

# Ceremony Found: Sylvia Wynter's Hybrid Human and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

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**Abstract:** This paper engages Sylvia Wynter's theory of the hybrid human as a prism for reading Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel *Ceremony*. Wynter's work aims at decolonizing Western categories of knowledge, positing the notion of an Autopoietic Turn/Overturn to unsettle the coloniality of Man as an epistemo-ontological category. The epistemic break Wynter envisions to catalyze this unsettling involves an understanding of the human as a hybrid species, made up of biological as well as symbolic life, *bios* and *mythos*. Such an understanding of the human is revealed in Silko's novel, as its protagonist, Tayo, undergoes a ritual of ceremonial healing that mirrors Wynter's Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, disentangling himself from Western modes of knowledge by scripting a new story for himself and his people. Drawing on two of Wynter's essays that carry "Ceremony" in their titles, my paper explores the intersections between Wynter's theory and Silko's fiction. By showing how Silko fictionally reenvisions new futures of being hybridly human beyond the category of Man, this essay points to epistemic pathways of decoloniality not predicated on anger.

Human beings are magical. Bios and logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities.

Sylvia Wynter

... he could see the story taking form in bone and muscle.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

**S**tories in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) are words made flesh. They exist not in a realm separate from the fictional reality of the novel but constitute and actively shape this reality. Worlds are set in motion through words, just as the mythical figure of Thought-Woman creates the universe

imaginatively on the novel's opening page. Intertwining traditional Pueblo mythology and (post)modern prose, *Ceremony* depicts the return of its protagonist Tayo as a World War II veteran of the US Army to his native Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. There, he faces a world of colonial trauma, which is compounded by his own experiences in the war that continue to haunt him. The novel traces Tayo's path to complete the ceremonial healing of his tribe and of his own trauma. His journey leads him first to the traditional healer Ku'oosh, whose methods fail to heal Tayo's emotional and psychological ills, and then to the more adaptive Navajo medicine man Betonie. The ritual that Betonie performs on Tayo exposes the protagonist to the generative potential of stories—be they the constructive mythological tales of Thought-Woman or those attributed by Betonie to the evil counterforce in this fictional universe, witchery. Only once Tayo realizes the generative potential of all stories, rejects the destructive narratives of witchery, hate, and anger, and embraces his own agency in the mythical tale of his people can the ceremony be completed.

Tayo thus becomes a fictional embodiment of a mode of being that Sylvia Wynter describes as “hybridly human” (“Ceremony Found” 203): composed of a physical and biological level as well as a mythological level, a “narrative-schema” (“Ceremony Found” 213).<sup>1</sup> Wynter argues that the modern, secular Western origin story of natural evolution, which charts human beings as biologically absolute entities, is no less of a narrative—an “order-instituting [cosmogony]” (“Ceremony Found” 213) or creation myth—than any religious schema or mythology.<sup>2</sup> As humans, we depend on such order-instituting cosmogonies to ontologically define our being and epistemically conceptualize our reality. Therefore, according to Wynter, “*we humans cannot pre-exist our cosmogonies or origin*

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1 Throughout this essay, I will mainly engage two of Wynter's texts, both carrying “ceremony” in their respective title: “The Ceremony Must be Found: After Humanism” (1984) and “The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition” (2015). While the term ‘hybrid’ carries rich layers of meaning in the context of postcolonial theory (see for instance Bhabha 5), I use the term here strictly in the sense that Wynter employs it to articulate the biological and the mythological as constitutive elements of a new understanding of being human, which I will elaborate on throughout the course of this paper.

2 See Wynter's citation of David Leeming for her usage of “cosmogony,” which I am borrowing in the following: “The Greek roots and related roots of cosmogony are *genos/genea* (race, family, genealogy, genesis), *gonos* (offspring) *kosmos* (cosmos, universe). Thus, *cosmo-logia*, or *cosmology*, the study of the cosmos, and *kosmos* and *gonos* or *cosmogony*. *In our creation myths we tell the world, or at least ourselves, who we are*” (Leeming qtd. in “Ceremony Found” 185).

*myths/stories/narratives* anymore than a bee, at the purely biological level of life, can pre-exist its beehive" ("Ceremony Found" 213).

