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Blood, Sweat and Tears in a Bottle of Palestinian Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of fairtrade extra-virgin olive oil from its troubled production in Palestine, to its convoluted and difficult circulation in the West Bank and out of Israel, to ethical consumers abroad who buy it out of solidarity with Palestinian farmers. I examine the emotions embedded in the product: the blood, sweat and tears of the Palestinian producer and the sympathy of the consumers. The deleterious conditions of production in Palestine affect its possible trajectories. The consumers of Palestinian olive oil effect an embodied expression of opposition to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Keywords: olive oil, olive trees, Palestine, Israel, nutrition and semiotic value

Introduction

This is very expensive oil. Expensive because a farmer risked being shot by an Israeli settler to pick his olives. Expensive because the farmer may have been kept from his land by the Separation Wall. Expensive because of what we had to go through to export it. (Palestinian olive oil producer, 2006)

This paper examines the promotion and consumption of Palestinian olive oil as a means of supporting Palestinian farmers, whose agricultural practices have been so harshly curtailed under the Israeli occupation. In the past few decades, there has been much concern with how bodies get commodified in the Middle East. In contrast, I consider here how a consumable commodity, Palestinian olive oil, becomes imbued with the experiences of Middle Eastern bodies and emotions.

This paper analyzes a nexus of production, consumption and circulation practices which are designed to effect political change. It is also a case study through which I theorize how the mundane issues of everyday commensality, nutrition and cultivated taste become transformed under the harsh political and economic conditions of occupation. Food, in this case olive oil—a staple of the Palestinian diet, is not a neutral fact that stands outside the occupation; rather, it is intimately bound up with it, as the planting and uprooting of olive trees is part of the struggle for land and legitimacy, as will be discussed further below. In this respect, the contemporary Palestinian fairtrade olive oil business is one that explicitly attempts an intervention in an extremely unfair situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, one that is getting increasingly worse as illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank expand despite international pressure to halt settlement activity. It is an attempt to counter the deleterious effects of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian agricultural economy, which becomes increasingly compromised as agricultural land is confiscated for the illegal Israeli settlements, as well as for bypass roads, the nine-meter high separation barrier,¹ as well as Israeli army bases, outposts and checkpoints.

In this respect, the movement to support Palestinian olive oil production through consumption practices bears some resemblance to other consumer movements which have been employed to effect political change, notably the boycott of sugar and rum for opponents of slavery (Mintz 1996) and the boycott of South African food products like wine and grapes by opponents of the apartheid regime. Both of these campaigns focused on the unfairness and brutality of slave or apartheid economies for the oppressed, using the pain of the oppressed as a reason for *not* consuming these food commodities. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement supports a boycott of Israeli products, particularly those produced in the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but this movement, founded by a consortium of Palestinian activist groups, has only really gained momentum since the Israeli incursion into Gaza in 2008–2009, which resulted in the death of over 1,300 Palestinians, mostly civilians. What has been more successful (and less controversial) has been the movement to support agricultural production in the West Bank. But whereas apartheid in South Africa was seen as a reason *not* to consume the agricultural fruits of slavery, the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people is given as a reason *for* consuming Palestinian olive oil. Thus, like many fairtrade products, fairtrade Palestinian olive oil is presented as providing an alternative to agricultural products produced under exploitative conditions. The marketing of Palestinian olive oil stresses the need to improve the lives and livelihood of the Palestinian farmers by providing them with markets for their olive oil. Neither the Palestinian Authority nor any other Palestinian political party figures in this promotional material. I argue in this paper that affect—the suffering of the Palestinian people, and the sympathy of the consumers—is a crucial element of the circulation of Palestinian olive oil.

Methodology

This article is based in part on data gathered on a preliminary field trip to Palestine in April 2006. This short trip with a group affiliated with the British branch of Jews

for Justice, who imported Palestinian olive oil, was enormously important in formulating my project. I conducted participant observation with Palestinian families and international volunteers in the fall of 2007, 2008 and 2009. I made additional fieldtrips in spring of 2007, 2008 and 2009 to interview olive oil producers and professionals (those involved in running cooperatives, nongovernmental organizations, testers, tasters and marketers) when the hectic olive-pressing season was over. For the past five years, I have conducted participant observation with volunteers who participate in the distribution of Palestinian olive oil in Toronto, Washington and London. I have also conducted ongoing fieldwork on the web, as much of the activism surrounding the distribution of Palestinian olive oil is web-based. Such “multi-sited” (Marcus 1995) field research is necessary for this project, which considers how the production, consumption and circulation of food commodities are fundamentally connected.

