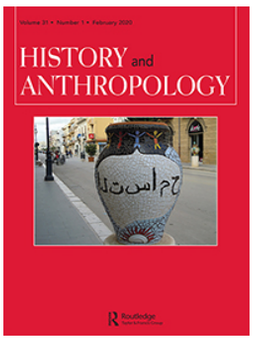

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Anne Meneley

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The olive and imaginaries of the Mediterranean

Anne Meneley

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the olive tree and olive oil continue to seep into imaginaries of the Mediterranean. The olive tree, long lived and durable, requires human intervention to be productive: it is emblematic of the Mediterranean region and the longstanding human habitation of it. Long central to the religious imaginaries and practices of the monotheistic tradition and those which preceded it, olive oil has emerged, in recent decades, as the star of The Mediterranean Diet. This paper, inspired by anthropologists who follow the 'thing', also follows the advocates, both scientists and chefs, who tout the scientific research which underpins The Mediterranean Diet's claims, which critics might consider part of contemporary ideologies of 'healthism' and 'nutritionism'. Nonetheless, as I analyze, this diet with its olive oil star, and the forms of sociality which are imagined to be part of it continue to affect the circulations of olive oil, culinary practices, and people from and to the Mediterranean region.

KEYWORDS

Olive oil; Mediterranean; food anthropology; circulations of commodities; imaginaries

> A constraining climate, a fragile landscape, but a vital luxuriance. The Mediterranean is marked by this constant struggle, sometimes quivering between myth and reality. Similar to olives, bitter and yet sweet as honey.
> Fernand Braudel

Thinking categorically about the Mediterranean

The sea itself is usually described as the defining feature of the Mediterranean, as it is in *The Corrupting Sea* by Horden and Purcell. But they also make an intriguing invocation of agricultural elements articulating the boundaries of the Mediterranean, including olive trees (2000, 14). An emblem of the Mediterranean so ubiquitous as to be almost hackneyed, 'the gnarled, ancient olive tree' is beloved by European artists from the impressionists like Monet and Degas, surrealists like Salvador Dali, postimpressionists like Matisse and Van Gogh, and to artists on the other side of the Mediterranean, like early Zionist Anna Ticho and contemporary Palestinian artists like Sliman Mansour. Fiona Stafford, a professor of literature at Oxford describes the olive in her *The Long, Long Life of Trees* (2016, 72):

> The olive tree stands for health and longevity, surrounding the blue Mediterranean with a reassuring air of continuity. Long life and quiet stability seem embodied in these familiar trees. Travellers from northern Europe, for whom the olive tree was primarily a figure from scripture or classical literature, have often been overcome by their first physical encounter.

CONTACT Anne Meneley ameneley@trentu.ca Department of Anthropology, Trent University, Peterborough, Cananda

> Tennyson was deeply moved by the olive trees beside the Roman ruins at Lake Garda, so little changed since the poet Catullus had described them almost two millennia before. The people were gone, their villa a wreck, but the trees at 'Sweet Catullus's all but an island, olive-silvery Sermio' were as fresh as ever.

The olive tree makes a less salubrious appearance in the work of pundits like Thomas Friedman. In his *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, the olive tree stands for traditional, static and backward cultures in contrast to modern, progressive neoliberal societies capable of understanding dynamic transnational global capitalism (1999). Although it may be news to Friedman, olive oil from the Mediterranean was one of the world's first widely circulated commodities, transnational long before the nation state, requiring the development of the world's first containers. The shards of the amphorae specially developed for liquid products like olive oil allow archaeologists to follow the trail of its circulation (Bevan 2014, 388). Such evidence of portable commodities puts the lie to the static, moribund understanding of the past that informs Friedman's impoverished world view. Although I would not want to lump anthropologists in with pundits like Friedman (and our texts certainly have a much more limited circulation), in the 1980s, we critiqued our own conceptualizations of 'culture' as belonging to timeless, discrete entities that could be studied in discrete places. This critique, according to Herzfeld (2005), led many to abandon attempts to find cultural unity across the Mediterranean.

