"Stubborn Materiality: African-American Religious Naturalism and Becoming Our Humanity"

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The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures. It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers. It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow. I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE, Stream of Life

In his groundbreaking volume, Souls of Black Folk (1903), 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, aspirations, ethical convictions, cosmological assumptions, and grasp of death. 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, capturing its vigor and accentuating its vital role in comprehending the complex psyche of the American nation. His insights into the rich and layered texture of African American religiosity, and his bold claims for its enduring legacy, are as relevant and cogent today as they were at the beginning of the twentieth century. Notwithstanding its range of worship expressions, African American religiosity has continued to evolve historically (and perhaps primarily) as a complex social and cultural mechanism that has aided African Americans in their untold struggles against various forms of injustices. This evolution is not surprising, given the harrowing experiences of Africans on the North American continent as enslaved subjects whose full humanity was often questioned or denied. Emerging from the context of slavery, the dominant African American religious tradition has often
interwoven its declaration of blacks' full humanity with theological tactics and strategies that provide the necessary ontological justification and ethical reasoning. In so doing, it has consistently revealed a general structure of human desire that underscores the value of life, insisting on our efforts to bring forth conditions that would accentuate the fullness of life for all those interested in processes of transformation.

In this essay, I explore the conceptual space opened by Du Bois, focusing on this theme of human desire within African American thought that values fullness of life. The particular humanistic discourse that I foreground in anticipating this task, however, departs from a tradition of liberal humanism that I find both limiting and problematic for various reasons. First, this 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. With its problematic forms of anthropocentrism and the reinscription of exceptional human nature, this model of liberal humanism has also advanced a facile environmentalism in which nonhuman natural processes are often accorded value according to their usefulness to humans. Concomitant with this ecological view are ethical sensibilities in which humans project our own notions of ourselves as the measure for valuing other parts of nature. According to this worldview, for example, whales and dolphins are worthy of human sympathy because they reflect our focus on cognition and autonomy, whereas other parts of nature (dung beetles and fungus) are unworthy of our regard, or not so valuable to humans.

In rejecting this dominant humanistic model, as well as its retention of a hierarchical model of nature built on the “great chain of being” concept, I prefer a materialist view that emphasizes a deeper, appreciable view of nature that constitutes the human itself. My humanistic approach in this essay has affinities with other recent developments in feminist theories, animal studies, posthumanism, and vegetal studies—all of which offer expanded (or new materialist) views of the human and the animated nonhuman world. As I have argued elsewhere, contributing to ongoing efforts of decentering the human may help provide the basis for envisioning different personal and biopolitical futures. Yet in reconfiguring the human within the context of African American intellectual culture, I also acknowledge a thorny but important issue: the traditional exclusivity of the category itself, or what some of us have recognized as lacunae in conceptualizing the human. The theoretical violence perceivable in how the category of the human has been constructed has been acutely recounted in feminist, liberationist, and postcolonial critiques. Their persuasive critiques stress that the normative human subject has been primarily conceptualized as, and associated with, the lived experiences of white
males of European descent, into whose ranks African Americans and other minoritarian subjects have not traditionally been admitted. In short, all human subjects have not traditionally been included in what is "properly" human.

My exploration of humanistic reasoning within the context of African American thought and history thus presents me with a complex yet important task. On the one hand, the model of humanistic discourse I invoke aims at reconstructing the category of the human in such a way that it can address the tyrannical presence of white supremacy, as well as other "isms" that have denied black (and other marginalized) subjects their rightful claims to becoming human and actualizing their humanity in many ways. On the other hand, my retrieval of the human necessarily rejects the aims of traditional humanisms that have positioned humans outside of nature and eclipsed the interrelatedness of all natural processes. Whatever conceivable notion of black humanity I claim in this essay will be ontologically enmeshed and entangled with other forms of natural life.

Bearing in mind these conceptual qualifications, I argue for a radical humanism that claims a religious sensibility for itself. Identifying African American religiosity as the ingenuity of a people constantly striving to construct their humanity and eke out a meaningful existence for themselves amid harrowing circumstances, I construct a concept of "sacred humanity" and ground it in existing hagiographic and iconic African American writings. With this term "sacred humanity," I evoke the notion of humans as value-laden, social organisms in constant search of meaning, enfused with value (or the good), and instilled with a sense of purpose (telos). This capacious view of humanity foregrounds African Americans as dynamic, evolving, social organisms having the capacity to transform ourselves and create nobler worlds where all sentient creatures flourish, and as aspiring lovers of life and of each other. As such, sacred humanity underscores the functional value of black religion as one of the highest aspirations of African American character: its claim on life.

