

‘Eating gull since Friday’ — Estuary Grotesque, Seaside Noir

By Len Platt (2016)

As you approach Clintonville from Margate town centre today it still feels as if you are entering a different world and there are queer signs everywhere.... On the kerb a slightly soiled Stanley knife blade winks in the autumn sun. It’s obviously had one very careful owner, for in an area where hypodermic syringes are discarded like fag ends you don’t get too close to the blood.

David Seabrook, *All the Devils Are Here* (2003)

Barbara was willing to do everything he asked, including water sports and fist-fucking.

Anthony Frewin, *Scopian Rising* (1999)

It is sometimes argued that current versions of Literature often appear more local in orientation than they once did, especially by comparison to the ‘postmodernism’ of the 1970s and 80s. In a 2014 essay entitled ‘Worlded Localisms: Cosmopolitics Writ Large’, for example, David James points to the work of such writers as Colson Whitehead, Teju Cole, Junot Díaz, Taiye Selasi, Zadie Smith and Jhumpa Lahiri in terms of a new kind of novel. Here ‘geographical and characterological coordinates seem deliberately compressed; ... diegetic reach is often confined, contingent upon quotidian circumstances; and ... vision may appear contracted, if not provincialized — put simply, [this is a] fiction of local life.’ Similarly David Marcus, drawn upon by James, describes what he sees as part of a broader ‘paradigm shift’.

Whereas writers like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, key figures in classical postmodernism, emphasize the global, 'the unseen networks of government agents and advertising executives that limited our everyday lives', the new group — which includes, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Zadie Smith — has 'tried to map out more local, more empowering connections: to mine the present for those rare, fragile moments of contact.'¹

The relationship between postmodern cultures and this new development is far from singular or unproblematic though. The new localism is obliged to take position in relation to its pasts, often dramatizing the 'tension between the local and the global'. Following Dominic Head, David James writes of 'productive frictions and dialogues' arising from what Head calls 'the interaction between national and transnational impulses'. Head identifies the parallels emerging between critical and creative discourses as the 'fraught global-local dialectic in theory' which also 'pinpoints the current crossroads of the novel'.² Even Philip Tew, highly sceptical of any criticism which seeks to align a writer like Smith with postmodern or postcolonial cultures, accepts that at some level these writers must be products of what Bauman has called the 'widespread aversion to grand social designs, the loss of interest in absolute truths' and 'the privatization of redemptive urges', consequences in some ways of 'that *abolition* of strangerhood which has been attained through raising it to the *status of a universal human condition*'.³

The general consensus is that things have moved on then, in the way of centres and margins. But as a new localism distinguishes itself from what we can now imagine as historical postmodernism, that cultural past remains in play, sometimes in strange ways not entirely consistent with the more sedate 'tensions' and 'frictions' typical of the writers referred to above. At least one contemporary art novel, *Behindlings*, the second part of

Nicola Barker's Gateway trilogy, positions the global at the heart of the local as a bizarre, defamiliarising joke. Built on the half-size, but still monumental, proportions of something like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Behindlings* revolves around another setting in the Thames Estuary, Canvey Island. This is imagined as a place where celebrity has descended on an animistic homeless wanderer with 'environmental interests'. As the novel opens, he is embarking on a circular island walk, a walk which he repeats over and over feeding on gulls, roadkill and dispatched sick herons along the way. Fan culture and its paranoia are represented by the ramshackle group that follow his every move, the 'behindings' whose activities somehow amount to the proportions of 'an institution'. The novel is built around rumours of secret plans and conspiracies, not global but local versions reformulated in terms of the complicity of the Canvey Island press with an equally diminutive local sweet manufacturer. Together they somehow form 'a kind of Secret-Service', one which operates at the centre of a noirist plot of unfathomable complexity. Here it is not reality itself that is reproduced as simulacra as in standard postmodernist culture, but rather the individual person in the homely shape of Ted, the local estate agent who is 'not the original picture anymore. I have become a duplication of the real me. I am a *copy*'.⁴

This ornate, literary fantasy, self-consciously textualised as a text searching for a full stop, roots itself in geographical and cultural specificity precisely at the points at which it evokes postmodern culture and the global.⁵ It is, broadly, a comic translation of the postmodern imagining itself as a return to the local. The question of how far such new formulations in prestige literatures remain any less traditionally 'metropolitan', or mystificatory, than what went before, however — not just in the 1970s and 80s but at earlier times — remains open.

