# Pandemic Comfort Food

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Conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a well-documented increase in consumption and interest in comfort food, along with a corresponding increase in digital sociality. As might be expected, the experience of physical isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic has led many to experiment with Zoom dinner parties, meokbang watching, and various other digital forms of commensality. This essay suggests that the explosion of discourse around comfort food consumption, along with the rise in digital commensality, during the pandemic shed new light on the concept, revealing its embeddedness in neoliberal subjectivities. For one, the settling of anxiety as a universal affective baseline harks to affective regimes that already defined pre-pandemic neoliberal subjectivities, suggesting the importance of historicizing the concept of comfort food within cultural neoliberalism. For another, the global relevance of comfort food becomes apparent as people from around the world share their anxieties and coping strategies with one another on social platforms from YouTube to TikTok. Here as well, cultural neoliberalism emerges as a framework for understanding cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking as a shared, if not universal, experience throughout the globe.

This essay opens with an analysis of current research on the correlation between pandemic conditions and increased comfort food consumption. By contrasting consumer research with public health studies on comfort food consumption during the pandemic, we glimpse the aporetic nature of neoliberal subjectivity, caught impossibly between the disciplinary biopolitical regimes of consumerism, on the one hand, and wellness, on the other. One thing these two bodies of research have in common is a certain reductiveness in their understanding of comfort food, limited to a neurochemical conception of comfort. How might one think about pandemic comfort food consumption in a way that takes these biopolitical and necropolitical regimes seriously as determining the shape of life under neoliberal conditions while also leaving room for thinking in excess of this determinism?

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This essay draws on Lauren Berlant's concepts of "exhausted practical sovereignty" and "lateral agency" as well as Paul Preciado's practice of gender hacking and biohacking for guidance. Next, the essay performs a close analysis of Beryl Shereshewsky's influential YouTube channel, a valuable archive of the present that was born out of, and shaped by, the pandemic. Shereshewsky's channel centers comfort food consumption, comfort viewing, and global cross-cultural dialogue as the basis for online community formation. If food is an aesthetic experience through which individuals and groups construct and perform their identities, relationships, values, and conceptions of the world, as food anthropologists and ethnographers understand it, then Shereshewsky's channel posits comfort food as a mobile concept and a universal particular in world spaces shaped by neoliberal globalization. Indeed, the forms of digital commensality that occur on Shereshewsky's channel testify to forms of "exhausted practical sovereignty" that subjects of global neoliberalism have recourse to as they build lives despite the multiple failures of states, employers, and institutions to care for them.

In what sense does this essay use the terms cultural neoliberalism? Julie Wilson's introductory volume, *Neoliberalism: Key Ideas in Media and Cultural Studies* offers a valuable definition of the term and synthesis of scholarship engaged critically with the concept over the past decade. In a general sense, neoliberalism is, "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life. According to neoliberalism, government's charge is not the care and security of citizens, but rather the promotion of market competition" (1). The concept of cultural neoliberalism in this essay corresponds to what Wilson describes as the phenomenon's most recent phase: "[h]ere neoliberalism is not only a set of economic policies and political discourses, but also a deeply entrenched *sensibility* of who we are and can become and of what is possible to do, both individually and collectively. It is what Raymond Williams called 'a structure of feeling'" (25). Even before the pandemic, the current phase of neoliberalism has been characterized by widespread precarity where crisis becomes an ordinary feature of everyday life. For this reason, neoliberal affective regimes are frequently characterized by short cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking alongside long cycles of anxiety and depression. Wilson cites a blog entry from the Institute for Precarious Consciousness describing the insidious omnipresence of anxiety within neoliberal structures of feeling: "Anxiety has spread to the whole social field. All forms of intensity, self-expression, emotional connection, immediacy, and

enjoyment are now laced with anxiety. It has become the linchpin of subordination" ("We Are All Very Anxious"). Finally, this essay maintains that there are valuable lessons to be derived by attending to strategies for survival and coping in a variety of global contexts where neoliberal structures of feeling condition the everyday. Indeed, when asked why his film *Parasite* had resonated so powerfully for audiences throughout the globe, the Korean director, Bong Joon-ho replied, "there is no borderline between countries now because we all live in the same country, it's called capitalism – I think that's the reason" (Bong).

