Elsewhere, yet Nowhere:
John Burnside's Autofictions and Strategies of (Dis)Placement
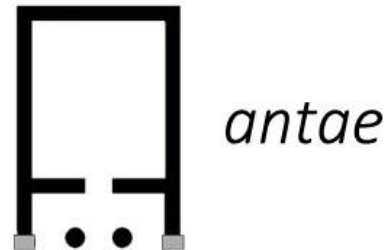
Ricarda Menn

Elsewhere, yet Nowhere:
John Burnside's Autofictions and Strategies of (Dis)Placement

Ricarda Menn

Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main

In reading John Burnside's three autofictions, this paper aims at discussing how spaces and personal remembering, as well as potential displacements, are interlinked endeavours in recollective narratives. In Burnside's whole oeuvre, spaces and affectively connoted realms are a recurrent point of reference: particularly so in his autofictional texts.[1] Certain realms, both imaginary and real, pose an intertextual connection between his novels, his poetry and his autofictions. More importantly, however, they function as a structuring device for ordering memory and recollections, as well as ordering and orienting the (written) self accordingly. Although the three texts build on different thematic premises, such as the complicated relation to his father (*A Lie About My Father,* 2006), the struggle of overcoming alcohol addiction (*Waking Up in Toytown*, 2009), and a more lyrical take on love and his mother (*I Put A Spell on You*, 2014), spaces are a recurrent realm of negotiating and structuring memory. Since the autofictional texts in themselves have not yet been subject to a scholarly discussion, this paper essentially relies on close readings of the spatial structures of the texts. In doing so, it illustrates in a further step how autofiction as a distinct mode of autobiography gives way to a more open perception of the narrated self, which is not bound to strict truth claims. Rather, in line with the serial, three-fold publication of the texts, the narrated self is subject to constant and multiple (re)-negotiations.

The motifs of spacing and displacing the self and memory therefore appear as symptomatic for an autofictional and serial, repeated self-presentation. In examining the role of spaces in Burnside's autofictions, this paper aims to shed light on an interconnection of autofictional writing and spatialised remembering. Although the analysis of space and place has attracted scholarly interest over the last years, the connection between autobiographical writing and spaces in general still remains a fruitful field of scholarly exploration.[2] As a key-argument, the notion of spacing yet displacing the self through writing and re-writing furthers the autofictional endeavour of self-narrative as a non-linear, fragmented enterprise. Before turning to selected close reading passages of Burnside's texts, a discussion and preliminary definition of autofiction is thus necessary to provide a cultural and generic frame for the succeeding discussion of the interconnection between space, writing and personal remembering.

---

[1] For a discussion on the interconnection of violence and withdrawal, see Scott Brewster, 'Beating, Retreating: Violence and Withdrawal in Iain Banks and John Burnside', in *Ethically Speaking: Voice and Values in Modern Scottish Writing*, ed. James McGonigal and Kirsten Stirling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 179-198.
For an analysis on seasides as recurring points of reference, here relevant, see Julika Griem, 'John Burnside's Seascapes', in *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space*, ed. Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), pp. 87-106.
[2] See Russell West-Pavlov, *Spaces of Fiction / Fictions of Space—Postcolonial Place and Literary DeiXis* (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

In general, autobiography is defined as a form of non-fictional writing, which offers a recollective account of a person's life, defined by a connection of identity between narrator, author and protagonist.[3] "Recollecting" is defined by the OED as a form to "review, recapitulate" but also denotes "to recall, remember". It thus also highlights the temporal distance involved in narrating a life story, often involving a reflective process. Autofiction is a form of autobiography, which foregrounds the use of fictional and narrative elements in an otherwise factual life story.[4] Often, autofiction is perceived as a hybrid between novel and autobiography.[5] In contemporary literature, autofiction adds to a renewed and changing understanding of authorship and performance of authorship, but requires further definition and consideration particularly in an Anglophone context.[6] In my reading, autofictional narratives also increasingly use spatialising strategies of remembering and narrating. Situated in a retrospective narrative, these constitute an autofictional ordering of the self, but also employ potential displacements, hinting at epistemological instabilities of the narrated self, so that the genre of autofiction in this light foregrounds a pluralistic merging of fact and fiction as a changed mode of subjectivity. In this sense, autofictions can pose a contrast to so-called misery memoirs, which essentially rely on linear narrative patterns, providing closure to a personal destiny and sufferings alongside forwarding potential blueprints for self-help.[7] These texts are often centred towards fixed truth expectations, which Gilmore describes as 'almost legalistic definition of truth telling',[8] and violations of those create a certain unacceptability, as the debate on James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) has shown.[9] As Siri Hustvedt observes, memoirs also tackle a desire for authenticity and true confession, while she at the same time delineates the impossibility of entirely truthful self-narrative.[10] In contrast, by openly acknowledging the impact of fiction unto self-narrative, autofiction poses a different angle on contemporary subjectivity and instead showcases the self as a non-linear entity, one which is subject to constant re-visitation.

Of the three autofictional texts under discussion here, space is arguably the most important category for reconstructing and ordering the self in *Waking Up In Toytown*. Already induced in the title, the concept of a "toytown" and an underlying quest for suburban normalcy is a main structuring principle.[11] The symbolism of a "toytown" is defined by the OED as '[a] model of a town used as a plaything; fig. a small or insignificant town'. A toytown is perceived as a

---

[3] Helga Schwalm, 'Autobiography', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology Online*. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/autobiography>. [Accessed 16 November 2017].

