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“I Picture Two Men Intertwined in a Double Helix”: Denaturalizing the Heteronormative in Jessica Grant’s *Come, Thou Tortoise*

GEMMA MARR

IN HER REVIEW OF *Come, Thou Tortoise* (2009), Diane Baker Mason writes that “I don’t believe I’ve ever read anything quite like [the novel]. In fact, I’m not even sure what it’s about.” Although the novel received many positive reviews and won the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, Jessica Grant’s narrative of Audrey “Oddly” Flowers remains understudied and hard to define. Using a non-linear sequence of personal flashbacks, the narrative moves through Audrey’s present-day situation by detailing her closest relationships and moments of personal growth. Alongside these complex reflections, Winnifred, Audrey’s pet tortoise, which also acts as a narrator, provides integral glimpses of Audrey from an external perspective. Admittedly, *Come, Thou Tortoise* is difficult to synopsise, but that does not make its content any less radical. As Baker Mason goes on to make clear, “it doesn’t really matter that *Come, Thou Tortoise* defies simplistic categorization.” From the beginning, Grant’s unique style of playing with language and narrative structure sets the novel apart from the romantic realism of Newfoundland and Labrador’s early literary canon and the growing wave of historical fiction from the province that is “imbued with a sense of loss” (Wyile 173).

Rather than simply “boldly energetic and playful” with “bearable” dialogue as Lucy Ellman suggests, the complex narrative strings Grant weaves throughout the novel generates a St. John’s both recognizable and renegotiated, thus actively participating in a vibrant and ongoing conversation taking place in Newfoundland’s literary community. Writing alongside authors such as Lisa Moore and Michael Winter, who investigate an urban Newfoundland in a state of flux, Grant builds upon and questions “the wonders and terrors of a globalized and tech-

nology-dominated present” and the continuation of “shared attitudes traditionally privileged in the culture of Newfoundland” that individuals use to “ground and stabilize themselves” (Fowler 119). Grant purposefully interrogates the strongholds of the traditional family through a rearticulation of urban space, writing a St. John’s made strange to revise and reorient the family to include queer relations. Not only does the novel interrogate the tension between sexuality and biology within the family, but also through the narration of her personal struggles and her navigation through straight space Audrey turns the reader’s gaze on the engrained, heteronormative predispositions that have been central to much of the region’s fiction. By reading moments of slippage peppered throughout the narrative and mapping the (re)orientation of language and space, I argue that *Come, Thou Tortoise* creatively deprivileges the centrality of the heteronormative family and, in doing so, actively redefines essentialist understandings of the region to include a new set of experiences, representations, and realities.

“You’re as Good as Home”: Surveying the Importance of the Home Place

Although the roles of sex and sexuality in the Canadian literary canon have been studied, the intersections of space and sexuality in the Atlantic region have received less attention. Indeed, following Peter Dickinson’s assertion in 1999 that a “discourse of (homo)sexuality and its role (or non-role) in the formation and organization of a literary tradition in this country . . . is virtually non-existent” (4), a critical focus on the development of and connections between Canadian literary traditions and non-normative sexualities has developed. Dickinson’s *Here Is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada* (1999), his work with Richard Cavell titled *Sexing the Maple: A Canadian Sourcebook* (2006), and Terry Goldie’s *Pink Snow: Homotextual Possibilities in Canadian Fiction* (2003) all provide theoretical tools, critical perspectives, and literary examples that highlight the complex interplay between sexuality and nationality in much of the Canadian literary canon. Similarly, many articles, such as Goldie and Lee Frew’s recent work “Gay and Lesbian Literature in Canada” in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2016), aim to provide overviews of the “destabilizing of sexuality and gender” (874) in Canadian literature.

Over the past twenty years, these texts have worked in different ways to highlight how the heteronormative and patriarchal structures so central to Canadian nation building and national consciousness have been constructed through, written against, or questioned in Canadian works.

