

# To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts

Simply by being an Arab who carries an Israeli citizenship, one is accused of being a traitor. The accusation comes from both Jews and Arabs.

—Sayed Kashua (Interview, *Al Nahar* July 14, 2004)<sup>1</sup>

**H**ERZEL HALIWA, THE PROTAGONIST of Sayed Kashua's short story "Herzel Disappears at Midnight" ("Herzel ne'elam be-chatsot"), is a young Israeli lawyer with a girlfriend named Noga. Although the two have been together for over two years, they have never spent the night together because Herzel is afraid that Noga will discover that every night, as the clock strikes twelve, her Jewish lover turns into an Arab:

At midnight he changes completely. He becomes a totally different person with different feelings, fears, and hopes. But most noticeable about this change is his language. From midnight until dawn he doesn't understand a word of Hebrew aside from: OK, Shekel, and Checkpoint (*be-seder, shekel, machsom*). . . . Not much changes in his appearance but still, inside he is totally different. . . . He curses, drinks Arak, smokes cigarettes, and plans political activities against the Occupation.

Herzel's nightly metamorphosis, itself a "genetic condition" (his forty-year-old childless mother had prayed to God to give her a son, even one that was "half-Arab"), openly parodies the obsession with ethno-national classification that governs a public Israeli discourse based on the binary "Jew" and "Arab." Kashua's choice of a Mizrahi name for his character (Haliwa is identifiably an Arab-Jewish surname) emphasizes the profound and all-encompassing principle of separation that divides Israeli society into Jewish and non-Jewish (namely "Arab") citizens. This pervasive bifurcation operates even *within* the Jewish-Israeli commu-

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the Hebrew and Arabic sources are mine unless otherwise indicated. I thank Samir Ben-Layashi and Nouri Gana for helping me locate some of the online Arabic reviews of Kashua's work. I also thank the two anonymous readers of this essay for their helpful recommendations. Arabic and Hebrew words and names have been transliterated into the Latin alphabet according to a simplified system based on the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. All diacritical marks have been omitted except for the 'ayn and the hamza. All transliterations from Arabic and Hebrew, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

nity in the distinction between two “types of Jews”: Ashkenazi (European) Jews and Mizrahi (Arab and African) Jews. If the former may enjoy the light of day, the latter, Kashua seems to suggest, can only do so by keeping the “Arab within”—that is, hidden in isolation and secrecy.<sup>2</sup>

Born and raised in Tira, an Israeli Palestinian village in *Wadi Ara*, the journalist, novelist, and screen writer Sayed Kashua has become a central, if controversial, figure within the Israeli public domain: a target of both political and literary praise and blame. Long known to Hebrew readers as the author of a provocative weekly column published in the weekend edition of *Ha'artez*, Kashua has gained further local and international recognition with the publication of his two widely read novels: *Dancing Arabs (Aravim Rokdim)*, published in 2002, and *Let it Be Morning (Va-yehi Boker)*, published in 2004.<sup>3</sup> More recently, as the writer and originator of a new and controversial Israeli TV sitcom called “Arab Labor” (*Avoda Aravit*), Kashua has become a central figure in the numerous debates generated by the show among both Jewish and Palestinian Israeli viewers and critics. Within the Israeli context, then, Kashua is known not only as an intriguing and productive young writer and journalist, but also—or perhaps even more so—as a relentless provocateur. If his fans view him as a refreshing new literary voice that promotes political and cultural exchange between Israeli Jews and Palestinians (his new TV series is both the first bi-lingual show on primetime Israeli TV and the first to focus almost exclusively on the experience of Israeli Arabs), many Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians nevertheless criticize the politics of his writings. During the 2006 war in Lebanon, for example, a number of Jewish Israeli readers of *Ha'artez* threatened to cancel their subscriptions to the paper in response to what they considered to be Kashua's offensive and disloyal writings criticizing Israel's role in the war. And although Kashua's novels have for the most part been received positively by Israeli Jewish critics (albeit, while ignoring the works' scathing criticism of Israel's politics of exclusion),<sup>4</sup> Israeli Palestinian critics have for the most part either ignored these texts or used them to accuse Kashua of reproducing negative stereotypes of Palestinians and Arabs by internalizing Israeli perspectives.

From this disputed position of one who is always suspected of betrayal and duplicity, Kashua writes about the Israeli Arab as not just a member of a national

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<sup>2</sup> I trace the history of this despicable logic of separation (the separation of Arab and Jew that is replicated by the rejection of the Arab *within* the Jew) in the introduction to *In Spite of Partition* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Both novels are written in Hebrew and have been translated into many languages—English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Dutch, and Spanish, among them. Regrettably, they have not yet been published in Arabic. I use the available English translations unless otherwise indicated. Page numbers provided in parentheses refer to the Hebrew and the English versions, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Yochai Openhiemer, for example, notes in his review of *Dancing Arabs* that “this brave book (which undoubtedly will appear as treachery to many Arab readers) is impressive because the writer does not seek to blame others for the poor condition of its Arab characters . . . but rather draws attention to the paternal violence and the absence of a reliable father figure in the narrator's life.” In a similar vein, Sarah Ostsaki-Lezer notes that the importance of the novel resides in its ability to “deliver an open criticism of the backwardness of the Arab society, its treatment of women . . . its low standards of education, the violence in Arab villages, the drugs, the rise of criminality and the [false] belief in Islam as a solution for everything.” Perhaps even more astonishing is the fact that some Israeli Jewish critics have managed to read Kashua's *Let It Be Morning*, which presents one of the most poignant literary attacks on Jewish Israeli ethno-national separatism published to date in Hebrew, as a text “dedicated primarily to the criticism of the Arab society” (Doytsh).

minority, but as perhaps the exemplary pariah of today's Middle East. Like Herzl Haliwa, all of Kashua's protagonists must negotiate their (Arab) identity and place both within Israeli society and in relation to the Palestinians of the occupied territories by way of secrecy, passing, and masquerade. Much like Kashua himself, these protagonists inevitably experience themselves and their reality as schizophrenic. But if Kashua's writings focus on the schizophrenic experiences of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, they are never simply descriptive accounts of those experiences. Rather, they explore the *production* of the figure variously known as the "Israeli Arab," "Israeli Palestinian," "Palestinian citizen of Israel," or "Arab Israeli"—all names standing for cultural schizophrenia, incompatibility, and failed identification.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while Kashua does not discredit the very problematic designation *Israeli Arab*, which he commonly uses to refer to his own identity and the identity of many of his fictional characters, his writings nevertheless reject the pre-given status of this identity, emphasizing instead the manner by which it comes into being by bringing 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. A split identity, an oxymoron—in sum, an impossibility.

In the rest of this essay, dedicated to a close engagement with Kashua's oeuvre, I focus on this manufacturing of the Israeli Arab as a failed subject and impossible identity (an Israeli who can never really be one, an Arab/Palestinian who is never fully or authentically Arab/Palestinian), who for this very reason is suspected of treachery by both. I also examine Kashua's central role in creating a counter discourse that exposes the illusory nature of purist perceptions of (ethnic/national) identity by calling attention to the importance of rethinking identity through the figure of the outcast, the pariah, and the "immediate suspect." If the Israeli Arab has come to represent a failed, inauthentic, assimilated, lost, and incoherent identity, Kashua suggests that this "failure" is not the result of an apriori or "natural" clash between the Israeli and the Arab. It is the outcome instead of separatist ideologies that depend on this clash in order to sustain the illusion of authentic and coherent (Israeli or Palestinian) national identities. In other words, 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.

