

THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF SOUL FOOD AS ACTIVIST- PRAXIS

BOOK REVIEW BY
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Carter, Christopher. *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith, and Food Justice*.
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The long, destructive legacy of colonization is a story we all share, a deeply entangled part of our historical and present-day narratives. Its imprints are embedded in the formations of our nations, the construction of our economic and political systems, and the design of our education and food systems. Its traces permeate the social fabric of all communities so finely as to appear invisible to the rational mind. And yet, the soul continually feels colonization's presence eroding its essence one generation after the next.

How do we cope with such an elusive erasure that homogenizes the experience of all living beings on Earth? Aboriginal author and novelist Alexis Wright suggests that as an act of resistance, we embark on a praxis of inward migration to the dwelling place where the stories of our culture are kept in our minds. This is “where we go to slowly pick things apart, to reimagine our world in new ways, and sometimes we come out the other side with a map of how to make some sense of our world...This inward place is where we work with our own thoughts—our own sovereignty of mind, our own sovereignty of imagination—and where we keep our own knowledge safe...This is where we fashion, and refashion, and imagine the stories we want told” (Wright 2022).

In the *Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith & Food Justice*, Christopher Carter joins a community of activist scholars who have dared to migrate inward to a dwelling place where they can pick apart the legacy of racism and other colonial and imperial practices that have sought to erode the ancestral spirit of African Diaspora Foodways. A dwelling place where through

decolonial analysis, the heritage of “Soul Food” is fashioned and refashioned, making space for new stories to be told.

Carter’s unique contribution to the scholarship of African Diaspora or Black Foodways is arguably most evidently illustrated through his exploration of the spiritual ecology of soul food as a decolonial or activist-praxis that, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes, is “a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels,” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 606) where one transforms one’s colonized views of self as “Other(ed)” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) by engaging with the spiritual ecology of ancestral knowledge. I interpret this engagement as a purposeful part of Carter’s inward journey, where his decolonial analysis of Black Foodways takes the form of an embodied unfolding of four movements: knowing, thinking, being, and doing, theoretically framed as epistemology, social analysis, theological anthropology, and praxis. Each of these movements engages ontologically relational conceptions of soul and soul food that have been subject to complex layers of historical colonial processes.

Carter defines soul food as a linguistic signifier that encapsulates transatlantic culinary wisdom born from Black agriculture centered in a spiritual and ritualized relationship with the land, inherently tied to evolving definitions of Black identity and spirituality (Carter 2021, 50). Similarly, Carter describes soul as the signifier of experiential wisdom of African peoples, who taught their descendants how to navigate foreign lands and oppressive environments (Carter 2021, 50). Experiential wisdom, which I argue, is deeply rooted in a relational ontology born out of intimate relationship to other-than-human species and geological space where what distinguishes subject from subject, subject from object, or object from object is mutual relation rather than substance (Runehov, Oviedo 2013, 1974-75). This ontology reinforces the notion that animate and inanimate beings are not individuated nor differentiated by metaphysical substance but rather by a web of interconnected relations of being. In other words, soul food can be interpreted as a linguistic signifier for a relational ontology where our species becomes fully human by developing radical relations with other plant and animal species in place. Conversely, we become less than human when those relations are severed by imperial and colonial processes seeking to profit from interconnected parts of the whole. Colonial ways of knowing and thinking reinforce the illusion of ontological separation between humans and nature that contrasts paradoxically with African epistemologies. Bagele Chilisa states, “African approaches to epistemology are characterized by understanding of interconnectedness, the relationship and interdependence captured in the concept of *Ubuntu*, which recognizes that individual identity is possible only in community

with others and nature” (Chilisa 2020, 310). The colonization of Black Foodways was and is a process that first and foremost sought to sever the interconnectedness between African peoples, African land, and other-than-human species in Africa. The purpose: was and is to objectify and commodify the individuated parts of an interconnected spiritual ecology that formed and forms part of Black identity and spirituality.

For this reason, Carter calls on African Americans to develop “an awareness and appreciation of the agricultural knowledge...latent in our African ancestors;” (Carter 2021, 48). As a liberatory tool to recognize African Americans’ sovereign and interdependent relationship with their environments. Chattel slavery, Carter explains, ironically ensured an unintended and lasting connection between African Americans and American soil, not because African Americans are defined by agriculture born from plantations: but because their heritage is rooted in the agricultural skills of the West African cultures of their ancestral past (Carter 2021, 47). Black Foodways carries the memory of a relational ontology where Black spirituality and Black identity are defined by a sacred relationship to other-than-human species in place. As Carter aptly points out, the ontology that drove the scientific revolution views persons’ relations and Earth’s ecology as separable, fractured, and divided (Carter 2021, Chap 3). This view of humans led to genocidal violence, climate catastrophe, disease, and chattel slavery. Colonization ensures that the structures that govern our social, cultural, and spiritual environments no longer support an ontology of relationality to our ecological environment by devaluing and cheapening that environment and its people.

Here Carter references Jason Moore and Raj Patel’s work in *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, whereby the cheapening of lives and nature is a “strategy, a practice, a violence that mobilizes all kinds of work-human and animal, botanical and geological-with as little compensation as possible” (Carter 2021, 91). This specific idea of cheapening originates from Moore’s theories of world-ecology which describe a process whereby the system of capitalism perpetuates an ideology of nature, other species, and all-natural processes as “cheap,” in so far as they have no value outside of their contribution to objectifying processes of capital accumulation (Moore 2016). Carter states that one must create relational distance from something to cheapen it. Here, he reiterates, “It is our inability to recognize and accept our relational responsibilities as a part of nature that enables human beings to cheapen subjects into objects.” While Moore and Patel emphasize capital accumulation as the foundation for cheapening, Carter states, “Coloniality is the foundation upon which the logic of cheapening is built” (Carter 2021, 91).

From this perspective, cheap nature and cheapening are the processes of stripping beings and their relations of the interconnectivity of value, deeming them valueless and even theologically and anthropologically profane. Much of what Carter describes in the first half of his book is a historical process of how colonial ideologies refashioned interconnected relations of Black lives, African land, and African species as desacralized, valueless, and profane; to profit from those very bodies, land, and crops as objectified cheapened commodities. Colonization is a process by which we devalue a relational world's knowing, thinking, being, and doing. Decolonizing Black Foodways as an act of activist-praxis is a process by which we reimagine a world where the interconnectedness of bodies, land, and other species have immense value. Not as commodities or objects of accumulation but as a spiritual ecology of relational beings. This not only means, as Carter explains, "committing ourselves to being human in ways that undo the structures of coloniality by prioritizing environmental justice," (Carter 2021, 50) but also being human in ways that reimagine reciprocal and mutual relations between human bodies, land, and other species. This requires the decolonization of our knowledge systems, modes of thinking, ways of being, and ways of relating in a world where coloniality continues to take place.

Carter states "The spirit of Black soul is one that pulls us toward an interdependent understanding of community by fashioning an antioppressive society where all planetary life flourishes" (Carter 2021, 52). Suggesting that we are only fully human when we see the spiritual ecology in our relations between the interconnected community that constitutes human and other-than-human species in place. If *The Spirit of Soul Food* is an act of resistance through a migration inward by Carter to reclaim sovereignty over the interconnected wisdom of his people's ancestral past to reimagine the future, it is also a call for all peoples to engage in the process of decolonizing our knowing, thinking, being, and doing; by giving spiritual meaning and value to an interconnected and relational way of moving through and with our animate and inanimate community on Earth.

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