

Of yarmulkes and categories: Delegating boundaries and the phenomenology of interactional expectation

Iddo Tavory

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Abstract Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this article delineates a process through which members of an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles unintentionally delegate boundary work and membership-identification to anonymous others in everyday life. Living in the midst of a non-Jewish world, orthodox men are often approached by others, both Jews and non-Jews, who categorize them as “religious Jews” based on external marks such as the yarmulke and attire. These interactions, varying from mundane interactions to anti-Semitic incidents, are then tacitly anticipated by members even when they are not attending to their “Jewishness”—when being a “Jew” is interactionally invisible. Through this case, I argue that, in addition to conceptualizing boundaries and identifications as either emerging in performance or institutionally given and stable, the study of boundaries should also chart the sites in which members anticipate categorization and the way these anticipations play out in everyday life.

This article deals with one process through which identification and boundary-formation are maintained in the everyday life of an Orthodox Hassidic group in Los Angeles.¹ Based on 22 months of participant observation, I chart the mundane ways in which donning the minimal mark of a religious Jew, the yarmulke, gives rise to interactions in which members are categorized as Jews by anonymous others in the street. These interactions, as I show, constitute and reproduce the everyday

¹For overviews of the literature on boundaries, see Lamont and Molnár (2002), Pachuki et al. (2007). See also the theoretizations of boundaries in Abbott (1995), Tilly (2004).

I. Tavory (✉)

Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Los Angeles, CA, USA
e-mail: iddotavory@ucla.edu

identification of men as “Jews” as distinct from the non-Jewish other. I divide this process into three phases. By donning the yarmulke, members provide a conspicuous interactional “hook,”² an interactional clue which others then treat as signaling the relevant membership category.³ These interactions, as I show, have a spectrum of their own: varying from other Jewish members using these signs to construct sociality or achieve pragmatic ends, to friendly categorizations by non-Jewish others, and the rarer anti-Semitic incidents which violently constitute the member as a “Jew.”

Members come to expect these everyday interactions. When such situations—including anti-Semitic incidents—occur, Orthodox Jews are neither surprised nor caught off guard. Through the last part of this boundary formation process, I argue that rather than thinking about boundaries and identifications as either institutionally constituted or only existing in performance, the conceptualization of boundaries and identification should take into account the usually invisible ways in which members incorporate the identifications and boundary-work performed by others,⁴ keeping self-categorizations on the “margins” of embodied consciousness (Gurwitsch 1985). More generally, through this case, I claim that a focus on members’ tacit expectations of boundary-forming interactions shifts the analysis from an emphasis on sites of performance to sites of expectation, simultaneously incorporating questions of potentiality and enlarging the scope of empirical analysis. The case of Hassidic Jews, then, exemplifies a process which may be far more generalizable—though not without changes—to other groups which use conspicuous signs of membership, as well as to interactions in which visible markers of “race” and gender are used.

Boundaries, identifications, and their expectation

Using the concept of “boundaries,” researchers have brought into contact questions of class and ethnicity, gender, and ethno-nationalism, as well as sociological themes previously subsumed under the study of “categorization.”⁵ Within these studies, and drawing on the seminal work of Barth, the question of boundaries has shifted from the study of stable categorizations and immutable identities to a delineation of the situations and contexts in which differences and categories of selfhood are evoked and wielded (Barth 1969).⁶ In ethnography, this theoretical prism has been particularly useful, drawing attention to the formation of differentiations between

² The metaphor of an interactional “hook” is taken from Goffman (1963a).

³ For the conceptualization of “membership category,” see Sacks (1979). In this article, I use “identification” rather than “Identity,” as the latter is a notoriously vague, as well as an overly static, concept (see Gleason 1983). To clarify, throughout the analysis below, I use identification to denote a recurring typification (see Schutz 1967) of the actor either by him or herself or by others. Such typifications are never really identical. They do, however, form a semantic field of similar practical categorizations, sharing a family resemblance of practical applications (Wittgenstein 1953).

⁴ The concept of “boundary-work” was developed, in the context of scientific work, in Gieryn (1983).

⁵ For studies of boundaries and class, see Lacy (2007), Lamont (1992, 2000), Lareau (2003), McDermott (2006). For the intersection of boundary-formation and gender identifications, see Harding (2007), Gerson and Peiss (1985). In the field of ethnicity and nationalism, see Barth (1969), Brubaker et al. (2004, 2006), Wimmer (2008). Lastly, for prominent works dealing with boundary categorizations in science and cognition, see Bowker and Starr (1999), Zerubavel (1991).

⁶ For Barth, however, though ethnicity is a shifting category based on a system of fluctuating differences, the importance of “the ethnic” goes uncontested. Ethnic identifications may shift, but ethnicity remains crucial.

in-group and out-group, the boundary-work which simultaneously constitutes self identification (See Anderson 1990; Lacy 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Small 2004).

These studies have pointed to two, interrelated, processes. First, many researchers analyze boundaries and identifications from the vantage point of the institutionally congealed ways in which differences are manifested in consumption and taste.⁷ Interactional processes do not take center stage, as the final markers of boundary-work—the objectified outcomes in the form of differential consumption—are the object of analysis. In ethnography, where questions of process are almost inevitable, this institutional component was translated into an emphasis on institutional forms.⁸ Thus, communities are analyzed in terms of the ways in which members manage to contain all the essential interactional sites of social action, without necessitating contact with the out-group. To take two prominent studies which partly use such an analysis, Small shows how many Puerto Rican immigrants in “Villa Victoria” remain isolated exactly through having all they need in the immediate environment. In a more complex analysis, Brubaker et al show how limited contact between Romanians and Hungarians in Cluj is reproduced through affiliation with different churches and educational institutions (Small 2004; Brubaker et al. 2006). Without having to form boundaries in interaction, members of different “groups” remain separated, bounded by institutional barriers that may have nothing to do with any volition to remain distinct.

Simultaneously, a productive move within sociology in general, and in the study of boundaries in particular, has been a growing emphasis on performance and performativity. Rather than treating the self as a constant and immutable construct, more and more researchers have begun to ask in which situations are certain identifications performed, and how (See Butler 1990; Lacy 2007). Drawing on a plethora of theoretical sources, such as Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, ethnomethodology, and pragmatist philosophers’ emphasis on action, sociologists have effectively flipped the questions of selfhood and identity (Wittgenstein 1953; Garfinkel 1967). To paraphrase Goffman, the question changed from being that of “identities and their moments,” into the study of “moments and their identifications (Goffman 1967).”