The Olive Harvest

Palestinian olive oil is a food commodity that circulates in the interstices of gift and commodity exchange. It *is* a commodity, but its circulation crucially depends on revealing the embodied conditions of its production to consumers abroad. In promoting Palestinian olive oil, marketers² highlight how the labor of olive-picking is made even more difficult by the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The construction of the Separation Wall has meant that much Palestinian agricultural land has been enclosed on the Israeli side of the Wall, often separating Palestinian farmers from their land.³ Attention is also drawn to the danger farmers must face if their land is close to hostile and Israeli settlers⁴ who have illegally settled on confiscated Palestinian land; they often shoot at or set their dogs on Palestinian farmers as they try to harvest their olives, making what is already hard labor fraught with danger. Palestinian friends have told me that the olive harvest was once a time of both communal hard work and celebration, with extended families bringing food and drums to their olive fields, sometimes sleeping there until the harvest was done. Now it is a time of tension and fear; gone is the “communitas” of harvest, as olives must now be picked as swiftly as possible.⁵ Those Palestinians with land that is close to a settlement, an Israeli army outpost, a bypass road,⁶ or any other space or structure that the army or the settlers deem to require a “security zone” will be allowed only partial and unpredictable access to their own olive groves. Permission to access the land is often granted only to the immediate family, who cannot provide enough labor to pick the olives in a timely fashion. Of late, groups of international volunteers have come to Palestine to help pick the olives of those farmers so endangered, and convey the conditions of the Palestinian olive farmer to those at home. Several of these volunteers, me included, have become involved in some way in promoting or circulating Palestinian olive oil.⁷



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In October 2009, I was in the West Bank with a motley crew of international volunteers from the UK, the Netherlands, the United States, Japan and Canada: political solidarity types; American or British citizens of Palestinian descent; non-Zionist Jews; several aging American hippies; church-goers of various

denominations, and the odd godless anthropologist and gay activist. We had little in common except that we had come for a YMCA sponsored initiative to organize international volunteers to help Palestinian farmers at risk from the Israeli settlers or the Israeli army or both. Aged from sixteen to eighty-four, none of us trained in agricultural labor, we could only seem appealing as farm-hands under the current conditions of Israeli occupation. The olive harvest has come to be a pivotal moment where tensions generated between Palestinian farmers, the illegal Israeli settlers, who have taken considerable amounts of Palestinian land, and the army who protect these illegal settlers come to a head.⁸ Trees, especially olive trees, have come to be a particularly important site where claims to land are made or denied; this is of course part of a much wider competition between Zionist and anti-Zionist discourses about the land and trees as discussed by Cohen (1993), Zerubayel (1996), Bardenstein (1999) and Bravurman (2009). Of course, every olive tree destroyed, uprooted or appropriated means less olive oil produced. Between September 2000 and September 2009, 1,628,126 fruit trees were destroyed or uprooted in the West Bank and Gaza (ARIJ 2009). In this paper, I focus on how such competition over trees and land is undermining Palestinian olive oil production in the West Bank while galvanizing the efforts to revitalize the olive oil industry for foreign export.

Part of this revitalization process has involved international efforts to protect the olive harvesters while picking and pressing their olives. As noted above, for the past three years, I have been one of these international volunteers. In October 2009, we were picking olives on Fawad's⁹ land, overlooked by the illegal settlement of Gilo, which was built on Palestinian land, but rezoned by the Israelis to be a suburb of Jerusalem.¹⁰ Above the land is a huge overpass designed to connect the settlements to each other and to Israel. Although these bypass roads are built on Palestinian land, Palestinians are forbidden to use them. Fawad's land, some of the most fertile and valuable land in Palestine, had been "rezoned" from the ancient Christian municipality of Bayt Jala to Jerusalem. This means that as Fawad, like most Palestinians, has no access to Jerusalem as he has no Jerusalem ID. In effect, then, Fawad was not allowed access to his own land and olive trees which had been in his family for several generations. Because of a series of court cases, however, he has been granted some limited access. In 2007, we had also picked olives on Fawad's land; then there had been an Israeli army presence, but we were allowed to pass. In 2008, a gate had been constructed, and we were forced to wait in front of it for an hour while the Israeli soldiers held all of our passports for some undisclosed reason. In 2009, a further barrier to Fawad's land had been constructed with a small gate to which he had a key, but which he could use only with the army's permission. Even with army permission, only he, his immediate family, his mother and his two brothers could access the land. Such a small number of people cannot provide enough labor to harvest their considerable number of olive trees, on some of the most fertile land in the West Bank, which produces some of the most expensive and valued olive oil in Palestine. No other Palestinians, extended family, friends or hired helpers, were allowed on the land. As internationals with Israeli visas in our passports, however, we were allowed to help, albeit under surveillance

from the remarkable variety of military vehicles passing by us on the road that is also Fawad's access road, although now he is not allowed use a vehicle larger than a motorbike, making it very difficult for him to transport the heavy sacks of olives to the mill.

We comprised a rather bizarre migrant labor workforce: instead of cheap, exploited, illegal laborers, we were (relatively) wealthy, self-financing, legal, enthusiastic if not gifted, foreign laborers.¹¹ Instead of having to sneak through barriers like the Palestinians who work illegally in Israel, a harrowing process unforgettably captured by Suad Amiry (2010), what made us valuable as agricultural laborers was the fact that we were foreigners with valid Israeli visas, from countries that Israel counts as allies, and were therefore allowed to pass barriers that undoubtedly more skilled Palestinian laborers could not.

