

# Rite of passing:

## Bureaucratic encounters, dramaturgy, and Jewish conversion in Israel

### ABSTRACT

On the basis of an ethnographic analysis of the state-run Jewish conversion project in Israel, I address the question of how bureaucrats come to know the subjects they serve. By analyzing how state agents construct the bureaucratic encounter with converts as a dramaturgical exchange, I theorize performance as an institutional mechanism through which bureaucratic knowledge is produced. The notion of “dramaturgy” sheds light not only on the everyday practices of state governmental power but also on the fragile, collaborative dynamics that underwrite the bureaucratic encounter. Such an analysis offers to complicate the notion of “power/knowledge” so often associated with bureaucratic institutions. [*bureaucracy, ethnography of the state, Israel, passing, performance, power/knowledge, religious conversion*]

**D**uring the Israeli government conversion proceeding, the would-be convert to Judaism often hears the phrase “we just want to get to know you, that’s all.” Spoken with a reassuring smile, the rabbinical judges’ words are meant to offset the formality of the occasion and mitigate the intimidation that accompanies the judges’ authority. By expressing interest in the convert’s story, these judges attempt to establish a more intimate ambience for discussion—one they hope will engender openness and self-confidence on the part of the convert. More often than not, though, this strategy falls short of its goal, and the convert—increasingly aware of her position as an object of the bureaucratic gaze—can usually manage in return little more than a thin, anxious smile.<sup>1</sup>

Far from a hollow gesture of kindness, the rabbinical judges’ attempt at familiarity captures the fundamental processes that constitute the Jewish conversion hearing in Israel as a bureaucratic encounter. In particular, it marks the extent to which these court bureaucrats do, indeed, aim to “know the convert”—that is, to gain knowledge of a wide array of practices, habits, and motivations they assume to be intrinsic to the individual’s subjectivity as a convert. Through this intimate overture, conversion agents unwittingly foreground a more general feature of their labor as local state bureaucrats—namely, the interactive production of information about the subjects they serve.<sup>2</sup>

Bureaucratic encounters clearly vary across context, differing in their purpose, form, and duration (Goodsell 1981). Some encounters are initiated by state officials, some by subjects; some have a fleeting, episodic nature, and others are repetitive and enduring; some are mediated by textual correspondence (Cody 2009), some emerge in the virtual spaces of e-government (Marston 2006), and others unfold in the context of face-to-face interaction. However, to different degrees, all of these bureaucratic encounters involve the transmission of information about the subject’s life; as a matter of course, such encounters position the subject as the object, or subject matter, of the proceeding. Whether one is recognized by the state

as “poor” (Yoltar 2009), “a true pacifist” (Weiss 2010), “a displaced person” (Hull 2008), or “a recovering addict” (Carr 2009)—to call attention to only a few bureaucratic categories recently dealt with by scholars—a range of domains relating to the subject’s life must be uncovered by bureaucrats and rendered intelligible to them. Indeed, the scholarly work on what Michael Lipsky (1980) describes as “street-level bureaucrats” has emphasized the extent to which “getting a fix on who people are becomes a centerpiece of their work” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003:53).

Based on the case study of bureaucratic conversion in Israel, this article deals with the question of how bureaucrats “get a fix” on who people are: how, that is, bureaucrats determine whether the subjects they serve are entitled to the categories and forms of recognition they claim. Given that bureaucratic encounters in mass societies are usually embedded in impersonal rather than personal relationships, and in light of the fact that such encounters are limited in both time and scope, this question becomes all the more compelling. Indeed, further complicating it is the abiding presence of distrust within the practices of bureaucratic institutions (Sztompka 1999:67–68); such dynamics foreground the importance of inquiring into how bureaucrats come to know the subjects they encounter.

To be sure, framing the scholarly engagement with bureaucracy in terms of knowledge processes is hardly novel. From Max Weber’s (1978:223–224) observations about the indispensability of technological knowledge to bureaucratic machinery, through James C. Scott’s (1998) analysis of state schemes as opposed to local knowledge, to scholarship on topics ranging from public policy (Feldman 1989) to the state documentation of identities (Caplan and Torpey 2001), the nexus between bureaucracy and knowledge has been studied extensively across disciplines and theoretical orientations. And yet much remains to be examined regarding the array of everyday practices through which bureaucrats generate and manage information about the subjects they encounter. As I summarize below, an abundant ethnographic literature has concerned itself with the everyday bureaucratic contexts in which states and subjects encounter and imagine one another. However, the very interactional mechanisms by which bureaucrats collect and produce information about subjects—mechanisms that are integral to these encounters—have largely escaped anthropological attention.

In this article, I employ a Goffmanian dramaturgical framework to better understand these mechanisms. By analyzing the elaborate set of interactive performances through which conversion agents in Israel gather and generate information about converts, I theorize the role of dramaturgical knowledge in shaping and sustaining the bureaucratic encounter as an exchange of information. In particular, I demonstrate how conversion bureaucrats construct this

procedure as a “rite of passing”—an intelligible performance of what conversion is expected to be: a religiously meaningful rite of passage.<sup>3</sup> This performance is based on a legible assemblage of bodily, narrative, and rhetorical signs, which produce decipherable information about the convert. It is through the management of this dramaturgical information that court bureaucrats attempt to overcome the inherent distance between themselves as knowers and their subjects as objects of knowledge.

By focusing here on dramaturgy, I not only aim to shed new light on the mechanisms through which bureaucrats come to know their subjects but I also intend to complicate the notion of “power/knowledge” so often associated with state bureaucratic institutions. Far from omnipotent, all-seeing knowers, bureaucrats emerge from this case study as somewhat limited in their capacity to know their subjects; the performances in which they participate only partially compensate for this weakness. Indeed, even though bureaucrats exercise their power to know through a variety of governmental and disciplinary practices, their authority is far from complete. Whether the “rite of passing” they facilitate takes the overt form of a juridical interrogation or the more subtle form of an open dialogue, it is a collaborative endeavor between court and convert. This endeavor positions the parties to the bureaucratic encounter as accomplices in a joint and fragile performance aimed at maintaining the crucial exchange of information.<sup>4</sup> Without gathering legible information about their subjects and subsequently producing what can, at the very least, pass as valid knowledge of them, these court agents cannot establish themselves as authorized knowers—they cannot perform as reliable bureaucrats. And even when such dramaturgically based knowledge is produced, the bureaucrats described here still fail to express complete confidence in their ability to reach the truth. After all, there is always the possibility that the performance is hollow.

Before analyzing this rite of passing, I first set the stage by contextualizing the conversion process in both the local politico-institutional setting of conversion in Israel and the theoretical frameworks of bureaucracy and passing that are central to this analysis.

### **Bureaucratization of the state-run Jewish conversion field in Israel**

As a part of a multifaceted departure from William James’s (1997) canonical model of religious conversion, scholars have begun to explore conversion in relationship to the politics of the state. Rather than underline the mental and spiritual dimensions of conversion, as James’s model suggests, contemporary studies have demonstrated the multiple ways in which conversion intersects with issues such as citizenship, ethnonationalism, political authority, colonialism, and state bureaucracy (Austin-Broos 2003; Dhalla

1999; Gellner 2005; Hefner 1993; Keane 2002; Luria 1996; Menon 2003; Özyürek 2009; Seeman 2003; Spyer 1996; van der Veer 1996; Viswanathan 1998). As was recently noted in two scholarly publications on Jewish conversion in Israel (Goodman 2008; Neiterman and Rapoport 2009), the field of conversion should be understood in light of this theoretical trajectory. In what follows, I briefly outline the contours of this field, focusing on the processes of bureaucratization that have marked its development.