Estuary chic

In the case of marginal states and the Thames Gateway, the new representational dimensions were laid out in the early nineties, linked to an earlier seaside noir developed by such figures as Graham Greene and Patrick Hamilton and significantly proselytised by populist architecture writer Ian Nairn and, later, former food writer turned cultural critic and broadcaster, Jonathan Meades. In a series of television films and newspaper articles, ‘the product of an obsessive preoccupation with places, mainly British places’, Meades set out to rethink ‘architecture’ in terms of the ‘rich oddness of what we take for granted’. Here places like Canvey and Sheerness, the latter with its ‘stupendous’ boatsheds ‘up to 350 yards long’, became part of a ‘thrillingly cheerless’ landscape — the north Kent coast with its ‘marshes, mud...pylons, silos, hoppers, bulky mills, ships that tower over the earth, horizontal bands of smoke’, what Nairn might have described as ‘industrial melodrama’.⁶ Alongside the topophobic extremities of the World Wide Web castigating the island for being ‘worse than an Afghan ordure pit’, this kind of elevation, although highly sensitive to the dystopic element, nevertheless insisted contrariwise on investing seaside and estuary places with an ambiguous kind of exotic beauty.⁷ Sheppey might be ‘a landscape of despair’, but it also possessed ‘utilitarian grandeur’, ‘structural rawness’ and in a telling phrase, ‘unwitting sublimity....The conjunction of environmentally insouciant buildings and machines with flatlands and wetlands is immensely potent.’⁸

Sheppey and places like it offered a version of aesthetic value aligned with the prestige of classical romanticism and not always in ironic ways. Like Wordsworth’s mountains, this mix of industrial detritus and seascape existed outside the fantasies of history, selfhood or agency. It had no ‘centre’, the new beauty just somehow was. Such dimensions migrated directly to novels. In Barker’s *Behindlings*, the protagonist Wesley is

simultaneously ‘jolted’, ‘upper-cut’ and ‘highjacked’ by the ‘huge brash edifice’ that is ‘the Oil Refinery’.

Wesley stood straight on the wall, shoulders dragged back by his rucksack, appraising it thoughtfully. He was bewitched by its humming and its clatter — all that convoluted metal glittering back at him, so ...*imperturbably*. All that *industry*.

His glance lowered. He admired the muted swathe of seabirds on the remaining patches of mudflat, paddling contentedly — winter-throated and dozy — between him and this ... this kinky, tortile, flexular ... this ... this big, sexy, silver thing.

This swirling, Byzantine monstrosity. This *beauty*.⁹

At the same time as they were figuring so largely in the discourses of social care and welfare, old declining ports and resorts were also making significant public appearances in quite different circumstances, not only in relatively new media but in older cultural forms like the novel. Barker could hardly be said to be characteristic, her work is far too idiosyncratic for that, too much indulgent in the bizarre. But if *Behindlings* was anything to go by, marginal places appeared to be achieving that privileged kind of currency where exoticism merged into eroticism. Seaside and port, quite literally, were becoming sexy again.

David Seabrook’s *All the Devils are Here* — a hybrid book, part travelogue, part murder mystery, part literary history — was a further and perhaps more reliable indicator of the currency ports and resorts now had in metropolitan art cultures. It was a Granta publication, a clever and sophisticated exploitation of Seabrook’s fascination with narrative mystery and the oddness of coincidence engineered through a heady mix of archive, legend, gossip and innuendo. Detective-like, the Seabrook persona moves through a sequence of narratological knots. Wrong-footed by red herrings (‘I keep meaning to tell you; *he’s not the*

one'), he pulls at threads, making obscure connections between the shabby chic of *Carry-On* films; 1960s London gangland; Robin Maugham (nephew to William Somerset) and the tail-end of a retired gay culture living out the last seedy days of its life in seaside Deal.¹⁰ Elsewhere the book seeks out strange parallels and juxtapositions between contemporary Rochester and Chatham; Dickens's last and unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; Victorian orientalism and the mad parricide Richard Dadd who also painted fairy landscapes and, most famously, cats with wild staring eyes. Elsewhere still John Buchan's spy thrillers become implicated with political extremism, alongside Cynthia Curzon, Sir Oswald Moseley, William Joyce and the creator of Billy Bunter, Frank Richards.