Fawad told us that the former commander of the army had cut the water and electricity to his land and their lovely house which dated back to the Ottoman period. The services had been returned due to the efforts of his Israeli lawyer and the replacement of the draconian commander with someone who had a bit more heart. Yet their ability to remain on their land over the long term remained in doubt. Forever-changing bureaucratic/military rules and the vagaries of the Israeli personnel makes uncertainty what Raymond Williams (1976) would call the "structure of feeling" in contemporary Palestine. Williams' work, influential in many of the social sciences and humanities, discusses how political economies, and in this case, the political economy of the occupation, affect the everyday emotions of the Palestinian population. The threat of being denied access to their own olives, trees and oil is an example of deliberately imposed food insecurity.

While infrastructure elsewhere in the world is designed to facilitate agricultural and other production and circulation of goods, Israeli infrastructure in the West Bank serves only to impede it at every step of production and circulation.¹² On our way to Fawad's farm in 2009, our fifty-person bus nearly pitched off the narrow road into a valley in the mountains outside of Bethlehem. Because the Palestinians are prevented from using the perfectly-maintained settler bypass road (which themselves serve as another kind of wall) and hindered by checkpoints, what used to be a 15-minute trip to their fields ended up an hour-long white-knuckle ride, as the roads are so narrow that two large vehicles cannot pass each other at the same time. This infrastructural issue of course adds to the growing danger of olive picking.¹³ Before the increasingly bold attacks by the illegal Israeli settlers on Palestinian farmers, olive picking was both a productive activity designed to produce oil for the family and for sale, and a time of communal solidarity when children were given time off school to help with the harvest and wide groups of kin and neighbors would have communal meals in the olive groves. Now Palestinians can count on little aid from the army or the police if the settlers attack. The Israeli human rights organization, Yesh Din, notes that of 69 complaints filed regarding settler damage to Palestinian olive trees, not one has resulted in an indictment (Levinson 2009: 1).

On another farmer's land, again familiar to us veterans who had been olive picking in 2008, some forty to fifty olive trees had been entirely uprooted by the



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Israeli army, ostensibly for “security” reasons, as the land was close to the route of the Segregation Wall. The land now appeared forlorn and abandoned, and therefore, following the resurrection of an old Ottoman law, designated to become “state” land. As the Palestinians would often joke, “Do you think this land is really going back to the Ottomans?” Clearly, the aim is to render Palestinian land unproductive so it can be expropriated. Such legal/bureaucratic measures systematically undermine agricultural productivity in Palestine (see Bravurman 2009).

The Keep Hope Alive olive tree campaign of the East Jerusalem YMCA planted 200 internationally sponsored olive trees on a farmer’s land in February 2009; a week later, the army had uprooted fifty of them. The reason given for this action was that the olive trees were close to an Israeli military outpost abandoned three years earlier, which had also been constructed illegally on this farmer’s confiscated land. It is clear that the Palestinians’ right to livelihood is systematically undermined by Israeli “security” concerns. Critics of the Segregation Wall note that it does not serve to separate Palestinians from Israelis, but to separate Palestinians from other Palestinians and Palestinians from their land. It should be noted that these tree-planting campaigns are entwined with the sale of olive oil abroad. As one Palestinian member of the Keep Hope Alive campaign told me, “When we sell Palestinian oil, we also plant international identities in Palestinian soil.” So the sale of the olive oil becomes envisioned as being rooted in the tree, in future agricultural productivity for Palestinian farmers and as embedding international political support for the Palestinian farmers, who often feel abandoned by the international community.

A great deal of the agricultural land around Bethlehem, Bayt Sahour and Bayt Jala, famed for its olive oil, has been annexed behind the Segregation Wall. Access to these lands must be negotiated through the Palestinian liaison officials, who then refer them to the Israeli civil/military authorities in the Etzion settlement block. As many of my informants and a recent testimonial published by B’Tselem note, the Israeli authorities either do not allow access to the land, or allow access to the landowner alone, without a vehicle, meaning that he has to carry the ladders, nets, buckets and sacks and walk to his fields. To quote one farmer:

I’m eighty years old. To get from my house to the road in front of it, one of my sons has to help me. So how can I go alone to my land, and walk the long way through the gate? So I couldn’t get to my land during the 2007 and 2008 harvest. Despite my yearning for my land, I didn’t think I could make it there on my own. I’m afraid I’ll die without saying goodbye to my land, which I’ve been tied to from the day I was born. (Zeid 2009)

For many Palestinian farmers, olive trees and oil provide an important source of income. Even if a small farmer does not produce enough oil to sell, having enough for a year for family use is an important part of household budgets. Palestinians speak too of how olive oil is not just an intrinsic part of their everyday diet (although it is that, appearing at most every meal). One hears, “if we have olive oil and bread,

we can survive anything,” marking olive oil as an essential food product for Palestinian survival.¹⁴ The taste and smell of olive oil provide embodied memories; olive oil is healthful for Palestinian bodies; and the trees and the act of cultivating them provide familial connections as olive trees are a key item of inheritance. While it is true in Palestine, as elsewhere, that everyone thinks their own olive oil is best, freedom from depending entirely on the Israeli food products and produce that flood West Bank markets is a source not only of family pride, but also of health, as olive oil is a nutritionally rich fat. The wonderful work of medical doctor and ethnographer Tawfik Canaan (1927), notes the place of olive oil in the everyday religiosity of Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians. The olive tree is known as a “*shijara mubarak*” and the tree of light “*shijara an-nur*.” It has long been used as a medicine for skin and stomach ailments, fright illness, a condition caused by a bad shock, and burns; it was also a key element in both Christian and Muslim devotion, where olive oil was offered to local prophets or saints like St. George, venerated by both (Canaan 1927).

