The urban veil: image politics in media culture and contemporary art
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Chapter 4

**Intersubjective Inscriptions of the Urban Veil: Toward a New Politics of Difference**

*Hayet.djelali.org* was the provisional title of a work by web-based artist Martine Neddam. The project was commissioned by Association Commune, an institution in Marseille dedicated to public art interventions. It was conceived as an identity-sharing, online interface and was to take the form of the personal website of a fictive persona, Hayet Djelali: a young, French-Algerian Muslim woman living in Marseille who studied journalism, was committed to the freedom of expression, used social media to disseminate her political views, and wore the veil. The project, scheduled to launch in January of 2005, was halted in November 2004 when certain high-profile media events in France caused many of the project’s co-participants to withdraw.

I am not interested in discussing whether or not the reasoning behind the abandonment of the project is valid. Rather, I want to explore the tensions and contradictions that the project brought to light, and which contributed to its ultimate discontinuation. I will argue that the visibility of the Muslim veil in France places strain upon contradictions at the heart of French republican ideals. Specifically, the project illuminates how the French principle of *laïcité* (secularism) subjects the (veiled) Muslim woman’s body to a double bind. Her body must be seen to adhere to a politics of difference in which she either identifies with the body politic or is perceived as falling away from into its constitutive outside. The body thus becomes a crucial site through which the Muslim woman is required to perform her citizenship, and by extension, through which the national body is reaffirmed.
Throughout this study, I have repeatedly referred to Silverman’s notion of the cultural screen to address how image repertoires are a crucial site for processes of intersubjective formations that govern how we understand ourselves, particularly in relation to others. While the cultural screen has been a leitmotif in this dissertation, in this chapter, the image of the Muslim veil as site of intersubjective encounters will be the primary site of inquiry. Specifically, I ask: what new forms of intersubjective encounters does the image of the urban veil inscribe? Neddam’s unrealized, web-based project hayet.djelali.org, together with Endless Tether, a large-scale, three-channel video installation by Farheen Haq, serve as case studies that provide provisional answers to this question.

In the first half of this chapter, based on a description of the proposed project and the political terrain into which it sought to intervene, I will investigate how hayet.djelali.org exposes the central role that the term laïcité plays in debates surrounding the Muslim veil in France. I explore the spatial mapping that this principle of secularism effects between the political and the religious, and the public and the private. I suggest that the form Neddam’s work was meant to take would have significantly challenged these inscriptions.

The concept behind Neddam’s project further reveals how these spatial mappings prescribe modes of identification that must be performed, subjecting the visibility of the Muslim (veiled) woman to a double bind. Whereas the Western subject is understood in post-structuralist terms as having multiple points of identification and belonging, the veiled woman is first and foremost perceived through her religious identity. In France, the visibility of the veiled woman signals her identification with Islam, an identification
that is referred to as a *repli identitaire*; a regressive folding-back from the space of the body politic of equal, abstract citizens to a communal space of incommensurable difference.

Neddam’s *hayet.djelali.org* would have proposed a far more complex web of possible sites of identification, provoking a rethinking of the politics of difference subtending the principle of *laïcité*. As epitomized in the psychoanalytic model of difference in the visual realm, difference according to the logic of the *repli identitaire* signals a lack of unity in the collective self. I attempt to shift the psychoanalytical and post-structuralist articulation of difference throughout this chapter from one predicated on lack to one that is predominantly relational and affirmative.

To this end, in the second part of this chapter, a close reading of Haq’s *Endless Tether* shifts the ground of discussion to the “imaged body”: the body on and in front of the screen. *Endless Tether* draws attention to the role the body plays in the production of social space as well as the processes of identification (projection, idealization, and alienation) that this space calls forth. The predominance of horizontality in *Endless Tether* suggests that intersubjectivity is above all relational: a form of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “being-with.”

The unidentifiable rituals taking place on the screens exacerbate tensions in the formal aspects of the work: between fragmentation and continuity, proximity and distance, and identification and alienation. Such tensions, which are felt and embodied by the viewing subject through haptic modes of perception, are brought into dialog with Deleuzian concepts of the body in art. This highlights how intersubjective relations depend primarily on the ever-shifting meaning attributed to the intersecting and
distancing relations established between bodies. By plunging the viewing subject into a dynamic field of relations—one that offers multiple sites of identification as well as (dis)identification—*Endless Tether* explodes the double bind of the (veiled) Muslim woman. It gestures to an alternate politics of difference that I believe offers a far more appropriate way of thinking self/other relations in contemporary pluralist societies.

In this chapter, I propose the image of the urban veil as a site of encounters that promote modes of identification in which difference is affirmed. And yet, this site of encounters also accommodates the possibility that some elements remain withheld and unknowable, even as they maintain a presence within the intersubjective relation.

### 4.1 Hayet.djelali.org, the Principle of Laïcité, and the Body’s Double Bind in France

Martine Neddam, a French Algerian of Jewish descent living in Amsterdam, is well known for her series of fictive characters given a virtual existence through interactive websites in which both the artist and internet users are the creators of the personas’ identities. Neddam’s characters often tap into sensitive and highly charged, if not taboo, topics such as Neddam’s first experiment in the genre dating back to 1996, *Mouchette*. The figure of Mouchette is based on the suicidal adolescent in Robert Bresson’s film by the same name. Certainly, while the personas are fictive, the issues they embody are real. The interactive web platform in which they live and evolve not only creates a space for the characters to exist, but also for the exchange of information and ideas generated by users who identify with the figure, or have something to say about the topics they embody.
Unlike the editors behind many user-generated platforms that have emerged in the last decade, Neddam is committed to a form of censorship resulting from her own judgment calls with regard to the information she circulates on her sites. While everything she receives is archived in her private databases, not everything is made public. Hence, the characters and opinions expressed publicly are completed, mediated, and in a sense, authored and authorized by her.

To be sure, from the outset, hayet.djelali.org is positioned in highly precarious terrain by the identity-sharing format, the figure’s fictive identity, and the highly charged topic of the Muslim veil in France. Neddam and the organizers at Association Commune were well aware of this fact, and groundwork for the project progressed cautiously and collaboratively. The artist performed fieldwork by interviewing representatives from the associations Femmes d’ici et d’ailleurs and Collectif Feministes pour L’Egalité in Marseilles. She also organized workshops with students and residents from the predominantly Arab municipality of Belsunce. Association Commune and Neddam approached Radia Louhichi, a teacher of economics in the suburbs of Paris and the activist behind Une école pour tous et toutes, a network created after the ban of ostentatious signs of religion in public schools in March 2004. That ban had resulted in schools denying access to several young veiled women the same year. Following discussions with Louhichi, it was decided that she would serve as the model upon which the fictive person of Hayet was to be based. Louhichi committed herself to Neddam’s project, agreeing to submit texts, political commentaries, and messages that stemmed from her work and experiences to the site on a regular basis.

