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Manimism and the Primary Error

James Burton

1.

Sylvia Wynter has argued convincingly that cosmogony—the creation and circulation of origin stories—is a crucial site and means by which what she refers to as any particular “genre” of human declares and, in the process, makes itself. That is, any particular group of humans with some form of collective self-identity produces for itself a “fictive mode of human kind.”¹ The defining feature of all humans that has underpinned every genre is for Wynter the capacity for storytelling, which confers on any given “we” the capacity “*autopoetically to institute ourselves as symbolically made-kin* through the medium of our retroactively projected origin stories or cosmogonies.”² In most cases, such cosmogonical statements function to declare and enshrine the exceptional status of the self-conceived “we”/“us” in question, its superiority over other beings considered non-humans (not-us), against which it defines itself. Inscribed within each cosmogony is a “sociogenic replicator code of life/death” that operates such that the subject “reflexly and normally desires” to realize itself on the positively marked side of this code, and to detach itself from “all that is made to embody the negation of that sociogenic self.”³

A further trait of cosmogonies, at least historically, is that they obscure the fact of the auto-institution of the genre in question, thus concealing their own function, by projecting responsibility for the genre’s creation on to some exterior agency: “nature spirits, deified ancestors, gods and goddesses, or the single God of the three Abrahamic religions,”⁴ or, in the case of *Man(2)*, Nature/Human Nature and Evolution.⁵ The path to the “ceremony found” has required and continues to require interventions that reveal the function that has thus been hidden; while the enactment of the new ceremony itself must embrace it, through the auto-institution of a new understanding of what it is to be human with a corresponding new order of cognition that actualizes “the *heresy* of securing the non-opacity of our own agency.”⁶ It is in the spirit of pursuing this enactment, and attempting to perceive the challenges it involves, that I would like to pose the following question: Why, if we agree with Wynter’s

¹ Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overtturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,” in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015, pp. 184–252, here p. 199.

² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

argument, should so few cosmogonies present the creation of “humans” (the ancestors of those who consider themselves to belong to a particular genre) in perfect terms? Or, to put it otherwise, why are the originary “humans” of any genre so often associated cosmogonically with some form of error, deficiency or shortcoming that seems to undermine their supposedly exceptional status?

2.

A diverse range of creation stories feature some oversight on behalf of the creators of the first people that results in their presentation as essentially incomplete, lacking, or otherwise flawed (e.g. in terms of their behavior). In a classical Greek account of the creation of animals, including humans, Epimetheus (meaning “Afterthought”) errs in squandering his “stock of properties on the brutes” and leaving “unequipped the race of men”;⁷ humans are created by, and as, an afterthought. This leads to his brother Prometheus stealing fire and wisdom from Zeus and bestowing it upon humans to compensate. A story attributed to the Absarkoes Plains Indians similarly recounts how humans, lacking the fur and claws of other beasts, are given fire and weapons, and instruction in how to hunt, by Old Man Coyote.⁸

The Absarkoes example also includes a further error commonly found in creation stories, that of the corruption of the earliest people, possibly by virtue of some malign/trickster agent. Here Little Coyote does “something bad” by advising Old Man Coyote to “give the people different languages so they would misunderstand each other and use their weapons in wars.”⁹ There are Altaic/Turkic myths in which a Man-Devil, sometimes named Erlik, sometimes the “first man”, seeks to trick the creator god into allowing him his own territory, and engages in various acts of sin and betrayal. As Leeming notes, in such myths, “[t]he Devil participates in creation [...] but he instills a germ of evil into the work of the primary creator”.¹⁰ Similar examples are found throughout world mythology, from the repeated quarrels and transgressions of the Insect People and later First Man and First Woman in Diné (Navajo) mythology, to the Barotse account of Kamonu, who will not stop trapping and killing the other animals with his weapons, to the original transgression of Adam and Eve in Genesis.

⁷ Plato, *Protagoras* 321C; Plato, *Plato with an English Translation*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1952, p.131.

⁸ David Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World. An Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010, pp. 91–2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

There are also mythologies, including those of ancient Mesopotamia, in which humans' special status is either negated or indicated only in the most minimal fashion. In the *Enuma Elish* and *Atrahasis*, humans are created solely as laborers to serve the gods, and soon become such a nuisance that the gods send plagues, famines and eventually a great flood to wipe them out. Far from being perfect or even exceptional created beings, in these accounts, humans' origins and early years are dominated by error, from the process of their creation out of the body and blood of the supposed traitor god Qingu,¹¹ to their social inferiority as slaves, to the suffering inflicted on them by the gods—such as the famine so extreme that people are forced to eat their young¹²—to the great flood that wipes out all but the handful saved by Atrahasis.