This was 'new writing' with a vengeance, stylish and full of flair. Iain Sinclair described it as 'a white noise of puns, submerged quotations, barks of self-intoxicated laughter' and deemed its author to be 'the real thing'. In the surest sign of a developing genre's contemporaneity, sharp distinctions were drawn up distinguishing between 'true' coastal noir and its pastiche. Sinclair identified figures like Billy Childish — singer, painter, writer, filmmaker, the performer of 'a hundred records, all bad' — and 'Dame Tracey Emin' in terms of a seaside chic that 'peddle[d] bad memories of the Estuary, Chatham and Margate for the shocked delight of bored metropolitans (who never have to go there).' By contrast, Seabrook was genuine, a writer who 'lived it', thriving 'on the way he's been spurned and ignored' just like the places themselves. His early death in a flat in Canterbury, some said 'under suspicious circumstances', only seemed to confirm things in this respect.¹¹

But Seabrook's insiderly status is hardly straight forward or unproblematic. The exposure of a dark seaside underbelly — wartime fascist culture rampant in the Broadstairs aristocracy; scandals hanging over Deal's 'celebrity residents'; madness and murder in Chatham — comes across as intimate work, the product of personal contact, research,

interviews, time spent out in the field, mapping the territory and challenging rights of way where access is prohibited — literally in the case of Seabrook's visit to Naldera, the seaside residence of 'George Nathaniel Curzon, first Marquess Curzon of Kedleston in Derbyshire, and the last Viceroy of India under Queen Victoria'. The result is a reconfiguration that not only mounts a challenge to fantasies of seaside respectability but also redraws traditional centre/margin borders in favour of a much more fluid, overlapping kind of geography.

At the same time the journalist/investigator working the inside track is inevitably outsiderly too, a position adopted with particular relish in *All the Devils* where Seabrook's trips from Canterbury to coast and Medway town are precisely that, always journeys to and from somewhere else. Here *All the Devils* joins up with the detective novel. Seabrook's highly wrought version of Baedeker reconvened by Elmore James comes complete with trademark aphorism — and just to emphasise, this aspect of style is not uniform to *All the Devils*. It surfaces chiefly in relation to the representation of locations plagued by economic and social problems. The short journey from Rochester and its kitsch heritage industry to the post-1980s squalor of Chatham becomes a 'shift from retro to necro'; the only question to ask of the latter, like Sheerness once a Royal port and dockyard, is 'Can this corpse still crawl?' By Rochester station 'scores of prostitutes, some of them very young indeed, hassle locals hurrying home....they still take it in all the usual places (including the arm)' and so on.¹²

In this respect the return to the local is highly-mediated manufacture. This is return as artifice as much as anything else — which raises questions about the broader strategy of positioning the contemporary local in relation to prestige cultures usually located elsewhere, whether traditionally 'high' or contemporaneously 'cool'. The characteristic seems typical of new seaside and estuary literature. Just as Meades's industrial seascape is

interpolated with Wordsworth's 'naked crag' and perilous ridge', so Barker's *The Behindlings* imagines a Canvey Island following in the wake of prototype cultural material from the 'age of enlightenment' — Arthur Young's late-eighteenth tours, John Wesley's diaries and the legends of Dick Turpin.¹³ *All the Devils* also trades especially freely in this respect, but to what purpose? Is this simply the leftovers from a postmodern culture that typically blurred distinctions between the 'high' and 'low' in a radical dislocation of cultural value?

The opening of *All the Devils* suggests the play of other kinds of literary geographics. It begins with a visit to a Victorian sea shelter, the kind 'built for eternity', on the front at Margate. This is the place where in 1922 T. S. Eliot sat and worked on the unfinished manuscript of *The Waste Land*. That text is an iconic expression of modernist angst and has a particular relation with noir fiction. Both speak to cultural disorder, political anarchy and social despair — the dark underbelly of the civilised world — thus the appearance of Martin Rowson's noirist comic-book pastiche of *The Waste Land* in 1990.¹⁴ Expecting the worse, Seabrook finds nothing to commemorate the literary history behind this place, or so he thinks. He misreads a sign on an adjacent building as 'TOILETS/ It takes a few minutes for the penny to drop. I rub my eyes and look again: T. S. Eliot/Lest we forget'. Against a backdrop of 'joyless amusement arcades' where 'facial scars' are ubiquitous, Seabrook finds himself reassembling the circumstances that might have produced this hugely influential poem, a poem that itself can 'connect nothing with nothing' on Margate sands.¹⁵ Here he makes the alignment between a post-war text that 'appeared to have been blown to bits and put together at high speed' and the more subtle devastations of a contemporary kind constituting a different but still recognisable 'front'.

There are the hunched sedated souls lingering in cafés and souped-up milk bars.