The connection between the performative and institutional levels of analysis in ethnography, however, did not receive as much theoretical attention. Ethnographers dealing with this question seem to posit a kind of positive feedback between the levels, where the performative both creates and is reproduced by the institutional (Brubaker et al. 2006; Lacy 2007; Small 2004). The challenge in theorizing such a relationship is that the process of self-identification must include some account of constancies of identification between situations. Without such an assumption, we are reduced to what can be best described as a goldfish world, in which boundaries and selfhood must be re-discovered and re-enacted *ex nihilo* in specific institutional settings. In other words, by avoiding the immutable constancy of earlier theories of self, performative sociology—even when it takes institutional analysis into account—must scrutinize

⁷ For the by-now classic account of the relation between taste and class- and status-based distinctions, see Bourdieu (1984). See also Halle (1994), which bases his argument *against* Bourdieu on similar studies of congealed taste. More squarely in the Bourdieusian camp, though adding national and ethnic nuances, see Lamont (1992).

⁸ This institutional aspect of boundaries is perhaps best captured by the term “institutional completeness,” developed in Breton (1964).

the invisible sites of constancy in which identifications are retained without being performed, the analysis of “potential” identifications.

In fact, however, the assumption of such potentiality permeates the sociology of boundaries and of self, usually relegated to the Bourdieusian term “habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1990, 1998).” This term accounts precisely for potentiality, a class and status defined space of “durable transposable dispositions... inscribed in objective potentialities,” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53) which operates even when empirically invisible.⁹ Yet this term is also the most cryptic of Bourdieu’s analytic toolkit (Alexander 1995; de Certeau 1984; DiMaggio 1979). Bourdieu seems to use the term slightly differently in different places, treating it as a stance towards time (Bourdieu 1998), a “feel for the game,” (Bourdieu 1990) and a “socialized subjectivity.” Tying these conceptualizations is a depiction of the habitus as a relatively coherent set of acquired and socially located apperceptions, appresentations, and actions.¹⁰ The actor is seen as incorporating, usually in her early life, specific ways of seeing, experiencing and understanding that are ready-at-hand and reproduced in action.¹¹ However, the scope of the habitus, as a causal link, is extremely wide (Brubaker 1985; DiMaggio 1979)—practically taking over the theoretical role that “socialization” played in earlier accounts. The specific ways in which habitus is acquired and performed are left unclear, and the concept of habitus is usually used as a meta-theoretical assumption—an independent variable of action—rather than a dependent variable of action and perception.¹²

In order to tackle this question, and specify the kinds of micro-processes that a term such as “habitus” implies, I return to the phenomenology of everyday life, and especially to these parts which deal directly with the question of potential. Thus, Gurwitsch partitioned the act of embodied perception into three distinct parts, or gradations—theme, thematic field and margins of consciousness (Gurwitsch 1964). The first two of these gradations of perception can roughly be compared to the ideas of “figure” and “ground” in Gestalt psychology and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (Koffka 1935; Merleau-Ponty 2005).¹³ However, the third of these terms, what Gurwitsch calls “marginal consciousness,” pertains to these aspects of perception that are neither in the conscious foreground nor in the background, but rather remain on the “sidelines” of experience (Gurwitsch 1964, 1985). These margins of consciousness are precisely “a field of potentiality in that it founds the possibility of the subject dropping one theme and picking up another (Embree 1985).”

⁹ In Fact, Bourdieu (1990: 184) attacks Garfinkel’s sociology precisely on these terms, calling the ethnomethodological stance an “occasionalist illusion.”

¹⁰ For an explication of this phenomenologically-influenced theoretical language, see Husserl (1960), Merleau-Ponty (2005 [1945]).

¹¹ Michael Polanyi’s concept on the “tacit dimension” and his focus on embodied forms of knowledge are similar in many respects to Bourdieu’s notions of bodily hexis. See Polanyi (1983). As with Bourdieu, though the analysis below is not antithetical to Polanyi’s, I did not use his conceptualization of “tacit knowledge,” as it did not provide a process, but rather a more general emphasis on learning and habit. It is, in fact, far less specified than Bourdieu’s position-specific habitus.

¹² However, see Wacquant (2004) for an account of the production of embodied habitus in boxing.

¹³ Although Gurwitsch builds on Gestalt theory, the addition of “margins” of consciousness corrects a crucial weakness. As Gurwitsch shows, the Gestalt theorists’ dichotomy of perception and memory into “foreground” and “background” may actually hinder analysis in certain situations—such as those presented in this article. The question Gurwitsch addresses by using “marginal consciousness” is not how we shift our attention to *different aspects* of a stimulus, but how we move from *no experienced attention*, to it becoming the theme of our consciousness.

However, changing conceptualizations does very little in the way of answering the problem—much like Bourdieu’s habitus, Gurwitsch’s philosophical apparatus for the phenomenology of potential does not lend itself easily to the empirical. Put differently, we encounter the same problem: how can the sociologist observe what is, in its very essence, invisible? To partly answer this question, I return to a basic interactionist insight—that consciousness should not be analyzed only as an embodied field of solitary practice, but as it is embedded in interaction.¹⁴ As such, rather than delineating the latent ways in which the subject categorizes herself or is categorized by others, we should ask in which ways do subjects come to consciously or subconsciously expect a certain interactional unfolding of the situation, how shifts between theme and margin occur in interaction. Paying attention to the ways subjects react to categorization in interaction—both by others who occupy the same membership categorizations (Sacks 1979), and by those who are members of “the other side” of the boundary—provides a way to glimpse the working out of potential, the margins of embodied consciousness.¹⁵

Lastly, thinking about interaction also means—as many have argued (Brubaker et al. 2006; Fannon 1967; Goffman 1963a; Sartre 1948)—that a useful way of thinking about at least certain kinds of boundary formation and identification processes is in the interaction between members of different group categories, treating identification as “a language of relationships, not attributes (Goffman 1963a, p. 3).” Much like the gendered or racialized self, or like Althusser’s citizen of the state,¹⁶ the subject is constituted in interaction with the other. Thus, rather than looking at the ways identifications are “held” in some abstract way, potentiality is revealed in interactions with others, interactions in which members tacitly come to expect they will be “reconstituted” in specific ways.¹⁷

Settings and methods—Orthodox life in an LA neighborhood

The community studied here is a Jewish Orthodox group in Los Angeles, living in a relatively prosperous upper-middle class neighborhood on the border of Hollywood. Though extremely visible, Orthodox Jews comprise only about fifteen to twenty

¹⁴ For classical formulations of this basic pragmatist-interactionist insight, see Mead (1934), Blumer (1969). For a similar approach in the sociology of emotions, see Katz (1999).

