

Rhinestone aesthetics and religious essence:

Looking Jewish in Paris

A B S T R A C T

I explore the paradoxical construction of race through fashion among the Parisian children and grandchildren of upwardly mobile immigrant North African Jews. Faced with the conflation of North Africanity and inassimilable difference, Sephardi youth escaped some forms of French racism by enacting others. By essentializing and individualizing Jewishness through conspicuous consumption, they made Frenchness possible for “Arab Jews” in ways foreclosed to Arab Muslims. But these same practices also helped fashion and biologize their exclusion from the French nation. Rather than encourage the deconstruction of “modern” identity narratives, Sephardi youth liminality thus encouraged the reessentialization of class, ethnicity, religion, and nation. [*national identity, youth culture, minorities in Europe, race, Jewishness, France*]

On October 27, 2004, I attended a sixth-grade Jewish history class at a government-funded Jewish day school on the outskirts of Paris. As in most such day schools, the students were overwhelmingly the children and grandchildren of the approximately 55,000 Tunisian, 50,000 Moroccan, and (to a much lesser extent) 125,000 Algerian Jews who immigrated to France in the decades following French decolonization (Bensimon-Donath 1971:2; Laskier 1983:342; Taieb 1989:57). That morning, students were talking about anti-Semitism in France, envying my luck at coming from a place where Jews literally wore their identity on their sleeves. I thought they were confusing the United States with Crown Heights, in New York City, so I insisted that most U.S. Jews were not ultra-Orthodox and, therefore, were indistinguishable from non-Jews. “That isn’t true,” one of the girls shot back, “you can always tell if someone’s Jewish because of the *tête juive* (lit. Jewish head).” Her classmates overwhelmingly agreed.

Mrs. Amsallem,¹ the teacher, who had been half listening while preparing her lesson, suddenly entered the conversation. A self-identified Ashkenazi, or European, Jew, she angrily denounced as racist any attempt to link Jewishness to physical appearance, even when clothing provided the identifying marker. She banged on the table for silence and told the following story: Her son had gone with three or four Jewish friends to the Champs Élysées. One of those friends was wearing a Lacoste baseball cap. While walking down the street, her son and his friends passed a group of Jewish boys they did not know, and one of those “idiot Jews” beat up the kid in the baseball cap. “A Jew hit another Jew,” she shouted, “because of his hat!”

Mrs. Amsallem’s accusation of student racism is counterintuitive. In analytical terms, fashion and race point to diametrically opposed conceptions of identity. If fashion is consciously constructed and always ephemeral, race is presumed to be given and unchanging. But the two seem inextricably tied in the baseball-cap tale. How and why? How can one understand the relationship between student discussions of legible Jewish physiognomy and a story about fashion-driven intra-Jewish violence? What is

the connection between clothing and Jewishness in contemporary Paris? What might it suggest about how young Sephardim negotiate national and religious identities? And what might it imply about youth understandings of Jewish diaspora, including a Jewish future in France?

The beating of the boy in the Lacoste baseball cap provides a window onto the racializing practices of some Parisian Jewish adolescents. I argue that in contemporary France, where being “Maghrebin,” or North African, is associated with delinquency, poverty, and religious fanaticism, the children and grandchildren of North African Jewish immigrants escaped some forms of French racism by enacting others. Many objectified, essentialized, and individualized Jewishness through conspicuous consumption, thereby making Frenchness possible for young “Arab Jews” in ways foreclosed to Arab Muslims. But the same practices also underwrote young Jews’ alienation from France. By consuming signs and symbols of global Jewishness, these young Sephardim enacted a particular conception of diaspora that denied its local roots. In the process, they both biologized and fashioned their exclusion from the French nation.

Young, liminal, and (anti)racist?

Academic and political conversations about contemporary “youth” in France do not typically include Jews. Since the first “headscarf affair” in 1989,² French scholars have explored “Arab” teenagers’ rejection of universalist social norms and embrace of totalizing ethno-religious imaginaries (Bensoussan 2004; Brenner 2002; Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Kepel 1987; Lorcerie 2003; Taguieff 2002; Trigano 2001; Wiewiorka 2005).³ For many of these social scientists, Muslim youth make up a “new dangerous class” that threatens the French social order through archaic values and violence (Beaud and Pialoux 2003). In different ways, both the Right and Left link this threat specifically to Islam. On the right, commentators privilege an imagined Muslim will-to-domination that makes minority status intolerable (Brenner 2002; Taguieff 2002). On the left, writers see fundamentalist Islam as the only stable source of values in destitute communities abandoned by the state and excluded from the nation (Cesari et al. 2001; Kepel 1987; Wihtol de Wenden 1999). Both sides often view Muslim youth practices as a retreat from “modernity,” emphasizing young people’s supposedly premodern, essentialist assumptions about gender, race, and social organization.

Whereas French social scientists accuse Muslim youth of dragging French society back to the dark ages, much English-language theoretical and ethnographic literature emphasizes the potential for liberation contained within youth identity and culture (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1990; Hebdige 1979). Although theorists of this bent acknowledge that this potential is not always realized, it seems to

reside almost inevitably in the multiply determined liminalities of many contemporary youth, who are depicted, in Homi Bhabha’s (1994:1) terms, as “in-between” social roles (child–adult; consumer–producer), cultures (country of origin–country of residence), even epistemological conditions (sincerity–authenticity; see also Hall 2002; Jackson 2005:175). For many of these authors, the link between social liminality and antiessentialism has been reinforced in the contemporary moment by massive migration and rapid social change—phenomena that make totalizing identity narratives almost impossible to maintain. As a result, even when youth claims about community and identity may appear essentializing, some writers insist that the practices on which those claims are based undermine assumptions about bounded, continuous traditions (Dolby 2001; Gopinath 1995; Jackson 2005). Youth are thus described as “resisting” or denaturing hegemonic discourses, often through consumption practices (involving clothing, music, drugs) that create “sutured” or hybrid identities, thereby calling attention to otherwise unspoken social categories and assumptions.

