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**WRITING IN THE MAINSTREAM AND AGAINST THE CURRENT:
LOADED BY CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS**

by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts (English) Honours

Arts Programme
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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to highlight the significance of Christos Tsiolkas's first novel, *Loaded* (1995), as a Grunge text within the milieu of Australian literature. Grunge is a problematic genre in that it is difficult to define and is surrounded by major contradictions relating to its production and reception. Tsiolkas maintains that Grunge seeks to represent the contemporary local experience of living in Australia and the journey of *Loaded*'s protagonist, Ari, reflects this by representing the nuances of contemporary Australian society on the margins. This representation seeks to undermine the 'homogeneous picture of what it means to be Australian' (Tsiolkas, in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48) and brings to the attention of the reader the importance of asking the questions of ethnicity, questions of nationalism and questions of sexuality that are central within the text. The main aim of this thesis is to assert Tsiolkas's position within the mainstream of the milieu of Australian literature, even if he does go against the current.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed:

Date: 11 _

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And to my very best friend, Dean Pitts, thank you for sharing the computer and being there when ever I needed you.

I wish to dedicate this thesis to two very important women who left my life this year: Grandma Hughes, whose last words to me were 'keep on working Amy girl' and Grandma Stone, whose afternoon chats I will forever cherish. Two inspirational and generous women I will never forget.

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Introduction

When Christos Tsiolkas's first novel, *Loaded* (1995), was published Kakni argued that it caused a sensation in Australian literary circles. He suggests that the cause of this controversy was the stylistics that characterise it as a Grunge text (2000, pg. 96). *Loaded* deals with a night in the life of Ari, a nineteen-year-old, Greek-Australian homosexual whose escapades lead him through the suburbs of Melbourne on a quest of self-discovery and, in some cases, self-mutilation. Ari is bored with normative lifestyles and with the suburbs; his only escape is through drugs, sex and music. He aims to pave a new life for himself, different from that of his family and friends. However, he doesn't believe in anything or anyone, except that he cannot make a mark on the world, and doesn't want to anyway. Kakni (2000, pg. 296) maintains that *Loaded* makes a significant step forward for the gay and ethnic Australian novel because it focuses on these marginal identities and discourses. He insists that the text paints a picture of Australian society that isn't always flattering and is 'much more disparate and fractured than we had dared to think' possible. (2000, pg. 296)

The themes in *Loaded* convey the characteristic voice that permeates much of Tsiolkas's work. Many of his short stories deal with similar issues and are published in marginal Grunge, gay and multicultural anthologies. For instance, his short story *Saturn's return* (1996) deals with the relationship that a 'wog' and an Australian homosexual couple have with their fathers, and is published in *Blur: stories by young Australian writers* (1996). His short story *Bypassing Benalla*

(1994), in which the narrator writes of his compromised position in terms of his sexuality and ethnicity, is published in *Fruit: a new anthology of contemporary Australian gay writing* (1994). Another short story, *Jessica Lange in 'Frances'* (1997b) is published in *Pub fiction* (1997) and deals with the relationship between two homosexual men that ends in the rape of one man by the other. Tsiolkas's second novel *The Jesus man* (1999) deals with apathy, pornography, violence, class and religion in the Greek/Italian family of gay protagonist, Lou Stefano. In *The Jesus man*, Tsiolkas critiques identity politics and the power of media. His autobiography, *Jump Cuts* (1996), deals with similar issues and the way they affect his own life. *Jump Cuts* is co-authored with gay writer Sasha Soldatow. This brief overview of Tsiolkas's work highlights the importance of the theme of identity within his writing, and the questions of sexuality, ethnicity and nationalism that characterise this theme. The representation of this theme within these texts suggest that Tsiolkas writes within the mainstream, but, I will argue, against the current.

As a young Australian I am interested in writing by other young Australians and the versions of contemporary society that they portray in their writing. What I find exciting about Grunge is that it offers a disparate multiplicity of identities as they exist within Australian society. However, I am concerned that this writing has been either marginalised or ignored by the wider community of literary critics. Indeed, when I began to investigate Grunge, I was disturbed by the dismissive and derogatory criticism that this genre faced. The statement that concerned me most was a suggestion made by Condon that 'perhaps a thesis awaits – throwing up in

contemporary Australian fiction' (Condon, 1995, pg. 9). This thesis will not be typed on a 'sheaf of sick bags' (1995, pg. 9) as Condon suggests. I could have concentrated on a defence of Grunge, but I am more interested in highlighting what I loosely call the voice of Tsiolkas, in examining this voice and asserting a more prominent place for it in Australian literature.

Tsiolkas occupies an unusual position as a Grunge writer because he has been extensively interviewed and his writing has been widely quoted. This position is of course paradoxical; he has been interviewed and published on issues surrounding his marginality within dominant discourses. However, I argue that Tsiolkas is able to transcend this paradoxical position and that his comments offer an insight into his writing that highlights its importance. The exploration of *Loaded* and Tsiolkas that I will undertake in this thesis will be contextual in the sense that I will offer a palimpsest of issues surrounding the text and its author, that propose a new direction in Australian literature.

Chapter One addresses the debates surrounding the reception of Grunge, focusing specifically on the contradictions that have affected this genre. I will argue that Grunge is able to transcend such contradictory problematics. Focusing on the niche marketing phenomenon of Grunge and the notion of generationalism, as suggested by Davis (1997), I will construct a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse *Loaded* and its apparently marginal position within Australian literature.

My emphasis in Chapter Two is to acknowledge the disparate versions of contemporary Australian society that Tsiolkas conveys in *Loaded*. Focusing on the politics of migration, as suggested by Tsiolkas (1997a), I will question the definitive nature of Australian national identity. By exploring the representation of the suburbs of Melbourne in *Loaded*, I will argue that such an identity is problematic due to the diverse nature of Australian society. This chapter will also focus on the question of ethnicity that is characteristic of Tsiolkas's work and in so doing, highlight Tsiolkas's distinctive voice and position him as a truly multicultural writer, as suggested by Jurgensen (1991).

In Chapter Three I use the metaphor of the road less travelled in two ways: for a reading of the key theme of sexuality as it is represented in *Loaded*, and as a means of defining the voice of Tsiolkas. Ari takes a different path from that of his friends and family and, in so doing, questions typical versions of sexuality, nationalism and ethnicity. Likewise, *Loaded* diverges from traditional forms of nationalism and paves the way for a reading of contemporary Australian society from the margins, exploring key determinants of these margins in the process.

While I will argue the social and cultural importance of Grunge, I do not wish to discriminate against mainstream Australian literature. Rather I aim to consolidate Grunge as one version of consensus that works within the greater rubric of Australian literature and in so doing, position *Loaded* as important social commentary.

Chapter One: Searching for the Voice

The position of Grunge literature within the mainstream of Australian literature is problematic. Grunge entered discourses concerned with this milieu based primarily on defending and disputing its stylistics and the issues with which it deals. Indeed, almost as soon as Grunge texts started to appear in 1995 and 1996 the debates focusing on the production and meaning of this genre began.

Leishman (1999, pg. 94) maintains that young Grunge writers were urged to participate in appearances at book festivals around Australia in these formative years, where they sat on Grunge 'panels' and defended and disputed their writing. These festivals generally concentrated on questioning the role that these authors have in the future of Australian literature and the style of writing that they use (Leishman, 1999, pg. 95). Grunge thus became prominent through controversy, a situation that has marginalised it within critical literary discourses.

The position of Grunge literature is also problematic because it is difficult to define. In this chapter I will construct my own definition of Grunge as a genre. Interestingly though, one of the more noteworthy predicaments of Grunge is the question of whether it is a genre or conversely a 'moment' or phenomenon in the history of Australian literary production. Waldren argues that Grunge was 'created' in 1995 when a spate of angry, nihilistic and urban texts by young writers were published (cited in Leishman, 1999, pg. 95). Likewise, Syson (1996, pg. 21) highlights that the emergence of Grunge was recognised retrospectively. He suggests that Grunge was actually instigated by Andrew McGahan's first novel *Praise* (1992) and that

for a few years *Praise* stood alone, deserving of its moderate accolades...but the progenitor of nothing and seemingly destined to fade into history. Along comes a bunch of novels that seem to share a number of its concerns and there you have it: a tradition (Syson, 1996, pg. 21).

This 'tradition', as Syson describes it, gave way to many texts in these 'founding' years including Stevens's *Nature Strip* and *Big man's Barbie*, McGregor's *Suck my toes*, Boyack and Colvey's *Black* and *Snakeskin vanilla*, Winchl's *Liadhan*, Ettler's *The river Ophelia*, Berridge's *The lives of the saints*, Naher's *The underwharf* and Tsiolkas's *Loaded* (Waldren, cited in Leishman, 1999, pg. 94).

Critics such as Dawson (1997) suggest that Grunge literature exhibits a temporality that situates it more as a phenomenon of Australian literature in the 1990s. Dawson argues that if the contemporary wave of Grunge literature began with *Praise* and McGahan is considered the 'father' of this wave, then, because his second novel *1988* (1995) was not a Grunge text¹, this heralded the genre's temporality within the history of Australian literary production (1997, pg. 121).