3.

I am not suggesting that humans are universally associated with error or imperfection in cosmogonies. (To give just one counter-example: a story reported from the Ekoi of southern Nigeria tells how the first people were created by the sky gods, learned about food and medicine, and thrived from then on).¹³ But the association is very widespread, and certainly found in those cosmogonies that enable the statements defining Man and its predecessors. Even in the evolutionary cosmogony of Wynter's *Man(2)*, which does not ostensibly feature divine creators, there is a continual implication of the inferior status of the earliest humans compared to those of today, along with an acknowledgment that they are nevertheless "the same." In so many accounts, the first people have dramatic failings or inadequacies that must either be overcome, compensated for, or continually managed.

We might note how often the diverse errors involved in the creation of humans are transmuted into the basis for an accidentally positive outcome, or at least into a feature that ultimately contributes to a better overall state. This transmutation is where I locate an initial answer to the question of why there should be such a widespread cosmogonical association of the first humans with error, given that cosmogony (following Wynter) should function to establish their exceptional, privileged status: cosmogonies not only present auto-instituting statements legitimating the superiority of the genre of human they serve, but also, very often, work to *accommodate and counter suspicions or evidence that such statements are inaccurate*. That is, they take into account, and find ways to manage the experiential evidence that contemporary individuals of a given genre do not wholly display the perfection or superiority that their cosmogonical auto-instituting statements would claim for them.

¹¹ "The Epic of Creation," in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, trans. Stephanie Dalley, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp228-277, here 261.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹³ Maria Leach, *The Beginning. Creation Myths around the World*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1956, pp. 138–9.

I seek to substantiate this argument further below, through a consideration of the nature of exceptionalism and its relationship to cosmogony, before moving on to its implications for the task with which Wynter charges us: that of finding the ceremony, and of actualizing the ceremony found, that would “function according to laws applicable to all human systems”¹⁴ and “breach the dynamics of order/Chaos”¹⁵ that characterize the genre of human centered around the imaginary figure of Man, thereby allowing “us” to enact the “Autopoietic Turn *towards* the non-opacity of our hitherto *genre*-specific orders of consciousness and to the empirical reality of our collective human Agency and, thereby, now fully realized *cognitive autonomy* as a species.”¹⁶

4.

The exceptionalism that characterizes most, if not all human genres, can be said to precede every conception of the human. Even the simplest gesture of self-reference, as a diverse range of thinkers from Gregory Bateson to Stuart Hall have made clear, involves in some sense a separation of part of oneself from oneself, a viewing of oneself as though from outside.

George Spencer-Brown provided an incisive formulation of this logic in *Laws of Form* (1979). One of the most basic gestures possible is the drawing of a distinction or “arranging a boundary with separate sides.”¹⁷ Any gesture of deixis or identification, such as naming, observing or pointing, makes a distinction between that which is identified and everything else. Pointing to *this* necessarily separates it from *all that*. Spencer-Brown represents such a gesture with the symbol \sqcap , a shorthand for an enclosed space (as Kauffman notes, it could equally aptly have been represented by a square).¹⁸

Any entity that observes or identifies itself necessarily makes such a distinction and identifies itself with the inside of the distinction, yet at the same time crosses the line of distinction in order to view itself as though from outside. As a result, the view it has of itself is incomplete, since the part that is doing the observing is not identical with the part that is being observed: “whatever it sees is *only partially itself* [...] it must [...] act so as to make itself distinct from, and therefore false to, itself. In

¹⁴ Sylvia Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism.” *Boundary 2*, vol. 12, no. 3/vol. 13, no.1 (Spring–Autumn 1984), pp. 19–70, here p. 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 242.

¹⁷ George Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979, p. 1.

