision of Muslim women. She finds ways to talk about her everyday experiences that resonate with all women, regardless of their religion/culture. In reaction to the comic’s story about being criticized for her hijab, Oumma.com user Doris stated that Ososemane’s activism is in her strength and her joy. She does not come across as

140 Ososemane characterizes this vulgarity-free approach as in direct opposition to the tradition of non-Muslim French comics who are perceived as lewd.
141 I call it a hijab here because Samia says that she is “veiled” - in terms of appearance, many people would probably think of her as wearing a turban instead of the more classic-looking hijab.
beaten down or scared in ways that the French majority might expect (17 April 2013). Other users chimed in that Ososemane needs more visibility and opportunities to reach French audiences because she is able to disarm people and change their minds, though some users felt that the French majority will never be able to see past her “origins.”

To fight stereotypes, women have participated in street art or participatory actions that explicitly target non-Muslims. For example, in 2013 a group of young women spent the day distributing roses to people on the Champs-Elysées. They filmed the event and explained that distributing flowers is a way to combat the image that Muslim women are terrorists or anti-French, and to fight Islamophobia. The video shows these women, some wearing a hijab, interacting with strangers, explaining that they want to convey Islam’s core tenants of peace and generosity (7 May 2013). People passing by who were offered roses were clearly surprised and confused. The voice over of the video explains that this act of peacebuilding is a way to form a different image of Muslim women. A stranger who received a rose told the camera that she was pleasantly surprised that a woman in a hijab was doing something nice randomly.

Videos and articles that document the creative actions of women in material spaces are not always supported by Oumma.com users. While the strangers receiving the roses might have felt positively about what was happening, the idea behind the action brought out strong reactions from users.

“It’s pathetic! I get the impression that Muslims do EVERYTHING just so that others accept them as if they had something to feel guilty for! Thousands of Muslims have been killed by Occidentals across the world without a single one of them repenting. Until today, Muslims are killed because they are Muslim, mosques are defaced in France without the media so much as mentioning these stories, and we do what? We offer roses??? It’s not by offering roses that we will be accepted!” (Sarah, 7 May 2013)
Anger towards this kind of intervention was also expressed when Niqabitch began garnering media attention. Niqabitch were a duo\(^{142}\) who protested the passing of the law prohibiting the niqab in public spaces by posting a video and an accompanying article on the popular news site Rue89.\(^{143}\) While the article explained why they took issue with the law (including stigmatization of Muslim women, lack of input from women wearing the niqab, ignorance of politicians), the video showed the women strolling in front of government buildings in Paris wearing a niqab on the top half of their bodies with minishorts and heels on the bottom half. The look was arresting for onlookers—two women strolling with their hair, face, upper body and arms covered by black material, but with their legs completely exposed. Onlookers appeared shocked and uncomfortable. The video went viral and the two women created a Twitter account to continue the public conversation about their protest. Their use of satire was explicit and meant to bring levity to a situation that they felt was taken too seriously by politicians (Moors 2011).

The Niqabitch were featured on Oumma.com, and their work was met with some irritation by women users (13 May 2012). Reading through the comments, it appears that some women objected to this piece of activism because it did not fully explore the point of view of Muslim women. While Niqabitch protested the law for its ignorance and lack of desire to hear from Muslim women, Oumma.com also seemed to object to how these women were creating a duality of Muslim and the Judeo-Christian culture in too simplistic a way. By summing up Muslim culture as veiled and French culture as exposed, Niqabitch were not properly addressing cultural insecurity concerns through satire. In addition, they were relying on Western approaches to feminism. Women on Oumma.com connected more readily to other artists expressing anger and concern regarding the passing of the niqab law. In 2010 and 2011

\(^{142}\) At the time, they were two university students, one was Muslim, the other not.
\(^{143}\) For more information see http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-nos-vies-connectees/20110411.RUE8746/minishort-et-niqab-balade-de-niqabitch-dans-paris.html.
elusive street artist Princess Hijab gained notoriety not only on Oumma.com but in national media for using black spray paint to cover advertisements in the Paris metro, altering their appearance. Princess Hijab would black out everything except for the eyes of the people and statues on the ads, creating a niqab effect. Riding through metro stops, people would see enormous niqab-clad men and women. Princess Hijab kept a rather low profile and never showed her face, though she willingly gave a handful of interviews. Users on Oumma.com were much more in support of this artist’s work describing it as subversive but effective in showing the ridiculousness of the 2011 law.

During my visits to Boulogne-Billancourt I also came across evidence of Muslim women using creativity to challenge and dispel representations of themselves as a threat. In 2012 the play *Les Monologues Voiles* was running in Paris and was prominently advertised in Billancourt.

The play was created by a Dutch actress Adelheid Roosan and models itself on The Vagina Monologues. Roosan interviewed over forty-five Muslim women living in Europe about their experiences being a woman and a minority, and transformed their stories into poignant pieces that are easy for audiences to absorb. When the play ran in Paris, it was interpreted by three francophone actresses (one French, two Belgian) who had parents from North Africa. Though the play is technically written by a non-Muslim woman, the stories are from the real-life experiences of Muslim women and the actors, when interviewed by French media, said they connect personally to the issues raised in
the play. There are jokes about being characterized as violent, accusations of being too submissive to males and to Islam and allusions to being too conservative and prudish.

There is also the running theme of veiling, what it represents to non-Muslims and the role it plays in the lives of Muslims in Europe. In the version I saw, the play beings with the line “My veil? I wear it in my eyes.” The title Les monologues voilés already suggests that the play will deal with veiling in some sense, and each monologue does have the running theme of personal/public, hidden/exposed and understanding/misunderstanding. The play was a moderate success in Paris, was well reviewed, and heavily advertised in Billancourt. I talked to several women from different parts of Paris who had seen the play, and they all indicated that they felt it was an important step in exposing the French public to the complexity and varied experiences of Muslim women.

There are many Muslim visual artists working in France and women from abroad who exhibit there that incorporate the representations fueling cultural insecurities in their work to raise questions and contest what viewers think and feel about Muslim women. However, during my time in Boulogne-Billancourt and other parts of Paris, I was not exposed to their work and I did not see them appear on Oumma.com. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that visual artists such as Hanan Benammar and Zoulikha Boudbdellah have used their experiences living in France to tackle important issues of identity, borders and culture. The art scene in France is well covered by the media, and these women have attracted the attention of enthusiasts and critics, and have therefore used their own voices to contest cultural insecurities.

There can be numerous interpretations of what this means, but I took it as the character explaining that whatever the veil represents to her (e.g. piety, belief in God, being Muslim), it serves as a lens for seeing the world.
The examples above of the use of creativity are far reaching and very public. This is just one side of how women observed on Oumma.com demonstrate creativity in their engagement and contestation of cultural insecurities. There can also be much smaller, more subtle uses of humor to combat preconceived notions or to ridicule how the fears around Muslim women have been blown out of proportion. Many users on Oumma.com crack jokes and are sarcastic with their comments when responding to topics and themes related to cultural insecurity. They also share funny, creative things that they have done in their offline lives to engage with these representations. For example, during l’affaire du pain au chocolate, Shanez sent by post to her city hall a chocolate croissant addressed to the deputy mayor François Copé (7 Oct 2012). She included a cheeky letter in which she noted that because the “bad Muslim” youth were stealing snacks from “little French darlings,” she felt it her responsibility as a Muslim to return the bread to the French people. The chocolate croissant example is a small one, but it raises the idea of how important it can be to use satire in fighting the production of cultural insecurities. Within the performance art pieces and other audio-visual mediums, Muslim women are finding ways to use their creativity and humor to not only present another vision of themselves to the French majority, but also to be relatable. Drawing upon everyday experiences and highlighting their lives as French citizens, women are able to show that they are, as women, not unlike French non-Muslims.

7.3.2 Authoring

Within the node Creativity is the sub-node Authoring. In the analysis of the data, this sub-node was separated from creativity because in many ways authoring is a better fit for discussions on engagement in virtual spaces, but the authoring books, articles and opinion pieces bridge both physical and virtual spaces. The texts are found either online, through tech devices or in book and article forms. The content is in a sense virtual, even if the book itself is tangible in offline spaces. However, authoring often allows women to access live audiences and be seen in public when they are promoting their work and engaging with issues important to this dissertation. The data analyzed for this sub-node revealed that women use writing as a
way to inform people about the history of Muslim women (within the context of religion but also migration) and the contemporary context in which these women live. Authors write about a range of topics, but in terms of cultural insecurities, the hijab, feminism and the “real” Islam are topics that are used to fight stereotypes of Muslims in France.

Muslim writers have used fiction and non-fiction to discuss the marginalization of Muslims in France, often drawing upon themes of religion and culture more generally to open conversations on why Muslims are continuously treated as foreigners in their own country (Markovic and Yasmeen 2014). Though there have been several successful Muslim authors, scholar Hélène Jaccomard’s finds that these women are often sidelined within the French literary community, which classifies them as niche or genre writers because of their heritage or self-identification as Muslim. The sub-node Authoring includes references to a number of writers and personalities who have published articles and books through outlets other than Oumma.com. In material spaces, their activity translates to talks, interviews and participation in conferences which provide them with an opportunity to share their personal experiences but also their research on Muslims in France. Scholars such as Houria Abdelouahed who has published books on the role and rights of women in Islam starting with the age of the Prophet Muhammad, has been interviewed by a number of national media and has given talks on her work. She uses these platforms to dispel many preconceived notions about the role and rights women have within Islam. Over the last thirty years, Leïla Sebbar, a fiction writer, poet and essayist, has used her background in psychology to contest how the French media and state have represented Muslim women as dangerous. Users and Oumma.com staff have used her interviews and literary works to discuss circulating narratives and how to engage with them (“Attention à la falaise!” 25 Feb 2005). Sebbar’s essays and poetry on the Muslim experience have gained her national recognition and in 2016 she was nominated to be inducted into l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.
Chapter Five includes the story of rapper Melanie Georgiades’ reversion to Islam, something that received extensive coverage on both Oumma.com and in the mainstream media. Georgiades’ decision to publish a memoir on her career and subsequent conversion in 2012 led to a string of interviews with national media outlets. This allowed her a platform to challenge the stereotypes of Islam as a violent, intolerant religion by speaking about her personal experiences. She emphasized the comfort and peace that the religion brought her, and the importance of wearing the hijab to her recovery from the psychological issues she faced due to fame. In interviews, Georgiades highlighted that the public had objected to her choice to wear a hijab more than her conversion, and accused her of being a bad example for youth. In a short promotional tour for her book, Diams was able to respond to many of the representations around the hijab and also those regarding the submissiveness of Muslim women.

Georgiades’ previous success as a rapper afforded her a certain visibility that not many other Muslim women enjoy, and because she is a contributor to popular culture, she was given access to platforms that scholars and other writers would not have. As the rapper Diams, she did not identify as a Muslim woman, but she did see herself as a marginalized immigrant and banlieue-educated. In addition to her raps about what it means to be a woman, she also challenged discourses on national identity and French culture. In her 2006 song “Ma France a Moi” (loosely “My France”), Diams directly responded to the discourses of then-president Sarkozy and other politicians on what it means to be French. In the refrain of the song, Diams talks about how this “France profonde” (a term alluding to traditional French) is not hers. Her France is loaded with pop culture references from different parts of the world, multicultural symbols and influences from the working poor. Throughout the song, Diams reveals the struggles she and others around her face but also the values held by these marginalized banlieue communities (e.g. the importance of family, of respect). “Ma France a

145 For an example of the media coverage, see http://www.lefigaro.fr/musique/2012/10/01/03006-20121001ARTFIG00519-Diams-s-je-porte-le-voile-par-discretion-et-pudeur.php.
“Moi” was a strong illustration of the lived experiences of many second and third generation youth but it also served as a rebuttal to the idea that people with ties to other cultures cannot be French. Her reversion garnered enough interest among both non-Muslim and Muslim French to afford her time to unpack how she identifies as a Muslim woman and which representations circulating in France are false.

7.3.3 Religion in public spaces

The movement of Muslim religious practice from private to public spaces raises concerns around maintaining French values. As mentioned in Chapters Four and Five of this dissertation, the need to safeguard the republican value of laïcité is used as the biggest legal and sociocultural argument for controlling Muslim communities in France. Religion imprinting itself on material spaces is met with resistance, and in addition to the examples used earlier in this chapter, there has been evidence of Muslim communities openly practicing their religion in offline spaces regardless of the potential legal and social ramifications. The node Religion and Public Spaces was used to code comments and information linked to (a) practices in physical environments, (b) discussions on public debates on the place of Islamic signs and symbols in offline spaces and (c) ways in which Muslim women tackle these issues head on in their everyday lives. This node includes 484 references from 161 sources. Four main topics emerged from this node including religions institutions, prayer in public spaces, festival meetings and clothing (specifically veiling). Veiling is by far the most discussed topic covered on the website, and therefore is given in its own subsection. It is not, however, the only visible symbol of Islamic activity in offline spaces.

Aside from Muslim institutions cropping up or signs and symbols that may be added (topics which have already been covered) there are activities that take place in public, such as prayer in the streets and Ramadan open dinners, that have raised concerns within the non-Muslim French majority regarding the changing French landscape. Praying in the street is something that gained national attention in the 2000s, when media began circulating images
of what seemed like thousands of men on their hands and knees wearing skullcaps and white tunics, praying in the streets of the northern Parisian neighborhood\textsuperscript{146} \textit{La Goutte d’Or}.\textsuperscript{147} The images circulated by the media launched a rush of criticism that this was offensive, inappropriate and in direct violation of the laws on secularism. Christianity and Judaism have few instances of religious practice outside of private institutions, and the visibility that prayers in the street brought to Islam allowed cultural insecurity discourses to flourish.

At the time, the \textit{Goutte d’Or}’s mosque was too small to accommodate the large and constantly growing Muslim population. In addition to the national attention this received and the encouragement of Muslim women online for the prayers to continue, there were also many local associations that mobilized. For example, in 2010 there were events held such as “\textit{Saucisson et pinnard}” /“Sausage and wine” organized by political groups in the neighborhood objecting to the perceived Islamization of the neighborhood. In reaction to this, Muslim men and women in Paris organized their own meetings and public discussions. Some users on Oumma.com advertised meetings in churches and other venues to open the conversation around the importance of diversity to the identity of the \textit{Goutte d’Or} (\textit{“Centre l’apèro “identitaire”La Goutte d’Or solidaire,”} 15 June 2010). The activism and effort put forth by both women and men led to the mayor granting the community permission to build a larger cultural center and mosque (Mathieu 2010).

Muslim women also actively practice their religion in public spaces through communal gatherings. During Ramadan 2012, different neighborhoods around Paris were holding weekly dinners in public spaces. Muslims would get together after sunset to break

\textsuperscript{146} The \textit{Goutte d’Or} is one of the oldest neighborhoods of France to have a substantial Muslim population, and it is one of the few where the presence of the Muslim community has been felt on the landscape prior to the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{147} Famous photographer Martim Parr released a series on the neighborhood which was covered by several mainstream outlets. For an example of these images and the stories that accompany them, \textit{Le Monde} wrote the following article \url{http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2011/04/02/martin-parr-s-infiltre-a-la-goutte-d-or_1502144_3246.html}. 
their fast and share their food with one another. They also advertised these events to reach out to non-Muslims as a way of sharing their faith. I was told by one woman that these were opportunities to not only teach the French public about the positive sides of Islam, but to also offer Muslims who do not usually practice to join the community. At the time, these dinners were not covered by the national media, and were made visible through flyers, word of mouth and the appearance of long tables set up outside in different public spaces.

7.3.4 Resistance through veiling

Veiling practices are clearly the tensest and most explored topics by Muslim women on Oumma.com because veiling is such a complex topic within France. A headscarf or a niqab’s visual nature has made veiling a catch-all, loaded practice and probably one of the key elements of the production of cultural insecurities. These are easy symbols to fill with meaning, fear and anxieties. The passing of the 2004 law prohibiting hijabs in public schools generated not only a surge in international interest on the tensions France was experiencing at all levels vis-a-vis Muslim communities, but it also inspired a fair amount of research in the social sciences. Content from the website that was specific to veiling practices was coded with the sub-node Veiling, which has 460 references from 151 sources. Much of what is being discussed on the website is in reaction to how the French public is representing Islam and the role of women in it through veiling. Yet the comments, opinions and stories shared by these women show that the act of choosing to wear a hijab or a niqab is both a personal, spiritual decision but also can be an act of contestation of cultural insecurity. Girls and women use different strategies to face the consequences of wearing their hijab or niqab.

148 There are many excellent books and journal articles that analyze the 2004 decision and everything that led up to that moment including but not limited to: Barres 2014, Scott 2010, Bowen 2008. Any research conducted on Muslim communities in France always includes an analysis of what headscarves mean, how they have been portrayed in French society and what role the state has played in regulating veiling practices.
Pressure from society to remove the hijab comes in the form of the constant discourses on secularism and the threat that Islam poses to France. The pressure for girls and women to forego their veiling practices can be intense and should not be underestimated. In the cases of the 2004 and 2011, the state criminalized the wearing of a hijab in public schools and the niqab in all public spaces. Pressure to remove one’s hijab or niqab also comes from within Muslim communities. For instance, Imam Tariq Oubrou gave an interview in 2012 in which he recommended Muslims to “renounce certain visibilities” and not “feed the rising Islamophobia.” In other words, Muslims would be happier in France if they looked less Muslim, particularly the women. In response to this interview, users admitted that either they or someone they know chose to go without a hijab except when they pray or go to the mosque. For other women, the tactic of blending in is not an option. Siham writes, “In my opinion, this only displaces the problem, the obligation to renounce something that constitutes our identity and our spiritual efforts. Because even when closely shaven, or unveiled, we are not protected from discrimination. So what’s the point? Why not stand up and be patient with the reactions we get” (10 Nov 2012).

The imam’s words are telling. Wearing a hijab or a niqab is, in a sense, a form of resistance, as it appears that large swaths of the non-Muslim French majority make considerable efforts to banning veiling practices from public spaces. The poor treatment of women wearing the hijab in everyday spaces only underscores the decisions that these women face. Even though Muslim women have been wearing hijabs for decades in France, it continues to be a symbol of difference and an excuse for othering. As Fatiha K wrote in an article on the expulsion of two young girls from school “En excluant Lila et Alma du lycée Henri-Wallon, c’est toute la communauté musulmane que l’on stigmatis.” / “By excluding Lila and Alma from Henri-Wallon high school, it is the entire Muslim community that they are stigmatizing.” (“Deux jeunes musulmanes exclues du lycée d’Aubervilliers : la logique du bouc émissaire,” 13 Oct 2003).
The stigmatization of all Muslims is a reality but also something that family members of hijab-wearing women want to spare their loved ones. Interviews with high school girls during the 1990s and the early 2000s showed that many parents preferred that their daughters wait until after high school to wear a hijab. Parents expressed a desire for their children to have a good education and to keep a low profile in hopes of protecting their children (e.g. Scott 2007). As Ismahane Chouder et al.’s (2008) book documents, a fair number of girls refused to remove their hijab and were subject to isolation, suspension and even expulsion from their schools. Parents would therefore ask their daughters to only wear the hijab in public spaces not related to school. As documented by Chouder et al. and national media, some girls still refused to take off their hijab in protest of the law. These girls not only cited their personal spirituality but also their belief in secularism as the framework for protecting religious freedom.

For those who want to wear a hijab, being well informed and prepared to defend oneself is a strategy employed to work around the law. For example, Inès and Imen were interviewed on Oumma.com after having worn the hijab to the baccalaureate exams. Inès explained that they had copied down the text of the 2004 law and were prepared to recite their rights if asked by a teacher or school staff member about their attire. Imen stated:

"C'est vrai que c'est énervant de l'enlever, le remettre, l'enlever, le remettre. C'est dur, la loi mais je respecte la loi. Vu qu'on pouvait garder le hijab pendant les épreuves du baccalauréat, je respecte quand même la loi."

