

Koffler Centre of the Arts
Books & Ideas: Michael W. Twitty
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Hello. You're listening to Koffler Digital Audio, a stream that encompasses all of our downloadable audio content, including audio walks, radio plays, podcasts, and artist interviews.

I shall now introduce tonight's panelists. Michael W. Twitty is a recognized historical interpreter, independent scholar, and the founder of Afroculinaria, the first website/blog devoted to the preservation of historic African American foods and food ways. Twitty's book, *The Cooking Gene, A Journey Through African American and Culinary History in the Old South*, won two James Beard awards in 2018 for Food Writing and Best Book. His piece in *Bon Appetit*, "I Had Never Eaten in Ghana Before, But My Ancestors Had" was nominated for a 2019 James Beard award and was selected to be included in the Best American Food Writing 2019. This year, *The Cooking Gene* was named on Book Authority's list of 100 best food books of all time. Michael's next book, *Kosher Soul*, is slated for publication next year.

Nam Kiwanuka is an award-winning multiplatform journalist and producer. She cohosts *The Agenda* with Steve Paikin, Ontario's leading daily prime time current affairs show, and hosts *The Agenda* in the summer on TVO. Nam has hosted magazine shows for the NBA and CFL and was a MuchMusic VJ and a videographer, me and my brother's favorite, I might add. She has worked at CNN and BET, was a columnist for the BBC's *Focus on Africa* magazine, and has interviewed Salman Rushdie, Britney Spears, Jack Dorsey, Magic Johnson, and Margaret Atwood.

Nam, I'm pleased to pass the screen over to you. Thanks, everyone.

Nam Kiwanuka: Hi everybody! Hi cousin!

Michael W. Twitty Hi! How are you?

Nam Kiwanuka: I'm good, I'm good. I'm looking forward to having this conversation and in these COVID times, you miss connecting with people and being at events, but I think it's really neat that we can still do this and chat in our homes and maybe even get a bit deeper than normal, so COVID-19 I think a year ago, none of us would have imagined that this is what we would be living through and COVID-19 has exposed many inequalities that exist in our societies. Study after study show that longstanding health and social inequities have put people in the BIPOC, that is, black indigenous people of color communities, at increased risk of getting and dying from the coronavirus. How has this pandemic made the work that you do, Michael, around culinary injustice that more urgent?

Michael W. Twitty:

You know, I just came back from a trip from writing a piece for a magazine on food in the Gullah Geechee corridor and the pitch didn't include anything about COVID. But going down there and seeing how it's affected things, I mean, we're talking about an area that is majority black, has been majority black since the British colonization all of the South, the Carolinas and Georgia, and folks down there who have restaurants, I mean I saw a variety of options. I saw the restaurant that was sort of half open, the restaurant that was completely closed inside, only take out. People are doing sort of like bootleg operations at their back yard, which by the way was the best food I've had in all of those places. I'm not going to lie! And people are doing popups where you have picnic tables distanced out in a field. I mean, it's both a moment of cultural and societal sobriety and fear, but also a moment of reclamation and empowerment. I mean, it really has shown both, the resilience of the people and just relying on these old things, I mean, here's the deal: All of the survival techniques come from the era of segregation and Jim Crow and enslavement. You know, every single one of them. And that's something that didn't really hit me until two days in. Some places I've been a lot of times, but this is part of my heritage. But it only hit me two days in, it's like, Oh, so all the stuff that we're doing is the stuff that we used to thwart Jim Crow's power over our economic viability and our ability to survive. Okay. We have something in us and around us that other people simply don't have. You know? We were forced to develop, it's not a hard shell, people often make that analogy; that's not what it is. We were forced to develop a system of survival. I've often told people, Nam, that how people who are oppressed and marginalized survive their oppression and marginalization, is their greatest form of cultural capital. I just saw it.

Nam Kiwanuka:

That's really, so you mean in a sense that being able to pivot against all odds is a form of social capital.

Michael W. Twitty:

Yes, being able to make it, being able to improvise, being able to live outside the box and the bubble, and being able to create your way out of hell, is us. You know, Nam, there is a joke that I love the most. I will do the simplest, quickest version we can do. So God and the devil have a phone conversation. And God tells the devil, now we have to talk about these black people and the devil says, What? And he says, They're always singing all the time and praising my name and they are soulful in their robes and jerk chicken and Jollof rice and ugali and posha and just every time they get so loud and they get so, you know. The devil said, God, hold on a second, and then the devil comes back and says, God, I have to call you back. The black people just installed air conditioning. That is the joke! The joke is sort of there but it's more of a joke -

Nam Kiwanuka: I don't want to laugh!! (laughs)

Michael W. Twitty: But we are in hell and we make the best out of it. We make the best out of heaven and hell, and that is the secret towards us no matter where on the planet we are as black people.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, I mean, I don't want to really talk about politics, but in a way it seems as if you do have an election on November 3rd. Today, someone in the White House, I won't say who, someone in the White House today made a comment that implied that black people don't want to be successful and I was listening to that and I always try to lead with a full heart, but when I heard that, it just kind of, it's one of those nicks where you're not only being dismissed, but all these assumptions, what the foundation of the system that we live in right now where, when you think of enslaved people and how they were treated as if they weren't humans, was based on the fact that they were less than humans. So you are living in the United States. You've been working in culinary injustice for a very long time, living through a global pandemic again; I don't think many of us a year ago would have thought this is what life would be like in 2020 because 2020 is going to be my year, I don't know how many people said that, and COVID-19 was like, 2020 is going to be my year! (not to make light of it at all). Does this moment make the work that you do more urgent?