¹⁸ “Foreword: Laws of Form,” *Cybernetics and Knowing*, vol. 24, nos. 3–4 (2017): pp. 5–15, here p. 6.

this condition it will always partially elude itself.”¹⁹ This is akin to the “blind spot” recognized in cybernetics and systems thinking as necessarily rendering the observation incomplete:²⁰ “one area of the retina has no photoreceptor cells, so our field of vision is incomplete. We cannot see what falls within this zone, and we cannot see that we cannot see, since we are unaware of this deficit. This principle is abstracted and applied to every type of observation.”²¹

At the end of *Laws of Form*, having elaborated what he calls the “primary arithmetic”, Spencer-Brown suggests that the question of why the universe seeks to observe itself, e.g. through cognitive self-reference, which may be considered the fundamental necessary condition for the production of cosmogony, constitutes the “original mystery.”²² Following this, I term the *primary error* the immanent fact that any such self-observation is necessarily incomplete, and any self-conception always-already flawed—that it is by necessity not whatever it takes/states itself to be. The primary error means that, in addition to establishing a hierarchical value-system situating “us” at the upper level, the basic distinction inscribed in any cosmogonical statement of how “we” came to be simultaneously places this exceptionalist self-conception in doubt.

5.

The immanence of the primary error means that it is always-already threatening to become visible. Given that it is co-present with the conditions on which exceptionalism is based, it is very likely that cosmogonical statements seeking to justify that exceptionalism must look for ways to manage the signs of the primary error—especially since, following Wynter, one of their major functions is to obscure the fact that the genre’s stated superiority is the product of its own irrational assertion, rather than an objective or divinely sanctioned truth.

Not only can we consider the primary error to be immanent, but we should expect any subjective experience of “error” in a person or group’s relation to the universe to risk pointing to the primary

¹⁹ Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form*, p. 105.

²⁰ See, e.g., Heinz von Foerster, “Cybernetics of Cybernetics,” in *Communication and Control in Society*, ed. Klaus Krippendorff, New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979, pp. 5–8, and Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, trans. Peter Gilgen, Cambridge: Polity, 2013, pp. 103–104: “When handling a distinction, you always have a blind spot or something invisible behind your back. You cannot observe yourself as the one who handles the distinction. Rather you must make yourself invisible if you want to observe.” See also Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge. The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, trans. Robert Paolucci, Boston: Shambhala, 1998, pp. 239–242 and *passim*.

²¹ Claudio Baraldi, Giancarlo Corsi and Elena Esposito, *Unlocking Luhmann. A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2021, p. 59.

²² *Laws of Form*, 1979, p. 105.

error. For a superior, perhaps perfect, divinely ordered creation, nothing should go fundamentally or terminally wrong. Thus the recognition of one's own mortality, the experience of grief at the loss of others, or any existential threat to the genre's survival, whether through disease, famine, or a confrontation with another, militarily superior genre of human, will appear to signify that the threatened genre is not the superior creation it believed and declared itself to be. Even small daily misfortunes or unsuccessful endeavours may be cause for doubt.

It would therefore make sense for cosmogony in particular, along with other mythological and proto- or quasi-religious narrativizations of a given genre, to function to assuage such doubts, to find ways of containing them, and thus of avoiding the revelation of the primary error.²³ In some cases—perhaps where a genre has survived numerous extreme, potentially existential threats, such as the destructive floods continually affecting the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia—it may be that the larger part of a cosmogony has to be given over to this task, with human exceptionalism barely visible in the eventual survival of (a few) ancestors. Only Atrahasis, as the man who saved humans from extinction by protecting a number of them in a great boat, is granted the truly exceptional status of immortality, and the epic adventures of Gilgamesh culminate in the acceptance, rather than the overcoming of human mortality and ultimate frailty.

6.

All this would suggest that what Wynter terms the “opacity” surrounding the auto-instituting nature of human genres has never been total. While cosmogonies may work to obscure the primary error, they do so, at least in part, by inscribing and acknowledging signs and indicators of it, though in ways that ultimately direct attention away from the primary error.

²³ It is worth noting that Henri Bergson's theory of fabulation anticipates the arguments of Wynter here and the archaeological interpretations of Juan Luis Arsuaga on which she draws (see Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton with W. Horsfall Carter, London: MacMillan, 1935 [1932]); Juan Luis Arsuaga, *The Neanderthal's Necklace. In Search of the First Thinkers*, trans. Andy Klatt, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002). Bergson situates the evolution of the capacity for fabulation, or story-telling, in direct relation to the threats posed by the intelligence regarding a person's or a people's sense of their own mortality and fallibility. Like Wynter, Bergson identifies this capacity to fabulate as playing the essential role, in evolutionary terms, of countering the social dangers posed by these results of (self-)awareness, but also enabling the historical development of social structures that are destructive and oppressive (or in his preferred term, “mechanizing”). Still paralleling Wynter, he also recognises fabulation as having a key potential role to play in overcoming such mechanizing structures, encapsulated in what he terms “closed morality” and the “closed society”, an overcoming that corresponds closely with Wynter's search for the “ceremony”. For an account of these three aspects of the function of fabulation, see Burton, *The Philosophy of Science Fiction. Henri Bergson and the Fabulations of Philip K. Dick*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp29-60.