Dawson supports his argument by suggesting that the stylistic form of Grunge can be seen as confessional and autobiographical². He insists that the very process of writing a Grunge novel is a cathartic experience for first time writers, the logical outcome being that the writer's autobiographical material is exhausted, which in turn marks 'their move away from Grunge' (1997, pg. 121).

¹ I disagree however with Dawson's assertion that *1988* is not a Grunge text. It shares some of the characteristics of Grunge in terms of its representation of male boredom and alienation from suburbia.

² This of course, could be argued for all forms of literature.

What exactly a movement away from Grunge marks the writer's movement toward, Dawson does not say. I presume, however, that he means a movement toward a more 'acceptable' style of writing. Arguments such as this deny that Grunge literature has any genealogy, and suggest that it does not make any significant comments about contemporary Australian society and culture. I argue however that Grunge is significant because its stylistics are used to represent different and traditionally marginalised discourses and positions within Australian society.

I believe that, despite all the discussion and debate about Grunge, this genre has not received serious critical analysis. The kind of analysis I am suggesting can only be attempted through a theoretical framework that encompasses Grunge's marginal position and the important issues with which these texts deal. This framework facilitates the premise for this chapter. In order to examine the social significance of *Loaded*, and indeed Grunge literature as a genre, I will first undertake a contextual investigation that will centre on the debate surrounding the validity of this genre and the rupture it has created within various discourses concerning Australian literature. This examination will focus on situating Tsiolkas within this context and searching for his relationship to this supposed marginality.

I will trace several key streams that have evolved in the critical reception of Grunge by examining critiques and reviews published in response to this genre. These streams relate to the standard of the values and stylistics used by Grunge writers, the reaction of established Australian writers to this genre and the

environment of Australian publishing when they were written. Leishman notes that when it first emerged 'Grunge was charged with revelling 'in sleaze, violence, sex, [and] drugs and [being] empty of values' (1999, pg. 96).

She insists that in the formative years numerous newspaper and journal articles appeared that focused on bemoaning the supposed impoverished stylistics and values of this genre and these first time writers (1999, pg. 96). This critical reception was certainly derogatory. For instance, Condon insists that

publishers should seriously consider packaging each book with a sixpack of Chuxs (for the vomit that flows through the pages), clean needles (for the smack), Panadol (for the hangovers), condoms (for the alley sex), and a travel jar of Horlicks in case it all becomes too boring. Maybe even a peanut neck cushion, if sleep takes over during the reading. All could fit neatly in a small sample bag with handle (1995, pg. 9).

He concludes by suggesting that 'the main thing you'll find missing in your grunge-lit fun bag is a 'story'' (1995, pg. 9).

The values and stylistics of Grunge were considered more sensational than stable when compared to the writing produced by established Australian writers. For example, in another article titled *Our remaindered canon* (1997) Condon investigates the reasons why 'many fine and important local books, particularly by older writers, have a negligible shelf life' (pg. 8). He pointedly turns to established writer Malouf, who maintains that

the way to go seems to be...books written by someone under 30, preferably 25, about something involving the young lifestyle. Drugs, sex and throwing up, it seems to me (in Condon, 1997, pg. 9).

Other critics insist that these texts were being published by an industry in crisis.

Modjeska, for instance, admits that she found herself 'obscurely out of sympathy with much of the writing that's been hailed as 'new' or 'young'' (2000, pg. 9), and maintains that

we have writers at the beginning of their careers, all of them with the ability, the voice and the things to say that could and should make them important figures in our culture - and in different ways they have all been let down editorially (2000, pg. 10).

Many positive critiques of young Australian writers work continued to denigrate Grunge, rather than focus on the merits of individual texts and authors. Sullivan, for instance, in *Nurturing and knifing the young* begins a discussion of the Best Young Novelists (2000) panel at the Sydney Writers' Festival with the question:

What should we do about our young writers? Are they going to the dogs? Should we pat them constantly on the back and tell them how brilliantly they're doing, or give them the occasional rap over the knuckles to bring them up to scratch? (2000, pg. 10).

While Sullivan concedes that her question 'sounds patronising' (2000, pg. 10) and asks 'why these questions are being raised when books by young Australians are being snapped up as never before by overseas publishers' (2000, pg. 10), she insists that the issue of standards is 'an issue that publishers, agents, critics and the writers themselves feel passionate about, and there's no easy resolution in sight' (2000, pg. 10). Macris in *Youth loses plot as market beckons* insists that

in recent years...there has been some concern over the standard of fiction being published in an environment where the relentless pursuit of high sales and rapid turnover threatens literary quality (2000, pg. 8).

His article is actually about the same group on the Best Young Novelists list that Sullivan discusses.³ Macris insists, however, that he is not questioning the standard of the texts on the list, but the

remainder of the field...filled with the kinds of substandard efforts that have become all too familiar, derivative genre fiction, lame inner-city farce and wistful coming-of-age confessionals (2000, pg. 8).

Continual generalisations about the writing of young Australian authors, such as the above, where the good are lumped all too readily with the bad, has caused a divide among critics and writers⁴.

Last year, *Australian book review* published a symposium titled *The state of Australian fiction: is there too much mediocre fiction being published?* Most of the critics, authors and publishers answered this question by insisting that this was indeed the case, and that most of this mediocre fiction was coming from young writers. For instance, Windsor argues that while the '*Sydney Morning Herald* makes much each year of a Best Young Australian Novelists feature...which is 'commendable culture involvement', it should in fact be 'read as part of a Fairfax bid for the youth market' (2000, pg. 30). And Reimer asks: 'when did the Vogel, for instance, last come up with a Kate Grenville, a Tim Winton or a Brian Castro?' (2000, pg. 30)⁵. These comments function to highlight two contradictory

³ Tsiolkas was one of the authors on the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Best Young Novelists (2000) list with his second novel, *The Jesus man*.

⁴ Bradley, a joint-winner of the Best Young Novelists prize in 2000, argues that 'there's something very backhanded about the way this has been done this year...it's like being handed a poisoned chalice' (in Sullivan, 2000, pg.10).

⁵ Craven, critic: what Australian fiction publishing requires is a restoration of a the kind of self-confidence (and the attendant sense of value) which would ensure that if a new Murnane or

issues that have affected the critical reception of Grunge literature, contradictions that need to be recognised and addressed. Firstly, 'Grunge' is considered by some to be merely a marketing phenomenon within Australian publishing. Secondly, as suggested above, the so-called divide between the critics and the authors is actually a generational divide between new, young writers and established, older writers and critics.

While many of the comments made in the *Australian book review* symposium are negative, I wish to highlight a glimmer of hope, most relevant in the context of this thesis, made by Bradley, who suggests that

what bothers people is the fact that in a vibrant culture lots of people talk at once, in lots of different voices, instead of a select few. And yes, a lot of what gets said is forgettable, and a lot of it is noise, but that's always been the case. You need the noise to get the good stuff (2000, pg. 31).

I believe that many Grunge novels have got 'the good stuff' and offer serious social and cultural commentary about contemporary Australian society, and that, while it is important to explore them in a historical context, this should be in the form of a dialectic between the individual texts and the contexts in which they are written. In order to establish this dialectic I will address the issues that have

Mathers came among us he would automatically have the attention of the most powerful publishing intelligences in the land (2000, pg. 33);

Falconer, critic: first novels, especially by younger authors...are often given to the least experienced reviewer...This means that first novelists often do not get to learn from considered, expert reviews, surely an important phase of 'research and development' for our national literature (2000, pg. 32).

Jain, novelist: I know of at least one extraordinary manuscript by (in my opinion) a brilliant young writer which no publisher to date had the guts to take up. If too much mediocre fiction is being published, it's not necessarily that there's nothing better on offer (2000, pg. 32).

Bradley, novelist: contemporary Australian fiction is internationally successful in a way it has never been before, critically and commercially. And while this success is being achieved across the board, it's particularly noticeable amongst younger writers (2000, pg. 31).

marginalised this oeuvre within the mainstream of Australian literature; the marketing phenomenon of 'Grunge' and the issue of generationalism within Australian literary culture.

Syson contends that the phenomenon of Grunge literature in Australia can be seen as the result of the 'needs' of the literature market. He highlights that by 'observing the street cred that Grunge bands like *Nirvana* possessed' the publishing industry saw a way of

obtaining relatively high levels of credibility and sales among a large and untapped 25-40 year old market by promoting a set of new writers as being the literary expression of that same sentimental teen spirit (Syson, 1996, pg 21).

Felik's essay *Pulp Fiction* (1997) echoes Syson's argument by highlighting the economic imperatives within which Grunge was created. According to Felik, these imperatives 'reshaped the publishing industry to emphasise high turnover, short shelf life and readily recognisable faces' (1997, pg. 114), rather than publishing texts because of their presumed literary standard. He insists that Grunge is lurid in its content and, 'just as importantly, its consumability' (Felik, 1997, pg. 118).

Syson (1996, pg. 23) highlights that, rather than going out on a limb for new audiences in the current market environment, publishers are 'targeting, capturing and servicing client groups'. The focus and target of Grunge literature, Dawson argues, is a 'specifically non-literary audience' (1997, pg. 122), the audience of Generation X. The result of this niche marketing is evident on the cover blurbs, in

the forewords and in the authorial bio-data of texts marketed under the category Grunge. A good example of this niche marketing is evident in the short story anthology *Pub Fiction* (1997). In her *Introduction*, Stevens explains how the anthology came to be.

