

Queering the Mainstream: *The Slap* and ‘Middle’ Australia¹

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Christos Tsiolkas’s fiction, drama and screenplays explore characters with desires not often depicted in Australian literary writing; these characters pursue anonymous beat sex, excessive drug use, vicious violence, pornography, blood fetishes, and the great taboo of sex with minors. Such preoccupations, and his continued exploration of uncomfortable desires and provoking issues, have meant that Tsiolkas has been seen as interesting and immensely talented, but rather marginal in Australian literary life. His accounts of migrant experiences, while less confrontational, have also tended to place him outside of the white Anglo dominance of Australian literary life. This has all changed since the publication of *The Slap*. In writing a fiction that concerns a range of mostly middle-class, inner suburban Melburnians, Tsiolkas is now seen to be writing prose highly relevant to ‘ordinary’ Australian life.

This has seen the book discussed in arenas outside the strictly literary, such as in the columns of daily papers and on news television, where, amusingly for those familiar with his earlier work, Tsiolkas has been consulted as a potential authority on the disciplining of children.² He is now a major figure in the literary life of Australia and beyond.³ In 2009 *The Slap* won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, the ALS Gold Medal, the Australian Book Industry and Book Association’s Book of the Year awards and the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award, as well as being short-listed for the Miles Franklin. The book has also been successfully adapted for television.

Does *The Slap* actually represent a departure, a jump into the mainstream, in which Tsiolkas is suddenly more interested in writing about backyard barbeques than sex in back alleys with strangers? And in his literary techniques—the instant decoding and widespread use of popular fictional methods, discussed later—has Tsiolkas moved squarely into the realm of popular fiction? Is this book really different from the rest of his oeuvre or can it be seen as a continuation of an ongoing literary project, especially that begun in *Loaded*? This article will trace both continuities and discontinuities in Tsiolkas’s work as seen in *The Slap*. It will also examine its specificities as a fiction produced in the later stages of the Howard years in Australia, a fiction that recasts the nation via a profound ethics of inclusion.

Followers of Tsiolkas’s work know that the structures and divisions of Australian society, as they manifest in Melbourne, have always been central in his writing. Such structures reflect various vectors that have an impact on potential identities or identifications for individuals within contemporary Australian life. Class, ethnicity, sexuality, and race are just some of the more obvious of these. The way these vectors play out on the physical geography of the city has been shown to be inseparable from the subject positions they help to produce. Tsiolkas’s work is grounded in very literal ways, concerned with how the city he writes about is classed, where ethnic groups concentrate, how sexualities coalesce in localities, and where sex and drugs are available in a variety of forms. Despite tracing these factors though, Tsiolkas resists essentialising identities around embodiment. Though these vectors provide a way of mapping the city, they are also an exercise in ‘mapbreaking’ it, as Ari’s ultimate refusal of identity

suggests (Schwartz 16). Though this impulse in his current work goes well beyond sexualities, such a rejection of identity politics is a tactic of the queer politics of the nineties.

The queer theoretical and political project has sought to deconstruct those binaries which position heterosexuality and homosexuality as differing poles, taking their meanings from their opposition to each other. Queer recognises that identity is not stable, but contingent, even though identities have material, not just discursive effects. It is opposed to essentialist understandings of identity politics, which is why it can also be applied to any system relying on binaries for meaning. Heterosexuality has almost always represented itself as 'a natural, pure, and unproblematic state which requires no explanation' (Jagose 17). If homosexuality is presented as the opposite of this, it too is naturalised as an identity, if a deviant one. However, queer unsettles both categories; it resists essentialism, and sees sexuality as an unfixed 'zone of possibilities' rather than determining of fixed identity. Early on in the resignification of the term 'queer' in the late 80s and early 90s, its further potential for undoing binaries outside of sexuality and gender was acknowledged. Eve Sedgwick wrote in the introduction to her collection *Tendencies* (1993) that

a lot of the most exciting recent work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. (8-9)

Tsiolkas applies 'queer' to a range of possible identities in *Loaded*. Though he is potentially marginalised by both sexuality and ethnicity, *Loaded's* Ari refuses the position of 'boundary marker' in favour of dissolving those very boundaries which could render him invisible and/or peripheral. Ari's rejection of 'gay' or 'straight' identity flows into his rejection of fixed understandings of what it means to be 'Greek' or 'Australian' (though significantly not so clearly into his perception of gender, which remains an important part of the articulation of his subjectivity) (Treagus 219). *Loaded* sets out Tsiolkas's queer political project, and makes clear his rejection of the identity politics which saw writers from certain ethnic backgrounds through the eighties and nineties in Australia as 'multicultural writers' or even earlier, as 'migrant writers'. Those identity politics also saw gay and lesbian writing, or at least writing with non-heterosexual themes or characters, consigned on the whole to dedicated collections or marginal presses, to be ignored or greeted in much less celebratory ways than multicultural writing in Australia. A rejection of identity politics has been part of the means by which Tsiolkas has moved from such marginal positions. But has he also left his concern with ethnicities and sexualities in Australian life behind?

