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Dancing Arabs and Spaces of Desire

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that Sayed Kashua’s *Dancing Arabs* can be read as an attempt to dramatize the many parallels between Israel’s “ethnocracy” and the colonial situation. The novel reveals that the Arab minority in Israel is not one minority among others within a democratic situation, since democracy connotes the possibility and desirability of assimilation. The interactions in Kashua’s novel gesture toward a forceful discouragement of total integration on the part of Israel’s Arab citizens. There is no possibility of assimilation for Arab citizens because the very intelligibility of the ethnic landscape in Israel depends on maintaining the Arab-Jew divide.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose que le roman *Dancing Arabs* de Sayed Keshua peut être lu en tant que dramatisation des nombreux analogies entre « l’éthnocratie » israélienne et la situation coloniale. Le roman démontre que la minorité arabe en Israël n’est pas une minorité parmi d’autres dans une situation démocratique, car une démocratie propose la possibilité et le désir d’assimilation. Les relations sociales dans le roman de Keshua révèlent un découragement ferme contre l’assimilation pour les citoyens arabo-israéliens — il n’y a pas de possibilité d’assimilation pour les citoyens arabes car l’intelligibilité même du terrain ethnique en Israel dépend du maintien d’un clivage arabe-juif.
When *Dancing Arabs*’ first-person narrator announces mid-way through the novel that he wants to be a Jew, he is, in effect, revealing something very important about the way dominant norms operate in ethnically divided societies like contemporary Israel. In his early adolescence, the narrator—an Arab citizen of Israel who is never named—is sent to a Jewish Israeli boarding school, and it is here that he begins his sometimes desperate attempt to approximate the gestures, aspirations and tastes associated with Jewish Israeliness. 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 decides 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 “*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 practise by holding up a piece of paper to his mouth and telling himself: “If the paper moves, you’ve said a *p*” (Kashua 2004: 102).

First published in 2002, in the aftermath of the eruption of the second *intifada* and the events of October 2000, in which thirteen Arab citizens of Israel were killed by police during demonstrations, Sayed Kashua’s *Dancing Arabs* emerged on the literary scene at a time of heightened tensions between Jews and Arabs within Israel. The ongoing repercussions of these two historical events have served to amplify already existing tensions within Israeli society: many Jews have become more convinced of and vocal about their perception of Arab citizens as a fifth column, while most Arab citizens—who comprise approximately 20 per cent of Israel’s citizenry—have become more convinced of and vocal about their perception of themselves as second class citizens and a repressed minority. The “fictive” Israel that Kashua describes in his novel is informed by the “real” ethnic and political Israeli landscape, and this landscape clearly serves as the narrative’s backdrop. In recent years, critical sociologists, historians, geographers and political scientists have argued that the “real” Israel is an “ethnocracy,” in which one ethnic group has hegemony and dominance (cf. Yiftachel 1998). Although social stratification among the various sectors within the Jewish and Arab populations exists, the intransigent dividing line in terms of identity, identification and access to power revolves around an Arab-Jewish binary opposition. The marginalized Jewish populations can and do demand participation and recognition on the basis of their “common Jewishness” (Kimmerling 1999: 355). The Arab citizens of Israel, on the other hand, can do no such thing; their place in the Jewish state has always been precarious: they are neither inside nor totally outside. This feeling of precariousness has intensified since the October 2000 events, as the policemen involved in the civilian shootings have been exonerated, Arab politicians have
been further marginalized and **delegitimized**,** and mainstream Jewish politicians** have begun to entertain and circulate the possibility of exchanging Arab villages inside Israel for Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank as part of a comprehensive peace plan.

The Jewishness of the contemporary Israeli State is conceived by the hegemonic secular establishment as an *ethnic* or cultural category and *not* a religious one. It is constituted in fundamental ways through the policing of the spatial and definitional borders between the Jew and the Arab within Israel proper (the pre-1967 borders), as well as through the continual production of absolute difference between the Jew and the Palestinian in the occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. As *Dancing Arabs* lays bare and current scholarship has argued, the negotiation of identity by Arab citizens of Israel has therefore taken place in relation to Jewish Israeliness on one hand, and Palestinian nationalism on the other (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998). Because of the intensified feeling of precariousness, this negotiation has become increasingly urgent and public as greater numbers of young Arab citizens are claiming a Palestinian-Israeli rather than an Arab-Israeli identity. Israel’s constant and continuing efforts to suppress its Arab citizens’ identification as Palestinians reveals how high the stakes involved in identification and the assertion of identity have been (Gordon 2007).