The problem with this modern, secular Western conception of being human is that it takes as its subject the supposedly universal category of Man. Wynter's intellectual project is deeply invested in deconstructing this category, extending and rethinking Derridean principles for her own radical decolonialism (Derrida, "Ends"). Throughout her sprawling work, Wynter illustrates how the figure of Man developed in conjunction with the spread of colonialism, becoming a "measuring stick through which all other forms of being are measured" (McKittrick 3). The Darwinian model that divided humans into the "naturally selected" (white Europeans) and the "naturally dysselected" (racialized Others) violently instituted itself at the top of a hierarchy of epistemo-ontological discourses, imposing the Eurocentric world-system of Man as a universal category of knowledge while categorically excluding other modes of being.<sup>3</sup> Through the lens of Man, then, the cosmogonic model of Western science comes to be perceived as 'natural,' universal knowledge, even though this system's central subject figure, Man, represents only one *genre* of the human, as Wynter phrases it. She argues that this system masquerades as factual when it really is autopoetic—a system that is created by and sustains itself through the story that it tells.<sup>4</sup> Or, as Wynter scholar Katherine McKittrick puts it so succinctly: "Humans are, then, a biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—*storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological*" (11).

In her essay entitled "The Ceremony Found" (2015), Wynter posits the notion of an Autopoetic Turn/Overturn that is necessary to dislodge and decolonize the category of Man, anchored in the Western scientific episteme that defines being human in purely biological terms.<sup>5</sup> To arrive at a new, ecumenically human understanding of what it means to be human, we must view ourselves from outside

3 See Wynter's use of "dysselected" with reference to Charles Darwin's biocentric model of evolution in "Unsettling" (267).

4 See also Ira Livingston's *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics* (2006). Both Wynter and Livingston draw on the work of Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana, who describes systems that are capable of reproducing and maintaining themselves as characteristic of "autopoiesis." Wynter and Livingston foreground a linguistic perspective through their adaptation of the phrase.

5 For her Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, Wynter draws on Aimé Césaire's "science of the Word" and Frantz Fanon's sociogenic principle—detailed accounts of which would go beyond the scope of this paper. Also relevant in this context is John D. Niles's idea of *homo narrans*, which posits storytelling as the defining characteristic of the human species (1999).

of this discourse, this episteme, and recognize the autopoetic and hybrid character of our species—instituting what Wynter calls “a gaze from below” (“Ceremony Found” 207). Instead of tethering ideas of being human to the figure of Man, accepting the cosmogony of Western Man as ‘natural’ and universal, Wynter proposes the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn as decolonial praxis through which to define being human as hybrid—part *bios* and part *mythos, logos*, cosmogony.

This paper explores the connections between Wynter’s theory and Silko’s fiction, arguing that *Ceremony* fictionally imagines such an Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, forming its characters out of words and (fictive) flesh, entangling the characters’ physical realities with the stories they tell about themselves and others. More than a return to Laguna storytelling traditions and a “claim to power for story” (Weaver 133), Silko imagines a postcolonial future beyond the Western scientific episteme, in which stories animate human beings as hybrid. Through an analysis of *Ceremony*’s literary tropes, this paper will show how Leslie Marmon Silko fictionally reenvisions new futures of being hybridly human, beyond the category of Man.

A key literary figure that will guide this analysis is a cluster of what I describe as “tropes of (dis)entanglement”: Following his ‘encounter-in-ritual’ with the Navajo medicine man Betonie, Tayo begins to disentangle the epistemic and ontological threads that had kept him tied up in the colonial world of Western Man in the first part of the novel. Loss of land, war trauma, alcoholism, and nuclear radiation initially all form knots in an entangled system of narratives, the common origins of which (in the Western episteme) remain hidden to Tayo at first. Betonie’s healing ritual exposes Tayo to a “counter-cosmogony” (Wynter, “Ceremony Found” 207) to the biocentric Darwinian model, insisting instead on the hybrid human’s autopoetic component. He comes to recognize the ways in which stories shape his being and eventually seizes control over his own narrative. In Wynter’s words, one could say that Tayo “emancipates [himself] from the *biologically absolute* terms [...] of secular Western Man” and finds “a ceremony able to resolve the contradictions of our uniquely human, hybrid level of existence” (“Ceremony Found” 202).

To begin this essay, an analysis of the first part of the novel aims to give shape to the entanglements that plague Tayo before the commencement of Betonie’s ceremony. Following Wynter, I will define these entanglements as “webs of significance” (“Ceremony Found” 202) and examine another set of tropes that permeate the first part, which I will characterize as “tropes of ethereality.” These tropes serve to illustrate the world in which Tayo finds himself at the beginning of

the novel as “*death-worlds*,” governed by the rules of “necropolitics” (Mbembe 40) and “radioactive colonialism” (Churchill and LaDuke 51). The ceremony, I will argue, reconfigures what Wynter describes as symbolic representations of life/death. In the second part, then, the disentanglements in Tayo’s mind affected by the ceremony will be analyzed as constituting an Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, which enables Tayo to reverse the symbolic life/death order and realize his hybridly human existence.