One of things that emerges from *Loaded* is the depiction of Melbourne, which is constantly mapped, especially in terms of class. The notion of writing the nation through writing the particularities of Melbourne is seen in much of Tsiolkas's work. Even though *Dead Europe* is largely set overseas, it deals with two of Melbourne's larger immigrant groups, Greeks and Jews, as it reflects on connections between Europe and Australia. *The Slap* comes back squarely to the familiar territory of Melbourne itself. The barbeque is at Hector and Aisha's home in Northcote, and the book ends at Richie's friend's place just up the road in Coburg. Gary and Rosie are in Richmond and shop in Collingwood; Richie's friends are in Preston, and Harry's family is further afield in Brighton. While the tracking of suburb and class is less blatant than in *Loaded*, it is still an inescapable preoccupation of the book and serves to reflect various social positions via the specificity of these locations.

Whereas *Loaded* appeared at the end of the Keating era, *The Slap* was published just after Australia had experienced over a decade of Howard's prime ministership. This was a time when debate in Australian public life was stifled, and hence more conflicted, with views contrary to those of the government of the day derided with references to 'the chattering classes', 'elites' and the greatest bogey of all, 'political correctness'. Tsiolkas has said that he wanted to explore what Australian society was like in the years between the Tampa election (2001) and the late 2007 one—explicitly Howard's Australia in its later phase (personal communication November 2008). The former election campaign, during which the Howard government seemed to appeal to the racism and xenophobia of electors, marks an extreme moment in a right-wing backlash against the multiculturalism of the previous Labor governments.

The term multiculturalism, as a positive signifier of an Australia consisting of a blend of distinct yet co-operative communities with shared values, largely passed out of public discourse during the Howard years, pre-empted by the rise of Hansonism in the 1990s; both seemed to assert that such a multicultural Australia had never existed. Pauline Hanson's appeal to 'the myth of the monocultural past' (Dale 16) was reflected in the Howard Government's depiction of asylum seekers as dangerous outsiders, with whom Australians had no common values, and in a concurrent distrust of certain groups as outsiders within the nation. Yet it was often those excluded from this mythical view of Australia who became part of the aspirational class of the Howard era. *The Slap*'s Harry serves as an illustration of this: 'Harry was rolling in money, riding the seemingly endless wave of the economic boom' (32).

In line with Tsiolkas's queer politics of rejecting binaries and essentialist positions, *The Slap* tracks individuals' ethnicities and the material effects that flow from them, but resists locking identity into racial or ethnic origins. Identities shift and align in unexpected ways, while still reflecting those wider factors and currents, such as class and migration patterns: the indigenous Bilal becomes a Muslim convert; Rosie's marriage sees her shift from her middle-class background and expectations, while Richie and his friends are about to become the first generation in their respective families to attend university. Tsiolkas is also concerned with the ways such factors divide individuals from each other, not as insurmountable obstacles that send people scuttling back into their monocultural groups, if that were possible, but as the real difficulties experienced in being a society mixed by a multiplicity of identifications.

After writing *Dead Europe*, Tsiolkas wanted to 'write about family relationships and the suburban world' (*Age* March 12, 2009). This desire sees him tackle supposedly iconic practices in national life, and the book is very consciously framed by two of these, forming part of its more mainstream appeal. The backyard barbeque is the first, but its menu is an indication that things have moved on from chops and snags. In a paean to culinary multiplicity, Tsiolkas celebrates

a stew of eggplant and tomato, drizzled with lumps of creamy melted feta. There was black bean dahl and oven-baked spinach pilaf. There was coleslaw and a bowl of Greek salad with plump cherry tomatoes and thick slices of feta; a potato and coriander salad and a bowl of juicy king prawns. His mother had brought pasticcio, Aisha had made a lamb in a thick cardamom-infused curry, and together they had prepared two roast chickens and lemon-scented roast potatoes. There was tzatziki and onion chutney; there was pink fragrant taramousalata and a platter of grilled red capsicum, the skins delicately removed, swimming in olive oil and balsamic vinegar.' (36)

When Hector's family and friends partake of this Greek/Indian feast, they enter the tradition of the backyard as a site of egalitarian fellowship, but it is no longer an Anglo-Celtic preserve; in fact, the Anglo-Celts are a minority in this version of the Australian dream, as the generally assumed and elided category of Anglo-Celtic whiteness is named—'skips', 'bloody Australians' (93, 46)—noted and rejected as dominant.

