Beyond Sustenance: The Social Practices Around Food Among the Students of Clark University

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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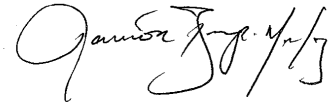

Professor Neto Leão

Abstract

This study focuses upon the social practices around food at Clark University, a private liberal arts school in Worcester, MA. It explores the role of food, and its associated social practices to unpack a perceived lack of conviviality and community around food within the institution. This work is significant in that food holds many titles; its meaning is contextual to place, identity, and power. It explores the notions of choice and agency among students' social practices around food. Through student surveys, observations, and an archival analysis, this paper underscores the importance of understanding the meaning of food when conceptualizing and constructing community food initiatives; that it is imperative those initiatives are structured and designed with the multifaceted meanings food involves. In this paper, I use the phrase ‘food as a tool’ to highlight how people use food in different manners alongside different meanings. Finally, this research finds significance in the delineation of ‘food’ and ‘fuel’ in the context of institutional demands onto student life.

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Introduction

The Rise and Fall of the Bitches in the Kitch

After over a year of pandemic isolation, I was quite accustomed to cooking on my own. Cooking was my reprieve from the constant family time that characterized the pandemic. I used it to be creative and alleviate my pandemic-induced depression. In a society that urges us to be unique, I felt ordinary, but I discovered in the pandemic that cooking made me distinct. In the Fall of 2021, Nora and I both entered college with the mindset that we preferred to cook alone. While my dorm building shared one kitchen among three floors of residents, Nora's dorm had a semi-private kitchen. Both of us craved the privacy and ease of cooking in a kitchen that we felt comfortable in and naturally began to cook dinners together for our friends.

There's an inherent thrill when cooking with Nora, she's artistic and adventurous. Nora's mind sees limitation as an opportunity for creativity; despite not owning a baking tray, we used tinfoil to create one of our own[1]. To me, Nora's demeanour incites our culinary creativity, adding toasted pistachios to our carbonara and tajin to mashed potatoes. With different palettes and skills, we learned how to riff off of the others strengths and develop mutual trust in the kitchen. That mutual trust pushed us to create *Bitches in the Kitch,* a joint instagram account to document our culinary creations. We hoped to inspire other Clark students to cook more with their friends, by finding creative ways around the barriers that come with being a college freshman.

[1] This homemade baking tray was used much more than I'd like to admit, but is a testament to our ingenuity!

Sophomore year created a new dynamic in our relationship as we became roommates. Together with our close friends Nat and Evelyn, we moved into an on-campus apartment hoping that living together would allow us to spend more time together. Contrary to our expectations, we actually found ourselves spending less time together during our second year than we had during our first. I was confused and disappointed, why did I feel so far from my friends when they were just down the hall? Living together was supposed to be fun and bring us closer together, but our friendships were in uncharted territory and it must've been our fault for navigating it poorly. We stopped intentionally scheduling time together. We convinced ourselves that brief greetings in passing or occasional kitchen overlaps while preparing our separate meals counted as quality time. Nora and I did see each other more than the others, and consequently, we cooked together a fair amount. Perhaps reasoned by *Bitches in the Kitch* or our shared major which enabled more schedule alignment? Regardless, by the time junior year arrived, we all deliberately decided to stop living together and force ourselves to make these friendships a priority. But junior year was not the romantic reality we had dreamed. Sure, we hung out and cooked together a few times, but weeks would go by in between those plans; it was a struggle to discern what was a priority. Senior year exacerbated this issue, pressurized by a fear of 'the last time'. As the rigors of college life heap more time and energy demands upon us, our intentional time together dwindles to sparse occasions — and *Bitches in the Kitch* feels like a relic of our past.

Frustrated, I began to question how liable our approach to living together really was. Junior and senior year were far from the magical switch I'd hoped for. Instead, I found myself feeling even further away from my friends and myself. Moreover, my relationship to food was changing. Food was no longer the connection that deepened and enriched my friendships, nor was it my creative and reflective outlet; food was transforming into fuel. I watched as my passion for trying new cuisines and challenging myself as a cook faded away.

My sophomore-year excitement to be constantly cooking in a kitchen of my own had been reduced to microwaving a frozen burrito at 10pm and watching whatever mind-numbing TV show sparked my interest.

Commentary on the Problem

I knew that I wasn't the only person having this experience, Nora felt it too; we discussed how the tiny sliver of being together with food had been stomped over and replaced by being together silently in the library. But beyond the two of us, were other students feeling and living this way? Had they also seen a shift in their relationship and behaviors around food? If so, what did it look like? What characterizes Clark students' social practices around food? More and more, I was becoming convinced that I was not the sole cause of my dissatisfaction in college, and speculated that my emerging foodways were being shaped by something else.

I offer this vignette, about my relationship with food and friendship, to illustrate just one way that college students demonstrate a social practice around food and navigate its associated changes. For Nora and me, this practice has been cooking together, but what do these social practices around food look like for other college students?

Additionally, this vignette begins to unpack a problem at Clark University: a lack of conviviality and community around food. The university's 2023 campus climate survey revealed significant dissatisfaction among students regarding their sense of belonging and community, especially those of marginalized identities. Student respondents expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation, indicated by comments such as, "[Clark is a] bit cliquey and can be intimidating to make friends" (Clark Campus Climate Survey, 2023, p. 7). BIPOC[2] students, in particular, reported a notably low sense of belonging. In describing the campus climate, some BIPOC respondents commented that, "Clark needs some cultural

[2] (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)

healing - we do not have diverse classrooms and the brochures feel inaccurate to the more cliquey, predominantly White environment" as well as, "I feel a sense of community in spaces that make an effort to include a diverse set of voices and experiences" (Clark Campus Climate Survey, 2023, p. 7). Furthermore, students expressed a very strong appreciation and desire for events and activities that enable the sharing and celebration of cultural, ethnic, and racial identities. Survey respondents commented that "events such as Gala…" that celebrate identity and "connect students through the dances" are the most likely to bring Clark students together "through widespread attendance/support" (Clark Campus Climate Survey, 2023, p. 12). It is evident that despite feeling disconnected on campus, students are craving a sense of conviviality and community, many with an eagerness to learn about their peers' cultural identities.

My Research

To explore this experienced and theorised problem, I set out to understand students' social practices around food, and the factors that mold and model them. The benefits of communal eating are longer-term and harder to calculate, which is surprising given that many in society presume these benefits to be undoubtedly true. I argue that dominant societal assumptions that coincide with food, eating, and their attached benefits do not encourage consistency in regards to 'being together' through food. Drawing from my own collegiate experiences with the social practices of food, I place this hypothesis in a university setting and determine how universities influence the consistency and convivial nature of students' social practices around food.

As a researcher, I am interested in how food and communal eating[3] can be a conduit for social change and building community. The aim of this paper is to unpack the social practices around food at Clark University,[4] and discern what factors influence those

[3] In this paper, I will use the terms 'communal eating','social eating', and 'commensality' interchangeably.
[4] Students social practices around food indicates my dependent variable

practices[5]. To research this, I administered a survey looking into how students experience food while they're part of the institution. My initial research questions attempted to explore students social practices around food:

1. How do students experience communal eating during their time at Clark?
    a. When practicing communal eating, are students able to recognize and experience benefits towards their socioemotional wellbeing, mental health, and collective wellbeing?
2. How do communal eating practices build community among Clark students?

As I began to receive and analyze my data I began to recognize a misalignment in those initial questions. First, my research questions were embedded with my own personal bias and a lack of clarity in defining forms of communal eating. Second, my data demonstrated the significance of my inquiry; respondents were detailing the various forms and meanings associated with their social practices around food. My research was proving that I couldn't assert the community building strengths of food, without unpacking the emerging variation in how students relate to food.

The redirection of my research questions are as follows:

1. What are Clark students' social practices around food?
    a. What role does food play in the lives of students? Essentially, how do students think about and relate to food? In what ways do they organize and practice community around food?
2. What structural and personal factors act as barriers and enablers of experiencing community around food at Clark?

Theorizing a Theoretical Framework

[5] The influential factors of students social practices around food indicates my independent variable

You may have noticed that oftentimes recipes, chefs, and cooks will emphasize the importance of *balance* in a meal. The balance of the five flavor elements, Sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami, each critical towards structuring a harmonious plate. Additionally, the field of nutrition and associated public health policy efforts recommend eating a well balanced diet; focusing their concerns onto "nutrients, calories, physiology and body weight [... from this viewpoint] 'eating behaviour' classically relates to food *intake* in the most restrictive sense" (Fischler, 2011, p. 532). Interestingly enough, the idea of balance is profoundly integrated throughout food's orbit. Conceptually, food itself is a multidimensional phenomena. In being an integral part of humanity and evolution, it appears that food necessitates a balanced combination of all 'ingredients'. This is also the case when theorizing food, "we need to think about matters political, historical, economic, socio-cultural, and scientific *all at once*... we must study food as a system. Such holistic thinking actually restores our sense of power and humanity" (Belasco, 2008, p. 7)

Around the time that I chose to center my Praxis around food, I was taking Professor Borges-Méndez's class and beginning to scratch the surface of food scholarship. But my conception of food was still limited and still largely based through an experiential lens; I understood that food was related to culture, identity, social inequities, and community, and I could grasp that food was affiliated with intersectionality, but I hadn't internalized that conception yet. Through Praxis, I found that my interpretation of food was unbalanced and lacked vital pedagogical and interdisciplinary grounding. "Tasting as you cook and adjusting flavours is a skill that chefs must master to perfect the dish" (Le Cordon Bleu). Creating a balanced theoretical framework required ongoing engagement with the presence of food across a multitude of disciplines, as well as, continuously re-conceptualizing my current stance on food. I say 'current' because this theoretical lens will continue to evolve. As society

develops, and as I develop alongside, the lens through which I understand food should change too; as such, *I'm tasting as I cook*.

A distinct aspect of my process for re-defining my food lens was to answer my own survey questions. In particular, it was helpful to answer my question examining the role that food plays in participants' lives and on a college campus. As I answered my own questions I began to notice that this newfound scholarly background had broadened my insights and influenced my perception of the role of food. The combination of the academic and personally reflective lenses allowed me to physically see exactly how I conceptualized food, resulting in what I classify as my *Food Theory* and my *Eating Theory.*

A Critical Taste

I believe that food, whether that be understood conceptually, theoretically, materially, or practically, is deeply an entrenched and fundamental component of society. As members of any society, we are inseparable participators of a global, local, and agro-ecological food system. We are inseparable from "the web of actors, processes, and interactions involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming, and disposing of foods" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 2). As I built my theoretical framework, I was advised by professors and peers to take a critical stance on my definition of food, eating, and its social impacts. Applying an individual critique was easy, searching for applicable theories was the hard part. Yet, our current food system demands that scholarly theories "embrace a much needed holistic understanding of the interplay between food, people and physical space" (Andersen, 2015, p. 44), thus, a critical lens is imperative.

From a scientific and climate standpoint, our food system is in hot water. Already, it fails to equitably deliver nutritious, safe, and healthy diets to all citizens; just reaching

universal food security[6] is not a given in this structure. To make a bleak situation even bleaker, "the world is changing: the global population is increasing, migration to cities is accelerating, and transitions in dietary habits towards more processed and animal source based foods are becoming commonplace. [... thus, increasing] pressures on land-use and environmental change" (Dangour et. al., 2017, p. 8). Moreover, the current approach of our food system relies upon an uneven distribution of power: "dominant models driving food processing, distribution and consumption patterns" (Clapp et. al., 2022, p. 5) are upheld by, "structural inequities and power differentials in society – be they based on gender, race, literacy, or other factors that are often beyond the control of individuals" (Clapp et. al., 2022, p. 5). A discussion of food habits, at its core is a discussion of climate change and agroecology, food politics and structures, and food sovereignty[7] and agency. A holistic viewpoint of eating habits, be they communal or individual, understands that "different peoples options are channeled down particular pathways, reinforced by particular policy processes, institutional pressures and external support" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 9).

Capitalism, the informant of Habitus and Field

Marxian logic grounds this discussion within the context of capitalism. Marx bases his ideas of Materialism on the idea that humans are corporeal beings who *produce* their means of subsistence "beginning with food, water, shelter, clothing, and extending to all of the other means of life" (Bellamy, 2016, p. 2). Translated onto a societal scale this becomes the Modes of Production, the ways society produces its necessities of life, aka capitalism. The diet of the working class plays a large role in understanding Marx's view of capitalism and class difference. Within the class-based Vicrorian system of this time period, "working-class

[6] Scholars of food, agroecology, and climate change define that food security to at minimum, "concerns the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods as well as the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, for example, without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies" (Tomich et. al., 2011, p. 137).

[7] The term Food Sovereignty emerged from 1990s food justice movements, such as *La Via Campesina* to fight against inequalities from a globalized food system. Defined as "the right of peoples to define their own food system to ensure their own livelihoods and access to culturally appropriate foods" (Clapp et. al., 2022, p. 4)

diet was heavy in carbohydrates and fats, low in protein, and deficient in several vitamins, notably C and D [... and maintained] a serious lack of fresh green vegetables, a low protein intake, and very little fresh milk" (Bellamy, 2016, p. 3). Within the context of Victorian life-long working hours, often arduous physical labour, and long walks to and from work" (Bellamy, 2016, p. 3), the health of laborers must have been deficient and concerning. Marx believed that "the dietary conditions of the working class were part of a larger dialectic of poverty, a symptom of the entrapment of the poor in capitalist society" (Bellamy, 2016, p. 8).

This falls in line with Marxist Base and Superstructure theory: "Base refers to the production forces, or the materials and resources, that generate the goods society needs [... and] Superstructure describes all other aspects of society" (Singh, 2013, p. 75). In regards to eating, the means and relations of production, i.e. capitalism, shapes our culture around eating, which I argue is highly individualistic. Additionally, this base informs both our individual Habitus and our various Fields. French sociologist and intellectual Pierre Bourdieu asserted that our everyday practices of eating are driven not by conscious decision-making or free choice but as a result of Habitus, "the paramount frame through which a person perceives the social world, and is, at the same time, itself framed by a person's socio-cultural and economic conditions of existence and social class positions" (Ehlert, 2021, p. 682). Ultimately, this becomes internalized and converted dispositions that generate meaningful practices (Phull et. al., 2015, pp. 981-982). As long as the base is maintained the superstructure can embody culture, practices, and accordingly Habitus. Furthermore, it informs the Field: the spaces and norms that govern the performance of social roles and influence or alter habitualized eating practices. In explaining key Bourdieuian concepts, Thomson (2013) quotes Bourdieu's description of the Field as,

> "... It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same

> time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies (Bourdieu 1998b: 40–41)" (Thomson, 2013, p. 72).