The volunteer olive-pickers and Palestinian farmers I worked with were lucky not to have had more vicious encounters while picking olives. Some of the Israeli settlers shoot at Palestinians, or set their dogs on them while they are trying to pick their olives, or attack the trees directly, by cutting them down or burning them. Stories about such encounters, like those of the cabdriver whose land had been confiscated by the construction of the wall, and was now forced to buy olive oil for his family instead of producing it himself, are legion.¹⁵ The Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem has distributed digital cameras to farmers who are being victimized by the settlers so that they can make a record, but as noted above, offenses are rarely punished.

Refiguring Palestinian Olive Oil

These increasing incidences of violence against Palestinians and their trees, undermining their livelihood, their physical wellbeing, their cultural and religious heritage surrounding the olive tree, and their connection to their land as well as the overall gutting of the Palestinian economy in the post-Oslo period, form the backdrop for the reformation of the Palestinian olive oil industry to produce oil for export, in order to provide some extra income for Palestinian farmers. An impetus for this rejuvenation was also the closure policy between Israel and Palestine since the second intifada, of which the Segregation Wall is the paradigmatic example of what Israeli political scientist Neve Gordon calls the “separation policy” of the later Israeli colonial policy (Gordon 2008: 213). If the period after 1967 until the first intifada had been characterized by the development of a Palestinian proletarian class in Israel, leading to the neglect of the olive groves (Tamari 1981), the period after the second intifada led to a kind of “re-ruralization” of Palestine, with people looking to olive oil as a potential export product. The formation of several olive oil cooperatives, organized by the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee and Palestinian Fair Trade Association, among others, aims to produce extra-virgin fairtrade Palestinian olive oil for export to the UK, EU, US, Canada, New Zealand and Japan. The production of extra-virgin olive oil is very time-sensitive, and requires



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that olives be picked, transported to the mill, and pressed the same day. As Julie Peteet (2008: 14–15) has pointed out, the Israeli system of permits and checkpoints has served to “steal time” from the Palestinians. If they cannot get their olives to the mill on time, the olives will be ruined. As I have noted elsewhere, exporting a product, especially an agricultural product, presents considerable challenges if one does not have a port, an airport, or in any meaningful sense, control over one’s own highways. In addition, Palestine is a place with a very uncertain legal status, which makes exporting products yet more difficult (Meneley 2008; see also ARIJ 2007).

Many Israeli peace and justice organizations like Rabbis for Human Rights are involved in the olive harvest, and it has become a focus of international solidarity, as noted above. Olive oil has become an important commodity for expressing solidarity with the Palestinian farmer’s attempt to make a living despite “illegal, mean-spirited, and often petty Israeli obstacles” (Zatoun Brochure, n.d.), not only for the Israeli left, but increasingly for international consumers. For instance, the Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development, an independent nonprofit organization, sponsored an event in December 2009 in Washington, DC celebrating the olive harvest and offering fairtrade Palestinian olive oil for sale, in the hope of providing much needed income for Palestinian farmers. Olive tree planting campaigns, where individuals abroad can sponsor olive trees or volunteer to plant them, are implemented in the hope of staving off further annexation of Palestinian land by the Israeli authorities declaring land uncultivated or neglected. In Palestinian nationalist discourse, the olive tree plays a prominent part in claiming rootedness in the land, longevity and steadfastness [*sumood*] (Abufarha 2008). Zatoun¹⁶ Canada, which is a nonprofit purveyor of Palestinian olive oil, depends on volunteers to help pack boxes of olive oil when the shipment comes in, and deliver it to the informal depots in people’s homes or universities where customers can pick it up. Zatoun is not only concerned with olive oil, but with wider activities supporting Palestinian causes. Supporting Palestinian food commodities is an everyday embodied practice, part of a larger political agenda, which also includes embodied but non-violent practices like using one’s body as a physical barrier or medium of protest. One of the former organizers was one of the seven Jewish women who managed to get into the Israeli consulate in Toronto and stage a sitdown in protest at the bombing of Gaza.

