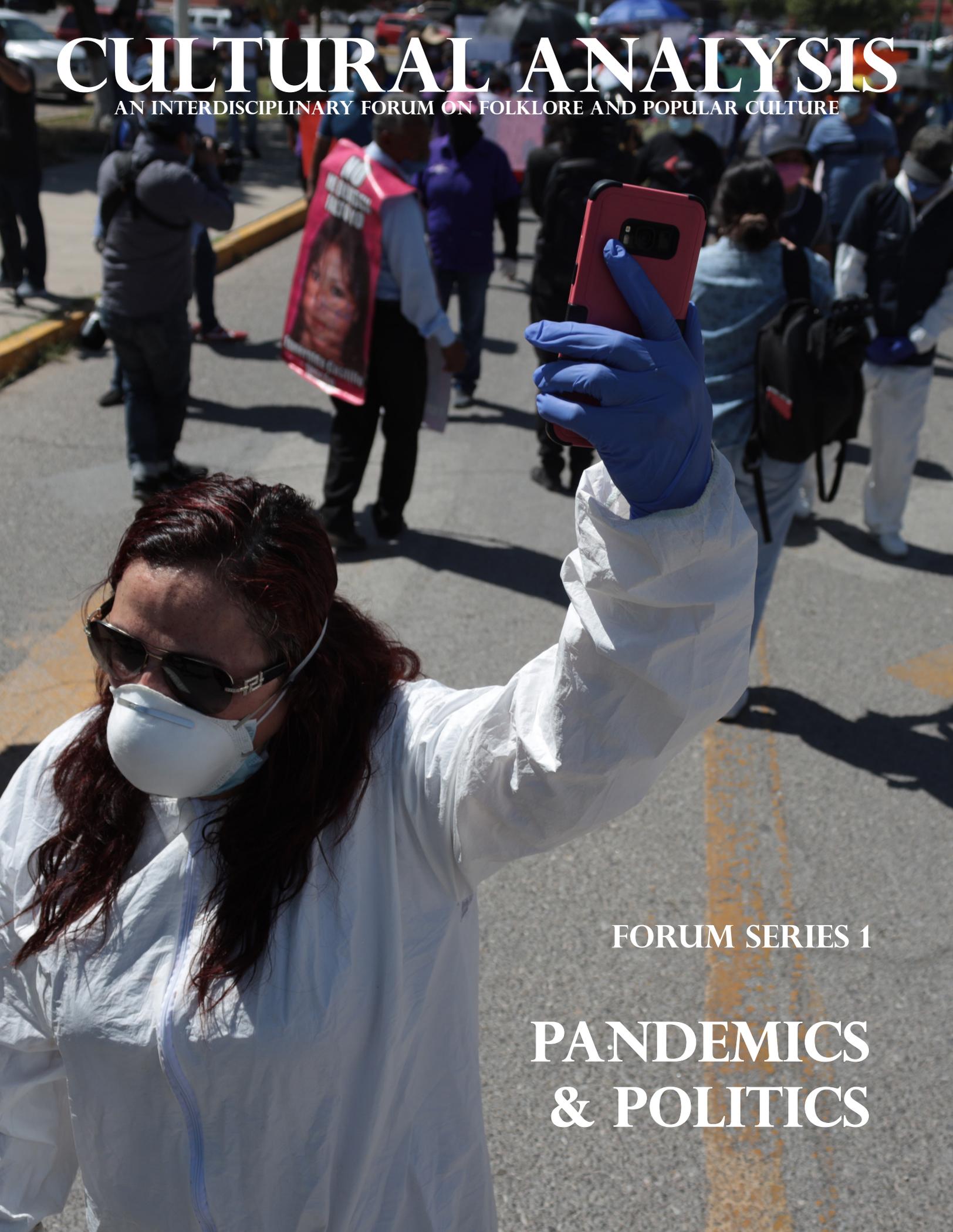


# CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE



FORUM SERIES 1

PANDEMICS  
& POLITICS

# CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE

## **Pandemics & Politics**

Forum Series I

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## Essay

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# Refrigerators, Cupboards, and Canning Jars: Emergent Meanings and Subversive Practices in Food Preservation and Storage During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has radically changed everyday life for many of us. Shutdowns of businesses and the closure of public spaces forced recognition of things we had formerly taken for granted. For many, food preservation and storage was one of those “hidden” aspects of life that became fraught with anxiety. Fears over contagion by the virus through shopping for food, shortages of certain items, and disruptions of the larger food system meant that individuals were concerned with having sufficient supplies on hand, ways to store those supplies safely, and preserving foodstuffs for future use. These types of concerns were historically central to survival and made up a large part of everyday life, but the industrial food system and modern technologies had created a sense of security around them that has now been challenged by the pandemic.

This paper uses auto-ethnography, observations of social media, and findings from an oral history project on comfort foodways<sup>1</sup> to look at activities and conceptualizations around food preservation and storage during the pandemic. It suggests that there developed a new appreciation for practices and products that had become a standard part of modern life—the small, seemingly insignificant things that we frequently do not imbue with explicit meaning. For example, cleaning cupboards, organizing refrigerators and freezers, saving leftovers or excess produce tend to be looked upon as obligatory chores to make other more important activities run smoothly. Similarly, preserving foodstuffs as pickles, relishes, jams, jellies, and so on are rarely necessary now for physical survival, but they have taken on psychological and emotional functions of creating order out of chaos and giving individuals a sense of efficacy while also having unexpected social functions in the sharing and bartering of skills, equipment, and products. Some individuals have turned to historical practices of preservation, affirming the value of traditions and the past.

The pandemic also created more awareness of weaknesses in the contemporary industrial food system, an awareness that has led to practices that challenge that system’s hegemony on global food cultures. A rise in home and community gardening, the use of farmers markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture), bartering of items, and more reliance on home cooking are circumventing some of the established links in the food chain. Similarly, preservation of food has become a means by which individuals can reduce their own dependency on that supply chain. Also, the pandemic

has highlighted some of the social inequities within the industrial food system and the ways in which those inequities ultimately impact consumers, so that there are now active efforts to correct those.

