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Lead Article

Finding Comfort and Discomfort Through Foodways Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Public Folklore Project

By: Lucy M. Long with Jerry Lee Reed, III, John Broadwell, Quinlan Day Odum, Hannah M. Santino, and Minglei Zhang.

Abstract:
This article describes an international oral history project run by the nonprofit Center for Food and Culture on how individuals found both comfort and discomfort through foodways during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project expanded the concept of comfort food to include the range of activities included within foodways and also explored the variety of meanings attached to the concept, emphasizing that both "food" and "comfort" are culturally and socially constructed. The project resulted in an archive of documentation from over 65 interviews, a virtual symposium, and an on-line exhibit. The exhibit and resources on comfort food, folkloristic approaches to foodways, and oral history methods are posted on a free website (www.foodandculture.org). As such, the project is an example of public folklore presentations of folkloristic concepts and materials. It also illustrates public humanities in its exploration of the meanings of comfort foodways during the pandemic. This paper describes the findings from this project and discusses their implications for insights into individuals' experiences around foodways practices during the pandemic. The lead author designed and directed the project; the additional authors contributed in its development, conducted interviews, participated in the symposium and exhibit, and offered commentary and insights on this paper.

Keywords: comfort, foodways, COVID-19, pandemic, public folklore

Introduction

When COVID-19 was recognized as a public health threat in the U.S. in early March of 2020, one of the responses in popular media was a turn to comfort food. Defined colloquially and somewhat tautologically as food that "affords solace or comfort" (OED), the genre seems a logical way to address anxieties about health, mortality, economic futures, and social isolation as well as the numerous minor inconveniences caused by the pandemic. Observations of accounts on social media platforms, popular food media, and personal experiences suggest that the concept resonated with a large portion of the American public who embraced comfort food preparation and consumption as pastime and therapy during the pandemic.

At the same time, there were numerous accounts of discomfort around food. The usual foodways practices attached to procuring, preserving, preparing, presenting, consuming, and even disposing of food were disrupted. Some, such as shopping,

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posed very real dangers of exposure to the virus, while others brought concerns about adequate food supplies. Shortages of certain items—for example, pasta, yeast, and chicken—fanned such fears and also posed challenges to maintaining eating and cooking habits and preferences. Also, the turn to comfort food for some caused weight gain, a major source of discomfort referred to online as "the COVID-19."

These less than comforting aspects of food seem not to have a place within the genre of comfort food, even though there was some acknowledgement of them in the public discussions of comfort food. In order to obtain a fuller picture of individuals' experiences of both comfort and discomfort around food, I[1] developed a virtual oral history project[2] based on folkloristic approaches to foodways, the total network of products, practices, contexts, and performances involved in eating.[3] Sponsored by the independent nonprofit, Center for Food and Culture, the project resulted in a website with resources, an online exhibit, a virtual symposium, and community workshops.[4]

The goal of the project was to document lived experiences around foodways during the pandemic, but it also unexpectedly served a role as a public folklore and humanities project in that it made the general public more aware of the meaningfulness of food. Responses to the interviews and public presentations demonstrate that participants gained an understanding of folkloristic approaches to food and also gleaned perspectives from the project that they then applied to their own lives.

This paper describes the findings from this project and discusses their implications for insights into individuals' experiences around foodways practices during the pandemic. In addition, it draws on auto-ethnography and observations of commentary from social media[5], food publications, and news outlets to suggest expanding the category of comfort food to include all practices, contexts, and performances connected to food. It also suggests the need to encompass a more nuanced understanding of comfort. It then uses the concept of liminality as an interpretive lens for explaining the popularity of comfort foods during the pandemic.

Comfort Food as an American Food Genre

The project was built on the popularity of comfort food in the media during the pandemic, and while the purpose was to document individuals' lived experiences of comfort and discomfort around foodways, it also suggests a critique of the concept itself and what it represents about American food culture.[5] The phrase "comfort food" is not an analytical one, but is drawn from common usage. It seems to have been first employed in print in 1966 by Dr. Joyce Brothers who used it to explain the increase in obesity in the U.S. She claimed that Americans were eating unhealthy foods in response to stress. These comfort foods tended to be high in fat, sugar, salt, carbohydrates, and calories so that their consumption negatively impacted body weight and physical appearance. The category implies a morality attached to food that then carries over to the individuals consuming them so that indulging in such

"bad" foods implied a lack of self-discipline and self-esteem. A need for comfort, however, was justification for eating such foods, relieving the individual of responsibility—and judgment—for their behavior.

In 1977, Phyllis Richman, food writer for *The Washington Post*, used the phrase in reference to southern cooking, bringing it into popular parlance and solidifying its characterization as high in fats, sugar, and salt. This also paved the way for entire food cultures (particularly African American, Jewish American, and Midwestern) to be characterized in this way, both justifying a perceived lack of nutritional and health consciousness and excusing those cuisines for not following "mainstream" nutrition norms. The food industry has since turned "comfort food" into a marketing category that specifically plays on the need for solace as an excuse to eat foods otherwise considered inappropriate or unhealthy (Jones 2017, Long 2017). Cookbooks have proliferated with the phrase in the title with the implication that readers can expect recipes that throw out dietary concerns.