As this critical interrogation of the “textual *superabundance* of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality” in Canadian literature grew (Dickinson 4), each work entered into a dialogue with the rest, creating a movement through latent representations of queerness “distinctively constituted *as secrecy*” (Sedgwick 73) and into contemporary representations of sexuality as a diverse and embodied experience. As this corpus continues to develop, creative works by John Richardson, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, Dorothy Livesay, Sinclair Ross, Leonard Cohen, Dionne Brand, and many others garner attention, yet the above studies tend to overlook texts from Atlantic Canada. Although Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) has invited queer readings¹ (or in some cases brief acknowledgements), a consideration of the wider particularities of sexuality in Atlantic Canadian literature remains underdeveloped. Moreover, despite the number of texts from Newfoundland and Labrador that represent queer identities and relations, critical engagement with these works remains underwhelming. Novels such as Sara Tilley’s *Duke* (2015) or Wayne Johnston’s *The Son of a Certain Woman* (2013) and *The Divine Ryans* (1990) (which, like *Come, Thou Tortoise*, is set in St. John’s and follows a child’s developing understanding of his father’s sexuality), have received little attention. Similarly, more recent short fiction by Robert Chafe and Eva Crocker has yet to garner significant scholarly interest. Apart from excellent articles by Paul Chafe (“Where”) and Mareike Neuhaus on Kathleen Winter’s 2010 novel *Annabel*, critical attention to sexuality in works written or set in Newfoundland and Labrador — a province with a distinct social, economic, and political history — is almost non-existent.

This lack of critical engagement with sexuality in Atlantic Canadian literature is made doubly problematic through a brief overview of regionally specific criticism. Many studies in the past three decades have done great work to interrogate the roles of race, class, and gender in Atlantic Canadian literature. Still, the prevalence of heteronormative structures in much of the region’s fiction merits focused analysis. In his groundbreaking study *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and*

Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia (1994), Ian McKay outlines the development and continuation of the fictitious “Folk” in cultural productions of and from the region to showcase the misconceptions that arise from a homogenized and simplistic understanding of place. Writing at roughly the same time as Dickinson, McKay details, among other things, how the image of the “natural” family came to be fundamental to the Atlantic region. Described in his opening reading of the fishing family portrait as a manufactured “truth” (xiii) and continuing through to the final discussion of the Folk as an antimodern construction, the centrality of the family for the Folk — as heteronormative and patriarchal — creates a discursive space for McKay to address a variety of critical subjects, such as racial erasure, gender ideology, and biological “blood ties” (275). Although McKay makes clear that the Folk were and are “family centered and respectful of traditional moralities” (137), the family acts mainly as a means of moving through the iterations and implications of the Folk from a variety of important angles rather than as a unit to be deconstructed and analyzed for its own heteronormative structures.

McKay’s work has been highly influential, and many critics have built upon his reflections on the centrality of the family. In *Studies in Maritime Literary History 1760-1930* (1991), for instance, Gwendolyn Davies disputes McKay’s assertions that “Maritime literature is merely a literature of nostalgia created by middle class writers who idealize a pastoral, golden-age” (195).² Instead of a skewed view of a selective past, Davies details the home place as a “common bond in being from ‘down home,’” which generates a “sense of cultural continuity and psychological identification in the face of social fragmentation, outmigration, and a continuing hardscrabble economy” (193, 194). While Davies speaks of the home place in the context of the Maritimes, in *Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada* (2004) Danielle Fuller widens the scope, locating the home place as a space of critique for Atlantic Canadian women to write against “the conservative and exclusive notion” of home and community (30). Fuller argues that these writers “situate households and places within ruling relations that are experienced locally but that operate on a much larger scale” (32), a particularly striking critical process in contemporary women’s writing from Newfoundland. For example, Susanne Marshall highlights how Lisa Moore navigates the minutiae of everyday life in the province

to blur “the distinction between what is and is not a home place . . . dependent not only on topography but on human connection — and disconnection” (80). Whether upheld by or contested in the literature, the concept of the home place is an apt starting point from which to interrogate the impacts of heteronormative regulation within and upon the home and family.

In much of his work, Herb Wyile, like McKay and Fuller, problematizes the notion of any coherent narrative of the Atlantic region grounded in a conventional understanding of home. Most notably, in *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature* (2011), Wyile offers an interrogation of literary depictions of globalization and work, the changing nature of social relations, and resistance to simplistic narratives of the region by Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, and women writers to highlight the methods used to redefine the traditional literary milieu of the region. Wyile contends that, “[r]ather than [being] hermetically sealed in the nineteenth century,” contemporary writers offer “a resistance to the idyllic constructions of the region as a leisure space, and exhibit an acute consciousness of the degree to which the region is shaped by past and present economic, political, and social developments” (6). Throughout *Anne of Tim Hortons*, Wyile highlights the various ways that contemporary writers have shifted the overarching view of the region “by openly critiquing the implications of a Folk vision of that society” (103) and by emphasizing the complex social realities that exist on the East Coast.

