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12-2020

### Which Politics of Nature?: A Response to Crawford

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#### Recommended Citation

White, Carol W., "Which Politics of Nature?: A Response to Crawford" (2020). *Other Faculty Research and Publications*. 144.

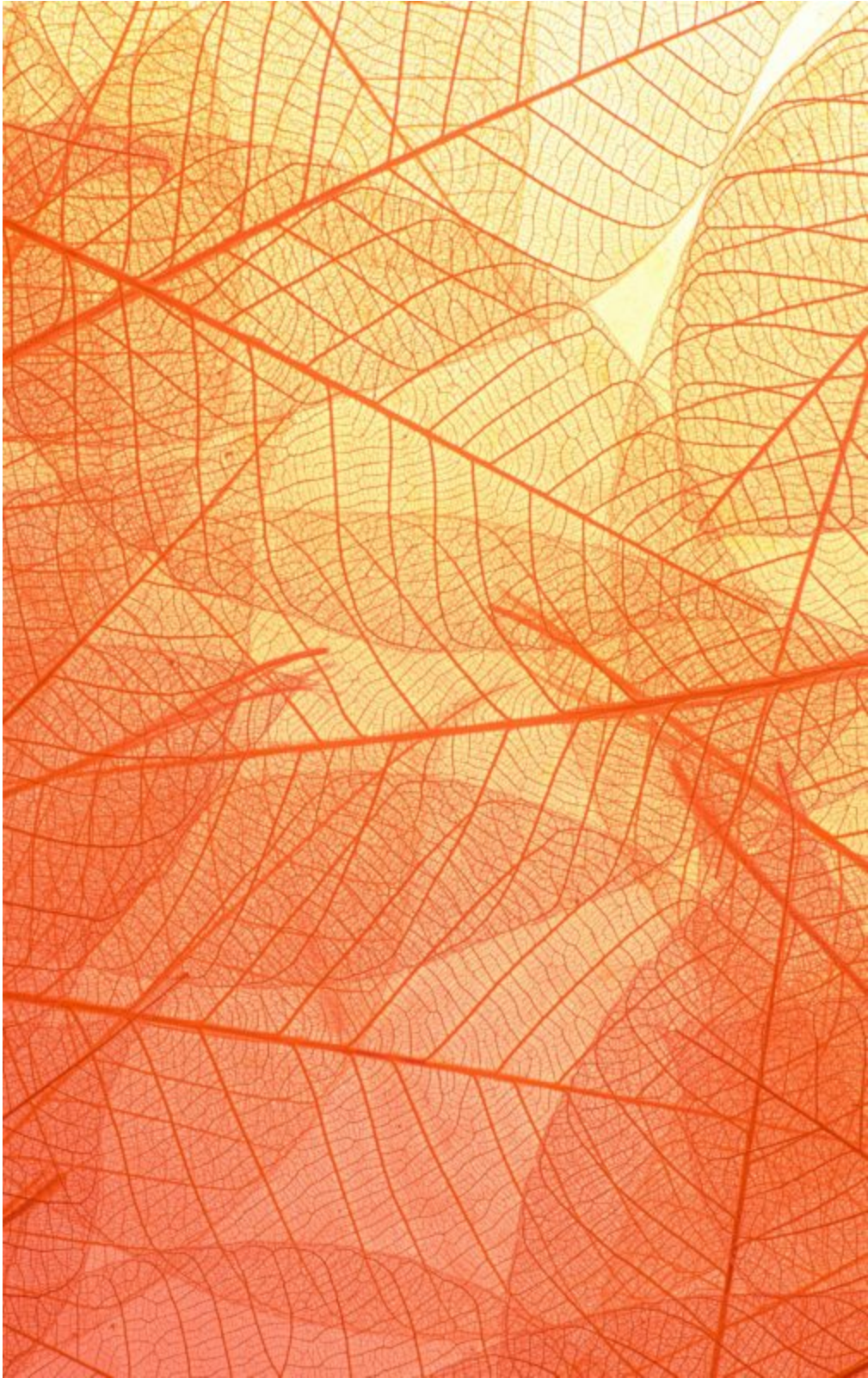
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# Which politics of nature? A response to Crockford

[tif.ssrc.org/2020/12/07/which-politics-of-nature](https://tif.ssrc.org/2020/12/07/which-politics-of-nature)