The concept arose, not out of the blue, but out of the smoke. One of those lazy afternoons, those lazy sessions (you know the kind) – hey, someone should do an anthology called *Pub Fiction*. Yeah – get a bunch of cool writers. They’ll know what to do....don’t over-edit. Keep it raw. Keep it authentic. Don’t bow to any tired old literary ideals. Forget the critics: entertain the readers. The result you hold in your hand (Stevens, 1997, pg. v).

Once she has captured her ‘non-literary’ targets, Stevens goes on to acknowledge their ‘non-literary’ subjectivity.

Now if you don’t dig wordy introductions, head straight for the bar. For slower immersion, find yourself a table, make sure it’s not wet, and read on (Stevens, 1997, pg. vi).

The title, *Pub Fiction*, is itself a ploy to capture this generation of readers by creating a sense of a shared experience between reader and writer. As Stevens explains,

writers today are a multi-skilled lot. Many of the contributors to *Pub Fiction* are also busy with music, film, art, performance. That’s why the title, an obvious pun on Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, made so much immediate sense. We are children of television: we are informed by pop culture. Music and film are an integral part of the creative process (1997, pg. vi).

The aim of *Pub Fiction* is to bring ‘the pubs and clubs of Australia (and elsewhere) to life’ (Stevens, 1997, pg. vii) for readers in the same generation as these writers, and it is marketed accordingly.

Grunge literature is targeted at an audience who shares a specific cultural knowledge. In this vein, Tsiolkas has argued that his writing is dependent upon certain cultural practices that make ‘little attempt to speak’ (cited in Syson, 1996, pg. 22) to anyone without knowledge of them. However, as Davis argues in his definitive text *Gangland: cultural elites and the new generationalism* (1997), critics from outside this context have not acknowledged, recognised or realised these differences when they came to review Grunge texts. This revelation introduces the second contradiction that has affected the critical reception of Grunge. Davis focuses on the generational divide between the older ‘establishment’ of Australian literary critics, which he argues is most readily represented by the Baby Boomer generation, and the new Australian writers, represented by Generation X.⁶ In response to what he calls the ‘culture wars’ (1997, pg. 199) Davis suggests that a ‘spate of seminal ‘culture wars’ texts’ (1997, pg. 199), written by critics from the Baby Boomer generation have appeared in which ‘these commentators...portray themselves as under siege’ (1997, pg. 33)⁷.

⁶ For the purpose of this thesis, the baby boomer generation refers to people born after World War Two and before 1960, and Generation X refers to people born after 1960 and before 1990.

⁷ Davis goes on to say that,

in recent years this New Establishment has produced a spate of books, speeches and plays on similar themes, backward-looking, shrouded in rage and gloom. Put Garner’s *The first stone* together with Williamson’s troika of conservative plays – *Brilliant lies*, *Dead white males* and *Heretic* – plus books such as Peter Coleman’s *Doubletake*, Robert Manne’s *The culture of forgetting*, Robert Hughes’ *Culture of complaint*, Keith Windschuttle’s *The killing of history*, Kate Jennings’ *Bad manners*, Don Anderson’s *Real opinions* and *Sex and text*, Terry Lane’s *Hobbyhorses*, and even John Laws’ *Book of irreverent logic* and John Laws’ *Book of uncommon sense*, and a picture starts to emerge. Add to these Anne Summers’ patronising *Letter to the next generation*, which appears as the final chapter in the updated edition of her *Damned whores and God’s police*. Add to this a series of articles published by Christopher Pearson’s *Adelaide review*. Add to that a series of speeches, such as Garner’s to the Sydney Institute in the wake of the reception of *The first stone*, Christopher Koch’s 1996 speech on winning the *Miles Franklin Award*, Pierre Ryckmans’ 1996 *Boyer lectures* and Robert Dessaix’s speech to the 1995 *Victoria Premier’s Literary Awards* dinner, along with a series of newspaper articles and media appearances by various figures such as P.P. McGuinness, Barry Oakley, Luke Slattery, Susan Mitchell, Peter Craven, Les Murray, Frank Moorhouse, Richard

He argues that the discourses of the 'cultural elite' (1997, pg. 21) have become more concerned with 'talk of scrapheaps, of living in a 'fin de siècle age', of witnessing the death of literature, the death of the novel' (1997, pg. 21) rather than serious discussion of the ideas and issues presented in the literature of these young writers (1997, pg. 35). Davis notes that

serious attempts to engage with youth culture are few and far between in the mainstream media, even though they are largely run by people of a generation who voiced similar complaints twenty or thirty years ago (1997, pg. 101).

Rather, he insists that in reviews of Grunge literature these 'figures played the part of 'native informant', setting themselves up as authentic reporters of what's wrong with the position they left behind' (1997, pg. 33) and that they adhered to the motto 'by the middlebrow, for the middlebrow' (1997, pg.131). The voice of the younger generation, however, was absent from such discussions and Davis (1997, pg. 131) questions why younger reviewers 'more adept at spotting the book's themes' were not given the opportunity to 'mount an informed critique'.

No reviewer spoke of any of the 'Grunge' books as literatures of cultural dispassion. Nor were they likely to, as they manifestly lack the apparatus to contextualise the books even in terms of obvious things, such as the social realities younger people face (Davies, 1997, pg. 131).

Instead, Davis argues Grunge texts 'were spoken of in terms of a 1970s paradigm, as existential, individual rites of passage' and that 'in these terms, naturally, they failed' (1997, pg. 131). Davis concludes that the majority of critiques by the literary establishment did not recognise the significance of Grunge, simply

Neville and Beatrice Faust, and despite the differences between the members of this loose-knit gang, the common themes are striking (Davis, 1997, pg. 30-31).

because they did not understand it in the context of their own cultural knowledge. Likewise, Leishman argues that the hostile reception by many critics to Grunge 'was not so much a conscious effort to dismiss the value' of this writing but a 'failure by critics to recognise the values expressed in that literature' (1999, pg. 97).

Tsiolkas's writing has been marketed as 'stark, uncompromising prose' (Syson, 1996, pg. 24) but is that because the texts he writes allow us to gaze voyeuristically and somewhat smugly at the stark, uncompromising and nihilistic society that he portrays; or because his writing brutally deconstructs the world in which we live; or because, as Spencer suggests,

X is the parapraxis which slips through history and language system evading (and annoying marketers)...[producing a literature] that hovers around the point of consciousness, tickles the fringes of the acceptable, helping define the culture by marking its borders (1995, pg. 33);

or all of the above? Being marketed as a Grunge writer has allowed Tsiolkas to make his mark on the literary scene in Australia, but it is a label he is prepared to reject. This is the dilemma of the Grunge writer. Many of them do not want to be known as, and do not identify with, this tag. Syson maintains that these writers 'felt that their works were doing such different things that to label them this way threatened their difference, integrity and purpose' (1996, pg. 21). Tsiolkas argues that 'if there's any common identification with any of these writers, it's that maybe we want to talk about contemporary experience and a contemporary local experience in Australia' (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48).

To clarify, while I will discuss Tsiolkas and the themes and issues of *Loaded* in the context of Grunge, it is not Grunge in the sense of the marketing ploy used by publishers to sell books, nor Grunge in the sense of a literature produced by a certain group of young Australian writers, but Grunge as suggested by Tsiolkas — a literature that talks about contemporary local experience in Australia. Bradley argues that Grunge writers have grown up in ‘a world that often seems darker than the sun tinted vistas of the sixties and seventies that popular culture constantly recycles’ (1996, pg. xi). However, simultaneously ‘it is a place of increasing plurality and acceptance of difference’,

where space to explore desires and lifestyles that have previously been suppressed or forbidden is growing, and where traditional concepts of power, sexuality, family and meaning are beginning to unravel, creating room for new ways of defining (or not defining) (Bradley, 1996, pg. xi).

Bradley argues that Grunge is not a generational writing, it is not the voice of one group of people, but rather the writing of a disparate group that articulates ‘new ways of seeing, new ways of conceiving of possibilities and interpretations that are usually ignored’ (1996, pg. x).

So why look beyond what many critics have rejected and defend this type of literature? Felix highlights three reasons why Grunge should be considered an important and valid genre of Australian literature. Firstly, Grunge ‘names a set of preoccupations that many are evidently prepared to call upon in their fiction’ (1997, pg. 115). Secondly, Grunge is a revealing term; many people actually live the lives portrayed in this literature. And thirdly, Grunge examines many of the inequalities that exist within contemporary society. I argue that these observations

function to legitimise the stylistics of Grunge. They also reveal a 'cultural dispassion', as Davis (1997, pg. 131) describes it, inherent within Grunge literature that is essential in positioning texts such as *Loaded* as important social commentary.

