

# SAYED KASHUA'S COMPLAINT AGAINST PHILIP ROTH: AUTHORIAL NETWORKING BETWEEN EAST JERUSALEM AND MANHATTAN'S UPPER WEST SIDE

## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights what seems to the author an insufficiently examined way of relating one writer to another: a writer's decision to textually align him- or herself with another author. Intertextuality is usually not thought of as connecting two people or two authors, but rather two texts. This paper does the former by looking at how Sayed Kashua, an Israeli Arab author and journalist, uses the image of Philip Roth in his newspaper columns. First, Kashua establishes Roth's status as an author who was maligned by his community and presented an inspiration for Kashua, who has himself been accused of self-hatred. Second, Kashua presents Roth as a merciless satirist, especially of Jewish life, and thus presents himself as a much milder, forgiving writer. Third, Kashua stresses that Roth is Jewish but not Israeli, while Kashua is Israeli but not Jewish. Roth's position is only partially familiar and related to the Jewish Israeli public. Kashua stresses this position to foreground the way he too, as an Israeli Arab, is only half-familiar to this same audience.

**KEYWORDS:** Sayed Kashua, Philip Roth, literary networks, authorial self-presentation, Palestinian Israeli literature

In a newspaper column entitled "A New Translation of Philip Roth Made My Life a Living Hell," Sayed Kashua, an Israeli Arab author and journalist, gripes in his

usual ironic tone about how reading about Portnoy's father's chronic constipation has caused him to suffer from the same gastric affliction.<sup>1</sup> That people have physical reactions to literature is well known; but this complaint is altogether, if I might say, too visceral. Why does Kashua align himself to such an extent with Roth's work?

Kashua (b. 1975) is one of the best-known writers in Israel today, thanks to a weekly column in *Ha'aretz*, two partially autobiographical prime-time television shows, and three books of fiction. Some of his prominence is surely due to his position as a Palestinian-Israeli writing in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish population, and not in Arabic, his mother tongue. Kashua is acutely aware of the drawbacks and perks of this status and makes sure his readers are, too. Again and again, he highlights his role as an Arab man living and working within a Jewish national society, writing to a Jewish audience in their native language, and not always depicting his people in a positive light.<sup>2</sup>

Kashua is anything but remiss in acknowledging the Jewish American author Philip Roth (b. 1933) as an influence.<sup>3</sup> In the newspaper column cited above, he willingly admits that he wants to be more like Roth. In an earlier piece, he describes his giddiness at meeting the American author in New York. But my subject here will not be a claim of influence. Rather, I will examine Kashua's decision to publicly connect himself with the older novelist. I will not deal with how one author influences another, but rather with how one author uses another to affect readers.

There are three main ways in which Kashua uses Roth's figure. The first, which I will discuss rather briefly, invokes Roth's status as an author who was maligned by his community. As such, Roth is presented as an inspiration for Kashua, who, like Roth, has been accused of self-hatred. The second application is related to the first—Kashua presents Roth as a merciless satirist, especially of Jewish life, thus positioning himself as a much milder, more forgiving writer. The third function is more specific to the Israeli context. Kashua points out that Roth is Jewish but not Israeli, while Kashua is Israeli but not Jewish. Roth's position is only partially familiar and related to the Jewish Israeli public; Kashua stresses this position so as to foreground the way he too, as an Israeli Arab, is only half-familiar to this same audience. These three issues can be placed under another agenda: proving that Kashua, like Roth, is a literary author.

## AUTHORIAL NETWORKING

Readers—academic and otherwise—often discuss authors and their texts in terms of affiliation with other writers. Critics connect one author to another by showing their biographical associations (Roth was a friend of Bernard Malamud);<sup>4</sup> claiming influence (Franz Kafka, among others, in Roth's case);<sup>5</sup> or, simply suggesting

an illuminating comparison (I, for one, have sometimes found that Margaret Atwood's works shed light on Roth's, despite their many differences). These critical procedures, in conjunction with such commercial practices as Internet retailers suggesting books that one might like according to those one has already bought, make clear that general and specialist readers alike conceive literature not merely as lists of books or separate individual writers, but as a network of interconnected authors and texts.