Furthermore, as I discuss later in detail, the conception of humanity as sacred emerges from a naturalistic vision that emphasizes deep interconnectedness among humans and celebrates our kinship with other sentient life, accentuating a modality of existence in which transformation occurs. 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 as ultimately important and valuable. Since religious naturalism does not use "supernatural" concepts or theories in comprehending humans' need for value and meaning, the realm of nature is the focus (this includes both natural processes and human culture for most religious naturalists). Religious naturalists 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. In this context, then, religious naturalism offers an eloquent rendering of sacred humanity in explaining and advancing human animals' deep, inextricable homology with the rest of the natural world. Further, the materialist spin I offer will underscore that the inexhaustible connection or entanglement with other natural processes, or with the more-than-human, constitutes the very notion of the human as such.

To advance my argument, I outline a trajectory of modern philosophical reasoning that has shifted emphasis from a transcendental divine Other, or the traditional object of faith (deity), to emphasize human subjectivity. I then assess the dominant model of human subjectivity arising in modern humanism—the prototypical tyrannical model, replete with gender, racial, class biases—that reinforced problematic differentials of Enlightenment ideals, outlining specific shortcomings suggested by both postmodern and African American cultural critiques. Next, I provide examples from select African American intellectuals whose ideas helped generate a liberationist vein of humanism in African American thought. Building on their insights, I begin a construction of sacred humanity—as the specific site for the emergence of an African American religious naturalism.

This naturalistic vision emphasizes deep human interrelationship in the world, and it accentuates humans' propensity toward life. More important, within African American religious culture, a naturalist view of humanity helps us grasp the conceptual richness of a liberationist motif within black religiosity and to celebrate its enduring legacy. With the concept of sacred humanity, I thus bring to light deeper understandings of basic convictions in African American religious expression. Posed as questions, these convictions ask: What does it mean to be human and to affirm the essential value of blacks? How do we continue justifying religiously that indeed all humans share in the same ontological reality? Why do racist conceptions of blacks' humanity remain woefully impoverished and inadequate in light of current scientific views that show a deep interrelatedness among all biotic life forms?

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN HUMANISM: ANOTHER VIEW

With a general movement from Immanuel Kant's positioning of morality as the focal point of religion, through G. W. F. Hegel's speculative idealism, to Friedrich Schleiermacher's elevation of intuition or feeling, religious thought in the West has put more and more emphasis on human ingenuity, and less on the divine as the transcendent Other. From Cartesianism through the Enlightenment to idealism and Romanticism, those attributes traditionally predicated of the divine subject have progressively been transferred to the human
subject. In other words, as Mark C. Taylor has suggested, through a dialectical reversal, the creator God dies and is resurrected as the creative subject. As God created the world through the Logos, so (Western) humanity now creates a "world" through conscious and unconscious projection. Like the God of classical theology, this sovereign subject relates asymmetrically only to what it constructs and is, therefore, unaffected by anything other than itself. The subject becomes the first principle (formerly identified as God) from which everything arises and to which all must be reduced or returned. Moreover, an undue emphasis on human knowledge eventually leads to a modernist project in which all objects of knowledge exist for the epistemological subject.

In areas of knowledge as diverse as science, theology, and early modern philosophy (albeit directed toward different ends), one locates the same exclusive concern for and interest in humanity. Within the general area of theology, for example, this general trend culminated (and was best represented by) a Protestant liberal movement derived from the German intellectual tradition. Although too broad and complex to outline here, twentieth-century modern liberal theology has had an interesting array of thinkers who have grappled with the role and task of theology in an increasingly complex and troubled world. Its trends have ranged from the historic-critical research of Albrecht Ritschl, through the neo-orthodoxies of Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Reinhold Niebuhr, to the empirical process orientations of the Chicago School of the 1930s and '40s. In the latter part of the twentieth century, such post–World War II liberal movements as the existentialism of John Macquarrie and Paul Tillich also represented the modern search for new foundations.

