

HEBRAIZING THE ARAB-ISRAELI: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN AYMAN SIKSECK'S *TO JAFFA* AND SAYED KASHUA'S *SECOND PERSON SINGULAR*

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Hebrew unified Jews from disparate countries and ethnic backgrounds as part of Israel's nation-building process; consequently, linguistic mastery of the Jewish language served as the *sine qua non* of social mobility. Arab citizens living within the new state were caught in this wide net; knowing Hebrew and becoming familiar with secular Jewish Israeli culture was a precondition for advancement and integration.¹ In time, Arab writers, such as Emile Habiby, would write in Hebrew, which like Jewish writers in Israel who continued to write in their mother-tongue Arabic, confronts what Lital Levy has described as the conventional binaries of Israel: "Hebrew Arabic, Arab and Jew." By disrupting these traditional dichotomies, writers "engage translation inside their texts as a creative alternative to barking, as a mode of resistance to the authority that has displaced them from their pasts and their homes."² This binary division has traditionally assumed that Arab means Palestinian, and is separate from Israeli, which implies Jewish; but two young writers, the prolific and widely known Sayed Kashua, and the first-time novelist Ayman Sikseck, offer a new hybrid identity in which the Arab-Israeli (non-Jewish Arab citizens of Israel) casts off the polar division the two options represent, and instead these writers present a third path.³ Rejecting the isolated position of the Arab within Israel, and arguing his increasing assimilation in the twenty-first century through mastery of language, integration within the education system, changing social values and economic status, as well as a radical reformulation of political values, the hybrid identity offers ways in which a generation of Arabs coming of age within Israel have staked out a cultural and intellectual space that confounds previous categorizations.

The history of Arab writers using Hebrew has been viewed within a framework of post-colonial criticism in which writing in Hebrew is deemed an act of protest. Arab-Israeli writers are considered to produce minor literature: literature by a minority in the language of a majority. This position assumes, as Hanan Hever has shown in his study of Anton Shammas's novel *Arabesques*, that Arab-Israeli authors de-familiarize and de-territorialize Hebrew by separating it from its Jewish identity while simultaneously opening up space within Hebrew for the Arab-Israeli.⁴ Writers such as Shammas and Habiby satisfy the criteria of writing minor literature that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

consider an act of dissent by the colonised protesting against established hierarchies of power.⁵ Arab-Israeli writers, moving between Hebrew and Arabic in poetry, prose, political writing, and journalism have established Hebrew as a space of "otherness," creating a distance in representations of self.⁶ In an Israeli context, Hever has argued that Arab minor literature, in Hebrew, "invades and subverts the majority culture,"⁷ whereby Arab writers, as Lawrence Silberstein elucidates, "problematize and subvert the dominant Zionist/Israeli conception of Hebrew literature as Jewish literature and Israeli culture as Jewish culture."⁸

In inscribing the Arab's story in Hebrew, Arab-Israeli writers have called attention to identities that remain separated within the otherwise Jewish social space. Nonetheless, writing in Hebrew is not only a political act against the Jewish/Zionist elements of Israeli culture, as Hever and Levy claim. It can also, as Yael Feldman contends in discussion of *Arabseques*, release the Arab-Israeli from the constraints and taboos of his own Arab language and culture: "[F]or Shammash the Hebrew language has become the language of liberation that set free the forbidden story of an internal Arab conflict."⁹ Scholars view the dichotomy of Arab-Hebrew writing from multiple perspectives. Rachel Feldhay-Brenner has claimed that an Israeli Arab uses Hebrew as a "relational act that accepts the status of second class citizens and appeals against it at the same time,"¹⁰ and Hever has described the use of Hebrew by Arab writers as an "Achilles' heel," attacking Hebrew culture from within. Catherine Rottenberg, who argues in reference to the writing of Sayed Kashua that the Arab subject is not a "free agent" and is not affirmed as the "Arab citizen," rejects Brenner's emphasis on the aspect of dialogue and communication but supports "Hannan Hever's assertion that a certain kind of authorial voice on the part of the Arab writers can force Jewish readers to take a fresh look at their cultural assumptions and expectations."¹¹ Thus, scholars have interpreted the act of Hebrew writing from Arabs as a form of cultural attack against Jewish cultural hegemony, a mode of free expression for Arabs who are censored within Arab culture, and an opportunity to highlight the treatment of Arabs in Israel.

Mapping this binary of Jewish/Arab onto a colonial dichotomous model of black/white that characterizes post-colonial discourse belies the complex social hierarchies in Israeli society. Differences between the native and foreign interloper that this scholarship depends upon, as embodied in physical characteristics, food, and domestic landscapes, do not translate onto the racial or ethnic differences in Israeli society, while the assumed divisions between Arabs and Jews obscures the complicated origins of Jews (including Arab Jews) which offers its own black/white issues. Among Jews from different sites of migration, color difference is less socially significant since European Jews can be dark-skinned and dark-eyed while Jews from other places including the Middle East and Asia can be light-skinned with blue or green eyes; though some measurable differences do exist (between Russian and Yemenite Jews, for example), which has led to symbolic rather than real color divisions and an importing of racial politics from other cultural spaces. Moreover, Palestinians can also be dark- or light-skinned with dark or light eyes, and may more closely resemble Jews than some Jews resemble one another. Even the stereotypical Western conventions used to describe "Semites," such as dark or almond eyes, dark curly hair, or large

noses cannot be employed to distinguish between ethnic or religious groups in Israel. Just as Jews from Arab countries, and Jews who have settled in the Middle East have come to see the regional food as their own (falafel, tomatoes, olives, couscous, humus, etcetera) Arabs in Israel have also come to share the globalisation of cuisine, and may be found eating pasta, schnitzel, sushi, matzah, and ice-cream. While hierarchical divisions exist, they do not necessarily accord neatly with the conventions of post-colonial theorizing. Moreover, as Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana have shown in regards to Jewish intra-ethnic distinctions, “the hegemonic discourse in Israel denies the existence and importance of ethnicity and does not acknowledge social inequality.”¹²

Subtle variations of ethnicity notwithstanding, cultural representations of these divisions between different groups within Israeli society have been undermined through depictions of “passing” that serve to highlight the flimsy boundaries of difference. In her examination of Israeli cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, which examines characters “passing” in the film’s text and actors from one background “passing” in roles identified with a different group, Carol Bardenstein claimed that most instances of social “passing” take place between those closest to one another along a spectrum of social mobility. Unlike other Middle Eastern cultures in which there is a binary division (fellah/urbanite, black/white, Christian/Muslim), she argues that Israeli culture has a scale of identity—Ashkenazi Jews, Mizrachi Jews, Arab-Israelis, Palestinians¹³—which leads to a greater degree of fluidity in the process of acculturation, but often means that “the majority of the enactments of identity boundary crossings in these films take place between the subjectivities of Mizrachi Israeli Jews and Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and the rest shift between points on the spectrum that are similarly in close proximity to each other in the social hierarchy.”¹⁴ Therefore “passing,” in the Israeli-Palestinian cinematic context, can be seen as an adoption of those social codes and linguistic markers that are not entirely dissimilar from those already known and experienced, thus the process of masquerade is already partially complete before the “passing” ever takes place. Yet Bardenstein’s contention that Israeli cinema represents characters usually playing an ethnic and social position one away on this spectrum (Mizrachi as Israeli Arab, Ashkenazi as Mizrachi) is not comparable to the literary model. In Hebrew, Arab writers have represented Arab characters (often Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank) passing as Jewish Ashkenazim.