[4] See E.H. Jones, 'Autofiction', in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature*, ed. by Richard Bradford (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 174-184.

[5] See Christine Ott and Jutta Weiser, 'Autofiktion und Medienrealität', in *Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Kulturelle Formungen des postmodernen Subjekts*, ed. by Christine Ott and Jutta Weiser (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), pp. 7-18.

[6] See *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

[7] See Leigh Gilmore, 'American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help and Redemption on Ophra's Couch', *Biography*, 33(4), (2010), 657-679, p. 665.

[8] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography,* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 7.

[9] See Siri Hustvedt, 'The Real Story', in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2013), pp. 93-115, p. 96.

[10] ibid., pp. 99, 101.

[11] Since the spatial reading of a quest for suburban normalcy is inscribed into the title, this dealing with normalcy and its evasions is one striking example, which needs to be discussed in length, before turning to a more comparative reading of spaces throughout all three texts. A similar instance of a spatialising title can be found in *Ashland & Vine* (2017), where the title refers to a place of murder. Moreover, *Glister* (2008) is also structured around places, albeit with a rather mystical undertone.

small, almost meaningless place, as opposed to urban places and cities; similarly, the combination of a "toy" and "model" creates a structural ambiguity. The model serves as a channel for desiring normalcy, by aiming at life in such a modelled, conventional and potentially unexciting place. At the same time, this desire is belittled and made void—the term "toy" suggests a temporal link to childhood, but is in adulthood of limited use. Discussing Burnside's poem 'Suburbs' (1991), Julika Griem considers the notion of suburbia 'as a non-space on the periphery of the city, a dormitory town where middle-class aspirations are buried under the surface of commodified, standardised lives'.[12] To a certain extent, the space of a toytown thus comes to resemble a fiction, an almost utopian place that exists in a collective imaginary, exemplifying standard and routine while initially promising possibilities of social and spatial change.

Reading Burnside's attempt at normalcy in *Toytown*, the suburban fantasy functions as such a desired space, yet a realm out of reach. The protagonist's struggle for achieving a suburban life without addiction and alcohol excesses is deconstructed throughout the text and in the end ultimately refuted by the narrator. Initially, the suburban fantasy comes to mean a 'normal life. Sober. Drug-free. Dreamless. In gainful employment. A householder. A taxpayer. A name on the electoral role. A regular, everyday sort of guy'.[13] The promise of a healthy life without drugs is linked to the expectation of normalcy as a suburban imaginary. Living in such a place does not only promise and necessitate absence of drugs, but also a wealthy living standard, by regularly going to work and owning a house. Griem acknowledges this effect as a potential 'monotony' which however also come to create 'a regenerative potential'.[14] Indeed, these characteristics form a contrast to his previous spatial and mental disorientation. In Burnside's search for normalcy and overcoming his addictions, he turns to such a place as a promise for cure:

> I went to the suburbs because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what they had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted the order that other people seemed to have, the non-apophenic order of a normal life. A normal life, as a normal person—in Surbiton, or somewhere like it (*WT*, 19).

Order and normalcy are structurally linked and potentially provided for by a suburban surrounding. Inherent to the deliberate decision of moving to such a place is, moreover, the promise for life, and not death. An increased quality of ordered, normal life forms a contrast to the preceding disorientation under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

Initially, the move goes as planned: '[I was] looking out over a long suburban garden full of roses and making a plan that had something to do with Surbiton. *Surbiton*. Shorthand for a place that almost existed, a simplified world', and the imagery of a rose garden evokes an idyllic premise of connecting with nature through ordering and tending a garden; the elevated position of the 'upstairs window' and the momentary aesthetic pleasure of viewing the garden provide a place for reflection (*WT*, 25). Hence, the second half of the quotation can serve as a potential

---

[12] Griem, p. 88.
[13] John Burnside, *Waking Up In Toytown* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 19. Henceforth cited in text as (*WT*, page number).
[14] Griem, p. 90.

foreshadowing of the imminent refuting of the suburban fantasy. Realising it is a 'place that almost existed', something 'simplified', the potential shortcomings are hinted at. In this regard, the recollective evaluation carries a form of awareness, which previously might only have been a slight premonition.

Thus, the desired effect of normality on life is, again with a temporal distance, evaluated in a self-humouring way:

> It was a perfect plan. Ridiculous, yes; but perfect. I would become someone else and so be cured of my indelible shame. Cured of my obvious insanity. All I needed was to be contained, to be delimited, in a routine that was so set as to be unbreakable (*WT*, 26).

