

## Gastronomic Myths of Disruption

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The theme ‘Food and Disruption’ of this year’s Dublin Gastronomy Symposium encourages contemporary gastronomic interpretations of Clayton Christensen’s business theory that ‘disruption’ is essential for innovation and growth (2011). This story may indeed explain how innovations, especially technological ones, have had wide-reaching and powerful impacts on the history of food. Consider for example the invention of early agricultural techniques, the distillation of alcoholic beverages, the introduction of new foods into the ‘Old’ worlds of Europe, Asia, and Africa with the ‘discovery’ of the New World, or modern refrigeration. However, the application of Christensen’s theory necessarily privileges innovation and extensive distribution and practices of consumption as *the* touchstones of achievements in global food history, and is a narrative that implicitly or explicitly underlies many modern, shall we say colonialist, initiatives in global economic ‘development.’ The problem with Christensen’s story is that it underplays the costs to real persons when businesses must fail in order for productive innovation to emerge. That is, the people who depend on those businesses for their livelihood suffer when they lose their jobs. So, I agree with Jill Lepore’s (2014) critique of the rhetoric and applicability Christensen’s theory to the values of realms other than business:

generally, the rhetoric of disruption - a language of panic, fear, asymmetry, and disorder - calls on the rhetoric of another kind of conflict, in which an upstart refuses to play by the established rules of engagement, and blows things up...Innovation and disruption are ideas that originated in the arena of business but which have since been applied to arenas whose values and goals are remote from the values and goals of business. People aren’t disk drives. Public schools, colleges and universities, churches, museums, and many hospitals, all of which have been subjected to disruptive innovation, have revenues and expenses and infrastructures, but they aren’t industries in the same way that manufacturers of hard-disk drives or truck engines or drygoods are industries. Journalism isn’t an industry in that sense, either.

Doctors have obligations to their patients, teachers to their students, pastors to their congregations, curators to the public, and journalists to their readers - obligations that lie outside the realm of earnings, and are fundamentally different from the obligations that a business executive has to employees, partners, and investors (Lepore, 2014).

That is not to deny that stories of food have been central to concepts of disruption from the dawn of time. It’s human nature to ‘make lemonade out of lemons’ – to use food metaphors and stories to ‘spin’ the inevitable, often traumatic experiences of change naturally occurring or intentionally engineered. But many food-related myths of disruption address precisely the cost, the suffering, even violence accompanying growth and change. In other words, I’m re-defining ‘disruption’ in a more expansive way. So instead of simply glorifying the creative potential of ‘blowing things up,’ these food stories also offer ways to repair the damage and violent separations caused by the inevitable and necessary disruptions in the human condition and in the natural world. In this paper I will share several examples of such food-related stories regarding some of the basic disruptions of living in the real world: (1) exile, death, and the physical pains of maternal labor in the mother of Western gastronomic myths of disruption - the Biblical story of eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge; (2) the trauma of slavery and sexual violence recounted in *The Cooking Gene* (2017), Michael Twitty’s culinary history of Southern African American cuisine; (3) death which separates us from our loved ones and them from us in the lyrics of the well-known Scottish and Irish song ‘The Parting Glass.’ These stories of disruptions are ‘myths’ in the sense that critical scholars of the comparison of religions like Jeffrey Kripal understand myth, as ‘a sacred story that founds and grounds a particular world’ (Kripal et al., 2017, p.114). Moreover, ‘myth’ does not mean ‘fiction’ or ‘made-up story’ in a pejorative sense (though indeed myths are human-made stories in the literal artistic sense of fiction), but rather are ‘symbolic stor[ies] pointing to some deeper... cultural, psychological, historical or philosophical’ truth (Kripal et al., 2017, p.114).

What all these expressions of ‘gastronomic myths of disruption’ have in common is not only the mindful acknowledgement of the pain and damage of disruption, but also the repairs – what Jewish mystics called *tikkunim* (literally ‘repairs’) – the food stories imply or explicitly offer for the damage done when these ruptures occur.