Yet as our editors Paul Silverstein and Naor Ben-Yehoyada urge us to take up 'the Mediterranean' as a category again for renewed anthropological reflection, I suggest here that it may be illuminating to consider how plants and foods, particularly olive trees and olive oil, are not only defining features of 'Mediterranean-ness', but constitutive of the very region itself. I explore the Mediterranean as a category by deciding 'to follow the thing' (Marcus 1995). And as a thing, olive oil continues to be particularly apt for considering how the Mediterranean as a region might be imagined and reimagined. When I first started my research on olive oil in Tuscany, a professor and olive oil farmer told me that olive oil, along with wine and grain, for centuries, even preceding monotheism, was part of a triumvirate of foods considered to define the Mediterranean. Olive oil was emblematic of a unity that transcended the many differences of the Mediterranean peoples. Olive oil has been a 'standard feature of Mediterranean life through … the Bronze and Iron Age and up to the present day' (Bevan 2010, 26). Although olive oil could be produced in many different parts of the region, it was also traded widely in the ancient world, a testament to the quip that the olive oil business was to the ancient world what petroleum is to the contemporary world. Herzfeld's invocation of Austin's 'How to do things with words', encourages us to consider the performative nature of Mediterranean-ness, as he suggests:

> … that we treat attributions of Mediterranean culture, not as literal statements … but as performative utterances that can, under the right 'felicity conditions', actually create the realities that people perceive. This is a crucial move: it allows us to see claims of Mediterranean unity as a number of things: excuses expressive of, and enmeshed in, a global hierarchy of value in which 'the Mediterranean' comes somewhere between 'modern' and 'primitive' … the rhetorical moves of publicity campaigns designed to exploit lingering exoticism among consumers or awaken their mystical leanings toward new diet fads; and scholarly classifications shoring up the boundaries of existing disciplines or, more kindly, for defining new alliances and agglomerations capable of generating novel and interesting heuristic options … .It also allows us finally to get away from the tiresome ontological debate and to focus instead on issues of power and hierarchy. (Herzfeld 2005, 50)

It is necessary to consider other discourses beyond anthropology which present powerful imaginings of the Mediterranean; as in Said's analysis of the 'Orient', whether an imagining is true or not does not dilute its impact in terms of circulations of people and things. Therefore, I examine the invocations of the health benefits of 'The Mediterranean Diet' as an example of what Herzfeld calls: 'the rhetorical moves of publicity campaigns designed to exploit lingering exoticism among consumers or awaken their mystical leanings toward new diet fads' (2005, 50, emphasis added). As olive oil appears as the star of this diet, it has had a distinct material effect on how olive oil from the Mediterranean is consumed and circulated in the contemporary world. I certainly embrace Herzfeld's call to leave behind tiresome ontological debates to focus on the issues of power and hierarchy within and beyond the discipline of anthropology; as will be obvious to discerning readers, my analysis of the Mediterranean Diet does not imply an endorsement of it.

Olive trees and olive oil continue to have tenacious potential for place-imagining practices. The particular material attributes of the tree and the fruit from which the oil is derived which has made it so 'good to think *with*' in anthropological discourses and beyond. The olive tree, not productive in the wild, provides an excellent example for the current anthropological concern: the nonhuman actant in human worlds. The cultivation of olive tree represents the centuries-long human-nonhuman collaboration so celebrated in contemporary multispecies anthropology. Olives are not edible in their natural form; food historian Rachel Laudan notes the peculiar challenges of developing what appears to be at first an unlikely source of one of the world's first food commodities:

> People had been working for millennia to discover how to maximize their profit from olive trees, one of the most unpromising of the many unpromising plants from which humans have learned to produce food – a small straggly tree that takes years to mature enough to produce tiny, bitter fruits every other year that cultivation has never succeeded in making good to eat fresh. By the third millennium B.C.E., improved varieties were being cultivated in Syria, Palestine, and Crete. (2013, 66)

In this respect, olive oil, so valued as a 'natural' fat is actually one of the world's first processed foods. The olive tree has had a long and traceable past, which remains meaningful in many parts of the Mediterranean world. Olive cultivation requires, as it has since ancient times, an initial investment in the landscape: the trees are not productive for several years (time varies according to cultivar, but seven years is not uncommon); terraces require strenuous labour; processing technologies require investments in mills and presses which are the emblems of human productivity in the archaeological record. Bevan refers to these infrastructures as 'reusable landscape capital' likening them to the modern equivalent of terroir (2010, 25). The ancient remains of olive presses are the archaeological signature of a plant that requires human knowledge and care; together they cultivate a sense of place. Indeed, the evidence of historical cultivation of olive trees has significance for contemporary politics as it can be employed to claim evidence of long presence on the land.