Further, while it is true that someone who is able to occupy a position simultaneously inside and outside the belief system comprising the genre, its values and cosmogony, is more able to articulate, expose and challenge the primary error, nevertheless, it is unlikely that doubts would not have arisen among those generally identifying with the descriptive statement of their genre. Though they, for the most part, remain on the “inside” of the genre, and therefore do not acquire the insider-outsider perspective of a W. E. B. Dubois or a Frantz Fanon, or indeed a Sylvia Wynter, the very act of self-identification and self-declaration requires a crossing of the boundary, the taking up of an exterior perspective—even if the blind spots immediately produced continually reinstate the opacity that prevents the primary error from being openly recognized.

The hypothesis here is that cosmogonies—which of course change and adapt over time—must always have been managing these doubts, seeking to keep the primary error out of view. Further, at certain times, any genre that persists is likely to encounter errors so obviously and unavoidably pointing to the primary error, that strategies of suppression or denial must shift to partial acknowledgment and containment: that is, they must make use of the experience of error in ways that partially accept it as reality, but recast it, transform it, re-present it so as to minimize its destructive effects, and to reduce or sever its link to the primary error.

This means, I think, that wherever we discern successes in attempts to challenge the hegemonic exceptionalism and self-certainty of a given genre, we should also be wary of the extent to which those successes are contained, recapitulated, re-tooled, re-animated in new directions that support the primary values of the genre of human concerned, allowing it to adapt and re-form, rather than be overcome. Most, if not all human genres have been engaged in an ongoing defense against not only exterior, but also interior, immanent challenges to their self-exceptionalism.

7.

We can read the various major shifts in Wynter’s account of the history of Man in these terms. In “The Ceremony Must Be Found,” Wynter locates a model for the task of overcoming *Man(2)*’s overrepresentation of itself as the human in the “Jester’s heresy” of the *Studia Humanitatis*, the “rewriting of knowledge” that constituted the rise of Renaissance humanism. This secularizing process succeeded in deconstructing the Christian medieval model of the world as divinely caused and ordered,²⁴ thus displacing certain aspects of the previously dominating cosmogony and its statement

²⁴ Wynter, “The Ceremony Must be Found,” p. 28.

of the nature of the human genre with which many of those then living in the European region identified themselves. For a long time, the more rigid adherents to the older cosmogony struggled to maintain it relatively unchanged in the face of growing challenges. But an increasing body of evidence, critical argument and popular sentiment gradually meant that, without adapting, the primary error of this particular genre was in danger of being fully exposed.

While on the one hand we may understand the heresy of the *Studia* as a successful challenge to the self-exceptionalism framed by religious (Christian) cosmogony, we should equally understand it as a successful adaptation that, for the most part, served the interests of those who had been favored by that previous cosmogonical understanding. The *Studia* gave rise to “a new template of identity, that of Natural Man,”²⁵ which preserved the special status of the majority of those who had, by virtue of distinctions of birth, heritage, race, gender and other social factors been most privileged under the previous template. Wynter’s important strategic gesture seeks to ensure that we are able to recognize the value of this heresy even as we engage in the struggle to overcome the hegemony of Man (so that we do not throw out the baby Jester with Man’s dirty bathwater). But it would also be of potential strategic importance to recognize and be wary of the potential for every heresy to be absorbed by an adapting hegemony, and re-tooled to serve its own interests—and to understand this as an extension or intensification of a struggle that is always-already ongoing *within* cosmogony and its descriptive statements.

8.