## Pandemic Comfort Food in Consumer and Wellness Research

*The New York Times* reported in April 2020 that large food businesses, which had seen steady declines in sales previously, have experienced dramatic increases in demand since the COVID-19 outbreak. The Campbell Soup Company saw sales of Campbell's soup rise by 59% while sales of its Prego pasta sauce and its Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers increased by 52% and 23% respectively. Along similar lines, Kraft Heinz reported to its investors in early April 2020 that factories were working three shifts to meet suddenly increased demand for products like its Oscar Mayer cold cuts, Kraft cheese, and macaroni and cheese. Conagra Brands, which produces Slim Jim jerky snacks and Chef Boyardee pastas, reported a fifty percent increase in shipments to retailers and in-store sales in March 2020 (Creswell).

Companies like Farm Rich, responsible for such products as Disney Frozen II Mac & Cheese Bites and Star Wars Mandalorian Cheesy Potato Tots, began conducting consumer research as early as August 2020 to examine the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Americans' eating habits. In conjunction with OnePoll, Farm Rich conducted a poll of two thousand respondents and found that two in three of its respondents reported eating more comfort food during the pandemic, citing pizza (55%), hamburgers (48%), ice cream (46%), French fries (45%), and other American "childhood food favorites" in particular (FarmRich.com). According to a longitudinal comparison (2004 – present) of key food search terms and searches for "comfort food" via Google Trends, comfort food related searches attained an all-time high in October 2020, a 35% increase from October 2019 and a 74% increase from October 2004.

If consumer researchers were the first to publish results showing a correlation between COVID-19 and changes in the eating habits of people in the developed world, academic researchers have been quick to catch up.

An Australian study published in June 2021 focuses on the perceived impact of COVID-19 on comfort food consumption over time, for example, the authors conclude that reported increase in consumption of comfort foods correlates to emotional distress generated by the pandemic (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Along similar lines, a Danish-Chinese study published in April 2021 focuses on COVID-19 and digital commensality, asking how reported increases in "out-of-control" eating during the pandemic might correlate to reported increases in use of digital technology for social purposes under the same conditions. The authors write:

> A recent survey during the first wave of the pandemic around April 2020 found that social activities had decreased between 46.7 and 58%, and overall life satisfaction had decreased by 30.5% (Ammar et al., 2020b). Eating behavior and physical activity levels were also adversely affected, with a reported decrease in total weekly activity minutes by 33%, higher reported meal frequency, snacking, "out-of-control" eating, and more unhealthy food choices (Ammar et al., 2020a). Somewhat expected, the number of individuals who used digital technology for social purposes had increased by 24.8% (Ammar et al., 2020b). Eating is, in large part, a social affair (cf. Herman, 2017), therefore, it seems natural to assume that a non-trivial share of newly-digitized social interaction involved food. (Andersen et al.)

The above examples of research on comfort food eating during the pandemic must be situated within the wider material and social context that produced them. On the surface, the contrast between these instantiations of pandemic-response knowledge production could not be more striking. If consumer research, we can presume, has emboldened large food producers like Kraft Heinz to increase production and invest in further development of nostalgic-but-addictive comfort food products to meet newly rising demand, public health research frames "comfort food consumption over time" as a "health-risk behavior" (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Research produced in this vein frames comfort food as a "coping mechanism," whose initial efficacy winds up devolving over time into a form of "disordered eating." Indeed, their conclusion calls for additional research into healthier ways to mitigate stress during a crisis: "[f]uture interventions should address comfort food consumption by focusing on handling emotional distress during a crisis." On its horizon of expectation is a public engaged in healthier coping mechanisms and risk reduction where eating habits are concerned.

While these two research products appear as though they couldn't be further apart – one caught up in the *teloi* of consumerism, indifferent to comfort foods' negative health effects, and the other caught up in the *teloi* of public health discourse – they both frame comfort food and the pandemic in surprisingly similar ways. To begin with, they rely on an equally decontextualized understanding of comfort food. The consumer study cited above measures consumption of specific food items such as pizza, hamburgers, ice cream, French fries, mac and cheese, and so on, while comfort foods in the above-cited nutrition study "refer to foods that are […] highly processed and rich in saturated fat, sugar, or sodium" (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Comfort foods in these studies are construed reductively as substances that provide comfort due to biochemical properties rather than their culturally embedded meanings.

