‘Tuning into my “awareness continuum”’: self-monitored attention from *The Yips* to *H(A)PPY*

(Alice Bennett, Liverpool Hope University)

The Yips (the sporting ailment) is rooted in contagious self-awareness. *The Yips* (the novel) finds its characters concerned with a mode of attention that turns a self-monitoring gaze on the self. This paper begins by arguing for the significance of the word ‘focus’ as a marker of this specific mode of self-monitoring attention in *The Yips*: the vicar, Sheila, prays, ‘Dear Father, please help me to be still, to be more focused’; the tattooist, Valentine, tells herself, ‘Be calm. *Calm*. Renunciation. Equanimity. Focus. Renunciation. Equanimity . . . *Urgh*!’ My argument follows a thread of interest in the tracking and monitoring of attention that runs through Barker’s work from *The Yips* to *H(A)PPY.* In contemporary culture more broadly, self-monitored attention forms part of a preoccupation with certain kinds of instrumentalised, productive states of concentration. From commodified practices of mindfulness to wearable devices that track and nudge the user into more self-conscious actions, the word ‘focus’ marks out the territory of a particular kind of modern attention. Jonathan Crary has theorised this form of disciplined attention as a marker of modern capitalism that can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Theorists of technology, such as Natasha Dow Schüll, have understood this self-regulation to be associated with technological innovation which includes wearable devices, biomonitoring and the notion of the quantified self. While there are some clear connections between Barker’s work and these ideas about self-monitoring and the administered or quantified self (from Stuart Ransom ‘tuning in’ to his ‘awareness continuum’ in *The Yips* to the ‘tuning fork’ in the heart in *H(A)PPY*), this paper argues ultimately for some specifically literary concerns that arise from the depiction of self-monitoring. Like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, a novel that plays a minor but significant part in *The Yips*, Barker’s work also draws on the discourses of self-help and sports psychology to frame the novel itself as an object that anarchically disrupts the demands for monitored, disciplined, or productively focused attention.

‘The sure caress of this silence’: minimalism and expansiveness in *Small Holdings*

(Andrew Biswell, Manchester Metropolitan University)

Nicola Barker’s second novel, *Small Holdings*, is often overlooked in critical assessments of her writing. A resonant and subversive comedy of embarrassment, the book is set in a public park in North London, yet there is a strong implication that this fable about an urban English garden might be comprehensible as a crafty political allegory. I approach *Small Holdings* with particular reference to questions of genre and style. Despite its outward appearance of minimalistic narrative and formal realism, a close reading of the novel shows it to be interested in undertaking more complex kinds of metaphorical work. In particular, Barker’s playful examination of truisms, proverbs and platitudes within the text allows the book to engage in a process of poetic and/or philosophical expansiveness, which might be thought to be at odds with the formal boundaries the novel sets itself. Recent critical work on Barker by Ben Masters (2017) gives rise to further reflections on the multiple functions of ‘voice’ and ‘voices’ in *Small Holdings*. Attending to the unwinding of the plot and the novel’s deployment of a style which aims at the transcendent, I argue that it places a double emphasis on the difficulties and possibilities of interpersonal connection.

The final section of my paper looks at Barker’s style alongside the work of two other contemporary novelists: *The Restraint of Beasts* by Magnus Mills (a novel which is also concerned with the experience of manual work), and *Arlington Park* by Rachel Cusk, which represents contemporary existence in terms of a flat and ‘monochromatic atmosphere’ (Schoene, 2010). As Cusk is a follower of Barker who reviewed *Small Holdings* for *The Times* on publication in 1995, I end by suggesting that Barker’s fictional style has opened up new possibilities which Cusk and others have followed.

Approaches to place with Nicola Barker

(Tim Brennan, Manchester School of Art)

This exploration will engage Nicola in a Socratic dialogue about her characters’ approaches to manoeuvring through the built environment. The aim is to shed light on the author’s consideration of place and environment, and how this is modelled in her novels. The exploration will take the form of an ambulant interview that will be transmitted into the conference space via a live GoPro link. The walk would be around 20 minutes in duration and would begin/depart and end/arrive in the delegates’ space. Questions will surface through a series of quotations selected from *Behindlings*. brought to bear on our short journey and offered up for critical inspection. Each quotation will exist as a lens through which Nicola might unpack a range of potential aspects in her oeuvre. Examples of these could include: the tension between the fabric of imagination and factual information, the construction of atmosphere to model space, the collision of quotidian observation with that of *apriori* perceptions of place, or the traversing of discreet chronotopic and spatial zones within the author’s work.

