Chapter 3

“The Word, for Loss”
Literacy, Longing, and Belonging

Introduction

Against a backdrop of public discourse that reduces literacy to abstracted skills and abilities, largely outside—or only with glib consideration—of social relations, and in which international literacy test scores rank nations and peoples on a global scale of progress in (post)modernity, too little attention continues to be given the sociocultural nature of literacy. New Literacy Studies scholars have insisted, for decades now, on the situated nature of literacy (Gee, 2001; Street, 2001) through their familiar refrain of “literacy as social practice,” but teachers continue to be guided by testing schedules and demands to enhance test scores, sometimes under threat of job security. Under such prevailing conditions, and despite a proliferation of research that directs us otherwise, the insights of New Literacy Studies remain marginalized within both public discourse and public school practices. In Canada, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador regularly scores lower than many other provinces on nationwide standardized tests. While New Literacy scholars would see their problematic character, such scores, usually presented in decontextualized ways to feed a sense of a “literacy crisis,” hold great public sway, both grabbing and reinscribing the cultural imagination in particular and often deeply conservative ways.

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The political dimensions of these conservative statistical dramas may be obvious to New Literacy Studies scholars, but less obvious are the psychic dimensions they can also register. There exists a dearth of research that might provide more compelling insight into the psychic complexities of literacy learning. If, as New Literacy Studies scholars argue, literacy is situated, social and political, then what emotional dynamics might operate within the deep particularity of specific social contexts to mediate relations to literacy technologies? This chapter is a partial exploration of the psychosocial aspects of literacy. Focusing on the \textit{structures of feeling} (Williams, 1973) that might accompany some prevailing and persistent beliefs about literacy, the paper highlights the complex intersections of history, memory, culture, and identity, and how their relational character may come to bear on longings for, beliefs about, and cultural practices of literacy. Framed around an analysis of \textit{Ann and Seamus}, written by Kevin Major and illustrated by David Blackwood, this chapter also offers something by way of what psychoanalytic inquiry might bring to literacy research and, in particular, to New Literacy Studies. Specifically, I use this discussion to inquire into the nature of certain attachments and their intersection with projects of literacy as they relate to social and cultural transformation, with particular reference to contemporary Newfoundland and Labrador.

\textbf{History’s Contemporary Resonance: \textit{Ann and Seamus}}

\textit{Ann and Seamus}, a verse novel,\textsuperscript{2} is a poetic rendition of the story of Ann Harvey, a largely unsung hero(ine) of early nineteenth century Newfoundland. Ann and her family, at that time in history the sole inhabitants of Isle aux Morts, a tiny community on the southwest coast, twice saved large numbers of seafarers shipwrecked on the reefs and sinkers that form the coastline of Newfoundland and Labrador. The rescue described in \textit{Ann and Seamus} of 163 Irish emigrants aboard the British brig \textit{Despatch} out of Londonderry, Ireland, en route to Quebec City in 1828, earned the family a gold medal from the Royal Humane Society. By all accounts, it was seventeen-year-old Ann