But what is meant by “passing” here? Passing “can be understood at the most basic level as an attempt to control the process of signification.”¹⁵ Its association with the performative nature through which identity is constructed is a key element in thinking about the ways in which Kashua and Sikseck challenge the expectations of what Arab-Israelis should be within Jewish and Palestinian society. In the Israeli context, passing is embodied in a history through which Arabs passing as Jews already repeats an earlier process by which Mizrachi Jews sought to pass as Ashkenazi Jews. The treatment of passing in American and Caribbean literature was situated within a racial context with implications of racial mixing that emerged out of a culture of slavery, discrimination, and miscegenation. Its formation against a background in which interracial sex and interracial marriage were forbidden—and a racist

society in which a “drop” of black blood (the claim that a person had any black ancestry) meant they were socially and legally black, even when their “white” looks might allow them to “pass” undetected in white society, could lead to imprisonment, slavery, or death, bears little relation to the distinctively separate Israeli identities of Arab and Jew. Instead, “passing” in Israeli culture is more closely allied with Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial notion of “mimicry,” meaning the imitation of the colonizer by the colonized. As a form of subversion, the adoption of modes of behaviour that enable the colonized access to power works to undermine the system by suggesting both the ease of infiltration and the performativity of colonial authority. Defining “passing” in Israel as “mimicry” remains problematic, since Bhabha’s framing depends on determinations of racial (and color) difference which in this context are absent.

Accepting a reading of “passing” that draws on models of the undetectable Jew within Christian society (or the homosexual passing as heterosexual) assumes overlapping and shared identities that threaten society’s divisions and its supposed heterogeneous (or heteronormative) values, offering a temporary disguise which may be, at any moment, cast off. While the Arab may “masquerade” as a Jew, pretending to be that which he is not in order to avoid detection as an Arab; this term implies no permanent physical transformation, and only a temporary adoption of Jewish mores. While writers such as Habiby have played with this pretense, the transformations of the characters in Kashua’s and Sikseck’s work is a subtle and usually permanent process.

To define “passing” in the Hebrew context most accurately, it is perhaps wisest to think of it within the frame of the Hebrew term, *lehitashknez* (to become Ashkenazi), which is used to denote adopting cultural values, dress, tastes, language, social etiquette, etc., of the historic—and symbolically, if not actually—white, socialist, ruling elite, and was originally used to indicate the assimilation of Mizrahi Jews to Ashkenazi Jewish cultural norms. This “mimicry” in its historical Jewish frame is not subversive but manifests the country’s determined melting-pot aspirations which framed the immigration of Jews from many countries of origin as an “ingathering of exiles.” Though issues of racism and cultural superiority were an element of this process, it cannot be viewed within the usual post-colonial terms of minority/majority, or powered/ disempowered, since fiction and cinema, key sites of Israeli culture, resolve these conflicts in harmonious scenes of weddings and births across Jewish ethnic groups, rather than emphasising cultural separateness.¹⁶ Likewise, this term is not used by the Ashkenazi to denigrate the Mizrahi, who adopt behaviour and modes of discourse assumed to be Ashkenazi, as mimicry is viewed in other contexts, but rather in recent years has become a term of vilification used by Mizrachim, used to attack those who assume the adoption of certain behaviours associated with Ashkenazim as part of a process of self-empowerment; thus the in-group/out-group binary conventions of colonial discourse are disrupted in the Arab/Israeli context. Moreover, the condemnation of *hitashknezut* as social critique, implies the abandonment of a particular and specific ethnic tradition, culture, and value set, and is a legacy derived from the local variant of black culture politics, “The Israeli Black Pan-

thers," that emerged in the 1970s, thereby allying Arab/Israeli passing with national inter-ethnic political discourse rather than post-colonial discourse.

In the Israeli context, in which Mizrachim have already worked to become the "right" kind of Jew, for Arabs to pass in Israeli society as Jews is not simply to mimic Jewish behaviour, which is itself ethnically and culturally diverse, but to become Ashkenazi, subsequently facing censure within the Arab community for doing so. Arguing that Arab writers are working subversively within Hebrew by creating characters whose Arab origins are undetected by Jewish characters is to apply a post-colonial reading that loses the cultural specificity of the term *lehitashknez*, by substituting it for the racially implicated term "passing" where more complex cultural politics are at work. Moreover, reading the Arab character as a figure playing out the colonizer/colonized literary paradigm imposes a Western literary reading that obviates Arab literary traditions already present, such as that of the trickster. In this essay, though I use the term "passing," I define it within the specific cultural framing of *lehitashknez*, showing that mastery of Ashkenazi conventions represses the Arab's "Arabness," thereby enabling him free movement within Jewish spaces, but that it also serves as a transformative experience that ultimately alienates the Arab from a traditionally Arab space.

Sayed Kashua's *Second Person Singular* (2010) and Ayman Sikseck's *El-Yafo* (To Jaffa; 2010) explore the role of language and the construction of a complex and distinct Arab-Israeli identity. In his first two novels *Dancing Arabs* and *Let it be Morning*, and his television series "Arab Labor," Kashua presents Arab protagonists copying the language, dress, politics, and cultural attitudes that they believe will help them succeed in Israeli society. While this platform offers an opportunity to ridicule the petit bourgeois Arab-Israeli who seeks entry into a society from which he is excluded in a conventional exploration of mimicry, *Second Person Singular* moves beyond these acts, that may or may not lead to successful passing characteristic of his earlier works, and explores the complete metamorphosis of an Arab-Israeli. His novel traces the psychological and social developments that two Arab-Israelis experience as they transform themselves in order to be accepted into Israeli society. As their separate lives weave throughout the novel, the lawyer stands for the imposter grasping at advancement, mimicking the ways of those he perceives to be superior to him. By contrast, Amir La'ab, a social worker, turns into Yonatan Forschmidt. Stripped of his former Arab identity, he becomes the Jew. In its final rendering, the possibility of total transformation both threatens the apparent segregation of Arab and Jew in Israeli society, and points to the Arab's assimilation into Israeli society.

Likewise, Sikseck offers a study of the Arab-Israeli raised in a society where Zionist cultural and linguistic codes are learned from childhood. His nameless protagonist aimlessly wanders the streets of Jaffa, looking for a direction in life, constantly moving between both a Jewish and an Arab world. As these two young writers show, the Arab-Israeli is no longer aping his colonizer, he has internalised the codes of behaviour, language, and dress thereby accepting the existing cultural structures, while adopting the external trappings of a Jewish cultural and political identity, including mastery of Hebrew. Simultaneously,

for both Kashua and Sikseck, their protagonists must reject, disguise, or subsume the manifest traits of Arab identity when in the public sphere, and disguise their desires, interests, and modes of thinking when in an Arab sphere.

The texts' consciousness of the process of assimilation and integration suggests the sublimation of Arabness. But in a post-modern meta-consciousness that reflects the distance between a writer and a text, in constructing works that emphasise the loss of Arab identity, the writers make this loss, or at least the process of loss, present. Sikseck and Kashua highlight the tensions Arab-Israelis face between the desire to integrate, often resulting in passively accepting the subordination of their own Arab cultural inheritance, partly as the result of Israeli cultural imperialism, and partly due to the active pursuit of this erasure so that they may become insiders within Israeli society. As with previous Arab writers, including Habiby, Shammas, and Mansour, who have used Hebrew to express the Arab-Israeli struggle, by co-opting the language of Judaism and Zionism, these writers subvert the meaning of Israeli-ness, thereby rejecting the very submission their characters appear to accept. At the same time, these writers diverge from previous generations of Arab writers for whom Hebrew served as a weapon which emphasised their alienation from Israel (and its Jewish Zionist values) offering them the capacity to critique the society they found oppressive and exclusionary. Where once Arab writers enacted a Hebrew-speaking identity within the traditions of minor literature, thereby establishing two conflicting poles: Arab or Israeli (implying Jewish/Zionist), Kashua and Sikseck explore an alternative cultural hybrid identity that distinguishes Arab-Israelis from both Jewish-Israeli and Arab-Palestinian society. For today's generation of Arab-Israeli writers and their Arab-Israeli characters, though Arabic remains the informal vernacular, Hebrew is not an alien tongue made foreign in the hands of the outsider, but the insider's formal literary language.