In what follows, I argue that *Dancing Arabs* manages to trace and to forcefully dramatize the identification problem of Arab citizens of Israel by drawing our attention to a crucial relationship between identification and what I term “the desire-to-be,” which I define as the desire and attempt to approximate norms associated with specific categories of identification (Rottenberg 2003). Since ethnicity has been one of the major categories of identification through which a subject’s identity becomes recognizable and coherent to her/himself and to other members of society in Israel, subjects are interpellated or initiated into society as ethnic or “ethnicized” subjects. This preliminary interpellation imposes on the subject an identification as a Jew or as an Arab. A series of norms are concatenated to each category of identification, and a specific type of relationship between identification and the “desire-to-be” is encouraged and compelled by society—one which induces and urges the subject to approximate the hegemonic *norms* linked to the category through which he or she is interpellated. If, for instance, a subject is interpellated into society as a Jewish man, he will be encouraged to emulate norms associated with both Jewishness and masculinity, and punished if he does not.

Kashua’s narrative complicates this schema by revealing that if a subject who is interpellated into society as an Arab wishes to access some of the privileges that accompany “being Jewish,” this subject will also be encouraged to emulate norms associated with Israeli Jewishness. The novel underscores that in contemporary Israeli society a multiple set of norms circulates, and Arab subjects can and
do desire norms not necessarily associated with “Arabness.” In more general theoretical terms, the novel shows how a subject who identifies as part of the subaltern ethnic group is allowed and often pushed to desire norms associated with the hegemonic ethnic group. Simultaneously, though, the narrative gestures towards the impossibility of changing one’s identification. “Once an Arab, always an Arab. For [the Jews] you’ll always be an Arab,” the narrator’s father tells his son (106). Thus, Dancing Arabs reveals the way bi-ethnically divided societies allow for a certain flexibility in the way subjects desire-to-be, while imposing and policing forms of identification. An Arab subject may desire what Jews desire, but he or she is never allowed to identify as a Jew. There is no possibility of assimilation for Arab citizens, because the very intelligibility of the ethnic landscape in contemporary Israel (and thus the “Jewishness” of the state) depends on maintaining the Arab-Jew divide.

This paper maps out the narrator’s movement from the all-Arab space of Tira to the Jewish space of the boarding school and the “mixed” but segregated space of Jerusalem. Each ethnic space produces its own specific sets of norms; the narrative can be said to gauge the power dynamics within each space as well as what transpires when an Arab citizen crosses over from one space to another. Kashua’s novel therefore illustrates something fundamental about the workings of hegemony in Israeli society, and it does so through an examination of the way hegemonic norms operate on the level of subjects’ very desires and aspirations. My argument is primarily theoretical. By drawing attention to the situation of Arabs within Israel, however, the novel (and my analysis) also gives voice to a group that is rarely represented in the current discourse on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Moreover, through Kashua’s use of a liminal first-person narrator, the text manages to raise unsettling questions, from within, about the nature of Israel’s democracy during this period of profound tension and uncertainty; these questions are addressed to a primarily Jewish and Western audience. It is important to note here that Kashua writes in Hebrew. The implications of this language play will be discussed in the final section of the paper.

The Multiplicity of Desires within Arab Space

Dancing Arabs’ first two sections recount the narrator’s childhood and early adolescence in the village of Tira, a minority community and relatively homogeneous and separate entity within the larger Israeli state. Its population, like the population of all other Arab villages that became part of Israel following the 1948 war, consists entirely of Arab citizens; there are no Jews. The narrative suggests that in the Arab villages within Israel proper, as opposed to the villages in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, children have been initiated into society as Arab rather than Palestinian. In one of the most moving and disturbing vignettes in Dancing Arabs, the narrator recalls a particular day in history class when his
teacher asks the children if they know what Palestine is. No one in the class does. The teacher then asks whether or not the children have ever seen a Palestinian. The only boy to respond tells the teacher and the class: “[H]e’d once been driving with his father in the dark and they’d seen two Palestinians.” The teacher is outraged and beats the children, screaming, “We are Palestinians, you are Palestinians, I’m a Palestinian” (104).

Identification with “Arabness” in Tira almost always implies, and is inextricably intertwined with, the desire to “be an Arab,” that is, a desire to live up to the norms associated with “Arabness.” Accordingly, the village is shown to have its own dominant regulatory injunctions and its own set of rules, which are, at least in some respects, different from the ones circulating within Jewish Israeli space. This is a crucial point; in any given hegemonic society minority and alternative communities exist, holding different and competing norms. Within such communities, norms that are negatively valued and even actively discouraged or punished by the majority and/or dominant society may be affirmed as positive and desirable. What is most important here is that in Tira, a homogeneous community described as trying to resist the (complete) penetration of Jewish Israelieness, there are several ways to approximate “Arabness”; multiple norms, which are at times in tension or even in conflict with each other, circulate within this “Arab” space. A subject’s desire to emulate any one of the circulating norms, however, is inextricable from his/her identification as an Arab; there is a linking or coupling of identification and the desire-to-be. Furthermore, the fact that there are always numerous norms circulating within a given space suggests that norms never operate as monolithic regulatory ideals, nor do they operate unproblematically in tandem with other categories of identification, such as gender or class.

