Research Essay

Comfort Food in Activism: Sweet Potato Comfort Pie

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Abstract: The author uses the concept of "performative intimacy" to discuss the work of Sweet Potato Comfort Pie, an organization that makes and distributes sweet potato pies to comfort those affected by racial violence or other hardship, and express gratitude to activists working toward racial justice. The pies also create an atmosphere of care and support for participants in Sweet Potato Comfort Pie's programs, which host difficult discussions about white supremacy and systemic racism especially as they are manifested through police brutality and racial violence.

Keywords: activism, comfort food, foodways, race and racism

On May 25, 2020, a Black man, George Floyd, was killed by cops in Minneapolis, Minnesota; stopped for allegedly using a counterfeit $20 bill, Floyd was then pinned to the ground by law enforcement officers, one of whom, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck for nine minutes. Floyd called out that he couldn't breathe. Surrounding civilians called out that Floyd couldn't breathe. And yet Chauvin continued kneeling on Floyd's throat, even after he lost consciousness. Three other police officers failed to intervene. Some of Floyd's last words were calling for his mother. Once the police realized Floyd was unconscious, they called for medical attention, but didn't immediately start resuscitation. Floyd was pronounced dead at the scene (Hill et al. 2020).

Floyd was the latest in a series of incidents of police brutality against African Americans in the United States over the preceding several weeks. Two months before George Floyd's death, Ahmaud Arbery was gunned down while jogging through a neighborhood in Georgia that was a regular part of his route. Three white men thought he looked suspicious, so they grabbed their guns and chased him down in their cars and murdered him. For two months, prosecutors failed to press charges against the men, in part because one of them had been an investigator for the local district attorney. Finally, after a video was released weeks later of Arbery's murder, the men were arrested. The three men were later convicted of hate crimes and sentenced to prison terms (Andone 2022). Of course, the whole ordeal inspired outrage, as did the murder just days before Floyd, of Breonna Taylor—a medical professional who was killed in her own home after police executed a "no-knock" warrant on the wrong address. After the cops broke in without announcing themselves, armed to the hilt, Taylor's husband responded by grabbing his own firearm and shooting at the invaders. Taylor was killed by the cops, hit by eight out of twenty bullets fired. Immediately after her death, Taylor's husband was charged with attempted murder (Oppel et al. 2022).

Amidst this spate of new and highly publicized incidents of police violence, Floyd's murder was the straw that broke the camel's back. Protests erupted, at first centered in Minneapolis, but then quickly spread around the country. Despite the pandemic—which was disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and revealing the deep systemic inequalities in American life (North 2020)—crowds of

thousands gathered. In Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Louisville, Austin, Detroit, and many other towns, protests grew in strength and number. By the second or third day of demonstrations, protestors began looting. The third precinct in Minneapolis was set ablaze. Cops began to respond with tear gas and escalating violence (Taylor 2021). By the weekend, the protests had spread all around the country.

I watched all this occur from my apartment in Madison, Wisconsin, where I was still sheltering in place due to my own high risk for negative COVID outcomes. When the protests arrived in Madison on May 30, 2020, a lengthy peaceful protest eventually turned violent. Storefronts on State Street were smashed up. Video caught some white protestors breaking glass, while other protestors threw rocks at the police and lit a police car on fire. Still other protestors asked these disruptors to stop, but the police escalated, throwing tear gas and arriving in tactical gear (Beck et al. 2020). I watched live feeds and retweeted information on Twitter, focusing on boosting informational posts to help protestors find their way to safety.

At the time, all of this felt jarring to me—a feeling that reflects my privilege as a white American to not have to live in fear of this violence every day. It felt strange to be sitting safe and sound in my own apartment while I watched familiar places get destroyed and local police turn violent. I wished there were more that I could do to help—a complicated feeling when I didn't feel I myself could take to the streets because of my health and my anxiety around crowds. I wanted to find ways to stand in solidarity with those on the ground. I wished there was more I could do.