Kashua and Sikseck can be viewed in light of recent scholarship on Anglo-Arab writing that has pointed to a second generation in immigrant and post-colonial literature; writing by the children of immigrants raised within the new host countries and their respective value systems, in which there is a distance from the homeland that only exists as an imagined space.¹⁷ Characterised by skepticism and "two or more looks," this generation questions the myths and values associated with their ethnic origins and emphasised within their close family and social groups, while simultaneously critiquing the promised utopia of the colonial/new world space.¹⁸ Kashua and Sikseck may already be considered a third or even a fourth generation of Arab-Israeli writers of Hebrew. Strong features of this writing—of which Kashua and Sikseck are Hebrew examples of a larger literary trend—reveal meditations on ethnic identity, intergenerational conflict, and the tension between traditionalism and modernization. Nevertheless, this literature cannot be essentialized to these specific motifs since, in the Arab-Israeli context, the tensions are neither the traditional relationship of colonizer to colonized that is characteristic of Anglophone or Francophone immigrant writing, nor the identity confusion found in ethnic writing of immigrants to the United States, France, Germany, or the United Kingdom. Unlike African American, Asian American, British Indian or Turkish German writing, Arab-Israeli writers also contend with

the ongoing state of the conflict and the debate about bi-nationalism or a two-state solution.

"Passing," in Arab-Israeli Hebrew fiction, points to an assimilation that threatens to destabilize the already sensitive social boundaries that exist within a discourse preoccupied with questions of nationhood and nationalism. Despite the public spotlight on some recent Arab writers, actors, and visual artists, Arab-Israelis in general are not integrated into Israeli society, socially or culturally, and traditionally remain apart. However, the current generation, born in the 1980s and 1990s, may be revealing substantial changes in this position. For those raised within the Israeli educational establishment, increased access to modes of cultural capital such as print and online journalism, literature, and media, has enabled many to flourish within an Israeli society that was once closed to most Arabs. But in adopting many of the trappings of Israeli society, Arab-Israelis have also begun to reject what they perceive to be a problematic Palestinian identity with its attendant conservatism, lack of education, and opportunity.

Faced with a dichotomy of learning to assimilate into the Jewish society for which they have been educated but will remain forever excluded by virtue of religion and ethnicity, or to return to a Palestinian society which seems backwards and stifling, their writing reflects identity ambivalence and a newly developed hybridity. Reflecting on the national elements of an Israeli society in which religious symbols are integrated, along with its Zionist historical narrative, these writers are creating a unique space within Hebrew and Israeli culture that is neither Zionist nor Jewish. As Ami Elad-Bouskila notes, for Arab-Israelis there is a "vacillation between national distinctiveness and their Israeli identity together with, intermittently, their desire for legitimization from both Arabs and Israelis, despite their ongoing process of Palestinization. Awareness of their status as a national minority with ties to the Arab world and to the other branches of the Palestinian people has not resolved their situation but rather enhanced their sense of its uniqueness and complexity."¹⁹ The hybrid existence of the Arab-Israeli's "third way," through which the Arab has hebraicized his identity, suggests constantly shifting boundaries for this society in transition, often represented as moving from a traditional, agrarian, and rural way of life to an urban, affluent, and highly educated community whose moral and religious values are in flux; a situation which may in part be modulated by its relative novelty.

In the past, most Palestinian authors who wrote in Hebrew were Druze (Naim Araid, Reda Mansour) or Christian (Anton Shammas, Atallah Mansour.) They were perceived to be more integrated into Israeli society, since their interests were often allied with Israel in opposition to Arab-Muslim interests. Therefore, it has been assumed that they chose Hebrew as a way to engage with their minority status, both within Israeli society, and as a minority within Arab-Muslim society.²⁰ Moreover, stylistically it was poetry rather than prose which was considered the preferred genre for Arab-Israeli writers according to Bouskila, capturing a traditional Arab/Middle Eastern form of writing in the Hebrew language, though Rachel Felday Brenner argues that among second-generation

Arab writers of Hebrew the confessional was also popular. The uniqueness of Sikseck is that he describes a protagonist whose traditional Islamic identity (his practice lapses in varying degrees throughout the narrative) is a clear and constant marker. In the same vein, though Kashua's protagonists are generally more secular, in his weekly newspaper columns and in "Arab Labor" there are regular references to traditional Muslim practices. The decision by Arab-Muslims to write novels in Hebrew demonstrates a new level of integration into the prevailing social codes of Israeli society. Bouskila has challenged Hever's claim that Arab writers chose Hebrew "to strike the Achilles' heel" and instead argues that Kashua's generation of Arab-Muslim writers have chosen Hebrew in order to be integrated into "Israeli culture and its emerging identity, each author for his or her own reasons."²¹ Moreover, these young authors appear to demonstrate a symbiotic rather than oppositional relationship to the Hebrew language, and Israeli culture, which they embrace.

If Arab writers in the past recognized the silenced home language within the majority space by writing in Hebrew, and addressed their Arabic audiences in the minority language through other political and literary works to demonstrate their mastery of both worlds, they were able to indicate their opposition to the majority and silencing of the minority. By contrast, these new writers signal a major change as part of a generation of Israeli-Arabs distanced from an Arabic literary heritage, but heirs to a now significant Hebrew Arab-Israeli literary heritage (such as Anton Shammas, Naim Aridi, Emile Habibi, Atallah Mansour and others) that reconfigures the previously established relationship between language and identity. Kashua and Sikseck move beyond Shammas' deJudaizing of Hebrew, and instead experience it as their only literary language.²² The permanent presence of young Arab authors within Hebrew literature lies between the heritage of Bialik and the Bible (with their respective Zionist and religious traditions), and Christian and Druze Hebrew authors with their oppositional writing.²³

The duality that characterized past writers but seems to be disappearing from the new hybrid Arab-Israeli identity is explored repeatedly throughout Sikseck's novel. The protagonist's proficiency in Hebrew is contrasted with his (and his peer group's) lack of skill in Arabic. At the Hebrew book fair, the unnamed protagonist begins talking to two Arab men standing in line for ice cream when they cannot decipher the words for the flavours. They are surprised to find that he is an Arab and his answer to their question of his origins elicits a response that conveys their sense of alienation from him: "Now it's clear why every second word you utter is in Hebrew."²⁴ Though he always attends the Hebrew book fair, he is not even aware of the Arab book fair in Haifa, and when he does learn about it, forgets to attend — denoting a subconscious level of cultural sublimation. This theme recurs when the protagonist tries unsuccessfully to read the Arabic letters on the side of a novel in a little shop in the Jaffa flea market. For the aging shopkeeper this failure represents the decline of a Palestinian identity and culture among Arab youth..

'Of course you don't know who that is,' he said. 'Who your age knows who Ghassan Khanafani is? You're just—' he stood up to raise his voice but then

he stopped and changed his mind and sat down on the chair opposite us, 'But you aren't to blame.'²⁵

In evoking Ghassan Kanafani—not only a renowned Arab writer, but often considered the literary father of Palestinian nationalism—Sikseck highlights an assumed Arab/Palestinian cultural and political heritage. Yet in the same moment the protagonist exhibits his detachment from Kanafani's name, his language, and his writing, thereby signalling a break with his traditional legacy. By contrast, he is well versed in Bialik and the icons of Hebrew literature. "I remember the date of Bialik's death, but I've forgotten most of the stories [in Kanafani's] 'In the Land of Sad Oranges.'"²⁶ Hebrew literature is second nature for the protagonist, who is versed in its linguistic, cultural, historical, and textual dimensions and therefore the Zionist ideals that led to the establishment of the State of Israel, while Arab literature struggles to establish a position in his cultural knowledge and remains ethereal.

For generations of Arab-Israeli writers, Hebrew was a foreign language, a symbol of the occupation they challenged. Sikseck and Kashua write in Hebrew because it is the language in which they were raised; if not in their home, certainly in schools, media forms, and popular culture. Furthermore, where once Arab writers were poly-lingual, this generation is no longer as comfortable writing in Arabic as Hebrew, thus the implied dissidence of Arab writers using Hebrew, which was a powerful element for previous generations of writers, are immaterial for these two men. As Gil Hochberg reminds us, Kashua, who was raised in a prestigious Jewish boarding school in Jerusalem, lacks the mastery of written Arabic (*fusha*) that he has of Hebrew. For Kashua, "Hebrew is *not* the language of the other/master, no more so than it is the language of Kashua and his narrators. In Kashua's own words 'Hebrew and I chose each other.' ('My French Boycott.')"²⁷ Or as he claims in his *Ha'aretz* column of September 12, 2012, "Hebrew is the language of building bridges" whereby using Hebrew offers a way to be heard in Israel. Writing in Hebrew never represents for Kashua and his narrators simply a movement away from the self (or "true identity") and toward assimilation into the culture of the other. Nor does Hebrew represent a space of liberation. More accurately, it functions as a means for coming to terms with the very idea of "the self" as a cultural product—one that is already written from the outside by others. This is no less true for Sikseck, whose protagonist moves between spoken Hebrew and Arabic fluidly but who writes in Hebrew because this is his literary language.