Medical sociologists, psychologists, and nutritionists began studying the phenomenon in the early 2000s, defining comfort food as "…food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress, that evokes positive emotions and is associated with significant social relationships" (Locher 2002). These foods brought comfort by fulfilling needs for nostalgia, convenience, physical comfort, indulgence (Locher et al. 2005, Romm 2015, Wagner et al. 2014), and belonging (Troisi 2011). In 2017, folklorists and anthropologists published qualitative studies of comfort food as a cultural construction, recognizing that the meanings of food are created, adapted, and manipulated for varying purposes according to specific contexts (Jones and Long 2017).

This project shifted focus from comfort food products (specific ingredients and dishes) to the processes surrounding them, highlighting the potential for activities, that are oftentimes overlooked, to be recognized as opportunities for socializing, solace, and meaning-making. This shift also allowed us to recognize ways in which individuals mobilized their own definitions of comfort. Findings from this project suggest that foodways practices have the potential to satisfy additional needs, ranging from temporary ones for entertainment and distraction to ones that alleviate anxieties of a deeper existential nature around the meanings of our lives and the nature of our place in the universe.

Methodology

The project generated over sixty-five virtual interviews conducted and recorded via Zoom. Materials from the interviews were then used to create an interactive online exhibit. Documentation also included written responses to the questionnaire sent to my email address or to the website, and written and verbal comments during the online symposium and community workshops on the subject. Community workshops were conducted virtually and were held by a public library, university classrooms, a church, and a public folklore center. The last included a chef giving a

food demonstration and discussing how the dish represented comfort in her Native American culture[6].

Participants came from across the U.S. and at least six other nations: Ireland, New Zealand, England, Colombia, China, and Israel. They were contacted through online listservs of academic institutions and scholarly societies as well as through social media formats targeting the general public.[7] This means that the participants were self-selected volunteers, many already interested in food. None seemed to be food-insecure, and their willingness to volunteer their time to the project suggests that they were in relatively stable situations.[8] The research team also interviewed family members, co-workers, and friends. Relationships between researcher and participant could be noted but was not given a statistical analysis. Respondents were asked to describe their ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, region, occupation, religion/political affiliation/ethos, and any other salient identities or situations they felt impacted their relationship to food during this time. This information can be used to identify factors shaping individuals' and groups' access to food as a medium for comfort, but is not discussed here.

The virtual interviews used a questionnaire organized around the concept of foodways dividing the discussion into products (ingredients, dishes, meals), the various practices involved in eating (production, procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, consumption, clean-up), and concepts (attitudes and beliefs pertaining to food and eating); performances of identity, values, belonging, or power through food. The actual interviews could be non-linear, allowing participants to focus on those components of foodways they found the most relevant. At the same time, all components were presented, nudging interviewees to think about and recognize that these activities were connected to food. Individuals were asked to describe both discomforts and comforts they experienced in each component.

Finally, participants were not given scholarly definitions of comfort food, nor of comfort itself. We were interested in how individuals interpreted and used those concepts without our explanations of their history.[9] This approach resulted in the description of a wide range of emotions, inconveniences, fears, and anxieties being assuaged through foodways activities.

Discomforts and Comforts in Foodways Practices

The oral history interviews asked for descriptions of each individual's comfort foods, but they focused more on foodways practices than products.[10] This essay follows that focus as well. The descriptions that follow are illustrations of the range of discomforts and comforts that were experienced. The responses are not contextualized here although consent forms include details such as gender, age, occupation, religion/ethos, educational background, race-ethnicity, and geographic place of the participant during the interview. Also, the specific living situations of individuals seemed to be of particular significance since that tended to shape access to ingredients, storage, cooking equipment and space, and commensality around

eating. Whether or not living quarters were shared and with whom also was a significant factor that needs more attention.

Production refers to producing or raising the raw ingredients that became food. It includes practices such as farming, gardening, domestic livestock, and beekeeping.

While none of the participants worked in farming as an occupation, many said they had previously raised some of their own food, more for recreation or taste rather than out of necessity. The pandemic made them think more seriously about these practices, partly because of shortages of certain items early in the pandemic, such as pasta, beef, yeast, and flour (Severson and Moskin 2020), and concerns about the viability of the industrial food system. The outbreaks of COVID-19 among workers in food processing industries brought questions about food safety as well as the ethics of that system.

Home and community gardens were very common, and several respondents were looking into raising "backyard chickens," beekeeping, and building greenhouses. They also said they frequently participated in social media discussions about those topics. One expressed discomfort in her frustration that they were not able raise their own food:

> "I really wish I could but unfortunately I live in a tiny apartment with a tiny balcony. Although I may grow small things like herbs…" (Banu O., CFAC-LL-BO-10/2/20)[11]

While gardening in particular was recognized as a way to protect against discomforts caused by the breakdown of the industrial food system, it also was acknowledged as comforting on deeper levels. Numerous individuals spoke of it connecting them to the seasons and to nature. My own experiences corroborated this since the limitations around travel meant that I was home enough to plant, tend, and harvest a small garden, something I usually am not able to do.

Procurement refers to practices around obtaining ingredients or cooked food. It includes shopping, fishing, hunting, and foraging as well as procuring food from other sources, such as friends or restaurants.

Shopping for groceries caused significant discomfort for many respondents, particularly early in the pandemic when little was known about the virus, and scientific data on whether surfaces and food packaging were safe was not yet available. Interviewees had many thoughts on how to handle shopping bags and produce to alleviate the discomfort of fear of exposure to the virus.

