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Carol W. White

Bucknell University, cwhite@bucknell.edu

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Author(s): Carol Wayne White

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Black Lives, Sacred Humanity, and the Racialization of Nature, or Why America Needs Religious Naturalism Today¹

Carol Wayne White / Bucknell University

“Life must be something more than dilettante speculation. And religion (ought to be if it isn’t) a great deal more than mere gratification of the instinct for worship linked with the straight-teaching of irreproachable credos. Religion must be *life made true*, and life is action, growth, development—begun now and ending never.”

—Anna Julia Cooper

I. Antiblack Rhetoric and the Animal Other

In September 2016, a first-year student at East Tennessee State University interrupted a Black Lives Matter protest on campus, parading in a gorilla mask. Clad in overalls and barefoot, the young man offered bananas to the protesting students, heckling them.² When set within a wider historical context, this student’s actions evoke a legacy of intimidation in which perceived differences attributed to certain humans are symbolized in terms of animal otherness. This mechanism of targeting certain groups as different and designating them as the Other has often included linking them to animals or objects that require managing, cleansing, or elimination.³ Early examples include Nazi propaganda during the 1920s and ’30s, portraying Jewish citizens as rats⁴ or vermin that deserved to be exterminated.⁴ Elsewhere,

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented as the Annual Lecture of the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* at the 2016 meeting of the American Academy of Religion (San Antonio, Texas, November 2016).

2. Susan Svrluga, “Student Arrested After Wearing Gorilla Mask, Handing Out Bananas at Black Lives Matter Protest,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 2016, accessed October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/09/29/student-arrested-after-wearing-gorilla-mask-handing-out-bananas-at-black-lives-matter-protest/>.

3. Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, “The Dangers of Dehumanization: Diminishing Humanity in Image and Deed,” in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, ed. Susan Dente Ross and Paul Martin Lester (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 43–44.

4. Randall L. Bytwerk, *German Propaganda Archive*, accessed October 2016, <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/>; see also Randall L. Bytwerk, *Bending Spines: The Propagan-*

during WWII, political cartoons in the U.S. featured Japanese people as mice and rats, suggesting they should be defeated.⁵ Amid anti-Irish fervor in both Great Britain and the U.S., Irish immigrants were viewed as apes, or as wild creatures that were to be controlled.⁶

Simian images, in particular, can be traced back in Western thought as an effective strategy to demarcate a certain notion of normative humanity. In an early Platonic Dialogue, *Hippias Major*, possibly authored by Plato himself, Heraclitus is quoted as saying that the most beautiful of apes is hideous in comparison to humans and that the wisest of humans are apish in relation to gods.⁷ In Christian contexts, representations of the monkey as “an image of the devil” (*figura diabolica*) and the sinner circulated widely; these images also symbolized humanity in a state of degeneracy. During the Patristic period in Christianity, certain theologians also used monkey icons to symbolize pagans, heretics, and other enemies of Christ.⁸

Centuries later in the U.S., simian imagery has become an effective strategy of antiblack rhetoric, with ontological implications. Projected images of African Americans as apes, monkeys, or gorillas justified the institution of slavery and miscegenation laws in the U.S.; they also reinforced still widespread stereotypes of black men as beasts with unmanageable sexuality.⁹ Sadly, this form of animalization to portray blacks as subhuman has not been confined to this nation. In 2016, Penny Sparrow, a white South African estate agent, commented on black New Year revelers “littering” the beach in Durban with these words: “From now [on] I shall address the blacks of South Africa as monkeys as I see

das of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004).

5. Anthony V. Navarro, “A Critical Comparison between Japanese and American Propaganda during World War II,” Michigan State University, accessed October 2016, <https://www.msu.edu/~navarro6/srop.html>.

6. L. Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

7. *Hippias Major* (or *What is Beauty?*) belongs to the early Dialogues. Its precise date is uncertain, although a date of ca. 390 BCE has been suggested. In this Dialogue, Socrates and Hippias set out to find a definition for “beauty” but are destined to fail due to their inability to formulate an answer that encompasses the entire concept.