It is undeniable that Arab writers using Hebrew have developed their discourse from the focus on Palestinian and Arab nationalism that dominated the writing of previous generations. Kashua and Sikseck bring a new sense of identity to the Hebrew language they use; they are no longer battling or subverting the language as their predecessors had done, but instead inhabiting it from within. These authors belong to a new, popular, and prolific cohort of Israeli writers whose narrative style draws on surrealistic elements in an otherwise realist narrative that seeks to represent in stark terms the absurdities, violence, and fear that pervade the Israeli reality. This continues to reflect the disempowerment of minority groups, including Arabs within the Israeli establishment. Constructed as a foreign element from within, their references

to Arabic language, literature, and customs (food, dress, music) within their fiction nevertheless continue to pose a threat that offers to destabilize the normative order and its Jewish Zionist identity.

Ayman Sikseck *El-Yafo*

Sikseck's debut novel *El Yafo* is a meditation on the condition of an Arab-Israeli student from Jaffa studying in Jerusalem. The protagonist transitions smoothly between Arab and Jewish cultures without attracting attention by either group. "Passing" disrupts the "accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one another."²⁸ The effortlessness with which Sikseck's protagonist appears to perform the different identities he adopts denies their falsity, highlighting his integration rather than pointing to his exclusion or marginalisation. The very title of the novel—Yafo, instead of Yaffa—conjures up the Jewish rather than Arab terminology for the city, indicating total acceptance and assimilation into Hebrew cultural hegemony. The student's act of passing is so complete that he does not articulate it as a formal process, in contrast to the protagonist of Sayed Kashua's first novel, *Dancing Arabs*, whose transformation is articulated as a conscious journey, one which has been much discussed by critics. Rottenberg notes:

Immediately following his arrival in Jerusalem, he buys himself clothes in a 'Jewish store,' as well as a Walkman and some cassettes in Hebrew. During his second week of school the narrator decided that he must get rid of his Arabic accent in Hebrew. In order to do this, however he needs to learn how to pronounce the letter "p" correctly. Arabs frequently have trouble with the letter "p" because the sound does not exist in Arabic they usually pronounce it "p" as if it were "b." While Adel, another Arab student at the boarding school 'was convinced there was really no difference between "b" and "p,"' the narrator who is determined to speak Hebrew like an Israeli Jew, begins to practice by holding up a piece of paper to his mouth and telling himself: 'If the paper moves you've said a "p."²⁹

This performance of cultural difference serves for Rottenberg as a recurring motif for an Arab-Israeli identity anxiety. Attempts at mimicry, such as learning to assimilate culturally, and perfect pronunciation or accent are frequent among Kashua's protagonists, since only mastery offers the possibility of "passing" in Israeli society. Acceptance offers physical safety, freedom from harassment, and increased opportunity for advancement, yet it becomes a torturous mask that might be removed at any moment. Thus many of Kashua's characters live in a constant state of tension, afraid of being exposed, humiliated, and exiled. Instead, Sikseck's protagonist exudes a calmness and confidence in his cultural knowledge, which suggests his almost total assimilation into Israel society.

When I passed through the alleyway that comes out of the station, a guy wearing a kippah came towards me, with a backpack that was almost identi-

cal to my own and held out a little booklet, on either side it was bound by pieces of unpainted cardboard. "A book of psalms, buddy," he explained and pointed with his free hand towards his feet at the sign resting against the electricity pole nearby. "Five shekels to save the Synagogue. Go on, what do you say?" A mitzvah. I looked ambivalently at the sign and recognized the synagogue he was talking about. I dug my hand into the pocket of my pants and pulled out a few coins to give him. "Thanks buddy, thanks a lot," he said, and introduced himself as Yigal, shook my hand and gave me the book. I took off my backpack so that I could put the book inside, but my fingers wouldn't work and kept sliding off the zipper. "Here let me try." Yigal unzipped the bag and opened the largest pocket wide "It's exactly like mine." His sudden approach to my bag made me nervous, as if he'd entered through a door that I make sure to lock, but suddenly found open, and without answering his smile, I lifted up my bag and turned to go.³⁰

Asked to contribute to the building of a local synagogue, the Arab-Israeli protagonist offers up a few shekels and is given a book of psalms in return. In age, look, dress, manner, and behaviour he resembles the youth collecting charity and his act of "passing" as an Israeli-Jew is complete even at the narrative's start. Because the Jewish Yigal has mistaken the identity of the Arab protagonist, he is willing to offer him the opportunity for a mitzvah (good deed) symbolising the Jewish cultural underpinnings that are constantly encoded in even the simplest interactions within Israeli society. In turn the Arab protagonist reveals that he is familiar with the synagogue mentioned, denoting his connection to the Jewish landscape of Jaffa, challenging readers' expectations about the Arab Muslim's alienation from Jewish sites. In *El Yafó*, despite the anticipated rupture between Arab and Jew, Sikseck suggests that Arab integration has already taken place; notwithstanding the fact that there is further differentiation between ethnic positions along the hierarchical social spectrum, both among Palestinians and Israel's Arabs, and between Jews from different geographic locations. Despite the resemblance between the two men, and the possibility of friendship that arises when Yigal introduces himself, the Arab-Israeli remains suspicious—an inversion of the Jewish suspicion of the Arab, characteristic in Hebrew writing and played out within the novel in the Jewish suspicion of an old Arab woman, seated on a bus with a large shopping bag. Sikseck confronts the Jewish readers' expectations and prejudices, normalizing the Arab-Israeli, and making the Jewish Israeli's reactions seem aberrant.

The Arab protagonist's nerves are evident when he is unable to work the zipper, and Yigal's offer of help only provides further anxiety since he fears that he may finally be exposed. The Arab can transcend social boundaries with ease but his skill is not matched by a concomitant confidence that he will pass, thereby undermining the very act of passing he has just performed. Rottenberg has claimed that the oppression Kashua's characters experience by Israeli authorities and by society at large are what "spur him to attempt to "pass as a Jew," taking on the habits of the Jewish population by correcting speech patterns, and buying clothes, books and cassettes."³¹ For her, the ability to pass "unnoticed" or be mistaken for a Jew demonstrates "passing" not as integration but as falsity, a mask that can be assumed. However, Sik-

seck's protagonist never appears to "learn" the rules for "passing," since he was raised with them. Moreover, Kashua's latest novel, *Second Person Singular*, moves beyond this process of mimicry, as previously mentioned.

Arab protagonists who have contended with constant suspicion in Israeli society litter the annals of Arab-Israeli and Palestinian fiction (both in Hebrew and Arabic), most famously in Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Sayeed: The Pessoptomist* (1974), which established a tradition that Sikseck bucks against in creating a character not considered threatening for Jews. Sikseck's anti-hero understands the social codes, in terms of dress, language, accent, and education, marked by his ability to pass safely and with ease. This is contrasted with the ways in which other Arabs, who do not "pass," are treated. Ethnically marked and therefore visible as the subaltern and suspicious other, the attack on an old Arab woman highlights the self-affirming relationship between racism and fear that saturate Israeli society. Moments before her wares are upended by a terrified and suspicious passenger, who suspects the old woman of being a suicide bomber, the protagonist's Jewish girlfriend, Nitzan, has already expressed her own apprehension and barely suppressed terror of the old woman.

Next to the driver stood a woman around my mother's age, wearing a traditional Islamic headscarf and holding a large bag in her hand.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Nitzan took my hand and intertwined her fingers in mine.

"What are you thinking?" I murmured.

"It looks suspicious to me."

"What are you talking about, suspicious?" I felt my cheeks turning red. "Because she's Arab she looks suspicious?"

Nitzan looked at me shocked and went quiet for a while. "What?!" she finally said. "Did you see the bag she's holding? That's why she looks suspicious, anyway look around, everyone is frightened."