> "The precautions that I took included leaving the produce in the balcony for a few hours and then removing them from their bags and placed in the refrigerator… For packaged products that can be cleaned with soap and water I cleaned them in that manner." (Banu O., CFAC-LL-BO-10/2/20)

Spending time inside a store seemed dangerous and discomforting. Mask mandates were inconsistent around the world, and not all customers or employees could be trusted to respect the six-feet (two-meter) distance deemed safe. One individual pointed out that safety concerns caused her a good deal of discomfort and impacted her daily routine, which was then discomforting:

> "…we had to have a bigger chunk of time dedicated to grocery shopping because everything took longer, the queue to get in, and at the till..." (Ana C., CFAC-HS-AC-7/26/20)

Ordering food delivery or pick-up from supermarkets or restaurants was a common solution to allying fears of COVID contamination from going into public indoor spaces. To reduce risk, some interviewees also began consolidating their shopping with friends, neighbors, or family. One person would take orders, shop, and deliver items, oftentimes placing bags outside a door so that the person inside could retrieve them with minimal physical contact. The individuals would then stand far apart and shout out a conversation. Along with these visits being a welcome respite from the isolation many were experiencing, they affirmed a social network and strengthened relational bonds.

Other individuals stated that in order to avoid indoor spaces, they began frequenting outdoor farmers' markets where available. This not only supported local producers, but also turned the events into social occasions. A neighbor told me at our weekly market that it was the only time she saw other people, and she looked forward to it all week. It was comforting to her to be able to interact with others in real time and space.

Not surprisingly, the shortages of specific ingredients created discomfort for many, sometimes forcing individuals to visit numerous venues or pay higher prices by ordering online. One participant observed that those who suffered food allergies or other dietary restrictions felt particularly challenged during this time. They found it difficult to obtain some items, and the discomforts they felt about going into stores kept them from seeking out foods they needed.

Others ended up finding comfort by sharing what they had with neighbors and friends, which then affirmed social networks. A number of virtual as well as neighborhood groups developed around such needs, leading to a sense of comfort through the new community.

> "As a hearth cook, I was surprised that things once rarely in demand are now hard to get–yeast, canning equip and pectin. And just have to laugh when thinking what will be next. At the very beginning someone in our county started a Facebook page for hard-to-find things, and to post when seeing something at a store; and now there are almost 14,000 members." (P.B.R., email to author, 9/2020)

Another result of the uncertainty about supplies was that some individuals began rationing their food. One mother who was now preparing meals three times a day said that she began assigning ingredients to each meal. Like others, she began making careful use of leftovers, incorporating them into other dishes. While the uncertainty of future availability of food was stressful, she noted finding comfort in the feeling of control over those supplies. Another individual told how planning meals had led to weight loss, something they found to be a comforting "silver lining" to the pandemic.

Prepared food could still be ordered for take-out or delivery from restaurants (while some allowed limited indoor seating). A common reason given for doing so was to vary the routine, while others wanted to support local businesses.

> "…I feel like I've actually eaten out more because of the hardship that I know the businesses are going through. So normally I would cook, like, ninety-eight percent of my meals at home, but I think we've been going…once a week." (Amanda T., CFAC-QO-AT-7/16/20)

Giving financial support to local businesses was a source of comfort in that it made individuals feel that they could make a difference in a small way in the face of the pandemic in which they felt ineffective. A social media group in my area was started specifically to connect potential customers with those local restaurants offering carryout. This initiative was presented as one small step individuals could take to make a difference during the pandemic. Similarly, another participant told how developing a project purchasing meals from local restaurants and donating them to the local community brought her a form of comfort:

> "And I think that we started it as a way to-- I don't know, deal with our own guilt for not being affected by it … I'm like in this incredible state of privilege…and it just felt so strange to know that all these people are so affected by it. But it doesn't affect me, and so, therefore, what can I do to help uplift others." (Amanda T., CFAC-QO-AT-7/16/20)

Some individuals mentioned that the convenience and aesthetic pleasure of eating someone else's cooking felt indulgent, especially when they knew other people could not afford the expense. While feeling discomfort over the inequalities it reflected, that indulgence gave them physical comfort. The pandemic actually served as an excuse for them to frequent restaurants more than they usually did or could fit into their budget.

Preservation refers to methods, spaces, or equipment used to preserve foods.

Interviewees expressed surprise at being asked about this aspect of foodways. While it was historically a significant part of everyday life, the modern world and industrial agriculture have made appliances for food storage—as well as extended

shelf life of food through additives and techniques—so common that they tend to be invisible in our thinking about food. The pandemic challenged that complacence and made participants in the project aware of preservation as a significant source of both discomfort and comfort.