169 An association that helps housewives, students, and women of various faiths, including atheists, to learn French and acquire professional skills, with the goal of fostering mutual understanding and aiding those women to participate fully in the social fabric of Marseille.
The project was scheduled to launch in January of 2005 for a minimum of two years. However, in the following months, several high-profile political events occurred: the saga surrounding the Danish caricatures (September 2005), the French urban riots (November 2005), and the horrifying murder of Ilan Halimi (January 2006). These events caused many of the participants of the project, including Louhichi, to withdraw. As a result, Association Commune, whose existence was already on precarious ground, decided to pull the plug on the project. The curators claimed that the political context and timing was not right. They wanted to avoid feeding into stereotypes and existing radicalism among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They also hoped to avoid contributing to the hyper-exposure of veiled Muslim women in France at the time, and speaking on their behalf.

To be certain, the concerns surrounding the project were legitimate. But what is of more pertinent interest is how the artwork’s perceived threat exposed tensions that I believe are directly related to the form and structure of the project and the intersubjective encounters it aimed to stage. Consequently, in what follows, I look at three aspects of the web-based project and how they highlight and deflect spatial mappings of citizenship in France—and the double bind to which the visible female body is subjected within this configuration. These three aspects converge in the work that the term *laïcité* does in creating spaces and modes of interpellation in the French republic.

I will first demonstrate how the French mapping of public and private, and secular and religious spaces projects a normative image of the veiled woman as folding back from the political body. This presupposition attributes only one axis of differentiation to her: her religious identification. I will next look at three interrelated aspects of Neddam’s
project: first, its social media platform characterized by a mode of self-presentation; second, its supplementation of a visible subject with the discursive utterances of a (collective) self; and thirdly, the use of various modes of address that stage multiple sites of (dis)identification. I maintain that by shunning the question of visible difference, Neddam’s project intended to create a subject position that could not be seen as folding back from the political body, but instead, would have been seen as actively intersecting with, and contributing to, the multiple sites of identification and collectivities within the French socio-political landscape.

The Spatial Mappings of Laïcité

The principle of laïcité has been central to debates surrounding the veil in France. Secularism takes on specific characteristics in each of the socio-political contexts in which it is adopted. In some instances it can mean the equal treatment of religions by the state. In France, the term laïcité designates a radical separation of church and state. The Greek root of the word, laikos, designates “of the people,” indexing the central imperative of national unity demanded by the French republic, in which citizens are asked to display their loyalty to the nation above all. Their individual differences, especially their religious affiliations, must be contained within the private realm. The history of this principle is inexorably linked to the stronghold the Catholic Church had on French society. Many have already critically addressed how the term’s roots are embedded in Judeo-Christian values and an understanding of public and private spheres specific to Western traditions of socio-political thought. Citizens whose cultural

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understandings of space are not articulated in these terms are, as a result, already discriminated against. Such is the case with Muslims. As discussed in the previous chapter, Saba Mahmood has elaborately illustrated how, contrary to common sense understandings, the practice of veiling does not lend itself to private/public distinctions. Rather, it is a highly personal, quotidian ritual undertaken whose goal is the attainment of pious behavior. Veiling chiefly concerns the architecture of the self, and by extension, a body that continually breaches what are, according to the logic of laïcité, public and private spheres.

The Stasi commissions of 2003, in which the question of the Muslim veil [l’affaire du foulard Islamique] was a key issue, portrayed the visibility of the veil as an intrusion of a sign of religious affiliation into the nominally neutral space of the political sphere, and at the same time, a signal of the veiled woman’s folding back [repli identitaire] from the unity of the body politic into a communitarian space. The banning of ostentatious religious signs in public schools was among the final series of proposals made by the Stasi commission—a proposal that was implemented by the French government in March of 2004. The law perpetuates the role that educational institutions have played throughout the history of the French republic. It serves as a secular tool par excellence in nation building; the privileged site where, in Joan Wallace Scott’s words, “differences were contained and transformed into Frenchness.”171 This motion was extended last year by a further ban on face coverings in public space (April 2011), another politically fraught attempt by white men to save “brown women from brown men,” to recall the words of Gayatri Spivak.

Anthropologist Mayanthi L. Fernando convincingly suggests that the intolerance manifested towards veiled women in the French public sphere points to a structural contradiction at the heart of republican citizenship: its dual universalizing and particularizing imperatives.\textsuperscript{172} In the first instance, the principles of equality, freedom, and laïcité must necessarily be seen to transcend and hence annul individual differences in order to lay claim to a universal status. Within the second particularizing register, there is a simultaneous recognition and erasure of a commensurable difference—a difference that can and must be transformed and integrated into the cultural particularity of the nation. A failure to do so signals an incommensurable difference, which in turn challenges the universalizing claims of the republic. The Muslim veil’s stubborn visibility, which stands in as a signpost for identification with an alternate set of cultural principles and values, turns its legibility into one of incommensurable difference. Attempts to ban the Muslim veil from French public spaces, then, do not only express a desire to accommodate right-wing voters and anti-Islamic sensibilities, but such legal action must also be seen as an attempt to erase the visible failure of French republicanism and its universalizing claims.

The instrumentalization of the figure of the secular Muslim woman by the French government, as Fernando indicates, became a strategy to outweigh the visibility of the veil with the image of successful incorporations of Muslim women. Such an effort is epitomized in \textit{Les Mariannes d’Aujourd’hui}, a series of fourteen images displayed on the facade of the National Assembly in Paris in 2003. The fourteen large-scale portraits depict Muslim women from across France who had taken part in a march against

women’s oppression in the suburbs. They are clothed in the colors of the Republic, and wear, in opposition to the Muslim veil, the red cap of Marianne [bonnet phrygien]. In Fernando’s words, these women were clearly meant to symbolize the “transition from difference to non-difference that performs the universality of republican citizenship.”


The point that I want to emphasize here is that the term laïcité sets up a spatial articulation of difference that locates the Muslim woman’s body on one axis of interpellation, and hence one axis of differentiation. Whereas post-structuralism has taught us that a subject inhabits multiple sites of identification and belonging, including political, economical, racial, and sexual affiliations, the Muslim woman (and here more so than the Muslim man, whose visible difference is less charged) is reduced to her religious identity alone. This identification is signaled by the presence or absence of the veil. Significantly, not only does this structure presume that the veiled woman is necessarily more pious than her unveiled counterpart, but it also denies how her subjecthood intersects with or diverges from other principles and values of the French socio-political landscape. As journalist and writer Amin Maalouf laments in Identités

173 Ibid., 390.
Meurtrières, whereas everyone has multiple points of belonging and identification, only some people at certain moments are required to affirm one at the expense of others.\footnote{Amin Maalouf, \textit{Identités Meurtrières} (Paris: Grasset, 1998): 7-8.} This is the predicament that the body of the Muslim woman finds itself in. In a double bind set up by the term \textit{laïcité}, the unveiled Muslim woman is perceived as identifying with the national body, and the veiled woman signals a folding back (when in fact she is being pushed back) from the body politic; as a result, she becomes its constitutive outside.