Grunge portrays an 'underground' world of contemporary youth culture; it is 'sexually charged, contemporary, angry, ahistorical, amoral, nihilistic' (Syson, 1996, pg. 21). Waldren (cited in Leishman, 1999, pg. 95) argues that Grunge is not a new genre of literature. Instead, he prefers to locate it within the wider tradition of dirty realism. In his view, Grunge is not so much preoccupied with dirty realism, but is informed by it. Likewise, Jaivin maintains that dirty realism is a stylistic of Grunge and not just a 'way of talking dirty to Generation X' (1995, pg. 30). While the term dirty realism is itself problematic⁸, I wish to employ it here as a means of exploring the stylistics of this genre and the way that *Loaded* employs these. I will examine this stylistic characteristic as two separate elements in order to reveal individually their importance in the creation of meaning. I will do this by, firstly, exploring the 'dirty' representations within *Loaded* and the connotations of these, and secondly, through examining the function of realism.

Leishman cites four key characteristics of Grunge that combine to create the dirty realism that these texts employ. They are 'drug use; listening to music; having meaningless sex; [and] expressing boredom and disbelief' (1999, pg. 101). The young, urban characters of Grunge, who suffer the circumstances of contemporary

⁸ Many Grunge authors also deny the category dirty realism; for instance, Tsiolkas insists that 'the dirty realism thing is a media creation' (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 47).

society and Generation X, can only find solace in a life that distances them from any sense of reality and from the boredom that accompanies it: a life of drugs, sex and music (Dawson, 1997, pg. 121). These characteristics function within *Loaded* to distance Ari from the dominant culture represented in the text and to position him as an outsider. The text begins with Ari waking up and complaining; 'I've just got up and I'm already bored. I wouldn't mind a joint' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 3). Ari's boredom and disillusionment come from a rejection of the grind of everyday life and the banality of normative lifestyles. This is combined with the inescapable reality that people around him are caught in this cycle: 'the faces of all the workers and all the married people I see carry the strain of living a life of rules and regulations' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 10). Ari sees his friend Joe, for instance, caught within these normative boundaries.

Joe has got his world worked out, or so he likes to think he has. He's got a job, got a girlfriend, got a car. Soon he wants to get married. I think it's a mistake but I figure that it isn't my business to tell him such things and I don't. He's an adult. But it seems to me that there are two things in this world guaranteed to make you old and flabby. Work and marriage. It's inevitable (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 10).

Ari's indifference toward normative lifestyles means that he lives a liminal existence, transgressing boundaries between the normative and his own set of cultural practices. A combination of drugs and sexual energy transports him spiritually and emotionally into this liminal and transgressive space.

Speed is exhilaration. Speed is colours reflecting light with greater intensity. Speed, if it's good, can take me higher than I can ever go, higher than my natural bodily chemicals can take me....On speed I like to fuck. Fucking with lots of touching. Feel every hair on their body, on my body....No boredom, just exhilaration (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 22-23-24).

Music also offers an escape; 'in the voluptuous thunder and rhythms of the Walkman I disappear and I am out of here' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 145).

The physicality of Ari's transgressions are not only assisted by drugs and music, but by the actual physical space that he occupies or invades. These spaces are also grungy and underground. For instance, in club toilets:

We lock ourselves in the cubicle, avoiding the looks we get from the women doing their faces at the mirror. I pour the last of the speed from one packet onto the toilet lid and add a small amount of powder from the gram I'm going to sell (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 56);

or in alleyways:

he turns down the alley and I hesitate. I think of mad fuckers, think of my throat being slit, think of those crazy men who get off on death. The vision of madness entwines with my urge to have sex. Blood and semen; these days the liquids go together. I turn into the alley, slowly, walking into the dark landscape of a dream (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 57-58).

Although there are 'a lot more dirty things going on in the world than sex and drugs' (Spencer, 1995, pg. 46), the use of underground cultures, of drugs in toilets and sex in alleyways, positions Ari against the norm and gives him a marginal identity.

It is appropriate, then, that Ari is described by his friend, Johnny, as Persephone.

You know the story don't you, she spends half her time in hell and the other half in the real world....Tonight our sweet little Persephone is slumming it in hell (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 96).

This 'stage name' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 96) describes Ari's dilemma because

the trouble is our little Persephone is beginning to enjoy her time in hell. Aren't you sugar? You don't know what's real any more, do you? (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 96-97).

During the twenty-four hour period of the text, Ari's life is presented as a combination of drugs, sex, music and boredom, a combination that highlights the transgressive dilemma that he is caught in. Ari as Persephone is a constant theme throughout the text, perhaps the most obvious being the time he spends at the Greek club. Ari changes from being a drug dealer (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 54); to having sex in an alleyway with an older man (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 57); to dancing the rembetika inside the club (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 59) and many other things in between. The way that Ari changes according to the situation that he is in illustrates just how flexible, but also how contrived, his identity is. He cannot exist within normative culture, but he cannot exist without it. He is Persephone, but no one can know about his dual life; 'the truth is yours, it doesn't belong to no [sic] one else' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 129).

This duality is important in representing what Tsiolkas describes as the experience of dislocation in contemporary Australian society, an experience he aims to express in *Loaded*.

I hope what I've been able to express in *Loaded* is how the experience of dislocation has, I think, become even more acute in the contemporary world, where stimuli are so fast. There are so many pressures now about what identity means and how you express identity....So for someone like Ari...it's not only a question of feeling separate from his parents' experience of what being Greek means, but also his peers' experience of being Greek or Australian or gay or young or urban or whatever (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 47).

The experience of dislocation gives Ari the ability to see the versions of identity available to him, and creates a divide between himself and everyone around him. For instance, there is a generational divide between Ari and his parents⁹:

Mum has worked hard all her life for her kids and we've all let her down (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 33).

Dad has an excuse, he was born in Greece. A different world. Poverty, war, hardship, no school, no going out, no TV. It's a world he'd prefer to go back to and a world I have no fucking clue about (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 12).

Ari labels his friend Joe, who does the 'nine to five' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 10), as a 'coward' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 10) and Joe's fiancé Dina is 'commonplace' and a 'wog' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 39). Everyone gets a label based on gender, ethnicity, age, or any identifiable factor. In fact, Ari labels almost everyone that he comes into contact with, but refuses to label himself. He insists that 'what I am is a runner. Running away from a thousand and one things the people say you have to be or should be' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 149).

The experience of dislocation that pervades *Loaded* performs another important function in relation to the representation of reality. Indeed, while *Loaded* seems to be an ethnographic representation of youth culture, realism has a very loose function within the text. Tsiolkas himself has commented on his manipulation of it and describes the result as hyperrealism (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48).

It's not straight realism. I wanted to write within some of the stylistic parameters of what's called realism – setting it within a

⁹ This is not to suggest that only a generational divide exists between Ari and his parents. Other factors that contribute include the experience of living in countries other than Australia, the emigration experience, gender experience etc.

twenty-four hour frame, writing in the present tense. But because I also wanted to express so many ideas and thoughts within it, at times I found myself breaking through the boundaries of what realist writing is meant to be. To me the ethnography and the location of *Loaded* is real, but Ari's articulation, his expression isn't realism (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48).

This hyperrealism functions through the experience of dislocation represented in the text. Many of Ari's musings document the inequalities of being young, gay, Greek and unemployed in a society that wishes to marginalise such people. Ari's articulate and insightful views about the world, about what is wrong with the society in which he lives and his place in it, are important in creating the cultural dispassion that defines Grunge as a genre, and in situating *Loaded* within this context. This is one of the key factors of hyperrealism in *Loaded*, because while Ari is experiencing these margins, he is after all, only nineteen. Spencer, for instance, asks 'could an uneducated nineteen year old boy...really be that articulate and wise?' and concludes that it is 'unlikely, but who cares' (1995, pg. 46).

Both dirty realism and hyperrealism play an important role in *Loaded* and allow Ari to articulate his views about society. These comments provide the means for Tsiolkas to articulate his notion of the experience of dislocation. They also highlight Felix's argument about the importance of Grunge as a genre within contemporary Australian society. The preoccupations of Grunge, and its stylistics of dirty realism, enhance the revealing nature of the texts and allow them to convey the inequalities of society. *Loaded* relies on these factors in order to place Ari on the margins of his society and therefore occupy a liminal space within it.

Bradley argues that Grunge literature originates from writers of a group who share a sense of the world 'where there is a growing awareness of the complexities and contradictions of human behaviour and the representation of those behaviours' (1996, pg. xii). This cultural dispassion is an integral idea within the wide rubric that is Grunge literature, and certainly within *Loaded*. It allows Tsiolkas to explore some of the tensions within Australian society that affect young Australians. Ari insists that he is

surfing on the down-curve of capital. The generations after this are not going to build on the peasants' landholdings. There's no jobs, no work, no factories, no wage packet, no half-acre block. There is no more land. I am sliding towards to sewer, I'm not even struggling against the flow. I can smell the pungent aroma of shit, but I'm still breathing (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 144).

Earlier in this chapter I suggested that the issues that Grunge deals with and the position of this genre in the milieu of Australian literature, form a dialectical framework that can be used in a reading of *Loaded*. This dialectic allows a reading that supports Tsiolkas's aim for the text, which is to undermine the 'homogeneous picture of what it means to be Australian' (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48). In so doing, *Loaded* undermines representations of the homogeneity of Australian society in mainstream Australian literature.

However, the tensions explored within *Loaded*, as a Grunge text, are not new in the context of Australian cultural production. They belong to a 'long tradition of Australian writing...the literature of social protest' (Syson, 1996, pg. 26). This idea will become the focus of the chapters to follow in which I will assert Tsiolkas's position in the context of what Turner (1993) refers to as Australian

national fiction, both as a writer who explores the nuances of living in contemporary Australian society, and as a writer with his own voice — a voice that is distinctive and important.