Drawing on Leszek Kołakowski’s association of secular Renaissance heresy with the figure of the jester in the medieval and Renaissance court, Wynter points to the tendency of each rebellion to morph into a new conservatism, calling this a “dynamic” movement in which “the Jester’s role in the pursuit of human knowledge alternates with the Priest’s role—transforming heresies into new orthodoxies, the contingent into modes of the Absolute.”²⁶ The suggestion I am making is that this is not just a historical dynamism, but one that is always-already active, such that heresy may switch to conservatism (and even back) in a moment, or may reveal its ambiguous/dual role in serving either/both depending on the angle from which it is viewed.

Wynter proposes that “calls made in the 1960s and 1970s for new areas/programs of studies [...] re-enacted in the context of our times a parallel counter-exertion, a parallel Jester’s heresy to that of the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

Studia’s.”²⁷ However, because those making these calls initially demanded “to be incorporated into the normative order [...] of knowledge” rather than pushing for and undertaking the rewriting of that knowledge, figures like David Bradley, along with many other Black scholars, found themselves “entrapped” in “enclaves labelled ‘ethnic’ and ‘gender’ and/or ‘minority studies.’”²⁸ This enabled departments and academic institutions to retain exclusionary definitions of their subject areas, maintaining intact, for example, “a definition of American literature which lawfully functioned to exclude not only Blacks, but all the other groups whose ‘diverse modalities of protest’ [...] had fueled the call for new studies.”²⁹ Fully enacting the Jester’s heresy entails, as subsequent critical and emancipatory areas of thought such as Black Studies, decolonial thought, and queer theory have recognized clearly, the kind of wholesale rewriting of knowledge epitomized by the *Studia Humanitatis*.

However, we should also be wary of the extent to which even this larger rewriting may simultaneously serve hegemonic interests—just as the historical figure of the jester not only voiced popular heresy, but did so at the service of the court, and therefore the ruler. Beatrice Otto has argued for the near-universality of jesters (or close equivalents) in cultures with court systems. The reason for this, she suggests, is that they have fulfilled “a deep and widespread social need”³⁰ for criticism of the powerful to be aired: “Jesters in China, Europe, the Middle East, and India aimed their humorous arrows at the same targets—religion and its representatives, self-important scholars, venal officials and nobles, and erring, corrupt, or lazy rulers, together with anything deemed sacrosanct.”³¹ Otto examines a wealth of figures from a diversity of world cultures, all of which seem to share this core critical/heretical function of the fool or jester, from the Irish bards who had the power to “advise and admonish the chieftain” to the Scandinavian *skalds* who had “the jester’s right to criticize,”³² all of whom were not only tolerated, but favored by their rulers.

9.

Historical detail regarding jesters and similar figures in non-European cultures confirms the appropriateness of Wynter’s use of the Jester as representative of the heresy needed to challenge Man. However, the fact that historical jesters played a role for *both* sides of the power hierarchy also seems

²⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁰ Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere. The Court Jester around the World*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001, p. xviii.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 14.

relevant to Wynter's metaphorical-conceptual imaginary, and a fuller incorporation of this dimension might deepen our understanding of the complexity and dynamics of power at play. The jester occupies a place in the court and among the entourage of the ruler at the latter's behest. He (historical examples tend to be male) is not just a critic of the ruler, but also affiliated with them: he is a *fou du roi*, the *king's fool*. Otto identifies numerous instances of a ruler explicitly valuing their jesters and similar figures. Montezuma was "an enthusiastic keeper of jesters"³³ while Harald I was said to "value his skalds more than any of his other followers,"³⁴ and the very fact that equivalents of the jester are found so widely testifies to the fact that rulers found their presence beneficial. While there may have been no choice but to tolerate some form of "fool behaviour" generally (e.g., in the form of village festivals), given its prevalence and popularity among the people,³⁵ the regular institution of the fool or jester within courts and similar privileged circles indicates that their inclusion was important to those in power.

What need would the jester be fulfilling for the hegemony? In settings in which criticisms of the ruler are implicitly or explicitly prohibited, and which see transgressions punished harshly, it can be expected that even a minimally strategic ruler would recognize the benefits in having access to popular views of them, especially where those views are critical. The jester, along with the various reactions to his foolery (such as laughter) would function as a medium by which the ruler could gain access to the criticisms that their citizens were normally too afraid to voice in public. Granting the jester an exceptional freedom to speak openly and critically to the powerful enables the ruler to apprise themselves of such opinions. But beyond this, it also has the potential to contribute to the sense that the ruler is able to listen: whatever the rules against treason and blasphemy might suggest, they are, after all, tolerant of criticism, able to listen to the views of their people, and even laugh at a joke made at their own expense. They reveal themselves as self-aware, humble, capable of hearing and acknowledging their own mistakes, and, by implication, capable of rectifying them.