Disruptions in the supply chain and hesitations about shopping meant that some individuals were now dependent on food they had preserved previously or could procure and then safely store. One participant described her discomfort:

> "At the beginning there's everybody had that fear, you know, that the supply might be…, so we- we got like…. canned foods and frozen food to last longer." (Ana C., CFAC-HS-AC-7/26/20)

Refrigerators, freezers, cupboards, and pantries could only hold so much, and some individuals had limited space. One response was to purchase an additional refrigerator or freezer, but undertaking that expense was not available to everyone, and freezers were in demand in some areas of the U.S. One approach, as described below, was to focus on necessities that did not require cold storage. To our surprise, that included water:

> "…the only thing that I really went crazy and stocked up was water. … I made sure that all the dry goods that I usually use (e.g. pasta, rice, lentils, chickpeas and canned tuna) were all up to par and that I had enough for at least 3-4 months' worth." (Banu O., CFAC-LL-BO-10/2/20)

Even those individuals with plentiful storage expressed discomfort about not knowing exactly what items were there. Speaking from my own experience, a first step to relieving this concern was to make an inventory of what was in freezers, refrigerators, and cupboards. I, and others, then felt comforted both by the knowledge that there was enough food to last shortages and shutdowns and by the sense of being able to create order in the midst of the chaos created by the pandemic.

Another response, observed both on social media and in the oral histories, was to turn to various methods for preserving foods: canning, drying, pickling, or making jams and jellies. Home canning became so popular in the U.S. that the lids for canning jars were quickly bought up and unavailable by mid-summer. Suggestions began circulating on virtual platforms for alternate ways to preserve food than canning, and participants in the project mentioned freezing and drying excess garden produce.

When respondents obtained good results, they found it comforting to know not only that they had food on hand, but also that they could achieve those results themselves. Friends in informal conversations joked that they should have listened better in home economics classes or paid attention to their grandmothers who had knowledge of and skills to perform a variety of preservation techniques. A meme

circulating on Facebook pointedly observed that these "old-fashioned" skills were now being appreciated, an observation that seemed to offer comfort tinged with revenge for those who felt their homemaking skills had previously been belittled by modern trends.

Preparation refers to practices around cooking, such as techniques, selecting recipes, and developing menus. It also includes the spaces in which preparation occurs and equipment or tools used.

One participant used the pandemic as an occasion to bring out cooking equipment that hadn't been used in years.

> "I took out my two crockpots. They probably weren't used for 15-20 years. I took out an omelet maker that I had, so it's the kind that you put the eggs in and you cook the eggs. Then you flip it over so it turns out to be an omelet, just like the kind you see at hotels. I took out this little machine that chops onions and I took out a roaster, so I'm calling this, you know, taking items out of hiatus." (Carlys L., CFAC-QO-CL-7/29/20)

A majority of the interviewees pointed out that the stay-at-home mandates resulted in food preparation now occurring throughout the day. While some relished the practice, others found it a source of discomfort due to a lack of culinary skills, equipment, space, time or specific ingredients. One mentioned the frustration of spending time on cooking and then having the dish not taste the way they had hoped.

Others found the constant meal planning and preparation tedious. Several described how cooking was turned into an obligation rather than a domain of artistry and imagination.

> "After…some weeks I'm just like 'I can't stand my own cooking anymore.' You know, I don't cook from scratch; I usually buy some meats and pop them in the oven or the grill—that kind of stuff, so it's not like very elaborate meals. But still, I was sick of doing it." (Ana C., CFAC-HS-AC-7/26/20)

Others found that food preparation actually provided structure to otherwise shapeless days, and was comforting in the routineness of the activity. Some described the sensory, social, and spiritual comforts they found cooking. The physical processes of cooking engaged their attention and gave a form of respite from the realities around them that she found comforting.

> "I tried a million new recipes, learned a lot of new techniques, but only with the ingredients and equipment I have on hand. So if there wasn't a certain ingredient I substituted or omitted it." (Banu O., CFAC-LL-BO-10/2/20)

Bread making and baking, seemed particularly comforting to people, an observation shared by many in the general public, judging from the celebration of it on social media. The resulting loaves fulfilled needs for hunger but also seemed to give a sense of comfort in a number of ways—satisfaction from mastering culinary techniques, from being able to control the entire process from start to finish, and admiration and enjoyment of the aesthetics of the finished product.[12]

A similar kind of satisfaction was found by many in trying new recipes. As with the example below, that satisfaction was oftentimes multilayered, reflecting concerns about using up ingredients, having enough food, and recycling.

> "But, but and the other thing is it like in terms of my recipe meanderings, I discovered this like there were certain things that I've always tried to find, and one is like what to do in soured milk again, it's part of the conserving recycling thing, and I found this great recipe, which I deduced is was from the depression because the woman said her mother made it in the 30s and early 40s, so I just assumed. And, it's so and it's like this amazing recipe which calls for a cup of sour milk, and a half of a cup of vegetable oil and that's it for the wet ingredients, and the dry ingredients are just white flour, sugar, spices, and if you want, you throw in some chopped walnuts. It is the absolute most simple cake, and it's amazing, and the fact that I'm making this thing from the depression also enriches that, you know, I mean, it's sort of like it's so appropriate on that level." (Emily S., CFAC-JR-ES-6/30/20)

Sharing of skills, recipes, and even ingredients became the basis for socializing for a number of participants. They would send recipes to each other and give advice or tips on making the dish. Several described how cooking was the topic of virtual gatherings with family and friends, and one recounted how requesting a recipe helped her reconnect with a family member and gave her a sense of connecting with her own past—both of which she found comforting. Similarly, people told of cooking the same dish at the same time as friends, using a recipe given by a family member, or watching the same YouTube video to learn how to make a dish. These activities turned cooking into a social activity and comforted through the sense of community and companionship they offered.

