

# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

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Review of:

## **The Food and Folklore Reader**

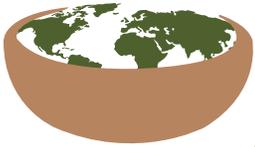
Edited by Lucy M. Long. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 467, introduction, index, appendix.

By: Hanna Griff-Sleven

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Folklorist Lucy M. Long has curated a textbook to serve as an introduction to folklore methods and theory as they apply to food culture. It is an ambitious undertaking: this book contains forty articles spanning the discipline of folklore. Long has culled the archives of the field, using seminal works that define folklore as well as articles that explore more contemporary issues such as food security and culinary tourism. The strength of a good reader relies on the choice of articles and an understanding of why the articles were chosen. This reader succeeds the most with Long's comprehensive introductions to each of the book's five parts. She does an admirable job covering diverse food cultures with examples from the many ethnic identities within the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Jewish and Arab cultures, and many more. Also included are helpful questions for discussion and suggestions for further reading in order to encourage students to explore these ideas in their own work and/or future projects. However, the book is a lengthy one, and if one is using it in print, it is a heavy one. There are simply too many articles, and not all of the older ones need to be reprinted since they are easily available elsewhere. Food culture is so popular these days, with food blogs and articles appearing daily, perhaps a more critical editing of Long's selections would make this book stronger.

The *Food and Folklore Reader* is divided into five parts: "Foundations: History, Definitions, and Methodologies," "Food in Groups, Community, and Identity," "Food as Art, Symbol, and Ritual," "Food as Communication, Performance, and Power," and "Food in Public and Applied Folklore." Long has written excellent introductions to both the subject and the subsequent



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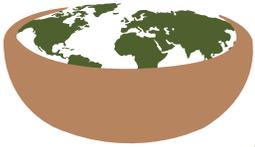
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articles. The introductions are all followed by discussion questions, references, and suggestions for further readings. There is an appendix of sources and a thorough index as well. Because this reader was intended to introduce the reader to the many viewpoints and ways to study food, Long excerpted many of the articles in order to include so many. As a foodie reader, I found this disconcerting and disappointing: I wanted the whole article there. I think this is one of the downfalls of such ambition. Because of the book's heft as well, I would have liked to see a selection of half of the forty essays that included complete versions of her favorites and reference notes for the others.

In Part I, "Foundations: History, Definitions, and Methodologies," Long opens with Don Yoder's 1972 article, "Folk Cookery." Re-reading this article reminded me that he was the one to suggest the use of the word "foodways" in order to include all the many different ways food should be studied, setting the course for food studies in the United States.

Part II, "Food in Groups, Community, and Identity," not surprisingly, is very diverse as it looks at folk groups and identity. "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways," by William and Yvonne Lockwood, was included in its entirety and was full of rich ethnographic detail about the Arab-American community's foods and the changes they have undergone in various contexts, both public and private. The culinary glossary and rich ethnographic documentation made me want to jump on a plane, call the Lockwoods, and go shopping in the markets and eat my way through the neighborhoods. As a mind bender, I enjoyed Jay Mechling's "Boy Scouts and the Manly Art of Cooking." His analysis explores how the Boy Scouts of America take the traditionally feminine domestic field of cooking and other nurturing tasks and present these skill sets as masculine. Another well-written article is Marcie Cohen Ferris's "Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora," a description of her Jewish family's foodways in Arkansas and how they used their ethnic identity to negotiate their religious and regional identity. She is a beautiful writer and this article is a must for anyone who wants to look at foodways through family stories and identity.

Part III, "Food as Art, Symbol, and Ritual," looks at folk traditions and food in many different ways. Annie Hauck Lawson and Sean Galvin write about



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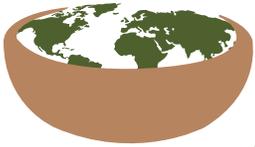
their fieldwork with five different ethnic bread makers in Brooklyn, New York. They did a remarkable job of addressing the interplay between baking as an art versus baking as a business and the ways religious and cultural values are encouraged through bread making. They captured the diversity of Brooklyn through the commonality of bread and a study like this would be a helpful article in a world where diversity appears to be a dirty word.

Long's own article, "Green Bean Casserole and Midwestern Identity: A Regional Foodways Aesthetic and Ethos," is a good read on how mass produced recipes become meaningful and has the bonus of including the original recipe. This also would be helpful in a class where the exotic might very well be the white Caucasians who are wondering where their folklore is situated.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article, "Playing to the Senses: Food as Performance Medium," looks at the possibilities and constraints of the convergence of food and performance by examining how food as art and food in everyday life intersect. It is a very accessible and creative lens to look at folklore in context.

Part IV, "Food as Communication, Performance, and Power," is perhaps one of the most thought provoking as the authors chosen bring up many sensitive issues through food. Janet Theophano's "I Gave Him Cake: An Interpretation of Two Italian-American Weddings," examines two weddings in one family and how the choice of the menu for each highlights the importance of understanding the context of any situation (in this case, how the family felt about the choice of the grooms).

Perhaps one of the more disturbing articles I have ever read is Luanne Roth's "Beyond *Communitas*: Cinematic Food Events and the Negotiation of Power, Belonging and Exclusion." She examines the way mainstream films use foodways as metaphors for representing groups as different, foreign, or distasteful. This article was only an excerpt and focused mostly on the violence in the film *American History X*. Roth alluded to her examination of food in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Along Came Polly* and I liked the contrast of humor with her insightful yet visceral analysis of *American History X*. Thus it was a relief and pleasure to read Diane Tye's article, "A Fruitcake Always makes Me Think of Grandma: Food and Memory in L.M. Montgomery's



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Creation of Female Landscapes.” Tye examines food in a literary context and how food descriptions can evoke a sense of place and passing of time.

Part V, “Food in Public and Applied Folklore,” is perhaps the weakest section. There are too few articles about foodways and festivals and yet the public arena of festivals and food blogs is where the student of folklore and food usually first comes in contact with food. It is also a disservice to the reader that no photographs were included. Food and its preparation are such visual genres, I am sure many of the authors have documented their work and such documentation in this chapter would have been helpful.

I found two essays helpful. “No Food or Drink in the Museum?: The Challenges of Edible Artifacts,” by Sarah Conrad Gothie, raises interesting questions as she looks at still life paintings, Julia Child’s kitchen, and how these give way to complicated issues of experiencing food in and out of context. This article would be of great use in a classroom, having students reconsider classic paintings of food, reconstructed kitchens, and how museums interpret such things. Nomvula Mashoai Cook and Betty Belanus’s article, “A Taste of Home: African Immigrant Foodways,” was originally in the 1997 Program book for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. This is a beautifully written article that uses folklore theory as it describes the role of African restaurants in establishing continuity in traditional celebrations and food.

Overall this anthology is good and the bibliographies and other references are excellent. Long knows the world of food and foodways. Yet this might be the fault in the book. On the one hand, fuller versions of a smaller selection of Long’s favorites may have sufficed. On the other, a two-volume format could have permitted full versions of the entire selection. As an adjunct professor whose time is limited, I would have appreciated having everything in one place instead of having to hunt down full versions of the articles elsewhere. All in all, however, Long did an admirable job of collecting these articles on how to study the vast and ever growing world of food and culture chiefly from Folklore’s foodways perspectives.