It is crucial to understand that much of what we as readers know about a writer is the way he or she aligns with other authors and how he or she is tied to them. Sometimes critics' connections are prompted and supported by the author him- or herself through a direct reference to another writer in his works. Thus, Roth dedicated an obituary to Malamud, wrote a story-essay about Kafka, and has a character read a James story in *The Ghost Writer*.<sup>6</sup> These invocations, however, are far more than merely permission to compare. Rather, authors make these active connections to other authors as rhetorical devices that shape their personae. My aim here is to take the first steps in showing how, by making explicit and implicit references to other authors in fiction and nonfiction alike, writers take partial control over this network-like aspect of literary reception and interpretation. Such *active* alignments need to be disentangled from other ways in which authors are passively linked to other writers. Authors work at manipulating their public image; because much of this public image consists of relationships with other authors, rearranging these networks may be a highly effective means of producing a desired persona. My point is not that literary men and women network in their everyday lives—fascinating though such a study must be—but that they exhibit networks for public consumption.<sup>7</sup> In this authors are akin, one may say, to users of online social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), where one's list of affiliations is easily accessible to anyone interested and is part of the networker's self-presentation.

That these networks are not an incidental part of the literary system, but rather crucial for its existence, can be highlighted through Bruno Latour and his collaborators' Actor-Network-Theory, as introduced in *Reassembling the Social*, his critique of sociology. In his book, Latour convincingly argues that society is not a *sui generis* or self-supporting structure. Societies need constant reestablishment and reconnection by various actors in order to exist; what needs explaining is not why societies change, but how they maintain stability. The sense of permanence we may have is due to the nonhuman—material, but also textual—actors that are a part of the network.<sup>8</sup> Literature, like society and as part of society, is also a mutable assemblage in need of preservation by different actors such as authors, readers, critics, texts, physical books, publishing houses, and libraries. The categories we have for organizing literature (e.g., canons and genres), are likewise changeable assemblages made up of networks of authors, texts, character types, cover designs,

clichés, and many other nonhuman elements. The full understanding of literature as actor-network is far beyond the scope of this essay, and its potential has been already suggested and elaborated to certain extent by Rita Felski.<sup>9</sup> However, even without further elaboration, the importance of establishing connections in the maintenance of the literary world should already be clear. Presenting the network's makeup is crucial for writers who want to control how they are perceived.

## IN HEBREW

Kashua's background needs some explaining for readers unfamiliar with Israeli society. Kashua is an Israeli Arab, or an Israeli Palestinian—the term is contested; Kashua prefers Israeli Arab.<sup>10</sup> Approximately 1 million of the State of Israel's 6 million citizens are part of the Arabic-speaking minority. Most are descendants of Palestinians who remained in what became the State of Israel after the War of 1948. Unlike Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, these men and women have the full rights of Israeli citizens. Yet while in theory they *are* equal citizens, in reality they suffer from discrimination and inequality. Their everyday lives, identities, and histories are different from those of Palestinians living in the occupied territories or in Arab countries. As Karen Grumberg shows, this spatial in-betweenness of the Israeli Palestinians—neither fully in Israel nor in Palestine, imagined geographical entities that in reality overlap—is vital for Kashua's self-perception.<sup>11</sup>

One reason to pay special attention to Kashua when studying authorial image management is that his persona manipulation archive is large and diverse. Like other writers, he can manipulate his public image in his fiction, interviews, and other public appearances. But Kashua, unlike most other novelists, also produces a weekly column. These short essays are not opinion pieces, but nearly always autobiographical sketches, though they often have political implications.<sup>12</sup> The columns are dramatized and perhaps fictionalized to some extent, but their subject is their author, and often the theme is Kashua as a famous professional writer, describing meet-the-author engagements and random encounters with people who recognize him. Such columns give a critic interested in image projection tens of short, often dense, texts that are advantageous for exploring how Kashua fashions and refashions his persona.

For the sake of this discussion of image manipulation, I will only survey two columns. Still, a description of Kashua's biography and persona will not be out of place. Kashua was born in Tira, a city in the Triangle area of Israel, but much of his education took place at a Jewish boarding school near Jerusalem and at the Hebrew University, where he majored in philosophy and sociology. He worked as a journalist, among other things, reporting on the West Bank.

The pieces I look at date from a time he rented a house in a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem. Kashua left Israel in 2014 and now lives in Illinois. Much of this information is well-known to the readers of his weekly column in *Ha'aretz* and an international audience through translations of his columns and some press, including a *New Yorker* profile.<sup>13</sup> Kashua's move to the United States, which took place after I had written most of this paper, lends some additional relevance to my argument about Kashua's identification with an American author.