This ancient human/nonhuman alliance features the olive tree as a tenacious and vibrant co-producer of physical and spiritual life in the Mediterranean. In her recent documentary, *The Golden Harvest*, film maker Alia Yunis uses olive oil as a narrative hook to explore themes which extend from culinary pleasure to religion, to health, to dispossession (2019). The material qualities that are valued in culinary realms, such as the oil's capacities to preserve and nurture, are also valued in religious and moral spheres. Olive

oil, therefore, lends itself to another contemporary concern in anthropological theory, in that it addresses the ways in which the material qualities of a substance (its embodied *qualia*, Harkness 2013; what Keane 2003 calls qualisigns), hold potential for meaning-making. Olive oil's distinctive material properties – its capacity to seal, illuminate, and preserve – have been central to lubricating the spiritual life of the Mediterranean's Abrahamic religious traditions and those that preceded them (Meneley 2008). While the Greeks imagined olive oil as a gift from the goddess Athena, the ancient Hebrews lit their menorahs with the oil, the Christians baptised their young with the oil, and the Prophet Muhammad venerated the tree as blessed. In contradistinction to Mary Douglas (1966), whose work on pig fat illustrated the ways in which dietary taboos in the Holy Land could reveal ancient classificatory systems of the world that should not be violated for fear of unleashing chaos, olive oil is a fat that does not transgress boundaries, nor offend the dietary taboos of either Jews or Muslims, or, for that matter, vegans of the Mediterranean region.

Here, I investigate how the Mediterranean, as a Bakhtinian chronotope, beckons Northern Atlantic peoples to a *desirable* space–time (Bakhtin 1981). This Mediterranean chronotope pervades the burgeoning literature of culinary 'adventures' as forms of cultural encounter, of knowing-culture-through-food in travel discourses; the Mediterranean chronotope as a narrative space–time whose picaresque emplotment is usually a series of encounters with food and place, even penetrates into food science discourses about The Mediterranean Diet. Long after it had been critiqued in anthropology, the idea of the self-evident connection between 'culture and place' has thrived in food discourses, from nutritional advice to cookbooks.

Chronotopes: desiring the bright Mediterranean

> At my first sight of the Mediterranean world, I realized that I had never known light before. I was from the world of darkness. London was not so bad, but the light of the northwest is a very dull light. The light of the Mediterranean held my eyes so I decided to stay for a time.
> Albert Hourani

A noted scholar of the Arab world, Albert Hourani, was brought up in England. He expresses here a sentiment here about the Mediterranean of a site of light, desirability, and hopefulness, albeit sort of vague, about a different life, a better way of existence. Fernand Braudel, in his preface to the First Edition of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, says that he hopes his love as a *northerner* of the Mediterranean is captured in the book: 'In return, I hope that a little of this joy and a great deal of the Mediterranean sunlight will shine from the pages of this book' (1972, 17). The chronotope of the Mediterranean figures the desire of the Northern *Self* for the exotic Mediterranean *Other:* a characteristic genre is the picturesque foodie tour, always marking a departure from the drab normality of one's usual food and surroundings. Paul Fussell's *Abroad* (1980), published after the celebrated *The Great War and Modern Memory,* his consideration of the poetry generated by the horrific WWI, again attends to the connection between world history, life experiences and cultural productions. Fussell is gifted at conveying how Williamsesque 'structures of feelings' are embedded in literature; this time his focus is on British travel writing between the world wars, writing that expressed a strong desire to leave Britain, the grey weather, that horrifying, joyless food for the easygoing Mediterranean, warm weather, sun, and delicious food.

But it was not only scholars who were entranced by the Mediterranean and the allure of olive oil. This is a pervasive theme in the post war novels of Barbara Pym, particularly in *Excellent Women*, written while she was secretary to Darryl Forde at the Africa Institute in London. Along with hilarious skewering of boring, stuffy anthropologists, Pym's novel is peppered with reflections on the food of the time, on fake scrambled eggs and curried whale meat and curious pastes ([[1952] 1978, 103) and being served shop cakes made of substitute materials that would last almost indefinitely at the Learned Society ([[1952] 1978, 175–176). Pym's heroine, Mildred, who reads cookery books at night, makes lunch for Rocky Napier, the dashing naval officer and estranged husband of anthropologist Helena who was besotted with Everard Bone, an Africanist who had just 'gone over to Rome' ([[1952] 1978, 156). She serves him lunch with a salad dressed with her treasured 'hoarded olive oil' which she describes as more suitable for an open-air romantic lunch in the sun. Importantly the Mediterranean chronotope is something portable, embodied in Mediterranean foodstuffs, it can be processed and consumed elsewhere: narrative accounts of travel become instead cookbooks. Elizabeth David was writing about olive oil in a time when it was sold in British drugstores for cleaning ears or as a laxative; rationing was still in place in the 1940s and when her *A Book of Mediterranean Food* was published in 1950, the evocative taste of even the simplest peasant food evoked desire and romance in the heart of the hungry and yearning British consumer.[1]

