

Despite This Loss We Go On

Book Review

Despite This Loss: Essays on Culture, Memory and Identity in Newfoundland and Labrador by Ursula A. Kelly and Elizabeth Yeoman (ISER Press: 2010).

JUDITH P. ROBERTSON

University of Ottawa

In memory of Dr. Roger I. Simon, Teacher.

In *Despite This Loss: Essays on Culture, Memory and Identity in Newfoundland and Labrador* (ISER Press: 2010), Memorial University Professors Ursula A. Kelly and Elizabeth Yeoman along with twelve cultural workers including teachers, curriculum specialists, academics, an architect, an Innu activist, a visual artist, and a playwright investigate the intricate legacy of loss that haunts and institutes—in part—Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) identity. “Grief is not a house, it’s a country,” states Bernice Morgan in *Cloud of Bone*. Likewise, for Kelly and Yeoman, NL performs as a “country” whose multiple significations—while over-determined and elusive—are profoundly mediated by the allusiveness of loss. About their book’s contributors, Kelly and Yeoman write: “They invite us to understand loss as inevitable and disruptive, as

inconsolable and productive. Together, they suggest that the chaos born of loss can become a space in which to reconsider what in life is germane and to reorient—to make something of what loss leaves us by resituating ourselves, individually and culturally, in relation to the event. Examining loss can propel a renewed ethic in relation to memory” (254). In this undaunted and principled view, NL is not so much a fixed place as it is a practiced place, comprising unforgiving temporal/spatial realities and the need for consciousness to articulate and safeguard itself in mobile and creative ways.

The problem is that “[F]rom a psychoanalytic perspective the patient is always suffering from the self-knowledge he has had to refuse in himself” (Phillips 1988, 53). The intrusion of a personal/collective remembrance of loss onto a terrain of melancholia creates identities that are emergent and turbulent spaces of struggle and agency. This theme anchors many of the chapters. Vicki Sara Hallet (74-90), for example, presents a case study of NL’s intergenerational patra-linear families to reveal the performative geographies of island spaces in which newcomers are “strangers”, a designation that produces the aporia it names. RM Kennedy (103-116) reads loss autobiographically against the sign of Ron Hynes’ “Sonny”, a supple identificatory figure whose “burden expresses the melancholic dilemmas of love and loss for all minoritized cultures learning to live with what Walter Benjamin has described as the catastrophic ‘wreckage’ (1968:257) of modernity” (105). Like Kennedy, Kate Bride (226-245) wonders what it means to remember loss through iconic forms of cultural heritage, for example, Cassie Brown’s *Death on the Ice* (1972). Bride demonstrates how the book’s photographs of the heinous 1914 sealing disaster have become a part of the cultural imaginary of what it means to be a Newfoundlander/Labradorian—identity positions imbued with notions of death and living with loss.

We should ask under what conditions, discursive and institutional, do “identity” differences become salient or defining characteristics of people and their ways of life, especially given the anomalous state of the sundry spaces and bodies of Newfoundland and Labrador? Kelly and Yeoman’s interpretative methodologies embrace geography, history (personal and collective), and metaphor as primary strata for reading that “beautiful terrible” place called Newfoundland and Labrador and its imbrication in social suffering. For Kelly and Yeoman—whether it is in a serious autobiographical meditation on the work of ambivalence in coming and going as an academic Newfoundlander, or on the distinctive ways in which NL remembers its vertiginous eddies of wartime anguish—the past slices grievous lines of hurt into the present. Reading performances of NL identity against this un-mourned “structure of feeling” can, therefore, only bring forward something better: dialogue and increased understanding.

Situated within a tradition of theoretical and philosophical studies that takes the personal as its starting point, this volume bravely tackles the difficult knowledge of loss in a way that is unburdened of the periodic tediousness of academic prose. Artists Marlene Creates (91-101) and Clar Doyle (117-126) draw on material culture as commemorative avenues of grace. Both Creates and Doyle anchor their narratives in a strong identification with workers and lay people as keepers of public memory. Tshaukuesh (Elizabeth Penashue) addresses the reader in a first person voice in two languages (Innu-aimun and English), that embodies grace in its invocation to witness development on the Upper and Lower Churchill and the anguish it engenders for Keepers of the Land (246-253). Similarly, Inuit teacher and curriculum specialist Sophie Tuglavina (157-175) affirms language as the fragile lynch pin for cultural survival. Tuglavina’s bilingual (Inuktitut/English) essay elaborates a cruel narrative of how the inability of Native communities to provide first language education for children—because of scarce resources,

qualified personnel and remote geography—results in the spectre of loss of traditional knowledge and the death of well-being.

The states of struggle that these essays portray reach out as fresh and intimate, opening questions about cultural grief in relation to anger, colonialism, development, diaspora, voice, sadness, living North, and facing forward. Writing in a deeply personal way exposed for all to see is difficult to achieve in an academic text, without seeming sentimental or solipsistic. A clear strength of *Despite This Loss* is that the editors and authors achieve this, while at the same time informing their perspectives with the rigor of helpful insights from Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, Roger Simon, Deborah Britzman, and Roland Barthes, among others.

A significant strength of the book is how it affirms NL as both a geographical and a metaphorical reality in whose spaces co-exist primary expressions of coloniality—and therefore of post-coloniality. For example, it is difficult to read Robert Mellin's chapter about vernacular architecture and resilience on Fogo Island (34-73) without at the same time thinking about the dizzying postmodern building extravaganza that native multi-millionaire Zita Cobb has begun through her mammoth investment on a stretch of rock long known for its ability to clear the ground for new relations. Susan Tilley (127-136) sabotages notions of fixedness in NL identity in her personal narrative about being devalued in academia through language, at the same time as being exoticized and romanticized by outsiders. In Tilley we read NL identity as a mobile practice, capable of operating on the fringes. The losses that attend diaspora can excite difference as a space of hope for those who return "home". This is a theme that also grounds the chapters of John Hoben (200-225) and Jennifer Wicks (137-156). In asking how representations of loss are mediated by discourse and mythology, Hoban reads survivor testimony in a NL rural community as a form of counter-hegemonic discourse, that—even though it may lack nuanced historical

complexity—demands from the witness an ethical response. Wicks draws our attention in important ways to how very difficult it is to research discursive processes in relation to identity, especially in the company of research participants whose voices are overpopulated with the politics of historical colonialist relations. By revisiting loss through the politicized routes of specific cultural, social, and personal genealogies, *Despite This Loss* contributes to critical educational practice by constructing new theoretical and methodological perspectives on mourning and memory, thus engaging subjugated histories. Ultimately, NL lives on in the reader's imaginary as a dynamic site in the production of new meanings about loss and identity, legible from the salvage of these perspectives.

Educational writing at its best does not provide easy answers and solutions; it creates problems. It performs a transitive affect. I am grateful to Kelly and Yeoman et al for editing and authoring a collection that brings the human in its frailty and precariousness onto the educational stage, thereby allowing us “to stand for the value and dignity of human life, to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives” (Butler 2007 xx). I thank them, too, for the honour of including, posthumously, the voice of Dianne Grant in the collection. Grant's contribution (176-191) squarely implicates schooling in the reproduction of inequality for Canadian students. Schooling in Canada's North is implicated in projects of loss that situate division at the core. Confederation, first language struggles, and the lure of the Land coalesce in processes of grief. *Despite This Loss* opens conditions for acquiring a new sense of immensity and humanity that may incite and motivate change.