## THE DEATH-WORLDS OF MAN: BEFORE THE CEREMONY

### Tropes of Entanglement as Webs of Significance

The prose narrative of *Ceremony* begins in discomfort: Tayo does not sleep well, as the psychological trauma he suffers as a World War II veteran infests his dreams and ‘half-waking’ thoughts. Focalized through Tayo’s tangled consciousness, the narrative voice shifts from the sounds of a Spanish love song to those of Japanese soldiers in the war and to the hopeful sounds of Tayo’s uncle Josiah bringing him medicine. The impression that is imparted on the reader ends as the voices in Tayo’s mind are drowned out by the all-subsuming noise of Western civilization, typified here by the “loud, loud music from a big juke box” (Silko, *Ceremony* 5). The reader is told that Tayo had not been able to sleep “for as long as all things had become tied together” (6), like the colts in one of his memories involving his deceased uncle.<sup>6</sup> This trope of entanglement is spun further, deeper into Tayo’s recollected past: “He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma’s wicker sewing basket when he was a child” (6).

Entanglement on these opening pages symbolizes a lack of control and an inability to keep different threads—thought-strands, memories, faces, impressions, layers of time—apart. But it also symbolizes generative, creative potential, as the mythological figure of Thought-Woman initiates the fictional universe of *Ceremony* through the spinning of her web of thoughts.<sup>7</sup> This mythical register

6 As citations of *Ceremony* recur most frequently throughout this paper, I will cite only page numbers for citations that are already contextualized clearly enough as citing Silko’s novel.

7 In the Pueblo creation myth detailed by Silko in “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” (1986), Thought-Woman, the Spider, creates the universe through her thoughts,

forms what Robert M. Nelson describes as the “backbone” of the text, to which I will later return (*Leslie Marmon Silko* 19). The entanglements in Tayo’s mind lie at the root of what plagues him; they cause him pain and present themselves as seemingly indissoluble: “He could feel it inside his skull – the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more” (Silko, *Ceremony* 6). Following Sylvia Wynter, we might say that Tayo finds himself inside the “webs of significance’ [...] that we as humans spin for ourselves” (“Ceremony Found” 202).

Wynter borrows this terminology from Clifford Geertz, who himself paraphrases Max Weber in his semiotic definition of culture.<sup>8</sup> In “The Ceremony Found,” Wynter interrogates the ramifications of what it means if these webs of significance are at once “the indispensable condition of our being able to performatively enact ourselves as *being human*” (202), and at the same time constituted within an epistemological world-system that tethers *being human* to a limited, colonizing definition of *Man*. In other words, if what it means to be human has been defined through the parameters of Western Man, a figure that is constructed in opposition to and through the exclusion of other *genres* of the human (to follow Wynter’s terminology), then how can human beings collectively disentangle this epistemo-ontological complex to arrive at new, decolonized terms to describe their own humanity and thus performatively enact it? The answer that Wynter proposes is a “Ceremony” that is to be disentangled throughout this paper as well as interwoven with a possible answer suggested by Silko’s *Ceremony*.

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thinking first of three sisters for herself, who then help her create the rest of the cosmos by imagining all things in it (1011). See also “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective” for Silko’s likening of Pueblo expression to “a spider’s web – with many little threads radiating from the center, crisscrossing each other” (54).

- 8 “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 5).

### Tropes of Ethereality and the Death-Worlds of Modernity

For a long time he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital, because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke. (Silko, *Ceremony* 13)

Another set of tropes that pervades the first part of *Ceremony* prior to Tayo's encounter with Betonie is an ensemble that I will describe as "tropes of ethereality." In his recollection of the time he spent at the veterans' hospital, Tayo imagines himself as having become "invisible" (14), taking on the ethereal, ephemeral qualities of white smoke. During his contact with white doctors in this Western institution of ostensible healing, Tayo's definition of his own humanity is essentially reduced to a mode of nonbeing: "[H]e waited to die the way smoke dies, drifting away in currents of air, twisting in thin swirls, fading until it exists no more" (15). While these recollections occur in the past of Tayo's narrated present, they are still with him, ghostlike: "hauntologies" entangled in his sense of self (Derrida, *Specters* 10).