The narrator in Dancing Arabs describes the various and at times conflicting norms that have been linked to “Arabness” and circulate concurrently in his native village. The narrator is acutely aware of the gendered division of performing “Arabness,” and he describes the impact of gender norms on his own identity formation throughout the first two sections of the book. He recounts how his father castigated him for being “such a coward” when he displayed signs of fear (31). The narrator’s description of himself as timid is contrasted with images and depictions of the “Arab hero.” In the chapter, “The People in Tira Used to Be Braver,” the themes of heroism and defending the land are clearly linked to “traditional Arab culture” and thus with “Arabness.” The grandmother’s obsessive narration of past feats and the heroism of the shahidim (those who fell in the ‘48 war), alongside the father’s attempt to inculcate in his sons the importance of “defending” the land (55) all gesture toward the need to define and mark boundaries of identity (particularly male identity) by encouraging the regulatory ideals of heroism and honour.

Whereas the narrator describes himself as an odd child who has only one friend in the entire village and does not really fit into the larger community, he neither dis-
identifies with “being Arab” nor desires to be a Jew at this stage in his life. Rather, he depicts himself as constantly attempting to live up to the dominant norms circulating in Tira. He admires the legendary “heroes” of the village—men like Abu el-Abed (33)—and portrays himself as trying to approximate these ethnic and gender ideals. In one of the rare moments that the narrator says he actually feels “like a man,” he explains this feeling as a lack of fear (35).

Though the strong, brave, fearless Arab man is one of the most powerful norms in the village, there are other norms that compete or, at the very least, have an uneasy relationship with it. The narrator’s grandmother initially serves as the mouthpiece for the “alternative” norm: the well-educated, studious, intellectual or professional man. The book’s second chapter centres on the grandmother’s memories of when her son was in grade and high school: “He was the cleanest child in the class, the best-looking in the school.... He was the best student ... got the highest grades” (11). The grandmother is so determined that her son attend university that she works “like two men, and everything she earned was for him” (ibid.). The tension between these two notions of masculine behaviour can be felt through the narrator’s description of his father’s life trajectory as well as his own. His father had no clearly defined involvement in campus politics; his occasional outbursts of nationalist fervor, and his castigation of his sons for not being “brave enough” all gesture toward a desire to live up to the dominant norm which links Arab masculinity to strength, honor and intrepidness. However, the father is also described as envious of the school’s principal, who is considered a successful professional in the village. The narrator recounts how his father would constantly tell him that the “principal had been a nobody when it came to schoolwork and had gone to some second-rate teacher’s college.” This scorn is usually followed by the father reminding his son that his grades “were the best in his class, and if he’d had enough money to finish university he would have become a doctor long ago” (77).

The narrator is also caught between these two norms. An entire chapter is devoted to the description of the war games the protagonist and his brothers played as children. In these gun battles, the narrator attempts to emulate Hamzah, the prophet Muhammad’s uncle, who, as the narrator tells us, was “very strong” and would “fight against ten infidels at once and kill them all” (27). On the other hand, the narrator wants to be the best student in Tira, just as his father was (8). Unlike most of the other children, who rarely do their homework and who are consequently subjected to corporal punishment, the narrator tells us that he received “fewer beatings than anyone else, fewer than the girls even. I always did my homework. I never made noise in class. I didn’t talk with anyone. I spent recess at my desk with my hands folded” (69, emphasis added). This kind of behaviour is at variance with the ideal of the strong and fearless hero.
The first two sections of the novel dramatize not only that there are always more than one set of norms circulating in a given community, whether that community is hegemonic or marginalized, but also that subjects can and do negotiate between circulating norms. In Tira, a subject’s desire-to-be can and does fluctuate between or among the different norms, and subjects gain a certain amount of agency by being able to negotiate between possible desires-to-be. It could be argued that the ability to negotiate among various competing norms is characteristic of all social spaces. But while there is always some leeway vis-à-vis the desire-to-be, the question of identification, or more precisely, dis-identification as an Arab does not arise in these two sections of the novel. Throughout his childhood, the narrator fluctuates between his desire to emulate one or the other of the competing dominant norms, but he never considers identifying as anything other than an Arab.