The next day, May 31st, I scrolled through my Facebook newsfeed, attempting to aggregate and boost posts to educate my predominately white followers on what was going on and how they could combat white supremacy. At the same time, I was trying to find tips from others about how to contribute to the racial justice efforts happening around me without having to hit the streets myself. It was then that I stumbled across a post from Rose McGee, the founder of "Sweet Potato Comfort Pie" (SPCP), a racial justice organization based in Golden Valley, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. I had met McGee in 2017 when I reached out to her to learn more about SPCP—a group that I ended up featuring in my dissertation analyzing how foodways create intimacy and connection.[1] McGee's post resonated with me immediately because it offered one pathway forward for folks like me. The post read:

> In solidarity while under curfew, make Sweet Potato Comfort Pies tonight in your own homes. Get them out into community across the country tomorrow - Monday. Why?
>
> It was hard being up all night on edge being vigilant pacing the floor and praying. Tonight we make Sweet Potato Comfort Pies in our own homes so that tomorrow in concert we take them wherever the Frontliners feel we need to go across the Twin Cities and across the country where you are. Justice for George Floyd...justice for all! Use your own recipe or Google Rose McGee's recipe and make yourselves ready. This is the "sacred dessert of Black Culture" and we know that Black Lives Matter! I

> will guide you through the process of making if you need it. For those interested, join us by getting your ingredients today in preparation of making your pies starting at 8pm tonight. You only need to make what the recipe calls for 2 pies. This pie is not about the quantity but the quality and power it represents. I will get back to you on when and where to distribute. "FORTIFY! FORTIFY! SWEET POTATO COMFORT PIE!" Stay safe everyone.
>
> (Please share with others who are in solidarity.) (McGee 2020)

This call to arms invited people stuck in their homes (due to COVID and, in the Twin Cities, a state-imposed curfew) to contribute in a material way to the community effort—to offer care in response to the violence. By offering SPCP's signature sweet potato pie, community members could not only "fortify" the protestors, but also extend comfort and build community connections.

The idea of using SPCP to support this racial justice movement is built on the understanding that sweet potato pies are a comfort food. Leveraging this understanding, SPCP is able to reach across difference in their community to affect long-lasting change. They do this by engaging with sweet potato pies in three ways. First, McGee, a Black woman originally from the South, considers sweet potato pies to be a personal comfort food, and ties the dish back to her own African American, Southern roots. Second, the pie becomes a gesture of comfort—by sharing a homemade dish, people feel recognized, supported, and cared for. Finally, the sweet potato pie provides a safe framing for people to engage in often difficult racial justice work. Altogether, it is SPCP's understanding of the comfort sweet potato pies can provide that allows it to be so effective. Looking back at how SPCP has operationalized the pies in the past, and examining how the pies were able to operate in May 2020, I hope to reflect on the role comfort food can play in activism.

Origins of Sweet Potato Comfort Pie

SPCP has always sought to comfort folks in light of tragedies, especially police violence. The organization began when Rose McGee saw the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown on the news in 2014. In an interview with the author on March 3, 2019, she says she heard a voice: "I am spiritual person, so I just feel the Lord spoke to me and said, 'make some pies and take 'em down." For several years, McGee, a Black woman in her sixties, had sold sweet potato pies at food stalls and farmers' markets around Minneapolis. She had only stopped selling the pies when her other work commitments made it impossible to keep up with demand. But when the call comes, McGee says, you heed it. "Call and Response is so, so

important in our culture…So when you know you gotta respond, you just do. Well, I did. I got busy and started baking. And took about 30 pies down there."

Figure 1. Rose McGee presenting during SPCP's MLK Day of Service in January 2019. Golden Valley, Minnesota. Photo by the author.

McGee walked the streets of Ferguson, Missouri just days later, giving out sweet potato pies and listening to what folks had to say.