The other iconic event, that which closes the text, is the Big Day Out, marking a generational shift in the Australian experience of collective community. The Big Day Out is the pre-eminent popular music festival that travels the country every summer and has done since 1992 (bigdayout.com). Few older Australians would have much understanding of the event, the behaviours and allegiances it spawns, or the modes of 'deep, horizontal comradeship' experienced by a BDO crowd (Anderson 16). Like other conceptions of 'the nation', the experience of it at the BDO is largely imaginary, but the experience of crowds, movement, audio overload and heat, gives it an intense shared physicality—and that is before the drugs and alcohol are factored in. In using the BDO as the final frame for the novel, Tsiolkas evokes its role in debates around competing versions of nation.

The Big Day Out came to wider public attention in relation to the nation after the Cronulla riots of December 2005. Previously, though central to the summer experience of many young people across the country, it rarely entered into public discourse, and certainly was not seen as 'nation building'. Increasingly, popular music festivals, and the BDO in particular, have become sites at which younger Australians are often draped with national flags and sporting Southern Cross tattoos. The conflation of a sense of national identity with contemporary popular music has been accentuated by the fact that the public youth broadcaster, Triple J, holds its Hottest 100 countdown on Australia Day. Listeners are encouraged to report their BBQs and parties, the music having come to be seen as synonymous with national identity by many. The BDO itself generally falls on Australia Day in Melbourne, tying both events together and inviting the prevalence of flags seen at the festival. As one regular attendee told me, 'It's not just about the music anymore'.⁴

In connection with this, the Cronulla riots are part of a fraught cultural backdrop to *The Slap*. What occurred at Cronulla and its surrounding suburbs in December 2005 is significant because it seemed to herald a new and dangerous shift from the politics of rhetoric to a politics of large-scale physical confrontation. In retrospect, it was indeed a low point in the national response to multiplicity, yet the attacks on Indian students in the years since perhaps indicate that Tsiolkas was right to take a pessimistic view that what actually occurred at Cronulla went beyond drunken mob posturing: 'A promise articulated in multiculturalism [...] was sent kicking, flung out to sea, destroyed on the sands of Cronulla' (*Tolerance* 41). In the aftermath of Cronulla, BDO organisers, fearing that drunken nationalistic fervour would turn into violence and intolerance, discouraged attendees from bringing flags to the event (Dejaeghere and Tudball 48). Instead of being hailed for its foresight and moderation, this action was treated as tantamount to blasphemy by the Prime Minister and a number of other politicians and RSL leaders, who seemed to deliberately overlook the real intent of the discouragement: 'The proposition that the display of the Australian flag should ever be banned anywhere in Australia is offensive and it will be to millions of Australians.' Howard went on to say, 'The reason given at the time was quite unacceptable. They're running their own political agenda but because of public pressure, they're now backing down' (*SMH* 22 Jan, 2007). In this he was backed up by NSW Labor Premier, Morris Iemma (*SMH* 22 Jan, 2007).

Political opportunism of course has a lot to do with such public reactions. Rather than seeking to be branded 'un-Australian', BDO organisers faced the potential for 12 hours of alcohol-fuelled mob enthusiasm turning nasty; this must have been an alarming security prospect. Tsiolkas also claimed that after Cronulla: 'We have a national body politics in which the rhetoric of both major parties is indistinguishable, where any ethical component to the social contract has been torn up as unnecessary or cumbersome or simply uneconomical' (*Tolerance* 15). In evoking the BDO as a formative joint experience of young Australians, Tsiolkas acknowledges its history as a venue for a brand of clumsy and demonstrative nationalism, but he also employs it to show generational change in the nation's experience of everyday life and shared symbols. In an intrinsically hopeful narrative move, it becomes the final frame (with the barbeque as its initial one) and is experienced by an ethnically diverse group of teenagers, thereby challenging the 'myth of the monocultural past' referred to earlier, and overturning any legitimacy of that myth in the present. This is queer politics applied to racial and ethnic diversity, drawing on a generation's mainstream collective experience, but uncoupling it from an assumed Anglo-Celtic whiteness.