Michael W. Twitty: Well, I mean, you know, in the food world we had a huge reckoning after George Floyd and it was because there were sisters that weren't getting paid, there were brothers that weren't getting paid, more sisters than brothers, and just not getting paid. It wasn't being recognized, it was being pushed down. People actually revolted against practices within the food journalism and the food world that enabled this mentality of, well, maybe they don't want it, maybe they don't like it, maybe they're just not the same. The thing about that person and their comment and it's just a comment, I'll focus on the comment. It's really not new, it's actually something they will talk about (- - -) but working within (- - -) is that we have a history and tradition of black Jewish relations in America, and some degree in Canada and other parts of the English-speaking world as well. We have that. But we also have people who frustrate the efforts to twin up on social justice and fighting antisemitism, anti black racism, when they make comments, I don't need a thief and a crook telling me anything about making it in America. Because you know, Tulsa got burned down, Rosewood got burned down. Many of the black communities. Wilmington got burned down. We were successful and we not only beating Jim Crow but we were starving it to death. And it's not just that, but it's

all the redlining and all the surrogation, all the other stuff. It's not complaining like that person said, it's bearing witness and one thing I cannot bear as a Jew and as an African American, is for one person to constantly remind us about the struggles and the genocides and the wars and other things that have gone against the people. And that other said, the same person will say, but those people have the right to do the same thing. No double standards. Our folks are very proud when we go through all the hoops in what they call "law and order" here in America to make it, and then you have somebody who is a crook and a thief, the son of a crook and a thief, buying and building; 666, my God, oy vavoy! And then he says that. So that's already null and void. Back to our journey. So many of my friends who had to shut down or the word of the year is reconfigure, reimagine, reinvent. Everybody, but especially in the black food community, it has meant so many different things. People who have farms, people who have places that are open space are like, yeah, that is our time to really speak to the values that we have.

Nam Kiwanuka: And I do see that. Throughout this pandemic, I've been trying to see silver linings. I do see people wanting to know where their food comes from, growing their food even if they have a little green space on their balcony, and that has to be something that gives you hope.

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah, but yet it goes back to what we were talking about earlier. It's yet another survival method that came through enslavement, that came through the depression, poverty, Jim Crow. You know, both of my grandmothers who were born 10 years apart and neither one lives with us anymore. But both of my grandmothers were born 10 years apart, different parts of the South, and they both said the same thing. When the depression came, the white man came to our door to beg for food, not the other way around. And that's because they were sub-rural urbanites and they were rural people who as long as they had a patch of ground and some seeds and some ingenuity and knowhow, they were going to make sure every child got fed and every elder got fed.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, this is the book. I want to read something. Just to go off what you were just saying, you write in *The Cooking Gene*, soul food or African American heritage cooking and its umbrella cuisine, Southern food, are the most remarked and most maligned of any regional or indigenous ethnic tradition in the United States (that's what you wrote). What did you mean by that?

Michael W. Twitty: I meant that people project their issues onto a food that was essentially spurred on by indigenous and African food ways. It's

also the most purchased, most bought, most traded in regional food cuisine in Anglo North America (we know America is not just Anglo). But in Anglo North America is the most regionally successful cuisine and yet people trod on it, partly because they know where it comes from, they know that it comes from Creek and Cherokee and Seminole villages. They know it comes from West Africa to America. They know it comes from the plantations and the urban centers where black people and their children cooked. So it's a way of maligning, and also let's put it out there: if everybody wants me to be completely blanket fair and across the board, it's also the food of poor white Appalachian people and poor white people in the bayou called Acadians. The same people came from Nova Scotia many years ago who essentially settled among black people and natives and came up with a tripart cuisine. So it's a way of, in my opinion, Nam, of projecting onto this cuisine all of the racial fears and animus that America has as its original sin.

Nam Kiwanuka: I mean, I love my mac and cheese, I do, and fried chicken, and you've actually described southern food as "elegant." How is southern food elegant?

Michael W. Twitty: It's elegant because, guess what? You where those dishes started in? They didn't start in a cabin, they started in the big house kitchen. It started with black cooks who took the best of West and Central Africa and SE Africa as well; the best of Native America, and the highbrow parts of European cuisine, specifically the British Isles, France, Germany, and Spain; and they created a cuisine that was served on mahogany tables manufactured by the enslaved, on porcelain purchased with the labor of the enslaved, under huge carved wooden fans to keep the people cool that were worked by the enslaved. And people, it wasn't a cuisine of diners and drive ins or whatever, it was a cuisine of long 4 hour dinners served in the afternoon by people who were the wealthiest in America, by the most devious of means. And people have to remember, the greatest chef in early America was a black man trained in the courts of the French king, James Hemmings. This wasn't just some stuff, I mean that kind of democratic image of southern food really doesn't meet with the historical origins and even when we talk about the food from the cabin, meaning the enslaved person's cabin, we're still talking about appropriation.

Nam Kiwanuka: How so?