As such, the Field could be understood as the material formation of the Base and Superstructure. Taken in combination with one another, Base and Superstructure theory, plus Habitus and Field explain the internal and external negotiations of eating practices, how food and eating is idealized, limited, and approached by other institutions and individual agents.

Capitalism commodifies food, makes it a purchasable and marketable substance and thus, tells us that "food is a commodity, an object whose exchange creates distance and differentiation" (Counihan, 1999, p. 113). As a reflection, an eating culture informed by capitalism values the speed, convenience, and nutritional components of food. As corporeal beings we are defined by how we *produce* a substance, not by how we *gather* or *extract* it, which is given far less social capital and merit; "a capitalist driven food industry [the base] has replaced the element of time with the perceived necessity for speed [the superstructure]" in this manner, "the food industry has fractured our ability to cultivate a relationship with food based on ancestral ways of knowing" (Abarca, 2021, p. 5), but replaced with with the idealized mindset of "the American dream: that each person can and should carve his or her own path to success. Eating should be as individualized as other pursuits" (Counihan, 1999, p. 118).

The critical lens that I've outlined has influenced the ways in which I perceive food and eating at Clark and within scholarly literature. This draws the foundation of my theoretical framework and my conceptualization of food theory.

Food Theory: Beyond Sustenance

Within this Praxis, the notion of a ‘food theory’ determines the concoction of theories and lens’s that inform my conceptualization of food, what role I believe it plays in society, and particularly at Clark. Throughout my Praxis I have maintained the belief that food is capable of much more than satiating our physical needs and instead provides outlets for gathering in community. When viewed as something capable of encouraging sociality, food can be reflective of cultural values and encourage *being with* as well as being *in* community. With this in mind, we might create our own opportunities to change how we individually and/or collectively approach food.

(R)Evolutionary

From a historical and anthropological perspective, food is a revolutionary aspect of humanity's evolution. Obviously, food is a means for sustaining ourselves; the body tells you to eat when you feel hungry and so, the privilege of satiating that hunger with food exemplifies one of foods most innate uses. However, while food is one of the most essential elements of human survival, “it is much more than simple biological nutrition” (Kerner & Chou, 2015, p. 1). Food underscores the evolution of humanity through the millennia, largely due to our need to survive. Yet, throughout evolution food has not remained in a strict role of being a biological necessity, rather our biologic need to eat employs food to be versatile, creating opportunities to form cooperative foraging groups “and serving as a source of our sociability through cooking and sharing food” (Crowther, 2013, page. XX). Humanity’s relationship with food accentuates our evolutionary history which contextualizes why food plays such a large role in our contemporary lives. Consistently, food has shaped our daily habits and influences our physical and socioemotional health. It defines our identities, as individuals and within the groups and societies we feel tied to (Crowther, 2013, page. XX); it has always paved the way for humans, the innately social creatures that we are to engage with our sociability.

A Comprehensive Overview

In this paper, I will use the term *food as a tool* to explain foods' multifaceted functions that extend past fulfilling our (albeit important) basic needs. With that being said, because food is so integral to our lives it can be employed in various aspects of society. To name a few, food can be used to unpack historical transformations; imbedded within the promotion of health and wellness, food can be a marketing tool; it can become an instrument for visually or theoretically telling narratives or expressing social commentary; food can shape careers and express one's values; food is historically, culturally, socially, and socioeconomically symbolic; food is emblematic of the individual, in that food is used to express the eating preferences or desires of the individual; food functions to intentionally perpetuate marginalization, via inequitable distributions of food resulting in food insecurity and food apartheid communities, and to apply social capital to systemically dominant cuisines and eating habits; food can be used to control or reward behavior, of the self and others; today, food is capitalized upon used to structure and sustain a corporate global food system.

Food is a tool for learning about other cultures, countries, and cuisines. Crowther (2013) defines cuisines to be "a facet of culture concerned with ideas, beliefs, behaviours, and practices of people in relation to their creation and use of food that is socially and physically sustaining (Crowther, 2013, p. XXVII). Cooking a recipe with a cuisine that is not your own becomes a learning opportunity to begin to understand other cultures; the same ideology applies to eating a restaurant with a cuisine that is not your own. However, there is an inherent privilege in that ability, and is determined by some form of flexibility in capital. Bourdieu's three fundamental forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural are seen as mutually constitutive, "in that economic capital affords the time and resources for investment in [...] cultural capital [and] socioeconomic success [... which is] associated with greater social capital in that one's social network becomes broader, more influential, and more

conducive to opportunity and further enhancement of one's other capital stocks" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Essentially, the capacity to try and explore with food is reliant upon the relations of capital an individual contains. Still, as both an edible substance and a cultural symbol, food welcomes us to share our culturally significant foodways with others and facilitates understanding others across cultural, ethnic, or racial similarities and differences. Cuisines are emotional and contextual, to share one's culture through food then becomes a uniquely intimate and privileged occasion for sharing and accepting identities.

In a similar light, many people experience food as a universal love language that communicates care for others. The act of offering, sharing, or making food for someone else "can be used to show affection to loved ones, to show hospitality to strangers, or to adhere to or express religious beliefs" (Hamburg et. al., 2014, p. 1). Eating is an intimate experience that derives from our basic need to survive, to feed someone becomes an expression of thoughtfulness and compassion. In theory, feeding others communicates a desire for that person to survive. Sharing food with others acts as a non-verbal indicator of one's feelings towards those they are offering the food to, and can serve to strengthen the relationship or sense of community. In particular, the habitual sharing of food may assume a degree of dependency or reciprocal commitment. Sharing food or eating together also functions to be "both inclusive and exclusive: it creates and/or sanctions inclusion (even transient inclusion) in a group or community, as well as exclusion of those not taking part." (Fischler, 2011, p. 533).

A Complicated Gendered Role

Much of how I theorize around food has to do with my relation to gender. Food contains an inherent responsibility that contradicts the romanticized viewpoint of feeding others. I often think about my paternal grandmother, Doris Newman and while I get sad thinking about the role of gender in her story, Gram would probably be quite offended by that

reaction. Gram, like me, was strong-willed, with a stubbornness that could frustrate you like no other. She was feisty, opinionated, smart as a whip, hilarious and furiously loyal and loving, however I felt her devotion most through dedicated time, not food. She was a life-long teacher in Ohio with a Master's in education. Additionally, she was a single, divorced mother who developed Multiple Sclerosis in her mid-twenties[8]. Impressively, Doris was valedictorian of her 1962 Norwalk High School class and her 1966 Ashland College class. I often think about that fact and wonder how her life may have been different if she had never gotten pregnant, if the responsibility of motherhood and caretaking hadn't been thrust upon her as a young twenty-something year old. My Dad's anecdotes about the role of food in his youth are encompassed by dinners at Berry's Restaurant (the town's family restaurant) every single night. Doris was incredibly bright and only ever failed Home Economics, and yet with the burdens that life thrust upon her, she was suddenly face to face with these maternal duties. I'm very privileged to feel such anger at this story; that her intelligence, her remarkableness was eclipsed by her gender identity, where food plays a fundamental role. I'd like to close this anecdote and pay respect to my Gram by discussing her ferocious love. My Dad's dream was to be an actor; Gram would usher and sell candy at his shows in Norwalk so that she could sit in the back row hoping her cackling laugh could be heard on stage. My Dad says it landed every time. When he was fourteen, Gram privately sacrificed over half of her already limited salary to give her son the opportunity of a lifetime, sending him to the Interlochen Arts Academy, an arts boarding school in Michigan. Food wasn't central to my relationship with Gram, she didn't leave us with cultural family recipes and most of my memories with her in the kitchen involved my parents cooking. But, time was indispensable to how she expressed her love and with her "Christmas in July"[9] gifts in tow, would use her

[8] My father was 5-years old and still remembers his Mother telling him to call his grandmother because she could no longer walk. Gram re-learned how to walk and write with her non-dominant left hand (I joke, but truthfully Gram's hand-writing was almost illegible and took an acquired eye to comprehend).
[9] Gram's second Christmas every summer

limited savings to visit New Jersey multiple times each year. Food simply isn't integral to my memory of Gram and perhaps you could see this anecdote as negating the ethos of my thesis, however, food is just *one* expression of love, identity, culture; it is not the only way.

I purposefully brought up Gram's life story because of how gender became an obstacle in her opportunities. Food is a historically gendered entity as "women's involvement with food constructs who they are in the world - as individuals, family members, and workers - in deep, complex, and often contradictory ways (Allen & Sachs, 2007, p. 1). Fischler (2011) negotiates fears that a globalized food industry has replaced sharing food with solo-dining; this fear is exacerbated by a perceived loss of the family meal. In navigating the validity of this decline it's important to recognize how the idealized family meal denotes an unbalanced gendered responsibility. Women are centered throughout history within food provision and preparation, and eating together in a convivial ambiance is inextricably connected to how women curate the family (Phull et. al., 2015). Within this historical context, the circumstances that allowed for the idealized family meal "may have allowed for the preparation of traditional foods and the creation of convivial mealtimes [but] were certainly oppressive for women" (Phull et. al., 2015, p. 980). As we delve deeper into modernity and see a rise in industrial food, gender still takes a prominent role. Women are constantly villainized when it comes to food, "mothers often take the blame for their failure to provide their children with nutritious food. Women with children are caught in a double bind as they are enjoined to make their children happy by feeding them junk food while they are simultaneously exhorted to be "good mothers" by ensuring the nutritional health of their children" (Allen & Sachs, 2007, p. 11). Moreover, "the replacement of home cooked meals with food from snack and fast-food outlets can be a response to the time poverty of women juggling paid and unpaid care work, in the absence of gender redistribution of such caring roles" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 12). Food is notoriously attached to femininity, yet in the case

of my Gram, her relation to gendered expectations, combined with her physical disabilities and financial barriers resulted in a rejection of that attachment.

> Leach et. al., (2020) further discuss how "class intersects with other disparities and as feminist, anti-racist and decolonial analyses show, the relations of gendered and racialized bodies, identities, and subjectivities are shaped by eating too [...] the link between diets and representation, such as the associations between meat eating and masculinity, thinness and western ideals of femininity or food and essentialized views of ethnicity fuelled by social interactions and media imagery in many settings" (p. 12)

'You Can Count on Me if You Need Anything'

The strengthening of relationships through food can often become a social benefit that outweighs the costs of sharing food resources (Hamburg et. al., 2014) and acts as "a signifier that "you can count on me if you need anything"' (Jenkins & Purnell, 2013, p. 14). Jenkins & Purnell(2013) explain this dynamic to be a form of social capital defined as "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Jenkins & Purnell, 2019, p. 10), for example, helping with homework, giving rides, providing emotional support, etc… The sharing of food strengthens trust and "encourages the [reciprocal] exchange of social capital… the stronger the bonds, trust, and exchange of social capital, the stronger the likelihood that others will seek out more information and interaction" (Jenkins and Purnell, 2019, p. 63).

To exemplify this dynamic, I offer a brief vignette from a conversation with my Mom about my family friends, aptly named the SOMA Family. My parents were new to town - having just moved from living in New York City in their early 20s, and were employed full-time. After ten years of hustling in the city, my Dad decided to transition from acting to broadcast journalism. My Mom was becoming a successful theater manager on Broadway,

however, this required long evenings in the city; not the most conducive for raising a baby. They were young, isolated from their origins and needed support; my Mom had lost her father less than a decade before I was born and seeked emotional guidance. What has stood out to both my Mom and I is how food became a way to bring together the SOMA parents, who just happened to meet sporadically during preschool pickups. Potlucks and holiday dinners transformed them into a village. Suddenly I went from having two parents, to having nine. These parents would often split carpooling shifts and host all the children after school, providing snacks and facilitating home work. After reflecting upon the role of food in my upbringing, my Mom dramatically sighed and said to me, '*food is so amazing actually'*.

I grew up in a community that intentionally used food to bring people together, which imbedded in me an understanding of how sociability naturally surrounds food. This transformed into a passion for food as I grew older and a strong belief that food can be a tool for social change. One's evolving food relationship enables everyday commensalities that are impactful towards social change at personal, familial, and community level. As such, foodways "can function as platforms for transformative social change" (Abarca, 2021, p. 667). The way we eat, cook, and organize around food provides a pathway for meaningful connections and meaningful change; today, I am employed at a food justice organization in Worcester, working with high school students on an urban farm.

Culinary Subjectivity

What we eat and how we eat are defining characteristics of our identities. It encompasses our cultures and ethnicities, our lived experiences and the experiences of our genetic and evolutionary ancestors. It represents our current values and needs, and it expresses our hopes for the future. As discussed, we use food to communicate and share parts of our identities with others, as well as, feel connected to varying components of our current selves. Food itself captures both the tangible and intangible; it "refers to a material item, a performative

action, a symbol and/or a metaphor" (Abarca, 2020, p. 16). Food also highlights insecurities within the complex networks that frame our society, in that "the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently" (Fischler, 1988, p. 275). When discussing 'food' we begin to convey the varying essence of our relationships, networks, and social systems; the far-reaching natures that are "emotionally, socially, culturally, politically, and ecologically" significant (Abarca, 2020, p. 16). Because food is so ingrained to the very framework that makes up our society, it can be self-defining.

To explain this phenomenon, I use the term *culinary subjectivity,* coined by Dr. Meredith Abarca (2020) to analyze how people's food cultures and preferences are reflected into their day-to-day lives as "the product of active engagement with ever-changing foodscapes that for many people transcend national borders and encompass [a] multitude of culinary ethnic based flavors" (Abarca, 2020, p. 19). In the same vein as Abarca, I use culinary subjectivity to address the ways in which food influences our sense of self as a product and producer of relational networks and consider the continuing process of self definition related to "migratory movements, food availability, culinary knowledge, socio-economic realities, and… personal palate…" (Abarca, 2021, p. 666) within a "capitalist driven food industry" (Abarca, 2021, p. 668). In *Commensality: Networks of personal, family, and community social transformation,* Abarca (2021) analyzes three food-centered oral histories for El Paso Food Voices digital project, as part of the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso, to discuss how one's evolving food relationship enables everyday commensalities that are impactful towards social change at personal, familial, and community level.