> "…early on at the beginning of a lockdown, we couldn't see my mother in person because she was still working and interacting with people. And we were all trying to be really careful and she didn't want to accidentally infect us or something. So we started this tradition of spaghetti Saturday and for spaghetti Saturday, we would get on video chat about six thirty on Saturday and we would cook pasta dishes, whatever we wanted in our respective kitchens while we were on the video chat. So my whole family, her and then we would prop her screen up at the table, just like she was sitting in a chair at the table." (Sarah G., CFAC-HS-SG-7/31/20)

The sense of community that emerged around shared food preparation also became a physical reality for some. Three friends described how they shared a sourdough starter, each adapting it to their own tastes and supplies on hand. They then held a small socially-distanced gathering where they brought the resulting loaves to consume with each other. Although I was not part of the initial round of sourdough starter, I was at the gathering and able to taste the bread. The individuals involved then agreed to participate in the oral history project, affirming that while the bread itself was a comfort food, the sharing of the starter and then the sharing of its consumption gave even more comfort.

Presentation includes activities such as setting the table, selecting dishware, "plating" food, and creating table decorations.

This did not seem to cause much discomfort, and several individuals stated that it was actually a relief to not spend time or effort on such things. Another, however, said she missed creating the artistic presentations that usually accompanied social events around food. She found it comforting to attend to how she presented the dishes she made for herself; it helped to frame the event as a meal. The popularity of photographs posted on social media of finished dishes and meals suggests that such comfort was fairly common.

Concerns about supply systems and sustainability shaped one participant's approach to presentation. While not seemingly tied to comfort, her choices eased some of her anxieties about the future.

> "I am not so keen on presentation so I kept my usual simple presentations for food. But I did pay attention to use less plates, to create less dishes and save water, which is something I am still continuing to do." (Banu O., CFAC-LL-BO-10/2/20)

Consumption refers to actual eating styles and techniques as well as the contexts in which the eating occurs and the intentional use of it for socializing.

This last aspect seemed to be the most significant. Numerous interviewees spoke of how isolated they felt when public eating establishments closed and precautions were advised in social gatherings, even in private homes. It made them realize how much of their social lives had revolved around food; and the lack of those opportunities was emotionally stressful. Eating together virtually became a popular way to deal with the isolation, and that sometimes combined sharing recipes and cooking together before the meal:

> "And we would all eat together and talk about, you know, we tell her what we made. She'd tell us what she made. And it was really fun. We would do a different sauce every Saturday. So it'd be like, oh, what do we have? Or what seasonings or let's put anchovies in this week…" (Sarah G., CFAC-HS-SG-7/31/20)

Some individuals went to great lengths to share food safely—building outdoor spaces in their yards, redesigning interiors to allow for physical distance between people, or planning communal gatherings in which participants brought their own meals and had their own eating spaces. These creative strategies extended to a variety of virtual occasions for sharing food and drink together, for example, happy hours with "quarantinis," themed meals shared virtually, ordering delivery from the same restaurant or even ordering the same dishes, online pub quizzes, and preparing and consuming a shared recipe during a virtual video visit.

The pandemic seemed to highlight the role of food in holiday and life-cycle celebrations, and the inability to meet in person for these events was a major source of loneliness and stress. Interviewees described virtual gatherings and other creative solutions to replace the usual celebratory meals. A number told of variations on rituals or even inventing new ones that could be done in these new contexts. One friend posted on her Facebook page:

> "Birthday slumber party with Katie. She's making her favorite cocktail, a Femme Fatale. St. Germain, vodka, pineapple juice, house sour, habanero salt. Takeout supper from Maya. I'm so grateful for all you Facebook friends keeping this extrovert afloat in tumultuous times." (Paddy B., quoted from Facebook with permission)

Some individuals adapted ritual holiday meals, sometimes calling up family or friends to share menus, recipes, or techniques. The food itself was comforting in the continuity it represented with their past, and the virtual interactions attached added layers of meanings and emotional comfort.

> "So we do usually do an Easter with my mom and we did that…It varies from year to year what we have, so there's not something we have to have for Easter. So this year she brought eggs from her chickens, which we colored, and then we made little egg salad like sandwiches for Easter. And it was very lovely. I mean, in other years, we might have had some ham or … side dishes and more of a hot meal, like a more traditional Easter meal for this area for Pennsylvania. But, you know, I just felt like we have our own eggs and we can make this very simple thing and that's fine." (Sarah G., CFAC-HS-SG-7/31/20)

The ability to observe these celebrations with food gave some individuals a sense of resilience and comfort. Adapting usual rituals to the pandemic circumstances or inventing new ones in spite of the pandemic reassured individuals that life would continue and that they had the ingenuity to survive. A frequent comment was that they planned to continue these new traditions after the pandemic was over.

While not everyone enjoyed these virtual or socially-distanced alternatives nor found them comforting, many did. One individual actually felt the pandemic had

improved her social life. She was physically disabled and previously had not been able to meet with friends in restaurants. Since no one was going to restaurants during the shutdowns, she was now able to join virtual meals with them.

Consumption also includes the physical techniques we use to eat. One individual pointed out that the time spent sitting in front of her computer caused her physical discomfort, so that she purposely stood up when she was eating. Others described eating food directly out of containers or not using the expected silverware, partly to cut down on the amount of cleaning up that would be needed.