Another blind spot at work in both the consumer and public health studies cited above is a reductive, and decontextualized, understanding of COVID-19. Consumer research tends to treat COVID-19 in terms of an external event with bearing on the consumer market; conceived in these terms, COVID-19 is on par with such external events as the holiday season, a newly signed trade agreement, or the arrival of a new "game-changing" technology. Its value as a data point resides in the degree of predictability and profitability of its effects on the consumer market. Public health studies are only slightly more nuanced in their understanding of COVID-19. Salazar-Fernández et al. measures the perceived negative impact of COVID-19 along three axes: economic impact, effect on interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and effect on own and friends' health. However, the conclusion of the study frames COVID-19 as a "stressor" among others, equated with any number of stressful life events, from divorce and the loss of a loved one to a career change. The conclusion takes as a given that there will be other stressors on the horizon and offers the reassuring conclusion that indulgence in comfort food is an effective short-term coping mechanism in response to these. Equally reassuring, the study concludes that people tend to self-regulate "disordered eating" over longer-term stressful events such as COVID-19. As a result, the wider historical and cultural context that made COVID-19 uniquely stressful is lost from the equation.

What's lost in this framing of COVID-19 as merely one stressor among others is the experience of failures of states to respond adequately to the crisis, despite knowledge and practices proven to mitigate the damages of the pandemic, accompanied by often surreal spectacles that put on display the irrationality and inhumanity of market-driven policies. In a nutshell, the necropolitical regimes of

neoliberal capitalism were exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, many commentators have described COVID-19 in terms of a "potentially fatal internal crisis of neoliberalism" (Šumonja). Rather than framing the pandemic as an external event that had an impact on neoliberal economies, Šumonja details bi-directional causalities between the two:

> According to Rob Wallace (2020a, 2020b) evolutionary biologist and phylogeographer, the increased appearance of corona viruses like SARS, MERS or COVID-19 in the human population is a predictable outcome of agroindustry's devastating impact on natural ecosystems rather than a series of isolated incidents. It should not be forgotten that the initial reaction from most governments to the outbreak was an exercise in 'epidemiological neoliberalism' (Frey 2020). This policy bluntly exposed the politics of the whole project: pretend to do nothing while making sure that the 'natural laws' of markets keep functioning, even if it means allowing people to get sick and die from 'just another flu'. Then, in the wake of what was becoming the greatest pandemic since the Spanish Flu, the disastrous effects of 40 years of neoliberal privatisation of public health institutions were revealed. That is, the lack of staff and material capacities in underfunded state hospitals, and the complete inability of the private for-profit health industry to provide even the most basic medical equipment and treatment in the time of social need (Šumonja).

The "business as usual" approach to COVID-19 reflected in public health studies seems out of touch with the sense of social breakdown that has characterized the experience of the pandemic for many. Indeed, while the consumer research on COVID-19 and comfort food consumption is invested in harnessing the pandemic's market value, public health research under neoliberal biopolitical regimes confirms David Harvey's observation that sickness in late capitalism is defined as the inability to work (106). To have currency as a knowledge product in the neoliberal information economy, research on COVID-19 must frame it as a stressor that can be overcome to optimize productivity. However, if both comfort food and COVID-19 are historically determined by and embedded within dynamics of neoliberalism, research on pandemic comfort food needs to acknowledge and account for this embeddedness.

## Biohacking Neoliberal Protocols of Consumerism and Wellness

Although the term "comfort food" is never used, Lauren Berlant's 2007 essay, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)" offers a useful reflection on comfort eating under conditions of neoliberal precarity, anxiety, and exhaustion. Berlant explains what can only described as necropolitical cynicism by describing the incoherence that arises in a biopolitical regime that equates sickness with the inability to work on one hand (pathologizing comfort eating as a 'disordered eating'), and on the other, weighs profitability against the health of the populace (deregulation of food production, the sugar lobby, etc.). Berlant writes: "Compassion and corporatism collaborate in these particular epidemics of the failing will and body as long as concern for the health of profits 'balances' concerns for the health of persons" (769). This incoherent mix of compassion and corporatism gets expressed in state-sponsored neoliberal policy, such as the "1996 statement by the U.S. at the World Food Summit, which declared that 'the right to adequate food is 'a goal or aspiration' but not an international obligation of governments'" (Berlant 770).

How might we conceptualize comfort eating in a way that neither casts the comfort eater as dupe to the predations of "big food" nor casts comfort eating naively as a form of resistance to neoliberal regimes of consumerism and wellness? Berlant offers formulations such as "regimes of exhausted practical sovereignty" and "lateral agency" to describe comfort eating in response to the stress and exhaustion of life building under neoliberal regimes:

> [F]ilial relations of eating become scenes for the production of happiness in terms of repeatable pleasure, if not health. This is the material context for so many. Working life exhausts practical sovereignty, the exercise of the will as one faces the scene of the contingencies of survival. At the same time that one builds a life the pressures of its reproduction can be exhausting. Eating is a form of ballast against wearing out; but it is also a counterdissipation in that, like other small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways (778-9).