Professor Ramón Borges-Méndez charges students with a similarly reflective task through his Food Autobiography assignment. The goal of this assignment is to encourage

critical thinking among students, about how their food citizenship is shaped and formed, "because eating is such a basic condition of existence, people take their foodways for granted and rarely subject them to conscious examination" (Counihan, 1999, p. 114). The Food Autobiography entices students to pause, reflect, and embroil themselves within their relationship with food. In the deliverable, we reflect upon those drivers and forces, such as our culture, upbringing, gender, ethnicity/race, socioeconomic backgrounds to dictate our relation to food, and essentially our culinary subjectivities. However, what I appreciate most about this assignment is that Professor Borges Méndez also considers the way trauma, hardship, travels and experiences, employments, biologies, and food activism (among other contextual informants) also saturate this dynamic. In broadening the standard ideas of influencers, he emphasizes to students that our relationship to food is deeply contextual. In this manner, I believe the question of Food Autobiographies complicates the term culinary subjectivities. Our culinary subjectivities are in fact subjective to our lived experiences. They are in part "formed by the foods people incorporate into their bodies" (Abarca, 2020, p. 22), but are also shaped by a myriad of factors that ask our culinary subjectivities to be flexible; to be unfixed and open-ended components of our senses of self.

Culinary Subjects and Choice

As culinary subjects the ways in which is we engage with food is multifaceted and "impacted by food made available by the food industry, values embedded within diverse food systems, food popularized by media outlets and popular culture which promote an idea of a lifestyle, as well as by food adaptations born out of peoaples' voluntary or forceful migratory journeys and socio-economic status" (Abarca, 2020, p. 20). We are situated within the harsh reality of a global industrial food system; "supermarket development has brought foreign foodstuffs into domestic urban markets [... and] have played their part in making sure branded products fly off the supermarket shelves" (Ehlert, 2021, p. 683). Continuously,

"global corporations, 'supermarket culture' and media present a standardized and universalized picture of what is delicious, healthy, and trendy, establishing globally recognized brand names (e.g. Coca Cola, McDonald's, etc.) as familiar and desirable, while pushing their availability" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 11) This is what Leach et. al., (2020) cites as "a form of food cultural imperialism" (p. 11). This situation is only planning to expand, finding new technologies, methods, and markets; as Marx would affirm, "capitalism always needs to grow, even if it means surpassing its limits" (Siddiqui, 2024, p. 526).

In this vein, aquaculture makes a surprisingly good example. Global fish production has maintained a steady pressure on the environmental crisis. Over-exploitation of fish stocks and natural resources are regularly attributed to the practices of capture fisheries[10] in which overfishing appears to be commonplace (Mansfield, 2011). Orthodox perspectives on this issue deem capture fisheries as inherently problematic, explaining "overfishing in terms of individual rationality (rather than capitalist tendencies)" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 418) and interpreting the underlying problem as the lack of fish ownership, leading "to a "race for fish" in which rational fishers catch to the point of overfishing… [using] resources to depletion" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 419). In the 1980's capture fishery production hit a plateau (Mansfield, 2011), but luckily aquaculture appears as the ideal solution; the "blue revolution" is promoted in the name of progress, development, and increased food production to feed a growing population" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 419). Through the privatization and increased control over fish production, consumers can rejoice as aquaculture provides more fish that is less expensive, "and any problems associated with those fish are temporary" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 420). Consumers should not feel so special to the industrial food economy, this is only an attempt to avoid the capitalist crisis; in "the process of "fixing" capital by domesticating fish,

[10] Mansfield (2011) defines capture fisheries as the wide range of methods used for capturing wild fish, that are grown without direct human input, "Some capture fisheries are very small scale and low tech, while others are extremely high tech and industrial" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 417)

applying new technology, and changing environmental conditions, aquaculture also produces a *materially different fish* [... involving] a series of practices that are designed *not* to mimic nature, but to increase its productivity" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 423). Aquaculture practices related to feeding regimes have provided new pathways "for environmental pollution to accumulate in the bodies of fish" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 429); for example trace pollutants in formulated fish feed bioaccumulate along the food chain through fat and result in high concentrations of harmful contaminants in farmed fatty fish[11] that are sold to consumers.

Fischler (2011) asserts that U.S. health-policies aiming to improve people's nutrition, does so based upon an implicit assumption "that information about nutrients, energy and exercise delivered to each and every individual should be able to optimize behaviour" (p. 543). But, what if consumers aren't given the tools or resources to make those health-forward choices? Or, what if they aren't given all of the information; in the case of aquaculture, Mansfield (2011) believes they aren't. When it comes to fish, consumers are told an conflicting message: "*eat more fish because it is a wonder food, but also, eat less fish because it is toxic"* (p. 414)[12]. Combine this inconsistent messaging with the withheld knowledge that farmed fish are *materially different* fish, and appears that consumers are not fully equipt when freely making decisions about their food and health. Mansfield (2011) agrees, "fish producers are not really expected to provide safe seafood, so much as consumers are to make proper choices" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 421). Our culinary subjectivities are

[11] Intensive aquaculture feeding regimens rely upon formulated fish feed (a combination of fish meal and fish oil derived from cheap and abundant wild fish which often already contain traces of environmental contaminants. As a result, fattier farmed fish concentrate all the pollutants present in their feed contain higher levels of harmful contaminants, more than what would be found in wild fish of the same species (Mansfield, 2011). While trace amounts of contaminants are less risky to human health, the concentrated contaminants found in farmed fish pose new health risks for consumers such as, "cancers, neurological problems, birth defects, and developmental problems for children" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 430).

[12] Dissolved into its basic nutritional components, fish are extraordinary for health: low in saturated fat, high in protein, and high in omega-3 fatty acids which are good for heart health and brain development: the industrial fish industry tempts pregnant women to eat more fish for their babies' brain development. But, consumers be wary! Fish also contain high levels of environmental toxins, such as PCBs, dioxin, and mercury, they may contain chemicals (i.e. dyes and antibiotics), and they might increase your risk of cancer and neurological problems. The industrial fish industry backtracks because of these dangers: "Fish is dangerous for everyone, but children and all women who are or who could get pregnant should especially avoid eating fish" (Mansfield, 2011, p. 414).

subjective and formulated by what resources, information, or forms of capital we have access to within a capitalist food setting. Fischler (1988) figuratively and literally asked "*If we do not know what we eat, how can we know what we are?"* (p. 282). He argued,

> "that the modern food consumer suffers from a crisis of identity. At the core… is the fact that the food industry has created eaters who are 'merely… consumer[s] without knowledge or the history and origin of the food they consume… the food industry has considerably eroded the 'traditional culinary system which connects nature, food, and community' with its interests solidly on economic and technical efficiency" (Abarca, 2021, p. 8)

If our foodways are defining, of the groups and cultures we are part of, as well as, of our individuality and culinary subjectivity, then in an industrial food context are we simply defined as just consumers? Essentially, are our culinary subjectivities just another element circulating the industrial food system? To some extent, yes, as "food consumption [... works] as a resource for expressing individuality, group membership, social movement action, and/or group distinctions" (Neuman, 2019, p. 79). If that's true, then within the globalized food context, we might be placing more pressure than we realize on responsible individual choice.

Culinary Subjectivity in a Industrial Food System

Or, maybe we do realize? Leach et. al., (2020) questions the likelihood that this approach will create systemic changes in regards to food; that national dietary recommendations codifying "assumptions that malnutrition will be best addressed by individuals learning to weigh every plate on its nutrient value, rather than addressing factors of social and environmental justice ranging from poor housing, to wage equality, to pollution and contamination of food supply" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 12). Conflict theory suggests that our social systems are constructed by conflicting power dynamics "who wish to maximize their wealth and power" (O'Leary, 2007, p. 58). Perhaps the food system isn't failing but

doing exactly what it has always set out to do. It is here that I detect an inherent conflict within our current food system. Compelled by a corporate food regime framework[13], it undermines its supposed purpose of feeding a global population; "in other words, the current food regime stands in the way of human food security, democracy [... and] ecosystem restoration" (McMichael, 2014, p. 937). The consensus of food regime theory is that "both colonial legacies, and agro-industrial and or neo-liberal food regimes can work to narrow down, progressively, the food pathways available to certain groups of people" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 12). As culinary subjects, our access to choice is only relative to what a corporatized food system will offer the places we're situated within. This belief is shared amongst food justice[14] scholars and activists; that there is nothing broken about the food system, "that the inequities it produces are functions of how it should work, as the push to maximize production and consumption while devaluing labor are integral to capitalist production" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 4). Reese & Garth (2020) explain how our current food system reflects and embodies the afterlife of slavery. Food inequalities and injustice are not accidental, but rather entrenched within the framework of a corporate food system[15] and result in areas characterized as *Food Aparthieds*.

Known as "urban farming's de facto grandmother"' (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 6), trailblazing food justice activist Karen Washington, coined the term 'food apartheid' to explain systemic food injustice and insecurity in the United States. Her 2022 Bioneers conference talk entitled, *911 Our Food System Is Not Working*, describes how the food system is exploiting and failing the same people it's supposed to feed. She rejects the popularized

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[13] The concept of *food regimes* looks at power through world systems theory and a Marxist historical-materialist political economy analysis (Leach et. al., 2020) explaining concept as the "rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale" (Friedmann, 1993, p. 30)

[14] Definition of Food Justice: *"*At minimum, food justice highlights the problems of a contemporary food system that relies heavily on undervalued labor and the quick and efficient circulation of food products and is concerned with the unequal distribution of and access to healthy, affordable food" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 2).

[15] Eloquently put, "the fruit that is produced from a capitalist economic system for which the expendability of Black life is not tertiary but central" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 2).

term ‘food desert’[16], which she asserts as an outsider term used to sugarcoat the gravity of food inequity and implicate these communities with an inherent desolation. This misappropriation of “ecological language to describe human-designed systems” suggests that “these unequal food systems are naturally occurring, while simultaneously narrowing the scope of food systems to market-based food solutions” (Forsyth, 2024). This language dilutes the severity of environmental racism and misleads the public from seeing the food system as a *racist* food system, “understood as an inherently immoral economy[17], which proffers “junk” while denying access to consumption and “high quality” and “healthy” food. (Newman & Jung, 2020, p. 135). Washington (2022) clarifies that “in essence, we do have food. We’ve got that junk food, we’ve got that processed food, we’ve got that fast food. What we don't have is healthy food options. So I coined the term food apartheid” (*911 Our Food System Is Not Working*, 2022, 10:01).

In evaluating culinary subjectivities relation and access to agency, I stress that an analysis of language is vital; “it frames our understanding of the issue as well as how we interact with and respond to it” (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 5). Our explicating terminology is capable of perpetuating, deconstructing, or neutralizing the very issue we seek to address. In seeing food inequity as a place-based, naturally occurring phenomenon, as food deserts, we maintain the very power dynamics central to the disparity. We prolong change and allow a corporatized food system to continue its capitalist agenda. Yet, this is not a hopeless case in

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[16] The term ‘food desert’ can be traced back to Scotland 1995, in a government publication document, using the term to refer to “a geographic area that lacks sufficient access to grocery stores, especially in low-income communities” (Karpyn et. al., 2019). The term became federally recognized under the Obama administration which classified food deserts as low-income areas “where a third of the population lives more than a mile (for urban areas) or 10 miles (for rural areas) from the nearest supermarket” (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 6).

[17] Newman & Jung (2020) utilize the concept of moral economies to “link social inequality and structural racism in the food system with lack of access to healthy and fresh foods” (p. 132), and “expose the inherent racism in the supposedly neutral economy” (p. 133). Their use of “the immoral racist economy is linked to a combination of exploitation by predatory corporations such as the fast food industry, including restaurants and convenience stores, as well as the strategic economic withdrawal of major chain (full-service) grocery stores, which can be both punitive and a strategy of underdevelopment, thus acting as instruments of power and exclusion” (p. 135).

which culinary subjects are stagnant individuals, easily manipulated by the whims of the food system. Embedded in Abarca's (2021) conception of culinary subjectivities, she argues that as culinary subjects we also maintain a level of agency in redefining what kind of subject we are; as food is infused with "culturally specific symbolism and socioeconomic realities" (Abarca, 2021, p. 667), how we apply our connection to food and the food system reflects and embodies our social values as acts of social/communal responsibility. Food apartheid not only recognizes this agency, but implores that culinary subjects leverage it for systemic food system transformation. From a food apartheid perspective, our culinary subjectivities are multifaceted. In being shaped and informed, they are an outcome of the systemically racist and industrial food system. They circulate the food systems elements, alongside production, distribution, etc…, they are inextricably tied to the food systems preservation. Simultaneously, they are fundamentally connected to an individual's agency, flexible to the ever-changing wants and needs of people. Finally, as a proponent of the term food apartheid, I believe that it is through this degree of agency that I see culinary subjectivities as a tool for transforming the food system, the same system that intends to accumulate capital off of the inequities it produces.

Building my Eating Theory

In this Praxis, I tie in an additional framework, which I define as my 'eating theory' to explain how I determine the role of eating to be in society and at Clark. Eating is embedded within societal structures and individual daily routines, it "may be the ultimate quotidian act; you [aim to] do it every single day of your life" (Tuten, 2020, p. 3). The ways in which humans eat, and moreover, eat together is reflective of our evolutionary journey and inherent social nature. To look at eating, the ways it is structured, experienced, and understood offers insight into the critical elements of society. In building my 'eating theory' I draw from a plethora of scholars and literature, assessing the social influence of eating. Additionally, I

apply a community framework to how I conceptualize eating[18]. In the influence of Clark, my eating theory determines that the community building and convivial elements of communal eating requires an intentionality behind the structuring and designing of food on campus, that fits the needs, wants, and gaps of student life.

In their widely cited book, *Commensality from Everyday Food to Feast*, Kerner and Chou (2015) explain that, "food and the consumption of food are very much a part of everyday discourse, and innumerable questions about them are discussed in public media, academic conversations, and over private dinners" (p. 1). They find these discussions to be most concerned with food's connection to health: "what kind of food is healthy (official suggestions keep changing), and why do nearly one billion people go hungry, while at the same time many Western and increasingly Middle Eastern countries have considerable problems with obesity?" (Kerner & Chou, 2015, p. 1). I believe that my Praxis adds and complicates this discussion, with scholarly insight and my own research into the social aspect of food and eating.