With a shift increasingly focusing on the human subject of faith, twentieth-century liberal theology introduced a new problematic within religious scholarship: an attempt to articulate the deep structures of the experiences and consciousness of a self that is said to be representative for all humans. For example, Tillich's existential approach that speaks of human nature in general abstract terms reflects a fundamental flaw in Western reason: its universal and ahistorical tendencies. In a fashion akin to modern philosophy, with its obsession with identity and singularity, these types of theological configurations have failed to speak convincingly of the human subject in all its historical complexity. Just as the categories of Western philosophy often obliterated differences of gender and race as these shape and structure the experience and subjectivity of the self, so a dominant model of modern theological thought postulated itself as the discourse of the one self-identical subject, thereby blinding adherents to (and in fact delegitimizing) the presence of otherness and difference that did not fit into its categories.

These trends show that influential notions of the human and its spheres of creativity, as represented by an influential form of modernity, have often been
ambiguous as well as potentially lethal in their consequences. Ironically, in its creativity and success in enacting its most cherished ideals, Western humanity brought forth material conditions and an ethos of dominion that threatened its own life as well as that of other sentient beings. Begun as a revolt against oppressive structures (political and religious), enlightened rationality fell short of its emancipatory aims to culminate in a reign of terror. Classic Enlightenment ideals—progress, universalism, and guaranteed freedoms once privileged at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth—now appear in contemporary culture as suspicious ideologies, masking special privileges and selfish materialism. For example, scientific medicine, long viewed as the paradigmatic expression of Enlightenment reason, has been lax regarding health matters (and this is further complicated by the race, gender, and class inequalities in health care) as well as for its acquisitive nature, which seems endless. Likewise, technical industrialism—in expanding as the Enlightenment had hoped—continues to pose a threat to myriad natural systems and to use up crucial natural resources on which we all depend. The African philosopher Emmanuel Eze has demonstrated that Enlightenment reasoning provided an ideal intellectual and epistemological basis for establishing and legitimating the hegemony of the West over the other traditions Europeans were beginning to encounter in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Those traditions, values, and folk practices not compatible with or radically different from the Enlightenment ideal were often viewed suspiciously and located low on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scienticity. Ironically enough, the liberal humanism that espoused the universal rights of humans spawned a distinct set of discursive formations and cultural practices that justified unjust capitalist social relations in the West and their extension, via colonialism and imperialism, to other societies.

Jean-Paul Sartre depicts the violence of liberal universal discourse when he noted in 1961 that abstract assumptions of universality really served as a cover for the more realistic practices of slavery, colonialism, racism, and barbarity. Here, Sartre alludes to the development of the Euro-Anglo construction of "whiteness" as the normative identity for human subjectivity. This form of racism depended on a logic of racial difference whereby one group (certain Europeans) defined itself as white in such a way that it became the standpoint from which other races or groups were judged on the basis of the degree to which they are less white. Thus the white liberal subject often identified itself as full and others (those identified as nonwhites) as empty or existing in the condition of lack. In modernity, this condition of lack eventually took on group associations, which often led to the dichotomy of fullness and hunger having symbolic form in antiblack societies as lightness and darkness, whiteness and blackness, and—one of the most complete and extreme form of this
racialized binary logic—the construction of the superiority of the white race over the black races.\textsuperscript{11}

"WE, TOO, ARE HUMAN": EXPRESSIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMANISM

Addressing the adverse effects of this racialized reason (or reasoned racism) has been one of the hallmarks of an evolving African American intellectual trajectory. This legacy of thought is replete with ethical, aesthetic, and ontological implications involved in its ongoing task of justifying and defending the fact that African Americans, too, are human. In the late nineteenth century, for example, with 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—or how they were categorized below the normatively European model of humanity. Cooper rejected the narrow focus of this atomistic outlook and 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 humanistic discourse astutely reminded her contemporaries of a crucial insight: "The philosophic mind sees that its own 'rights' are the rights of humanity."\textsuperscript{12} Cooper envisioned the young America of her day as the "consummation of the ideal of human possibilities" and, consequently, the proper arena for the interplay of forces and conflict in which diversity becomes standard.\textsuperscript{13} For Cooper, the nation's growth would be structured by inevitable conflict as it evolves toward sustaining a rich, civilized culture of celebrating differences; in this context, healthy, stimulating, and progressive conflict consists of "the co-existence of radically opposing or racially different elements," which can contribute to a peaceful, harmonious way of life only when it is conceived as constituted by differences and where the general ethos is "the determination to live and let live."\textsuperscript{14}

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.\textsuperscript{15} His critiques of American life focused on perceived "truths" about blacks' inferior humanity, which he questioned, disassembled, and, in some cases, even reconstructed in his published work. Du Bois encouraged his contemporaries to recognize the transitory, fallible nature of racial constructions embedded in essentialist notions of superiority and inferiority. Du Bois's very early conception of life within the veil was always accompanied by his imagining the possibilities of life beyond it. He inspired his contemporaries to imagine African Americans as centers of value whose self-generating genius and potency had become
obfuscated by the veil. Not only this, Du Bois sketched out a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to the social ills facing his generation:

Work, culture, liberty—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race, the ideal of fostering and developing the traits of the Negro, not in opposition to contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack.  