Arab Desires within Jewish Space

In the opening lines of the third section of the novel, the narrator first confesses that he has always wanted to be a Jew. This statement is strange, since during his childhood and early adolescent the narrator does not really know any Jews, and has not had any prolonged or intimate contact with them. Furthermore, after the few encounters he does have with Jews during his childhood, he does not express a desire to be one. It is only when he is accepted into the Jewish Israeli boarding school and enters Jewish space that he first experiences both the compulsion and the encouragement to desire Jewishness. The power of his confession, of this “always having wanted to be a Jew,” lies in its reinterpretation and refashioning of the past. Once the narrator egresses Jewish space, he is forced everafter to negotiate between the dominant norms of Tira and the hegemonic norms circulating in Jewish Israeli society. And, for the narrator, the hegemonic norms of Jewish society come to influence his desire-to-be to such an extent that these norms often trump those of Tira.12

During his first two weeks at the boarding school in Jerusalem, the narrator is initiated into Jewish Israeli society, and he is undoubtedly interpellated into this new space as an Arab. On the very first day of school, his Jewish roommates laugh at him when he admits that he hasn't heard of the Beatles, for saying “bob” instead of “pop,” for the pink sheets his Mother has bought him, and for his unstylish pants (92-93). Two more disturbing incidents occur when he returns to Tira for the first time during the Rosh Hashanah school holiday. In the first incident he and Adel, another Arab student, are riding a public bus towards the central bus station. A group of students from the Polanski Vocational School board the bus and start to taunt the two boys. The Jewish students begin to sing, “Mohammed is dead.” The menacing atmosphere alongside the humiliation of being singled out in public overwhelm the narrator, and he gets off the bus. Adel follows. Once Adel
and the narrator are safely on the sidewalk, one of the Jewish students “opens a window and spits” (97).

The other incident occurs just a few hours after the first. The intercity bus, which the two boys take from Jerusalem to Kfar Saba, travels through Ben-Gurion Airport in order to drop off and pick up passengers. There is a checkpoint at the airport’s entrance, and a soldier who inspects the bus orders Adel and the narrator to get off. After demanding their ID cards, the soldier proceeds to go through the boys’ bags; he searches their books, sheets and clothes, and then tells them that they must wait for the bus to return to the checkpoint so they can reboard after it exits the airport. But this is too much for the narrator. He refuses to get back on the bus, begins to cry and calls his father to demand that he pick him up. The father has little sympathy for his son’s tears; he laughs and asks his distraught son whether he has “thought about how people will look at [him]” if he drops out of the boarding school. But at this point the father’s admonition of his son for being such a “scaredy-cat” does not really move the narrator (101, translation modified).

All of these incidents have an immense impact on the narrator and spur him to attempt to “pass” as a Jew. He begins emulating Jewish norms, and in effect, becomes what Homi Bhabha terms a “mimic man” (1994). He decides to shave his moustache, practises pronouncing the sound “p” correctly, and buys himself some “Jewish” clothes, cassettes and books. He starts sitting at the back of the bus with the other Jewish adolescents and singing “their favorite bus-trip songs” (103). Later on in the novel, the narrator describes himself as:

The youngest Arab ever to learn to pronounce a p.... I have almost no accent. You can't tell by looking at me. I've got sideburns and Coke-bottle sunglasses. I even speak Hebrew with the housekeeping staff.... I studied with Jews, and all of my friends are Jews. I know all the Jewish expressions, even army slang. (202)

And he is duly rewarded for his efforts to “fit in.” One of the rewards for assuming Jewish gestures and tastes is that he does indeed begin to pass as a Jew. The narrator’s performance of “Jewishness” is so convincing that, on another occasion when Arabs are asked to get off a public bus, he tells us: “The only time they ever made me get off was on that first trip ... I felt sorry for the Arabs who were taken off, and I thanked God they hadn’t picked on me” (101). Soldiers and Jewish students from other schools don’t seem to notice him in public places anymore, or if they do, they think he is a Jew. The more he endeavors to approximate Jewish norms, the more he earns the trust and approval of the students and teachers around him. The narrator proudly recounts how his history teacher allowed him to carry the gun taken on school trips as a sign of trust (although the teacher does not allow him to carry the ammunition). This is an important marker in Jewish Israeli culture, since, for the most part, Arab citizens are excluded from
fields in which there are “security” concerns. Perhaps the most interesting, and for the narrator the most intense “reward” for his attempts to assume “Jewishness” is his romance with a Jewish student, who initiates him into mainstream Jewish culture.

