

Collective Facework and Performative Primordialism: A Study of Community Relationships in Crown Heights, Brooklyn¹

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This ethnographic study analyses racial and religious group identity within the context of Crown Heights, a well-known neighbourhood in central Brooklyn, New York. I set out to understand how residents in an area often described as rife with racial and religious tension have come to navigate instances of discrimination. Through interviews and participant observations conducted across a six-month period, I find that social actors confronted with bias may compensate for inadequacies in institutional reporting structures by resorting what I refer to as “perform primordialism”. The study centres two cases, one in which an incident of bias is formally acknowledged by state actors and one in which it is not. Both serve as snapshots of the modal approaches that social actors take to navigate the harm caused by discrimination. Ultimately, the concept of “performative primordialism” extends sociological discourse on interactionism in urban neighbourhood settings.

Keywords: Interactionism, facework, racism, antisemitism, neighbourhood.

Introduction

Crown Heights, a central neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York, has an almost double identity in the public eye. It exists both on the leading edge of gentrification and as an ostensibly infamous site of recurring tensions between a particular sect of the Orthodox Jewish community known as Chabad-Lubavitch and local Black/African-American/Caribbean-American populations. Social commentators and academics with “primordialist” inclinations have historically treated the area as one of ethnic conflict over resources and political power, in which the same categorical actors reappear, and clash, time after time. Some of the most notable examples of this are the ethnography *Race and Religion Among the Chosen People of Crown Heights* by anthropologist Henry Goldschmidt; the Jeremy Kagan film *Crown Heights* (2004) which explores Black-Jewish relations in the aftermath of 1991; Edward Shapiro’s book *Crown Heights: Blacks, Jews, and the 1991 Brooklyn Riot* (2006); and a plethora of articles, podcasts, and community events attempting to bridge the “community divide”. However, dominant constructivist understandings of “group” identity would call into question the prominent way this neighbourhood has come to be understood; by reducing events to “group differences” much is lost. Scholars Jerome Kruse and Judith N. DeSena highlight some of this much needed nuance in their book *Race, Class, and Gentrification in Brooklyn: A View from the Street* (2018), where they analyse community-based grassroots opposition to gentrification, along with its racial and class-based implications, in the Brooklyn neighbourhoods of Greenpoint/Williamsburg and Crown Heights/Prospect Lefferts Gardens. Additional ethnographic scholarship (Fijalkow and Lévy-Vroelant 2020, Hosman 2018) demonstrates some of the notable variations in understandings to and rejections of gentrification. This article, in contrast, focuses less on oppositions to gentrification and instead places emphasis on opposition to identity-based discrimination, while the realities of gentrification and displacement frame the historical

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moment. Although the community actors with whom I spoke are well aware of the nuances both within and between “groups”, the reduction of conflict to such differences can oftentimes be beneficial in ways that constructivists take for granted. The present discussion uses Crown Heights as a lens through which we can better understand and address this gap in constructivist framings. To clarify, this is not a push toward primordialism: it is instead a call to take seriously the ways in which local actors and interlocutors have come to understand themselves and strategically employ primordialist notions of group belonging to their advantage; ways which merge some key primordialist perspectives into an overlying constructivist frame.

Dominant constructivist explanations of group identity tend to neglect key characteristics that have influenced group differentiation. In the case of Crown Heights, community actors such as police, organizational leaders and residents apparently — although not in actuality — fall into pre-designated “roles” based on racial and religious affiliations. Contrary to primordialist explanations, these “roles” are not innate group tendencies. Instead, they are constructed political identities that are repeatedly reinforced due to the failure of local governance structures to adjudicate moments of tension categorized by racial or religious discrimination. More specifically, state actors fail to convince the residents of Crown Heights that they take seriously issues of antiblack racism and anti-Semitism. It is this political and social deficiency that continues to reinforce primordialist notions of group identity.

Ultimately, I extend Rogers Brubaker’s critique of groupism, the tendency to take racial, ethnic and national groups for granted as homogeneous and externally bounded groups. I concur with Brubaker’s understanding that racial, ethnic and national categories are not things in the world but perspectives on the world, but I expound upon Brubaker’s understanding of research participants as the “real primordialists”. In *Ethnicity Without Groups*, he states, “In fact, on the primordialist account, it is participants, not the analysts, who are the real primordialists, treating ethnicity as naturally given and immutable” (Brubaker 2004: 83). Brubaker’s interpretation assumes notable degrees of reflexivity attributable to research participants. Based on my research, I argue that research participants, and in particular the Lubavitchers and the Black residents of Crown Heights, are not necessarily primordialists, but at times may pretend to be, or signal themselves as such, in what I refer to as “performative primordialism”. This notion of “performative primordialism” differs from “strategic essentialism” in that it emphasizes theatrical and reflexive embodiment. The significance of “performativity” is echoed throughout Erving Goffman’s (1955) dramaturgical analysis of facework. In the case of Crown Heights, the failure of the state to appropriately handle racial and religious discrimination has, at times, led to forms of collective facework. During these moments, Black residents, the Lubavitchers and the police, will step in to both reinforce and protect their respective group identities. When framed in this way, a dramaturgical approach to group identity can allow us both to understand better the seemingly cyclical nature of conflict as it emerges within Crown Heights and to make sense of the shortcomings of existing constructivist understandings.