"Nobody is frightened," I tried. The driver silenced the radio so that he could concentrate better on the bag in her hands.

"But I'm frightened!" she replied angrily.³²

The nameless protagonist does not experience the fear of the other passengers. He sees a woman much like his mother, rather than the suspicious suicide bomber that the other passengers identify. Though he attempts to calm his girlfriend's panic, he cannot alleviate her fear. His silence in the face of the woman's attack might be read as a symbol of his complicity with Israeli hegemony, and as a sign of his ongoing fear of discovery that will expose the falsity of his acculturation.

In *El Yafu*, the Jewish girlfriend represents the Arab protagonist's desire for total assimilation, but his failure to share her fear marks him out from

the Jewish population, and this emotional division ultimately separates them. Though he may pass in Israeli society, he has not become Jewish with its legacy of suspicion and anxiety. Rottenberg has claimed that the acquisition of a Jewish girlfriend for Kashua's protagonist in *Dancing Arabs* symbolises his most intense "reward" for his attempts to assume "Jewishness," and that it is by virtue of this relationship that he is initiated into mainstream Jewish culture.³³ Sikseck's protagonist is not in need of this initiation or education, he is already part of Jewish culture, exemplified by his Jewish girlfriend's ease, and her role as a member of the security services. At the same time, his identity as an Israeli-Arab, and the constant tension between the societies, of which he is never fully a part, comes to the fore. Shamed by his failure to defend the Muslim woman, who is then assaulted, as her bag is overturned and ransacked, he nevertheless cannot identify with the other passengers' terror.

The impossibility of truly connecting with Israeli Jews forces him to connect with his hybrid identity in its purest form, among others who are like him, a fusion of Arab and Jewish society. The attack on the old woman is sufficient to prevent the protagonist from enjoying the film, and he leaves Nitzan at the cinema and returns to Jaffa, where he is supposed to attend the dedication ceremony of a local mosque. Just as he was unable to enter the cinema, however, he is unable to enter the mosque. He neither belongs to this traditional religious Arab world, nor to the secular Jewish world he just left. When his father exits the mosque and sees him outside, they embrace, which we later learn was the last time they truly hugged. Mistaken in believing his son entered the house of prayer, the father's misunderstanding serves as an allegory for the protagonist's political situation: he is "close enough" and able to "pass" in Palestinian society, just as he passes in Jewish society.

Deviating from the norms of passing, which usually denotes acceptance in one community and alienation if unmasked in the "other" community in which one passes, Sikseck's protagonist engages in "passing" in both Jewish and Arab society, only safe within his new complicated and hybrid identity. Seated outside on a bench, he meets another Arab-Israeli who had also been on the same bus moments earlier. Not recognising this man as Arab on the bus, demonstrating the absolute success at passing, the characters now share their mutual recognition of one another, leading to a deep friendship. These youths might be considered trapped in a limbo, in which they fit in neither world; yet in their finding of one another and their shared understanding of both Jewish and Arab obligations and moral values that impact their lives, they reflect not the isolation of a liminal and transforming protagonist, one who belongs neither in an Arab nor in a Jewish world, but the creation of a third and clearly demarcated identity. That they use both Hebrew and Arabic together, and are able to discuss their connection to both Jewish and Muslim experiences, suggests that this third way is fixed, and not simply a pendulum oscillating between inaccessible extremes.

Sikseck addresses the flourishing of religious practice and expectation within Palestinian society in recent years through the protagonist, who examines his childhood experiences and reveals that his memories were of the Jewish festivals that took on a nationalist rather than simply a religious identity.

"Hag Sameach?!" I asked, surprised. "But since when does Ramadan interest—"

"Not Ramadan, idiot," he cut me off with his laughter. "Succot. It's only a few more days, have you forgotten? How is that possible?"

"I remember," I said.

"In high school we were made to feel that it was our holiday as well," he continued, "Maybe enjoyment, maybe resentment. Who thought about Ramadan at all back then?"

Each year, towards the end of the summer, Samahar and I used to build a *suc-
cah* in the yard behind our house.³⁴

Jewish culture is transformed into a universal Israeli identity that includes the Arab-Israeli while no strong counter-identity (Ramadan) exists. Similarly, his later attempt to resist the Hannukah delicacy of hot jam-filled doughnuts, which are being distributed freely at the bakery, represents the extent to which he is compromised by Jewish Israeli society; though the woman in front of him refuses the pastry he consumes, he remains torn between the desire to resist, and the pleasure of the steaming, sugary luxury: "The dough was oily and there was almost no jelly, but I swallowed the bite and thanked the girl with a broad grin."³⁵ Finally, even the woman who has turned down the free sample finds herself browbeaten at the counter into accepting the forced purchase of doughnuts. Neither Arab nor Jew is immune to the pressure to conform. In turn, Judaism becomes a cultural symbol within a secularized Israeli culture applicable to all its citizens, not a separate religious practice. Even while Sikseck's character merges into Israel and its codes, his very presence interrupts their presumed religious authenticity, highlighting his disruption of the very values that underscore Israeli culture.

The protagonist's clear comfort within Israeli culture is a metaphor for his acceptance and understanding of Israelis, which colors his engagement with Israeli security. Broadly, he fights within the system but does not resist it. He easily passes through security barriers and responds politely and graciously, such as his answers to the security guards who approach him at the book fair. Finally when asked for his ID card, his security-guard girlfriend removes him from the interrogations. Pronouncedly, he is only marked out in Israeli society when he associates with Arabs from elsewhere, whereby his cultural camouflage is compromised. By contrast with his behaviour, the Arabs with whom he is standing refuse to answer, and the security guard with "a shrug of his shoulders, because he had no choice" requests their ID. The protagonist's respectful engagement is contrasted with the other Arabs' rebelliousness. Sikseck's protagonist is complicit in the oppression of the peripheral Arabs, who are alienated, while the protagonist views this same complicity as an avenue to free movement that is incomprehensible for them.

In his afterword to Sikseck's novel, Hever claimed that the protagonist, with his hybrid identity, is engaged in an internal battle, that "of someone who cannot find a place, either national or personal."³⁶ Just as the protagonist's linguistic and literary heritage now belongs to that of a Hebrew Israel,

rather than an Arab Palestine culture, the protagonist's inability to resist the doughnut suggests the threatening of his Arab identity, as he merges into the dominant social discourse; although the novel repeatedly returns to the possibility of resisting this cultural imperialism. In a surreal search, the protagonist prowls the night looking for "Keren Palastin!" which he finds marked on a sewer cover in Latin and Arabic letters.

This quest he undertakes repeatedly becomes the symbol of his search for a Palestinian identity. While "keren" often refers to a fund or foundation, being a play on the Israel Fund (*Keren Kayemet LeYisrael*; KKL), it also translates as power or prestige, thus his attempt to find a Palestinian identity, a compulsion that drives him increasingly, remains a pursuit conducted under the cover of darkness, without direction or focus. "In my blindness I've passed here over and over, as if it wasn't here at all, and who can know how many times I've trampled it under foot."³⁷ Yet despite this hint at a sense of a Palestinian nationalism it is already clear that at a family celebration the 1948 Arabs from within Israel already distinguish themselves from those on "the other side of the fence." Seeing Palestinian Arabs as people who can never have "good taste explained to them," the two groups seem separated by more than just distance.³⁸ Though the specter of ideological solidarity looms, reality demonstrates the increasing misunderstanding and disconnectedness between Palestinians and Arab-Israelis.

The protagonist's attempts to reclaim a fading and vanishing Arab identity manifest in his involvement with protests against the treatment of Palestinians and more broadly Muslims. He refers to protests against the publication in Denmark of a cartoon about Muhammed, to which he responds: "Their indignation aroused my envy, and my heart was embittered because I hadn't known about the protests beforehand."³⁹ The specific references to protests by Israeli-Arabs in Haifa first appears in the conversation about Arab book week and his failure to attend.⁴⁰ Thus his very inclination to participate in protests is tempered by his removal from Arabic culture.

"Are you helping me with the sign?" called Muhammed from his nest in the sand. A large placard lay before him.

"What's the problem?" Narmin got up and went over to him.

"No problem, I've nearly finished," he said. "I wrote the slogans the way you requested, in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. The problem is I've forgotten how to say 'transfer' in Arabic."