By Carol Wayne White



Susannah Crockford makes an astute observation in her essay for this forum: In *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism*, Robin Globus Veldman redirects attention away from a perception commonly held by evangelicals' critics (end-time apathy hypothesis) to evangelicals' more complicated embattlement with secular culture, or the world. For Crockford, this new focus compels readers to ascertain what the concept of nature might mean to evangelicals who enact what Veldman calls their practical environmentalism. While assessing white evangelicals' discourse on nature, Crockford surmises that perhaps perceived crucial differences between their position and the ones held by climate science advocates can be explained by the contested conceptual terrain from which the term "nature" arises. I agree with Crockford and further explore other nuanced meanings and perspectives associated with this contested conceptual landscape in this essay. More specifically, from the vantage point of religious naturalism, I consider the "nature" of nature discourse in Veldman's framing of white evangelicals' embattlement with secular culture, underscoring Crockford's astute reminder that a politics of nature infuses all of our discourses on nature.

White evangelicals' practical environmentalism is grounded in a view of nature associated with wildness, or that which must be carefully cultivated and kept in place within a specific ontological ordering. As Crockford writes in her contribution to this forum, "The value of nature blooms from its utility to them, for hunting, for fishing, for domesticating problematic wildness and creating order that primarily benefits humans." Crockford also reminds us that their practical environmentalism is grounded in a theocratic vision, where individual human actions are aligned with a divine, cosmic order. White evangelicals see climate change and environmentalism transgressing the natural order, putting government and Earth where God is. As summed up by Crockford, nature has its place and climate change disrupts this sense of order. Accordingly, white evangelicals must reject climate change.

Veldman addresses this point in her book when discussing what is ultimately important to white evangelicals: personal salvation and its inextricable relationship to the operations of sin in the world. Notably, these theological maxims are sustained by a complex set of attitudes and practices, or a distinctive social world and its concomitant identity politics. As a result, white evangelicals' agonistic relationship with environmentalists is inevitable and necessary precisely because the latter's values, practices, and aims blur the lines of what is ultimately important and what is secondary in the divine cosmic ordering. As Crockford eventually concludes, the cultural wars continue, and, sadly, the divided house is in danger of collapsing.

From the vantage point of religious naturalism, I remain curious about both positions, wondering whether, and to what extent, both may be contributing to a "popular fantasy of nature rescue" narrative that often advances humans' ethical relations to myriad nature in problematic ways. This narrative also helps to obfuscate a fundamental maxim that Donald Crosby and Jerome Stone articulate in *The Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*: "thinking deeply about nature and our place as human beings in nature is an urgent and salutary activity for each of us and for the institutions of our societies, no matter what our

personal religious or secular outlooks may be in this time of rampant species endangerment, global climate change, and looming ecological crisis.” Herein lies the appeal of religious naturalism within current theoretical debates on nature: its fundamental conception of humans as natural processes intrinsically connected to other natural processes. The advances of the sciences, through both physics and biology, have demonstrated not only how closely linked human animals are with nature, but that we are simply one branch of a seemingly endless natural cosmos. Understanding the deep history of the cosmos is thus profoundly important for any basic understanding of the materiality of being human, of being alive in the manner we currently find ourselves. Big Bang cosmology, for example, shows the world evolving naturally, based on the interconnection and interaction of all of its fundamental components. Bearing in mind these insights, I share Loyal Rue’s contention that humans are “ultimately the manifestations of many interlocking systems—atomic, molecular, biochemical, anatomical, ecological—apart from which human existence is incomprehensible.”

When set within this theoretical context, white evangelical Christians’ view of nature is unmasked as a robust narrative of human exceptionalism (“*imago Dei*”) that remains apart from the natural, wild world it seeks to cultivate and order. In this view, “more-than-human nature” remains the other, not humans’ kin, and is treated as mere objects that help showcase humans’ valiant moral efforts. This popular view also overestimates human animals’ autonomy, positioning us outside of complex, myriad nature and rendering invisible our inextricable connections. As noted by Crockford, nonhuman nature is accorded value according to its usefulness to us. Moreover, in rejecting the “human hubris” of the secular environmentalists who are viewed as opposing their theocratic vision, white evangelicals’ advance a patently “anti-humanistic” agenda on one level. At the same time, in practicing their environmentalism, they uphold an ontological ordering that ironically advances an entrenched form of human exceptionalism that negates the facticity of interrelatedness within and among all material beings, including humans. As A. Marie Houser observes, “The boomerang of anthropogenic climate-change, which rounds back to humans, bringing its pain, withers the phantasm of the sovereign human species. Climate change exposes the ways in which the human and the more-than-human exist in lateral, not hierarchical, relation. To some, the slip of the human from its vaunted station constitutes a final, dizzying insult to the traditional order, already (the thinking goes) too much challenged by social-justice movements.”