It’s true that it was annoying to have to remove it, put it back on, remove it, put it back on. It’s tough, the law, but I respect the law. Given that we can wear the hijab during the baccalaureate exams, I still respect the law ("Des parents d’élèves s’insurgent contre le port du voile au baccalauréat,” 21 June 2012).149

Inès and Imen were forced to use their knowledge to defend themselves when parents who, once aware after the first day of exams that Muslim girls were wearing hijabs, complained to the school that this was illegal and distracting to their children. Much like other

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149 Imen is referring to a system that many students who wear a hijab have developed. They wear it to school, remove it during each class, and put it back on in the hallways and at lunch.
girls throughout France, Inès and Imen were accused of provoking and needling the French with their religion. The choice to adapt to the situation brought about by the 2004 law (prohibiting the wearing of their hijab in the hallways in schools) by girls all over France is evidence that they are willing to comply with the law when absolutely necessary, but were not and continue not to be willing to forego their beliefs when given the legal choice to follow them. While media has covered stories of high schoolers wearing the hijab, the mothers of students have also been faced with demands to remove their hijab when participating in school events (“Grenoble: Des femmes se mobilisent contre l’exclusion des mamans voilées des activités scolaires,” 17 Dec 2013).

Women have also been faced with conflicts in the workplace because of perceptions and feelings about their hijab. One of the more famous cases involved a daycare worker in Chanteloup-les-Vignes, a town northwest of Paris. L’affaire Baby-Loup involved a daycare worker at the Baby Loup Crèche (nursery) located in a culturally and economically diverse city. In 2008, one of the care workers, Fatima Afif, was fired after her maternity leave for refusing to remove her headscarf (Lavandon Noël 2013). Legally there was nothing about her performance at work that merited termination, but as a private institution, Baby-Loup argued the they had a right to fire her based on their own criteria, which in this case was presented as protecting laïcité. Afif lodged a formal complaint for discrimination on religious grounds with le Conseil prud-hommes Mantes-la-Jolie.

The media quickly picked up l’affaire Baby Loup, and users on Oumma.com expressed their dismay regarding the hysteria displayed by the French public (e.g. “Crèche Baby Loup: la justice interdit le voile dans un structure privé,” 2 Oct 2011). Afif was accused of trying to instill Islamic values in the children (who were babies), of proselytizing and of provoking parents. Though Afif expressed her need to secure her job, she refused to comply with management’s request to remove her hijab when caring for the children. She was not willing to compromise her spiritual beliefs, and felt that French laws should protect her right
to religious practice. After a long legal battle, the courts supported *Baby Loup*’s decision to fire her, on the grounds that exercising one’s religion at work is in violation of secularism. The case took on such importance that in 2013, then-Minister of the Interior Manuel Valls awarded the founder and director of *Baby Loup*, Natalia Baleto, with a medal of merit for her unwavering dedication to *laïcité*.

According to users on the website, discrimination linked to the hijab is something that many women face in the workplace, though these cases rarely attract media attention. As Catherine puts it, “Muslims are applied a double penalty. First, they are discriminated against during the hiring process because of their name, then they are penalized for what they wear. This shows clearly that it is the religion that is a problem and that secularism is just an excuse” (28 Nov 2013). These examples are a fraction of the problems faced by women and some ways in which they contest and fight back against the negativity around the hijab. There have also been tensions for women who wish to wear the niqab. This is a risky choice to make as the 2011 law allows police to stop, fine and even arrest niqabis. Yet there are women who continue this practice because of their spiritual belief but also because they feel that it is a human right. Women who are not niqabis will defend this act. For example, Lotta reacted to a fellow male user who accused a niqabi involved in a verbal altercation with police of being a crazy convert. She stated: “Because converts are not Muslims? The Islamic veil is prohibited but the law is unfair! Do we have to follow laws like sheep or should we fight for our rights? This is only the beginning, soon they will outlaw the hijab and then what will we do?” (22 July 2013)

Writers and users on the website view the 2011 law as an example of Islamophobia but also as an excuse used by the government and other non-Muslims to create a false narrative about Islam, linking it to the Middle East, radicalism and terrorism. Several users actively fought the passing of the law, and many sent opinion pieces, letters to politicians and published online open letters about discrimination and injustice faced by Muslim
communities. In a letter to Aurélie Filipetti (then Minister of Culture and Communication), the Collective for Muslim voices wrote

“Il était une fois, enfin, une nouvelle loi d’exception, ciblant cette fois-ci un voile encore plus voilant (le voile dit intégral) et pénalisant par conséquent les femmes qui le portent d’une pénalité encore plus pénalisante (en leur interdisant l’accès à tout espace public, y compris la rue).”

Once upon a time there was finally a new law of exception, this time targeting a veil that was even more obscuring (the so-called integral veil) and by consequence penalizing the women who wear it with an even heavier penalizing penalty (by forbidding them access to any public space, including the street) (“Dialogue presque imaginaire entre Aurélie Filipetti et son double,” 20 May 2012).

The Collective underscores that by characterizing the practice as a violation of women’s rights, a safety concern for the public and profoundly antithetical to French culture non-Muslim French fail to understand the position of a niqabi. This practice provides women who subscribe to its meaning access to public spaces and the freedom to move within society. Prohibiting the niqab does not mean that these women will then turn to the hijab and continue about their day. In some cases, it means that they will no longer feel it is appropriate to leave their homes. Kenza Drider, who has contributed content to and been interviewed by Oumma.com, as well as mainstream outlets, is one of the most vocal advocates for the niqab. As a niqabi she has publicly denounced the 2011 law and sought to educate the French public about this practice. In 2011, she announced her intention to run for president: “j’ai l’ambition d’être au service de toutes les femmes qui sont l’objet de stigmatisations ou de discriminations sociales, économiques ou politiques” / “My ambition is to be of service to all women who are stigmatized socially, economically or politically” (“Une fille en niqab candidate à l’élection présidentielle 2012,” 23 Sept 2011). Her campaign was supported by the organization Touche Pas à ma Constitution (Don’t touch my constitution), which helped circulate images of Drider in her niqab. This was the ideal platform for Drider to challenge the representation of a woman wearing a niqab. Not only is she outspoken and confident, but
she is able to shift the conversation to highlighting the feminist aspects of the niqab, such as the freedom of movement and choice it provides.\footnote{150}

Though I only saw evidence of niqabis in northern suburbs of Paris, I did speak at length to a young woman who was on an extended stay from Libya. She shared her feelings on the French “obsession” with the hijab, and though she was not wearing a scarf, she explained that she normally wears a hijab in her home country. She however, does not feel comfortable wearing one in France because of the tense debates surrounding it. She also relayed that she wore the niqab at one point, which she characterized as a time of inner reflection. She was diagnosed in her mid-20s with cancer and during her treatment she turned to the niqab as a way to protect herself and heal from within.\footnote{151}

7.3.5 Other forms of dress

Though veiling remains the biggest topic within the production of cultural insecurities, Muslim women have found themselves in positions where they must either fight or at least stand up to pressures placed upon them due to their clothing. Style is cultural and is a regulating device in societies, and cultural insecurities find their way into expectations of how people should dress. Fashion is important to both the history and contemporary culture in France. French haute couture and independent designers are known around the world, and the turnover of its fashion industry is 34 billion Euros (INSEE 2016). Though higher fashion is linked mainly to Paris, the ordinary French woman is often represented as effortlessly beautiful and chic. Muslim women who wear a hijab and other clothing traditionally from other regions, such as tunics and turbans, are in direct conflict with the representation of the

\footnote{150}{It should be noted that there are of course Muslim women who support the 2011 law and feel that the niqab is in fact a tool for oppression. Politician and previous director of NPNS Fadela Amara has often spoken out against this practice (“Fadela Amara, la porte-parole autoproclamée des musulmans fait campagne contre la burqa,”17 Aug 2009).

\footnote{151}{The need for quiet and withdrawal from society by wearing a niqab is something mentioned on Oumma.com through interviews with women. This topic of retreating is something that will be discussed in the following chapter.}
fashionable French woman. Aside from veiling, the clothing choices of certain Muslim women might not elicit fear within the majority, but the clothing is imbued with references to other places and cultures that feel distinctly apart from France. Refusing to follow French fashion trends is a form of resistance in itself. Finding good clothing that suits the needs of Muslim women can also be very tricky.

Oumma.com contributor Magali produced a video on the role of fashion in the lives of French Muslims explaining how many women feel that they cannot be fashionable and maintain their values (2 March 2009). Magali encourages users to not only think about how fashion can be adapted to Muslim traditions, but also to reflect on how it can serve as a product of French culture. She reminds women that they can wear different colors, fabrics and styles as long as the clothing respects certain criteria. Muslim fashion is not about negating the body, it is about revealing the personality and tastes of a person. Magali explains that tight clothing is not made for Muslim women because it would make ablutions difficult as well as particular prayer postures. Sheer clothing is not acceptable because it may incite lust/desire, and a woman should not incite temptation and should respect the self and the other. Magali feels that women in French society can find their place and not give into the need to fit in or to avoid scrutiny from the majority. Resisting the pressure from the majority culture through fashion might seem like a small thing, but this form of resistance shows that some Muslim women are not willing to be forced into conforming simply to make non-Muslims more comfortable. There are other examples of this form of resistance including the wearing of Islamic-style swimsuits.

The burkini, the name given to a modest form of swimwear that covers most of the body and also the hair, is another hot topic in France. The media has occasionally covered stories about the swimsuit style in the past, but in 2016, French media obsessed over the presence of burkinis on French beaches and le Conseil d’État even convened to discuss
whether it should be made illegal on beaches and in public pools. However, in 2010, the burkini was already an issue at the local level. Women reported being mistreated by pool staff, as in the case of Carol (“Quand le burkini fait des vagues en Seine-et-Marne,” 13 August 2009). She was asked to leave her local public pool because the staff insisted that her bathing suit was not hygienic. Carol lodged a formal complaint with the municipality stating that the public pool had no right to deny her service based on clothing that was not listed as forbidden.

The story gained momentum and Daniel Guillaume, communist party member and vice-president of the Syndicat d’agglomération nouvelle, claimed that the “Islamic bathing suit” was unclean and should be banned from public swimming areas. By 2016, he and the media were accusing the style of being rooted in religion and therefore inappropriate in public spaces, giving the state license to debate and interfere on the grounds of secularism. It was agreed within the Syndicat that what was labeled as the burkini should be forbidden. Those opposed to this type of swimwear express a discomfort not only because it is related to Islam, but because of the emphasis on modesty. At the time, Carol was aware that the pool would object to her suit, but she still felt that she had the right to bath in a public pool as long as she was clothed. The Conseil d’Etat raised the question of whether to outlaw the swimsuit style in the name of laïcité in 2016. It was ultimately decided that the style should be permitted, but it once again launched a new round of public debate around religious symbols in French public spaces.

7.3.6 Engagement through the media

More often than not, users on Oumma.com express their irritation with how the French media bring limited to no visibility to the experiences and points of view of French

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153 A group of elected representatives at the commune level.
Muslims. There are many important subjects that they feel are not covered, including the rise and normalization of Islamophobia and the viewpoint of “lambda” Muslims—French Muslims who are both assimilated and mostly progressive in their politics. Oumma.com published a humorous cartoon on how to conduct a television debate on Islam (“La recette pour organiser un debate sur l’Islam à la TV,” 31 March 2013). In the cartoon, non-Muslim scholars and public figures are seated, ready for a televised debate. The only Muslim present is the plumber Karim who was called to fix a leaking pipe but was dragged onto the set for the show. He is asked by the moderator if he thinks secularism is the cause of Muslim identity politics. In the comments section, users discuss the realism of this cartoon and the lack of visible Muslim voices that are both educated and moderate.

The discontent fueled by the poor representation of Muslims in the media leads to direct engagement by Muslim women. In 2004 a group of Muslim men and women came together after the announcement that the television station France 2 would be airing a documentary on famous scholar Tariq Ramadan made by journalist Mohamed Sifaoui, a controversial figure in Muslim communities. Sifaoui is best known for his claim of having infiltrated Al-Qaeda and for being critical of many aspects of Islam. The announcement of the documentary sent the group of Muslims into action, and in addition to preparing a larger protest against the representation of Muslims in the media (which occurred on 22 January, 2005), the group also booked a meeting with France 2 representatives. Their goal was to voice concerns about seeing Tariq Ramadan through Sifaoui’s filter but also to challenge the France 2 representatives on why they choose either radical voices or people who are critical of Islam to represent the Muslim perspective. The group expressed anger and consternation that a channel which claims to be at the service of the French public ignores its responsibility of “de-ontologizing” views on Islam when it runs such programs. (Rassemblement de téléspectateurs deviant le siege de France 2, 15 Dec 2004).
While attempting to engage with the media is a way for Muslim women to challenge representations and possibly create a counter-narrative, it is difficult for women to gain access to national platforms. Nonetheless, women on Oumma.com write letters/emails, participate in marches and take the opportunity, when it arises, to speak in front of a camera on behalf of Muslim women. There is skepticism on the part of women regarding whether their efforts to change media representations will really work, but they do see the importance of getting involved.

7.3.7 Legal action

Taking legal measures to combat the behaviors resulting from cultural insecurities (e.g. physical and verbal assaults, loss of employment) is a theme that emerged from both articles published on Oumma.com about specific events but also in the discussions and comments left by users. During the coding process, the node Judicial Issues was created towards the end of the data collection process to flag the instances of women contacting the authorities or seeking support from organizations that might lodge complaints on their behalf. Prior to creating this node, evidence of these actions and events was coded under various nodes such as Religion in Public, Defining Issues and Workplace. The node Judicial Issues contains sixteen references, and several of the stories were shared in Chapter Five to illustrate the insecurities that Muslim women feel living in France and experiencing Islamophobia.

When women encounter violence and discrimination in their everyday lives, they are faced with the option of being passive or reacting. Deciding to remain passive is a choice, and should not suggest that they do not have agency or the ability to take action. There can be a number of reasons why Muslim women choose not to report events to the authorities, including the belief that it will make no difference for them. The coded material for the node Islamophobia (which had over 150 references) revealed that because women perceive Islamophobia to be rife within France, they will not seek support from the police and/or legal counsel based on the belief that there will be no benefit to them, or worse, that the
discrimination and violence is inherent in these institutions. However, not all women feel this way. There is evidence of women reporting cases to the police, to legal and social organizations and to media outlets when an injustice occurs.

As discussed in the sub-section on Religion in Public spaces, veiling practices are a way for Muslim women to contest negative representations. Through their behavior and desire to portray Muslims as ordinary people, they can convey to the non-Muslim majority that they are not in fact a threat to the nation, to the culture, to feminism, etc. However, their veiling practices can lead to everyday experiences of violence. There are many non-Muslim French who are not prepared to accept these cultural practices, and Muslim women face being attacked or abused when they are veiled. Violence inflicted on hijabis happens throughout Western Europe and is nothing new. Leading up to the 2011 law preventing women from wearing the niqab in public spaces and after the law passed, there were reports of women being arrested or attacked because of their niqab. These attacks are usually verbal, but some women experience physical violence, including the ripping off of their niqabs or hijabs, pushing and/or punching (e.g. “Une femme en nib violemment agressée à Nantes,” 15 Sept 2012).

Such stories are met with outrage by users on Oumma.com as well as recommendations of what can be done. Due to these stories and personal experiences, women share that in material spaces they feel vulnerable -“Like many French Muslims, I feel attacked, targeted, given the side eye day after day. I feel like a stranger where I live and move every day, the examples and scenes of intercultural exchange, the stupidity and brainlessness of people that I meet make me want to vomit.” (Ellie, 28 Nov 2012). Women also share their desire to fight back: “You know, the hate rises in me every second and I’m not waiting for someone to attack before I react and pour all of my frustration of being ‘represented’ and ‘defended’ by ignorant people who do not know how to speak French
correctly and have futile interests in helping. No one better come at me, honestly I feel badly for the idiot that tomorrow tries to attack me or my community” (Ellie, 28 Nov 2012).

While sitting in a bus in Boulogne-Billancourt, I encountered the kind of scene often depicted by Muslim women on Oumma.com. A woman wearing a hijab seated herself by an older woman. As the bus departed for the next stop the elderly lady told the woman to remove her scarf, stating that because she is in France she should not be wearing a veil. The Muslim woman was taken aback by the woman’s words and seemed somewhat at a loss for a response. A couple nearby told the older lady to leave the Muslim woman alone, but the damage was done. Women on Oumma.com do not mention the response that others around them might have when they are confronted or mistreated in public spaces. Rather, they seem to think that there is not enough defense of women by non-Muslims.

Women who are attacked in the street sometimes choose to report the incident to the police as a way of fighting back but also raising awareness. This type of reaction to cultural insecurities can be a difficult as the police are not necessarily interested in their case. To gain a stronger foothold, women turn to both Muslim and non-Muslim organizations for support. For example, one women who reported being cut with a knife and having her hijab ripped off, not only went to the police but also to the Collectif contre l’islamophobie en France (CCIF). She was able to use the CCIF to raise awareness through the media and also to put pressure on the police to find her aggressors (“Une femme de confession musulmane a été agressée à Argenteuil,” 22 April 2009). Other women advocate on their own behalf by sending their stories to as many media outlets as possible. For instance, one woman shared her story of an attempted robbery. She was stopped by two men at knifepoint and since she had nothing with her, the assailants began to hurl insults such as “dirty Arab, terrorist, dirty Muslim” while pulling on her hijab. She reported the incident to the police, and though they were willing to fill out a report, they noted that they would not be willing to spend money trying to track the robbers down (“Une femme voilée témoigne de son aggression,” 4 April 2012). This story
was met with encouragement by users, but also the recommendation that all women wearing a hijab should learn self-defense as these acts of aggression will only continue. Women do report taking such classes, though this tends to be in the wake of personal experiences with violence or because someone in their immediate circle was attacked.

Everyday violence also includes discriminatory practices at work which almost always connect back to veiling practices. The insecurities around what veiling might mean in public spaces become an excuse for ignoring not only the rights these women have, but also for viewing them as individuals. In these cases, women turn to organizations to lobby on their behalf as did three women who were denied banking services because of their hijab (“Les femmes voilées sont interdites d’accès à la Société Générale de Viry-Châtillon,” 8 August 2009). Reporting these events and types of treatment to organizations that lobby on behalf of Muslims is an important step. It provides women with support but also gives them the feeling that they are not alone and what is happening to them is unacceptable. The CCIF website indicates that they have over 14,000 supporters and that they have helped over 200 women and men win cases against acts of Islamophobia. They have also raised awareness and put pressure on politicians at the municipal and city level to take complaints of discrimination linked to culture (religion) more seriously.

The act of fighting back either in the moment (shoving or yelling at assailants) or through legal channels is a way in which Muslim women take on the negative representation linked to cultural insecurities. Most obviously, it goes against the narrative of the submissive woman who does not know how to stand up for herself. It also helps bring to the forefront the idea that because Muslim women are implicated in the production of cultural insecurities, they too are at risk, something rarely discussed by mainstream media, politicians and other public actors. In fact, women can even be blamed for bringing violence on themselves. This

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154 The CCIF website provides additional personal stories of Muslim women and men who have faced violence because of their religious identities (http://www.islamohobie.net).
aspect of cultural insecurity can be surprising to the French majority. Bringing awareness to these situations means that non-Muslims are given the opportunity to reflect on how detrimental the racism and sexism interwoven into these insecurities can be for minority groups.

7.3.8 Civic engagement

Working to make life better for Muslim communities through political means is a way to engage with and contest negative representations. Political activism and voting are topics that proved to be important for the women on Oumma.com. The fear of a strong Muslim lobby or voting bloc is not a prominent theme in the circulating narratives on cultural insecurities in France, but the fear of identity politics and its ability to erode a national identity is a big component of discourses on fear. The beur/beurette political identity of the 1980s and early 1990s spurred discussions of the place of multiculturalism in France. While there could have been hope for an expanded understanding of common culture at that time, Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) observed a return to an assimilationist model where minority groups were encouraged to emulate and become versions of the French majority. This revival of assimilationism was accompanied by a new wave of identity politics within Muslim communities. Tricia Keaton’s ethnographic work in France reveals that unlike previous generations where the origins of one’s parents or grandparents were an important marker of identity, teenagers and people in their 20s identify as French. They are, however, keenly aware that they are racialized and live a life of being culturally assimilated but socially excluded (Keaton 2005: 406). They connect to the national identity but are not considered by others to be a part of it.