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<sup>5</sup> How to name a figure is always a political matter, and in the case of "Israeli Arab" the stakes are high. The designation "Israeli Arab," as pointed out recently by Saree Makdissi, effectively undermines the fact that these "Arabs," like their relatives in the occupied territories, are not "generic Arabs" but "Palestinians." Indeed, "Israeli Arab" has roots in the modern Zionist remapping of ethno-national identities, which collapses the differences between localized national Palestinian identity and the linguistic, cultural, and religious affinity Palestinians have with other Arab nationalities. Calling Palestinian citizens of Israel "Israeli Arabs," then, is a way of giving credence to the idea that there is not and never was anything particularly Palestinian about these non-Jewish Israeli citizens. It implies that if these people were relocated or transferred to other neighboring Arab countries they would be seamlessly absorbed. At the same time, there is also a risk in referring to Arab citizens of Israel simply as *Palestinians*. While this term is historically valid, it risks masking the complex and conflicted identifications and differentiations that are involved in this particular minority position. Accordingly, Rima Merriman suggests that, as problematic as the designation "Israeli Arab" is, it nevertheless is the only existing term that "accurately reflects the sense of schizophrenia as well as exclusion that Palestinians with Israeli IDs *feel*."

Kashua is certainly not the first Palestinian to focus on the experience of the Israeli Palestinian, nor is he the first to emphasize the particular difficulties facing this minority in light of a political conflict that situates “Israeli” (or Jew) in an explicitly antagonistic relationship to “Palestinian” (or Arab). Thus, while there is indeed something unique about Kashua’s central position within Israeli cultural, literary, and journalistic circles (a centrality that far exceeds even the recognition given to Emile Habibi, the Haifa born Palestinian writer, Knesset member, and recipient of the Israel Prize for Literature), it is nevertheless important to situate Kashua’s writings in relation to earlier literary portrayals of the Israeli-Arab figure. Indeed, only by following the trajectory of literary representations of the Israeli Arab from the mid 1960s to the present can we understand the cultural location from which Kashua writes and the presuppositions that inform his own literary constructions of this figure. By tracing this literary genealogy I am not suggesting that these texts provide the discursive material from which Kashua’s literary voice directly emerges. Whether Kashua read these texts, cites them, or writes against them is not my concern. In fact, there is little in his writings that suggests the existence of such a literary dialogue or intertextual relationship. Nevertheless, I believe that only by situating Kashua’s preoccupation with the question of the (im)possibility of the Israeli Arab in relation to previous Palestinian literary engagements with this question can we fully grasp the political implications of his work, which is too often and too hastily dismissed as either “not Palestinian enough” (too Israelized) and/or “not literary enough” (too journalistic).<sup>6</sup>

### “Israeli Arab”: A Brief Literary Genealogy<sup>7</sup>

“Israeli Arab,” how humiliating is this name no matter how many will try to soften it. And frankly, it makes no difference if we call ourselves instead “Palestinian citizens of Israel” or even “the Palestinian minority that is forced to hold an Israeli citizenship.” Whatever specific name is used, the underlining message remains the same: “Israeli Arab”—an oxymoron.

—Sayed Kashua, “So Humiliating Is This Name”

Attempting to tell the story of the Palestinian who has become a citizen of Israel—a Palestinian of the “inside” (*min al-dakhil*), as she or he is known among Arabic speakers, or one of the “Arab inhabitants” (*ha-toshavim ha-aravim*) in Israeli

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<sup>6</sup> Both of these accusations in fact appeared in the two anonymous evaluations of this essay solicited by *Comparative Literature*. One reader questioned the political value of Kashua’s work, arguing that “Kashua lives under some denial towards his oppressive relationship with Hebrew,” that he “is assimilating into the culture of the Zionist colonizer,” and that as such he represents “a big success of the Zionist project [to] convert Palestinians into Jews [as once entertained by Ben Gurion].” The other reader took issue with Kashua’s status as a writer: “[Kashua] works in the media . . . [he is] not really a writer in the sense used by either Israeli or Palestinian literary elites . . . he circulates as a journalist provocateur.”

<sup>7</sup> The account that follows focuses only on some of the most prominent Palestinian texts (written both in and outside of Israel) that deal with the figure of the Israeli Arab. I have deliberately excluded Israeli-Jewish texts that deal with the same figure—for example, novels by Yoram Kanuik, Sami Michael, and A.B. Yehushua—because my primary interest is the ways in which Palestinians (most notably *Israeli* Palestinians) have come to imagine, write, or undo this figure in their struggle to highlight the actual existence of Arabs/Palestinians in Israel, while simultaneously articulating the impossibility of this very existence.

parlance—Ghasan Kanafani's haunting 1969 novella *Return to Haifa* (*'A'id ila Haifa*) describes this figure as a son who has been both "lost" and deserted. Left behind by his fleeing Palestinian parents in 1948, Khaldun is adopted as a young baby by a Jewish Eastern European couple and renamed Dov. Although he is aware of his Arab biological parents (his adoptive parents never hide this information from him), Khaldun/Dov voluntarily chooses to cut off all ties with his Arab origins, becoming instead a prototypical Israeli soldier. Nineteen years later, when he finally meets his biological parents while they are making a painful trip back to their lost home in Haifa, he refuses to acknowledge them and refers to his adoptive Jewish parents as his only family. Kanafani's story ends with the Palestinian parents leaving their lost son behind and finding comfort in the fact that their younger son, who was born in a refugee camp, has become a devoted *fedaaee* (freedom fighter). That the story can be read as an allegory about the fate of Israeli Arabs (the Palestinians of the inside) in relation to that of Palestinians who fled Palestine in 1948 and have since lived in exile is obvious: Khaldun/Dov is a figure who has been stripped of his (Palestinian) past—an Arab who has been transformed into a Jew or, worse, into a Zionist soldier; his younger brother, on the other hand, remains faithful to his true origins and his people's national cause.

The protagonist of Athallah Mansour's *In a New Light* (*Be-or Chadash*), published in 1966 and considered the first Palestinian novel to be written in Hebrew, is also a Palestinian orphan raised by a Jewish family who chooses to deny his Palestinian origins in order to assimilate—in this case, into the Jewish Israeli socialist society of the kibbutz. Both Mansour's and Kanafani's texts, then, represent the Palestinian living among Israel's Jewish population as a figure of loss: an Arab who has lost his true identity (his Arabness) in the process of becoming or desiring to become an Israeli—in short, an Arab-turned-Jew. Mansour's protagonist, however, is unable to replace successfully his original Arab identity with a new Israeli Jewish one. Unlike Khaldun, who transforms into Dov and is fully integrated into the Israeli army, Mansour's Yossi finds that, despite being eventually endorsed as a kibbutz member, he is nevertheless marked as a permanent "other." Because, as his Jewish colleagues and friends explain, "they were brought up to believe in the principle of full equality between nations, . . . the main duty of every socialist is to serve as an *avant garde* to [his] own people in their struggle for socialism." Therefore, Yossi's "true place" is not with the Jews: instead, "he should live and fight with his own countrymen" (*In a New Light* 172). Mansour's Israeli Arab thus suffers a double loss: if he is first estranged from his Arab origins and past, he is further exiled from the Israeli society, which accepts him only as other/Arab, and a "failed Arab," at that, since he does not fulfill his duty as a true socialist by devoting himself to improving the lives of his "own people."

