

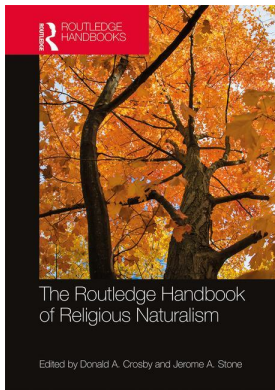
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### **African American Religious Naturalism and the Question of the Human**

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# AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS NATURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN

*Carol Wayne White*

In the contemporary era, religious naturalism features a synthesis of ideas and viewpoints that depart from traditional forms of religion. These perspectives include rejecting supernaturalism in any form and following the dictums of science in understanding reality, including human life and culture. With other religious naturalists, I am convinced that any truths we discover and any meaning in life we uncover are revealed to us through the natural order (Stone 2008: 1). In this chapter, I embrace these tenets of religious naturalism within the context of African American cultural and intellectual life. I offer a naturalistic view of humans that becomes the focal point for challenging exclusionary and outdated conceptions of humanity embedded in the logic of white supremacy. I present humans as highly complex organisms, owing the lives we have to the emergence of hierarchies of natural systems. Rejecting any notion of a supernatural reality beyond nature, I rely on current developments in science to help describe humans' processes of transformative engagement with each other and with the more-than-human worlds that constitute our existence.

These theoretical convictions foreground a model of African American religious naturalism that addresses issues of justice for myriad aspects of nature. In so doing, it provides insight into a legacy of white supremacy built upon a culture–nature binary in modernist discourses, where processes of racialization have helped shape an exclusionary category of the human, designating who is properly so and who is not. In this and other historical contexts, this binary differentiation functioned to demarcate certain spheres of life as superior and others as inferior, justifying the exploitative practices of the former. Traditional humanistic discourses inflected by it have also overestimated the autonomy of human beings, positioning us outside of nature and rendering invisible our inextricable connection to other life forms and material processes. Both of these impulses—white supremacy and human exceptionalism—evoke a model of nature built on the “great chain of being” concept, and they have produced violent and harmful consequences.

This exploration of humanistic reasoning within the context of religious naturalism involves a complex yet important task. On the one hand, I seek to reconstruct the category of the human in such a way that it can address the various “isms” that have denied black (and other marginalized) subjects their rightful claims to their humanity. On the other hand, my retrieval of the human necessarily rejects the aims of traditional humanisms that position us outside of nature. Whatever conceivable notion of complex humanity I claim in this essay will be ontologically enmeshed and entangled with other forms of natural life. I first outline a trajectory of humanistic

thinking in the West that provides the backdrop for this model of African American religious naturalism. Following this, I outline some of its central claims, introducing the sacred humanity concept. I then conclude with some reflections on its value in American culture and life.

### **Denying black humanity: white supremacy and the culture–nature binary**

Addressing the National Colored Convention in 1853, Frederick Douglass offered an astute observation about the lived experiences of black people in America:

Our white fellow-country men do not know us. They are strangers to our character, ignorant of our capacity, oblivious of our history and progress, and are misinformed as to the principles and ideas that control and guide us as a people. The great mass of American citizens estimate us as a characterless and purposeless people.

(Douglass 2000: 269)

In this passage, Douglass confronts the perceived black degradation rooted in the minds of white individuals held captive by the ideology of white supremacy—what he elsewhere labels “diseased imagination” (Douglass 2016: 501). A century later, at the height of the civil rights era, James Baldwin poignantly addressed the effects of this diseased imagination with his creative use of the bastard epithet. For Baldwin, the bastard metaphor revealed the pathology inherent in many whites’ refusal to embrace their familial kinship with blacks, based on the false notion of black cultural and biological inferiority: “The problem is rooted in the question of how one treats one’s flesh and blood, especially one’s children. The blacks are the despised and slaughtered children of the great Western house—nameless and unnamable bastards” (Baldwin 1998: 468).