Some felt discomfort from the lack of defined mealtimes. Snacking continuously throughout the day became common for some, a trend corroborated by the increase in sales of snack food. The snacks tended to be on foods typically thought lacking in nutrition but offering comfort, which meant that their consumption led to weight gain—the "COVID-19" people joked, but something that definitely brought discomfort.

The lack of set times for eating and the lack of rituals that framed those occasions as meals during the shutdown was a relief to some individuals, who had felt chained to them, but others felt a lack of structure to their day. Meals had previously structured many peoples' days in ways that they had not realized. They had divided up the work day, defined family time, and provided (sometimes, forced) occasions for interacting with others or for simply a change of activity. "Grazing," on the other hand, tended to make the days feel amorphous, and brought attention to the importance of the meal not only as a social convention but also a psychological one.

At the same time, the change in routine could cause discomfort from the socializing that was now forced upon some people. One participant who felt she was weathering meals with her entire family offered these insights:

> AT: "We usually eat them [meals] together at the dinner table."
> QO: "Has that held up during quarantine?"
> AT: "Yeah, although I would say I'd almost prefer to just eat them with my partner."
> QO: "Do you feel overly exposed to your family right now?"
> AT: "Yes (Laughs). I do and we all work from home, right. My dad is here all the time, my brother doesn't have a job, he's here all the time. My partner works from home and I work from home. It's a lot." (Amanda T., CFAC-QO-AT-7/16/20)

Clean-up/Disposal includes practices around unused ingredients, "waste" from food preparation, leftover food from a meal, and cleaning up after eating.

Most interviewees did not consider food disposal an issue, although one who lived in an apartment building felt discomfort when she had to use an elevator to take out the trash and was concerned about getting too close to other people. Others said

that they were now making a point to compost, something that they then found comforting in the idea that they could also nourish a garden.

Dealing with leftovers, however, was a source of discomfort for a number of participants. Individuals mentioned that some family members refused to eat leftovers, so they had to disguise them in some way, eat the leftovers themselves then prepare something new for the others, or even throw them out. Also, leftovers sometimes took up much needed refrigerator or freezer space. At the same time, other individuals said they discovered creative uses for leftovers, recycling them into new dishes, or adding new spices. Their ingenuity gave them a sense of resilience and control that was comforting.

From Discomfort to Comfort

It was clear from the oral history interviews as well as from observations of social media and our own personal experiences that there were a wide range of stresses, anxieties, and fears around foodways practices during the pandemic that were experienced as discomfort. While aspects such as procurement and consumption tended to be the most visible, others that were usually thought of as routine chores or as pleasant hobbies could also cause stress. Home gardening was seen as a significant source of produce in case of disruptions in the supply chain, leading to stress about the success of that garden; cleaning up after eating became a tedious and discomforting task when it had to be done three or more times a day; not having room to fit food items into an already packed refrigerator or freezer caused distress; and the lack of formal meal times made the day feel disquietingly unstructured.

At the same time, it was also evident that people were finding comfort in foodways practices, not just in the consumption of items perceived as fitting into that category. Activities such as preparing food, growing it, getting recipes to work out well, baking bread, viewing a row of newly canned tomatoes, and so on, were comforting in themselves. Perhaps more significantly, a number of those comforting activities grew out of discomforts. Planting a garden might have initially been a way to ease concerns about the safety of shopping or the reliability of the supply chain, but tending plants and harvesting food gave a sense of grounding that individuals described as comforting. Shortages in certain ingredients led some individuals to share and barter with their neighbors. A yeast shortage early in the pandemic initially dampened bread making enthusiasm, but individuals began sharing suggestions and recipes for alternative rising methods—sourdough, baking soda and baking powder-based quick breads, salt rising bread, flat breads such as Mexican tortillas and Indian *naan*. The newfound knowledge and skills seemed to be comforting. In some cases, communities—both virtual and physical—developed the sharing of skills, equipment, or food items. The passing along of sourdough starters created social networks, perhaps even a sense of family relations through a genealogy of "offsprings" from someone's starter.

Other participants agreed that they found comfort by taking active roles in their communities. Ordering takeout from local restaurants was a way to lend financial

support; shopping for an elderly neighbor helped keep them safe from contracting the virus; making meals for busy friends affirmed a social network but also contributed in a tangible way to insure others' wellbeing. Several individuals told of becoming involved in larger food activism projects helping supply food to those in need or working for more equity in the food system. Helping in these ways gave them a sense of significance in that they could make a difference. By comforting others, they comforted themselves.

These observations suggest the usefulness of expanding comfort foods to comfort foodways. The shift from product to process recognizes the potential for activities that are usually overlooked to become sources of comfort. It also allows for the recognition of the varied ways in which individuals use and make meaning through food practices. Out of the discomforts being experienced, some individuals found comfort. Rather than being passive victims of the pandemic, they acted with creativity and resilience.