I suggest here that food preservation practices in the U.S. during the pandemic have been both emergent and subversive. The concept of emergent, as developed by Raymond Williams, refers to a continuous recreation of “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship,” (1977), (emergence), that then challenges the status quo (emergent). In this sense, the new then subverts the old and established ways of doing, evaluating, and thinking. Contemporary folklore scholarship recognizes the subversive nature of folk practices, sometimes using the phrase “vernacular culture” to highlight this potential (Primiano 1995). Food preservation as emergent and subversive practice has been explicit for some individuals but implicit for most, a subconscious reclaiming of personal agency in creating meaning, order and social, physical, and even spiritual connectedness that then challenges the human-nature dualism (Barndt 2007) underlying contemporary industrial agriculture--as well as other types of binaries that divide contemporary society.

### **Spaces (and Appliances) for Food Preservation**

“Several days after the lockdown announcement where I live in northwest Ohio (second week of March), I cleaned my freezer. It took almost the entire day to sort through packages and bags of frozen foods, some of which were unidentified leftovers or excess garden produce from previous years. As I sorted this food into edible and non-edible, I revisited memories they evoked of the pre-pandemic days when we could gather and visit with people without fear of the virus. The memories were a comforting reminder of the richness of my life.

It was also comforting to find that I had enough food for meals for several weeks, so that I could postpone a trip to the supermarket, which at that point was full of unknown dangers. And now that the freezer was cleaned, I could restock it, putting off further shopping and also ensuring that I had needed ingredients, some of which were now in short supply or unavailable. Knowing that I could feed myself gave a sense of security as well as a modicum of control in this chaotic situation.”

*-Lucy Long*

Spaces for preserving foods includes cupboards and rooms specifically constructed for that purpose: pantries, root cellars, and spring houses. Many American homes also include some sort of basement or cellar that is usually cooler than the rest of the house and can be used for food storage. During the pandemic, if individuals lacked such space—or the designated areas were filled—it was common to adapt other rooms for storage as well.

These spaces in the past enabled the habits of Americans to make only occasional shopping expeditions and to buy items in large quantities. The pandemic brought attention to these spaces, tying them to a sense of security. Those with plenty of space

were able to draw upon previously-filled larders, avoid trips to the supermarket, and stock up on items in case of shortages, such as what occurred with some staples, such as bread, beef, chicken, pasta, yeast, and flour. It was common to inventory what they had and then plan their meals accordingly, with future shortages in mind. As one individual observed:

... My biggest comfort food... is pasta. I was sensitive to the fact that I can't just eat pasta like 24/7, as much as I would like... because that's just going to end poorly. But it was also because I wanted to save it. There were so many issues with the supply chain. .. you can't touch the pasta because the pasta's for emergencies. So, we're not going to mess with the stuff that's in the cupboard until we've gone through all the things that could potentially expire. Capri C. (CFAC-CF-JB-CC-6/23/20; (21:10))

Cupboard and pantry spaces allowed for storage of foods, but they could also carry aesthetic and even nostalgic meanings. One individual reminisced:

My grandmother's canning cupboard. When I was a child, it was...like a wardrobe that had been converted. And my grandfather had wired it with a light, a fluorescent light, so that when you opened the doors, the light would go pink and would come on and illuminate all these beautiful jars, all the different green beans and peaches and jellies and all these different things. And so I think I have this sort of sense of pleasure that I derive from the aesthetics of a well stocked pantry. You know, I have these positive associations with open the cupboards and here are all these jars. —Sarah G. (CFAC-SG-HS-2020)

This individual made a point of creating her own artistic arrangements of her canning and other preservation efforts, especially during the pandemic. This was functional in that it enabled to easily see what foods she had, but it was also decorative and connected her with those childhood memories.

Preservation spaces also include appliances, such as electric refrigerators and freezers, both of which have become standard fixtures in the modern western world. We tend to attend to them as elements of interior design and convenience, losing sight of how they have radically changed our relationships to food, making us less dependent on seasonal and local production. They have been fundamental to enabling our food habits to become more diverse and more secure, while also tying us to the modern technologies and economies that make up the industrial food system. They have also shaped our shopping habits, so that weekly or even monthly expeditions to a large supermarket have become the norm in much of the U.S. Frozen food now tends to be a staple of American cooking, whether it is store-bought or home grown and homemade: "the history of storing food by keeping it chilled goes hand in hand with the evolution of what and how Americans eat..." (Grahm 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Electric refrigerators for home use were invented in 1913, although the idea of preserving food by keeping it cold is an ancient one. Pre-electric rural homes used spring house, root cellars, underground caves or built basements as a natural means

of keeping food cool, and community ice houses offered large freezers. “Ice boxes” kept foods cool but required large blocks of ice that were replaced every few days. The invention of electric refrigeration and then the building of infrastructure so that electricity was available to most homes in the U.S. meant that we could “update” those residual practices. They not only incorporated the new technologies, though, they changed the way we could produce food, distribute it, prepare it, and consume it. It even had an effect on what we did with leftovers, allowing for purposefully cooking more than needed so that some could be saved for future meals. In short, it reflected the connectedness of our foodways practices both within our personal habits and to the larger industrial food system.

My own freezer and refrigerator holdings attested to this connectedness. The connection to past meals and past purchasing or producing of items was obvious, but also, the stored items allowed me to bypass shopping, cutting into the likelihood of catching the virus. The pandemic highlighted the significance of those appliances to my physical sustenance, perhaps even survival. It also made me realize—and appreciate—how they had been integrated into my own personal foodways.

## Technologies for Food Preservation

“The summer and fall of 2020 were unusual for me in that I stayed in one place long enough to have a garden and also to sign up for a weekly CSA. This resulted in an overabundance of certain items—tomatoes, kale, cucumbers, and, of course, zucchini. I decided to can some of my excess produce, so a friend brought over a case of canning jars that they didn’t need. I then discovered, as did many others, that canning lids for the jars were difficult to find. I started looking at the possibility of drying or freezing some of that produce, which then lead to looking at other equipment and tools—dehydrators, drying racks, and containers or bags for freezing.”