The premise of turning into 'someone else' carries the connotation of aiming at a transcendence of the self. Although narrated in a hypothetical conditional, showing that the plan might still potentially work, it is nonetheless retrospectively ridiculed, illustrating temporal distance to the narrated I. The initial plan to live a normal life and the promise of a cure is, early on in the text, staged, yet at the same time undermined. Indeed, the place does not bring about the desired change: 'I had been in the suburbs for what felt like forever, and I still had no idea of how to live a normal life' (*WT*, 147). In line with this comes the realisation that 'the Surbiton of the real world […] was proving very different from the Surbiton in my mind' (*WT*, 143). Accordingly, the imagined space is not reconcilable with the real world; the expectation of a new life of normalcy is similarly not easily achievable. Rather, the autofictive text resists a simple moment of conversion: a self-help logic of just moving places and changing behaviour from one moment to the next is refused. Using the suburban 'dreamscape', a potentially clear-cut solution for his problems is anticipated, but the illusion and shortcoming of this imaginary construct is evoked (*WT*, 28). In a final refusal of normalcy, the narrator finally comes to accept that the image of Surbiton and the previously desired suburban normalcy prove as a failure:

> It's a long time since I wanted to be normal. […] Now, I have no desire to be sane, partly because it's not in my nature but, mostly, because the generally accepted definition of sane is hideously inadequate. If Surbiton – real or imaginary – is sanity, then I have no desire to be sane. I have no desire to be mad either, but I don't regret having been made, once upon a time (*WT*, 262).

Narrated in the present tense, this passage shows how the aim at normalcy is ultimately deferred. Split between a duality of normalcy versus madness, there is here a refutation of these conventional expectations and he has come to accept his own, idiosyncratic way of life, outside such societal norms and values. Although madness is long in the past, this is not conjoined with regret, but considered as a necessary development of life. In contrast, the concept of sanity and normalcy, as depicted by the suburban dreamscape, is dismissed. Surbiton is questioned with regard to its validity and actual potential. Hence, the place is both a structuring principle for the narration of *Waking Up in Toytown*, but at the same time unmasked as illusionary.

Accordingly, the titular denomination of 'waking up' can be read as indicating this dual structure of desire and its realisation. Moreover, on a very literal basis, it symbolises the protagonist's continued waking up in unknown places after a night of alcohol and drugs, each time induced with a loss of remembering and a loss of time. Thus, a suburban model life serves as an underlying structural principle, making clear the motivations and potential downfall of

the narrated life. Underlying this is a sense of ordering the self, and illustrating a search using affectively connoted spaces throughout the text. Places, in such an autofictional texts, do not only pose a reference point for memory and remembrance, but also function as ordering principles for the self in writing.

Alongside a suburban normalcy, *Toytown* structurally relies on a further important space, namely the "asylum". In fact, the first sentence of the autofiction introduces a number of articulate techniques of autofictional self-presentation: 'Not so long ago, when I was still mad, I found myself in the strangest lunatic asylum that I had ever seen' (*WT*, 1). As a structuring principle, the placement in a lunatic asylum creates a problematic unreliability, caused by limited accountability and sanity implied by the stay in such an institution. Openly admitted, it engages the reader in an underlying search for order and ordering memory in the text, and not a deliberate lie. A general problem of autobiographical texts being the limits of memory, this generic convention is here deliberately staged within the autofictive reconstruction of the past.[15] Denoting a play with the reader, who is potentially on the lookout for slips and errors, questioning authenticity, the generic problem of limited memory is made productive to a certain extent by making the reader aware of this. The space of the lunatic asylum thus serves a dual purpose within the text: it marks a point of departure, for the narration, but also the quest for normalcy of the protagonist. In posing a connection to implied madness as recurring reference in Burnside's fictional writing, this quite openly problematises autobiographical reliability.[16]

However, spaces and places are not only used as a structuring principle for remembering: they carry affective connotations and open up a phenomenological realm of perceiving sentiments and moods. Consequently, the initial description of the asylum experience carries a distinct emotive quality: it puts the narrator 'in a mind of a certain type of church, one of those places where you stand waiting for God […] to arrive at any moment with Good News, or a foretaste of Armageddon, or both'.[17] The presence in an asylum is compared to being in a church, which opens up a realm of biblical interpretation and foregrounds a spiritual quality, a potential for reflection. Alongside this, the duality of good news and Armageddon highlights the changing impetus of the situation: being at the mercy of some instance, his life can either start anew or end in failure. Metaphorically, salvation and damnation are evoked in this sentence, and are not perceived as mutually exclusive, indicated by the slightly ironic ending 'or both'. A decisive moment for memory and recollection is spatialised by the asylum, carrying a spiritual quality through the church analogy, evoking a sense of renewal. A new, better life and personal downfall are structurally equalled, so that, ultimately, one is not thinkable without the other. Whereas traditional autobiographies clearly stage a moment of change and potential conversion as a turn towards the better, such a simple solution is from the beginning onwards refuted through a structural ambiguity. Told in retrospective, the change brought about by the lunatic asylum is not a clear-cut process, but an ongoing and vexed negotiation of sentiments. Considering the subsequent failure of attaining normalcy, this is deliberately foreshadowed in the passage.

---

[15] See Arnaud Schmitt, 'Making the Case for Self-Narration Against Autofiction', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 25(1), (2010), 122-137, p. 129
[16] As understood in Scott Brewster, 'Borderline Experience. Madness, Mimicry and Scottish Gothic', *Gothic Studies*, 7(1), (2005), 79-86.
[17] ibid., p. 81.

By no structural coincidence, the beginning of *I Put A Spell on You* is likewise constructed in a spatialised way, negotiating the recurring notion of belonging by an affective mediation and perception of spaces. The initial chapter is, in contrast to those of *Toytown* and *A Lie,* told in retrospective, which takes place in 1958 and recounts a move of the family. On a first level, this move marks a changing point in the narrator's life, by literally changing places and relocating. This is judged as a 'move up, in most ways'.[18] The horizontal description of moving 'up' refers to an increase in social position and social standing and implicitly carries the promise of a better life and conditions. In this regard, the beginnings of *I Put A Spell on You* and *Waking Up in Toytown* rely on spatialised metaphors to illustrate the prospect and promise of a new life, situated on a point of transition and departure.