Such theoretical acuity was also reflected in the writings of James Baldwin, who also dreamed of brave new conceptions of humanity beyond the vexed “raced” configurations he both experienced and witnessed in the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century. During a critical period of the civil rights era, Baldwin ingeniously unmasked racial, heterosexual, and other problematic privileges lurking in dominant constructions of the human in North American culture and religion. He emphatically rejected the distorted ontological gravitas of modern humanistic discourse, replacing it with a fuller, more capacious model of humanity. His essays and works of nonfiction expressed the sheer ontological weightiness of having to reinvent (or justify) one’s humanity over and over again, in every generation.  

Baldwin’s race-conscious rhetoric often focused on the hypocrisy of white Christians who, in an attempt to maintain their social order identity as white people, willfully denied their own moral connection to (and biological kinship with) those of African descent, whom they continued to exploit. Part of black Americans’ exilic experience, Baldwin suggests, is owing to white Americans’ denial of literal familial kinship with blacks. Baldwin’s insistence that whites see themselves in blacks (and as black) emphasizes the deep genetic homology structuring all life forms—what I will later describe as humans’ interconnectedness with each other and with all natural organisms.

In select essays, Baldwin associates the term “love” with a critical awareness of our common humanity. As he eloquently asserts in The Fire Next Time, “We, with love, shall force our [white] brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality, and begin to change it. . . . We can make America what America must become.” One thus finds in Baldwin a form of communal ontology that recognizes a humanity constitutive of our biotic materiality on which various identity markers are attached. As he emphatically states at one point: “It is so simple a fact and one that is so hard, apparently, to grasp:
Whoever debases others is debasing himself." 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 expanded views of humanity, Cooper, Du Bois, and Baldwin 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 anthropocentricism with the tenets of religious naturalism. Going beyond the level of human exclusivity in this context marks the emergence of what I deem an African American religious naturalism.

Sacred Humanity: Stubborn, Entangled Materiality
Cooper, Du Bois, Baldwin, and a number of other iconic African American figures helped establish a cultural legacy that has confronted the persuasive force of a dualistic worldview, showing its far-reaching effects, including a dominant and impoverished view of black bodies as the immoral, devalued other. These authors promoted the 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, the concept of sacred humanity evokes our essential entangledness 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. In this essay, I embrace a contemporary strain of religious naturalism within the science and religion paradigm that is best associated with the works of Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, and Loyal Rue—all of whom have been influential in my development as a religious naturalist. 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, that emergent properties arise as a consequence of relationships—for example, 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.29

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.”24

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.25 Goodenough has provided a persuasive view of evolutionary theory that celebrates such directionality; her descriptive account of how life works in terms of biophysics and biochemistry is useful here: “Life is getting something to happen against the odds and remembering how to do it. That something that happens is biochemistry and biophysics; the odds are beat by intricate concatenations of shape fits and shape changes, and the memory is encoded in genes and their promoters.”26 Biophysics is concerned with “electrochemical gradients” and the physics through which “channels and pumps” work to “span the cell membrane” and thus allow the chemical processes of the cell to work.27 Basic biochemistry has to do with the shapes of proteins, particularly enzymes, and the sequences of shape changes or cascades, that is, those processes through which a cell perceives or interacts with that which is external. The “cell is set up to optimize the flowing of cascades.” In other words, proteins that will interact with one another have “domains, called addresses, that target the proteins to the same cellular location,” and each “destination proves optimal for particular biochemical reactions.”28 This means that a cell is like a community:
Its inner workings are segregated into interacting compartments, whereas its outer membrane defines its interactions with the rest of the world.

