Chapter 2

Writing “The Distance Home”
Migration, Mourning, and Difference

Introduction

And who would say, to watch him sleeping there, one hand trapped under his face, his dimple squashed, that this little boy will grow to be a man, like the rest of us, whose surest legacy is loss.

Lawrence O’Toole, Heart’s Longing

Early in his memoir Heart’s Longing: Newfoundland, New York and the Distance Home the author Lawrence O’Toole establishes the tenor of everyday life in the imagined community of the title, Heart’s Longing, a close resemblance to his birthplace of Renews, Newfoundland, a small fishing community on the southern Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland and Labrador. In these initial pages, O’Toole focuses on one day as he provides glimpses of the comings and goings of various people in the community. But this is no ordinary day in Heart’s Longing, for a death has struck one of the families, shifting the emotional landscape of the community and drawing all eyes toward the sisters, Dottie and Alverne Reddy, whose sister has died suddenly the day before. O’Toole describes the sisters in their home the morning following their sister’s death, noting
how, as they go about preparations for the wake and funeral, “neither survivor can find her grief, as if she’d somehow mis-
placed it” and how “each privately thinks how queer it is she
cannot find her grief for her dead sister” (p. 11). In many ways,
O’Toole’s memoir can be read as a quest to confront a *double entendre* of the “queerness”\(^1\) of grief—its elusive, haunting, and
often idiosyncratic character, which can be accentuated by sexu-
ality and difference—the long and difficult mourning that is
finding and negotiating grief, the “distance home” of the title.
This distance is physical, emotional, and spiritual, and intensely
confounded by displacement and difference. The narrative is a
pilgrimage of loss and reclamation and a testament to grief’s
haunting—how it is that, when we seem unable to find our
grief, it invariably finds us and makes a home within. In these
ways, the visit of death to the community of Heart’s Longing in
these opening pages is a fitting mise-en-scène for this memoir.

Cultural texts are opportunities to ask certain questions and
to inquire into particular politics and affects. O’Toole’s memoir
has personal meaning, given how his experiences resonated with
those of mine outlined in the preceding chapter. Despite our
difference of gender, we have many commonalities: the strug-
gle to reconcile one’s sexuality; the deep love of and alienation
from place; and the recognition of mourning as a central part
of coming to terms with both these difficulties. In addition to
these personal interests, I would argue that two characteristics
of this memoir help make it a potentially rich object of study in
a broader context of an educational discourse of loss and place:
first, the memoir captures well some of the complexities and
contradictions of leaving, longing, and belonging; and, second,
it exemplifies an explicit negotiation of mourning, melancholia,
and difference. In these senses, I argue that, as a multilayered,
artistically evocative study of migration and the vicissitudes of
leaving and return, and of reconciliation and renewal in the face
of loss, the memoir is what Paula Salvio calls “a narrative of
reparation” (Salvio, 2006, p. 84) through which complex, con-
tradictory, and ambivalent relationships to place, to self, and to
others are explored. The memoir is also a study in writing itself
as reparative. Using O’Toole’s memoir as an analytic focus,
then, I pursue the following questions: What does this memoir