Chapter Two: Discovering the voice

'National fiction', as Turner (1993) would have it, is rarely described as a nuance of living in contemporary Australia. However, it could well describe Ari's experience of Australianness, and, by extension Tsiolkas's contribution to Australian national fiction. Leishman (1999, pg. 102) argues that, Tsiolkas and other Grunge writers aim to reconcile the disparity between the available representations of national identity and the contemporary lived experience of being Australian. She maintains that, to this end, Grunge literature seeks to 'acknowledge, through the writing of alternative narratives, the existence of unequal social relationships in Australia' (Leishman, 1999, pg. 101). This thematic endeavour places the genre of Grunge, and consequently, Tsiolkas and *Loaded*, squarely into the current literary and social debate concerning the notion of Australian nationalism and national identity. However, it is by no means a nationalistic voice that permeates these texts. Rather it is an alternative set of narratives that seek to represent the margins of Australian society.

This chapter seeks to consolidate the position of *Loaded* and Tsiolkas in the wider context of Australian literature, while at the same time exploring key themes and issues evident within the text. I do this in relation to nationalism and national identity, and the differing representations that *Loaded* offers. Through the examination of these themes I aim to highlight Tsiolkas's distinctive voice within this debate, and his rewriting of certain rhetorical figures and landscapes.

The notion of Australian nationalism and national identity is in a state of flux and has been for some time. A central point of contention is that traditional representations of nationalism and national identity exclude rather than include. Dale (1997, pg. 10) argues that paradigmatic 'Australianness' is defined in opposition to a perceived difference from the other and that the ambiguities and inequalities that this creates discourage the recognition of marginal discourses. Questions surrounding the limitations of Australia's nationalism and national identity have stemmed from the reaction of marginal discourses to these ideals. This is particularly important in *Loaded* for, as Syson argues, the text has captured a moment in Australian history in which some basic cultural promises are in the process of being broken (1997, pg. 83).

The idea of a multicultural Australia, and the highly political challenge of multiculturalism, has been central in the re-evaluation of Australianness. Jurgensen (1991, pg. 24) argues that multiculturalism 'is an extension of social values and the adoption of other cultural structures'. He insists that multicultural literature allows for new values and new meanings and that 'it is this challenge which disturbs the owners of monocultural power' (Jurgensen, 1991, pg. 25). Jurgensen posits that the defence of cultural nationalism is problematic precisely because it does not allow for the creation of new meanings in a society with such a varying structure (1991, pg. 25).

'Multiculturalism' relates to the very heart of an Australian identity ('what does it mean to be Australian?') because it challenges not only the assumptions of an exclusive cultural self-projection, but also, as an inseparable part of it, the political power enforcing such sociocultural consensus (Jurgensen, 1991, pg. 25).

Jurgensen suggests that 'conservative forces' resist a redefinition of Australian culture and identity because 'they already know what it means to be Australian and aim to protect this meaning' (1991, pg. 26).

In order to demonstrate this resistance, I wish to highlight a recent essay by Cowden in which he argues that there is an overwhelming preoccupation with 'new' Australian writing, and that this 'is not in any way counterbalanced or contextualised by discussions of the literature of the past' (2000, pg. 162).

Cowden positions Tsiolkas within this context, arguing that while his writing 'seems to me enormously significant in the way it has opened up a cultural space for gay people within the Greek and other ethnic minority communities,' it is not the 'kind of text which really facilitates new ways of thinking about Australian literature' (2000, pg. 162). He maintains that

Tsiolkas's work has a sensational attention-grabbing quality - in the sense it mirrors shifts in contemporary culture - but it seems that as people teaching the next generation of students about Australian literature, we need to approach this and other recent texts with a longer perspective.... The point is that the issues which the present generation of critics have argued for were always already present in the Australian literary tradition, particularly as that tradition must be amongst the most consciously modern of any in the world (Cowden, 2000, pg. 162).

Cowden concludes by arguing that a celebration of literature by writers such as Tsiolkas suggests that 'a generation has grown up for whom the 'cringing' attitudes of the past are no longer relevant' (2000, pg. 163). However, rather than celebrating this, he suggests that it is

precisely at a moment like this that we have to have the confidence to go back to our own canon, not with an attitude of reverence or rejection, but to see this material as a crucial means of giving voice to a deeper and more complex sense of the past, which might in turn create the space for new ways of conceiving the future (2000, pg. 163).

I argue that *Loaded* actually achieves the kind of counterbalancing that Cowden is looking for, but it does so from the margins of Australian literature, not from within the canon. Syson concurs. He suggests that, while *Loaded* as a postmodern text continually reminds us that 'history has happened and has brought us to this moment but now it is over' (Syson, 1997, pg. 87), in fact

Tsiolkas...wants us to prove Ari wrong. He challenges us to show we are not at the end of history and that there are connections between the struggles of the past with those which are necessary today (Syson, 1997, pg. 87).

These comments are particularly relevant to debates about Grunge, which has typically been seen as a literature that denounces the past because of its postmodern nature. Syson, for instance, argues against comments by Berridge, who suggests that Grunge is part of a 'developing international tradition of urban realism...throwing away the effete, politically correct shackles of the past' (cited in Syson, 1996, pg. 23). This comment suggests that Grunge as a genre is mutually exclusive from the rubric of Australian literature. This idea is problematic, because the very issues that Grunge deals with, despite its fundamental postmodern intentions, already exist within the forms of social protest characteristic of Australian literature. Syson supports this assertion and concludes that Berridge's argument

exhibits very little knowledge about the history of Australian literature and even less of its internal conflicts and differences or its tradition of urban realism and anti-bourgeois writing (Syson, 1996, pg. 23).

Syson argues that 'Grunge is much more a continuation of a tradition of Australian literature than it is a new and revolutionary development' (Syson, 1996, pg. 23) and that these texts 'articulate the rumblings of a structure of feeling¹⁰ that is being demolished at its deepest levels' (Syson, 1996, pg. 26). That notwithstanding, he posits that 'Grunge refers to a growing and exciting force in Australian literature' (Syson, 1996, pg. 26), one that offers a version of contemporary postmodern society in pluralist terms. *Loaded* refers to these shifting social and cultural allegiances, as I shall illustrate later in this chapter, a confrontation that questions whether cultural and social identity can ever be fixed. Ari is a compromised hero because he must exist within a liminal space in order to live his life the way he wants to. In the text's preface Tsiolkas introduces the idea of this compromised position by citing Rodriguez.

The immigrant child has the advantage of the burden of knowing what other children may more easily forget: a child, any child, necessarily lives in his own time, his own room. The child cannot have a life identical with that of his mother or father. For the immigrant child this knowledge is inescapable. Richard Rodriguez. *An American writer* (1995, preface).

¹⁰ The notion of this 'structure of feeling' and its deconstruction reflects William's arguments in *Culture* (1981, pg. 27) that the structure of feeling is the expression of formal and conscious beliefs and is reflected in cultural production. This structure of feeling, Williams argues, manifests often 'traceable connections to the relations, perspectives and values which the beliefs legitimise or normalise, as in characteristic selections of subject' (1981, pg. 27). He contends that the structure of feeling is 'important in tracing the changing culture of what is otherwise... a continuing or persistent class'.

These ideas are reflected in Tsiolkas's own comments about Australian identity. Indeed, writers such as Tsiolkas are still defining their own role in Australian cultural production and are still finding ways to represent this identity. Tsiolkas has grappled several times with the notion of Australian identity and nationalism in different interviews that he has given. When asked by Zownazit, in an interview for the ABC program *Two Shot*, how his sense of place has framed his writing, Tsiolkas replies

well I think...I have to answer not as much as a writer but as a person growing up in a migrant culture within Australia because it's taken me a long time to feel at home with the, with the sense of Australian identity and even now at this point I don't particularly know what that might mean....for a long time I felt that I lived, I think I've expressed it as living within a hyphen, a hyphen where it's neither Australian nor Greek, it's something else (*Two shot*, 2000, pg. 1).

Tsiolkas represents the idea of 'living within a hyphen' in *Loaded*, and through this represents the multicultural nature of Australian society. Jurgensen argues that a truly multicultural imagination is rare, and insists that 'it is a special kind of literary quality' that 'only a handful of Australian writers have so far reached' (1991, pg. 28). He posits that 'the genuinely 'multicultural' author possesses the special gift of transformational imagination, a creative interaction between various cultures' (Jurgensen, 1991, pg. 29). Thus, 'multiculturalism's essential nature is a commitment to cultural tolerance' (Jurgensen, 1991, pg. 29). This is the style of writing that Tsiolkas presents in *Loaded*. It is a voice that works within the context of the milieu of Australian literature, while at the same time, presenting a new, multicultural and dynamic version of this society. I will aim to show this dynamism in the following analysis of *Loaded*.