I mention these studies — of both Atlantic Canadian literature generally and sexuality in Canadian literature specifically — because viewing their overlapping attentions brings to light the importance of thinking through the family as a site of power relations, a manifestation of rigidly structured sexual norms, and, importantly, as an opportunity to reorient ourselves away from the “traditional moralities” (McKay 137) and hegemonic heteronormativity of the Folk and the home in the region’s literature. By focusing on Newfoundland, with its “very different set of cultural and ideological tensions [that] must be considered as a regional literature distinct in itself” (Creelman 3), *Come, Thou Tortoise* complicates and deconstructs the family through a navigation of the home “space” and the city of St. John’s to give voice to queer relations in the province, acting as a springboard for readings of sexuality and the family in the literature of the wider Atlantic region.

“I Don’t Recognize This Latest Permutation”: Rethinking the Home Space

Space, gaze, and orientation are all central to Sara Ahmed’s articulation of a “queer phenomenology.” Ahmed builds upon the work of spatial theorists and philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to “show how bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space . . . [and] how bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space” (*Queer Phenomenology* 5). Beginning from the point of disorientation, Ahmed reflects on the perception of, movement through, and “second skin” of space: that is, on how various spaces — the home, the social, the professional — “impress on the body” (9) to change and shape how we orient ourselves in the world. Within regional literary criticism, space and spatial theory have performed an essential function. A brief review of the scholarship makes this clear, for the contrasting depictions of space (urban/rural), the preservation of specific spaces (historic sites), and the reconsideration of certain spaces (“Africadia”) all aid in the conceptualization and critical interrogation of Atlantic Canada and its literatures.³ Similar themes and concerns arise in the literature and criticism of Newfoundland. Christopher Armstrong, Paul Chafe, Peter Thompson, and others highlight the tension between the urban spaces of St. John’s and a romanticized, rural vision of the province, particularly found in the navigation of sterile and intimate spaces as characters attempt to understand contemporary Newfoundland.⁴

By offering another means of inquiry, Ahmed’s integration of space and sexuality adds a crucial new dimension to the understanding and use of space in regional criticism. Starting from the “straight line” of orientation, Ahmed argues that “Sexuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces . . . but also in the sense that bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space” (*Queer Phenomenology* 67). For her, sexual orientation is less the having of an orientation — that is, as something “integral to the subject” (68) — and more the process of becoming — that is, extending and moving through spaces delineated as normative. Ahmed contends that sexuality involves a kind of hidden “work” that organizes and is organized by factors outside individual desire, noting specific-

ally “how the familial and social are already arranged” (100). Thus, to be queer involves everyday acts of negotiation and navigation through spaces preconceived as “straight,” an accumulative process of refusing to reorient oneself toward the normative that necessitates a move through space in different ways.

This renegotiation through “straight” space holds enormous potential for a critical inquiry into sexuality in Atlantic Canadian literature. Rather than work within the boundaries of the traditional Newfoundland literary canon, with a “tendency toward nostalgia, an inclination to see the past as . . . a greater source of regional pride” (Wyile 135), *Come, Thou Tortoise* revises conventional constructions of both place and family to write queer relations as a manifest presence in the region’s present. Audrey’s narrative works to destabilize the traditional family, actively refusing the rigid parameters established through “the heteronormative field,” a space that both constructs and complicates engrained structures of normativity. Ahmed describes this field as an open space “that contains objects [and] would hence refer us to how certain objects are made available by clearing, through the delimitation of space as a space for some things rather than others.” She continues: “Heterosexuality in a way becomes a field, a space that gives ground to, or even grounds, heterosexual action through the renunciation of what it is not, and also by the production of what it is” (“Orientations” 558). Ahmed argues that certain things — family photos, furniture, socialized jokes, as well as physical relations and actions — work in tandem to carve out, constitute, and claim the heteronormative field. This space becomes a space of orientation, instructing us how to move through the world by and through our interactions with these codified objects. This field acts as a space where the heteronormative individual and family are recognized and accepted via an adherence or submission to a specific code of normative conduct.

Audrey’s unique interaction with space is therefore an important aspect of her articulation of her family within and against the structures of heteronormativity. As Ahmed notes, “If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with” (“Orientations” 543). For Audrey, this affective connection among people, space, and orientation becomes most palpable after her father’s death. We learn in the opening pages of the novel that her “dad

is in a comma, sorry coma,” from a “severe blow to the medulla oblongata as he was walking home. From, this is unbelievable, a Christmas tree. Hanging sideways out of a pickup truck” (Grant 5-6). Because Walter dies while Audrey is travelling, the St. John’s into which she arrives has been irrevocably altered. She notes this shift instantly: “This is the wrong airport. The old airport had no escalators and we were all alive in it” (31). From the opening pages, her movement through space is marked by loss, and as Audrey navigates through the “wrong” old spaces she is forced to recodify her understanding of and her interactions with her home and family.