"I didn't just go and say, 'here, take a pie.' I asked people, 'will you please take a sweet potato pie for comfort?' And they were shocked. But once they realized this was serious and they saw the pie, and they saw the beauty of the pies, they wanted to talk, and they wanted to be heard with respect." The conversations McGee had with the folks she met that trip stayed with her. The power of the pie was profound—both for sparking conversation and connection, but also because it allowed her to listen. She decided she had to harness the power of the pie for her own community and thus, Sweet Potato Comfort Pie was born.

McGee returned home to Golden Valley and gathered some of her friends and connections in the community. They decided that one need they could fill was offering a larger event and discussion around Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Pre-pandemic, SPCP's most consistent programming centered on an annual Martin Luther King Day of Service where volunteers would spend Saturday baking the equivalent number of pies to the age Dr. King would have been turning that year, followed by an event on Sunday where they celebrate Dr. King's life,

and decide as a community to whom they will gift the pies. Some pies are given in celebration of the hard work of community members, others are gifted to individuals who are experiencing hardship and need comfort or support. SPCP accompanies both the baking and the MLK Day event with story circles and "pie-dentity" conversations that allow participants to discuss their own identities and experiences of race (or lack thereof), as well as larger racial justice issues facing the community. The pie helps make these conversations more comfortable—it helps frame the experience around something delicious, sweet, and filling, rather than the harsh truths of racial inequality. The pies not only comfort people who receive them, they also comfort the SPCP participants who seek to do this difficult work toward change.

Figure 2. Volunteers holding up an extra-large sweet potato comfort pie made for the 2018 MLK Day of Service. Photo by the author.

While the MLK Day of Service grew larger and larger over the years, SPCP also gained national attention for its response to tragedies in communities nationwide. While SPCP has responded locally to, for instance, police shootings of Jamar Clark and Philando Castile (and during the pandemic, George Floyd and Daunte Wright), it has also brought pies to the Charleston Emanuel AME Church and the Tree of Life Synagogue after mass shootings at each. In these responses, the pies offer solace—they are made with love and care and offered with the intention of comforting the survivors. In this way, SPCP is a "comfort food" because it actively provides or evokes comfort; the pies become a gesture of comfort to someone outside the self.

But sweet potato pie is also a "comfort food" in the sense that it fits McGee's and others' personal criteria for comforting food. McGee calls sweet potato pie "the sacred dessert of Black culture." She ties it to her own memories of growing up in the South with her great-grandmother and grandmother, who raised her. McGee says that when they would gather every Sunday to eat after church, everyone would be after her grandmother's sweet potato pie—it was a dish that the community recognized her grandmother made best. Despite the superiority of her grandmother's recipe, McGee never learned to make the pie from her grandmother—she didn't start making sweet potato pie until she was an adult living far

from home and missing that family food. She was seeking the nostalgic comfort the pie could provide.

Of course, sweet potato pies are much more common in the American South than they are in the North, so McGee and SPCP are careful to curate people's understanding of the pie. Kate Towle, a white woman who is a founding member and volunteer for SPCP and a close friend of McGee, describes how she introduces the pie in SPCP story circles—a narrative she learned from McGee:

> One thing I like to tell in the circles is that the sweet potato…is a fibrous vegetable that's very, very nutritious and very easy to grow. And it was a staple of the diet for people who were enslaved, and when they got access to sugar and flour and ovens because of their creative ingenuity, they turned it into sweet potato pie, which became, you know, an iconic dessert. Well, when slaves, you know—people who were enslaved had hardly anything; they had no property of their own—they could take this iconic dessert and gift it to others to comfort them, to celebrate with them if they had a baby, to calm them and nurture them. And so from that standpoint, it's a beautiful and powerful cultural gift. (Towle 2019)

Towle's description of sweet potato pie suggests its symbolism as a gesture of comfort and care reaches back to the time of slavery, when it was one of the only goods slaves could exchange in celebration, love, or support. Understanding the pie as a "cultural gift," as Towle calls it, gives this gift an added meaning that supports SPCP's activist goals. By tying it back to the of traditions enslaved Africans and their descendants, the sweet potato comfort pies require those who eat them to consider the racial inequalities embedded in American culture.