Michael W. Twitty: I don't want to get into the layer of I call it "folk lie" not folklore. But there are enough comments left in the documentation that talk about how we hid certain things. We hid certain crops and ingredients in things. We cooked at nighttime. It was called "Negro

daytime” for a reason, because our private existence...

Nam Kiwanuka: Was at night.

Michael W. Twitty: Right. Had to be outside of the prying eye of drivers, overseers, and slaveholders. And so we did hide certain ingredients and things from the people who were manifesting power over us because we didn't want to lose it. We knew that it could be lost, it could be taken from us. And that's what I call it. I mean, it wasn't Thomas Jefferson who was cooking that amazing food at Monticello that is the star piece of part of their historical interpretation.

Nam Kiwanuka: Coming up with the recipes or growing the food.

Michael W. Twitty: Right, none of it. And even that transmission. James Hemmings wasn't the only one. How do I translate haute cuisine (I'm sorry, French speakers, my French is not as good as yours in Canada).

Nam Kiwanuka: Oh, mine's not all that great either.

Michael W. Twitty: I heard Mary say, Metis and I thought it was Matisse, like the artist. But it's just like that. There were so many who said, Okay, I have to take some European techniques and modes of eating. I have to take African ingredients and techniques and Native American ingredients, and somehow make it look the way European Americans want it to look on a high level.

Nam Kiwanuka: That's ingenuity!

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah.

Nam Kiwanuka: Yet, you never really hear when we talk about enslaved peoples, enslaved African, we don't really hear them as being creators, as being innovators, but that's what it is that they were doing.

Michael W. Twitty: I want people to understand these earliest Atlantic Africans as having agency and ownership. I think there's this awful stereotype, Nam, and it comes a lot through media.

Nam Kiwanuka: It does!

Michael W. Twitty: But I think the media of old has left a permanent scar. Alex Haley inspired me but I think between *Gone with the Wind* and *Roots* and other productions, people have this mistaken idea that early Africans and the Metis in Canada were these straight-up victims, these zombies, these whatever because like you told me earlier,

you don't learn this stuff in school. You don't learn about these rebellions. These rebellions are not just people who are angry. They're people who are poor, intellectually processing their exile and going, how do we do more than just kill people and fight back? How do we make them rethink this whole process? And it's not just that. It's the idea that resistance was woven into everything including food. Everything! And resistance isn't what people think it is. It's not just knocking heads. Because, by the way black folks in America, they just knock heads. We wouldn't be here. We were outnumbered. We weren't in our home. That's very important. But here's something important. When James Hemmings leaves his occupying space as an enslaved man and goes to be a free man, because he liberates himself through food. He demands that the terms of his emancipation be that he can educate his relatives and then he'll move on. And he does so. That's how he gets out of this game. He could have gotten out of it in France, but that's another story. The point I'm trying to make is, when he leaves, he writes down all the utensils, all the gadgets, and writes down recipes. If you don't know about enslavement, and know that was the greatest form of resistance to enslavement, was being literate. Being able to write your own name, the day you were born, where you were located, being able to write things in fine handwriting was the way he did. Then we have to have a whole new conversation about what is resistance. And look at that forward as we move forward as African people in the world.

- Nam Kiwanuka: Well, speaking of resistance, you've said that your ancestors, you consider your ancestors your board of directors.
- Michael W. Twitty: Yes.
- Nam Kiwanuka: In what ways are they your board of directors? And I have a board of directors which is my girlfriends who pick me up and lift me up whenever I'm going through something. But you say it's your ancestors.
- Michael W. Twitty: It's complicated because I guess everybody has family issues, I have mine. I have mine because my blurred existence as a child when blurred wasn't cool. So all you new blurred, you are on the shoulders of...
- Nam Kiwanuka: The black nerds.
- Michael W. Twitty: Yeah, me and Nam can tell you, there's gonna be blurred (- - -) one day, honey.
- Nam Kiwanuka: We need a national holiday, how about that?

Michael W. Twitty: Blurred holiday, how about that? That's where it's at. But for me, the ancestors were always there and I know for some people the metaphysical or supernatural aspects of this are totally untenable but I'm so sorry, this is not a metaphorical conversation, this is a literal conversation. That's just my belief and the way I do things. I respect everybody. But for me, the Egun ancestors (and that's the Yoruba word and not the (- - -) but the ancestors are something that is a force. There have been moments in my life where they have chimed in and it's been deep, it's been deep. One time, I had a disagreement with someone and I started to doubt how far I could take this project. Because here's the deal: The genealogy that's in The Cooking Gene and genetic genealogy of The Cooking Gene and the history is woven there because I cannot tell you literally, directly step by step everything about my ancestors, okay? The names that I have are there because they were property. They were written on somebody's receipt, someone's bill of sale, someone's will when they died. They were property to be passed down. The fact that there were some people who were just like, well you know what is all this ancestor stuff? I said it because you have made Thomas Jefferson a food ancestor in one guise. You've made Dinah Shore and Paul Prudhomme the ancestors of southern food. You were about to make Paula Deen one until she messed up. You don't know my people. Name a single black cook! Name how this affects black kids who see this thing in their families and experience the same kind of food prejudice other ethnic communities do in the West. Talk to me anything about that. The Notebook did, so I had to write it. There is amazing work out there. Toni Tipton-Martin, Fred Opie, others. But, you know, that was their lens. My lens was, would you like to grow up in a black family, to hear these things around you and the meaning in the world about, stereotypes about who you are and your food and understand where they come from, why they're there, who put them there, and how that makes you feel as a black child.