Muslim communities in North America have displayed political engagement based on making recognition claims upon higher-status groups. These communities (a) point to difference as compatible with national identity and/or (b) argue that the perceived difference should not be recognized as different but rather a part of Canadian identity (Amin 2014). In
the case of Muslim women in France, they display more of the latter argument that Islam is a part of France and Muslim French are not different than non-Muslims. Studies show that this holds true in terms of voting. Muslim civic engagement has followed the changes in immigration and representation discussed in Chapter Four. Up until the early 2000s, researchers found three main phases of Muslim political activity. The first phase (1940s to the late 1970s) consisted of “Arab immigrants” who were lobbying for work visas and residency rights. In the 1980s, it was the “civic Beurs” who mobilized against discrimination and racism. In the 1990s, the children and grandchildren of Muslim immigrants along with revert claimed their Muslim identity and the right to express it (Ajala 2011). Studies in the early 2000s found that unlike in the UK where over 80 percent of Muslims think of their Muslim identity as most important, over 40 percent of Muslims in France thought of themselves as French citizens first and Muslim second.

French Islam is said to be predominately organized on the local level, where mosques and community centers are an important part of civic life (Godard and Taussig 2007), with three main national organizations guiding Muslim political engagement in France: la Grand Mosque de Paris, l’Union des organisations islamique en France (UOIF) and the Fédération nationale des musulmans de France (FNMF). Interestingly enough women on Oumma.com (in the material coded) talk about their engagement much more in national terms than local ones. Conversations around civic engagement were coded under the larger node Social Engagement which includes 114 sources and 117 references. During the analysis of the data it became apparent that political engagement in relation to cultural insecurities is an important theme for women on Oumma.com.

Voting for the possibility of bettering the lives of Muslims is threaded through all types of conversations. When articles on discrimination and Islamophobia are shared, users talk about the importance of voting for the right candidate to improve the life of Muslim women. When politics are put at the forefront, both women and men recommend that their
fellow Muslims not only use voting as a means of changing their lives, but also outline which
candidates and parties are the most Muslim-friendly. There are also women who feel that
their Muslim identity is not what plays the biggest role in their decision-making in politics.
Identity as a worker, a student or a mother may take the lead. There are also unexpected
revelations. When Marine Le Pen performed relatively well during the first round of
presidential elections in 2012, users on Oumma.com engaged in heavy debate. Some
defended the choice of electing the Front National. Others claimed that voting for the Parti
Socialist, specifically François Hollande, was the only choice for Muslims; “Honestly, I don’t
understand why Muslims support Marine Le Pen. We used to call that national socialism,”
(Delphine, 23 April 2012) and “I know Muslims that vote for Le Pen - their argument is that
they are anti-Zionism,” (Yara, 23 April 2012)

Anecdotally, I recall that in 2002 when Jean-Marie Le Pen made it to the second
round of the Presidential election, the radio station Beur FM was taking calls from listeners
about the unfolding events. People identifying as beur/beurette or Arab were calling in and
talking about the election. More than one caller stated that they had voted for Le Pen because
they were sick of immigrants bringing problems and taking jobs. At the time, this was
shocking—Le Pen had always been presented to me as anti-Arab and anti-Muslim. It was a
reminder that voter intentions are never really known, but also that Muslim political
engagement in France is just as complex as that of any other group.

7.3.9 Social engagement

Women participate in marches, demonstrations and rallies to fight against negative
representations of Muslims and to bring about change. Throughout the data collection period,
there were periodically advertisements for and coverage of different types of group
engagements in material spaces. There have been citywide marches against the 2004 and
2011 laws, demonstrations to fight police violence in the banlieue and discrimination at work,
and the participation of Muslim women in political rallies. Users who report having
participated in such activities express that this is an important way to raise regional or national attention on specific issues.

Muslim women also participate in wider-reaching campaigns. For instance, Oumma.com’s media coverage of the march for *Les Indigènes de la République*\(^\text{155}\) reveals the type of engagement users and other women find important (“*Le reportage vidéo de la marche des indigènes,*” 12 May 2005). In the video of the march, Oumma.com interviews a range of Muslim women. Senator Alina Boumede-Thiery of the Green party talks about the role of colonialism in today’s racism and France’s difficulty in moving beyond the past. The senator and other women who follow point to issues of sexism and racism as a fundamental aspect of the everyday social, economic and political hardship faced by Muslims women. The video shows many hijab-wearing women marching and shouting for equal rights or carrying signs that state “Recognize our competencies, our experiences, our performance” and “Solidarity with women wearing the scarf.” One interviewee framed the march as standing up to the ghettoization of Muslims and demanding the right of people to have their dignity. According to her, research shows that no politician has really represented the needs of immigrants for the last thirty years and that they are unaware of the discrimination and marginalization faced by youth and non-youth who are not part of the French majority. She calls on politicians to recognize the unfair treatment of Muslims on the job market in particular. The anger and feeling of injustice she displays is often discussed by Muslim women on Oumma.com, especially in terms of respect and the right to decent jobs.

While marching may be an option for Muslim groups who wish to raise awareness or voice their opinions, some Oumma.com users have not been able to demonstrate because of barriers put into place by their local government. Permits are often denied or rallies are

\(^{155}\) This association raises awareness of the post-colonial experiences of minorities in France (particularly Muslims) and stands against discrimination. They have called for the reversal of the 2004 law against the hijab in public schools and strongly align themselves with famous Muslim figures such as Tariq Ramadan.
postponed for unexplained reasons, which is interpreted as a tactic to silence Muslim women. These barriers also reveal the deep-seeded fears that the government will not allow Muslim to gain recognition and power. The situation becomes even more tense when perceived Islamophobes are granted a platform. For example, in 2012 the Jeunesses Nationalistes scheduled a march against the presence of Islam in France. This far-right group has often spoken out about the dangers of Islam and the need for it to be expelled from French public spaces. Oumma.com editors and users remarked that the granting of permission for this march would be tantamount to an admission by the government of its anti-Muslim tendencies. Many Muslim groups have been denied permits for marches (“la manifestation des atlas des Jeunesses Nationalistes sera-t-elle autorisées samedi à Paris,” 28 Sept 2012).

Social engagement in the form of activism, marches and demonstrations provides an opportunity to stand up and contest negative representations circulating about Muslim women, but also helps participants create a counter narrative. This can be portrayed in a negative way by French media and public figures, but at least offers the opportunity for women to share their experiences, opinions and needs. Users on Oumma.com also use volunteering and work within associations as a form of activism to fight discrimination and to present a peaceful, generous side of Islam. They support youth groups (“Les scouts musulmans de France au service des handicapé,” 14 March 2014) and the Secour Islamique (Malina, “Ce qui le plus mal c’est la communauté,” 11 April 2011). There are complaints from users and staff that French institutions only support organizations such as SOS Racism that, while helpful, are not exclusively Muslim and limit the power that Muslim organizations can have in public dialogue (“La marche s beurs et le keffieh,” 11 Dec 2013).

7.4 Discussion and conclusion

Material spaces afford women a variety of opportunities to challenge and fight negative representations circulating in French society. These spaces have a role in the production of cultural insecurities as they are sites of interaction and observation between
Muslims and non-Muslims who are susceptible to fears and anxieties associated with losing one’s culture. As Muslim communities gain more visibility on the landscape, they can be met with more resistance by certain non-Muslims groups. Everyday spaces can also become sites of vulnerability and fear for women who are targets for hatred and discrimination. The small, everyday acts of violence that Muslim women, especially those wearing a hijab or niqab, may encounter influences how they use public spaces. The circulating narratives portraying Muslim women as a threat to Frenchness are also reflected and expanded upon in material spaces.

Within the examination of how Muslim women engage with and contest representations of themselves is the idea of agency—the ability to make choices and take action in the world. While this is a simple definition, it does capture the tension of understanding whether social structures and power structures determine individual agency and human action. Though contesting and resisting are not synonymous with agency, and can exist separately, I will cautiously link these concepts in my discussions below when discussing how Muslim women are active in material spaces. Feminists and gender scholars from various parts of the world have debated the meaning of agency within different socio-cultural and historic contexts. Structures that may prevent women from being agentive are perceived and experienced differently around the globe. The agency of Muslim women, in particular, has come into question mostly around practices of veiling, but also within discussions of patriarchy linked to Islam and Muslim societies. Discussions of agency and the hijab (and, to a certain degree, other forms of veiling) within non-Muslim societies, cannot be separated from the categories of submission and resistance (Chapman 2015).

Anthropologists such as Saba Mahmood (2004) and Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) have carefully examined the issue of Muslim women, religion, tradition and agency. Both have strongly objected to European and North American perceptions of Muslim women as powerless, citing examples of political mobilization and the role of choices within Islam.
Both authors accept that in non-Islamic societies, the agency of Muslim women may seem invisible to outsiders. Mahmood sees Muslim women as demonstrating a non-liberal, pious agency that does not conform to discussions of agency in North America and Europe. The agency of self-identifying Muslim women in this dissertation is not limited to Mahmood’s pious agency, or Rachel Rinaldo’s (2014) critical pious agency where women critically engage with religious text in public spaces. Avishai (2008) has contributed to these ideas by explaining that women may appropriate religion to achieve certain extra-religious goals such as economic opportunities, relations within the family, political ideologies, and cultural affiliations (411).

The discussions around religion and agency for Muslim women are strongly related to the negative narratives circulating in France, where public actors and everyday people make assumptions about the agentive constraints placed on Muslim women. However, after analyzing the data collected for this dissertation, it seems that the type of agency that women in this study talk about is slightly different than that described by Mahmood, Abu-Lughod and Rinaldo. These scholars identify agency within religious practices and structures, challenging the Western notion that agency is impossible in Islam. The women on Oumma.com blend both religion but also their experiences of having been born and/or raised in French society, which leads to describing agency within Islam but also within French culture. While agency is an important component of the production of cultural insecurities, the research questions ask more about the agency that Muslim women have in engaging with, responding to and resisting/contesting their implication in the production of cultural insecurities.

Material spaces have a hand in the production of cultural insecurities, rooting them in everyday experiences. The circulating representations of threat are transferred to everyday spaces through images, texts and other symbols. They also appear in the interactions of people with one another and the space around them. Cultural insecurities can lead to the
feeling of a tipping point (there are too many Muslims) or that any evidence of Muslims on
the landscape is proof that France is changing. This is seen in the tensions that arise when
Muslims establish their own institutions (or make the request to do so), such as mosques,
schools or commercial shops. Public and government actors as well as everyday non-Muslims
implicate themselves in ensuring that the building and establishing of Muslim institutions
remains regulated and controlled. There is also evidence of small signs and symbols placed in
neighborhoods that reinforce and aid in the production of cultural insecurities imprinting
themselves in neighborhoods, as seen in Boulogne-Billancourt.

The appearance of Muslim institutions on the landscape is both a point of tension but
also a step towards bringing visibility to Muslim communities on a neighborhood level.
Communities throughout France have lobbied to move their religious practice from private,
invisible spaces to public spaces where they can be recognized as part of French society. This
transition has not always been easy but fighting for Islam-friendly spaces is important and
leads to increased dialogue with non-Muslims. Jocelyne Cesari (2005) writes: “Wherever the
Islamisation of urban space is an issue, it confronts the resistance of the community at large.
Regardless of the nature of the Muslim community’s request, a refusal—Implicit or explicit—
from the local municipality or the surrounding community (neighborhood associations) often
constitutes the first step towards a dialogue” (1018). Her observations hold true for the
communities that share their experiences on Oumma.com and is the case for Boulogne-
Billancourt and other suburbs visited during my field work. These Muslim communities met
resistance and rejection when requesting that Muslim-specific spaces such as mosques be
established. However, after negotiations and discussions, these communities were eventually
given the green light. These groups often must underplay the religious aspect and present
these places as an opportunity to share their culture with others.

Another important aspect of visibility on the landscape is the presence of women
engaging in veiling practices. The complexity behind choosing to wear a hijab/niqab begs the
question of whether these women have choices and agency within this process. French public figures, scholars and journalists who have actively spoken out about the perceived harm it causes women are perplexed by the possibility that wearing a hijab is a choice. Furthermore, the idea that these women would have agency within Islam and their households seems counterintuitive when working within French feminism models. Feminist scholars working within Islamic contexts, such as Mahmood, would argue that the concern with agency should not be approached through questions of patriarchy and religion, but rather looking at structures of political and economic power. Given the way in which Muslim women on Oumma.com share their stories on wearing/not wearing a hijab/niqab in France, it seems that the question of agency is not straightforward. Scholars have noted that resistance does not equal agency, but choice, at least in the case of these Muslim women, does seem like an agentive act. These girls and women are making an informed choice, are weighing consequences and being strategic, all within a context where they are up against people and institutions that have more power than they do. These women take risks not only out of personal conviction but also to help break down the stereotypes that French society has created about them.

Women address and challenge the negative representations of themselves in offline spaces in a variety of ways. They use their creativity and humor to mock these narratives. They participate in civic life, voting for candidates that best fit their needs and encouraging other women to get involved. Muslim women also participate in marches and demonstrations, give talks, attend conferences and engage directly with the media. These opportunities to be active in public space provides them with some visibility, showing the French non-Muslim majority their priorities and how important it is to them to participate in French society. Women who wear a hijab or a niqab are also contesting their negative representation by behaving in ways counter to the narratives. Women on Oumma.com often mentioned the need to be a model of good behavior but also a strong woman, helping to build a new narrative in public spaces while staying true to their spiritual beliefs.
In various parts of this chapter, the question of agency could be raised to bring to the forefront the tenuous position in which Muslim women find themselves. They are represented as both lacking agency but also purposely resisting integration through their choices to blend their parents’ culture and their religion with their lives in France. Feminist scholars caution that resistance does not equate with agency, and in the circulating narratives on Muslim women in France, it is true that these women are portrayed as encouraged or required to act in certain ways by their families and their religion. Their resistance is linked to perceived larger ideologies and elements of Islam that are considered incompatible with French national identity. Following this line of thinking, Muslim women are expected to be rejecting of French values and French feminism. Within the framework of cultural security (or the desire of the French to feel that their culture is being safeguarded), multiculturalism is not acceptable or at least should not be apparent in public spaces.

Several feminists working in Muslim contexts have challenged what Western, white feminists believe to be signs of agency. This debate appeared many times on Oumma.com as well. Users and women interviewed on Oumma.com perceive a difference between French feminism and Muslim feminism, and their ability to be agentive is reflected upon. Asma Lamrabet, a Moroccan doctor and Islamic feminist author, contributes to Oumma.com occasionally. In an article entitled “Feminism islamique” (26 May 2003), Lamrabet not only outlines the differences between what she calls pro-Occidental feminism (based in secularism and issues of femininity) and what Muslim women are beginning to develop in Europe. Lamrabet describes a movement of women who are leading public discussions, publishing written works and presenting their ideas at conferences and other outlets that shares how Islamic feminism “carries with it a message of deep emancipation” through religious practice and belief. Contributor and user of Oumma.com, Dr. Zahra Ali also published an anthology of Islamic feminist thinkers, portraying the diversity of approaches to feminism within Muslim communities.
Oumma.com contributors and both of the scholars mentioned above approach feminism and agency from a religious point of view. This is in line with well-respected feminist scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod. Their insistence upon looking at gender roles and the position of women through Islam makes sense for two reasons. First, religious practice and family tradition within Islam is an important aspect to how these women self-identify. Second, these women are living in a context (Western Europe) where their cultural identity, specifically their religion, is often a one-dimensional way in which they are categorized by the non-Muslim majority. Their Muslimness takes the priority in cultural insecurity narratives, and the resulting representations show them at a disadvantage because of this identity. Therefore, there is much discussion of why Muslim women have agency, how Islam is structured in a way to support the emancipation of women and how political structures are what oppress women.

Through my observations on Oumma.com, it seems that women are approaching their actions, decision-making and reactions to the cultural insecurity that the French majority displays in more nuanced and complex ways. Certainly, those women who are practicing the religious aspects of Islam work within a framework of their spiritual beliefs and requirements from religious text and traditions. Within this framework are norms of gender roles. However, many of the women on Oumma.com were born and raised in France. Their religious practice is blended with non-Muslim French culture (both contemporary but also long-standing traditions and customs). Lamrabet insists that the only feminism that will be acceptable in France is one that claims the exotic and interesting parts of Arab culture but that rejects religion. Yet women on Oumma.com who are religious describe the ability of the “Islamic culture” to adapt itself to different national contexts, including that of France. This adaptation leads to the development of Islamic feminism (e.g. “L’Islam peut il s’adapter à la société française?” 27 Jan 2004). Some of these women have influences from their parents and grandparents who were immigrants. Others have no attachment to countries other than
France. In addition, many of the women on the website and women that I met in the Paris metro area self-identify as Muslim, but are not religious.

These nuances influence how they engage with and contest representations of themselves as a threat. The choices they make in how to react, the ways in which they want to be perceived, the arguments they use and their opinions on cultural insecurities are all influenced by a delicate balance of feeling part of French culture but also sensing and experiencing their marginalization. These women have grown up with the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, as well as the gender roles prescribed by French culture, just like non-Muslims. Some of these women have grown up in poorer banlieue which has its own influence on processes of being, while others are from middle-class families all over France. Their individual experiences help form a specific type of Muslim French feminism that is not solely reliant on practices within Islam.

Bearing this in mind, the question of agency still remains. When Muslim women challenge the representations of themselves as a threat, are their actions truly agentive? This question is important because it not only addresses head-on the narratives circulating about Muslim women in France, but it also moves us towards understanding how minority groups who are at a disadvantage in terms of political, social and often economic power can fight discrimination and eventually change the narrative that they pose a threat to the majority.

Most importantly, it seems that Muslim women on Oumma.com recognize that they are in a fragile position but feel that within the confines of their situation, they do in fact have agency. This agency is about choice, the ability to act and the opportunity to defend themselves. It is also the ability to stand up and represent themselves on their own terms as Muslim French. The examples used in this chapter show that women do all these things in various ways. Whether they successfully alter the larger circulating narratives of Muslim women is difficult to say. Not only is it difficult for them to gain consistent national visibility in positive ways, but they are also competing with global narratives about Islam as a threat to European and
North American societies. This is particularly difficult to overcome. However, in the examples and comments made by women about their experiences in everyday material spaces, they are able to contest representations they disagree with and provide a complex look at what it means to be Muslim French.

In material spaces women often have to work, together and also men, to see positive changes around them (e.g. establishing a mosque, reporting discrimination in the workplace). For many they must also be in constant contact with non-Muslim French who may mistreat them for a variety of reasons. This might also mean moving through environments where they feel vulnerable or where they feel distinctly unwelcome. These are the realities of material spaces, which are rich in meaning and experiences, but also loaded with cultural insecurities. The next chapter of this dissertation will look at virtual spaces, specifically online, to uncover how women are engaging with and contesting the representations of themselves in France. Virtual spaces offer an opportunity to see another side of Muslim communities, how they discuss certain topics, the ways in which they engage with cultural insecurities, and what advantages and disadvantages online spaces offer minority groups facing discrimination.
Chapter 8  Engagement and resistance in virtual spaces

As discussed in Chapter Six, material spaces allow Muslim women to engage with and contest negative representations through diverse ways including art, clothing practices and civic activity, just to name a few. Whether it is through political activism or defending themselves in moments when cultural insecurities lead to discrimination or violence, women come into contact with the repercussions of cultural insecurities on a daily basis. They also find ways to challenge the dominant narratives of submission, terrorism and others in creative ways. Material spaces allow for contact and interaction in everyday circumstances between Muslims and with non-Muslims. The imprints of Muslim activity and the evidence of cultural insecurities in the resulting behaviors and visuals on the landscape show that these tensions are a part of everyday experiences. Material offline environments can be spaces of fear and vulnerability for Muslim women, but they also offer a chance to engage with negative representations and build counter narratives.

However, material spaces are not the only places in which cultural insecurities are produced and in which Muslim women respond. Virtual spaces allow for different types of contestations that intersect with and are different from those in physical spaces because of their built environment and the ways in which people behave and interact. Virtual spaces are everyday places that are imprinted with meaning and offer opportunities for interaction in both similar and in different ways from offline spaces. In this dissertation, virtual spaces refer to online websites/pages of Oumma.com and to a small degree, printed text. I include printed text in this category because they create an experience for the reader that is rooted in visualization, imagination and internal processes that are different than tangible, outward experience of material spaces.