Similarly, *A Lie About My Father* puts forward an interesting connection between memory and spatial recognition: 'For me, memory beings in King Street, the condemned house where my parents lived after they were first married'.[19] The memory and the initiation of a family history are linked to a specific house and a distinct spatial entity. By describing the house as 'condemned' as well as 'dilapidated' and 'infested with rats and house mice', the impetus of a fresh, positive start is quickly taken apart (*LF*, 32). Rather, the state of the houses inhabited corresponds to the low social standing of the family and potentially foreshadows subsequent anticipations of their failures.

The various moves throughout all texts also come to be accepted on the narrator's part while retaining the negative emotive quality: 'I was sure we were going to somewhere as grey and wet as the pit town we were leaving' (*LF*, 125). Although the father continues to make plans and raises hopes for a new life and a social rise, this only results in resignation on the part of John. Underlying this strive for social rise is the larger plan of moving to Canada; as much as Burnside seems aware that this is just an illusion, a longing for the place is poignantly evoked, as in the following passage:

> I hated him for it. He'd gone on letting me dream of Canada till the very last minute, and I knew that I would always long for a homeland that would correspond to the snowy woods and little outlying villages of wooden houses and picket fences of my imagination. […] I am still waiting to complete the journey I began in my ten-year-old mind all those years ago (*LF*, 125).

This passage offers one of the few instances in which Burnside openly comments on hating his father. Ultimately related to the refusal and failure of going to Canada, an underlying yearning for a more stable home and belonging becomes visible, although this is momentarily destroyed by the father's actions. Opposed to the ugly grey and crowded pit towns of his childhood, nature and scarcely populated areas constitute the highest contrast possible. Defined by nature and snow, the whiteness of this land forms an underlying fascination for snow, and a symbol for an innocent and fresh start into a new life. Whiteness, in this case, can be read as a blank page, a state unburdened by the past and the surrounding industry. Canada comes to be a land associated with new possibilities, enchanting nature and 'wilderness' (*LF*, 125). Considering the recurrent

---

[18] John Burnside, *I Put A Spell On You* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 1. Henceforth cited in text as (*PS*, page number).

[19] John Burnside, *A Lie About My Father* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 32. Henceforth cited in text as (*LF*, page number).

motifs of the tundra and forests, longing for a place close to nature is systematically set into narration. This fascination and yearning is an ongoing process, indicated by the turn to present tense in the last quoted sentence. Canada epitomises desire, social mobility regarding the remembered childhood, and a further ordering principle of memory, illustrating the unresolvedness of that dream and the prevailing yearning which constitutes a continuum between memory and presence, narrated life and ongoing narration of life. Since Canada is equalled to a homeland, a promise for whole-hearted belonging is implied as well.

In *Spell*, an episode in which the narrator describes the protagonist getting 'lost in the north Norwegian tundra' introduces a recurring spatial disappearance alongside a fascination with snow and the tundra as a place (*PS*, 187).[20] More prominently, however, the placement in the north introduces a peculiar sense of home and belonging:

> I am not sure I can adequately relate how strong this sense of being suddenly and uniquely at home in the far north was; what I *can* describe is the memory of that first arrival, a memory of slowly descending out of a high sky towards a landscape that looked and felt immediately as if I had secretly belonged there all my life – a place that, had I not known how far I was from my own house, I would happily have called home (*PS*, 190).

The memory of this feeling of belonging is by no structural coincided spatially linked to the Norwegian landscape of snow and implied solitude. Narrated in a present tense, emotional attachment and affective connection to the place mark ongoing concerns and fascinations. In analysing the impact of dwelling in Burnside's poetry, Campell observes how, '[f]or Burnside, the pathway of dwelling necessarily engages issues surrounding the physicality of the environment […] and as such often counter questions of violence and discomfort'.[21] Space thus seems not only physically but also mentally related to dwelling, as an act of personal reflection and recollection. Campbell further argues that strategies of placing further constitute a mechanism of sense-making and control, so that, arguably, the structuring of memory along the lines of distinct ones constitutes a peculiar strategy for ordering and controlling past memories.[22]

As a contrast to industrial places of his upbringing, nature constitutes an ongoing fascination and imparts desire and belonging while at the same time allowing for the possibility to dwell and linger. The notion of home and a place to which heart and soul seem to belong is still of ongoing concern and relevance. This is, to some extent, also openly commented upon:

> I knew that, with each of those homes, I had settled too easily for an illusion. It goes without saying that I am all too aware of how ready I am to shift the furniture of recollection around for convenience of dramatic effect, but this sense of finding home wasn't a realization that I came to in the course of time (*PS*, 190).

---

[20] The arctic setting of *A Summer of Drowning*, as well as the disappearance of characters in both *A Summer* and *Glister*, highlights a spatial mediation of vanishing and mysterious impetuses.

[21] Alexandra Campbell, 'Being, Dwelling, Tracing: John Burnside's Creaturely Cartographies', *Anglistik—International Journal of English Studies*, 27(2), (2016), 95-109, p. 96.

[22] See ibid., p. 106.