With the publication in 1974 of Emile Habibi's *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist* (*Al-waq'a' al-gharibah fi-ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi al-Nahs al-mutasha'il*; literally, *The Strange Events in the Life of Saeed, Abu Al-Nahs, the Pessoptimist*), the drama of the lost "Israeli Arab" evolves from a narrative involving a crisis of identity into a full-fledged political satire (see Khater). Habibi's infamous pessoptimist is not a melancholic figure, nor does he share Dov's or Yossi's sincere attempt to belong to the Jewish Israeli collective. Rather, this tragic-comic figure represents the truly dispossessed: he has lost not only his village, home, and sense of origins, but also his agency. Incapable of distinguishing comedy from tragedy or pessi-

mism from optimism, Saeed the pessoptimist operates mechanically. His “devotion to the state,” which leads him at one point to become an informant planted within an Israeli prison for “political criminals,” is motivated not by the desire to belong, nor by ideology, but by a naïve wish to maintain a pseudo-normal life, even if under military rule. Habibi’s reliance on irony to account for the hierarchal relationship between Jews and Arabs, as well as between Hebrew as the dominant colonial language and Arabic as the language of the subordinate (his novels, written in Arabic, include many Hebrew phrases and puns), seems to have become the preferred *modus operandi* through which the story of the Palestinian citizen of Israel is narrated. This is certainly true of both Elias Suleiman’s maverick cinematic representations of Israeli Arabs in “Chronicle of Disappearance” (*Sijl al-Ikhtifa’*) and “Divine Interventions” (*Yadon ilaheyya*) and the poetry of Samih al-Qasim and Mahmoud Darwish, who emphasize the irony involved in the status of the Israeli Arab as a “present-absentee.”<sup>8</sup> It is surely also evident in the case of Anton Shammas’s *Arabesques* (*Arabesqot*), published in Hebrew in 1986.

Written as a fragmented semi-autobiography that reads both as a satire and a detective story, Shammas’s novel gradually problematizes his narrator’s attempt to recover his lost Palestinian roots until he finally realizes that his familial and national origins are to be found only in “an Arabic soap opera” (52). At the same time, the patronizing attempt of the narrator’s Jewish Israeli writer-colleague to offer his Israeli Arab friend an alternative mode of identification, which he describes as “salvation through the Hebrew Language” (82), is also mocked by Shammas, who never fails to expose the bitter irony involved in such acts of “colonial hospitality” (see my “Colonial Hospitality”).

If Habibi’s novel empties the figure of the Palestinian Israeli of any traceable political agency by suggesting that to “discover who Saeed the pessoptimist might really be” is perhaps an impossible mission—“how could you ever find [Saeed] unless you . . . trip right over him?” (163)—Shammas goes a step further by predominantly representing the Israeli Arab (or rather the impossibility of representing this figure) through a filter composed of a dense web of orientalist images produced within the Israeli Jewish cultural imagination, thus replacing the discourse of identity with a discourse of representation. His Israeli Arab is always already only a “representation” caught between stereotypes, whether pernicious or corrective. It is this literary genealogy, involving the transformation of the Israeli Arab from a “figure of loss” to a “lost figure,” that serves as the immediate cultural-historical context through which we should understand Kashua’s assertions that the Israeli Arab is an impossibility, an identity that is overdetermined from the outside and that stands for failure, loss, incoherence, and inauthentic affiliations.

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<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew administrative term “Present-Absentees” (*nokhachim nifkadim*) refers to Palestinian refugees of the 1948 war. The term “designates the history of the dispossession and displacement of those Palestinians—their number is estimated at 160,000—who found themselves within the state of Israel between 1948 and 1952 . . . . The category of ‘absentees’ was originally a juridical term for those refugees who were ‘absent’ from their homes but ‘present’ within the boundaries of the state as defined by the Armistice Agreements of 1949. The vast majority of the Palestinians so classified were not allowed to return to their homes, to reclaim their property, or to seek compensation. Instead the state promulgated the ‘Law of Absentees’ Properties in 1950, which legalized the plundering of their possessions” (Piterberg 43).

### Jews, Arabs, Stereotypes

The popular lives of minorities are frequently constructed in narratives of self-recognition that have no option but to engage in the demeaning dialogues or discriminatory conversations that determine their everyday existence. Minorities are often offered only the most disciplinary and normalized spaces of representation—the stereotype, the statistic, the survey, the report, the statute, the documentary, to say nothing of the virulent forms of hate speech.

—Homi Bhabha, “Joking Aside”

Published over two decades after Shammas’s *Arabesques*, Sayed Kashua’s first novel, *Dancing Arabs* (2002), is a first person narrative account of a young Arab adolescent who (like Kashua himself) grows up in the Palestinian village of Tira in Galilee until enrolling in a prestigious Jewish boarding school in Jerusalem. In tracing the coming of age of a young narrator who becomes progressively immersed in the colonizer’s culture at the expense of growing increasingly alienated from his family, maternal language, and culture, *Dancing Arabs* resembles many other novels dedicated to the experience of the children of immigrants or colonized people. Like many of these texts, it also ascribes the power of this transformation primarily to the colonizer’s educational system, locating the heart of this drama in the classroom, where the clash between the protagonist’s so-called original culture and the adopted newly dominant culture takes place most explicitly (see, for example, Albert Memmi’s *La statue de sel*, Asia Djebar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*, Farida Belghoul’s *Georgette!*, Kateb Yacine’s *Le polygone étoilé*, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*).

A closer engagement with the novel, however, reveals that the main protagonist is not a particular individual—indeed, the narrator, like most of the other characters in the book, remains nameless. It is rather two collectives—“Arabs” and “Jews”—always already grouped, pluralized, fixed, and stereotyped, that comprise the novel: “the Jews decided to let me take the test”; “the Jews eat with a knife and a fork”; “the first time I ever saw Jews I wet my pants”; “the whole village knew the Jews are coming to visit”; “the Jews have not yet decided what to do with my brain” and “Arabs wear different pants”; “the Arabs call me a settler”; “I don’t need to be stuck for the rest of my life with Arabs”; “they are Arabs from head to toe”; “Arabs should not be allowed to dance.”<sup>9</sup> The world of *Dancing Arabs* is composed entirely of such competing stereotypes, and the few attempts made by different individuals (the narrator, his first Jewish girlfriend, his grandmother) to question or go beyond this prescribed reality inevitably fail.

If the writings of Habibi, Shammas, and Mansour “affirm the Israeli Arab as a subject—that is, as an independent, free agent—whose ‘I’ both portrays and addresses the Israeli [Jewish] ‘you’” (Feldhay-Brenner 105), then Kashua’s novel already assumes the impossibility of such an affirmation and with it the impossibility of Arab and Jew meeting as an “I” and a “You.” Indeed, *Dancing Arabs* repeatedly stages failed meetings between Jews and Arabs—that is to say, “meetings” that fail to take place as they take place. This is most evident in the chapter “The Day I Saw Jews for the First Time,” which depicts a student exchange between Jewish and

<sup>9</sup> The respective page numbers for these quotations are (with the Hebrew text first, followed by the English translation): 61/85; 68/93; 45/63; 49/65; 95/130; 68/93; 100/133; 154/211; 150/204; 126/173.

