

SPECIAL SECTION

Erosion

Lessons for Losing

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ABSTRACT This essay examines how two very different thinkers address the question of how to live loss. The first is the Canadian Cree artist and writer Tomson Highway, author most recently of *Laughing with the Trickster: On Sex, Death, and Accordians*, and the second is US environmental writer Elizabeth Rush, author of *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore*. In two very different modalities of knowledge making, we see a shared quest for a planetary subject able to live loss in a clear-eyed and affirmative way. For Highway, the question is how to live loss, beginning with language loss, without losing the capacity for laughter and joyfulness. The arts of the trickster are his answer. For Rush, the question is: what changes can we be making now to head off crisis, and what language can make such change meaningful and desirable? We also see the two writers striving to make language respond to the challenge of scale. How do you capture the gigantic without being abstract? Highway moves to the mythic, arguing for Indigenous pantheism. Rush tacks between the particulars of planet science and the personal narratives of those living the loss of place.

KEYWORDS loss, language loss, Cree, coastal flooding, trickster

1.

I almost didn't make Tomson Highway's keynote. It was the opening day of a week-long gathering on performance and politics held at Concordia University in June 2014.¹ The map of Montreal crinkled in my lap as I barked unfamiliar street names at my driving companion, begged pedestrians for directions to a parking garage. I'd been treasuring Tomson Highway's work for three decades, ever since I encountered his hilarious plays *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. This would be my first, maybe only, chance ever to hear him live.

We were lucky—the session started late. Highway began with lengthy, elaborate greetings in French, then Cree, then English. In keeping with the occasion, it was performative and political. “I am a full-blooded Cree Indian,” he announced to his audience of Latin Americans, US Americans, and Canadians. “My mother tongue, the language I grew up in, the language I most often dream in, is one of the

most beautiful languages that has ever existed on earth, one of the most ancient in this hemisphere, and it is going to disappear.”

Not everyone thinks that Cree, an Algonquian language now spoken by just under half of the two hundred thousand Cree people across the Canadian North, is going to disappear, but Tomson Highway, playwright, novelist, concert pianist, composer, librettist, performance artist, humorist, does. He has made it a challenge of his life and work to live his place in that losing fully and consciously, and to convey its force and depth to others. For me, a linguist and lifelong language lover, the decimation of the world’s languages looms large among the unbearable extinctions unfolding around us. Highway embodies that story.

Highway was born in 1951 into a hunting and trapping family on the northmost edge of Manitoba, bordering what is now Nunavut. One of the youngest of twelve children (of whom six survived to adulthood), he spent his early years in a vast expanse of lakes and pines, following caribou herds by canoe in summer and trap lines by dogsled in winter, speaking Cree and Dené, the language of the other Native inhabitants of the region. The first European language he heard, he told us, was not English or French but Latin. The Catholic church had long been entrenched in the region; the local Cree-speaking priest persuaded Highway’s parents to send their two youngest, Tomson and his brother René, to a residential school for Aboriginal children. Their contact with English began there and eventually led them to a high school in Winnipeg, where Highway trained as a classical pianist and René as a dancer. Highway began his career as a writer in the 1980s, after completing university and seven years as a social worker among Canadian Native people. Many of his works—plays, novels, children’s books—have been published in both Cree and English, and some in French.

Highway’s life story is one no subsequent generation will ever be able to tell. His parents’ way of life is gone. Language loss is nearly always generational—some radical change interrupts the transmission of a language from older to younger speakers. Such interruption is the only way languages can be lost, and the loss is really a substitution. The language is replaced by a more powerful language. The subject of his keynote was this: How do you live such loss? And more particularly, how do you live loss with wonder, magic, and joy? His prized tool, learned from his parents and his community, is laughter. Chuckles, playfulness, and silly jokes punctuated his keynote address, intercepting nostalgia, sentimentality, and rage (though not grief). Cree, he told us, is “the world’s funniest language”; it arose from “the laughter of a cosmic clown.” Highway empowered his audience to engage with language loss by exposing them to the expressive powers of the fully fluent, accomplished native speaker who is able, as he put it, to “dig his way through the warp and weave” of the doomed language still so fully alive in and for himself. This is a gift to be given. In the

course of conveying the social and imaginative stakes in the disappearance of Cree, he offered a response to another question: By what “arts of living” or “science of dwelling” can a fluent native speaker inhabit a vulnerable language in love, joy, and plenitude, knowing that its life is now as finite as her or his own?² How can such a losing be lived? I wanted an answer to this question. Lamentation seemed to me a necessary but insufficient response to the projection that, within a few decades, at least half the world’s languages, perhaps more, would have no living native speakers. Big languages were replacing small ones across much of the planet. There is nothing necessary about this—people are easily able to learn multiple languages, and an immense proportion of the world’s population does. But the cards are stacked against small languages and Indigenous ones.