Thus, sweet potato pie is an impetus for conversation around racial justice issues. By deliberately contextualizing the pie, SPCP invites people into discussions of race and racism in America. In some ways, it even invites people into Black culture. Though these discussions are often difficult, the sweet potato comfort pies actually comfort participants in these discussions as well. The pies literally make discussions of racial justice—especially in a predominately white community like Golden Valley—more palatable (pun intended). [2] McGee suggests,

> Well, I think like most things, you know, if you're trying to approach something with the preaching attitude, it may not be as effective. But if it's coming from something that is more human, that any of us can connect with, it will be more effective. And food, in my opinion, is something that we can all connect with and relate to, especially when intentionality has been brought into it with a cultural history, so that people understand that there's power in this, there's a reason that we're doing this.

By using the pies rhetorically, SPCP is able to create space for dialogues that can affect change. During the pandemic and the 2020 racial justice protests, many white folks were looking for outlets to address their own understandings, or lack thereof, of race and racism.

SPCP provides an approach couched in the pie—as a tool to both draw people in and facilitate conversations that they might not otherwise have. The pie comforts ruffled feathers and softens the sharp edges of these difficult conversations just by being part of them.

Furthermore, the pies give people a concrete way to give back that may feel more personal and accessible to them: by making and gifting pies, they can materially express their sorrow and support in a way that might be more familiar to them than marching in the streets. Making pies—or making any item meant to be given—is also recognized as an act of care. Putting in labor, time, energy, and effort makes a gift mean more to the recipient. Because the pies are homemade, they symbolize the giver's investment, thoughtfulness, and often, love—all of which can be comforting gestures or expressions of care. McGee's daughter, Roslyn Harmon, who also volunteers with SPCP, describes the key reasons one is given a pie: "I think to gift somebody with a pie it's just a, you know, 'way to go,' or, you know, 'things will get better'" (Harmon 2020). The pies are given to express support for the individual—either in gratitude or to provide comfort. Harmon goes on to say that reactions to the pie often echo this feeling of being cared for: "The people that receive it, like I've seen people cry. I've seen people get emotional, because it's like, '*wow*, you really thought of me?' And all of this is just fabulous. Like, 'Wow, that you would just take the time to think about me to receive one of these!'" These reactions demonstrate how pies are received as gestures of kindness—a kindness that extends beyond the moment of the gift and makes an impact on the receiver.

Figure 3. Sweet potato comfort pies being decorated with hearts during the 2019 MLK Day of Service baking day. Photo by the author.

Harmon also suggests that every sweet potato comfort pie is deliberately infused with love. "I do truly in my heart, believe that the pie tastes the way that it tastes and is so good because there's love behind it. There's love behind it." The infusion of love into the sweet potato pies allows them to be even more impactful—expressing love through the pies creates a sense of community that is lasting. Sweet potato comfort pies have been known to build bridges between disparate parts of the community. "We have great stories…of how

the pies brought people together," Harmon says. One of McGee and SPCP's favorite stories to tell is about the efforts they made early on to bring together law enforcement and communities to have conversations around racial justice issues. These efforts often succeeded—for instance, over the several years they have been hosting the MLK Day of Service, the Golden Valley police chief has gone from boycotting the event to bringing in the pies as an active participant. The pies are meaningful and powerful and, because they create comfort, they create connection. Those connections can help bring people together for lasting change.