Arab school children. Not only is this exchange program imposed on the Arab students from without (“from now on you are in ‘Seeds of Peace!’” they are told by an Israeli man who introduces himself as a member of a youth peace organization), but it also replicates the radical separation it ostensibly hopes to overcome: “The Arabs stood on one side, the Jews on the other” (50/66). Here, as in many other occasions in the novel, Jews and Arabs, as well as the names “Jew” and “Arab,” are brought together and situated in relation to each other, only to be immediately repositioned along an impassable divide. Within the existing Israeli social setting, the novel suggests, “Arab” is necessarily located in radical opposition to “Jew.” This antagonistic relationship accounts for the narrator’s need, as an Israeli Arab, to *pass* as an Israeli by looking less Arab (that is, less like the image of the Arab in the contemporary Israeli-Jewish imagination) and more like (the image of) a Jew: “I look more Israeli than the average Israeli. I’m always happy to hear this from Jews. ‘You don’t look like an Arab at all’ they say” (*Ata mamash lo nira’a aravi*, 67/91).

Passing is indeed a central theme in *Dancing Arabs*, but it is primarily through repeated descriptions of passings that fail to pass that Kashua dramatizes the impossibility of being an Israeli Arab. Examples of such failed passings are numerous and include both the failure of Jews to pass as Arabs and vice versa. All point to the inability of individuals to escape the policing effects of a separatist ethno-national identitarian imagination. In one of the novel’s opening scenes, for example, the narrator recalls a story, variations of which he had heard several times throughout his childhood:

People in Tira used to be braver and kept the Jews out. Once, some Jews tried to get into the village by pretending to be Arabs. They came with *Kaffiyes*, but Abu al-Abed knew they were Jews . . . when he told the people around him that they were Jews, they thought he’d gone crazy. “What’s gotten into you? They’re Iraqi soldiers” they told him. But Abu el-Abed was certain he was right [because] he could tell Jews by the way they walked. “One shot to the air” he told his friends, “and you’ll all see. If they’re Arabs they’ll shout at us; if they’re Jews, they’ll lie down flat on the ground.” [And then,] as soon as he fired, they all went down in the dust. It was [now] obvious [to everybody] that they were Jews. (20/33)<sup>10</sup>

In another scene, the narrator interacts with three Arab women in the emergency room of an Israeli hospital in West Jerusalem, where he is sitting among many “lost looking Arabs” and pretending to read a novel in Hebrew in order to “conceal his identity”:

“Excuse me” someone addresses me [in Hebrew]. She’s young, dark-skinned and fat. Behind her are two other women. They all look the same. . . . The woman stresses her words: “she has a birth condition” (*yesh la mazav shel lieda*). I don’t know where to hide myself. What should I tell them now? Should I answer in Hebrew . . . because [really] how am I suppose to know that they’re Arabs? True, you can tell, but if they didn’t recognize me, maybe I could pretend not to recognize them. Then again, with these three, you can’t miss it. They’re Arabs from head to toe. (150/204–05)

Although both these passages engage in a discourse of performativity and masquerade, Kashua seems to be exploring this discourse in order to stress its limits in the face of ethno-racial dogmatism. The question that propels the novel—“How can one tell?” (how can one tell an Arab from a Jew)—does of course trouble the stability of any given identity by implying that there is a strong performative component to identity as such. And yet the narrator finds little solace in any such performative acts because his daily life teaches him that, in a reality governed by

<sup>10</sup> I have made significant modifications to the English translation in this case in order better to capture the exaggerated childish tone of the original Hebrew.



oppressive racial stereotyping and a separatist ideology, even the most talented “expert at assuming false identities” (67/91), who “even the Arabs mistake for a Jew” (148/202), is not in a secure position. On the contrary, his “camouflage efforts [built over] years, can be shattered [in any given] moment” (148/202). Anything might give him away: the presence of his wife, who, as he worryingly notes, “looks a little Arab” (*Hee ktsat araviya*) (148/202), or even the presence of Arab strangers, whose very proximity threatens to implicate him and reveal his hidden identity.

This fear of metonymic exposure is captured especially clearly in one of the most powerful scenes in the novel. Visiting a bar in Tel Aviv where his friend Shadya works as a bartender, the narrator is mortified by the presence of two dancing Arabs. “Arabs should not be allowed to dance here,” he comments,

They are really ugly, especially the short one with the mustache. He swivels his ass, crammed into those [ridiculous] cloth pants of his, making a mockery, not only of himself but of anyone dancing next to him—of the whole bar [but] especially of Shadya and me . . . don't they realize how different they are, how out of place, how ugly? . . . Arabs should not be allowed to dance. (126/173)

The two dancing Arabs, whom the narrator describes as “taking over the dance floor,” function as a haunting presence that threatens to reveal the narrator's own shameful Arabness. Indeed, when he tells himself that he and Shadya are Arabs, “but of a different kind” (127/174), he reveals the damaging effects of an internalized racism: “involuntary, unconscious judgments of ugliness and loathing [that are] locked into the subject's identity anxieties . . . [making him fear that] he has an ugly, fearful or despised body” (Young 208). Moreover, this self-abjection is far more powerful than the protective mechanisms offered by acts of mimicry, performance, and passing. Thus, it is at the very moment when the narrator attempts fully to distinguish himself from “Arabs like this” (126/174) that this difference threatens to collapse:

Just don't let anyone think I'm one of them. But no, there's no way I can look like them . . . If I convey what these Arabs convey, I'm in serious trouble. But it's out of the question. People aren't scared of me; they're not put off by me. Or are they? Maybe they are, except they manage to hide it. . . . I must be as disgusting as the rest of them. I can't believe it. (129/177)

In a socio-political reality governed by racial phobia, a reality in which the very word Arab “sounds like a curse” (154/211), “passing” may perhaps offer temporary practical solutions, but it provides little, if any, psychological consolation. Accordingly, as the novel progresses, the narrator reluctantly accepts his father's perspective, realizing that “once an Arab always an Arab” (76/106), a static condition he pairs with the lesson he learns from his Palestinian friend Adel: “Jews remain Jews” (143/195). *Dancing Arabs* thus traces the failed production of the Israeli Arab, an identity that in this novel is always already an impossibility based not only on self-negation but also on the negation of any comforting masquerade.

### Jews, Arabs, Demography

The truth is, Israel is a Jewish democracy: democratic towards Jews and Jewish towards Arabs.

—Ahmad Tibi

Kashua's second novel *Let It Be Morning* (*Va-yehi Boker*), published in 2004, also represents the impossibility of being an Israeli Arab, but in this case the text

focuses more specifically on the impossibility of sustaining an Israeli Arab identity, even as a chosen (if self-deceiving) illusion. Written at the height of the Second Intifada, *Let It Be Morning* opens with the events of October 2000, during which thirteen Israeli Arabs demonstrating in support of the Palestinian uprising were shot and killed by the Israeli police. (To date, and contrary to the recommendations made by the Israeli Or Commission examining the events, no indictment was brought against any of the officers involved in the shooting.) It is hardly a coincidence that Kashua chose to open a novel about the fictive transformation of Israeli Arabs “back into” Palestinians with this historical event. Indeed, the “October events” mark a crucial moment in redefining the relationship between Arab citizens of Israel and the State, one that has reinforced their sense of discrimination and fortified their identification with their Palestinian origins and families in the occupied territories.