¹⁵ This potential identification, however, is not stable. If it were the case, we would be returning through a phenomenological detour to an identity-theory in which a single identification is coherently present in all situations. Instead, this phenomenological formulation changes the performative question, treating marginal consciousness itself as a fluctuating feature of certain sets of action-sites. Though this is beyond the scope of this paper, a productive question is, then: in which sites of action are certain identifications held at the margins of consciousness? And, relatedly, what are the different situational mechanisms that reconstitute them as theme?

¹⁶ See Althusser (1971), Barnes (2000), Butler (1990), Foucault (1978), Gardner (1995).

¹⁷ Another conceptualization that describes a similar process of identification in expected interaction is DuBois’ “double consciousness.” Indeed, much like Althusser’s “Interpellation,” DuBois’ “double consciousness” presents an extreme case of the generalized process I describe below. However, for DuBois, the double consciousness includes an inner, true self, and the self as the Black American knows she will be seen by others, and especially the “White Other.” Though this describes an important case—which I revisit in the discussion—I depart from the theoretical implications of the term in two important ways. First, in that I do not differentiate a-priori between “true” and “false” positions of consciousness, and; secondly, in that I show that this recognition and interaction with others is not always violent or unwanted. The violence and humiliation implied by “double consciousness” thus represents one pole in a spectrum of identifications in interaction. See DuBois (2007 [1903]), Gilroy (1993).

percent of the neighborhood.¹⁸ Moreover, as Katz et al show, the area is populated by at least two other visible groups—Russian immigrants, and young performance artists trying to succeed in the Los Angeles’ entertainment industry (Katz et al. (2009) *Six Hollywoods Ethnographic Project*, unpublished manuscript). Thus, rather than being segregated and isolated as in some areas of New York and Israel,¹⁹ Orthodox Jews share the public space with non-Orthodox residents and visitors. In the following analysis I draw mainly on observations made in the Chabad community—considered one of the biggest Hassidic groups in the USA today (Fishkoff 2005; Mintz 1992), and one of the larger Jewish Orthodox sub-groups in the neighborhood.²⁰

This article is primarily based on ethnographic data collected through 22 months of participant observation. Additionally, I draw on 12 interviews. I observed and participated alongside synagogue members at their daily prayers, Saturday prayers, holidays and communal events in three synagogues for 22 months between 2005 and 2007. I observed and participated in more than 300 such meetings during the same period, and attended all holidays as well as joining members for meals, and informal conversations. I also participated in smaller study sessions, both at the local Yeshiva, in the houses of members, and at another synagogue. I lived in the area for 13 months, taking part in the same routines members lived by. I introduced myself as a researcher to synagogue members in the beginning of the project, and periodically during the study, and sought permission to study them, to which members all assented, with the exception of a few members who assented to my observations, but asked me not to write about them specifically. I also explained that though my study focuses on the maintenance of Jewish religious life in Los Angeles and its history, my research topics are open ended. Though not religious, as I am both Jewish and Israeli, members took me in, invited me to meals and events, sometimes consulting with me on the meanings of Hebrew terms, and hoping I will become more religious as a result of my involvement in the community.²¹

¹⁸ Hassidic Jews in the neighborhood are conspicuous, in part, because of Los Angeles’ tight zoning regulations. Although families live on the tertiary streets of the neighborhood, both synagogues and educational institutes must be located on the main streets, making their presence in the community seem more prominent than is actually the case. Numbers and percentages of Orthodox Jews in the neighborhood are extrapolated from the 2000 US census. As the census does not ask directly about religion, percentages were gauged by looking at the percent of white population in the neighborhood with five people or more sharing the household. This is a rough approximation, based on the large family size of Orthodox Jews. Families where children have already left the household are offset by the fact that at least some of the families captured by this measure are non-Jewish Orthodox.

¹⁹ See Levy (1988), Poll (1962).

²⁰ No reliable census data exists for the size of the Chabad movement, neither in Los Angeles nor elsewhere. Fishkoff (2005) quotes 200,000 worldwide as a likely figure. This is based on estimates presented by Chabad itself, and seems inflated even to Chabad members in the field. Though any estimate is largely conjectural, in the USA, of about 5.2 Million Jews, 9.3% of the Jewish population consider themselves Orthodox. According to interlocutors’ estimates, about 10% of Orthodox Jews are Chabad Hassids, which places the movement at 50,000 members—slightly less than one percent of the Jewish population in the United States. There are about 200 Chabad families in the neighborhood, or about 1,000 members, as well as about 200 students in the Yeshiva, who are mainly out-of-state students.

²¹ My religious position, especially in Israel, where non-religious often means anti-religious, was also cause for some suspicion on part of some members. However, most members were more curious than suspicious. Growing up in a well known mixed Orthodox-Secular neighborhood in Jerusalem, members were intrigued at how I managed to grow in the holiest of places without any religious education—this was especially the case of one member who, as we found out, grew up in the same neighborhood as I did, on a parallel street.

After meetings and prayers I wrote field notes, with the exception of Saturday meetings, for which I took notes after the Saturday, as taking notes would constitute work, and would comprise a breach of trust of members' religious practices. Where I was able to jot notes during meetings, I immediately afterward expanded them into complete fieldnote sets.²² All names of local institutions in the neighborhood as well as individuals' names were changed. Additionally, some members read and commented on drafts of this and other papers written through the project, both asking me to nuance the analysis, and offering invaluable advice and additional observations.²³

Interviewees were approached through a convenience sample, through contacts and friendships fostered in the course of participant observation. Interviews were designed to find similarities and differences in the patterning of historical narrative and current position in the community, as well as routines of everyday life in the neighborhood—including shopping, schooling of children, and synagogue life. In interviews, I asked first for a biographical account, designed to chart the ways in which the subjects narrate and make sense of their past, and moved on to questions concerning their daily lives and experiences—attempting to see whether and how interviewees understand their present in the community through their understanding of their past. I then asked members about the education of their children, about daily routines in the neighborhood, about their work and about synagogue life—one of the main sites of sociality within the Jewish Orthodox neighborhood.²⁴ Additional topics were brought up by interviewees. Interviews were conducted in English and Hebrew and lasted between an hour and four hours.