Community

What does community mean exactly? A sense or feeling? Actual relationship(s)? It might be somewhat of a buzzword, getting its 'buzz' from being an in-word, a word that defines what is in vogue, dipping in and out of mainstream language (Cornwall, 2007, p. 2). Or, rather than a buzzword, perhaps community has become a fuzzword, designating "a shared language amongst diverse actors obscuring sometimes opposing viewpoints on meaning and implications" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 2). Purnell (2019) says that "when defining community, we have to question the significance we might be inclined to attach to structural forms [of community] and seek, instead, the meanings imputed by their members" (p. 9). From my perspective, as a member of the Clark and CYES communities, as well as, the

[18] As a Community, Youth, and Education studies major, I would be remiss to not be explicit in how I conceptualize community!

MAPSO community, I define community to involve a sense of belonging, to feel mutually meaningfully connected to a group or structure, but also transcends space, place, and size. Digital communities provide a great example of this. Rather than a strictly rigid structure tied to material factors, community, in my eyes, is about the emotional significance attached to others.

Commensality in Relation to Hierarchy, Power, and Choice

Several related concepts of commensality[19] formulate a critical understanding of food and eating's active relationship with hierarchy, power, and choice. I use these critical perspectives to unpack a lack of community and conviviality around food at Clark, as well as students corresponding social practices around food. Moreover, they are informative of this eating theory.

Many scholars believe commensality "functions as a social demarcation and hierarchical distinction" (Jönsson et. al., 2021, p. 17), creating and reinforcing social relations and norms that are displayed through routinized social practices around food. Grignon (2001) coined the term 'segregative commensality', in which an inherent aspect of communal eating creates an exclusivity of those not included within the group, as well as symbolic boundaries that serve to maintain systemic inequalities and uneven power dynamics. In including and excluding, there is a clear designation of superiority and hierarchy, which Grigon (2001) theorizes to be found in discontinuous societies "in which hierarchization is the very principle of structure and social life" (p. 29), ultimately undermining the very essence of conviviality.

The term 'chosen commensality' appears powerful for feeling a sense of autonomy, particularly within a hierarchized structure. Yet it transacts a mere illusion of accessibility; in the privatisation of food lies the privatisation of choice. U.S. "normative representations hold that behavior is left to individual freewill" (Fischler, 2011, p. 544). Yet, this ideological

[19] In this paper, I use the term *communal eating* interchangeably with commensality.

notion obscures the actualized limitations engendered by systems of supremacy. Thus, enabling a romanticization of choice which evokes a paradox between the systemic ideological meaning associated with choice, and the diminished access to choice; further maintaining systemic hierarchical boundaries. Any system wants to sustain and intentionally designs itself through boundaries and structures that adhere to the system's individualistic goals; the essence of conviviality might appear threatening to those goals[20].

Eating Theory: Intentional, Practiced, Structured, and Designed

Abarca (2021) takes a theoretical viewpoint to communal eating as a web of relationships, centered around food's material and symbolic influence, that increase and integrate social connections and experiences among people; further, she illustrates the meaningful nature of eating with others to invite the growth of networks, communities, and connections. In correspondence, Neuman (2024) stipulates that the practice of eating together "does not require that participants eat the same thing" (p. 557), but does require some level of social engagement.

My eating theory argues that when promoting conviviality and community, there must be an intentional understanding of the various meanings that key stakeholders' attached to food. To that point, my eating theory necessitates community initiatives around food that are critically structured and designed. At Clark, this design must be functional for the needs and wants of college students. Guided by individualist and capitalist ideologies, the U.S. bases its conceptualization of eating "on implicit assumptions, in particular that eating is just another form of individual, private consumption" (Fischler, 2011, p. 545), Clark is no exception. However, I theorize that social practices around food have the potential to be sociogenic, in that they encourage social bonding helping to develop pro-social identities (Parsons, 2018);

[20] In light of my research at Clark, I define 'commensality' to be the practice of eating with others, that is accessible in any format (including all types of location/space, time spent, and types of food), representing symbolic meanings (such as social and cultural contexts), and facilitating the eventual growth of networks and communities.

in higher education, eating together can derive meaningful community among a diverse range of students and faculty, ultimately facilitating a more communal and supportive academic environment. However, my eating theory argues that this is only accessible when food and eating are placed under the scope of national ideologies and tailored to the gaps in student needs.

Conceptual Framework

Conviviality

This Praxis is framed around a problem at Clark University, a perceived lack of conviviality and community around food. In examining students' social practices around food, this study begins to discern the relevance of the problem, the extent to which it's shared, and why it is significant. The following section initiates an explanation, specifically with the concept 'conviviality'.

Prior Modern Philosophical thought saw connection and interdependence as an imposition, adhering to notions of "autarky" - translated to "the self that wards off others" (Boisvert, 2010, p. 59) —setting the stage for the eventual conception of current individualist ideologies. Conviviality counters this "anti-dependency mania" and attributes interconnection as the base of human existence; as convives we are not detached spectators but rather participants (Boisvert, 2010). Overarchingly, "in the most fundamental sense, [it means] accepting an orientation built around the slogan "to be is always to be- with [...]"' interweaving "the metaphysical, the biological, the social, and the moral aspects of existence" (Boisvert, 2010, p. 60). The social sciences also conceptualize the term's significance: Conviviality is "characterized by joyful and harmonious social interactions" (Bernardi & Visioli, 2024, p. 8). Conviviality is atmospheric and captures the intangible pleasurable and affective qualities of a moment, relating "to a sense of 'becoming with' that facilitate an open and unpredictable encounter" (Marovelli, 2019, p. 191).

Since learning of conviviality, during my time studying abroad at the Umbra Institute[21] I was instantly enchanted by its characterization, emphasizing friendly and celebratory occasions, often over food. Within my Praxis theoretical space, this definition was consistently re-evaluated, becoming a tangled web of how I see community. As confusing as this mess was, it symbolized conviviality's nuanced meanings. My conceptualization of conviviality has been puzzling, at times even contradictory, and still its essence remains clear in my mind. Emerging as a seemingly universal tool for connectivity, sociability and joy. Simultaneously, it's subjective —serving as a marker of distinction, cultural capital, and privilege, while also reinforcing social boundaries as it permeates through the atmosphere.

Frequently, conviviality is discussed in relation to food and the social practices around it: these spaces define conviviality as the intangible social ambience and essence of communal eating, distinguished by being friendly, lively, and facilitates connection (Phull et. al., 2015; Marovelli 2019; Bernardi & Visioli, 2024). Yet, there are further complexities to this dynamic that are essential for understanding the dominant discourses at play. The convergence of food and eating together does not magically develop a meaningful sense of community or belonging out of thin air. Rather, these outcomes occur at the nexus of 1) a structured and designed social practice around food, 2) the essence of conviviality, and 3) an account of the needs and desires of stakeholders. This dynamic is particularly significant for academic institutions and their responsibility in crafting a campus culture of belonging and interconnectivity. Social practices around food and the subsequent personal and societal meanings attached, function as both implicit and explicit indicators of broader life circumstances; my research noticed this to be highly prevalent among Clark students. The social practices around conviviality are informed by how we're situated within larger societal

[21] In the Fall 2023 semester I had the privilege of studying abroad in Perugia Italy at the Umbra Institute's Food, Sustainability, and Environmental Studies program. This program emphasized the significance of food in relation to identity, ultimately becoming a strong informant of my theoretical stipulations on the role of food.

structures. In this manner, access to conviviality is dependent upon the structure's design, and the intention attributed to fostering a sense of conviviality.

Is Food a Tool for Conviviality?

Embedded within the heart of my research is the phrase 'food as a tool' which I use to capture Clark students' various uses of food, ranging from the solo fueling of the bodies to the collective bringing people together. Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), in which he associates conviviality with a scholarly framework, adding an additional dimension to its running list of definitions. Illich (1973) coined the phrase 'tools for conviviality' using it "as a technical term to designate a modern society of responsibly limited tools" (p. 6). His argument for a convivial society through convivial tools maintains a clear framework of individual agency. Illich claims a separation between 'tools' and 'systems'; tools are equitable and nonrestrictive, they "foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody" (Illich, 1973, p. 30), and distinctively, do not require or adhere to standardized forms of knowledge or schooling. Comparatively, systems maintain the concentration and value system attached to standardized forms of power (ex: knowledge), increasing capital production. Illich (1973) uses a broad interpretation of 'tools' as "planned and engineered instrumentalities" (p. 28) including systems; explaining that 'tools' alone are not inherently convivial or non-convivial, rather they can be used *for* conviviality. Those functions rest upon *how* they are used, moreover, the implications of their growth "beyond a certain point [... increasing] regimentation, dependence, exploitation, and impotence" (p. 28), subsequently also hinges upon *how* tools are used.

From this separation, what are tools and what are systems? Moreover, is food a tool or a system? In *Tools for Conviviality,* Illich (1973) introduces the difference between 'food' and 'feeding' epitomized in the "humanitarian liberals who have come to feel that feeding the starving millions is their vocation. They forget that people *eat"* (p. 55). In this way, food

aligns with the broad use of ‘tool’, and can be both a tool and a system in relation to implied values and definitions associated with food and the extent to “when means have been turned into ends” (O’Donovan, 2010, p. 150). There is a noticeable difference in implicit values between ‘feeding’ and ‘eating’; the distinction indicates that eating is full of contextual value and anchored in the affective elements of food, such as, cultural identity and cuisines; eating your cultural cuisine is emotive, a meaningful form of storytelling through the culinary expression of a place (Crowther, 2013). Whereas feeding strips the material of its human element, associating it along the lines of giving feed to farm animals to sustain their lifespan; or fuel to keep a system from crashing.

Beyond the role of sustenance, individuals' foodways transmit the symbolic meanings the individuals attach and relate to food with. Conviviality is a comprehensive concept that helps me understand and complicate students' social practices around food. In addition, conviviality explains the problem at Clark: certain factors that design and structure the institution cause a low sense of community, belonging, and conviviality on campus. Illich’s (1973) convivial societies begin to outline the intentions of power systems, to maintain control over the bodies of the institution and accumulate capital. Food as a convivial tool is particularly interesting to my research as it’s framed within an idea of agency, that the essence of conviviality can support collective and individual autonomy; *Tools for Conviviality* specifically offers criteria and guidelines for distinguishing tools once again making this a particularly helpful concept.

Food as a Tool: Defined

Inherent to this research is the phrase ‘food as a tool’ which I employ to capture foods' myriad uses for bringing people together, extending its substantive role beyond its material and nutritional operations. My research is concerned with a lack of conviviality and community in the structure of Clark, ‘food as a tool’ helps explore that gap by emphasizing

students' social practices around food that engender a sense of belonging within the campus community, despite institutional barriers and shortcomings regarding a sense of community.

With that being said, because food is so integral to our lives it can be employed in various aspects of society. To name a few, food can be used to unpack historical transformations; imbedded within the promotion of health and wellness, food can be a marketing tool; it can become an instrument for visually or theoretically telling narratives or expressing social commentary; food can shape careers and express one's values; food is historically, culturally, socially, and socioeconomically symbolic; food is emblematic of the individual, in that food is used to express the eating preferences or desires of the individual; food functions to intentionally perpetuate marginalization, via inequitable distributions of food resulting in food insecurity and food apartheid communities, and to apply social capital to systemically dominant cuisines and eating habits; food can be used to control or reward behavior, of the self and others; today, food is capitalized upon used to structure and sustain a corporate global food system.

Literature Review

In my literature review I will draw from various academic articles that analyze the social practices around food. These articles address the practice of commensality (1) on campuses with college students, (2) in other community spaces unaffiliated with higher education, (3) at large in any societal format. I found many of my sources through both the Google Scholar and Clark University (Scopus and EbscoHost) databases and searched for keywords/phrases such as 'commensality', 'benefits of communal eating', 'conviviality and food', 'the role of food' , 'social practice theory and food', and 'communal eating in college'. Additionally, I found a multitude of sources that are integrated throughout my paper using the appendices and citations of the previous articles I had read. A limitation within my review of the literature is that many of my empirical studies about commensality are not based in the

US. However, I use these studies to make comparisons and draw implications for the prevalence of conviviality and community in higher education within the US.

Using the key terms mentioned above, my research questions are as follows,

1. What are the social practices around food?
2. In what ways is community around food experienced by participants in that shared space?
    a. Are there benefits to experiencing community around food?
    b. How do people think about, relate to and ultimately organize around food?
3. What structural and personal factors act as barriers and enablers of experiencing community around food?

Additionally, because my study and research pool has been specific to Clark University students' social practices around food, I aimed to engage with literature that specifically explored how college students experience food and eating on campus in general, and the role of food for building community within higher education. With that being said, there appeared to be much literature on how students experience food options, nutrition, and eating in general, however, there was very minimal research on how students experience commensality or generate community through food. This paper aims to explore that relationship and attempts to fill that gap in food studies literature.

Health

There should be a relationship between social eating habits and healthful lifestyles; author Jenna Cummings examines this relationship, by conducting an online cross-sectional survey of 750 U.S. adult participants in January 2020, she studied if certain social eating behaviors either undermine or support health-promoting diet changes and food choice in American adults. This research found that regardless of commensality and/or other sociodemographic factors, Americans consistently chose more highly processed foods,

including when eating with friends. According to Cummings,"the United States is one of the countries with the widest availability of processed food in the globe" (Cummings, 2023, p. 2), facilitating what can be viewed as an American over-reliance on processed foods and a factor in commensal eating habits. The study discovered that highly processed foods were eaten with friends more than all other co-eater relationships, (Cummings, 2023). Given these findings, the author suggests that "integrating minimally processed food like fruit and vegetables into commensality practices, particularly eating with friends, may be optimal for American public health" (Cummings, 2023, p. 4). An overarching limitation that is important to highlight from this study is an insubstantial discussion on the forces that drive Americans to choose processed foods both alone and within co-eater dynamics. Food choice is a layered issue within the United States, in which, processed foods are often centralized to low-income communities of color and fresh fruits and vegetables are intentionally made inaccessible, due to the systemic racism and historic redlining practices that intentionally instigate inequality. Furthermore, processed and industrial food options are scattered across American institutions and organizations, becoming a core component of our daily lives. However, this study does highlight U.S. over-reliance on the processed food industry, situating American's food choices and consequently, their communal eating habits to their built environment. This study suggested that easy access to processed foods across the United States may act as a barrier towards commensality in a hopeful attempt to reduce processed food intake. However, my research and Praxis does not agree as my definition of commensality does not discriminate across the type of food eaten.