The pursuit of happiness in *H(A)PPY*

(Eleanor Byrne, Manchester Metropolitan University)

In Nicola Barker’s most recent novel *H(A)PPY*, she mines a rich seam current in contemporary dystopian fiction in setting her novel in a post-apocalyptic dystopia where all desire and feeling have as far as possible been tuned out of the human experience in the pursuit of a perfectly neutralised ‘neuter’ human/digital hybrid. The posthuman experience in H(A)PPY is not unlike a collage of scenes from Charlie

Brooker's *Black Mirror* series as Barker turns to the dystopian genre to portray a future reality in which subjects exist in 'The System', measured by a Graph, and monitored by a sensor where words are coded in a range of 'alarm' colours to further tune out dangerous feelings. The social injunction to be happy, to live in the moment, to regulate and neutralise strong or negative emotions, satirises the contemporary cultural wave of well-being and mindfulness, asking what the socio-political function of happiness is.

Whilst this model of the excavation of all private space and the replacement of it with digitalised surveillance is not 'original', the narrative of protagonist Mira A who can't help but disrupt the smooth flow of neutral feelings required by the system, certainly is. Partially attached to the digital archive of all that has gone before Mira A suffers a kind of archive fever as she mines the archives almost randomly and plugs into the melancholic music of Augustine Barrios, and via his story to the violent history of the colonisation of Paraguay. The story of Empire and its genocidal effects, its production of 'social mutism' for the indigenous Guarani population, appears both entirely random but also renders visible the weaponisation of language and its role as a prison, a filter and producer of the real. In doing so she creates a narrative that auto-deconstructs as language mines itself to understand its role in the creation of an impasse or aporia at the heart of meaning.

This paper will discuss the ways in which Barker's work might usefully be read alongside a wave of work in this area by feminist scholars. In Sara Ahmed's 2010 book *The Promise of Happiness* she invites us to recognise the role of affect in the disciplining and scaffolding of our personal political and social orders by focusing on the speech act 'I just want you to be happy', uttered to those who are not pursuing the conventional or ideologically 'correct' objects for their happiness that the wider neo-liberal regime demands. Ahmed is among a group of feminist academics whose recent work explores the use of 'bad feelings', melancholia and grief, such as Judith Halberstam's recent work on the queer art of failure, and Sally Munt's on Shame. For Ahmed, the affect alien – who feels out of sync with the dominant discourse of normative happiness – converts 'good' feelings into bad: kills the joy. However, the killjoy bears hope: as outcast and rejected they pursue the space of a radically different kind of being that has nothing to do with happiness. Unhappiness comes to signal the limits of the promise of happiness and is the spur to create new life worlds for those 'unhappy' affect aliens. Barker's H(A)PPY also speaks to Berlant's *Cruel Optimism,* which outlines the ways in which emotional investments in a 'good life' operate as unsustainable fantasies that harm those who invest in them. Her analysis of the present suggests we should understand it through a model of 'crisis ordinariness', a kind of impasse, the 'stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might clarify things'. Mira A's 'absorptive awareness' produces a liberatory trajectory out of 'The System' as she puts together the fragmented history of Empire that breaks language itself and opens narrative up to multiple possible genres, genre breaking and disruptions that speak otherwise.

‘Flying in formation. But madly’: spatial discombobulations in *Five Miles from Outer Hope*

(Ginette Carpenter, Manchester Metropolitan University)