\textit{The Spatial Inscription of hayet.djelali.org}

To return to Neddam’s proposed project, I maintain that \textit{hayet.djelali.org} exacerbates the contradictions at the heart of the principle of \textit{laïcité} and deflects its workings via three characteristics: its platform as personal website; its presentation of a discursive instead of a visible social subject; and its use of various modes of address that communicate and stage multiple sites of (dis)identification.

In the first place, by masquerading as a personal website of a pious Muslim woman, \textit{hayet.djelali.org} raises questions about how social media currently challenge the spatial mappings of \textit{laïcité}. Social media are public platforms that purportedly reflect the ideal of the individual freedom of expression that is specific to liberal democracies. Freedom of expression in the public sphere, however, has always been subjected to dominant socio-political configurations, as is made clear in France by the overriding of the supposed freedom of expression regarding religion. Benedict Anderson has shown that mass media forges collective imaginaries in the constitution of national communities.
And yet, while new media and communication technologies continue to construct and represent the political body, they also increasingly offer new opportunities for self-expression in the public realm, as media theoreticians Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have pointed out. The artist and theoretician Jordan Crandall has characterized the cultural transformations initiated by social media platforms, including personal websites, blogs, twitter, MySpace, Second Life, and Facebook, as a shift from a culture of *representation of the world*, to a culture of *presentation of self to the world*. Social media has inaugurated an unprecedented paradigm of and for self-display.

It is important to note here how mass media and religion are currently intersecting in new and complex ways. In *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors point out that religion, and especially the so-called “book religions” such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, has historically laid claim to a mediating status: between the divine and the faithful. Moreover, religion, like mass media, has always played a “public role.” Religion is a mediating practice that creates publics. In the last few decades, the increase of information technologies has dovetailed with the decline of the nation-state as the primary site of representation and identification, opening the door for religion to play an increasingly important role in this regard.

Hence, while the term *laïcité* delineates a clear separation between the private (religious) and the public (political) realms, the conception of hayet.djelali.org engaged and highlighted a far more porous spatial configuration. Riding the wave of the culture of

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self-display, the identity-sharing nature of the piece would have turned it into a site of connectivity and identification in its own right. Far from suggesting a repli identitaire—a movement away from the public domain—the users of the hayet.djelali.org site would have created a collective self that identified with the (fictive) pious figure, jointly manipulating her image as a form of (collective) self-expression within the public at large.

Secondly, Neddam’s characterization of her virtual characters as “a narrative process”178 is indicative of how the figure of Hayet Djelali would have been staged primarily through textual encounters. Although it is impossible to address the exact contents of a site that never materialized, we can examine the site’s intended strategies of narration; its positioning of a reader through modes of address; and its interactive and layered structure.

As is typical of a personal website, and as exemplified through the sites of her previous virtual characters such as Mouchette (1997), David Still (2001) and Xiao Qian (2006), Neddam conceived a multi-layered platform for the project of hayetdjelali.org. This platform would have featured a series of pages dedicated to Hayet Djelali’s biography, including texts about her life, family, friends, and a sample of personal photos. Another set of pages would present her “work” as a student of journalism, including a CV and writing samples of her studies and articles to be published. Finally, there would have been a series of functional pages used primarily for sending and receiving emails. These various pages aimed to present the character in all her

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complexity, such as her political views, taste in fashion, daily struggles and
discrimination she faced and her unfolding relationships with friends and family. 179

More importantly, however, the Internet user who encountered the site would
have had to engage with the various forms of self-writing across these various genres,
each of which address, and hence position, the user in different ways. Some modes of
narration and address would have been informational. The articles that she would have
produced regarding a political issue or event provide an example of these informational
modes of address and narration. The voice of Hayet, within the context of the articles,
would take on a certain authority on a given topic, and the reader would be positioned in
relation to the text as someone being informed. However, the reader would also have
been able judge whether she agreed or disagreed with the arguments of these articles.

When paging through Hayet’s private emails, the reader would have become an
exterior witness to informal and occasionally intimate dialogs with friends and family,
which would reflect her everyday experiences and personal relationships. The result
could have lured the reader into a position of discomfort and even voyeurism.

Neddam claims that the salience of her virtual personas is rooted in their capacity
to entice users into a reflexive process about various issues of concern specific to the
fictive characters. 180 Neddam, who has a background in linguistics, has explored various
modes of interrogation that most often take the form of the virtual character asking the
visitor, who is directly referred to as “you,” staged questions. In such instances, the
visitor is positioned in a dialogic relation to the persona. As semiotician Daniel Chandler
has pointed out, this form of interrogation causes the reader to feel directly looked at and

179 This information is outlined in the artist’s project proposal for Association Commune.
180 Paule Mackrous, “Le partage sur le Web.”
spoken to. It is a mode of address that “stimulates interaction with each individual viewer.” In the case of Neddam’s sites, the interrogative act is followed by the possibility of the user responding directly, in writing, on the interface. These answers are then read by Neddam, some of which are selected and incorporated by her into various pages of the site.

Some strategic aspects of Neddam’s identity-sharing interfaces, which are deployed to cajole the visitor into an explorative mode, are the various playful and even tactile interactive features that encourage the user to navigate the sites’ numerous pages. Such devices include pop-ups; highlighted or pulsating words that one is prompted to activate with a click of the mouse; and modes of narration and textured images that produce a sensuous relation to the interface. This last tactic is employed on the Mouchette site, where an image of the virtual persona licking the screen is accompanied by the written interpolative comment: “Finally, I can come that close to you. Do you also want to come that close to me?” The user can click on yes or no. The question is immediately followed by, “Put your cheek on the monitor. How does it feel?”

The historian Martin Jay, among others, has argued that vision is the most abstracting of all the senses. Building on this argument, one of the main objectives of the present study is to stress the highly problematic tendency in current debates to reduce readings of the Muslim veil to issues of vision—a sense that is closely allied with power and knowledge. The politics of difference orchestrated around the term laïcité and the reading of the veil as a visible sign of (dis)identification operate in this manner: they

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abstract the singularity of the veiled woman to the legibility of the veil, which serves as a sign of an incommensurable difference.