Biochemistry and biophysics generate the patterns that constitute pulsating organisms, including the development of multicellular organisms such as humans. To understand this idea fully, it is important to grasp the concept of natural selection and its role in our evolutionary heritage as human animals. As Goodenough points out, evolution can be viewed minimally as changes in the frequencies of different sets of instructions for making organisms. To understand evolution, then, one must grasp how the instructions become different (mutation) and then how the frequencies of those instructions are changed (natural selection). Within the context of describing mutation as simply a change in the sequence of nucleotides in a genome, the concept of natural selection raises two important questions: Does the new protein or promoter work better, worse, or the same as the old one? How important is this difference to the organism? As a set of dynamic processes, evolution occurs through the chains of modification—a protein gets slightly modified by a mutation; this modification gets further modified or added to, and eventually over time, complex new systems are created. For example, bacteria flagella started out with a protein to improve acid transport that happened to also rotate; even though the rotation was originally an irrelevant consequence, this feature is eventually built onto as other proteins attach to it, and so on. In this context, for example, the term “bricolage” (the construction of things using what is at hand, similar to a patchwork quilt) is a colorful and helpful metaphor to help us grasp the complex process.

Following Goodenough’s lead, I consider the metaphor of music useful for understanding the complexities of evolution. Consider, for example, how a good musicologist can often detect older forms or variations (a fugal texture, a specific cadence, or even a melodic strain) in new compositions. This music analogy helps describe the complexity of evolutionary life, too, as a fascinating organic composition of intricate movements in which the old is woven with the new to generate something more:

A good biochemical idea—a protein domain that binds well to a promoter, a channel that’s just the right size for a calcium ion—gets carried along through time, tweaked and modulated to best serve the needs of the current composition/organism but recognizable through evolutionary history. These conserved ideas combine with novelty to generate new direction, new ways of negotiating new environmental circumstances.

This technical, scientific discussion inspires a rich, even poetic, rendering of human life as one distinct biotic form emerging from and participating in
a series of evolutionary processes that constitute the diversity of life. In this essay the scientific epic thus becomes the starting point for positing an African American religious humanism constituted by a central tenet: Humans are relational processes of nature; in short, as stated above, 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 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."31 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?

With other religious naturalists, I share the sentiment that reveling in a sense of our connectedness with other living beings can only 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 term "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.32 My usage of the term "sacred" is thus imbued with the quality of ultimacy within the confines of what religious naturalism affirms: Nature as the realm in which we move, live, and have our being. Sacrality is a specific affirmation and appreciation of that which is fundamentally important in life, or that which is ultimately valued: relational nature. Humans are interconnected parts of nature, and our sacrality is a given part of nature’s richness, spectacular complexity, and beauty.

Notwithstanding the diverse cultural and individual options of articulating this truth, there is, quite simply, the sacrality of humanity’s inextricable entanglement with all that is. Finding meaning and value in our lives within the
natural order presupposes this fundamental interconnectedness. We claim and become our humanity in seeking and finding community with others—and with otherness. This is a simple value that religious discourse has reiterated again and again. Goodenough states:

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. 24

My notion of sacred humanity within African American religious culture presupposes these truth claims, marking the emergence of an African American religious naturalism in the twenty-first century. This viewpoint’s distinctive voice stands in contrast to other contemporary ones in positing and celebrating blacks as an emergent, interconnected life form amid spectacular biotic diversity. With the concept of sacred humanity, this model of religious naturalism declares that blacks essentially value our deep homology with other sentient beings. As such, the term can be used to challenge the most virulently constructed of “isms” rooted in problematic and alienating self-other differentiations, especially racially constructed ones the enduring legacy of African American religiosity has targeted.

SACRED HUMANITY AND MEANING
I am aware that an attempt to derive an African American religiosity based on an understanding of humans as natural processes may seem troublesome to some. Recall, for example, that nineteenth-century scientific perspectives on natural processes within later evolutionary thought (the new “science of man”) promoted Enlightenment racism, in which notions of racial differences often presented the social inequalities between various cultural groups as reflecting the precepts of nature. 25 However, these ideological extensions are part of a discourse on nature that some contemporary feminists, religious scholars, and postcolonial critics are currently addressing. In resisting many of these problematic tendencies, the notion of sacred humanity that I ground in the language of religious naturalism also leads us to other possibilities, visions, and assumptions. Evoking our sacred humanity presupposes an evolutionary narrative that has propelled humans’ efforts to create meaning and purpose. This conviction 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. The notion of sacred humanity thus emphasizes the social character of cognition in human animals and enriches our understanding of humanity as symbol makers, creators of a world imbued with value, and as social organisms. Studies of the brain suggest that the human limbic system, which we share with mammals, is the center of emotions that mobilize action and makes possible richer forms of relationship that involve empathy and caring for the young. These factors, in turn, lead us to recognize emotion, social relationships, and values often associated with traditional religious symbols—all as part of human reality.