Expanding the Needs Met by Comfort Foodways

One theme that was clear from the virtual interviews was that a wide range of stresses, anxieties, and fears associated with the pandemic were being experienced as discomfort. Previous researchers identified the needs fulfilled by comfort foods as being nostalgia, indulgence, convenience, physical comfort (Locher 2002, Locher et al. 2005), and belonging (Troissi and Gabriel 2011). This project suggests that all of those needs were being met for some individuals through foodways, if not through the consumption of dishes or ingredients thought of as comfort foods. Recipes for childhood favorites were dug up or retrieved from fading memories; taking three hours out of a busy workday to tend sourdough starter, knead dough, and bake bread was, for some, an indulgence they rarely could afford; for others ordering take-out was both a way to support local businesses and put dinner on the dinner in a timely manner. Letting soup slowly bubble on the stove all day steeping the house with aroma was a physical comfort not usually possible when work had to be done outside the home, and sharing recipes via Facebook groups or meals through a virtual platform reminded people that they belonged to families or friend groups.

Additional needs described in this project included entertainment, distraction, control, agency, connectedness, and significance. Some people found the lockdowns and the long days at home boring. They welcomed various foodways activities as entertainment and recreation (as in re-creation). It gave them something to do. For others, it distracted them from the fears and anxieties associated with the pandemic. The stream of news stories about it made it difficult at times to think about anything else, and some people found respite from that news through participating in various foodways activities, whether by choice or not.

Pandemic foodways addressed other, deeper needs, such as fears about life and death, loneliness and feelings of isolation, loss of a sense of structure and routine with the days seemingly running together, and concerns about one's economic,

professional, or social future. These anxieties were more existential in nature, with individuals feeling they had no control over their own lives, much less the broader world. The usual rules of working and living, including eating for nutrition and health, seemed meaningless as well as ineffective in the face of such precariousness. Individuals again described finding comfort for these anxieties by participating in foodways practices.

An activity like cooking or gardening was an opportunity to have control over the process of creation from start to finish, and the final products were a tangible reminder of one's own efficacy or agency, something that was in question during the pandemic. Other practices, such as cleaning storage areas, preserving foods, or planning menus gave some people a sense of control over their immediate futures. Gardening gave individuals a feeling of "groundedness" and spiritual connection with the earth and seasons. The numerous forms of virtual commensality that emerged helped ease the loneliness many experienced, comforting by fulfilling the needs for belonging, but also contributed a sense of connectedness that oftentimes reached into an individual's past—and even suggested a future after COVID-19. Furthermore, addressing the discomforts of others seemed to give some individuals a sense of significance that their own existence still mattered. As one participant stated:

> "I think [it gave me] comfort in knowing I can work from home and make a difference in the community. I think I would've felt really lost without something to do. I know I would've invented something, you know, to occupy my time. I think knowing that there's such an increase in food insecurity right now and that we're implementing a tangible solution, I think, has brought me so much comfort. And just given me purpose, I have to get out of bed because I have so much to do for this project." (Amanda. T., CFAC-QO-AT-7/16/20)

There are undoubtedly other needs fulfilled by foodways that can be described as giving comfort or "relief from stress." Acknowledging the additional ones mentioned here moves food in general to a medium through which we can address the much deeper existential anxieties that have been highlighted by the pandemic. The situations it has created are not just inconvenient, physically uncomfortable, or fleeting needs to indulge or reflect on our pasts. They are life-or-death moments in which we are confronted with our powerlessness and insignificance in shaping our own mortality. That foodways practices have emerged as a domain through which individuals are working through such issues speaks to food's power and potential.

Comfort Foodways and the Pandemic as Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminality offers an interpretive lens for explaining the popularity of comfort foods and comfort foodways during the pandemic. It refers to rituals in which individuals or groups transition from one stage to another. The time in between is liminal; the older established rules are suspended but the rules of the new stage do not yet apply (Turner 1969). From this perspective the pandemic has

uprooted, suspended, and even challenged many of our previous norms of behavior and conceptualizations about life in general, not just food. We will eventually move into a post-pandemic world, but the rules for the new norm are not yet known. Comfort foods similarly can be seen as liminal in that they are a response to an (ideally) temporary emotional state which in which the normal guidelines for healthful and moral eating are suspended (Long 2017). It makes sense that individuals would turn to consuming foods and participating in foodways they might previously have felt they needed to limit or avoid. The pandemic has created an opportunity to look at these activities differently, without the taint of judgment attached to them.[13]

As a liminal time, the pandemic can be an occasion for exploring a potential new order. While this liminality in itself has oftentimes been stressful, it offers the potential to develop new relationships with food. Foodways activities that were previously routine chores are now recognized as providing opportunities for participation in larger social networks as well as for performance of identities, values, and relationships. The mundane routines of our everyday food lives are now appreciated as meaningful reflections of our survival and as potent moments for aesthetic expression and engagement. Perhaps these new relationships will be permanent, encouraging us to find comfort in all food and foodways.

Conclusions—The Project as Public Humanities and Public Folklore[14]

While the Finding Comfort/Discomfort through Foodways project was initially developed in order to document lived experiences during the pandemic, the public programming represented both public humanities and public folklore. As humanities,[15] it offered an understanding of food as a cultural domain in which individuals acknowledge and construct meaning. It brought attention to activities not usually recognized as being meaningful, such as shopping, organizing a refrigerator, or putting away leftovers; demonstrating that such everyday types of things could carry memories, histories, and relationships.

As public folklore, the project introduced folkloristic theories and methodologies to the general public.[16] It expanded the usual notions of food as just the stuff we eat to include foodways as a total system of practices, processes, and contexts around which individuals interact with food. This focus on personal experiences sets the project apart from most studies of food systems, and responses suggested that individuals felt they gained perspectives that helped them use food to address some of the physical and emotional impacts of the pandemic. As one participant observed, the pandemic in general made them more aware of the food system.