These observations and interviews resulted in over 1,000 single spaced pages of notes and transcripts, which were then analyzed through the heuristic methods proposed by the “grounded theory” approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). After the question of everyday interactions with anonymous “others” emerged as a large sub-set of observations in the field, I went on to further categorize and theorize the data, based on a continual process of “internal falsification” of possible explanations.²⁵ As I did not specifically cover the interactions I described below in interviews, I went back and specifically asked a number of interviewees and other members if they had similar experiences to those I had witnessed.

Throughout this article I also draw on interactions in which I was the object. I do this not because I propose an auto-ethnographic method,²⁶ but for the following two reasons. First, as these interactions were with “anonymous” others, I was targeted for interaction as a “religious Jew,” not as an ethnographer. In these examples, the focus of analysis is the other interactant, not me. Secondly, non-violent interactions with others in the street were set in motion in accordance to generalized rules of deference. As Anderson shows (Anderson 2004), interaction with strangers—especially crossing religious, class and ethnic lines—almost always occurs when one shares the same generalized project with others, as when two people are waiting for the bus or shopping in the market. When the member is already engaged in

²² On fieldnote writing, see Emerson et al. (1995).

²³ For the feedback and challenges in sharing ethnographic work with members of the field, see Duneier (1999).

²⁴ See Heilman (1976) for an ethnography of sociality in a Jewish Modern-Orthodox synagogue.

²⁵ For the definition of internal falsification, see Timmermans and Tavory (2007).

²⁶ See Ellis (1995).

interaction (as when she is walking with a friend), there is very little “space of entry” for the other to enter the interaction.

Finally, a large part of the analysis below is predicated on the claim that members are *not* thematically aware of certain facets of their clothing and identifications in their everyday life. Claiming that members are *not* attending to something is, of course, empirically challenging—especially when this “something” is as conspicuous as clothing items that are intentionally put on in the beginning of the day. I allow myself to make this claim not only because I have often completely forgotten I wore this attire, but because members all claim that they do. Indeed, as I show in the analysis below, members were sometimes quite annoyed when others “remind” them of these dis-attended aspects.

Becoming a “Jew”: on dis-attended signs

Being an Orthodox Jew,²⁷ the member is born into, or later enters, a world of signs. Even those considered less observant by the community will post certain signs of belonging on their body, on their doorframe, in their house. Of these signs of belonging, I focus here on those signs that men wear on their bodies—the black Hassidic garments, the beard, the yarmulke.²⁸ Like other uniforms that signify occupational status—such as the priests’ collar, the policeperson’s uniform or the Amish man’s clothes²⁹—the Hassidic dress provides men with a clear sign of ethno-religious belonging. For members there are many gradations of dress and attire, signifying degrees of observance and membership in a specific Orthodox sub-group—a round hat means something different than a flat one, a shaggy beard is different than a well trimmed one (Levy 1988).

And yet, beyond this dizzying array of gradations and differentiations known to members, wearing even the most minimal sign of belonging, the yarmulke, members are recognized and categorized by both members and non-members as Jewish, and somewhat observant. The yarmulke, as a sign, can be seen as a mediating category between signs “given” and those “given off (See Goffman 1959).” Though it has specific meanings known to the wearers—or at least to adults, as the yarmulke is worn by boys since they are three years old—it is usually worn as a matter of habit, without thinking of its symbolic meanings. In fact, men in the Hassidic community sleep with their yarmulkes on, taking them off only when they go into the shower. This habitual aspect of the action of “putting signs on,” or rather “keeping them on,” indicates that conscious volition is not a sufficient category through which to think

²⁷ The category of “Orthodox Jew” is used here as a nominal, not necessarily an experiential, category (see Brubaker et al. 2006).

²⁸ I focus on men, rather than women, as the signs of belonging coded in dress are more visible for this category. While there is a dress code for women—long skirts, long sleeve shirts, and a head cover or wig for married women—it is harder to immediately recognize. The Black dress and wide brimmed hat which Chabad-affiliated (and other Orthodox Jewish) men wear are not religiously prescribed, but are remnants of 18th century non-Jewish Polish fashion, with the “Borsalino” hat being the kind worn by the 7th Rebbe of Chabad, Menahem Mendel Schneerson (see Heilman 1993; Levy 1988). The yarmulke itself is not a Torah edict, but dates back to the early middle ages, and only lightly touched upon in Talmudic law as a sign of extra-piety (Kidushin 31a; Shabbos 156b).

²⁹ For a discussion of signs in Fashion and uniforms, see Davis (1992); Joseph (1986).

of the signification and interactions entered when donning of the yarmulke. When asked if they think about their dress and yarmulke, or attend to its signification on an everyday basis, most members told me that though in certain events and occasions they are acutely aware of it, it is usually worn non-reflexively, as a matter of habit.³⁰

And yet, there is a specific interactional effect created when members wear a yarmulke, an effect that can be termed a “diffused intentionality.” Without initiating interaction, or even being thematically aware of it, the yarmulke provides a space for interaction in its automatic denotation of Jewishness for a general audience, posited for all who can see. Thus, for example, entering the community, one poignant moment of transformation as an ethnographer, donning the yarmulke for the first time, was the ways in which I became both visible and invisible. Walking on the main streets, non-Jewish women would take special care to “not look” at me, extending civil inattention to its utmost (Goffman 1963b). On the other hand, members are visible in ways they weren’t before. People in bus stops approached me every now and then to ask me “if it is true that Jews believe that...,” and bearded Orthodox Jews wearing their earlocks and black hats, suddenly noticed my existence, sometimes nodding, returning nods they had previously usually ignored.

Thus, though in most cases members dis-attend their clothing in everyday life, wearing the yarmulke—and of course the full Hassidic garb—is a constant resource for interaction on the part of others, an interactional hook marking the wearer. With the yarmulke, members become Jews whether they seek interaction or try to avoid it, whether actually “doing-being Jewish” or engaged in other activities, where Jewishness is far from the relevant facet of self. In what follows I distinguish three different sub-sets of situations where such signs provoke other-initiated identifications: interactions with Orthodox and “other” Jews, everyday interactions with non-Jewish others, and the more disturbing interactions with non-Jews—anti-Semitic incidents. Two common elements unite these interactions: first, they were all initiated by anonymous others, using the yarmulke as a resource for interaction. Secondly, in each the wearer is re-constituted as a “Jew.”