When Audrey returns home to St. John’s, then, she must reorient herself within this new space. This (re)navigation of the home place gives the reader intimate access to the Flowers family, and as Audrey moves through their home she uses specific memories to highlight details of the history of Walter and Thoby. Ahmed describes this shifting process of orientation toward others as “shap[ing] the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies” (*Queer Phenomenology* 3). For the Flowers family, the shifting process in their familial structure is palpable, as Audrey initially states: “How can there be only two of us. I keep looking over my shoulder” (Grant 34). This change in familial proximity and her perpetual distance from her deceased father forces Audrey to reorient herself around and with Thoby, and though eventually she reflects that “Maybe I am acclimatizing to this house that doesn’t have my dad alive in it” (136), her initial days in the home after his death prompt her to reflect on her life and closest relationships.

Audrey begins her process of reflection and reorientation from the kitchen table. By designating the table as her “new headquarters” because “the rest of the house hurts” (112), she solidifies a locale from which to view and review her familial relations. Specifically, this long stay at the kitchen table becomes the impetus for her reflections on the relationship between her father and Thoby. It is from this location that we learn of the familial tensions among Grandmother, Walter’s brother Toff, Walter, and Thoby; we become privy to Thoby’s (and secretly Walter’s) time at the motel called the Civil Manor; and we see them play a game of Clue on the kitchen table, an event that foregrounds a key moment of revelation later in the novel. In this way, Audrey’s presence in the specific spaces of the Flowers residence and her reorientation

through their home without her father becomes more than merely a process of mourning. Her movement through memory and space acts as a means of rediscovery, as a method of renegotiating and understanding Walter and Thoby within and against the presumed heterosexual structures of the family.

This process becomes clear as Audrey moves throughout the house. After many days at the kitchen table, she asks herself “Am I ready to leave the ground floor. I’ve been circling — kitchen, living room, hall, bathroom — for days” (168). Exhausted, as she climbs the stairs, she witnesses Thoby in a moment of extreme grief. Although Audrey initially reflects that “He seemed so okay,” she goes on to note that “He is not okay. . . . I’m paralyzed. I’m watching him behind his back. *I’m not supposed to see this*” (169; emphasis added). From her liminal position behind Thoby, as unseen but seeing, Audrey retrieves his grief from its relegated position on the sidelines of the narrative. Shifting the reader’s gaze from her own grief, her move from the kitchen table necessitates a refocusing as Audrey moves away from her own memories and toward the reality of his loss. Although Thoby is “wobbly” and “trembles” as they drive home from the airport, and though she has noted his dishevelled appearance, thus far in the novel she has continually refocused her attention on other matters. As the depth of his loss comes into closer proximity, Audrey persistently reminds herself of what not to think about and repeats the mantra “Don’t look at him” (61).

As she sustains her view of Thoby from her position on the stairs, her observation adds a new dimension to her own and thus the reader’s understanding of her familial dynamic. By allowing her gaze to refocus on Thoby, aspects of his experience are recuperated from the background of the narrative. As Ahmed contends, “We can think . . . of the background not simply in terms of what is around what we face, as the ‘dimly perceived,’ but as produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order to sustain a certain direction; in other words, to keep attention on what is faced” (*Queer Phenomenology* 31). Although not clarified at this stage in the novel, Thoby’s breakdown on the porch revises his then-known positioning within the family. Thoby is momentarily in flux as Audrey renegotiates the affective impacts of his transformed proximity, and this progression from Walter’s strong “brother” to something as yet unknown is solidified through the later revelation in Penzance.