Considering how communal eating inevitably is more time consuming than eating alone, why is communal eating so beneficial? A study done in collaboration with the Big Lunch project, an annual UK event that incentivizes communities to gather over food and build community, investigated that question. This research used data from a national stratified

survey of 2,000 adults and asked two questions: (1) Are respondents who eat regularly with others more likely to feel happier, more satisfied with life and more engaged with their communities, and have a larger number of friends and family on whom they can depend for support than respondents who more often eat alone? And (2) Does having a recent evening meal with someone other than a household member result in an increased feeling of closeness to that person, and does the strength of this effect depend on what behaviors had occurred during the meal? (Dunbar, 2017, p. 3). Dunbar hypothesized that because

> "activities such as laughter, singing and dancing all… trigger the endorphin system in the brain that underpins primate social bonding… [and] since endorphins are involved in the control of feeding… the very fact of eating might itself trigger the endorphin system and promote bonding… hence people who eat often with others might be expected to have larger social networks and be happier and more satisfied with their lives, as well as being more engaged with their communities" (Dunbar, 2017, p. 2).

Dunbar's analysis of the data discovered key elements of how commensality is experienced by those in that shared space and how it impacts participants in the longer-term. The analysis found that (1) those who eat socially are more likely to have a wider social network capable of providing social and emotional support and feel better about themselves. Furthermore, (2) "eating with someone in the evening makes one feel closer to them than eating with them at midday and (3) that evening meals at which laughter and reminiscences occur and alcohol is drunk are especially likely to enhance feelings of closeness" (Dunbar, 2017, p. 9). This adds additional layers to my concept of food as a tool to include liquid substances as well; additionally 'food' is also a tool for reminiscing and storytelling that enhance feeling close to others.

The Role of Universities

Expanding upon this analysis of social practices around food for socioemotional health, a cross-cultural analysis of university students in Korea and Japan worked to understand the different experiences between commensality and solo-eating. The research found that Korean participants were more likely to be affected by commensality and solo-eating than Japanese participants, which supports the notion “that cultural attachment to commensality and social acceptance of solo-eating vary across modern societies” (Cho et. al., 2015, p. 1). This study adds to research on commensality and helps a) explain the role that culture plays in one's impression of commensality and solo-eating, and b) brings forth the perspectives of university students' relationship with commensality.

Given that my research is situated within a university and my participants are university students, the article above and the two following are especially salient. A study on the commensal eating practices and loneliness among university students before or during COVID-19 in the UK particularly outlined the relationship between students' communal eating practices. This study conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with university students in England and found that prior to the pandemic students struggled to practice commensality and healthy/regular eating habits (meal skipping, rushed meals alone, abnormal eating hours). This resulted in a theme of general loneliness, as well as loneliness in relation to solo-eating, among university students. Concerningly, “frequently eating alone has been associated with unhealthy dietary behaviors and increased risk of overweight/obesity as well as depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation” (Mensah and Tuomainen, 2024, p. 16). During the pandemic students demonstrated more time for regular home cooked meals, but again, felt a great deal of loneliness and solitude. College is often romanticised as a period full of exciting life experiences, the building of life-long connections, and an overall jovial care-free energy. However, Mensah and Tuomainen counter that impression and reveal the loneliness epidemic within higher education. Additionally, this research proves the importance of

understanding social practices around food for the mental and emotional wellbeing of students.

Additionally, a study investigating the meal consumption patterns and behaviors of college students in relation to mental well being add to understanding student social practices around food. Morshed et. al., "aim to gain deeper insights into participants eating context and situate such context with individual mental well-being (p. 6). The study finds the period of transition from adolescence to adulthood particularly stressful for young people and can result in unhealthy, irregular social practices around food. Their findings suggest that the university context has an immense influence on students' mental and physical wellbeing, as well as their social practices around food. For example, the study highlights that,

> "During weekends, students generally tended to be less stressed, anxious, and depressed and miss fewer meals compared to weekdays… this particular observation could be explained by factoring in the busy schedule of students as they tend to have more commitments (e.g., deadlines, classes, presentations, etc.) during the week and tend to miss more meals" (p. 13)

University factors have a major influence on students' lives, how they understand and conceptualize the world around them; this includes food. Morshed et. al., affirm that understanding the influence of the institution and "how individuals perceive the relationship between food and well-being can contribute to a better understanding of food choices" (p. 18).

Food: A Community Building Tool

The community building elements of commensality and conviviality are inherent to their nature. Authors Purnell and Jenkins conducted 12 years of ethnographic research on how eating together can help build a sense of community among participants and found that the weekly ritual of 'Family Dinner Nights' enabled deep connection among community

members. Through communicative acts such as an atmosphere of open invitation and shared storytelling, participants experienced an increased sense of familial connections and social capital. This research offers rich qualitative data that demonstrates how the elements of consistency and care with food have the capacity to build meaningful connections. Purnell and Jenkins exhibit the idea of food being a tool for building community, that while the food is an enjoyable and critical component of a convivial eating experience, it more so acts as a gateway into opportunities for authentic connection; and with consistent application of this tool meaningful community and relationships can derive.

Expanding upon Purnell and Jenkins work, I cite another UK study that explores three different food sharing initiatives in London (Skip Garden and Kitchen, Be Enriched, and Community Shop). Brigida Marovelli conducted ethnographic research on these collective spaces, which she argues are necessary in urban areas, especially during times of austerity as ways to embrace social difference and encourage the practice of hospitality and care. Marovelli questions how the stigmatization of poverty and social exclusion show up in food sharing/communal eating, and if these food practices create more dignified moments of commensality. The author collected qualitative data from all three food sharing initiatives and found a series of practices that intentionally facilitated social relationships with trust, care, and respect amongst all participants. This resulted in very positive and beneficial experiences for everyone involved, as the initiatives intentionally did not target exclusively people in need, but remained open to anyone. In this manner, the three initiatives managed to foster a sense of togetherness, encouraging intimacy and familiarity during the meal. In Marovelli's interviews, "organisers describe food variously as a 'tool', 'a language', 'an end', and 'an easy way to talk to one another' and they explicitly think of commensality as a way for creating a positive affective atmosphere to contrast loneliness and social isolation" (Marovelli, 2019, p. 198); my praxis sees food and communal eating in the same manner.

In a corresponding light to Marovelli's research in which social and symbolic separation is viewed as a barrier towards generative commensality, a study on commensality among criminalized individuals finds similar outcomes. *"'Commensality' as a theatre for witnessing change for criminalised individuals working at a resettlement scheme"* Parsons (2018) investigates the impact of commensality among criminalized individuals and the wider community through a communal lunchtime meal, significantly *outside* of the prison estate. The significance of generating communal dining experiences outside of the prison estate is an intentional effort to use commensality as a tool for "the performance of imaginary future selves for criminalized individuals" (Parsons, 2018, p. 183), with a desired results of *desistance,* being the cessation from offending in the future. Parsons's research of practising communal eating with criminalized individuals (referred to as trainees in the article) and volunteers/staff looks at how "commensality dissolves some of the barriers between staff/volunteers and trainees" (Parsons, 2018, p. 189) and engenders social bonding, generativity, a development of self-worth, and a challenging of preconceptions and stereotypes. For trainees, the commensal occasion becomes an arena to "be yourself" (Parsons, 2018, p. 194) and kindles responsibility and care for others wellbeing through food preparation and communication throughout the meal. Moreover, Parson recognizes how social cohesion through eating with others can be reciprocal. This is best demonstrated through the article's findings regarding volunteers and staff who challenged "their own preconceptions and stereotypes of prisoners/offenders… [displaying] that the community is willing to accept the reformed prisoner/offender" (Parsons, 2018, p. 195). Commensality "has the potential to be sociogenic, in that it encourages social bonding, [and] helps in developing pro-social identities" (Parsons, 2018, p. 195); this social development and cohesion through communal eating can be applied to other forms of institution, including collegiate settings in which eating together can derive community development and cohesion among a diverse

range of students and faculty, ultimately facilitating a more communal and supportive academic environment.

Parsons' analysis concludes with trainee's recognition of how the commensal experience has benefited their socio-emotional and collective well being, in that,

> "it becomes part of a normalising process, of 'not feeling like a prisoner' (Nolan) and 'learning to be with people' (Ryan). It is 'civilising' as well, as Alex says, 'I was trying to be polite and civil and stuff like that'... most of the trainees like Bradley say 'it's just nice to talk to people' and 'conversations just fly about, that's what I like about it, you get to speak to everyone'," (Parsons, 2018, p. 191).

Kniffin et. al., derives a similar analysis but in a different institutional format, a firehouse. Stemming from 15 months of qualitative and quantitative research with an over 2,000 persons fire department in a large US city, the authors explored the contribution that interaction over food may have on work-group performance. Through semi-structured group interviews and a quantitative survey administered to department officers, Kniffin et. al., questioned if "worksite eating that is shared among co-workers enhance[s] team performance" (Kniffin et. al., 2015, p. 282), ultimately finding that "commensality among coworkers can be a strong and important practice that is positively associated with enhanced work-group performance" (Kniffin et. al., 2015, p. 298). Similar to Parsons research, Kniffin et. al., observed space/location to be a critical component towards the experienced successes of commensal eating; the dining room was typically a main gathering point for firefighters to reflect upon an alarm call and discuss various methods and practices that could better serve their work. Food, cooking, and eating together appeared to be a fundamental aspect of the work environment in which fire fighters would often describe their unit with "variants of the phrase "we're like a family"' (Kniffin et. al., 2015, p. 289) and dedicated a large part of that association to the commensal tradition. Further, 81% of command officers reported that every

squad member is part of the group meal and credit communal eating for facilitating a positive relationship with the organization's performance. To that point, Kniffin et. al., “reveals significant positive correlations between work-group performance and eating… as well as cooking together” (Kniffin et. al., 2015, p. 294). Kniffin et. al., explicitly reveal that commensality is linked to an enhanced work performance, thus, identifying a new question within my research at Clark: Could the prioritization of commensality specifically within academic departments enhance students academic performance and relationship to school?

Methodology and Methods

The section that follows describes what happened during my data collection process; it explains what I did, how I did it, and why I did it. It outlines the methods I employed, and as (Becker, 1998) puts it, the trick[s] or simple device[s] that helped me understand my problem (Becker, 1998, p. 2). While my praxis has always centered around the role of food and its connective abilities, the project itself has gone through many different iterations. The result of my multitude of changes has offered me an assortment of data points to explore a perceived lack of conviviality and community at Clark. To reiterate, my research questions are as follows:

1. What are Clark students' social practices around food?
    a. What role does food play in the lives of students? Essentially, how do students think about and relate to food? In what ways do they organize and practice community around food?
2. What structural and personal factors act as barriers and enablers of experiencing community around food at Clark?

Methodology

In my methodology I aimed to understand if my inquiry into conviviality was shared by other students; is there a lack of conviviality and community at Clark? If so, what

constructed that? I used an iterative and reflexive lens in my methodological process. This embodies the emergent meanings and social practices around food that I discovered throughout my research, thus creating an iterative cycle of re-defining my concepts, re-evaluating my research methods and research aims. This created a constant reflection onto my own beliefs and bias, adding a reflexive lens.

Survey 2: The Worcester Food Survey

In the early part of Fall 2024, I conducted 'survey 1' (the *Worcester Food Survey)* collecting and storing data through the online anonymous survey platform Qualtrics. I distributed 'survey 1' and recruited participants through social media fliers on my personal Instagram account. My research subjects consisted of undergraduate and graduate Clark students over the age of 18, and the survey itself did not ask for any other identifiable markers (such as class year, gender, race, etc…). The survey consisted of 23 questions and was estimated to take 20-30 minutes, with no direct benefits for participation in the study. Additionally, respondents did not receive any academic or monetary compensation for their involvement and participation was completely voluntary.

Survey 1: The Clark Eating Survey

At the end of October 2024, I submitted an amendment to Clark University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to produce my second survey investigating students' communal food habits. I based this request on my initial inspection of 'survey 1' in which I was particularly intrigued by the ways in which those participants appreciated engaging in food practices with other people. The majority of my procedures remained the same in 'survey 2'; subject eligibility was 18 years or older Clark undergraduate or graduate students; participation remained voluntary and there were no direct benefits to participating, nor did respondents receive any academic or monetary compensation for their involvement. There were no changes to my confidentiality and data security procedures and my data has been

kept classified and secure within my personal, password protected Google Drive account. Again, I utilized Qualtrics, the online anonymous survey platform to collect data and recruited participants through fliers on social media. In ‘survey 2’ I incorporated an additional recruitment procedure, in which I distributed my survey flier to the Graduate School of Geography and Community, Youth, and Education Studies email lists. ‘Survey 1’ was estimated to take around 5-10 minutes to complete and consisted of 15 questions.

I drew from the critical feedback that 'survey 2' received to construct the far more successful 'survey 1', which heavily influenced the survey duration and the amount of open-ended questions.

Food Space Observations

My curiosity stemmed from what I perceived to be a lack of community and conviviality around food, at Clark. My survey data was started to illuminate some answers to that question, however, those responses were just a limited scope to a larger issue within the University. As I combed through the nuances of my data it became very evident that students' social practices around food were complicated and impacted by external factors that had yet to be illuminated within my surveys. To investigate these nuances I performed observational research and recorded my examinations and impressions in a reflective journal. I mainly observed the dining hall, paying special attention to its structure and design. ‘Space’ was an interesting aspect of this method; while I originally set out to only observe the dining hall I began to notice other places across campus where social practices around food were occurring.

Clark Archives

From my observations of the dining hall and my emerging interpretations of ‘space’, I became curious as to the history of food at Clark. How had Clark as an institution organized around food in the past? How did students organize around food; what characterized their

social practices? Moreover, as my research began with the problem of illuminating what I perceived to be a lack of conviviality and community around food, I wanted to know if this impression was new, something characterized within this generation of Clark students? Or is there something inherent to Clark that enables that impression. To investigate, I visited the Clark Archives to analyze social practices around food from a historical angle. I combed through digital and physical copies of *The Scarlet*, Clarks student newspaper. I also analyzed architectural records, building plan proposals, and photographs of the dining hall through the years. The archival research added and complicated how I had contextualized Clark, and illuminated important findings regarding how the institution structures and designs social practices around food.

Epistemology

As epistemology is the theorizing of knowledge, my epistemological stance is heavily connected to how I conceptualize food and eating. What does it mean to theorize knowledge around food and eating? Moreover, how does my inquiry into conviviality and community around food at Clark contribute to that stance?