Foregrounding the *mis-en-scene* of his writings by an ironic commentary on 'dramatic effect' and a deliberate arrangement of 'furniture', or rather memory's contents, the spatial construction of all three texts can be interpreted as a deliberate structure, highlighting a dual structure of spatially ordering and staging memory. Narrated much closer to the author's presence, the use of the present tense suggests that the search for home and realisation of the meaning of home is not a closed process. The situation of the narrated presence, 'the place where I work, where my children go to school and where, undoubtedly, I am doomed to belong' furthers this reading (*PS*, 191). By comparing the present place as 'doom', albeit a kind to which one belongs, the desire to live in solitude in a different place, closer to nature, is imminent. While it becomes apparent that at this point of his life, having a family, the author is no longer as free as in his adolescent years, the notion of spatial belonging is not a stable one. This observation is confirmed by Griem, who argues that Burnside's writing is prone to 'mixed feelings about notions of home and belonging'.[23] It thus seems symptomatic that spaces and places are generally subject to placement and displacement, thus narrativising this perceived instability.

Alongside the places in themselves, affective connections are a marker for illustrating either belonging or distance. The use of animal metaphors in combination with the prefab's house surrounding is peculiar; close to the house, 'tawny owls hunted through the night' (*PS*, 1). Generally, the owls evoke a nocturnal quality of the narration and an association with woods—a concept recurrent in both Burnside's fictional and prose writing—which, as Astrid Bracke observes, are 'strange, haunting and frequently thoroughly unpleasant places'.[24] In a phonetic similarity, a previous house is labelled as 'rat-haunted tenement' (*PS*, 1). Thus, the evaluating contrast between the phonetically close hunting and haunting accounts for the affective connection towards the respective places the owls hunt through the night, occupied with themselves and their task, their spatial presence is understood as fascinating and not as intruding. The rats, however, 'haunt' the described place, and actively affect the haunted person; moreover, as the house is only described in terms of the rats' presence, it seems as if the rats occupy the place and de-power the human owner. Their presence can even be considered as uncanny, defamiliarising and destabilising the otherwise familiar house. Strikingly, the open space of nature and woods is more positively described than the domestic house, suggesting a closer fascination and belonging to nature, which reconnects to the notion of dwelling.

Affective connections to places point to a larger prevalence of Burnside's spatial mediations. Although the beginning of *A Lie* is not as metaphorically constructed as the other two, the situation of celebrating Halloween 'at home' is nevertheless symptomatic for a distinct negotiation of belonging and home, which features as a recurrent pattern in his poetry as well. Here, Halloween is celebrated at home, and the re-connection to the 'dead' is conceived of as a 'private, local festival of penance and celebration' (*LF*, 3). Halloween as a recurring motif in his writing is presented as an embodiment of remembering and recollection, since it fuses past and present in one temporal event. Remembering the dead is a private event, which necessitates

---

[23] Griem, p. 87.

[24] Astrid Bracke, 'Solitaries, Outcasts and Doubles. The Fictional Oevure of John Burnside', *English Studies*, 95(4), (2014), 421-444, p. 421.

a form of spatial recluse and space for reflection; nonetheless, this definition is undermined by the comment 'whatever *home* happens to be' (*LF*, 4). In such a reading, locating home is a fraught enterprise, but nonetheless a decisive one. Arguably, home is not a fixed place, but rather a realm with affective associations, which can be stabilised, yet destabilised, depending on the associated sentiments.

In line with the previously discussed haunted and discomforting places, a distinct event in *A Lie* recounts the narrator's childhood association with mysterious and haunted houses. Strikingly, these are experienced as less threatening than the family home, as more comforting and less alienating than the own home. Surrounded by 'dark woodland' and 'open fields', the narrated I of the childhood regularly visits 'the Water Houses, a dark, mysterious set of sheds and storehouses that, to my mind, was both deeply sinister and infinitely exciting'. Alongside this dark yet enthralling surrounding, the place is described as 'magical', 'dark and damp […] haunted by tawny owls and foxes; haunted, too, by strange noises and movements in the dark that nobody could explain'. Characterised by owls and nocturnal creatures, the place nonetheless conveys fascination and a sense of affective belonging, since the protagonist attends it 'as often as I could' despite it being forbidden to him (*LF*, 39-40). The unexplainable noises of the place as well as the haunting animals form a sort of magical, mysterious place, which is perceived as alien and yet familiar. The mediation relies on an uncanny duality of estrangement and similarity. It serves as a counter-mirror to his normal home, which lacks comfort. Rather, the uncanny, haunted houses surpass the affective quality of the normal house and belonging. The affection toward such darkly fascinating places is further constructed as a contrast to the industrial surroundings:

> I was a pit-town child, escaping into the woods or the wet meadows for the afternoon, entering a world that I knew must belong to somebody else and, at the same time, quite sure that those others had no right to it. I made it up in words I took from books (*LF*, 41).

In contrast to the industrial fabrics of his childhood, nature is conveyed as a potential form for retreat and solitude and presented as a 'world' in its own right, constituting a different mind-set. This spatial perception, moreover, goes along with a peculiar sense of ownership and imagination: although aware that the place has to be entitled or owned by someone, Burnside alone feels entitled to its belonging. Underlying this is a form of ecological connection, which runs deeper than material conditions. Since he alone discerns himself as cherishing its merits and being able to imagine and convey an image of the place, the affective connection is more profound. Due to imagining and being able to narrate the place, it becomes imaginarily and ideologically owned, as opposed to conventional ownership. Accordingly, the empowerment of places and circumstances in this regard is necessarily brought about via language and fictive techniques. Generally, places do not only construct and constitute memory, but also form a mental landscape of belonging, entitlement, and affection.