At the Olive Harvest Festival in Jenin, October 31, 2007, Nasser Abufarha, head of the Palestine Fair Trade Association, which supplies olive oil to both Zatoun Canada and Zaytoun UK, explained how fairtrade olive oil can form a culturally important bond between the farmer and the ethical consumer. Indeed, Zaytoun UK has achieved some considerable success in the ethical consumer market. Its founder, Heather Gardner-Masoud, was awarded the Times’ Readers’ Award for Women in Ethical Business, while *Ethical Consumer Magazine* declared Zaytoun olive oil to be its favorite ethical consumer product (Zaytoun n.d.).

Michael Fischer (2006) dismisses what he calls these “olive narratives” as “one-eyed” nostalgic narratives, which I think is both cynical and inaccurate. Fischer not

only ignores the way in which olive oil becomes a form of embodied memory (see Efrat Ben-Ze'ev 2004), but also the way in which olive trees are spoken of as kin, like children, who will be mourned when damaged or uprooted.¹⁷ The attempts to reform Palestinian olive oil production for export; the attempts to replant the uprooted trees; the attempts to encourage international connections and support through buying olive oil, planting olive trees, or picking olives, are not mere nostalgic narratives, but attempts to counteract what Sari Hanafi (2009) calls the “spacio-cide” of the Israeli colonial regime, where the focus of the occupation is not so much on killing Palestinians (although there has been plenty of that as the cruel bombardment of Gaza has shown), but on taking their space; controlling their movements, and their means of livelihood and meaning like their olive trees which are so closely intertwined with the assertion of Palestinian rights to be on and work the land that they own.

“Blood, sweat and tears” are very real metonyms of these harsh conditions of production. The particular circumstances of the production of Palestinian olive oil are first conveyed to the consumer by the text on the label, for they cannot be tasted in the oil itself.¹⁸ The packaging on Holy Land Olive Oil¹⁹ features a quote from the recently deceased and much lamented Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, saying “If the Olive trees knew the hands that had planted them, their oil would have become tears.” The label tells us that this oil “highlights the Palestinian deeply held emotional connection to olive trees and the land.” This statement indexes the fact that while the olive tree itself has been widely touted as a symbol of peace, as Rosenblum (1997) notes, in the context of Palestine-Israel, it could be said to be as much a symbol of enduring conflict, as the Israeli uprooting of Palestinian olive trees and Palestinian campaigns to replant olive trees are highly visible and evocative symbols of attempts to ensure dispossession or to assert possession. On Holy Land Olive Oil’s label, the trees from which the oil is produced are said to give “this oil a unique link to the ancient Mediterranean and its history.” The label notes that the oil is extra-virgin, cold-pressed, that the olives are not treated with chemicals or pesticides, and that they were hand-picked by Palestinians. The label notes that the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee, a longstanding NGO which also markets the oil on behalf of the Palestinian farmer, is working toward achieving organic certification. After noting that the product is fairtrade, the label ends by asserting that the oil contains “no genetically modified products.” The particular suffering of Palestinian laborers that is congealed in the oil is highlighted on the label along with other, international qualisigns of distinction like “extra-virgin,” “organic” and “not genetically modified.” The bottle and the label are not merely functional, but deliberately styled to be both elegant and educational, for the connoisseur who is both health conscious and endowed with a social conscience. It displays an attempt to link an “affect of solidarity” with aesthetic “discourses of distinction.” Palestinian blood, sweat and tears are welded to more typical qualisigns of historical and regional distinction like “Mediterranean” and to fashionable “artisanal” modes of harvesting, like hand-picking organically grown olives.

So much the consumer can glean from reading labels and promotional material, but the journey of the olive backwards from the consumer toward the producer is



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long and convoluted. Contemporary olive oil circulation is crucially linked to highlighting *place* of production (think Tuscany or Greece, for examples of famous olive-producing places). However, Israeli attempts to keep Palestine as a kind of non-place, legally, poses particular problems for the circulation of its food commodities.²⁰ One can argue that the context of the production of Palestinian olive oil, specifically the properties, both material and symbolic, of the place deeply affects the possibilities of its circulation. All olive oil producers need to find markets for their oil in a timely fashion; although olive oil is more durable than fruits or vegetables, it should be consumed within a year or two of its production. It is also very sensitive to heat, light and air; if exposed to these elements, its quality decreases rapidly.

As noted above, the Israeli occupation makes for considerable difficulties of circulation: Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to a complicated system of permits and checkpoints that restrict the movement olive oil as well as Palestinian bodies. Exporting olive oil out of the West Bank therefore requires a complex mobilization of networks of people, both costly and time-consuming. Circulation is therefore unpredictable, especially because the Palestinians control neither airport nor seaport, nor in any meaningful sense, their own highways, which aside from the huge and unsightly permanent checkpoints (called terminals by the Israelis), are also punctuated by the oxymoronic “flying checkpoints” which can appear anywhere on Palestinian highways, causing unforeseen delays. The oil must go through an Israeli port (usually Haifa or Ashdod) to reach North American and European consumers, and it is therefore subject to the vagaries of Israeli permission to export. To turn again to Williams’ theory of “structures of feeling,” this infrastructure of control permeates life in contemporary Palestine and produces a sensibility of uncertainty and unpredictability. One is never certain that one will be able to get to work, to school, or to the hospital, never mind get one’s olive oil to an Israeli port, and on to consumers abroad. One Palestinian olive oil marketer told me that since the Israelis increased their stranglehold on the West Bank, he never makes business appointments as he is never certain he will be able to keep them. As Amahl Bishara (2008: 522–3 fn 17) notes for Palestinians more generally, the cell phone has become the crucial element of technology by which olive oil professionals manage the military and bureaucratic obstacles which often hinder the arrangement of business meetings and the transfer of their oil to the port in a timely fashion. While the enormity of these “infrastructural”²¹ obstacles struck me as impossibly frustrating, Lori Allen (2008) has recently noted that the violence of the occupation and the restrictions, alternately frightening and boring, become to seem *‘adi* or “normal” for contemporary Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