8. Raymond H. A. Corbey, *The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal and Human Boundary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

9. Wulf D. Hund, Charles W. Mills, and Silvia Sebastiani, eds., *Simianization: Apes, Gender, and Race (Racism Analysis—Series B Yearbooks)* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2015), 68; see also Mark S. Roberts, *The Mark of the Beast: Animality and Human Oppression* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008).

the cute little wild monkeys do the same, pick and drop litter.”¹⁰ Additionally, a liberal Belgian newspaper attempted to evoke satirical humor in simianising Barak and Michelle Obama in 2014.¹¹

This persistent theme of representing people of African descent as inferior beings, indeed, subpar humans, invites further examination. As a religious naturalist, I am particularly concerned that the symbolic value of these gestures is deeply embedded in problematic notions of animality, race, and nature in our country. In short, they offer us a lethal combination of intimately conjoined white supremacy and species supremacy. With the former, processes of racialization have been influential in an exclusionary category of the human, designating who is properly so and who is not. With the latter, a trajectory of liberal humanism has consistently overestimated the autonomy of human animals, positioning us outside of complex, myriad nature and rendering invisible our inextricable connection to other life forms and material processes. Both of these impulses—white supremacy and species supremacy—evoke a hierarchical model of nature built on the “great chain of being” concept, and they have produced violent and harmful consequences. In this essay, I argue that one effective way of challenging them is through the lens of religious naturalism. As a capacious ecological religious worldview, religious naturalism is a critical intervention in Western humanistic thought. It shifts attention back to ourselves as natural processes, encouraging us to question our values, behaviors, and use of resources. Religious naturalism also demands that we conceive and enact new forms of relationality with each other and with the more-than-human worlds that are an integral part of our existence here.¹²

In advancing my argument, I first trace a perceivable thematic pattern that helped to shape the evolution of black religious and critical thought in the U.S.

10. Murithi Mutiga, “South African Woman Faces Criminal Charges Over Racist Tweets,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2016, accessed September 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/south-african-woman-faces-criminal-charges-racist-tweets>.

11. Catherine Taibi, “Belgian Newspaper Accused of Racism for Picture of Obama and Michelle as Apes,” *Huffington Post*, March 24, 2014, accessed October 2, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/24/newspaper-obama-ape-belgian-satire-putin-barack-president-racism-racist_n_5020987.html.

12. 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 what we perceive as ultimately important and valuable. Religious naturalism does not use supernatural concepts or theories in comprehending humans’ need for value and meaning; consequently, the realm of nature is its proper focus. As a religious naturalist, I draw on two fundamental convictions in understanding basic human quests for meaning and value: the sense of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and fertility, and the recognition that nature is the only realm in which people live out their lives.

since the historical slave experience: the necessity of dignifying and valuing the humanity of blacks against the norm of white supremacist assumptions. In response to these dehumanizing factors, I outline a trajectory of black humanistic discourse offered by Anna J. Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin that underscores the conceptual richness of this liberationist motif within black religiosity. Building on their ideas, I contend that what is primarily at stake is how we conceive our “humanity,” as well as the social, ethical, and ecological implications of that conception. Toward that goal, I outline a model of African American religious naturalism that presupposes human animals’ deep, inextricable homology with each other and with other natural processes, drawing our attention to an expansive view of our humanity as an emergent phenomenon, not an achievement. I also introduce the concept of sacred humanity, which emphasizes humans as sacred centers of value and distinct movements of nature itself where deep relationality and interconnectedness become key metaphors for honoring all life forms. In the final section, I offer some suggestions for understanding our human animality in light of these claims.

II. Emergence of Black Religiosity: The Question of the Human

In *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.¹³ 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. I share Du Bois’s functionalist 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. Employing specific images, symbols, and rituals, black religiosity has functioned in the United States to address fundamental issues of life and death for black agents intent on living fully and with dignity. This functional value of black religiosity, I contend, distinguishes it as one of the highest aspirations of African American character, namely, its claim on life.

The multivalence of dehumanizing processes and antilife 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

13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 359–553.

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.¹⁴ Along with other cultural practices, these laws were integral to an emerging white supremacist ideology that used the construct of race for judging blacks' humanity against a normative conception associated with Western Europeans.

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.”¹⁵ She also notes, and I emphasize here, that this ideology of dualism was an integral component of Western European cultural imperialism, where the purported “civilized” races of Europe distinguished their own 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.¹⁶

This epistemological framework was later sanctioned with nineteenth-century scientific studies, or the rise of scientific racism. In Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1851), the slant of the brow is used to draw connections between the “Negro” and the “Oran Outan” and differences between those two and the “European.”¹⁷ In 1854, other prominent scientists such as Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon documented, in an influential ethnological study entitled *Types of Mankind*, their perception of objective racial hierarchies

14. William W. Fisher III, “Ideology and Imagery in the Law of Slavery: Symposium on the Law,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 68, no. 3 (1992), art. 4:1051–83. See also Andrew Fede, *People without Rights: An Interpretation of the Fundamentals of the Law of Slavery in the U.S. South* (New York: Routledge: 2012), 34ff.

15. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 132, 144.

16. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 1st ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 15.