Jewish conversion in Israel has always been a highly politicized and nationally significant issue—one subsumed under the legislative auspices of the state. Given the lack of separation between religion and state, as well as Israel's Jewish self-definition, the state has historically maintained the prerogative of formulating the set of regulations and arrangements that constitute conversion. Above all, Israel has established a strong connection between the issue of conversion and matters of immigration, naturalization, and registration (see Gavison and Medan 2003:127–135; Neuberger 1996). To the extent that one's status as a Jewish convert, for immigrants and citizens alike, defines how (or, in fact, determines whether) she is granted civil recognition, financial benefits, and religious services (such as marriage and burial), this connection is quite strong. The ongoing debates about the Law of Return (Israel's Jewish repatriation law) and the question "who is a Jew" have strengthened the political salience of this connection (Corinaldi 2001; Elam 2003; Mariner 1999). Augmenting these tensions, the state's control over conversion continues to be shaped by the hegemony of the Orthodox rabbinical establishment. This dynamic has stirred up heated debates among Jewish organizations and religious denominations both within and outside Israel.<sup>5</sup> Aside from issues of state recognition for non-Orthodox conversions, these debates have also provoked internal Orthodox contestation. Generally, though not exclusively, they have unfolded along the ideological lines that separate religious Zionists from Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews—focusing on the meaning and significance of the requirement of *kabalat mitzvot* (the acceptance of religious observance). In particular, these debates have pitted those who seek to ease the religious process of conversion against those who take a hard-line stance on the issue; in doing so, these debates bring to the fore the question of whether the halachic issues implicated in conversion should be subjected to national considerations.<sup>6</sup>

Over the last 40 years, the state has progressively bureaucratized the conversion field and expanded its involvement within it. The state's appropriation of conversion has unfolded in response to two separate incidents interpreted by Jewish Israeli officials and politicians alike in terms of a "national threat." During the 1970s, in the face of a growing rate of intermarriage between (primarily female) non-Jewish volunteers in the kibbutzim and (generally male) Israeli Jews, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel initiated the establishment of several state-run conversion

institutes. These institutes include conversion schools (the formal setting in which converts are expected to attain the relevant knowledge of Jewish law and tradition) as well as religious conversion courts (in which conversion petitions are evaluated by rabbinical judges). The construction of Jewish conversion as a mechanism through which the ills of exogamy can be managed is not unique; numerous Jewish communities throughout history and across regions have framed conversion in an analogous manner (e.g., Fishman-Barack 2006; Tobin 1999). However, the organization of such mechanisms under the umbrella of the state and as a Zionist biopolitical endeavor is a novel development (Krael-Tovi 2012).

What began as a small-scale system in the 1970s in two decades developed into an extensive state-run conversion apparatus designed to confront a much graver national challenge: large-scale, non-Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union (FSU). The opening of the Soviet Union's "iron gates" in the late 1980s set in motion wide-ranging political and organizational processes that facilitated the arrival in Israel of an estimated one million immigrants. Because of a confluence of legislative developments (especially the loosening of eligibility requirements for immigration under the Law of Return) and sociological circumstances (namely, the high rate of intermarriage among Soviet Jewry), this influx has come to include over 300,000 immigrants not deemed Jewish according to the matrilineal principle of Jewish law. Given its unprecedented scope, non-Jewish immigration from the FSU has shaken the already fragile Jewish demographic dominance over non-Jewish minorities; as a result, non-Jewish FSU immigration has been discursively constructed in the political and public spheres as "a national problem." Concomitantly, efforts to solve this "problem" by way of a mass conversion of FSU immigrants have become construed as a "national mission." To the extent that FSU immigration has been structured from the outset in terms of the religious and Zionist imaginary of the "ingathering of the exiles," one can understand why the Israeli state has placed non-Jewish FSU immigrants—rather than other threatening non-Jewish minorities (e.g., Palestinians and foreign workers)—at the center of such nationally driven, inclusive schemes. These discursive constructions have accelerated the organizational processes by which Israel, throughout the 1990s to the 2000s, has bureaucratized the entire field of conversion (Krael-Tovi 2012).<sup>7</sup>

During this process, a conversion administration was founded to supervise the newly established local conversion institutes. A number of other important processes accompanied this development: The Rabbinical Court for Conversion was reorganized on a larger scale, new conversion programs were initiated and incorporated into national bodies such as the Israeli army, and numerous state ministries (including the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption and the Prime Minister's Office) were called on to

share financial and organizational responsibility for these endeavors.<sup>8</sup>

The organizational reform of the conversion field has been accompanied by the emergence of new bureaucratic regulations—the formulation and activation of which have subjected both converts and conversion agents to the mutually interdependent logics of uniformity, classification, and liability. These qualities (or tropes) have influenced how and where conversion procedures are conducted. The macrolevel bureaucratization of the conversion field has shaped the very arenas in which, and modalities through which, the microlevel processes of conversion unfold. As a part of these processes, a more extensive paperwork system has been integrated into the conversion procedure. The introduction of this system has concomitantly shaped both the materiality and language through which conversion applications are articulated, evaluated, and documented. In addition, the spaces in which the range of conversion practices take place have shifted from communal or personal spaces (such as the local synagogue or the living room of a rabbi's home) to more institutional spaces (e.g., courtrooms in state-owned buildings adorned with state symbols). In keeping with these developments, the time frame of the conversion process has also become strictly regulated—delimited to a period of roughly a year.

The macrolevel course of bureaucratization has resulted in another feature that is especially relevant to this discussion: the fragmentation of the conversion process into a series of relatively short bureaucratic encounters between converts and various state agents. From the conversion school to the conversion court and, finally, the immersion bath, the average convert must typically navigate a series of bureaucratic exchanges as her application circulates among a considerably broad array of government agents: teachers, court representatives, rabbinical-court judges, and ritual-bathhouse attendants. The fragmentation of this process clearly shapes the kinds of engagements in which bureaucrats come to know their subjects. For example, conversion judges usually meet with a convert for a short time (usually for less than an hour), and this meeting is held approximately a year after a court representative has opened the convert's conversion portfolio. The court representative usually meets the convert only twice during this period, for roughly twenty to thirty minutes per meeting. The records of these meetings as well as the documents compiled and submitted by the convert make up the bulk of the portfolio that the court judges briefly read before inviting the convert into the courtroom. If that procedure does not result in an approval of conversion, it is repeated a few months later (sometimes with a different panel of judges). If that court hearing results in approval, the convert is then sent to finalize the process by immersing herself in the *mikveh* (ritual bath)—an act that is also supervised by unfamiliar agents. As this brief

description illustrates, converts and conversion agents operate within a fractured bureaucratic routine, devoid of intimate exchange or personal relationships.<sup>9</sup>

My analysis of this series of exchanges is grounded in three years of ethnographic fieldwork (2004–07), during which I aimed to encounter conversion bureaucrats at those junctures at which they encounter converts. For nearly two years, I attended two conversion programs, participating with converts and teachers in the many activities they shared both within and outside class. In addition, I attended 170 different encounters between converts and conversion agents (court representatives, rabbinical-court judges, and ritual-bath attendants) in various locations throughout Israel. The converts I met came from a variety of backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of individuals with which the contemporary conversion apparatus engages. I observed the conversion of Israeli citizens (mostly immigrants from the FSU), foreign nationals (who are temporary residents in Israel and are usually married to Israeli Jews) and tourist-visa holders (generally *gerei tzedeck*—righteous converts—who usually have no Jewish background but are religiously inspired to join the Jewish fold). To supplement the array of informal encounters I had with all participants at different locations of state–subject interface, I conducted 40 interviews with participants from all of the above categories—including converts, senior officials, teachers, and rabbinical judges. Focused on the state side of this interface, particularly the work of local bureaucrats at the level of the conversion court, my analysis in this article rests primarily on the ethnography of the conversion court and interviews with court agents.<sup>10</sup>

To better elaborate the ways in which I analyze the bureaucratic encounter of conversion, I briefly review the anthropological literature on the state and bureaucracy as well as scholarship on performance and passing; it is at the juncture of these bodies of scholarship that the theoretical claims of this article emerge.