This paper reads Nicola Barker’s *Five Miles From Outer Hope* (*FMFOH*) via the lens of feminist geographer Gillian Rose’s conception of ‘paradoxical space’ (1993). It argues that Barker’s millennial coming-of-age novel disrupts conventional conceptions of place, body and text to open up opportunities for interruption, re-articulation and remapping. Rose insists upon a way of thinking about spatial configurations that refuses conventional distinctions between mind and body, real and metaphorical, experience and desire. This paper claims that *FMFOH* enacts these paradoxes in the gleeful refurbishing of place, setting, time, body and the text itself. Like many of Barker’s works, *FMFOH* is located in an edgeland space, in this case an island off the South Coast of Devon that is joined to the mainland at high tide. It is thus a place both inside and outside, detached and conjoined. The dilapidated hotel setting is similarly liminal, its former grandeur overwritten yet palimpsestically present, as its rooms are reoccupied and repurposed by the protagonist Medve’s family. These locations in turn mirror Medve’s adolescence, as she chaotically navigates the shifting landscape between childhood and adulthood while ‘built like a shire horse. Six foot three in my crocheted stockings…huge.’ (Barker 2011: 7). The embodied discomfort of teenage development is further echoed in the novel’s temporal space as Medve resides uncomfortably in the early 1980s, dragging with her the outdated habits and vestments of a hippy upbringing while gesturing forward to the guerrilla and tank girls that will appear later in that same decade; she is, in many ways, a child out of time. On a textual level, Medve’s narration of the summer of 1981 is pointedly unreliable, told retrospectively and containing numerous hints that it is, at very least, highly embellished, blurring the distinction between fantasy and experience.

This paper argues that it is this ceaseless boundary crossing, these repeated border forays and retreats, that make Barker’s novel resonate so clearly with Rose’s model of a feminist paradoxical geography, whereby hegemony and hegemonic resistance are simultaneously present, and multiplicity and difference are embraced. These contradictions attach themselves with enduring tenacity to Medve’s adolescent world and the digressions, narrative eccentricities and grotesque characterisations that permeate Barker’s oeuvre are distilled to high volume in *FMFOH* to represent teenage wonder and frustration. The stranger La Roux’s uninvited intrusion into Medve’s summer forces in her a crisis of hospitality whereby the sauce he offers both tempts and disgusts. La Roux therefore becomes the embodied representation of Medve’s struggles with her own repeated spatial abjection as a burgeoning young woman. The paper concludes by arguing that it is Barker’s deployment of the image of the starling murmuration that coalesces the contested and contesting spaces of the novel and demonstrates Rose’s paradox in process. By ‘flying in formation. But madly’ the parliament of birds represents a moment of spatial synthesis where conformity and resistance coexist in a rare place of harmony. The image resonates through the text as counterbalance to chaos and a promise of progress.

‘All at sea in familiar territory': dislocation, impermanence and island survival in *Wide Open*.

(Daniel Janes, Independent Researcher and Senior Editor at Review 31)

In Iain Sinclair's novel *Dining on Stones*, the narrator Andrew Norton says: "[Nicola] Barker, Hackney-based, wrote about islands (Hackney being the first). She had a thing for English eccentrics, decent but damaged, behaving oddly in small communities, navigating a slant through a warped topography." None of Barker's novels exemplifies this more than *Wide Open*, a novel of uncompromising, all-pervasive "damagedness", which follows trauma-stricken outsiders on Shellness beach on Sheppey.

I will argue three main points. First, that the Sheppey of *Wide Open* is a dislocated space with a disembodying effect on the characters. Identities are constantly shifting, such as Jim and Ronny with their transference of personalities and names, or Sara, described as being in "a state of flux", her weight constantly changing due to a yeast allergy. Second, that Barker's Sheppey has an overriding sense of impermanence. "That's where all the temporary people go," says Lily, Sara’s daughter, of the island's prefab chalets. "Nobody permanent has anything to do with them." All arrangements here are provisional: at one point, Barker uses the image of an Etch-a-Sketch, which underlies both the precariousness of island existence and the erasure of past traumas, which the characters are seeking to escape. (Indeed, Barker’s Sheppey can be considered an example of what Maria Tumarkin [2005] described as a “traumascape.”) Third, that *Wide Open* is, in its own way, a narrative of island survival. This is explored in the recurring image of the black rabbit, a rare species that cannot thrive on the mainland - a predicament mirrored in the stray, even feral, inhabitants.

“Woah there a moment. Time out!” The measured art of looking, listening and slowing down in *Clear: A Transparent Novel*

(Beccy Kennedy, Manchester School of Art)

“Are you still starving? When are you going to stop?” is the line used to advertise the current one-man show theatre adaption of Kafka’s short story, ‘A Hunger Artist’ (https://www.sinkingshipproductions.com/a-hunger-artist/). This judgement in relation to stopping is part of the hunger artist’s existentialist position; if they stop too soon, their performance loses gravitas. If they stop too late, they die. This tension between life and death keeps the audience watching as the starving artist diminishes a little more each day. Hunger art became unfashionable by the twentieth century, as Kafka charts in his story. Prior to that, in early modernity, ‘were different times. Back then the hunger artist captured the attention of the entire city’ (1922).