There are groups of squabbling Albanians outside. There are the young men of the

front, this front, all bare arms, body art and fast working furious faces, faces that ought to be spouting water from the walls of Gothic buildings, but they're here and speak, spraying spittle.¹⁶

This correspondence with classical modernism, the writing to and overlapping with Eliot, hardly amounts to a blurring of traditional cultural borders and checkpoints. This is more like maintenance work, a reminder of the noirist inheritance of Eliot's poem for sure, but one which implicates echoes of the conservative agendas behind something like 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1921), and even of the disastrously anti-Semitic appeal to 'breeding' and 'the Anglo-Saxon heart' in *After Strange Goods* (1934).¹⁷ In this respect Seabrook's visit to Eliot's Margate is not transgressive at all. It is a return, not just to hard-boiled chic but also to the blasted 'remnants' where the barbarous Sweeney and Wyndham Lewis's 'massman' still hold sway.

Seaside noir, the new real? — *Weirdo* (2012)

In a place like his, for a person like me, you need some kind of insurance policy, and that's where I got mine. It wasn't just the sad old men who hung around the toilets who were interested in my pretty young arse, you see. There were a lot more who were very respectable, very prominent upstanding members of our little seaside community. I made sure that every time they thought they were fucking me, I was fucking them right back.

Cathy Unsworth, *Weirdo*

The new fashion in seaside and estuary places transferred readily to more traditional noir film and fiction. In Anthony Frewin's relatively uncomplicated thriller *Scorpion Rising* (1999), Margate featured as 'a half-asleep, dead-and-alive, cheap seaside resort' and 'that poxy

seaside resort'.¹⁸ The seaside town became the background for entrapment, murder and usurpation without making much impact on things otherwise. One of Margate's deserted factories, the ominous-sounding 'Prescott and Forster's Thanet Dye Works', rendered the broken industrial as a stage for assassination, but beyond a limited range of markers of that kind the narrative could just have well been set in almost any place with little or nothing in the way of gain or loss.

Sometimes, however, the noirist shift to seaside location has been more disruptive and inventive, involving a self-conscious updating of the older form. This was notably the case with Cathi Unsworth's 2012 novel *Weirdo*. Unsworth is part of a specifically revisionist trend that has been associated with writers like Dreda Say Mitchell, Joolz Denby and the American authors Megan Abbott, Gillian Flynn and Christina Faust, all of whom engage with the problematics of a genre traditionally dominated by men representing masculinity in very particular ways. In the case of Unsworth, the potentially counter-cultural challenge combines easily with a specific commitment to noir as contemporary fashion. In this sense trend setting in her work figures as the more or less natural counterpart to iconoclasm and modernist angst.

Notwithstanding the retro elements, Unsworth cuts a highly contemporary figure. For all the marginal outsiderliness, from many perspectives she occupies a centrist position. Described by *Metro* magazine as being at the cultural edge and 'ignored by the mainstream', this is an author who has 'carved out an idiosyncratic niche writing unsettling, subcultural British noir'.¹⁹ Nonetheless Unsworth features prominently in the commercial and commodified production of youth cultures. She worked for some years as a journalist and then as editor involved with such publications as *Sounds*, *Bizarre*, *Melody Maker*, *Mojo*,

Uncut, Volume and Deadline. She is also a contributor to more 'grown-up' contemporary arts programmes, like BBC2's *The Culture Show*.

Her novels likewise occupy liminal and sometime contradictory spaces in this respect. They are both sensationalist and exploitative, insiderly workings of noir conventions at their most commercial; yet at the same time they make strong appeals to the local and youth culture, elements which seem to combine in strange ways in the cultural geographics implied in the narrative structure of *Weirdo*. Here the singular 'hard boiled' I-narrator of traditional noir is displaced by a double narrative. The first replays an original brutal and seemingly ritualistic murder as it happened in 1984; the second is a re-examination that takes place in 2003 after new genetic evidence casts doubt upon the original conviction which saw a teenaged girl imprisoned for life 'in a grim stately home for the insane'. In this way there are at least two moderns established in *Weirdo*. The first is a 1980s reality characterised by a now outmoded seaside youth culture of Goths, punks and bikers; the second is more contemporary, a new times visitation where an ex-London Metropolitan copper — 'Ladbroke Grove, born and bred' — arrives at the fictional seaside town of Ernemouth on the Norfolk coast, believing he has taken 'a detour from the real world somewhere between here and the M11, [and] got lost in a folk tale instead.'²⁰ Supported by the London money of a high-status lawyer who wants the Woodrow case reopened and the assistance of a London-based journalist returned to her home town to care for a dying mother, the narrative function of this moderated version of the traditional noir detective is typically noir — to interrogate the town and the authorities that run it.

Unlike more conventional noir where moral securities are undone without much hope of renewal however, this novel has much more in the way of closure, an end point that puts a stop to one brutal reign of terror at least and restores the Goths, bikers,

transgendered Celticists and white witches who form the wider constituency of Unsworth's 'weirdoes' to the humanity they have always possessed. The exposé of the crimes that falsely convicted Corrine Woodrow — 'the Wicked Witch of the East, the tabloids called her' — refloats some version of moral order.²¹ In all these respects the so-called margins, both of place and sub culture, are wrenched into new positions, but none of this can be achieved without the mediating authority, resources and sleek know-how of a London partnering both temporally and geographically inscribed as the now.