Just as Audrey must leave her place at the table to move through her grief and reorient herself in the world without her father, so too Thoby must leave the site of his own mourning to revisit his life before Walter's accident. Despite her fear of flying, Audrey eventually decides to look for Thoby in "the bottom of England" (Grant 385), and after a series of equally sad and hilarious encounters she finds him in a cottage in Penzance. As Audrey begs Thoby to wake up, she relates that "He looks like a pirate. Or like someone whose brother just died. Or like someone whose true love is dead" (387). This movement through his characterizations brings her negotiation of her family full circle. Audrey reaches back to the opening of the novel through her reference to her father's depiction of their family as "a dad and a pirate and a child" (140), to the falsehood of Thoby and Walter's relationship as brothers, to solidify fully and make known the truth of their status as lovers. Rather than being "really coy about sex" (Ellman), then, Grant's strategic use of allusion and relegation is purposeful. These "orientation devices" (Ahmed, "Orientations" 544) serve as moments of negotiation with the normative and detail Audrey's movement inside and against the heteronormative field. While Audrey stabilizes herself at the table, she sustains the narrative gaze within her own affective field; however, by eventually moving through the home and into the world, she expands this gaze and allows herself access to what she thinks she is not meant to see. As she becomes oriented in space without her father, the reader gains glimpses of the vaguely obscured affections between Walter and Thoby.

This is crucial because the novel runs for almost four hundred pages without an overt statement of their sexuality. Importantly, when the reader is ultimately given a clear image of their relationship, it is through a memory of Walter, Thoby, and Audrey around the kitchen table, the location that she initially must leave in order to provide the first clues of their relationship. As she attempts to wake Thoby, she asks if he "had to run away to a place that did not have my dad dead in it" (Grant 389). Upon highlighting his inability to reorient himself after their loss, Audrey begins to move through her closest memories of Walter and Thoby together:

Sometimes a card fell on the floor. And we were so absorbed in the game on the table, in the rolling-pinned-flat house so like the one my dad had escaped in England, that we forgot there was a floor,

and a real house around us, and an under-the-table world where other mysteries might be unfolding. . . . I crouched down to pick her up, and as I did, I saw my opponents holding hands under the table. Outside the game. I grabbed the card and sprang up with a surge of happiness. What was the source of this happiness. I thought it was because I'd found the lost card. Look! Look what I found! But it was not because of the lost card. Do you hear me. That was not why I was so happy. (389)

This move back to the table renegotiates the shift in proximity that spurs her initial reflections and permits her full-circle disclosure of her familial dynamic. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, the family table is a means of configuring the details of their family and acts as a central place from which Audrey reorients the reader's "attention on what is faced" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 31).

By returning to the table to detail the reality of Walter and Thoby's relationship, Audrey's process of reorientation becomes an overt refusal to adhere to the "straight line." Indeed, as Audrey tries desperately to wake Thoby, she states that "I know who you are, Mr. Green. Mr. Moss. I know it was because of me that you met my dad. . . . Thank you for loving my dad. Thank you for coming to live with us" (Grant 390). By navigating through her familial spaces now destabilized by loss — the kitchen table, Walter's bedroom, the tree in her bedroom, the plane and the basement, and back to England — her process of orientation becomes a means of reconfiguration. Rather than simply remembering Walter and Thoby as brothers and accepting the parameters of the heteronormative field, Audrey pushes back against these restrictions by recalling their relationship with joy and understanding.

Importantly, in this scene, Audrey does not come to a new understanding of her father and Thoby's sexuality. I certainly challenge Ellman's review of the novel in *The Guardian*, which argues that "It is doubtful whether Audrey ever fully absorbs the fact that her father was gay and that Uncle Thoby, who helped to bring her up, was his lover, not his brother." Rather than a simple shift between secrecy and exposition, the novel turns the gaze on the reader, and Audrey's revelation of her knowledge of their relationship complicates this disclosure. As Audrey moves passionately through her bedside speech, the reader can not only recognize what she is saying in the present but also reflect on and reinterpret the "orientation devices" previously articulated in the

narrative. One such clue earlier in the text details this renegotiation process clearly as she relates that “You don’t solve a mystery by adding information. You solve a mystery by subtracting what you think you already know. You subtract your assumptions one by one until you are left with the truth” (Grant 330). This is ultimately the process at work throughout *Come, Thou Tortoise*. Rather than build toward an eventual unveiling of her parents’ sexuality, Grant structures Audrey’s narrative as a stripping away. As Audrey reorients herself to the world without her father in it, she speaks back to a long history of writing from Atlantic Canada that centralizes the heteronormative home place and family as essential to, even emblematic of, the region. By openly recognizing and rejoicing in Walter and Thoby’s love, she asks readers to reflect on their own assumptions of what constitutes a family and writes queer relations as an active presence into the spaces of St. John’s.