This ethnographic and interview-based study, conducted during the spring and summer of 2019, illuminates the ways in which conflict is — or is not — navigated by community actors

in Crown Heights. To be clear, I do not claim to explain the relationship between the groups in question, nor do I analyse the racialized histories of Crown Heights at large. Instead, I examine two major conflicts involving Black residents, Lubavitchers and police in Crown Heights. Particular attention is paid to the ways state actors undermine the production of a resolution and the deployment of facework to protect group identity.

On Facework

Constructivist sociological approaches focus on the ways in which ethnic and racial identities are created and recreated over time. Although such identities are created relationally, as discussed by race scholars such as Natalia Molina, Ramón A. Gutierrez and Daniel Martinez HoSang, in their book *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (2019), there is a degree of collective facework which leans into performative primordialism. As noted in the case of Crown Heights, performative primordialism can emerge when it serves to counter events that threaten “face”. In such cases the “face” that is threatened is one of a collective group identity.

This study builds on the work of symbolic interactionists such as Ashley Reichelmann, Herbert Blumer and Erving Goffman, and considers the collective nature in which facework may be performed. Erving Goffman (1955) introduces facework as the maintenance of “face”; the preservation of one’s honour, dignity and position in the social world. Scholars such as Ashley Reichelmann and Herbert Blumer extend this theory of facework to consider group behaviour. Reichelmann utilizes an interactionist frame to contend that racial identities are not only formed through interactions with in-group and out-group members, but that racial groups can also experience racial threat as a collective emotion (Reichelmann 2020). She finds that if an event is perceived as a racial threat it may add to racial prejudice against out-group members. This aligns with Blumer’s claim, from decades earlier, that race prejudice is fundamentally tied to where in the racial hierarchy one group perceives themselves in relation to others (Blumer 1958). Although these studies focus on different identity groups, facework strategies appear to be largely consistent across groups and even cultures (Oetzel et al. 2008). I build on this body of work and underscore the notion that a desire to save face, to protect one’s pride, can merge into a collective effort when the “incident” is one that implicates a whole identity group. Interactions coloured by dehumanization, discrimination, racism and antisemitism lend themselves to perceived assaults on a collective “face”, and the performance of collectively “saving face” may easily be misidentified as genuine commitment to primordialist fallacies. In the case of Crown Heights, I narrate two examples of identity-based discrimination which exemplify performed primordialism.

On Constructivist and Interactionist Analytical Frames

Constructivism and interactionism serve as useful analytical frames through which we may broadly conceptualize processes of racialization. While the former lays the groundwork for understanding racial categories as habitually constructed, with flexible and ever shifting boundaries relative to their temporal and local contexts, the latter allows for more specific

analyses of daily interactions which reconstitute such categories. When viewed together, interactionism can take dominant constructivist understandings of race a bit further. Rather than interpreting racial identifications as lending themselves to “false consciousness”, we can use interactionist framing to uncover the ceremonious motivations that prompt performed “groupness”. This is similar to Anna Marie Smith’s assertion that essentialist claims can be viewed as resistance against the complexities of domination (Smith 1994), or Elisabeth Eide’s findings that members may present their group identity in a simplified and collectivized way in order to achieve particular objectives (Eide 2010). My primary point of departure, however, is in the “how” and “why” of group identity construction. By emphasizing performance, rather than strategy, we allow for a degree of reflexivity and role-adherence that is otherwise missed.

Much of the contemporary literature on race and interactionism centres the perspective of the dominant racial group; for example, notably Trump supporters in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The pool of research subjects is skewed toward white Republicans and emphasizes their strategies for navigating perceived threats to their racial identities. For example, in *Signifying Aggrieved White Selves: Trump Supporters’ Racial Identity Work* (2022), Douglas Schrock et al. take an interactionist approach, demonstrating how Trump supporters use racial discourse and emotional communication to engage in three forms of racial identity work: othering racialized freeloaders; criminalizing racialized others; and discrediting racialized dissenters. Together, these forms of racial identity work construct what Schrock et al. refer to as signifying aggrieved white selves. Similarly, in *Collective Threat: Conceptualizing Blumer’s Threat as a Collective Emotion* (2020), Reichelmann lays the groundwork for considering racial threat as a collective emotion primarily among white U.S. Republicans. This research frames racial threat as an affective group response generated through sustained interaction with social groups and group representations. While these notions of “signifying aggrieved white selves” and racial threat as “collective emotion” offer significant conceptual contributions to our understanding of race and interactionism, they limit our understanding to the behaviours and strategies taken by a dominant racial group. They do not explore the behaviour of non-dominant racial groups, or the ways these non-dominant groups construct and re-construct their racial identities in the face of similar interactions.