In some ways, then, borders and margins familiar in cultural geographics are confirmed in *Weirdo*; in other ways though they seem interfered with — an ambiguity that surfaces everywhere in the novel. If at one level shabby Ernemouth is an anachronistic throwback requiring liberation from a benevolent metropolis, elsewhere its seaside youth culture is elevated; intimately known, sympathised with, psychologised and linked to the dissenting climate of nineteenth-century machine breaking — thus the cultural archaeology that so insistently references Captain Swing in the book. Elsewhere still the town and its dark secrets are removed altogether from such edges to become a microcosm of contemporary metropolitan life. As the journalist Francesca puts it, taking on local police corruption may not be 'taking a stand against the most powerful men on the planet ... but it's the same principle. Something went wrong here and we have the chance to put it right.'²²

Analogous ambiguities enter almost every aspect and every level of the novel. At times, for example, *Weirdo* appears like a version of insiderly stark realism with all the standard stereotypes:

The flats back on to what was designed as a garden and kiddies' play park, back in the 60s when the estate went up, but had now mutated into a communal dump. A

muddy scrub, pitted with discarded fridges, car bumpers and the skeletal remains of a burnt out scooter. Not for the first time, Rivett marvelled at how these vermin could afford the appliances they discarded so thoughtlessly on their week cheques from the DHSS. Then the sound of a dog barking, rivalled in ferocity only by the accompanying yowls of a female voice, diverted his attention back to the first-floor flat.²³

Elsewhere the alienating nightmare of vicious brutalising and conspiracy involving every human madness from paedophilia to black magic reads more like a Hammer horror movie — indeed the tradition is evoked directly when the villagers finally turn against one of their own monsters: ‘A legion of townsfolk behind her, bearing torches and whooping with laughter, curses crackling on their lips like fire. Preparing the scaffold for Gina. A man made of smoke and soot behind them all, bigger than the sky’.²⁴ At times conflicting impulses like these operate across a single passage. How, for example, does one engage with a passage like the following? Does it indulge us in dangerous transgression or invite us to take offence? Does it represent insider cool or moral outrage?

In the foreground, the woman stared out from between the straps that held the ball-gag in place. Her flesh was white and plump in all the right places. Black leather binds criss-crossing soft flesh, trussing her into unnaturally submissive positions. Raises red welts on her the globes of her arse, a cat-o-nine tails hanging for the bedstead, limp from a post-coital scourging. Her black eyes were fixed on the camera with an unblinking gaze of hatred.²⁵

None of this uncertainty poses any threat to the novel tradition; it should barely raise eyebrows. At one level, we understand that the cultural geographics of insiderly and outsiderly positions are relational anyway and change with perspective. There are well

known critical traditions that have historically put ambiguity at the centre of literary aesthetics. *Weirdo*, however, is a novel where the local is substantially signified by 15 year old girls being sold by their mothers to biker friends and offered up to perform in pornographic movies. Here local women themselves figure as prostitutes and forge relations with international hard drug rings; incest and child abuse is run of the mill; young people routinely sell themselves under piers to get money to play on slot machines; they fantasise about the powers they might exercise as adepts of black-magic masters like Aleister Crowley. From this perspective the question of how far and in what senses the novel is intended to operate as *a la mode* entertainment, or in some other way, is not without interest. If we are being entertained, where do the more immediately recognisable images of 'low life' come into the deal?

Overweight women pushing prams, trailing overweight children with cartons of fries in their hands. Teenage boys in slouchy jeans and hooded tops, hawking gobs of spit straightforward onto the ground. Teenage girls in short skirts and bare legs shouting to each other and laughing.²⁶

Can it really be that these more formal versions of seaside noir have ambitions outside the commodified sensational? Is it the intention that this kind of representation should stand in some ways for the 'new real', or would that be having things all ways?

