Book Review


Equality isn’t an idea; it is a practice. We practice it when we don’t treat other people or other animals as objects. (Adams 2010, 1)

Rev. Dr. Christopher Carter’s book contributes to a multi-generational, burgeoning landscape of scholarly and ministerial leadership, committed to naming, defining, and centering meaningful Black self-representation, plus a contextual contribution to redefining Christian meaning. Carter develops a critical religious food ethic, positing, ‘food should be a part of our conversations when discussing race and racism’ (p. 5). Rather than primarily reporting and critiquing, Carter reconsiders theological anthropology, focused on the ‘soul’ in Soul Food, asserting Black veganism as a full ethical embodiment toward justice for both Black people and nonhuman animals.

Addressing interlaced religious, racial, and culinary identity, Carter’s book reflects and feeds generationally defining social movements, seasoned in historical, contemporary, cultural, theological, social scientific, and ethical scholarship. Each chapter provides not only a buffet of integrative analysis but also epistemological grounding in the author’s experience and skilled storytelling on historical lives. Furthering constructive ethics, the author adds recipes to conclude each chapter, offering home-cooked vegan revisions of inherited soul food recipes for readers to test, ingest, and embody. Carter works to liberate not only people who share his heritage, but all who suffer from racialized cruelty as well as animals suffering from extractive exploitation. Building from Black American cultural inheritance of Soul Food and intellectual convictions in Christian scholarship, Carter defines a decolonial food methodology of ‘soulfull eating, seeking justice for food workers, and caring for the earth’ (p. 162).

Carter identifies as a ‘social ethicist and practical theologian’ (p. xii), describing a need to renovate theological anthropologies linked to oppression, remembering a complex past and charting a liberative future. Most of Carter’s prose is accessible for undergraduate and popular readers, with some forays into terminologically academic writing, offering an insightful read for seasoned scholars of religious ethics, Christian theology, food, environmental justice, Black, African American, Ethnic, and Women’s and Gender Studies. Carter defines his inclusive intention for proposed practices to apply for ‘any person… moved by the stories of those victimized by our food system and committed to building an antioppressive and antiracist society’ (p. 124). Though his primary target audience is U.S. Black communities, Carter invites a diversity of readers to engage in daily virtue ethics through a theologically consistent, racially meaningful, food politics of ‘soulfully vegan’ eating.
In the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2, Carter guides readers in recognizing racialized themes across U.S. history, uncovering agricultural roots linked to contemporary food politics. Throughout, Carter centers Black experience, highlights parallels in human and animal captivity, and balances horror and nostalgia in focused detail. In addition to a content overview, Carter’s ‘Introduction: Knowing, Eating, and Believing’ (recipe: red beans and rice) functions as a primer on U.S. racial literacy. The systemic accessibility of Carter’s categories speaks to his fluency with teaching and acuity with translating complex concepts into digestible language. In ‘Chapter 1: Transatlantic Soul’ (recipe: collard greens), Carter traces an historical thread from North American colonization by Europeans—with examples of West African traditional ecological knowledge and foods replanted alongside enslavement in new territory—through plantation agriculture and its legacies in ongoing labor dehumanization. Carter’s reflection unearths necessary challenges to stereotypical depictions of subjugated bodies and lives, even as they intersect, providing decolonial perspective on agricultural heritage, knowledge, and self-efficacy. In ‘Chapter 2: Food Pyramid Scheme’ (recipe: Gumbo), Carter examines U.S. food politics and policies as unjust for US Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, as well as a variety of people across the globe. With an overview of harmful policies in both U.S. and global food systems, Carter charts agricultural mechanization and a revolving door between food policy and agribusiness interests.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Carter returns to theological anthropology and liberative praxis, enhanced by historical and contemporary studies of American agricultural-cultural critique with examples of Black people as full theoethical subjects. In ‘Chapter 3: Being Human as Praxis’ (recipe: corn bread), Carter affirms a fullness of humanity in Christian theological anthropology, or how human beings are constituted in relation to the divine. This chapter exposes wounds from Christian enslavement theologies, grounded on differential humanity, pedestalizing the masculine and white. He reflects on cheap food, racialized enslavement, and Indigenous genocide in terms of Cartesian reductionism’s ‘relational distance’ (p. 91—93), which facilitated ‘practicing Christianity to conform to nationalist empire-making ideologies’ (p. 93). For Carter, Christian ethics require reflection on being human among humans, standing against differential treatment and dehumanization, and asserting God-given dignity for animals subject to abusive exploitation as food. In ‘Chapter 4: Tasting Freedom’ (food: watermelon), Carter names a liminal space of anti-oppressive praxis, diminishing perfectionism to highlight practices of ‘being human in antioppressive ways’ (p. 123), both as ‘instruments of God’s love and compassion’ and to ‘promote and preserve the flourishing of the humanity of both the victims and the offenders’ (p. 124). He names three moral virtues key to decolonial environmental justice: ‘practical wisdom, improvisation, and justice’ (p. 125), which are further elaborated as discernment, dynamism, and justice-led work. These virtues concretize in three practices: ‘soulfull’ eating, food worker justice, and earth care, developing a systematic theology of food as justice-building ethical expression.