### **Bureaucracy, dramaturgy, and the ethnography of the state**

As Peter B. Evans et al. (1985) have observed, over the last three decades the state has been “brought back in” to scholarly analysis. In their oft-cited work, these authors frame the concept of the state as a coherent and bounded political entity (see Mitchell 1991:77). However, the notion that prevails in contemporary academic literature understands “the state” as highly fragmented and processual—as a “cultural artifact” (Steinmetz 1999) or a disaggregated assemblage of ideas, images, practices, agents, and apparatuses (Aretxaga 2003; Li 2005:385; Nuijten 2003:15; Sharma and Gupta 2006:9). In this literature, the state emerges as an inherently elusive entity (Brown 2006:191; Trouillot 2001), whose power must be both critically investigated and disen-

chanted (Abrams 2006). By aligning itself with these kinds of analyses, anthropology's position within this multidisciplinary endeavor has been no less than crucial. Veering from the functionalist assumptions of early political anthropology, anthropologists have grown mindful of the complexities of both defining and ethnographically investigating the state (among many others, see Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Trouillot 2001; Yang 2005). In their attempts to unpack the multilayered and translocal entity that is the state (Gupta 2006), many anthropologists have come to study the quotidian and locally articulated dynamics of bureaucracy (Das 2004; Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Fuglerud 2004; Gupta 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2001:17; Heyman 1995; Yang 2005; Yoltar 2009). After all, it is within and through the mundane activities of bureaucratic institutions that the state ritually ratifies itself, regulates the identity of its subjects (Herzfeld 1992), reproduces itself by the activation of its symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1998), and, ultimately, takes on life, sense, and meaning for those who locally encounter and embody its diffuse forms of power (Sharma and Gupta 2006:8). This analytic perspective on bureaucracy has yielded nuanced and insightful ethnographic accounts of the sociocultural dynamics that mutually surround and constitute bureaucratic encounters. The discourse on corruption (Gupta 2006), the symbolic roots of the state's ever-pervading formalism (Herzfeld 1992), the "thought-work" underpinning the engagement of local bureaucrats with state systems of categorization (Heyman 1995), and the material production of authority (Feldman 2008; Hull 2003)—all of which are integral to understanding bureaucracy—have been productively theorized. However, the ways in which the exchange of information is organized in bureaucratic encounters have thus far escaped anthropological attention. There are, I should note, a small number of studies from which one can indirectly draw insight into these exchanges. This is how I read, for example, Erica Weiss's study (2010) depicting the ways in which the Israeli army's conscience committee (the institution responsible for evaluating applications for exemption) compels those who claim recognition as "pacifists" to demonstrate the sincerity of their stated morality. Another example is Cagri Yoltar's (2009) study of the Turkish health care system, which demonstrates how bureaucrats evaluate cases of deception as they strive to verify the poverty level of candidates for benefit eligibility. By subjecting the candidates to a set of governmental practices, these state agents aim to enhance the legibility of their subjects. Both studies document how bureaucrats struggle to develop strategies to access otherwise inaccessible information about the subjects they encounter. However, neither of these studies foregrounds or theorizes the questions I address in this article. A brief review of the analytical framework of dramaturgy and my use of it here helps clarify how I address that lacuna.

The vocabulary associated with dramaturgy, which speaks of "performance," "theatricality," and "role play," is not entirely absent from the scholarly literature on the state. However, the use of this vocabulary in this scholarship has either been cursory in nature or has overlooked Erving Goffman's influential models of social interaction as performance. Clifford Geertz, for example, in his *Negara* (1980:121), traces the etymological roots of the word *state* only to discover associations of splendor, pomp, and display. It is on these kinds of associations that some scholars have focused in their writings on the state with regard to the "spectacles," "visual dramatizations," and "public performances" embedded in both rituals and everyday social life (Geertz 1980; Handelman 2004; Nugent 2010:698; Taussig 1997; Taylor 1997). Indexing another analytical direction, *performance* is oftentimes deployed within scholarship on the state in connection with the notion of "performativity," as theorized by Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. This framework underpins analyses of a diverse array of state-related contexts, such as the hypertheatricality of national terror (Taylor 1997), recursive bureaucratic procedures (Sharma and Gupta 2006:13), the "ritual" of bribe giving (Gupta 2006:217), and the signature of "neoliterary" women on state documents (Cody 2009). In accounts that draw closer to the Goffmanian model employed here, public committees have been explored through the distinction between "front region" and "back region" (Buur 2001), the material surroundings of government offices have been analyzed in terms of a bureaucratic presentation of self (Goodsell 1977), and, finally, power relations between officials and citizens have been described as structuring practices of impression management (Ferguson 1984:97–104; Nuijten 2003:17).

My analysis employs a similar vocabulary; however, it differs from the aforementioned scholarship by more fully and explicitly engaging the implications of a dramaturgical framework for understanding state bureaucratic practices. By developing such an approach, I do not intend to discount the relevance of other performance frameworks to the ethnographic study of the state. However, my focus lies elsewhere: on how a Goffmanian perspective—as a perspective on the everyday interactive management of information about selves and situations (Goffman 1959)—can shed light on the interface of state institutions and subjects. Given the emphasis placed in ethnographies of the state on the realm of everyday understandings and interactions, the relative absence of this perspective in the literature is remarkable. My goal is not simply to demonstrate how, under the institutional canopy of the state (and everywhere else, as the early Goffman would contend), individuals perform selves, project definitions of situations, manage impressions, and pass in front of each other. Rather, I am interested in considering how the set of behaviors, techniques, and principles associated with performance and

passing takes shape and becomes implicated in the processes through which bureaucrats come to know the subjects they encounter.

Although a comprehensive review of Goffman's work on dramaturgy or the ongoing scholarly discussions about it is beyond the scope of this article (for such elaboration, see Burns 1992; Lloyd 1999; Manning 1992; Tseñlon 1992a, 1992b), it is necessary for the sake of my argument to emphasize two important points. First, dramaturgy can be perceived, as Goffman himself suggests, as the "grammar and syntax" of social interaction (Burns 1992:25). As such, it can also be thought of as a microsociology of interpersonal knowledge—a grammar of signs, clues, models, images, and facts through which individual performers, performance teams, and audiences foster and negotiate information about both selves and the definitions of the situations in which these selves are implicated. In other words, through a fine-grained analysis of the conditions under which people reveal, conceal, and decode facts or inform and misinform others, Goffman's work demonstrates just how much the theoretical framework of performance can reveal about human interaction.

Second, in what Alvin Gouldner describes as Goffman's sociology of "co-presence"—the sociology of "what happens when people are in one another's presence" (1970:378)—it is the appearance of a self, rather than that self's "true essence," that is of critical import. For Goffman, the "mask" is integral to the self who wears it; staging a role does not imply a masquerade, and the distinction between front and back regions is not necessarily analogous to that between truth and falsehood.<sup>11</sup> The individual is depicted as a performer whether his or her performance is spontaneous or carefully planned. Located on a continuum between cynicism and sincerity, a performer can shift between or even incorporate both positions. While Goffman maintains this inherently multifaceted understanding of performance in relation to both selves and their sincerity, he also stresses "the structural place of sincerity in the drama of events" (1959:71). Such a position reinforces the notion that believable performances are built on trust in the sincerity of performers.