Wide Open (1989)

The direct application of seaside noir to Sheppey was bound to be made at some point, not least because of the associations so often made between the island and crime and criminality. Allegedly, it was the tucked-away resort of choice for London criminals before Spain opened up more glamorous borders in the 1960s. My London neighbour, Bernard Tamplin, was once

the joint owner of the caravan park Muswell Manor — he sold the park after the storms of 1986. He tells the tale of a lazy Sunday afternoon in 1965 when a smartly-dressed man arrived at his clubhouse in a chauffeur-driven Jaguar. Surprised to see so much style on his doorstep, Bernard asked his barman if he knew the identity of this figure. He was assured in hushed tones that the well-groomed visitor was none other than Charlie Richardson, notorious leader of a South London ‘torture gang’. His specialty was pinning victims to the floor with six-inch nails and removing their toes with bolt cutters. On this occasion, Bernard recalls, Richardson was very much off-duty and excessively well mannered. He finished his drink, having left one behind the bar for the barman in a show of generosity executed with restrained style, and left. Like all big criminals from Moriarty onwards, he apparently had a gift for the sinister-polite.

Such stories are legion in relation to Sheppey and have created a particular mystique which still figures in popular fiction about island life in the 1960s, as well as more prestigious academic literatures. Associated connections with the penal code only strengthen things in this respect and go back even further, to the late-eighteenth century. Prison hulks once floated on the Medway and Swale, a connection between Sheppey and punishment that very much continues today. One of the island’s most prominent landmarks, visible from virtually everywhere on Sheppey and beyond the Swale, is the large group of buildings outside Leysdown that form a ‘HMI prison cluster’. Comprised of three prisons built for adult males — Elmley (a section C prison ‘for unsentenced and sentenced adult men’ and ‘unsentenced young offenders’; Standford Hill (a section D open prison for prisoners serving sentences of a maximum of five years and being eligible for parole in a maximum of two years) and Swaleside. The latter is a category B prison — half its inmates are serving life sentences. Its prisoners have included such figures as the hopeless would-be Russian spy, Michael Bettany;

Liam White, the professional criminal convicted for the road-rage murder of Stephen Cameron in 1996 and Michael ‘Skull Cracker’ Wheatley, the bank robber notorious for pistol whipping his victims, as well as for escaping from Sheppey to continue a sequence of further bank robberies in May 2014.

Nicola Barker’s Sheppey novel *Wide Open* is dominated by the island prisons — ‘the distant crust of mismatching eczema perched on the crest of a preponderant flat landscape’, described elsewhere in terms of the rotting teeth of a diseased body: ‘The prison was like a set of dirty teeth, and the land around it like a bad mouth, and the sky above it was like the grey face of the person who owned the teeth and the mouth and didn’t care a damn about either of them’.²⁷ It positions Sheppey with the literary traditions outlined above. This novel, too, combines a particular poetics of place with strangeness of person and narrative to build an integrated aesthetic of the weird that owes something to noir and has won growing recognition for Barker over the last decade or so.²⁸ Set very precisely along the road outside Leysdown leading to Shellness on the easterly tip of Sheppey, this first part of a trilogy operates the same aestheticised mixture of topophilia and topophobia where the island figures as a strange, flat and ‘empty place’, ‘like the surface of the moon’, the ‘garden of England’ displaced by a desolate ‘wilderness’, a ‘moonscape’.²⁹

Against this dark, alienating background, Barker’s extraordinary cast of characters live out their weird and disordered lives. Lily, the teenaged daughter in a farming family that rears boars, is brash, wild and disturbed. Even her own mother describes her as ‘a bad lot’. She is ‘ill-formed’ and, like almost all the characters in this novel, vulnerable to the world in quite visceral ways. Despite being ‘rough’ — ‘she had no soft edges’:

She'd led a sheltered life. She'd been born premature and had lain helpless and bleating in an incubator for many months before they could even begin to consider taking her home.

And there were several further complications; with her kidneys, parts of her stomach, her womb. Things hadn't entirely finished forming. Nothing was right. She was incomplete. *So fragile.*

And the bleeding. Her blood would not clot. Not properly. Even now, mid conversation, her nose might start running, her teeth might inadvertently nick her lower lip, her nail might catch her cheek, her arm. Blood would trickle and drip. Then gush, then flood. It wouldn't stop. There were never any limits with Lily. There was never any sense of restraint or delicacy.³⁰

The passage establishes some of the markers standard in Barker's version of the grotesque — weakness combined with endurance, illness and deformity with visitation and, curiously, excess. A cartoon-like grotesque, Lily worships the buried remains of 'the Head', a freak piglet, with a huge head and tiny body that died shortly after birth, part of the animism that renders her a 'savage' for whom almost all social exchange leads to confrontation and anger. This radical, if not unrecognisable, version of teenage angst, an 'essential, a delectable product of this godforsaken place', is a vital force in many ways, but a wildly destructive one which leaves Lily dismembering chickens, leaving blood and gore all over the house for her mother to find and clean up, much as a teenager might litter cast-off clothes in a less disturbed and defamiliarising version of family life.³¹