Like material spaces, virtual spaces figure into the everyday experiences and habits of people’s lives. The internet provides us with what seems like plethora of opportunities and avenues in which to exchange, and access to areas within online spaces seem endless (Sands
Websites, social media platforms and mobile devices all have their own ways of mediating our experiences and exposing us to others. Through their construction, these spaces can play a role in the production of cultural insecurities because of the opinions and experiences of those participating in these spaces. Social scientists have increasingly been interested in the role of virtual spaces in our lives, especially on the internet. New and adapted methodologies are being used and tested, and questions on what impact technologically-mediated communication and interactions have on our societies are being asked in new ways. How cultural insecurities are engaged with and contested by Muslim women online is important for this dissertation because it provides a dimension of interaction not afforded in material, offline spaces.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which women on Oumma.com engage with cultural insecurities on the internet and also explores the characteristics of online spaces that help facilitate discussions and open new avenues of exchange with other Muslims and non-Muslims. There are a lot of similarities on how women engage with and contest negative representations in virtual and physical spaces. For instance, this chapter discusses how civic and social engagements online are important to many of the women in this study, as was the case in material spaces. Yet online spaces afford women opportunities and experiences that are unique in comparison to offline. This chapter begins with a brief overview of published social science research on Muslim women online to ground the chapter. I then discuss specific themes that emerged from the coded data of the activities and way in which Muslim women are addressing negative representations in French society. Comments and opinions on Oumma.com I collected and coded illustrate how the by-product of being implicated in the production of cultural insecurities is challenging in ways that require specific coping strategies. The third section of this chapter looks specifically at how women employ both online and offline to cope and stay resilient. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the unique attributes of virtual spaces which offer minorities who are implicated in the production
of cultural insecurities opportunities to engage with and provide counter narratives to these representations.

8.1 Virtual spaces and Muslim women

Virtual online spaces are similar to material spaces in the sense that they are created through interactions as well as internal processes, but they are not identical in terms of construction and use. Aside from the obvious differences between in real life experiences and those mediated by technology (e.g. what is tangible and sensory in our offline lives is very different online), there are ways in which these virtual spaces are accessed and used that are specific to their construction. The answer to the questions of who has access, when and why are constantly changing because of both ownership and user interests. Rules and regulations online are not the same, and how we choose to share information and experiences are specific to online.

In addition, the collection of interconnected spaces on the internet are both public and private in ways that are different than in material spaces. In countries such as France, public and private spaces are determined through a set of laws, where public spaces are usually governed by the state, and private spaces are (mostly) controlled by individuals, groups and businesses. While there are laws that can interfere with private ownership (e.g. imminent domain in the US), for the most part, access to these spaces is based on agreement from the owner. In online spaces, these boundaries are much messier. Individuals, groups, businesses and state institutions can buy domains and create websites, making them the owner of that space, though the companies who provide these platforms can control access. Websites can be made private through settings and securing measures, which limits access to the general public. Non-secured webpages can be viewed by the general public. However, even when pages are public, communities may feel as though the spaces are semi-private. For instance, Oumma.com which explicitly states that it is a source of news and a place of interactions for Muslims in France, is open to any user. Yet, when users who are not considered to be a part
of the community share unwanted opinions, other users will ask them a) why they are on a Muslim website and b) tell them that they are not welcome.

This private versus public distinction is worth mentioning not only for the ethical concerns of data collection discussed in Chapter Three, but because the sense of community and privacy are important to how people interact online. In material spaces, Muslim women are exposed to all sorts of people and places. They can modify their routines and choices to avoid some places that might seem unsafe or negative to them. They are also forced to interact in places where they are susceptible to discrimination (e.g. schools and banks as discussed in Chapter Five). Online spaces are different in the sense that Muslim women may choose when they visit social sites, with whom to interact and what to read.\textsuperscript{156} This does not suggest that they do not face discrimination or at the very least irritations in connection to cultural insecurities on the internet, but there is the opportunity to make choices.

Choices are an important part of interactions online, though there are some basic barriers that also control use. Virtual online spaces have rapidly become a part of the everyday lives of many people thanks to increased internet access around the world. The INSEE reported in 2011 that two out of three households in France have access to the internet, though this does not include mobile devices that use cellular service to go online.\textsuperscript{157} As this chapter uses the activity of Muslim women on Oumma.com to illustrate how their online activity allows them to engage with and contest representations, it is important to mention the limitations this presents. One of the biggest issues is what type of sample this website provides. There are a number of questions and concerns raised by researchers on access to online space. Analysis of distribution (globally) shows that inequalities due to

\textsuperscript{156} For the most part this is true. Obviously online bullying in social media accounts, offensive material on public sites (e.g. racist or Islamophobic articles) and other objectionable material can surface anywhere, exposing women to more backlash due to cultural insecurities. However, Muslim women do have the potential of having a little more control in what they expose themselves to online.

\textsuperscript{157} https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/1281219
geographic location, education, gender, ethnicity, language and income-level all play a role (e.g. van Deursen et al. 2015). Commonly called the digital divide, this inequality on both a regional and a community/individual level effects the profile of who is participating online. While access to internet is quite high in France, there is a risk that minority groups that have been marginalized (ex. families in the banlieue) may not have the same type of access to online spaces due to cost or other factors. The website does not release statistics about their users, but it stands to reason that access and frequency of participation on the site is influenced by socio-economic factors.

Aside from the issue to access or barriers to online activity such as language and education, social scientists have found that minorities benefit from online spaces. As mentioned in Chapter Five, researchers find the internet to be an important site for Muslims forming and discussing identities because it bridges geographic spaces, offers information and is a safe(er) platform to discuss issues that arise when individuals and communities are marginalized because of their religion (Hoekstra and Verkuyten 2014). There is also evidence that religious and other minority groups are disproportionately more involved in online communities than the majority (Kozinets 2010). Muslims communities in Western Europe and North America have shown not only a sustained interest in building communities online, but their use and habits have evolved over time. Social scientists have posed questions on how Muslims are using online spaces to build new religious practices and networks, new Islamic discourses and identity as well as community-making.

Given that Muslim communities are found around the world, are diverse in their identities and traditions, and have connections to specific regions (e.g. Mecca, family ties), it is not surprising that the internet could play a vital role in how connections are made and maintained. Their activity is both beneficial but can also contribute to the production of cultural insecurities. The representations of Muslim women in audio, visual and text form that circulate in societies find a convenient home online as information moves quickly. Yet virtual
spaces can also serve as important platforms for challenging representations of cultural threats through a variety of means including producing material that acts as a rebuttal to representations, sharing content that builds other narratives and by finding ways to bring together communities in a positive way.

Social scientists have found that until now, Muslim women living in societies where they are in the minority, use online spaces differently from those in predominantly Muslim countries. Much of websites registered in Islamic countries, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, have been dedicated to two things: they either serve as a way to learn about religious texts or to voice political activism/dissent. Women in these countries have turned to the internet as a space for self-expression and forming of political identity which they cannot do in offline spaces due to access, social norms and other regulating factors. There are several specific examples such as female activists in Afghanistan who have utilized virtual spaces during the late 1990s to voice their experiences and concerns while living under Taliban rule (Sarwary 2012; Bunt 2002). The internet allowed Afghan women to tell the world of the harsh conditions and inequality they felt, through the physical abuse and strict gendered laws, while insisting that Taliban rule was not Islamic law. The internet has helped Iranians challenge the political legitimacy of Mohammad Khatami in the early 2000s, something that would have been impossible in material, offline spaces (Rahimi 2016). During the Arab Spring, both men and women used social media as a way to express their solidarity, document injustice and to share their vision of a better society. Blogging proved to be important in promoting women’s empowerment during the Arab Spring as women were less visible in the streets (Radsch and Khamis 2016); Social media gave these women new tools to articulate their identities and participate in the public sphere.

Early research on Muslim activity online in non-Islamic society shows that religious belief tended to be the driving force behind the use of websites and platforms (see Anderson 2016 as an example). These spaces were dedicated to religious education, and to some extent
issues of culture and regional traditions within the Islamic world, though this was less likely to be the main focus of these sites. Some of the Cyber Islamic Environments described by Bunt (2002) include: websites that offer versions and recitations of the Qur’an and Sunna, Islamic music sites (though the appropriateness of music that is not specifically linked to religion tends to be contested depending on the tradition), Sunnī and Shī’ā analysis of shārī’ā text (legal texts), and sites which post and discuss the ahādīth. These sites were particularly popular in the 1990s and opened up new channels of interaction around sacred and practical aspects of Muslim life. From the late 1990s to the present, many Islamic social websites have cropped up around the world. Sites such as Muslims Online (www.muslimsonline.org) or Muslim dating sites have exploded, allowing individuals to interact with the umma.

Religious use of the internet has led to political groups using Islam for certain ends and, while these groups are in the minority, they receive considerable media attention. This off-shooting includes terrorist groups and jihadi organizations that utilize websites and social media for propaganda purposes or as a recruitment tool. Though there has been considerable media coverage of groups such as ISIS’s skilled approach of enticing youth on Twitter and other social media platforms, the presence online of such groups is not new. Examples include organizations such as the Laskar Jihad in Indonesia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Laskar Jihad was able to use an online platform to tailor their image as a socially-minded religious group by curating their content all while targeting and eliminating any dissenting voices about their organization group (Bräuchler 2016).

The increase in radical Islamic groups’ use of communication technologies certainly feeds the production of cultural insecurities, and Muslims active online can suffer because to it. Despite the possible negative reactions from the non-Muslim majority, groups have continued to form and create vibrant virtual communities. There are studies on Muslim bloggers in Europe who build networks through their opinions and coverage of politics and
culture (e.g. Eckert and Chadha 2016). Other studies have shown that online platforms allow Muslims living in Europe to maintain their transnational ties. For example, Lenie Brouwer’s (2016) research explores the nature of websites used by Moroccan youth living in the Netherlands. These young people are usually the first generation to be born in Europe, and they stay connected to their parents/grandparents’ place of origin by discussing two main topics online: marriage with men and women still living in Morocco and holiday travel in the Maghreb. Similar studies on Muslim online communities reveal that online members of closed groups who live in Western Europe or North America tend to converse solely in the language of where they live or in English even if they are chatting about religious topics or with people from Arabic-speaking countries (Eickelman and Anderson 2016; Brouwer 2016; Piela 2011 and 2010). This has prompted researchers to think about questions of assimilation, integration but also how youth are negotiating identities.

Gendered identities is a topic found in some of the literature, particularly focusing on how Muslim women interact online. Earlier research from the late 1990s, early 2000s showed that men had the tendency of participating online more than women, but today there is equal activity between men and women (Bhimji 2016). However, most of the studies show that online spaces are split along gendered lines, where girls and women create spaces of discussion that do not include men. Lifestyle bloggers and vloggers will often provide the disclaimer that their content is for sisters only and that brothers are encouraged to find other places to interact. Though these women never take off their under scarf and/or their hijab in videos, they feel that strangers who are male should not be viewing or participating with Muslim women in these spaces. Online, virtual spaces also give women access to information on Islam (as the internet breaks with traditional Islamic scholarship which usually is provided

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158 This is worth noting this as it illustrates how the younger second and third generation do not use Arabic to communicate with other Muslims, even though they have at least a basic level learned through their religious practice. Authors point to this choice in language as an indication of their integration or their cultural preferences. Reverts are a different story as they may know basic prayers in Arabic, but they are less likely to be able to use it in conversations online.
by local imams) and provides them a space to discuss both religious topics (Bhimji 2016, Piela 2011) but also more personal things such as sex before and after marriage (Marcotte 2015), domestic violence and queer identities (Kort 2016).

As explained in Chapter Three, Oumma.com as a site of research is different from many chosen by other researchers. It is not a private group, it does not focus solely on religion, the content it heavily influenced by the cultural, political and economic current events and users are both male and female from all over France. Web analytics that are public show that, in addition to the high percentage of users from France, there are also users from North and West Africa, Belgium and Switzerland. The virtual spaces of Oumma.com are everyday spaces where users share their viewpoint, their experiences and their opinions. Users are both interacting with strangers, but simultaneously forming bonds and habits in a textual and visual world which is unlike their daily realities. The sensory and tangible experience of interacting online is different. Habits formed include choices in what to visit and read, ways of navigating online and style of communication. All of this is dictated by the structures of the virtual environment.

As mentioned earlier, online spaces are different from material spaces but these types of spaces are also linked. As mentioned in Chapter Six, comments, discussions and uploaded material such as videos are rooted in the experiences of women in material spaces. However, the use of these spaces, their function and mechanics, are distinct. It was important to bear this in mind during the stages of data collection and analysis even if it seemed that the information women were sharing echoed one another. Academics through the 1980s and 1990s attempted to make connections or at least question how individuals were re-representing or re-inventing world realities in computer-mediated environments. This is not surprising as so many computer and video games, or total immersion experiences such as

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159 For example, I observed one or two times when two women would exchange their email addresses so that they could continue their conversation about being Muslims in France in a more personal way.
Second Life, call upon associations with real world experiences to create new environments. Nature, buildings, human forms and animals are all represented in many of these virtual worlds providing users with a life-like experience (whether successful or not). Oumma.com as a news and lifestyle website falls under another category. No attempts are made to fashion a user experience into a new world but rather relies on communication of information and opinions that directly references offline life.

Much like material spaces, there is also the question of power - who controls the environment and how much power do others have to express themselves and alter information. Oumma.com controls the main content that is uploaded and police the comment section. In one of the versions of the website, a point system was assigned to the users. When Oumma.com staff found something objectionable or negative, they would deduct points from the user. Some frequent users who I have referenced through this dissertation would have up to -200 points at one time. It was never made clear to the users what exactly the points were for, but some speculated that it was a tool to reward or to shame them for their opinions. Website staff also deletes comments, though this will sometimes backfire. Users will return to the same article, complain about Oumma.com’s decision to censor and will rephrase exactly what they want to say. The guide for censoring material is never explained to users. When contacted, Oumma.com told me that they remove material that they think is inappropriate or offensive. This is somewhat confusing as there are non-Muslims who periodically posted racist and Islamophobic material (in my opinion and the opinions shared by others), but their comments remain on the site.160

The interactions of Muslim women on Oumma.com create its own type of culture, something also found by Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway in their own research:

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160 When I returned to Oumma.com in autumn 2016, I realized that all of the comments that were visible from the early 2000s until 2015 had been erased. This is probably due to an update of the website, but it is surprising. Users are welcomed to start posting again, but the history of user experiences has disappeared.
“Cyberculture refers here to ways of life in cyberspace, or ways of life shaped by cyberspace, where cyberspace is a matrix of embedded practices and representations” (Bell 2007: 5). The practices mentioned include a range of actions including drawing on a large amount of visual and textual information to provide examples, highlight topics, to further arguments, build knowledge and develop discussions. Users can pull from endless sources, whether they be news outlets, other types of websites, opinion blogs/vlogs and any other random artifacts floating online. Women on Oumma.com practices include writing text, uploading audio and visuals to share with the community, both in the comment section but also as main pieces (cleared by Oumma.com editorial staff). This pulling from different sources enriches the discussions that take place and challenge circulating narratives in ways that are in a sense larger than what would be possible in physical spaces. This is a unique aspect of virtual spaces - the bridging on space, connecting people that would otherwise never have contact. There is also a longevity to the discussions with strangers that can occur online as users can constantly resist things that they and others have written and posted.

The practice of pulling information from other sources and blending it with their own opinions and stories allows for women to share and build new interpretations and narratives about Muslim women. In Peter Mandaville’s work on the Islamic diaspora, he states “new media opened up new spaces of contestation where traditional sources of authority should be challenged by a wider public” (Mandaville 2016: 228). Online spaces provide women in France the opportunity to contest their implication in the production of cultural insecurities in humorous, passionate, active and passive ways that influence both virtual but also physical spaces. The analysis of the coded data from 1997 to 2014 unveiled a number of examples of how Muslim women in France repost to representations of themselves as a threat. Through their interactions in virtual spaces, they challenge discourses and create new narratives that are opposed to those circulating in society. They also illustrate the complexities of self-identifying with a religious minority through the stories they tell and the discussions they have about the Muslim experience in France. The following subsections provide a summary
of the main themes that emerged from the data. Some activities and approaches taken by women are similar to those found in virtual spaces. Others are specific to online environments.

8.2 Engaging with and contesting negative representations

Oumma.com offers a rich landscape for observing how Muslim women interact within their communities and for understanding how they discuss cultural insecurities with users that, generally speaking, consider themselves part of the same or similar community. Chapter Six presented evidence and analysis of how women confront cultural insecurities and their place in it and whether they have agency in these actions. In online spaces, women share information, participate in groups and activism, use virtual spaces to bridge their physical ones, to develop further their identity as Muslims in France and use virtual spaces to create counter narratives.

8.2.1 Activism online

While the research on Muslim activism online has looked heavily at youth protesting the current political regime in Islamic countries, the type of activism found on Oumma.com is more in the form of signing petitions, getting involved in political parties, rallying for a cause by posting information and links, organizing boycotts and producing videos on topics about injustice.

Online petitions were one of the most popular ways in which Muslim women are actively fighting against the circulating representations of themselves as a threat to France. The petitions are for a variety of things including but not limited to: demanding better services, challenging media coverage of Muslims, contesting the expulsion of veiled women from public spaces, and fighting against any moves to restrict the wearing of a hijab. In the

\[161\] Here I am using community to talk about Muslim French living in the hexagon.
lead-up to the passing of the 2004 law on ostentatious religion signs in schools, several petitions circulated on the website. Le collectif les mots sont importants submitted a petition entitled “Yes to secularism, no to laws of exception” (7 October 2003). After explaining how they felt the upcoming law was discriminatory and profoundly sexist, they called upon feminist organizations and human rights groups along with everyone else to sign as a gesture of resistance.

Polls on Islam in France are commonly administered or reported on by major newspapers. When the results are released, Oumma.com often publishes the findings to raise awareness within their online community. These polls generally show disfavor among the French majority towards some facet of Islam (e.g. building of mosques, the wearing of the niqab, or more general feelings on the religion). As shared by Salam, “For 100% of Muslims, polls are basically a threat” (25 Oct 2012) - this is a sentiment that is shared by many users. Salam also points out that “like all poll results, we don’t learn anything about what is happening under the surface, personal convictions or deeper feelings the French have, and nothing new on their assumptions, their contradictions and internal divisiveness, but resign ourselves without questions to what magazines say”.

Women report participating in such polls because they feel that even though the polls are clearly geared towards non-Muslim French, they are citizens and feel the need to express their opinions. Their participation usually is an act of protest or in anger as the topics are viewed as ludicrous.

In addition to petitions and to lament about polls in the media, several organizations use Oumma.com as a place to call for boycotts. Oumma.com also uses its platform to inform users of injustices or Islamophobia, and to ask for their help in making a statement. In an article on one of Charlie Hebdo’s offensive cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad, the editors stated: “Oumma.com appelle tous les musulmans de France à traiter avec le plus grand
mépris ce énième piège béant tendu par Charlie Hebdo, et à répondre juridiquement, si certains le souhaitent, à cette volonté à peine voilée de nuire à la concorde nationale.”

Oumma.com calls on all Muslims in France to treat with the utmost contempt this umpteenth open enemy trap set set by Charlie Hebdo, and to respond legally, if you would like, to this barely veiled will to harm national cohesion. (“Méprison la nouvelle provocation de Charlie Hebdo! 19 September 2012).

It can be somewhat chilling to see the amount of times that Oumma.com and its users showed anger and frustration towards the staff of Charlie Hebdo given what would later happen. Users such as Saba call the staff the enemies of Islam and demand that the paper be shut down as hate speech should not be covered under freedom of speech. There are also calls to boycott any products from Israel and demands that the French government not participate in conferences that are either paid by Israel or support their cause in any way. For many women on Oumma.com, this is an important point not only because they want to show solidarity with Palestinians, but because they fear the influence off Zionism in France. Users state that the control of the Israeli lobby and Orthodox Jews in France is dangerous for Muslim communities as they are characterized as an enemy. Those who comment on publications demanding boycotts against Israel believe that Zionist have strong financial and political control in France and pose a real threat to the human rights of Muslims living in France.