None of this fits my story. Some middle-class Sephardi teenagers engaged in the essentializing practices typically attributed to disadvantaged, Arab Muslim youth, calling into question interpretations that reduce youth identity practices to class or Arab Muslim difference. At the same time, Jewish teenagers used widely circulating commodities to construct ethno-religious identities, therefore presumably accepting identity as a malleable, situational “choice.” Their choices, however, were overdetermined, structured by racialized logics of national inclusion, by the inherent ambiguity of difference in France, and by the simultaneous individualization and naturalization of identities common in a rapidly changing global economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Adolescents thus understood their self-fashionings as reflections, rather than constructions, of Jewish authenticity. This strange doubling is not a retreat from modernity but part and parcel of its contradictions. It powerfully illustrates the ways in which the social forces presumed to undermine “modern” conceptions of self—particularly race as a mode of reading interior essence from exterior form—may lead to renewed essentialism. In France, this has produced a generational reracialization of Jewishness precisely as its biologization has faded from French national discourse.

Arab, Jew, Arab Jew

What appeared at first glance to be a story about Jewish-on-Jewish violence turned out to be more complicated. The teacher’s recitation provoked a shocked murmur among the students. One boy denounced the story as a lie. Another noted that the teenager dressed in the Lacoste cap had “provoked” the unknown boys by disguising himself as a *re-beu* (*rebeu* is the slang, double inversion of the word for

Arab). Because everyone knows how rebeus dress, the student continued, the boy had been “disguised” and had betrayed his Jewishness; it was therefore “normal” that he had been beaten. A third boy—seeming rather unsettled by the turn of the conversation—whispered to his neighbor that he wore Lacoste eyeglasses. He was reassured when the neighbor insisted that eyeglasses were always “Jewish.”

This conversation only makes sense in light of adolescent presumptions about “Jewish” dress. Since the late 1980s, young Parisian Jews have called their own distinctive consumption patterns “chalala” (pronounced *sha-la-la*). I was told that the children of Tunisian retail clothiers had pioneered chalala in the 1980s, but no one I spoke to could explain the etymology or meaning of the term. This silence made chalala all surface and no substance, a fitting gloss for a complex of highly visible (and variable) consumption practices. In 2004, dressing *chal* meant wearing ostensibly expensive, tightly fitted, brightly colored, virtually unisex garments. Some adolescent girls and boys described the typical chal outfit as a “uniform that costs 500 euros,” consisting of body-hugging, acid-washed jeans made by the Italian company Diesel; skin-tight T-shirts in Day-Glo colors manufactured by the Danish-owned, U.S.-based company Von Dutch; and Converse high-top sneakers in colors matching the shirts. Other brands—notably the French flagship brand Lacoste—were shunned. Boys tended to favor racing jackets covered in advertisements or slogans, and girls zip-up sweatshirts. Both boys and girls wore their hair long (longer, however, for girls) and gelled into large, asymmetric styles.

Adolescents very often accessorized their clothing choices with Jewish or Israeli symbols. Boys and girls carried camouflage pencil cases marked with the name of the Israeli army in Hebrew (Tahal) and English (Israeli Defense Forces [IDF]). Many boys wore Israeli army *kippot* (sing. *kippa*), the Jewish male head covering, and, occasionally, T-shirts that were similarly militarily marked. Students of both sexes tied red string bracelets to their wrists, indexing the purchase of a wish or blessing from religious figures at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. They also wore necklaces or bracelets adorned with a giant sky-blue bead bought in Israel, IDF dog tags engraved with their names, pendants representing Israeli paratroopers, and Jewish stars in every possible size and color. Girls favored Jewish stars covered in brightly colored rhinestones that matched their T-shirts, sneakers, and earrings. Boys seemed to prefer large silver stars or small, stylized scrolls marked with a star. Symbols thought of as Jewish identity markers in other contexts—for example, the *chai*, the Hebrew word for life—were relatively rare, the result, explained one high school student, of their general illegibility; if only Jews could recognize them, their communication value was considered too limited. The five-fingered hand worn by both Jews and Muslims in the Mediterranean basin was almost entirely avoided.

Chalala therefore worked to create legible distinctions between Parisian Arabs and Jews. Although much French discourse presumes that these two terms refer to mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed, and easily identifiable groups of people, the Lacoste baseball-cap incident belies such assumptions. It is proof that, despite discourse about the “Jewish head,” some North African Jews and Muslims may be more physically and culturally similar than different. They sometimes share physiognomy: the dark skin, eyes, and curly hair ironically mentioned by many youth as evidence of the “Jewish head.” They often share cultural markers: last names, parents and grandparents who speak Arabic, culinary traditions, musical tastes, and even traditional religious rituals (cf. Allouche-Benayoun and Bensimon 1998; Friedman 1988; Goldberg 1978). They may also share physical spaces. This particularly applied to day-school students. Although Sephardim generally have been much more upwardly mobile than North African Muslims (Bensimon-Donath 1971; Benveniste 2002; Tribalat 1995:163, 176–182), in 2004 many day-school families still lived in heavily immigrant-populated neighborhoods, explaining, at least in part, the choice of Jewish rather than public schools.⁴ Day schoolers were therefore far more likely than other Parisian Jews to share buildings, street corners, and public transportation with North African Muslims. They were also far more likely to be “mistaken” for Arabs. In a school hallway, a nervously giggling 13-year-old girl told me that she had often been “taken” for an Arab. During an interview, a 16-year-old boy claimed that an adult “Tunisian,” who had broken up a fistfight he was having with an Arab boy, took him for an “Arab Tunisian.”

Whether or not Sephardi adolescents recognized the danger, there were obviously serious material consequences to being taken for Arab in France: regular police harassment, employment and housing discrimination, racist violence. “Chalalisme,” therefore, can be understood as an overdetermined response to this threat, deploying and deflecting at least two colonially inspired discourses that might result in the conflation of young Sephardim and Arabs: the collapse of Arabness into poverty and of North Africanness into fanatical Islam.