His first novel, *Dancing Arabs*, is a fictionalized autobiography that includes references to his father's stint in an Israeli prison, his own studies, and his mixed emotions about his place as an Arab in Israel.<sup>14</sup> *Dancing Arabs*, I must admit, is worth reading more as a social document than as a work of literary art. His second novel, *Let It Be Morning*, is a much more complex fiction about an Israeli Arab journalist returning to his hometown after years living in a Jewish city.<sup>15</sup> After only a few weeks there, the town is put under siege without explanation and all communication with the outside world comes to a stop. The citizens must fend for themselves. This disaster scenario makes Kashua's narrator contemplate his Israeli Arab identity, examining under strain what is one of Kashua's most ubiquitous concerns. The way members of Kashua's community behave toward one another and toward Palestinians without Israeli citizenship is satirized, though with some sympathy. His most recent work of fiction, *Second Person Singular*,<sup>16</sup> which also appeared under the English title *Exposure*, is a novel of marital jealousy and ethnic passing, by and large a more realistic and emotionally subtle affair. I will address it in the final section of the paper.

Kashua's tone, especially in his columns and television show, is comic and ironic. He satirizes Jews, Palestinians, people in general, and himself in particular. Though political and ethnic issues are often at stake, he is just as likely to burlesque family dynamics or his role as a minor celebrity in a small country as he is to aim his darts at the way Jews treat Arabs. It almost goes without saying that the quality and insight of these columns as well as their preoccupations change from week to week, but the best are as good, or even better than, Kashua's novels. They often use literary techniques like irony, parallel events, and various characterization methods to make a point. As the literary critic Hanna Herzig argues, Kashua rarely shows himself using his authority directly, but uses "tricks" to bring his messages home.<sup>17</sup>

#### **SOCRATES, FLAUBERT, JOYCE, ROTH. . .**

In "Mister Roth and I," Kashua describes his first stay in New York City and closes with a nervously expected meeting with the prominent writer at an Upper West Side café. After some pleasantries Roth asks, "'So, what do you want?' . . .

and I didn't know where to start. What do I want? Get him to sign the books, get him to tell me about Portnoy, about Zuckerman, about *Operation Shylock*, about *Sabbath's Theater*, tell me how he got started, what it was like with Saul Bellow."<sup>18</sup> Discarding the idea of asking him about the novels, or about another author, Kashua tells the readers what he really cares about, thus revealing as much about himself as about Roth:

What do I really want? I know perfectly well what I want. I want to know what it is like to be the enemy of the people, how do you face attacks from the people you belong to. . . . I wanted to ask him how he felt when all American Jewry's leaders attacked his works, what did he do, how does he feel about it today.

Kashua is referring to the periods in Roth's career after the publication of the stories of *Goodbye, Columbus* and the novel *Portnoy's Complaint*,<sup>19</sup> when several Jews, some of them very prominent rabbis and scholars, accused Roth's writing of Jewish self-hatred and supplying fuel to anti-Semitic flames. These attacks are almost always mentioned in journalistic profiles of Roth and have been depicted and parodied in Roth's writing, most prominently in *The Ghost Writer*.<sup>20</sup>

We never receive Roth's answer. In fact we can't be sure Kashua ever asked these questions at all because the column ends with Kashua's realization that what Roth was asking him was what he wanted for *breakfast*. This misprision notwithstanding, Kashua's message here is clear to readers who know, and many would because he has discussed it in his columns and interviews, that he has attracted accusations of betrayal and self-hate from members of the Palestinian Israeli community. Mahmoud Kayyal describes the reviews of Kashua's first novel thus: "Almost all of them were severely critical of its derogatory view of Arab society, and its contribution to the perpetuation of a stereotypic view of the Arab in the eyes of Jewish society. Muhammad Hamza Ghanayim emphasizes that 'Kashua jeers at us Arabs, in Hebrew'; he is, therefore, 'a tragically schizophrenic cultural hero,' who engages in 'a spiritual examination of himself and of the 'other' in completely Israeli terms, which completely distort the fragrance of the Arab in this, his first literary production."<sup>21</sup> Gil Hochberg also gives an account of Kashua's reception, showing how Palestinian Israelis critiquing Kashua's television show see it as "cater[ing] to an Israeli Jewish audience to whom Kashua chooses to speak in familiar terms by uncritically adopting their racist perspective."<sup>22</sup>

By invoking Roth's trials with the Jewish community, he suggests that hearing Roth should help him cope with the problems he has with his own ethnic group. Here Kashua offers himself as Roth's pupil in the art of handling public contempt. He is a less experienced Roth. Kashua points out that they occupy similar positions and are part of the same tradition of artists and thinkers scorned by their society, a tradition that includes James Joyce and Gustave Flaubert, and goes at least as

far back as Socrates—a lineage Roth invokes in *The Ghost Writer*, but would be known to many readers even if they had not read that novel. Kashua thus presents his struggles in a heroic light, a light bestowed by the literary luminary Roth. Alignment that stresses some kind of similarity is in all probability the most common function of authorial networking.