Another aspect of the circulation of Palestinian olive oil depends on tracing the oil back to the conditions of production: the metaphoric congealing of emotion in Palestinian olive oil. The fear and uncertainty, the suffering and hope, of the Palestinian farmer are stressed in the hope of evoking another embodied emotional state—empathy—in the consumer. As Bornstein (2007) notes for International Solidarity Movement volunteers, there is an attempt to reshape and reorient the

emotions of activists/consumers to engender feelings of anger and empathy for the harsh conditions that the Palestinians endure. Palestinian olive oil producers emphasize that the high price of their oil is not only its higher expense because of the difficulties of transport, but also because of the emotional and physical difficulties of production. These experiences are highlighted to consumers, who show their solidarity and sympathy by purchasing Palestinian olive oil. The marketing of Palestinian olive oil not only highlights the standard qualisigns of distinction like extra-virginity, but also the troubled and troubling conditions of production which are specific to Palestine.

This attempt to relink the commodity to the moral (or immoral) conditions of production, characterized by pain and suffering, is piggybacked on the crucial dimension of consumer aesthetic appreciation of the oil and the derivation of pleasure from it. In this sense, olive oil becomes a kind of “aesthetic bridge” for a quotidian (and nonthreatening) political engagement, as Jessica Winegar (2007) notes for the consumption of certain forms of non-political Arab art post September 11th. This kind of “branding” of Palestinian olive oil imaginatively links production to discourses of distinction: even for the sake of solidarity, consumers abroad (Japan, UK, US, Canada) will not buy oil that cannot be classified as extra-virgin. The issue is complicated: Palestinian olive oil is expensive and consumers who pay \$15–20 per bottle want a quality product. The other factor is that North Atlantic tastes for olive oil have been cultivated by the international standards set by the International Olive Oil Council, which ranks very low acidity oil as the prestige extra-virgin olive. The compassion of the consumer abroad comes at a high price in terms of what they expect for a product, even one that is bought out of solidarity and in sympathy. The determination of a single qualisign, “extra-virgin,” has technical, scientific and aesthetic aspects. Extra-virginity is now primarily determined by a chemical test for acidity level: legally, the term “extra-virgin” can only be used to denote an olive oil that has less than 0.8 percent acidity. A grade of extra-virgin also ensures that an oil can be sold at a higher price, which has an important pragmatic effect for Palestinian farmers with few wage labor opportunities after the Segregation Barrier.

The need to export olive oil to North Atlantic and Japanese external markets where consumers’ tastes are educated to appreciate this kind of extra-virgin olive oil has dramatically changed production practices in Palestine, often with the intervention of foreign experts, primarily Italian and French.²² As Palestinian blood, sweat and tears are conveyed to the consumer, the discourse of distinction which defines a taste for extra-virgin oil flows from the consumer to the producer. Although the traditional thick and aromatic dark green olive oil is beloved by Palestinians and some Israeli leftists and peace activists, for whom its consumption is part of an embodied political subjectivity, it is not easy to sell to customers abroad as it is decidedly not extra-virgin, as it is high acidity, and an acquired taste.

But the production of the extra-virgin olive oil that consumers abroad demand is very sensitive to time,²³ and time is seemingly one of the elements of existence that the Israelis want to “steal,” as Julie Peteet (2008) has noted. Ironically, the



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consumer's desire to consume high-quality extra-virgin olive oil while expressing solidarity for the oppressed farmer makes it easier for Israel to exert the "spoiler" role—taking value from the commodity—by delaying its circulation. Olive oil left in the port in the sun will rapidly deteriorate to the point where it can no longer be graded as extra-virgin.

Olive oil's long association with peace makes it an apposite symbol for those who oppose the conflict that makes the production and circulation of Palestinian olive oil so difficult. Discourses of "love and peace" often appear in the promotional material of international peace/solidarity associations that market Palestinian olive oil. In addition, the commodity status of Palestinian olive oil is underplayed while the discourse of the gift is foregrounded. As one Canadian olive oil dealer commented privately:

There's an enormous amount of gift giving so people will buy a case of twelve [bottles of olive oil], they'll keep two and they'll give ten away. So it's just this kind of giving away, it's this gifting going on ... it just keeps coming back. So olive oil, there's also a spiritual quality about it ... The olive oil's role is to open our hearts to the possibility of love. So it doesn't guarantee love, it just opens the heart to the possibility. And what I've noticed in the two years that I've been working with it and promoting it and as someone who can keep on talking about it, it's just the openness, it's just ... I don't have to try to sell it.