Arab poverty and Jewish “class”

Chalala asserted and enacted affluence through sartorial splendor (Ferguson 2002; Newell 2005). Whether adolescents paid full price for Diesel jeans at Replay on the Rue Etienne Marcel or bought counterfeit versions in Parisian or Israeli markets, the very terms of chalalisme conflate Jewishness and wealth. All teenagers who dressed according to its stylistic canons looked “rich,” projecting an aura of upward mobility and seamless integration into the French economy. An article on chalalisme published in the French weekly *Paris Observatoire* in late April 2004 underscored

precisely this point. It featured a picture of a girl wearing a large fluorescent-pink rhinestone Jewish star and matching T-shirt, earrings, and belt and quoted her as saying, “I’m rich, and I want to show it” (Cabourg and Gourdon 2004:22).

Young Sephardim contextualized these claims to wealth within a Jewish–Arab opposition. Echoing mainstream French stereotypes, many adolescents insisted that Arabs were uneducated and had too many children, which left them poor and dirty. Using the language of the Far Right, some claimed that Arabs “foutent la merde partout,” a harsh expression that means “make a mess” and has implications of filthy (shitty) national disorder. In keeping with such assumptions, Jewish adolescents of both sexes routinely contrasted their ways of dressing, which they described as “classy” or simply “dressing well,” with what they imagined as “Arab” sartorial practices. I was told repeatedly that, whereas Jews care deeply about what they wear and can afford to dress nicely, “Arabs don’t care” and cannot afford to buy good clothes. When I asked what Arabs wore, I was almost invariably given a description of a male dressed in nondescript running pants, hooded sweatshirt, and uncoordinated sneakers. Not surprisingly, adolescents also claimed that Arabs favored “cheap” French brands, like Lacoste and Adidas. Both of these brands are actually quite expensive.

For Jewish youth, *chalala*’s sumptuousness thus helped produce legible distinctions between North African Jews and Muslims on street corners in working-class neighborhoods like Créteil and Sarcelles. At the same time, it also made claims to the bourgeois Jewishness of Paris’s chic 16th arrondissement. Prior to the waves of North African Jewish immigration that began in the 1950s, the vast majority of Jews living in France were Ashkenazim. Although a large plurality of this population was itself of relatively recent German or eastern European origin, most Jewish Holocaust survivors were from families that had been French for generations, if not centuries (Birnbaum 1996; Marcus and Paxton 1981). As part of an attempt to negotiate Ashkenazi Frenchness—which was intermittently (and often virulently) challenged from emancipation through World War II—elite French Jews and Jewish institutions participated in a civilizing mission that paralleled French colonial efforts in North Africa (Abitbol 1985; Graetz 1996; Schwarzfuchs 1980). The binary oppositions that helped structure relations between the colonizer and the colonized also inflected metropolitan Jews’ understandings of North African Jews, creating an iterative language (Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Gal 1991; Herzfeld 1987) through which Jews might “Westernize” Jewishness vis-à-vis Islam and naturalize Ashkenazi Frenchness vis-à-vis “backward” North African Jews. As a result, while the French Jewish establishment played up Jewish and Muslim differences in its public communications with colonial officials—insisting that North African Jews were civilizable whereas “Arabs” were

not—internal Jewish writings characterized North African coreligionists as illiterate, impoverished, superstitious, and materialistic “Arabs” (Abitbol 1985; Schwarzfuchs 1980:44–46).

These kinds of oppositions still appear in contemporary Parisian perceptions and performances. In 1992, a letter written to the editor of a prominent Jewish weekly objected to the widespread use of the term *Séfarade*—which is a Frenchification of the Hebrew word for Spain—to characterize North African Jews. The troubled reader noted: “It is not possible to accept the erroneous extension by which, for the last few decades, our North African coreligionists, who are Arab Jews, have become Sephardim” (Hasson 1992: 2). Many Sephardim routinely performed their own playful or uncomfortable versions of this Othering. Moroccan- and Tunisian-born teachers in a Jewish school joked about Ashkenazim viewing Maimonides as an “Arab” and described Ashkenazi–Sephardi couples as having “mixed” marriages. Julie, an upper-middle-class college student from a Moroccan family, offered her own less humorous account:

Sometimes I’m ashamed of the way [Sephardi] people behave. . . . Over there in the street, there are all these kosher butcher shops. All those who double park in their big SUV Mercedes and who block the entire street without thinking about it, I find that shameful. . . . I’m ashamed when there’s a woman yelling in a restaurant, or who has a bizarre reaction, or who doesn’t realize that the person across from her is not Jewish and starts to say: “the Arabs, I want to kill them” or “one should only marry Jews” or something like that. . . . I think it gives people a negative image. . . . It’s true that I’m Sephardi, but I think Sephardi Jews have created a very bad image. Ashkenazim are more reserved, more discreet, much more integrated as well. They melt into the crowd. For an Ashkenazi, unless he has a very distinctive family name, you won’t know he’s a Jew.

As this quote suggests, the language of symbolic capital, particularly “taste”—discretion, the sense not to be racist (at least in public), the rejection of ethnicized clannishness—was routinely mapped onto ethnohistorical differences (Bourdieu 1984). It was thus through the semiotics of class that young Jews attempted to negotiate the intra-Jewish distinctions that help overdetermine Sephardi Arabness. However, bourgeois Jews, whether Sephardi or Ashkenazi, did not necessarily accept this vision of universal Jewishness as economic and symbolic capital, as money and taste. Julie associated “bad” Sephardi behavior with the cultivated visibility and the ghetto bling of double-parked Mercedes SUVs. She was not alone. Mrs. Amsellem ironically showed her own “racist” colors by describing the lack of taste she thought evident in her students. Angry about their reactions to her story, she told me they were

“arrivistes,” or social climbers with money but no culture. “You won’t find kids like them among the Orthodox,” she noted, “because they have other values. You also won’t find kids like them among the Liberals [Reformed Jews]; they are just like Mr. and Mrs. Anyone who have their own practices and go about their lives without needing to show everyone what they are. But in this socio-economic group, this kind of attitude [excessive attention to dress and racism] is common.”