Berlant describes comfort eating here as a form of lateral agency, that is, as an undramatic, brief and temporary form of "opting out" from the pressures of social reproduction, a ballast against the exhaustion of building a life within the necropolitical regimes of neoliberal late capitalism. This formulation is useful for thinking in excess of the *aporia* (irresolvable and inherent contradictions) of

consumerism and wellness, of corporatism and compassion that shape our thinking about comfort eating. Nonetheless, to the extent that Berlant's argument remains at the scale of sociological statistics, their conception of comfort food offers no distinction between "big food" products, such as fast food and store-bought junk foods, and homemade comfort foods. Preferring to look in the aggregate at the phenomenon of obesity as it intersects with class, race, et cetera, Berlant brackets the phenomenology of eating, and eating as individual expression.

Paul Preciado offers a way to think about pandemic comfort food eating in the biopolitical aporia of consumerism and wellness that leaves room for consideration of eating as individual expression. To begin with, the consumerist and nutritional conception of comfort food as sugary, salty, fatty foods that provide the eater with a serotonin boost aligns well with Preciado's concept of the pharmacopornographic. According to Preciado, the pharmacopornographic era is characterized by the production and regulation of what he calls "potentia gaudendi" (orgasmic force) defined as "the real or virtual strength of a body's total excitation" (41). Preciado explains, "[c]ontemporary society is inhabited by […] subjectivities defined by the substance (or substances) that supply their metabolism, by the cybernetic prostheses and various types of pharmacopornographic desires that feed the subject's actions and through which they turn into agents" (35). For Preciado, for whom the topical testosterone treatment Testogel becomes the central case study, it is critically necessary to historicize the substances that shape pharmacopornographic subjectivities. The histories of these substances are often grounded in exploitative imperialist, misogynist, racist, and transphobic practices. And yet these substances are made available on the market and consumed as though they were neutral chemical compounds absent of history and context.

A comparable example where comfort food is concerned can be found in Sidney Mintz's account of the imperialist and racialized violence that conditioned Europeans' and North Americans' addictive relationship to sugar. As a pharmacopornographic stimulant, refined sugar is neither morally neutral nor absent of historical context even though nutrition and consumer research tend to treat it as such. Moreover, as Berlant's look at the necropolitical cynicism of the sugar lobby demonstrates, sugar's present continues to be informed by exploitative racial and social class dynamics. But rather than abstaining from these substances whose histories and present-day existence bear the worst traces of European and North American imperialism, Preciado advocates strategies of biohacking, gender hacking, and glitching the neoliberal protocols that govern their consumption.

*TestoJunkie* intersperses critical theory chapters with an essayistic first-person account of his experience taking Testogel, critically analyzing official medical protocols (which turn out to be horrifically heteronormative and transphobic, among other things), and ultimately crafting his own hacker protocol for using the substance. The first step in Preciado's biohacking involves historicizing the substance while the second involves critical analysis of the protocol for its consumption in order to hack it for one's own designs. What's involved in biohacking pharmacopornographic substances is therefore a dual process of critique, which restores context and history to the substance, followed by consumption in violation of the protocol.

How might Preciado's practice of biohacking bring nuance to the discussion of comfort food consumption during the pandemic? For one, it allows for a critical reading of concepts like "self-medicating" and "coping mechanism" frequently invoked in public health and nutrition studies as disordered forms of self-care. While neoliberal subjectivities are caught in the aporia of wellness and consumerism, drowned in endless mixed messages, consumption protocols define food reductively in terms of caloric and nutritional composition. Food is drained of context. Additionally, and crucially, it creates space to consider the importance of historical and cultural context in the consumption and enjoyment of comfort foods.

To biohack comfort food *à la Preciado* would entail a critique of reductive dietary and consumerist protocols followed by restoration of meaningful personal context, or creation of entirely new contexts, for consumption that eschew those protocols. The next section examines an online community devoted to appreciation of cross-cultural eating under pandemic conditions. Online food communities, of course, devote a great deal of energy to restoring and creating meaningful personal contexts for the consumption of comfort food. Whereas the scene of cross-cultural eating might have traditionally taken place in so-called "ethnic" restaurants before the advent of COVID-19, here it takes place digitally and in one's own kitchen. While the creator and viewers discussed may not engage in explicit critique of consumerist and dietary protocols, they saturate their contributions with regional context, history, and personal meaning, offering many salient examples of comfort food consumption that run counter to official nutritional and consumerist protocols.