The promotion of a nonspecific "peace" and even a nonspecific kind of "love" plays a prominent role in the North American circulation of Palestinian olive oil. Olive oil circulates in North American circles through an unusual combination of the promotion of peace as a vague goal and its promotion as a practical means of contributing to the everyday subsistence of the Palestinian farmer who must cultivate olives in a place where the normal agricultural rhythms are disrupted by what I have elsewhere called "occupation time" (Meneley 2008).

I was curious that none of the various Palestinian olive oil professionals I have spoken with has ever mentioned "peace" as a goal that might be achieved by the export of olive oil. When I was in Palestine in November 2008, I asked one Palestinian olive oil professional if he thought that the sale of Palestinian olive oil would lead to peace. He laughed in surprise and said that he did not think anything but wider-scale political changes would make any difference to the overall plight of the Palestinians. He said their more modest goal was to help Palestinian farmers make ends meet. However, a Palestinian ethnohistorian to whom I posed the same question said that she approved entirely of the peace agenda of the Palestinian olive oil purveyors, because at least they are helping to communicate that Palestinians are just ordinary people trying to make a living and support their families. She said, "No one is born with a stone or a gun in their hands," alluding to the unwarranted stereotype that Palestinians are "naturally" or inherently inclined to violence. She suggested that politically motivated emotions of sympathy and solidarity might well disrupt occupation logics, or at least lead to an "opening of the heart" to the quotidian stories of ordinary

Palestinians under a brutal and demeaning occupation, which so often seem to fall on deaf ears.

The commodity-like attributes of the oil like “extra-virgin” and “organic” place it in a discourse of distinction along with other high-quality olive oils from all over the Mediterranean. The gift-like qualities of Palestinian olive oil, the way in which it embodies the suffering of the Palestinian people, separate it from the commodity sphere, setting up a different sphere of exchange which is palpably more “gift-like” in its attempt to overcome the anonymity and amoral aspects of contemporary commodity exchange. What it means to consume the pain and suffering of others in a delicious bottle of olive oil deserves a paper in itself, but for now, I want to suggest a reason why consumers of Palestinian olive oil might be willing to consume a product that has its suffering palpably embedded in it, in contrast to the slavery and South African apartheid activists who advocated against consuming food produced through the pain and suffering of others. The key distinction in this case is that the Palestinian farmers are independent producers as opposed to slaves, serfs or indentured laborers. Ironically, what the Palestinian olive farmers face is the inability to realize the value of their own labor unless they can find markets abroad. Those involved in marketing Palestinian olive oil stress that the benefits go directly to the farmers themselves rather than to the government, although how credible it is to speak of the Palestinian Authority as a government is questionable as it lacks the key attributes of statehood, control of borders and the ability to protect its people against the continuing Israeli incursions into its territory. Although the Palestinian Authority technically has control in a minute fraction of the West Bank, primarily the large urban centers, the Israeli army can enter the cities and lock them down at any time.²⁴

Postscript

All eyes are now on Gaza, although Gazans do not produce enough oil for their own consumption, even if exporting agricultural products from Gaza was not now so incredibly difficult. From September 2000 to September 2009, 1,120,770 fruit trees were destroyed in Gaza (ARIJ 2009). In 2007, while visiting the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee’s (PARC) state-of-the-art bottling facility near Ramallah, I noticed that dozens of cases of olive oil from PARC sponsored olive oil cooperatives had been bought by the EU as food aid for Gaza. European aid organizations used to buy large quantities of virgin olive oil from West Bank NGOs to donate as food aid to Gaza, helping the West Bank farmers at the same time as the Gazans, increasingly necessary as economic trade between the West Bank and Gaza has become increasingly curtailed since 2005. But that was then. According to the Logistics Cluster, a group of UN and non-UN humanitarian groups that track the shipments of humanitarian aid, very few products from the West Bank, particularly the olive-rich north, are now getting into Gaza (Logistics Cluster 2009). In April 2009, the Israelis would not allow olive shoots supplied from the Food and Agriculture Organization to be imported into Gaza. I recently read that the Israeli prison service is reforming its food offerings, away from transfat margarine to olive oil (Kyzer 2009). Given that scientific evidence has ratified long-held folk beliefs