17. Robert Knox, *The Races of Men* (London, 1851).

with illustrations comparing blacks to chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans.¹⁸ In the same era, Ernst Haeckel, a respected professor of zoology, used his theory of polygenesis to represent the human species in a hierarchy from lowest to highest, ranking “negroes” among the lowest races and depicting them as savages related to apes.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ While declaring the superiority of the human species from other organic life, French thinker Arthur de Gobineau advanced important distinctions within the human animal, with blacks representing the lowest form: “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.”²¹

These theories proposed a graduation from civilization to barbarism, at once justifying European colonialism and highlighting the belief in the singular role of the Europeans as a civilizing force.

These early scientific perspectives also helped to justify later (popular) forms of biological determinism—a widely held conception that the biological (physical) and social differences shared between groups, arose from inherited, inborn distinctions. As a result, people viewed societal structures as accurate representations of biology. W. E. B. Du Bois keenly noted in the mid-twentieth century in the U.S. that common perceptions of the vast differences in the development of Whites and the “lower” races were often legitimized through scientific displays: “I remember once in a museum, coming face to face with a demonstration: a series of skeletons arranged from a little monkey to a tall well-developed white man, with a Negro barely outranking a chimpanzee.”²²

18. Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, et al, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Company), 1854.

19. Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation: Or the Development of the Earth and Its Inhabitants by the Action of Natural Causes* (New York: Appleton, 1876), 10.

20. *Ibid.*, 332.

21. Arthur de Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, trans. A. Collins (London: Heinemann, 1915), 205–12.

22. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in *Writings*, 625.

Finally, as Sylvia Wynters persuasively argues, these developments provide insight into the underside of Western humanistic discourse in which the category of race becomes one way to answer the question of who and what we are. After the Enlightenment period, this is a question that many thinkers believe religion is no longer capable of answering.²³

II. “We, too, are Human”: Black Humanist Responses

Addressing the adverse effects of this trajectory of racialized reasoning has been one of the hallmarks of an evolving African-American religious and intellectual trajectory. Visionary thinkers and leaders addressed the ethical, aesthetic, and ontological implications involved in the ongoing task of asserting the fact that African Americans, too, are human. In the late nineteenth century, for example, in her feminist collection of essays and speeches, *A Voice from the South* (1892), Anna Julia Cooper challenged the different ways African Americans were systematically dehumanized and denaturalized as the other. Notably, what is important in Cooper’s assessment is that the humanity of African Americans was removed from the natural ordering of abundant human life and classified as something different. Attributes normally associated with human beings (agency, genius, creativity, etc.) were divorced from black bodies, whose only worth was accorded to their physical capabilities. Cooper envisioned an ideal view of American culture that inspired and enabled each person to attain fullness of being and to flourish as part of the whole. Her cultural criticism rested on the cosmological notion that interconnectedness is one of the basic features of life, and that all entities are members of each other. Her humanistic discourse astutely suggested to her contemporaries that “the philosophic mind sees that its own ‘rights’ are the rights of humanity.”²⁴

In the same era, Du Bois’s conceptualization of life behind the veil of race and the resulting “double-consciousness”—a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others—conveyed his aspirations for African Americans to look anew at themselves, and to reinvent themselves.²⁵ The ongoing inspiration Du Bois provided to his contemporaries was inextricably tied to his image of African Americans as centers of value whose self-generating genius

23. Sylvia Wynters, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 287–88.

24. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118.

25. Du Bois, *Souls*, in *Writings*, 364–65.

and potency had become obfuscated by the veil. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois consistently characterizes black folk as beings with an innate desire for subjectivity, making clear to the reader that blacks have been incessant dreamers of ontological integrity. Thus, while naming the discriminatory practices and moral deficiencies of a nation that kept black folk from achieving their full humanity, Du Bois reminds African Americans of the task set before them: “This, then, is the end of [their] striving; to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.”²⁶ Questioning perceived sacrosanct truths, Cooper and Du Bois encouraged their contemporaries to recognize the transitory, fallible nature of racial constructions embedded in essentialist notions of superiority and inferiority.

