

Positionality

Growing Up in the Layers of MAPSO

While my family technically resides in South Orange, New Jersey, I like to say that I grew up in MAPSO. MAPSO or SOMA are the two playful terms that residents of Maplewood and South Orange use to describe the integration of the two towns. Each town maintains their own municipality, operating systems, and distinct charm. MAPSO has a strong foothold in the performing arts, and takes a lot of pride in local entertainment. MAPSO is situated 45 minutes outside of NYC, therefore many residents were former NYC dwellers who wanted a slower life while still being able to further their artistic careers. However, the individuality of one town never negates their connection to the other, and those who live in MAPSO feel a sense of belonging in both communities. Maplewood and South Orange share one school district (SOMSD). There are six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Inevitably, as you grow up and transition into different stages of adolescence, you are able to meet new peers who share the same sense of MAPSO identity and belonging. Consistently growing up with this mutual and instantaneous acceptance of new people into my world has helped shape how I conceptualize community, a welcoming spirit and a sense of belonging.

There is a weighted element of performativity and contradiction within the MAPSO community and school district. Part of the appeal of Maplewood and South Orange is in how they define the area, as a niche for diversity and liberal ideals; around the towns there are signs that trumpet ‘Stigma-free Town’ and ‘Hate Has No Home Here’. However, the community has historically maintained an issue of housing segregation, economic disparity, and academic inequality. MAPSO hasn’t escaped the structural racism of their suburban urban planning policies, such as a history of redlining and exclusionary zoning laws in which neighborhoods are zoned entirely for single family homes to restrict the building of

affordable apartments, isolating affordable multi-family housing to less affluent and less white neighbourhoods.

These housing patterns trickle down into the schools where one of the six elementary schools (Seth Boyden) is predominantly low-income students of color, while the rest are majority white, and in certain areas drastically wealthier. A 2017 ProPublica analysis of the district found that on average, Black students in the district are “academically three grades behind their white peers... are five times likelier to be suspended than white students... [and] on state tests in math and language arts, black students lagged behind their white classmates in all seven elementary schools” (NYT). As a white student, I felt a lot of pressure from my school and peers to enroll in Advanced Placement courses. At the same time, students of color were being deterred away from those spaces. At Columbia High School, where I attended, “white students made up 64 percent of the students who took Advanced Placement courses... while black students represented just 22 percent” (NYT). Thus, a contradiction for MAPSO, who publicly prides itself on being inclusive, diverse, equal, and progressive, have never intentionally repaired the systemic racism within our community and schools. The romanticized concept of continuously welcoming new members of our community as you enter each school year was a deceitful ploy to hide a tactful secret of systemic racism and classism behind progressive propaganda. This context is important towards explaining my positionality and realist worldview of addressing the impact of underlying systems. Rather than conjuring up some idealized image of a united and harmonious two towns, authentic and sustainable community building efforts must confront inequitable power structures and work as a collective in order to have meaningful change.

My Identities

I identify as a White, Jewish, queer and cisgender woman, and a 21 year old college student. My queerness is a facet of how I conceptualize belonging. For almost the entirety of

my life, my identity has been tied to being a student. I always felt an odd intensity and competitive nature around academia within SOMSD, especially among the wealthier and whiter students I grew up with. Starting in elementary school, I always struggled in the SOMSD academic arena. Growing up with undiagnosed ADHD I internalized a lot of self-doubt around my intelligence, while simultaneously, constantly being pushed to keep up with my classmates. This manifested into a deep seated need to prove myself academically and is conflated into how I orient myself as a Praxis student. I used Praxis to prove myself, my academic value, and my beliefs.

My positionality is inextricably tied to my privilege and the societal benefits I receive from my race. I maintain a perspective that my whiteness is often my first identifier when entering new spaces and reflect that outlook when engaging in community building work. How I conceptualize food and the social practices around it are connected to my privileges regarding access and space. Moreover, the perceptions of convivial food experiences, what counts and what does not are connected to socio-economic hierarchies and identities. Thus, any conceptualization of food itself is contextual, my positionality holds that at the forefront when I assert myself into food spaces.

Food Contributes to my Worldview

Furthermore, I have found food to be a tool for connecting with my Jewish culture. JGAF applies this through potluck style Shabbats and holidays, in which members bring any type of food to share. In preparing and sharing Jewish recipes, such as the kugel I made last Passover for JGAF, I feel closer to my ancestry, my family, and those I am sharing those meals with. In my life, food has always acted as a tool for fostering community. This is displayed most clearly through my family's extensive and diverse friend group, affectionately called the 'SOMA FAMILY,' who helped to cultivate my relationship with food and cooking for others. Lively dinner parties were consistent throughout my childhood, where everyone

could taste the special ingredients of care and love in each meal. Through food I learned about my loved ones' different cultures and histories. I'm so grateful for those childhood food experiences, where I witnessed families of different religions, races, and structures meaningfully appreciate one another. The 'SOMA FAMILY largely contributed to my understanding of what food, community, and sharing all mean to me.

Both an Insider and Outsider of Clark's Communal Eating Scene

In this Praxis I am both an insider and outsider of Clark's communal eating practices. While I am not directly linked to the eating habits of every Clark student, the past four years have offered me insight into the general campus climate. Throughout my time at Clark I have personally witnessed a collective enjoyment of communal eating, whether that be in the dining hall, at JGAF, at a nearby restaurant, or in a friend's apartment. I have seen the excitement of a sporadic meal with friends, where schedules magically align and students are seen eating bistro sushi on the green. I have also witnessed a sense of loneliness and anxiety among Clark students, who struggle to feel connected to others. I see communal eating to be a tool for reducing that loneliness and encouraging meaningful shared experiences.