The idea of evaporating bodies is explicitly connected with Western science again in the novel in a different way. As Tayo visits Ku'oosh, an old Laguna healer, at the behest of his grandmother, he recalls the scenery of nuclear war as a place "where human bodies had evaporated" (Silko, *Ceremony* 34). A semantic rift is laid bare as Tayo realizes that the old medicine man lacks the interpretive framework to fathom this modern way of warfare: "In the old way of warfare, you couldn't kill another human being in battle without knowing it, without seeing the result, because even a wounded deer that got up and ran again left great clots of lung blood or spilled guts on the ground" (33). The webs of significance through which Ku'oosh sees the world—his belief in an *embodied* form of life that also connects humans to other living beings—cannot grasp this notion of life being rendered vaporous, showing the conceptual limits of the "old sensitivity" (62). As in Tayo's association of a smoke-like existence with the veterans' hospital (an institution of Western medicine), so is the trope of ethereality, of human life as vaporous rather than embodied, again linked to Western science in the form of modern warfare.

The mode of warfare that makes human bodies evaporate is part of what Achille Mbembe describes as the necropolitical framework of modern politics. In his

influential essay “Necropolitics” (2003), Mbembe builds on Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben’s theoretical models of biopolitics to offer a more extensive analysis of state power in an age of nuclear mass destruction. He argues that “the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe 39). He puts forward

the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. (Mbembe 39-40)

The result of Western scientific ‘progress’ is the development of war technologies that threaten the entire destruction of the planet and all its inhabitants. Furthermore, Mbembe identifies “the colony as a formation of terror” (23), citing racialization as the determining principle for what kind of life is deemed worth living and what kind of life is not—who is selected and who is dysselected, in Wynter’s terms. “That colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness stems from the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*” (Mbembe 24). The colony, then, for Mbembe, becomes the location where the Agambian state of exception is lived in “death-worlds” by the racialized and colonized, those dysselected by Western discourse from the category of Man.

Silko represents these death-worlds that Mbembe describes through the experience of the novel’s protagonist prior to his healing ceremony. Even when Tayo is no longer actively involved in the necropolitical machinery of World War II, in the context of colonial occupation he is rendered akin to “living dead,” scripted through tropes of ethereality, or what Mbembe describes as “phanto[m], unreal and ghostlike” (24). In addition to Tayo’s own perceived existence, the Laguna reservation he returns to can also be read as a kind of death-world. It is a place of “dead unburied” (Silko, *Ceremony* 157), where settler colonialism has morphed into what Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke have described as a new kind of colonialism, a “radioactive colonialism” (51).



### THE DEATH-WORLDS OF RADIOACTIVE COLONIALISM

In 1975, two years prior to the publication of *Ceremony*, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found extensive groundwater contamination under the Laguna reservation (Churchill and LaDuke 67). The years following World War II, in which the novel is set, marked the age of the so-called “uranium boom” in the American Southwest (Sharp 120). Spurred by the Cold War arms race, said boom saw powerful corporations take control over mineral reserves located primarily on land owned by various Native American tribes (Sharp 129). According to Helen Jaskoski, more than half of all uranium reserves in the United States lie under Native American reservations (2). The uranium boom fed into a “colonial stranglehold” over resources (Churchill and LaDuke 53), which not only rendered reservation inhabitants as “economic hostages” of the uranium industry (Churchill and LaDuke 58) but also brought disease, death, and environmental destruction over the territories and their peoples. This framework of exploitation, economic dependency, and pollution constitutes the “radioactive colonialism” that Churchill and LaDuke describe. Since it is characterized by an “expendable relationship of subject peoples to multinational corporations” (Churchill and LaDuke 56), echoes of Mbembe’s necropolitics resonate strongly in this configuration. Dysselected from the category of Man, racialized Indigenous subjects become expendable, rendered as “living dead,” to follow Mbembe.

As Patrick B. Sharp remarks, “Silko wrote *Ceremony* during the last decade of the uranium boom on the Laguna reservation, when the illness and death caused by the uranium mines was just beginning to be understood” (120). In the first part of her novel, Silko represents this historical background as a death-world governed by the necropolitics of radioactive colonialism. The white world for Tayo is a world characterized as lifeless, cold, vaporous, violent, clinical, and even “monstrous” (Silko, *Ceremony* 33), and it finds its echoes on the postwar Laguna reservation, where colonization and its discontents have wreaked havoc on a world defined by the necropolitics of colonial occupation. The uranium mines in the novel are explicitly characterized as death-worlds when Tayo’s view drifts over them: “The sandstone and dirt they had taken from inside the mesa was piled in mounds, long rows, like fresh graves” (227).