Nicola Barker’s *Clear: a transparent novel* (2005) tells the story of a group of interconnected characters who watch the non-fictional event in 2003 of the illusionist

David Blaine starving – as a twenty-first-century hunger artist – in a perspex box suspended above the River Thames in London. The novel has invariably been contextualised by critics as a comment on spectatorship, the relationship between seeing and being seen in a post-9/11, late capitalist, reality-TV orientated age. The allusion to transparency in the title and to the see-through surfaces/lenses of Blaine's perspex box, the Sky News 24-hour cameras and even the reappearing Tupperware of the character Aphra, alongside numerous visual-cultural references within the dialogue, work to focus the novel onto themes of looking, and relatedly, to subject/object orientation, social identification and mass mediation. Blaine's continued presence in the box as it is suspended in the air creates an artificial dividing line between space and place (whilst cordoning off the individual from society) but it also signifies a temporal partition between the bustling, contemporary everyday and the asceticism and aestheticism of slowness. Meanwhile, Blaine's work as a hunger artist, highlighted when Barker's narrator Adair reads and discusses Kafka's short story of the same subject, anchors our attention to the measurement of flesh (and the body) in time and space, with time defined as much by measurement as space is. Indeed, the work of the magician (e.g. disappearing tricks and sleight of hand) is as reliant on timing and speed as it is upon opticality. Blaine's real-life hunger stunt contested the ontology of 'the illusionist' by making the magician's box transparent, putting his actions on show for an extended period, without the time limitations of a present-day theatre act. Similarly, Barker's novel creates an unconventional, dialogue-driven narrative and a visual format that progressively incorporates space on the page, giving the reader time to stop and think. Much longer than a standard screenplay, the reader's time is used to reinforce the value of time itself.

In this paper I argue that the centring of the narrative and dialogue upon Blaine's 44-day stunt enables the reader to meditate (critically) on the temporal conditions of post-digital, neoliberal life and, in turn, to advocate a move towards slowness (as theorised by scholars such as FIøistad, Koepnick and Marquard), accompanied by collective reflexivity. Slowness allows the characters (and the greater London and tourist community) to come together and engage with the world in a way that counteracts postmodernist individualism. Barker's millennial characters are given permission to watch and contextualise Blaine's stunt across the 347 pages. The reader is invited to watch the characters do this, becoming complicit within the meditation of slowness, set against a backdrop of consumerism and social/mass media frenzy within the capital.

Laughter and tears, paradox and contradiction: Nicola Barker and comedy

(Huw Marsh, Queen Mary University, London)

Nicola Barker is often described as a comic novelist, but references to her comic voice tend to consist in briefly noted asides rather than sustained analyses. Critical commentaries note her tendency toward the grotesque, and she is seen as the stylistic heir to Martin Amis and Angela Carter, two writers deeply concerned with the comic in their own distinctive ways. Yet that is where the discussion ends. This paper argues that the comic element of Barker's fiction deserves further attention, and that it is integral to an understanding of her treatment of paradox and contradiction, ideas she describes as central to her work. Drawing on examples from three novels – *Five Miles from Outer Hope* (2000), *Clear* (2004), and *The Cauliflower* (2016) – I trace the role of comedy and the related categories of laughter and humour in Barker's fiction, arguing that she is concerned not only with *being* funny but also with exploring the social and psychological significance of the comic. In *Clear*, for example, the spectacle of David Blaine's 'Above the Below' is a site for the public ridicule described by Michael Billig as the 'social core of humour'. At the same time, however, the novel performs a comedy of a different type, enacting a self-consciously Kafkaesque narrative of 'grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern complexity', to quote David Foster Wallace on Kafka. And in *The Cauliflower*, religious faith – that seemingly most grave of topics – is imbricated with lightness and comic farce. Indeed, comedy's ability to suspend incongruities without resolution provides a fitting mode for an exploration of the nature of faith.

Barker's comedy should not be viewed as an adjunct to her exploration of the serious or profound, but rather as the form that allows her to represent the messiness and complexity of life. At one point in *The Cauliflower*, the narrator asks, 'is this book a farce, a comedy, a tragedy or a melodrama?' The answer is that it is all these things, and as the well-known affinity between laughter and tears suggests, it is the hybrid nature of comedy that enables Barker to hold them in productive tension.