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### Eating the Forbidden Fruit in the Bible

According to the Biblical story of the first humans in the Garden of Eden, nearly all the fundamental and painful disruptions of our human situation are attributed to an act of eating. Exile from our place of origin and separation from intimate daily contact with our divine Parent, death,

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painful extraction of our plant foods from the ground ‘by the sweat of our brow’ and of our offspring from the females of our species in the labour pangs of childbirth, the division of gender roles and the subjection of women to ‘their men’ (‘he shall rule over you’); enmity between humans and non-human animals (‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers’) – were all punishments for disobeying God’s command not to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 3:14–24). On the plus side, we get to be like God knowing the difference between good and evil. But it is not an unambiguous good to be able to know like God, because of the dramatic and painful disruptions that come with it, ripping us apart from our home, our Parent, our land, our basic relationships with human and non-human others. Still, how can we know the difference between things if they are not separate(d) from one another? This seems to be the essence of knowledge according to this story. Perhaps this is why the one day of creation that God does not ‘see that it was good’ is the second day which accentuates the separations God makes to differentiate the parts of creation (‘And there was water separating from water... And God made the firmament and He separated between the waters below the firmament from the waters above the firmament’ Gen 1:6–7). In other words, separations per se are somehow not good, though when God looks back at the whole of creation when he’s done, he sees that everything is good. So, while knowing is God-like, the separations necessary for discerning one thing from another implicate us (and God) in a kind of conceptual violence – to know is to separate the parts from the whole. However, even though knowing disrupts the oneness of everything through our violent conceptualization of the parts from the whole, good from evil, the Biblical Hebrew word for knowing also is the verb for putting the parts back together, as it also means ‘engage in sexual intercourse’ – ‘to know in the Biblical sense’. So this gastronomic Biblical myth of origins and of the origins of the fundamental disruptions that separate us from the persons and places we ought to and long to be connected to acknowledges on the one hand the painful costs of these separations and the ‘repairs’ for them. But on the other hand, the story re-unites the parts of creation even as we divide them through knowing them conceptually, reunites people physically through sexual knowing, and provides us with the hope and implicit promise that though things are not currently as they should be, eventually they will improve when we return to the Garden and experience the original unity of the world. The Biblical story suggests that ‘knowing’ is a kind of consumption. That paradoxically entails both a disruptive separation from and between us and the objects we desire to consume (or wish to avoid). We are quite careful to distinguish between foods (good or not good to eat), mates (others to unite with, but not to ingest), and predators (beings that want to eat us) but also to incorporate into ourselves, so that we are what we eat.

### Cooking, Disruption, and Repair in Michael Twitty’s *The Cooking Gene*

‘What’s the best thing you ever cooked?’ I asked my mother. ‘A little black boy named Michael; I cooked him long and slow,’ she replied.’ (Twitty, 2017, p.13)

In *The Cooking Gene*, the African American food historian Michael Twitty tells a story rich in gastronomic metaphors that weaves together his personal genealogy and a culinary history of Southern African American cuisine, without glossing over the traumatic disruptions of forced uprooting and family separations, displacement, slavery and sexual violence inherent in both. First of all, Twitty frames the story of Southern cuisine he is going to tell using synonyms for disruption and makes value judgments about such disruptions. In describing his project, he says:

The lofty goal of participation in the praise fest for rediscovering and sustaining America’s food roots seems trivial at best when going to your source is *traumatic*. The early and antebellum South is not where most African Americans want to let their minds and feet visit. It’s a painful place, and the modern South is just beginning to engage the relationship between the racial *divide*, class *divisions*, and cultural *fissures* that have *tainted* the journey to contemporary Southern cuisine. It’s an entangled and deeply personal mess that has been four centuries in the making. This book is about finding and honoring the soul of my people’s food by looking deep within my past and my family’s story [my emphasis] (Twitty, 2017, p.6).

The disruptions in this story are ‘traumatic’ and have ‘tainted the journey to contemporary Southern cuisine’. And he describes the research trip for the book he took with his former partner as their ‘Southern Discomfort Tour’ (Twitty, 2017, p.xiv).

But to this story of the violent social disruptions at the heart of the history of Southern gastronomy he adds a story of resurrection through memory, a repair of the ruptures with the people whom time and traumatic history have threatened to erase. Thus, he describes the healing, reparative personal story of his ‘cooking life’ as a process of resurrection by remembering the ‘stories of about people using food’:

My entire cooking life has been about memory. It’s my most indispensable ingredient, so whenever I find it, I hoard it. I tell stories about people using food, I swap memories with people and create out of that conversation mnemonic feasts with this fallible, subjective mental evidence. Sometimes they are the people long gone, whose immortality is expressed in the pulp of trees also long gone and in our electric ether. Other times they are people who converse with me as I cook as the enslaved once cooked, testifying to people and places that only

come alive again when they are remembered. In memory there is resurrection, and thus the end goal of my cooking is just that – resurrection (Twitty, 2017, pp.11–12).