### NOT AS BAD AS ROTH

In “A New Translation of Philip Roth Made My Life a Living Hell,” the piece with which I began, Kashua focuses on the differences between himself and Roth. The piece presents a new, yet related, way that Kashua utilizes Roth’s image. After complaining about the constipation caused by his reading experience, he stresses that he actually admires Roth a great deal. In fact,

I wish I could write like Roth—Portnoy writes about his family specifically and the Jews in general. It’s not that I want to write about the Jews, I want to write about Arabs, but it’s hard, and to write about them like that in the enemy’s language, well, that’s impossible. I will only dare to produce such hate-filled descriptions that go hand in hand with the consciousness of a common destiny when I learn to write in Arabic. Roth wrote English, his mother tongue and the language of the American Jews he depicts in the book. He wrote about them for them, not about them for others.<sup>23</sup>

There is quite a lot going on in this portion of the first paragraph. Kashua writes that he wishes he could be more like Roth, suggesting that though he *should* be measured on the same scale as Roth, he is *not as extreme* as the American author. Kashua compares the ways he and Roth depict family life and the ethnic or national community. It turns out that he is not as mean-spirited as Roth was. But though their art is similar in some respects, Kashua is quick to remind the reader that he and Roth do not share an ethnic background: it is not about Jews that he needs to write, but about Arabs. He will certainly not write like Roth—at least not yet.

The main reason he brings here for not being able to be as satirical as Roth is this: he will not write against Arabs in the “enemy’s language,” Hebrew. Since literary Arabic is difficult to master, and most of Kashua’s formal education was in Hebrew—a background many of his readers are already aware of—he is stuck. Hochberg is worth quoting here on the issue of Kashua’s use of Hebrew:

Educated in a Jewish boarding school, his mastery of Hebrew far exceeds his knowledge of written Arabic (*fusha*). Furthermore, his existence and daily experiences, as his writings make clear, have always been in Hebrew, a fact that

makes his writing in Hebrew a natural, if not necessary, choice. . . . Writing in Hebrew never represents for Kashua and his narrators simply a movement away from the self (or "true identity") and towards assimilation into the culture of the colonizer.<sup>24</sup>

The term "enemy's language" is ironic because it is, despite the conflict, also Kashua's. It is meant to be taken as an echo of his Palestinian critics who might wish to ignore or suspect him simply for this choice. According to Kayyal, at least some Arab intellectuals find that

Hebrew writing by Arab authors is. . . strange and incomprehensible, and such an act is a denial of the rich Arabic cultural, literary and linguistic heritage, which is an essential component of the national identity. Moreover, such acts constitute sycophancy and treachery in the face of Israeli aggression, and are useless, in view of the weakness and marginality of the Hebrew language.<sup>25</sup>

While this term is used to ironize his critics, it is also expedient in making his position more vivid when contrasting himself with Roth, who is presumably writing in the unproblematic language of his community.

Kashua is somewhat disingenuous about Roth's actual position in the United States, especially in the early years of his career. Though English is the language of most American Jews, it is also the language of American gentiles, some of whom are anti-Semitic—an issue Roth dramatizes in *The Ghost Writer* when Nathan Zuckerman's father worries that, if published, the story that the young writer has produced based on a family feud over money will corroborate some of the worst stereotypes non-Jews have about Jews, and implores his son not to publish the story. Kashua showed awareness of these issues when writing "Mr. Roth and I," cited above, but in the later piece he stresses the differences rather than the similarities.

Kashua wants to show that he is not as provocative and provoking as Roth was in the novel he has been reading. *Portnoy's Complaint* is written as if it was a transcription of Alexander Portnoy's long monologue to his psychotherapist. He tells of the dysfunctions and absurdities of the Jewish family and his own onanistic and amatory exploits in what was in the late 1960s an almost unheard-of directness or vulgarity. Kashua is glad to tell the world that he appreciates the novel, but unlike Roth, he is holding back, not going all the way. He wants his readers to know that he could be meaner, he could be more hateful, more revealing, more of a traitor. He is saying: look at Portnoy, and see how difficult to digest my writing might be; think of things you have heard of Roth and realize how timid I am. He is signaling to his Arab-speaking readers that he is not as bad as they make him out to be, and at the same time he tells other, mostly Jewish readers that there is much about his world they do not have access to despite reading his columns and novels.