*Hayet.djelali.org* clearly aimed to eschew such a politics of visuality, presenting a far more complex image of subjecthood. The interactive nature of Neddam’s project would have necessarily generated a figure that was multilayered and always in the process of becoming. The encounter with this virtual figure is therefore never complete. Rather, resonating with Luce Irigaray’s metaphysical claim that “behind the veil there is only veil,” the internet visitors were to encounter the virtual persona through the site’s many layers as well as by virtue of their own personal choices—and navigation through and interactions with its pages—so that they would never attain a coherent image of the figure.

The project affords the visitor a web of axes of identification and (dis)identification in which he or she can identify with certain struggles and forms of discrimination; disagree with opinions and values expressed; and experience moments of intimacy or discomfort toward the figure. The work consequently operates through registers of affect to dismantle the possibility of attributing to the veiled figure a simple reading of incommensurable difference. With Fernando’s argument regarding the universal and cultural imperatives of republican citizenship in mind, I maintain that Neddam’s project offers a more plastic model of citizenship: it implodes the double bind ascribed to the Muslim woman’s body by *laïcité*.

Hence, although I do not disagree that the project in many ways ran the risk of undermining the very goals it sought to achieve, I want to suggest that on paper (where such risks remain contained), Neddam’s project initiated a conceptual departure from a
politics of difference and citizenship contingent upon visible modes of identification of
and with the female body. Hayet.djelali.org would have occasioned an encounter with a
written body that is seen to engage actively with, and contribute to, the socio-political
landscape in protean ways. Moreover, such a figure could not have been contained within
the spatial configuration inscribed by the principle of laïcité. This web piece
presupposed a far more intricate spatial mapping, in which the veiled woman could not
be interiorized into or repelled from the body politic in one stroke.

It is now necessary to examine more closely the politics of difference being
displaced, so that in the second section I can further elaborate this alternate model
through the analysis of a second case.

The Politics of Difference, Identification, and Lack

Throughout this study I have demonstrated how difference, especially when it
comes to the politics of representation underscoring the Muslim veil in European and
North American imaginaries, is predominantly articulated as a failure of sameness with
regard to the subject of representation. This politics of difference, as I have sought to
argue in my case studies, is contingent upon the idea that difference is needed to structure
sameness. By sameness I refer to both the individual and the collective subject of
representation, and by extension, to individual and collective identities. I have argued that
the image of the Muslim veil often secures various historical articulations of identity by
serving as its defining outside, such as in its relationship to constructs of Christendom,
European culture and values, Western feminisms, and now laïcité; the nation as a unified
political whole.
Within these articulations of self that the image of the Muslim veil helps to structure, the veiled woman is reduced to a symbol—the semantic reading of which, as I argued in chapter two, is plural and has shifted over time. As a result, the image of the Muslim veil has in various historical moments and contexts symbolized the backwardness of Islam; woman as victim; the eroticized Orient; tradition; and in the present chapter, a *repli identitaire*—an instance of (dis)identification from the ostensibly shared universal ideals and values of the French Republic. What I want to emphasize across these readings of the veil is the reduction of the complex and heterogeneous subject positions of veiled women to a single, fixed reading of her visible difference. Meyda Yeğenoğlu reflects on the reductive representations of the veiled woman that are used to structure the self in Orientalist discourses:

If the veiled woman/culture remains always different or infinitely dissimulating in Orientalist logic, this is not because of the complexity of her/their being-in-the-world, in which one might find continuities as well as discontinuities with one’s own culture/subjectivity, but because they are always absolutely different. They should remain different, because I should remain the same: they are not/should not be a possibility within my own world, which will thus be different.  

Thus, the identity of the veiled woman has repeatedly been constructed by representing the element from which the self is differentiated. In my investigation I am concerned with how, subtending the work that the image of the veil performs in this regard, processes of (mis)identification with exterior images play out. The psychoanalytical model, and specifically, Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase, help explain the dynamics of identification that take place between subject and image.

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183 Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 57.
In Lacan’s *The Mirror Phase* (1949), the child who experiences its own body as lacking coordinated motor skills and bodily unity mistakes the seemingly more coordinated image in the mirror as his, and proceeds jubilantly to interiorize the *Gestalt* of this image into his sense of self. This proprioceptive process of self-formation—via external (and idealized) imaged bodies—continues throughout the subject’s mental development.\textsuperscript{184}

This model of subject formation is important for my argument in three ways. First, it highlights the central role that the identification with imaged bodies plays in subject formation. Second, it suggests that the process of interiorization of an external image is predicated on a preexisting sense of lack within the subject. And third, it necessarily implies that the other is always already a constitutive part of that self.

It is important to reiterate here that the process of identification with exterior images/bodies generally takes two alternate trajectories, which represent the double bind of the Muslim woman’s body under discussion in this chapter. According to the image politics of the cultural screen, if the exterior image is perceived as an idealized image, the self will assimilate it. If, on the other hand, it is perceived through the cultural screen as a un-idealized image because of its race, gender, or other axes of differentiation, it will remain as a defining outside. This brings us back to the question of the politics of difference and identification that is central to this chapter.

Freud revealingly describes the incorporative logic that undergirds the relation to the idealized other as cannibalistic. Similarly, Silverman’s citation of Max Scheler, the German philosopher, explains how the other’s specificities and singularity are annihilated

in instances of what he calls idiopathic identification. This process results in the “total
eclipse and absorption of another self by one’s own, it being thus, as it were, completely
dispossessed and deprived of all in its conscious existence or character.”185 Such a
process illustrates what is at stake in the simultaneous recognition and erasure of
difference that underscores the parading of the secular Muslim woman’s image in French
public spaces. The assimilation of her supposedly commensurable difference as a secular
Muslim into the unified whole of the nation occurs at the expense of unrecognized and
erased specificities: namely, her race and class.

I would add that these features of incorporative identification processes call forth
the ideals and inevitable failures of discourses of multiculturalism. It has become a
tendency for liberal democracies to claim that they accommodate cultural diversity—a
term that is at the core of multiculturalism’s ideals. Homi Bhabha argues that cultural
diversity is not the same as cultural difference, however, and that the discrepancy
between the two exposes contradictions between the particular and the universal in
mechanisms of identification.186 For Bhabha, cultural diversity in liberal democracies
functions in an analogous manner to the idea of a musée imaginaire, in which other
cultures are present, but categorized and presented within our own grid of representation
and meaning. This occurrence operates on the assumption that all cultures are translatable
and knowable. Following Bhabha, in the case of the universal ideals that underscore
French republican values, the universalism that provides the subtext for the recognition of

cultural diversity ends up containing cultural difference, by masking the universalist claim’s inherent ethnocentric norms, values, and interests.\(^{187}\)

Hence, the purported claim of accommodating cultural diversity at the heart of multiculturalist discourses must be seen, on the contrary, as an attempt to “respond to and control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference.”\(^{188}\) In such logic, the universal and general prevail and contain the singular and particular, and by extension inhibit “emergent moments of social identification and cultural enunciations.”\(^{189}\)

I want to stress that the identification operation underpinning the de-idealized image/body is equally dismissive of cultural difference. This is exemplified in the perception of the veiled woman’s incommensurable difference in the French Republic. Instead of a legitimate recognition of cultural difference, as well as points of continuity with the veiled subject, cultural singularity is pushed to the outside—to the invisible private sphere—as the constitutive defining other.