Through the notion of performative primordialism, I extend prominent constructivist framings of group identity to capture some of the subtleties of these non-dominant reconstruction of racial identities. Rogers Brubaker’s critique of groupism recognizes that research participants are a kind of primordialist, and ethnicity, race and nations are political projects rather than things that exist in the world. He specifically challenges the tendency to take groups for granted and to treat them as though they are “internally homogenous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes [...] the tendency to represent the social and cultural world as a multi-chrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, or cultural blocs” (Brubaker 2004: 8). Building on this, Brubaker asserts that ethnic conflict should not be interpreted as conflict between ethnic groups, racial conflict should not be understood as conflict between races, and nationally framed conflict should not be understood as conflict between nations. Instead, he

emphasizes, ethnicity, race, and nations are practical categories and political projects. As sociologists we should think of “ethnicization, racialization, and nationalization as political, social, cultural, and psychological processes. And it means taking as a basic analytical category not the ‘group’ as an entity but groupies as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable” (Brubaker 2004: 11). Rather than a thing, “groupness” should be thought of as an event, and as a cognitive perspective. By focusing on categories rather than on groups, we are better able to capture relevant processes and relations.

What Brubaker overlooks, and what the category of strategic essentialism seeks to identify, partially successfully, is *why* social actors seem to rely upon these primordial beliefs. There is a degree of reflexivity that research participants have that is assumed away by researchers more generally, and by Brubaker more specifically. In many ways these primordial inclinations reflect how research participants believe they are perceived in a given interaction, and how they believe they are able to best protect themselves from discrimination, especially during “incidents”. Following Goffman, I identify “incidents” as “events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face” (Goffman 1967: 12). Not only are such groups constrained by forces external to themselves, the threats they face also serve to crystallize and reinforce their group affiliations. To claim that research participants genuinely view themselves as being part of “internally homogenous [...] unitary collective actors with common purposes” is to misunderstand the field site. Similarly, to contend that primordialism is merely “strategic” de-centres dramaturgy, also a necessary lens. Rather, I will argue, primordialism, as performed in the field site, can be compensatory, responding to perceived neglect by larger state structures. What Brubaker identifies as false consciousness are in fact attempts to save “face” and to protect against discrimination.

Methodology

Over the course of six months, just prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, I examined “incidents” in Crown Heights characterized by racial or religious tension. My primary methodological tools were ethnography and in-depth semi-structured interviews documenting reported conflict and resolutions, referencing the last thirty years. During the summer of 2019, I developed relationships with several community organizations founded in the aftermath of what is referred to as the “Incidents/Uprisings/Riots/Pogrom” of 1991 (a three-day period of protests and violence between Black and Chabad Crown Heights residents), and through them attended community events, local police precinct meetings and street demonstrations. In total, I conducted hundreds of hours of observations and sixteen in-depth interviews with various community actors, including but not limited to police, organizational directors and lawyers. I coded my interviews and observations for sequence and theme. The two incidents highlighted in this paper echo some of the dominant non-legal ways in which anti-black and anti-Semitic incidents are addressed once they achieve a degree of public prominence.

For context, Crown Heights, Brooklyn has undergone several major demographic shifts over the last century, during which the boundaries of the neighbourhood expanded to include

parts of a bordering neighbourhood, Bedford Stuyvesant. In 1940, during World War II, the Chabad-Lubavitch Orthodox Jewish Hasidic movement relocated in what was then a primarily white neighbourhood, with its World Headquarters officially established at 770 Eastern Parkway, also known simply as 770. The 1960s saw an influx of Caribbean immigrants due both to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and the restriction of immigration to England, a popular destination country for Anglo-Caribbean migrants (Mitchell 1992). In 1969, during a city-wide period of suburbanization and white flight, the Chabad-Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, instructed his religious community to remain in Crown Heights despite demographic changes (Goldschmidt 2006). Consequently, at a time of immense racial and ethnic re-segregation in the United States, Crown Heights was establishing itself as a relatively integrated locality. Although this neighbourhood is still understood to be composed of white people, Caribbean-Americans, African-Americans and Chabad-Lubavitchers, it is important to recognize that the outlines of these groups are neither culturally nor politically fixed.