Highway began with geography, displaying a gigantic, resplendent satellite image of the Canadian North on a twenty-foot screen behind him, without which, he told us, none of us would understand anything he was going to say. It was about scale, the challenge, shared by ecologists, of conjuring a planetary-scale geographic imagination. This is a world of “mind-boggling vastness,” he said, that none of you knows anything about. Nunavut, he observed, arm sweeping across the screen, is the size of all of Western Europe, including Scandinavia, with a population of thirty-five thousand. Imagine France, he said, with only a thousand people (chuckles, scattered applause). Growing up in his part of the world meant having fifty lakes all to yourself, not a few meters of beach. The Cree language he learned growing up in the 1950s was embedded in the geography, ecology, and isolation of this territory, its stories and cosmologies constructed in and on that place, reproduced there down generations of Cree speakers, alongside the even more ancient language of the region, Dené. Many people learned both. Nobody around him spoke French or English. There was no TV—no electricity, in fact. His father played the accordion.

Jorge Luis Borges, in “The Witness,” imagines the extinction of the Anglo-Saxon language with the death of “the last man who has seen the face of Woden.” Tomson Highway wanted his audience not just to imagine the last person on earth who dreams in Cree but to imagine Cree itself, to attend to its gifts, its rhythms and design. What, exactly, was being lost? Pay attention, he said, this won’t come your way again. I was glad to do it—I was someone who read grammars for fun. He conjugated verbs—*to breathe*, *to suffer*, *to stink* or *go sour*, including subjunctives. He gave us the word for skirt, coded in Cree as “dress cut in half.” One, two, three skirts. With hilarity, he described the community ritual of the Hail Mary contest: a whole village on its knees in the main street, rosaries in hands. With a starting pistol, the priest kicks off the competition to see who can say the rosary the fastest in Cree. Highway performed it for us, awarded himself the prize (more laughter and applause). He gave us a sentence that, in a room full of Cree speakers, triggers instant hilarity. In English it means “Who just came in the door?” I laugh, imagining

how this could indeed always be funny: watch out, the door's open, and anything could happen here right now.

Then he got down to the serious business of semantic design. Speakers of European languages do not and cannot know, he said, what it is like to be formed by a language that has no grammatical gender. Or what it is like to then discover that the languages of power all divide the world into two, and only two, genders, one subordinated to the other, with no place for his queerness. European languages he finds "obsessed with gender," a trait connected for him with Judeo-Christianity's "monotheistic, phallic superstructure" that has no room for a female divine or for a capacious multiplicity of genders that does not pit one against the other. Highway explicitly connected the rigid gender binary with the history of brutal, often sadistic, murders of Aboriginal women in Canadian cities. He surely endorsed the intense search in the Spanish-speaking world for ways to neutralize grammatical gender and the normativity of masculine markers. That would be a riddance, not a loss.

How does Cree map the world? What is lost if it is lost? In Cree, Highway explained, as in many but not all Amerindian languages, the key grammatical distinction is between things that are animate, endowed with soul or spirit, and things that are not. In Cree, he told us, the former are marked by the prefix *aná*, the latter by the prefix *animá*. As with grammatical gender, the distinction sometimes seems arbitrary but often is not. For example, the processing of raw materials into usable products involves a shift from having spirit to not having it. The word for "cow" is marked as animate; "steak" is cow inanimate. The word for "tree" carries the marker for animacy; "chair" is the same word, but marked for inanimacy or absence of spirit. Likewise, the word for "rock" carries the animacy or spirit marker; "cement" or "sidewalk" is the same word, but with the inanimacy marker. Processed or manufactured objects, in other words, are coded as inanimate versions of their animate raw materials, as something like the afterlives of the things they were made from (those are my words, not Highway's). The distinction does not carry a negative valence in Cree but rather marks a transformation from one form of energy to another. Dead or de-animated things remain among us in different form. They are not experienced as dead. The live body, of course, is animate, but individual body parts—leg, hand, head—are marked as without spirit or animacy. There are three exceptions, however: the vagina, the womb, and the anus, all coded as having lives and spirit of their own. The first two, Highway explained, are capacious spaces of life, the third the birthplace of the trickster and laughter, enabling Cree, said Highway, to conceive of "a Female God who laughs and laughs and laughs." Yes, I thought, I need to meet her; we all do.