A big laugh broke out among the group.

"You call yourself Arabs?" said Hani, and rejoiced in sharing the word.

"In Al Kuds you wouldn't pass the entrance exam."

Despite attempts to reconnect to an Arab identity in which "Al Kuds" rather than Jerusalem (the Hebrew term) becomes the reference point, Sikseck points to the impossibility of stemming the process of assimilation into Hebrew culture. Furthermore, language becomes a framing for the politics of the

peace process. While the term population “transfer”—and by extension the peace process—exists in Hebrew as active vocabulary he cannot summon it in Arabic, suggesting the failure of Palestinian activism, and of Arab participation in the future of Palestinians.

While the novel is critical of Israeli society's treatment of Arabs and the erasure of Palestinian identity, it views this cultural destruction as a responsibility that belongs to Arabs as much as it is the fault of Israeli Jews. Similarly, Sikseck is equally critical of an outmoded Arab moral code, which is no longer in keeping with the lives of Arab-Israelis. Though the hero and his paramour Sarihan can conduct an illicit sexual affair, they must do so in secret and she must marry according to the rules of their society, just as his sister must. Though the men have freedom of movement and education, the women remain trapped in a patriarchal system that no longer reflects their own values or desires. Sayed Kashua has been repeatedly criticized for depicting Arab-Israelis negatively by creating Arab stereotypes of traditionalism and backwardness that purportedly fit the pictures Jews already accept as true, and Sikseck's critique is no less pointed at precisely those self-same issues. He is arguing, moreover, that the Israeli Arab's traditional way of life no longer accords with any of the other continually moving goal posts for Arab-Israeli identity.

The impact of Hebrew as a culturally imperialist force has permanently dislocated the Israeli Arab from an Arabic past. The protagonist's continued efforts to record his own identity, through constant acts of writing in his notebook, is a move to construct his self not as either Palestinian or as the “wannabe Jew” of Sayed Kashua's literature, but as a way to create his own distinct Arab-Israeli identity, that passes in both worlds, but exists only in its purest form in the liminal hybrid space of contact with other Arab-Israelis. Hebrew has become the Arab's language and *El Yafo* demonstrates the ultimate failure to maintain the purity of a minority culture. Finally, the novel presents the gradual erosion of Arabic and Palestinian identity that has already taken place for a young generation of Arabs embedded within Israeli culture.

Sayed Kashua—Second Person Singular

Sayed Kashua, columnist, dramatist, short-story writer, and novelist is acclaimed in Israel and abroad. His first two novels, *Dancing Arabs* and *Let it Be Morning*, have received much critical and scholarly attention.⁴¹ These novels, like the early series of his popular television program “Arab Labor,” have presented the Arab-Israeli as a figure caught between two worlds, both of which accept his presence with suspicion and ridicule. Accused of creating Arabs who want to be Jews, but can never be accepted as such, Kashua's characters are held back by their own ethnic identity. Constant attempts to pass in both worlds ultimately fail.

Kashua's third novel *Second Person Singular* moves from the act of passing, and engages with the possibility of full metamorphosis. He weaves together the stories of two men, a lawyer, who remains nameless, and a social worker, Amir, whose attempts to pass in Israeli society explore the role of education

in this process of assimilation and integration. Though both men have degrees from elite institutions, their academic knowledge does not compensate for gaps in cultural education. Their attempts to overcome these handicaps in order to pass within the societies in which they exist lead to fervent attempts to educate themselves in the culture and customs of the world in which they hope to belong. Moreover, writing “passing” highlights the very manner in which identity is constructed. “[B]ringing together two seemingly incompatible identities—Israeli and Arab—only to re-enforce, validate, and naturalize the current dominant national ideologies of inclusion and exclusion that inevitably render this identity incomplete: Israeli *but* Arab, Palestinian *but* Israeli” creates a split identity:

It is precisely through the impossibility of the Israeli Arab that we are invited to rethink our notions of (ethnic/national) identity and to envision new possibilities of being that are articulated beyond and across current (and prevailing) ethno-national political maps.⁴²

Though Rottenberg argues that in *Dancing Arabs* Kashua’s protagonist “not only has always wanted to be a Jew, but that he has pulled off becoming one,”⁴³ she claims that he nevertheless fails to depict “his full integration into Jewish society. Rather, the novel constantly underscores Jewish Israeli society’s ambivalent relationship to him as well as his own ambivalent relationship to this dominant society. He never does become a Jew.”⁴⁴ In *Second Person Singular*, the transformation from Arab to Jew becomes complete. Unlike the lawyer, who is parodied for his petit-bourgeois aspirations manifested in his social climbing, the adoption of a socially superior accent, his self-education, and social acculturation; Amir the Arab metamorphoses, becoming Yonatan the Jew. This act, which is the most extreme of the many characters in Kashua’s oeuvre of short stories, his regular column for *Ha’arets*, and his novels, no longer explores the possibility of the “wannabe Jew” (the passing evident in other cultures) that Hochberg identified in Kashua’s writing, but presents the Arab caterpillar as he becomes a Jewish butterfly. Moreover, the transformation from Arab Palestinian to Ashkenazi Jew disrupts Carol Bardenstein’s claim that in the Israeli context there is a racial/ethnic spectrum of transformation, but characters rarely move by significant leaps.⁴⁵ Kashua’s novel offers a change beyond that of mimicry, impersonation, or passing.

The incentives that the transformation offer are clearly outlined in Amir’s extended monologue in which he claims that, more than anything else, Israelis are liberated—a freedom that not only speaks to a security situation, but a social and intellectual liberation that is blocked for the Israeli Arab. As an Arab, he is caught in a culture that maintains tribal codes of family and group, and invariably the accompanying pressures to conform. Trapped by his social culture, experiences of guilt, and barred from the free world available to Israeli-Jews, Amir’s claustrophobia is emblematic of the Arab-Israeli condition.

Today I want to be like them. Today I want to be one of them, to go into the places they’re allowed to go, to laugh the way they laugh, to drink without having to think about God. I want to be like them. Free, loose, full of dreams, able to

think about love. Like them. Like those who started to fill the dance floor with the knowledge that it was theirs, they who felt no need to apologize for their existence, no need to hide their identity. Like them. Those who never looked for suspicious glances, whose loyalty was never questioned, whose acceptance was always taken for granted. Today I want to be like them without feeling like I'm committing a crime. I want to drink with them, dance with them, without feeling as though I'm trespassing in a foreign culture. To feel like I belong, without feeling guilty or disloyal. And what exactly was I being disloyal to?⁴⁶

Israeli society, with its lack of inhibition and its sense of confidence and ownership is alluring for the Arab-Israeli protagonist who remains unable to participate because of his own inhibited self. Nevertheless, the apparently liberal Ashkenazi represented in the students' open-minded views, and relaxed attitude to integration between Arabs and Jews is shown as hypocrisy, and disappears when the group is in the privacy of what they assume is a like-minded social circle, where they demonstrate racism and bigotry. The same qualities that pervade Arab society and that the Arab-Israeli is attempting to escape are no less evident within the Jewish-Israeli sphere.

During the entire process of Amir's transformation, he is supported in each of his acts by Rochaleh, the liberal, educated, Ashkenazi mother figure who slowly adopts him as her own son. She helps him to gain an education, first by borrowing Yonatan's books, and later by helping him assume her son's identity in order to study at the Bezalel art school. Finally, she encourages Amir to switch the ID cards and with Yonatan's death, to assume his identity completely; a process she refers to as an organ transplant that, "could very well save your life."⁴⁷ For Rochaleh, enabling Amir to change his identity is part of her belief that national boundaries are inherently destructive.