*-Lucy Long*

Having spaces for food storage is only one part of food preservation. Specific tools or equipment are frequently needed, along with the knowledge and skills for using them properly. As I discovered, the availability—or lack-- of technology can determine the choice of preservation method used, the types of foodstuffs being preserved, and the resulting dishes that can be made. The modern world usually offers instant access to any technology we want, so this came as a bit of an eye opener. The shortages, not only of food, but also of the tools for preservation, emphasized the interconnectedness of foodways with the larger society.

Jars historically were sealed with hot paraffin wax or beeswax, a practice no longer recommended because of the possibility of shrinkage of the wax, which would allow in mold spores. One website claims that wax sealing is safe as long as the preserves are used within a couple of months.<sup>3</sup> Another, from Sept. 3, 2020 during the height of canning during the pandemic, observes that the method: “...was fairly effective as long as the product was stored in a consistently cool place, such as a root cellar. Not many of us have the luxury of a root cellar. Unfortunately, if the storage temperature

of the jar fluctuates, the wax contracts with cold temperature (letting in pathogens and – in my country house – ants) and then expands with warm temperatures to trap the undesirables in the product beneath the wax.”<sup>4</sup>

A number of websites point out that wax sealing was an older way that harkens back to pre-industrial, pioneer life. One site, aptly named “Prairie Muffin Manifesto” suggests it as a way of subverting, or at least, bypassing, the contemporary money-based economy and industrial food system.<sup>5</sup> Although the post was from 2012, it seems to reflect current attitudes evident in other posts and received numerous viewings during the pandemic.

Many would-be canners, however, like myself, decided that due to the lack of lids, they would look into freezing produce. Airtight plastic containers and bags seemed to be the best tools for those. These seemed to be in plentiful supply, although there was concern over possible shortages due to supply chains being disrupted.<sup>6</sup>

Looking into these other means of preserving led to some surprising historical information, again illustrating connections not often recognized. Plastic containers are frequently used for storing foods and can oftentimes go from stove or cutting board to refrigerator or freezer to microwave (although now not recommended) and then to table. Such containers can easily be purchased in a variety of sizes and designs and in a range of prices. The most famous of these is Tupperware. The rise of the company converged with the post-World War II development of suburbs, rise of a middle class, and the 1950’s social world of stay-at-home mothers and homemakers.<sup>7</sup> Plastic containers represented the modern industrial world, replacing old-fashioned glass and stoneware. Today, however, consumers are concerned about the health and environmental impact of these plastics. Recycling initiatives assuage some concerns, but a number of consumers are returning to glass containers.

Plastic bags, however, remain a popular alternative for storing food, whether dried, refrigerated, or frozen. Another modern invention, they have become essential in much of our everyday lives, but particularly in relationship to foodways. They also illustrate the complexity of human progress and the unanticipated connectedness of our inventions. They were developed in 1959 by a Swedish engineer as an alternative to paper bags made of wood and whose popularity was threatening the survival of forests.<sup>8</sup> These plastic bags were meant to be reused since they could last an extended time (beyond our lifetimes). In the 1960s, cellophane bags came into use, and in 1968 Dow Chemical Company invented Ziploc plastic bags with zippers.<sup>9</sup> All of these bags are central to contemporary food preservation and would impact our daily lives if not longer available.

Other technologies for preservation are not as integrated into our foodways, but are oftentimes considered essential by those who use them. Pressure cookers for canning, dehydrators, drying racks, and vacuum packagers have all made food preservation much easier and safer. There were reports of shortages during the Pandemic, and the internet offered numerous DIY (Do It Yourself) solutions. These illustrate how tied our food is to the availability of the tools used for preservation.

## Skills

“Every summer when I was a child my father made blackberry jam from the blackberries we had picked—and suffered through thorns and chiggers, and possible visits from rattlesnakes and bears. We helped with the entire process, up until the jars of the filled preserves were boiling. We had to leave the kitchen then and told not to even peek in when he opened the pressure cookers. I knew he was serious; all my aunts had scars on their forearms from where steam from pressure cookers during canning had burned them. It made a big impression on me. During the pandemic, then, I thought about canning extra produce, but I was secretly relieved when canning lids were unavailable.”

-Lucy Long

The tools and equipment for preservation are useless—or even dangerous—without the knowledge of how to use them properly. Even then, knowledge does not automatically translate into ability or skill. It is one thing to read about how to open the pressure cooker after boiling the jars; it is another thing all together to have experience with nuances of arm placement, strength of hand pressure, and body position to keep out of the way of steam or, possibly, exploding bottles. Acquiring the skills for preservation illustrates the interconnectedness of cognitive knowledge and hands-on knowledge, as educational philosopher, John Dewey, promoted (Heldke 2001). For many contemporary Americans it also illustrates the interconnectedness of the past with the present as well as of a possibly romanticized rural life with contemporary urban or suburban living. In that sense, food preservation during the pandemic challenges the separation that has developed between craftsmanship by choice for self-expression and fulfillment of creative impulses and the pragmatic and functional craftsmanship necessary for physical survival.

Along with fears about one’s physical safety, concerns about food safety kept some people from experimenting with canning, drying, and other techniques. Canning, especially, was challenging.

My mother has a PhD in biology genetics and bacteriology, and she always warned us about the dangers of botulism. I’ve always been afraid to do any canning because of that. (Susan E.—CFAC-SE-JB-2020)

Such concerns, however, did not seem to deter most individuals during the pandemic from trying various forms of preservation. If they lacked experience, it was easy to find guidelines and instructions. The *Joy of Cooking*, for example, a basic staple of many American kitchen bookshelves, includes entire chapters on “The Foods We Keep,” “Canning, Salting, Smoking and Drying,” and “Freezing.” It follows these with chapters on “Jellies and Preserves” and “Pickles and Relishes” (Rombauer and Rombauer-Becker, 1980.) The line-drawing illustrations and careful descriptions take readers through the necessary steps, and warnings about correct equipment and techniques are scattered throughout.