Chantal Mouffe, in reading Carl Schmitt against the grain—combined with a psychoanalytical understanding of identification mechanisms involved in subject formation—has vociferously stressed how we/them constructs always form a core subtext in constructions of political identities. Political institutions, she claims, fail in the present to offer political identities that reflect the plural societies in which they operate. According to Mouffe, “Citizenship is vital for democratic politics, but a modern


\(^{188}\) Bhabha, “Translator/Translated” page number?

\(^{189}\) Ibid.
democratic theory must make room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens.”

Political institutions’ failure to recognize the diverse nature of its citizens political struggles and forms of identification is evidenced when subjects find themselves in contradictory modes of interpellation through the available modes of identification. Such is the case of the veiled woman, who is at once interpellated as an equal citizen and negated by her religious difference, all within the same political sphere. Moreover, when political struggles and passions are not given legitimate forms of inscription within the political realm, subjects turn to other outlets and forms of collective belonging. This helps explain both the current rise of various forms of populism throughout Western Europe, and the emergence of differing degrees of Islamism in the Middle East, Europe, and North America over the last few decades. What is needed today, and what the current understanding of terms such as laïcité fail to provide, are more flexible modes of collective identifications on both the “we” and the “them” side. It is in this sense that Mouffe has called for a form of radical pluralism. She contends that

in order to radicalize the idea of pluralism, so as to make it a vehicle for a deepening of the democratic revolution, we have to break with rationalism, individualism, and universalism. Only on that condition will it be possible to apprehend the multiplicity of forms of subordination that exist in social relations and to provide a framework for the articulation of the different democratic struggles – around gender, race, class, sexuality, environment and others.

I assert that Neddam’s hayet.djelali.org and Haq’s Endless Tether, which I will turn to in the next part of this chapter, offer templates for rethinking processes of identity

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192 Mouffe, The Return of the Political, 6.
formation along these lines of radical pluralism. By creating platforms for protean forms of identification between images and subjects/bodies, these works eschew the desire for a unified self and correlated we/them constructs. Moreover, these art works do not prescribe, as an alternative, a postmodern model of identity politics or what Judith Butler has theorized as “the embarrassed etc.”: an endless, horizontal accumulation of adjectives that strive to situate and encompass a comprehensive subject, but ultimately fail to do so. As Jeffredy T. Nealon has pointed out, such a failure prefigures an impossibility of wholeness and hence signals a form of lack.193

In *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*, Nealon asks, “Can this failure of sameness be rethematized as an affirmation of difference? What possibilities are there for concrete responses that do not merely or finally reduce otherness to a subset of the same, to a subset of an inquiring subject’s identity?”194 In the second part of this chapter, I aim to develop preliminary answers to these questions by building on my analysis of *hayet.djelali.org* through a close reading of *Endless Tether*. I suggest that these works think about identity and difference not in terms of fixed identities ascribed to bodies, but rather, following Jean-Luc Nancy, as processes involving mutable forms of identification. This implies revisiting the central role the image of the other plays in the formation of the self, and the assumption underscoring the mirror-phase scenario, in which the idealized body in the mirror is fixed.

In the next section I turn to a Deleuzian articulation of the body, and more specifically, the body given to us in art. I maintain that the fixed position of the other is an impossibility that has considerable implications for the correlative positioning of the

194 Ibid.
self. By extension, I adopt a theoretical framework that proposes a web of identifications subtending mechanisms of individual and collective self-formation. I contend that difference, articulated as a web, obstructs the possibility of the idea of absolute difference. And yet, it also has the capacity to accommodate components of the other’s difference that remain withheld, unknowable, and ultimately, inassimilable.

4.2 Endless Tether: Toward a New Politics of Difference

The Mirror Image and the Emergence of the Body without Organs

*Endless Tether* is a large, three-channel video installation that spans the surface of a gallery wall. On the right-hand screen, a pair of hands tosses a lavish red cloth across the middle screen. The cloth is caught on the far left by a three-quarter length cropped nude female, Haq, who begins to pull the cloth and wrap it around her body. The red cloth, set off against the white background, forms a formidable horizontal line spanning the width of the work, creating a continuous flow moving from right to left. The two figures serve as brackets for the cloth, which occupies the entire middle screen, with only the occasional intrusion of Haq’s hands as they reach in to grab hold and pull the cloth toward her. The middle screen renders visible the dynamics that occur between the two figures: dynamics that are given form through the materiality of the folds. To this end, the images are projected slightly in slow motion, allowing us to take in the liveliness of the cloth, which, at moments, flows smoothly from one figure to the next. Multiple pleats convey slackness, as one pair of hands gently feeds and the other calmly receives and wraps. At other moments, the red cloth tightens, becoming a creaseless, red wall between the figures as the hands grip and enact a sort of tug-of-war with Haq’s body, which inclines to add force as she struggles with the cloth that seems to entangle her. Throughout the piece’s seven minutes, the images intermittently disappear and the screens turn white, becoming luminous squares that saturate the installation space with light. Halfway through, when the images return, there is a shift in direction; the movement flows from left to right. Now the hands pull, causing Haq to turn in the opposite direction as the red cloth unravels from her body.\(^{195}\)

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\(^{195}\) *Endless Tether* can be viewed at [www.farheenhaq.com/work/tether/](http://www.farheenhaq.com/work/tether/).
In the following section, I will begin where I left off in my analysis of hayet.djelali.org, with the disappearance of a visible body that signals an incommensurable difference. I will focus on the emergence of a body/subject that refuses a fixed position of difference and continually addresses the viewer in various and at times contradictory ways. Neddam’s web piece sought to enact this discursively. I will now explore how this can be achieved via images of the body: a primary site, according to psychoanalysis, for structuring sameness and difference in the field of vision.

Haq’s *Endless Tether* will provide the theoretical terrain upon which to explore the new forms of intersubjective encounters that the image of the urban veil can inscribe. To this end, I will bring the structural and formal aspects of the piece into dialog with Deleuze’s interpretation of the body without organs. By doing so, I will provide a model of identification processes in relation to the imaged body that is an alternative to the one that the mirror phase postulates. This model creates a crucial slippage between a body that is identified through the sense of vision and one that is submerged in a dynamic field of relations into which my own body is drawn, in a manner that is predominantly felt.

The following aspects of the work are pivotal for enabling this slippage: the play between continuity and fragmentation, between proximity and distance, and ultimately, between the interpellation of visual and haptic modes of perception.