This brings to mind Terrence Deacon’s exploration of the intricate connection between the evolution of human language and our brains, or what he calls their coevolution. He argues, for example, that language itself is part of the process that has been responsible for the evolution of the brain. Language has changed the environments in which brains have evolved. Humans are a species that in part has been shaped by symbols, in part shaped by what we do. According to Deacon, ritual, mythology, and so on—simply ways of doing things that are organized conventionally, symbolically—have become a hallmark of our species. Humans have transformed and even reinterpreted much of our biology through this symbolic system: So much of what we do—for example, marriage and conflict, as in warfare—has been transformed by this linguistic tool; it 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 in ways that are uniquely human. Based on these insights, I share the conviction 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. In short, processes of “religious” valuing within humans are inextricably connected to the fact that we are organisms with built-in values.

Furthermore, evolutionary biologists, sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists, and philosophers are currently debating the extent to which one can argue that humans are value-driven decision systems with primary values built into us. A consistent scientific view is that a successful life outcome consists of promoting the transmission of information conducive to maintaining
the emergent dynamic logic that gives it its meaning—that is, promoting the production of emergent outcomes (called traits in biology) that collectively make their own continuation more likely. Deacon and Goodenough contend,

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.\(^1\)

Here, the human self emerges as a biological process that is not only affected by genes but also by many other factors at higher levels. In human development, as in evolutionary history, selfhood is always social, a product of language, culture, and interpersonal interaction, as well as genetic expression. Additionally, as various scientific views make clear: Naturalistic views of the human indicate a complex, social organism that can connect deeply with others, symbolize its environment (or engage in world formation) through values and language, and express love.

SACRED HUMANITY AND RELIGIOUS VALUING

The concept of sacred humanity I advance here is a particular configuration of our humanity as finite organisms; this conceptual view inevitably raises important issues of how humans come to terms with the facticity of non-existence, or, more popularly expressed, with the inevitability of death. It is this angle, I believe, that generates the fullest philosophic and religious connotations of the sacred humanity concept. It is also what distinguishes my model of religious naturalism from strict reductionist forms of naturalism. Religious naturalism posits a view of the human organism as a valuing entity; in this context, I suggest that affirming death also becomes the proper point of departure for appreciating the value and meaningfulness of human life. In advancing this perspective, I follow the general ideas of Konstantin Kolenda in his overlooked text, *Religion without God*.\(^4\) In this work, Kolenda transforms the life-death dialectic within the framework of recognizing death as a necessary condition of humans having a destiny. For example, rather than posit a life-death contrast, one may think of these two contrasting terms as necessary conditions for the emergence and development of individual destinies. Hence, for Kolenda, the idea of destiny carries with it the notion of wholeness. And rather than assume, as many still do, that the ultimate destiny of every human
is to die, Kolenda refocuses attention on the fact that the destiny of a human also includes all that an individual has experienced and will experience in life. This insight encourages humans to immerse ourselves in our finite naturalness, and to see that death is not an experience or phenomenon of oppositional otherness.

Human life as a totality is captured more correctly when one understands death as a necessary condition of having a destiny, or of being a whole. Another aspect of this theory is that the universe acquires distinct meaning through human destinies. There is a sense of the universe coming to be in a different way with the entrance of human destinies, for "every upsurge of consciousness through the birth of a person is a triumph [for the universe] and a privilege [for the emerging individual]." With Kolenda, I affirm each human birth as a glorious event and the starting point of yet another spectacular phenomenon that helps transform the complex cosmos into an even more dynamic, dramatic world. Consequently, when we value human life and find it interesting or even precious, we are aware of the countless opportunities to light up the cosmos with the varied and seemingly inexhaustible projects of human individuals and cultures. Granted, I am not suggesting that that the knowable universe is enlivened only through human activity, as that idea retains too much hubris of traditional humanism, devaluing the emergence of other forms of animal and plant life, as well as their concomitant levels of sentience, conscious awareness, and valuing. Rather, I am much more compelled by the subtler notion that humans are individual and collective destinies engaging an appreciable world. These ideas help us view humans as enmeshed natural organisms that add a particular dimension of value to an already vital, expansive, and valuable universe.