Further, the couching of these criticisms in the form of humor may form a way of containing them. Laughter regarding a person's shortcomings, their failures of personality and errors of judgment and behavior, may well seem to condemn them. But at the same time, it renders them more trivial than they might otherwise be perceived to be. The king's shortcomings are raised, laughed at, but in the process, diminished in importance, shrugged off. The fact that the king does not punish the jester, but instead laughs along with them, shows that they are "in on the joke," even while they remain the butt

³³ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁵ Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool*, London: Faber and Faber, 2015: 1–3.

of it. Thus they indicate their ability to cross the boundary that places them in the exceptional position within the hierarchy, to identify with those outside of the most privileged circle: they indicate their partial affinity with the people, and thus offset the sanctified isolation and social disconnection that is otherwise essential to the power structures centered upon them.

10.

It is clear that, even as the historical jester may have provided a service to the powerless or disenfranchised in voicing criticisms that would otherwise go unsaid, they must also have done this in the service of the ruler. I think we may also acknowledge this ambiguity or duality that is embedded in the historical figure within Wynter's metaphorical-metonymic deployment of the Jester figure as symbol and vehicle of the heresy that challenges Man's hegemony.

At each major transformative moment in Wynter's history of Man, it can be said that the Jester ends up fulfilling both these functions. Humanism, as we have seen, performs an at first heretical rewriting of the system of knowledge, including its dominating cosmogonical statements; but it also enables the instantiation of *Man(1)*. When secular natural science, and in particular the theory of evolution, challenge key elements of the still-religious cosmogonical framework of *Man(1)*, they enact a further revolutionary rewriting that removes the divine legitimation of Man's privileged status, yet replaces it with another that, for the most part, leaves the main hierarchies of power and privilege intact.

At both stages, there is a mounting body of evidence, critical argument and popular feeling that threatens to expose the primary error, via the exposure and criticism of particular "errors" on the part of the powerful (those highest up the hierarchy established through Man), i.e. acts that display immorality, corruption or incompetence in such a way as to undermine their claim to the privileged status which Man's cosmogonical statement supposedly confers upon them. Previously adequate means of suppressing awareness of the primary error, of maintaining the opacity surrounding the fundamentally flawed, irrational nature of the self-definition and worldview of Man, prove insufficient to counter the new evidence and momentum of (first) the *Studia* and (later) the evolutionary paradigm. In each case, a kind of reformist compromise takes place, whereby the criticisms are partially accepted, but at the same time largely detached from their relationship to the primary error. Thus, in the cosmogonical rewriting that produces *Man(2)*, the divine justification for the "sociogenic replicator code of symbolic life/death,"³⁶ which privileges white, capitalist, bourgeois

³⁶ Wynter, "The Ceremony Found," p. 199.

men, is removed; yet the new cosmogony of evolution substitutes for the appeal to the divine an appeal to objectivity and material “reality” that retains broadly the same privileges for more-or-less the same people. Now it is accident and mutation that are said to have led to the superior status of the ethnoclass Man, yet this superiority remains a supposedly incontrovertible, objective fact.

11.

These acts of containment, whereby a set of errors or grievances are detached as far as possible from the primary error through a gesture that partially acknowledges and inscribes them, can also be said to characterize the mechanism by which Man’s position has been reinforced in the time since “the multiple anti-colonial social-protest movements and intellectual challenges of the period to which we give the name, ‘The Sixties.’”³⁷ Wynter suggests that these protests formed the “first phase” in the struggle against the overrepresentation of Man, but were followed by a “vigorous discursive and institutional re-elaboration of the central overrepresentation, which enables the interests, reality, and well-being of the empirical human world to continue to be imperatively subordinated to those of the now globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of ‘Man.’”³⁸