The representations of suburbia in *Loaded* can be seen as the stage upon which Tsiolkas's comments about Australian nationalism, and the identities that stem from this, are played out. The representation of suburbia has typically been seen as the representation of the everyday, which is particularly important within *Loaded* because it examines a day in the life of Ari. McCann (1998, pg. viii) argues that suburbia is 'the reality in which most Australians live...an extremely unstable collection of tropes, representational conventions and stereotypes that can't be read in referential terms'. He contends that this identification with suburbia is linked to themes of identity and, most commonly, to the desire for escape (1998, pg. vii). Within *Loaded* suburbia is identified by structured social groups and specific microcosms, through which Ari can question and comprehend his own sense of identity.

In *Aleka doesn't live here anymore: some musings on suburbia, migration and film* (1997a) Tsiolkas highlights the possibilities for a reading of suburbia, not as 'static and homogeneous', but as 'capable of reflecting the multiple and fractured communities and identities existent in urban Australia' (pg. 33). He traces the use of suburbia and its relationship to identity, particularly class based identity, in key Australian films arguing that

the post-Cold War period, a time we are living in now and therefore elusive in terms of historical categorization, has upset the traditional perspectives of understanding class....The politics of migration...have largely been ignored or made tangential to the concerns of the Australian film industry, even though these migratory effects and politics are, I would argue, essential to understanding the changes in definitions and identities of class (Tsiolkas, 1997a, pg. 33).

The effects of these migratory politics inform the key themes of *Loaded*. Indeed, the text focuses on the results of this social change and also its homogenising effects. Ari's movements across the suburbs in *Loaded* reflect different patterns of migration. Each group of Melbourne suburbs, eastern, western, southern and northern, represents different ethnic groups, and different stages of integration. The individual suburbs also represent different classes and thus concomitant economic and social inequalities. Indeed, Kirby argues that *Loaded* 'provides a detailed, sophisticated, class map of the suburbs' (1998, pg. 9) of Melbourne.

Loaded begins in the East. For Ari, the East is the 'whitest part of my city, where you'll see the authentic white Australian'. It is also the most Americanised. In the East Ari looks down the street and thinks 'oh-my-fucking-god-is-this-America?' with its 'backdrop of Seven Elevens, shopping malls, gigantic park lots' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 41). The East is described by Ari in two separate class divisions, the 'brick-veneer fortresses of the wogs with money', who live between 'the true Anglo affluence, [but are] never part of it', and the 'vast expanses of bored housewives and their drugged-out children who populate the outer eastern suburbs' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 41). Ari has family in the 'rich wog fortresses' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 41) of the eastern suburbs. His mother's second cousin, Aunt Nikki, is a rich wog by the river.

She made it big, married a fat wog in real estate, and comes to visit once a year, on Mum's name-day, dressed in fur and covered with gold chains, rings and bracelets...her husband stinks of alcohol, and her children look like Americans (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 42).

Ari's cousin Aleko and his family live in the eastern suburbs, but not 'on the rich hills near the river' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 42). Aleko's family have adapted to the East by denying their heritage; 'my cousin...Aleko, calls himself Alan and all his friends are skips' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 42) and

he has a sister and she's trying to be a skip as well. She dyes her hair blonde...and refuses to speak the wog language, to retain the wog name (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 42).

To survive in the 'flatlands of suburban hell' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 42), Aleko and his family have become Australezos (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43) or Greek Australians. This façade comes at a cost. Aleko's mother

cleans the toilets at the local primary school and returns home to a small concrete shit-box, trapped between neighbours who she has to yell at to be understood – every fucking utterance a humiliation. Her husband lifts crates every day, and is bored out of his skull every night (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43).

Further,

in the East, in the new world of suburbia there is no dialogue, no conversation, no places to go out: for there is no need, there is television (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43).

Class division in the East also affects 'the wog community' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43). Ari's Aunt Nikki denies Aleko's family because of class differences. The community they may have shared, based on ethnicity, no longer exists; 'for my Aunt Nikki, Alan and his family don't exist' because 'the wog community is a backstabbing, money hungry, snobbish, self-righteous community' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43).

The peasant Greeks who have made their money working the milk bars, delis, markets and fish shops of Melbourne look down on the long-haired loutish Greek boy and the bleach-blonde slutish Greek girl with disdain and denial. The denial is total. You are not me. We are not you. Fuck off. You don't exist (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43).

The brick-veneer fortresses of the 'rich wogs on the hill are not to keep the Australezo out, but to refuse entry to the uneducated-long-haired-bleached-blonde-no-money wog' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43). It is in the East where Ari learns that 'ethnicity is a scam, a bullshit, a piece of crock' (Tsiolkas 1995, pg. 43).

The North is next in Ari's migration across the city. The North 'is where they put most of the wogs' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81). In *Loaded's* northern suburbs the politics of migration that Tsiolkas describes in his essay are evident. Ari explains the history of the northern suburbs in terms of the migration of the 'wogs' within these boundaries.

In the beginning we clogged the inner city and the industrial suburbs of the West. But as wogs earned some money and decided to move further afield, into the bush-land-torn-down-to-become-housing-estates, more and more concrete and brick-veneer palaces began to be sprinkled across the northern suburbs. Wogs were not welcome to move South of the river...so instead the Greeks and Italians, the Chinese and the Arabs, began to build their homes on the flatlands on the wrong side of the river (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81).

In opposition to the Australezo of the East, in the North ethnicity 'will entrap you' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81) because 'the North isn't Melbourne, it isn't Australia' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81).

Little Arabic communities, little Greek communities, little Turkish and Italian communities. The northern suburbs are full of the smells of goat's cheese and olive oil, hashish and bitter coffee (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81).

But the northern suburbs with their 'ugly little brick boxes' are also the confines of the working class; 'where the labouring and unemployed classes roam circular streets; the roads to nowhere' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 81). The North is the area that Ari grew up in and the area in which he is destined to spend the rest of his life; 'and therefore I hate the North, I view it with as much contempt as possible' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 82).

I put on a scowl and roam the North in my dirtiest clothes,
looking and feeling unwashed. I am the wog boy as nightmare
(Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 82).

Ari believes that the 'old ways, old cultures, old rituals...no longer can or should mean anything' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 82). He does not want a part of the culture he grew up in. This resentment is epitomised in his disdain for the rituals of the weddings of 'cousins I have not seen in years' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83).

In the red glow of the plastic reception centre, the wog is
revealed as a conman, a trickster or a self-deluded fool.
Thousands of dollars spent recreating the motions of old rituals
that have no place or meaning in this city at the bottom of the
world (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83).

In stark juxtaposition, the youth 'get stoned, smoke joint after joint, so that we can go back inside, sit at the table, raise a toast without the bile exploding from our mouths', whereas the 'balding fat men' throw 'notes onto the bandstand' and the 'large women' jingle their 'gold bands and bracelets as they move around the circle of the dance' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83). But perhaps more defiantly,

on my knees, with hate written on my face, I spit out bile,
semen, saliva, phlegm, I spit it all out. I spit out the future that
has been prepared for me (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 84).

Ari does not go into much detail about the southern and western suburbs. Suffice to say they are the places where he feels at home. The South is a community of rejects; 'the wog rejects from the North, the East, the West. Flushed out towards the sea' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 132).

Artists and junkies and faggots and whores, the sons and daughters no longer talked about, no longer admitted into the arms of the family (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 132).

They live in 'flats and apartments smelling of mildew and mice' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 132). However, St Kilda Beach, 'which for decades has been the home of junkies and whores, refugees and migrants' is now 'being redone, remodelled, restructured into a playground for the sophisticated professional' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 131). The West is the opposite of the East. Ari describes an urban myth

that the places where the wealthy reside in my city were built in the East because it meant that when driving home the rich would not get the sun in their eyes (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 142).

Because of this, 'the squinting and the sunstroke fall to the poor scum in the western suburbs' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 142).

The representation of the different suburbs in *Loaded* converges to highlight the disparity of contemporary Australian society, and in so doing, to problematise the notion of Australian national identity. This identity supposes a shared sense of community, but the disparity evident in the text questions the very community that this ideal relies upon. Indeed, Ari rejects all notions of the urban myth about working class solidarity, a myth which suggests that 'we may be poor, may be

treated like scum, but we stick together, we are a community' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 142). Instead, he insists that

the arrival of the ethnics put paid to that myth in Australia. In the working-class suburbs of the West where communal solidarity is meant to flourish, the skip sticks with the skip, the wog with the wog, the gook with the gook, and the abo with the abo. Solidarity, like love, is a crock of shit (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 142).

Ari says that the notion of an ethnic community based upon class is even more problematic because 'beyond all else the peasant requires land to feel secure' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 143).

Possession of land, of more and more land, is the means by which an uneducated, diasporic community enables itself to rise in the New World and kick their brothers and sisters in the face, in the gut, in the balls, in the cunt (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 143).

And for this reason, Ari argues 'wogs turn on each other. They have migrated to escape the chaos of history and they know, they know fundamentally, property is war' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 143).

Syson argues that *Loaded* 'is a working class novel written in an age when it is not possible to write one' (1996, pg. 22).

The narrative is crying out for the comfort of an old-fashioned ('Street Fighting Man') literary politics of class conflict in which Ari's alienation can be explained, soothed and channelled into class action (Syson, 1996, pg. 22).