Yet the feelings that gave rise to the riots are given some kind of voice in *The Slap*, even if their racism is subdued. Ghassan Hage claimed not long after the Tampa election that: 'The defensive society, such as the one we have in Australia today, suffers from a scarcity of hope and creates citizens who see threats everywhere. It generates worrying citizens and a paranoid nationalism.' (3) It is no surprise then that the characters who feel the most threatened, Rosie and Gary, are Anglo-Celtic—'traditional' white Australians who have not thrived in Howard's Australia. In many ways it is their sense of paranoia that drives the action of the novel. It is a personal, rather than a political paranoia, but nonetheless it infuses their sense of failure and corresponding resentment of the 'wog', Harry, a representative of the aspirational class.

Framing devices are part of Tsiolkas's engagement with the nation and the fact that the novel has been received as enthusiastically as it has endorses Tsiolkas's success in depicting a recognisable Australia. The more obvious narrative tactic for representing and exploring the nation though is that of using multiple narrators from different perspectives. While the title and press around the book might indicate that it is about a child being slapped at the barbeque, and the book addresses briefly issues around parenting and physical punishment as a form of discipline, 'the slap' itself is much more a pretext for examining the lives of different characters. As an exercise in point of view, *The Slap* shows Tsiolkas to be capable of realising distinctive voices with apparent ease, especially the old and the young. There are four male and four female narrators, of varying ages, ethnicities and sexualities. There's also a ninth perspective, in the embedded letter from teenager Connie's bisexual father, who has died from HIV/AIDS a couple of years prior to the book's setting. From the very start of the book's first point of view, that of Hector, a beautiful and correspondingly narcissistic fortyish Greek man, at whose home the barbeque takes place, we see elements of supposedly marginal behaviour incorporated into suburban life. Hector, despite overseeing the BBQ, does a few lines of speed and fantasises about the teenager Connie with whom he has been conducting a rather chaste affair. Illicit sex and drugs are as much part of the Australian suburb as the barbeque and family ties are.

Where Tsiolkas employs obscenity in *The Jesus Man* and *Dead Europe* 'in the interests of retrieving and foregrounding aspects of social experience that might not otherwise survive the recoding operation of mainstream literary fiction', so in *The Slap* Tsiolkas employs many of

the methods of popular fiction in order to similarly unsettle 'the conventions of literary decorum', though this is inherently more subtle than his earlier use of obscenity (McCann, 'Christos Tsiolkas', 37). The result is a queer recasting of both the literary and the popular in Australian fiction, in which the division between both is evoked and undermined. Just as he extends 'queer' into ethnicity and race, so Tsiolkas employs literary techniques, that could be said to queer the divisions between the literary and the popular. Tsiolkas's engagement with popular fictional devices is not straightforward, though it is significant that the shift away from the literary has been identified in other writers publishing toward the end of the Howard era. In discussing three instances of such writing, Andrew McCann claims that 'politically engaged writing must also perform what are recognisable as popular, if not commercial idioms' and genres ('Political Fiction' 45, 46).

The hyperrealism of *Loaded* and the mythic horror of the double narratives in *Dead Europe* make both texts more interesting hermeneutically than *The Slap*; its mostly linear representation of consciousness is blandly accessible 'domesticated prose' (Falconer 24), open to instant decoding in the manner of popular fiction. Popular culture, according to Ken Gelder, 'doesn't require a culturally educated viewer'/reader (13). More precisely, popular culture does not assume a particular 'literary' education, though it often assumes a viewer/reader educated in its own conventions. But if the presence of layers of allusion, requiring a 'culturally educated' recipient, is characteristic of the literary, then the text plays with the categories of literary and popular, especially in the thin layer of imagery that runs throughout. This is one level on which the novel alludes to a cultural heritage, but it is an emphatically non-literary and relentlessly populist one. Television soaps are raised via both plot and structure. Mary Ellen Brown typifies soaps as containing numerous, sometimes stereotypical characters, overwrought plot devices and multiple narrative arcs (4); structurally the novel shares these. As part of this allusion, the second narrator is the soap writer Anouk, who wants to give herself time to write more seriously. She confirms the popular/literary divide in her blunt condemnation of the soap genre: 'She knew what she wrote was simple and moronic. She knew that she assisted in exporting stupidity to the world' (55). Her relationship with the younger soap star Rhys is a reflection of compromises made in her writing. He is not her intellectual equal, just as she feels she is above the work which pays so well. While Anouk's buying power and her television star boyfriend indicate that the seductions of consumer culture reward mediocrity and compliance, her condemnation of soap writing is ironically simplistic, with its use of the words 'moronic' and 'stupidity'. She may be capable of more serious writing, but her thoughts do not indicate a deeper intellectual engagement. Anouk's desire for depth without actually employing it reflects the text's own tactics. Even while evoking television soap as a trope, the text rejects it as a serious form, thereby undermining any populist appeal it might gain. But the text itself also seems to reject more serious literary styles; the quotation above would not be chosen as an example of fine writing. This is one of the ways in which the novel both invites and repels both popular and literary audiences.