## Comfort Viewing: Beryl Shereshewsky's YouTube Channel

Beryl Shereshewsky is a food YouTuber whose channel is focused on cross-cultural exchange through eating. She solicits suggestions from her viewers for dishes tied to a particular theme (e.g "how the world eats eggs," "trying your toast recipes," etc.) on her community page. She then includes clips of viewers explaining and contextualizing each chosen dish. Finally, she cooks and then eats the dish with particular focus on her reaction to the experience. The creation of her channel, the format of her videos, and much of the content of her videos, are informed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Shereshewsky had worked as a producer for Great Big Story, a streaming video hub owned by CNN that specialized in short-form video. CNN shuttered Great Big Story in September of 2020, in large part because the pandemic had taken a toll on its sales (Peterson). Soon after losing her job, Shereshewsky launched her YouTube channel. As she explains in her introductory video, "I'm gonna be exploring the world through food, in my kitchen, since travel is a bit off the table right now" ("I'm starting a channel!").

Her channel has been successful at engaging an international audience in a way that places cross-cultural eating at the center of online community formation. Audience interaction is a crucial component: Shereshewsky's videos include clips of her scrolling through her community page and frequently feature clips of her viewers presenting their favorite dishes. She is also active in responding to her viewers' comments in her channel's community page. In the period between October 2020 and October 2021, she has gained 385,000 subscribers and her most viewed videos "What the world eats when they're sick" and "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" have 1.4 million views each. The success of her channel resides in the extent of Shereshewsky's engagement with global online communities and in her skill at managing cross-cultural eating in her videos and cross-cultural communication in her community page. Her viewers respond with a great deal of affection and emotional intensity for Shereshewsky and her videos, creating the distinct sense of what Leela Ghandi terms an "affective community." A comment from one viewer, username Donovan Simms, captures the overall mood of Shereshewsky's videos and community page: "This video made me cry. Food is the universal connector, and if you wanna learn anything about anyone, you sit down and share a meal with them. In a time where gathering is still considered dangerous, this kind of cross-cultural exploration is needed more than ever."

Shereshewsky's videos and community page demonstrate the appeal of digital commensality under the stress of pandemic conditions while offering rich testimony to the meanings and contexts people around the world attach to the concept of comfort food. By examining her videos and community page, in contrast with the sanitized accounts of pandemic comfort food discussed in the previous section of this essay, one arrives at an understanding of comfort eating as a practice grounded in, but not fully determined by, the aporias of neoliberal subjectivity, understood perhaps best as a form of participation within pharmacopornographic economies, and yet also offering (albeit limited) forms of lateral agency, and openings for biohacking. With these considerations in mind, this essay will closely examine two videos devoted to comfort foods: "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" and "Comfort Foods Around the World."

Posted on November 4, 2020, "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" is one of the first videos on Shereshewsky's channel and it is the first to incorporate clips of community members from around the world discussing their favorite dishes, a format she returns to successfully in subsequent posts. Shereshewsky explains the new format in the opening of the video: "On my community page, I asked you guys what your favorite comfort food was, and where you lived, and so many of you responded with such amazing sounding dishes." She then offers her understanding of comfort food, which highlights the variability and value of individual experience:

> The thing for me is that comfort food is specific to the person. What my comfort food dish is, is not gonna be the same as someone else who even lives next door to me. So, instead of me presenting these as 'this is what comfort food is in X country,' I went through, picked a couple of dishes that I thought that I could recreate, and asked the people who submitted them to present them. So in this video, it's not just gonna be me. It's gonna be other people from this community, which I think is really fun and I hope it's something that we can continue to do, to share our cuisines and our cultures with one another, 'cause that's really what this channel is really about.

Each comfort food dish is presented by community members whose presentations are intercut with shots of Shereshewsky cooking the dish on a single burner portable gas stove. Igo from Wroclow, Poland presents *kluski śląskie*, a gnocchi-like potato dumpling slathered in gravy; Lindsay from Manila, Philippines present *champorado*, a chocolatey rice porridge often paired with a salted dried fish called *tuyô*; Andreea from Bucharest, Romania presents *mamaliga*, a kind of polenta

served with farmer's cheese and sour cream; Jaklyn from Jakarta, Indonesia presents *soto ayam*, an aromatic chicken soup flavored with lemongrass, lime and sambar chile paste; and Maricarmen from Cancun, Mexico presents *sopa de fideo*, a noodle soup made with a garlic-tomato chicken broth.