Ku’oosh’s failure to comprehend the death-worlds of modernity is what renders his ritual ineffective. Neither old-time tradition nor Western medicine can heal

Tayo's afflictions. It will be his challenge in the second part of the novel to disentangle the threads of this death-world. With the help of Betonie and his idiosyncratic ritual, Tayo will find a ceremony to emancipate himself from the colonizing category of Man and from Western knowledge systems by refuting what Sylvia Wynter calls the symbolic life/death codes of this epistemic regime. He will 'replot' the webs of significance, on which he depends to enact himself as human, to transcend the perceived ethereal conditions of his being brought on by the Western epistemes in which he previously remained entangled.

### REPRESENTATIONS OF SYMBOLIC LIFE/DEATH

If we follow Sylvia Wynter's understanding of being human as hybrid, composed of *bios* and *mythoi* (McKittrick and Wynter 16), we arrive at two different kinds of life and their respective negations in death. One kind of life is biological: "born of the womb" (McKittrick and Wynter 34). The other kind is symbolic: "the shared storytelling origin out of which we are initiatedly *reborn*. In this case we are no longer, as individual biological subjects, primarily *born of the womb*; rather, we are both *initiated* and *reborn*" in terms of the symbolic life/death codes through which we experience our being human (McKittrick and Wynter 34). Biological life/death is not the same as symbolic life/death. The latter provides the narrative framework through which the former is experienced and enacted.

Citing Peter Winch, Wynter writes that "all human groups institute their social orders about specific conceptions of 'Life/Death' which take the place of their biological life, orienting their behaviors" ("Ceremony Must Be Found" 26). These conceptions are what define the human as a species, as Drucilla Cornell and Stephen D. Seely write in their reading of Wynter's work: "According to Wynter, by means of the co-evolution of the brain with language and symbolic forms, *Homo sapiens* was able to break with the genetically programmed modes of kin recognition and replace them with narrative ones" (127). This is the epistemological break that institutes *homo narrans*. "All human groups, in other words, institute a specific descriptive statement (or 'episteme') through which they know themselves, others, and the world, and that includes symbolic codes of Life/Death or Good/Evil" (Cornell and Seely 127). In a world overdetermined by the figure of Man, the symbolic life/death code of the Western subject (as genre) overdetermines the

symbolic life/death codes of humankind (as species). Man's symbolic representations of life/death masquerade as universal, 'natural' life/death.

In the first part of the novel, Tayo accepts these symbolic representations of life/death as the terms of his own, biological being. In a sense, he 'lives' a symbolic 'death.' Even though the deadly effects of radioactive colonialism and necropolitics are very real and biological, Tayo has the power to symbolically redefine his world as a 'life-world,' a process that John D. Niles describes as the uniquely human "world-making ability" of storytelling (3). In order for this transformation to take place, Tayo will have to instate a counter-cosmogony with the help of Betonie's ceremony. Only by realizing himself as hybridly human can he disentangle his symbolic life/death from his biological life/death.

#### CEREMONY FOUND: TAYO'S AUTOPOETIC EMANCIPATION

##### Betonie's Ritual and the Cosmogony of Witchery

At the narratological center of the novel, Tayo visits a Navajo medicine man by the name of Betonie. In contrast to the Laguna healer Ku'oosh, Betonie updates the traditional ceremonies according to contemporary circumstances. Though he wears his hair "like the oldtimers" (Silko, *Ceremony* 107), he does not "act like a medicine man at all" (108), and in his house there are objects coded as Indigenous and part of the surrounding landscape (twigs, roots, mountain tobacco), as well as objects coded as Euro-American (Coca Cola bottles, Woolworth bags, telephone books). The early stages of Betonie's ritual recall a psychotherapy session, steeped in Western scientific epistemology, which further highlights the hybrid character of his approach. He describes change as a natural phenomenon that has been going on since time eternal and thus writes his updated rituals into an ongoing, ever evolving tradition:

[L]ong ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing. (116)