Luke the pornographer is a new neighbour, come to Sheppey to find a void — 'No stress. No people. Just emptiness. That's all. The sea was brown. It wasn't even the sea, really. It was the channel'. His first island encounter is with Lily who chastises him for being

naked, on the 'public highway', just outside the prescribed boundaries of a nudist beach. She wanders into his empty house uninvited and examines his 'portfolios', or 'dirty pictures', as she puts it—'Now you've returned you can set me straight on this. Is that a pick axe up her arse or' Thereafter Luke becomes, in Lily's terms, the 'pervert' or 'sicko' who 'stinks of fish'.³²

These are among the opening exchanges of a novel populated everywhere with the equally fantastic and grotesque — Ronnie, for instance, a savant and little lost boy figure who reads only certain kinds of lettering and eats only with his left hand, although he is not left handed. Like other characters in this novel, Ronnie is a self harmer. He cuts away at his wrists and legs, sets fire to his own head and eventually kills himself by swallowing a pat of frozen butter. Jim is also called Ronny, at Ronny 1's insistence. A 'skinny baldie runt of a man' who, without his hat resembled 'a big prawn', Ronnie 2 sprays weed killer around council estates for a living. Dressed in 'a white-skin suit' and helmet; 'he resembled an alien. Or an astronaut.' He has dark secrets revealed only partially, dripped out with painful slowness as the novel develops.³³

Sara, Lily's mother, has an affair with Luke. A powerful figure in many ways, filling in for her always absent husband, she runs the farm and tries to support her wayward daughter, although she finds her hard to like. When a dangerous boar escapes, it is Sara who dispatches the creature, and appears with a fork lift truck to remove the carcass from the beach. In order to show Luke who she is, 'plainly and frankly', she takes pictures of her body parts, of 'her armpit, her nose, her knees, her in-grown toenail ... her breasts...her anus, her clitoris.' The novel is partly built around a postmodern pathology which renders the body as separated, often diseased and dysfunctional. Like the landscape, the body is other, alienated from personal identity, sometimes in comic ways. When Sara sees the pictures of herself,

she has difficulty recognising things: ‘ “Oh God. That’s my arse. I mean my anus. I never saw it before. It’s not quite like I expected. It’s smaller.” She turned the picture the other way up. “I think I prefer it sideways. It seems more cheerful” .’³⁴

Above all though, it is the narratology of *Wide Open* that is so immediately strange and so evocative of a contemporary literary aesthetics where closed endings and ‘metanarrative’ are so deeply mistrusted. Why is Ronnie 2 so drawn to Ronnie 1? Why should they share names? What is the link between both these figures and a man, Nathan, who works in the lost property office at Baker Street tube? Who is Monica, the woman who appears to write to Ronnie 2 when he is in prison? Why is Ronnie 2 in prison? And so on, and so on. Epistemological instability dominates the book, with the answers to these and many other questions withheld across many pages of the novel. In parallel with strangeness of place and character, narrative meaning is labyrinthine and mysterious. The novel does reach some kind of end stop, but, again, like other elements in the story, explanations here are ugly, brutal and partial, built around abuse, paedophilia and a relatively new *topoi* which has taken on powerful resonance in contemporary popular culture, the murder of a child.

As ‘serious’ literature, *Wide Open* operates as a unique creative object and strains and struggles to reach that status, but it takes clear position in a wider contemporary cultural practice. Here associations which poetise place and person in the conservative ways of the heritage industry can no longer be taken as serious currency. For the cultural metropolis, literatures of place have moved on to a new localised level and they must operate in new ways — in the case of a novel like *Wide Open* through a radical aesthetic inversion where place and identity converge not around familiarity but around strangeness, emptiness and degradation. The ‘alien’ England conjured up in Barker’s work, as in many contemporary cultural products, may be ostensibly embraced and rendered ‘understandable’, in this sense

representing a continuation of the liberal traditions often taken to characterise the art novel. Barker herself has encouraged such views. In a *Guardian* interview given in 2000 she commented on how her 'weird' characters, to her 'seem normal'. The article goes on: 'And as for the maddeningly unexplained events that kick off her plots...they're always there for a reason. Barker says: "I like to write something that people have to struggle to understand; something to get over a prejudice." ' ³⁵ At the same time, this novel is knowing about the cultures of otherness and distinction with which it engages, as when Lily confronts Luke with a version of his own outsiderliness:

Lily appraised him, coolly. 'I've lived here a long while. See those over there?'

She pointed at a cluster of houses small purpose-built chalets. He nodded.

'That's where you people go.'

'Pardon?'

'The hamlet. It's fenced off, see? That's where all the temporary people go.

Nobody permanent has anything to do with them. We think they're weird.'