A “Bias” Incident: Acknowledged

On 27 August 2019, a sixty-four-year-old Lubavitcher man, Rabbi Abraham Gopin, was exercising in Lincoln Terrace Park of southeast Crown Heights when a stranger approached and violently assaulted him. The assailant hurled a large paving stone at Abraham, yelled an antisemitic slur and repeatedly punched him in the face before fleeing the scene (Rosen 2019). Several bystanders rushed to Abraham’s assistance and the Jewish ambulance service, Hatzalah, escorted him to a nearby hospital. The assault on Abraham, which leaned into primordialist antisemitic bigotry, resulted in the loss of Abraham’s two front teeth, a broken nose, and lacerations to his face (Chasan 2019). One of the websites that documented this incident (CrownHeights.info 2019) also routinely tracks news and crime related to the Lubavitch community in Crown Heights, oftentimes also related to the broader national and international Jewish community. The site’s *Crime* section maintains detailed accounts of reported crimes in which Lubavitchers are victims.

In response to this attack, several community leaders from prominent non-profit, cultural and governmental organizations agreed that something else must be done to address the palpable ethnic/religious/racial tensions in Crown Heights. Although this approach often follows incidents involving both a Chabad and a Black non-Chabad resident, according to several of my research participants, this will only occur once the police have already been notified. In contrast, incidents that go unreported are not subject to this approach; those that are reported have already deemed the criminal legal system an insufficient solution. One organizational leader, Paul (pseudonym), notes that he is often contacted by the 71st Precinct regarding “various [violent] incidents that take place” in the neighbourhood. When an incident includes both a Chabad and a Black non-Chabad resident, the police will consider whether to qualify the incident as a “bias incident”. Paul states,

“Police go after it; you know it takes on a different complexion once the word bias is included. So, a lot of times you’ll hear bias in these incidents, when they’re really not biased. They’re just common criminals [...] Many times, even the cops they’ll

call me up and I'll say, 'we'll you know what I think about it. It's just a common crime'. But [...] their bosses uptown, I mean in Manhattan, are saying, 'treat it as a bias [...] but deescalate it if it's not a bias [...] And I love for it to be deescalated, because I don't like to hear Crown Heights is always in this bias mode' (Paul).

Paul, like many of those I interviewed, cares whether an incident is considered to involve "bias". Notably, the incidents discussed are most often those involving a Black male perpetrator and a non-Black Jewish victim. Within the field site, I noticed significant disagreement, marked along racial lines, over whether such incidents can be assumed to be underreported or overreported.

In this instance, as with many others, community leaders deemed police response to be insufficient and a further, more interpersonal, conversation to be necessary. Collectively, these organizational and political leaders scheduled several meetings to discuss what they identify as prominent neighbourhood issues. I attended the second of these sessions, held on 28 October 2019 in a local community organization.

On that day, I walked over to the meeting location and was greeted at the door by a young man I had previously interviewed. The space was large by Brooklyn standards, and the open layout was outfitted with folding tables and chairs, in the shape of a square, facing the centre of the room. This allowed for all the participants to see one another. As prominent community leaders began to arrive, I introduced myself to those I was familiar with and then took a corner seat at the table. Attendees included a generous mixture of men and women, Black people and Lubavitchers, seemingly all around forty to sixty years of age.

At the start of the meeting, two handouts were passed around, entitled "Central Brooklyn Leadership Meeting" and "Central Brooklyn Leadership Meeting #2", respectively. The former summarized conversations from the prior meeting, with subheadings labelled "What's going on?", "What can we, as leaders, do to effectively meet these challenges?", "Who else needs to be added to the table?", "What can we do?" and "Next steps". Several concerns were identified under the subheading "What's going on?", such as the rise in anti-Semitic attacks primarily committed by young Black males, increased community violence due to community change and destabilization, economic immobility and a lack of meaningful conversation between the Lubavitchers and the Black residents of Crown Heights. The following excerpts were notable:

"There is a perception among some Black community members that the Jewish people are taking their homes, while they don't realize that Jews are also being forced out of their homes."

"There are a lot of bad acting landlords in Brooklyn with many different backgrounds; the Jewish ones are often most visible in the community because of how they dress."

"Layers of racism in the community make it impossible for people of color to not relive their trauma daily — they feel that society has failed them."

“In a similar vein Jewish residents have a long-term deep trauma caused by anti-Semitism reignited by recent attacks and incidents, locally and globally.”

This document then went on to suggest that to address these issues, an emergent group might consider including a more racially and generationally diverse group of people in the conversation, along with hosting a series of conversations centred around the issue of gentrification.