In the Jewish space of the boarding school, just as in the Jewish areas of Jerusalem, like the public buses, the narrator is encouraged to approximate the norms linked to Jewish Israeliness. He is even encouraged to “pass” as a Jew, which he does quite successfully. However, while Jewish society countenances and even promotes a certain kind of occasional “passing,” it does not allow Arab citizens to completely pass over into the Jewish world. If it is true that the intelligibility (and thus legitimacy) of the Jewish state has come to depend upon maintaining an essential difference between the Arab and the Jew, then one begins to understand why an Arab is never really allowed to “become” a Jew. Kashua’s novel reveals how in order to maintain its hegemony, the Jewish ethnocracy produces Jewishness as desirable and even encourages non-Jewish identified subjects who enter Jewish space to emulate the norms which have historically been linked to “Jewishness.” However, in order to maintain the fiction of its uniqueness, ethnic purity and superiority, this ethnic discourse must constantly invoke and reinforce the “non-Jewishness” of the Arab subject. Kashua’s novel suggests that this is accomplished by enabling a certain flexibility of desires-to-be while imposing and policing identification.

As we have already seen, the narrator’s entrance into the hegemonic culture profoundly shapes his desire-to-be. But although the narrator can negotiate between different desires-to-be, at times emulating Arab norms and at times Jewish norms, depending on where he is and what he wishes to accomplish, his identification never changes. In stark contrast to what the narrator tells us in the opening lines of the third part of the novel—that he not only has always wanted to be a Jew, but that he has pulled off becoming one (91)—the narrative never depicts 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.

Once an Arab, Always an Arab

It is during his formative years at the boarding school that the narrator learns the lesson: “Once an Arab, always an Arab.... For [the Jews] you’ll always be an Arab” (106). No matter how well the narrator performs Jewishness, there are certain lines which the dominant society will not let him cross. On a number of occasions, the protagonist does attempt to identify as a Jew. During one of the school field trips, in which a group from the boarding school accidentally encounters the narrator’s old class from Tira, the narrator ignores his former classmates’ greetings. His identification here clearly lies with his Jewish companions; he refuses to be
recognized as an Arab. There are other incidents like this in the novel’s later sections, where the narrator describes his desire to renounce his identification as an Arab (154, 203-205). Despite his attempts to identify differently, “[t]here are some things an Arab can never become” in Israel (107); one of those things is a Jew.

Therefore, the narrator may approximate norms linked to Jewishness as well as to desire to identify as a Jew in order to “become a Jew,” but he is never allowed to pass completely over into the Jewish world. For instance, in twelfth grade, while all of the other Jewish students are “getting into shape for the army,” the narrator is given a bus pass and a ticket to the museum. Most Arab citizens are not drafted into the military, nor are they allowed to do community service in lieu of the draft. When soldiers in uniform come to the school to speak about the army, the narrator is not permitted to participate. At one point, he realizes that he will never train as a pilot, something he has always dreamed of. This is true, he tells us, not so much because he isn’t physically fit or because his grades aren’t good enough, but simply because he was born an Arab (117-18).

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of the narrator’s inability to fully assimilate into the Jewish world during his years at boarding school arises his relationship with Naomi, his Jewish girlfriend. He is desperately in love with Naomi but is told repeatedly that after graduation he and Naomi will have to part. Naomi’s mother is decisive on this matter, telling her daughter that so long as the narrator and Naomi are in boarding school, she doesn’t mind her dating an Arab, but when Naomi graduates, she will have to break things off. It is not, the narrator is assured, that Naomi’s mother has anything personal against him, it’s just “too bad” his name is not “Reuben or David” (122). However, the full extent of Naomi’s mother’s aversion to the relationship is revealed as graduation approaches. She threatens to throw Naomi out of the house if she does not break up with the narrator, telling her that “she’d rather have a lesbian for a daughter than one who hangs out with Arabs” (124). Even the high school guidance counsellor reiterates the undesirability of the relationship between a Jew and an Arab; she encourages the narrator to “stop loving Naomi, or at least to try to love Salwa, an Arab girl at school” (125).

The scenes with Naomi seem to reinforce what the narrator’s father constantly repeats to him over the years: “[T]he Jews can give you the feeling that you’re one of them, and you can really like them and think they’re the nicest people you’ve ever known, but sooner or later you realize you don’t stand a chance” (106). As mentioned briefly above, Kashua’s description of the way the narrator is encouraged to desire to live up to norms associated with Jewishness, but not permitted to identify as a Jew, is reminiscent of Homi Bhabha’s description of the mimic man.
In his now classic *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha maintains that in the colonial situation mimicry emerges “as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha 1994: 86). Bhabha’s mimic man, the non-white native in the colonial situation, does not “re-present” but rather repeats and imitates the discursive effects of colonial discourse. Using Bhabha’s insight to read the novel, one notices how, on one hand, Jewish society (the colonizer) demands that the Other approximate, through mimesis, the norms of the colonizing power, norms associated, in our case, with the dominant Jewish ethnic group (88-89). On the other hand, in order to continuously naturalize, justify and authorize its power, Jewish society must constantly maintain the difference between itself as the dominant ethnic group and the Other, and therefore never allows the mimic man to completely “pass.” In other words, the novel can be seen to depict a society which is informed by a colonial discourse that moves between the recognition of cultural and ethnic difference and its disavowal (73).

