

Editorial Introduction: Comfort and Popular Culture

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Growing up, my family, the Reinhards, owned a golf course and country club. My grandfather built the golf course, and my grandmother cooked the food for the country club. My father worked as the course superintendent, and our house sat separated from the 9th fairway by a thin sliver of forest – which was not enough of a barrier to prevent golfers from walking across our backyard. I did not grow up loving golf, but I did grow up loving the food at our restaurant. My grandfather's brandy-marinated broasted chicken set the standard for any fried chicken to follow, and my grandmother was always experimenting with new dishes. One dish constantly on the salad bar but little eaten, except likely by her and myself, was her candied rice dish.

This dish, from what I can recall, was basically just a mixture of white rice and maraschino cherries from the bar. Served cold, it sat next to her homemade liver pate and pickled vegetables. And I adored it. Years later, when I had cherry *risalamande* in Denmark, I understood that she essentially had made a rice pudding. It was another decade before I recognized why I have so much love for the immensely bad-for-me sweet-and-sour chicken from various Chinese restaurants: those dishes often used a cherry-based sauce that combined with fried chicken and rice immediately brought me home to Sandalwood Country Club. I keep searching for the best bad-for-me sweet-and-sour chicken as my ultimate comfort food because of the nostalgia generated with each bite.

I like to think that Sandalwood, especially the food, served Northeastern Wisconsin in a small way by being a supper club and rural popular culture. That area has other similar local popular cultures based on food: fish boils, all-you-can-eat fish fries, supper clubs, grasshoppers, booyah, cheese curds, old-fashioneds, and, of course, brats served on a truck tailgate. You can travel anywhere in the world and likely find similar strong connections between local communities and their favorite foods. Indeed, celebrity chefs like Anthony Bourdain and Andrew Zimmerman established their brands through such travels that help demonstrate how alike we are even if our dishes are immensely different. Food generates community and popular culture when we use it to connect with each other. Whether the dish is time and location specific, such as those who prefer squirrel in their

booyah, or is a common dish elevated to stardom, such as the humble, squeaky cheese curd, our food defines us as much as it nourishes us.

And when we are under stress, when we are unhappy or upset, when we need a little help coping with life, our food is there for us. Comfort food satisfies cravings for specific flavors, spices, heat, sweetness, fats – but it also helps touch that part inside of us connected to happier thoughts and times. Sharing comfort food helps us explain ourselves to others in ways words never can. They provide a glimpse into our inner selves, perhaps all the way back to that inner child, who remembers eating Cinnamon Toast Crunch with Saturday morning cartoons, or challenging her father to see who can eat the hottest salsa without blinking. Yes, both of those, still comfort foods to me.

Popular culture and fandom often act as coping mechanisms during times of intense stress. People turn to what they love to escape harsh realities, even if just for a little while. Through popular culture and fandom we fulfill a need for control over our lives and a need for connections with other people. Popular culture provides the contexts in which such needs can be fulfilled, and fandom provides the pathways for both to occur. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such coping mechanisms were immensely needed, as people dealt with everything from minor inconveniences due to lockdowns to the major grief of losing loved ones.

The special issue articles presented here provide analysis and reflection on how food and popular culture have provided people around the world with the means by which to cope with the stress, trauma, and grief of the pandemic. From the simple pleasure of being able to eat one's favorite food, to knowing that even in isolation one is not alone, food and popular culture during the pandemic has allowed people manage – and during a pandemic, sometimes managing is all that a person needs.

Comfort itself is neither inherently good nor bad. Sometimes it is necessary, such as during the darkest moments of a pandemic. However, sometimes people's drive to be comfortable overrides over needs, such as public health and safety. A desire for comfort is perhaps seen in those anti-maskers decrying public health mask mandates because wearing the mask was uncomfortable. A downside to comfort is resistance to the common good when the individual's desire for comfort outweighs their perception of what is necessary to help others.

While a minority, such anti-masking mentality exists with its own popular culture online and in conservative news. People are encouraged to resist masking on the grounds of personal freedoms over community safety. And these popular cultures often overlap with those local, rural popular cultures I grew up with, as I

have seen repeatedly in my trips north during the pandemic. Their comfort comes with different foods, practices, and beliefs, all of which become and reinforce their community's popular culture. My nostalgia for Sandalwood cannot blind me to the truths of the gaps between myself and my homeland widened by this pandemic. But I still hope, one day, that we can all gather again with fried perch and rye bread to remember that no matter how different we are, we still have the same tastes in comfort food,

And that is a good place to start building a stronger community.