In connecting this incident of violence to alleged neighbourhood issues of Black on Jewish crime, economic instability and misplaced frustration, two things are notable. There is both a simplification of racial and religious identity, and at the same time an acknowledgement of the complexity added by histories of anti-Black racism, antisemitism, displacement and economic immobility. This nuance frames the oversimplification of identity within a stage that sets the stakes high. One interviewee, Fred (pseudonym), who was present during this meeting stated,

“When somebody attacks someone for what they look like or who they’re identified with, then they’re attacking that whole community cause that whole community feels threatened and unsafe. And that’s why they have these hate crime statutes. So, if you’re just putting a cross on a law [...] burning a cross on a lawn, you’re telling a person you don’t belong here because you’re of this race. But if you vandalize somebody’s property just cause you’re acting out [...] So okay there’s a crime, there’s a victim, there’s a damage, but it doesn’t have [...] it’s not the same” (Fred).

In incidents of “bias” these community members view the victim as one of a collectivity rather than as an individual. This threatens collective “face” and reignites local histories of antisemitism.

As the same interviewee notes, part of the approach taken can be attributed to the legacy of the 1991 Crown Heights protests/riots/pogroms (in which anti-Black racism and antisemitism erupted in several days of violence). In the aftermath, community leaders and elected officials took a more active role in “encouraging togetherness”. One aspect of this included outreach from city government officials to individual ethnic groups “to ensure that everybody’s voice is heard and that everyone’s voice is around the table” (Fred). In spite of this attempt to “include all voices”, several participants of the 28 October meeting acknowledged in their individual interviews that the voices at the table were not necessarily representative of their respective identity markers, although they may claim to be. Vicky (pseudonym) was present at this meeting and works closely with local Black leaders. In our interview she stated,

“So, the Jewish community is super organized and hierarchical, and they vote for who their leadership is to represent them [...] And we don’t have that same sort of structure in the Black community”.

In a separate interview, Paul (pseudonym), a Lubavitch man intimately involved in Chabad politics, criticized these claims of Jewish representation. He stated,

“Nobody today can claim to represent the Jewish community [nobody can] speak on behalf of everybody. We’re a very diverse community [...] Nobody represents everybody. And I object to people going forward and claiming to represent everybody [...] the problems with these meetings are that everyone is focused on being the representative that they go along with everything” (Paul).

These questions over the legitimacy of community representation are acknowledged, yet go unresolved. Instead, these select few don their roles as community representatives, take their seat at the mediation table when needed, and act in ways that ostensibly protects the collective.

The conversation segued into problem-solving for the “tensions” at hand. There was nearly collective agreement that they should host community discussions on gentrification and the changing neighbourhood. The majority believed that the incident of violence stemmed from misunderstandings and resentment surrounding gentrification. More specifically, it was the result of misplaced blame on the Jewish community for evictions and higher rent prices. By hosting community conversations, they hoped to unpack misunderstandings regarding the who (or what) bore the responsibility for gentrification and socioeconomic precarity.

Two Black community leaders interrupted the ongoing discussion to contest the dominant narrative that Black people are consistently perpetrators of crime. Instead, as one leader stated, “the Black community also feels targeted oftentimes, primarily by the police”. For the first time, the conversation began to shift away from “Black on Jewish” crime. One member emphasized that “Black people and Caribbean people respect police, but the criminal justice system has not been good for Black people”. Immediately, a Jewish community leader remarked on his discomfort with placing what he saw as too much blame on law enforcement officers. Voices were raised and the tension was palpable. Several participants began to speak over one another, all addressing the different roles policing played in contributing to community tensions and violence. Although it might be counterintuitive to situate police as an identity group alongside Black and Jewish residents, it is actually common practice in Crown Heights. One notable community leader is often quoted as saying “In Crown Heights there’s Blacks, there’s Blues, and there’s Jews”. As reductive as that sentence may be, it has set the stage upon which reported incidents of “bias” are negotiated. Before they find their way to the mediation table, these incidents are either reported to (or caused by) the police. Thus, it is commonly acknowledged that the police as state actors are routinely seen as insufficient for addressing “bias”, specifically that of antisemitism or anti-Black racism.

As the meeting drew to a close, three further steps were agreed upon. These included the need to extend the conversation into the broader community in the form of intimate conversations, the need for a response team when incidents like these do occur, and the need for some form of public education or public forum on community issues such as displacement. The agreement to lean into group identities and talk across difference was not new. Several “community conversations” have emerged and dissolved since the conflict of 1991. Many began as ways to facilitate conversation across what was described as an ethnic/religious/racial

divide, and to work to close these divisions. Henry Goldschmidt (2006) highlights a number of these formal structures for community conversations, including but not limited to: The Crown Heights Coalition, Project CURE, the Crown Heights Mediation Centre, Mothers to Mothers and Project CARE. The latter is self-described as uniting “communities, religious leaders & engaged elected officials to foster tolerance & better the quality of life for all in crown heights (ProjectCARE 2019)”. Although Project CARE was almost exclusively led by community “stakeholders”, not all these groups were organized in this way. For example, one group named “Can We Talk” consisted of Crown Heights women from various racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds who convened to discuss their different lived experiences. Rather than donning “roles” as representatives of their communities, they spoke honestly about their unique lived experiences.