This “re-elaboration” takes place along many different lines and in diverse sites. It includes, for example, the use of the logic of “development” to replace or displace the question of colonial power. Other examples are located in the formation, as mentioned above, of enclaves such as “ethnic studies” and “gender studies” to sanitize the threats to the humanities coming from those representatives of the human hitherto excluded from Man’s order of knowledge. We might note the frequency with which such moves seek to relegate the “errors” that have given rise to them to the past. The logic of development, supplemented by all manner of institutional and political discursive statements, effectively acknowledges that colonialism *was* wrong, that, for example, slavery *was* wrong, but tries to shift the emphasis on to a pragmatic consideration of the present state of things and the challenges to which it gives rise. In other words, the question of *how* certain nations and ethnicities (the “developed”) acquired a certain degree of security and privilege compared to others (the “developing”) is bracketed off in favor of a focus on the supposed challenge of bringing everyone (up/forward) to the same level. Similar processes govern the containment of challenges to patriarchy, heteronormativity, and able-bodied hegemonies, not to mention capitalism. While policies around, for example, gender and race equality acknowledge that there is still “work to be done,” they seek to

³⁷ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 257–337, here p. 262.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

make breaks with the past “errors” that historically produced, naturalized and enforced those inequalities, suggesting that *now* we are on the correct, enlightened path. These discursive breaks with the past work to sever, or severely downplay, the link between present/recent “errors” (ranging from microaggressions to legal and institutional structures of sexism and racism), and the *primary* error that produced and legitimated, and continues to legitimate them.

Many cosmogonies, as I suggested above, seek to contain and obscure the primary error by highlighting errors (of creation, behavior, etc.) that should or would otherwise point to it, and “animating” them, transforming them into something that points elsewhere (or nowhere at all, as in the case of an error that is narrated in a way that seems to invite laughter, which gives a sense of being an end-in-itself). In the same manner, these modern strategies of containment re-animate and thus seek to mask any contemporary or historical error that would otherwise threaten to expose the primary error.

12.

I refer above to these practices as “animations” of error, not only because they constitute a transformation of the meaning and content of the instance of injustice in question, but also because they operate, I would argue, within and through the animated and animating nature of a given genre, such as Man.

Another way of telling the story of the primary error is in terms of the rational and the irrational. The distinction and opposition between these two terms, and the many terms and concepts that become associated with them, is established by the very epistemological celebration of rationalism that characterizes Man. Where the distinction is made between the rational and irrational, the rational is immediately valued as superior, placed on the side of life as opposed to death. The rationality of Man renders opaque to itself the fact that its own rendering of this distinction, and therefore its valuing of the rational over the irrational, *is itself irrational on its own terms*.

Cosmogonically ordered reasoning declares the particular “we”/“us” of a human genre to be the true, ideal, or most perfect of humans, (over)representing themselves as the human per se. In the process, the auto-instituting or constructive nature of this reasoning is obscured, so that its descriptive statement(s) of the human are established as objective, self-evident, rational fact. The particular

European post-medieval self-construction of the human as “*rational (Western) Man(1)*”³⁹ frames all other past and contemporaneous cosmogonies as irrational, the products of erroneous religious or superstitious belief on the part of its various “by-nature-irrational” Others.⁴⁰ Yet it refuses to recognize that it functions itself in the same manner, producing an account of Man that it takes to be objective and rational and representative of all humans, without any awareness that it (self-)constructs this particular understanding of what it is to be human.

Wynter’s account of Man and its relation to the human shows us that Man’s self-legitimizing reason, practices and behavior operate in a manner that it would itself deplore as “irrational” or “magical” thinking; it has “transumptively inherited” an order of cognition that it classifies (or that the human sciences of the West classify) as “primitive.”⁴¹ It *animates* its own central figures, its conception of the human and its non-human or sub-human others, in the manner that modern Western anthropology came to attribute to animistic cultures: Man’s presumed reality and legitimacy is sustained only through a dynamic and ongoing fabric of belief interwoven with behavior, culture and ceremony. I have elsewhere referred to the belief/behavior system surrounding and sustaining Man as “Manimism” in order to emphasise this dimension.⁴² If the West’s “desupernaturalization” interrupted an earlier religious/divine order of knowledge in which humans projected their own agency onto a “magma of humanly invented *supernatural Agents*,” it merely substituted for them a new imaginary populated by other ostensibly natural and rational, but actually animated and animistic figures.⁴³

Manimism is only irrational in its own sense—the sense in which it declares every human genre except itself to be irrational. Wynter shows us that all human genres, including Man, are “story-telling,” and create themselves auto-institutionally through the stories they tell about themselves and their origins.⁴⁴ The crucial quality of the “Second Emergence” of the human that Wynter calls for, and for which the ceremony is (to be) found, is that it will be fully conscious of its own, as well as every other human genre’s story-telling, auto-instituting nature, where Man (and countless other human genres), have historically projected this on to some extra-human sphere.⁴⁵

13.