Countless other African American visionaries, artists, and thinkers have expressed the conundrum of affirming life and embracing one’s humanity in a world (or culture of values) where blackness—its symbolic resonance and its tactile materiality—has been the target of dehumanization processes. In recent years, the formation of the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the controversies surrounding its title have resuscitated important cultural debates on the question that stretches back to Douglass’ era: When will blacks’ full humanity cease being questioned and devalued in the United States?

The multivalence of dehumanizing processes and anti-life forces against black lives cannot be underestimated. Once transported onto American shores, the physical color of Africans took on symbolic significance within a cultural system of differentiation that both marked them as slaves and justified negative assessments of their humanity. With the establishment of slave laws during the colonial period, blacks were treated as objects or assets to be bought and sold, mortgaged and wagered, despised and condemned. In very few contexts were blacks regarded as human subjects with volition, feeling, and a sense of responsibility. Their slave status stripped them of many civil rights and liberties granted to all citizens of the nation (Fisher 1992; Fede 2012, 34). Along with other cultural practices, these laws were integral to an emerging white supremacist ideology that used the construct race for judging blacks’ humanity against a normative model constructed by European cultures. One factor contributing to the rise of white supremacy in the U.S. was an early modern binary construct that originated in Western Europe. This construct divided human culture from nature into spheres of greater-lesser value. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant focuses primarily on its gender implications, asserting:

At the root of the identification of women and animality with a lower form of human life lies the distinction between nature and culture fundamental to humanistic disciplines such as history, literature, and anthropology, which accept that distinction as an unquestioned assumption.

(Merchant 1980: 132; 144)

Merchant also notes that this ideology of dualism was an integral component of Western European cultural imperialism, where the purported “civilized” races of Europe distinguished their own supposedly normative humanity against other groups they encountered in the Americas, Asia, and Africa. As an extension of the nature–culture dichotomy, racialized notions of difference led to disparaging views such as the savage Native Americans and the intellectually inferior Africans. When measured against the idealized Western bourgeois human, Africans, in particular, were found to be deficient in requisite cognitive, aesthetic, physical, and moral attributes (Eze 1996; Mills 1997; Stefancic and Delgado 2013). This epistemological framework was later sanctioned with nineteenth-century scientific studies, where notions of racial differences often presented the social inequalities between various cultural groups as reflecting the precepts of Nature. More precisely, with the rise of scientific racism, emerging views of “black animality” appeared in influential studies. In Robert Knox’s *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (Knox 1851), the slant of the brow is used to draw connections between the “Negro” and the “Oran Outan” and indicate differences between those two and the “European.” In their 1854 ethnological study (*Types of Mankind*), prominent scientists Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon documented their perception of objective racial hierarchies with illustrations comparing blacks to chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans (Nott and Gliddon 1854). Advancing a theory of polygenesis, Ernst Haeckel, a respected professor of zoology, represented the human species in a hierarchy from lowest to highest, ranking negroes among the lowest races and depicting them as savages related to apes (1876: 10). He believed people of African descent were psychologically nearer to other mammals—apes and dogs—than to the civilized Europeans, and consequently assigned a totally different value to their lives. Haeckel’s evolutionary ideas were embedded within his notion of racial purity for Germans, supporting his views that the inexorable laws of evolution conferred on favored races the right to dominate others (Haeckel 1876: 332).

Some of these scientific studies contributed uniquely to the idea of whiteness as a normative category for establishing a group’s humanity. While declaring the superiority of the human species in relation to other organic life, French thinker Arthur de Gobineau also advanced important distinctions within the human animal, with blacks representing the lowest form:

I have shown the unique place in the organic world occupied by the human species, the profound physical, as well as moral differences separating it from all other kinds of living creatures. Considering it by itself, I have been able to distinguish, on physiological grounds alone, three great and clearly marked types, the black, the yellow, and the white ... the negroid variety is the lowest, and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character, that appears in the shape of the pelvis, is stamped on the negro from birth, and foreshadows his destiny. His intellect will always move within a very narrow circle.

(de Gobineau 1915: 205–212)

With varying degrees of emphases, these perspectives proposed a gradation from civilization to barbarism, reinforcing the singular role of the Europeans as a civilizing force—a colonizing belief that is transferred to American shores (Wynters 2003).