“The fellow Jew”—categorizations of co-membership

The first sub-set of these interactions, which usually occurred in the neighborhood, was initiated by other Jews. Most often these interactions are barely visible—a nod on the street and in the bus station from other religious Jews, the words “good Shabbas” uttered quietly when passing across another yarmulke-wearer on a Saturday. But sometimes these interactions were more elaborate, spelling out the assumptions underlying the more fleeting interactions:

As I am walking outside Ralph’s, I am stopped by a woman wearing a *Sheitel* (wig worn by married Orthodox women) and a long black skirt. “Excuse me, do you know when candle lighting is today?” she asks. I am not sure, but say I

³⁰ The members who said they were usually aware of the yarmulke, were those who only recently donned these signs for the first time, following a process of becoming more religious. As another interlocutor told me about donning the yarmulke, “In the beginning I was feeling for it and thinking about it all the time, but after a while... you just go on autopilot.”

think it is 6:55. The woman looks at her watch and gives a little smile “13 min to get home, ah?” I say we should probably start walking fast, and she laughs.

By constituting me as a “religious Jew,” I instantaneously became a pragmatic resource. Wearing a yarmulke denoted not only that I was a “Jew” in the abstract, but that I should own a specialized body of knowledge. With candle-lighting times changing every week, I am assumed to be up to date, a part of the same moral community which holds similar things important, worth knowing. Additionally, by saying that we only have a few minutes to get home, the woman does not only construct a moral community, but also exerts moral pressure. Even if I didn’t mean to rush back home, I would need to now, having been reminded of the generalized obligations “we” have. At the very same time, by responding to her interaction overture, any adequate response elicits a community *in situ*. Providing the candle lighting times, or even a weak approximation of it, serves to solidify not only the assumption of a general “Jewishness,” but the commonality of a shared project, a “we” that wasn’t explicitly worked out prior to the interaction.

The ways in which the yarmulke allows the other to construct commonalities in the process of achieving particular pragmatic ends can also be seen in the very different case below:

I walk down the street in Westwood when a homeless man asks me for money. I ignore him and continue walking, barely noticing his call. He calls after me, loudly, “Zedaka” (Hebrew for “alms”). I stop and look back. He starts talking to me, he went to a synagogue early in the morning and people wouldn’t give him money “I am wax poor, I told them,” but still, they wouldn’t budge. “Some people just become rabbis for the money, they aren’t good Jews” he tells me. I say I am sorry. In my synagogue people usually give alms. “Really? Where is it?” I realize I might have just brought a new beggar to shul, and try to weasel my way out of it. “We start really early...”

When by approaching me as an anonymous passer-by he does not get the kind of reaction he hopes for, the panhandler shifts his own frame of reference, the membership category, and uses the Hebrew word “Zedaka.” By actualizing this shift, he is signaling three interrelated things: first, that he knows exactly “what” I am; secondly, that perhaps he himself is a fellow Jew. But most effectively, from a diffused begging, where I was another person walking down the streets and who was morally entitled to ignore his call, the request is shifted to a personalized, moral, demand. Implicit in his shouting of “Zedaka” is a moral imperative—as “Zedaka” is not only the Hebrew translation of the word “charity” or “alms,” but a “Mitzvah”, a religiously proscribed deed of charity. This personalized demand lifts the “Jew,” as it were, from the status of an anonymous person on the street, to a member of the same group he himself belongs to—someone who will not only give him money, but may also listen and sympathize with his complaints about different synagogues, other clubs where “our” members meet.

This moral identification, though used here as a way in which commonality is assumed, re-constituted and manipulated, can also place the wearer of the yarmulke as a moral superior in interaction. Thus, in certain situations, not only is a commonality called forth, but along with it, a stratification of members—a system of

internal distinctions. Thus, in the next excerpt, I was walking by Green's, the non-Kosher hot-dog venue next to "Chibat Yacov" synagogue, smoking a cigarette, when a young man who was waiting in line approached me:

"Do you have a cigarette?" he asks me in Hebrew. I say I do, and hand him one. "I don't eat here, really, I don't. I am here with a friend. I wouldn't eat here," he says. Surprised, I try to laugh it off, saying that I think the owner of the place is himself Jewish. He doesn't respond to the joke. "No, really, I don't eat here." He points to another young man with a pony-tail, standing in line, who is watching us and laughing. "He eats here. I wouldn't. Really..."

Wanting a cigarette, and seeing my yarmulke, the man takes his chances. But when entering the interaction, he uses the yarmulke to constitute me not only as a Jew, but also as a moral entity. Wearing the yarmulke, his interlocutor is not only Jewish, but religious, and thus someone who might frown at his standing in line for non-kosher meat. Entering interaction, he thus frames himself as "Jewish," and enters into an un-elicited series of self justifications. The yarmulke not only affords him with a means to constitute the other as a Jew, but also—in entering interaction, and perhaps in the very act of perception—to constitute himself as a fellow Jew, though a morally dubious one.

Interactions with non-members—friendly identifications as "other"

This constitution of the yarmulke-wearer as Jewish in the eyes of others was not limited to "fellow Jews." Sharing the space with a host of non-Jewish others, in many interactions non-Jews asked me and others questions pertaining to Judaism, or simply used the category of "Jew" as a relevant membership category. Thus, for example, within the space of two days I have had the following—friendly—non-Jewish reminders of identification:

Monday: Boarding the bus, there is a drunken man, seems to be in his forties, sitting in the front of the bus, taking swigs from a bottle of cherry wine. "Are you Jewish?" he asks as I stand next to him. I nod. "I knew you were Jewish," he observes. **Tuesday:** Again, waiting for the bus, a woman standing next to me smiles "Are you Jewish?"

These are all friendly encounters. The comments weren't made to offend, but to strike up a conversation, to enter a space of sociability. And yet, within each of these encounters, the yarmulke wearer is reminded that he is—first and foremost—a Jew. Through the act of naming, the other re-constitutes the subject—here the Orthodox Jew—and crystallizes his identity even in instances where the thematic focus of performance is very different. In these everyday street encounters, then, wearing the yarmulke affords others with the possibility of constituting the subject. It is a perceptual resource that can be used to achieve different ends—from civility rituals to an attempt to get some money. Yet each overture uses a distinctive grammar, that of making the subject "interactionally Jewish."