The facilitation of community dialogue has been a recurring approach to improving community relationships. These approaches attempt to not only compensate for the inadequacies of the criminal legal system but also serve to soften the impact of perceived collective injustice.

A “Bias” Incident: Unacknowledged

In June of 2019, seventeen-year-old Justin (pseudonym) dribbled a basketball down Rogers Avenue as he walked home from a nearby park. Without warning, a New York City Police car pulled up next to him, parked, and three officers rushed to accost him. Surveillance footage shows the officers forcing Justin to the ground and using their knees to restrict his movement. In an interview with News 12 Brooklyn, this young, Black, Crown Heights resident states that, despite inquiring into the reason for his arrest, he was given no answers (News12 Brooklyn 2019). Instead, Justin was immediately taken to the 71st precinct house, where it was later determined that he was in fact not involved in the crime of which he was suspected. After several hours, having been offered neither water nor a courtesy phone call, Justin was released with a summons, and with the bruises from what his family and supporters now refer to as an unlawful arrest. This situation resulted in much collective frustration on the part of Justin’s family and friends, who saw his treatment as racially motivated — an undeniable example of primordialist anti-Black racism. City government officials did not acknowledge the incident as one of police misconduct nor of biased harassment.

During an interview, the director of one community organization noted that there is a long history of tension between the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and Black Crown Heights residents. She specifically cites an April 2018 incident during which police shot an unarmed man, Saheed Vassell, mistaking his metal pipe for a gun. Several activist organizations allied with Black Lives Matter organized protests in the neighbourhood. Crown Heights was once again at the centre of a national conversation around police misconduct, structural racism and gentrification (Lennard 2018). Ron (pseudonym), a young professional involved in Justin’s case, emphasized that the relationship between some Black residents and law enforcement goes deeper than mere distrust. He cites a history of false arrests and excessive use of force by officers in the 71st and 77th precincts. Unlike cases of identity-based violence

perpetrated by civilians, cases perpetrated by New York City police officers are not directed to the New York City Hate Crimes Task Force. Rather, “incidents” of this nature are dealt with through two primary avenues; through New York City’s Civil Complaint Review Board (CCRB) and through federal lawsuits. If the latter is not settled out of court, it may result in compensatory or punitive damages, while the former may lead to a disciplinary recommendation or an administrative trial. According to a database compiled by the Legal Aid Society, there were forty-nine federal lawsuits filed against the 71st and 77th precincts between 2015 and (CAPstat 2019). Ron remarks that shifts in policing policy over the last couple of decades have unintentionally incentivized a rise in cases filed against the NYPD.

“I think there’s a rise in cases because [...] When NYPD decided to accept a shift from broken windows — theoretically decided to take a shift, or pivot from broken windows and stop and frisk, it became, I think that the policy then was that well we’re just gonna arrest people, and we’ll arrest them, if we find something, a searching incident upon arrest [...] then we have probable cause and that’s what it is. But I do with more people saying no you can’t stop me, you can’t question me, that has led to some additional arrests. Um in Justin’s case, if there was a stop and frisk policy, he would’ve been stopped, he would’ve been harassed, he would’ve been searched, they would’ve found nothing, but he would’ve felt — he would’ve still felt victimized. But he maybe, maybe he may not have been arrested. And so, because he was arrested, now there’s a false arrest case” (Ron).

This understanding of policing policy frames the rise in cases filed against the NYPD as independent of shifts in anti-Black police bias. Instead, Ron views this rise as a reflection of procedural norms.

Considering the arrest of Justin and the subsequent controversy, the 71st Precinct Community Council agreed to discuss the incident at their regularly scheduled meeting, held at a local middle school on Empire Boulevard. As I approached the school on 20 June 2019, several teenage and preteen Black youth stood outside waiting for the event to begin. They spoke to one another with a sense of familiarity. A few minutes into my arrival, a middle-aged man invited us to go inside. The police presence was remarkable. A line of police vehicles sat along the street, and tens of armed officers stood along the inside of the building’s corridors, donning “NYPD Community Affairs” apparel. As community members filed into the auditorium seats, a panel of the community board members took their seats at a long table in the front of the room facing the audience. The “stage” was set, and the room filled with the dull hum of conversation. I sat on the right-hand side of the auditorium. Ron sat to the left of me; he explained the purpose of this meeting to four Black children saying, “This is a conversation between the community and the police [...] opportunity for us to ask questions about Justin’s arrest”. Through his description, I came to understand that he, as well as several of the community members seated near us, were unaware that Justin’s arrest was not the primary focus of this meeting. It was instead likely to be a bullet point in a regularly scheduled community

council meeting. As the meeting commenced, a piano played, a prayer was recited and the previous meeting's minutes were read aloud.