In a succeeding parallel passage, a connection to an abandoned house is evoked, in which home and belonging are more strongly exemplified. An abandoned place is turned into 'my special sanctuary […] the house that recurs, even now, in my dreams, a house I would fill with the stories I told myself, and so with the boy I was, whenever I managed to escape from the son I

was pretending to be' (*LF*, 105). It is interesting that this section creates a spatial connection between narrated past and narrated present—since the house is still a recurring dream motif for the narrator and the author; an omnipresence of such memories is lined out. Similarly, it shows another interpretation of spatialised memory and spaces as affective-laden places for ordering the self. The house in relation to the past is evaluated as a sanctuary, a place without need for pretension. It thus serves as a place for realising the self and the fantasies of the self, through storytelling as a more open and non-pretending form. On a broader scale, this hints at a generally narrative constitution and formation of the self, which in these phrases is distinctly spatialised. Moreover, one's own home is issued as uncanny, whereas the more graspable fright of the narrated house denotes comfort:

> My own house was much more frightening. Better the ghosts of other days than the present misery of the living; better the whisper of the unknown than the angry bawling of the all too familiar. For a while, at least, this empty prefab belonged to me, and to me alone. For a while, at least, I had a place I could think of as home (*LF*, 106-7).

Quite literally, this passage signifies the uncanny perception of the familiar and the realm of the family. The anger, violence and misery at home are perceived as alienating and frightening, removing any desire to belong. In contrast, the 'unknown' as well as the ghosts of a past are more endurable, presumably due to their non-canny nature.[25] In line with perceiving the place as home and a place for belonging, the actual home turns into an uncanny, non-bearable institution. At the same time, this place too is only a temporary recluse and momentary home, so that an underlying stability of home and belonging is once more refuted.

Nevertheless, the engagement with alternative and dark places as home and spaces of belonging is again rewritten and differently conveyed through a 'ruined house' in *Spell*:

> A corpse in a cupboard, a live girl buried under the floorboards, dark angels in the rafters: this is my home ground, though it neither belongs to me nor resembles anything I could describe to someone else – which is just as well, for any such thing brought out into the raw light of the public gaze can as easily perish as enchant (*PS*, 25).

For once, the contents of the ruined house become more acute, more graspable due to the mention of a corpse, a buried girl and dark angels—in contrast, the previous paragraph describes the haunted house only implicitly in terms of of 'ghosts' and 'whispers'. However, this part creates a duality of determination and non-determination. Although the haunting elements are conveyed as more graspable and further actualised, the validity of this description is questioned. Despite the narrator commenting on the 'home ground' of these elements, indirectly commenting upon their recurrent nature, these things are so unlike any other that they can hardly be adequately represented. This difficult mediation is programmatically staged, and used to evoke a further ambiguity. Since the place is almost indescribable, this constitutes a form of protection and makes the content a private treasure of the narrator. Opposed to the rawness of public presence, the act veiling and concealing ensures that such associations maintain their affective quality, this exclusively for the narrator. Thus, the limits of language in describing

---

[25] On a further scale, the perceived presence of ghosts and dead can also be investigated within the context of Burnside's autofictions and the engagement with a personal past.

this place accordingly constitute a form of protecting interiority. Nonetheless, this paragraph evokes an underlying paradox of autofictional writing, centring on the interiority of the writer's experience opposed to the exterior form of a written text, and the privacy of a personal life in tension with a public performance of autobiographical disclosure and autofictive author-presence. As Gilmore observes, autobiography is 'burdened by its public charge to disclose a private truth'.[26] Although committed to narrating private, intimate thoughts and feelings, and thus making them public, the refusal of describing this place re-constitutes a form of private treasure within a public text. Through openly playing out the conflict between public authorship and private persona, Burnside thus also uses autofiction and its avoidance of closure as a means to inscribe personal secrets into a text.

Underlying these diverse approaches to home is a search for home and order, stability and affection. Extreme interpretations, either dark, liminal spaces and their affection, or a bourgeois ideal of normalcy, are shortly introduced as homes, but also suspended. For once, this undermines definitive belonging, and portrays an ongoing quest for such a state. The spatial orientation of all three autofictional texts thus mediates a locating, ordering and spatialising of memory along the lines of a search for home and negotiation of belonging.

Next to determined places with a fixed meaning and connected purpose, undetermined rooms are also occasionally included. Whole episodes of drinking and drugs lead to a peculiar view on experienced spaces. Referring to his excessive drinking, the narrator remarks retrospectively: 'my control would snap—a far-off but resonant crack at the back of my mind—and I would find myself in the midst of a binge that might last for days, only to end miserably in some anonymous room, leaving me drained and ashamed' (*LF*, 12). Initially, the recollection evokes shame and misery, an impression that is furthered by the anonymity of the space he experiences. The unfamiliarity of this space conveys a sense of disorientation and, similarly, clear temporal and spatial markers are suspended because of the previous excess. As a peculiarity of recounting such events in an autofictional account, the cause-and-effect logic of these instances is recreated through writing and ordering the past as well as distancing the self from previous feelings of shame. Nonetheless, memory is still problematised due to the impact of alcohol. The anonymity of the room, therefore, illustrates the recurrence of such binges, but proves an undetermined place in the past, regarding personal belonging and spatial location. Only briefly occurring in *Spell*, with a situation of waking 'up on a stranger's floor', the impetus of disorientation and unknown spatial fixation is a recurring image, and attributed to the unavoidable past of alcohol and drug use (*PS*, 212).