³⁹ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 238–239.

⁴² James Burton, “Manimism. Worrying about the Relationship between Rationality and Animism,” *New Formations* no. 104–5 (2021): pp. 214–237.

⁴³ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 224

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 244–245.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

If Wynter has found the ceremony, there remains a great amount to be done in order to institute it. A part of this task continues to entail the successful critique and destabilization of Man. What I have tried to suggest here is that the pursuit of that critique will benefit from attending to the thoroughgoing extent to which Manimism is built on the inherent human tendency not just to obscure, but to contain and (re-)animate the primary error, and to do so via the animation of local errors that would, without intervention, point to it directly.

How would attending to these animations of error help us in this critical-emancipatory task?

Becoming attentive to our blind spots and seeking to circumvent them has always been of critical value, and may be said to be one continually renewed thrust within the kinds of social-epistemological shift epitomised by the *Studia*. The brain of *Homo Narrans*⁴⁶ (unlike the eye in isolation), is capable of changing its own structure autopoetically, and of shifting perspectives and recognizing its former blind spots, even if new ones must always be produced in the process.

Directing this kind of auto-critical attention towards animations of error and their relation to the primary error, means attending to the ways, both subtle and obvious, in widely diverse cultural sites, that Manimism continues to adapt and re-animate those aspects of its constitutive structure that are exposed as wrong. Such sites may range from the seemingly most trivial (e.g. the reaffirmation of the white, male hero in contemporary action movies, now embodying a reconstructed understanding of the injustices of race, gender and sexual normativity) to the most impactful (e.g. the reframing of the history of colonial genocide and slavery in terms of a process of development). Cosmogony is a particularly significant sphere in which to observe these animations of error, because, following Wynter, it remains implicit in every other cultural, discursive, epistemological process by which a genre of human seeks to (re-)establish and (re-)affirm who/what “we” are.

In any site where there is a hint of a (re-)animation of some error relating to the human, from ancient creation myths to the historical abolition movement to modern popular cinema, we might benefit from asking the following: first, whether this particular animating process partially or wholly isolates the erroneous/problematic/mistaken behavior, thinking or occurrence in question from the primary error; second, whether and how this separation might serve or function in the service of the hegemony of a particular genre of human, especially Manimism; third, with regard to our own critique, whether the very conditions enabling its operation, such as the king’s favoring of the jester, simultaneously serve to sever or diminish the relation between the particular (animated) errors in question and the primary

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

error; and fourth, whether our critique works effectively to restore and emphasize this relation between the local failure and the primary error.

14.

The latter would be one way of articulating what it is that a text like Zairong Xiang's *Queer Ancient Ways* does so effectively.⁴⁷ In drawing our attention to the contradictions, slippages, blind spots and in-built assumptions in the reception history of cosmogonies, Xiang reminds us that, far from belonging to the distant past, even the most ancient of creation myths form part of a contemporary, dynamic, ongoing set of cultural processes in which structures of power are continually being inscribed and contested. What may appear to be objective, politically neutral processes of archaeological, philological and anthropological investigation seeking to restore lost texts and descriptive statements, to establish their true meaning and proper interpretation, in fact are continually affected and shaped by—and continually reaffirm and reinscribe—the cosmogonical frameworks within which their practitioners necessarily operate, primarily that of Man or Manism. By exposing the heteronormative, patriarchal and colonial underpinnings of what would otherwise seem to be neutral decisions and honest mistakes of translation and interpretation, Xiang (re-)establishes the link between these seemingly localised errors, and the primary error that constitutes Man's self-presentation and overrepresentation as the norm, ideal and model of the human. Cosmogony then reveals its living, evolving and transformative potential as part of the critical-emancipatory and story-telling project of rewriting the dominant order of knowledge and therefore the human subject: the realization of this potential is the enactment of the ceremony whose determining praxis is “the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn” that will make possible “a hitherto unsuspected, trans-disciplinary, trans-epistemic, trans natural-scientific cum trans-cosmogonic modality.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Zairong Xiang, *Queer Ancient Ways. A Decolonial Exploration*, Earth: punctum books, 2018.

⁴⁸ Wynter, “The Ceremony Found,” p. 245.