The Slap does not move toward genre fiction in the way that Andrew McGahan's *Underground* or Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* do (McCann), but it does respond to the same particular political moment by moving away from literary fiction. McCann outlines 'explicitly political [...] moments of polemic in both *Underground* and *The Unknown Terrorist*' (53). *The Slap* lacks this kind of polemic—indeed, a right wing critic claims, surprisingly, that its politics are not apparent (Free 29)—but it is accessible in a way none of Tsiolkas's earlier novels are. It stops short of fulfilling Gelder's assertion about popular culture: that in its openness to 'the logic of the marketplace [...] it remains *conscious*

of its viewers/readers, and is determined to please them' (Gelder 13). *The Slap* might be immediately accessible in terms of decoding, but as a reading experience it takes many readers into less than comfortable places; it is not principally about pleasing them.

One of these areas of potential discomfort is the representation of sexuality. While not as recognisably concerned with queer sexuality as his previous work, the text nonetheless presents challenges to heteronormativity. One aspect of this is simply that the text acknowledges the sexuality of all characters, including the old in Manolis' chapter (though an exploration of Koula's sexuality might have taken this further). Sexuality has a certain edge; most characters enact or at least think about sex outside of the usually sanctioned forms. Heterosexuality is destabilised by the inequality that prevails in the relationships depicted. Harry and his mistress Kelly are one example of this, but Hector and Aisha's relationship also resolves itself toward the end of the book in a sado-masochistic way. After the tender affair Aisha experiences while away, helped along by some pills, she lets Hector hurt her in the act of penetration when they reunite, seemingly in an act of contrition: 'the sensation exactly what she wanted, needed, what she deserved' (376). Disturbingly for most readers, he seems unaware of her pain, and though he asks about her satisfaction—'Do you want to come?' (377)—he's unconcerned when she does not. While it may not be much of a revelation that some straight people are interested in sex that is not purely vanilla, it does undo the dominance of assumed heteronormativity to show apparently successful heterosexual relationships that do not embody the ideal of reciprocity.

Tsiolkas's ongoing concern with foregrounding queer characters is seen in Richie, the gay teenager whose story ends the novel. As well as providing the book's most hearty endorsement for his single mother's parenting efforts (capping off one of the 'mainstream' themes of parenting), Richie's story recounts connections with friends and family that the book asserts are the bedrock of most people's lives. Describing himself as a 'young art-fag boy', Richie is poised with his anxieties and his slight OCD at that dividing line in life between year twelve and whatever comes next. His chapter relishes the bonding that comes to a group of friends at the Big Day Out, with its accompanying speed, weed and pills. He also ends his night with the promise of a date with another young man, Lenin, the knowledge that he is connected to others—his mother, his friend Connie—and that life ahead holds promise. His sexual journey—meeting a potential boyfriend in his friendship group, arranging a date—is much more conventional than his friend Connie's, despite its same-sex nature. Connie's cross-generational dalliance with Hector, which is never consummated, her unplanned and painful encounter with Ali, and her unexpected rape claim about Hector, make her sexual journey seem less likely than Richie's. The rape accusation, in particular, evokes popular culture, in which rape and sexual harassment are often represented as the stuff of false accusation, rather than the grim reality that sexual crimes mostly go unpunished in our culture. The book enacts a queer politics as Richie's narrative inverts the discourse of romance by commandeering it for the queer boy, rather than the straight girl. Yet Richie's story also reminds the reader that same-sex attraction is a factor in Australia's alarming male youth suicide statistics, when he makes such an attempt after his humiliation at revealing Connie's accusations about Hector.