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and observations about the benefits of olive oil, the withholding of olive oil and olive shoots from Gaza is another attack on the health and wellbeing of Gazans, as well as on the cultural and religious heritage they share with their fellow Palestinians on the West Bank. In an interview with the *Guardian*, Nasser Abufarha, head of the Palestinian Fair Trade Association, explained that the association can no longer export olive oil to Gaza, which had formerly been a significant market for West Bank farmers (Tran 2009). Yet, in what was described as an “unintended consequence of Israel’s offensive in Gaza,” sales of fairtrade Palestinian olive oil in Britain soared, as sympathizers searched for tangible ways to help, despite the official position of their government. The recent “event”—if one can call the bombardment of some of the poorest and most dispossessed people on the planet by the world’s fourth largest army an “event”—has overshadowed everything, even the considerable efforts of the incredibly hard-working Palestinian olive oil producers and the tireless olive oil dealers in North America, often associated with Greek Orthodox, Presbyterian, Anglican or Jewish faith-based groups committed to nonviolent, but outspoken opposition to what historian Beshara Doumani (2004: 10) calls the “slow and cruelly systematic asphyxiation of an entire social formation” by Israel’s military occupation. I am reluctant to dismiss their efforts as futile, because they so clearly are attempting to create what David Harvey (2000) might call a “space of hope,” and it is along these networks that fairtrade Palestinian olive oil flows. These networks are also used to mobilize the protests against the devastation of Gaza and its people, and support for the Palestinian cause in general. Yet one wonders how many bottles of olive oil would have to be sold to offset the billion dollars of aid to Israel that facilitates the bureaucratic and infrastructural “spacio-cide” of Palestinian agricultural lands.

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Notes

- 1 This barrier is known as the “fence”, the Wall, the Apartheid Wall, and the Separation Barrier. It cuts well into Palestinian territory, cutting off farmers from their land.
- 2 These marketers, both Palestinian and international, are often volunteers who want to try to help the Palestinian farmers. The Canadian importer Zatoun is a nonprofit organization that depends on the aid of volunteers to pack, market and distribute Palestinian olive oil. These interfaith volunteers tend to espouse a nonviolent approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- 3 Anthropologist Jeff Halper notes that the Wall “...will de facto annex 10 percent of the West Bank, including some of the richest agricultural and olive-growing land” (Halper 2005: 12).
- 4 Those who want to expose the illegality of the settlements use the term “colonists” to expose the misleadingly benign term “settlers.”
- 5 This term was popularized by the anthropologist Victor Turner to emphasize the collective feeling generated by shared ritual.
- 6 These are roads constructed for the exclusive use of illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank. Palestinians are forbidden to use them.
- 7 Aside from giving talks to student and professional audiences, I have acted as a “courier,” delivering cases of olive oil and olive oil soap to university fairs or to interested colleagues.
- 8 The reports of the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem have documented the increasing violence during the olive harvest over the last several years.
- 9 All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. This is conventional anthropological practice, but one which is yet more necessary given the vulnerable status of Palestinian farmers in the West Bank.
- 10 The Israelis conquered West Jerusalem in 1948 and annexed East Jerusalem in 1967. The illegal settlements in East Jerusalem continue to expand with great speed (Yousef *et. al.* 2008).
- 11 I should note that there were a variety of different incomes: some were wealthy retired people, some were financially sponsored by their churches in the UK or US, and some were students or concerned individuals with jobs that allowed them to come to Palestine on their vacations, but this meant using up their vacation times and saving up for the trip.
- 12 See Ali Qleibo (2009: 191) and ARIJ (2007: 85–7).



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- 13 As Amira Hass (2010) has pointed out, the attempts by the Palestinian Authority and foreign donors to improve Palestinian roads have ended up reinforcing the increasing segregation in the West Bank.
- 14 After Hamas won the election in 2006, and the dramatic reduction in foreign aid meant that many government workers were not being paid, Ismael Haniyeh said that Palestinians would live on “salt, olives and hyssop” [za’atar]. “Days, later a cartoon in the Palestinian newspaper *Al Ayyam* showed a man trying to use his bank card at an automated teller machine, with salt, olives and hyssop offered instead of money” (King 2006).
- 15 I did not systematically interview cabdrivers or shopkeepers, but was surprised at how many of them, especially around Bethlehem, volunteered similar stories.
- 16 *Zatoun* or *zaytoun* is the Arabic word for olives. *Zayt al-zaytoun* is the phrase for olive oil.
- 17 The Israeli journalist, Gideon Levy among many others, describes this grief and mourning in *Haaretz* (Levy 2009).
- 18 Some olive oil purveyors, like *Zatoun* (Canada), include a brochure summarizing the impact of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian agricultural production.
- 19 I am referring to the Holy Land Olive Oil produced by *Al-Zaytoona*, the marketing company for olive oil cooperatives in the Ramallah-Salfit area. The name “Holy Land Olive Oil” is used by several North American olive oil importers and Israeli marketers as well. These competing claims to “The Holy Land” are reflected in the naming of olive oil.
- 20 Obviously, a place that is not internationally recognized as a state faces particular problems when trying to export its goods.
- 21 I use “infrastructure” in quotes to draw attention to the fact that it is backed by military force: every checkpoint, flying or permanent, is manned by armed soldiers who have been known to shoot for any deviance from the checkpoint crossing procedure.
- 22 I address this complex topic elsewhere (Meneley 2008).
- 23 Speed of picking, pressing and shipping are essential to retaining the high quality (extra-virginity) of olive oil.
- 24 *Suad Amiry* (2006) describes the harrowing problem of military curfew on food distribution and acquisition.

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