8.2.2 Raising awareness

Online spaces are important for raising awareness of certain issues that are not covered by mainstream media. In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I used examples of how women feel that discrimination and abuse of Muslims is often overlooked by media and key actors in France. Defacing of mosques, mistreatment by police and even death of young Muslims are perceived as not receiving the same amount of attention as the representations of Muslims as a threat.
Women look to online spaces as a place to raise awareness of the issues that they and their community members are facing. For instance, Kaki shared her dismay when a young Muslim was killed:

“Unfortunately, this kind of attack will not be reported on television channels in France. Thankfully we have the internet to inform ourselves of the severity and the impact of Islamophobia. Marwa Sherbini was killed in from of her son and on top of it she was pregnant (absolute horrible and barbaric). I also think that there will be others like Marwa. These cases are buried by the media so that Islamophobes do not have a bad conscience. This is all with the goal to be able to do things freely. The others (non-racist, non-violent, indifferent…) will never realize the rise of Islamophobia and the violence it produces, they are asleep without any real vision of reality. It’s also them that can say STOP (and some of them do and thankfully they are there), put a stop to racism, stop to certain depictions of Muslims. We would like it and they are a part of society just as much as we are.” (Kaki, 28 Nov 2012).

It is important for these communities that they have access to such news stories because it helps them share their own experiences and keeps them informed of what issues others are facing who identify as Muslim. However, this needs to be done carefully. I found two instances on Oumma.com where I could not find additional evidence that something had occurred. For instance, in 2010, a story was published on the website about a Muslim who was violently attacked in a dorm from in the United States. While the story is certainly plausible, I could not find any evidence of the case in US media. This does not mean it is a false, but it is important to keep in mind that stories on the internet might not all be true. If Muslim women are reading stories that are untrue, they are experiencing and fearing French society in a way that is not always accurate.

8.2.3 Demanding action

When other modes of recourse or acknowledgement fail, the internet becomes a place where women can make things public and demand for action. When women are stopped on the street for wearing a niqab or if they are mistreated by police or other institutions, they sometimes choose to make their experiences known on Oumma.com. There can be several reasons for this including to share with other men and women who face similar problems or to
hopefully inspire people to speak out against injustices faced by Muslim women. It is not only the women who lobby for themselves on the website. For instance, in the video “Le mari de la femme voilée interpellé à Trappes dément la version policère devant les camera” (reposted on 24 July 2013, original air date in 2010), the husband of a woman wearing a niqab agrees to an interview with Oumma.com to set the record straight. Mikael, a revert, and his wife Cassandra who is a revert and wears a niqab, were stopped in the street. His wife was asked to lift her veil and show her identity card. She refused to do this as both police officers were men. The police report suggests that both Mikael and his wife became agitated and eventually violent towards the officers who then arrested them.

Mikael and Cassandra denied that they ever resorted to violence and refused to pay any fine. However, they couple quickly realized that they would not be believed and would not have recourse through legal channels. Though Cassandra did not want to speak on camera, Mikael thought it was important to share with the Oumma.com community their experience and hopefully gain some public support for their claim of mistreatment by the police. As is most often the case with stories about the niqab, the women users who commented on this story focused on the injustice that the couple faced and how traumatic it must be for them. None of the users, however, defended the right to wear the niqab.

8.2.4 Sharing information

Online spaces allow for users to share important information that may help them in their resistance and contestations of their implication in the production of cultural insecurities. This information can range from informing people of events (e.g. where rallies are being held), recent developments (e.g. legal debates around Muslim practices), background/history on important subjects (e.g. colonialism) and everyday stories (e.g. individual experiences with discrimination). This information flows easily in virtual spaces and can be linked, shared and posted on an infinite number of platforms. This allows Muslim women to stay informed about
what is happening and allows them to choose to participate in different forms of contestation and resistance.

8.2.5 Building a political identity

The shingling of pertinent information has become increasingly common and important for Oumma.com users. The type of information listed above can easily be reposted to hundreds of sites and social media profiles in a matter of minutes. The information also becomes easily searchable. For instance, the hashtag #muslimpride was used as a way to share stories and one liners about what makes Muslims proud in the face of Islamophobia. This hashtag was used all over the world as an act of solidarity – the story of how this hashtag gained global momentum was covered by Oumma.com. While the beur/beurette political identity of the 1970s and 1980s developed in specific urban areas, the political identities of today are easily shaped and shared through sites like Oumma.com. Users talk about their cultural identity as one intertwined in politics because they are the target of scrutiny and state action.

8.2.6 Sharing personal stories

Online spaces allow women to share personal experiences with discrimination, whether it be a small instance or a clear violation of their rights. Women either have videos and articles published about the incident or they share their stories in the comment section. A perfect example of an article that shares such a story was written by Khadija Marfouk in 2003 where she documented her experiences with harassment in ‘Un rassemblement républicaine interdit aux files violées’. In it she recounts a peaceful gathering of the Ligue internationale contre le racism et l’antisémitism (LICRA) outside L’Hôtel de Ville in Paris. Marfouk, who wears a hijab participated in the demonstration outside, but was not allowed to enter the town hall afterwards. She was told that in a closed legal session, women wearing headscarves were not permitted to assist. The staff claimed that her hijab went against the fundamental goals of
the meeting which were to defend and reinforce the fundamental values of the French republic by fighting racism, communautarisme and xenophobia. The hypocrisy of that moment was neither lost on Marfouk nor on the readers of Oumma.com. Such stories are shared by women constantly, and often platforms such as this website, are the only places where people will listen and provide useful advice.

Women also share information about the history of groups such as Muslims, Arabs, Berbers, Maghrébins and immigrants in France. Oumma.com staff, contributors and users share their knowledge, opinions and feelings on some of the forgotten history of these groups, or the blatant omission by the French schooling system. The French government has even announced that public schools must remember to include the positive aspects of colonialism in their curriculum. Several writers, film makers, journalists and other professionals are interviewed on Oumma.com to share their work and the reasons why they feel it is important for French society to be familiar with the point of view of minority groups. Two examples found on the website include interviews with Yasmina Adi and Dalila Kerchouche.

Screen writer and documentary film maker Yasmina Adi was interviewed by OummaTV during the premier of her film Ici On Noie les Algériens/ Here We Drown Algerians (“Reportage sur l’avant-première du film ‘Ici on noie les Anlgériens”, 20 Oct 2011). The film uses old footage and recent interviews to educate the public about the time period she calls ‘the repression’, October to December 1961. At the time, many Algerians living in France were protesting and speaking out against the colonial practices of the French, and in many cases losing their lives because of it. During the interview, Adi states that the general French public has chosen to forget about this bloody period, but that many Algerians, particularly women, were active in fighting for the freedom of their Algerian families and friends. Adi highlights that by making the movie she wants not only France to recognize the ills of colonialism, but for Arabs to reclaim their history as not only post-colonial subjects,
but as men and women who fought for their freedom. The lack of educational material on this period is particularly painful to her.

Adi was able to interview women involved in the period of repression and one such woman, Ghennoudja Chabane appears during the OummaTV interview. Chabane feels that France chooses to forget about the suffering of Muslims and Arabs in general, particularly in relation to their shared history. Though she believed that her participation in the movie put her at risk for deportation, her activism for the treatment of Algerians in France encouraged her to share her memories of the women activists she worked with during the late 1950s, early 1960s. She lost her husband when the police raided a demonstration in Paris, so she replaced him as a leader in an organization for Algerian workers in France. Chabane ended the interview by saying that the younger generations (those connected to North Africa) do not know their family histories. They are unaware of the struggles of their grandparents and parents which is a disservice to them, particularly when they face discrimination today because of racism and Islamophobia.

Adi and Chabane’s work highlight two important aspects of what other Muslim women discuss online. There is evidence of a general dismay in how French society ignores the plight of many Muslims by erasing ugly histories or turning it into a positive. This same discontent is expressed in journalist Dalila Kerchouche’s 2006 interview in which she discusses her book Mon Père, ce Harki/ My Father, this Harki (“Les harkis étaient considérés comme de bon sausages à dresser”, 8 Oct 2006). Kerchouche traces the horrible conditions in which the Harkis were brought to France and moved through different lodging camps for over a decade. Kerchouche explains that the Harkis were rendered invisible by the French government who did not know how to handle their commitments to these fighters. The answer was to place them in large camps, away from the general public, controlled by former

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162 Harki was the term used for Muslim Algerians who fought on the side of the French during the early 1960s.
military and social workers. Harkis were not only kept from living in French society, but they were also separated from other Muslim communities because of their potentially strenuous relationships - Harkis were seen as traitors during the early 1960s as they fought against the Algerians in the FLN. The author also converted her book to a screenplay which aired as a made for television movie on France 2 in 2006. This marked the first time a movie was made about the experiences of the Harki after their arrival in France.

In the comment section of these two interviews, users lament over how North Africans have been stigmatized, mistreated and have had their history erased by the French state. This sharing of history that is forgotten also allows Muslims to build their identity in new ways. When users share information that is specific to Muslims in France, they are contributing to sculpting online narratives that are by Muslims. To a certain degree, these women have the power to create these narratives in ways that would be impossible in physical spaces.

8.2.7 Criticizing aspects of Muslim communities

One of the larger themes that emerged from the coded data was the amount of times Muslim women criticize Muslim leaders and those who are visible in the mainstream media. These leaders are supposedly representing Muslim communities across France and are acting as advocates. However, many of the most visible figures are also the most disliked by women on the website. Users criticize these leaders for their poor representation of Muslims in France and for being too willing to give in and bend to the will of those from the majority who feel culturally insecure. French media tends to call on a handful of people to “explain” Muslimness to them when certain events such as a terrorist or riots in a banlieue break out. There are also key thinkers who appear in interviews and on talk shows when the topic of Islam is broached. The comments and opinions on these leaders display the richness and diversity within Muslim communities as they voice what they think is inaccurate or negative about what is being represented and discussed. There is an element of safety provided by
Oumma.com in these instances. While women have no problem talking about famous imams as total fools and Maghrebie politicians as poor examples of their communities, they might be less willing to do this in other contexts. On the website, they can be unfiltered because this is considered to be a Muslim space. If these women were with non-Muslim, they potentially could be more careful in their analysis.

8.2.8 Voicing issues within the community

Chapter Four offers examples of the different opinions and objections to what Muslim leaders are saying and doing in France. There are additional examples that illustrate how Muslim women are particularly affected by certain choices and how they use virtual spaces to argue within the community and bring about change. For instance, in 2013 when the women who attend the Grande Mosquée de Paris found a note attached to the entrance of the prayer room stating that women were required to use the basement for their prayers. This came as a shock as there was no warning or explanation given. Until that moment, women had always prayed in the same room with the men behind a curtain. A few of the women, mainly Hanane Karini, objected to this request stating that it was not only inappropriate to relegate women to a basement, but that the stairs posed legitimate problems for the elderly and pregnant women. The women would also be required to pass by the rooms where men do their ablutions. When asked why the sign was posted, one of the men in the prayer area simply said “women are too loud”.

In the months that followed, women were met with physical and verbal barriers, racism, and sexism as they persisted in their attempts to maintain their position in the main prayer room. Karini formed the group Le collectif les femmes dans la Mosquée/ The Women in the mosque collective for women to meet with one another and voice their concerns. Repeated efforts to meet with the Imam and spokesperson of the mosque Dalili Boubakeur were met with silence. In early 2014 Hanane Karini contacted Oumma.com to be interviewed as a way to more publicly express her disappointment and anger with the leaders of the
mosque (“Les femmes dans la mosquée”, 13 Jan 2014). Her concerns for the blatant racism and sexism were followed by her objections to not only how the women were informed of the changes but how this appears to French society in general. The Grande Mosquée is not only a tourist attraction but also houses a popular hammam. Any person visiting the mosque will see the sign posted forbidding the women from praying in the main room (which was written in French). Hanane pointed out that French society does not need another reason to accuse Muslims of sexism or of the oppression of women and called on the Oumma.com community to help.

This story gained traction in the national media as well, which is something that Karini and Oumma.com users feared because of the distortion. Unfortunately, the underlying issue of division along gender lines is not uncommon based on the comments posted on Karini’s interview. Muslim feminists have argued that women are largely outside of the decision-making process influencing their religious communities as they have no presence within spiritual leadership (Andezian 1995). Given that inequality based on gender is such a hot button issue for the production of cultural insecurities, this is not something that users want to share with the French non-Muslim majority. While these women see it as a symptom of sexism within a handful of males, it will be represented as a systemic issue within Islam.

The racism mentioned by Karini is also common within Islamic institutions in France. For example, in 2006 a cartoon was briefly published on Oumma.com that showed a floorpan of a mosque. Within it, areas were designated for Maghrebin, Wester Africans, Pakistani and “others”. While it was meant to be a joke, users exploded in the comment section, saying that the continual separation between ethnic, national and racial identities within Islam was not funny. In addition to the calls for more unity and acceptance within communities, several women agreed that Islam in France should a) have no racial divisions and b) be more open to non-Muslims. An example of the media coverage can be found here [link].
because of the profound equality within the religion, b) that communities should learn to integrate the cultural and traditional side of each approach to Islam, c) that Muslims need to stick together and d) that the French non-Muslims do not need another reason to assume that Islam is intolerant. The cartoon was taken down by staff within two days.

8.2.9 The creation of counter narratives

In Danielle Saad’s article The Other Muslim (2015), she looks at how online spaces allow for Muslim women to create counter narratives that would be impossible for them to convey in other public spaces. “Muslim women participating in the creation of the online rhetoric about their lives may be using the Internet as a tool that removes constraints of location, time, access and stigma that often limit their individual agency within a dominant narrative enacted in face-to-face situations” (Saad 2015: 403). Her work uses AltMuslimah as a field site, interrogating how this progressive space is dedicated to gender issues in Islam and challenges the dominant narrative on Muslims in English-speaking countries. In many ways, Oumma.com is similar as they are both sites that focus primarily on news and cultural content. Saad’s work points to the creation of counter narratives online, which is something that Oumma.com facilitates for its users.

The counter narratives that are built through the published material and discussions between users are based in experience and point of view. Women offer rebuttals to why they are not submissive or oppressed being, and why they are not all terrorists. Most if not all users present a very moderate, left leaning political identity that is not openly critical of French culture. They in fact emphasize that they are also a part of French culture because not only because it is where they are born and/or live, but because they believe in its values. For example, they support secularism and do not see how wearing a hijab violates challenges this principle In fact, they see secularism as supporting their right to be Muslims.
8.2.10 Discussions on politics

Oumma.com users and contributors talk about French politics often. Articles and videos posted tend to cover topics that connect politics to Muslims in France. Users comment on these publications but also diverge and talk about their own views on more general themes like the economy. The discussions that unfold online are not necessarily different from those occurring in offline spaces. What does make them different is the number of people who join the conversation and the fact that the participants could be from anywhere in the world. Online spaces also give users an opportunity to talk to strangers in ways that they might not do in offline spaces. People share their experiences and exchange in ways which they may not feel comfortable doing when face to face with total strangers.

Women on Oumma.com engage with political discourses around cultural insecurities often online. Over the years, several of the women users and many of the men have criticized the socialist party in France for engaging in negative representations of Muslim all while courting them for votes. I rarely came across a user who spoke about the UMP or other more conservative parties as a viable option for Muslims. Instead, these women focus on the impossible situation of supporting a left leaning party that in theory defends their interests but in practice either neglects them or causes more harm. It is not uncommon to see comments such as the one left by Salam in an article about how Benoit Hamon (socialist party member and recent presidential candidate for the party) claimed that he found the stigmatization of Muslims unbearable. Salam’s reply was:

“Are there still Muslims out there still capable of drinking in these words from this Islamophobic, ultra liberal and zionist party? French Muslims need to wake up and stop being passive and accepting fake sentiments that are only used to get us to vote. Mass media does nothing. The socialist party is worse than the UMP, at least with Guéant we know who we re dealing with, while with the socialist party and its paternalistic excellence - full of prejudice, colonial in thought and racist. We offer the party docile beurs that want to serve and caricatures such as Malek Boutih, Amara, Habchi, Vallaud-Belkacem.” (6 March 2012)

While the Parti Socialist is often criticized by women online, it is also seen as the the only viable option for Muslims living in France, at least when it comes to national elections. Users
might talk about candidates from other left-leaning parties for local or regional matters, or maybe as a way to protest the lack of support they feel from the PS. Other parties such as the UMP and the Front National are discussed in terms of Islamophobia women feel is ingrained in each party. Users are also very critical of men and women who are either Muslim or who are or have family from Muslim countries that are affiliated with the UMP or other more conservative parties. For example, Fadéla Amara, one time president of Ni putes ni soumises and an outspoken feminist, was tapped by President Sarkozy to head the department on urban issues (la Politique de la ville) under François Fillon. On the surface Amara was the perfect candidate for the UMP to show their desire to reach out to Muslim, Arab and other minority groups. A burette born to Algerian parents (whose father was a member of the Front de libération national (FLN)) grew up in a Parisian banlieue. She engaged socially at a young age as an outspoken feminist, a defender of beur and banlieue rights through her work with SOS Racisme, NPNS and la Fédération national des maisons des potes.¹⁶⁴

Amara’s role as defender and spokesperson for the beur community and poor urban dwellers more generally inspired the Sarkozy cabinet to hire her. Whether their reasons were purely for optics/politics or if they truly felt she was right for the role is up for debate. Regardless, she was supposed to inspire confidence and support from Muslims in France. Users on Oumma.com, however, saw this move as a betrayal and a move to legitimize the Sarkozy government.¹⁶⁵ In an article where Oumma.com accuses Amara of being a beurette for sale, several users expressed their disappointment of her as a spokesperson.

“I’m proud of my origins and I am free and feel responsible for my actions. I love France. As a woman, I have always fought against the Ni putes ni soumises movement and the socialist party’s SOS Racisme. I would rather fight continuously rather than ever accept a position with the Sarkozy government” (Nadia, 20 June 2007)

“I am sick over this. I was so irritated by this nomination. I understand that we need diversity in our institutions, but not at any cost. I realized that all she had to do is stand out

¹⁶⁴ A network consisting of current and previous residents of underserved urban neighborhoods and of associations working to improve the lives of poor banlieue residents.
¹⁶⁵ Though Amara has always been unpopular with many users because of her work with NPNS - she is accused of vilifying the veil and encouraging the French majority in thinking of Islam as harmful to women.
in terms of her origins and her community for Sarkozy to pick her. Personally I could see Fadéla Amara in a National Front government, she is similar to Marine Le Pen. I’ve heard much more violent things towards Arab-Muslims coming from Amara than from Le Pen. (Yasna, 20 June 2007)

Not all of the women involved in this discussion were against Amara. One woman claimed that the negatively was just a byproduct of jealousy that both men and women have towards Amara. This discussion does illustrate how this online space allows women and men to debate on who is representing Muslim interests in the French government and how these political figures represent them.

8.2.11 Social engagement - A call for dialogue and action

There are also discussions on Oumma.com on issues that touch Muslim communities in indirect ways. The node used to code these themes was social engagement - a call for dialogue and action because these comments or articles written by women ask for support or exchange on specific events or narratives circulating in France. One of the most common topics is the plight of Palestinians, particularly in how French media represents them. For instance, in 2002, Fatiha K published an article on Oumma.com calling for Muslims to boycott TF1, one of the biggest television stations in France. TF1 was running a documentary on Israeli special Forces trained to spot and take down terrorists. Fatiha K discusses how incredible she finds that a French documentary would spout such propaganda and that Palestinians should not be represented as terrorists given their political situation. Fatiha K feels Muslims in France are implicated in this story, and explains that after 12 mosques in France had been attacked, she does not understand why the executives at TF1 would help portray Muslims as dangerous ones. She states “Nous, citoyens français soucieux de paix et de justice souhaitons dire notre disapprobation et notre vive inquietude face à de tels managements constatés.

Many users casually but repeatedly call for their fellow Muslims to vote a certain way or speak out publicly about certain issues. For instance, Qodra often leaves comments about
how Muslims are too complacent and they need to “move” or “react” to evidence of racism and Islamophobia in France society (e.g. 12 June 2012 and 18 June 2012). Women also engage with attempting to change the online landscape by challenging misinformation on Muslims and Islam or by fighting against more extreme websites. Fatiha K has published articles on Oumma.com on such websites. One in particular, SOS Racailles was a neo-nazi site run by Liberty-web.net. Much of the content accused Muslims of being cause of economic decline and negative social changes in France. The site was eventually shutdown, but similar websites popup all over the internet. Fatiha K’s article was in reaction to television channel France 2 airing a segment on Islam that featured references to the website (“Retour sur l’emmision de France 2 ‘Complément d’enquête’ consacrée à l’Islam’, 5 Feb 2003). They are a part of the landscape of cultural insecurities, though they are on the extreme end of the spectrum.