With each human being viewed as a unique destiny, I impress on myself the notion that when I meet a person, I am encountering another center of value. Moreover, assuming that the values realized in human lives are the highest values we know of, then even seeing a stranger on the street puts me face to face with a manifestation of myriad cosmic meanings—both potential and actual. Personal interaction with another becomes an intersection of entangled worlds, as well as our participation in the drama of life in its evolving transformation and expansion. As each human destiny is a recipient of modes of acting, speaking, and thinking that reach deep into the past, one may become aware of concrete links with other members of the human race who have prepared the emergence of our destinies by living out theirs. Seen from this perspective, my individual experience is a continuation, a development of a larger project, and I can view myself as its partial actualization. More eloquently, I am an important aspect of the evolving, unfolding, entangled stream of life.
SACRED HUMANITY, HUMAN DESTINIES, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOSITY

Both within the specifics of African American historical and cultural realities and on a more general level, the sacred humanity I have described in this essay accentuates the liberationist theme in African American religiosity as the uncontestable recognition of our longing to take our highest ideals or values seriously: the irrefutable, essential value of our humanity. Additionally, the theory of human destinies outlined above lends itself to a deepening understanding of this religiosity grounded in an expanded view of our human nature. As human destinies, sacred humans seek compensation, rounding out the actual with the ideal, according to our many talents, insights, and abilities. This experience of religiosity (both individually and culturally) is inextricably connected to how African Americans become our humanity—how we literally become human from the perspective of a dominant culture that has denied us that right. The very presence of this longing in African American culture attests to an awareness or sense of distance between what we are and what white supremacist racial views suggest we are, or between the world as it is and as it could be.

As I interpret these ideas within the context of African American religious life and culture, I consider such awareness and desire as instances of existential courage. African Americans have been compelled to seek realms of possibility. This ongoing task—of necessarily positing and celebrating African Americans as humans—has been one way, among many, for African American visionaries to contest impoverished models of black animality that justified slavery and helped fabricate the notion of white supremacy in the United States. Within the context of blacks' lived experiences in this nation, these insights reveal the significance of the liberationist theme in black religiosity: blacks' tenacious refusal to reduce our ennobled humanity to mere brute existence (or rather to determinist forces and mechanistic explanations of cause/effect). Both within and beyond the specifics of black culture, the task of becoming our humanity involves the recognition that participation in human affairs helps transform isolated individual destinies—we become enriched by diverse allegiances, identifications, and loyalties.

Within the context of U.S. racial discourse that has persistently placed blacks and other subjectivities outside the circle of humanity, the notion of sacred humanity symbolizes our rejection of conceiving our humanity solely as an individualistic phenomenon—a rigorously communal ontology is implied. 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. Moreover, any inkling of white supremacy, or sense of cultural superiority of any kind, is anathematic to this naturalistic view; these eschewed cultural constrictions are forced impositions on the wholeness of natural interrelatedness and deep homology that evolution has wrought. Sacred humanity conveys connectivity with all that is—with oneself, one’s family, the larger human community, local and global ecosystems, and the universe. Religiously, this implies love, and love implies concern for the well-being of the beloved. The concept of sacred humanity also reinforces perennial, expansive perspectives from the wisdom traditions that adamantly promote kindness, empathy, and compassion for all natural processes, including human ones. With the capacity to influence each other and other natural processes, humans have a responsibility to act in ways that promote the flourishing of all life, and to urge other humans who may be less inclined to value our interconnectedness to do the same.

A major value of this model of African American religious humanism is its emphasizing humans as relational natural organisms—we are part of the evolving universe. Those values that we confer on events are more or less the universe appreciating dimensions of itself. Granted, this process is not merely narcissistic introspection, isolating any one of us from the contexts in which we live our destinies. All manifestations of truth and any sense of the real emerge from the concrete actions of entangled, aspiring, stubborn individuals: we, right now, where we are. It is akin to discovering worlds of possibility beyond the sterile fear of nonexistence; beyond enforced solitariness founded on illusions of separateness and universal abstractions. In Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being, M. Shawn Copeland suggests that being human is neither hypothetical nor abstract. Rather, while advancing a theological anthropology based on critical analysis of the body—physical and social, enfolded, historical, and concrete—and in particular the bodies of black women, Copeland points to an expanded view of selfhood that is concrete, visceral, and embodied in everyday experience and relationships—all determinants of who we are.44 Ascertaining this fuller sense of humanity evokes the speech of Miranda in The Tempest as she envisioned an enchanted new world of possibility: “O wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world! That has such people in it!”45 In light of the emerging theory I advance here, we might now say, “Oh what wondrous worlds that honor such entangled creatureliness—our becoming humans!” As I mentioned earlier, human life as a totality is captured more correctly when one understands death as a necessary condition of having a destiny, or of being a whole. Thus human sacrality is inescapably tied to our sense of finitude, which is only possible and truthful when we rest confidently in our natural, material bodies. The concept of sacred humanity and the African American
religious naturalism from which it emerges honor this truth. They remind us that the holiness of life is recognizing that each moment of existence is an opportunity to honor our stubborn materiality and entangled finitude.

