



# The Minnesota Star Tribune

COMMENTARIES

## *From a place passed by: How I represent Minnesota now that I'm in college out East*

What I wish for – what I think we all wish for – is an attempt to understand, to not be thrown away.

By **Kerrera Jackson**

NOVEMBER 29, 2024 AT 5:31PM



Sightseers broke away from the candlelit path at Fort Snelling State Park to take in views of the frozen Minnesota River. (Aaron Lavinsky/The Minnesota Star Tribune)



**Opinion editor's note:** *Strib Voices publishes a mix of guest [commentaries](#) online and in print each day. To contribute, [click here](#).*

...

Who could you be if not surrounded by the people or places from your past? Going to college provides a fresh new beginning to the rest of life; the opportunities are endless. You could make your personality all about your newfound love for math, dance, classical literature or improv theater. You could dress differently, cut your hair, put on more (or less) makeup, and no one would know that that wasn't you before you came here. But there is one thing that can pull you back to who you were before Tufts, before the possibility of reinvention was accessible.

During those first few nights standing on Tisch Roof, everyone gets asked the same question: "Where are you from?" This is something we have no control over, no ability to manipulate, even in a new location. Still, our need to perceive others persists. When meeting so many reinventions, we latch onto the one thing we know for sure.

I wasn't expecting it when I came here to Massachusetts: the pause, the glint of confusion in people's eyes when I tell them that I'm from Minnesota. They take a moment to see if they can remember where that is, or suddenly realize that it's a state in the first place. There's the shock that I made it *all* the way over here, followed by polite conversation wherein they attempt to remember one thing, something, anything, about Minnesota. This can only happen for a second until they quickly move on to something else, something they're more familiar with discussing. From these moments on, it's always felt like I have to work upwards – from the disappointment and confusion I've caused them, from the vision that I'm from this unheard-of place, a blank gray slate where a state should be. What fills in this slate are stereotypical images of middle-of-nowhere farmland and tiny towns pretending to be cities.

My whole life I've been from one place: Bloomington, Minnesota (but I always tell people "Minneapolis"). I grew up a 10-minute walk away from the Minnesota River and a 10-minute drive from the Mississippi. Not only did I have rivers to escape to, but waterfalls too, and a lake always a stone's throw away. School got canceled for snow days but also for "cold days," when it would get to -40 degrees in parts of the state, and no one would bat an eye.

Not only is the nature beautiful, but the culture is, too. "Minnesota nice" is a common phrase most people connect to my home state. It's not just a saying, it's a way of life. You pass strangers on the street, and you wave, say hello and ask how their day is going. There is a sense of greater community there that I miss when walking on these gray Bostonian streets filled with blaring car horns and turned-down faces.

Our music scene is also something I miss – there's nothing Minnesotans know how to do better than show up at live music. If I wanted to get a decent view at a show I had to line up by 4 p.m., even on a weekday, with the line already trailing down multiple blocks. I grew up going to the Dakota Jazz Club with my parents and later graduated to hot and sweaty shows at First Avenue, an iconic venue where Prince got his start. When I think of home, I think of those late nights in the city, where time felt endless – where it felt like I would never leave. I've never moved homes, let alone states, and like almost everyone else, I've never thought about what it would be like to be from somewhere else. Where else could I even be from?

But when I came to Tufts, I started to ask myself this question – where else might people see me as being from? What if I lied about it so that I could feel like I fit in more here? I started to make people guess. The classic answers always appeared: New York? L.A.? D.C.? Maybe this was just a way of delaying it, though: the reaction that always followed, the reaction that even the humor of the game can't fully cover up, a game I made so I can feel connected to them for a little bit longer.

Every chance I get, I sprinkle some facts about Minnesota into conversation.

“Minneapolis has an incredible food scene.” “I live super close to the Mall of America, the largest mall in the country!” “We have a flourishing art scene, like did you know that Keith Haring had a long residency at the Walker?” “Did you know that Prince is from there? Bob Dylan? Winona Ryder? Judy Garland?” I'm from there, isn't that enough?

But these reactions also mean presumption. It's human to immediately fill in the blanks when key data is missing, but what's filled in are assumptions – that it must be uninteresting, that it must not be worth their time. My stomach sinks, and it's hard not to go quiet, to feel numb at the mercy of the perceptions of what people think my life was like before coming here.

My experience is not a singular one, it's something I talk about at length with friends from other “unmemorable” places. That is something that I am grateful for, though: the community that being from a place Tufts doesn't normally encounter brings. Every time I meet someone from Kansas or Wisconsin or South Carolina, I jump at the opportunity to tell them that I'm from somewhere uncommon, too, something that we share.

There's an assumption being made by fellow student Dake's friends when they say they don't want to visit his home in West Virginia. He tells me that he would love to experience his home with the people from Tufts he cares about. But he knows that they will never want to visit. I beg my own friends from Tufts to come and visit me every summer, and every time I get the same response – a polite smile and quick affirmation that they'll “check the flights.” There's an assumption being made when I get asked if I'm glad I left home, like being in Boston has saved me from a dreary and boring future, like I can't love where I'm from just because they don't know how.

There's an assumption being made when someone asks Eleanor, a lesbian from Alabama, if she's ever been "hate crimed," or when her dad gets told that he's "just a doctor from Alabama," like if he was a doctor in New York he'd automatically be smarter. A caricature is easy to remember, but the reality of a diverse and multifaceted place is not.

There are painters from Iowa, musicians from Louisiana and philosophical theorists from North Dakota. There are trans people in Oklahoma, aspiring filmmakers in Utah and schoolteachers in Ohio trying to build a brighter future. There are pride parades in Arkansas and musical theater scenes in Indiana. There is so much joy, so much culture and so much life in places people don't expect it from.

But then again, what if there wasn't? What if there were only farmers, factory workers, or non-college-educated people in these places? They aren't any less deserving of your time, respect or consideration. We single out what we perceive as interesting, instead of recognizing the complexities of other's lives. We accept only our experiences, or our perceptions of the world, as the "correct" ones.

"People automatically assume that everyone in West Virginia is someone that would disagree with them politically, and I wish people understood that you don't have to discount a whole state just because of your perception of what they believe," said Dake. It's easy to make perceptions based on a place's politics, and there is so much to say about the political climate of where someone is from or why they wouldn't want to move back there. But boiling their lives down to just that does a great disservice to their homeland, the place that raised them and that they can still hold tenderness for.

The thing is, can I even blame them? To what extent can any of us actually ever understand each other, before we all melted into the same liberal-arts-school pot? Someone who grew up in New York City can't understand my life before Tufts, and I can't understand theirs. I can't understand what it was like for Dake to grow up in West Virginia; I have my presumptions about that, too. But what I wish for, and what I think we all wish for, is an attempt to understand, to not be thrown away.

"I'm very proud of where I'm from, and that has to do with a lot of my personal growth and my relationship to where I'm from. At the beginning ... I felt ashamed of where I was from. I was really trying to not have any kind of Southern accent, and I was really trying to push that down. I didn't want people to know that I was different. But I don't at all anymore, and I regret having that shame ... . A lot of who I am is dependent on where I came from, and I don't want to lose that," said Eleanor.

I will never lose the way I elongate my O's when I get excited, my constant Minnesota fact-dropping or my life in the Midwest. We can't change where we are from, we can only change our perceptions of it, and we can all accept that there is so much more to the world, to this country even, than we think we know.

*Kerrera Jackson, from Bloomington, is a junior at Tufts University in Boston.*

Share

 Comment

---

→ ABOUT THE WRITER

**Kerrera Jackson**

---