> "I think we'll all begin to appreciate what's involved in getting food in its raw form to our supermarkets and to our farmers markets, a lot more now that we know how, having lived without some of those things that we really appreciate [that it's a lot] of work and value beyond the tangible form…" (Nancy S., CFAC-HS-NS-8/7/20)

This project identified some of the discomforts and comforts felt around food during the COVID-10 pandemic. It offers a foundation for further research in a number of areas: on comfort food itself, on the role individual aspects of foodways in finding comfort or discomfort, and on effective strategies used to deal with discomforts experienced due to the pandemic. Perhaps most significantly, it can identify obstacles, whether structural or situational, that keep some individuals from finding comfort through foodways.

Notes:

[1] "I" in the paper refers to Long, the lead researcher and developer of the project. "We" refers to the research team along with Long and is used for activities and observations in which all members participated. Partial funding from the Association for the Study of Food and Society, Ohio Humanities, and Chicago-based private foundation supported a team of graduate student researchers, based in four states within the U.S. (Tennessee, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania) and in Ireland. Their names are listed as co-authors. Jerry Reed, III was assistant director of the project and helped with administration as well as setting up the virtual symposium. Two of the students were trained in public history, one in folklore, one in sociology, and one in communication studies. Prior to conducting interviews, we did sessions on folkloristic approaches to fieldwork and interviewing. Quinlan Day Odum and John Broadwell developed resources on public history, while Hannah Santino offered resources from anthropology and sociology.
[2] We called it an "oral history" rather than an ethnography since we were unable to fully document individuals within their usual social and physical contexts.
[3] "Foodways" is frequently used to refer to traditional ways of eating, but within the field of folklore it is both a theory and a method for approaching food as a holistic system that connects individuals inwardly to their own pasts and identities as well as outwardly to larger social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental structures. For more on the concept, see Long, 2015.
[4] The online exhibit, questionnaire, and other project materials can be viewed on the website of the Center for Food and Culture: www.foodandculture.org.
[5] Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
[5] I do not offer a critique here, but I tease it out in another paper.
[6] This program was organized by Sally Anne Steiner at the Folklore Village in Dodgeville, Wisconsin (https://folklorevillage.org). Since it was initially scheduled for early November, I suggested we invite a Native American chef so that we could address the discomforts felt by many Native Americans around the celebration of Thanksgiving. A video recording of the session is available through the Folklore Village.
[7] Formats included LinkedIn and Facebook pages for the Center as well as for some of the individual researcher. Listservs included those sponsored by the public folklore section and foodways section of the American Folklore Society, and one run by the Association for the Study of Food and Society
[8] The project documented some demographic data but not enough to fully address the social position of respondents. The experiences of individuals who were food-insecure, working two or even three jobs, or suffering from financial instability would probably be very different from those recounted here. We want to make sure that the observation that many of the individuals interviewed were able to create comfort from their discomforts is not misunderstood as a superficial optimism reflecting social privilege. Some of the findings suggest that economic privilege actually did not automatically offer more comfort, but more

research is definitely needed in this area (for example, an individual who had to move in with her family felt that she would have been too lonely on her own). Thank you to readers Diane Tye and Theresa Vaughan for pointing out the need for clarification.
[9] We treated comfort food as a "native" or emic category rather than an analytic one. Emic categories are those in use within a community rather than an official one imposed by outside authorities.
[10] The implicit morality is still attached to the genre, but there is growing recognition that comfort food differs according to individuals' identities. Judging from social media, this current culinary relativism seems to be expanding the food industries' definitions of comfort food.
[11] Interviews are identified by the date on which they occurred. CFAC in the citation refers to Center for Food and Culture. The first set of initials refers to the interviewer; the second set refers to the interviewee. Most of the interviews were virtual and recorded via Zoom, however, several participants wrote out their responses and sent them by email to the project director.
[12] An article by the author and Theresa Vaughan addresses this phenomenon. See "Kneading comfort, community, craftsmanship: Home baking during the Coroniverse," in revision for *Vernacular Responses to the Pandemic*, edited by Ben Bridges and Diane Goldstein.
[13] Also see Shen and Long, 2020, where I discussed the concept of liminality in relation to emotional eating during the pandemic.
[14] Comments about the project as public humanities have also been published in the magazine of one of the funding agencies, Ohio Humanities: *Pathways*, Summer 2021.
[15] My own approach to the humanities is that they are those disciplines that study the ways in which humans have made meaning of their lives as well as made their lives meaningful. Public humanities encourage engagement with the public outside of academia. For more information, see the website for the National Endowment for the Humanities: https://www.neh.gov/divisions/fedstate/in-the-field/56-ways-do-the-public-humanities. Additional discussion can be found on: https://fas.yale.edu/news/collaboration-and-community-public-humanities-yale, "Folkloristic perspectives on comfort foodways during the pandemic."
[16] Public Folklore can be seen as a part of Public Humanities in that it applies folkloristic concepts and methods to projects and audiences outside of academia. For more on the scope and content of public folklore, see: https://www.afsnet.org/page/PublicFolklore. Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky offers a masters degree in public folklore: www.wku.edu.

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