Plentiful websites and Youtube videos also offer instructions. These come from a range of sources with varying levels of authority: official home extension services attached to universities<sup>10</sup> or the federal Department of Agriculture which runs The National Center for Home Food Preservation,<sup>11</sup> to popular media, such as the periodical *Better Homes & Gardens*<sup>12</sup> to miscellaneous organizations, businesses, and individuals.<sup>13</sup>

Individuals attempting to learn skills in preservation could easily turn to these printed or Internet sources, but as with any skill, having an experienced guide helps, and the available videos could only go so far. Some, especially women, drew upon memories of home economics classes, courses starting in the mid-1800s taught specifically to enable females to be better managers of their homes.<sup>14</sup> These had originally been serious classes that applied scientific methods and content to food preparation, meal design, and nutrition, in an attempt to modernize American homes. An impetus behind the home economics movement was to get rid of “old-fashioned” as well as immigrant practices as a way to Americanize the urban populations that developed along with industrialization of the nation. The movement provided work opportunities for women, but its acceptance and affirmation of gender differences brought it under criticism in the 1960s counterculture. My own “home ec” classes in junior high and high school in the late 1960s and early 1970s reflected this challenging of traditional roles, with many of us were dismissive of the classes and skills we were supposed to learn.<sup>15</sup>

Food preservation was integral to the 1960s homesteader and “back-to-the-land” social movements as well as part of the current DIY (“do it yourself”) and maker trends (Belasco 1993; Christenson 2015; Janovich 2021). Along with the association with conservative gender roles, the skills of preserving foods, particularly canning, tend to connote an old-fashioned, rural life style. County fairs still hold competitions for these skills, giving ribbons for taste and appearance, and packaging of such items sold commercially frequently play on rural “country” themes. Cultural groups and regions associated with older ways, such as Amish, Appalachian, and Mennonite, are also used in marketing ploys. Representative of some of these attitudes—and a bit of “I told you so” revenge—is a cartoon that appeared on Facebook in the summer of 2020 showing a grandmotherly woman in “country clothes” looking smug and saying: “and you thought you didn’t need to learn how to can.”<sup>16</sup>

Other common preservation methods—drying or freezing—seem to carry less stereotyping, but the pandemic has given new value and meanings to all of these skills. Those who had them, including older rural women, were now sought after, and there seemed to be a renewed appreciation for the craftsmanship involved. In my own small social universe, I saw individuals turning to others who had more experience, asking them for guidance, advice, and critiques. Also, the lack of canning lids encouraged experimentation with other means of preservation. The internet was full of suggestions for freezing, sun-drying, and oven-drying of common garden produce, such as tomatoes and zucchini.

The pandemic inspired a focus on the functional necessities of preserving food, but it was evident that individuals found those methods to be a medium for artistry and self expression as well as a way to connect with others, both in their personal histories

and the present. These skills drew upon the past, but were being adapted to the realities of modern life and the present pandemic. Also, that past is frequently peopled with family members, teachers, and others who created both pleasant and distressing memories. Current interactions around food preservation have created entirely new relationships with some of those individuals as well as new social networks, both virtual and real-time.

## Foodstuffs

“Some of my own forays into preserving food during the pandemic came from the over abundance of zucchini my garden. The prolific output of this squash tends to be commented upon regardless of COVID with jokes about leaving them on neighbors’ porches, and food media offering recipes every summer. Since zucchini does not last long when fresh, I tried numerous way of cooking it into dishes that could be frozen for later use. I also tried preserving it in the form of relish, a variation on the cabbage chow chow I grew up with in southern Appalachia. Since I didn’t have canning lids, I made several batches, freezing some. The rest could be kept in the refrigerator for only several weeks, so I took it to potlucks and gave some to friends.”

*-Lucy Long*

Preservation requires foodstuffs that can be preserved—an obvious observation that tends to be forgotten in the over-abundance usually available in the American food system. The pandemic, however, made us realize that we could not assume that food would always be available whenever we wanted it. Even if we had plenty of room in our refrigerators, cupboards, and pantries, those spaces were useless if we could not find the foodstuffs to stock them with. That realization lead to a rush on buying of staples—and caused some of the shortages in supermarkets. Consumers emphasized dry goods, canned goods, and frozen foods. Bulk purchases that could not be safely stored were frequently shared with others, creating and affirming social networks. One individual, for example, bought large bags of flour that she then shared with local friends who loved baking bread, establishing a community of individuals who shared a common interest as well as a sense of mutual obligation.<sup>17</sup>

The foodstuffs that were stored shaped what dishes people made. One individual, an adventurous cook and culinary historian stated that, when the pandemic started:

I used things in the back of the cabinet that had been sitting there a long time that I had kind of like, avoided dealing with. So, with some cornmeal I made a polenta, and then I cooked some mushrooms and put cheese on top and under the broiler. And so, we had polenta with a mushroom ragout type thing on top and cheese. (Cathy L. —CFAC-CL-JB--7/6/20)

She also described how her pantry inspired, rather than constrained, her cooking:

Well I try to use what I have in the house first. We have a very large house, so I have a pantry and I also have basement storage. I thought, well now is the time to start using these items which I know I have and maybe I bought them thinking I would use them, but I haven't used them. I'll take an inventory of that, but then I've gotten quite a lot of nice recipes just by reading our Chicago Tribune. Every Thursday they have recipe section. Then I also get some magazines that'll have recipes. I also get emails with recipes. Like, about a week and a half ago I got an email from the Polish Cook. I happen to be Polish-American and she had a recipe in there for Polish Royal Salad. I said, "Well, I've got these ingredients at home, I think I'm going to try this. (Cathy L.—CFAC-CL-JB--7/6/20)

Other cooks missed certain items, however, and felt that the pandemic negatively impacted their pleasure in food.