Counterbalancing Twitty's gastronomic myth of disruptions reflected in the enslaved African American roots of Southern cuisine is a gastronomic myth of resurrection, repair and healing. As he puts it,

intra-ethnic self-care is at stake from the narratives we tell the next generation, from sustainable best health practices to our relationship with the environment and protecting spaces of cultural memory. We have to tend to our own healing, not just work at assuaging the tensions born of slavery's racially divisive nature... This is about *food being a tool for repair* within the walls of black identities. When you are oppressed, how you survive your oppression is your greatest form of social capital. In the case of black people worldwide, the cross-pollination of African cuisines and the exchange of knowledge among cousins, this capital is limitless [my emphasis] (Twitty, 2017 p.411).

When he was writing his book, Michael Twitty's mother died. He had discovered his mother's African roots were in Sierra Leone, and he evoked the demonstrative wailing mourning rites of Sierra Leone in contrast to Western rite which left him cold. In this chapter on grief when he describes this, he muses how appropriate conversations over food at grave sites were in both African culture and in his own memories (Twitty, 2017, pp.374–5). He ends that chapter with two recipes, 'Macaroni and Cheese the Way My Mother Made It' (very cheesy and eggy, with cream cheese, sour cream, two kinds of cheddar, evaporated milk, and a topping of brown sugar, garlic and onion powders, salt and pepper) and 'Funeral Potato Salad' (chock full of red potatoes, sweet relish, hard-boiled eggs, red, green, yellow, and orange peppers, onion, garlic powder, chopped celery, brown yellow mustard, and a lot of mayonnaise) (Twitty, 2017, pp.378–9). Rich in fats, colors, flavors, textures, and memories.

Clearly, the gastronomic myth of disruption shaping Twitty's personal story and story of Southern cuisine includes not only a mindful acknowledgement of the pain and damage of disruption, but also the repairs which telling the stories of 'mnemonic meals' offer for the damage done by these ruptures.

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#### Bridging the Gap with Dead Friends and Lost Lovers in 'The Parting Glass' song

But since it falls unto my lot, That I should rise and you should not...  
So fill to me the parting glass, Good night and joy be with you all.

Since I first heard this song in the movie *Waking Ned Devine* (1998), I was so moved by it that I decided I wanted it sung at my funeral, preferably over a shared glass of something intoxicating that would remind my survivors of me. This popular Irish song has a long history that goes back to the 17th century, Scottish in its origins, with versions by poets as illustrious as Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, though it is really only in its later Irish versions that the 'parting glass' is accentuated as the thing that reconciles the losses felt from friends who died, past love affairs, and other ruptures between friends and the regret accompanying such memories (Kloss, 2010, 2012). For example, in one of the earlier versions, the concluding lines of each verse stress God's consoling role for these losses, e.g. 'I beg the Lord be with you all', 'He – whose pow'r and might, both day and night, Governs the depths, makes rain to fall [...] Direct, protect, defend you all', and 'I Good Night, and joy be with you all'. Or in a more secular earlier version, a verse otherwise familiar to many of you here, 'Her cherry cheeks, her ruby lips, alas! she has my heart withal,' ends with 'Come, give me the *parting kiss*, Good night and joy be with you all' (Kloss, 2010, 2012). But in the later Irish versions, including the one popularized by the Clancy Brothers in 1959, two or three out of the three verses, plus sometime a repeated chorus end with 'fill to me the parting glass'. The memories of loss are repaired through a shared *cup*, a gastronomic image of shared ingestion, acknowledging both rupture and communion in the expression '*parting glass*', almost oxymoronic in its connotations. And I choose the term communion intentionally, as I do not doubt the emphasis on a farewell parting glass has some echoes of the farewell cup Jesus shared with his disciples on the night he was betrayed as told in this earlier Christian myth of disruption. I love the way Juniper Quin, a writer for the blog *Seven Ponds: Embracing the End-of-Life Experience* in her post recommends the 'Parting Glass' for funerals:

As a song to remember a loved one, this is a particularly powerful choice, *as it seems to roll toward us from the other side*. This voice is mature and recognizes the Self in the Other ('all the harm I have ever done, / Alas it was to none but me), and blithely releases whatever isn't important ('all I've done for want of wit / To memory now I can't recall). *As a life comes to its end, many of us seek and wish this kind of resolution*. There's something reassuring about imagining a loved one evolving toward a state where they can blithely and easily say, 'fill to me the parting glass / Goodnight and joy be with you all.' Indeed, the wordplay further along speaks to this levity [my emphases above]:

But since it fell into my lot,  
That I should rise and you should not,  
I'll gently rise and softly call,  
Goodnight and joy be to you all.

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Fill to me the parting glass,  
And drink a health whate'er befalls,  
Then gently rise and softly call,  
Goodnight and joy be to you all (Quin, 2016).