The novel’s narrator is a young journalist, who together with his wife and daughter returns to his childhood village in *Wadi ‘Ara*, a region located in central Israel. Returning after the October shootings, he realizes that “the estrangement, which he has always felt, but which he partially enjoyed, has turned into a burden [and] has in fact become a danger to [his] life” (23/19; my translation). Soon after his return, the village is surrounded by Israeli tanks and cut off from electricity, phone service, and water. The bulk of the novel follows the villagers’ attempts to survive without any knowledge as to why they have been put under such harsh conditions. Because, as loyal and protected citizens of Israel, they have no reason to suspect that they are the reason for the curfew, the villagers conclude that either Israel must be running “a secret mission [looking for] some terrorists who escaped the West Bank or Gaza” (66/73; my translation) or “the Americans have thrown Israel some important information about an operation—in Syria maybe—and Israel wants to make sure that life inside the country remains calm” (85/ 94; my translation).<sup>11</sup>

The bitter irony of the situation is revealed only in the final chapters of the novel, when the villagers, who all along try to “continue to behave normally . . . holding to their belief in their citizenship” (155/ 176; my translation), discover that the cause for the curfew was in fact the signing of a new “historical peace treaty” (228/ 260) between Israel and the Palestinians that involves an exchange of territories and populations. Watching the Israeli news reports, the narrator and his family learn that Israel has agreed to dismantle many of its illegally built settlements, put Jerusalem under UN control, and even give up almost the entire West Bank, with the exception of a few densely populated Jewish settlements, for which it has offered *Wadi ‘Ara* and its inhabitants in exchange. Seeing on their TV screen the colored maps that mark the newly drawn national borders, the family slowly realizes that overnight they have lost their Israeli citizenship and with it the title “Israeli Arabs”: “I think that from now on we are Palestinians” (230/ 266).

The special TV report on the new treaty also includes several interviews with Israeli politicians and academics, representing both the right and the left. The

<sup>11</sup> Within the novel, the Israeli Arab villagers seem to adopt the artificial division imposed by Israel between “Israeli Arabs” and “Palestinians” by repeatedly differentiating between themselves and the illegal Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza, whom they mockingly call “the *Gaza-wiyya* and the *Daffawiyya*” (124 /140). This unflattering description “successfully demonstrates the power of the Zionist discourse to split apart the Palestinian people” (Halihal).

first, a Knesset member from the right, expresses his pain over having to support a peace agreement that causes Israel to lose Jewish land. The second, a leading spokesman of the Israeli left, praises the agreement, describing it as “an historical milestone for the future of the Israeli democracy . . . enabling Israel [once again] to be free of the [ethical] burden of occupying another people” (229/264). The last speaker is a famous professor and “an expert of demography,” who proudly announces the belated fulfillment of the Zionist dream:

The great threat (*ha-eyum ha-gadol*) confronting the State of Israel is no longer. The Jewish identity of the state is finally secured. . . . Luckily we didn't wait to sign this [peace agreement] . . . our figures show that it would have been a matter of less than two years before the Palestinians living between the Mediterranean and the [Jordan] river would have outnumbered the Jews. This was a last minute rescue. . . . Finally—a truly and fully Jewish state.” (229–30/265; translation modified)

Here, the differences between the Zionist right and left seem completely negligible, standing for little more than shifts in rhetorical nuance. In essence, by identifying Israel as a Jewish state, both sides agree that Israeli Arabs represent nothing but an obstacle, or, in the words of the demographer, “an imminent danger” (107/119).

It is in light of this unapologetic preoccupation with demography and the determination to maintain the Jewish character of Israel that we can perhaps best recognize Kashua's literary project as an attempt to rewrite the experience of the Israeli Arab *back* into the Israeli national imagination through his insistence on using the term “Israeli Arab” (rather than Palestinian citizen of Israel, or Israeli Palestinian), even as he declares it a “humiliating name.” By reclaiming the Israeliness of his Palestinian characters, Kashua protests the separatist ethno-national imagination that renders the Israeli Arab a national threat and a demographic problem, not to mention a failed or inauthentic Palestinian/Arab. When asked in an interview published in *Al-Nahar* (July 14, 2004) to respond to the accusation voiced by some Arab readers that he uncritically adopts Israeli terminology in referring to himself and his Palestinian characters as Israeli Arabs, Kashua replied that the question of identification with which Palestinians carrying Israeli citizenship are faced is not a simple one and that it does not “boil down to a matter of choosing between self and other, authentic or false.” The designation “Israeli Arab,” he further suggested, is the one that best captures the difficulties associated with this identity, which is always already suspected of treachery: “simply by being an Arab who carries an Israeli citizenship, one is accused of being a traitor. The accusation comes from both Jews and Arabs.”

By situating this drama of “double treachery” within the specific socio-political and historical context of present-day Israel, Kashua invites us critically to rethink this context through the very “impossibility” manifested in the figure of the Israeli Arab. Indeed, if Kashua's texts emphasize, as I have suggested, the limits of masquerade and “passing” as viable political instruments for fighting discrimination, they do so only 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. It is precisely this illusion, I suggest, that Kashua's overtly sarcastic and provocative writings target and aim to deflate.

### The Work of Irony

Only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to hear them.

—Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*

Read as a minority speech-act, the joke circulates around a doubly articulated subject: the negatively marked subject, singled out as a figure of fun or abuse, is turned through the joke-act into an inclusive, yet agonistic, form of self-identification.

—Homi Bhabha, "Joking Aside"

If the daily experience of the Israeli Arab is inevitably determined by "the most disciplinary and normalized spaces of representation," to borrow Bhabha's words; if it is, as Mansour, Habibi, Shamma, and many other Israeli Arab writers make clear, confined by stereotypes and burdened by the defensive attempts to prove them wrong, Kashua employs sarcasm, self-irony, and the menace of ambiguous speech to fight this social imprisonment. Using and abusing the stereotypical and discriminatory language imposed on Israeli Arabs from without, Kashua's texts engage in a liberating discourse that sets familiar stereotypes into motion, creating in turn a language of self-identification that confronts the images of otherness produced by the hegemonic Israeli discourse. Indeed, Kashua's ironic utterances mobilize, confuse, and unsettle the very borders upon which cultural (ethnic, national, religious) differences and hierarchies are prescribed and, eventually, naturalized.

Writing from the position of a minority, Kashua makes visible and even accentuates the ambivalence inherent in any given site of identification. His narrators commonly identify as "Arab" in relation to the national project of Zionism, the colonial oppression of Palestinians, and the orientalist perception that informs Israel's racial discriminations. They also recognize themselves as "Israeli," particularly in relation to the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, a point emphasized most notably in *Let It Be Morning*. Reappropriating the conditions of exclusion involved in the production of the Israeli Arab as a minority (Israeli *but* Arab, Palestinian *but* Israeli), Kashua's writings rework and restage patterns of (ethno-national) othering into narratives of sarcastic defiance and ambiguity. In so far as Kashua's characters are conflicted beings who do not know what they are or ought to be (Israeli or Palestinian, Jew or Arab), and whose daily reality, like that of Herzl Haliwa, is often schizophrenic ("Jew by day Arab by night"), his narratives, far from providing direct and coherent accounts of such an "identity crisis," are purposely disjointed and destabilizing, breaking down any "single voice" into a multiplicity of contradictory annunciations.