In *The United States of Arugula*, David Kamp (2006) traces the transformation of American cuisine from worshipping at the Parisian altar of expensive haute cuisine of chefs to the peasant foods of the Mediterranean, from hierarchical to commensal, from exclusive to communal. Alice Waters' Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, California was instrumental in this transformation. Food writer for *The New Yorker*, Calvin Trillin, in a Foreword to Alice Waters' *40 Years of Chez Panisse: The Power of Gathering* writes:

> Chez Panisse was instrumental in overthrowing that regime [old school fancy]. It uncoupled good eating from fanciness. Its menu included takes on humble street food. It hired the sort of chefs who wore baseball caps rather than toques and might have found themselves drifting into kitchen work after getting bored with graduate studies in anthropology. It was wildly inclusive. (2011, 7)

In contemporary culinary/travel discourses yearnings for different, kinder ways of life, which depend on both vagueness and to a certain extent, on an absence of certain kinds of empirical knowledge, the Mediterranean looms large. Less gifted writers such as Frances Mayes of *Under the Tuscan Sun* fame describes of pressing her own olive oil with her newly found poet husband after her harrowing divorce, as part of an idyllic life in Tuscany. By the time I arrived in Tuscany to study extra-virgin olive oil in 2000, Cortona was, according to a rueful young Italian male guide, like a pilgrimage site for distraught, divorced American women looking for a new life. Mayes used the 'ethnographic present' tense to describe her life in Tuscany, which creates a sense of timelessness and ahistoricity, as it did in early functionalist ethnographies. One of my olive oil consultants noted that while it was a 'terrible' book, it had been great for the olive oil business and for Tuscan tourism in general. The chronotope of the Mediterranean is a timeless space of shared *qualia*, embodied, sensuous properties affording a cross-modal iconism (Harkness 2013, 13) expression in narratives of desire and sensuous consumption, *qualia*-encounter, by which these properties of place, including properties of things and

properties of people, become properties of the consumer, at the centre of which are the qualia of olive oil. This is an imaginary which focuses on the pleasurable side of the Mediterranean, not the austerity, conflict, famines, and refugees which are somehow left outside of these idyllic stereotypes.

Extra-virginity

I have often joked about how my own impulse to study olive oil in the Mediterranean might have been a desire to escape from the relentless need to debunk stereotypes about veiled Muslim women in societies like Yemen, where I had done my doctoral research; Westerners often perceive Middle Eastern women as victims of the honour-shame discourses. My doctoral work in the Yemeni town of Zabid on the coast of the Red Sea (1989–1990), was informed by anthropological work on Mediterranean ideas of honour and hospitality, notably J.G. Peristiany, John Campbell, Michael Herzfeld, as well as gendered rethinkings of them (see Dubisch 1986). In my book ([1996] 2016), I analyzed how women had their own public domain of constant, competitive hospitality in a distinctive style of sociability which required much work, taken deadly seriously. Mauss' statement, 'In the distinctive sphere of our social life, we can never remain at rest' could have been written with Zabid in mind. Not visiting a family implied that a woman's honour will be besmirched by entering into the family house of a dishonourable man. Therefore, the sociable movement of women in between the households in Zabid was essential to establishing, maintaining, or challenging a man's honour, and by extension, that of his family.

When I chose to study olive oil in Tuscany, I did not move as far away from discourses of honour as I had imagined I might, as in the new discourses of the Mediterranean, at least those about olive oil, the defining moral qualia of the region ('honor/shame') seem to have moved from being the properties of humans to nonhumans given the concern not only with the virginity of olive oil, but its extra-virginity! The relatively recent term of 'extra-virgin' has been a productive source of many hilarious advertising quips, like '4000 years old and still a virgin!' I myself could not resist the temptation by entitling one of my first articles on olive oil 'Like an Extra-Virgin' (2007). In *Extra-Virginity: The Sublime and Scandalous World of Olive Oil*, Tom Mueller unpacks the notorious corruption of producers and marketers trying to pass off substandard oil for the far more lucrative extra-virgin olive oil. He describes his interaction with Flavio Zaramella, president of Mastri Oleavi, a private olive oil association with its own tasting panel, who after tasting a common Italian supermarket brand which had 'extra-virgin' on its label: 'He shook his head, as if unable to believe his eyes: "*Extra virgin*? What's this oil got to do with virginity? This is a whore"' (Mueller 2012, 5). Despite my continued fascination with the politics of the production and circulation of olive oil, I soon missed working in the Middle East. But as olive oil was not a part of the everyday cuisine in Yemen as it is in the Mediterranean, I ended up going to Palestine to study the recent introduction of 'extra-virgin' olive oil to the Holy Land. The first, most pressing question for the quippers of the world is: how do you produce an Extra-Virgin in the Holy Land, the home of the Virgin Mary and the famous Christian narrative of the Virgin Birth. Like the concept of 'the Mediterranean', the 'Virgin Birth' was once a topic anthropological debate from Malinowski to Leach to Delaney. Olive oil producers, consumers, and ritual users have long had a concern with the purity of the oil; for instance, the first-pressed oil was long considered more valuable