American colonists extended the binary construction formulated in scientific racism into a unique American narrative of civilization overcoming wilderness. Encountering the deeply forested North American wilderness “the white Puritan colonists measured ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ in terms of (among other things) ‘how far a people could distance themselves from Nature’” (Spiegel 1997: 16). In diaries, personal writings, and memorials of the frontier period, colonists symbolized wilderness as an enemy to be conquered and overcome by the civilized pioneer army (Nash 2014: 27). Intermingled here are cultural, religious, and social forces that essentially made wilderness synonymous with darkness and sinister forces. As Roderick Nash contends,

The pioneers shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland. As a consequence, frontiersmen acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God. Civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good.

(Nash 2014: 24)

As part of the legacy of white supremacy in the United States, these perspectives both justified black slavery and the exploitation of the more-than-human natural worlds. As summarized by Paul Outka, this colonizing legacy consisted of whites viewing dark-skinned peoples as part of the natural world, and then proceeding to treat them with the same mixture of contempt and real exploitation that also marks American environmental history (Outka 2008: 3).

In *The Promise of Religious Naturalism*, Michael Hogue articulates an important insight into Western modernity that is intriguing, in light of the historical perspectives and accounts I have outlined:

Just as it once was thought by many that Western modernity would eventually lead to the demise of religion, protection from and control of nature has also been a running theme of Western modernity. The paradox, in short, is that modernity has not led so much to the demise of religion but to its transformation, and that rather than insulating humanity from the risks and hazards of natural processes, modernity has in many ways led to the increasing vulnerability of nature.

(Hogue 2010: 2)

Hogue’s articulation of this paradox leads me to consider the potential nature of black religion’s transformation after modernity. Can a transformed black religiosity effectively respond to some of the ways modernity has led to the increasing vulnerability of multifarious nature? The African American religious naturalism I propose in the next section responds to these concerns.

### **Toward an African American religious naturalism**

In his groundbreaking volume, *Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois sketched the complex unfolding of nineteenth-century African American religiosity, revealing the institutionalization of a people’s hopes, fears, core values, ethical convictions, and cosmological assumptions. In this and other works, Du Bois offers a compelling view of African American religiosity as an evolving, humanistic enterprise with monumental social and communal implications (Du Bois 1989).

I share Du Bois' approach, identifying African American religiosity as the ingenuity of a people constantly striving to inhabit their humanity and eke out a meaningful existence for themselves against the backdrop of culturally coded white supremacist notions and practices. This perspective is in keeping with those aspects of traditional black religious expression (primarily Christian) in the U.S. where specific images, symbols, and rituals function to address fundamental issues of life or death to black agents intent on living fully and with dignity (West and Glaude 2003: xiii–xv).

Historically, the symbol God has functioned in African American religious culture to affirm the value of black humanity as well as the fact that all humans share in the same ontological reality as other humans (Evans 1992: 100). It has been posited as an ultimate value—indeed, an *a priori* notion—in religious expression, symbolizing the means by which particular limitations on human potentiality could be dissolved or at least addressed. However, I am not persuaded by this appeal to the God symbolism (or to any form of supernaturalism) in my reading of black religiosity. What is crucial here, I believe, is recognizing the creative energies of blacks who rejected the impoverished conceptions of their humanity used to justify slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and other unjust social practices and cultural norms through the last several hundred years.

In making these claims, I am viewing African American religiosity primarily through the lens of religious functionalism, which, as Loyal Rue has suggested, places the proper focus on who actually creates and uses religion: humans (Rue 2005: 1). Religious functionalism in this context is a method of analyzing and interpreting religious experiences and expressions as natural events having natural causes. In advancing this theoretical orientation, I do not presume that religious phenomena can be completely explained; rather, I suggest that the extent of our understanding is contingent on efforts to grasp these phenomena in terms of underlying natural processes. In the Western history of ideas, this general approach is not all that new, having been advanced many times in the past. As Rue asserts, notable thinkers such as Kant, Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud have argued that “regardless of what religion *says* it is about, it has to *do* fundamentally with meeting the challenges to a full life” (Rue 2005: 3). With these earlier figures and contemporary naturalists like Rue, I share the conviction that religion both originates in human experience and is properly understood in natural terms, as opposed to those theories that see it emerging from some transcendent order or given by divine revelation. In this essay, however, I offer a fresh iteration of this general humanistic orientation in setting it within the context of raced living in the U.S. Given its emergence from the historical realities of slavery, black cultural and religious expression in the United States brings into relief an important point that other white humanists have failed to grasp: black slaves and their descendants have never had the luxury of asking these questions in abstraction. In surviving and making a claim about the value of life, American blacks have lived these questions into the future—both for contemporaries and for generations to come.