Thus, bourgeois Jews, most of whom did not live in mixed, blue-collar neighborhoods, contested chalala as a mode of universal Jewishness, often reinscribing it within a classed and ethnicized Ashkenazi–Sephardi divide. Chalala’s conflation of Jewishness with wealth and upward mobility, however, may have become emblematic of Jewishness among many non-Jewish minority youth. Crimes involving anti-Semitic insults were often (although certainly not always) property crimes. According to adolescent and newspaper accounts, thieves peppered victims, whether actually Jewish or not, with anti-Semitic slurs while trying to steal cell phones or wallets.⁵ Sephardi adolescents also associated theft with anti-Semitism; some explained that any property crime against a Jew was anti-Jewish because everyone knew Jews had money. At least in part, growing anti-Semitism in France may be a terrible sign of just how successful North African Jewish claims to upward mobility and establishment status have been in poor mixed neighborhoods (Silverstein 2008; Wieviorka 2005).

Fashioning Jewishness

Chalala projected wealth as a means of negotiating Arab–Jewish proximities and as a mode of transcending some intra-Jewish divisions. It also coded Jewishness. When girls and boys alike wore half a dozen Jewish stars in a variety of forms, from pendants to pinky rings and charm bracelets, they embraced Jewishness of a particular kind. Chalala did not correspond to even adolescent standards for religiously observant Jewishness (although a student did tell me that the Torah prescribed its modes of distinction). More-observant youth often saw chalala as an inadequate or unacceptable alternative to religious practice. As one noted, “I don’t need to be chalala. I’m Jewish because I keep kosher, because I keep Shabbat, because I observe all Jewish holidays.” Two senior boys—Elie, who was visibly observant, and Aaron, who claimed to be frustrated by the difficulty of following Jewish law, halacha—fought over what it meant to dress *feuj* (*feuj* is the slang inversion that means “Jewish”). Elie insisted that he dressed *feuj* because he wore the dark trousers, white button-down shirt, and large, plain kippa associated with non-Hasidic, Orthodox observance. Aaron chortled, pointing to his brightly colored sneakers; tight, acid-washed jeans; and royal blue, logoed T-shirt as truly visible signs of Jewishness.

Chalala also challenged the forms of Jewishness encouraged in day schools. Chalala did not embrace the gender distinctions or the concern with sobriety, modesty, and economy that motivated school dress codes. It also did not necessarily incorporate clothing associated with religious observance. Many chal boys, for example, covered their heads only in school, where it was required; some gelled peaks into their hair that made wearing any head covering difficult. Similarly, girls in ultra-Orthodox schools sometimes changed from long skirts into tight jeans as soon as they got onto the metro—an immodest act by any number of teacher standards. In addition, school administrators, particularly in ultra-Orthodox settings, disciplined students for wearing chal clothing. Girls were exhorted to take off large earrings, to cover up their exposed knees or collar bones; boys were reprimanded for removing their kippot, using too much hair gel, or wearing provocative slogans.

But chalala’s distance from the norms of Torah-observant Judaism may also have been overdetermined. Over the last 30 years, institutional French Judaism has increasingly embraced visible, often public religiosity. Since the 1970s, the Chabad Hasidim have become a durable presence in the Parisian landscape, attracting large numbers of second- and third-generation North African Jews, who now dress in the wigs and dark suits of eastern European shtetls (Podselver 1986). Even the Consistoire—the state-recognized mouthpiece of religious Judaism—has gone from being an agent of secularization, or at least Protestantization,⁶ to an instrument for encouraging and enforcing observance of strict interpretations of halacha (Albert 1977). To the deep chagrin of many Parisian Jews, the former chief rabbi—Joseph Sitruk—opposed the law banning the Muslim veil from schools on the ground that it would also inhibit Jewish observance, particularly the wearing of kippot (Benattar et al. 1989).⁷

In these totalizing forms, Jewish orthopraxy exhibits features resembling those that are widely criticized in Islamic practice, particularly its cultivation of heteronormy and gender distinction. In 2004, the Renseignements Généraux, the French equivalent of the U.S. FBI, released a report on 300 neighborhoods described as exhibiting a dangerous tendency toward “ethnic withdrawal” (Bensoussan 2004:3). According to the report, the signs of such a threat were women who covered their heads and bodies, butchers certified in ritual slaughter, shops selling religious paraphernalia, and well-attended houses of worship. Although Muslim practices were the target of this report, all of these “signs” can be found in a range of Jewish neighborhoods and are encouraged by the rabbinate and day schooling.

Does this proximity matter? Many French Jewish intellectuals and officials vociferously deny that any such parallels can be drawn (Bensoussan 2004; Finkielkraut 2003; Trigano 2003). Thinkers who do compare Jews and Muslims argue that the latter have replaced the former at the edge

of French national inclusion. For these authors, Jews and Jewish practice no longer define the limits of the French nation; Muslims and Islamic practices do, thereby allowing for the relatively unproblematic inclusion of Jews within Frenchness (Benbassa 2004; Scott 2007; Silverstein 2008). If this is the case, even the close similarities between Muslim and Jewish orthopraxy should not threaten Jewish Frenchness (Scott 2007:78). But this assumes Jewish nationalization as a stable achievement. In fact, Jewish Frenchness appears dialectically tied to Muslim non-Frenchness, produced through daily and contested practices of Jewish distinction like chalala. As France and Europe are increasingly defined in opposition to (certain) illiberal religious practices, the fragility of these continuously reproduced differences has become increasingly evident in a whole range of social locations. The Stasi Commission, a government council on secularism appointed in 2003 by then president Jacques Chirac, denounced government-funded religious schools that violate national law by applying ethnoreligious admission criteria (Stasi 2004:91). For national education officials, this would have been understood as a reference to Jewish day schools. In 2005, a noted historian of France and Europe and a member of a major French Jewish organization told me that she was frightened by European Judaism's increasing resemblance to Islam, evident in its growing insularity and desire to repress dissent. A 2006 Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) report on Judaism in France decried Consistorial rabbis' "fundamentalist" tendencies, specifically citing attempts to separate men and women.⁸ The banalization of this kind of commentary was, for the president of the largest Jewish student union, the greatest threat facing French Jews. In his words, anything that put Jews and Muslims "back to back" was disastrous.