Developed within the context of Goffman's (1963:79–104) dramaturgical framework but no longer limited to it (Ahmed 1999; Renfrow 2004; Sanchez and Schlossberg 2001), the category of "passing" lends itself well to these flexible conceptual contours. "Passing" is a broad category that includes a wide range of practices through which individuals perform their identities and are classified by others—processes that generally signal the transgression of social boundaries. The concept pertains primarily, but not exclusively, to the strategic practices of individuals with discredited or marginalized identities in matters of conceal-

ment, elusion, and disguise (identities often construed in terms of physicality, race, sex, and gender; see Ginsberg 1996; Norton 1997). However, the notion of "passing" has been extended to include practices of positioning in an increasingly broad variety of contexts (Kidd 2004; Rueda and Mehan 1986). In each case, however, it is through the interactional encoding and decoding of legible signs (Maltz 1998) that individuals convey information about themselves and claim recognition of who they are, wish they were, or pretend to be. Like *performance*, *passing* refers to the set of practices associated with the management and communication of information about identities in fields of visibility. Like performance, it can be unwittingly practiced or highly calculated; it can be integrated into processes of self-identification or deployed pragmatically. This is why passing, like performance, often provokes anxiety about insincerity and impersonation; as Amy Robinson notes, "The 'problem' of identity, a problem to which passing owes the very possibility of its practice, is predicated on the false promise of the visible as an epistemological guarantee" (Ginsberg 1996:4).

The dramaturgical framework employed in this case study not only emerged inductively from my observations of the interactions between converts and conversion agents but also developed out of my own position, experience, and interactions as an ethnographer. As I moved between the different locations that constituted my field site, I came to be understood by both converts and conversion agents as a crucial "informant." In Goffman's terms, I was the "go-between" or "mediator" (1959:149)—moving between otherwise well-demarcated regions and gaining access in each of them to "behind the scenes" information. Through my fieldwork in the conversion schools, I knew about the preparations converts undertake to learn to pass as "true converts." At the same time, through my observations of the bureaucratic work that takes place within conversion courts, I came to understand the practical knowledge necessary to conversion performances: what kind of performance is passable and what kind is not. As a result of my ability to move between these sites, I was often placed in, and thus forced to negotiate, the role of informant. In particular, court agents often attempted to mobilize my ethnographic knowledge for their own agenda of evaluating performances—attempts that I chose to decline. These requests for information, as well as my decisions regarding what information to share with whom, provoke obvious moral and political questions for anthropologists. But, with regard to the issues relevant to this study, it is important to note that these dynamics sharpened my understanding of the bureaucratic field of conversion: the extent to which conversion agents are preoccupied with the management of information about the subjects they encounter.

## The conversion performance

How could Rabbi Cohen know this convert? How could he know if she is really sincere? What do you think—that he has some kind of mind-reading technology?

—Rabbi Peres, a senior official of the Rabbinical Court for Conversion

We really don't know as much about converts as people think we do. This is why the convert must show us the right signs and present the figure—and I am extra cautious not to take it even further and say “the image”—of “a real convert.” Even the convert's friends have to think she is observant.

—Rabbi Bar, a rabbinical judge

During my fieldwork, more than a few conversion court agents expressed their painful awareness of how imperfect and contingent their ability is to “really” know converts. “Tell me: How can I know if someone is ready for conversion in one hour?” an agent once asked me rhetorically. “I never met this person before,” another confided, “I've only read about her in a file, so there is no way I can know for sure who she really is.” Such concerns are continuously augmented by the search for and preoccupation with sincerity—hardly a unique feature of conversions (religious or otherwise) conducted in political and state settings (Fitzpatrick 2005; Kharkhordin 1999:48–49; Luria 1996; van der Veer 1996).<sup>12</sup> This metalinguistic norm of sincerity (Keane 2002) implies a binary division between an honest convert and a cynical one—a division underwritten by anxieties regarding imposture.<sup>13</sup> In fact, for some of the court agents with whom I spoke, distrust and suspicion about imposture mark the point of departure of their work; such concerns constitute its very premises.<sup>14</sup>

In their different ways, the two court agents cited above reflect these concerns. Rabbi Peres, in his somewhat Foucauldian language of “technology,” calls into question the prospects for a successful evaluation of a convert's genuineness; Rabbi Bar goes even further by signaling how court agents have come to manage this concern—by relying on the semiotics of the conversion performance. Clearly lacking “a mind-reading technology,” he portrays bureaucrats as dependent on what might be described as “a technology of performance.” This reliance on signs, as I show below, positions the convert as a performer—one who, to successfully pass as a “real convert,” must present to bureaucrats “the correct” religious signs. Because Orthodox Jewish conversion places a priority on practical religious adherence in everyday life (observing dietary laws, religious holidays, etc.), these signs should indicate precisely such an adherence. The conversion procedure, understood here as a conversion performance, revolves therefore around the presentation of a subject who undergoes the significant religious rite

of passage of becoming an observant Jew. During this performance, which I refer to as a “rite of passing,” the convert is expected to communicate—through her conduct, style of clothing, and both bodily and verbal language—the legible signs of a meaningful religious change. She must perform her biography to signal who she was, is, and intends to be. Hardly a unilateral strategy of the convert, this rite is, in fact, the result of a series of intricate and somewhat covert forms of collaboration between the convert and various conversion agents; the two parties function together as a “performance team.” Indeed, to a great extent, as I show in the following discussion, bureaucrats are the ones who construct and sustain this rite. Ultimately, they are the ones who validate it.

*Validation* indexes two disparate meanings here. On the one hand, it signals a trial-like authentication of the performance, with the aim of substantiating “truth” and exposing “deceit.” On the other hand, *validation* points to the interactive process through which court agents facilitate the encoding and decoding of proper signs. Through this process, court agents partake in the very production of knowledge that, tautologically enough, they will later come to validate. Both meanings coexist to simultaneously produce and ensure the legitimacy of the conversion performance and, consequently, of bureaucratic knowledge.

## Validation: Investigation of a multisited performance

Sometimes, to explain the conversion process to converts, I paraphrase the saying about justice: that it “should not only be done, but should manifestly be seen to be done.” Conversion too must not only be done but must also be seen to be done.

—Rabbi Levi, a rabbinical judge

Conversion court bureaucrats idealize the pedagogical function of the conversion court—as an essential mediator in the life-changing journey that converts undergo. This is why court agents struggle with the implications of conversion as a juridical procedure and also why they tend to dissociate their labor from legal markers (such as the presence of attorneys or use of legal jargon). At the same time, as Yehuda Goodman (2008) demonstrates, because of the enactment within the court of governmental standards of professionalism, expertise, and objectivity, the conversion procedure is constituted as a trial-like investigation of the convert's performance. Although I agree with Goodman, I argue that one should consider this trial-like investigation not only through the theoretical lens of governmentality but also through that lens's intersection with the frameworks of performance and passing. To the extent that governmental mechanisms construct the conversion

procedure as a performance, the bureaucratic encounter captures not only what Foucault describes as “the art of government” but also what Goffman describes as “the art of impression management.”

The conversion procedure, like other legal processes (for an elaboration, see Barnes 1994:37–42), functions as a ritual affirmation of the value of “truth”—an affirmation that is, in fact, grounded in the working premise that people commonly lie.<sup>15</sup> Because court agents meticulously seek to reveal and differentiate between the traces of lies and core truths of the convert’s self-(re)presentations, they test the accuracy—or at least, the reasonability—of the information they derive from this performance. In doing so, court bureaucrats become akin to “hunters and gatherers” of legible signs—the crumbs of visible and assessable information that the convert scatters throughout the conversion process and, ultimately, in the courtroom. By necessity, these dynamics position the convert as a performer.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the series of bureaucratic encounters of the conversion process, the convert is encouraged to share her biography and demonstrate how intimately interwoven her rite of passing is within her life. In effect, rather than simply permitted to speak, the convert is obligated to do so—silence is a dubious option. Also, rather than merely write her conversion narrative, the convert is expected to perform it. As a convert once told a court representative, “I don’t have a letter—I am myself the letter.” Both in writing and through speech, the convert is expected to describe what motivated her to convert, how she has thus far experienced and managed the changes in her life, and how she envisions her future growth as a Jew. The written narrative is submitted at or prior to the first meeting with the court representative; after the meeting, it is placed in the convert’s file to be consulted at all future stages of the process. At each of these stages, the convert’s narrative is construed as an act of self-witnessing—as a text that must be assessed for its credibility.