Each of the presenters links their chosen comfort foods to memories of being fed and cared for by their grandmothers or mothers; three of them also associate comfort food with the feeling of being stuck indoors during cold or rainy weather. Lindsay from Manila explains, "growing up, whenever it would rain, this would usually be served in our home. And eating it just brings back a lot of good childhood memories." Jaklyn from Jakarta describes *soto ayam* metaphorically as a "big warm hug to your soul," which elicits several delighted comments on the community page. Igo from Wroclow associates *kluski śląskie* with their childhood, stating that "it tastes like the feeling of comfort and safety." Along similar lines, Andreea from Bucharest links *mamaliga* to a feeling of childhood well-being: "This is the perfect comfort food for me because it always takes me back to the simplicity and safety of my childhood when my Grandma used to make this dish for me." Her formulation of comfort food as harking to an earlier time of "simplicity and safety" alongside Igo's formulation, "comfort and safety" will strike viewers, anxious and mentally exhausted from the complexity and precarity of life in a global pandemic, as especially poignant.

The interplay between cooking montages and close-up shots of Shereshewsky tasting each dish is of crucial importance in creating a "comfort viewing" experience for her viewers. Her viewers comment frequently on both aspects. However, the close-up shots of Shereshewsky tasting and responding to each dish are what evoke the most affectively intense responses from her viewers. Many comments in her community page focus on Shereshewsky's facial expressions. One viewer, username Hiyaa_Heeyaa comments, "My reason to watch your video: Beryl's eyes are so expressive. I open my eyes wide when Beryl is tasting something or trying to describe something. Can't help it, it's so so adorable." Another viewer, username Kerry Berger, adds: "I enjoy your facial expressions and smile especially when you taste something new that is unexpected and it hits you with a powerful Wow, and the experience opens your world to the wonders of culinary arts from the eater's perspective. Please keep on producing these videos. As a chef, I also gain some ideas from the dishes you introduce. Thank you." These comments emphasize the "mirror neuron" aspect of digital commensality: seeing Shereshewsky's expressions evokes the same expressions and emotions in the

viewer, imparting a vicarious sense of wonder at the novelty of the first bite of each dish followed by a sense of satiety and comfort from watching her continue to eat and express enjoyment. Indeed, some commenters describe Shereshewsky's channel itself as comfort viewing. Username Sarah Corke, for example, writes, "This channel is SO underrated, I never comment but you're one of my favourite channels, and definitely my comfort YouTuber."

In contrast with the close-up reaction shots, which center attention on Shereshewsky's facial expressions while tasting each dish, the cooking montages show very little of Shereshewsky. The viewer sees her hands stirring a pot or measuring out cornmeal in an in otherwise static overhead shot. Shereshewsky's cooking montages do not function as recipe videos; ingredients are listed but without proportions, and viewers only get a partial glimpse of the cooking process. Moreover, Shereshewsky reminds viewers that she is not a trained cook in many of her videos. The function of the cooking montages seems, rather, to be an acknowledgement of the care and work that goes into making these dishes that her viewers recommend. Describing the process of making the *mamaliga*, for example, Shereshewsky says, "I have never made polenta before. It is a lot of work. You have to stir it non-stop." Several comments in her community page fixate on this moment, sparking discussion about whether the stress and effort of cooking cancels out the comforting effect of the dish. One viewer, username lily black, writes, "It's comforting because someone cooks it for you. You don't make them by yourself" to which Shereshewsky responds, "Omg trueeeeee." Another viewer, username Alexandre Pereira Costa, writes, "This episode's curse is a blessing in disguise because after stressing out cooking you can better feel the calming effects of comfort food." Along similar lines, a viewer with username Ekua Walker writes, "I think the little stressors that happened making the dishes gave you a chance to really put the 'comfort' part of the dish to test."

One might unpack this from a few different angles. First, the framing of cooking and comfort eating in terms of quantifiable degrees of stress and relief that might neutralize each other's effects places this discussion squarely in the realm of the pharmacopornographic. Indeed, several comments on Shereshewsky's community page construe comfort food and comfort viewing in terms of serotonin boosts. However, context always plays a role in creating the right conditions for these. Two contexts in particular matter where the visualization of labor is concerned: First, the focus on Shereshewky's labor in the kitchen underscores the conception of comfort food as a form of care. It brings attention to the embodied nature of the work that

goes into providing care. Indeed, Shereshewsky's cooking montages serve as a metonymy for the invisible labor that goes into her content, from sourcing hard-to-find ingredients to filming and video editing. Highlighting this labor is crucial to her viewers' enjoyment of the tasting reaction shots. Shereshewsky's viewers associate the kitchen labor she does for them with the feeling of being cared for. One viewer, username Catherine Del Spina, writes, echoing Jaklyn's hug in a bowl metaphor, "Speaking of hugs in a bowl…Beryl, You are like a hug for all of us."