Nam Kiwanuka: How did it make you feel as a black child?

Michael W. Twitty: It made me feel shitty. I joke in the book about the musical Hair, because at least that gave me some perspective and a way into a narrative. It was Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben and the Cream of Wheat man.

Nam Kiwanuka: Caricatures.

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah, and it was jokes about Negroes eating fried chicken and watermelon and this and that, and I'm like wait a minute, but this is part of who we are, why is it me? I feel for all the people now who

are just like, “Stop making fun of white people for not having seasoned food” or something. And I’m like, I know better. I grew up around ethnic white people. I know you, I know you too with your sauerkraut and your garlic and your paprika. I know you. Don’t worry about that! But as the epitome of whiteness in this world is about erasing those ethnic peculiarities and going for some imagined end vision of some superior person that doesn’t exist.

Nam Kiwanuka: Um, hmmm.

Michael W. Twitty: And the opposite of that is the over-seasoned, over-fattened, over-everything black and brown person.

Nam Kiwanuka: I know it’s a meme, it’s a joke, it’s I think we hear this (I know you’ve heard this) about people love their fried chicken and I didn’t realize until I was reading your book that there is a historical connection to that and insomuch as enslaved peoples were only allowed to have guinea fowl and chicken. How important is it for not only black people to know that history, but for Americans to know that history?

Michael W. Twitty: Absolutely everybody. Everybody. Americans, North Americans, people in the English-speaking world. People in any of the worlds where slavery was a center to the economy. Spain, Portugal, France, etc. etc. Right now we have an international story that goes, Oh, piri piri was from Portugal. Un uh. It’s Angolan, Mozambique and the Portuguese took that stuff and went around the world with it. Feijoada, the most important central dish in Brazilian cuisine is not the food of the big house, the Casa Grande. It is the house of the favela. It’s favela food, it’s a slave food, slave peoples’ food of Brazil. Jerk is the food of the Maroons and revolution in Jamaica. The barbecue and the spices of Haiti are the food of Vodou, the religion that brought freedom and liberation at first to the island of Haiti. And then there’s the food of East Africa that you grew up. The food of earliest people who were saying, No we’ve got to stand and relieve ourselves of these chains. So it’s everybody’s job to understand where this food comes from since the food has the stories. You know, there is a bit of as nasty little trend among trolls in social media that goes, my friend, Pati Jinich, who is a Mexican and Jewish. She had someone get on her page and say, You know what? Please spare me these stories of these women and these villages in Oaxaca and Jalisco and other places and the people making the food. I just want to know how to make the good Mexican food, don’t tell me anything about the culture or history. And that’s why we have people in my country, unfortunately, they keep breaking my heart, that will sit up there and munch on the best Mexican food or this food or that food, but

will then spout racial insults and not just that, create whole programs to create modern forms of ethnocide. That's untenable. But you know something? Even if that's sort of shocking, that's what's been happening to African Americans since the day we got here in 1526. Moving on to 1619, another primary date in our history. People have taken, taken, taken, taken, abused. I remember when I (I'll say this rather quickly and then we'll move on), when Michael Brown was murdered, not shot, not died, murdered in Missouri, someone took his body and meme'd around it, "Junk food and soul food".

Nam Kiwanuka: Heartbreaking!

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah, heartbreaking. It made me vomit because I'm a big black man. Could have been me. And that's how some people would have done me instead of wondering why yet another American of color was killed. That's how they would have done me. You know, we have Breonna Taylor here they value the walls more than her body. And it's just that combination. So people ask me the question all the time, Nam. Why the food part? Or, just do the food, don't do that social justice, don't do the history, don't do the culture. Like, no, no, no, baby, they go hand in hand with us. They are inextricable. They are woven together and I'm proud that I've always taken that stand to say, these are stories we're telling because the key ingredients are not the foods, the people who make them.

Nam Kiwanuka: You've actually said that culinary justice is not an elite issue, but you've spoken when we think of the chefs, you see one group and even this past summer, with the Black Lives Matter capturing the global attention, you heard all these stories coming out with Bon Appetit magazine and how did you manage to push through the noise before Black Lives Matter and to say, this is where I am standing and this is what I'm going to do.

Michael W. Twitty: My grandmother from Alabama (blessed memory) told me, don't lie to white people and you ain't got no problem. Don't lie to white people. Don't tell them that it's raining when they're pissing on you. Tell the truth. And I remember a time when I was doing this work pretty broke and pretty not really succeeding, wondering where the next meal was going to come from, and I was pushing against, I was gathering moss, I was getting there, I was gathering attention and there were people who were established in this food world, they didn't want to have that discussion. They wanted their jobs, and I respect that, that's not a sort of insult against them. But they didn't have the kind of like, I was out there in the wilderness. They weren't in the wilderness, they were in the brick and mortar. They