Such theoretical acuity was also reflected in the writings of James Baldwin, who in the mid-twentieth century, also dreamt of brave new conceptions of humanity beyond the vexed racial configurations he experienced and witnessed in the United States as well as in parts of Western Europe. Returning to North America from Europe in the mid-sixties, Baldwin wrote extensively about the racial distortions imposed upon our shared humanity. In the absence of embodied authenticity and relational integrity, he employed the bastard metaphor to reveal the pathology inherent in many whites’ refusal to embrace their familial (even biological) kinship with blacks. For Baldwin, the bastard term symbolized the moral paralysis he saw embedded in an American psyche suffering from a great lie perpetuated by white supremacy.²⁷ With an eye toward expanding his contemporaries’ views of their constitutive humanity, Baldwin emphasized embodied forms of love that he believed would result in the vital flourishing of all North Americans. He also shared Cooper’s earlier theme of one and all. While insisting that whites see themselves in blacks (and as black), Baldwin emphatically stated, “It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp: *Whoever debases others is debasing himself.*”²⁸ For Baldwin, what humans can become, and what we wish to be, depends on how we act in the here and now. In the most immediate sense, this construction of humanity is dependent on radical acts of love—of embracing otherness within oneself and as oneself.

At this juncture, it is important to note that in their brave attempts to formulate comprehensive views of humanity, Cooper, Du Bois, and Baldwin

26. *Ibid.*, 365.

27. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, in *Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 468.

28. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, 334.

nonetheless operated within a paradigm of thought that retained an exclusive view of humanity. This tendency is not surprising given their historical locations during the first and middle parts of the twentieth century and their basic concern to address various forms of racist ideology with contemporaneous forms of knowledge. In the next section, I build on the intellectual legacy these historical figures helped to shape in order to explore an expansive view of black humanity free of this problematic anthropocentrism with the tenets of religious naturalism.

III. Sacred Humanity: Emergence of African American Religious Naturalism

The cultural legacy established by Cooper, Du Bois, and Baldwin promoted the full humanity of African Americans at historical junctures when it was questioned and denied; more important, their brave efforts show that when blackness is defined in a narrow sense, or negatively marked as different, the more capacious visions of our entangled humanity become marred and distorted. Their collective work thus provides the impetus and vision for my formulation of “sacred humanity” in the twenty-first century. Grounded in the tenets of religious naturalism, this concept evokes our essential entanglement with each other and with other natural organisms. At the heart of religious naturalism in all its variants is a basic conviction: any truths we are ever going to discover and any meaning in life we should uncover are revealed to us through the natural order.²⁹ I embrace a contemporary strain of religious naturalism within the science and religion paradigm that is best associated with the writings of Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, and Loyal Rue—all of whom have been influential in my development as a religious naturalist.³⁰ This vein is particularly appealing because it focuses on the materiality of existence and includes human nature and human culture in its grasp of naturalism, thereby challenging some widely held paradigms about the nature of “nature.”

Another important feature of this strain of religious naturalism is its emphasis on emergence as an important new concept for thinking about biological and cosmic evolution. Consider, for example, as Goodenough argues, that emergent properties arise as a consequence of relationships—for example,

29. See Jerome Stone, *Religious Naturalism Today: The Rebirth of a Forgotten Alternative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), chap. 1.

30. Representative works include Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Donald Crosby, *Living with Ambiguity: Religious Naturalism and the Menace of Evil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Loyal Rue, *Religion is Not about God* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

the relationships between water molecules that generate a snowflake, or the relationships between neurons that generate a memory. Emergent properties also give rise to yet more emergent properties, generating the vast complexity of our present-day cosmic, biological, ecological, and cultural contexts.³¹ These insights compel us to reflect meaningfully on the emergence of matter (and especially life) from the Big Bang forward, promoting an understanding of myriad nature as complex processes of becoming.

The general view of humanity I hold, on which I build my concept of sacred humanity, arises from this context. 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.”³² Human life is also part of an evolutionary history showing directionality or 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 advance in the ability of organisms to gather and process information about the environment and respond to it.³³

The scientific epic thus becomes the starting point for positing an African American religious naturalism constituted by a central tenet: humans are relational processes of nature; in short, “we are nature made aware of itself.” 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

31. Ursula Goodenough and Terrence Deacon, “From Biology to Consciousness to Morality,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 38, no. 4 (2003): 801–19.

32. Rue, *Religion is Not About about God*, 25.

33. Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990); see also Terrence Deacon, “The Hierarchic Logic of Emergence: Untangling the Interdependence of Evolution and Self-Organization,” in *Evolution and Learning: The Baldwin Effect Reconsidered*, ed. B. Weber and D. Depew (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 273–308; Terrence Deacon, “Emergence: The Hole at the Wheel’s Hub,” in *Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*, ed. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 111–50.

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 positing 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?”³⁴

I share Goodenough’s sentiment that reveling in a sense of connectedness with other living beings can be described as sacred. 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, or in ways of conjoining with others that transform us.³⁵ This is an essential aspect of our humanity that religious discourse tends to advance and reiterate again and again: we humans seek and find community with others—and, in my own words, with otherness. Moreover, as Goodenough observes, humans have sought connections of all kinds through the ages. However, with the aid of recent scientific knowledge, we now “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.”³⁶ The advances of science, through both biology and physics, have served to demonstrate not only how closely linked human animals are

34. Carol Wayne White, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism* (New York: Fordham Press, 2016), 33. This section is drawn from chapter two of this text.