In another example for spatialised memory, drinking is equated to a 'brown room':

> Alcohol is a substitute for something else, but I can't give it up because, if I do, I'll remember that something else, and that something else is an unbearable, and at the same time, impossible desire, and the only thing that stops me from remembering that desire, that brown room with the crimson lights at the end of that dark corridor, is drink, and no matter what happens, no matter what idiocies I inflict upon myself, nothing is as bad or as beguiling, as that room (*WT*, 18).

---

[26] Gilmore, p. 14.

Quite literally, the suppression of desire is here linked to a non-determined elsewhere, a repressed compartment of memory, overcome by the act of drinking. However, this is constructed in a dual way, as elsewhere, a non-determined room, and as a 'brown room'. This brown room is slightly more graspable and defined by a name, but at the same time is similarly non-localised. The room symbolises and spatialises the desire to drink and the need to escape the associated shame and guilt. Moreover, situated at the end of a corridor and associated with dark colours, the room is presented as an endpoint to a certain journey with bad connotations. Drinking appears as a counter-strategy, but cannot completely eradicate the existence of that hidden memory. Although the nature of the room and the suppressed memory remain unclear, a general tendency to desiring "elsewhere" and non-determined places is underlying all texts, but specifically *A Lie* and *Toytown*. The image of "elsewhere" can be read as a place in contrast to the prevalent situation, as a counter-mirror to the vexed concept of home. It similarly opens up the realm of transcending the present situation of 'misery', and functions as a spatial device for disappearing.

Particularly in *Toytown*, but also in *A Lie*, events are included in which the narrator wakes up in a place, known or unknown, without a clear sense of how and why he got there, as has been earlier discussed. These disorientating places, like the brown room, offer a spatialised reading of the effects and impacts of drug and alcohol, as well as the structure and order memory. For instance, in *A Lie*, in a surrounding that the paratextual crosslink connects to Sheffield in the year 1972:

> I wake in an unfamiliar churchyard, lying in the corner where the people who tend the graves toss dead flowers and wreaths and, even though it's about six in the morning, it's already warm and muggy. It's surprising but I don't feel too bad and, if at least I don't recall much about the days that passed between its beginning and its end, I remember where this particular episode started. […] I don't know this yet, but it's four days since I left home (*LF*, 192).

The section includes a shift to the present tense, albeit set in the narrated past. This could indicate a distance to the previously retold childhood, and a passage and a memory that is closer to the state of mind of the narrator than the protagonist is. In general, this suggests a continuous, fluid construction of memory and the act of remembering, constantly veering back and forth between past and present. Moreover, the incident refers to a clear change of spatial location, with the narrated I leaving his home for good. As the distance to the house of his parents arguably still holds true, the momentary narration in a present tense might serve to highlight this ongoing spatial remoteness. Alongside this, the unfamiliarity of the churchyard and the proximity of graves can serve as spatial metaphors for illustrating a difficult coming-of-age, as well as a generally dangerous and life-threatening period of drug-consumption, most vividly retold in *Toytown*. In *Spell*, the presumable same move is narrated, although, in line with the focus on the mother, defined as 'move […] out of my mother's house' (*PS*, 133). Narrated in retrospection, the passage puts forth a more definite and conclusive take on leaving home and it excludes the father from a conception of home.

Inherent to running away from home is the desire 'to be somewhere else', a spatial construction without a clear determinant, only defined as remoteness from the previous life and its spatial confinement (*LF*, 201). However, the narration moves back to a narrated past, by recounting

visits to his mother: 'I drifted around, stopping in at the house now and then, when I thought the coast was clear. I never stayed long and, much to my mother's disappointment, I was soon off again, wandering from place to place' (*LF*, 205). Strikingly, there is no mentioning of his father, so that he only visits the place when his father is absent, and then just for the sake of his mother. The dislocation from his parents is not yet complete, and creates a difficult tension between the affective closeness to his mother and the hating distance to his father. Whereas the home still functions as some sort of focal point, an obligation and yet a fixed place, his life is otherwise characterised as aimless drifting around, attending nameless, meaningless places, which serve as undetermined contrast and potential for freedom and non-belonging.

The expressions of going somewhere yet nowhere pinpoint the undetermined nature of this state of mind. Accordingly, the spaces in *A Lie* increasingly turn towards non-determined places, imaginary ones, and those characterised by a purpose to disappear. The text incorporates an underlying change, and moves from a description of vexed homes to the inclusion more imaginary, non-determined spaces. Furthering the plot movement and increasing distance from the father figure, the depiction of spaces does not only function as an ordering principle, but also as a metaphorical underscoring of this structure. In line with a refusal of clear-cut belonging, such displacements can also resemble what Griem refers to as 'liberating isolation', a state of non-belonging that nonetheless grants the narrator and protagonist a mental realm for reflection without socio-material obligations.[27] This is also accounted for by Bracke, who observes 'a deep sense of disconnection between themselves and society'.[28] In *Spell*, a similar instance of roaming around with no particular place is characterised by the expression 'to stay afloat' (*PS*, 157). This serves to further highlight the liquid and potentially instable quality of such an aimless spatial orientation and proffers a slightly nuanced reading of these non-determined places, which signify, at least in part, social withdrawal and distance.