couldn't say these things without risk to their financial security. But I was saying the same thing, I was saying let's talk about the culture and the history. While other people were like, Nah, I don't want to get into politics. Excuse me, but I hate when people describe our culture history as "politics" but everybody else's stuff is a fun hobby, a walk down memory lane, nostalgia. But I can't talk about my stuff because it's politics? So long before these little wars were starting and with Bon Appetit what's funny is that I had an article in there that we just worked on because I have a really great editor I'd worked with, and she was encouraging stories about chefs of color and there was another situation where there was a sister there who was doing pieces with another editor, that's how this works, but wasn't getting properly paid, etc. So those two issues bumped heads. And so you have to explain to people, you know an article isn't recent. An article might take a year or 3 to 6 months at the shortest to put together the photographer, to orchestrate the food when it's really a feature piece. And the feature piece was on Juneteenth. It wasn't one they threw up because they were trying to survive and tokenize somebody. But even more so, Nam, what was so precious and important about that piece in the middle of all that hell and sturm and drang, I mean you felt it, we all felt it, people around the world felt it, this disgust at seeing this outright murder of a man. The little details that people will try to harp on and try to push and ram is inconsequential. We saw a lynching in 2020 and we couldn't take our eyes off it. But in that piece, Chef Omar and some of the other folks who are participating, Kurt, they asked for a black photographer, black food stylist, a black writer who happened to be me. So at the same time the other people still facing injustice over the resources and payment who understand magazines, other companies are multipronged. It's not just one person, you go through one chain of command. But we were already enacting a forward vision of making history by saying, we want the key players here to also be African Americans so their work is featured right along with ours. And unfortunately, that's how a lot of this chain starts and moves forward, is that we both have a little tug to the past and all its traumas and pain, but also try to go 2, 3 steps forward while reorganizing the power structure.

Nam Kiwanuka:

I think you're a fascinating individual and I'm not just saying that because I'm interviewing you, but because when I look at your work, you're very intentional with what you do. A lot of us, I know we hear if we don't listen to history, we're bound to repeat it. But you want to understand history and you've put yourself in situations that would make a lot of people uncomfortable. And you said at a talk that you gave a few years ago that in becoming the first colonial antebellum black chef in 150 years, you said this: When mastering

these historic recipes, I'm hoping to restore the most important ingredient in the food that I think is there, the emotional and ethical tone of what goes into the pot and what you create. Why did you want to become the first colonial antebellum black chef in the first place?

Michael W. Twitty:

Because we were considered the best cooks in that period of our history. For the 200 plus years of American history including the time of British colonization, black cook was revered. The black cook was considered a genius. That's not my words, it's their words. Black cooks engendered power, male and female. Black women created in the quarters and in some of the kitchens of early America, to paraphrase one of my favorite scholars, William D. Pierson, a cuisine, and here's where William D. Pierson comes in, with a resistance too civilized to notice. And I am not one of these burn it down of our past. I wrote a piece of writing which I have yet to publish, called *The Last Negro*. And it's about what happens when the last black person dies that had Negro on their birth certificate. And everybody celebrates, they let's burn 'em all. Forget about that. And then somebody wants their pass back and it you can't find it because it burned it all, destroyed it all. So it's really hard, colonialism and slavery, our twin biggest demons as African descended peoples. We have to have some sort of relationship with our past but, no that's not where our past started. You know, nowhere in my writing do I ever suggest that's where the first page is. That's why I had to go through genetic genealogy and other means, oral history, contextual research because if you want the king and queen part, you got to dig for it, boo. You cannot skip over the patchwork quilt to get the Kente cloth.

Nam Kiwanuka:

But was it hard, though, because when you did the southern discomfort tour, it couldn't have been easy.

Michael W. Twitty:

No, but I mean I first and foremost see myself as an historic interpreter. White, black, whatever. A similar but dissimilar question could be asked of white women. You realize you're interpreting a part of the past where you can't vote and you can't divorce your husband, you can't run away, you get abused to death, you might have a stream, every childbirth is risk of your life to you, etc. But like for me, yes, but as an interpreter I have to say this. I'm not a reenactor, because we get those confused. An interpreter takes off those clothes and hangs up at the end of day and then goes to 7-Eleven for a while or whatever. A reenactor lives that life. I don't know too many black reenactors of slavery, I don't know any, in fact. But we are willing 21st century educators. And as a 21st century person, we speak as 21st century people and say, yeah this food smells good and it looks good and it looks

like somebody put their heart and soul and love and hard work into it, but let me tell you about families being separated. And I remember this one little girl, oh my God, the little girl was Asian American and she was adopted by two white parents. And we are talking about this stuff, and I realize from the children in the room, I have to adjust my tone and what I say. But the little girl was really picking up on what I was saying and we were talking about in colonial Williamsburg, segregation of people, separation of people. The little girl turns to her parents and says, where would I have fit in? Where would they have put me? And it's like sometimes the little kids get it better than the adults.

Nam Kiwanuka:

Kids are smart. They see right through the stuff.