Strict adherence to totalizing, highly gendered forms of religious observance thus may very well threaten the boundaries between Judaism and Islam, Jews and Muslims, Sephardim and Arabs. Chalala partially avoided this trap by secularizing, individualizing, and neutering Jewishness. It was fashion, not orthopraxis, a refraction of the forms of consumer "choice" familiar to all Parisians, not heteronomous submission to divine will. Although consumption is never rooted in the choices of an autonomous subject, it is experienced and described as such. This may be particularly true at the heart of the world of Western fashion, where individual idiosyncrasy is cultivated around the edges of the latest couture styles and brands (Bourdieu 1990). As a result, adolescents thought of their consumption practices as an authentic reflection of an already constituted self, not as a means of constructing that self. Whereas long skirts and head coverings, for example, could be seen as producing appropriate (gendered) Jews, one did not wear Diesel jeans and a Jewish star to become a Jew, but to illustrate that one was essentially Jewish.⁹ And this was an essential Jewishness undifferentiated even by

gender, a critical religious form of distinction largely leveled by the way chalala feminized male dress—those necklaces, rings, and elaborate hairdos—while masculinizing female comportment—those Israeli army symbols and the often violent talk about "killing" Arabs that accompanied them (Auslander 1996; Kuchta 1996).¹⁰

Rhinestones and race

If adolescents acknowledged chalala as a choice, they also understood it as a choice rooted in race. This understanding too may have been overdetermined, a response to the abstract individualism prescribed by Republican conceptions of national belonging and to the more general problem of identity in the contemporary world. Wendy Brown (2004) has argued that racialization in the French context has long been a mode of individualization, one that allows for the disaggregation of potentially threatening "national" identities while simultaneously rooting identity in a collective essence. She notes, "Defined neither by belief nor filiation, the racialized [19th century] Jew became highly individualized as well as physiologically, intellectually, and emotionally saturated with Jewishness" (2004:7). In this imaginary, Jewishness exists whether or not it is expressed through practice, at least in theory allowing for individual assimilation without the loss of collective identity. But it can also call particular kinds of (collective) comportment into existence.

This is precisely how many young Sephardim seemed to see Jewishness. They imagined it both as an interior essence and as an indelible, inevitably visible ontology (Gilman 1991). Adolescents slipped between sartorial codes and "Jewish" physiognomy, insisting that ethnoreligious identity was somatically fixed and universally legible, with or without distinctive clothing. Some argued that Jewishness was visible through the gaze because the "Jewish soul" shines through the eyes.¹¹ Like the students in the Jewish history class I attended, many other Jewish youth talked about the *tête juive*, which they vaguely defined as physical characteristics presumed to make Jewishness legible to Arabs, "the French," and other Jews.

This account of individually carried, transparent, and inescapable Jewishness also may have helped compensate for the growing indeterminateness of identity itself (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). Two high school girls at an Orthodox school begged me to read their favorite novel, *Un cri sans réponse* (Kramer 1990s), a story about a U.S. girl who immigrates to Israel, attends an Orthodox school, and observes halacha. But she is not "really" Jewish; a Reform rabbi more interested in money than Judaism converted her Christian mother for profit. The protagonist's lack of authenticity, the difference between her practices and essence, is the central anxiety of the book, one that leads the main character to leave Israel, undergo an Orthodox conversion, and advocate the

exclusion of those (like herself) who threaten the halachic “purity” of Israeli Jews.

That the protagonist is an immigrant, someone whose background cannot be known in what is an otherwise established local community, is hardly accidental. This displacement creates the possibility for dangerous infiltration and, through the specter of marriage and reproduction, threatens the very survival of the ethnoreligious community. These themes resonated with adolescent concerns about immigration, intermixture, and the loss of homogenous community. Still identifying themselves as “Moroccans” or “Tunisians,” youth talked about their families’ North African homes as lost paradises where Jewishness was a self-evident fact of everyday life, ingrained in the tiniest details of ordinary existence. There were no questions about who was Jewish and how. Chalala as racial presumption and practice offered a means of recuperating this self-evidence, reconstructing a face-to-face Jewish community through transparent adolescent legibility. It allowed Jewish adolescents to display a connection to other Jews whom they might never meet but would recognize instantly. Actually, it ensured that they would meet.

But, as the baseball-cap story suggests, adolescent racial imaginaries ultimately undermine the self-evidence they seek. The criteria Sephardi adolescents used to describe the *tête juive* were profoundly ambiguous. Dark skin and dark curly hair are somatic markers just as likely to exclude Jews (particularly, although not exclusively, Ashkenazim) as to include non-Jews (particularly, although not exclusively, Muslims of North African origin). This is precisely why chalala was so crucial to the creation and maintenance of ethnoreligious distinction. It is also why that significance had to be denied. Many adolescents were thus careful to insist that they read physiognomy, not clothing. The boys on the Champs Élysée might not have thought twice about beating the baseball-cap boy because they presumed his dress reflected the Arab physiognomy they were sure to find under the hat. The boy who denied the truth of the story also refused to admit that clothing could produce identities; understanding Jewishness as race should make it impossible to confuse Jews with anyone else. This also explains the furor of the student who denounced the beaten boy as a traitor who “deserved” what he got. For him, preserving the presumed isomorphism between surface and essence justified the violence.

Domesticating diaspora

I have suggested that chalala was a creative response to French national identity concerns that implicated young Sephardim in complex ways. It was therefore a distinctly French form of Jewishness. But like a dialect, it designated an even more particular geosocial field. Its existence and form were tightly tied to the specificities of Parisian life.

The same clothing in a different part of France—or outside France—would not have meant the same thing. In Montpellier or Marseille, for example, the bright colors, racy cuts, and unlikely combinations of chalala blended into a more general “Mediterranean” aesthetic—a stark contrast to the relatively somber colors and bourgeois style of Paris. With their particularly marked bodies and practices, young Jews mapped out Parisian “Jewish” spaces. They gathered in defined locations, patronized particular Parisian stores, and stopped to snack at certain restaurants: the Opera metro stop, with its regional rail-line connection, the Rue de Rivoli or Rue Etienne Marcel in the heart of the garment district, the Marais on Sundays when its shops were the only ones open in Paris, the Palais du Fruit restaurant that served only fruit and therefore could pass as “kosher.” As one teenager told me, everyone knows where to go to meet and hang out with other Feujis.