Much like in physical spaces, there is evidence of people acting and responding to these narratives of hate and intolerance by reacting one-on-one. This is done through writing text, uploading videos or images that directly challenge or mock the information that the user finds offensive.

8.2.12 Advocacy in the workplace

Oumma.com also gives Muslims a space to discuss their rights in France. This is not something particular to an online space, but it does allow for reaching a larger audience and comparisons of personal experiences with a larger group. Women in Paris can share their experiences with discrimination or challenges with women in Marseille, Lyon, etc. in a way they could not in offline spaces. For instance, a discussion in 2002 on Oumma.com raised the issue of knowing one’s rights in relation to religious holidays. The author noted

“Beaucoup de nos frères et soeurs sont fonctionnaires ou contractuels de fonction publique, mais ne connaissent pas ce texte qui leur donne droit à des congés notamment à l’occasion de l’Aïd Al-Adha.”

“Many of our brothers and sisters are government workers or contract workers, but they are not aware of their rights to take holidays such as for Aid Al-Adha.” (19 Feb 2002)
This article outlines the Muslim holidays along with the Catholic and Jewish holidays which are recognized and granted to either the specific religious group or to everyone (most of the Catholic holidays).

When women encounter discrimination in the workplace, many users provide information on next steps and how to handle the legal questions this will bring to the surface. Women also offer support to others who face difficulties at work. This also translates to supporting women in the general umma, particularly those who face injustice because of their religious beliefs. This is often linked to wearing the hijab. For instance, in 2012 an article appeared on Oumma.com relaying how a Muslim woman in Kansas was eventually fired from AT&T for not removing her hijab. The woman was awarded thousands in damages by the courts. Comments from the women on Oumma.com were supportive and illustrated a real connection to this woman through the struggle of being a minority. These comments ranged from saying that God is great and protects his people to criticizing the US for its xenophobia (“5 millions de dollars de dommages et intérêts pour une américaine convert à l’islam qui a été discriminée” 5 June 2012).

Muslim women in France face the reality of being denied employment due to their hijab. While this is most likely a conversation that women have among themselves in offline spaces, online, women are able to provide a large audience with stories, tips and suggestions on how to deal with this problem. For instance, contributor Khadjia made a video about the dilemma of whether to remove the hijab to find good employment (“Quand travail et hijab ne font pas bon ménage - sauf pour faire des ménages” 03 February 2009). She states that even if a woman has a strong educational background, she might find that only “small positions” (work she did as a student) is available to her. According to Khadija, some girls are able to find a higher-level position, but this is rare. Women face the same type of traumatic decisions that they faced when in high school - but not all is lost. She sees this as an obstacle leading to the betterment of a person and that this struggle will mean that Muslim women become
stronger and more combative. As is often the case with articles and videos on Oumma.com, Khadija recommends taking a step back and considering the positives and negatives more closely. This idea of reflection will be covered later in this chapter.

8.2.13 Veiling practices and online spaces

Veiling practices present complicated issues of public versus private. In the French society, this confusion on what type of freedom of movement these practices afford is complicated and often misunderstood. Though this subsection about veiling practices and what is discussed online, it is worth mentioning that online spaces have their own specificities when it comes to public versus private spaces. Online spaces include not only the questions of what the websites and their pages constitute, but also what these virtual spaces can do with inviting the public into private physical spaces. This is an important aspect of building counter narratives. Muslim women are able to publish online videos of themselves at home or in religious spaces which non-Muslim French, access which would normally not be afforded to non-Muslims. Videos on Oumma.com and OummaTV (which eventually became their YouTube channel), contributors tell stories about themselves, their lives or share their opinions on what is happening in France. Viewers are given a glimpse into the contributor’s lives, where they portray very normal French experiences. Through the visuals and audio content, these women build a counter-narrative of being non-threatening, concerned with the same things as other French men and women.

As mentioned several times in the earlier chapter, veiling practices are the topic that received the most attention both in terms of the representations within cultural insecurity discourses and as a topic of debate on Oumma.com. Muslim women’s bodies are a battleground for discussions on national and cultural identity mainly because of veiling practices. Most users seem mystified by this. For them, this is a personal, spiritual practice that has nothing to do with other types of identities. To engage with and contest negative representations of the hijab and niqab, Muslim women refute claims, post supporting material
online and author text. Some women engage with conversations around what the hijab offers in term of moving through public spaces. They point out that it is because of the hijab that they feel comfortable to move around freely which they know will confuse the non-Muslim French majority.

In addition to the representation of oppression attached to the hijab and the niqab, there is also the representation that they are ugly and unfashionable. This might seem like a small detail, but women voice their frustration of being portrayed as sad and constrained through their clothing. For some non-Muslim French, it seems confusing that women would choose to dress in muted colors and cover their hair if it is not necessary (because it is not required in French society). Oumma.com allows women to challenge this representation in their discussions on fashion and changing trends for hijabis. Mainstream fashion magazines in France are unlikely to share these fashion trends, and Muslim women must depend mainly on the internet or television channels from other countries to see their tastes represented.

When it comes to the niqab, the elements of public versus private spaces is important. The niqab in France has been portrayed as one of the ultimate ways to oppress a woman. Her body is covered from head to toe with only the eyes visible. The colors of the garment are muted, sometimes drab. In some instances, she even wears gloves. In the context of France, especially the evolution of feminism and its use in opposition to representations of Islam and Muslim women, it is not surprising that the niqab is troubling. Arguments in its favor have generally fallen into two camps: those who say that women have the right to wear what they want and those who claim that wearing the hijab is what gives women the freedom to move in public spaces. This aspect of the niqab being a tool to allow women freedom of movement is important. In Anna Piela’s (2016) recent work on niqabis in online spaces, she investigates the trend of niqabi’s taking picture of themselves (fully veiled) and positing them on the internet.
Piela’s work is interesting because it begs the question of what is private and what is public online. The niqabis could choose to anonymously post an image of their face something and never attach it to their offline identity. They could post an image of their face in closed groups for women. Yet in Piela’s study they choose not to do this in part because this is a public space. On Oumma.com, the few niqabis who have been interviewed wear their niqab on camera. They also point to how useful online spaces are for them to dispel misconceptions about the niqab, especially that it is a tool control women’s bodies. They view the niqab as a way to gain access to public spaces while respecting their personal convictions.

8.2.14 Working through a changing Islam

Online spaces also allow women to work through ideas of how their practice and understanding of Islam changes with living in a country that is not predominately Muslim. This is, of course possible in physical spaces as well, but online women can interact with people from across France and the world. In theory, this can enrich the conversation. The editors and contributors to Oumma.com have explored this topic in many ways since 1997. In one article Mohamed Mestiri says “Etre occidental et musulman en une même entité aujourd’hui exige un effort nouveau d’appropriation et d’évolution des traditions cultuelles dans un environnement questionnant et souvent contrariant.” To be occidental and Muslim in one entity today requires an effort to evolve and appropriate changing religious traditions in an environment that questions and often opposes it. (“La république et le culte musulman: le faux pari de l’importation identitaire” 26 April 2005)

Mestiri touches upon the delicate balance that Muslims are facing in France. By working around the expectations and rules of the majority vis-à-vis their religious practice, Muslims risk compromising too much. However, religious identities are just like any others – they are not static but rather are constantly evolving. This might seem odd given religious such as Islam are based and structured around historic texts. This does not stop the practice and identities associated with Islam from changing. Online platforms such as Oumma.com are
a place that allows for these changes to occur. Different Muslim cultures (meaning attached to different territories) are meeting in one place. Women from different backgrounds are sharing their views on religion, what they have learned and how they adopt to their surroundings. This type of exchange can and does occur in physical spaces, but not to the same frequency and degree as online. Within this question of a changing Islam, is the notion that online platforms allow for new types of Muslim community to emerge (Mandaville 2016). Given the ways in which users talk about Oumma.com, it does seem that some of them view this platform as creating a distinct community, though whether it is a distinct religious community is difficult to judge.

Roxanne Marcotte’s (2015) work on Australian Muslim women online shows that some online spaces are converted to new Muslim communities because of the type of information that is shared. In her example, girls and women talk about sex in ways that would not be possible with their families and possibly with friends. The community she observed talked about virginity, sex before marriage, violence, the concept of choice and diseases. All of these themes are important for Muslims as sex before marriage is taboo, showing sexuality outside of the husband-wife dynamic is inappropriate and violence around sex is not discussed. Yet, what is expected does not reflect the reality, and having a place to share information is important for these girls and women who have no one in their immediate circle with whom they can talk. These women are creating communities of trust that reflect an Islam that is being shaped by Australian society.

8.3 Strategies for coping and resilience

Themes that emerged from the coded data that were specific to online spaces were strategies that Muslim women employ to be able to cope with being the target of racism and Islamophobia. Chapter Five discussed the types of insecurities women on Oumma.com feel in their everyday lives. The pervasiveness of Islamophobia was by far the issue that concerned women the most. Users view French non-Muslim society as a whole to be obsessed with
portraying and understanding Islam in only negative terms. The laws and discourses related to
cultural insecurities are evidence for these women that they are the target of discrimination
because they are Muslim, and to a certain extent Arab when it applies. (This is a grey area as
Arab is often conflated with Muslim by non-Muslim French.) Islamophobia is a source of
pain and fear, from being mistreated in public spaces to the potential of physical violence or
the stripping of rights. The constant circulation of negative representations of Muslim women
coupled with stories of what other Muslims experience are things that website users find
difficult to bear. It is therefore important for these women to develop strategies to be able to
function in their daily lives. A fair amount of previous research on Muslim women shows that
turning to religion as a strong cultural identity is one way of both resisting and coping in
societies where Muslims are in the minority (e.g. Brown 2006). While this was a topic
discussed by women on Oumma.com, there are a handful of other strategies women employ
including: the use of humor/satire, reflection and calm, ignoring, and disengaging and
retreating.

8.3.1  Humor/satire

Women on Oumma.com use humor as a way to cope with negativity and to create
counter narratives where they represent themselves as both fun but also willing to challenge
how French society perceives them. This use of humor has been documented in other
instances as well. Mucahit Bilici (2010) found that humor serves as an inversion of
Islamophobia which is dark and serious. Bilici finds that after September 11th, Muslims were
primed for humor as a way to cope with the situation they were facing. There were many
comedians within different Muslim communities (for example Axis of Evil and Allah Made
Me Funny), not widely known to non-Muslims in North America, but popular in Muslim
communities. More famous Muslim comedians such as Azhar Usman often talks about
security issues and plane rides in joke form as a way to shed light on the difficulties they face
and the discriminatory practices of authorities. Bilici presses upon the idea that the coupling
of fear and laughter are reactions to otherness that are effective in ways that cannot be tackled
by other forms of communication: “The ethnic comedian basically plays on teletypes. He critiques and destabilizes the existing ‘common sense’ for its failure to see reality” (Bilici 2010: 199). Women on Oumma.com are doing something similar to cope with their everyday lives.

Much like the examples discussed in Chapter Six on creativity, Muslim women use videos to perform short skits or monologues that poke fun at the representations of themselves in French society. An extremely popular video was uploaded by comedian Samia Orosemane. In her short skit “Ils veulent qui j’me cache!” (They want me to hide myself), she takes on the character of Yemma Zouina, an outspoken woman with a strong, stereotypical Maghreb accent. She first jokes that her husband is actually letting her speak today, though she always speaks regardless of whether she is allowed to or not. Yemma then launches into a monologue about how the French are bothered that women wear a hijab in France but are also bothered when they wear them in Islamic societies. She poses the question “where will I go if it bothers you so much?”. She ends the video with saying that she knows that the French do not want to see her in the streets, and would rather that she stay locked up at home. During the entire video Yemma is standing in a living room that is decorated in a style reminiscent of colonial paintings of harems, with silk pillows, billowy curtains and strong colors. The video is an effective challenge of not only what non-Muslim French think of the hijab but also their preconceived notions of what North African women are like. Yemma is even wearing extremely drab, big clothing and a hijab that covers much of her head. This is very different from the way Orosemane presents herself on a daily basis with colorful clothing and a turban-like hijab that exposes her neck and entire face.

Sometimes women and men on Oumma.com work together presenting a funny look at the discourses circulating in France. In a video clip entitled J’ai décidé d’enveler mon voile intégral (15 October 2009), a woman wearing a niqab is sitting in what looks like a court room. A female voice is heard explaining that while the French parliament is launching an
investigation in what role the niqab has in French society, this woman, Malika, has agreed to explain her disgust and the pain that she feels in light of this debate. The narrator elaborates on Malika’s pain and feeling that her humanity is being taken from her as she sits and listens to what French society feels. The narrator finishes her monologue by saying that Malika has agreed to offer a symbolic gesture for French non-Muslims that will convey her desire to calm anxieties around the niqab. Malika begins to talk saying that she is ready to do this symbolic gesture that is strong and one of protest. She goes on to say that women wearing the niqab are subject to scrutiny that is unfair and that all niqabis want is to help build the French republic with other citizens. She characterizes the niqabi community as educated, liberated and free. She ends her speech by saying that in honor of Muslims in France she will lift her niqab.

Just as Malika starts to lift the fabric the frame freezes and music starts. The camera moves to a man who is reading off of cards as if he is the host of a game show. He says:

“To see what is hidden behind the veil press 1. To ensure that Malika stays in her kitchen, press parliamentary mission. To see the face of the woman who threatens French laïcité and the survival of the republic press wherever you like. And if you think that we are being treated like idiots, press “beat it idiot”. And if you think that Malika was really going to take off her veil, hit yourself. Aren’t you ashamed?”

This video is both funny and incredibly strong in its critique of the debates and representations circulating in France from 2009 to 2011. The niqab was a focal point for fears and anxieties of how French society was being changed by Muslim women. As explained in Chapter Five, there are few women on Oumma.com who are interested in wearing the niqab, and most are not in favor of what it represents culturally within Islam. However, these women support the right of others to choose to wear it. This video was very popular with users, especially because it turned into a game show.

The story of Malika does an impressive job at portraying how ridiculous the discourses were and continue to be on the niqab. It also highlights the interest that people have in what is under the veil (what is being hidden) and the responsibility that non-Muslim
French have placed on women who veil. It is not up to French society to accept these practices but rather for these women to forego their beliefs to make others comfortable. The fact that Malika would lift her veil as the ultimate symbol of solidarity with the French is made ludicrous in the video. What do people expect to see under the niqab? Why would showing Malika’s face change anything in her beliefs and values? The game show hosts drives the point home when he asks if the viewers are not ashamed for expecting these women to stop their practices. Many of the users echoed these sentiments in their comments, indicating that the language about French society taking them for idiots is spot on.

Humor is also used by women in the comment section or in articles as rebuttals or ways of adding their opinion. These instances are not necessarily as obvious or as big as the videos mentioned above, but they do show that women are trying to engage with representations in ways that make sense to them. As Bilici (2010) says, humor turns Islamophobia on its head, making narratives seem less threatening and silly. The examples of humorous comments on the website will not reach a large audience in France. The only people that are exposed to this type of engagement are those perusing the comment section of uploaded material. However, the humor that is brought to the content is sometimes also seen in physical spaces. In Chapter Six, the example of a user sending chocolate croissant to city hall was used to illustrate less obvious uses of humor. Women participate in these small acts as a way to cope with their situation.

8.3.2 Reflection and calm

Another important strategy used by women on the website is to stand back, reflect and approach issues with a sense of calm. The idea of reflecting on the situation is often connected to religious practice, something that user feel is a part of how Muslims should react to negative situations. Taking the time to reflect is both advice that women share with one another in connection to stories about Islamophobia in their lives and it is something that they use themselves. This is a strategy that women on the site employ not when they are faced
directly with discrimination or threatening situations, but rather when they read news that feels disturbing connected to politics or current events. For instance, when the *Bloc Identitaire* defaced a mosque with graffiti, several women pointed out that the community did the right thing in not responding immediately but rather reflection on the best course of action (21 Oct 2012). For these women, reacting immediately is both dangerous (the inability to control tempers) but they are also hyper aware of how this will be perceived.

The concern over whether Muslim women will be seen in a negative light due to quick reactions to injustice are not an indication of submission. Users have a fair amount of comments alluding to the fact that they do not care how the people around them perceive their personality. Standing up for yourself and speaking out against injustice is recommended and valued. However, users make a distinction to be made between defending oneself verbally or even physically in one-on-one interactions versus defending oneself in situations where there is an audience. Users express the importance of portraying Muslim women in a positive light and not feeding into stereotypes of violence attached either to the religion or to the *banlieue*. For instance, on several occasions where women report having experienced discrimination in the workplace, users and contributors to Oumma.com are quick to say that the woman should stop, reflect and address the issue with serenity (2 Feb 2009). Content on the website shows that Muslims feel at a disadvantage in the job market when they are labeled as Muslim and/or Arab or considered a person of color. Presenting a potentially negative image of Muslim women in a professional setting will not only put the individual at a disadvantage but will also influence how others are treated in the future.

The strategy of reflecting and approaching issues in a calm manner illustrates the responsibility that women feel in representing Muslims in France. This is particularly strong when women wear a hijab. The visual element and the embedded meanings and representations that have been assigned to veiling practices in a sense force women to be calculated in how they defend themselves. They do not feel they have the luxury to react in
the moment or say exactly what is on their minds. Virtual spaces such as Oumma.com are a good place for women to share their frustration and anger with those who understand rather than doing so with non-Muslim French. However, this strategy is also a burden for women as always thinking about the right way to approach something can weigh on their shoulders. Their position is constricting, but other users provide support and validation in their responses. Women use examples from the Prophet Muhammad or the Qur’an to remind one another the importance of calm and reflection (27 October 2009). This turning to religious text also reinforces the notion that Muslims must be ambassadors for their religion at all times.

8.3.3 Ignoring

Reflecting on a situation can often lead to the choice of ignoring. Something that might not be evident on the physical landscape (unless it is discussed by Muslim women in person) is the need to ignore or avoid places, events and conversations. This strategy is used by a number of women on Oumma.com. In Boulogne-Billancourt I observed women ignoring or pretending not to hear comments or see evidence of non-Muslims exhibiting anger or fear towards them. The occasional times that I heard or saw a Muslim women on the receiving end of comments such as “we are in France, take off your hijab”, these women did not respond or acknowledge the person. My observations of when Muslim women use avoidance or ignoring as a tactic, however, ended there. Online spaces, on the other hand, are able to provide ample evidence of this strategy because women can openly comment on experiences they have had and choices they have made when facing someone who feels cultural insecure. Again, this strategy is discussed most often when articles and videos lead to the topic of Islamophobia. Several users voiced not seeing the point of engaging with irrational responses that non-Muslims have in France to the presence of Muslims. For instance, Saba shared the following in response to a Charlie Hebdo drawing:

“As long as Islamophobia does not spill into places where we are obliged to see it and as long as they do not make defamations against human beings that are Muslim, we need to ignore these manifestations that awaken nothing but contempt for people who are lost. We
Knowing when to ignore and when to respond is not straightforward. In response to Saba, both men and women agreed that it was not worth responding with anger or action when it comes to Islamophobia expressed by outlets such as Charlie Hebdo. Users saw this as a trap or fight where Muslims would inevitably lose because of (a) the mission of Charlie Hebdo and others to provoke negative reactions and (b) the ability of the media to fall back on legal arguments of secularism or freedom of expression. As in comment sections of other articles on Islamophobia, users remind their fellow Muslims not to reflect and approach the situation in a level-headed way. This means recognizing that Islamophobia is often about trying to get a rise out of Muslims that will lead to behavior that reinforces negative stereotypes. Ignoring it is a way of fighting back, even if non-Muslims are unaware of it.

Ignoring manifestations of cultural insecurities was also encouraged by non-Muslims active on Oumma.com. Nadine who shares on several occasions that she is Christian, commented on an article about a viral video that depicts the inherent violence in Islam. Nadine shared that she was confronted with anger upon seeing an anti-Christian play at Châtelet entitled “PissCh...”. Nadine signed petitions to have the play banned due to the offensive material, but she quickly felt that this was useless. Ignoring the issue and not validating the play felt like a better strategy because it saved her from feeling drained and helpless (14 Sept 2012). Nadine recommended to others on the site that they concentrate on the positive images and narratives of Muslims and not feed into the negative.