We had a pretty stocked fridge, but then when it got down to the end of it, it felt like we were mixing and matching things. Maybe I'm spoiled about flavor profiles or something, but I just wanted things to feel like they're complete. (Ellie C. and Albert O,—CFAC-CF-JB-EC-8/5/20)

Concerns over the availability of certain items led to some creative strategies, such as freezing cartons of milk, and also to looking at alternative ways of storing foods. Unwashed eggs can be kept safely at room temperature, for example, freeing up room in refrigerators for items that have to be kept there, and, in my own area, at least, this inspired a small cottage industry of "backyard chickens." Similarly, home and community gardens blossomed during the pandemic, partly out of concerns for food access, but also because people were not travelling and therefore able to tend to them. This resulted in an abundance of produce that in years past might have been composted or given away. Concerns about the future of food supplies, however, meant that people felt a need to preserve those fruits and vegetables. Similarly, CSA's<sup>18</sup> and outdoor farmers' markets gained in popularity and oftentimes meant an abundance of fresh produce that would need to be preserved for later use.

These gardens and markets shaped the ingredients that were available and being preserved, with an emphasis on fresh, local, and seasonal produce. That in turn shaped the dishes and meals being consumed. Not surprisingly, food media and social media in the summer and fall of 2020 offered numerous recipes and tips for dealing with the most common produce—tomatoes, zucchini, cucumbers, parsley, basil, melons, and later, apples, peaches, and berries. That in turn inspired interest in preservation technologies and skills. While such interests did cause shortages of things like canning lids, it also encouraged virtual and real-time connections between individuals in sharing equipment and knowledge.

Once produce was preserved, storage became an issue. Pantries, root cellars, cupboards were filled, giving a comforting sense of security and, as mentioned earlier, aesthetic pleasure. It was also common to share the abundance of that preserved

produce, giving jars of pickles, jellies, and jams to friends, family members, or neighbors. Such sharing affirmed social connections, reminding individuals every time they took a bite of the interconnectedness between people.

The abundance, as well as concerns around entering supermarkets, also seemed to inspire cottage industries in which items were sold informally by word-of-mouth among friends. Some more entrepreneurial individuals sold their wares at farmers markets or set up their own unattended roadside stands with boxes or jars for customers to pay in cash. These stands were run on an assumption of honesty, implying a sense of interconnectedness in which individuals could trust each other. Similarly, trading materials, services, and knowledge around food preservation became part of a barter economy that bypassed the usual monetary systems.

The foodstuffs that resulted from preservation illustrate the interconnectedness of all the processes involved in eating as well as our own connections with other people. Several individuals pointed out that their own plentiful supplies of preserved foods made them acutely aware of those who were lacking resources or access to have enough. One made a point to give from her own supply to community food pantries, although many of these do not accept home-canned goods (an ironic trust in the safety of the industrial food system). She also used her preserved foodstuffs to create meals to be given out to the homeless. In these instances, the food connected individuals to larger social and economic systems, not only to their immediate groups or personal history. The pandemic highlighted those connections. One participant in the comfort foodways project stated:

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... (Nancy S.-CFAC-CM-NS-HS-2020)

Another mused that she was posting less about food on social media during the pandemic because of her awareness of other's difficulties. She did not want to make light of their situations, but she also recognized the possibilities for hope that could be found in food in general, including preservation:

I feel like it might be slightly inappropriate to talk about pleasure, because I know that this has been an extraordinarily difficult time for a lot of people... it's a hard situation, but you're trying to figure out like, where can we find joy? Where can we find pleasure? ... I do take pleasure in that intellectual challenge of cooking with the limited supply of ingredients... figuring out new things to do with ingredients I already have. And... so whenever I would make something,... I wanted to document that. I wanted to share that. ... if you produce a beautiful loaf of bread or a row of jars of jam, there is a pleasure that comes from that feeling of competence, like I can do this. (Sarah G.-CFAC-CM-SG-HS-2020)

## Conclusion

The practices around food preservation during the pandemic highlighted its significance not only in our food choices but also in our very survival. The situation in the U.S. was not so dire that starvation could have resulted; it did however impact our access to the ingredients and meals that we have come to expect and consider normal. It also brought attention to the presence or absence of spaces to store food and to the technologies and skills needed to safely preserve foodstuffs. The presence of a second refrigerator or freezer meant more than convenience; it meant security in the food supply and some control over planning menus. Similarly, the technologies and skills needed to preserve foods were also highlighted, bringing attention and perhaps respect to domains that had frequently been dismissed as old-fashioned, domestic, female, and insignificant. The need to acquire knowledge of preservation literally and figuratively connected some individuals with their own pasts as well as an idealized American one based on pioneer self-sufficiency. Older relatives were frequently called upon to share their experience, and printed materials, such as cookbooks, and virtual sources, including Youtube videos, blogs, Facebook groups, and Instagram were turned to for instruction and guidance.

The possibility of connection through these preservation spaces and practices was a recurring theme throughout the pandemic. It is also built into the folkloristic concept of foodways that approaches it as a system in which all the parts impact and are shaped by each other as well as its larger contexts (Long 2015). From this perspective, preservation is one aspect of a larger system along with production, procurement, preparation, consumption, and disposal. Each of these practices depends upon the others, and small, seemingly insignificant changes can alter the others, ultimately shaping what we consume and the meanings we attach to it. The lack of canning lids led to freezing produce which then led to overloaded freezers and meals designed to use up those frozen foods. Similarly, the lack of refrigerator space meant the lack of certain ingredients and the need to alter meal plans or menus.

The pandemic highlighted the systemic nature of foodways as well as its potentials. It also illuminated our dependency on industrial agriculture and modern technologies. Ironically, the industrial food system was developed in order to make us independent of the vagaries of nature. It made us instead dependent on the vagaries of capitalism, corporations, and stock markets. Food preservation during the pandemic reconnected us not only to the seasons and nature but also to the people who labor in all the links in the food chain—the farmers, harvesters, grocers, shelf stockers, truck drivers, and others.

The need for food preservation made evident a sense of connectedness and also, for some, of interconnectedness, that is, a recognition of mutual responsibility, a reminder that we are all part of the same universe, whether we like it or not, and that our choices impact others.<sup>19</sup> These practices, then, can be seen as emergent in that they challenge the industrial food system, subverting the individualism and mind-body dualism that is the foundation of contemporary American society.