I gathered from our conversations that she had nothing but scorn for tradition, nationalism, religion, roots, roots trips, and sentences like, "He who has no past, has no future." She believed that the Arabs did a bad job of impersonating the Zionists, who did a bad job of impersonating the European nationalists of the early twentieth century. Nor did she believe in identity, certainly not the local nationalistic version of it. She said that man was only smart if he was able to shed his identity.⁴⁸

Rochaleh's notions of identity fluidity are at odds with the nationalism that characterizes the Arab-Israeli conflict, however, this instability is not a solution for Amir, for at the very moment in which Amir has become Yonatan, the Ashkenazi son, his mother Rochaleh abandons their home. Sent out to find another new home, the presumed shelter of an Ashkenazi identity is revealed to be ultimately flawed. Unmarried, Rochaleh is abandoned by her son's father, who ceases to visit after Yonatan's accident and is no less isolated than Amir. The "accident" that serves as the central motif of the novel is Yonatan's attempt at suicide, which is replayed repeatedly in the further imagined attempts at suicide that Yonatan enacts even in his vegetative state. Finally, Rochaleh ends Yonatan's life. The incapacitated Yonatan serves as a metaphor for Israeli-Jewish society's determined self-destruction. At the same time, Amir, having abandoned his Arab identity—first by leaving his mother and by re-

fusing to claim his ancestral land, later by changing his clothes, his hair, his behavior, his language and his ideals, and finally by burying Yonatan with his own Arab identity card as a symbolic burial of himself—is also engaged in a process of self-annihilation. The parallels between these young men, including their interests, physical resemblance and rejection of home and family mock Amir’s metamorphosis. For in becoming the Israeli, he has embarked on a journey of his own obliteration.

Ultimately the novel’s exploration of the polarizing effects of ethnic identity and the attempt at its obliteration can be seen in Amir, who as he becomes the artist Yonatan is caught up in a process whereby he works constantly to maintain the act of erasure. When the lawyer sees the final art exhibition (a series of images that erase ethnic boundaries), he comes to understand the mission that has become Amir/Yonatan’s way of seeing Israel: “The lawyer, who was always proud of his ability to discern between Arab and Jew at a glance, had a hard time determining the ethnicity of these people.”⁴⁹ The images in which it is impossible to distinguish those differences, which are markers of daily Israeli experience, become the articulation of the lawyer’s own struggle.

The lawyer’s attempts to become invisible to Israeli security reveal a constant process of adaption and transformation. When he first left his parents’ home, “He was stopped practically every time he boarded a bus.”⁵⁰ He struggles to master a system that will allow him to escape detection and thereby avoid the constant oppression and humiliation that being marked out affords him.

It had taken him some time, but he had finally figured out that the border police, the security guards, and the police officers, all of whom generally hail from the lower socioeconomic classes of Israeli society, will never stop anyone dressed in clothes that seem more expensive than their own.⁵¹

His superficial transformations of hair and clothing become increasingly more sophisticated:

“What’s up?” a security guard asked him near a bus stop, and the lawyer, who knew that the security guards checked the Hebrew of passersby, and who always answered crisply and with a generous smile, now merely nodded, but that too, sufficed. The guard did not ask to see his papers.⁵²

The act of passing through checkpoints with ease confounds the Arab-Israeli’s bounded situation and supports passage from marginalized to integrated; Karen Grumberg explains in her discussion of his earlier novels:

The Israeli Palestinian...has not been forced to relinquish his spatial rights. Through an intricate and sometimes absurd color-coded system that classifies identification cards, license plates and maps, he is allowed to continue living in his home, and to move about the country relatively freely.⁵³

Grumberg’s assertion that Kashua’s characters daily experience “social, cultural, and spatial ‘in between-ness,’ to the point that, metaphorically or literally, they cannot move” leads to a process whereby the “character’s paralysis asserts the fallacy of their designation as Israelis even as it denounces the futility of their identification with Palestinians and Palestinian nationalism.”⁵⁴ Accepting

Kashua's rendition, that having understood the codes of Israeli-Jewish society his characters are able to operate, supports a charming if simplistic rendition of the divisions within Israel. The lawyer's constant attempts to educate himself and transform his person reflect a destabilizing of identity that leads to a state of incompleteness. He changes his accent from that of the Triangle and "he adopted the more refined, less threatening accent of the Galileans. They seemed more enlightened, more educated, better dressed, better off, the products of superior schools."⁵⁵ Though as he later learns, when he meets his wife, a Galilean, despite his assumptions, these people are no wealthier or more educated. He moves to an office in West Jerusalem, even though his clientele continues to come from the Eastern side, since both they and he believe it will make him more authoritative, and it raises his status in their eyes. Even the act of taking a wife is seen in relation to the ways that it improves his social standing. This is so marked that when he suspects his wife's infidelity and questions whether he would have married her if she were not a virgin he concludes that what matters is whether the other wives in his social circle had previous sexual partners. He remains Arab because his wife is a possession not an equal. He sleeps alone because he is isolated in his quest to fully integrate and become the ideal Israeli he imagines, a dream already undermined by his previous illusions, while his family are able to dwell in the ambiguities of the Arab-Israeli.

For the lawyer, auto-didacticism is an ongoing task, as it is for his entire social group, that, aware of the knowledge they lack, have a monthly meeting in order to educate themselves. But though he represents a generation in transition, the lawyer can never complete the assimilation that Amir accomplishes. Kashua satirizes the lawyer and his unending quest to understand the Israeli psyche. The security guard's simple "what's up" becomes a test of nationality and identity, rather than a greeting. In this novel, Kashua emphasizes, "The limits of masquerade and 'passing' as viable political instruments for fighting discrimination," as Hochberg has claimed, "by further calling attention to the violence involved in uncritically internalizing the very illusion of a *real* unmediated and unmasked identity, itself carried through the promise of a coherent and authentic national subjectivity: Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, or Jewish."⁵⁶

Kashua's constant mockery of the lawyer and his group's attempts at improvement (no one reads the books assigned, a single person dominates talk because of their pet subject, the food and its provenance is the real social measure of the meetings) remind us that the Arab-Israeli remains forever excluded as much through his own cultural baggage as his alienation from Israeli and Western culture. Ultimately, Kashua despairs that this first generation who aims to assimilate can never succeed. Only their children will know enough about the social codes to be accepted in Jewish-Israeli society.

The lawyer was certain that the other members of the group had also been made aware of their shortcomings and that they realized that they, too, had to close the gap. If they were unable, then they had to ensure that their children were given the tools to do so. ... the Arab parents simply wanted their children to soak up Western culture, for their children to learn from the Jews that which they themselves could not provide."⁵⁷

The children of the next generation will understand the cultural languages and social codes that remain elusive and unknowable for the lawyer. In his regular column published in *Ha'aretz*, Kashua presents a discussion with his own child who is unclear of her ethnic identity—"Language is identity," I found myself shouting in a whisper. "Language is belonging." The child wisely retorts that Kashua writes in Hebrew, is this then his identity she asks. As an adult, he has consciously chosen to adopt Hebrew as his literary language, in order to connect through his writing with the Israeli culture in which he lives. As an Arab father, his inclination is to find his daughter an Arabic tutor because her increasing integration into Israeli society threatens to remove her from an Arab ethnicity and past. Like the protagonist of Sikseck's novel, there is a growing alienation from an Arab and a Palestinian identity for those who accept Israeli culture in order to assimilate within it. Finally Kashua comments on his relationship between his identity and the Hebrew language in his response to questions posed by a French literary prize:

I learned your language at the expense of my mother tongue so I could address you in a language I thought you could understand. So I don't want someone who isn't fluent in the language to speak to me in flawed and slow Arabic. I'm at work, I'm not standing at some checkpoint. And maybe I learned Hebrew just for this moment, when I could use it to shout eloquently at a worker who tried to slight me and remind me of my place. So, "Get out of my office!" I shouted. "And I don't ever want to see your face again!"

Time went by and no one came into my office to request an explanation for my behavior. I went back to the questions for the French prize and answered the one about language: For me, language is merely a tool for writing stories. Hebrew for me is a bridge between cultures.