In ‘Conclusion: Food Deserts and Desserts’ (recipe: peach crisp), the book provides a primer for understanding historical context for Black American food traditions and offers critical analysis of remnants of colonialism in a ‘structurally evil food system’ (p. 158). Building from the earlier chapters’ work to dismantle food coloniality, the final chapters build a Christian ethical stance of ‘radical
Compassion’ to ‘embody love and pursue just relationships’ (p. 158) for food animals and people, inclusively.

Carter focuses on Black/Womanist studies in religion to define cultural dietary issues, though omitted voices match his goals in Womanism, feminism, and animal ethics. Carter breaks ground by focusing on racialized issues with animals, deemphasizing mainstream vegan literature on health promotion, animal rights, and climate concerns, which motivate movements to critique meat consumption at an individual, consumer level. Carter roots his work in key authors from Black/Womanist studies, such as Jessica Harris’ High on the Hog (2011), Melanie Harris’ Ecowomanism (2017), Aph and Syl Ko’s Aphro-Ism (2017), Emilie Townes’s Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil (2007), and Psyche William-Forson’s Building Houses out of Chicken Legs (2006).

Undoubtedly, Carter’s book will be scrutinized by those afflicted by his clarion moral voice, such as those who decry mentioning the personal in academic work, who chafe at Critical Race Studies, and who cry ‘Essentialism!’ when faced with social commentary pertaining to a larger collective group. Although some might criticize aspects of personal reflection dotted throughout the work, Carter’s reflections ground the book in clear epistemological territory, incorporating ‘experiential knowledge’ (p. 42) in decolonial praxis. His approach contrasts with uncountable studies that seem to obscure profoundly influential personal stakes, which scholars hold whether intentions are transparent or not. Embodied knowledge production is increasingly central to theological accountability to defy historical evils and reorient toward wholesome self-understanding in a life-giving universe. Carter’s work reiterates that experience matters to scholarly work and religious meaning, and groups of people who share unjust experiences can lean toward collective methods to reclaim human dignity. In his words, ‘Liberation is a decolonial process, a process of letting go of the narratives that kept us tied to coloniality by grounding ourselves in the truth of who we are and whom we aim to be, a process of decolonizing our knowledge and placing institutions at the service of life, a process of thinking and imagining social systems that sustain and promote life’ (p. 25—26). Alongside scholars who explain how identity shapes their project, Carter abstains from the dubious distraction of abstracted essentialism by focusing on decolonizing, non-homogenizing representations of Black history, Black culture, and Black foods.

Beyond scholarly politics outlined above, further critique may define diversities in animal husbandry, beyond silent catastrophes in factory farming. Conflating animal husbandry with factory farming is a move familiar in vegan discourse. Perhaps implicit in this conflation is the ethical drive to avoid harm of any kind, particularly to avoid killing animals for any reason. Yet, millennia of human communities have harbored animal bodies with varying ecological exploitation, many avoiding the chilling abuses akin to factory farming. Although Carter’s ethical compass settles on veganism, he may find colleagues and allies who similarly decry animal exploitation and support antiracist human-to-human ethics while maintaining traditions of animal edibility, albeit with overlapping goals of mutual flourishing among human and nonhuman communities. Among those with similar interests to restore dignity to animals, farm workers, farmers, plus land and water health, some refer to a prayerful meal as a ‘truer prayer’ with meat derived from such restorative practices (Butterfield 2008).

Carter’s luminous contribution combines critique with constructive theoethics, affirming a religiously meaningful ‘soul’ in Black people and in animals, claiming
that both have been epistemologically, categorically, and historically excluded from ensouled beings by people who might exploit their bodies for work and food. Carter renders a theological turn toward a mirror of ensoulment, not only to demonstrate the spiritual value of every living being whose eyes can look straight into your own, but also to expose dehumanizing and demoralizing logic required to embody anthropocentric, supremacist theologies, which translate to daily cruelties in individual and structural terms. As colleagues and I wrote to describe similar commitments to enable social and ecological justice: ‘What else might the face of Love look like on Earth’ (Yugar et al. 2021: x)? Carter’s work provides innovation between inheritance and legacy: ‘Soul food, like jazz, is a Black, American, and southern invention’ (p. x). It is rare to encounter a book that represents lived experience and intergenerational injustices, metabolizing harsh realities into both epistemologically nuanced analysis and fueling faithful cookfires for freedom.

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References