A key component of Betonie's ritual is his relaying of a story to Tayo that describes the origins and workings of witchery. According to this tale—reproduced in the lengthiest passage of *Ceremony's* mythical register—a group of “witch people” gather in the lava rock hills north of Cañoncito for a “contest in dark things” (123). One witch demonstrates their prowess through the telling of a story, claiming that “as I tell the story it will begin to happen” (125). The witch's story details the destructive force of “white skin people” (125), setting out to kill and steal. In the witch's story, these people serve as the vehicle that sets the witchery loose into the world through their inanimate way of viewing the world:

They see no life  
When they look  
they see only objects.  
The world is a dead thing for them  
the trees and rivers are not alive  
the mountains and stones are not alive.  
The deer and bear are objects  
They see no life. (125)

In his analysis of *Ceremony*, David M. Higgins draws an intriguing parallel between how witchery is characterized, and Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the Enlightenment, seeing the “disenchantment of the world” that they write of reflected in witchery's core principle of inanimateness. “Witchery, in Silko's description, is a legacy of enlightenment rationalism that leads to a nihilistic will-to-power which lacks imagination and empathy and ultimately leads to brutal cruelty and subjugation rather than widespread human empowerment and utopian advancement” (Higgins 62). In this interpretation, Western rationalism constitutes the source of planetary destruction. While I want to counter Higgins's reading to some extent—since the witchery is embedded in a mythical tale of Indigenous origin, which makes the notion of witchery as a legacy of enlightenment rationalism difficult to uphold—it can hardly be denied that Silko intertwines the discourses of witchery and Western rationalism semantically. The worldview of witchery echoes the rational, bioscientific view of Man, separating knowledge from feeling, mind from body, and beings from each other. It is also worth noting that witchery is associated topographically with the location of the uranium mines, foreshadowing the “pattern” in the rocks that will “explode everything” (Silko, *Ceremony* 127). This pattern signals the threat of planetary destruction that lies

dormant in the lava rock hills, activated by Western science—‘white-skin people’ acting as the vehicle for witchery—through the creation of the atomic bomb. Most crucially, it is the story (within the story) that unleashes the destructive force of witchery. Thus, Betonie’s narrative constitutes a counter-cosmogony to Western science and its epistemic and ontological principles—a competing autopoietic system predicated on the generative potential of the word.

### Tropes of Disentanglement

When Tayo wakes up following Betonie’s scalp ceremony, the reader becomes aware that Tayo’s way of looking at the world has been transformed: “He took a deep breath of cold mountain air: there were no boundaries; the world below and the sand paintings inside became the same that night. The mountains from all the directions had been gathered there that night” (Silko, *Ceremony* 134-35). It is the surrounding landscape, the mountains and their air, that give Tayo a new sense of animateness. Through Betonie’s retelling of his grandparents’ story, Tayo learns that “[i]t will take a long long time and many more stories like this one” before the ceremony can halt the destruction of the world (139). But he also comes to sense a change within himself, contrasting his haunted, ephemeral existence prior to the ceremony to a newly found sensation:

He was thinking about the ceremony the medicine man had performed over him, testing it against the old feeling, the sick hollow in his belly formed by the memories of Rocky and Josiah, all the years of Auntie’s eyes and her teeth set hard on edge. He could feel the ceremony like the rawhide thongs of the medicine pouch, straining to hold back the voices, the dreams, faces in the jungle in the L.A. depot, the smoky silence of solid white walls. (141)

Tayo is no longer subsumed by the “smoky silence” but registers a bodily sensation effected by the ceremony. This is emphasized again in a later passage, when Tayo runs in the rain “until the pain faded like fog mist” (202). Here, vaporous quality is recoded and reimagined as something positive and natural, in contrast to the tropes of ethereality in the first part of the novel. He starts to view the world and himself through a new set of symbolic codes, one that is not entangled with colonialism and the epistemic hegemony of Man and his knowledge systems. Betonie’s story begins to form a part of his very existence: “[S]uddenly Betonie’s vision was a story

he could feel happening” (173). However, it will take Tayo until the end of the novel to fully disentangle the webs of significance he had formerly found himself in, in order to arrive at a new understanding of his own humanity.

Tayo’s disentanglement is powerfully symbolized when he sets out to cut a hole into a fence erected by white farmers to protect ‘their’ land, in order to create an opening through which to steer the herd of cattle he is chasing. At first Tayo hesitates at the thought that perhaps the farmer on whose land he finds the cattle did not steal them. According to the colonial ‘governmentality’<sup>9</sup> he had previously adopted, “only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t steal” (177). But as he cuts into the wire, he recognizes this mode of knowledge not as truth but as a story: “The lie. He cut into the wire as if cutting away at the lie inside himself. The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or what they were doing to each other” (177). What Tayo also realizes here is that the lie, the hegemonic story of Western civilization that posits itself as truth, has become a part of him, enmeshed in his being. As he begins to cut away at the lie inside himself, he begins to disentangle himself from the world of Man and its epistemic and ontological principles.