Michael W. Twitty:

Through the obfuscation. They know what's up. And when young African American kids came in. At first it's funny because 8 times out of 10, but not always, they come in, I don't want to be here, why do I got to be here, and all this, the fidgeting that our children do and I immediately stop talking to the adults and I go, hey, what's up? And they go "hi" and I go, see what I'm doing? You do it so it makes some (- - -) or something and a little girl starts smiling, right. And little boy is like, I want to do something! So he does something and then 10 minutes later they're still doing something and the parents are trying to move on, and then 20 minutes later they haven't stopped and moved on and parents say, okay it's time go. No, I'm not going to go yet and cry. We don't want to go. And sometimes they start talking to the kids about remember grandma used to this talk about this, she's from North Carolina, she used to talk about this...da, da, da right? Or something else or the elders will be there and they'll be like, oh, no, this wasn't so very long ago for me. And sometimes it's the first time those kids and grandkids have heard their elders talk about what they remember, and sometimes the connection of food isn't just about trauma, it's about true connection to the roots like rice, okra, black-eyed peas. They need to remind people where these things come from and all of a sudden, those kids and those folks have a genealogy, a gastronomic genealogy. They know who they are, they know who they come from. And then to our part as pan-African people, you and I, it's also a way of saying I remember the first time I did a garden for the Smithsonian in honor of the University of Virginia and it wasn't a west African or a Caribbean person or an African American come up to me, it was a Somali man and his kids, and he was so excited through his children. He says, yeah we had okra and yeah, we got sorghum, and yeah we got this and the man, if you believe this, you know how Somalis are tall and thin and whatnot...

Nam Kiwanuka: And gorgeous.

Michael W. Twitty: And gorgeous. He picked my big butt up, picked my big self up, threw me in the air. I had not been in the air by a Somali before. It's amazing. And tossed me around. He hugged me and he says, we black people grow everything! And that was just so beautiful to me because I had these moments where between us and outside of us. Last story: Japanese-American grad student came by one day at a festival many years ago and she was really impressed. She told me her family's story about being in the camps in California, was in tears. She comes back the next week when the festival is on and she brings a German grad student, exchange student, the other side of the story in the globe, and she said to me, I brought her here because I saw your garden and I saw the real American history. And I wanted her to learn that while she was here. So for me, all those narratives and then some make the more difficult parts of the work completely worth it.

Nam Kiwanuka: I'm looking at the time and I can't believe we only have 15 minutes and I also want to get some questions, so I just wanted to read something else from your book, because your writing is, and I think you just touched upon some of this stuff right now, but you write: The real history is not in the food, it's in the people. We are working against the loss of our cultural memory, against the consequences of institutional oppression, against indiscriminate and flagrant appropriation, and against courts of public opinion that question our authenticity, maturity and motives, and the revolutionary act of clarifying and owning our past. It is my belief that the very reason we are here in space and time is deliberately connected to our journey with food. The only question I've ever wanted to answer for myself was, how was my destiny shaped by the history of southern food? Do you have an answer for that?

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah! The board of directors never leaves me alone, by the way, never, ever. Like the former character Apu said in The Simpsons, I was kept awake last night by the howling of my ancestors. That's real.

Nam Kiwanuka: Is that legacy?

Michael W. Twitty: It is, it is, it is, it is, but it's also it's a little bit of the burden and I have to say, it's like looking at a sugarcane plant and knowing that my fate was sealed the minute that first indigenous woman of New Guinea was thirsty and she broke that grass, that cane to get that water out and she said it was sweet. Our deal was sealed. The fact that the ancient sea border was exactly the place in the south where the most fertile, that fertile crescent going from the

Chesapeake to Texas of cotton, tobacco, rice and sugar; that was the ancient seabed that provided the most fertile soil and long after the animals that lived there had gone extinct, that seabed remained with its precious soil. That made slavery in America its most profitable business. I mean, you just can't get away from those things. You have to understand your relationship to those events, both natural and cultural, without which you wouldn't be here.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, how do you as a young black boy in America, when you don't see other people that look like you, doing what you're doing now, why food?

Michael W. Twitty: Because I had a grandmother and a father and a mother who wore the shoe, and many other people. I had elders and I had trips to the old south and I got to interact with the landscape. That's how. And also, just like they weren't validating us, I was validating them. One of my great heroes is Nathalie Dupree who had a longtime popular southern PBS; before there was Food Network and Cooking Channel, there was just the Public Broadcasting Service in America that did cooking shows on the weekend. That was it. And Nathalie Dupree was one of the greatest, and she's still here, she's in Charleston, but I told her, I said, You know I would ask, I would validate what he said when my grandmother was from Alabama and there were too many things I'd never heard of, red-eyed gravy and this and that and the other, and I'd run to Grammy and say, Grammy! This white lady on TV says such and such. And she'd say, Okay, I'll tell you about that. I mean, I had those experiences, other people don't. And I didn't care that I didn't see myself because guess what? I knew that was in me. You know, I represent as a gay black Jewish southern man because you know what, honey, you said something earlier to me off camera that made so much sense from Audre Lorde: You might be scared to speak, but you're still going to be scared, so why not just speak. You might be scared to represent, but you've got to represent. You might be scared to represent, but baby, do your thing and see what happens. That's the story of my whole life.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, you know, I am still going to read this from your blog post but it's kind of, you just gave me the answer, so a few years ago on your blog you wrote this and I'm asking this question too because your book *Kosher Soul* is coming out next year, so you wrote, I think this was 2015. Last year when I was working to sell my book, one publisher was really excited by the prospect of publishing me except for one thing, I'm Jewish. Being Jewish or rather weaving that fact into my narrative, presented such a problem for said publisher, a very well known publisher, that they requested I leave it out of my book in order to be published. By openly discussing my

Jewish story, even as a small part of the book, I was “muddying the waters.” America is not ready for this, nervously laughed the Jewish editor. I was supposed to be their black author, nothing more, because America wasn’t ready to see me as marketable or palatable. Me, Michael W. Twitty black, gay and Jewish, just too much too soon. Exquisite writing. That’s really painful to read. How do you shake that off and then write another book and I think you have plans to write another book after that?