Those kinds of interactions were widely reported by all the members in the community with whom I have spoken. In fact, they are so much a part of everyday

life that no one told me of them until I asked if these interactions happened to them as well. One rabbi told me that a homeless guy just approached him “the other day” to ask “what Jews believe in.” I asked him how he replied, and he said that he usually tries to be polite, “explaining a little about Judaism.” Others, however, found these interactions tedious. Thus, one interlocutor said that it seems the only people who refer to him as “rabbi” are non-Jews on the streets who assume that any person with Hassidic clothing and a long beard must be a religious authority.

These categorizations performed by non-Jews may also stand in stark contrast to the position of members in the community. Thus, the next excerpt is the account of a member who turned religious not long ago, and as such has relatively little knowledge of religious law and practice. Within the community, other synagogue members knew it, and sometimes made sure to remind him of his novice position. However, in interactions with non-Jews he was often constituted as a religious authority. When I asked him if non-Jews interact with him as a Jew, he gave the following account:

“It happens a lot, mainly when I go shopping,” he says. He had two such incidents last week, in the large department store he shops in. In one incident, someone in the shop asked him what kind of vegetables to put in a kosher sandwich. He was really happy he could answer them. On the other occasion, however, somebody asked him if an oven was or wasn’t kosher. He looked, and it didn’t say anything about being kosher so he couldn’t really tell. “They always call me rabbi, and ask questions. But I am not a rabbi, not close. Maybe my sons will be, if they want. They can be anything they want to be, but not me. I still try to answer them, but a lot of times I can’t.”

Thus, there is often an extra-layer within these interactions—where the non-Jew constitutes the member as a religious authority and the member finds it hard to deliver the interactional goods. In these instances, though the member may try to interact as expected of him, he is also faced with his own position in the group. Especially in a community in which knowledge of religious law is highly regarded, there was a wide gap between what the non-Jew expected of him and what he felt he could deliver. In this sense, these interactions may have a transcendent facet, hidden in interaction, where the member is both constituted as a Jew and must come to terms with his inferior position in the very group he was constituted into. After actually trying to answer the religious questions posited to him (an attempt he would not perform within the community) he must then correct the non-Jewish other.

Additionally, though members do not usually attend to the possibility of non-Jews using the yarmulke or garments as membership categorization devices, when either their “Jewishness” or other aspects of their performance are specifically scrutinized, they sometimes re-attend to these aspects. Thus, for example, in the next excerpt, when talking of a documentary film about Chabad Hassidism in Los Angeles, in which a couple of members were asked to participate, the husband told me and his wife:

“You know, I was thinking of shaving off my beard, taking off the yarmulke, and wearing Jeans for the filming, then I’d say ‘didn’t you know? This is how Hassids look....’” Less amused, his wife curtly replied, “No you don’t! You

are going to wear your clothes, and you are going to be the best Hassidic guy ever.”

When the situation requires him to attend to his Jewishness, to his membership categorization, the first things he comments on are the signs of Jewishness he wears. Constructing a scenario in which he will be Hassidic, minus the signs of membership, he de-exoticizes himself by playing with the possibility of being Orthodox without these external identification clues—without which he becomes, suddenly, quite mundane, not “the best Hassidic guy ever.”

Even when it is actually questionable if others are attending to the yarmulke or other such signs, when members feel scrutinized, these signs of categorization become the first things attended to:

Sitting at dinner at Jonathan’s, he tells me and his family of an interrogation he had at work. There was a case of fraud somewhere in the finance firm he works in, and as he occupies a central managerial position, he was asked to answer some questions posed by investigators from the central headquarters of the company. As he is telling of the long interrogation he just went through, he says “though there was nothing I did wrong, I wasn’t even in the firm at the time, I kept feeling like I had to look good, being a Jew, and looking like I do.”

What is telling about this narrative is the way in which the interrogation is transformed within the account. The theme of the interrogation had nothing to do with “Jewishness,” and the same man told me on other occasions that when at work he very rarely feels “Jewish,” but is rather engrossed in his work and fellow co-workers, who had also become some of his best friends. And yet, when he is interrogated, the signs of Jewishness suddenly take on a central meaning. The scrutiny of his conduct and person becomes, in his experience, or at least in its narration, an interrogation of a “Jew,” who then must perform as best he can—as any suspicion of his person becomes a suspicion of “Jews.”

Symbolic violence: anti-Semitic incidents

Lastly, some interactions are not always as friendly as those described above. In rare instances, the constitution of members as “Jews” takes the shape of anti-Semitic remarks and episodes:

I walk down Melrose with Joe. We just got some tea at a kosher café, and are walking back. As we are walking down the street, a guy peeks out of one of the cars going east, he lifts the black Halloween mask he is wearing, shouts “Jews” and gives us the finger as the car zooms off. I am completely shocked. “Did he say ‘you’?” I ask Joe. He laughs, “Jews.” Joe sees my expression, and remarks “what, were you never called a kike before? It happens... usually on holidays, when people drink and lose their inhibitions.” I ask him if it happens a lot, “Not a lot, a few times a year, on the main streets. La Brea, Melrose. They never stop. Cowards... you just ignore them.”

Unpacking this interaction, as we were walking down Melrose neither of us were thematically performing a Jewish identification, though wearing “Jewish” attire, we

weren't attending to it as meaningful in the interaction between us. However when the rider shouted "Jews!" I was violently thrown from one performative identification to another, instantaneously becoming "a Jew" whether I liked it or not. More telling than my own reaction, however, was Joe's nonchalant acceptance of the incident. Sociologically, this non-reaction is mysterious. If identity and selfhood are always constituted in action, he should have been thrown off. In the conversation that preceded the slur, he was not "doing-being" a Jew. Rather, he was talking about politics—if anything, he was doing-being a Republican. Yet, not only was he not surprised, but he also took it upon himself to elucidate any vagueness—the man did not say "You" but "Jews." It is here that the marginal consciousness of Jewishness is made manifest. According to his own account, the reason he was not surprised is that these things happen—they are expected. Knowing that these episodes may occur, he anticipates them even when not thematically focusing on the aspects of self relevant for their framing.