Second, the focus on Shereshewky's labor in the kitchen highlights the work that goes into cross-cultural communication. Although her viewers tend to index on the "wow" moment after Shereshewky tastes a new dish from another place, it is her willingness to learn and execute new cooking techniques and to risk failure that places her on equal ground with her community members. It creates fertile grounds for cross-cultural exchange. Her cooking montages serve as an invitation to viewers in the know to debate local culinary aesthetics and cultural norms. Commenters engage vigorously with this aspect, offering advice on cooking technique, critiques of texture, choice of garnish, choice of ingredients, and so on. They debate amongst one another about regional variants of the dish, often switching from English into their local language. The embodied aspect of cooking matters in this respect as well since the ergonomics of preparing these global comfort dishes is as culturally determined as their consumption and culinary aesthetic.

Shereshewsky's subsequent videos, including her second comfort food video, begin to include outtakes of Shereshewsky cooking. Many of these show wider angle shots of her as she hurls an expletive after getting burned, for example, or yanks an overflowing pot away from the burner. The inclusion of these kitchen mishaps situates Shereshewsky as a student, learning to attain a better understanding and appreciation of another culture, but not yet attaining mastery. This is crucial since, in the tasting reaction shots, Shereshewsky appreciates every single dish she tries. Most of her viewers comment on how impressed they are with her cross-cultural eating skills (e.g., Filipino viewers express delight and surprise that she eats the head and tail of the Tuyô and enjoys it). However, it seems to bother some that she never expresses distaste for any of the dishes she tries. Legislation of taste and distaste for certain foods is, after all, an age-old way to police identitarian boundaries of self and other. For these viewers, it appears improbable that Shereshewsky could like everything that she eats.

The interest in Shereshewsky's distaste for certain foods is so great among viewers that she responds with a series of videos entitled "Foods I don't like" in

which she challenges community members from around the world to suggest local preparations that might change her mind about ingredients she dislikes such as bitter melon and cantaloupe. These "Foods I don't like" videos add narrative tension to the tasting reaction shots that isn't there in the comfort food videos. Viewers wait, curious to see whether she'll like a dish or not. In her comfort food posts, by contrast, the narrative tension resides in the cooking montages and outtakes where we see her struggle as an amateur cook. The tension is resolved in the close-up reaction shots where facial expression of wonder is immediately followed by an expression of satiety and comfort. This structure is crucial to the success of her formula in offering vicarious enjoyment and comfort to her viewers.

Shereshewsky's channel offers an archive of the present through which to examine and reflect on comfort food as it is conceptualized and consumed in various global contexts. Scholarship on comfort food often wavers between attributing a uniquely Anglo-American genealogy to the concept and understanding it as a universal concept. Jones and Long, for example, write, "[t]he idea initially appears to be straightforward and self-explanatory–it is food that comforts. A closer examination, however, raises numerous questions about the concept, the specific foods belonging to this category, and the nature of food itself […] It is unclear whether comfort food is a universal concept or is particular to modern, Western societies" (5-6).

Shereshewsky's viewers offer their own definitions of comfort food in their comments that suggests they understand it as an interplay between biochemical composition and individual experience shaped by various cultural factors. Some viewers index on the biochemical. Username Kalandaari writes, for example, "'Fat is comforting', or as we say is France, 'Le gras, c'est la vie!' (Fat is life)." But most viewers agree with Shereshewsky's formulation of comfort food as a kind of universal particular. Username Mud Puppy comments:

> At the beginning, she clarified that "comfort food" is a personal thing, so she said she wasn't going to claim that any one dish represents an entire culture or country. I take pleasure in cooking, so it doesn't matter if the dish is difficult or time-consuming. "Comfort food" is, indeed, different for ever[y] person. I live in Indiana, yet MY favorite comfort food is a Dutch dish called stamppot. Kale and mashed potatoes with smoked sausage.

Along similar lines, username Mulan 121 writes, "I feel like comfort food is this universal thing we all love and can bond over. Soup, rice pudding, stew, toasted

sandwich. In the video they might have been from specific cultures, but we all have a version of them that reminds us of a favourite childhood dish."