Michael W. Twitty: Right, about being gay in the kitchen.

Nam Kiwanuka: A trilogy!

Michael W. Twitty: A trilogy, yes. Because somebody who I respect, I was at the Roger Smith Cookbook Conference and she literally said to me, Baby, don’t take it personally, these people don’t know who you are and you’re a lot for them. You are a lot of things they’ve never really encountered in a person. And I just thought that was sad. I thought it was sad because if you are in the United States or Canada, I think this applies to both of our nations, and you’re not able to take full advantage of the collision of cultures and worlds that make our two nations so significant and beautiful, you’re wasting your Canadian-ness, you’re wasting your American-ness and therefore what is the dream of being in our part of North America where you can be part of a multicultural society? You know, we have all this rhetoric in both of our countries about bubbles and boxes and lines and boundaries and western chauvinism, whatever the hell that is (it’s white supremacy, by the way), all of that is nonsense compared to the fact that we should be indulging in, happily muddled in the kids’ sandpit of being able to have opportunities that no other human beings have had in the whole history of humankind. So hey, just be yourself, be yourself! And you know, they didn’t want me being...how do we explain a black Jew? I don’t know how you explain a brown or white one, or any other color Jew. How do you explain a black Christian, that’s a bigger question for me, we ain’t gonna go there tonight. Hello! But the bottom line is that we have to love ourselves enough not to erase ourselves.

Nam Kiwanuka: I think which is easier said than done.

Michael W. Twitty: You got it right, its easier said than done!!!

Nam Kiwanuka: So do you, when you’re writing, do you ever find yourself editing parts of yourself out? Or is it, maybe now because social media is great but it’s also awful. It’s great in the sense that you can find community, you can find people who push back against that, just be

square and sit there and just do your thing. So do you find yourself that you edit yourself, or it's empowering.

Michael W. Twitty: I do edit myself and I'm going to stop editing myself very soon because I want to write more about issues of being a gay man. That's still into TMI territory, but had also realized this, just like there was me once upon a time, I came out when I was 16 in my high school newspaper.

Nam Kiwanuka: In the school paper?

Michael W. Twitty: Yes, like flat out hey I'm gay, stop being prejudiced against gay people, blah, blah, blah.

Nam Kiwanuka: That takes a lot of courage.

Michael W. Twitty: You know, now I know that, back then I was just, I had blinders on, I think. But the bottom line is that for us, issues of health, mental wellness, being real with our families, I mean like a plurality of gay men who are in committed relationships are also polyamorous, polygamous, or open. I just got married. My marriage is not monogamous.

Nam Kiwanuka: Congratulations on getting married.

Michael W. Twitty: Thank you. But I have a priority. My priority is my husband and my household and my relationship with him. But you know, if somebody...people have used information like that against us to spread libel or to even berate our black maleness for a long time, even in gay liberation. So I'm trying to write more about what it means to be black and gay and experience prejudice, what it means to see a lot of my friends die before the age of 50 or 40, and not just HIV, thank you very much. Many other things. That's why it's so important to have the conversations and talk about all those different elements, not just the trauma but also the joy of being a big black gay man.

Nam Kiwanuka: This is the thing, this is the joy. Because I feel like joy is an act of resistance too. No?

Michael W. Twitty: Sean Sherman's other half said to me as a Native American woman, she said to me, the opposite of our oppression is taking joy and pleasure in our culture and who we are, naturally. And that's why the food is so important. Anybody came in here expecting recipes, I'm so sorry!

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, I was just going to ask you because I'm thinking, we do have

a question about recipes because I'm imaging too, though, food brings you joy and cooking brings you joy and discovering, finding the history of food brings you joy.

Michael W. Twitty: Yes! and also there are moments when I connect with other people of different backgrounds about the same ingredients and similar foods or the process of how they work with their family is also joyful.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, we do have one question here that says, as a Jewish person how are you testing or tasting recipes that involve pork products? Lard...

Michael W. Twitty: Not necessary, not necessary. I've kind of got a master at this. I'm flexidox in a lot of ways, ha ha. But I think that one of the biggest things about it is we've had about 100 years of African American or soul food or soul foods that don't rely on pork. Pork is a new world addition to the African palate. Pork is a delicacy in Africa. Most people don't have pigs.

Nam Kiwanuka: Well, where I come from, women we really don't eat meat except for Christmas. We're not allowed to eat meat.

Michael W. Twitty: Right, right, right. No that's so important today because I think people retrograde all of those western influences and they really aren't there. I mean, pork is AM, as I call it, After Massah. It ain't BM. It's not what I found in Ghana except the southern part of Ghana. It's only where the Europeans were, where you find this. But in the interior, pork is not a big deal. Nigeria, it's certainly not because of Muslim influence in a lot of places, or Senegal, other places. So in a traditional food, when I do prepare it historically, I have other people taste the food. I mean, I got it down to a science: when the meat goes in, what spices I'm using on the flavor so they can taste the food afterwards. Importantly in own house, though is smoked turkey, smoked meat, other things instead of the pork. It's not really a big taste difference either, I don't think, not majorly.

Nam Kiwanuka: We have three minutes, so I am going to ask about the book Kosher Soul. It's coming out next year. What is the book about?