Though not the theme of performance, "Jewishness" it is still available enough to allow members to effortlessly appraise the situation. In this sense, when walking on the crowded streets shared with non-Jews in the neighborhood, Jewishness is constantly held in the margins of embodied consciousness, forming a facet of an everyday stroll down the street, even when it is not attended to. To return to the more theoretical terms presented in the introduction, this non-surprise points towards the limits of a purely Pragmatist-interactional analysis in which identity and self are constituted only when performed in action. Such analyses, purposely eschewing questions of "potential," do not account for such spaces in which potentiality is revealed through the instantaneous shift in self identification.³¹

These incidents are also a place where a folk-sociology of the non-Jewish other is formulated. In an attempt to come to terms with these incidents, Joe produces a double folk-sociology of motives: "It happens, usually on holidays, when people drink and lose their inhibitions." First, the anti-Semitic incidents are coherently posted on a calendar—these things happen at certain times of the year, periods in which, perhaps, one should be more careful. But secondly, in this folk-sociological formulation, the non-Jewish other is inherently perceived as anti-Semitic. These episodes occur on holidays not because there are different people roaming down Melrose in their cars, but because the same people, having drunk, "lose their inhibitions." Always an anti-Semite, alcohol unfetters and makes visible the gentile's true face.

When I asked other members of synagogues if such episodes occurred to them as well, I was assured they did—though some synagogue members told me it often happened, and others less so. Across the board, however, my interlocutors, telling me of these incidents, said they were not surprised when these incidents occurred. They were sometimes frightened, as a friend of mine was when approached by a group of young men who screamed "Heil Hitler"; members were often angry, some of them hollering back slurs at the anti-Semites; they sometimes tried to educate them, but they were not surprised.

³¹ The differences between Joe's reaction and my own result, in part, with the fact that I have grown up as a secular Jew in Israel, and was thus habituated to be doubly "invisible"—both as a Jew in a mostly Jewish state, and as an "unmarked" secular Jew. Though this difference is telling, I don't further analyze it, as this would involve a more auto-ethnographic standpoint than I take here (see Ellis 1995).

The tacit expectation of such incidents does not only mean that members re-orient effortlessly when encountering such instances, substituting margins for theme, but also that vague incidents are interpreted as anti-Semitic. Thus, when it is either unclear what aspect of self is being stigmatized, or when a vague perceptual cue is afforded by a passer-by, members often interpret it as anti-Semitic:

Jonathan, Dov-Ber and I are walking back from synagogue. They are both wearing a Hassidic garb. I am wearing a black jacket and yarmulke. As we cross one of the quiet residential streets, taking our time and talking about Jonathan's trip abroad, a car goes by, honks, and the driver shouts at us "This is Jaywalking!" Dov-Ber turns to Jonathan. "Did he say Jews?" Jonathan, shakes his head, "'Jaywalkers', we **were** walking in the middle of the road..." Dov-Ber laughs. "Oh, Jaywalkers..."

Unsure what the driver actually said, Dov-Ber reaches to the ready-at-hand interpretation of the incident. The situation in which three people walking down the street are shouted at by a passerby is automatically translated into an anti-Semitic incident directed against three "Jews." When the anonymous other shouts at him, the immediate assumption is that the attention is centered upon our "Jewishness." Similarly, when I was talking with one member about anti-Semitic incidents in the neighborhood, his wife, sitting on the sofa on the other side of the room, added her own account of anti-Semitism:

"It happened to me only once, a few years ago, at Ralph's." I ask her what happened. She was walking with her children when a man came up to her "you only know how to reproduce, don't you?" he muttered. Telling it even now, years later, she gets visibly upset, slightly reddening. "They weren't even misbehaving. Not that it matters, and he just came and said it... the way he said it, it was really nasty. But I let him have it, Shlomo heard me shout at the guy all the way from the other side of the store. He didn't expect it, started to mumble that he is sorry."

Like the incident above, one can raise questions as to whether the incident was actually "anti-Semitic." Commenting on her large number of children, the man's remark is disparaging, but not necessarily anti-Semitic. It could, for example, be read as a sexist comment. Though it is plausible that the man actually was categorizing her as an Orthodox Jew, there are other options of interpretation—options that are not available in the anti-Semitic incident at the beginning of this section. Yet, in her narrative she constructs it as anti-Semitic, adding that though the content of the remark may be ambiguous its tone was not. Not used to these incidents, she still tries, in her narrative account, to dispel the "reason" for the slur. The children "weren't even misbehaving," the slur was uncalled for, anti-Semitic.

In fact, the only incident I was told of or saw, in which anti-Semitism produced shock, was an incident in which Jewishness was supposedly invisible, where even marginally, the member wasn't expected to be identified:

I stand near the bus stop at La Brea and Wilshire. An elderly man, dressed in a black jacket, slacks, a cap and a cane, stands at the stop. As I walk around, smoking a cigarette, I hear shouts from the stop. I come closer and see an

apparently homeless woman, dressed in rags, shouting at the old man. “You are all going to hell”, “I was celibate for 27 years”, “you think you are so good, you Jews, but you will all go to hell”. I come closer. The woman continues to shout at the man. He shrinks back. Now and then he says “but what do you want from me?” I stand by the man, and the woman retreats, shouting a few more incoherent remarks. I ask the man what it was about, and he says “I don’t know what she wanted.” He seems distraught, keeps asking me, “why did she come and shout at me? Something must have happened to her...” “How did she know I am a Jew?!” I stand next to him as the woman returns and shouts, “I will put his picture on the wall, his naked picture,” “Shikzes (non-Jewish women) are good enough to have sex with, but aren’t good enough to marry,” “you think you know Torah, you don’t know Torah, you Jews.” Luckily, the bus comes, and we board it. The man looks at me, “maybe she had some kind of affair with a rabbi, and she is all mad? She is crazy, sick.” “But how did she know I am Jewish?” He is a holocaust survivor, he tells me on our bus ride, a camp survivor from Poland.