Indie style: Nicola Barker's early fiction and a turn-of-the-century aesthetic

(Ben Masters, University of Nottingham)

1994 saw the release of Blur's seminal Britpop album, *Parklife*, and Nicola Barker's debut novel, *Reversed Forecast* – a novel that centres on the idiosyncratic world of greyhound racing, which is the subject of *Parklife*'s iconic artwork. Beyond a shared affinity for offbeat characters and locales, and an explicit (often ambivalent) fascination with the late-twentieth-century zeitgeist, both works take cues from Martin Amis's 1989-novel, *London Fields*. (Albarn has described how Amis's novel 'changed my outlook on life', and Barker has called Amis her literary 'Daddy'.) This paper will begin by exploring the transition from *London Fields* to *Reversed Forecast* and *Parklife* and go on to examine the development of a turn-of-the-century British literary aesthetic that I will call 'indie style'.

Indie style (as a literary phenomenon), I will suggest, encompasses a range of identifiable characteristics: outsider character types like the misfit, the stranger, the intruder and the slacker; liminal or overlooked settings; a sincerely comic tone; the knowing use of cliché and wordplay; narratives structured around multiple characters and/or points of view and network-styled plots; innovative uses of free-indirect style; and distinctive authorial tics. And these characteristics often speak to an ethical preoccupation with equivocal and marginalised aesthetic categories and their affects – something I will substantiate by looking at Barker's early novels through the lens of Sianne Ngai's work on the zany, cute and interesting. This will open up questions about how far indie style, as a literary aesthetic, is expressive of the tensions between the so-called mainstream and the alternative; and how far it seeks to establish a neo-humanist ethical vision from within postmodern culture.

I will range across Barker's early work, from the novels of the 1990s (particularly *Reversed Forecast* and *Wide Open*) to her essential novel of the 2000s *Darkmans* (2007), while situating Barker at the forefront of a generation of indie stylists. This will bring me to the final section of my paper where I will draw comparisons between Barker's work and the early work of two other turn-of-the-century indie stylists who, like Barker, self-consciously explore the intersections between ethics and aesthetics: Ali Smith (one of Barker's most vocal advocates) and Adam Thirlwell (whose most recent novel, *Lurid & Cute* (2015), directly invokes Ngai's vocabulary).

'You grew up in this shithole, then?' Geographic writing and the Thames Gateway series

(Len Platt, Goldsmiths, University of London)

Nicola Barker's Gateway novels — *Wide Open* (1998), *Behindlings* (2002) and *Darkmans* (2007) — respond to contemporary cultural versions of seaside noir, psychogeographics, and to what Jonathan Meades terms 'industrial melodrama'. They also belong to older traditions of writing about the Thames estuary. These include an early species of geographic antiquarianism once formally known as 'chorography' represented by such texts as William Lambarde's *A Perambulation Through Kent* (1576) and Thomas Philipott's *Villare Cantianum or Kent Surveyed and Illustrated (*1659). This was the first literary culture, but not the last, to develop a marginal identity for the eastern reaches of the Thames which stood in stark contrast to the cultured civilisation of Kent and Essex 'proper' as well as to the idylls representing the Thames west of the City. Renaissance plays like *Arden of Faversham* (1592?) and Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent or the Mayor of Quinborough* (1619/20) likewise constructed an easterly Thames hinterland that served as a wild, dark and dangerous place marking the limits of urban civility and political order. Early travel literature, notably Defoe's *A Tour Through England and Wales*, and Victorian and modern gothic worked in similar ways. Texts like *The Ingoldsby Legends* (1837), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), *Heart of* Darkness (1891), *Dracula* (1897), Arthur Morrison's *Cunning Morrell* (1900) and Somerset Maugham's 1933 play *Sheppey* form a cultural fabric out of which Barker's estuary writing comes.

This paper explores continuities in this tradition, as well as marking the specific post-industrial conditions that produce new elements to contemporary estuary writing by such figures as Iain Sinclair, David Seabrook, Meads, Cathi Unsworth and, especially, Barker. It explores the new markers of 'estuary grotesque' in relation to a widespread Othering of the 'white working class' and post-industrial decline. It also shows how, in Barker's case, the representation of marginalised estuary lives becomes interrogated by a counter impulse to make the strange mainstream, or as Barker puts it, to make 'weird characters … seem normal'.