The ambivalence Bhabha points to in colonial discourse is uncannily similar to the contradiction that *Dancing Arabs* exposes in the “origins” of ethnic definition in contemporary Israel. The novel manages to reveal the paradox embodied in ethnocratic discourse by dramatizing the way this discourse attempts to produce desire in the Arab Other to mime Jewish practices through the emulation of norms, while at the same time presuming that there is an essential ontological core in each ethnicity that precludes Arab subjects from ever really becoming Jews. As Hannan Hever reminds us in his book, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon*, the “homogenous Jewish subject” has historically produced and safeguarded itself in majority rhetoric and iconography by demonizing the Arab minority in its midst, by seeing “them” as specifically Eastern, Oriental Others (2002: 207). One of the most important ways ethnocratic discourse assures that “Arabness” remains “inherent” is through the continual imposition and surveillance of identification.

In principle, this ethnocratic discourse should work to encourage Arab subjects to approximate “Arabness” (as defined hegemonically and even by communities like Tira). Such discourse would operate as a mechanism of control, in that an Arab subject’s attempt to approximate norms associated with Arabness would ensure his or her subordination in relation to the dominant society. In other words, in Jewish space an Arab-identified subject who attempts to approximate norms of “Arabness” would automatically be marginalized: his/her access to sites of power would inevitably be denied because “Arabness” is not posited as desirable within Jewish space. But this conclusion misses a crucial point. If an ethnocratic regime privileges certain attributes, then it must also encourage subjects to desire and strive to embody them. It can and does attempt to bar certain subjects from accessing privilege and positions of power through ethnic differentiation and segregation, that is, by compelling ethnic identification and controlling ethnic space; but it cannot completely control the effects of its own discourse. As long as “Arabness” is coded as undesirable under the Jewish ethnocratic regime, only
those Arab-identified subjects who strive to embody attributes associated with Jewishness will gain admittance to some of the benefits of privilege and power.

Consequently, Dancing Arabs can be read, perhaps against the grain, as an attempt to dramatize the many parallels between Israel’s ethnocracy and the colonial situation. The Arab minority within Israel, as the novel so brilliantly reveals, is not one minority among others within a democratic situation, since democracy connotes the possibility and desirability of assimilation. Historically, minority populations in liberal democracies like the United States—the Irish, Jewish, Asian and Latino minority groups—were, for the most part, encouraged to assimilate into mainstream culture. They were urged to desire the norms which have traditionally been linked to “Americanness” and were ultimately allowed to identify as Americans. However, the interactions in Kashua’s novel gesture toward a forceful discouragement of total integration on the part of Israel’s Arab citizens. They have never been allowed to assimilate. This is due, in large part, to the inextricable relationship between Israeliiness and Jewishness: Israel is, after all, defined as a Jewish state. Consequently, the inability to identify as a Jew is intricately tied to the inability to identify as an Israeli. As Nadim Rouhana and Asad Ghanem argue, “The availability of complete Israeli identity to the Arabs is … impossible because its meaning is intertwined with the Jewishness of the state” (1998: 330). In the section, “I Wanted to be a Jew,” the narrator tells us that he looks “more Israeli than the average Israeli,” by which he means that he looks Jewish and “not … Arab” (91). Through a barely noticeable shift or slippage from Israeli to Jewishness, Kashua lays bare the almost complete interchangeability of the two terms.