"Don't let these ideas upset you," he said. Cree is a disappearing language; this is "the last gasp," "the Goddess's farewell tour . . . a chance to say farewell to an idea that might have worked at one time in history." And yet his performance itself

raised a question: Do languages really “die” when they have no more fluent speakers? Can they not continue to inhabit and operate in the world in some other way? Surely their mappings, wisdoms, semantic designs can continue to animate the world for people, if they are asked to do so? Highway demanded a linguistic after-life in which languages are a resource not for communities of native speakers, but for everyone: “The time has come to listen to other people’s sacred stories. . . . We need to allow our languages to lead us back to the garden and make the serpent speak to the man and not the woman.” Allow our languages to lead us. We ought to see to it, in other words, that Cree’s transformative semantic powers are retained and transmitted: the power to “bend the straight line of the phallic into the circle of the yonic,” which has space for everything; the power to give nature back its soul, the chance to ditch the story of expulsion from the garden and the entitlement to dominion over nonhumans. Let our languages lead us, he says, because they already have, or are, the maps.³ Let them do their work in a new intellectual commons.

2.

Eventually Tomson Highway put his philosophy into writing, in a book titled *Laughing with the Trickster: On Sex, Death, and Accordions* (2022). Based on his 2022 Massey Lectures,⁴ this book joins an extraordinary flourishing of Indigenous thought that has been burgeoning from sites across the planet since the turn of the millennium. It comes from Amazonia, the Andes, Australia, New Zealand, North America, Mesoamerica, Hawaii, Scandinavia, and other places.⁵ This wave of Indigenous knowledge making is distinguished, like Highway’s lecture, by its extroverted character. It is addressed to non-Indigenous people with the aim of transforming them, indigenizing them, creating new planetary subjects and transforming the intellectual commons. It is driven by the knowledge that for Indigenous people to survive, the capitalist lifeways that threaten all human and carbon-based life must change dramatically and quickly. Non-Indigenous people, especially first world and rich people, must come to inhabit the world differently—be persuaded, compelled, inspired.

In Latin America, the term *buen vivir* (living well) has been widely adopted to name the new ideal of a “good life” in which all life-forms and elements exist in balance. In Tomson Highway’s *buen vivir*, the central principles for maintaining balance are laughter, pleasure, and joy. If you, I, and we are not laughing, we are not living well. In fact, such lives are not worth living at all. What is the point? Highway claims absolute authority on this subject. For centuries, his Cree people have lived in harsh conditions and with colonial invasion experienced devastating loss over and over and over. Laughter and joy, the playful, irreverent arts of the trickster (“Who just came in the door?”), have been essential to their survivance and remain so.⁶ They are cultivated and nourished. These trickster arts, he argues,

are critical for facing the challenges of drastic environmental change. Mourning, grief, and remorse do not energize people to live well, or at all. Rather, in the midst of loss, death, and extinction, humans should work to keep their love of the world alive and powerful, alongside grief and loss, including love for the new landscapes that emerge from the ruinations unfolding around us. The earth, says Highway, is a garden we have been given to inhabit and care for. Cultivating beauty, pleasure, laughter, and joy is a crucial aspect of how loss should be lived. People must continue to love their own humanness as well, even as they own the devastation they have wrought or that has been inflicted upon them. That energy alone empowers survivance and the ability to change.