Through the lens of functionalism, black religious expression becomes one type of values discourse upheld by individuals and communities in their myriad struggles to humanize their existence. In short, from my perspective, the wide range of affirmations of blacks' valuable humanity reiterated from one generation to the next are more than emancipatory declarations; these affirmations provide an important shift in humanistic thinking. They offer to us an opportunity to raise important, more fundamental questions for contemporary readers: How to understand the complex human being that is being affirmed in African American liberationist discourse and that is further distorted by racialization processes? Operating on the assumption that the natural order is ultimately and finally real, I am essentially concerned about the human in its most concrete, basic terms: as a material process of nature in relationship with other forms of nature.

### **Sacred humanity concept**

The advances of science, through both biology and physics, have served to demonstrate not only how closely linked human animals are with nature, but that we are simply one branch of a seemingly endless natural cosmos. The general view of humanity I hold, on which I build my concept of sacred humanity, presupposes this verity.<sup>1</sup> Donald Crosby states this insight in even more eloquent terms:

Nature requires no explanation beyond itself. It always has existed and always will exist in some shape or form. Its constituents, principles, laws, and relations are the sole reality. This reality takes on new traits and possibilities as it evolves inexorably through time. Human beings are integral parts of nature, and they are natural beings through and through. They, like all living beings, are outcomes of biological evolution.

(Crosby 2008: ix–x)

With other religious naturalists, I believe that understanding the deep history of the cosmos is profoundly important for any basic understanding of the materiality of being human, of being alive in the manner we currently find ourselves. Humans are highly complex organisms, owing the lives we have to the emergence of hierarchies of natural systems. Expressed succinctly, humans are “ultimately the manifestations of many interlocking systems—atomic, molecular, biochemical, anatomical, ecological—apart from which human existence is incomprehensible” (Rue 2005: 25). Human life is also part of an evolutionary history showing a trend toward greater complexity and consciousness. As Stephen J. Gould and other scientists have noted, there has been an increase in the genetic information in DNA and a steady increase in the ability of organisms to gather and process information about the environment and respond to it (Gould 1989; Deacon 2003; Deacon 2006).

In highlighting human animals as emergent life forms, I warn against a particular reading of this claim that concludes human beings are the triumphant summit of natural development. Rather, my position is best described by recent insights in ecological studies, aptly described by Crosby: organisms of various types, including human beings, are inextricably bound together in a web of mutual interdependence for their continual flourishing and survival as they make common if varied use of the energy of the sun (Crosby 2013: 16). Within each web, each species of animal has a niche for which it is more or less adapted, and has attributes others lack (Spiegel 1997: 22–23). This ecological bent challenges those who would use evolutionary history as the basis for deciding who is better than whom. As suggested by an earlier view of Marx and Engels, I consider human beings within the larger contexts and relations of nature, which is in constant flux and change, incessantly coming into being and passing away as every organic being simultaneously assimilates matter from without and excretes matter from within (Parsons 1977: 24). At the same time, I reject the more emphatic aspects of later Marxist discourse that looked upon the “animal” part of humanity as some sort of biological residue, a thing left over from humanity’s past (Frolov 1986).