A case in point can be found in the second section of the piece, in which he describes a phone conversation with his parents. His mother warns him about drinking alcohol (prohibited by Islam) and informs him that they are going on the *Hajj*, a pilgrimage to Mecca. Kashua's father was a lifelong member of the communist party and therefore presumably an atheist, but though flabbergasted, Kashua does not berate his father for hypocrisy or inconsistency. He only makes gentle fun of his mother's belief in holy water's healing power and her hope that Playmobil toys will be less expensive in Mecca than in Israeli branches of Toys "R" Us.

Kashua's conversation with his parents can be compared with—and might be modeled after—a conversation (or rather a yelling match) between Alex Portnoy and his father. It is Rosh Hashana, one of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar, and the elder Portnoy asks young Alex to come to synagogue with him or at least change from his street clothes to something more appropriate for the high holiday. Alex refuses, stating that "I'm not going to act like these holidays mean anything when they don't! . . . There is no such thing as God, and there never was and I'm sorry but in my vocabulary that's a lie" (61). This argument sends the entire family into tears. When Portnoy divulges that his mother was in the hospital at the time, recovering from surgery, it seems even more mean-spirited to deny his father's requests. While an older Portnoy may suggest that Alex was a "little prick" (64) for being so unkind to his father on this occasion, his disdain for organized Judaism has not passed by the age of thirty. This is obvious by the diatribe against Rabbi Warshaw who, as Portnoy tells his psychologist, is "a fat, pompous, impatient fraud, with absolutely grotesque superiority complex" (73). I will save you the worst of it. Though these statements may be ascribed to a young Portnoy, it seems that even at thirty he is happy to repeat them. As for Roth, he decided to include them in a published work and accept the censure they may draw. Kashua's tolerance toward his parents' extemporized *Hajj* seems even more magnanimous when situated against Roth's viciousness toward organized religion and its representatives. Connecting to an author mainly in order to highlight the differences is another common rhetoric, perhaps somewhat more complex than underlining the similarities.

### **PARTIAL LEGIBILITY**

The image Kashua projects through Roth, the satirist holding back, is complicated and undercut by its own presentation. By saying that he has much more he could criticize and mock, he is suggesting how despicable his ethnic or national group might be. This is especially striking as Kashua has been quite rough on his own people in his newspaper work and even more so in his fiction. His first novel, for instance, depicts violence against children in the home and at school.

Looking back to such scenes makes one wonder how terrible the things he does not talk about may be.<sup>26</sup> The idea that Kashua's columns are depictions of reality and not fabrications is fostered by their appearance in the newspaper, which generally promises its readers true reportage rather than fiction. It might seem that by simply stating that there are more vicious things to write, he is leaving it up to the reader to imagine the worst. Is this move more dangerous than simply revealing everything? This question will lead to the next way Kashua deploys Roth: showing both of them as only partially legible to the Jewish Israeli audience.

A Jewish Israeli reader might be satisfied that even if he does not hear everything, he knows a lot about what is going on in Kashua's life and knows that there might be more to tell. He or she might even imagine that it is possible to guess what Kashua would report if he dared. This potential is registered by the many Jewish Israeli critics, myself not excluded, who are happy to interpret or explain Kashua's writing to other Jewish Israeli and international readers. It is especially noticeable with those critics who, while not wrong in doing so, interpret Kashua as writing in a Jewish tradition or, figuratively, as a Jewish writer. Hanna Herzig, writing in Hebrew for an online magazine, shows how Kashua presents himself as a "comic anti-hero, pretty cowardly, passive." Thus he is reminiscent of the "diaspora Jew" who "does not know quite how to deal with gentile society," which for Kashua is, as Herzig points out while invoking Woody Allen, Jewish Israeli society. But as Herzig also underlines, Kashua is not totally estranged from this society; he always finds himself integrating into it, again very much like the widespread representations of the American Jew. In fact, Kashua's "Jewishness" is a recurring theme in academic engagement with his works.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Adia Mendelson-Maoz and Liat Steir-Livny, focusing on his fiction and script writing, have found that Kashua often endows his protagonists with qualities that correspond with Jewish stereotypes, while Batya Shimony makes the case that Kashua integrates Jewishness into his Palestinian Israeli identity.<sup>28</sup> Clearly part of Kashua's project is to make himself seem familiar to his audience, often through using a Jewish cultural vocabulary. Indeed, the alignment with Roth can be read in those terms; however, I believe that this framework needs some refinement.