He insists, however, that this is not possible, nor is it needed, arguing that 'Tsiolkas is too contemporary a writer to resort to such a simple and schematic frame' (Syson, 1996, pg. 22). At the end of the novel Ari is not moved to class

action. He does not want to change the hypocritical nature of the 'rich wogs on the hill', or the position of the 'uneducated-long-haired-bleach-blonde-no-money-wog', except to 'shoot them all. Bang. Bang' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 43). Likewise, though he wants to escape from the North, 'the spaces in which Greek, Italians, Vietnamese, and the rest of the one hundred and ninety other races of scum, refoos and thieves' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 82), all he can do is fantasise about screaming 'to the fucking peasants on the sidewalk, Hey you, you aren't in Europe, aren't in Asia, aren't in Africa anymore. Face it motherfuckers' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 82). Instead, Syson argues Ari is left in a 'depressing stasis, staring at the ceiling and unwittingly waiting for the great leap forward' (1996, pg. 22).

The idea of a tension between disgust, sympathy and familiarity is one of the significant aspects of Grunge (Syson, 1996, pg. 24). It is this alienation that Ari shares with the community of contemporary characters from Grunge literature, and as Syson argues, with the history of a literature of cultural dispassion that exists within the milieu of Australian literature (1996, pg. 23).¹¹ Earlier I indicated that Syson believes that Tsiolkas 'wants us to prove Ari wrong' (1997, pg. 87). This notion is reinforced by Kirby, who suggests that 'ultimately the text is sympathetic but not complicit with Ari's stance, positing other alternatives' (1998, pg. 11). This is evident, for example, through the characters of Stephen, Ariadne and the Turkish taxi driver. Stephen, the beautiful Marxist 'bangs his fist on the

¹¹ Syson argues that

if we want pictures of depressed and frightened young Australian men expressing their alienation through excessive alcohol consumption, acts of brutality, sexual conquests and active contempt for authority, we need look no further than Eric Lambert's war novel, *Twenty thousand thieves*. Then there's Elizabeth Harrower's

table and asserts that Marxism is not dead' (Kirby, 1998, pg. 11); 'it's the only theory that makes sense of alienation...I'm never going to stop resisting capitalism' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 62). Ariadne, 'clothed in silk and expensive shirts and skirts' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 74), argues for 'a new left of young people, artists, deviants, troublemakers from all the communities' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 71). And the Turkish taxi driver tells Johnny and Ari 'you should care more about it [the Polytechnic], those people struggled' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 86). While the text posits these alternatives, it does not offer them as a solution to Ari's experience of dislocation. Kakmi (2000, pg. 298) suggests that this is the greatest achievement of *Loaded*, that it 'fearlessly tackle[s] the recent upheavals in Australian history, without presuming to offer platitudinous solutions'.

In her essay *Shit creek: abjection and subjectivity in Australian 'Grunge' fiction* (1998) Brooks argues that Grunge has challenged traditional representations of suburbia within Australian literature. She argues that Grunge insists upon a renegotiation of urban space through which the writers can 'explore different identities created from experiences and relationships between characters and their situations and surrounds' (Brooks, 1998, pg. 87). This idea is evident in the cross-suburban migration that Ari undertakes in the text, whereby the liminal nature of the space Ari occupies within the suburbs, corresponds to his marginal identity. Brooks suggests that Grunge writing establishes identities for those on the social and cultural margins, 'identities that contest and ultimately renegotiate the borders

The watchtower, David Ireland's *The unknown industrial prisoner*, Helen Garner's *Monkey grip* (1996, pg. 23).

of city space', and that most analysis of Grunge literature has neglected to explore this relationship (1998, pg. 87).

In Chapter One, I touched upon the idea of Ari occupying 'underground' spaces such as alleyways and toilets, and the way this was characteristic of the dirty realist style of *Loaded*. The use of spaces characteristic of dirty realism, renegotiates the spaces and places commonly identified and conveys an off-the-map reading of the margins of these spaces and places. Brooks maintains that, by 'opening up liminal spaces that disturb cognitive maps' characters in Grunge literature also challenge borders within society (1998, pg. 87). This idea is important in Ari's evaluation of his place in society, and the notion of this journey as a metaphor will inform my discussion in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: The voice of Christos Tsiolkas

McMahon suggests that, metaphorically, *Loaded* describes the journey of the road less travelled. She argues that this idea is 'made explicit' (2000, pg. 173) by the lyrics of a Greek song incorporated into the text; 'the road has its own story, the story written by youth' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 85). Ari has a specific memory attached to this song, that highlights his literal and symbolic divergence from the life of his parents.

My father picks me up and drags me to the centre of the lounge,
pulls me towards him. In adolescent rebellion I pull away,
needing to pull away, not wanting to. He shrugs, and picks up
my mother instead and dances with her (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 85).

The metaphor of the road less travelled will become the central theme of Chapter Three. I intend to use it in two important ways; for a reading of *Loaded* and as a means of defining the voice of Tsiolkas. *Loaded* diverges from traditional forms of nationalism. The text paves the way for a reading of contemporary Australian society from the margins and explores key determinates of these margins in the process. Suburbia plays an important role within this endeavour by providing a medium through which the interlacing of class and ethnicity in Australian society can be explored. Both class and ethnicity represent for Ari factors that will determine his interpellation into the system within which the people around him live. Ari, on the other hand, does not want to live within this normative system and seeks his own path. Thus, he denies his class and his ethnicity. What remains for Ari is his sexuality, the only determinate of his identity that he believes he can control. The representation of this sexuality, and its divergence from the norm, is

the central consideration of this chapter, both for a reading of the text, and for an understanding of the voice of Tsiolkas.

Kirby insists that it is impossible to think about the suburbs 'without thinking about the economic conditions that created and maintain them' (1998, pg. 1). However, she argues that *Loaded* diverges from this common theme by dealing with gender as well as class antagonism. Kirby insists that, within Grunge, the alienation of labour precipitates the masculine subjects 'into ever more violent and brutal acts of self-maintenance' (1998, pg. 1). Thus, characters 'oppressed by the cycle of modern life' (Kirby, 1998, pg. 1), aim to find escape within the very boundaries that control them. This idea is central in *Loaded*, for Ari denies his class and his ethnicity in order to also deny the future he sees destined for him. He insists that

there is no New World. There is no future available to the refo and the wog any more. Nowhere to run, like the song. They don't need factories any more, they have elegantly-sculptured machines powered by microchips. They don't need labour any more. Not now, now that they have the Internet. Nowhere to run, like the song (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 144).

Likewise, Ari does not accept the 'very cherished urban myth' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 144) that 'every new generation has it better than the one that came before' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 144). All that Ari lives by is the knowledge that he is 'ruled by...[his] cock' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 149).

I see someone I think is attractive and I want to be with them, taste them, put my cock in their face or up their arse or through their cunt. I can't imagine any of this ever changing. Marriage is out (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 149).

As discussed in Chapter Two, Ari's journey maps the characteristics of the eastern, northern, southern and western suburbs of Melbourne according to a consistent criteria; 'the ethnicity and class situations of the inhabitants' and the 'particular hatred it inspires in him' (McMahon, 2000, pg. 170). Ari's portrayal of each suburb conveys his denouncement of the 'accepted map of social organization and conformism and attempts to carve out an alternative space within and against the city' (McMahon, 2000, pg. 169). This alternative space highlights the last and most important criteria in Ari's journey, the specific pleasures that can be derived from each suburb (McMahon, 2000, pg. 170). For instance, in the East, 'the whitest part of my city' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 41), Ari was 'picked up by a guy once, he lived in this shit-hole suburb somewhere, Burwood or Balwyn or Bentleigh or Boronia' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 41). Ari hates the North 'but the North is temptation' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83).

It is in the North were I search for the body, the smile, the skin that will ease the strain on my groin, that will take away the burning compulsion and terror of my desire. In the North I find myself, find shadows that recall my shadow (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83).

Ari roams the North so that 'I can come face to face with the future that is being prepared for me' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83) – a future where it is he who is waiting with 'his dick...out' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83). It is in the South where 'the smell of the sea tickles my nose' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 131), where the 'whore dominates' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 132) and

the sea breeze of the southern ocean, the breeze that comes from the end of the world, makes me strong, draws me to the whores and faggots and junkies. I am a sailor and a whore. I will be 'til the end of the world (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 133).

And it is in the West ‘the familiar landscape in which I have spent all my life’ (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 149), where Ari has sex with a ‘tall guy with shaved hair, wearing a black T-shirt and leather pants’ (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 138) and ‘some old Yugoslav guy with a big gut and grey hair’ in the toilet (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 139).

I put my hands inside the old man’s shirt and rub his chest; thick and heavy tits, fat hairy gut. He tries to kiss me again and I move away and wank myself, close to coming. I ejaculate all over the faggot on his knees, come falling on his cheeks, his lips and his torso (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 139).

It is in the West, at the end of the novel, where Ari concludes that ‘I am here, living my life. I’m not going to fall in love, I’m not going to change a thing’ (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 150). Kirby insists that Ari’s experience of the suburbs through his sexuality is both a literal and cultural deviation and ‘in his nomadic crossings of Melbourne, from East to West and North and South, he finds poignancy, beauty and excitement’ (1998, pg. 12).

McMahon suggests that Ari is compelled to travel the city and transform it into a grid of his own personal space, and she argues that he does this through dance (2000, pg. 166).