In light of these observations, the scientific epic becomes the starting point for positing an African American religious naturalism constituted by a central tenet: humans are relational processes of nature. Our inexhaustible connection or entanglement with other natural processes, or with the more-than-human, constitute the very notion of the human as such. In declaring such, I contend that our humanity is not a given, but rather an achievement. Consider that from a strictly biological perspective, humans are organisms that have slowly evolved by a process of natural selection from earlier primates. From one generation to another, the species that is alive

now has gradually adapted to changing environments so that it could continue to survive. Our animality, from this perspective, is living under the influence of genes, instincts, and emotions, with the prime directive to survive and procreate.

Yet, this minimalist approach fails to consider what a few cognitive scientists, and most philosophers, humanists, and religionists tend to accentuate: our own personal experience of what it is like to be an experiencing human being. As I noted elsewhere, becoming human, or actualizing ourselves as human beings, in this sense, emerges out of an awareness and desire to be more than a conglomeration of pulsating cells. It is suggesting that our humanity is not reducible to organizational patterns or processes dominated by brain structures; nor do DNA, diet, behavior, and the environment solely structure it. In posing fundamental questions of value, meaning, and purpose to our existence, human animals become human destinies. Our coming to be human destinies is structured by a crucial question: How do we come to terms with life?

I share Ursula Goodenough's sentiment that reveling in a sense of connectedness with other living beings can be described as sacred (Goodenough 2000). On the molecular level, there is evidence to support the loftier (or religious) idea that in the very nature of life itself there is some essential joining force. This orientation toward joining with others in establishing our common humanity is what I imagine when using the phrase *sacred humanity*. Humans are, by our very constitution, relational, and our wholeness occurs within a matrix of complex interconnectedness—put another way, ways of conjoining with others that transform us. Granted, this is not your typical approach to the sacred, which admittedly is a complex word that has been used for a wide range of phenomena: places, times, persons, events, and deities. Traditionally, when people designate something as sacred, they view the thing in question as “other than ordinary.” Thus, in the broadest sense of the term, the sacred has been used by scholars, especially those sympathetic to the work of Mircea Eliade, to convey the “extraordinary” (Eliade 1987).

Utilizing the tenets of religious naturalism in conjunction with values discourse, I consider humans' awareness and appreciation of our connection to “all that is,” as an expression of sacrality, or what we perceive and value as ultimately important and valuable. Value in this sense refers to an organism's facility to sense whether events in its environment are more or less desirable (Dolan 2002: 1191). Minimally, this facility evokes the notion of adaptive value, which is the basic matrix of Darwinian theory (Gould 2000: 158). Within a larger ecological framework, however, this truth takes on fuller meaning, as Holmes Rolston's observations suggest: “An organism is the loci of values defended; life is otherwise unthinkable. Such organismic values are individually defended; but, ecologists insists, organisms occupy niches and are networked into biotic communities” (Rolston 2006: 911).

Humans seeking, finding, and experiencing community with others—and, in my own words, with otherness—is an essential aspect of our humanity that religious discourse tends to advance and reiterate again and again. As Ursula Goodenough writes:

We have throughout the ages sought connection with higher powers in the sky or beneath the earth, or with ancestors in some other realm. We have also sought, and found, religious fellowship with one another. And now we realize that we are connected to all creatures. Not just in food chains or ecological equilibria. We share a common ancestor. We share genes for receptors and cell cycles and signal-transduction cascades. We share evolutionary



constraints and possibilities. We are connected  
all the way down.

(Goodenough 2000: 73)

Scientific theories feature the social character of cognition in animals and humans, providing various types of evidence for understanding humanity as symbol makers, creators of a world imbued with value, and as social organisms. According to Terrence Deacon, what is particularly interesting about the course of human evolution is that it has entailed the co-evolution of three emergent modalities—brain, symbolic language, and culture—with each feeding into and responding to the other two and generating particularly complex patterns and outcomes. In *The Symbolic Species*, he explores the intricate connection between the evolution of human language and our brains, or what he calls their co-evolution (Deacon 1997). The gist of Deacon's study is that language itself was part of the process that was responsible for the evolution of the brain. Language has changed the environments in which brains have evolved. We are a species that in part has been shaped by symbols, in part shaped by what we do. According to Deacon, ritual, mythology—ways of doing things that are organized conventionally, symbolically—are the hallmark of our species. Humans have transformed and even reinterpreted much of our biology through this symbolic system. So much of what we do—marriage, conflict, as in warfare, or whatever—has been transformed by this linguistic tool that has, in a sense, taken over and biased all of our interactions with the world. Expressed succinctly, our brain has evolved very differently in some regards than other species' brains and in ways that are uniquely human (Deacon 1997: 36ff; 45–46).