“Funny How People Will Not See Something They Don’t Recognize”: Destabilizing the Heteronormative Family

Just as Audrey’s movement through space destabilizes the heteronormative family as tied to the home place, so too her use of language gives the reader intimate access to the place of the Flowers family in their wider community. Moreover, the communal acceptance of Walter and Thoby in St. John’s actively critiques the supposed supremacy of the nuclear family in the region. By making clear that “As far back as I can remember we have lived on Wednesday Place” (Grant 41), Audrey makes a distinct note of their community as her “point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where’ of its dwelling” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 8). Because “bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling” (9), Audrey’s connection to and development in St. John’s are integral to her understanding of herself and her movements through the wider world. Through her unique means of seeing and navigating St. John’s, Audrey posits 3 Wednesday Place as a site of rejection — not the rejection of her family from their community but their communal rejection of traditional iterations of the biological family. By breaking from the conventions of language and movement, she describes the East Coast as a safe space for the Flowers family, destabilizing the heteronormative to naturalize a queer familial construction within the region.

Throughout the text, Audrey uses the family's unique lexicon and relationship to the surrounding community to establish language and the home space as central sites of renegotiation. She continually lists and defines a special category of terms and phrases; for example, we learn that "Thoby equals Qantas. Which in our family means safe" (Grant 35). Or, as Audrey recalls attempting to detail her dreams to her uninterested (though loving) father, she notes that "I will remember my montage. Which is code for dream" (57). With each new term or phrase in the "secret family language" (81), the reader becomes inculcated in the household dialect in order to understand the dynamics of the family and the wider community. Like language, the home space of the Flowers is similarly reworked through the actions and relations of the family to their local "environs" (100), and as Audrey details the unique aspects of her neighbourhood "the reader feels involved, spoken to like a member of the family, or of the community" (Baker Mason). Audrey describes specific movements through space, such as "the Northwest Shove," and her unique method of running around the house to create a "bounce [that] can be felt inside the house and possibly inside all the houses on Wednesday Place" (Grant 41). Even the landscape is made strange through the bottomless pond that Thoby states has "never frozen in my or Clint's or Oddly's memories" (40). In a particularly symbolic move, Audrey uses her flower shovel to imprint an emblem of her family onto the landscape, actively naturalizing their presence in St. John's by "whack[ing] some pretty patterns" throughout her community, "because Flowers are what we are" (75). In this way, the home space is reconfigured as a site of self-assertion, and as Grant creates a non-conventional connection within the community through language and location she rewrites the "down home" in which they all reside to reflect the reality of St. John's as a diverse and vibrant city.

This self-assertion is particularly powerful, for the level of intimacy among the reader, Audrey, and her surrounding community is juxtaposed with the geographical distance of England and the ideological variance of Audrey's grandmother. An upper-class, elderly woman from London, Grandmother continually adheres to custom. She refuses to rethink the rules of Clue (Grant 97), she does not acknowledge the alternative birthdays of Audrey, Walter, and Thoby (88), and she is unceasingly disapproving of their familial dynamic. Although she remains tied to Walter as a result of their familial lineage, Grandmother maintains a

palpable distance from Audrey and Thoby throughout the novel. This discrepancy in their relations becomes clear when the elderly woman asks “Do you know what you’re doing with that child” (140). By describing Audrey as “that child,” Grandmother highlights a break in the chain of the “conventional family,” which Ahmed describes as “following a certain line, the family line, that directs our gaze” (“Orientations” 560). The phrase “that child” disconnects Audrey from a possessive form of familial connection; she is not “their” child or “your” child but acts as an embodiment of the disjuncture of the familial line.

The implication of Grandmother’s question is not lost on the then seven-year-old Audrey, and after listening to the conversation between her father and Grandmother she goes on to detail the hidden meaning behind this question: “I knew what she was getting at. The other parent. Where is the other parent. And clearly you do *not* know what you’re doing with that child, Walter” (Grant 140). By gesturing to an absent parent, Grandmother negates Thoby’s presence entirely, and this act of erasure reveals to Audrey that “not everyone was on board” with their family. She realizes “through [her] Lysol tears” (140) that Grandmother’s interrogation of their family articulates the presumption of the nuclear, heteronormative family as the standard, an assertion that Audrey perceives as a threat.