The first aspect of *Endless Tether* that impedes the visual mastery needed to secure one’s relationship to the imaged body (which would either be assimilated as my own or identified as its defining other) is the sheer size of the work: a horizontal landscape that spans the width and height of one large gallery wall. Consequently, it is impossible to take in the entire image in one glance. The continuous movement of images

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flows across the three screens, whose borders are emphasized as unlit black frames. The result is a paradoxical continuity of movement between the screens, and a fragmentation of the image in three distinct parts. Accordingly, in this installation I find myself following the continuous flow of the images. My eye slides across their surfaces from one figure through the middle screen to the other, forgetting the borders between the projections. At other moments, I focus on one of the three screens. The pleats in the cloth catch my attention, the hands reach in and I follow them into the next screen, where they begin to wrap the red folds into place, tightly, around the body. The arms on the other side pull, and the body on this side reacts, inclining to add force, so that the cloth in the middle stretches out and tightens.

The paradoxical relationship between continuity and fragmentation literally affects the way I am positioned in relation to the image, both in terms of proximity and distance. The continuity of the movement as well as the materiality, and the slightly slowed-down pace of the images, encourage my look to be carried across, or to jump in a syncopated manner from one screen to the next—but always horizontally, and predominantly on the surface of the screens. In heightened moments of tension, or conversely, of slackness, the grip or feeding gesture of the hands, resistant or complicit postures of the body, strained or smooth flow of the cloth, are all aspects of the work that my look falls upon.

The screens turn abruptly into three large, white, illuminated surfaces. I am suddenly aware of my own body as it is pushed back at a distance into its place. As I sit against the back wall of the gallery space, a feeling of malaise sets in. I have the impression that I am witness to the unfolding dynamics of an intimate relationship
between two people. The images reappear and the middle screen speaks to me of a landscape, its horizon line in the far distance. The life and texture of the cloth bring me back to the surface and convey sensuality. The left-hand screen takes on the appearance of a billboard, depicting a woman in a sexy red evening dress. The hands grip, the body protests, I feel entangled.

*Endless Tether* plays with my modes of looking and, ultimately, with my positionality in relation to the image. It accomplishes this through the interplay of continuity and fragmentation, proximity and distance, and through positions that oscillate in tandem with the interpellation of optic or more embodied forms of looking. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Laura Marks argues that the video image has a predilection for invoking a haptic mode of perception. Marks contrasts what she calls “video haptics” with optical visuality. How the image appeals to one modality of vision or the other is largely dependent upon its capacity to distance or absorb the viewer. Most importantly for my analysis is that optical visuality is aligned with perspectival space, according to Marks, such that it assures the distance allowing for identification, symbolizing processes, and a mastery of the image. Images that construct a visual field on the surface of the screen in a way that emphasizes the electronic texture of the projected image tend to lose optical clarity, encourage an embodied view, and engulf the viewer in a flow of tactile impressions.

Marks notes that the video image is almost never entirely haptic. The haptic image usually occurs in a dialectical relationship with the optical. Yet, when I engage with the image in a haptic way, “I come to the surface of my self, losing myself in the

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intensified relation with an other that cannot be known.”  

I will return to the concept of an unknowable body further on. What I want to emphasize here are the shifting interpellations of the image that position me in multiple and even contradictory ways in relation to the body on the screen. In this manner, I can never secure one form of identification with the imaged body; as it is in a constant state of renegotiation, so am I.

The treatment of the imaged body in Haq’s piece, together with the use of video, opens bodies up to each other both on and in front of the screen, situating them within a dynamic field of relations. This field of relations is staged, represented within the projected images. The landscape format that reaches an apex in the middle screen, where the cloth literally serves as a trait-d’union between the two figures, most prominently embodies this idea of relation. This binding link renders tangible the ever-shifting nature of the relationship between the two figures. Consequently, we can invoke what Deleuze calls the “Figure,” a term he used to characterize how the painter Francis Bacon was able to render the intensive register of the body palpable in his paintings. According to Deleuze, Bacon did not represent the body. Instead, the painter succeeded in de-forming the visible body by conveying its vital forces through the materiality of the painted medium.

The concept of the Figure must therefore be differentiated from the notion of figuration, as it entails an alternate relationship between form and matter. Whereas figuration is largely understood as a process of giving form to matter, with the Figure, it is the medium, or matter, that gives form to intensities: forces and power relations that are normally imperceptible. Moving beyond the form of the visible body interpellates a haptic mode of perception, creating a body that is more aptly characterized as being felt

198 Ibid., 12, my emphasis.
Such a body, then, clearly cannot entertain the same identification processes as prescribed in the mirror stage scenario. It should be noted that in the Lacanian model, the subject perceives the mirror image proprioceptively, meaning via his bodily ego. The mirror image provides a visual model, in which, as Laplanche and Pontalis state, “Certain results of maturation and biological organization are attained solely by the visual perception of the counterpart.” Through the visual identification process with the image’s Gestalt, the subject attains mastery over his or her bodily unity. I argue that exactly the opposite is at stake in Endless Tether. Here, the body on the screen is constantly in a state of re-formation. At some moments, the body on the left-hand screen appears beautiful, with an attractiveness that gestures toward fashion and advertising platforms. Yet, no sooner is this association made than the image is transformed into a body on a “tether,” struggling with such idealized images as if they were suffocating. The body is continually reconstituted and reconstituting itself, and reconstitutes me and my relation to it in the process. Thus, whereas the mirror image serves to construct a desired or idealized self-image, the imaged body I encounter in Haq’s piece undoes such work. Consequently, I will turn to the Deleuzian concept of the body without organs as a model to help articulate what occurs in, and in front of, the screens in this installation piece.

The concept of the body without organs, which Deleuze largely developed in relation to the artistic production of the poet Antonin Artaud, follows a complex and multifaceted trajectory in the philosopher’s oeuvre. Nonetheless, its practical implications remain clear. To think of the body without organs is to think of the body

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201 See Anne Sauvagnargues, *Deleuze et l’art*, 83-106.
outside its organic determinations. For Deleuze, the organic body is the paradigmatic unified and hierarchical body, governed by the brain as its central organ. This concept of the body, I argue, is directly linked to the mirror stage scenario and processes of self-formation that strive toward, and operate through, imaginaries of a coordinated, unified subject.

However, for Deleuze, the subject/body consists of another register in which multiple, virtual forces enter into relation with one another in a constant state of becoming. He theorizes the organism as that which imprisons these forces, subjecting them to an organized corporeality—as exemplified by the interiorization of the idealized image in the mirror and its motor coordination.