Kashua will not let the reader stay satisfied thinking that he or she knows what is going on in Kashua's life, nor will he let them think that they can fully understand him. Going back to the column, still in pain from constipation, Kashua appears in a panel discussion on the future of Jerusalem. He inevitably speaks about the clogged sewage system faced by Palestinian East Jerusalemites. This indeed may be a real problem, but it has a special (and humorous) significance for Kashua because of his gastric complaint. After the panel is over, a deeply moved middle-aged woman comes up to him and says: "Your talk made me ashamed to be an Israeli. . . your pain was simply. . . so, so sincere." The butt of the joke is Kashua's Israeli audience. The woman sees the pain, which is indeed sincere,

visceral in fact, but she mistakes its origin and therefore its significance. Instead of national Palestinian pain, it is personal physical pain and has nothing or little to do with her being an Israeli.

The piece that began with Kashua reading Roth ends with an example of an Israeli misreading Kashua, a case where a crucial piece of information was hidden from the Israeli auditors. The way Roth is partially readable to Israelis is important in seeing why Kashua is only half visible to the same public. Just before the scene I described, Kashua foregrounds Roth's distance from Israeli life: "I went on stage with tears in my eyes. The pain was unbearable, I cursed Roth and his father and Portnoy's mama [*em-ema shel Portnoy*]. Why should I suffer in 21st century Jerusalem because of some perverted Jewish man from the sixties?" Almost half a century and an ocean separate Kashua and Portnoy. (The column, incidentally, includes an illustration by Amos Biderman, of Roth and Kashua with a toilet separating their images.) It is therefore unjust that their suffering should be shared, and indeed their complaints are not really the same. Kashua is fixated on what is a minor aspect of that novel; *Portnoy's Complaint* is more about sexual dissatisfaction and impotence (what Kashua suggests by calling Portnoy, or maybe Roth, perverted) than about constipation. The scenes depicting the father's battle with his bowels may be memorable, but they are not the obvious center of the novel. Nor is it insignificant that he does not mention that Portnoy visits Israel in the final section of that novel.

The same chasm that exists between Kashua and Roth also appears between Roth and most of his Israeli readers. Jews but not American Jews, they only share part of Roth's cultural background. In Kashua's *Guf Sheni Yabid/Second Person Singular* (2010, English 2012), this point is hinted at by invoking *The Human Stain* (2000, Hebrew 2000), Roth's novel about Colman Silk, an African American passing as a Jew. Amir, one of the two protagonists of Kashua's novel, finds himself assuming the identity of a Jewish suicide—passing as Jewish, just like Roth's Silk. Though not all of Kashua's readers would think of Roth's novel, I believe some do.

Racial or ethnic passing occurs in Israel. One example of passing has reached the headlines in recent years when it led to a rape conviction. Saber Kashour had sex with a Jewish woman after presenting himself as an Israeli Jew named Dudu. He was first prosecuted for forceful rape, but agreed to a "rape by deception" plea bargain. Critics of the court's decision to accept this plea have said that in so doing the courts are justifying racism and subverting the rape laws.<sup>29</sup> Despite its occurrence, the phenomena of Palestinians passing as Jews did not register in fiction, as far as I could ascertain, until *Second Person*. There are no other novels of ethnic passing about Arabs in either the Hebrew or the Palestinian tradition, though there are several novels about ambivalent and mixed identities: Yoram Kaniuk's *Confessions of a Good Arab* (1984, English 1988), for instance, is a story about a man with a Jewish mother and a Palestinian father.<sup>30</sup> To the best of my

knowledge, *The Human Stain* is the only American novel about racial passing that has been translated into Hebrew. Kashua writes that, while fluent in English, he only reads translations from English.<sup>31</sup> This is the case with many educated Israelis. Kashua is probably not thinking or expecting anyone else to think of other American novels of passing, say James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* or Nella Larsen's *Passing*. However, a reader who knows Roth's novel—or even its widely available if not especially successful screen adaptation—may recall *The Human Stain* when reading Kashua's novel. They would note that *The Human Stain*'s subject matter was quite distant from their experiences, even more alien than the Palestinian lives Kashua is describing. Racial and ethnic relations in Israel, though arguably just as complex, are worlds apart from those in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