A member of the community council introduced the Deputy Inspector of the 71st precinct. His introduction was accompanied by a request that members of the audience, "please not yell, scream, nor threaten the director". This moment made clear two things: that he assumed the audience would be inclined to act in such a way, and that a warning might serve as a suitable deterrent. The Deputy Inspector walked to the podium. His remarks began with a clarification that the officers in question were responding to "shots fired". Justin matched a description, and once confronted by police officers he became combative. With the utterance of the term "combative", Ron stood up to interject, "you need to be honest [...] the police cannot control the narrative", he proclaimed. One member of the community council warned, "if we [the audience] continue to speak, no questions would be asked or answered". An elderly Black woman in the audience concurred with this sentiment and implored the man responsible for the outburst to listen and to not interrupt the deputy inspector. The Deputy Inspector continued to describe the incident through a distinct police-centred lens, and a similar verbal altercation with the same re-emerged. This dispute continued until Ron loudly proclaimed, once again, that "the police could not control the narrative". With this final decree, he implored Justin's supporters to walk out of the meeting and continue their discussion outside. As nearly half of the auditorium emptied out, the seventeen-armed police officers stationed around the inner perimeter of the auditorium were visibly on edge.

Ron contends that the police did not make room for honesty. In our conversation following this meeting, he stated that admitting fault is a legal liability for the police. Given this, they are incentivized to push particular narratives that offer them protection. Similar to the case of Rabbi Abraham Gopin, the police offer little by way of security. In stark contrast, however, the community leaders I had grown familiar with were not involved in cases such as these, which focus on anti-Black police bias. Ron stated,

"Police are very powerful, and doing what I did in that meeting in terms of getting up and saying something to an inspector is unheard of. It's like you're being disrespectful. And you need the police if you get in trouble or if you need help, or something like that [...] they are the biggest gang in the city [...] And so, our cases don't have the community activists, the loud community activists that you, y'know, that you see" (Ron).

In Crown Heights, and in New York City at large, reported incidents of anti-Black violence are more often than not perpetrated by state actors like the police. However, as we have seen, incidents of identity-based violence perpetrated by police are resolved in a different way from those perpetrated by civilians. While both deem the criminal legal system to be an inadequate solution in and of itself, the former is more often limited to this method, despite its framing of police as the perpetrators of violence. This provides a unique challenge in that the police, as state actors, are particularly invested in avoiding legal liability. The bureaucratic

structure equips police with roles, procedure and scripts to save face within the public record; procedural performance may be disregarded when off record.

As I would later find out, upon exiting the meeting, Ron was met by members of the police commissioner's office who "acknowledged that the inspector handled it [the meeting] wrong". In his recounting, he noted that "the commissioner has to handle his rank and file [...] [he] has to be very mindful of how he shows support for his officers [...] People from the commissioner's office walked out to speak with us about what happened and what was gonna happen moving forward". This act of refusing to punish a colleague during a public facing "performance" is a Goffmanian example of "maintaining the line" — one that Ron acknowledged as a social fact. Team members suppress their immediate desire to punish their offending team member until "the audience is no longer present" (Goffman 1990: 89).

After the mass exit from the meeting, a question-and-answer session began with what remained of the audience. While questions pertaining to the specifics of the case were off the table, a conversation did briefly materialize around how the officers were defining and implementing their use of the term "combative", and whether such a term was appropriate to describe Justin during his arrest. This soon resulted in another, less hostile, debate, which ended with a member of the audience coming to the defence of the precinct and asserting that younger people must demonstrate more respect towards law enforcement officers. After this contentious, roughly thirty-minute Q&A, the discussion of the arrest ceased altogether, and the community meeting moved on to the remainder of the agenda. The arrest went unacknowledged as an incident of bias deserving of official attention.

Throughout the remainder of the meeting the Deputy Inspector routinely touted dialogue as "the way to solve problems". The allegiance to dialogue as a key solution to incidents of "bias", alleged or otherwise, appeared throughout the field, cited by local community organizations and neighbourhood residents alike. In this instance, however, dialogue broke down. Perhaps this was because the discussion was inserted into a regularly held community meeting; because it was limited to only certain questions; because the inspector commandeered the conversation; because the discussion was prefaced by an off-putting warning that assumed the audience would be threatening; because there were many armed officers present; and/or because there was no guarantee of resolution. Those who walked out of the auditorium refused to continue to engage in a discussion that presented a singular and distorted view of Justin's arrest. They were unconvinced by the Inspector's performance, condemning it as not only inauthentic but also absurd.