## Notes

- 1 Directed by Lucy Long through the Center for Food and Culture, the project included over 65 interviews with individuals across the U.S. and in 5 other countries. It resulted in a virtual symposium and on-line exhibit. Those materials can be viewed at [www.foodandculture.org](http://www.foodandculture.org). More about the project is available Long 2021 and Long, et al., 2021. Some of these materials are also discussed in essays in a special issue of *Digest: A Journal of Foodways and Culture*, Vol.9, no.2, Fall 2022 on folkloristic perspectives on comfort food during the pandemic
- 2 Also see: Caitlin Kearney, Not just a cool convenience: How electric refrigeration shaped the “cold chain, “ November 12, 2015, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/electric-refrigeration-shaped-cold-chain>); and Jonathan Rees, *Refrigerator*, Bloomsbury Press, 2015; and Rees, *Refrigeration Nation: A History of Ice, Appliances, and Enterprise in America*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.
- 3 <https://www.leaf.tv/articles/how-to-seal-a-jelly-jar-with-paraffin/>
- 4 <https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=43505&>
- 5 <https://prairiemuffins.wordpress.com/2012/09/13/poor-mans-berry-jam-no-sugar-no-pectin-wax-to-seal/>.
- 6 Some blamed disruptions on with trade with China: <https://www.silive.com/news/2020/02/could-the-coronavirus-in-china-cause-a-shortage-of-reusable-bags-expert-says-its-possible.html>.
- 7 More information of Tupperware can be found at: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/ice-harvesting-electric-refrigeration> and (<https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/parties-plastic-how-women-used-tupperware-participate-business>).
- 8 <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/plastic-bags-pollution-paper-cotton-tote-bags-environment-a9159731.html>.
- 9 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/10/how-the-plastic-bag-became-so-popular/381065/>.
- 10 For example, <https://fcs.osu.edu/programs/healthy-people/food-preservation>.
- 11 <https://nchfp.uga.edu>
- 12 <https://www.bhg.com/recipes/how-to/preserving-canning/how-to-can-green-beans/>.
- 13 See, for example, <https://www.amodernhomestead.com/canning-green-beans/>.
- 14 For more information on the history of home economics, see <https://sites.middlebury.edu/homeec/history-of-home-economics/>.
- 15 I flunked the hot cocoa exam, because I didn’t like the thickness of the final product and adapted it to my own tastes.
- 16 I have been unable to find the source for this cartoon.
- 17 This account was given by Dr. Theresa Vaughan and is included in an article on home baking during the pandemic that we collaborated on together (Long and Vaughan 2023)
- 18 Community Supported Agriculture, in which consumers pay a set amount each week and then receive “shares” of whatever is harvested.
- 19 The terms “connectedness,” “interconnectedness,” and “systemic” have been given specific meanings by various disciplines, which I do not go into here. They all are compatible with folkloristic perspectives that emphasize the complexity of human cultural forms and practices and contextualize specific instances of human expressions within a holistic view.

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## Response

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### Inklings, Frights, Coping, and Gratitude—Personal Foodways in Tough Times

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“**R**efrigerators, Cupboards, and Canning Jars” invites readers to contemplate the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on their foodways, just as rapidly changing, globally experienced circumstances began to threaten food supplies, access, and security for most people in the USA in 2020. Risks of contagion, masking mandates, and social distancing strongly affected grocery shopping, working, and dining out routines, especially in the early pre-vaccine period. Most people quickly had to adjust customary food preferences, packaging, and personal food production, while also adapting to an emergent slew of food purveyor distribution practices. At first, the times *may* have required seemingly extraordinary attention and action common to periodic disruptions in what we *may* perceive as trusted everyday equilibriums that we often take for granted (cf. Long 2022, 1). However, I see this reaction as an initial panic, observed recurrently in Wisconsin when dangerous weather events are first announced, like tornados and heavy snow. Residents flock to grocery stores, stocking up to excess and depleting reserves.

Just as we orchestrate the everyday year with weekend changes in routines and periodic intensities in festive events and life passages, human history is full of uncomfortable downturns and depar-

tures from the expected that can cause shocks, surprises, and reliance on others, past and present, to comprehend how to respond. Celebrants of Passover, Ramadan, and to some extent, Lent annually alternate their dietary practices to remember past sacrifices through fasting and symbolic foods; some families during Passover extend their stories of exile to millions now suffering (Sherman 1988). More than ever, we are experiencing devastating hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes, wildfires, colonizer-induced nation-state warfare, famine (Haber 2002), exiling and refuge-seeking, as well as metropolitan housing evictions and unhousedness (Desmond 2016). Pandemic-like foodways are but a spectrum of common variations for the 80+ million who are now experiencing such challenges around the world every day.<sup>1</sup> They are also deeply endemic in the personal, family, and community emergency food system toolkits of millions more,<sup>2</sup> including the condensed food kits of recreational hikers and migratory workers like sheepherders and fishing people.

Folklorists have published robustly on adaptive strategies of individual immigrants, including their foodways,<sup>3</sup> examining how refugees with restricted means assert elements of older systems while responding to varied aspects of newer contexts. Their adaptive “immigrant process,” as I like to call it, often relies on maintaining connections with customary food supplies from the old country, overseas trade, friends’ purchases to send or bring back, and earlier immigrants’ established markets, restaurants, and bakeries in the new country. In some cases, new immigrants and health food advocates have sparked partnerships with farmers to grow foodstuffs like teff for Ethiopian

injera-making (cf. Busse, et al. 2015) and special dietary requirements, as well as expanded varieties of South Asian rice for home cooking in the new country (cf. Yoshimura 2009). Individuals' emergent syncretic cuisines benefit from ongoing overseas trade rooted in ancient historical patterns centuries, if not millennia, older than 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernities. Nevertheless, they also draw from what they see in use by older immigrant and indigenous communities locally and regionally—among neighbors, in grocery stores, at food markets, farm stands, local food suppliers, farms, and farming people—for substitutions in customary foodways and additions to repertoires and new festive meals like Thanksgiving (Lockwood and Lockwood 2002), for example.

