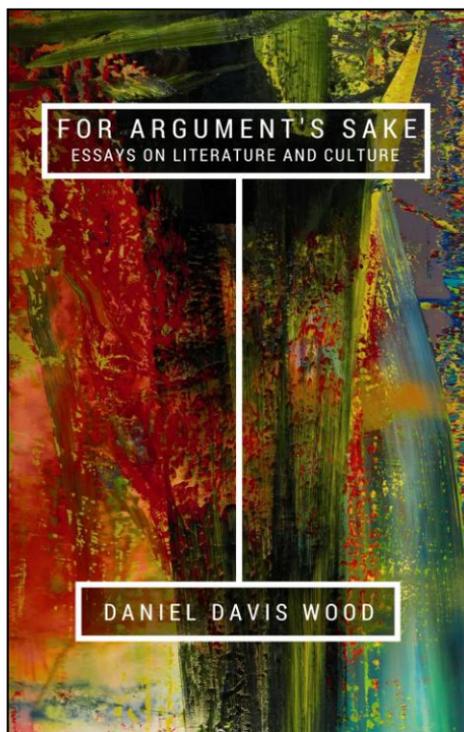


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 391-394.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



www.danieldaviswood.com

CULTURAL CRINGE

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (16 August 2010).

DEAR WORLD: ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE, I'D LIKE to apologise for Christos Tsiolkas.

In my experience, one of the most irritating things about simply being Australian is that, whenever you make any initial attempt to participate in any sort of cultural enterprise alongside anyone from virtually anywhere in the Western world, you must first thwart and dismantle the preconceptions of parochialism attributed to Australians in general before you can expect others to take you seriously. The global assumption — reinforced by the colourful behaviour of so many Australians abroad — is that the nation itself lacks a sense of cultural sophistication and that, as a result, the people of Australia do not recognise cultural sophistication when they encounter it either within their own country or elsewhere. The assumption isn't true, of course, or at least not on any essentialist basis, but it is widespread and resilient, and its persistence has long been a source of grief for those who champion Australian culture: *How can we best prove to the world that Australian culture is worthy of serious attention and respect?* In Australia itself, the assumption is understood historically to have fuelled a phenomenon known as the cultural cringe: a reflexive awareness amongst Australian artists and audiences that Australian art of any type is inherently inferior to the art of others — that, indeed, Australian artists have something to prove in the first place.

Since the 1980s, though, Australia has seen a concerted effort to shrug off the cultural cringe, an effort advanced by figures from across the political spectrum with right-wing nationalists and left-wing republicans sitting side-by-side. The result has been essentially an inversion of the inferiority complex that once held sway. Now, Australians in general are more likely to take such excessive pride in Australian culture as to proclaim it superior to alternative cultures the world over: *Australian culture isn't just good on its own terms; it's the greatest culture in the world and everything else is weak by comparison.* Unfortunately, as might be expected by anyone not so deeply invested in the perceived value of Australian culture but perhaps invested in its

value relative to other cultures and their artistic output, this attitude only reinforces the preconceptions of parochialism that persist abroad. As this reinforcement in turn adds grist to the mill of Australian cultural supremacists, we enter into a vicious cycle of undue acclaim for even the most mediocre output of Australian culture and the equally undue denigration of even the most impressive output of cultures elsewhere. For those Australians who seek to engage with and appreciate cultural enterprises of a global variety rather than simply dismissing them, the obnoxious actions of one's own countrymen abroad are what kindle the parochialism globally attributed to Australians in general — and, as such, they are the root cause of the irritation that comes with simply being Australian.

Well, the beat goes on as Christos Tsiolkas, one of Australia's most juvenile novelists, cannot simply publish his latest novel abroad without making a series of characteristically sensationalist remarks with the self-satisfied ignorance so typical of Antipodean triumphalism (see Higgins). Worse than that: from Gerald Murnane to David Musgrave to Amanda Lohrey, Delia Falconer, and Brian Castro, there are any number of Australian novelists whose truly innovative work is inevitably the first casualty of outbursts like these which strip meaningful literary discourse of its nuances and taint it with half-baked reductive generalities. And worse still: *Meanjin* and *Overland*, two of Australia's most prominent periodicals, have tweeted support for our man as he takes a jab at those too-cerebral, out-of-touch Europeans (see Anon.), and all this, of course, without explanation and without justification. To put it in the only sort of language that the author himself would likely understand, this is the literary equivalent of letting out an almighty fart in a crowded elevator with a dozen floors still to go before the doors rush open:

He said: "In the English-language novel there is a fear of writing about the real world. I don't read a lot of contemporary fiction that's true to the world. I read to have my assumptions challenged, to be scared, to cry. That novel isn't being written at the moment." (Higgins)

Clearly, though, the assumptions he wants to have challenged are his assumptions about the world at large rather than his assumptions about the capabilities and responsibilities of fiction — as if it was somehow the purpose of fiction to challenge one's assumptions about the world at large! — and therein lies the problem. Will any of our literary periodicals attempt to point that out and to undertake the difficult intellectual labour of unravelling its implications? Don't hold your breath. This isn't about genuine cultural engagement; it's about enlarging the profile of Australian culture by the most expedient means: by unashamedly ripping into the cultures of others. Do that, however, and you diminish the odds of the best contributors to your own culture receiving the recognition that is their due. That, more than anything else, is truly worth cringing over.

Works Cited

- Anon. 'RT Go Christos!' *Meanjin Quarterly* (15 August 2010): <<http://twitter.com/Meanjin/status/21266684943>>. Web.
- . 'Go Christos!' *Overland Journal* (15 August 2010): <<http://twitter.com/OverlandJournal/status/21264860919>>. Web.
- Higgins, Charlotte. 'Slap Author Christos Tsiolkas Takes Swipe at 'Dry' European Fiction.' *The Guardian* (15 August 2010): <<http://guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/15/christos-tsiolkas-slap-author>>. Web.
- Tsiolkas, Christos. *The Slap*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2008. Print.