From Mimicry to Mockery

In his chapter on mimicry, Bhabha claims that by rearticulating colonial “presence in terms of its otherness, that which it disavows,” the mimic man can potentially disrupt the self-grounding assumptions of colonialism, disclosing the way in which otherness always inheres in presence (1994: 91). The colonized is constituted as the Other by and through colonial discourse; however, the colonizer is dependent on the production of this otherness for his claim to legitimacy, purity and authority. Simultaneously, the colonized is encouraged to mimic the colonizer, and because colonial discourse is constituted by a “différance,” this mimicry can transform into a hybrid site which lays bare the way in which the colonial presence “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (107). Mimicry can in this way always slide into mockery or parody, exposing the contradictions in colonial discourse. Examining these insights within the Israeli context suggests that when mimicry is conceived as mockery or subversive hyperbole, it can expose not only the way in which Arabness is constitutive of Jewishness, but also how Jewishness has been dependent on Arabness for its claim to authenticity and authority.
On one level, however, the narrator’s mimicry does not really seem to disrupt the self-grounding assumptions of the Jewish state. The narrator’s attempts at mimicry bring about his psychic confusion and even breakdown—certainly an identity crisis. The novel’s last two sections, “Hitting Rock Bottom” and “The Road to Tira,” describe his inability to negotiate successfully between the norms of Jewish and Arab society; these sections can be read as his recognition that mimicry will never get him what he wants: to be a Jew. He eventually marries an Arab woman from his native village of Tira and even succumbs to his family’s demand that he and his wife, Samia, have a “proper and conventional wedding.” However, he admits that, “When we go to a shopping mall or places like that, I hope people will assume she’s Moroccan or Iraqi [i.e., a Mizrachi Jew] and that I’m a western Jew who likes eastern women” (202).

In a sense, the narrator’s marriage to Samia registers not only his capitulation to the norms of his village, but also his ultimate inability or unwillingness to reject these norms. He appears to realize that if he completely rejects the norms of his childhood, he will be stuck in Jewish space without an escape route, and he knows that for an Arab citizen this space is an unpredictable and often hostile site. On the other hand, his admitted discomfort concerning his wife’s inability to pass as a Jew, as well as his reluctance to return to Tira and settle down, demonstrate the extent to which the norms of Jewish society affect and influence his desires no matter where he goes. At the end of the novel, he recognizes that in order to survive he must begin to re-engage seriously with the norms of his village. But this re-engagement and negotiation, as the novel suggests, is destabilizing.

On another level, Dancing Arabs urges the reader to read differently. Discussing other novels written by Arab citizens of Israel, Rachel Feldhay Brenner argues: “The adoption of the Hebrew language to tell an Arab story is ... a relational act that accepts the status of second class citizens [by Arab citizens of Israel] and appeals against it at the same time” (2001: 13). Brenner examines the pseudo-autobiographical narratives of authors Atallah Mansour (1969), Emile Habiby (1984) and Anton Shammas (1988), contending that “the autobiographical tale affirms the Israeli Arab as a subject—that is, as an independent, free agent—whose ‘I’ both portrays and addresses the Israeli ‘You’” (105). Sayed Kashua’s novel appears to continue in this tradition of fictional autobiographies written in Hebrew by Arab citizens. By writing in Hebrew, Kashua, like his predecessors, is addressing and attempting to engage a predominantly Jewish audience. Nevertheless, I do not read Kashua’s tale as affirming the Arab citizen as an independent and free agent. I am also uneasy with Brenner’s emphasis on the dialogic aspect of the “Arab story in Hebrew letters,” an encounter between the Arab author and Jewish reader which she describes as: not violent or oppositional, but “communicative.” Rather, I support Hannan Hever’s assertion that a certain kind of authorial voice on the part of the Arab writer can force Jewish readers to take a fresh look at their cultural assumptions and expectations (2002). Dancing
Arabs inhabits the dominant society’s language, which can be seen as an act of mimicry, and by way of performative reiteration and dancing the dance of the dominant culture—"I always wanted to be a Jew"—it discloses the mechanisms through which hegemonic norms operate. The very conception of a “free” agent is put into question, since the narrator is portrayed as a subject who is inescapably constituted by normative injunctions and desires-to-be.

There is no doubt that Kashua’s book can be read as simply exposing the difficulties of growing up as a minority in Israel, difficulties that produce profound identity trouble but in no way challenge the status quo or the “Jewishness” of the Israeli state. Given the current tension, suspicion, and increasing lack of contact between Jewish and Arab citizens within Israel, this is the way that many reviewers have chosen to read the novel. But as I have argued, the narrative, by which I also mean the use of Hebrew as the narrative’s frame, stages the similarities between Israeli ethnocratic and colonial discourses. The intelligibility of Israel’s current ethnic landscape is dependent on the Arab-Jewish divide, and thus the Arab is constituted as the Other of Jewish hegemonic society. Especially while s/he occupies Jewish space, the Arab is encouraged and compelled to desire to live up to the norms associated with this hegemonic society, but at the same time is never permitted to identify as a Jew. The sophistication of Kashua’s dramatization, I believe, lies in its exploration of the operation of dominant norms—as opposed to sovereign power which is only one aspect of hegemonic control—and how these norms can and do affect the psychic lives of the Arab citizens of Israel. If the novel pushes the reader—especially the Jewish reader, and now that the book has been translated into several languages, the Western reader—to draw parallels between colonialism and the position of Arab citizens of Israel, then I believe that Kashua’s linguistic as well as narrative mimicry does indeed challenge the self-grounding assumptions of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

Notes

1. The linking of nationalism (i.e., Zionism) and Jewishness has historically worked to diffuse or displace much of the tension among the different segments within the Jewish population by producing a common Other—the Arab. Oren Yiftachel offers a breakdown of the different “ethno-classes” within the Jewish population, as well as the way these ethno-classes have been, at least partially, incorporated into the dominant Ashkenazi society. See Yiftachel (1999).