He glanced over at the chalets as though he hadn't truly noticed them before.

'Perhaps they think you're weird.'³⁶

But for all this familiar territory, there remains something disturbing about Barker's work, not least because however clever it is, it also echoes the very much less intelligent abuse and prejudices, standard in internet traffic about Sheppey and routinised in everyday views held about this place and other 'marginal' places like it. This is why islanders have had difficulties with the book. Whatever distinctions one may want to make, *Wide Open* is a confirmation in this respect. As a 'serious' novel, it gives special authority to those positions that imagine Sheppey in terms of the strange, criminal, degenerate dispositions of another England, often converging around the paedophilic. In a ugly demonstration of what is taken

to be a standard feature of contemporary aesthetic, here the high-status literary world of the fashionable metropolis finds itself sharing territory with the low journalism of something like the *Sun* or the *Star*, as well as the metropolitan distortions of another time.

Notes

¹ David James, 'Worlded Localisms: Cosmopolitics Writ Small' in Len Platt and Sara Upstone (eds) *Postmodern Literature and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 47-8; David Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity', *Dissent* (Spring 2013). <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/posthysterics-zadie-smith-and-the-fiction-of-austerity> (1 November 2013).

See also Ramón Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative', *Narrative*, (21 January 2013).

² See James, 'Worlded Localisms', 48; Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 147.

³ Zygmunt Bauman. *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 97-8. See Philip Tew, 'After the First Decade: Revisiting the Work of Zadie Smith' in Platt and Upstone, *Postmodernism and Race*, 247-63 .

⁴ Nicola Barker, *Behindlings* (2002; London: Fourth Estate, 2011), 420; 418.

⁵ Barker, *Behindlings*, 534.

⁶ Meades, *Museum Without Walls* , xiii, 262

⁷ *The Knowhere Guide*, <http://www.knowhere.co.uk/Sheerness/Kent/South-East-England/info/worstthings> (August 15, 2014).

⁸ Meades, *Museum Without Walls*, 260-1.

⁹ Nicola Barker, *Behindlings* (2002; London: Fourth Estate, 2011), 163.

¹⁰ David Seabrook, *All the Devils Are Here*, loc. 814.

¹¹ Iain Sinclair, 'The Coat in Question', *The London Review of Books*, 25/6, 20 March 2003, 31-33. The reference to Childish's bad' records is attributed to Seabrook without reference.

¹² Seabrook, *All the Devils Are Here*, locs 208, 226, 214.

¹³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 10.

¹⁴ See Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1-4. See also Martin Rowson, *The Waste Land* (1990; London Seagull Books, 2012).

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' (1922) in *Selected Poems* (1954; London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 62. For the correspondence reference see T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', *The Dial* LXXV (1923), 480–3; reprinted in Seon Givens (ed.), *James Joyce: Two Decades of Criticism* (1948; New York Vanguard Press, 1963).

¹⁶ Seabrook, *All the Devils Are Here*, loc, 39.

¹⁷ Eliot appeals here to Virginia 'as a place where, post Civil War, there are good chances for the establishment of a native culture [...] You are further away from New York; you have been less industrialized and less invaded by foreign races.' He continues by explaining that 'the population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely to become fiercely self-conscious or adulterate; reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable'. T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: a primer of modern heresy*— The Page-Barbour lectures at the University of Virginia (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 57, 19-20.

¹⁸ Anthony Frewin, *Scorpius Rising* (1999; Harpenden: No Exit Press, e-book edition, 2011), locs 183, 513.

¹⁹ <http://metro.co.uk/2012/07/10/weirdo-cathi-unsworth-book-review-3372756> (4 November 2014)

²⁰ Cathi Unwin, *Weirdo* (London: Serpent's Tail, e-book edition, 2012), locs 93, 69, 59.

²¹ Unwin, *Weirdo*, loc. 50.

²² *Weirdo*, loc. 2144.

²³ *Weirdo*, loc. 3286.

²⁴ *Weirdo*, loc. 3583.

²⁵ *Weirdo*, loc. 3068.

²⁶ *Weirdo*, loc. 451.

²⁷ Nicola Barker, *Wide Open* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 43; 222; 130. Hereafter referred as *WO*.

²⁸ The third book of the Gateway series, *Darkmans* (2007), is set in Ashford.

²⁹ *WO*, 33.

³⁰ *WO*, 50.

³¹ *WO*, 68.

³² *WO*, 19-21; 22; 54; 96.

³³ *WO*, 72; 6; 27.

³⁴ *WO*, 179; 195.

³⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jun/10/fiction.johncunningham> (4 November 2014)

³⁶ *WO*, 19.