Conclusion

“Learning to Live with Ghosts”
Loss, Place, and Education

A Conclusion

Together, the chapters of this book reiterate an argument for a more concerted focus on loss in education. Cultural crises—of which loss is an indelible feature—demand a rearticulation of educational vision at local and global levels, as is well demonstrated in the work of many contemporary scholars working on many different fronts. The work of Edmund O’Sullivan (2002) in transformative education in the context of the threat of planetary collapse, that of Megan Boler (1997) in critical emotional literacy in the context of unrelenting imperialist war, and that of Rachel Kessler (2004) and her PassageWorks Institute (2000) devoted to the inner life of young people are but three examples that speak to some of these (not unrelated) contemporary crises.

The visions of these educators are in stark contrast with prevailing notions of education, those that shape and maintain current technicist, rationalist, and decontextualized forms of education. Such forms of education are effective in maintaining the ill-based logic of exploitive economics, rampant consumerism, and unsustainable communities. However, they are not befitting a context of planetary depletion, increased global conflict, and unprecedented cultural destruction. Many educators realize the
incongruities between their immediate, prescribed tasks at hand and the urgent needs of their students and communities. Such incongruities create great difficulties for educators as, increasingly, the limited possibilities of dominant modes of education are confronted. Such lost ideals of teaching and learning are not unrelated to the crises an educational discourse of loss might address (Phelan, 2003).

In each of the preceding essays in this book, I have addressed aspects of a cultural crisis particular—but not limited—to Newfoundland and Labrador and some of the personal, social, ecological, and psychic dimensions of this crisis. In so doing, I have gestured to a notion of education that challenges accepted traditions within mainstream educational practices and, as well, but to a lesser extent, within critical practices of education. In this concluding chapter, while drawing from these preceding discussions and returning to issues outlined in the introduction, I attempt to highlight briefly what I consider to be key characteristics of an education that addresses cultural crisis, loss and change.

A V O W I N G  L I F E:  
T H E  A C K N O W L E D G M E N T  O F  L O S S

Loss is the persistent condition of life, the very basis of subjectivity (Butler, 1997). Yet, little time is spent in education explicitly wrestling with this fundamental human bond and both its enabling and disabling dimensions. Contemporary times demand even more so that this disjuncture between what unites us and that about which is spoken in education be addressed. Rachael Kessler (2004) argues that we are “a culture afraid to sit with the feelings of loss” (p. 147). Furthermore, as Joan Didion (2005) notes, great social admiration accrues to those who hide grief well in a world in which to express grief is to be considered self-indulgent. Part of what such fear and repression instill is a refusal to acknowledge loss and an “othering” of those whose expressions of grief differ from our own. Without a meaningful acknowledgment of loss—as an individual and, importantly, a cultural experience—a deep and integrated