NOTES


5. Religious naturalism is a way of describing a worldview that is scientifically credible and emotionally satisfying. As such, it is not common naturalism if that is understood as cold, heartless reductionism. Some religious naturalists have targeted a type of reductionistic naturalism sometimes expressed by Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins. Accordingly, these figures assume reality to be self-explanatory, and no further explanation is needed. For religious naturalists, however, the universe is not reducible to the categories of analysis used to explain it. The natural explanations within the framework of science are not decisive with respect to the
explanation of that framework. Nor is my approach another form of natural religion, or a form of apologetics using scientific and natural investigations to support religious claims or doctrines in traditional theology. In this essay, I follow the trajectory of religious naturalism within the science and religion paradigm that is best associated with the works of Ursula Goodenough, Donald Crosby, and Loyal Rue. I discuss this viewpoint in much more detail later in the essay.


7. This list is not fully representative of the complexity and diversity of liberal theology; it does, however, list some of the major post-Enlightenment Protestant scholars who were concerned with the vitality and necessity of religious interpretations in an increasingly secularized society. For representative works, see Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958); Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1970); Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013); John Macquarrie, In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach (New York: Crossroad, 1983).


10. Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to Frantz Fanon, Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1961), vii–lxxii. Insights emerging from such developments as cultural studies, feminism, and postcolonial thought show that discussions of liberal (and influential) political philosophies, such as those of Jefferson, Hume, or Locke, must also take into account the extent to which their doctrines were implicated in acts of racial supremacy, sexism, exploitation of other nationalities, colonialism, and slavery. For further readings, see Sandra Harding, ed., The “Racial” Economy of Science (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); William Tucker, The Science and Politics of Racial Research (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Elazar Parkman, The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Wil-

11. Recent studies in race theory show that even though such terms as blackness and whiteness are constructions that are projected, they take on certain meanings that apply to certain groups of people in such a way that makes it difficult not to think of those people without certain affectively charged associations. Thus the blackness and whiteness of individuals and groups become regarded by a racist culture, which takes its associations too seriously, as their essential features—as, in fact, material features of their being. For further readings, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3–17. For further readings in critical race theory, see Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Kimberlé Crenshaw and Garry Peller, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995).


13. Ibid., 161.


20. Ibid., 334.


22. See, for example, Goodenough, *Sacred Depths of Nature*: *Rue, Religion Is Not about God; Crosby, Living with Ambiguity.*

27. Ibid., 40.
28. Ibid., 42–44.
29. Ibid., 66.
30. Ibid., 71.
31. Ibid., 64.
33. 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." See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).
35. The development of various theories of evolution from Lamarck to Darwin was crucial to the creation of racism in the nineteenth century. For further reading, see Peter Reill, "Anti-Mechanism, Vitalism, and Their Political Implications in Late Enlightened Scientific Thought," *Francis* 16, no. 2 (1989): 195–212.
36. Rue, *Religion Is Not about God*, 75. Rue also observes: "The meaning of human life should be expressed in terms of how our particular species pursues the ultimate telos of reproductive fitness. Like every other species, we seek the ultimate biological goal according to our peculiar nature. That is, by pursuing the many teloi that are internal to our behavior mediation systems, whether these teloi are built into the system by genetic means or incorporated into them by symbolic means. For humans there are many immediate teloi, including the biological goals inherent in drive systems, the psychological goals implicit in our emotional and cognitive system, and the social goals we imbibe through our symbolic systems. Human life is about whatever these goals are about" (75).
39. Ibid., 36; 43–46.
40. Michael Arbib, *The Metaphorical Brain 2; Neural Networks and Beyond* (New York: John Wiley, 1989); Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpin-


42. Konstantin Kolenda, Religion without God (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1976). Kolenda rejects the life-death dialectic that has become an influential conception of human reality for many Westerners. In this sense, his perspective is not unlike that of Heidegger, Camus, Sartre, and other major twentieth-century existential figures, whose philosophical and phenomenological reasoning offer important and serious appraisals of death. I build on his ideas in this chapter.

43. Ibid., 21.

44. Ibid., 26.

45. Ibid., 26–27.