Based on these insights from Deacon and other scientists, we can affirm that humans seek meaning by viewing their lives in a cosmic and religious framework that is itself a human symbolic construct—the brain is part of the cosmos and a product of the cosmos. Its structures reflect the nature of the cosmos and whatever ordering and meaning-giving forces are expressed in its history (Arbib 1989; LeDoux 1996; Brothers 1997). These naturalistic views of the human indicate a complex social organism that can love, connect deeply with others, and symbolize its environment (or engage in world formation) through values and language. They also lend support to my view of human individuals as multilevel psychosomatic unities—both biological organisms and responsible selves. Here, the focus is on us humans' heightened awareness of our ability self-consciously to make decisions, act on those decisions, and take responsibility for them. This point converges with Rue's descriptive account of human beings as star-born, earth-formed creatures endowed by evolutionary processes to seek reproductive fitness under the guidance of biological, psychological, and cultural systems that have been selected for their utility in mediating adaptive behaviors. Humans maximize their chances for reproductive fitness by managing the complexity of these systems in ways that are conducive to the simultaneous achievement of personal wholeness and social coherence (Rue 2005: 75).

A consistent scientific view is that a successful life outcome consists of promoting the transmission of information conducive to maintaining an emergent dynamic logic that gives life its meaning—that is, promoting the production of emergent outcomes (called traits in biology) that collectively make their own continuation more likely. As Goodenough and Deacon assert:

Traits common to all organisms include such non-depressing and religiously fertile capacities as end-directedness and identity maintenance; traits common to all animals include awareness and the capacity for pleasure and suffering; traits common to social beings include co-operation and meaning making; traits common to birds and

mammals include bonding and nurturance; traits common to humans include language and its capacity to share subjective experiences, and thus to know love. Transmission of genomes is the steady background drumbeat; emergence is the music.

(Deacon and Goodenough 2008: 860)

### **From the diseased imagination to moral imaginations**

With its conception of the human as an emergent, interconnected form amid spectacular biotic diversity, the African American religious naturalism I am proposing has rich potential to work with other critical discourses seeking transformations in American culture and life. First, its new religious ideal—sacred humanity—ennobles and dignifies new images of ourselves, creatively inscribed onto the tissues, bones, and liquids of which we are constituted. In so doing, it challenges the most alienating self-other “isms” created by humans, specifically underscoring the historical insights regarding the notion of blackness as a form of otherness in a cultural formation that reifies whiteness. Further, it asserts that full liberation for all Americans requires a rejection of the dualistic, binary structures that support such problematic racialized views.

This naturalistic view also resists the lure of a generic, universal construction of “man” that has justified the devalued status of women and other subjects relegated to minority status. Enlightenment configurations of this normative human have been associated with a coherent, white, propertied, and rational subjectivity (Haraway 2004: 48). Rather than assume that gender, race, class, abled-bodiedness, and other socially derived markers provide the basis of our humanity, we should recognize them as highly complex categories constructed in contested discourses and other social practices. When these constructions are used to support racism, sexism, and other forms of cultural superiority, they become forced impositions on the wholeness of natural interrelatedness and deep genetic homology that evolution has wrought.

Moreover, this African American religious naturalism helps undermine a dominant cultural fantasy of human exceptionalism that anchors humans on one side of the Great Divide, away from all other species. This premise assumes that the human alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies, and it has lent theoretical support to popular myths of the self-made individual in the U.S. African American religious naturalism rejects this fantasy, and encourages us to join with Haraway in appreciating our intricate entanglement with other material processes:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with many*.