The ensuing passage sees Tayo unravel the connections between different typologies of Western epistemes: nuclear war, destructive technology, economies of exploitation, and narratives that disavow the stealing of Indigenous lands. He tracks all these separate threads back to their common origin in ‘the lie.’ While for Tayo the source of this lie is the witchery of the “destroyers” (178), Silko once again intertwines the idea of witchery with the idea that the evil in Tayo’s world is an entanglement of different ways in which Western narrative-schemas overdetermine the narrative-schema of humankind. The afflictions that plague Tayo, as they are presented in *Ceremony*, can all be traced back to an evil force—witchery. But by describing this witchery in terms analogous—if not identical—to the rational, scientific worldview of Western Man, the novel’s ideological critique begins to sound a lot like that of Sylvia Wynter.

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9 Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon, Glen Sean Coulthard demonstrates “the production of the specific modes of colonial thought, desire, and behavior that implicitly or explicitly commit the colonized to the types of practices and subject positions that are required for their continued domination” in the contemporary Native American context (16).

### Telling Stories of Life Instead of Stories of Death

The end of the story. They want to change it. They want it to end here,  
the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away.  
(Silko, *Ceremony* 215)

The destroyers' stories are connected with death, just as the death-worlds of radioactive colonialism and Tayo's ethereal, smokelike existence in the first part of the novel is connected with Western science. His ceremonial healing aided by Betonie consists of Tayo recognizing life around him, realizing his connection to this life, and thus scripting an ontology of "survivance" for himself and his people (Vizenor). In the end, Tayo's worlds of symbolic life/death arrive at a climactic confrontation in the hills northwest of Cañoncito, the site of the Cebolleta uranium project.<sup>10</sup> The location is doubly significant as it not only is the site of the destructive uranium mining that has plunged the area into a state of radioactive colonialism but also is identified as the origin point of the witchery. In this sense, witchery, colonialism, and Western 'techno-science' are associated again—one might say entangled—through a shared topography.

As Tayo realizes that his friends Harley and Leroy have betrayed him and begins his escape from them, he recognizes his vulnerability in "their place" by the uranium mines (225). The necropolitical death-world of nuclear weaponry, the symbolic death code of the mines and Western war technology, exude their influence over Tayo so that he feels weak, sick, and fearful. His ultimate challenge to complete the ceremony will be to disentangle himself from the symbolic life/death code of the Western episteme, to rewrite 'their' story of death into a story of life.

The symbolic struggle between life and death is configured in two opposing images of the sun. On the one side, Tayo recalls the sunrise song of the Dawn people, celebrating the sun's coming as the "event which in a single moment gathered all things together" (169). In this scenario, the sun signifies new beginnings, replenishment, the "power of each day," and the convergence of all creation (169). But this ancient sun of the people has a rival, articulated in the Manhattan Project's nuclear flash, "witchery's final ceremonial sand painting" (228). Tayo's grandmother, standing in as a representative of Laguna tradition, tellingly recalls the moment in which this sun of death stakes its competing claim:

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of the project and maps of the area, see Wilton.

It was still dark; everyone else was still sleeping. But as I walked back from the kitchen to my bed there was a flash of light through the window. So big, so bright even my clouded-up eyes could see it. It must have filled the whole southeast sky. I thought I was seeing the sun rise again, but it faded away. (227)

The bomb exploded at Trinity Site in New Mexico in the vicinity of the Laguna reservation takes the place of the sun, if only for a moment. As Robert M. Nelson remarks, it represents “an artificial New Mexico sun, one designed to blind rather than illuminate, to destroy rather than to nurture” (“Function” 163).

In Tayo’s imagination, the nuclear blast evokes associations that echo his previous description of the sunrise through the Dawn people’s song. He arrives again at a “point of convergence,” one “where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid” (Silko, *Ceremony* 228). But instead of renewal, this convergence brings finality—a “circle of death” instead of an ever-ongoing replenishment of life for all living things and the Earth (228). The atomic bomb is the great equalizer opposing the sun’s enduring, life-giving power over the planet. It unites human beings as “one clan again,” all at the mercy of its apocalyptic force, “united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things” (228). This is the fate of Man, the dangerous culmination of Western technological progress.