And as to the second question, about what it means to be an Arab in a Jewish state, I wrote: This question should be referred to Jews, they're the ones who decide.⁵⁸

Kashua aspires for a perfect hybridity, which takes on the best elements of Jewish and Arab society, but liberates Arab-Israelis from the constraints they face in both realms. Like Sikseck, he offers characters who model this possibility even as both writers simultaneously lament the loss of Palestinian language and culture. Kashua, raised within an Arab community that lives separately from the Jewish world, experienced his acculturation through his time at a prestigious Jewish boarding school where the memory of adaption exists as a trauma, though one now assimilated into his identity. But Sikseck, raised in Jaffa in a "mixed" city where Arabs and Jews live, work and learn together, imbibed the Jewish-Israeli system at so early an age that he had to "learn" Palestinian Arab tradition more consciously than Jewish religion and culture. It was Succot and not Ramadan that framed his childhood memories. This education may ultimately explain their different positions, but Kashua's children, now raised in Jerusalem with Hebrew as their dominant language, may come to see themselves in light of Sikseck's absolute hybridisation. Ultimately, isolated from both traditional Arab and national Jewish worlds, his children's identity may reflect this new, third way.

Endnotes

- With thanks to Phyllis Lassner and Adriana X. Jacobs for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.
- 1 Sammy Smootha concluded that in 1980 (the decade that Kashua was in school, and Sikseck was born, "over 75% of [Arab citizens of Israel] were born, reared, and educated in Israel, thereby shaped by the realities of Israeli society." Sammy Smootha, *The Orientation and Politicization of the Arab Minority in Israel*, Monograph Series on the Middle East, No. 2 (Haifa: Institute of Middle East Studies, Haifa University, 1984), 7.
 - 2 Lital Levy, "Exchanging Words: Thematizations of Translation in Arabic Writing from Israel," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 23.1 & 2 (2003): 106–127, 107.
 - 3 This essay examines characters who are Arab-Israeli, Jewish-Israeli, and Palestinian. I have avoided using the term Palestinian for Arabs citizens in Israel, (or Palestinians of '48), and have instead used Arab-Israeli or Israeli Arab to avoid confusion when referring to those living within Israel's borders and who have Israeli citizenship by contrast with those living in Gaza, the West Bank, or elsewhere, to whom I refer as Palestinians.
 - 4 Hannan Hever and Orin D. Gensler, "Hebrew in an Israeli Arab Hand: Six Miniatures on Anton Shammas's Arabesques" *Cultural Critique*, Spec. Issue: The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse, Abdul R Jan Mohamed and David Lloyd, eds., 7 (1987): 47–76, 74, 76; 'Ivrit Be'hoshet 'arati Shisha Prakim 'al arabsekot Me-et Anton Shammas' *Te-oriya U-ivkoret* 1 (Summer 1991): 23–38.
 - 5 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dona Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.)
 - 6 Na'im Araidi 'Sifrut 'Ivrit Ma Na'am' *Moznayim* 65:4 (1991) 41; Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Rachel Feldhay Brenner, "The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction: Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas," *Israel Studies* 6.3 (2001): 91–112, 103–104; Mahmoud Kayyal, "Arabs Dancing in a New Light of Arabesques: Minor Hebrew Works of Palestinian Authors in the Eyes of Critics," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11.1 (2008): 31–51; Lital Levy, "Literature in Conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 39.2 (Winter 2010): 131–132; Reuven Snir, "Petza' Me P'tza'ar: HaSifrut Ha'Aravit HaFalastinit Be Yisrael," *Alpayim* 2 (1990): 244–68; and Reuven Snir, "'Hebrew as the Language of Grace': Arab-Palestinian Writers in Hebrew," *Prooftexts* 15 (1995): 163–183; Ranen Omer-Sherman, "Longing to Belong: Levantine Arabs & Jews in the Israeli Cultural Imagination," *Michigan Quarterly Review* XLIX.2 (Spring 2010): 254–291.
 - 7 Hannan Hever and Yael Shapira, "Yitzhak Shami: Ethnicity as an Unresolved Conflict," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 24.2 (Winter 2006): 124–139, 135.
 - 8 Lawrence Silberstein, *Mapping Jewish Identities* (New York, New York University Press, 2000), 17.
 - 9 Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 126; referring to Yael Feldman, "Postcolonial Memory, Postmodern Intertextuality: Anton Shammas's Arabesques Revisited," *Publication of Modern Language Association* 114:3 (May 1999): 373–89.
 - 10 Felday Brenner, "The Search for Identity in Israeli Arab Fiction," 91–112, 103–104.
 - 11 Catherine Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," *Topia* 19:15; referring to Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York: New York University Press, 2002.) Emphasis in original.
 - 12 Orna Sasson-Levy and Avi Shoshana, "'Passing' as (Non) Ethnic: The Israeli Version of Acting White," *Sociological Inquiry* 83.3 (August 2013): 448–472, 456.
 - 13 These divisions may be further subdivided, with Ashkenazi Jews being categorized as Anglo-Saxon, German, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian, for example, and Mizrahi Jews referring not only to those from North Africa, as the term originally implied, but also including Yemenite, Syrian, and Iraqi, as well as those not from Arab lands who might also be deemed "black," such as Indian, Persian, and Bukharian.
 - 14 Carol Bardenstein, "Cross/Cast: Passing in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema," in Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 100.
 - 15 Maria C. Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

- 16 See the Bourekas films *Kazablan*, *Salah Shabbati*, and *HaShoter Azulai* to name but a few. The political and social reality were different and Mizrahi Jews experienced certain kinds of discrimination, disadvantageous settlement policies, poverty and other social, medical, educational and economic problems, but the very suggestions of cultural harmony and equality suppressed the visibility of economic and social realities in Israeli society for decades, in contradistinction to the presentation of race, ethnicity and colonialism in other contexts which maintained separation as a cultural standard.
- 17 See Samaa Abdurraqib, "Making it Survive Here and 'Dreams of Return': Community and Identity in the Poetry of Mohja Kahf," in Layla al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (New York: Rodophi BV, 2009), 449–463.
- 18 Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in Alpina S. Sharma, ed., *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.)
- 19 Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 27.
- 20 Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture*, 39.
- 21 Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture*, 46.
- 22 In *Arabesques*, Anton Shammaas presents the character of Yehoshua (Yosh) Bar-On, a thinly disguised depiction of the Israeli-Jewish author AB Yehoshua, whose representation of Arabs in fiction were lauded for their authenticity, and for the representation of the Arab voice such as the Arab monologue in *The Lover*. Among these texts, "Facing the Forests" actually depicts a mute Arab. For Shammaas, his critique of this writer, and Shammaas's own attempt to write his personal history, instead becomes a multilayered and complicated family saga in which identity becomes impossible to pin down, reflecting his notion that it is for the Arab to tell his own story, with whatever difficulties may be entailed.
- 23 Hannan Hever comments on Shammaas's attempt to de-Judaize Hebrew from its Jewish identity in "Ivrit be-eto shel aravi," *Teoria Ubikoret* 1 (Summer 1991): 23–38; and "Hebrew in an Israeli Arab Hand: Six Miniatures on Anton Shammaas's *Arabesques*," in Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, eds., *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 264–93.
- 24 Ayman Sikseck, *El Yafo* (Tel Aviv, Yediot Aharonot, 2010), 114.
- 25 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 39–40. All translations from Hebrew to English are my own.
- 26 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 39–40.
- 27 Gil Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts," *Comparative Literature*, 62.1 (2010): 82–3.
- 28 "Introduction" in Maria C. Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, eds., *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 2.
- 29 Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," 100; Kashua's *Dancing Arabs* is quoted on 102.
- 30 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 9.
- 31 Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," 106.
- 32 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 55.
- 33 Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," 107.
- 34 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 20.
- 35 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 45.
- 36 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 139.
- 37 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 25.
- 38 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 11.
- 39 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 60.
- 40 Sikseck, *El Yafo*, 74.
- 41 Kashua's work has received much scholarly attention for these two books, and for his creation of an Arab-Israeli "space." See Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.)
- 42 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab," 70
- 43 Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," 91.
- 44 Rottenberg, "Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire," 107.
- 45 Bardenstein, "Cross/Cast: Passing in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema" 100.
- 46 Sayeed Kashua, *Second Person Singular* (New York: Grove Press, 2012), 304.
- 47 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 291.

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- 48 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 290.
- 49 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 345.
- 50 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 20.
- 51 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 21.
- 52 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 156.
- 53 Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 125.
- 54 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*, 125.
- 55 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 143.
- 56 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab," 78. Emphasis in original
- 57 Kashua, *Second Person Singular*, 39.
- 58 Kashua, "Language is Identity," *Ha'aretz*, Sept 6, 2012.