The tautological definition of comfort food as "food that comforts" makes it highly mobile as a concept; it becomes a universal particular in the sense that the concept has global relevance but is also inflected at the individual level with different contextual meanings. What's more, the Anglo-American genealogy of the concept need not be at odds with the tautological definition if we bear in mind the fact that the Anglo-American world was largely a driving force in the economic and cultural neoliberalization of the globe. Coined in 1977, the expression "comfort food" gained cultural relevance within the specific context of the rise of economic and cultural neoliberalism. Out of the increasingly deterritorialized flows of global financial and cultural capital and the remaking of social relations, which had begun to accelerate in the late 1970s, comfort food emerged as a kind of synechdoche for a newly commodified conception of the family. So while global economic inequalities still persist, it is also true that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to comparable conditions of precarity, shared affective regimes shaped by cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking, throughout those parts of the world that were most dramatically changed by neoliberalization, particularly in the Anglo-American world and its neo-colonies (South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia) where compressed economic development has given rise to production of new cultural forms organized around stress relief.

## Conclusion

Returning to Preciado, we might ask whether Shereshewsky and her community manage to biohack comfort food despite reductive consumerist and wellness protocols surrounding the concept. Certainly, Andreea and Igo engage in a version of biohacking by linking the comfort derived from eating certain foods to an earlier time of "simplicity and safety" or of "comfort and safety." One should not construe these formulations simply as nostalgic expressions of desire for a time free of adult responsibility. That would be falling prey to the very same neoliberal discourses of self-reliance and privatized happiness that trap individuals in isolating cycles of anxiety and shame. Indeed, by reducing comfort food eating to biochemical excitation, neoliberal discourses of wellness occlude the communitarian aspects of safety and comfort that have long been associated with eating and commensality throughout most of the world. Shereshewsky's community reminds us that the

neoliberal status quo of precarity, anxiety, and crisis ordinariness is not the natural state of things. Indeed, their richly contextualized accounts of comfort eating throughout the globe serve as a reminder that another world is possible, to echo the famous EZLN motto, *otro mundo es posible*.

Yet as the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay rightly pointed out, Shereshewsky does not fully mount a critique of comfort food as Preciado does with Testogel. Shereshewsky and her contributors do eschew neoliberal protocols of comfort food consumption by simply enjoying their comfort foods without concern for caloric or biochemical content. They saturate comfort food consumption with commensal context (family, community, regionality, etc.) even when they find themselves eating in isolation during pandemic lockdowns. And this account of comfort eating is certainly more reassuring than the bleak scenes Berlant depicts in "Slow Death." However, there's not much to suggest that Shereshewsky's online community has moved beyond "lateral agency" and "exhausted practical sovereignty" in their comfort food consumption.

Shereshewsky comes close in her second comfort food video. She opens it by confessing that she has struggled in the past with eating and self-image, going on to explain that therapy helped her reorient her attitude towards food and embrace the pleasures of meaningful eating, which her viewers are now able to enjoy. It is reasonable to assume that her therapeutic process involved a certain degree of critique, that is, learning to attribute her food-related struggles to culturally and historically determined ideologies rather than to failures of the will and of individual responsibility. While this may be true, Shereshewsky's confession about therapy turns out to be a tie-in for her sponsor, the online counseling platform BetterHelp. Most of her viewers applaud the sponsorship (username Amalia Tardiff writes, "Kudos on another seamless sponsored video. Make that money honey!"). However, one viewer, krunchykrystal, expresses concern that Shereshewsky has hitched her wagon to an exploitative sponsor:

> I adore you videos so much! I have to say though as a licensed therapist it really sucks to see you partner with BetterHelp. So many YouTubers I love have done so too not knowing that they along with TalkSpace and Cerebral exploit therapists, mine client data, and have completely unethical practices. Please PLEASE get a local therapist and don't use this tech company or any other app like them. They are exploitative and dangerous [sad face emoji].

The BetterHelp sponsorship serves as a reminder that, as much as Shereshewsky might work to create a carefully curated experience for her online community, her

channel is not immune to the more exploitative aspects of pharmacopornographic enjoyment or what Preciado terms the "pornification of labor" (274). Indeed, while this essay has thus far highlighted the redemptive dimensions of Shereshewsky's approach to comfort food and comfort viewing, it is also true that a portion of viewers engage her YouTube channel in a more crassly transactional way. Numerous comments fixate on her physical appearance in often demeaning and sexist language. Shereshewsky rebuff these comments with self-assured humor and feminist wit, modeling practical tactics for engaging sexist trolling for her community. But as hard as she works to create a sense of commensality on her YouTube video channel, the medium itself is so thoroughly determined by neoliberal logics, it is difficult to imagine a way for Shereshewsky to overcome the pornification of labor. If she succeeds in reframing comfort food in excess of its biochemical components, it must also be noted that her channel might never fully escape the pharmacopornographic constraints of monetized cultural labor.

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