By foregrounding spaces and realms, the three texts thus share a strategy of ordering memory in relation to spaces. Negotiating the vexed treatment of home and belonging, they employ similar places, also in line with his general oeuvre, but also place their own emphases and partly diverging readings. The changing focuses in the context of autofictive self-presentation can be read as a way of ordering, re-ordering and re-writing the self along these spatial and affectively connoted lines. Not only functioning as spaces for memory and remembering, this repeated but simultaneously non-repeating treatment of spaces shows how memory and subjective remembering is not bound to strict truth-claims. In contrast to popular memoirs, then, the narrative construction is staged as non-linear, refusing conventional patterns of transformation. Rather, the autofictional self is a multiple entity, subject to renegotiations and potential displacements. In this sense, the strategies of placing and displacing the self and memory illustrate how autofiction, and particularly serial autofictions, tackle the self as a multi-facetted entity.[29] Instead of telling one story of the self, serial autofictions rely on a multitude of stories, constituting a potentially open-ended process of self-negotiation. This open-endedness is quite

---

[27] Griem, p. 93.
[28] Bracke, p. 421.
[29] See Inge van de Ven, 'Karl Ove Knausgård's My Struggle and the Serial Self', *Between*, 6(1), (2016), 1-16. Her analysis provides a good starting point for serial autobiographies as repeated forms of self-narrative, which however requires expansion in scope and methodology.

a literal phenomenon in Burnside's case, since he is working on more books of memory.[30] Thus, revisiting and rewriting the self along the lines of non-stabile places appears as one narrative strategy for illustrating this while also accounting for the subjective and fraught nature of personal remembering.

Underlying a general cultural preoccupation with self-improvement and re-invention and changed concepts of subjectivity, serial and even autofictive narratives showcase an extreme case of refusing coherency and linearity. In contrast to conventional truth expectations, uttered quite prominently in the so-called "memoir boom", autofictive self-narratives thus openly undermine the notion of a singular life story in a contemporary context and highlight the impossibility of authenticity and mere factual life-narrative. By using space as one angle for examining the instabilities of the narrating and narrated self, one potential narrative strategy for autofictive recollections thus comes into focus. Through revisitations and re-narrations, Burnside's texts thus stage an epistemological instability of remembering and self-formation. On a larger scale, this analysis also requires to be broadened in scope, for once relating how other authors might engage in similar techniques of spatialisation and displacement. In conclusion, one may say that the discussion of autofiction in line with serial forms of autobiography needs further elaboration, particularly in how other narrative strategies might tie in with a non-stabile form of contemporary subjectivity.

List of Works Cited

Astrid Bracke, 'Solitaries, Outcasts and Doubles. The Fictional Oevure of John Burnside', *English Studies*, 95(4), (2014), 421-444

Brewster, Scott, 'Beating, Retreating: Violence and Withdrawal in Iain Banks and John Burnside', in *Ethically Speaking: Voice and Values in Modern Scottish Writing*, ed. James McGonigal and Kirsten Stirling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 179-198

——, 'Borderline Experience. Madness, Mimicry and Scottish Gothic', *Gothic Studies*, 7(1), (2005), 79-86

Burnside, John, *A Lie About My Father* (London: Vintage, 2006)

——, *I Put A Spell On You* (London: Vintage, 2014)

——, *Waking Up In Toytown* (London: Vintage, 2009)

Campbell, Alexandra, 'Being, Dwelling, Tracing: John Burnside's Creaturely Cartographies', *Anglistik—International Journal of English Studies*, 27(2), (2016), 95-109

---

[30] As remarked by the author during readings in Hamburg and Frankfurt in 2016 and 2017.

Gilmore, Leigh, 'American Neoconfessional: Memoir, Self-Help and Redemption on Ophra's Couch', *Biography*, 33(4), (2010), 657-679

Griem, Julika, 'John Burnside's Seascapes', in *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space*, ed. Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), pp. 87-106

Hustvedt, Siri, 'The Real Story', in *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2013), pp. 93-115

Jones, E.H., 'Autofiction', in *Life Writing: Essays on Autobiography, Biography and Literature*, ed. by Richard Bradford (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 174-184

Ott, Christine, and Jutta Weiser, 'Autofiktion und Medienrealität', in *Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Kulturelle Formungen des postmodernen Subjekts*, ed. by Christine Ott and Jutta Weiser (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), pp. 7-18

Schmitt, Arnaud, 'Making the Case for Self-Narration Against Autofiction', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 25(1), (2010), 122-137

Schwalm, Helga, 'Autobiography', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology Online*. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/autobiography>. [Accessed 16 November 2017]

van de Ven, Inge, 'Karl Ove Knausgård's My Struggle and the Serial Self', *Between*, 6(1), (2016), 1-16

West-Pavlov, Russell, *Spaces of Fiction / Fictions of Space—Postcolonial Place and Literary DeiXis* (Basingstoke, NH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)