Similar to the first episode above, the reaction of the man, standing in the bus station, and finding himself the target of an anti-Semitic incident is to create a folk-psychology of the incident. The incident is not constructed as denoting a general anti-Semitic undertone of the non-Jewish society, as in the case of Joe, but calls for psychological analysis. And yet, what is striking is the re-iteration of the question “how did she know I am Jewish?” Without the visible perceptual clue of the yarmulke, covered by a baseball cap, the other is not supposed to be able to construct him as Jewish. It is noteworthy, in this respect, to lay out the explanatory possibilities he does not entertain—e.g., that the woman simply shouts anti-Semitic slurs at every passer by, whether they are visibly Jewish or not, and just “luckily” chanced to shout at a Jew. Rather, the question he asks is how he was “recognized,” shaken by the possibility (which becomes all the more troubling given his biography) that Judaism is somehow bodily inscribed and visible even when he does not hold the possibility of identification.³²

Discussion—interaction and its expectations

Taken together, these incidents delineate one set of processes through which the boundaries between Orthodox Jews and the non-Jewish other are constituted. The yarmulke and other signs of belonging are constant provocations of identification. And yet, their activation in interaction is complex. Of course, the yarmulke is worn in the beginning of the day, and in the wearing, one can argue, the Orthodox man takes care to signify boundaries and identification. Moreover, many of these physical markers—especially the earlocks worn by men—are religiously prescribed precisely in order that Jews mark themselves as different from those amongst whom they live. Yet, in everyday life, the yarmulke is often put unreflectively, as a matter of habit. It

³² Another possibility is that the woman categorized the old man as “Jew” based on his bodily features, and her own knowledge that there was a large Jewish community in the area. However, these possibilities—though logical—are purely speculative.

then becomes a “hook” used by anonymous others. In this sense, boundary-work is unintentionally delegated from members to the mundane other—enforcing the “Jewishness” of everyday identification.³³

Living in a community such as the Hassidic community means learning to tacitly expect these kinds of interactions. It is in this sense that being a Jew is not only something done at specific points of time. By tacitly expecting the nods of other Jews on the one side of the spectrum, and the possibility of an anti-Semitic slur on the other, the categorization of one as a Jew is formed on the margins of embodied consciousness—active without being interactionally attended to. Habitually having to reconstitute the self as “Jewish,” these instances lose their shock value. Simultaneously, such experiences begin to shape the folk-sociology and perceptions of others. Thus, these visible signs become building blocks from which both Jewish identification and the categorization of non-Jews are forged—ways in which “doing-being” Jewish is distributed across situations where the categorization of self as “Jewish” is not interactionally visible.

More generally, this case raises questions about the ways in which boundaries and identifications are held in everyday life. Though the yarmulke and the Hassidic attire are a special case—with all its idiosyncrasies of signs and membership categorizations—the boundary process presented is more general. Almost every identification category is demarcated by signs. But rather than seeing these signs as volitional denotations, this analysis points to a more complex account. Thus, when routinely placing signs—whether gender, occupational or ethnically specific—members dis-attend to these signs. Yet the signs then operate as place-holders, hooks for interaction. By wearing them, people “unintentionally delegate” the interactional work of boundaries and membership categorizations to others entering interaction with them. In this sense, signs crystallize identification beyond performance and institutional position—the interactional process of their re-constitution and their location in marginal consciousness cannot be reduced to either explicit performance or an institutional position occupied by the actors.

The effect of such signs has been analyzed in studies of stigmatization (Goffman 1963a; Davis 1961; Link and Phelan 2001). As such, it was analyzed as an unwarranted semiotic effect of appearance, and dealt with in relation to discrimination as well as in the literature on gendered, ethnic and racial “passing.”³⁴ Though questions of discrimination, stigmatization and passing are crucial—especially for signs that are not easily erased such as sex, age and skin color—more often than not, the interactional effect of signs is far more complex. Though the possibility of sexist, racial or ethnic violence is never sought, other interactions using the same categorization signs are welcomed. In such situations, signs allow people to continue inhabiting a certain membership category even when they dis-attend to it. Indeed, by far most of the street-interactions I described are friendly, initiated either by other Jews, who constitute a moral community through these mundane interactions, or by non-Jews who use the signs as a hook upon which friendly interaction may be “hung.”

Moreover, this view of categorization risks becoming overly passive. While it is true that in all the interactions described above members did not initiate their

³³ In this sense, the yarmulke may be conceived through Latour’s framework as an interactant, a non-human agent having power of its own to shape human interactions (Latour 2005). Put on, it influences, mediates and shapes interactions. In the network of relations constituting social life, it creates affordances for categorized interaction (here in a religio-ethnic sense).

³⁴ See Sanchez and Schlossberg (2001).

categorization but were categorized by others (or perceived themselves as categorized), it is also the case that members both posited these signs and were tacitly expecting these interactions. Again, this kind of expectation of interaction seems to be far from specific to the case of Hassidic Jews. As the literature on gender and race amply shows, members are very seldom surprised when constituted in interaction as “a woman,” as “black,” as “Muslim,” etc.³⁵ These tacit expectations, I argue, are important for understanding boundary formation processes, and more generally to studies of the constitution of identification and self. Rather than seeing identifications and boundaries as either institutionally given or only performed in interaction, an analysis of such tacit expectations stresses the role of “embodied margins of consciousness,” of the invisible sites of expectation which work to carry identification and boundaries of selfhood beyond performance.

Lastly, if the question of performativity is enriched by that of interactional boundary delegation and marginal consciousness of identification, further research can look at sites and processes that were hitherto scarcely explored. First, such studies could chart, in addition to the ways in which people learn to perform specific membership categories, the ways they learn to expect their identification and categorization by others—e.g., when and how do girls start expecting being constituted as sexual objects; when and how do African immigrants learn to expect everyday racism in the USA. In this capacity, a spectrum of such phenomena could be constructed, with friendly constitution of community in one end of the spectrum, and violent interpellations and the formation of what DuBois called a “double consciousness” on the other (See Althusser 1971; DuBois 2007[1903]).³⁶ Secondly, even after this expectation of interaction has been embodied, such studies could explore the specific sites of action in which such marginal consciousness is more (or less) embodied. Thus, adding this phenomenological layer to questions of religious, ethnicized, gendered, and racialized identifications can help develop a more nuanced account of the ways in which the lived reality of those signified identifications and boundaries are navigated in everyday life, with identifications assumed, forgotten, re-materialized in the acts of others, and tacitly expected.

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³⁵ For visibility of gender, see Butler (1990), Gardner (1995). For the visibility and recognition of race, see Anderson (1990), Barnes (2000), Fannon (1967). For Muslims in Europe, see Amiriaux and Jonker (2006).

³⁶ See also note 17 above.

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Iddo Tavory is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at UCLA, and editor of “*Dancing in a Thorn Field: The New Age in Israel*” (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2007). He is currently conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a Jewish Orthodox community in Los Angeles.