Although the police would not qualify as a primordialist ethnic/racial/religious group, they have, in both instances, set the stage for the performance of primordialism; in fact, they necessitated it. Ron's comment is emblematic of this fact. While ruminating on his neighbourly relationships, he stated,

"My neighbour is an older — is an older black woman — and her family, we can't stand each other. Two houses down are a row of Hasidic families, and we all get

along fine and dandy. Our differences aren't based on race. Differences aren't based on culture. Our differences sometimes are as granular as personality, y'know" (Ron).

Ron is well-aware of the nuance surrounding racial and religious categories. Despite this, when faced with inadequate state-sanctioned pathways for addressing anti-Black racism, he finds himself compelled to turn away from the state, juxtaposing it to more promising aspirations to the insularity of the Chabad community. He believes "they are goals" because rather than relying on the state, they take care of their own, "doing for their community what we should be doing for ours".

Discussion and Conclusion

The Lubavitchers and the Black residents of Crown Heights are not necessarily primordialists, but at times they may adopt a primordialist "face". On this stage, Black residents, Jewish residents and the police are positioned alongside one another, despite occupying distinctive (and sometimes overlapping) social categories. In the instance of sixty-four-year-old Rabbi Abraham Gopin, who was violently assaulted, and that of seventeen-year-old Justin, who was accosted by police, paths towards redress encourage a reliance on primordial notions of group identity. Not only is the violence against them emblematic of primordialist bigotry, but the solutions they are given necessitate participation in primordialist simplifications of their own racial and religious identities, in order to obtain a seat at the mediation table.

Community actors inhabit their roles as "representatives" of their respective groups, they maintain their team line and they save (collective) face. In many ways, their roles compensate for the shortcomings of the only remaining avenue made available by the state: the legal system. In contrast to assumptions of "strategic essentialism", these performances were not the most strategic — they did not maximize benefits for either aggrieved party. Rather, they were routine scripts induced by the state itself. This has been most notable through the state's intentional sourcing of "ethnic" community representatives in the late 20th century as a hedge against "inter-ethnic" violence, and through its framing of biased incidents in a way that disproportionately excludes the most commonly reported instances of anti-Black and anti-Semitic violence. Of course, this all occurs amongst the much larger backdrop of systemic racism and societal structures that marginalize Black and Jewish identities in different and meaningful ways. This focus on the smaller-scale interactions does not serve to negate structural understandings of the ways discrimination operates.

Both cases exhibit snapshots of distinct approaches taken by members of the Crown Heights community to address ongoing concerns of antisemitism and anti-Black racism. While the reconstitution of racial and ethnic categories appears in both, one salient difference is whether the incident of bias is acknowledged as such by city government actors. Despite these differences in recognition, both cases are demonstrative of a failure on the part of the state to convince residents of Crown Heights that it takes issues of anti-Black racism or antisemitism seriously. Local histories of Black and Jewish subjugation connect these ongoing incidents to

legacies of dehumanization. Such high stakes, coupled with the inadequacy of the tools afforded by the state, reinforces dependence on group identification and action.

My concept of performative primordialism contributes to the sociology of interactionism by tying a Goffmanian dramaturgical lens to constructivist understandings of group identity. This shifts the discourse to one that centres the intentions and motivations of research subjects, positioning such subjects as conscious social actors, both figuratively and literally. Performative primordialism allows us to convey more accurately both the reflexivity and the situational awareness of research participants, complicating how we understand the choices they make.

This research sheds light on some of the shortcomings of current attempts to address identity-based violence. Not only are antiblack racism and antisemitism actively contested in the current historical moment, but the issues themselves are often posited as insurmountable. In better understanding the inadequacies of the current system, we may be better situated to restructure our approach. Specifically, we must grasp the connection between incidents of racial/religious bias and the affront not only to one's personhood, but to one's racial/religious community. This may necessitate, at the bare minimum, a recognition on the part of the state, that actors such as Justin are not disposable; an "on the record" validation of their humanity.

Although this article references these particular examples, it does not mean to suggest that the state generally acknowledges incidents of antisemitism while ignoring incidents of antiblackness. In fact, it is neglectful, in uniquely different ways, towards both issues. Future scholarly work might explore the counterfactual: What might happen to the cyclical nature of conflict within this context if harm is recognized and dealt with without a reliance on performative primordialism. I imagine it may look something like traditional restorative justice practices, decentring the legal system and calling the complicity of the state into question. Future work might also explore the possibility that these incidents in fact do not constitute unique moments of tension but rather constitute the present an infrequent acknowledgement of a continuous and normalized state of antiblackness and/or antisemitism.

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