I am finding Lucy Long's essay a useful start to reflect on our individual pandemic foodways as embedded in *endemic* foodways wisdom that people anywhere—whether the newly displaced or older established and indigenous immigrants—cultivate from older models to survive untoward circumstances in new contexts, with agency, dignity, and some regularity. Many folks commonly need reminders to heed basic maintenance aspects of their lives that may not seem like they require much attention until a breakdown occurs.

I have a hard time thinking of the pandemic pattern as newly emergent and subversive in ways that Long asserts challenge anything “industrial” or “industrialized,” whether food system, agriculture, or world—as well as challenging oppositional binaries like “human-nature” (10) or “functional” versus “decorative” (3). These latter binaries have been under review for decades among academics (Cru-

shank 1995; Turner 1999), with some refreshing pandemic-inspired developments (Siragusa 2021; Morrow 2021). Indigenous philosophies have been continuously emergent as holistic integrations of culture and nature through millennia (cf. Kimmerer 2014; Rowen White 2020). Food work is already so fluidly relational because of inherently alluring and expressive aspects that varied species see in the foodstuffs themselves.

Wendell Berry's 1977 justifications in his oft-reprinted *Unsettling of America* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1996, 171–223) confirmed before my eyes during the pandemic the legitimacy, efficacy, and resilience of diversely-manifested “traditional agricultural systems” in the USA that could accommodate “multispecies labor,” crop diversities, and modest industrialized methods. All are currently vibrant in what I saw emerge in the 1960s as an “alternative food system” with the proliferation of small local food purchasing groups and healthy-food cooperatives, collective and often organic or biodynamic market farming, expansions of farmers' markets, and strengthening of the distribution system for such “specialties.” Berry sees no justification for monocrop overproduction for global distribution as in the dominating and encroaching petrochemically-poisoned “agribusiness” practices that follow aged colonial strategies for feeding oppressed multitudes. His careful wording of terms does not condemn modest industrialization in the food production and distribution spheres per se but differentiates the “agribusiness” type as particularly devastating if it becomes the truly dominating specter that Long sees as eminently manifest. We old hippies have been collectively subversive for a long time; it seems our zeal did not

come out of the blue but has remained emergent. The path is wide, present, and beckoning across generations.

Like many food-focused scholars, teachers, and writers during the early pandemic, intrepid foodways folklorist and food studies advocate Lucy Long was quick to focus research on food-related experiences.<sup>4</sup> She ethnographically logged her own, and also managed a team of distance-ethnographic field surveyors who obtained similar information, which she describes in another pandemic foodways publication (Long, et al. 2021, see also Siragusa 2021, Catela 2021). In “Refrigerators, Cupboards, and Canning Jars,” she intensifies an essential area of personal household food system activity she experienced more fully than usual. The sphere includes spaces and tools for storage (2), preservation technologies and skills (4 and 5), and foodstuff production (8). Long’s slightly surprised and exaggerated depictions of her experiences suggest they occurred early during the pandemic, especially from March through October 2020. They were fortuitously timed with the growing and harvesting season in northern Ohio, a fecund midwestern lower Great Lakes state, and led her to garden and receive a weekly local farm box of seasonal produce. She considered coping with overabundances in foodstuffs through one of the more recent preservation methods (canning by pressure cooker) but found canning jar lids in too short supply (as is common close to the season of need during ordinary times). She wondered about a more ancient type, food drying, but with electrified equipment that had gone scarce because of reduced supply and great demand during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

While Long draws on a variety of

sources for generic evidence, I found the recordings of her own experiences and quotes from roughly a half-dozen+ peer colleagues particularly engaging, revealing the individual, personal garden-kitchen landscapes and practices she evaluates. She does not identify these chief sources, but several appear to share similar contexts, including broad sub-regional geography, personal and professional depth in food study and practice, socioeconomic status, mixed ethnicities, and middling ages. All but one bear women’s names; I hesitate to attribute skin colors. In this essay, I’d say she is writing from and for a peer audience who shares similar riches in resources, resourcefulness, and resilience in facing sudden challenges in their customary food provisioning strategies.

In this group, I see elements of expertise, strategy, play, and sustained intentionality that lead me to think the interviewees are mostly seasoned foodways performers who regularly enjoy cooking and experimenting with food. They maintain and judiciously monitor well-stocked and aesthetically housed larders (2, Capri; 3, Sarah; 8, Cathy), testing new recipes from cookbooks and online sources or adapting old ones (8, Cathy), judging compositions against usual expectations of completeness and satisfaction (8, Ellie and Albert), and expressing success in finished productions to others (10, Sarah). Long, Sarah, and Susan (5, 3, 6) mention earlier family influences that had made impressions and conditioned their current food preservation practices, confirming a traditional form of absorbing knowledge that sticks. Long also reveals, through memories unfolding while she checked her freezer contents, the rich social life of festive food events marked by the generation, commensal-

ity, and shard-saving of sumptuous and varied meals with friends and family in recent years; her leftovers are like an autonomic response to long-held home preparedness practices. These performers' repertoires and individual performances of preparations and practices would be continuously emergent, as Richard Bauman describes traditional storytellers in *Verbal Art as Performance* (1986 [1977], 37–45) and Henry Glassie characterizes in "Tradition" (1995). They show us fairly elaborated versions of personal food system performances while under the pandemic's initial grip, somewhat out of the ordinary, some even festive, fun, and experimental, yet not far from their ordinaries. Not yet like horrendous descents as experienced in famine, warfare, incarcerated ghettos and POW camps (Haber 2002, Helphand 2006).

Suppose more of Long's evidence had come from individuals like Nancy (9), who gained insights from her pandemic experience about the character of food supply distribution. In that case, we might have seen a comparatively more downsized level of foodways practice and performance consistent with a younger generation (Gilmore 2013). If there had been more evidence solicited and/or cited from individuals who live in communities with persistently less robust food security and supply, we also might see further variations in pandemic scalebacks and performance dynamics. Sarah (10) tempered her online posts of food production successes out of respect for hungry, food insecure people she knows are everywhere. We need to hear how these demographics are coping in different parts of the world and regionally throughout the USA. How might their ever-emergent foodways reflect deep structures of traditional wis-

dom and practice?