There is an additional aspect of Roth's identity that Kashua does not share. Roth is a Jew; Kashua is not. This gap also exists between Kashua and many of *his* readers. The other distancing factors are not relevant—most live in twenty-first-century Israel. At the same time, Kashua's readers are also distant from Roth. Kashua and the public he seems to have in mind are Israeli citizens, lacking certain knowledge and assumptions that American authors and readers share. By calling attention to how Roth—an American Jew—is not wholly in sync with their understanding as Israeli Jews, Kashua stresses that he too is not absolutely legible to his readers as an Israeli Arab. They might easily understand Kashua as an Israeli, but they run into difficulties when trying to understand him as a Palestinian. At the same time that Kashua makes efforts to make himself available to his Jewish readers by using their language, familiar cultural stereotypes (as Mendelson-Maoz and Steir-Livny show), and aligning himself with Jewish authors, he is also keeping the readers at a distance, showing them that they can easily misread his motives and meanings. They should not jump to conclusions about what he does not tell them.

This position of partial illegibility—of absent presence—is not only emphasized for cultural-political reasons. The reader's perception of Kashua as a *literary* author is enforced by such presentation. Difficulties with reading and understanding mark a work's literariness. If a text seems absolutely legible, it is easy for the audience to conceive of it as a merely utilitarian object; the newspaper columns would seem like reports and Kashua's fiction as entertainment. The difficulty of a text's language or worldview will often signal that it has artistic or philosophical value. If a text is absolutely illegible, though, it is no longer seen as literary, but as gibberish, not worth reading at all. A balanced, partial legibility is maintained by most literary writers, not only of their texts but also of their personae. Kashua uses his ethnic-national difference, among other things, to show that his writings are literary. By playing with identification and identity, Kashua takes one step in a long term project of marking himself as a half-decipherable figure, and thus, one

deserving the attentive reading that goes along with the literary authority he seeks. Aligning and misaligning himself with Roth is one of the ways Kashua shapes his own role as a central Israeli author, at the same time as he adjusts his position vis-à-vis Israeli and Palestinian milieus. By playing with his location in the literary network, Kashua shapes the perceptions concerning his cultural-political significance and the value of his work.

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#### NOTES

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1. Sayed Kashua, “A New Translation of Philip Roth Made My Life a Living Hell,” *Ha’aretz*, March 27, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1194968> (Hebrew).
2. This is as good a place as any to point out my position as an Israeli Jew, and thus a member of Kashua’s target audience but not his ethnic group or nationality. Perhaps our similarities should also be mentioned: we both studied at the same sociology department at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, though at different times. Additionally, I occasionally write for *Ha’aretz*, the newspaper where Kashua’s pieces were published.
3. Bernard Avishai, an American-Israeli political scientist and commentator, takes, at least partial, credit for introducing Kashua to Roth’s work: “I once gave a Hebrew translation of *The Human Stain* to an Arab-Israeli friend, the novelist and journalist Sayed Kashua. . . . He stayed up all night to finish it. *Portnoy’s Complaint* had had a similar effect.” The context is a book about *Portnoy’s Complaint*: Bernard Avishai, *Promiscuous: “Portnoy’s Complaint” and Our Doomed Pursuit of Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 153.
4. See, for example, Evelyn Avery, “Roth on Malamud: From *The Ghost Writer* to a Post-Mortem,” *Philip Roth Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 87–94.
5. See, for example, Daniel L. Medin, *Three Sons: Franz Kafka and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, and W. G. Sebald* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010).
6. See “Pictures of Malamud,” in *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 120–31; and “I Always Wanted You to Admire