By discounting Walter and Thoby as possible parents and Audrey as a connected member of her familial line, Grandmother’s question highlights the supposed investment (and thus reward) of the conventional family. As Ahmed details, heterosexuality is a pressure to accept “the family line as [the child’s] own inheritance” (“Orientations” 560). Thus, by giving birth to and raising Walter in the confines of the conventional family, Grandmother invested in the continuation of the normative line, an assumption that “pushes the child along specific paths” (560). By not conforming to the conditions of heterosexuality laid out by his familial structure, Walter represents a break in this chain, and any non-normative familial construction of which he is a part remains unrecognizable to and disconnected from his mother. Ahmed contends that “The heterosexual couple becomes a point along this line, which is given to the child. . . . [I]t is what the child is asked to aspire ‘toward’” (560). The conventional family stands in as both a past and a future pressure by looking not only backward to a familial inheritance instilled

at birth and reiterated throughout Walter's development but also forward through Grandmother's assertion of Walter's parental failure.

This pressure to aspire toward the normative family is clearly articulated when Audrey states that "Families are supposed to have a king, a queen, and a jack. Not a dad and a pirate and a child who doesn't know her own age" (Grant 140). This comparison implies a disjuncture from the normative path laid out by Walter's familial roots; however, as Audrey reflects on her family, it becomes clear that she does not feel bound by the strictures of convention. Instead, she is content and states that "dad explained this. . . . sometimes there is only one parent. Sometimes there are two. Sometimes there are three. But what it comes down to is who wants to be. And if someone does want to be, like my dad, who really really wanted to be, . . . or like Uncle Thoby, then that person should be allowed to be" (140). For Audrey, Walter's explanation of their familial structure removes the pressure to aspire toward heteronormativity. Moreover, this depiction decentralizes the heteronormative couple as the only possible origin for the family. That is, Walter's "really" wanting to be a parent implies that Audrey does not stem from a damaged or defective heteronormative coupling. Instead, traditional notions of reproduction, genealogy, and ownership are irrelevant, and her understanding and acceptance of her own family are made clear: "I was wholeheartedly on board with that" (140). Rather than the model of "a king, a queen, and a jack," the family emerges from desire rather than inheritance, and its central strongholds — the number of parents, the method of becoming parents, and the function of the family as a site of legacy — are destabilized to make space for something decided on rather than a biological imperative.

Audrey makes the importance of safeguarding their version of the family explicit: "Our guests from England . . . would make us like a deck of cards. They would shuffle us apart. And so it was more important than ever that I protect us. England had kings, queens, and jacks. But we had the jokers. We *were* the jokers. Outside the deck, across the ocean, dancing our little jig of happiness" (Grant 141). This passage marks an important delineation between England, as a site of restriction, and the Flowers home in St. John's as a place of safety and desire. Indeed, Audrey details that "England was another word for Grandmother" (368), and as the novel progresses England is continually depicted as an overbearing and often oppressive place. The discourse

of heteronormativity and homophobia thus becomes tied to the province's colonial roots and embodied by Grandmother, who, despite her potential knowledge of Walter and Thoby's relationship, upholds "[t]he conjugal family" (Foucault 3) as standard. Michel Foucault outlines the historical processes of normalization whereby sex became "the serious function of reproduction. . . . The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as a model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy" (3). This imposition of the heteronormative as the standard generates the level of secrecy that Audrey works to negate throughout the novel, and Grandmother — the site of biological "generation" (Foucault 4) — becomes the silencing force against which Audrey continually speaks.

Through this process of repudiation, Audrey appears to continue the work of her deceased father. She details a conversation that she overheard as a child between Walter and Thoby emphasizing that "We were safe because my dad had pointed a gun at England and said, *Noli me tangere*" (Grant 368). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *noli me tangere* implies "a person . . . which must not be touched or interfered with." For Ahmed, "*tangere*, to touch," is a crucial site of social contact, a contingency in the processes of becoming "always directed toward others, however imagined" (*Queer Phenomenology* 103). By refusing his mother's "touch" on their family, Walter directs his development explicitly away from his biology. By vocalizing their disjuncture in this way, Walter and Audrey necessitate a clear break from tradition as connected to "blood ties" (McKay 275), England, and heteronormative articulations of the family. Both physical and emotional distance separate England and St. John's, stemming not only from Grandmother's questioning of their relationship but also from Walter's insistence on the negative implications of her presence. By redirecting his affective attention away from his mother and toward his local community, Walter is therefore an active agent in the discontinuation of biology as the origin of the family.