Indigenous thinkers do not have a monopoly on the ideas they advocate, nor do they claim one. Ecological thinkers intersect with them all the time. Despite the global ravages of capitalism, many people on the planet share the experience of deep embeddedness in place, deep interconnection with fellow life-forms and beings in a shared habitat. Environmental writer Elizabeth Rush, for example, captures this force powerfully in *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore* (2018), a brilliant and moving study of the impact of rising sea levels in the coastal regions of the United States. In case studies of Maine, Rhode Island, Louisiana, Florida, California, Oregon, and New York, along with ecological analysis, Rush crafts vivid portraits of individuals inhabiting coastal areas where marshes are being flooded, island communities forced to move, towns sinking, whole cities facing inevitable retreat. She interviews people of all races and economic strata, many of them people whom marginalization and poverty have tracked into low-lying places where their belonging has lately become difficult or impossible. Love of/in place breathes throughout her book. A woman whose coastal-marsh home is gradually being overtaken by the ocean ponders her impending decision to stay or go. Among many factors, she says,

I have to take into account my incredible love for sitting right here. I feel so privileged to be observing these changes so immediately. It is frightening but it is also incredibly interesting, awesome, really. There is something magical and enlivening about seeing how dynamic life is on the planet. . . . I am sitting here literally watching the ocean encroaching right here in front of my house and it amazes me.⁷

She feels called upon to transform herself, “making peace with uncertainty toward being more fully in the present, and toward living a life where gratitude is near the surface.” Highway would agree. His recent memoir is titled *Permanent Astonishment*.

In contrast with Rush’s grounding in ethnography and climate science, Highway’s home terrain is mythology. His Massey Lectures weave comparisons among

Christian, Greek, and North American Indigenous mythology, placing them on a continuum of value from Christian monotheism through Greek polytheism to Native pantheism. The superiority of the last lies in its ability to embrace all aspects and forces of life, and its groundedness on the planet and in the more-than-human world. The earth is a garden we have been given to tend, a womb that contains. No one wants to expel us from it: “the vast expanse of space, the vast expanse of land, the vast expanse of ocean, the vast expanse of air, the vast expanse of sunlight, of lake—up here in Canada, of lakes unlimited, of forests unlimited, of wildlife unlimited, of a garden of pleasure, a garden of joy unlimited and of beauty unlimited and most, most wondrous.”⁸ As with Rush’s interviewee, gratitude lies near the surface, even though the wondrous garden is at times heartless and cruel. The abundance and dynamism of life animate Highway’s earthly cosmos as well: “Those who lived in ages before us . . . —they live here with us still today, in the very air we breathe, in the shimmer of a leaf on that maple tree, in that shaft of sunlight that drifts in your window and lands on your wrist. . . . Tears of sorrow are to be shed, yes, but so are tears of joy, of rampant celebration.”⁹ What I am trying to notice here is that in these two very different modalities of knowledge making, we see a shared quest for a planetary subject able to live loss in a clear-eyed and affirmative way, animated by what I have been calling the love of the world. We also see two very conscious writers striving to make language respond to the challenge of scale. How do you capture the gigantic without being abstract? Highway moves to the mythic, tacking between the limitless womb of the goddess and the shaft of sunlight on your arm. Rush, too, tacks between the principles of planet science and the lone woman wading across a flooded street to get to a bus stop—arts of the trickster.

The two writers also share a quest for ways to embrace radical uncertainty and unpredictability, the newly salient dimension of planetary experience. Never again, most likely, will farmers be able to predict monsoons; there is no way at all of knowing how high seas will rise in the next ten years, or fifty, no way to anticipate what life-forms will show up to occupy the habitats whose current creatures must depart. How to live these changes? Highway bets on the figure of the trickster. It (she) will do what it will do, play its games, dance its dance, and we humans will play along as we always have. Rush bets on agency and intentionality. People must take refuge, not only accept but seek displacement and deplacement without losing who they are. Coastal communities have to move inland, starting right now. People, including Rush herself, must find inner resources to empower such change. Rush turns to Tempest Williams in *Refuge*: “I am slowly, painfully discovering that my refuge is not found in my mother, my grandmother, or even the birds of Bear River. My refuge exists in my capacity to love. If I can learn to love death then I can begin to find refuge in change.”¹⁰ Key to both writers’ visions is the fact

that extinction does not produce nothingness but (as with language) substitution. Habitat destruction does not produce simply an absence of habitat. Other habitats are made, other life-forms come to live there, just as a language dies only through replacement by another, more powerful language. Loss produces presence as well as absence. The word “change” perhaps captures this, without implying change is neutral for those who live it.