Women also talk about ignoring certain physical as well as virtual spaces that will cause them emotional distress. Areas of cities where there are signs and symbols that are anti-Muslim, neighborhoods where women notice an undercurrent of hostility and political rallies that lean towards the right are just some examples of places that women choose to avoid.
Women also avoid online spaces that either focus too much on negative representations of Islam or are outright hateful, racist and/or Islamophobic. Occasionally women will talk about having looked online at Zionist organizations having visited the *Font Nationale* website. They and other users will lament that this is a mistake and these spaces should simply be ignored. While both reflecting and ignoring may seem like passive ways of contesting representations, there is agency in this. Women do not “take the bait” or lose the control that they wish to keep. They are actively making the choice to either respond in a way they feel is suitable or they choose to ignore what they feel will not change even if they do react.

8.3.4 Retreating and disengagement

Ignoring is an active response, though it may seem passive in its execution. The manner in which women on Oumma.com talk about ignoring something shows that this is a choice and a blatant act that is well informed. Women are aware of what has been said or done, or what a certain space represents to them, and they choose to focus on other things or go to other places. There are also some women who choose to retreat and disengage completely as a way of contesting how they are represented in French society.

Disengagement, here the act of removing oneself either physically or mentally from a situation, was discussed by several Oumma.com users. The node entitled Retreating and sub nodes Retreating from Physical Space, Retreating from Virtual Spaces were used to capture users who expressed the desire or the act of removing themselves from public spaces and the exposure to discourses on cultural insecurities. The comments coded in these nodes are usually one or two lines where women state that they are either too tried or disillusioned to continue participating in the public sphere.

The strategy of disengaging and/or retreating into other spaces is not easily noticeable when conducting observations in physical spaces. While I would classify actively removing yourself from society as an offline activity, it is not something that is easily spotted and it can only be spoken about publicly online. Much of the time, this strategy means that women
choose to no longer interact on the landscape and prefer to limit their movements. Staying at home is often viewed as the best course of action, but it is impossible to know this unless you have personally spoken to the person. It is much easier to uncover this strategy online as women openly talk about their decisions to retreat openly and the benefits they see to it.

Retreating comes in many forms. The more extreme version is users who choose to avoid public spaces unless it is absolutely necessary. These women stay at home and mainly socialize there. Less obvious examples of retreating are women who refuse to turn on the television, regardless of what is on. For them, this is an active way of disengaging with society because they are no longer aware of what is happening.

While this strategy might also seem passive, women are making a choice. It is certainly not one that directly challenges the negative representations circulating in society, it is an important step in self-protection. Retreating is used when women no longer want to expose themselves to the perceived hatred and discrimination they feel from non-Muslims. Discourses on veiling practices, images of conflict in Islamic societies, the use of Muslims as a scapegoat for economic troubles and social issues in France overwhelmed some women. Women also retreat because of the existential experience of being a minority in France. Ruth shared an experience from her childhood that forced her to retreat both in her home country of Algeria and when she came to France and decided to rekindle her relationship with Islam.

“I was born when Algeria was French and how does one not resent the French until the end of our lives when I think back, when I was little, I did not exist unless I acted like a little French girl but I would suddenly be rejected and thrown into obscurity as soon as I expressed myself as the little Arab girl or the little Muslim girl that I actually was” (3 April 2007).

Ruth goes on to say that she chooses to stay at home and not engage in French society. For her the push and pull of not being French enough is exhausting and unhealthy.

Disengagement and retreating are strategies that Muslims in other European countries have displayed. The Scottish Institute for Policing 2011 Annual Report included a section
entitled Muslim Encounters at Airports: the production of Disengagement (Blackwood and Reicher 2012). In this report, the institute reveals that because of the discrimination that Muslims feel at the airport (e.g. extra security screenings, invasive questions, requirements of revealing parts of the head when veiled), many Muslims they spoke to choose not to travel by plane. Though for this dissertation I might consider this more of an act of ignoring spaces that present uncomfortable and even unbearable consequences, the institute’s choice to call this disengagement does make sense. Muslims in Scotland are removing themselves from airports even if they do want to take a trip. They will modify their behavior to ensure that they do not need to fly.

Another form of retreating found on Oumma.com was the choice that many women make to turn to Muslim-only contexts for social and sometimes economic needs. When facing discrimination by the non-Muslim French because of the hijab or other outward symbols that represent a threat, users on Oumma.com often recommend to one another that they should only frequent Muslim-run businesses and participate in Muslim organizations (broadly cultural ones) to protect themselves. For instance, in story about Nora Ait Bella mentioned in Chapter Five (who was turned away from working at an aid organization because of her hijab), Salam recommends that women volunteer for Muslim charities only such as Le Secours islamique of the Comité de bienfaisance et de soutien au peuple Palestinien. She feels that the women around her face this problem all too often and that working exclusively for Muslims is the safest way to go (30 November 2012). Other women recommend certain activities or off and online stores that cater specifically to Muslims.

Muslim-only contexts are a way of disengaging because they remove the likelihood of interacting with non-Muslims. However, unlike the women who decide to retreat in their homes, these women will still be confronted by signs and symbols of cultural insecurities because of their movement through different public spaces. In all of the examples found of disengagement and retreating, women were firm in their desire to no longer hear or read
negative and what they perceive as untrue things about Muslims. However, women will most likely still be exposed to the narratives associated with cultural insecurities through their family and friends. In addition, any woman who is reading and interacting on Oumma.com will be exposed to these issues. In a sense, the women who talk about retreating on the website are not able to fully disconnect from society in a way that they may wish.

8.4 Discussion and conclusion

The previous sections of this chapter have reviewed Muslim activity in virtual spaces, the ways in which Muslim women engage with and contest negative representations of themselves online and strategies they use to cope with their implication in the production of cultural insecurities. Chapter Six examined how everyday offline landscapes are infused with evidence of cultural insecurities and in turn are implicated in the production of fears and anxieties of the non-Muslim majority. In Chapter Seven, an emphasis was not placed on all of the signs and symbols that contribute to cultural insecurities online. It is worth mentioning that this is an important facet of online activity. There are many ways in which women would be exposed to evidence of cultural insecurities such as on news and organization websites, on discussion boards, on personal platforms and on social media where people share their opinions and material produced by others. However, since this dissertation uses as a research site an online site curated to fit the preferences and needs of Muslims in France, there is less of a need to think about how cultural insecurities are infused in virtual landscapes (other than the fact that much of the content on Oumma.com talks about political, economic and social issues that relate directly to these issues).

After having reviewed the ways in which Muslim women actively and passively engage online around issues of cultural insecurities, it is worth considering what aspects of virtual spaces are unique and helpful to the women observed for this dissertation. During the analysis of the coded data, it became clear that several characteristics or aspects of Oumma.com were not only different from offline spaces, but also offer women other
opportunities to engage with representations of themselves. The discussions below are based less on observations made after the coding process.

8.4.1 Unique attributes of virtual spaces

While online and offline spaces share similarities of how Muslim women engage with and contest their implication in the production of cultural insecurities, virtual spaces do have unique attributes that set them apart. During the analysis of the coded data from Oumma.com, it became apparent that the website offered women three main things that physical spaces cannot. These are access to a large audience, visibility in unexpected circumstances and the ability to maintain transnational ties/ connection with the umma. Each of these topics became obvious not because of what Muslim women were directly stating in comments but rather observations of what their activities online means in the context of France. These unique attributes of online spaces are important for Muslim women in how and when they can challenge the information circulate about them to hopefully bring about a better understanding of Muslim communities and a change in the narratives portraying them as a threat to society.

8.4.2 Bridging spaces

The first and possibly most obvious characteristic of online spaces that facilitates communication and helps women engage with representations is the ability to reach a large audience and bridge geographic spaces. There is a limited number of women who are invited to speak on far-reaching platforms or are interviewed by national media. The opinions and experiences of these women can be shared with all Muslims in France, but their words and ideas will always be either edited or controlled by the context in which they are speaking. These women are also few in number compared to the amount of self-identifying Muslim women living in France. This limits immensely any understanding that non-Muslims may have of the complexity and richness of Muslim communities. The lack of opportunities to
speak on their own behalf to a large audience is a hindrance to engaging with and contesting representations linked to cultural insecurities. This is where online spaces are unique. In theory, any Muslim woman living in France can voice her opinions and ideas on different platforms that could reach a large audience. Algorithms and user behavior of course influence the reach someone has, but the potential is there in ways that does not exist in physical spaces.

Oumma.com serves as a community-making tool for sharing stories. In terms of content written by staff, stories of discrimination or injustice are shared in one location. The examples used earlier in this chapter revealed that users often feel mainstream, national media chooses not to cover stories of discrimination and more broadly Islamophobia. The example of the swastika graffiti on Muslim graves illustrates an important way in which the internet bridges and connects geographic spaces. The picture was taken by someone in a small town outside of Paris. The photo was shared with Oumma.com, and the staff wrote an article about the event for the community. This allowed users to read about an incident that is important to them, but is most likely not interesting to other media outlets (maybe because the story is too small or inconsequential for the majority of their readership).

Online spaces allow women to share negative experiences or voice their irritation as to how Muslims are treated by French society with women from all over France and sometimes other countries. The comment section of articles and video are filled with insights from women that could be anywhere. Material spaces would not allow for this type of exchange because they are bound by distance. This can be incredibly important for women who feel marginalized or do not have a strong Muslim community around them, who are living outside of metro areas and for reverts who may feel distant or different from the people they once knew. Several reverts have looked to other women on Oumma.com for guidance or insights on the way in which to deal with Islamophobia, tensions around the hijab or how to live with the circulating narratives attached to fear in France.
The research that has been done on connecting Muslims across spaces focuses largely on transnational spaces (the umma), which I will discuss in the next subsection. What I observed on Oumma.com is that while transnational communication is important, women appreciate the way Oumma.com provides a focal or meeting point for communities within France. This is an important distinction because women are looking to exchange with others who are in a similar situation. This usually means facing challenges that are more or less specific to France (though Western European countries have exhibited some of the same anxieties and issues over the years). Through these exchanges, communities are built.

Community-making in this case is an association of strangers and as Van Zoonen et al. 2010 have remarked, technology facilitates a type of unallocated citizenship that is not anchored in institutions or communities. Because belonging, citizenship and cultural insecurities are so tightly wound in the case of France, it is interesting to consider what this means for women on Oumma.com. They are linked by their citizenship or because they are living in France, but the bond they are forming is more complex. They are using virtual spaces to reach women who are self-identifying as French Muslims, who share in French culture but have been marginalized because of their religion.

The bonds shared online with total strangers are different from those found in physical spaces. Women would not easily have access to so many women from different geographic areas and potentially socio-economic backgrounds. Though it is a stretch to call the internet democratic, it does level the playing field to some degree. Women find themselves sharing personal stories, chiming in on debates and giving advice in ways that they could not with strangers offline. The topics that are covered on Oumma.com are also very specific to the experiences of Muslims in France. Offline spaces would not provide this kind of attention and possibility for debate among community members. It also allows Muslim women the opportunity to learn what is happening on a micro scale in France. The denying of spaces for mosques and schools, the expulsion of girls from classrooms, everyday
violence experienced within institutions and in public spaces by individuals can be shared online. The impossibility of the volume and type of information being shared would not exist for any self-identifying group in offline spaces because they simply are not structured in a way that allows for this flow of information.

As mentioned above, this idea of reaching large audiences of strangers and exchanging with them in personal ways needs to be examined with caution. Along with the algorithms that control what information is being seen by who (though Oumma.com does not seem that have this type of controlling methods in place), user behavior also plays a big role in what people actually see. Sharing information is easy, but ensuring that many other people see it is complicated. On Oumma.com this manifests itself in several ways. There are articles and videos that do not attract as much attention and interaction in the comment section. At times only one person will leave a comment on a publication. The opposite can also effect what information is being seen. Very popular articles can inspire 25 to 30 comments in a thread. While people may be responding to one another quickly, they may not see every single comment or have the time to react to everything they want. The fact that several articles, videos and audio files can be posted in one day on Oumma.com also effects who will interact with whom and whether or not someone’s comments will be seen by a large group. In some ways, these limitations may be beside the point. Women on Oumma.com may feel that they have reached a larger audience even if there lacks ways in which to measure this. What may be more important is the act of publishing something thoughtful or personal. These questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation but would be interesting to pursue in the future.

8.4.3 Making the invisible visible

The space beyond the frame is a concept used by Anna Piela (2013) in her work on niqabi women online. Piela draws upon other works to help explain the space of everyday experiences which are communal and are about exchanges that are removed from the media
and are not subject to generalities. Taking a photo of oneself with a niqab is an act of resistance - it challenges the norms of beauty and how a woman should present herself and the discourses on security. Through this photo exercise, a niqabi makes herself visible. She controls the gaze and then shares it publicly. Piela’s work is a nice example of how online spaces provide Muslim women visibility. There are of course questions of who see what and are the “right people” (in this case, people who do not usually have hear the point of view of Muslim women) watching comes into play. What emerges from the discussion on Oumma.com is the stark need for representations of Muslim women to change. The internet is full of platforms where everyday women can share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. They can provide counter narratives and build knowledge. However, there is no guarantee that this information will reach others. Online spaces can bring visibility, but it has its limitations.

8.4.4 Bridging spaces and strengthening transnational spaces

The third unique aspect of virtual spaces that emerged from the data was the ability for women to form and maintain religious transnational identities through the use of online spaces. The *umma* (meta Muslim community) has been considered by scholars as (potential) evidence of transnational ties that help sustain and rejuvenate the beliefs and practices of Muslims living outside of Islamic societies. Peter Mandaville’s (2001, 2002) work on Islam and technology has cited the internet as the main tool for reimagining the *umma* as a translocational, non-statist community. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, Mandaville sees new technologies as a way for Muslims to imagine connections with communities around the world. In 2005, Garbi Schmidt published an article asking whether the transnational *umma* was a myth or a reality. In the article, Schmidt defines the *umma* as a vision that Muslims have of the values and behaviors Muslims should exhibit worldwide. This vision is what potentially unites communities across geographic spaces.
At the time, Schmidt interviewed Muslim youth in Sweden, the United States and Denmark to see how the internet enabled the *umma* to survive. He found that while youth in the United States claimed that Muslim identity is borderless, they did not exhibit much interest in forming bonds with Muslims in countries that were not directly tied to them. In Sweden and Denmark, the youth engaged in practices based on religious loyalties within regions. For instance, a mosque frequented primarily by people who identify with the Maghreb (through familial ties and history) will help North Africans socially and economically before helping Muslims from other countries. Schmidt did find, however, that Muslim youth turn to the internet for religious instruction and learning as education from various imams is highly valued.

Later work, such as Kristin Zahra Sands’ (2010) research on being Muslim and being a user/producer online, finds that Muslim websites such as IslamOnline.net do exhibit a transnational usership. While religious instruction tends to be one of the more sought-after topics, Sands notes that there are many reasons why Muslims interact across spaces online, including offering support to Muslims living in situations of oppression. In his work on Dutch Moroccan youth, Lenie Brouwer (2016) states that the concept of transnationalism is closely related to new technologies. The use of the internet to talk about Morocco and keep in touch with friends and family from there allow for these Dutch Moroccan youth to develop a tie outside of the Netherlands. Saminaz Zaman (2016) finds that the activities of Muslims online challenges that previously held belief that online communication and community-making could erase cultural difference. She observed that the online *umma* brings together people through the commonality of Islam, but the “Internet has led to a democratization of Islamic knowledge”, not cultural eraser. Other studies have found that online communities are a way to connect marginalized Muslim to the *umma* (Anderson 2016).

The studies cited illustrate how the idea of the online *umma* has changed over time. While in the early 2000s, the internet was not bringing together communities in the way
people assumed, but 2016, researchers were finding that Muslims do in fact communicate with each other around the globe using the internet. Religious scholarship is still a focus, but Muslims are chatting about social and political issues as well. Oumma.com users and contributors demonstrate their connection to the *umma* in two main ways: through the content that the post and through their discussions about Muslims in other places. The mission of Oumma.com is provide information and resources to Muslims living in France, but analytics show that users from North and West Africa, other European countries and occasionally the Middle East visit the website. Transnational ties are complicated on the website not only because of the familial ties that Muslims in France may demonstrate with various world regions, but also because of its colonial and post-colonial ties to North Africa.

Content on Oumma.com that is both posted by contributors and users shows a genuine interest in building ties with Muslims across the world. Politics and the violation of human rights based upon religion is one of the more popular topics that unify Muslims globally. There are popular articles on Palestine and the political oppression experienced by those living in the West Bank and Gaza. Users voice not only their concerns for the wellbeing and rights of people living there but also what this situation means for the *umma* in general. Palestine represents the injustice that Muslims feel in non-Muslim societies and acts as a rallying cry for Muslims in France. Though Palestine itself is a Muslim territory/state, it mirrors some of the inequalities and discrimination with which Muslims in France connect. They see Palestinians as suffering from inequalities and violence because of their religion and to a certain extent, their race. These are experiences and feelings to which French Muslims connect in part because of the impact of cultural insecurities. Users also view the mistreatment and injustice experienced by Palestinians as largely ignored by the international community. When France was debating whether to pass the 2004 law prohibiting the hijab in classrooms, many users on Oumma.com both asked for the support of Muslims living outside of the country but also voiced their irritation that the international community did nothing to stop the law from passing (1 Dec 2008).
Women rally around examples of discrimination against Muslim women all over the globe. Stories that link the termination of employment with the hijab or due to absences for Islamic holidays are shared and commented upon. Users on Oumma.com feel solidarity with these women and share in their pain and anger. Often, they will recommend that the woman who has been fired or faces discrimination in the workplace go through legal channels to protect herself (6 May 2012). When Muslim communities in other countries try something new such as having a woman lead prayers at the mosque, many users will rally behind the idea even if it is not something that they do not think would be a good idea in their own mosque. The support they show is in telling women that it is natural for women to progressively take on other roles within religious instructions and institutions in countries where Muslims are in the minority (17 March 2005).

Users and contributors also voice concerns about human rights violations and religious persecution in Islamic societies. Saudi Arabia and Egypt (11 June 2001) are often at the forefront of these discussions. Women criticize these societies for not being open enough, for relying on a questionable set of teachings of Islam and for manipulating religious values to fit their political agenda. There is deep suspicion of governments in the Gulf States, and any evidence of their influence in France raises alarm bells for women on Oumma.com. Saudi Arabia is accused of violating the rights of women in particular and users do not want women affected by those policies to suffer. They also do not want these policies to influence how Muslims behave in other countries which is a concern often linked to the financial power Saudi Arabia has in the umma.

There is also evidence of Muslim women engaging with religious instruction from imams and communities around the world, though this is not the main focus of activity on Oumma.com. Users will share in their comments videos of imams from Europe, Africa and the Middle East who offer explanations of religious text and interpretations of the Prophet
Muhammad’s teachings. There are also imams from different countries who come to study in France. A university-based degree program for imams was developed to not only train them as religious leaders but to also teach them about contemporary French civilization (Bleich 2009). While some imams remain in France after their degree, many return to their countries to establish themselves in communities in which they were brought up. This not only means that French Islam is influencing the umma, but it also means that Muslims in France can follow the teachings of imams in different countries. Many videos of prayers and talks are uploaded online in French, making access easy for women on Oumma.com.

Oumma.com is a self-contained site, so it is difficult to find evidence of Muslim women forging bonds with people in other countries in a social way (through discussions in the comment section). Unlike a platform such as Youtube where you can visibly see Muslim women making friends across borders through their videos and comments, Oumma.com does not facilitate this type of action because content is controlled by the editors and the comment section does not indicate where the person is located. However, users will from time to time mention that they are living in a country other than France. Their involvement on the website is usually because they are interested in what is happening in French communities and because they feel a tie with the region. These women are often from or living in North Africa and want to understand what everyday lives are like for Muslims in France. Unlike in other studies, there is little to no use of Arabic or English on Oumma.com. Users almost exclusively exchange their ideas in French. While this ties the online community to both France and other francophone countries, it does limit the type of interactions these women can have with others in the umma.