For example, in a short journalistic piece called "The Immediate Suspect" Kashua examines one of the most frequently discussed topics within Israeli media since the outset of the Second Intifada: Israeli citizens' fear of riding the bus. The piece, which is narrated by an Israeli Arab journalist, opens with a description of the grave effects that witnessing a bus explosion has had on him:

My fear of buses began when I lived in Nachlaot, the neighborhood that borders the Yehuda market, by the Jafa street in Jerusalem. That is where the very first bus exploded. I think it was bus number 18 that was the first one. . . . I remember walking nearby, not close enough to see the blood and the dead bodies but close enough to hear the sirens and smell the smoke. Ever since I am bus-shocked. I no longer ride the bus or even drive in proximity to buses.

Kashua's parodic tone would immediately be recognizable to anyone familiar with the sensationalist rhetoric that has come to characterize the Israeli media's reporting on suicide bombers. The style of the paragraph clearly mimics a now familiar mode of testimonial report, which typically features a horrified eyewitness account ("I was right there," "I saw it, I heard it," "it was right next to me," "the explosion was so loud," "it was the first one," "there was so much smoke"), followed by a description of the traumatic effects of witnessing: "I have been afraid of buses ever since." As we move into the next paragraph, we learn that the journalist has since been asked by his editor to write a story about the experience of riding a bus during these hard times. Because he finds the reward he is offered—the opportunity to drive his dream car for a week—too tempting to turn down, the narrator decides to fight his fear of buses because "certain things are worth dying for":

The preparation was mostly emotional. I wrote a will and asked for forgiveness from all of those I've hurt. . . . After I completed all the emotional preparations, I set out to take care of the technical aspects of the mission. I had to choose the least dangerous route, pick up the bus-lines that are considered least vulnerable to terrorist attacks (*pigu'im*), and the hours that are the least popular.

While the narrator's preparations address his fear of falling victim to a terrorist attack, his language explicitly mimics the operative and ritualistic rhetoric of martyrdom most commonly associated with those *carrying out* the attacks: "certain things are worth dying for," "after the emotional preparation, I set out to take care of the technical aspects of the mission," and so on. This is a vivid example of the manner in which Kashua plays with different perspectives so as to make it impossible for his readers to identify a stable position of utterance. If the Israeli Arab is seen as traitor by both Israeli Jews and Palestinians, Kashua mobilizes precisely this double accusation, creating a voice that shifts back and forth between the (always already stereotypical) Israeli and Palestinian. This voice is doubly unsettled, as the fear of the Israeli journalist is conflated with the voice of the Palestinian martyr, and the voice of the hesitant passenger with that of the determined fighter.

The third paragraph introduces yet another "twist," as we realize that the most difficult task facing the journalist is not overcoming his own fear, but making sure others do not fear *him*. To do so, he concludes, he must conceal his Arab appearance: "I must work on my appearance for after all it is I—an Arab getting on the bus—that all other passengers fear. Certainly I must not wear a coat even if it is freezing cold. An Arab wearing a coat means at least ten people dead. . . . I must try my best to look as Israeli as all passengers on the bus." With this paragraph Kashua seems to come full circle: his narrator, an Israeli Arab journalist, is at once afraid (presumably like many other Israelis) to ride the bus (due to the threat of terrorism) and afraid of being identified as a terrorist. Surfacing through these convoluted perspectives is a voice that speaks in between and across static perceptions of the current political reality. Indeed, in mobilizing the unique position of an Israeli Arab who fears both a terrorist attack and being stigmatized as a terrorist, Kashua is able to situate the question of suicide bombers in relation to the broader history of Israeli colonial violence, a history that associates "Arab" (Israeli or not) with a dangerous alterity, even terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Intertwining the racist projec-

<sup>12</sup> Before leaving Israel in 1969, Mahmud Darwish commented that in Israel "every Arab is suspected and criminalized" ("unqidhuna min hadha al-hubb al-qasi"). Emile Habibi describes a similar feeling in his last novel *Ikhtiyah*: "There is not a single Arab in this country that is not haunted by the thought that maybe, deep inside, he is a terrorist [for he is right to believe] that his feeling of discrimination facilitates his potential to become one" (*Ikhtiyah* 47).

tions of Jewish Israelis with the actual suicide attacks carried out by Palestinian fighters, Kashua ends the piece with yet another account of “passing”: “With a pair of glasses, my hair pushed to one side I look just like any other Israeli Jew of Eastern-European origin. . . . Getting on the bus I look around worried, trying to locate potential suspects. To my relief, I discover that I am the only suspect. . . . Relaxed, I fall asleep with a smile on my face.”<sup>13</sup> To unpack the multiple layers of irony folded into these final lines one must carefully attend to the mobile position from which the narrator speaks: as an Arab who hides under a Jewish Eastern European appearance (so as not to be suspected as a terrorist); as a passenger who, like the other Israeli passengers on the bus, conducts a quick “racial profiling” to make sure there are no other suspects (namely Arab-looking passengers) on the bus; and, finally, as a rider who finds comfort in the knowledge that he is the only “suspected passenger” (Arab) and that he alone knows it.

Beginning with language typical of the Israeli media reporting on suicide bombing, then mimicking the rhetoric of martyrdom employed by suicide bombers, and finally concluding with the schizophrenic language of the Israeli Arab who watches out for suspects while simultaneously identifying himself as one, Kashua forces his readers to inhabit a variety of conflicted perspectives at once: suspected and suspecting, threatening and threatened, Arab and Israeli, outsider and insider. Kashua’s narrator, here as in many other instances, undoes the coherence of both Israeli and Palestinian subject positions, rendering them intrinsically fragmented and incomplete. Indeed, it is in highlighting and embellishing the polarized position of the Israeli Arab that Kashua converts the familiar language of the conflict—itsself based on historical overdetermination and clear political demarcations (Israeli versus Palestinian, Arab versus Jew, victim versus perpetrator)—into a series of unsettling and provocative statements that “interrupt the narratives of filiation through which the [very] meanings of majority and minority are determined, fixed and internalized” (Mufti 121).

Consider in this regard the question of language. In the context of minority literature, this question has often been formulated in terms of a political choice between either using the minority author’s own “minor” language or employing the dominant language (“the language of the master”) and subverting it from within.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the Israeli Palestinian writer Anton Shammas has accounted for his choice of writing a novel in Hebrew by stating that he is “like a guest in the home of the Hebrew language . . . one who politely volunteers to wash the dishes after dinner but who does so with the great pleasure of knowing that he *might*, even if just by mistake, break one of the host’s most beautiful dishes” (“The Meeting” 31;

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard that “the bus” functions in *Dancing Arabs* as one of the sites where the separation between “Arab” and “Jew” becomes most visible and explicit. The young narrator is always nervous when getting on a bus, even after years of “perfecting his Israeli Jewish appearance,” both because as a child traveling on a bus he had been the target of racist insults directed at him by Jewish kids and because he has since witnessed on numerous occasions Arab passengers being singled out by inspectors who asked for their papers, interrogated them, and often ordered them to get off the bus.

<sup>14</sup> The question of language choice in establishing a minor literature has been foregrounded ever since the publication of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s influential essay “What Is a Minor Literature?” For Deleuze and Guattari, a writer’s choice to write in the hegemonic language, while disorienting its linguistic hegemony from within (“deterritorialization” is the term they use), is an essential condition for the production of minor literature. Thus, for example, they emphasize the importance of Kafka’s decision to write in German (the dominant language of his time and place) rather than “in his Czech language or using popular, oral Yiddish” (25–26).

see Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition* 73–94). Kashua’s position vis-à-vis Hebrew, however, is quite different. 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. Therefore, accusations directed at Kashua’s use of Hebrew, or his “failure” to write in his “own” language, reflect little more than the power of hegemonic narratives to situate and naturalize existing political divides, while internalizing the very colonial perception of language as a site of inherent cultural possession (see Derrida, *Monolingualism*).