Crockford’s insights about the politics of nature compel religious naturalists like myself to also probe and continually question whether implicit forms of human exceptionalism may be lurking within our humanistic discourses on nature that often support the science of climate change. One avenue toward that end is remembering some of the pivotal developments and events that helped the rise of secular humanism in the United States. Humanism’s primary approach to the natural world was supported with such scientific methods as experiential verification, thereby establishing the criteria for falsification. Consequently, a dominant notion of truth emerged that often relied on reductionist empirical methods.

This epistemological bent helped to shape a humanist ethic in which humans become the sole source of fulfilling their own goals, one of which was maximizing human fulfillment and minimizing “human” suffering. With the dilapidation of Christianity as a resource of moral authority and national ideology, or as a source for establishing truth, humanistic developments grew and shifted, increasingly dependent on the role of science in accentuating the uniqueness of the human.

This general humanistic orientation leads me to consider the cluster of narratives surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene. As described by Rolf Lidskog and Claire Waterton, these narratives share some fundamental convictions: (i) that earth itself is a single system within which the biosphere is an essential component; (ii) that human impact is global and accelerating, now threatening the fundamental life processes of earth; (iii) that this change is traceable geologically, possibly implying a new geological epoch, “the Anthropocene”; (iv) that there is a need to radically change current human activities in order to avoid this threat. In sharing these convictions, Anthropocene narratives often invoke the concept of “human agency” in attempts to legitimate decisions and motivate actions in response to the problem of anthropogenic climate change and its myriad effects. While appreciative of the general goals of these narratives, my model of religious naturalism nonetheless invites us to further examine the type of human implied in promoting such efficacious agency. It asks whether subtle notions of “*anthropos*” are driving a politics of nature that perpetuates human animals’ exceptionalism and autonomy from myriad nature, justifying our calls to “rescue” *it*. In other words, an astute politics of nature continually questions how, when, and to what extent we harbor outdated ontological lines of demarcation in our environmentalisms. It is with these critical sensibilities that I appreciate Crockford’s provocative insight that we remain alert to the politics operating in our discourses on nature.

Perhaps, as Veldman suggests in the epilogue of her book, the socially powerful boundaries between white evangelicals and environmentalists are too entrenched for both to join forces. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Yet, rather than watch the divided house fall, I prefer to contemplate the possibilities of another politics of nature. This one asks us to consider the symbolic and ethical resonance of one root meaning of the word “religious,” which is “to bind together,” or to make connection, as in a real relationship. The politics of nature emerging from my religious naturalist discourse exemplifies a fundamental meaning of religion, namely, to have a profound sense of connection to that which is ultimate. In so doing, it explores and celebrates the fact of human animals’ deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world. The human is always, already part of myriad nature. If such is the case, community with other natural processes does not happen to us as a result of our efforts; rather it is that out of which our ethical capacity is made.

Additionally, this view suggests there are inseparable ethical connections between humanity’s relationality with other natural processes on the planet and humans’ activities with each other. It is not an either-or situation. In this discursive political space, we remain

attentive to the fact that climate change is certain to increase certain forms of injustice already operating in our various sociological and cultural settings. Due to historical inequities and disparities in the social and institutional contexts of human activity, the reality of climate change, existing vulnerabilities related to social inequalities will be exacerbated. As a distinctive aspect of myriad nature, humans have been shaped by evolutionary constraints to understand and appreciate our constitutive relationality. Some (not all) humans appreciate the fact that we are part of an interacting, evolving, and genetically related community of beings bound together inseparably in space and time. In doing so, we recognize that humans are capable of continually questioning our values, behaviors, and resource uses as we enact our relationality with each other and with myriad nature, or the more-than-human worlds that constitute our being here. In essence, this aspirational ethics enacts a politics of humility.