Connecting to the umma in physical spaces is more complicated and was not evident on the landscape other than fundraisers or talks about the Middle East or North Africa. Virtual spaces allow women the ease of gaining access to anyone around the world, provided that the person can communicate in a common language and has access to the same spaces. There is
also the ease of sharing information quickly and providing others with links to other sites. This jumping from websites also enables important connections to be made between Muslim communities. Mainstream French media will probably not cover stories about what Muslims are undergoing in other countries unless it is politically or socially relevant to France. The internet allows women to learn and engage with issues within the umma which would otherwise be unreachable for them.

Bridging space and connecting women to the umma are important aspects to online activity. As discussed earlier in the chapter, many ways in which Muslim women engage with and contest negative representations are similar to those exercised in physical spaces. However, virtual spaces allow for reaching wider audiences, making connections with diverse groups of people, sharing information that often is not made available and provides a place of candor. While these are all positive aspects, online spaces have limitations as well. They can both render the invisible visible, but finding information is up to the user. If users on Oumma.com are trying to create counter narratives and have fruitful discussions with groups who feel culturally insecure, limiting their activity to Oumma.com will not be useful.
Chapter 9  Conclusion

The production of an essentialized identity of Muslim women in France has contributed to the production of cultural insecurities, with multiple implications for exploitation and contestation. The state (through its political actors, institutions and emerging discourses) and public actors (media, intellectuals, celebrities, etc.) have constructed an identity for Muslim women informed by colonialism, politics and cultures in Islamic countries, perceptions of the banlieue and violent global events. The discourses around the threat posed by Muslim women to the survival of Frenchness are circulated by media and are found in everyday interactions, building and perpetuating ideas of fears and anxieties within non-Muslim French communities. Though these representations have shifted over time due to changes in immigration and in national and international politics, the idea of a singular, essentialized Muslim woman identity remains. There is no complexity in this representation, and though there may be competing ideas (e.g. provoker versus submissive being), one thing remains - the Muslim woman in France is a battleground for constructing and maintaining national identity in the face of minority populations. While constructing national identity through the feminine and female bodies is not new, in this context Muslim women represents what is not compatible with French culture and national identity.

The representation of Muslim women as a threat has lasting impacts on the lives of women who self-identify as Muslims. This dissertation has looked at how women in material, offline spaces and online engage with and contest these negative representations. Through observations of the activity of female users on Oumma.com, examples of Muslim woman identities emerged. For many of the women on the website, Muslim identity rests heavily upon the idea of choice. Women choose what traditions they want to follow and what aspects of Muslimness speaks most to them, all while seeing themselves as French. Representations of these women discussed in Chapter Four rely heavily upon the gendered aspect of this identity. To say that women on the website see and experience their Muslim identity as specifically gendered would mask its complexities. Being a woman is important in terms of
veiling practices and roles within the home, but gender is not seen as having an impact on other choices that women make. Many traditions that the women in this study feel are at the heart of defining their culture are not particularly gendered. Also, their political identities are not spoken of in gendered terms but rather privilege issues of economic class or a more general religious identity.

The data coded revealed that women are painfully aware of how they are being portrayed in cultural insecurity discourses. Women express great frustration around the misconceptions of veiling practices, what they see as the obsession in public discourses with attaching violence to Islam and the general narrative that these women do not qualify as French. At times, their French identity as citizens who believe in the values of the republic are more important to them than their religious identity. These values are cited not only when women in this study talk about their rights as citizens, but also to protect their rights of religious practice. Examples show that women turn to the logic of secularism to argue that veiling practices such as wearing a niqab should be legal because of the religious freedom afforded all living within France by the separation of church and state. As secularism is often used as a device to exclude Muslims from public spaces, this strategy shows their awareness of the larger debates on Islam in French society. It also figures prominently as

While Muslim women may be the principal face of cultural insecurities, the women in this study do not feel that they pose any kind of threat to Frenchness. In fact, they also feel both culturally and physically insecure because of these circulating narratives. Women report facing verbal and physical abuse when wearing a hijab or a niqab, being denied vital services, facing unemployment and unjustified termination of contract and feeling hostility from the French non-Muslim majority. Women in this study voiced their dismay at being rendered invisible and being represented by Muslim leaders who they feel neither reflect their ideas on Islam in France nor do they properly defend the rights of Muslims in France. They also fear
the influence of Zionist ideology in French society, which is perceived as both powerful and to the detriment of Muslim communities everywhere.

These concerns, however, do not prevent women from engaging with and contesting negative representations that they feel are inaccurate. Material, offline spaces are important sites of everyday production of cultural insecurities; the establishing of Muslim religious and educational institutions, opening of halal butchers and Muslim fashion shops, and the visuality of Muslim women (especially women who engage in veiling practices) found in everyday spaces fuel the anxieties of certain non-Muslim French individuals and groups. Signs and symbols that appear on the landscape such as anti-minaret and anti-halal stickers, speak directly to cultural insecurities that are circulating in French society. Yet materials spaces also provide an opportunity to engage with and contest the representations of Muslim women as a threat. These spaces open channels of communication and provide opportunities to build counter narratives through interactions and visualities that do not match the negative representations. Through the analysis of the data collected for this dissertation I found that Muslim women take part in a number of activities to contest negative representations. They turn to artistic expression such as performance art and visuals to bring humor and awareness to false narratives and unjust laws. Authors use their platforms (e.g. events, conferences) to present another face of Muslim women in France that is intellectual and reflective.

While veiling practices continue to be heavily scrutinized by many key public actors in France, Muslim women may use their hijabs and niqabs as a tool to illustrate the complexities of Muslim identities. Despite the pressure to remove their scarves/veils, many women stand by their spiritual convictions. By refusing to remove their head covering, even in the face of arguments of secularism and liberation, these girls and women break from the representation that they are oppressed and submissive. Oumma.com users and contributors describe veiling as an agentive act within the context of France. Wearing a hijab or a niqab presents an opportunity to show non-Muslim French that their personalities, ideas and
experiences are just as diverse as any other minority group (if they are given the opportunity to share and are not immediately written off). The feelings expressed by the website users of how counter narrative can be constructed is complicated. Veiling practices are visible and obvious, but they also render girls and women invisible in some ways. The overriding narratives that are embedded in veiling practices obscure the individual that is beneath the fabric. Some women expressed that wearing a hijab provides them with an opportunity to honor their faith while demonstrating their Frenchness. They are hijabis but they also attend public school, are politically engaged, share cultural traits with non-Muslims and participate more generally in everyday life. However, the themes that emerged from the coded data does not illustrate significant changes in perception of non-Muslims around them. None of the women talked about progress in making the hijab a part of French culture or at least acceptable. In fact, contentious feelings around clothing practices continue to spread as seen with the modest swimsuit style labeled the burkini.

In addition to resisting the pressure to remove their scarves and veils to be more French, Oumma.com users also engage with and contest negative representations through civic action (voting for a candidate that does not perpetuate Islamophobia) and social engagement through letter-writing, participation in protests marches and demonstrations, by trying to speak directly to media outlets and by generally defending themselves and their position in everyday material spaces. Use of legal services and seeking support from specific organizations that defend minorities against racism and discriminatory practices is a strategy used to garner public attention and to feel empowered when dealing with authorities. Women turn to these organizations when in conflict with strangers in public spaces. Verbal abuse and physical assaults due to Islamophobia166 or when they have faced discrimination in the workplace. These activities are ways for women to fight against what they perceive to be

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166 I use the term Islamophobia here because it is a) the term used by women in interviews or in the comments section when they relay their experiences with violence at the hands of strangers, and b) because these assaults are often accompanied by ethnic or religious slurs associated with Islamophobia.
injustices, but also to present a view of Muslim women as strong, capable and a part of French society.

Similar tactics are used in virtual spaces, where women can be both politically and socially engaged by creating and signing petitions and calling for boycotts. This type of involvement is enabled and encouraged on Muslim focused websites (in this case Oumma.com), but they almost always call for all French people to join their cause. These debates and discussions use human rights and republican values of the state to reinforce the idea that when Muslims are mistreated or targeted, all of French society suffers. This is a reversal to how public actors have expressed their insecurity towards the presence and activities of Muslims in French society. Cultural insecurities rely on the idea that Muslimness is incompatible with French culture, and by accepting Muslim values, traditions and cultural practices would mean that Frenchness is diluted. Muslim women online make the claim that their values and other cultural traits are not fundamentally different or challenging and that they are in fact a part of French culture. This argument is used not only because these women have lived in France all their lives and participate/contribute to society but also because French republican values underscore the importance of the defense of rights and sameness as citizens.

Online spaces support women in their efforts to engage with and contest circulating narratives in ways that would not be possible in material, offline spaces. Women are able to reach a much larger audience that spans across geographic space and diversity. They are also able to gain daily access to other regional and localized information that would be impossible in offline spaces. Online interactions allow women to share information easily and support one another even if they are strangers. Social bonds are formed across France that expose users to the experiences of women in different regional contexts. As most of the reporting and research on Muslim women focuses on specific areas in large urban areas, Oumma.com gives marginalized women not only a voice but also allows users to learn from each other what they
face in their daily lives. Tapping into the umma throughout the day is also made possible but online spaces, and women can engage in political, social and religious debate with Muslims from societies around the world. They are able to nurture connections outside of France and support communities such as Palestinians living around the world.

Evidence of strategies used by women to cope with the discrimination and cultural insecurity narratives emerged as a theme from the coded data. As is the case in material spaces, women online use humor as an important way to deal with the negativity they encounter with non-Muslim French. Sharing of stories, cartoons, videos or witty comments buffer the unpleasantness of being on the receiving end of cultural insecurities, and help build connections between users. In addition to humor, users reference drawing upon religious values such as reflection and understanding as a way to help them respond to discrimination and tension linked to cultural insecurities in measured and manageable ways. Reflection in particular is cited as the way in which women can ensure that they do not react poorly which would compound stereotypes. Ignoring issues and concentrating on more positive aspects of French society are also important. However, some women find the representations they see in media and around them as too much to bear. For some users, disengaging and retreating from non-Muslim spaces is important to stay healthy. These types of strategies are not easy to observe in material, offline spaces, especially if women are retreating and disconnecting from their public life. Online spaces, on the other hand, are able to reveal these aspects of these women’s lives.

By collecting data from Oumma.com, I was able to analyze data from over a hundred users, gaining insight in how some Muslim women react, interact and what they encounter in material, offline spaces through the comments and material uploaded on the site. It also presented an opportunity to observe and analyze the role of virtual spaces for Muslim women in France. While virtual spaces can also be landscapes riddled with fear and anxieties, I focused my analysis primarily on what users were doing to combat negative representations
linked to cultural insecurities. The findings of this dissertation show that in this case, minorities that are labeled a threat in societies (a) have multiple identities, (b) suffer from the representations circulating around them, (c) also feel culturally insecure and (d) react and respond to cultural insecurities in a variety of ways. The departure point of my research was that a large enough group of non-Muslim French use discourses of cultural insecurity to discuss the presence of Muslim women. Through these discourses a singular identity of Muslim women is constructed which is important for cultural insecurities to easily circulate and perpetuate.

There are of course still many questions, including ones on identities that remain after the analysis and writing of this dissertation. In Stuart Hall’s lecture on Nations and Diaspora (2017), he begins by stating that culture and cultural difference cannot be substituted for race and racial difference. He then uses ethnicity as the “biologized signifier” in lieu of race in cultural difference. By relying on culture as a way to identify others, I have not delved into other ways in which Muslim women are characterized, namely race and ethnicity. The question of where race as both constructed and also a perceived biological categorization fits into cultural insecurities in France is important. Race has only been mentioned in passing in this dissertation and has never been fleshed out in any real way. The reason for this is that it remained wholly unclear during my research exactly how face fit into these discourses. Historically and even today, the representations of Muslim women as a threat to French culture use primarily the example of Arab women from either North Africa or the Middle East. Within the context of France, Arab is a category that is attached to ethnicity and not race. There are plenty of Muslim women who are coded as Black in French society, but my impression is that their race trumps their religious identity, or at the very least their identity becomes more complex. As mentioned in the empirical chapters, there is evidence of slurs that attach dirty or terrorist to the term Arab have been heard or seen by some of the users. Yet according to Oumma.com users, outward examples of this remains localized. They are found in graffiti on buildings, defacing of Muslim graves and occasionally in public spaces
and schools. There was never an instance when users shared examples of larger discourse where ethnicity features prominently. It is there, but in more subtle ways.

As argued earlier, it is important for cultural insecurity narratives to capitalize on an essentialized, singular identity that can easily be portrayed. Using images and text that represent Arab Muslim women removes the question of race. Certainly, the idea of ethnicity remains, but it is one that is discussed in terms of spatiality, especially colonialism and the banlieue. As colonialized subjects, North Africans were not considered truly French, but there is a history of connection and familiarity. Cultural traits such as the French language and education were imposed on North Africans, and post-colonial ties that the countries have with France show a continued connection. The banlieue is both a foreign space but also something created within France. Of course, Muslims of various ethnic and racial groups (as categorized by French society) have lived in North Africa and/or have ties to the banlieue. However, these women are less of a target in cultural insecurity narratives.167

I suspect that there are specific reasons why race does not prominently figure in culture insecurity discourses and why the term Arab has not been racialized within these insecurities.168 David Theo Goldberg (2009) and subsequently Lawrence Berg (2012) have discussed how liberalism and neoliberalism have produced and at times reproduced new forms of racism by denying difference. By crafting narratives on equality, explorations of racial differences are then by default labeled racist. Hidden within ideas of neutrality, objectivity and equal opportunity, racialized beliefs are reinforced (credited by Berg as Tator 2009). Difference is highlighted when special treatment (e.g. social and economic services) are allocated, usually to marginalized groups, therefore highlighting their difference (Berg 2012). The French state has used these same arguments that, given the equality and human

167 They of course are included in other types of insecurities circulating through French society.
168 However, there are women on Oumma.com who use Arab as a racial category and see cultural insecurities as a sign of racism.
rights granted under law to all those residing within its borders, individuals are protected from being considered different. This is also used in discourses on secularism that allow everyone to be the same in the eyes of the state and their fellow citizens. Following this logic, using race as a boundary in cultural insecurity discourses would challenge the very republican values that actors claim to want to uphold. Using culture as an argument for difference does not challenge these values, but still allows actors to control groups and move their agendas forward. French culture as it is widely understood by actors engaged in cultural insecurity discourses serves as the norm. Those who challenge its traits and choose not to conform are erasing the possibility of sameness and equality and can therefore be portrayed as threatening key shared values.

It is clear in the context of France that a cultural argument is being made to create boundaries between those who belong and those who do not but only in certain cases. As stated at the outset, difference in cultural does not equate insecurity. It is not enough for people to be from different places and speak other languages then French. The emotions associated with cultural insecurities can arise only when the difference seems strong enough and that there is a perceived unwillingness on behalf of the other to not assimilate. Stuart Hall cautions us not to think of the identities within culture as ever fixed. This dissertation has talked about the identity of Muslim women generated through cultural insecurity discourses but also how women identify themselves. The ways in which Muslim women talk about choice in connection to their identities underscores Hall’s ideas. Through choice, women are able to loosely fit under the umbrella of Muslim woman, but this takes on many forms at different moments in time.

9.1 Cultural insecurities as a lens

Few geographers have looked to cultural insecurity as a lens for analysis of human interactions in material, offline and online spaces. The question remains of how looking at cultural insecurities could bring specific understanding of socio-political and economic
processes that occur in societies. In the case of France, scholars have looked at the treatment of Muslim women and resulting state actions through the lens of racism, sexism, class and to some extent ethnicity. Researchers and journalists such as Christopher Caldwell have argued that while France hides behind cultural difference, economic uncertainties are the driving force behind these discourses. These are valid points, and observing and analyzing behaviors of the state and public actors from multiple points of view is important. It is also helpful to think about the experiences of minority communities in several ways. However, the lens of cultural insecurities allows us to look at identities on multiple scales and across regions. Culture also cuts across other identities such as class and ethnicity. It is a unifying collective identity that brings specific dimensions to questions of discrimination and minority experiences in societies.

In discussions and explanations of culture by the state and other public figures, they rarely take into account that culture is not static, but it is rather a site of intervention, invention and performance by ordinary people in their everyday lives (van Nieuwkerk 2016). While we see figures such as former President Sarkozy or 2017 presidential candidate Marine Le Pen refer to the past, emphasizing an idea of French culture rooted in language, history and cultural artifacts, they cannot prevent French popular culture from being what it is - dynamic, changing and altering at all moments. Cultural insecurities illustrate how public actors with power to not only influence public opinion but who also have the ability to create regulatory measures rely on the past to attempt to control the present and future. However, in investigating how minorities engage with and contest certain representations, we see how they are influencing culture and are carving out their place in it. This is not unique to France – other European countries and the United States have all had power politicians use cultural national identity and the need to safeguard it as political tools.

In the case of France, it is difficult to see how these discourses on fear will change. Muslim communities have existed in France for several generations now, and the
representations of these communities as poor, uneducated, segregated and above all culturally different, does not necessarily fit reality. However, the acceptance of Muslims as part of France is slow. The debates on creating an Islam of France rather than an Islam in France points to how much certain political and public actors refuse to accept a changing France. I argued an Islam of France was not realistic because of the transnational ties and global influences inherit in Islam. However, the flip side of this would be to argue that there already exists an Islam of France. Practices within Islam have always been regional, and the fact that generations of Muslims have been living in France means that they probably have adapted these identities to the context they are in. As these men and women are raised in French culture, it is only natural that the religious aspects of their culture would be intertwined with other (French) elements. Their participation in French society helps redefine what it means to be French. This of course is one of the basic elements of cultural insecurities, that another’s culture will influence and change the one being protected.

Cultural insecurity as a lens can also help us think about identities across scales. In the case of France, Muslim women are seen as a threat in part because they have ties to other territories. They are not just diasporic ties that are connected through familial ties, but they are also connected to Muslims across the world. This means that Muslims in France can find themselves politically and socially invested in other parts of the world, and when political agendas between countries differ, this can be disconcerting. Muslims from around the world can also find themselves invested in what self-identifying Muslims are experiencing in France. When the 2004 law that prohibits the hijab in public schools was passed, Muslims from other countries spoke out against the decision. France has gained a reputation for being anti-Muslim, and men and women from different regions mobilize to support French Muslims. Tariq Ramadan has written extensively on the idea of a European Muslim identity. Within this framework, Ramadan is illustrating how these identities become both general but also important to individuals across Europe. This has both political and social implications at various scales. Ramadan has noted that Muslim identities are often the target of negative
discourses in Western Europe, but that there is room for a better understanding of how Muslims contribute and are a part of these societies. This idea of a pan-European Muslim identity is interesting within the context of cultural insecurities because it adds a new layer. Drawing upon a European identity might be more palatable in France but it might still be met with objections and skepticism.

### 9.2 Future research

The production and engagement with cultural insecurities deserves more attention by scholars. The scope of this dissertation was limited, and therefore ideas for future research abound. In the case of Muslim women in France, it would be helpful to understand more about cultural insecurities in everyday experience, particularly how non-Muslims are processing and applying their understanding of representations of Muslim women as a threat. The women on Oumma.com and in Boulogne-Billancourt have indicated that they encounter Islamophobia in the form of verbal and physical abuse in public spaces. Who is doing this? What is it about the cultural insecurity narratives that takes hold for them? Analyzing the representations that are circulated from above is easy, but understanding the everyday context is more difficult and is equally as important to understanding the experience of minority communities. Though I was unable to hold interviews in Boulogne-Billancourt, research conducted in *banlieues* that are not the stereotype associated with cultural insecurities (e.g. poor and isolated) would be beneficial. Social scientists have produced important and informative work on what *banlieues* signify and the experiences of marginalized communities in French society. However, there is little work on suburbs that are predominately populated by the majority (in the sense of race, ethnicity and culture). Collecting data on the experiences of minority groups in these contexts would expand our understanding of different processes such as identity formation, boundary-making and everyday experiences.

There are many contexts in which cultural insecurities could be analyzed, whether it be from the point of view of the majority or minorities who attempt to hold onto their culture
in the face of state and majority action. The resurgence in North American and Western Europe of political discourse on cultural identity and the nation reinforces the need to continue to think about culture. While culture as a topic has long been of interest to some geographers, looking to virtual, specifically online spaces is important. These are now everyday spaces that figure prominently in our lives and are constantly changing. There are many avenues of research and methodological questions that remain unanswered, and using cultural insecurity as a way of approaching different types of online activity could help us better understand interactions on individual and group as well as local and transnational scales.
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