The most salient element these two contrasting but intersecting thinkers share is the conviction that, in the struggle for making change happen, the most powerful instrument humans have is language. Highway, polyglot, language lover, and fluent Cree speaker, finds that languages have different expressive resources and animate the world in different ways. English is a language for thinking, he says, Cree for laughing. Particular languages don’t belong to particular communities; all have gifts to be shared by everyone. Knowing multiple languages is a huge resource for the planetary subject he envisions. Each language enables different facets of being; we should try not to lose any of them. (*Laughing with the Trickster* ends with a “Brief Guide to Cree.”)¹¹

Rush might agree, but polylingualism is not her concern. Rather, she is convinced that compelling, powerful, beautiful language is the only instrument capable of inspiring the changes that need to take place, of giving them meaning and making them desirable. “Unlike Descartes,” she says, “I believe that language can lessen the distance between humans and the world of which we are a part; I believe that it can foster interspecies intimacy and, as a result, care. . . . The language we use to narrate our experience in the world can awaken in us the knowledge that transformation is both necessary and ongoing.”¹² Highway would surely agree. Both writers perform this commitment to language in their work, as I have attempted to do here as well.

It now seems inevitable that what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “the environmental catastrophe of capitalism”¹³ makes living loss into a core experience, unevenly distributed, of every remaining generation of living creatures. If this is so, the matter of how to live the loss, and perhaps how to live loss beyond losing, becomes a central social, moral, imaginative, physical, and aesthetic challenge. Developing new arts of living, clear-eyed, in what remains of the garden, while retaining the capacity for beauty and joy, is going to call for the powers of the cosmic clown, the trickster goddess who drums, dances, and laughs.

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literary theory, linguistics, postcolonial studies, feminist and gender studies, anthropology, and cultural studies. Her publications include *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992; 2nd ed., 2007), a well-known study of the discursive formation of Latin America and Africa in metropolitan travel literature. With the West Coast SOFA collective, she coauthored *Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America* (1993). A collection of her work appeared in Spanish in 2017 as *Los imaginarios planetarios*. Her most recent book, *Planetary Longings* (2022), reflects on the millennial pivot from the global to the planetary through analyses of modernity, neoliberalism, ecocriticism, and contemporary Indigenous politics and thought.

Notes

1. The occasion was the biennial Encuentro of New York University's Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics, held at a different site in the Americas each year. This was the first time it was hosted by a Canadian institution.
2. I take the first of these beautiful terms from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who spearheaded the project *Arts of Living*. The second comes from Elizabeth Povinelli's *Geontologies*, and from her brilliant study over many decades of the life-building work of a small Australian Aboriginal group that aims not at preserving authenticity but at providing their youth with viable, meaningful ways of living the aftermath of colonialism.
3. Many Indigenous communities across the Americas are doing such work, defining new ways for their languages to live and operate in the world even as they no longer have native speakers. Digital technology is central to their work.
4. The Massey Lectures are a Canadian cultural institution sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), in which prominent Canadian intellectuals deliver a series of public lectures that are then published in book form.
5. The corpus is far too vast to survey comprehensively. Examples include Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*; Weaver, *Defending Mother Earth*; Weaver, *Native American Religious Identity*; Menchú, *La nieta de los mayas*; Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*; Marcos, *Desde las montañas*; Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*; Johnson, *Contemporary Native American Issues*; Patzi, *Sistema comunal*; Mamani, *Laq'a achachilankan*; Mamani Ramírez, *Geopolíticas indígenas*; Cook-Lynn, *New Indians, Old Wars*; Denzin, Lincoln, and Tuhiwai Smith, *Handbook*; Paredes, *Hilando fino*; Native Critics Collective, *Reasoning Together*; Rivera Cusicanqui, *Pueblos originarios y estado*; Sandoval, *De Iximche a Ixiche*; Vizenor, *Survivance*; Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*; de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*. The secondary literature on Indigenous resurgence is vast. For overviews, see Bengoa, *La emergencia indígena*; de la Cadena and Starn, *Indigenous Experience*.
6. The term *survivance* was introduced by Chippewa theorist Gerald Vizenor to name the process of living Indigenous being/becoming. *Survivance* denotes more than *survival* and is intended to correct that pathos-laden term. *Survivance* is "an active sense of presence," sustained by stories that "renounce domination, tragedy and victimry" (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*, vii).
7. Rush, *Rising*, 44.
8. Highway, *Laughing with the Trickster*, 59.
9. Highway, *Laughing with the Trickster*, 60.
10. Williams, *Refuge*, 260.
11. Highway, *Laughing with the Trickster*, 197–81.

12. Rush, *Rising*, 6–7.
13. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 9.

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