Puerile shithead? We need to talk about Wesley in Nicola Barker's *Behindlings*

(Eileen Pollard, University of Chester)

This paper will work towards a detailed philosophical understanding of the character of Wesley in Nicola Barker's 2002 novel, *Behindlings*, in the light of Jean-Luc Nancy's thoughts on being and community.

Part guru, part NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), Wesley is also repeatedly figured as Christ-like, not merely through the 'conceit' of the novel that those behind him follow him, but through his return to Canvey Island where the book is set: 'what could he seriously expect to gain from this strange and unexpected Second Coming?' In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy argues, principally, that *being* means 'being with' and that this experience is often uncomfortable, involving exposure, difference and abandonment. Such tension well describes the push-pull between Wesley and his followers, who are voyeuristically obsessed with him yet cannot *know* him, while he, on the other hand, despises them yet also needs them. Doc, a follower with a tragic past, explains: '"he hates being Followed […] and he never speaks to the people Following. That's the whole point"'. Wesley is the void-at-the-heart of his own philosophy though: 'He was hollow. He was empty […] He was a vacuum. He was struck-out. Deleted. He was nothing'. And yet he is everything as well at one and the same time. It is the classic post-structural conundrum – receiving everything while possessing nothing – that makes meaning possible. It is the signifier, the empty sign, for some, the palimpsest for others, and here, it is simply Wesley. However, my argument is that the characterisation of Wesley challenges and complicates such philosophy. For example, can a man who breaks into a woman's house and writes the word 'cunt' on her desk before leaving really be described as something as anodyne as an 'empty' sign? This paper will demonstrate how *Behindlings* repeatedly sullies any attempt at clean theorising by introducing a persistent taint to the main vehicle used to crystallise the theory, the protagonist, the 'puerile […] shithead', Wesley.

'But let's shift our focus to some other places in the world': spanning the globe in *The Cauliflower*

(Rainer Schelkle, Universität Tübingen)

After the first few pages of *The Cauliflower*, Nicola Barker's novel about Indian mystic Sri Ramakrishna, the narrator declares that this story "might easily be said to begin with a pinch of salt. Yes, salt. Sodium chloride." This is followed by an overview of the "revolutionary" role salt has played throughout history, from "Spanish salt production" financing the voyages of Christopher Columbus to "the *'gabelle'*, a much-loathed salt tax, spurring on the French Revolution" and "salt riots playing a central role in the American Revolution".This is just one example of how the narrative of Barker's novel spans the globe. When introducing Sri Ramakrishna, the narrator says that this was "a time when the world was ripe with a glossy new secularism –

bursting at the seams with revolutionary ideas about science and knowledge and art and progress". In another passage, the narrator describes the premiere of Johannes Brahms's 4th symphony in Germany and maintains that it provides "the soundtrack" to "the transition [...] from man into God" of the novel's protagonist in India going on at the same time, also referencing other events which took place around the globe during the same month, including the invention of the motorcycle, the occupation of Bulgaria by Serbia, and the first photograph of a meteor shower. At one point, Barker references two stories about a character who is also a historical figure and says they "neatly intertwine […] like a couple of temple cats" (53) which she proposes to call Yin and Yang, thus bringing in a playful reference to Chinese philosophy. The novel also refers to the migration of the Romany peoples from India to Europe that took place about a thousand years ago. Barker references Western pop culture – "horror films", "Joy Division", "Marilyn Manson" (83) as well as "Beyoncé Knowles" – in passages where she explains the Hindu faith to her readers. Barker juxtaposes mention of incidents in which Sri Ramakrishna would dress up as a woman and which "to the closed-off Western mind may appear shocking" (22) with the first-person account of "an anonymous transgender man" from "America, the late 1950s, early 1960s", implying at once both a global universality of queer sexual performances and identities, and that the traditional Indian mindset may be more open and tolerant towards them than a Western one. Barker unfolds a remarkably heteroglot tapestry of language which includes terms from both Indian and Western contexts ('sadhana', 'kundalini' etc. and 'brainstorming', 'carcinogen' etc.). The novel's narrator states that "the ancient concept of the *logos* is contained and originates in […] the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet." Barker also dedicates her novel to the 5,000 women who fall victim to honour killings worldwide every year.

This paper uses Marshall McLuhan's concept of the 'global village' to make sense of Barker's narrative strategies and framings.