Due to the individualist ideologies that underscore food and eating within the U.S., I believe there is a temptation to conceptualize eating and food as a strict nutritional act that only happens in order to sustain the body. My epistemological stance counters that ideology. Social practices around food are mechanisms for constructing and embodying knowledge. They apply to our senses, "textures and mouthfeel, flavors, temperatures, and so forth. You can say they are experiences of sensuality that can be public" (Tuten, 2020, p. 2). This sensory element is connected to our memories with food, thus constructing implicit and explicit meanings attached to social practices around food, and imply relations to hierarchy and power. In this vein, I apply the concept of 'food sovereignty' a term emerging from 1990s food and farmer justice movements to fight against a globalized food system. Food

sovereignty is an evocative phrase, it narrates a history of our food rights, it explains systemic disparities, and it’s aspiration driven. It's critically intersectional and recognizes how various elements that compose societies systems factor into social practices around food. Food sovereignty embodies the fundamental understanding of food's centrality to life itself, a critical balance of our systems that food necessitates. With an epistemological stance rooted within food sovereignty, I see food and the social practices around it to encompass both the meaning behind the material and a carrier of knowledge and stories that reveal fundamental aspects of ourselves and our world.

Description of the Site: Context

My research occurred at Clark University, a private liberal arts and research institution situated within the Main South neighborhood of Worcester, Massachusetts. Clark is centrally located in Main South and falls in between a series of local businesses and is directly across the street from Crystal Park, where you will often find community members fishing, children playing, and Clark students walking around. Main South is a culturally and linguistically diverse and predominantly low-income residential neighborhood of color. According to the Main South CDC 2020-2023 Community Investment Plan, the neighborhood is predominantly Hispanic or Latino (43.3%); 32.9% of residents are White, 16.1% are African American and 11.7% are Asian. The median household income is $26,736, comparatively, the City median household income is $45,869 and the unemployment rate of Main South is 15.3%, significantly higher than the unemployment rate of Worcester overall (9.9%), (MSCDC - CIP, 2020-2023).

Clark University is a small school with a population of 3,827 students; 2,349 of which are undergrad and 1,478 graduate students. According to the university, 26% of their student body identifies as BIPOC, 7% are international students, 15% are first-generation students, and 84% of undergraduate students receive some form of financial aid, (Clark University Fast

Facts, 2024). Clark's total estimated cost before financial aid is approximately $75,707, (Clark University Undergraduate Admissions, 2024). According to The See You Collective (SYC) transparency report, a total of $10,536 was requested by Clark students in August, September, and October 2024. The SYC is a mutual aid organization formed as a response to Clark's 2021 tuition increase and continues to financially support the needs of low-income Clark students.

Reflection on my Project Iterations

I started my Praxis wanting to co-create a community cookbook with restaurants and community stakeholders of Worcester's unique food scene; my theory behind this idea was to encourage students to try new restaurants and engage with the Worcester community, beyond their familiar or repeated spots. I ultimately scrapped the cookbook idea; I didn't grow up in Worcester and while I certainly have a lengthy list of restaurant recommendations, I haven't spent enough time in the city to fully know and be immersed in the food scene. My next project idea still drew from my original theory, a food map of students and Worcester residents meaningful restaurants and favorite grocery stores. After some reflection, I felt that the map was unnecessary, figuratively holding students' hands as they exited the campus. This led me to a distinct period of disconnection from Praxis. From feeling discouraged by all the emergent changes that characterized the past two years, and simultaneously, overwhelmed by the task of Praxis - to create meaningful and sustainable social change, I lost touch of the point of an intervention, to curiously explore a problem and use research to mitigate it. Now at the end, I regret not taking more advantage of the opportunity to create change within the food system, an opportunity that I had been excited for since my Freshman year.

I say all this to provide context towards where my head was at when I created and distributed the *Clark Eating Survey,* referred to as 'survey 1'; the context explains *how* I created the survey, as well as its limitations. I wasn't sure what exactly I was expecting to

prove when I conducted 'survey 1'. I knew how I was experiencing a misalignment between my role as a student and human wants/needs; I was curious to see if others felt similarly. However, looking back I believe that my own influence of how I understand experiencing community through food impacted the phrasing of my questions. My definition of 'eating together' was unclear in my survey and subconsciously collapsed with the association of cooking together, causing a murkiness to responses. More on that point, my survey reached more upperclassmen than it did underclassmen which additionally resulted in a subconscious association of eating together with cooking together. I think this demonstrates a common assumption among upperclassmen, that experiencing community around food requires cooking together, and thus the experienced barriers to that, contain elements of one's barriers towards cooking together. I think this demonstrates a common assumption among upperclassmen, that experiencing community around food requires cooking together, and thus the experienced barriers to that, contain elements of one's barriers towards cooking together. Despite the fact that my data responses do inherently skew towards upperclassmen, my findings still begin to capture a holistic picture of how community is organized around food at Clark. I can confidently claim this because of the range of data points that I have collected and analyzed.

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 weather 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.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process aimed to illuminate what I perceived to be a lack of conviviality and community around food at Clark.

A Rushed Coding!

On the Friday before Fall semester finals began, I attempted a thematic analysis on my ‘survey 2’ data. In realizing that my Fall semester draft was due very soon, I knew that I needed to make some sense of my data in order to receive feedback on how I was understanding my data. This was unfortunately an unsuccessful effort, as the rushed nature combined with my inexperience in interpreting and thematically organizing survey data made the entire prospect seem intimidating and the data appear murky and entangled with one another. Nonetheless, even though my data analysis was ineffective at that time, it initiated a deeper connection between myself and my research.

To execute the ‘rushed coding’, I physically highlighted a printed out copy of each qualitative response to visualize patterns and emerging connections. I made note of patterns in phrasing and terminology and designated those patterns into an independent coding key for each question. This resulted in a large unit of analysis and a very confusing codebook constructed of whole sentences rather than repeated words/meanings. That original code book reflected my anxiety, my fear of human error and missing something important. Further, I

approached my data as something to prove, rather than something I was curious to learn more about.

A Return to Data Analysis Allows for a New Perspective

Those original findings lacked substance, so I took another shot at it. Once again, I printed my qualitative responses and highlighted repeated words and phrases, with the intention of exploring their significance. While this process proved to be more successful, my data still puzzled me and I couldn't seem to take the next step in transforming my codes into categories. So, I asked my Praxis class for help and utilized a coding reliability approach to help verify my findings. This group exercise resulted in approximately 18 different interpretations of codes, categories, and potential theme ideas for only one of my questions.

I put all my faith into my peers and tried to make connections across 18 different perspectives. Exasperated, I vented to my classmate and friend Megan who's magic words finally made me relax. She told me to trust my gut, that there is no right or wrong way to code, it's all my interpretation and I know my data better than anyone. So I could code data one way and someone else could code it another, and our findings might be entirely mismatched, but not wrong. In my experience, while each interpretation may be different, the data will always try to convey its overarching message. In a second iteration of coding reliability, I saw this with clarity; Nora was kind enough to take another stab at my research and we noticed that our interpretations were different but interconnected. That night, I left the library finally feeling confident. With Nora's help, I confirmed that my gut is trustworthy and promised myself that I would follow those instincts more in the future.

Now I'm on a Coding Roll!

To code my qualitative responses, I performed a thematic analysis. I underlined, circled, boxed, highlighted, and starred pertinent words, marking up my paper with whatever format/imagery clicked for me in that moment). My friends who saw this expressed their

concerns over my wellbeing; fair enough, hunched over this messy looking paper, I looked a bit crazed. But, I quickly shook their comments off; I'd finally taken ownership over my research and in working with my data, substantial findings emerged.

Words that received a physical designation were either repeated or shared the same/similar meaning. This built my codebook, listing codes that are "essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story" (Saladana, 2009, p. 8). For the sake of my own memory, as well as, the reliability of my data analysis, I made note of the line number for each word/data response that applied to that code. In the end, I derived 86 codes for the qualitative answers of 'survey 2'. I repeated the same processes with applicable questions from 'survey 1' and added an additional 34 codes to my codebook, culminating to a total of 120 codes. Lastly, because 'survey 1' asked participants to share specific food resources, I performed a frequency analysis on the locations that were repeated multiple times.

As I transitioned from codes to categories, I honored my promise to trust my gut. From the code book, I organized my codes into 27 categories (20 categories for 'survey 2' and 7 categories for 'survey 1'). Every category was defined by how the codes within it were related, facilitating an analysis of how they each connected. In clustering codes together "according to similarity and regularity (i.e., a pattern)," (Saldana, 2009, p. 8), I began to make note of certain patterns and meanings that were relevant to my data.

Thematic Analysis and a Newfound Love for Whiteboards

As part of a directed study, Professor Borges-Méndez advised me to think about the forces and drivers of my topic through physically mapping them out. I found this guidance to be unbelievably helpful for how my brain works. I've always been a visual learner, and while this was more apparent in my early education, it proved to be just as necessary for my thematic analysis. This advice influenced how I approached my thematic analysis, which involved two complementary visual strategies. First, I physically answered my research

questions, without any scholarly or academic influence, to get a foundation of how I was grasping my data. As I wrote, I circled salient terms and concepts. This positively slowed my search for thematic connections, allowing the findings to gradually unfold. Similar to keeping a journal or diary[22], the written and reflective process unearths ideas you previously were unaware of. Secondly, in light of Ramón's advice, I mapped out my circled words onto a whiteboard; this helped me tangibly and theoretically make connections across themes and my own critical analysis. As part of this process, I made sure to critically analyze external factors, stemming from what I already knew, as well as, my literature and theories; "our observations are not "pure," that they are shaped by our concepts—we see what we have ideas about, and can't see what we don't have words and ideas for" (Becker, 1998, p. 18). This revealed underlying meanings and symbolisms of the role of food at Clark.

To briefly exemplify this, Bourdieu's theory of Habitus and Field became particularly salient when conceptualising what drives student's thinking around food. Instead of strictly analyzing individual responses, I aimed to look at respondents wholly. In doing so, I noticed the food's role shifted from adolescence to college. In adolescence, food was closely related to culture and togetherness; whereas in college it was distinguished along the lines of sustenance and energy. The concept of Habitus and Field tells us that our development of food habits are meaningful to our social context and the various roles we play within them. Yet, Phull et. al., (2015) explains that if the Field negates the Habitus, rational choice may take over and alter it. My participants' changing relationship with food reflected this contradiction, "the food of other places we eventually call home add more imprints" (Abarca, 2020, p. 17).

My data analysis journey is characterized by a growth in confidence and a return to my inner playfulness. Once I committed to the mindful practice of trusting my gut, I tapped

[22] Fun fact about me! I am an avid journaler and use that practice to a) document my life and b) learn more about myself through the written unpacking of my feelings. In the span of 2023, I finished approximately 3 ½ journals.

into my childhood disposition. The more that I validated my thinking process, despite how it was perceived, I created more space to have fun. My theoretical framework helped draw throughlines between categories, like an adult guiding a child's ingenuous and uninhibited nature. So, I pretended that I was a detective, investigating the structural and personal factors that influence how students organize around food at Clark.

Findings

This study set out to understand my inquiry of why there appeared to be a lack of conviviality and community around food at Clark? My research unpacked the layers of structural and personal factors that influence students' social practices around food. In this process, I hoped that after seeing “what kinds of organizations, institutions, and processes are involved in the production of that problem (what kind of machine is operating to make things happen that way)” (Becker, 1998, p. 120), I would be able to understand the role of food and its associated social practices at Clark. Understanding the context behind food at Clark is key; any attempts to foster more food-based community initiatives on campus need to understand the role of food first.

To get a hold of the context behind food at Clark, I distributed ‘survey 1’ that explored the social practices around food of Clark students, and found myself studying “a “practical” problem, a problem defined by its importance to the people involved in it” (Becker, 2998, p. 120). Since raising this question I have noticed some of my peers have taken a new look at the ways in which they organize around food. I can’t prove this as data, however, I believe this to be an unintended intervention that my discussion of food has created. I have received texts from friends who’ve noticed that the group dinners within their athletic club has made their community stronger and more joyous. Another friend once reached out to me when they were visiting another college campus and noticed how the students tended to spend elongated time and enjoy the food and atmosphere at that campus’s

dining hall more than what we had perceived/experienced at Clark. This friend recognized that to be a format in which those students prioritized the organization of their days, their workload, and their hunger around food and socialization. While I could downplay these examples and deem them to simply just be conversations with like-minded friends, I truly do not think that is the case, as I've felt this impact as well. This research has cast a light upon my own social practices and perception of food throughout my time at Clark. To Neuman's (2024) point 'beneath the proximate manifestations of how we eat together lie deeper, ultimate social dispositions of our species' (p. 566) that beg to be explored.

Clark Students Social Practices Around Food: Food as a Tool

My inquiry into this research helped ground my findings: is there a lack of conviviality and community at Clark? If so, why is that? To that point, my research questions[23] explore the multifaceted role of food amongst students' social practices around it. Neuaman's (2019) explains a practice-theoretical approach to food.[24] In this manner, mundane and everyday behaviors prove to be a strong point of analysis for my research: my study discerns that Clark University students' social practices around food can be described by the concept 'food as a tool', encompassing a discursive relationship with food itself and the assortment of meanings it is attributed. Clark students use food as a tool for negotiating their identity, reflecting upon foodways, and sustaining their wellbeing; in addition, they meaningfully engage with their communities, and experience a nuanced sense of conviviality. Finally, my findings suggest that Clark students use food as a tool for managing and withstanding the complexities of institutional influence.

You are What and How You Eat

[23] RQ: What are Clark students' social practices around food? What role does food play in the lives of students? Essentially, how do students think about and relate to food? In what ways do they organize and practice community around food? What structural and personal factors act as barriers and enablers of experiencing community around food at Clark?