Ari is a choreographer in this metaphorical scene as he creates patterns of experience across his city. Yet he too, makes this choreographic metaphor explicit by dance. So many of the disparate locations he occupies or visits – his own and others’ homes in the suburbs, city clubs and parties, the streets themselves – are sites of dancing (McMahon, 2000, pg. 167).

Ari’s journey is a process of working out and through sexual relationships and friendships, his ‘walk and dance is about the articulation and bodily experience of

homosexuality' (McMahon, 2000, pg. 168). The stylistic of dirty realism within the text contributes to the journey, in that Ari is enacting what McMahon describes as a 'ritual trance' (2000, pg. 169), through the use of drugs. Indeed, the only relief Ari has from the cycle of normative lifestyles and the boredom this creates is drugs, which 'keep me quiet. And relatively content' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 146). Drugs give Ari the chance to live the life he wants to live, they allow him to transcend the boundaries created by society. For instance,

on speed I dance with my body and my soul. In this white powder they've distilled the essence of the Greek word kefi. Kefi is the urge to dance, to be with good friends, to open your arms to life. Straight, I can approximate kefi, but I am always conscious of fighting off boredom. Speed doesn't let you get bored (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 23).

High on speed, Ari is able to produce an alternative map of the suburbs and city of Melbourne, 'and of sexuality, specifically male homosexuality' (McMahon, 2000, pg. 169). *Loaded* deploys the literal and metaphorical understanding of dance 'to describe the choreography of sexual relationships' (McMahon, 2000, pg. 173).

I take the bus from the city and roam the ovals and parks and river banks, searching out fat Arab men and chain-smoking Greek men who stand with their dicks out at urinals, cigarette in their mouths, waiting for you. A defiant dance, for I am a wog myself, and I have to force myself to my knees before another wog. I have to force my desire to take precedence over my honour (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 83).

While Ari actively participates in homosexual acts in public, he renegotiates these spaces as his own. His sexuality is not public, or at least not public knowledge. Ari's true sexuality is something that he keeps as a ritual, as much as drug taking is part of a ritual, that allows him to transcend the restrictions of society and his family. In stark contrast, Ari's best friend Johnny ritualises his sexuality in a

public way, through cross dressing, and in so doing, transforms himself into Toula. Ari insists that Johnny's 'dresses and skirts are also battle fatigues. He can't remain silent. Silence would kill Johnny' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 146).

Johnny is a sexual mentor for Ari. Ari explains that he 'figured out that my friend was a faggot' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 98) while he and Johnny were still teenagers.

He dragged me off to revivals of Bette Davies movies, I went with him to *Pretty in Pink* four times so he could wallow in Molly's presence. The fourth time he turned to me at the end of the movie, grabbed my hand and told me he wanted to be just like Molly (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 98).

Johnny affirms Ari's quest for sexual identity; 'I was trying to figure out what I was myself, attacked at night by dreams and fantasies which disturbed me', but 'Johnny knew, he smelt the come on me, smelt where my desires were taking me' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 98). Indeed, Ari explains that Johnny 'tells me that I'm a faggot and that I'm a faggot for life' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 146). The first night that Johnny appeared to him as Toula, Ari groaned 'Johnny, Johnny that's too much' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 99). But Johnny replied

- I'm disappointed in you, Ari...Never, ever, ever think anything is too much. He sat beside me on his bed. This life is shit, man, uncompromising....haven't we always said, he continued, that what we hate about wogs is that they are gutless? They don't take chances, they don't upset the status quo (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 99-100).

Ari, however, cannot 'upset the status quo'. He is caught by the bind of society's beliefs, evident in his realisation of the shame of Johnny's father.

I waved goodbye to Johnny's father, wanting to say something to wipe away the man's shame, staying silent because there was

nothing I could say, and walked out into the twilight, Johnny on my arm (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 100).

Above all, Ari will not fully recognise or acknowledge Johnny's travestism; 'Johnny is Johnny to me, he can be Toula to everybody else' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 97).

Ari's personal dilemma is that he wants to be a 'man' in the sense that he does not want to be feminised by his homosexuality. 'I'm a man, I say, in a deep drawl. And I take it up the arse' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 46). Tsiolkas insists that Ari 'thinks it will force him into a position where he will be in danger, whether that danger comes from his family, whether that danger comes from his peers, or from the community' (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48). This affects his relationship with George, a man he falls in love with during the course of the night.

- You just have to tell the truth once...Just once, Ari, once you tell them the truth, one argument, no matter how brutal and you never have to lie again.
- You're wrong... Truth they use against you...you never tell a wog anything important about yourself (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 129).

After their argument, George tells Ari to 'find yourself a good Greek girl', and to 'stop messing around with us poofers. Go home to Mummy and Daddy, go where you fucking belong' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 130). Ari doesn't tell George that he loves him, nor does he tell him that

to be free, for me as a Greek, is to be a whore. To resist the path of marriage and convention, of tradition and obedience, I must make myself an object of derision and contempt. Only then am I able to move outside the suffocating obligations of family and loyalty (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 132).

Ari's freedom is best captured in the section titled *Five transcendental moments*, 'five moments in which my desire, my sexuality, my dreams were not clouded by confusion, ambiguity and regret. By which I learned the five commandments of freedom' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 100). Ari expresses these moments as follows:

One. Walking out of the house with Johnny, dressed as Toula....Two. My father screaming at me, you failure, you animal, and me soaking up the contempt....Three. Watching Marlon Brando take off his T-shirt in *A street car named Desire*....Four. The accumulated media crap in my head....Thou shalt despise all humanity, regardless of race, creed or religion. Five. An old man, effeminate and frail, fearfully offers me fifty dollars if I let him suck my cock. I let him do it for free. Next night I go to my first gay bar and pick up a handsome young man with a good car and a good job. I only agree to fuck him if he gives me fifty bucks....Thou shalt never steal from the poor or the old but fuck the rich for all it's worth (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 100-101).

This section articulates the key thematic endeavours both of *Loaded* and the core of Tsiolkas's writing. These key themes include a questioning of ethnicity, of nationalism and of sexuality. These themes reflect a pattern that has emerged in Tsiolkas's writing; for instance, in his short stories *Saturn's return*, *Bypassing Benella* and *Jessica Lange in 'Frances'*, in his second novel *The Jesus man* and his autobiography *Jump Cuts*. Kakmi contends that the key concern of Tsiolkas's writing is to 'bring both the gay and the migrant out of their respective ghettos and into mainstream discourse' and to show 'a picture of the ethnic Australia that...[isn't] always flattering, and...more disparate and fractured than we had dared to think' (2000, pg. 296).

While Tsiolkas denies the category of Grunge writer and insists that he is 'a little sick of being consistently identified as a 'poofteer' writer – as if I write with my

dick not with my brain' (Tsiolkas, 1999, pg. 146) – he cannot escape prominent themes in his writing, such as his sexuality, nor his ethnicity and his relationship to Australian nationalism. Ari insists that 'words such as faggot, wog, poofter, gay, Greek, Australian...[are] just excuses. Just stories, they don't mean shit' (Tsiolkas, 1995, pg. 141). And these are the categories that perpetuate the margins within contemporary Australian society that I have argued Tsiolkas deconstructs.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that Christos Tsiolkas's first novel, *Loaded*, makes a significant contribution to Australian literature despite the negative critical context within which it is situated. The Grunge stylistics of the text, the way it has been marketed, the time at which it was published and the fact that it is written by a writer who is not established within this milieu, all compromised its position when it came to be reviewed and discussed. Indeed, these factors marginalised the text even more than the marginal issues with which it deals. Hence, *Loaded* has not received the serious commentary it deserves. However, it is an important text that demonstrates the cultural dispassion that Davis maintains is essential in representing contemporary Australian society (1997, pg. 131).

I have articulated the key thematic endeavours of *Loaded* and, in so doing, have explored the writing of Tsiolkas and defined his voice. These themes include questions of ethnicity, questions of nationalism and questions of sexuality. In order to explore these themes, Tsiolkas has represented the suburbs of Melbourne as a means of constructing a corporeal and liminal space, which he uses to portray the underground of Australian society. The protagonist, Ari, moves systematically through the suburbs and on his journey questions of ethnicity and nationalism arise cognisant with Tsiolkas's (1997a) notion of the politics of migration across local borders. On another level, questions of sexuality arise through his deviations into the 'underground'. The themes that Tsiolkas deals with, and the way in which he deals with them, convey the disparate nature of Australian society that Jurgensen argues should be an essential component of Australian writing. In this

context, Jurgensen maintains that multicultural literature should exhibit a transformational imagination that reflects interactions between various cultures (1991, pg. 29). This imagination is obvious in *Loaded* and forms the core of other texts that Tsiolkas has written.

Loaded reflects the nuances of contemporary Australian society. It goes beyond Turner's (1993) notion of a 'National fiction' in its description of these nuances. Ari's journey reflects the interactions between various cultures by representing the suburbs as made up of disparate microcosms. These microcosms represent identities that are on the margins of Australian society, either through ethnicity or sexuality. Through recognising the disparity and marginality of these identities, Ari is undermining the homogenous nature of Australian nationalism. This is essential in Tsiolkas's belief that Grunge literature reflects the contemporary local experience in Australia (in Robinson, 1995, pg. 48). And above all, I believe that it affirms Tsiolkas's place within the mainstream of Australian literature, even if he does go 'against the current'.

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