Yes, the levity which comes with the joy of a shared cup is a crucial component of a gastronomic and mnemonic 'repair' of what could be an otherwise unbearably painful rupture of death, the inevitable end of our mortal condition. The gastronomic myth underlying the lyrics and performances of the 'Parting Glass' doesn't ignore the pain of loss, but softens it and makes it an occasion for celebration.

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### Conclusion: Disrupting Disruption by Respecting and Repairing Relationships

So why do I find gastronomic myths of disruption and repair so compelling? Even with the disruptive technological advances (as per Christensen et al.) that may have eased our conditions, we humans still have to work to eat, we give birth painfully, we die, we fear creatures that might endanger us, and at times we feel exiled, displaced, alienated from some better times and places. Sacred myths about eating both call attention to the necessary separations we have to make to live in this world – food, foe, or friend, and connect us to the same world, which we need (and which needs us) for our sustenance and survival. As folksinger Mark Graham wittily sings in 'Working on the Food Chain,' (n.d.), 'You are what you eat, and you also are what eats you.' Eating, the stories we tell about it, and the taboos we attach to it are what Graham Harvey calls ways of 'respecting relations' between human and 'other-than-human persons.' (2013, pp.117,125)

He chooses this particular terminology (borrowed from William Hallowell's writing about Native American Ojibwa religion), to stress that

[a]ll beings communicate intentionally and act towards others relationally: this makes them 'persons'. All persons are expected to give and receive gifts, and to act respectfully (to mutual benefit or communal well-being) and, if they do so, this makes them 'good persons'. It is useful for us (humans) to speak about 'human' and 'other-than-human' persons only because we are humans talking to humans (if we were bears we might speak of 'other-than-bear persons'). This is also useful for speakers of English because we are preconditioned to hear the word 'person' as a reference to other humans. The word 'person' should be enough, without the additional 'other-than-human', and would be if English-speakers had not learnt to privilege humanity above other beings (Harvey, 2013, p.125).

Living in this world necessarily involves disruptions in the relations between persons understood as such, but that does not mean we cannot still *respect* them

Sacred myths are the ways religions and religion-like cultural worldviews communicate their ethos. The Maori theorist of religion Te Pakaka Tawhai aptly defines religion as 'doing violence with impunity'. Lest we misunderstand his point, Tawhai explains further 'the purpose of religious activity [including sacred story-telling, myth-making]...is to seek to enter the domain of the superbeing and do violence with impunity', for example, 'to enter the forest and do some milling for building purposes, to husband the plant and then to dig up the tubers to feed one's guests' (Harvey, 2013, p.99). Here Tawhai speaks specifically about cutting down trees to build a meeting house and harvesting sweet potatoes to serve guests in it. Removing plants from their homes in the forest or soil are acts of violence – even for 'good' social reasons. The contemporary scholar of religion Graham Harvey further drives home Tawhai's point this way:

To do violence to trees and *kumara* [sweet potatoes] is not a neutral act. Properly undertaken it requires that permission is gained – and this is not given just because somebody says 'please.' Placation is also required and may involve the making of apologies, the respectful treatment of trees and tubers (including those parts not required for building or eating), and address to the kin of those cut down or dug up. What Tawhai identifies as 'religious activity' is what someone does to make threatened beings (e.g., trees and *kumara*) less hostile and perhaps even happily willing to give up life to others (Harvey, 2013, pp.100–101).

In other words, this critical scholarly perspective on religions, quite influenced by indigenous rather than modern Western, overly spiritualized, non-materialist traditions, understands religion *per se* as rooted in myths of violent disruption *and* reconciliation, gastronomic and otherwise. Suffice to say that preparing places and foods to eat communally necessarily involves acts of violence that cannot and should not be ignored. As Michael Pollan pointed out in the *Omnivore's Dilemma*, there is a karmic price to pay for eating animals and plants, whether we recognize it or not. Industrial agriculture and food processing banks on our ignorance of this cost for us to enjoy our food, while mindful eating requires the opposite (2007, p.410). Or as I pointed out earlier, the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden reminds us that there's a cost for tasting the difference between good and evil in order to survive in the real world. Technological, business-informed myths of disruption and innovation tell only half the story, and tend to overlook painful consequences, or treat them dismissively and reductionistically as 'collateral damage'. Gastronomic myths of disruption such as the ones I have shared here tell the rest of the story, how to make reparations for the necessary violence with which we disrupt our relationships with the world, namely, by acts respecting the relations between us human and other-than-

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human persons. That begins with our daily acts of eating, flavoured with memories of those from whom we have been separated, gratitude for the gifts of food we give and receive from all kinds of persons, and the delightful company and tastes we taste. Goodnight and joy be to you all.

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