Some of us carry ongoing inklings that hard times are always lurking. Foodways, preparedness, and rationing are where we can individually and collectively take action to allay the worst frights and plights of surprising new events (Eckstrand & Eckstrand 3–5, 42; Terry 2020; Weso 2016; Westmacott 2002 [1992]; White 2018). I carry with me all too well the 1972 admonition of a 73-year-old German American farm woman in Dubois County, Indiana, who was still holding out on her own at her farmstead tending a small garden then, raising chickens, cooking (some on a woodstove), stocking, and preserving her foods: "You kids got Heaven compared to what we had!," she pronounced. "It can't last," she affirmed. I have few illusions that I could survive "self-sufficiently" as she and her past USA generations did, but I still take that vision to heart.

In Long's, several interviewees', and my foodways, I see evidence of a downsized food system version of "the old traditional way of life" that folklorist Warren Roberts articulated in his "Indiana Folklore" and "Material Culture and Folklife" classes at Indiana University back in the 1970s. While Roberts' concept may seem romantically idealized, oversimplified, and antiquated, it permits a kind of systems thinking embedded in terms like "landscape," "folklife," and "foodways." For me, it invokes compositions of defined spaces, working parts, individuals, and actions selectively intensified and engaged in aesthetics of relationship, through which I as an individual may express and share culture (Jackson 1984; Turner 1999; Erixon 1950, 15).

I respect this germ of an idea as it persists and resurges through continuities,

changes, and our present pandemic time as needed if only “in a general tone, a sound, a look, a certain spirit,” as Glassie asserts of “tradition” (408). For me, the toolkit also embraces forebodings, inklings, frights, and stages of thinking and acting with others in refreshed vigilance and cautionary behaviors. I see parallels in Wisconsin Historical Society’s early pandemic “Then & Now” series of weekly reports, City Lore’s “Group Poem,” the ASFS Listserv’s food supply thread (see note 4), and so many ethnographic fieldwork examples. I hang on to my foodways assemblage version of the toolkit as fundamental to my family’s co-existence and well-being in the world, and it has emerged in new and curious ways for discussion and reconsideration with others during the pandemic. Thanks to more recent mentoring, I see its kinship with foodways-focused traditional and local ecological knowledges (Kimmerer 121–127; Terry 2020; Rowen M. White in *For the Wild* 2020). Moreover, thanks to critical thinkers like Konrad Köstlin, and this journal’s audience, I have much to contemplate regarding how my confessional, intentional tone, in a reversely subversive way, may reflect fundamentalist aspects of “social conservatism!”

I stand by the decades we folklorists have gained, perhaps subversively, in the margins (Berry 1996, 171–223; Buccitelli 2016), integrating experiences, practices, hearsay, written and public sources, and especially the extraordinary volume of knowledge people have shared with us about navigating life during good times and bad. I have marveled at determined veterans who weathered lifetimes of changes, like the numerous farm and fish cooks and food producers I had interviewed over five decades since the

early 1970s in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. They often “cannily” doubled down to get through, applying a certain “knowing” to help sustain others through community collaborations—despite breakdowns in endemic food supply and persistent food system limitations. Many survived residual trauma from relatives’ past subsistence experiences and hard times making livings from farming, fishing, and “the land.” Many experienced tireless necessities of foraging, hunting, growing, and preserving food to sustain family and community. Some among the oft-evicted maintain neatly stored canned goods kept under lock and key, while others periodically celebrate a festive meal with more variegated ingredients than usual, despite dysfunctional appliances and cooking facilities (Desmond 2016). Even in the best of times, we see families and students, rural and urban, coping, despite persistent food insecurities. Their foodways testimonies cast an unwavering guiding light. I am grateful for it and Long’s impetus to contemplate it.

### Notes

- 1 The UNHRC UN Refugee Agency defines several categories of refugees and regularly reports population statistics at global and local scales. See <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.
- 2 Current West Coast USA and Canadian public works cautions resemble earlier Cold War bomb shelter preparedness to weather increasingly imminent climatological and geological disasters. Beyond such emergencies, publicly and privately supported social programs and services abound in the USA for the food insecure, offering variety in food selections and

meal menus through food banks, soup kitchens, Community Supported Agriculture shares, and discounts at some grocery stores.

- 3 A short list of several useful publications: Lockwood and Lockwood (1991, 2000, and 2002) and Kaplan, Hoover, and Moore's preface to *The Minnesota Ethnic Food Cookbook* (1986, 1998). These works have proven excellent for university teaching and perspectives on college student foodways at University of Wisconsin-Madison (Gilmore 2013). See also Ayande and Chilufya 2021 and Catela 2021.
- 4 Relevant freshly published works in a pair of foodways journals include Tye and Vaughan, eds.; Siragusa, Long, et al.; Ayande and Chalufya; Morrow; Catela. Food studies scholar Andrew Smith's March 14, 2022 Association for the Study of Food and Society listserv post reported that his recent search of Academia.edu revealed 16,000 pandemic-focused food studies publications already. He hoped to identify a smaller corpus for university teaching. Other early responses included: Wisconsin Historical Society's "Then & Now" nine weekly pandemic reports, April-June 2020, a third of which focused on foodways ("Home Delivery," "Seeds & Home Gardening," and "Food Rationing & Preparedness") (<https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS16339#jun1>); City Lore's email newsletter coverage from New York City ([citylore@citylore.org](mailto:citylore@citylore.org)) where food was a recurrent theme on "It Takes a Pandemic—Group Poem" (beginning April 10, 2020); a lively continent-wide "food purchasing during COVID outbreak?" thread, March 15-27, 2020 on the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS) membership listserv (see <https://www.food-culture.org/asfs-listserv/>).
- 5 Wisconsin Historical Society's "Then & Now" "Seeds & Home Gardening" post, May 26, 2020, noted a pandemic-related

upsurge in home gardening and related activities in Wisconsin that echoed earlier Victory Garden movements during past war-time periods of food rationing and scarcity.

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