35. 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.” Scholars, especially those sympathetic to the work of Mircea Eliade, have used the sacred (in the broadest sense of the term) to convey the extraordinary. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).

36. Goodenough, *Sacred Depths of Nature*, 73.

with nature, but that we are simply one branch of a seemingly endless natural cosmos. As Crosby states, “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.”³⁷

IV. Sacred Humanity and Cultural Transformations

In its emphasis on the human as an emergent, interconnected life form amid spectacular biotic diversity, my sacred-humanity concept has far-reaching implications within the context of American culture and life. First, it can be used to challenge the most viral “isms” rooted in problematic and alienating self-other differentiations, especially racially constructed ones that the enduring legacy of African American religiosity has targeted. Any inkling of white supremacy or sense of cultural superiority is antithetical to this natural view; these eschewed cultural constructions are forced impositions on the wholeness of natural interrelatedness and deep genetic homology that evolution has wrought. Furthermore, as an organizing principle in religious naturalism, the sacred-humanity concept helps blur the arbitrary ontological lines that human animals have erected between us and other species and natural processes. It directs our attention to a world evolving naturally, based on the interconnection and interaction of all of its fundamental components. As a materialist critique suggests, our humanity is inescapably entangled in other natural processes of becoming, such that in embracing our sacred humanity, we are acknowledging that the “more-than-human” constitutes the human as such.

Second, the sacred-humanity concept can help propel our moral imaginations, encouraging us to avoid separating and isolating justice advocacy for one form of natural process against another form. In returning to the simian imagery, or the use of the animal other with which I began this essay, I suggest that this term can help us think intelligently and compassionately about the layers of exploitation endemic to the processes of racialization of nature, which have been at the heart of an influential, modernist humanist project I have tried to outline. While we should be rightfully troubled by the images of people of African descent characterized as apes, I find it disheartening that very few people go further to analyze the speciesism that is evident in these cases. There is poignancy in seeing how our co-primates have been exploited

37. Crosby, *Living with Ambiguity*, ix–x.

to advance a certain racialization of human nature. My point is that alongside of the exclusionary tactics perpetuated by white supremacy have also been troubling instances of species supremacy. In making this observation, I follow the work of Christopher Peterson, who raises an important question: To what extent are both racist and antiracist discourses predicated on a repudiation of animality?³⁸

In his study *Metaphysics of Apes*, Raymond Corbey argues that in the context of imperialist and colonialism expansions, certain wild animals (apes in general, and gorillas in particular) came to be seen as powerful personifications of wilderness that must be fought and conquered by civilized Westerners. He also grants that these notions were prevalent before the later nineteenth-century notion that humans were connected to nature rather than apart from it.³⁹ Anticipating that some people will find the analogy between speciesism and antiblack racism troubling, Marjorie Spiegel makes the following observation in *The Dreaded Comparison*: “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.”⁴⁰ In short, the equation of blacks with co-primates is based on prior negative ideas about more-than-human animals.

Further, and quite importantly, the relationship between antiblack racism and speciesism is not merely an analogical one. On the contrary, the dismissal of “nonhuman” sentience conditions the reduction of some human others to the status of “mere” animal life. Species supremacy engenders the bestialization of social and political others, as we have seen in the earlier examples from different cultural settings. Spiegel offers an additional idea for our consideration: 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 reinscribe the speciesist logic that initiates their exclusion.⁴¹ I agree with Spiegel and emphasize that embracing our human animality requires an awareness of this subtle and pernicious form of the racialization of nature. We are human animals. Only that which names itself as “human” does so precisely by suppressing the animality that conditions its emergence. And, yet, to stress the

38. Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham Press, 2012).

39. Raymond H. A. Corbey, *The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

40. Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, 3rd, rev. & expanded (New York: Mirror Books/IDEA, 1997), 30, 37.

41. *Ibid.*, 37.

animality of all humans is not to suggest that there are no differences between humans and other animals.

Finally, with its capacious cosmology, religious naturalism also strengthens the case for addressing with concerted effort ecological degradation on various levels. Its theoretical claims alert us to the dangers of isolationist agendas that environmental justice advocates apparently 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. 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 the claims of religious naturalism, 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, religious naturalism compels us to cast 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. These important ecological values are ones that social justice advocates can extend to enact important ethical, political, economic, and social changes in American life.