David Free, writing in *Quadrant*, endorses not only Tsiolkas's decision to include the labels and ephemera of everyday life in a way that will swiftly date the book (and code it as popular), but he also claims that the representation of the slap itself encapsulates 'moral ambiguity' (28). But where the slap might have carried moral uncertainty if performed by a less violent and self-interested character, the fact that it is the unsympathetic Harry who

performs the act detracts from this ambiguity. The boy who is slapped, Hugo, has been shown to be a child who is raised largely without discipline. Had he been more sympathetic, Harry's actions in giving Hugo what seems to be a reflex slap in response to being kicked would be much more challenging. As it is, we can dismiss him as a habitually violent man, rather than someone who could be any of us caught in the same situation. Similarly, Hugo's parents are unsympathetic characters. Rosie, the boy's mother, is shown to be overinvested in her relationship with her son in order to compensate for the fraught relationship with her alcoholic, failed artist husband Gary. Gary, on the other hand, picks fights with people after a few drinks, usually on the basis of their class-based tastes or choices. When Hugo's parents decide to bring a charge of assault against Harry for slapping their son, this is shown to be fuelled partly by class-based resentment of others' wealth, education and circumstances. It is of course this same wealth and power that enable Harry to escape the charges. The plot circles around these events and the accompanying court case, but rather than developing real tension, the narrative meanders off into other territory. The plot spine of the popular novel is largely abandoned in favour of exploring the complexity of relationships between family and friends, and in developing character. This 'queer recasting' of the literary and the popular is part of the ongoing tactic of undoing the binary between popular and literary fiction, seen throughout the text.

Rather than a tedious affirmation of 'middle Australia', Tsiolkas instead succeeds in painting a very different Australia to what might have been considered 'mainstream' under Howard. This is because he 'queers' that mainstream by bringing his outsider characters and characteristics into the centre of Australian life. It is as if the novel enacts the sentiments of its character Connie: 'Who wants to be normal in John Howard's Australia?' (202). In overturning the usually elided yet assumed dominance of both heterosexuality and Anglo-Celtic whiteness, Tsiolkas draws a recognisable, yet challenging representation of current Australia, especially its urban present, thereby continuing the literary emphasis of his earlier works. As a hint to the reader that despite its different mode, *The Slap* is connected with the rest of his oeuvre, the protagonist of *Loaded*, Ari, reappears briefly. In case there is any doubt, Tsiolkas ironically prompts the reader with the comment 'You look familiar, Ari. Have we met?' Ari's response—'Yep, we go to the same gym'—indicates where his addictive personality has taken him in the intervening period. At around thirty years of age, Ari appears to provide Hector with his first lines of speed in years, and to assert drug use as a fact of life at that most ordinary of Australian events, the backyard barbeque. Rather than succumbing to HIV or a drug overdose as the reader may have anticipated at the end of *Loaded*, Ari has become a gym junkie: 'Hector recognised him now. He was one of those men who always seemed to be at the bloody gym' (21).

Via Ari, the reader is not allowed to forget that this is still the Melbourne of *Loaded*, but it is a broader picture, and time has moved on. Australians *do* take drugs, they *do* act on sexual desires outside of dominant heteronormative practices, they *do* wish violence on one another and hate without reason, as well as loving and supporting each other as family and friends. These are not 'traditionally white-bread characters,' as Delia Falconer has put it (24); they are from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and religious persuasions but they are all Australian. By pitching *The Slap* just enough in the mainstream, Tsiolkas has forced his readers to acknowledge that this very mainstream is occupied by all kinds of people. A further engagement with the mainstream is seen in Tsiolkas's queer recasting of the literary, breaking down the binary that distinguishes literary and popular fiction and creating a highly readable novel while occupying the literary field. These moves are indicative of Tsiolkas's queer political project and are emblematic of the ethical core of the novel. In breaking down

boundaries dividing people on the basis of sexuality, gender, class and ethnicity, Tsiolkas performs a queering of Australian fiction and society not achieved by any other writer at this time. In doing so, he enacts a profound ethics of inclusion keenly needed by an increasingly diverse nation.

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¹ Writing this article was assisted by a grant from the Fay Gale Centre for Research on Gender, University of Adelaide.

² An example of this occurs in an interview with Leigh Sales, *Lateline*, ABC 21 May, 2009. Transcript: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2008/s2577694.htm>

³ Following its success in the UK, *Dead Europe* was published there, and received notoriety with a nomination for the Bad Sex Award. *Guardian* online. 25 Nov. 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/25/christos-tsiolkas-bad-sex-award>

⁴ Thanks to Alex Rogers for this comment and for the discussion about nationalism at the Big Day Out.