At the beginning of the court proceeding, the conversion story is read aloud (usually by a court agent). The pace of the narrative and its aesthetics, poetics, flow, and intonation must all cohere. The court bureaucrats frequently compare the written version to the spoken one, looking for possible cracks and contradictions. They listen carefully to the vocabulary employed, the tone of the storytelling, and the body language of the speaker. Does the vocabulary seem too rich, local, or elegant for newcomers? Does the personal letter seem artificial, as though written by someone else? Does the convert speak too quickly or avoid eye contact—signs that she might simply have memorized her narrative. Sometimes the content itself seems “too good to be true,” expressing too much religious passion or too rapid a transformation.<sup>17</sup> As judges asked one convert, “What do you mean that your soul led you to synagogue; and why did you ‘immediately feel at home’ there?” On another occasion,

rabbinical judges questioned the possibility of religious faith in a convert’s upbringing—how it was possible for her to grow up in a communist–atheist environment and yet claim to have “always believed in an omnipresent God.” No aspect of the performance is taken at face value.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the convert is expected to perform for court bureaucrats her readiness to embody the conversion requirements. It is essential that female converts adhere to strict rules of modesty and that male converts wear a *kippa* (skullcap). Following the hearing, when the rabbinical judges discuss the case in private, they often dissect these aspects of appearance. For example, judges will frequently raise the question of whether the skullcap “sits well on the convert’s head” (i.e., whether he seems to wear it regularly) and whether the convert’s outfit appears natural; as one judge observed during a discussion, “It is clear that she really doesn’t know how religious women dress.” In court, the “art of visibility” may even extend to the religious objects converts carry with them. For example, court agents may ask to see how worn the convert’s *siddur* (prayer book) or blessing booklet appears; for the convert to pass as truthful, her religious artifacts must pass as used.<sup>19</sup>

The convert must also demonstrate a practical knowledge of the daily religious routine and overall manner of everyday Jewish life. In the words of Rabbi Nachum, a rabbinical judge who explained to me the logic of assessment that underwrites this emphasis, “Blessings, prayers, and other practical issues are good indicators for us because they are measurable and detectable.” In this vein, court bureaucrats will often ask the convert to recite blessings and prayers—listening for their “authenticity” and thereby determining whether they occupy an integral part of the convert’s life. They also ask converts a series of questions about their daily routine. As some court agents shared with me, they have developed and professionalized their methods for acquiring such information—methods that enable them, so they hope, to better distinguish between credible and untrustworthy accounts. The following excerpt, taken from an exchange between a court representative and a young female convert from the FSU, demonstrates this skillfulness:<sup>20</sup>

Reuven (the court representative): Do you do kiddush and havdalah?<sup>21</sup>

Sveta: Yes, and I also light candles and go to synagogue.

R: When did you light candles this past Shabbat?

S: 7:20 p.m.

R: When does Shabbat end?

S: 8:15 p.m.

R: How did you know this?



S: I checked it on the Internet.

R: Tell me how you do havdalah.

S: I hold and light the havdalah candle, fill up a glass of wine, and let it pour over a bit.

R: How long does it take you?

S: Five minutes and then I say the havdalah blessing.

R: Before or after the meal?

S: After.

The order of these questions is not arbitrary; by beginning with yes or no questions about the conduct of religious practices, and then asking for descriptions of those practices, Reuven skillfully arranges his questions to determine whether the convert is lying about her knowledge of Jewish ritual conduct.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this thorough interrogation, court agents are still aware of how limited their knowledge of the convert really is and, thus, how susceptible they are to deception. This is why they increase their “field of vision”—outside the court—to compensate for their own blind spots; they construct the entire conversion process as a “multisited performance,” designating people within both the religious community and bureaucratic institutions as significant audiences. This logic is well illustrated by Rabbi Dahan, one of the rabbinical judges: “Whatever the convert tries to sell us won’t pass. We have ‘people on the ground’ who tell us how she’s really doing. Their impressions are invaluable to us.” Similarly, Rabbi Tzadok, another judge, explained that “because I can’t get to know the person in an hour, whether it’s because the convert is too excited or simply dishonest, we must have people who report to us.”

Conversion teachers, the manager of the convert’s synagogue, the religious “host family” that tutors the convert during Shabbat and high holidays, the court representative—and sometimes even anonymous informers—all participate in the “conversion theater of knowledge.” This theater culminates with the conversion court hearing, at which point all of the above serve as witnesses (in writing, over the telephone, or in person) to the reliability of the conversion performance. In the words of one religious woman who hosted a particular convert, “I saw her totally immerse herself in religious life. I can tell she really did it with purpose”; in another case, a teacher told the court that “[the convert] was doing well in class, but to tell you the truth, I was never really 100 percent convinced that her conversion went beyond that”; and in a third case, the synagogue manager wrote the following in a letter read aloud in court: “I can attest to seeing her in synagogue during services a number of times, even in the winter on

rainy nights.” At best, all testimonies converge to support a coherent conversion performance (whether or not they coalesce in approval); in cases in which there are discrepancies among these voices, the judges cross-check them. It is important to emphasize that the individuals who testify are not professional experts. Rather, their (differentiated) authority derives from their role as spectators of the conversion performance at junctures deemed critical to the conversion process. Even I, although a secular Jew (and clearly positioned as such in the field), was asked to speak in the capacity of an informant, or informal witness, precisely because I observed individuals during the conversion process.

This overtly intrusive form of validation fosters a tense relationship between court bureaucrats and converts. However, it is grounded in, and necessarily depends on, a subtle teamwork. The bureaucrats are the ones who construct the conversion process as a multisited performance. They establish its rules and shape the contours of what will count as a proper persona. Other social mediators, as described above, help them to facilitate that performance and report the impressions it creates. Such a collaboration is necessary to both manage the flow of information between the parties and project the conversion procedure as a rite of passage.

The importance of this collaborative dynamic is most clearly visible when it breaks down. In those extremely rare cases during my fieldwork when converts or their spouses disrupted the dramaturgical routine, the court hearing fell apart. Such instances left the rabbinical judges both embarrassed and frustrated. Bereft of valid information, they were incapable of arriving at what they considered, or hoped to be, a reasonable enough conversion performance—that is, one capable of reinforcing the appearance of a halachically valid procedure. This was the case, for example, when a couple, a convert and a Jew, opted for silence during their hearing. This decision provoked numerous failed attempts by the rabbinical judges to understand the meaning of the couple’s silence and extricate themselves from its void. In another case, when a convert repeatedly attested to his deep acceptance of the Orthodox way of life but failed to make this change suitably visible in the correct arenas, the rhetoric of the judges left little room for doubt about the symbiotic nature of the rite of passing. One of the judges, in a belittling reprimand to the convert, told him, “You have to understand that we have a problem, and we need to solve it together. Your friend never saw you pray or lay *tefilin* [phylacteries]. We need to put a recommendation on file. Please help us. We’re embarrassed and need someone who knows you well. Please help us so we can help you.”

### Validation: The joint dramatization of the conversion procedure

In another form of subtle collaboration, court agents validate the information they acquire from converts by

allowing the conversion performance to unfold as a joint dramatization. In this sense, court agents not only establish and evaluate the performance, as I argue above, but also participate in its composition and staging. In doing so, they partake in the creation of the very impression that the subject makes on them. Rather than require the convert to “convince” the judges, one can argue, these bureaucrats help create the signs that they themselves must later construe as convincing. To be sure, the process of validation as a joint dramatization is hardly haphazard; rather, it constitutes a highly institutionalized, if unspoken, strategy—one built on a collaborative effort that hinges on interaction and mutual interpretation.