[24] referring "to a set of social theories where social practices [...] make up the unit of social analysis" (Neuman, 2019, p. 82)

Distinctly, *what* and *how* you eat is reflective of identity. Students at Clark use food as a tool for feeling connected to various facets of their identities; in particular, parts formed before becoming a Clark student. For example, one respondent discussed their meaningful connection with food,

> **"my family is Scandinavian-American and growing up, during every meal, my parents (especially my dad) would talk about the importance of being a sharing host and friend, and that building friendships and families came with sharing foods and hospitality. (Not the kind of hospitality that is taken as etiquette, but the kind that is inviting and welcoming to people for the mere sake of being in community with one another)"** (Survey 1)**.**

The invitational and welcoming hospitality this respondent describes is indicative of their relationship to food. In sharing food they're solidifying an aspect of their personal value system; a value system distinct from the more formal, "etiquette-driven occasions" (Fischler, 2011, p. 535) of communal eating. They expand to convey the meaningful connection between foods uses in their upbringing and their cultural identity,

> **"food is the only way I've ever been able to interact with my culture, and my family that came before me. We have recipe books going back generations, by and from my family. Eating and cooking Scandinavian food brings me a sense of identity that I don't always feel connected to, and sharing food has been ingrained in me as something that is special and meaningful"** (Survey 1).

This 'ingraining' suggests that sharing food is at the heart of their food Habitus. As such, this response is framed within the notion, "we eat what we are: our 'values, choices, and culture'" (Abarca, 2021, p. 674), and demonstrates the notable meanings Clark students attach to their developmental foodways. While this participant discusses social practices around food distinctly outside of Clark, students experience a unique relationship with food

and identity on campus as well. For example, one participant highlighted how food helps them feel close to home while living far away. When asked about their favorite restaurants they mentioned **Eggholic** in Shrewsbury, MA. They explained that the menu offers **"really good and tasty Indian Street food, this something I miss a lot being away from home, totally helps with tasty Indian food cravings"** (Survey 2). Using food as a tool for alleviating their yearning, the respondents' social practices around food "creates a feeling of home and offers a taste of belonging" (Abarca, 2020, p. 20). This is quite salient regarding the perceived limitations of convivial community engagement through food on campus.

Routine

The notion of routine came up frequently in my surveys, making it a particularly interesting and compelling concept to dissect. The communicative nature of my participants' routinized social practices around food extends to their campus years; moreover, my findings suggest that they offer a critical degree of insight into the stressors and socioemotional well being of Clark students. For instance, one participant mentioned that they are **"Never usually up early enough for breakfast"** (Survey 1) while another noted that **"During the week, I eat right before my 9:00ams and barely give myself enough time to have breakfast, let alone have it with my friends… lol"** (Survey 1). While seemingly simple accounts of morning eating behaviors, these responses suggest that Clark students are re-determining their priorities to adhere to structural time constraints; in line with using food as a tool, students sacrifice food to pacify the tension between them and the institution. In addition, my findings convey that *how* students are eating (or not eating) underscores an impulse to quantify their time and normalize pressure and anxiety as character traits of the 'busy student identity'. Morshed et. al., (2022) affirms that college students often adopt unhealthy eating behaviors and "irregular meal patterns, such as skipping breakfast [...]" which converge "with a variety of mental wellbeing concerns such as depression, anxiety, stress, and mood" (p. 38).

This suggests that students' food patterns are influenced by university design, which at Clark lacks a nuanced framework of conviviality and community. The concept ‘you are *what* and *how* you eat’ shows that students associate different values and definitions for food, that derive from a sense of identity, as well as difference in routinized behaviors and social practices. Consequently, this exhibits the significance of Clarks shortcomings in fostering a sense of belonging, particularly with food. Students' social practices around food provide a unique perspective on its role at Clark.

How Students Opportunize Food

To convey how identity and routine are embodied within the *what* and *how* of students' social practices, my findings suggest that students ‘opportunize food’ in a number of ways and for different reasons, one being the intentional invite. My survey respondents discuss how food has initiated occasions for building and maintaining friendships, “**it is a great way to make friends and have an easy reason to invite people to hang out”** (Survey 1). This response signals one formation of students' social practices around food, as invitational. This implies a desire to bond and connect with their peers; my findings suggest that this desire is shared among Clark student leadership, who use food as a tool for nurturing university engagement and enhancing the quality of student/campus life. There are over 130+ student-led clubs on campus, hosting meetings, workshops, and events; these organizations aim to engender a sense of belonging in the community, often using food as an incentive to be communal. Two of my participants took note of this, one mentioned that **“Food is a good way to bring people together, like for club events or even just casual hang outs”** (Survey 1). Another agreed, **“[food] can also persuade people to go to events”** (Survey 1). A large percentage of those groups represent a range of students cultures and identities[25]. In these

[25] To name a handful, students lead the Black Student Union, Asian Student Union, Salsa Encienda, African Diaspora Dance Association, and the International Students Association.

cultural spaces, food serves as a tool for celebrating the student bodies unique cuisines and cultural diversity, for instance,

> **"Salsa Encienda (Clarks Latin dance group) hosted *Baila Conmigo,* a dance showcase featuring salsa and bachata routines, and an intermission performance from unCover, Clarks k-pop dance group [...] The space immediately hits you with a sense of exuberance, this really came through in the boisterous crowd eagerly awaiting the performance. Clearly preparing for the high and lively turnout, a table in the back provided food for guests [...] I spotted my favorite option from last year's show, small fried balls filled with either chicken & cheese, ham & cheese, and nutella; I think they're a Brazilian dish called Coxinha" (Observation Journal, 4/26/2025).**

The cultural convergence between unCover and Salsa Encienda are indicative of Clark students' organized celebration of cultural diversity. Additionally, the observation's journal response illustrates how I perceived the salsa team's use of food: food is used to occupy and satitate eager attendees waiting for the show to begin. There is a deliberate intentionality behind this social practice as it was clear that based on previous attendance numbers, the salsa team could expect a large turnout. Rather than let guests wait impatiently, the team offers food as an activity to fill the empty time.

On a structural, institutional level there is an experienced shortage of convivial and communal food events at Clark. The lively boisterous crowd acts as a large-scale symbol of that feeling; in tandem their vibrant energy represents a general inclination for events that thoughtfully celebrate students' cultures. As a student-led organization Salsa Encienda fills this institutional gap and actively creates a space for highlighting students' cultural belonging. This is highly significant in the context of the 2023 university climate survey which indicated strikingly low levels of belonging and community among BIPOC students. These findings

circle back to the problem of this Praxis, a lack of conviviality and community around food, and demonstrates how students are picking up the slack and instinctually co-constructing a campus community characterized by meaningful, culturally relevant belonging.

Fuel: Necessary for the Performance as a Student

My research finds that students' social practices around food are nuanced; food is largely perceived and used as *fuel.* The deeper I dove into my survey data, the more curious I was about why food's value changes as students embed themselves within the institution? In exploring a lack of convivial community at Clark, the attached meaning students give to food are highly indicative of deeper life elements at play.

My data demonstrated that across different scales, Clark students see food along the lines of sustenance and energy. Some participants viewed it as necessary for survival, **"Eating food together is essential to human civilization"** (Survey 1), and for their physical wellbeing, **"I have trouble with appetite, nausea and sensory issues. On a college campus, food plays [...] an essential physical health role"** (Survey 1). Yet, overarchingly students conceptualize food in its material sense, as something that helps them concentrate and achieve academic expectations, **"Everyone needs to eat, and I can't focus if I haven't eaten in a while"** (Survey 1). Largely students recognize that they must eat in order to distinctly perform the role of student.

As student's engage in 'hustle culture' behaviors their self-image falls into alignment; one of my participants used particularly compelling language to describe how they feel they must operate food in college, **"Food is something you need before you can be yourself- you can't be a student, a worker, a person, without it. And yet people on campus (for varying reasons that are both personal and structural) are put in the position to operate like a "machine" with or without enough food to energize"** (Survey 1). To perform the role of the student, one must be a machine.

My findings suggest that when performing the role of a student, not only must you eat to be a machine, but you also must be a machine in order to eat. In discussing dinner, one of my participants mentioned that **"it [eating] feels more deserving/justified to take a longer nurturing break for food and company"** (Survey 1). Another participant concurs with these behavioral patterns, **"We often eat snacks together and count that as our break time"** (Survey 1). I see the phrasing of 'our break time' as twofold: it suggests that food organizes a healthy break for students to take a pause from being *'*locked-in'[26]. However, it alludes to the toxicity of 'hustle culture' that students only warrant a break (and in correspondence, food) if they have worked hard enough to deserve it. Finally, this characterizes an endless loop in which you are either working to eat or eating to work; embedded within that mindset is a perceived inability to stop working, even for pleasure, joy, or potentially conviviality.

Context About Clark

To gauge a deeper and broader understanding of students' social practices around food I performed observational research, particularly within Clarks dining hall, but also at the distinctly sporadic food events I came across on campus. This was particularly important towards trying to unpack how mundane everyday practices convey the presence of community and conviviality at Clark. To demonstrate these findings I provide my reflective journal entries on what I observed. My findings suggest that the physical structure of the dining hall shapes the feelings within the eating space.

> **"I notice that the majority of the people eating alone here are on the sidelines, at the hightops or counters. Some are facing inwards, almost watching the communal eating around them. They aren't always on their phones, although some are; they're almost passively watching? I wonder how they feel about this?**

[26] a popular slang phrase that many young people are using nowadays, *'locked-in',* understood to mean dedicating 100% of your energy to a particular task.

> **Perhaps they enjoy the ease of watching, without having to engage. And maybe the watching of commensality is enjoyable? I'm reminded of my Gram who preferred to watch the conversations happen and laugh along, rather than partake in them" (Observation Journal, 2/20/25).**

This is suggestive of a few aspects relating to my inquiry of a perceived lack of conviviality on campus and poses further questions: why do students choose to be positioned at the hightops? Is it a preference or is there an unwelcoming nature in the center of the room? Does watching or even just facing the center tables provide a sense of belonging? In regards to the concept 'food as fuel', does the solo nature of these dining experiences indicate that they're eating fuel and not food? Finally, after this observation I was curious why space is designed in this way? Is the physical design of the dining hall reinforcing barriers to a sense of belonging? I turned to the Clark archives to begin finding some answers.

My use of the Clark archives was important towards understanding why there might be a lack of community and conviviality at Clark; history is also a distinct reflective lens. My findings suggest a number of confusing changes to the dining hall's location. I say confusing because consistency across dates and spaces were difficult for me to pinpoint, which indicates a limitation to this point of research. However, my archival findings suggest that the dining hall was first in Estabrook Hall (1952), then moving to Dana Commons (1965),

> **"The dining commons building makes use of a tall central space to give unity to the various activities that take place in it [...] Clark has never had a central place for leisurely social gatherings" (Kepes, 1965, p. 6).**

Dining at Clark then moved to the University Center (1991), where it's situated today. However that move was not without fluctuations:

> **"The present dining hall was formerly the old Alumni gymnasium building, which was built in 1933" (Scarlet, 1998).**

My archival findings suggest a shift in priorities across Clark's administration. Whereas Dana Commons was intentionally structured to contain a sense of conviviality - the UC today does not have the same characterization,

> **"Downstairs there is a conversation pit large enough to hold a meeting, or to contain several different groups… two recreation rooms for billiards, cards, and ping pong, a music listening room, and a meeting room… the architects feel that the sense of occasion provided by a large, formal space is ample compensation"(Kepes, 1965, p. 6).**

Discussion

An analysis of one's foodways might appear to be a bit tedious, at its core this is a discussion of mundane practices (Ehlert, 2021). However, in the mundane lies the framework "through which a person perceives the social world, and is, at the same time, itself framed by a person's socio-cultural and economic conditions of existence and social class positions" (Ehlert, 2021, p. 682); making this analysis important work towards understanding the social conditions that manufacture a perceived lack of conviviality and community in Clark's environment. My findings suggest that students' social practices around food are reflective of their habitual foodways, both in upbringing and in college, and indicative of the context you're situated within. My survey data demonstrated how food is defining: first, in mirroring the multiple facets of our identities, our foodways act as a material bridge between our familial, cultural, and historical social practices with food. Subsequently, food broadcasts our implicit and explicit values, fostering a recursive relationship in which our identities and values are mutually infused, aka our habitus. One's Habitus in relation to food is impactful towards their sense of self; **"I think food at home is very different than on a college [campus] because at home it's viewed as culture and stories but at college it's a necessity**

since we don't have time in our day” (Survey 1). Counihans (1999) study of college students' foodways and U.S. food rules agrees,

> “The beliefs that success comes from individual hard work and taking control of one's life are manifest in college students' food rules. Their food rules embody these beliefs almost unconsciously” (p. 114)

Moreover, My findings suggest that students' social practices around food are indicative of the tradeoffs made to function within this system, where “eating should be as individualized as other pursuits. (Counihan, 1999, p. 118). Based upon my findings, ‘fuel’, rather than food, is used as a tool for adhering to the constraints of higher education and achieving the role of a student. Breakfast is most often a solo activity and skipped when needed. One of my participants exemplified this, stating, **“I am usually alone for this meal and am going to class as soon as this meal is done, others are usually gone or asleep” (Survey 1).** Additionally, eating is quick and convenient, **“eating on the go sometimes” (Survey 1).** My findings suggest that students value walkability and affordability when purchasing food outside of Clark.

This outlines the reality that academia inflicts upon students' foodways. In this reality students “are continuously challenged by competing demands, including academic responsibilities and involvement in extracurricular and social activities” (Deliens & Deforche, 2014, p. 9). In being a full-time student, the ability to work and generate income is restricted, thus adding an additional impediment to their eating habits. Overarchingly, they specified a perceived lack of time to be the largest impact on their foodways: **“We all need to eat but are all very busy so it’s often about finding a quick meal or moment to eat”** (Survey 1). One participant acknowledged how this impacts their ability to buy groceries, **“as a student living off campus, I have found it very difficult to buy groceries regularly enough, because of the amount of time I have that is free, and have spent many weeks**

spreading the ingredients I do have as thin as they can go" (Survey 1). What is surprising about this point of data, is that this participant blames the stretching of their groceries on time, rather than cost, which might be the common assumption. This does not negate the influence of "food product prices and individual budget [... on] students' food choices" (Deliens & Deforche, 2014, p. 7). Rather, it demonstrates what Fischler (2011) describes as the individualization and medicalization of eating, as well as a 'hustle culture' mentality. Enter any college library across the U.S., especially during midterms or finals, and I'd wager that you would repeatedly hear some semblance of that phrase. Is there something inherently competitive and agitated with how our country conceptualizes worth ethic? The research of Burgess et. al., (2022) assessed the dramatic decline of alcohol consumption among young people, specifically Gen Z, through the perspective of contemporary individualization; their findings corroborate the 'locked-in' mindset, which exhorts "endless pressure, as much as endless opportunity, driving eventual 'burnout'" (Burgess et. al., 2022, p. 911). The authors associate this as the influence of *'hustle culture'* in which their participants felt a limitation to their time:

> "We have this mentality of sitting around and talking to people isn't worth it. I mean, it is…but…we have it so ingrained in us that everything we do has to have like a productive outcome…you have to be constantly looking forward" (Burgess et. al., 2022, p. 911).