- My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka," in *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 281–302. Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979). Hebrew translation published 1981.
7. Some critics have already used network concepts to describe real world connections that are not necessarily exhibited by writers. Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long have used network analysis of literary periodicals and authors to show how literary systems are constructed, while Charles Kadushin presents the social network Hebrew author Yoseph Chaim Brenner created through analyzing his letters. Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long, "Network Analysis and the Sociology of Modernism," *Boundary 2* 40.2 (2013): 147–82; Charles Kadushin, "Social Networks and Jews," *Contemporary Jewry* 31, no. 1 (2011): 55–73. See also Laurence Roth's chapter on networks as a tool specifically for the study of Jewish cultures. "Networks," *The Routledge Handbook to Contemporary Jewish Cultures*, ed. Nadia Valman and Laurence Roth (New York: Routledge, 2014).
  8. See especially the subchapter: "No work, no group," *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 34–37.
  9. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 573–91; Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015): 737–42.
  10. See Gil Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts," *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010), 78.
  11. See Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 123–57.
  12. Yair Adiel already gave some scholarly attention to Kashua's columns, using them to illustrate and examine critical and political possibilities that he sees as missing from the Israeli linguistics. See Yair Adiel, "Poetics and Politics of Linguistic Attitudes as Reflected in Columns by Sayed Kashua," *Theory and Criticism* 34 (2009): 11–41 (Hebrew).
  13. Ruth Margalit, "Israel's Favorite Palestinian Calls It Quits," *The New Yorker*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/09/07/an-exile-in-the-corn-belt>.
  14. Sayed Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, trans. by Miriam Shlesinger (New York: Grove, 2004). Original edition 2002.
  15. Sayed Kashua, *Let It Be Morning*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger (New York: Black Cat, 2006). Original edition 2004.
  16. Sayed Kashua, *Second Person Singular*. Translated by Mitch Ginsburg (New York: Grove, 2012). Original edition 2010.
  17. Hanna Herzig, "Sayed Kashua as a Jewish Anti-Hero," *Second Opinion* (2011), <http://2nd-ops.com/2ndop/?p=6596> (Hebrew).
  18. Sayed Kashua, "Mister Roth and I," *Ha'aretz*, February 1, 2008, sec. Weekend Supplement, 6 (Hebrew). All translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise. However, some of Kashua's columns are available in *Ha'aretz's* English edition, <http://www.haaretz.com/> and Sayed Kashua, *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*, trans. Ralph Mandel (New York: Grove, 2016).
  19. Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), Hebrew translations published 1970 and 2010; *Portnoy's Complaint* (London: J. Cape, 1969), Hebrew translations published 1970, 2010.
  20. Hermione Lee describes *The Ghost Writer* as giving "comic (but probably not much exaggerated) versions of those angry letters of the sixties," in *Philip Roth* (London:

- Methuen, 1982), 33; and Hana Wirth-Nesher dubs it “a sophisticated and richly structured response to Roth’s critics.” “From Newark to Prague: Roth’s Place in the American-Jewish Literary Tradition,” *Reading Philip Roth*, ed. Asher Zelig Milbauer and Donald G. Watson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 26. The best academic account of the Jewish backlash against Roth and his ways of handling it can be found in Alan Cooper’s *Philip Roth and the Jews* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996). For a journalistic yet comprehensive account, see Claudia Roth Pierpont’s *Roth Unbound: A Writer and His Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), chap. “Defenders of the Faith.”
21. Mahmoud Kayyal, “‘Arabs Dancing in a New Light of Arabesques’: Minor Hebrew Works of Palestinian Authors in the Eyes of Critics,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11, no. 1 (2008): 47.
  22. Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab,” 84.
  23. Kashua, “A New Translation of Philip Roth Made My Life a Living Hell.”
  24. Gil Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts,” *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 1 (2010): 82.
  25. Kayyal, Mahmoud. “‘Arabs Dancing in a New Light of Arabesques’: Minor Hebrew Works of Palestinian Authors in the Eyes of Critics,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11, no. 1 (2008): 36.
  26. It needs to be acknowledged that this view suggests that satire is factual exposé and not a writer’s construction. This is not what I maintain; rather, Kashua plays with this view in order to make his own point.
  27. Hanna Herzig, “Why I Refuse to Read Books in English.” *Haaretz.co.il*, November 18, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1230814> (Hebrew).
  28. Adia Mendelson-Maoz, and Liat Steir-Livny. “The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua Subversive or Subordinate?” *Israel Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2011): 107–29. Batya Shimony, “Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity in Hebrew Words: The Case of Sayed Kashua,” *Israel Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 146–69.
  29. Amir Fox, “Rape by Deception: On the Saber Kashour Case,” *The Israeli Democracy Institute*, December 20, 2010, <http://www.idi.org.il/> (Hebrew).
  30. See Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab,” 71–73, for a brief history of this motif in Palestinian writing.
  31. “Why I Refuse to Read Books in English,” *Ha’aretz*, November 18, 2010. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1230814>. [Hebrew]
  32. The association is relevant even if Kashua did not mean to insert it. However, there are a number of other parallels (large and small) between the novels that give reason to assume that Kashua was thinking of *The Human Stain* when working on *Second Person*. Three examples should suffice: both use university or college campuses as a setting, both have a jealous husband as an important character, and both feature the use of handwriting experts.