This dynamic is made most apparent during the convert’s preliminary meetings with the court representative prior to the final court proceeding. During these meetings, the convert rehearses, memorizes, and revises her part, as if conducting an audition for a role that is already in progress. Throughout this rehearsal, the convert is aided in no small part by the court representative’s verbal and bodily cues. The representative tutors the convert: By asking rhetorical questions and offering hints, he indicates how the performance can be improved. To further expand the dramaturgical metaphor, the court representative, and later the rabbinical judges, can be understood as “stagehands” or “codirectors” in this play.

Of particular interest in this respect is the first encounter between the representative and the convert. Because this encounter takes place early in the process, it usually focuses on the basic motivation for conversion and the life story in which it is embedded (as opposed to the examination of religious practice that will come later). Precisely because this is the first meeting, it oftentimes constitutes what may be understood as “a test run” for the front stage. At this early point, many converts are still not equipped with the necessary tools for, and practical information about, the conversion process: Though they have learned about the process from their friends, teachers, and the Internet (and, in the cases I followed, an anthropologist), they are still not entirely sure about the persona they are expected to present. “Should I say that I have a boyfriend? I am afraid that if I do, the court representative will think I’m not serious about conversion.” “Is it too kitsch to write that I want to be part of the Jewish nation forever?” “How religious should I tell him I want to become?” “What should I wear?” These are some of the questions with which converts struggle prior to the first meeting. Not yet proficient performers, converts bring to the first encounter “drafts” of their presentation, including mistakes, unrefined narrative options, and unrehearsed bodily movements. Judges may use these “drafts” against the convert in later stages of the conversion process to demonstrate inconsistencies in her self-presentation. However, in many cases, the court representative responds to

such “drafts” by “editing” them—reorganizing, filtering, and rewriting them into a more coherent and “passable” narrative. The relational and dialogic nature of these narratives is especially compelling in light of the trial-like context in which they are established; whereas it is reasonable to expect attorneys to influence and structure their clients’ accounts to better align them with court rhetoric (e.g., Good 2011:101), it is surprising that bureaucrats—responsible for evaluating the presentation of the converts’ selves—in fact collaboratively “rewrite,” or “edit” the converts’ self-presentations. Take, for example, the following bureaucratic exchange:

Shlomo: Why do you want to convert?

Yulia: Because I want to live in Israel.

S: So what? It is not a requirement. What do you lack?

Y: I want, I want to be a standard Jew. Why do you ask why? It is obvious why.

S: So, practically, you just want to be like everybody else, that’s all. [He and the conversion teacher look displeased with Y.]

Y: No, not only because of that. I also want to keep Shabbat, Mitzvoth.

S: [Smiles] Oh, OK, so next time begin with this.

Y: [Apologetically] I am just very nervous.

In addition to these early interventions in the conversion narrative, court bureaucrats also influence the concluding performance. During the final stages of the court proceeding (usually after the conversion petition has been approved), the rabbinical judges conduct a ritualized testimonial of faith—a climactic moment whose emotional effect on the convert these judges will later tautologically construe as evidence of her sincerity. From what rabbinical judges told me, they often reach this moment when doubt still lingers in the air. In the words of one judge, “Most of our decisions are made within the gray area.” For these bureaucrats, the final conversion ritual is a moment of grace—a moment of order and reassurance within a process marked by ambiguity and doubt. It is a moment that creates for them the possibility of what Theodore W. Jennings (1982) describes as “ritual knowledge” and what Adam Seligman calls a “space of a shared ‘could be’” (2010:12): a potentially meaningful and truthful rite of passage. As Oskar Verkaarik writes regarding the effect of Dutch naturalization ceremonies on the cynical, local civil servants who organize and perform them, “The local bureaucrats remake the ritual, but the ritual also transforms them . . . thanks to a form that does not allow irony or ridicule to continue” (2010:70, 78).

The power of ritual knowledge in the validation of the conversion performance is clearly illustrated by the case of one young couple (Nikol, a Swiss woman, and Ori, her Jewish Israeli spouse) who struggled to convince the judges to authorize the woman's conversion. The judges were especially concerned with the couple's level of observance, passion, and persistence. At one point during the discussion, Nikol asked permission to speak: "We are not here to say that everything is perfect and the sun is always shining on us. But we do have the will and we really try hard. That is why we are here." The couple was asked to wait outside while the judges made their decision, during which they articulated their dissatisfaction: "I just don't see sparks in her eyes," one concluded. Eventually, the panel decided to allow the couple to proceed to the next stage of the process—the testimonial of faith. However, they delayed the ritual immersion of the woman until written confirmation of further religious progress could be submitted by the host family and others in the couple's community.<sup>23</sup> After informing the overwhelmed couple of this decision, the judges asked Nikol to stand and recite the final pledge:

Rabbi Dan: [Instructing her] Repeat after me, "I take it upon myself."

Nikol: I take it upon myself.

Rabbi D: To keep all the mitzvot.

N: To keep all the mitzvot.

Rabbi D: To which women are obligated.

N: To which women are obligated.

Rabbi D: And I believe in one God which is not flesh.

N: And I believe in one God which is not flesh.

Rabbi D: Congratulations. We are delighted to welcome you into the Jewish nation. Now you can say "Sh'ma Yisrael" [Hear O Israel].<sup>24</sup>

Nikol could hardly pronounce the words; her voice was quivering, and her intense crying seemed to sweep over her entire body. Finally, the prayer slowly came out. Ori shed tears. I did as well. The judges looked pleased, and after the couple left the room, one of them said to his colleagues, "You see, even in Switzerland, the snow can sometimes melt." "Yes," replied another, "this is the spark I was looking for."

By facilitating this moment, the judges not only built on the pedagogical strength of rituals, fostering (or so they hoped) a lasting effect on the soon-to-be Jewish convert, but they also helped elicit another legible sign of the rite of passage. The sun may not have been shining on Nikol and

Ori. Yet, through the performance of this ritual, the snow that covered them "melted" away. With this climactic moment, the judges finalized the bureaucratic procedure and moved on to the next case—their trust in the conversion performance reaffirmed. The ritual worked.

### Conclusion: Bureaucracy/dramaturgy, power/knowledge

This case study enables one, I argue, not only to theorize the bureaucratic encounter as a performance but also to understand how critical performance can be to the exchange of information about subjects entailed therein. Such a perspective sheds light on the fragile dynamics that underwrite the production of bureaucratic knowledge and, consequently, state power. In particular, by exploring how dramaturgical principles organize the bureaucratic encounters that constitute conversion in Israel, I have aimed to demonstrate the simultaneous strength and weakness of the conversion court as a bureaucratic institution. Such an analysis problematizes and ventures beyond a totalizing description of state power/knowledge.

To a significant extent, scholarly discussions of state power have been framed in terms of the Foucauldian notion of "power/knowledge." In this vein, state power has been influentially conceptualized in relationship to such factors as "informational capital" (Bourdieu 1998:45), "synoptic vision" (Scott 1998), and "investigative modalities" (Cohn 1996:15). It is not surprising, then, that political rupture, as described by David Nugent, is also analyzed through the prism of "a crisis in power/knowledge"—a crisis in which "the government [does] not occupy a privileged position of knowledge and understanding from which it [can] manipulate and manage the social order" (2010:693). The embrace of the notion of "power/knowledge" is also evident in the abundant literature on Western macrolevel epistemologies and technologies of knowledge, such as statistics and cartography, which are often employed by state apparatuses (Alonso and Starr 1987; Appadurai 1993; Desrosières 1998:147; Hacking 1990, 1991; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Rose 1990:6–7, 1999:197–232).

The bureaucratic encounter—in which information about individual subjects is produced by individual bureaucrats—can be understood as a microlevel arena comparable to that of macrolevel state processes—where the management of information about entire populations is conducted. However, the ethnographic analysis of the conversion procedure, or performance, in contemporary Israel presents a twist on the dominant scholarly narrative regarding the state's power to know. In particular, this case study demonstrates how the state's exercise of power/knowledge is both grounded in a structure and entangled in a set of practices that reveal the contingencies of bureaucratic encounters. Bureaucrats emerge from this

study as limited in their capacity to know subjects and dependent on the willingness of these subjects to play their role in the joint exchange of dramaturgical information.