(Haraway 2008: 3–4)

Second, propelling citizens of our nation beyond the diseased imagination first identified by Douglass, this African American religious naturalism entertains new moral imaginations

that resist the logic of white supremacy. With the sacred humanity concept as its organizing principle, African American religious naturalism directs our attention to a world evolving naturally, based on the interconnection and interaction of all of its fundamental components. In effect, it helps blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between themselves and other species and natural processes. We recall Hogue's assertion of religious naturalism as one viable response to the general paradox of modernity. The model of African American religious naturalism introduced here constitutes one specific case of Hogue's resolution. While it denounces black degradation and inferiority through the use of the animal other, it also goes further to analyze the speciesism that is evident in these formulations. In short, this religious worldview evokes a moral imagination that compels us to ask why is it that both racist and antiracist discourses are predicated on a repudiation of animality (Peterson 2012). One response is that the equation of blacks with co-primates that is rooted in Enlightenment racism is based on prior negative ideas about less-than-human animals (Thomas 1983: 40). In other words, species supremacy engenders the bestialization of social and political others.

Anticipating that some people will find these connections between anti-black racism and speciesism troubling, I turn to Spiegel's observation in *The Dreaded Comparison*: that the human/animal opposition makes the abjection of human others possible means that insisting on their humanity as a mode of resistance can only re-inscribe the speciesist logic that initiates their exclusion (Spiegel 1997: 30). I agree with Spiegel. Furthermore, when we continually dismiss "nonhuman" sentience, we create conditions for reducing certain human others to the status of "mere" animal life. As Spiegel notes: "Comparing the suffering of animals to that of other blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced false notions of what animals are like" (Spiegel 1997: 30, 37).

As we continue discovering and resisting the wide-ranging violence embedded in European colonialism, the sacred humanity concept in African American religious naturalism compels us to consider fully the colonization of other animals. On this matter, Jeremy Bentham offered an important insight in the eighteenth-century:

The day has been ... in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated by the law exactly upon the same footing as, in England for example, the ... animals are still ... The French have already discovered that the blackness of skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum*, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate... . The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they suffer?

(Bentham 1789: 283)

Bentham's emphasis on *sentience* is crucial. White supremacy and species supremacy distort the wholeness of animal sentience. One step toward decolonizing nature, toward making it less vulnerable, perhaps, is in honoring nature's sentience, which is an essential part of being alive, experiencing others, being affected by others, and experiencing wellbeing.

Finally, as we continue questioning the idea of Enlightenment progress, as well as the ethics of unrestrained development as a means of dominating nature in all its forms, the sacred humanity concept strengthens the case for addressing with concerted effort ecological degradation on various levels (Clingerman and Dixon 2011). Its theoretical claims alert us to the dangers of isolationist agendas that environmental justice advocates also resist. For example, the environmental justice movement helps make clear religious naturalism's sense of the irrefutable interconnectedness of all life when it concurrently advocates against the depletion of natural resources, challenges the policies that both create land polluted by landfills, oil refineries, and nuclear-waste repositories and force poor racial and ethnic communities to live near these sites, and fights for referendums that preserve the delicate ecosystems supporting whales and dolphins (Cole and Foster 2001). As these efforts suggest, religious naturalists and environmental justice advocates share a general maxim: harm done to any one sector of natural processes, inclusive of human organisms, is harm done to all. Inspired by this claim, a more robust environmental justice movement intentionally challenges and unmasks subtle binary differentiations that ground the most recent variations of the nature-culture continuum.

Honoring all materiality, African American religious naturalism casts aside problematic bifurcations of human materiality cast in racial and ethnic terms that often result in an "us-versus-them" mentality. With such a religious worldview, we can better identify and resist the ill-effects of white supremacy on all of us, resisting its power in determining how certain racial and ethnic bodies are treated. We can also detect and challenge the subtle processes of the racialization of nature endemic to American environmental history (Glave 2010; Finney 2014). These important ecological values are ones that social justice advocates can extend to enact important ethical, political, economic, and social changes in American life.

### Note

- 1 Parts of this section are drawn from a fuller discussion in my book *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism*, Albany, NY: Fordham Press, 2016. They are reprinted with permission from Fordham Press.

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