Sweet Potato Comfort Pie at the George Floyd Protests

Reading McGee's call to action on May 31, 2020, I was excited to see what happened with the pies. That night, McGee taught people her pie recipe over Zoom, and folks all over the city made sweet potato comfort pies at home to deliver to organizations around town, and to share with protestors. The next day, McGee and a caravan of volunteers brought pies down to the George Floyd memorial site. Though I was following their engagement from a distance, still hunkering down in Madison, Wisconsin, McGee and SPCP immediately began posting about the experience of sharing pies with the protestors. In a Good Morning America (GMA) article about the day SPCP brought pies to the memorial site, McGee describes recognizing that they needed to thank the volunteers at the memorial site—the folks handing out water and food all day in the hot sun—just as much as they needed to offer support to the protestors. They handed out pies in gratitude and solidarity and comfort—reaching many different people. One volunteer, Hannah Carney, told GMA "the experience fundamentally changed me and those in the space…witnessing the joy and strength that our pies brought to people who accepted them was transformative. I could see and feel change happening in real time." The pies provided opportunities for healing by comforting the protestors and volunteers, bringing solace to the bakers, and spreading love in the community. "Right now if we can just get people to bring some calm in their communities and if sweet potato pie is the way to do it, then great, that's the way to do it," McGee said to GMA. "We're hoping that more people continue to join in." (McCarthy 2020).

SPCP brought more than calm to the community that day—they also shared love, built community, and started more conversations about racial justice. SPCP's success depends entirely on its ability to convey so much through this symbolic food. The meaning behind the pies, the care they express, and the comfort they offer, are what make them such effective tools for social change. In this way, sweet potato comfort pies expand upon the definition of "comfort food." Whereas "comfort foods" are normally determined by an individual's preference, nostalgia, or connection to a dish, sweet potato comfort pies can become comforting even among people who have never had them and have no connection to the pie. In giving a sweet potato comfort pie—and presenting the pie with the accompanying story and context behind SPCP's mission—SPCP helps create a connection to that pie for the person receiving it. Furthermore, the pie takes on a communal significance. The relationship created in the moment of gifting a sweet potato comfort pie is not just between the giver and receiver, but also between the receiver and the larger SPCP community seeking racial justice in the world.

In my dissertation work, I theorize and explore what I call "performative intimacy"—the ways in which relationships are performed into being through traditional practices (Widmayer 2021). The term "performative intimacy" describes both a process of creating or reinforcing connections in relationships, as well as the type of intimacy that is being created. It is an intimacy that results from sharing, connection, care, and meaning-making—a closeness that comes because those involved acknowledge the significance behind, in this case, a food practice and share in that participation together, bringing them closer together. In the case of SPCP, making, giving, and receiving pies all create intimacy in different ways and at different levels. This is in part because SPCP invites and creates space for vulnerability, learning, and comfort—all of which create a sense of finding one's place within the sweet potato pie tradition. But SPCP also provides the pies with a significance that asks participants to look beyond themselves, and in so doing, asks them to consider their larger connection to the world around them. When properly contextualized and narrativized within these frameworks, even the fleeting exchange of giving a sweet potato comfort pie takes on a powerful intimacy—an intimacy that will last.

It is by creating intimacy and connections in their community that SPCP achieves success. They seek to be a "catalyst for caring" in their community and by building these relationships, SPCP demonstrates how comfort food can play a role in community care—not only creating space for meaningful conversation and deeper dialogues on race in the community, but also building networks to support that care as it grows. Through SPCP's work, the pies not only nourish those who eat them, but also provide space to nourish and heal the community, creating opportunities for lasting and meaningful change.

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[1] In my dissertation, I examined what I call "performative intimacy"—the ways in which relationships are performed into being through traditional practices. Looking at foodways practices within my own family and beyond, I demonstrated how ongoing interaction around and through traditional practices, the way participants in those traditions created and shared meaning, and the role of care, love, and gifting in food traditions all contributed to building relationships within groups (Widmayer 2021).

[2] SPCP has received some criticism for prioritizing or "catering to" white people. While these critiques are valid and represent a difference of opinion in the best way to affect change, they also underestimate the effect of SPCP's work. In my dissertation, I argue that SPCP engages with a long tradition of radical love in racial justice work, harkening back to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders who foregrounded love and care. Alongside other forms of protest or activism, an approach rooted in radical love has its place in the racial justice landscape. Furthermore, SPCP's recent work has done more to foreground what their mission statement calls "marginalized voices and experiences," making an intentional shift to supporting BIPOC. For further discussion on SPCP's radical love and its place in racial justice movements, see Widmayer 2021.

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