Instead, he chooses to create his own family by loving both Thoby and Audrey, and as an active member of his wider community he generates a strong and supportive network of relations in the spaces of St. John's. Importantly, his refusal to extend an "I-love branch" back to England turns the gaze on the figurehead of tradition to outline

the negative force of heteronormative pressure. “[H]e was taking sides. Our side of the Atlantic against theirs. And it wasn’t for himself he was doing it. It was for Uncle Thoby” (Grant 367). St. John’s becomes an integral location of the condemnation of homophobia and the strictures of heteronormativity. Rather than centralize a tension between Walter and Thoby’s sexuality and the ignorance or innocence of stereotypes associated with the East Coast, Grant reconfigures the community of St. John’s as a diverse, accepting, and protective place. By positioning the world *outside* St. John’s as a threat, she pushes against the hegemonic heteronormativity traditionally associated with the home place in Atlantic Canadian literature to naturalize queer relations in the region.

Conclusion

Although St. John’s as a fully positive locale for queer relations certainly simplifies the complex lived experiences of non-conforming sexualities in the region, Grant’s intervention in the literary construction of space and sexuality is significant. Similarly, though my redefined notion of the home space as a means of contesting the heteronormative construction of home and family overlooks the process of outmigration inherent in the literary trope, my reading shifts the focus from the experience of staying, an act complicated throughout the region by economic instability and lack of employment opportunities, to offer an additional avenue of analysis. I am most interested in the home place as a site of identification “in the face of social fragmentation” (Davies 194). Specifically, I wonder how fragmentation based upon sexuality, heteronormativity, and homophobia can affect how members of the queer community interact with traditional notions of the home place. In building upon existing analyses of the home place in this way, I contend that the rejection of the heteronormative family and the subsequent remapping of space in *Come, Thou Tortoise* offer a means of recognition for non-normative families in writing from the region.

As Wyile argues in *Anne of Tim Hortons*, juxtaposed with narratives of Atlantic Canada as comprised of “simple, content, unreflective fisherfolk” is a construction of the region as “Canada’s social, economic, and cultural basket case populated by deadbeats, welfare mothers, and rockbound trailer trash” (138). Where the Folk necessitates a “uniform and harmonious” (Wyile 101) construction of the region as innocent,

the East Coast as a backwater extends an equally destructive gaze. This disparaging view simplifies the real social, political, and economic tensions in the region to centralize a slew of negative stereotypes associated with poverty, laziness, and ignorance. The St. John's of *Come, Thou Tortoise* rejects both sides of this dichotomy, and while effectively "[r]ebuffing the gaze" (Wyile 137) Audrey Flowers does more than simply detail her familial dynamic. By inviting the reader into the community at Wednesday Place through the creation of specific phrases, the (re)invention of traditional spaces such as "Seagull hill," and the integration of moments of slippage and devices of orientation within the familial narrative, *Come, Thou Tortoise* generates a crucial disjuncture in how the home place and the region are traditionally conceptualized.

Of contemporary writing from Atlantic Canada, Alexander MacLeod writes that "regionalist writers are active participants in the cultural construction of the worlds that they inhabit" (107). This literary reconstruction is an ongoing and essential process that, as many regional critics have highlighted, generates a variety of vibrant new ways of thinking about, relating to, and navigating through Atlantic Canada's unique spaces and cultural discourses. Distinct from the experiences of the racialized family in George Elliott Clarke's *Africadia*, the heavily patriarchal family in Lynn Coady's *Cape Breton*, and the economic struggles of the Walsh family in David Adams Richards's *Miramichi*, Jessica Grant's revision of the family in St. John's is integral to the creation of alternative spaces in which non-normative sexualities can establish discursive power. Thus, though it might be a hard novel to define, by asking the reader to "subtract what you think you already know," *Come, Thou Tortoise* offers a critical addition to the literary landscape of Newfoundland and Labrador and the wider Atlantic Canadian region, for the creation of spaces where queer desire is made manifest is integral to an interrogation of the power structures inherent in the family and the home place.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ See Chapter 1 in Dickinson and Chapter 5 in Goldie.

² Although Davies's text was published three years before *The Quest of the Folk*, Davies cites McKay's early work "Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy's Cove" as a "tempting way to approach the home place," yet she contends that "to dismiss this literature as static, merely the product of middle class romanticization, is to ignore elements of realism, irony, and economic cynicism" (196).

³ Many critics from the region — including Alexander MacLeod, Susanne Marshall, Tony Tremblay, and Herb Wyile — rely heavily on spatial theory. Also see the special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* titled *Surf's Up: The Rising Tide of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*.

⁴ See, specifically, Armstrong; Chafe, "Beautiful Losers"; and Thompson. Although these articles focus on the work of Michael Winter, their articulations of the navigation of space, particularly urban space in St. John's, highlight tensions found in the works of many contemporary writers in the province.

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