Michael W. Twitty: So the book is about, it's kind of similar to The Cooking Gene in that I will be talking about (- - - -) identity and black (- - - -) identity. But my journey in Judaism and through Jewish food and also how Jews of color (and by the way, there are so many parts of our family, the Abuyudaya in Uganda. There are Jews in Harlem who have been there for years, black Jewish presence in Surinam

for almost 500 years. Black rabbis in Renaissance Europe. The first black Jew in America, Solomon the Mulatto Jew and they spelled Jew "Jue" (God help us!). 1600s in Massachusetts. You know how we know about him? From a police report.

Nam Kiwanuka: He was arrested?

Michael W. Twitty: Arrested for travelling on the Christian sabbath.

Nam Kiwanuka: But he's Jewish.

Michael W. Twitty: Yeah, no big deal to him. So imagine that, a black Jewish man, the first record we have in America, the first record we have is a police report. How iconic is that?

Nam Kiwanuka: How American!

Michael W. Twitty: How American!

Nam Kiwanuka: I love America.

Michael W. Twitty: No lie. I'm American right here. I'm going to tell you, that's the doggone truth. But I want my readers to reflect on that and also talk about the food, how many of us, and I've even talked about how black Muslims have had their own food revolution and food, understand, which is over 100 years old, and how white southerners who convert to Judaism have very similar ways of making food as Jews of color who are of southern origin and also how Caribbean black Jews have had several, almost 500 years, of continuous cultural development. So black-eyed pea fritters and there is a wonderful recipe for the charoset on Pesach that involves coconut and tropical fruit, and there's someone else who did rum-raisin hamantaschen.

Nam Kiwanuka: That sounds delicious!

Michael W. Twitty: You know, just like do kosher (- - -) of pastrami and collard greens. Part of Jewish tradition is minhag (custom) and this book is about how we as a people with a very mosaic history have created our own customs.

Nam Kiwanuka: That's wonderful and I think we'll leave it there. I wish we could talk all night, Michael. Thank you so much for your time. It was great. You know what? I do want to ask one more question about recipes because I recently wrote an article about being in the kitchen. I used to have a lot of anxiety about cooking because, like I said to you before, I've been on my own for a very long time and I didn't

grow up with my mother and I think as society, it's always like oh, well your mother should have taught you how to do X, Y, Z. And so being in the kitchen for me was very uncomfortable because it was a reminder of everything that I lacked in family. I didn't have the recipes that were passed down from mother to daughter, etc. and now I have children and I have to learn to cook more things and I think I now have like 3 dishes, but I once baked cookies, chocolate chip cookies, and because that's what you're supposed to do when you're a mother, right? And this cookie was so bad that my poor daughter, like it chipped her tooth, but being able to find that, being comfortable I worked through the discomfort. The pandemic has allowed me to go into the kitchen out of necessity but pushing through that discomfort, and I think that word "discomfort" has come up a few times. You know, for people who are watching and listening and who want to create a better relationship with food for whatever reason, what would you suggest is the best way to do that?

Michael W. Twitty:

Okay, so here's my 1-minute answer. It's so important to have the confidence to reconstruct. When you started talking about I don't have that connection, my mind immediately went to how I started talking about the food of the enslaved in early America, I mean who the hell talks about early African American cooking? Well, Michael Twitty does, but Michael Twitty had to go through a long journey to get to that point. So you talk about not having that parent figure that would have traditionally passed on certain things. And for me, having lost all but one grandparent until last year when I lost my other one, and then not just that, but losing the food of their great-great-grandparents and beyond. You know, doing the research, doing the homework, doing the journey no what culture you come from, whether you can cook or not is really a beautiful experience because it puts you, when you get to sit at the same table as your ancestors, you will learn something, you will understand something. Whether it's your taste of things that make you salivate because they're just a part of you, or whether it's a relationship with a culture to which you don't belong but you have great respect for, that's the thing that makes appropriation (- - -) respect and boundaries in space. But it's all of that, and then you sort of connect and learn and develop and you go "wow!" It was always within me. How many stories we tell our children, or movies or parables or folk tales where the secret is really in here, in the heart, in the kishka, in your intestines and not out somewhere in the world for you to find. And the journey is rough, I mean it's chipped teeth, it's, honey, burnt eyebrow, burnt arm, hair, burnt beards, burnt all of it. It's rough. It's showing up at Pearson Airport in Toronto in like shorts and tights and it's snowing. It's all of that. You know, hey, call me snow! Woops!

Nam Kiwanuka: But mistakes are information, right.

Michael W. Twitty: Mistakes are data. Yes.

Nam Kiwanuka: Michael, thank you so much. I can't wait to read your new book and hopefully we will be able to do this again soon.

Michael W. Twitty: Absolutely!

Nam Kiwanuka: And to everybody watching and listening, thank you so much. We appreciate it. Do you want to say anything to everyone that's watching?

Michael W. Twitty: Yes, I want to say thank you everybody. I know this is a really tense and rough time for all of us and boy, I wish I was in your house cooking with you and having fun, and I wish our political cultures weren't so sour and the pandemic was beyond us, but I have a strong belief in all of our communities that those who wish to see the light of day and make a new world, will have it. And we will feast together. Thank you.

Nam Kiwanuka: Thank you, Michael. Thank you all. Keep well in all of this and everybody else take care. Bye.

Michael W. Twitty: Absolutely. Bye.