The body without organs is not literally a body without organs, but rather an inorganic body: its virtual side. This facet of the body occurs on a plane of pre-individuated intensities, where possible outcomes have yet to be actualized. The inorganic life that animates the body can be connected to Deleuze’s concept of “haecceities.” Far from a unified entity, the body is conceived as an assemblage of intensive forces that “consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and be affected.”

It may seem puzzling how such a concept comes into play in daily, intersubjective encounters and processes of self-formation. For Deleuze, art plays a crucial role in this regard. The body without organs operates in the extremes of what can be thought, and can be brought to the realm of experience through art. Deleuze considered Artaud a great poet precisely because he was able to bring thought and the organized body to a

203 Anne Sauvagnargues, *Deleuze et l’Art*, 83.
point of rupture through a use of language brought to its asignifying limit. \textsuperscript{204} I argue that Haq’s use of video and the imaged body also creates a similar experience that captures the inorganic life of the body. By working through the strategic use of continuity, fragmentation, distancing, absorption, and the materiality of the medium and its images, I find myself caught in a dynamic space of shifting relations, between the bodies on and in front of the screen: relations that are above all embodied and felt.

To be sure, the result does have significant implications for processes of identification. In such a relational field, my shifting identifications cannot be neatly aligned along me/you, us/them constructs. And yet, as Mouffe has shown us, such constructs inevitably play a key role in the formation of collective identities. We may therefore ask what \textit{Endless Tether}—beyond shifting the politics of difference away from visuality and lack to a terrain in which intersubjective encounters occur within a dynamic field of relations—offers as an alternative for thinking about sameness and difference in the constructs of individual and collective self? Once the visible ideal or incommensurable body has disappeared, allowing for the emergence of multiple vectors of (dis)identification, what becomes of difference? Can Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference exist and be affirmed on its own terms within this model? It is to this question that I now turn in the last section of this chapter.

\textit{An Affirmative Model of Difference}

I take the predominance of the horizontal in \textit{Endless Tether} as my starting point in addressing this question. The horizontal, I have argued, prefigures the relational in this piece in several registers. The relational is the social: the link between the bodies on the

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 91.
screen and the bodies experiencing the work in the gallery space. The dynamic field of relations and vectors of identification between these various subject/bodily positions instantiates what Jean-Luc Nancy calls a “being-with.” In The Inoperative Community, he argues that being is relational, first and foremost. And for Nancy, the relational is the communal. He reasons that while a unified subject implies absolute autonomy, one nevertheless has to imagine that one is autonomous in relation to something else: an outside. It follows that one cannot speak of a being-self without speaking of a being-in-relation-to, and hence a being-with.

Nancy’s articulation of the relational operates similarly at the collective level, and responds to the logic subtending Mouffe’s notion of we/them constructs inherent in the political. And yet, for Nancy, the relational is not that which constructs; rather, it is that which undoes the workings of community and fixed collective identities. Certainly, for my purposes, what is most important in Nancy’s theory of being-with is not only that the (collective) subject is never one with itself outside its relations with others, but also that the relations between subjects are never absolute. To the contrary, relations are always shifting, and as a result, constantly repositioning: or in Nancy’s terms, (ex)posing subjects in various ways in relation to each other. Nancy states:

Excluded by the logic of the absolute-subject of metaphysics (Self, Will, Life, Spirit, etc.) community comes to cut into this subject by virtue of the same logic. The logic of the absolute sets it in relation: but this obviously cannot make for a relation between two or several absolutes, no more than it can make an absolute of the relation. It undoes the absoluteness of the absolute. The relation (the community) is, if it is, nothing other than that which undoes, it its very principle – and at its closure or on its limit – the autarchy of absolute immanence.

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206 Ibid., 4.
Just as the body without organs undoes the possibility of a coherent and unified subject position on an individual level, so too does Nancy’s notion of a being-with undo any notion of a fixed identity, and hence of an exclusive political body. Nancy’s theory implies that the specific nature of being-with is dependent upon the meaning attributed to the relation: one that is never absolute and has the potential to shift, constantly (ex)posing bodies/subjects to each other in mutable ways.

I contend that it is precisely through this logic that Haq’s piece succeeds in dislodging and rerouting fixed constructs of sameness and difference. I have discussed how the installation situates the bodies/subjects in *Endless Tether* in a matrix of relations that the visitor mostly feels, rather than sees. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, seeing continues to be aligned with knowledge ideologically. Such a movement toward the other—which is predominantly felt—therefore has significant implications for the meaning, and ultimately, the knowledge produced in this relation with the other. With this in mind, I will examine how the embodied experience of the dynamic web of relations in *Endless Tether* becomes channeled into processes of meaning-making and knowledge production, and ultimately, into social-political articulations of sameness and difference. This entails revisiting the central role that the image of the body plays in mediating political constructs of belonging. Deleuze’s articulation of the two poles of the cinematic body, namely the everyday and the ceremonial body, have purchase on the passage between the embodied experience of *Endless Tether* and its political implications regarding the double bind scenario that subtends the (veiled) Muslim body.

To begin with, the conflicting positionalities in which I find myself interpellated through the imaged body in this work depend primarily on moments of being touched by,
and hence sharing in—and other moments of being untouched by, and hence detached from—what unfolds in front of me. Such moments occur despite the fact that there is no distinct narrative structuring the piece. It is largely through the materialization of the struggles, or conversely, the harmony of the imaged bodies and the relations between them, that such identification processes are enabled.

In *The Time-Image, Cinema 2*, Deleuze develops the two poles of the body in cinema. For him, the body is not a material site to be known, but rather, a site of knowledge production in itself. Whereas thought has a predilection for reducing the ways in which we live and experience our bodies within specific categories, when it comes to the everyday pole of the body, thought is brought to life through the body’s attitudes and postures. The camera has the capacity to turn the body into a sort of time-image, in which the everyday body is never in the present moment, but rather manifests a transition between a before and an after.207

Certainly, bodily attitudes and postures are given tangible form in *Endless Tether*. For instance, my body relates to moments when Haq’s body resists, reluctantly striving to deal with the cloth being fed to her. These images speak to me of exhaustion, indexing the “before” of the lived body. When Haq pulls the cloth towards her, expressing eagerness, she signals anticipation and an attitude to which my body can also relate. And yet, there is a further movement beyond the temporality of this indecisive body with which I identify, to a body that begins to be encoded: a body that participates in generating the social space and the relations in which it circulates.

This second pole of the body in cinema is what Deleuze refers to as the ceremonial body. The ceremonial body exceeds postures and attitudes, extending to their...