Young Jews did not, however, understand chalala as a distinctively French, let alone Parisian, mode of Jewishness. If 30 years ago the bourgeois practices of a relatively assimilated Ashkenazi elite were viewed as normative for Parisian Jews, in 2004 the ethnicized and particularly classed practices of young Sephardim “represented” Jewishness. Young Sephardim did more than just shift the part of Jewish practice that could stand for the whole; they also had begun to imagine themselves as embodying universal Jewishness. Although rooted in specificity, this was a vision of Jewishness that could not recognize what it excluded. Day schools attracted a relatively homogenous population. In my experience, virtually no Ashkenazim were day-school students. There were also very few Sephardim like Julie, who had internalized normative bourgeois notions of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Even adolescents with Algerian ancestry seemed underrepresented, perhaps a function of Algerian Jews’ upward mobility and distinctive history vis-à-vis the French Republic.¹²

Lines of distinction, however did exist within schools. Richer adolescents were accused of forming an exclusive fashion police and shunning contact with those who could not afford the best brands. Fully observant students ridiculed those most implicated in chalala as superficial and even “not Jewish.” A small handful of intrepid teenagers tried to resist the political “group think” that defined all “Arabs” as an insidious, dangerous enemy.¹³ But there was, nonetheless, an extraordinary homogeneity to student practices. The same homogeneity followed students outside of school. Chalalisme was one of the few ways of being Jewish that was not, by definition, “invisible” or at least illegible. As one of my informants noted, for some pale-skinned, fair-haired (often Ashkenazi) girls, dressing “chal” was the only way to ensure that self-identified Jewish (often Sephardi) boys would read them as Jews, and thus as potential dates or wives. One fair-skinned Sephardi adolescent darkened her skin with orange powder, presumably to look

more like her classmates. Some adolescents, tellingly, did not even know what *Ashkenazi* meant. When I responded to questions about my “origins” with the term, I was often impatiently asked whether that meant I was from Morocco, Tunisia, or Algeria. The forms of adolescent Jewishness I observed, therefore, concealed their own conditions of possibility, allowing for the projection of specificity as generality.

Chalala helped reground these projections of Jewishness outside France, in Israel and, to a lesser extent, the United States. In 2004, the brands associated with chalala were not French. Adolescents constructed elaborate stories about those they favored, including improbably attributing the design and production of particular brands—like Von Dutch—to Jews. Some U.S. companies, such as Converse, may have been de facto “Jewish,” a product of the conflation of Jewishness with “America” in teenage imaginaries. A Jewish elsewhere was also a privileged location for buying chal accessories. The name of a store on the Boulevard Saint Germain that sells trendy chal clothing is an amalgam of Hebrew and English: *Eretz* and *Nowhere Else*. *Eretz* is the Hebrew word for the biblical land of Israel. The message seemed clear: Clothes sold in Paris were both an index of and means toward attaining a Jewish elsewhere—one that was simultaneously Israeli and American. Israel was also literally a source of these globalized markers of Jewish identity. Awash in knockoffs and counterfeit merchandise, Israeli markets provided vacationing French youth with cheap Diesel jeans and Converse sneakers. Adolescents established exchange networks that allowed those not going to Israel to get the right brand at the right price. “Authentic” versions of some accessories could only be purchased in Israel. In theory, the red string many adolescents wore around their wrists had to be purchased from mystic rabbis at the Western Wall.

Jewish preference for non-French brands symbolically or literally bought in Israel was contrasted with Arab taste for domestic products. Lacoste is a flagship French brand, and Adidas, which in some contexts was also thought of as “Arab,” is, not incidentally, one of the official sponsors of the multiethnic French soccer team. With more racist humor than acrostic accuracy, one adolescent told me that Adidas stood for “Attention, il y a des arabes qui squattent ici” [Danger, there are Arabs lurking here]. This imagined Arab preference for “cheap” French brands seemed a commentary on assumptions about Muslims—poor, dirty, badly dressed—but also about France. Young Jews accused France of being complicit in the production and maintenance of an otherwise disposable underclass. Several young Jews explained that the French might not like Arabs, but they are too cowardly to do anything about them. They therefore described France as a “garbage can,” an intolerable mixture of peoples who did not belong together. By refusing French clothing associated with Arabs, Sephardim—much

like Israel and the United States—also refused any accommodation, let alone amalgamation, with Arabs.

Israel was not just a privileged source of chal clothing. It was also an object of consumption that facilitated the reterritorialization of youth identities in Israel. Many Sephardi teenagers regularly vacationed in Israel, notably during Passover breaks or long summer vacations. But, when vacationing in Israel, they took the world of Parisian Jewishness with them. Many stayed and played in a handful of largely Sephardi, francophone “colonies” located in coastal cities (Eilat, Netanya, Ashdod). They traveled or lodged with extended family members and spent their time cementing ties with French Jews who did not necessarily attend their schools or live in their neighborhoods. Many of the adolescents I knew carried around photo albums containing pictures of their summer adventures with French peers on Israeli beaches. Adolescents regularly mistook these temporary communities of French Jews for “Israel,” citing their instant comfort in such enclaves as proof of a primordial Jewish connection to Israel. This was quite a hard impression for them to shake. Even physical violence between French and Israeli youth could be recast as a minor dispute within the larger Jewish-cum-Israeli family. Margot, a middle-school student, showed me a picture of a friend who had been hospitalized after being robbed and stabbed by a group of young Israelis who apparently thought “the French” were “ruining” their country. When I asked whether the beating made her feel unsafe in Israel—I knew she felt unsafe in France—Margot laughed off the question: “They are Israelis. . . . They don’t want to beat me up because of me, but because of the French thing. I know Israelis and how they will behave; all I have to do is avoid going out on Saturday nights. . . . I know Israelis, but I’m not really sure what Arabs are capable of. . . . Arabs really are ruining the country.” Even in the face of violent proof to the contrary, local identifications were continuously mapped onto large-scale abstractions—Jewishness and Israeliness.