This article is not the first to rethink state power/knowledge; however, the dramaturgical framework employed here is novel, as are the insights that emerge from it. In his *States of Inquiry* (2006), Oz Frankel criticizes the predominance of the Foucauldian panopticon in scholarship on the state. He writes, "Too much of the recent scholarly discussion about knowledge and the state has been haunted by the specter of the panopticon" (Frankel 2006:3). As an alternative, Frankel presents a rich historical account of what he calls "print statism" (2006:2) in 19th-century Britain and the United States, calling attention to the fragmented and conditional nature of large-scale state projects of documentation; the state's engagement with knowledge, he concludes, does not unavoidably entail the extension of its power. Matthew Hull's (2008) ethnographic account of how bureaucrats and residents in contemporary Islamabad handle graphic artifacts presents another compelling critique in this direction. In this account, Hull demonstrates how the governmental technologies intended to produce legibility in fact create opacity. He goes on to convincingly explain why Bruno Latour's "oligopticon," rather than Foucault's panopticon, is a more appropriate framework with which to analyze these dynamics. As he writes, "Latour points out what most bureaucrats understand: Administrative techniques do not converge in a unified set of representations. They generate ensembles of artifacts of limited and differing perspectives that are often very difficult to commensurate" (Hull 2008:509).

By analyzing how and why conversion bureaucrats in Israel elaborate, participate in, and rely on "technologies of performance," this article contributes to this critical discussion. First, framing the bureaucratic encounter in terms of performance allows one to both recognize the epistemological shortcomings of bureaucrats and understand the institutional mechanisms through which they seek to compensate, albeit partially, for these shortcomings. In other words, the ways in which bureaucrats come to know their subjects as performers promise to reveal a great deal, both about how little they otherwise know about converts and about how imperfect the modality of dramaturgical knowledge really is. Second, an understanding of the operation of this modality reveals the extent to which the ability of bureaucrats to perform their authority hinges on their participation in a collaborative performance. The dramaturgical perspective, in other words, allows for the identification of reciprocity, exchange, and teamwork even when governmental logic and a seemingly unilateral power relationship mark the interaction between state agents and subjects. Without ignoring either the dependence of subjects on the decisions of bureaucrats or the power of bureaucrats to discipline converts through this performance, this analysis

foregrounds what is usually overlooked in analyses of bureaucratic encounters—their symbiotic nature.

No doubt, the invasive, aggressive, and interrogative forms of validation described here are integral to the bureaucratic state as well as to the governmental power it exercises over its subjects. And yet this power is anchored in the great susceptibility of bureaucrats as "knowers." Even if the conversion procedure is a performance—or a powerful spectacle—of state governmentality, this procedure calls attention to the structurally inherent lack that facilitates it. Precisely because the conversion court bureaucrats are aware of how little they "really know" about their subjects, they construct the procedure as a multisited performance and overtly rely on the epistemological authority of visibility; but the array of legible signs that converts provide bureaucrats only partially alleviates the inherent weakness of these agents as knowers; unable to fully distinguish between true and false converts, bureaucrats can at best distinguish between convincing and unconvincing performers.

Converts are the ones who pay the price of the bureaucrats' weakness; this weakness is precisely what places converts within an extended field of visibility, in which they are all the more subjected to regimenting gazes. And yet the conversion performance hardly constitutes the all-seeing and unseen panopticon. It is anchored in the agentive capacities imputed to converts as objects and subjects of knowledge—as those able to "pass." Whereas in the contexts of national terror described by Diana Taylor (1997) and Nugent, the performances of everyday acts of allegiance are conducted at the nexus of what the latter characterizes as "a set of ever-present, mutually interlocking gazes of conformity" (2010:695), the conversion performance discussed here takes place within a number of localized and relatively bounded arenas in which the agentive convert must consciously make her rite of passage visible. And if, in the case study presented by Hull, "rather than one, there are two observers in the tower and the prisoners know that these observers are not looking at them in the same way" (2008:509), in the case study presented here, the "prisoner" (i.e., the convert) is provided the tools and training to learn when she is observed and how she should appear. In a way, bureaucrats confer on the convert the power to mindfully navigate the circumstances in which she performs; the convert thus exercises a measure of agency over how to conceal, omit, color, emphasize, and otherwise "play with" the relevant information about her self. Once the convert is positioned as performer, the stage is open, to a certain degree, for her own choices about the enactment of her role.

In addition, the various spectators dispersed throughout the fields of visibility are far more than simply agents who exercise disciplinary power over converts; they are mediators of legible signs. Bureaucrats are dependent on these mediators to validate not only the information they attain

but also their own authority; by accumulating, comparing, and then documenting the signs that these mediators provide to the court, conversion bureaucrats pass both morally and professionally as those who strive for, and even discover, the truth. In a sense, the significance of the various spectators lies more in supporting the authoritative performance of court bureaucrats than in inspecting the convert's performance.

This dynamic implies that the bureaucrats are not only positioned at the center of the panopticon (i.e., that they gather observations about converts) but that they are also themselves the potential objects of its gazes. One can think in this particular Israeli setting both of ultra-Orthodox, Haredi rabbinical figures who examine the religious-halachic strictness of the rabbinical court and of state institutions (i.e., the Prime Minister's Office and Immigrant Absorption Ministry) that are deeply invested in the actualization of the "national mission" of conversion. Under the observation of all these actors, the national mission the conversion bureaucrats pursue must be deemed publicly reliable. When the subject "passes" as a true convert, she also enables the court bureaucrats to politically "pass as" loyal to their moral, religious, and professional obligations. In a sense, the convert's religious performance carries the burden of this politics of knowledge; it provides the legible signs both for and of state bureaucrats. That is in part why the agents go to such great lengths to sustain the convert's performance. It is also why the employment of an array of disciplinary and investigatory methods can best be understood not as a mechanism of sheer governmentality but, rather, as its dramatized performance. It is a performance in which bureaucrats manage the impression they leave on different audiences—from the converts and witnesses in their immediate presence to the present-absent political and religious authorities who gaze at the court from their various locations of power.

The subtle forms of collaboration described in this article guarantee the success of the rite of passing and enable a production of information that may not otherwise be available to bureaucrats. Other studies that construe the state as a collaborator demonstrate how mutually beneficial collaboration can be for all involved (e.g., Perry 2009). But, for court bureaucrats, the risk implicated in collaboration is its potential to make them increasingly dependent on converts. As demonstrated throughout the article, the performance must be intricately coordinated and synchronized; the performance is susceptible to failure as well as to the converts' inability or refusal to play their role.

Like any other bureaucratic encounter, the conversion performance is particular, as is the political—in this case, the biopolitical—context in which it is situated. The ideological framework of the "national mission" and the religious politics of Jewish conversion are both factors that

pressure court bureaucrats to subtly collaborate with converts in both producing impressions of valid conversions and performing themselves as "knowers." However, this case study tells a larger story about the possible role of dramaturgy in bureaucratic encounters (beyond state bureaucracies in particular) and the microsocial dynamics of power/knowledge. It is a story about the contingencies of bureaucratic knowledge production—one that reveals the institutional mechanism through which these contingencies are creatively managed. Ultimately, it is a story about the practices, concerns, and assumptions of bureaucrats who "just want to know their subjects—that's all."

## Notes

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1. Because Jewish identity is governed according to the principle of matrilineal descent, the vast majority of Jewish converts, both within and outside Israel, are female (for elaboration, see Hacker 2009). For this reason, I use female rather than male pronouns throughout the article when referring, in general, to converts.