2. In this paper, I do not discuss the religious aspects of Judaism or the way these religious aspects do penetrate and influence the secular establishment. For an excellent account of the intricate ways in which ethnicity, religion and nationality have all played a part in the creation of the modern Jewish state, see Kimmerling (1999).

3. This is why “conversion” (from Islam to Judaism) is not a viable option for Arab citizens in Israel, and the novel actually points to the impossibility of this course of action. When the narrator raises the option of converting to Judaism, it is coupled with another possibility: blowing himself up or running over some soldiers at the Ra’anan intersection (223). Conversion is thus as possible or as likely as going on a suicide mission.
4. The popularity of Balad, a nationalist Arab political party popular with young Arabs and strongly identifying with Palestinian nationalism, attests to this.

5. There are, however, sub-ethnic categories of identification, such as Mizrahi, Ethiopian or Ashkenazi Jews, or within the Arab population (e.g., Bedouin or Druze). I will not be discussing these subcategories in this paper.

6. A subject’s position vis-à-vis the dominant society is thus crucial. If a Jew desires to live up to the norms associated with Arabness (which can also occur), that subject will be rejected by the dominant society.

7. The narrator’s high school friend, Adel, articulates this assumption in reverse: “A Jew remains a Jew” (195).

8. Arab villages in Israel have a limited kind of “autonomy”: they have their own school systems, in which Arabic is the language of instruction; and they have their own municipal councils and elected mayors. However, all these “autonomous” institutions are carefully policed by the Israeli State.

9. This seems to have been true in many villages during certain periods in the 1980s and 1990s. However, since the eruption of the second intifada, as I note above, there has been an increasing identification with “Palestinianness” among the Arab youth within Israel. Nevertheless, the identification as Palestinian has been coupled with the desire to live up to norms linked to “Palestinianness.”

10. It is not that the presence of Jewish Israeli culture is not felt, for it manages to penetrate into the very depths of the Palestinian community. The opening scene in the novel gestures toward the degree to which the dominant culture pervades the villagers’ lives. When the narrator finally discovers where the keys to his grandmother’s treasured cupboard are hidden and secretly explores the contents of the mysterious “blue” suitcase, he is frustrated by the Hebrew of the yellowing newspapers. The narrator cannot read Hebrew yet, since he has not begun learning it at school; in addition, the postcard which he finds, and which will be one of the clues leading to the unearthing of his father’s past, has a picture of a Jewish Israeli woman soldier eating falafel.

11. Categories of identification that constitute and make social practices possible (and are the condition of possibility of the emergence of the subject) are, according to a Foucauldian analysis, produced through an “artificial unity” composed of a series of disparate attributes, which operate as norms. Thus, the category “Arabness” is produced by the concatenation of a series of traits, like the defence of honour, intrepidness and strength, which operate in the service of specific social hierarchies. For a discussion of sex as a norm constituted by a linking of disparate attributes, see Foucault (1990). See Butler (1993) for a discussion of the conditions and norms that allow subjects to emerge as “intelligible.”

12. Thus I disagree with Nadim Rouhana and Asad Ghanem that Arab citizens’ performance of “Jewishness” is an adoption of the “superficial manifestations of Western society” (Rouhana and Ghanem 1998: 339). This kind of analysis assumes that there are “authentic” cultural expressions and fails to take into account just how powerful and constitutive norms are in shaping desire.

13. This has not always been the case, especially vis-à-vis African Americans. For a comparison between colonial discourse and the discourse surrounding race in the U.S. during the first part of the 20th century, see Rottenberg (2004).

14. In fact, only two of the fictional autobiographies—Shammas’s Arabesque and Mansour’s In a Different Light—were written in Hebrew. Habiby’s novels were originally written in Arabic and translated into Hebrew by Shammas.
15. I think that it would be even more difficult to argue that Sayed Kashua’s second novel, *Vayihe Boker*, which has just recently been translated into English, is “dialogic” in intent rather than oppositional and confrontational. The violent and surprising ending, in which Israel unilaterally (i.e., without even informing the villagers) hands Tira over to the Palestinian Authority, underscores the deep and deepening division between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian citizens of Israel.

16. Thus, I also do not accept Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s framework of minor and major literature, whereby minority literature can perform a radical “deterritorialization of language” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 19).

References