This movement also happened in the opposite direction, from more general global discourses to local practices (Appadurai 1996; Tambiah 1990). Some young Jews also enacted (albeit in aestheticized form) the violence associated with global discourses about Israel and its military. At least since the 1980s and the failed Israeli war in Lebanon, Jewish institutions and individuals have accused the French and European presses of being pro-Palestinian, pro-Arab, and anti-Israeli (i.e., Benzimra 1982; Grunewald 1982; Knoll 1982; Seroussi 1984). Since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000, that refrain has been renewed. During my fieldwork, several people told me that they had cancelled subscriptions to newspapers such as *Le Monde*, the left-leaning newspaper of record, citing disgust for its pro-Arab positions. Others talked about the nightly news as being focused too exclusively on Arabs. A journalist employed by a Jewish newspaper began his talk at a Jewish community

center with a version of the “David and Goliath” story regularly used by the French media. The story, which had aired on France 3, was about a Palestinian man who reportedly had lost all nine of his children to Israeli shelling of Gaza at the beginning of the second intifada. Two years later, while on a mission to Gaza, the journalist met the man, who assured him that all nine of his children were alive and well. The audience at the community center laughed knowingly.

The French press does focus on the structural inequalities that have accompanied the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Israel is often depicted as favoring force over negotiations, responding “disproportionately” to Palestinian attacks, and acting cavalierly with Palestinian lives (i.e., Axel 2004; Balibar and Reberieux 2004; Bôle-Richard 2008). The coverage of “Operation Cast Lead,” Israel’s 2008 military operation in Gaza that was aimed at stopping Hamas rocket attacks, was no exception. Young Jews condemned the media depictions as “racist,” while simultaneously adopting them as positive charters for Jewish behavior. By wearing Israeli flags, IDF T-shirts, and camouflage school accessories, adolescents literally wrapped themselves in the fetishized surfaces of a militarized Israeli identity. They also sometimes enacted the aggressive self-defense associated with the Israeli military. I heard that boys occasionally started or sought to provoke ethnicized violence, often by using Israeli symbols. Girls seemed to talk about violence rather than engaging in it, but their rhetorical displays were also a performance of militarized Jewishness. Jennifer, a 16-year-old aspiring pop singer, described in detail how she “bashed in the head” of an Arab girl who had told her Israel killed Palestinian babies; she also stopped in the middle of her story to humiliate a classmate she accused of being pro-Arab. Yaelle, a middle-school student, explained that she wanted George W. Bush to win the 2004 U.S. presidential election because “he would kill Yasser Arafat, all the Arabs, and all the Yasser Arafats of the world.” One of her classmates disagreed: “He’s been president and hasn’t killed the Arabs yet; so I don’t want him to win!”¹⁴

Jewishness thus became synonymous with mainstream French stereotypes about Israel: an aggressive self-defense, a refusal to turn the other cheek or to compromise. This conflation of Jewishness and a militarized Israeli identity was also confirmed through interactions between young Jews and Muslims. Corresponding to what Stanley Tambiah (1990) has called “focalization” and “transvaluation,” the dramatic increase in youth-on-youth violence over the last seven or eight years has become a mode of canalizing local economic, social, and religious identities into a single global narrative—“Arabs” have turned into Palestinians and “Jews” into Israelis and their U.S. allies. For young Jews, this was such a powerful lens for understanding daily interactions that even people described as physically black were characterized as “Arab” when associated with hostility or aggression. This kind of mapping of large-scale abstractions

onto messy local realities motivated non-Jewish youth at a demonstration against the Iraq war to chase and beat young Jewish bystanders; regardless of the Jews’ actual politics, they stood for the United States, Israel, and those oppressing Arabs. It also may have been why those bystanders, who were part of the traditionally socialist and therefore secular Zionist organization Hashomer Ha’zair, were wearing kippot, thus visibly conflating multiple forms of Jewishness with their political opposition to the demonstrators. The same kind of telescoping up to global narratives and down to local affect and practice occurred every time someone wrote “Israel assassin” across a billboard for a weekly Jewish magazine. It was also part of what motivated the beating of the boy in the baseball cap. An incident structured by local ambiguities and frustrations was understood as yet another shot in an imagined global war between Israelis and Palestinians.

Conclusion

Mrs. Amsallem called students who used clothing to determine identity “racists.” This is seemingly counterintuitive. If young Jews constructed and read identity from clothing, presumably they were antiracists, far better described as *bricoleurs* who consciously called attention to the constructed, performative aspects of identity. But Mrs. Amsallem was right. Although inextricably tied to fashion, Jewish youth practices made claims about essence; they were not thought of as modes of enacting a post-identitarian, postmodern self. These claims and their mode of declaration were overdetermined, a desperate but creative response to the double exile—as Arabs and as Jews—that threatened Sephardim in France. The stigmatization of Arabs in French national imaginaries encouraged young Sephardim to elide their Arabness through public projections of individualized, secularized Jewishness. Forced to enact the essentializing logics of the French public sphere to partially escape them, young Jews constructed commodified identities that they understood in ontological terms.

The results of these enactments were just as paradoxical as the process. The very practices that made Sephardi Frenchness possible also made it inconceivable. The illusion of local and global Jewish homogeneity projected through adolescent practices encouraged Sephardim to understand religious and national communities in Herderian terms. Rather than embracing the political definition of Frenchness long associated with French Jewry, young Sephardim recognized the ways in which French national identity has always been rooted in a fantasy of essential sameness, particularly whiteness and (post-)Catholicism. As a result, for many youth, the presence of both Arab Muslims and Jews in France was problematic, a violation of “natural” law that endangered France and both groups. France became a dangerous “garbage can” precisely because it

allowed for—and perhaps even required—forms of social intermixture that threatened young Jews' conceptions of community. Thus, an astounding proximity was discernible between far-right discourses, despite their association with anti-Semitism, and those of some young Jews.