***In the Approaches*: exuberant narration, metaphysical magic, and the creation of community**

(Berthold Schoene, Manchester Metropolitan University)

In Barker's work, wherever there are people, narrative proliferates. Yet invariably the result are novels that indulge the crafty pleasure of their author's textual virtuosity rather than aggregating into plot. Perhaps even more so than to Barker's other work, this applies to *In the Approaches*, a voluminous spin-off, composed while the author was taking a breather from continuing to work on something allegedly much more ambitious. Lit up by an intriguing mystery at its centre, surrounding the tragedy of a thalidomide child-saint and her Irish artist father and half-Aboriginal mother, the text never quite zooms in on its self-professed core; instead, it goes off at multiple tangents whilst busily making metaphysical magic in the margins. What I am interested in is how Barker's technique of exuberant narration informs her creation of community. Her books appear like proto-communal concoctions that follow the dynamic of wayward social experiments: if one corrals the damaged, the lost and the odd into a story, throwing in an assortment of anti-heroes, rejects and misfits, outsiders and mavericks for good measure, will community occur? Barker prefers off-centre locations because they offer her the best conditions for her experiments with community: 'I think: there's just enough going on here to be interesting but not enough to be overwhelming, so you think, I can reinhabit this area, I can make things happen here, you feel a sense of possibility. *And then I move all my characters in'* (Clark 2007 – my italics). Ultimately, in Barker's work, narration comes to work like life itself. As the narrative intensifies, contorts and unravels, but never lets up, characters manifest as vortices in a turbulent stream of narration. Or – as exhibited by Wesley's eventual apotheosis into 'The Fucking' at the end of *Behindlings* – a character comes to incorporate the very impetus and (erotic) momentum of the narrative, at once indomitable and unstoppable, making closure or resolution never really an option for Barker. In *In the Approaches*, too, narrative is let loose, showing that one can indeed 'write a story without actually *telling* a story', even if this makes the Author herself look like a 'cow' – erratic, devious, and at times wilfully incompetent.

The objective is to conjure a sense of community, not in any way neat or holistic, but – to use the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's terminology – *désoeuvrée* or 'inoperative'. Barker appears to share Nancy's interest in the question of how we can 'be receptive to the *meaning* of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common'. In *In The Approaches* the answer resides in community with a strong metaphysical inclination: 'Everything was interconnected. We were all chosen. We. *Us*. You know – the dregs. The pointless. The flawed. The unconvinced. The least worthy in many respects. […] Because majesty shines most brightly through … through frailty, I suppose. Through failure. Through weakness.' In Barker's novels, narrative becomes metaphysical currency. Her characters' conspicuous strangeness – a trait that, viewed through a Nancean lens, would simply highlight 'the fact that each singularity is another access to the world' – enables the author to adumbrate, elucidate, and open up the world to us as community, presented in *In the Approaches* as the magic of multiple strangenesses spinning off together.

Beneath the thin veneer of the modern: Nicola Barker's medievalism

(Chris Vardy, University of Manchester)

This paper will explore the relationship between postmodern presents and premodern pasts in Nicola Barker's *Darkmans* and *H(A)PPY*. It will argue that in Barker's work medieval spaces, styles and subjectivities serve to historicise and destabilise modernity and many of its constitutive cultural assumptions. *Darkmans* is structured around both an obsessive desire for a connection with, and a pathological desire to retreat from, the past in postmodern Ashford. I will argue that the text is defined by historical and temporal contradictions and dislocations: not haunted or traumatised by the past in a vague sense, but determined, often unconsciously, by its various interconnected medieval legacies: architectural, spatial and – crucially in the case of the revenant jester – linguistic. The paper will also consider the significance of the fantastic Gothic cathedral in *H(A)PPY*, which represents an illicit collective spiritual experience in an atomised and ahistorical digital dystopia. However, the cathedral does not just represent a nostalgic retreat from a world that takes modernity's constraining 'freedoms' to a disquieting extreme. Rather, using Lars Spuybroek's ideas in *The Sympathy of Things* (2016) about the counterintuitively close relationship between the digital and the gothic, I will argue that the novel instead invokes a medieval form to gesture towards the more experimental, emancipatory possibilities of digital culture and forms. In Barker's experimental fictions, as continuities are drawn between postmodern and premodern temporalities and visual cultures, modernity itself is presented as a potentially aberrant attempt to circumscribe unruly experiences and subjectivities.