As Kashua’s narratives make clear, Hebrew is *not* the language of the other/master, no more so than it is the language of Kashua and his narrators. In his words, “Hebrew and I chose each other” (“My French Boycott”). 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. 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 through the work of hegemonic narratives. Thus, for example, in *Dancing Arabs* the narrator’s initial motivation for learning Hebrew is not his desire to become integrated into the Jewish school he attends, but rather to learn about his own family’s secret past. Finding a small suitcase in his grandmother’s closet filled with old newspaper clippings with passport-sized photos of his father, the narrator realizes that he “must be able to read the Hebrew newspapers” if he wishes to know the hidden past of his father (11). Hebrew is here the language that scripts as a potential terrorist a father who simultaneously writes as an authentic and brave Palestinian, a status the narrator himself fails to achieve precisely because he appears “more Israeli.” Exploring the construction of authenticity side by side with the failure of such constructions, Kashua returns to the “question of language” as a question that directly challenges the binary thinking that determines, fixes, and internalizes the hierarchy between minority and majority, one’s “own” cultural possessions and those “borrowed” from the other.

### Lost In Translation

“Who’s your target audience?” is the question people always want to ask me . . . but what they are really asking is: “So, do you write for Arabs or for Jews?” So whom do I really write for? Does the fact that Hebrew and I chose each other automatically mean that I aim at a certain targeted audience? What does one write for Jews? What does one write for Arabs?

—Sayed Kashua, “My French Boycott”

In a short story entitled “Lost in Translation” Kashua offers his own sarcastic response to the question of writing in Hebrew. As the story opens, the narrator, a young Israeli Palestinian journalist/disguised freedom fighter, is gathered with fellow Palestinian fighters in a mosque. When the narrator proudly reports to them that he has successfully carried out an attack on Israeli soldiers, he is immediately cut off by another fighter who confronts him with a column from the English version of *Ha-arteẓ*, in which the narrator details his regular consumption of alcohol. (The fighter, like the narrator, must resort to the English version because he

“refuses to read or speak in Hebrew.”) Ashamed, the narrator confesses to publishing in the Israeli paper, but denies that the column’s content is his, claiming that his original text—which was written in Arabic—had focused on the importance of Islamic values. As soon as the meeting at the mosque is over, the narrator calls the newspaper’s editor and demands an explanation and apology, only to be told by the editor (who does not read Arabic) that the online English version is an exact translation of the printed Hebrew text. The confusion, he concludes, must have happened in the process of translating the Arabic text into Hebrew. The narrator then calls the Arabic translator, who confesses to knowing only a few words of Arabic (*kif, mabruk, sahhtin, ahlan*) and in fact using a fake name (Ahmad) to get jobs as a translator. “Ahmad” admits that he invented the content of the Hebrew text, but instead of apologizing he asks the narrator to thank him for the “Hebrew version,” which, after all, is the text that “made him a star!”

While the question of authenticity and origins (an Arabic original becomes a Hebrew text that is later read in English translation), as well as the issue of linguistic faithfulness (both the narrator and his fellow fighters take pride in not speaking Hebrew), is overtly mocked here, it is important to note that Kashua’s satirical account never fails to address the colonial dynamics underlying the relationship between Hebrew and Arabic, as well as the status of English as the language that dominates the movement between these two Semitic languages. This piece further invites readers who know that Kashua himself writes *only* in Hebrew and not in Arabic to reflect critically upon the possibility that there is an untranslatable or mistranslated “Arabic source” to be found in Kashua’s Hebrew writings. It simultaneously draws critical attention to the very quest for locating such a source of origins in an authentic *Arab* voice, a voice lost to/in the Hebrew language.

An understanding of translation as a linguistic practice and mode of being that is always already a mistranslation is inherently suspicious of notions of originality, locality, and unmediated authenticity. It is within this context that we can perhaps best understand the impetus behind so many of Kashua’s provocative statements, all of which toy with and parody the discourse of authenticity: “Why do Israelis insist that I have an identity crisis? I know very well who I am, a good for nothing Arab” (“Hebrew Arab”). Or: “You wonder who is a ‘good Arab’ (*aravi machmad*)? Well that must be me and frankly you should know that the secret desire of every [good] Arab is to be a Jew” (qtd. in Velodveski, “Not Writing”). And finally: “Just recently my wife and I discovered that we belong to a lost Jewish tribe. We were so delighted that we immediately hung photos of Theodore Herzl all over our bedroom” (qtd. in Livne, “Wandering”). If these examples feature the stereotypical image of the Israeli Arab as a tragic figure who lacks a sense of authentic (Arab) identity and who is in truth nothing but a “wannabe Jew,” other examples mock the prevailing perception among Israeli Jews that Israeli Arabs ought to be thankful for having the right to be Israeli. Thus, in a short piece published in an Israeli cultural journal and with the subtitle “An Open Letter to My Brothers in the West Bank and Gaza,” Kashua, who is evidently addressing his Hebrew readers rather than his “occupied brothers,” notes:

I know that many of you think of me as a collaborator and rightly so, but you have to understand. . . . While sometimes I want to be there with you behind the checkpoints and in the refugee camps—to be a “real Palestinian” living under “real occupation”—I usually come to my senses and realize that I am better off being an Arab Israeli citizen. True, I am not an equal citizen, but I am thankful for what I have. I am a modern slave that doesn’t seek his freedom. . . . I am writing you today, with the hope



that you will understand me better and also stop your fight. I beg you, please, for the sake of your Palestinian brothers living in Israel, give up, come down, surrender and be thankful for whatever you are offered. You see, your fight for freedom reminds us too much of our own slavery. So please stop, it simply hurts us too much. ("So Humiliating")

Turning to sarcasm and self-irony, Kashua articulates a structure of identification that confronts the accusation of national betrayal and disloyalty directed at him by both Israeli and Palestinian readers in a manner that foregrounds the illusory nature of national identity and authenticity.

This concern with authenticity has become especially prominent in Kashua's recent and controversial TV sitcom *Avoda Aravit*.<sup>15</sup> The title of the show, borrowed from an Israeli racist lexicon, refers to work performed by Arabs as "cheap" incomplete, unreliable, or shoddy. The term emerged in the context of early Jewish settlements in Palestine, when the Zionist leaders promoted the replacement of existing Arab labor with "pure" Hebrew labor (*Avoda Ivrit*) in order to assure the success of the Judification of the land (see Barghuti). Why, then, would Kashua choose such a condescending term as the name for his show? One answer, offered by some Israeli Palestinian reviewers, is that the name, like the show in its entirety, caters to an Israeli Jewish audience to whom Kashua chooses to speak in familiar terms by uncritically adopting their racist perspective. Thus, Raja Zaartreh accuses Kashua of presenting a "distorted vision of Arabs" based on an "uncritical internalization of Jewish Israeli orientalism," and Ayad Barghuti calls the series "The Work of Israelization," a "tragic self defeat [that] allows Israelis to make fun of Arabs without feeling racist, for after all the writer is an Arab and so are the actors." Likewise, the actor Mohammad Bakri has suggested that with this show Kashua has delivered to Jewish viewers "the kind of Arabs they have tried to make since 1948." These and numerous other negative reviews—from several leading Arabic newspapers and online magazines published in Israel—have been countered by only a few supportive reviews, the majority of which emphasized the fact that, as a TV comedy, the program ought not be taken so seriously. Faiz Abbas, for example, calls upon Arab viewers and critics to "ease up, turn attention away from the insults and enjoy a good laugh."