2. *Subjects* is not the most common way to refer to the individuals who encounter state bureaucracies. Oftentimes, these individuals are simply referred to as "people" (e.g., Sharma and Gupta 2006:11), "citizens" (e.g., Goodsell 1981), or "clients" or "customers" (see Carr 2009:331 n. 1). My decision to refer to converts as "subjects" is informed by the fact that they are both subjected to state power and simultaneously able to exercise their agency in and through the performance of their subjectivity (indeed, what conversion is all about) for state bureaucrats.

3. Across denomination and throughout most periods of Jewish history, conversion has focused on the individual (rather than on the group), who undergoes a meaningful, even transformative, voluntary religious rite of passage (see Porton 1994; Weiss 1996). This is why the individual convert is at the center of the "rite of passing" I describe in this article.

4. In this article, I focus on the perspective of the bureaucrats who embody state institutions rather than on that of the converts in this encounter. The questions of how and why converts oftentimes choose to collaborate with conversion agents, how this collaboration is implicated in their understandings of themselves as "performing subjects," and their relationship to the Jewish state all require separate discussions.

5. During the 1990s and 2000s, the Israeli Supreme Court, as the High Court of Justice, has, in fact, issued a small number of rulings in favor of the legitimization of non-Orthodox (primarily, Conservative and Reform) conversions (e.g., the recognition of such conversions conducted outside Israel for matters of civilian registration and the Law of Return). These rulings have rendered the hegemonic dynamics described here less totalizing. Secular conversion (see Beilin 2000) has never been significant enough to be seriously considered by the state or contested in public forums.

6. The two other criteria for conversion, namely, circumcision for males and ritual immersion (the practice through which one formally becomes a Jew), have remained beyond contestation. For elaboration on the historical development of the concept and ritual process of conversion in Judaism, see Finn 1997 and Porton 1994; for examples of the debates within Orthodoxy about the religious criteria entailed in halachically informed conversion, see Finkelstein 1994 and Zohar and Sagi 1995.

7. It is important to note that Israel has also become extensively engaged with the large-scale conversion of the Falasha Mura (who emigrated from Ethiopia). These immigrants and their circumstances of conversion (or "return") are a topic for a separate study (for a nuanced ethnographic account of this topic, see Seeman 2009).

8. Practically all of the agents at all levels of the conversion bureaucracy (from policy planners and senior officials to street-level agents, such as rabbinical judges and conversion teachers) are religious-Zionist (rather than ultra-Orthodox); as such, they straightforwardly align themselves with the national-Zionist tenor that characterizes the bureaucratic project of conversion, thereby demonstrating their wish to bridge religious law and Zionism. Their nationalist sympathies explain why many of these agents are not permanent civil servants or state functionaries but, rather, temporary or part-time employees of the state: civilians who simply feel ideologically compelled to contribute to the state-run conversion project. In a sense, these agents' position marks the permeable and somewhat artificial boundary between "civil society" and "the state," which is well described in the scholarly literature (e.g., Gupta 2006; Mitchell 2006).

9. The fragmented nature of contemporary bureaucratic conversions in Israel diverges from both previous arrangements in Israel and from current forms of conversion among Jewish Diaspora communities. In these two disparate contexts, the conversion process has generally been conducted within private settings, mediated only by a few conversion agents who manage to form close, long-term relationships with the convert.

10. My request to read conversion files was declined on the basis of the court's stated need to maintain the privacy of converts.

11. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was published in two editions, in 1956 and 1959. According to Philip Manning (1992:2, 40–48), the Goffmanian performer in the first edition appears more cynical and instrumental than the one in the second edition.

12. As Lionel Trilling has shown, the word *sincerity* entered the English language during the 16th century, a time "preoccupied to an extreme degree with dissimulation, feigning, and pretence" (1971:13) and in which the traditional modes of communal organization had collapsed, thus giving rise to new relationships between society and the individual. That is to say, the notion of "sincerity" is connected to the weakening of intimate forms and modes of knowing oneself and others.

13. The distinction between an "honest" and a "cynical" convert is not as sharp as these binary terms might imply. First, the bureaucratic arrangements that constitute the contemporary conversion field privilege citizens (usually by the Law of Return) over noncitizens (most notably, foreign workers and tourist-visa holders) to

prevent conversion from becoming a "cynical" route to citizenship. What is left for court bureaucrats to distinguish between, therefore, are more subtle and nuanced personal motivations (such as religious, national, social, and family-oriented motivations), none of which are generally considered cynical (as they often signal the wish to fully integrate within Israeli society or get married in a Jewish ceremony).

14. The forms of distrust and suspicion directed at converts differ according to their civil and national categories. In this regard, many court agents expressed to me that they consider FSU immigrants (known colloquially as "Russians") to be the least trustworthy converts. This is because, simply by virtue of being Soviet subjects, they are assumed by bureaucrats to have learned how to effectively lie to government agents and conceal information from state institutions. This assumption about the untrustworthiness of FSU immigrants exemplifies a more general feature of how bureaucrats come to know particular subjects, specifically, that these bureaucrats work within the confines of stereotypical schemes of collective identity.

15. As Anthony Good, following others, notes, truth is understood in law not in absolute but, rather, in pragmatic terms: "Truth is a statement made by a credible witness" (2011:98).

16. In fact, the larger institutional background of bureaucratic conversion in contemporary Israel—primarily the conversion school system—facilitates that "multisited performance." In particular, during my fieldwork in two conversion schools, I learned that teachers coach students on how and where to develop their role as a credible convert: how to personify, embody, and externalize the right persona (e.g., what is an appropriate outfit, what is the expected rhetoric) and in what locations it is most important to appear convincing. During the final months of the program, the training takes on the form of a simulation, as converts literally role-play a court procedure. This is why most converts enter the courtroom ready to perform—well-prepared to take up their roles within the bureaucratic encounter.

17. The question of autobiographical models of conversion has been dealt with extensively by Igal Halfin (2003) in the context of the Stalinist regime. This question has also arisen in this study, in ways that exceed the mandate of this article. But it is worth mentioning that, although court agents expect converts to embrace an Orthodox Jewish way of life, they do not expect converts' primary motivations to be religious or spiritual. Those who (for various reasons) pursued an all-encompassing, spiritually motivated transformation generally provoked the suspicion of conversion agents.

18. Note how this process resembles in its form and logic the credibility assessments of the British asylum courts, as described by Good (2011). Good's rich ethnography of the asylum court is not framed in dramaturgical terms, though he mentions that "legal reps see the taking of the statement as a useful 'dress rehearsal'" (2011:101). However, it is interesting to note that decisions about asylum status (for different reasons than conversion decisions) are also heavily dependent on this assessment process, specifically because asylum seekers lack official documentation from their countries of origin or alternative evidence or because better ways to acquire trustworthy information are unavailable to state agents.

19. I observed many procedures in which rabbinical judges disagreed about the importance that should be granted to each of these signs as a locus of critical information about the convert. Also, panels as a whole tended to vary with regard to the themes they emphasized during the investigation. During a number of procedures, converts negotiated the issues and boundaries that should constitute the investigation, thereby calling into question the means by which the court attempts to know them.

20. I have changed all names in the dialogues quoted in this article.

21. Kiddush (sanctification) is a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Havdalah (separation) is a Jewish ceremony that symbolically marks the end of Shabbat and holidays and brings in the new week.

22. The moral and legal boundaries of the intrusive conversion procedure have been subjected to institutional and public critique following the few (most likely, rare) occasions in which court bureaucrats attained information about converts through seemingly inappropriate methods. Such methods included checking phone calls recorded on a convert's cell phone (and discovering calls made on Shabbat) or checking the pockets in which converts keep their ID cards (and discovering prescriptions for birth control pills, which imply sexual "immodesty").

23. This separation between the components of the procedure is a "bureaucratic trick" court agents sometimes use to encourage the convert (by engendering a sense of hope as well as progress in the procedure) while maintaining their surveillance over her (with the hope of fostering further religious changes).

24. "Sh'ma Yisrael" marks an important section of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services, and its twice-daily recitation is considered an important mitzvah.

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