The 'hustle culture' mentality is replicated in a college setting as "college students' ideas about food are embedded in the value system of U.S. society" (Counihan, 1999, p. 113). Ingrained within these ideologies, "eating becomes a nuisance that detracts from work time or is reduced in meaning to being about health alone" (Tuten, 2020, p. 11), thus, the stretching of groceries, skipping of meals, and abandonment of the convivial communal aspects of

social practices around food feel necessary because buying groceries doesn't feel like it should be a priority.

Student's are not alone in this. Their actions and practices around food align with national[27] societal trends, "time spent eating has decreased, composition of meals has been simplified, both eating out and take-out have been gaining considerable ground; sandwiches, snacks, fast food, nibbles and 'grazing' do not seem to have been on the wane lately" (Fischler, 2011, p. 544). The rise of these foodways is the embodiment of U.S. values regarding individualization, privatization, and an industrial food system. My archival evidence which recognizes a shift in these values within the institution. When the dining hall was moved out of Dana Commons, the meanings attached to those social practices around food shifted as well and food lost its association to recreation.

With that being said, there is relative deviation; students are still able to discern an appreciation for the communal elements that come from eating with others, while simultaneously recognizing their use of it as fuel. One participant acknowledged that food **"brings me together with people, and I think on a college campus in general it can do that, but it can also just be for utility"** (Survey 1). But, what is salient about my findings is how in being a full time student, my participants change their priorities and *feel* a sense of guilt and inability to stop working; this feeling is what drives their actions, and maintains these social practices around food.

We could have a drawn-out debate over the actual necessity of the irregular nature of students' social practices around food, which I believe would be highly minimizing the significance of how students relate to their social practices. However what is not as easily debatable is the impact of individualism, capitalism, and "market economics [which] values productivity over the quality of human life" (Tuten, 2020, p. 11). Under these conditions, the

[27] And in some cases global, Mennell et. al., (1992) saw "'a reduction from five meals a day to three in Vienna since the turn of the century and a reorganization of their type'; an 'increased likelihood of solo-eating'; all a consequence of 'the major reorganization of industrial life'" (Fischler, 2011, p. 529).

student experience is arguably intense. Individualism's directions say that "it is up to the individual to make the right decisions, i.e. those necessary in order to be healthy" (Fischler, 2011, p. 542); consequently, many of my participants experience this as an increased pressure, which emphasizes a need to maintain control over their health and food habits. This pressure is exacerbated in ways in which it is "linked to a wider set of socio-economic and cultural conditions that have shaped young people's lifeworld" (Burgess et. al., 2022, p. 915).

Our U.S. value system instigates "an exclusive individual relation between the food (that is nutritional content) and the individual consumer" (Andersen, 2015, p. 43) justified by the industrial food regime[28]. In particular, *corporate food regime theory*[29], characterized by world trade liberalization and the dominance of global agri-food actors, furthers this explanation; that the global industrial food system is integrated in a manner that reflects, supports, and is driven by global cycles of capital accumulation (Jakobsen, 2021). Fischler (2011) expressed "that, when absorbing a food, a subject absorbs at the same time salient features of the food" (p. 533). Our food is born with the sole mission of accumulating corporate wealth and as consumers we follow those same guidelines. Thus our consistent habits, behaviors, and social practices around food must support that charge.

This behavior, to perform the student role within the Field of higher education additionally communicates students desires. They want to do well in school, and to successfully perform the role of a student. Further, they want that performance to be maintained and support their desired futures. College students "are in a sort of long-term "liminal" state [...] betwixt and between youth and adulthood" (Counihan, 1999, p. 115). This period is conventionally understood to be the foundation that eases students into that

[28] Food regime theory tracks global food system development, navigating how power inheres in colonial, historical, and structural relations in the interest of global capitalist accumulation (Leach et. al., 2020).

[29] Many involved in various aspects of the food system advocate "that we are living in a 'corporate food regime'" (Jakobsen, 2021, p. 2). "Ostensibly arising in the late 1980 s and lasting to this day [...] world agriculture is being increasingly usurped by finance and corporate capital – particularly in the form of transnational agribusiness corporations – through integration in 'global value chains' and export-orientation" (Jakobsen, 2021, p. 2).

transition of adulthood. In this sense, college “provides a theatre for the performance of imaginary future selves” (Parsons, 2018, p. 183). However, as my data and the corroborating literature shows, the behavioral patterns of this performance are largely characterized by “self-discipline [and] self-control” (Deliens & Deforche, 2014, p. 8). Thus, they are performing a future self that aligns with individualist and capitalist ideologies that fear inter-dependency. Burgess et. a., (2022) informs us that “late capitalism ‘disembeds’ the individual but is not then able to ‘re-embed’ in newforms of connection and collectivity” (p. 908). Hypothetically, food could be a tool for ‘re-embedding’ however my findings assert that many students' behaviors reflect fully autonomous and toxically industrious imaginary future selves. Moreover, as students foodways articulate a credence in self-control and individual choice, “they uphold hierarchical social relations” (Counihan, 1999, p. 113).

My observational data demonstrates that in the dining hall eating is more associated with ‘fuel’ as they eat whatever the school has provided. Illich (1973) conviviality theory discusses this along the terms of ‘radical monopoly’ and ‘compulsory consumption’. Clark as an institution that concentrates power and wealth, forces students to be on a meal plan for a minimum of two years. In those two years students' social practices around food are strictly tied to the university's desires, monopolizing upon the bodies need to eat and social disposition. From my findings, students' qualms with food on campus is connected to how they’re locked into the institution's radical monopoly, “where a major tool rules out natural competence” (Illich, 1973, p. 63). Students are inextricably linked to the university, their social practices and associated privileges around food are inherently dependent upon their status within the institution. This is shared amongst all tuition paying Clark students. As such, the composition of students' social practices for opportunizing food is the offspring of their linkage to Clark as a radical monopoly. Largely speaking, this comes through in descriptions of the dining hall. Locked into the institutions domain, the “radical monopoly imposes

compulsory consumption and thereby restricts personal autonomy. It constitutes a special kind of social control because it is enforced by means of the imposed consumption of a standard product that only large institutions can provide" (Illich, 1973, p. 63). As both beneficiaries and benefactors of the university, students' mixed feelings on the food at Clark are particularly interesting. For a number of reasons, the majority of my survey participants do not have the fondest association with how Clark influences food in relation to both food as a material object, the formation of its attached meanings, and its application to physical space.

Conclusion

In this Praxis I hoped to investigate what I perceived to be a lack of conviviality and community around food at Clark. My iterative and reflexive research methods, consisting of survey data, observations, and archival research set out to unpack this inquiry — to see if students shared that perception. I hypothesized that there were certain factors and forces of the institution's design that intentionally wanted to reduce any convivial nature of students' social practices around food. My research aimed to illuminate the extent of truth to that hypothesis and used the following research question to ground me in this exploration:

1. What are Clark students' social practices around food?
    a. What role does food play in the lives of students? Essentially, how do students think about and relate to food? In what ways do they organize and practice community around food?
2. What structural and personal factors act as barriers and enablers of experiencing community around food at Clark?

As I thoroughly analyzed a plethora of literature on food, I realized how central food is to humanity, capitalism, and interpersonal relations — just as the planets circle around the sun, I think humanity, our stories and systems circle around food. In that same vein, I

reckoned with the multidisciplinary nature of food and how that complicated my conceptualization of it both within and outside of the university. While “it might be tempting to think of eating as a purely individual act driven solely by nutritional demands” (Neuman, 2024, p. 565) food is much more complex.

My findings are drawn from my research as well as my embroilment in all kinds of literature surrounding the topic, dissecting the multifaceted nature of food as a material, and the social practices around it. Human beings don’t feed themselves at random, rather, they form an intimate relationship with consumption, reflecting underlying meanings that describe “something more profoundly about the structure of humanity and cultures” (Jönsson et. al., 2021, pp. 2)..

As a result, “food is the only consumed cultural artifact that quite literally becomes us” (Crowther, 2013, pp. XX), therefore, the old adage - ‘you are what you eat’ is probably more relevant than one would normally consider. Despite humanity's intimate relationship with food, dominant narratives in society tend to consider food as ubiquitous; rationalizing our social practices around food where “speed, convenience, and standardization have replaced the flair of design and creation in cooking, the comfort of relationships in serving, and the variety available in choice” (Ritzer, 1983, p. 2). Illich (1973) states that,

> “language reflects the monopoly of the industrial mode of production [...] the tongues of industrial nations identify the fruits of creative work and of human labor with the outputs of industry” (p. 104).

Dominant narratives of consumption mark it as an ordinary, individualist, and nutrient focused act done so out of convenience and to sustain our energy. Regardless of whatever buzzwords Clark attributes to food publicly, the inherent institutional demands require students to differentiate between ‘food’ and ‘fuel’; this almost a survival instinct on behalf of

students, to not completely muddle their convivial Habitus of social practices around food, and allow their performance of the student as a social role associate consumption with food.

Conclusive Reflection on Praxis

In our last ever Praxis class, Jie asked us to write out what impact we think our project has had, and on whom. Fighting against a very sleep-deprived, under-caffeinated, foggy brain I tried to jot down a few quick bullet points, which all seemed to circle around what Praxis had forced me to see. This wasn't very surprising as for about a year and a half, Praxis and I have been in a very strained and tumultuous relationship. Throughout our time together I became increasingly more exhausted. In early October, after yet another change to my project I journaled my frustration: *'I feel like I just can't fail at one more thing, academically or emotionally. Right now I feel totally lost with Praxis, like a failure. I don't feel the drive in myself to fix it, but I have to, I'm the only one who can'.* This journal entry signifies the impact Praxis had on me, it forced me to come to terms with my frustrations over how I was feeling and how I moved about life. I suspected that Praxis was to blame and as I reveled in my pity party, I felt it's passive-aggressive eye roll; we both knew of my role in this mess. Obviously, I couldn't hide the truth for long, Praxis had positioned my contradictions directly in front of me. With each passing year in college, I increasingly use food strictly as fuel. Subconsciously, my freezer is stocked with pre-packaged foods that I can heat quickly for the sole purpose of silencing my stomach growls. In times of stress, I struggle to discern food's value as more than the sum of its parts; it's worth compared to the toxic energy drinks that I desperately pour down my throat in an attempt to maintain my energy. This is how Praxis forced me to take a hard look at myself and admit to the contradictions in how I preach about food versus how I practice it.

I used to argue *'food had a magical capacity for fostering community, authentic connection and joy. That food was capable of much more than providing us with sustenance.'*

While I still hold parts of that to be true — I do believe that food is more than the sum of its parts, the magical capacity I referred to was far more complicated and required much more intention than I realized. With that in mind, as an action, I'd make a recommendation to Harvest Table, Clarks newest food provider, and suggest that as both an organization and as individuals, they assess what meanings they attach to food. I suggest they theorize how students use food as a tool, as fuel, and why that might occur. Within that theorizing might illuminate tangible and practical ways for building conviviality and community around food. I propose this idea because my findings suggest that food means many different things to Clark students and in promoting communal eating events that strive for a sense of conviviality, it is imperative to have a meaningful understanding of how the Clark student body experiences food, since that is their target group. Additionally, while seemingly silly to ask an organization to describe the meaning they attribute to food, I actually think this is quite crucial. When trying to promote meaningful and convivial experiences around food, how Harvest Table conceptualizes food and the social practices around it will emerge in the design and structure of those initiatives. Before we can develop a community around food and eating, we need to understand how and why we assign it that meaning, "the materialization of consciousness is reflected in Western languages" (Illich, 1973, p. 104).

Overall, we need to build a community around how we conceptualize food and its interconnected social practices, arguably *before* trying to enact any kind of community initiatives around food. A community where students are at the center of its design and structure, their agency and autonomy are focal; Illich (1973) would constitute this as a 'convivial society'. It is only through the guidelines of this type of community can food actually enact its 'magical properties' and build a meaningful sense of community.

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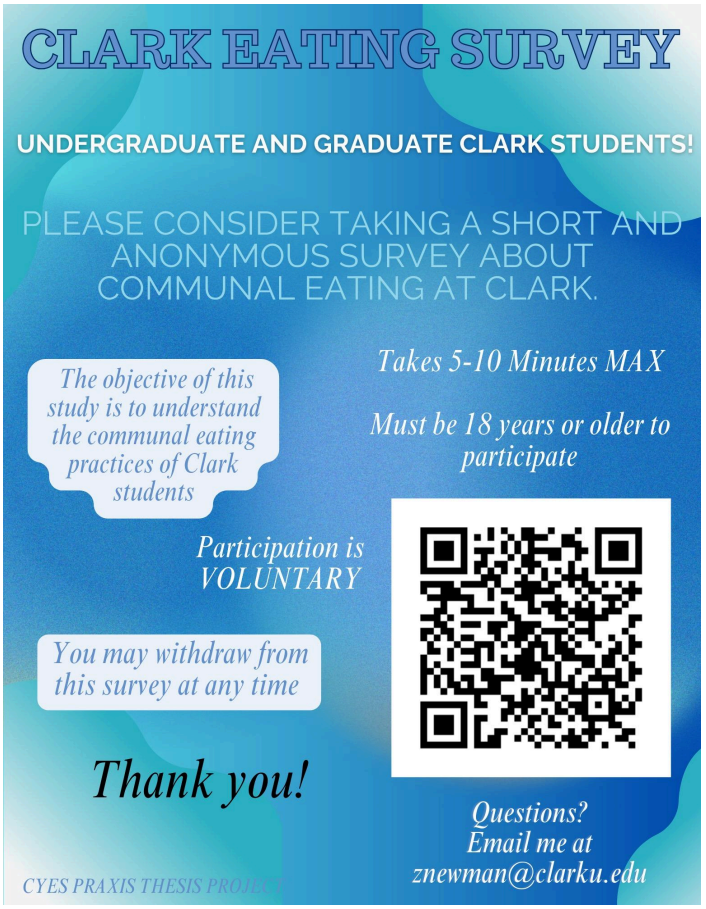
Appendix A

Clark Eating Survey Recruitment Flier



Appendix B

Clark Archival Data of the Ding Hall