This “integralist” conception of community informed how *chalala* reterritorialized Jewishness (Holmes 2000). Despite adolescent claims, Israel was not an idealized homeland because of primordial attachments to the land and its current occupants. Rather, Israel's ethnonationalism and much publicized discomfort with non-Jewish populations—particularly Arab Muslims—helped young Sephardim transform it into a literal extension of their families and friends. Even adolescent fascination with the United States—the sighs about the “beauty” of being a Jew there—fits into this logic. In addition to conflating the United States with Israel, French national discourse also associated U.S. “multiculturalism” with ghettoization, meaning the juxtaposition of mutually exclusive, relatively autonomous ethnic groups. Although many in France saw the U.S. scenario as a cautionary tale about the dangers of recognizing ethnic difference, young Jews understood it very differently, as a configuration that preserved the boundaries between and purity within ethnoracial groups. This too is deeply ironic. For over 200 years, European Jews fought to destroy the physical and ideological walls that enclosed them. Today, young Jews may be retreating behind those walls, immuring themselves in the mobile ghetto of *chalala* while dreaming of its territorial incarnations in Israel and the United States.

For many social scientists, diaspora and transnationalism are modes of belonging that challenge the hegemony of the nation-state and liberate minorities from the straight-jacket of nationally linked ethnoracial categories. But such a “progressive” view of globalization and postmodernity ignores the ways in which both diaspora and transnationalism are locally constructed, intimately tied to the very categories they purportedly transcend. In the case of some young French Jews (and perhaps some young French Muslims), the issue is not just that the local inflects the global. It does. But, more significantly, the local is the global, or at least it is often experienced that way, with potentially serious consequences for the possibility of pluralism in France.

Notes

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1. All personal names are pseudonyms.
2. In September 1989, a middle-school principal in Creil expelled three Muslim girls for wearing headscarves (Silverstein 2004:139). This was not the first disciplinary action associated with visible Muslim religiosity in schools, but sustained media attention helped create a national debate about the place of Islam in France and the role of public schools in the production of appropriate French subjects (Auslander 2000).
3. There is constant slippage in public and private discourse between an ethnic designation that conceals a wealth of distinctions among North African populations—Arab—and a religious one—Muslim. I use *Arab* to reflect my Sephardi informants' speech and to emphasize the ambiguity of racialized identity practices in France.
4. The rise in anti-Semitism in mixed neighborhoods may durably change this demography. But at the time of my fieldwork, people had many reasons for remaining in places like Créteil and Sarcelles. They included the prohibitive expense of Parisian housing “intra muros” as well as Jewish families' positive attachment to communities with the institutional and social infrastructure necessary for traditional Jewish observance.
5. The most discussed, recent anti-Semitic incident in France—the kidnapping, torture, and murder of the young cell-phone salesman Ilan Halimi in February 2006—follows this pattern. Youssouf Fofana, the man convicted of masterminding the crime, claimed that he targeted Halimi because Jews are rich and clannish and thus would be able to pay a hefty ransom.
6. This is perhaps a strange word choice for a Catholic country, but the “modernization” of French Jewish practice included some of the hallmarks of reformed thought—the privatization of belief; the focus on an orderly, quiet congregation; the introduction of vernacular sermons and prayer; and so on.
7. Somewhat surprisingly, many religiously observant Jews supported the law against the veil. One prominent, and very observant, Jewish community official explained this seemingly counterintuitive reaction by noting that the law would have no impact on Jews. Boys who wore kippot, he noted, were already in Jewish schools, where the law would not be applied. And those who were not would immediately transfer. Thanks to a privileged relationship with the French state, which funds most Jewish schools but (as of this writing) no Muslim schools, religious Jews could thus mark their difference from observant Muslims without compromising a commitment to visible, embodied practice.
8. The report was based on interviews done by sociologist Sonia Sarah Lipsyc with 45 community officials in France (Lipsyc 2006).
9. This is a stark contrast to ethnographic accounts of some African consumption practices. In these accounts, one is what one wears rather than the other way around. In all cases, however, a complex iterative relationship exists between signifying and producing, between outside and inside (cf. Comaroff 1985; Ferguson 2002; Masquelier 1996; Newell 2005).
10. This relatively gender-neutral, “free” choice of clothing as a reflection of an internalized self is less threatening to Republican imaginaries than the veil, which is seen as a means of producing dangerously hierarchical and heteronomous forms of subjectivity. Thus, despite the enormous anxiety around “visible” religious

identities among French youth, there was no mention in any government report or law of one of the most visible forms of Jewish distinction.

11. This reflects Hasidic logic about the distinctive nature of the Jewish soul, which has sparks of divinity not present, or not present in the same way, in non-Jews (Goldschmidt 2006).

12. In contrast to Moroccan and Tunisian Jews, Algerian Jews were granted French citizenship en masse in 1870. They thus had access to the same schools, civil service positions, and courts as European colonists.

13. One such student was derided by her classmates as an "Arab lover" for her attempt to get them to acknowledge that Palestinians suffer under Israeli rule.

14. Teenagers' violent language points to another important aspect of chalala: the generational conflict it can provoke within day-school families. Some parents happily fund and even occasionally share the sartorial proclivities of their children. More often, however, the visually and politically aggressive aspects of chahalisme fracture Jews along generational lines, highlighting differences in conceptions of "appropriate" Jewishness and French Jewishness. When parents complain about their children's inappropriate if not outright "dangerous" clothing, which they often do, they are in part reflecting on acceptable minority behavior in France. Whereas Jewish boys (and to a lesser extent girls) pride themselves on aggressive self-defense if not outright provocation, many Jewish adults praise teenagers who show "restraint" and relative passivity vis-à-vis anti-Semitic bullies. This privileging of public discretion—what some referred to as "exemplary Jewish citizenship"—has led to active attempts to silence stories about certain Jewish youth practices, particularly those with a violent cast. The story about the beating of the boy in the baseball cap, for example, was never reported to the police because, in the words of the Jewish history teacher, "We [Jewish adults] wouldn't want such things to circulate outside the community."

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