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207 Ibid., 189.
social significations. Here we are at the level of gestures, or what Brecht called, in reference to the theatricality of the body, the “Geste,” meaning the social relations conveyed through bodily actions. Certainly, Brecht’s materialist aesthetics and his conviction that art must intervene and reflect the means by which social relations are produced is relevant to this discussion. Highly critical of bourgeois theater, Brecht believed that art should not seek to serve as an escape from, or mere representation of, the world. On the contrary, art should strive to expose and intervene in the social production of reality. Terry Eagleton’s description of Brecht’s “epic” theater applies equally to the staging of social relations at work in *Endless Tether*:

> The task of theatre is not to ‘reflect’ a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically produced, and so how they could have been, and still can be, different. The play therefore, becomes a model of that process of production; it is less a reflection of, than a reflection on, social reality.\(^{208}\)

Brecht stressed that such a reflection could be obtained at the level of identification, and specifically in the modes of identification that alienate characters from their roles and the audience from the actors. I want to emphasize that such mechanisms of identification open up a space of social and political reflection and critique, and ultimately, aim to generate something new. The ceremonial body operates at this level. It does not represent, but rather reflects, and even has the capacity to intervene into as well as produce social relations. In Donald Bogues’ words, ceremonial bodies do not so much “inhabit a coherent, continuous space as they generate a space around them.”\(^{209}\)


I will now return to the production of space through bodies and modes of identification that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter in relation to the politics of the Muslim veil in France. This production of space is reflected but also deflected in *Endless Tether*. The space of ritual or gathering produced by the ceremonial bodies in Haq’s work is productive precisely because of its indecisiveness. Indeed, Haq has stated that she uses her own body in her work in order to “choreograph [her] own rituals and imagine new spaces of congregation.”

The new inscriptions of intersubjectivity that *Endless Tether* engenders have to do precisely with the dislodging of social relations from fixed meaning. Conjoining with the perpetually shifting attitudes and postures of the bodies on the screens are unidentifiable social and cultural codes that subtend what unfolds. The legibility of the direction of the images’ movement is a powerful example of this. I argued in the previous chapter that the black cloth Haq uses in (un)covering to cover her body represented the tracing line of writing. The red cloth in *Endless Tether* can be read in similar terms: as the social codes that inscribe her body. In this work, however, the specificity of the social and cultural codes that the cloth embodies remains ambiguous. If the cloth is to be read as a form of writing—a tracing line—the direction of its movement throughout the first half of the piece (from left to right) represents Arabic, if not Islamic, conventions of writing and acts of reading. In this case, the red cloth could very well embody the idea of Muslim codes regarding sexuality, feminine values, and dress. Yet, even in this scenario, the staged intersubjective relation remains unclear. Haq’s body is evidently female and dark-skinned. However, the second figure’s characteristics are difficult to ascertain, and hence, so too are the power relations between them. Furthermore, in the second half of

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210 Farheen Haq quoted from the artist’s website. http://farheenhaq.com/about/.
the piece, the direction of movement shifts: the cloth begins to flow from right to left, calling to mind Western codes of written inscription and reading, and an alternate set of values regarding femininity, sexuality, and dress.

Even the choice of red cloth reflects the general ambivalence of meaning underscoring the work, insofar as this color conjures a range of conflicting emotions and references, from love and passion to violence and warfare. The installation piece therefore successfully blurs the specific cultural references with which the subject sometimes appears to struggle, and other times, to espouse eagerly. One is left with the indecisive body of a secular Muslim woman caught at the crossroads of her cultural and religious values and those of the hegemonic, secular, neoliberal society in which she lives. And yet, neither of these cultural references is attributed a definitely positive or negative connotation.

*Endless Tether* brings the relation between the bodies on the screen into focus, while hampering the viewing subject’s capacity to attribute a clear meaning to the relation. This is what allows the work to break away from identity politics that supports us/them, me/you constructs. Moreover, this is what creates a space that more accurately addresses the complicated web of identifications subtending the production of social spaces in pluralist societies.

Maalouf writes that he is often encouraged to affirm a double affiliation or hyphenated identity: “So, half-French and half-Lebanese? Not at all! Identity cannot be compartmentalized, divided in half, or in thirds, or into partitioned spaces.”211 Echoing this sentiment, the female body in *Endless Tether* refuses to make the choice that would

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clearly align the imaged body with the spatial mappings and politics of difference contained in the term *laïcité*. In his discussion of the creation of alternate community formations in contemporary art, art historian Jean-Ernest Joos argues for the crucial need to de-centre the workings of us/them constructs by generating spaces in which the inclusion of a possible third party in any dual relation, even if it takes the form of a momentary coming together within a space of circulation, always remains open. Endless Tether creates such a space, and I am that third party.

Decisively, *Endless Tether* provides a model of intersubjective encounters and of being-with, in which difference cannot be conceived as absolute or completely assimilable. The moments in *Endless Tether* in which I find myself untouched, and unable to relate or attribute meaning to what I see, are offset by other moments of identification with the attitudes of the body on the screen—to which I am indeed able to attribute my own meaning. These conflicting moments disable any attempt to position the body/subject on the screen as radically other. Instances when I relate to the body on the screen via haptic modes of perception—modes that do not align perception with a mastering, knowing position—the imaged body is embodied by me and yet remains unknowable. In these moments, otherness and ultimately, difference, is felt; it is given a presence but cannot be assimilated into my own experience, my self-image, or what I claim to know. Here we have a distinctly alternative politics of difference. It accommodates moments of continuity and identification with the other, while recognizing instances in which that body affirms the presence of a (cultural) difference impossible to translate into the terms and experiences of sameness.

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The Urban Veil’s Politics of Difference and the Democratic Struggles of Pluralist Societies

In this chapter I examined two artistic projects that I contend engage directly with the spatial operations and correlative modes of identification that are mapped by the principle of laïcité in France.

Hayet.djelali.org and Endless Tether productively intervene into the spatial mappings of laïcité, reflecting the central role that the imaged female body plays in the formation of collective identities, and deflecting the key role that visuality plays in securing those constructs. Through close readings of the two works, I developed an alternate model of a politics of difference that promotes protean forms of (dis)identification. I argue that these works reflect the inscriptions of intersubjective encounters that I have been aiming to articulate in relation to the characteristics of the image of the urban veil.

Both hayet.djelali.org and Endless Tether can be seen as directly responding to Mouffé’s contention that there is an urgent need to rethink notions of citizenship and formations of collective political identity in order to attend to the democratic struggles and projects of pluralist societies. These artworks do just that. Both works open up the model of difference that underscores the politics of representation of the Muslim veil, creating spaces where the struggles of the urban veil can be inscribed. Concurrently, they demonstrate how the urban veil, in all its multiplicity, alters the various spaces and modes of identification in which it circulates. Most productively, the intersubjective encounters staged in these two art works crucially circumvent multiculturalism’s dual limitations in its treatment of difference: its devouring and disavowing effects. The model of difference
proposed here moves instead toward the construction of a collective self, whereby the
singularity of difference arises from multiple, intersecting, and diverging points of
identification across a range of conceptual, physical, and virtual terrains.