

# Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: The Question of Hospitality in Christos Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe*

JESSICA BROOKS  
University of Sydney

Christos Tsiolkas's novel *Dead Europe* (2005) paints a bleak picture of the exploitative nature of global capitalism and its dehumanising effects. As Andrew McCann has noted, the novel explores the way the global spread of capital has produced a 'discrepant' or *subaltern* cosmopolitanism—a cosmopolitanism of the politically marginalised and economically oppressed. In doing so Tsiolkas confronts the failures of leftist politics and the inadequacy of the standard liberal discourses of multicultural tolerance and cosmopolitanism<sup>1</sup> in combatting or even acknowledging real suffering. Despite 'promises . . . [of] a future in which the logic of the free market will bring justice, freedom, liberation and whitegoods for all,' we face a reality of widespread economic exploitation, inequality, intolerance and exclusion (Tsiolkas, *On Tolerance* 21). As a result the novel raises many ethical questions regarding the global mistreatment of the migrant and asylum seeker. Read through the lens of Derrida's later political interrogations, we find that *Dead Europe* considers the ethics of hospitality—what it means to welcome and receive the 'other'—and explores the economic violence and racial and religious intolerance that is so often behind violations of hospitality. Key to the novel's exploration of these issues is Tsiolkas's use of spectral metaphors such as that of the dead Jewish boy, Elias, who acts as a symbol for the cultural, political, and economic forces that lead to violations of hospitality. Elias's haunting of the protagonist, Isaac, symbolically demonstrates the effect of such ethical questions upon the individual subject.

Cultural theorists acknowledge that the global interconnectedness espoused by proponents of contemporary cosmopolitanism is completely overridden by economic inequalities and systems of power (Hall and Werbner 346). This is starkly captured in Tsiolkas's *Dead Europe*, which, as a number of critics have argued, confronts the hypocrisy apparent in liberal ideals of multicultural tolerance and 'liberatory cosmopolitanism' (McCann 140). In his PEN essay 'On the Concept Tolerance' Tsiolkas makes his position clear:

[g]lobalization celebrates diversity and tolerance . . . when it comes to dealing with the most manifest development of this globalization, the displacement and homelessness of millions of people around the globe, we are then told that we must secure our borders. ('On the Concept Tolerance' 5–6)

Key to the novel's exploration of this hypocrisy is the juxtaposition created between subaltern or what McCann refers to as 'discrepant' cosmopolitanism and the privileged cosmopolitanism afforded the protagonist. The novel's engagement with ideas of cosmopolitan identity is evident from the outset as it describes the literal and symbolic journey of photographer, Isaac, who in a period of midlife crisis travels to Europe in search of something 'more.' As a tourist Isaac embodies a prototypical example of the modern 'cosmopolitan.' Isaac's Greek heritage and Jewish name associate him with the two greatest merchant cosmopolitan societies of the historical world, while as an artist/intellectual he belongs to one of the originally cosmopolitan professions (a Greek exhibition of his photography is what brings him to Europe). But this is no ordinary tour of Europe, and as Tsiolkas himself admits in an interview in *Australian Literary Studies*, he wanted to write about those things 'outside the borders of that tourist world' (Padmore 449). Isaac's journey takes him through the fringes of Europe exploring the marginalised communities of sex







(223). Isaac's theoretical accountability is further dramatised through the novel's symbolic use of vampirism which, as McCann suggests, represents the dehumanised 'egocentric subjectivity incited by consumer culture . . . [and] the monstrosity of a mobile, cosmopolitan class that is now at liberty to rove the planet and prey (as sex tourists among other things) upon those from the wrong side of the West's borders' ('Pornographic Logic' 38). In a moment of apparent clarity Isaac complains he is 'sick to the soul, of wanting, desiring greatness, of never being satisfied. More, I was always wanting more. I was always hungry for more' (332). As he witnesses, learns about and reflects on the suffering of others, he himself suffers physically and in turn begins violently to inflict this suffering on others.

The difficulty in negotiating an ethical subjectivity within the exploitative environment of global capitalism becomes increasingly apparent as the various moral dilemmas of the novel are inscribed upon the body of Isaac. Isaac's steady mental and physical decline, which begins the moment he sets foot in Europe, is largely attributed to his haunting by the phantom of a Jewish boy, Elias, who was murdered by Isaac's anti-Semitic Greek ancestors who had given him asylum in exchange for gold. As a microcosmic expression of the larger themes of the novel, the tale is also one of economic and sexual exploitation. It is the boy's rape by his female captor and his fathering of her child (Isaac's mother), Reveka, that cements his haunting place in their familial history. Arguably the most significant spectre to haunt *Dead Europe*, the 'ghoulish boy' as Papastergiadis suggests, 'provides the metaphoric references for the broader narrative of moral and political corruption' (160). As Isaac witnesses and participates in the inhumanities of capitalist Europe, Elias takes an increasingly firm grip upon his psyche (396). All of the novel's spectral metaphors culminate in the figure of Elias, whose Judaism associates him with displacement and migrancy and the figure of the Wandering Jew who is cursed to remain forever homeless, and it is the boy's dehumanising experience of violent anti-Semitism that ironically turns him into a vengeful, vampiric demon. (Vampires have long been discussed as a figurative anti-Semitic representation of the Jew, and the Wandering Jew story is thought to have provided the origin for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.) Elias becomes not only a symbol of ethnic hatred, violated hospitality and sexual exploitation, but also of money<sup>4</sup> and capitalism itself, implicitly suggesting the intrinsic relationship between the economic, cultural and political which so problematises contemporary issues of migration. The wider implications of the relationship between xenophobia and economic struggle are again illustrated through Elias's Judaism. The unique place of Jews in the history of global capitalism has been well documented and as Jerry Muller suggests, '[f]or a variety of intellectuals in Europe, Jews served as a kind of metaphor-turned-flesh for capitalism' (15). Muller notes that modern forms of anti-Semitism often had less to do with religious difference than with a resentment arising from an exaggerated perception of Jewish economic success (6). As Jean Paul Sartre had long since argued, our encounter with the 'other' under capitalism is necessarily marked by the often violent and aggressive struggle for limited economic resources which leads us to dehumanise the other (*Critique* 131–33). Consequently, Elias's presence in the novel becomes symbolic of a premodern history of prejudice, xenophobia and religious enmity that is arguably perpetuated rather than effaced by the modern economic system of global capitalism. The spectral presence of Elias as symbol of capitalism, ethnic xenophobia and violated hospitality haunts Isaac and the present eschatology of capitalist democracy, demanding recognition and a more effective response to subaltern 'others' whose suffering it ignores (Derrida, *Spectres* 112). Isaac's violence while in the grip of Elias is the kind of resistance Papastergiadis finds is also present in dehumanised representations of the subaltern 'zombie' who 'has the potential for demonic and unpredictable reaction against the machine' (164).

Through Elias, Tsiolkas is able to infer the unspoken forces behind the practice of conditional hospitality: money and racism. In post-9/11 Europe, the spectre of anti-semitism rears its head