I would like to break this false dichotomy between "humorous" and "serious" by suggesting that it is precisely the show's humor that makes it so politically significant. The ironic representations and mocking reiterations that are everywhere present in *Avoda Aravit* allow it, I believe, to confront, remobilize, and perhaps even begin to defuse the racist Israeli stereotyping of Arabs, but without resorting to the kind of defensive or corrective stereotyping offered by several of his critics.<sup>16</sup> It is of course undeniable that the medium of TV, particularly in its primetime format, presents ideological and financial restrictions that necessarily set limits on one's ability to generate independent and subversive images and messages. In the

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<sup>15</sup> The show, written by Kashua and produced by Danny Paran, first aired on Channel 2, the most popular Israeli TV station, in November 2007. The cast includes Clara Khoury, Norman Issa, and Mira Awad.

<sup>16</sup> Some of Kashua's fiercest critics have responded to his use of the Israeli racist term "Avoda Aravit" with elaborately defensive accounts that seek to posit the greatness of "real" Arab work. Sheikh Kamal Hatib, for example, accompanies his harsh review of Kashua's TV program with a lengthy account of the vast contributions Arabs have made from ancient history to modern times, describing the greatness of "Arab work" in the fields of science, mathematics, medicine, art, and strategic military thinking.

case of *Avoda Aravit*—which was bought by the most popular Israeli channel (Channel 2)—this has meant, for example, that the first bilingual Hebrew and Arabic Israeli TV show, and the first series to focus explicitly on the daily experiences of Israeli Arabs, has ended up including far more Hebrew dialogue than was originally intended (at the expense of reducing the presence of Arabic to less than thirty percent).<sup>17</sup> Kashua has nevertheless defended his choices, saying that “he alone chose the show’s name and chose to purposely work with negative stereotypes,” creating what many unsympathetic critics have called a “sell-out” (qtd. in Zuaafi). Kashua’s choice of working with, rather than directly opposing, stereotypical representations must be understood, I suggest, as an attempt to redistribute and thus defuse the power with which they are endowed.

Reclaiming the Israeli racist name by redirecting its offensiveness back onto his Israeli viewers whose racism the show mocks, Kashua is able to “recast the sign of identity ‘singled’ out for brutal fun into a relational signifying system of cultural difference,” to borrow Bhabha’s words (“Joking Aside” xvii). Invited to watch a program about Arab lives, written by an Arab and with an all-Arab cast—in short, “an Arab work” (*avoda aravit*)—Israeli viewers are forced to confront their own position within this racist drama. Indeed, it is the figure of the liberal, leftist, and “open-minded” Israeli Zionist who fails to recognize his/her own racism that is the main target of the show’s sarcasm. In a manner that resembles Habibi’s ironic casting of his anti-hero Saeed the pessoptomist, Kashua constructs as the protagonist of *Avoda Aravit* a man (Amjad) who uncritically buys into the hierarchal and essentializing distinctions made between Jews and Arabs—not as a “compromised model for Israeli Arabs to identify with” or as a “replacement for the authentic Arab that the Jewish Israeli tribe has cast away” (‘Abed Al-Halim), but rather as a means through which to expose the underlying racism that characterizes the Israeli Jewish Zionist society, particularly in its secular, leftist, and liberal sectors where racism is not recognized as such.

True, Amjad, like the protagonist of *Dancing Arabs*, spends much of his time and energy trying to pass as a Jew—a task for which he is prepared to replace his “distinctively Arab car” with an “unmistakably Jewish car,” to take his daughter out of the local Islamic school and send her instead to a reformed Jewish School, and even to force his entire family to sit around the table “like the civilized Jews,” pretending to celebrate a “Muslim version of Passover.” But this desire must not be read as a transparent reference to Amjad’s or “Kashua’s own inferiority complex” (Kamal Hatib). More accurately, this desire, I suggest, captures but also mobilizes the convoluted psychological impact of a society dominated by ethno-racial inequality.<sup>18</sup> Kashua’s “assimilated Arab” who wants to be a Jew thus operates in

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<sup>17</sup> Several critics have pointed out that having a Palestinian husband and wife speak to each other in Hebrew rather than Arabic makes the show seem unrealistic. Others have further noted that, while the Arabic dialogue has Hebrew subtitles, the Hebrew dialogue does not have Arabic subtitles. In short, the program seems to reinforce the colonial inequality between Hebrew, which is assumed to be the national language, and Arabic, which is considered a language limited to the Arab minority.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that in all the examples mentioned here the joke is not so much on Amjad, but rather on his Israeli Jewish colleagues and friends. Thus, it is Amjad’s Israeli Jewish friend who teaches him the difference between “Jewish” and “Arab” cars; it is the Israeli Jewish teacher who welcomes Amjad’s daughter to the Jewish school and congratulates herself on running an open-minded institution that welcomes children with “all kinds of disabilities”; and it is Amjad’s Jewish Israeli guest, for whom Amjad arranges the Muslim-Passover event, who is the main target of the scene’s sarcastic

a similar manner to that of Franz Fanon's "black man [who] wants to be white" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 9). In both cases, the desire must be understood as a minority speech-act, and as such it cannot be read simply at face value. Rather, it should be read through the ambiguity it stages and the irony it casts as it opens a space of identification articulated "in the movement between third and first persons" that further emphasizes the "ambivalent condition of their borderline proximity" (Bhabha, "Minority Maneuvers" 434). Indeed, from what or whose perspective is this desire to be other (White/Jewish) stated? Does it reflect the popular racist projection of the dominant group, which assigns value to itself as it creates its own inferiors? Does it reiterate the accusation of betrayal often directed at the so-called assimilated minority from other members of his/her community? Or is it a sincere expression of the damaged psychology of the colonized person who has, in light of the social inequalities he/she experiences, developed an inferiority complex? Kashua, like Fanon, makes it impossible to separate one answer from the other. Furthermore, Kashua's repeated sarcastic comments about his *own* desire to be a Jew ("I am a 'good Arab' and the secret desire of every 'good Arab' is to be a Jew") make it quite clear that his focus on the desire of the Israeli Arab to be/pass as a Jew, far from naïvely duplicating prevailing stereotypes (among which the idea of an internalized Arab/Black inferiority complex is the most offensive), is in fact an explicitly critical commentary on such stereotypes.

One could of course argue that the fact that Kashua's extensive use of self-irony and negative stereotypes has been met with much suspicion and scrutiny is indicative of his work's failure to do the political work that I have outlined.<sup>19</sup> But these objections may very well indicate the opposite, especially if we accept Freud's observation that "only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to hear them."

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commentary. In this scene, as all the guests sit around the table, Amjad's father entertains himself by singing in Arabic his praise for his favorite drink, "diet Sprite." The soft-spoken Israeli woman who is "the guest of honor" joins in, admitting that she does not understand a word of Arabic but that she has always been moved by "the glory of Islamic prayers."

<sup>19</sup> Kashua himself would be the first to admit as much. Asked to comment on the harsh criticism directed at his writing by numerous critics, Kashua had this to say: "Since so many people oppose my work, they must be right. I am convinced: I must indeed be a Zionist hypocrite" ("My French Boycott").

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