Special Issue: Folkloristic Perspectives on Foodways and Comfort During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

By Guest Editor: Lucy M. Long (lucymlong@gmail.com)

When the COVID-19 pandemic began being publicly acknowledged in the U.S. in early March of 2020, one of the responses was a turn to comfort food. At first glance, this seemed like a logical move that calls for little analysis or even introspection. Of course, people looked to food for comfort; they sought comfort wherever they could—relationships, pets (the "pandemic puppy" phenomenon), reading, working through lists of movies to watch, virtual gatherings, and so on.

The idea of comfort food, however, is more than just dishes that bring physical warmth or positive feelings. Food in the U.S. is fraught with moral implications and judgments around one's ability to control their appetite. Proponants of comfort food developed a rhetorical strategy to justify eating certain ingredients and dishes without shame (Jones 2017; Jones and Long 2017). It has also become a marketing category within the American food industry covering dishes or items laden with qualities considered detrimental to our health—large quantities of calories, fats, sugars, and salt—but that carry a nostalgic and idealized aura of home or childhood (Long 2017). The cookbook publishing industry and food news media similarly presented comfort food as a special genre of food, set apart from the usual evaluations of "good" food. These industries both reflected vernacular attitudes and shaped them. As the pandemic up-ended everyday life, our usual rules for behavior were suspended, including the norms by which we judged food and foodways activities. Comfort food thus became an acceptable and celebrated way of weathering the uncertainties and fears caused by COVID-19.

Folklorists were not the only ones to notice this trend; the media frequently covered it,[1] and nutritionists and other health professionals expressed concern.[2] Scholars in food studies also noted it.[3] Folklorists did have a history of scholarship on the subject, however, thanks largely to the inspiration of Michael Owen Jones who initiated a number of panels on the subject at annual conferences of the American Folklore Society. Those panels led a collection of essays published in 2017, *Comfort Food Meanings and Memories*, co-edited by Jones and myself. Our Introduction in that volume reviews the emergence of the concept of comfort food and summarizes the scholarship on it (Jones and Long 2017).

In a way, the pandemic was an unexpected (and unwelcome!) opportunity to further explore the issues addressed in that volume. It at least made us aware of the constructed nature of this genre and that it was more complicated than what it seemed on the surface. It also suggested a lens for understanding the impact of the pandemic—and for narrowing down the massive upheavals it caused. At the same time, folklore emphasizes the connectedness of seemingly small details of everyday

life, and the ways those details can be mediums for individuals to connect with other people as well as their pasts and places. This approach is evident in the attention to foodways—the total system of practices around food and eating—and to the role of aesthetics and power in choices made by individuals. Also fundamental to a folkloristic approach are ethnographic inquiries into the meanings attached to and interpreted through these foodways products and practices.

Food-centric folklorists had a prior foundation, then, for their inquiries into comfort food during the pandemic and they were able to quickly develop projects[4] as well as conference papers for the annual meetings of the American Folklore Society and of the Association for the Study of Food and Society[5]. This special issue draws from that work. It includes research articles and reflection essays, with the latter recounting personal experiences around comfort food during the pandemic. Significantly, some of these touch on international and "ethnic" data, raising questions about the universality of food as a medium for comfort, but the particularity of the genre as an American construct. Nader Mehravari offers an international perspective by examining how the pandemic seemed to highlight a specific dish, *tahdig*, as a comfort food in Persian communities around the world. Robert Smith similarly reflects on comfort food in Australia, concluding that the category lacks the morality attached to food in the U.S. Diane Tye also places her study outside the U.S., but focuses on pandemic foodways within her own family in Canada and how activities around preparing and sharing of food gave them an anchor for imagining the future, especially in light of her father's experiences of food shortages during the 1930s pandemic. Theresa Vaughan offers a similar longer view by contrasting and comparing experiences during the current pandemic with those of her family in the equally devastating flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919. Hannah Santino and Lucy Long muse on an item in Ireland, that is a comfort food to them—scones—and how they actually figure within a number of different liminal situations, not only the "twixt and between" condition of the pandemic.

Family is closely connected to the idea of comfort food in general, and some of these articles emphasize that theme. Along with Tye's article mentioned above, Rachelle Saltzman focuses on her family, recounting how the labor-intensive preparations of certain traditional Jewish recipes connects her metaphorically with her heritage as well as literally with various relatives, both through virtual communications and by the sharing of those dishes. Margot Finn reflects on how she established a tradition during the pandemic of making a type of "Dutch baby" pancake, Filipino *bibingka*, and hopes that it gives her children a grounding that they will carry with them beyond the pandemic.

The American approach to comfort food tends to emphasize individuals achieving emotional support or fulfillment, but these foods can also mark people as outsiders or emphasize that they do not belong. Jerry Reed reflects on how dietary restrictions barred some people from finding comfort through food, emphasizing their differentness from the norm being experienced by others. Although the individuals he interviewed were able to resolve the barriers to comfort, Reed points out that

others were not, and we should be aware that not everyone has the ability to find comfort through food. Some individuals, on the other hand, intentionally use comfort food to inspire social change. Christine J. Widmayer describes a community group in Minnesota that bakes and gives sweet potato pies to address racial conflict.

The pandemic brought comfort food to the forefront. In doing so, it has made people recognize the power of food in general to carry memories, forge and affirm connections, and create a more livable present. Although COVID-19 seems to now be under control with vaccines and masking, it seems to be with us to stay. It remains to be seen whether comfort food will also continue to play a role in our lives.

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[1] For a comprehensive listing of articles in newspapers and food media, see articles by Long, et al, 2021 and Long 2023. Long and Vaughan (2023) includes references specifically related to bread and baking.

[2] For example, one of my colleagues in the nutrition program at Bowling Green State University, Dr. Wan Shen, developed a study on pandemic-related "emotional eating," the phrase used in dietetics and nutrition to refer to eating for emotional needs rather than biological or physical ones. After she conducted her survey, she asked me to assist in interpreting her data, leading to a co-published article in 2020 (Shen, et al.).

[3] Food studies journals all began running reflection pieces on food during the pandemic, and some of these essays touched on comfort food. For specific articles published, see *Food, Culture, and Society*; *Food and Foodways*; and *Gastronomica*.

[4] One of these projects was the Comfort-Discomfort Foodways Oral History that I developed through the independent, non-profit Center for Food and Culture. This project was funded by small grants from the Association for Food and Society, Ohio Humanities, and a private foundation. I was fortunate at the time to have then-Bowling Green State University Popular Culture graduate student Jerry Reed working with me on another project, and he agreed to stay on to work as assistant director of the project. Three other graduate students, John Broadwell, Quinlan Day Odum (both from Middle Tennessee State University's Public History Program), and Hannah Santino (Sociology, University of Limerick) helped develop the questionnaire and resource materials for the website (http://www.foodandculture.org/) as well as conducted virtual interviews. An additional student, Minglei Zhang (American Studies, Penn State University), also assisted with the interviews, and another, Iris Teeuwen (Folklore, University of Oregon), designed and built the on-line exhibit presenting excerpts and photographs from the project (https://comfortfoodwaysexhibit.wordpress.com/). The project is described in more depth in Long, 2021 and Long, et al, 2021.

[5] A number of publications resulted from these papers. See Long 2022; Long 2023; and Long and Vaughan 2023.

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