But this narrative of progress leading to ultimate destruction is one that can be countered through ceremony. Tayo realizes that his story does not have to end in death there in the lava rock hills. The story of his people does not have to end in annihilation. He does not have to be “another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud” (235). Instead, he has the power to change the story, seizing control over its outcome, transcending the death-world of the uranium hills and transfiguring it into the location of ceremonial healing through the autopoetics of the hybridly human.

## CONCLUSION

For the first time in the history of humankind we are now confronted with a common environment. As a post-atomic one, it challenges us with the demand that we reinvent our present conflictive modes of group integration. This demand implies that we must now



consciously alter our mode of self-troping. (Wynter, "Ceremony Must Be Found" 51-52)

Like Silko's character Tayo, Sylvia Wynter, too, identifies the postatomic moment as a potentially unifying, panhuman one. As planetary destruction looms theoretically at any instant, the age of intraspecies differentiation must be terminated by an epistemological break that understands being human not in terms of *genre* but in terms of species. Wynter argues—and so, in a way, does Silko, as this paper demonstrates—that humanity must emancipate itself from the purely biological understanding of its being, realizing its ecumenically human constitution as a hybrid species. Composed of biological life as well as symbolic life, we enact our being through the stories we tell about ourselves. The power to shape these stories lies not in the master code of Man and the epistemo-ontological complex of Western science and rational empiricism, but in each cosmogonic chartering principle we write for ourselves. In *Ceremony*, Tayo finds and reclaims this cosmogony in an updated continuation of the mythical tales of the Laguna people.

The real sun of symbolic life eventually prevails over the symbolic death of the rivaling, nuclear sun in Tayo's story:

The sun was pushing against the gray horizon hills, sending yellow light across the clouds, and the yellow river sand was speckled with the broken shadows of tamaric and river willow. The transition was completed. In the west and in the south too, the clouds with round heavy bellies had gathered for the dawn. It was not necessary, but it was right, and even if the sky had been cloudless the end was the same. The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs; we came out of this land and we are hers. (Silko, *Ceremony* 236)

This story ends and is reinitiated in sunrise, just as the stories of the Dawn people. The epistemological break of 'self-troping,' the transition of symbolic death to symbolic life, is effected by a bond that is created between Tayo's own story, his sunrise song, and that of the Dawn people in Laguna mythology.<sup>11</sup> The ceremony is thus completed when Tayo tells his story to the Laguna elders, closing the circle between traditional and present modes of storytelling. This process is also

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11 See also Nelson on how "Sunrise" constitutes a formal bracket of the prose narrative, "enclosing and contextualizing the story of Tayo within sacred time and space" (*Leslie Marmon Silko* 58).

performed on a metatextual level, as Silko fuses her prose narrative with the Laguna mythical tradition. Silko's literary strategy therefore mirrors the hybrid character of Betonie's ceremony, making changes in the rituals, for "only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong" (116).

In the end, it is the fusion of textual registers that completes the ceremony:

Every evil  
which entangled him  
was cut  
to pieces. (240)

Tayo completes his disentanglement, finally cutting through 'the lie' in the mythical register of the text. Here, his story is finally subsumed in the cosmogony of his people; the end of his story (not in death) gives his people new life so that they "will be blessed again" (239). The generative potential of Tayo's counter-cosmogony thus manifests itself on an individual as well as a collective level.

This, then, is the Ceremony Found: Through the consciousness of her protagonist, Silko poetically imagines new ways of being hybridly human. She institutes a kind of Autopoetic Turn, in which Tayo realizes that he is more than Man and also constituted symbolically by the stories he tells about himself, which prescribe the ways in which he defines his being. The tropes of disentanglement in the text create a parallelism between the text and Tayo's consciousness, underscoring the dual ontological character (*bios* and *mythos*) of being human that Wynter imagines. With the help of Betonie's ceremony, Tayo emancipates himself from the symbolic representations of 'life/death' that cosmogonically charter the world of Man and the webs of significance in which he finds himself at the outset of the novel. By reconnecting with—and, in the process, updating—tribal Laguna mythology, Tayo completes a process of healing that transcends Western science, predicated on a science of the word. Tayo is *homo narrans*, and Silko points her readers to the decolonizing potential of such an understanding of being human—an emancipation from the figure of Man and from the epistemo-ontological discourses that evolved historically in conjunction with colonialism.

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