and desirable than the later pressed oil. What did surprise me was the extent to which in everyday conversations olive oil producers from all over the Mediterranean from Tuscany to Palestine evoke honour-shame discourses that anthropologists found a defining feature of the region, in their concern that THEIR olives not be tainted by the dubious purity of someone else's olives at the same press (Meneley 2005). While the Virgin Birth is steeped in the language of miracles (and anthropological interpretations of them), the birth of the extra-virgin is couched in the language of technoscience.

There was a clear attempt in postwar Mediterranean Europe to unite olive oil producers under a single body. The commensurability of olive oil received an intergovernmental boost with the establishment of the International Olive Oil Council in 1959 (IOOC, which became the IOC in 2006), an institution which established standards for olive oil production, evaluation and circulation in an attempt to regulate a business that has for centuries been infamous for corruption. One of the moves made by the IOC was to set standards for a new grade of olive oil 'extra-virgin' which was determined by two tests: the first is a relatively straightforward chemical test to determine that the oil had to be under 0.8 acidity and the second, to be certified to have no flaws at an organoleptic test conducted by boards of certified olive oil tasters. Extra-virginity testing is therefore as much aesthetics as science. And, as in wine tasting, olive oil tasting emphasizes the inculcation of the capacity to *speak* about one's sensorial, gustatory experience; as Michael Silverstein notes: 'you are what you say about what you eat' (2004, 644). For instance: 'suave, with notes of almond, hazelnut and artichoke barigoule' was used to describe the L'Huile d'Olive Miraval, Angelina Jolie's and Brad Pitt's new olive oil brand.[2]

The Mediterranean Diet

Olive oil was once an important fuel for secular as well as sacred spaces, so perhaps it is fitting that these imaginaries of a desirable Mediterranean both fuel and are fuelled by scientific discourses about olive oil and its prominent role as a star in The Mediterranean Diet, beloved by physicians and chefs alike. The contemporary Mediterranean Diet is fetishized in places in the North Atlantic where previously animal fats were historically preferred to fats derived from plants. Discourses about the Mediterranean, as many scholars have pointed out, often contain filtering back of what northern, urban peoples thought 'the Mediterranean' should be. This fact is certainly true of the Mediterranean Diet, which garnered attention above the popular interest in specific regional cuisines of the Mediterranean. One of the notable scholars of the Mediterranean, David Abulafia, notes in his tome *The Great Sea*: ' … by 2000 the idea that a Mediterranean diet rich in fish, olive oil and vegetables is *far healthier than traditional north European diets* often based on pork and lard took hold' (Abulafia 2011, 629, emphasis added). He argues: 'These changes in diet are of far more than anecdotal significance: old ethnic identities have been broken down as the cuisine of the Mediterranean has become globalized' (2011, 629). Further, he notes the homogenization and generalization of the Mediterranean as a cultural area onto a global stage. 'In a sense, then, the Mediterranean has become everyone's cultural possession' (2011, 629). See, for instance, an excerpt from *The Long, Long Life of Trees*, published by Yale University Press yet written to be accessible to a public audience:

> Mediterranean cuisine is almost synonymous with the olive, because of the ubiquitous, fine-flavoured oil, which adds that very distinctive taste to dressed salads, cakes and bakes, and fried or grilled dishes. The olive fruit is very versatile too, whether baked into bread, blended into a paste for bruschetta, sprinkled over pizza, stuffed with capsicum, or launched into a cocktail. While it is not difficult to see why warm sun and stress-reducing siestas might help to prolong life, the good health associated with a Mediterranean lifestyle is probably a direct consequence of the ubiquity of the olive tree. Olive oil, a natural source of monounsaturated fat, tends to lower, rather than raise, cholesterol and blood-pressure levels, as well as being brim-full of antioxidants. The risk of heart disease, stroke and even certain kinds of cancer is reduced by a diet rich in olive oil. (Stafford 2016, 71)

The Mediterranean Diet invokes two themes: one, scientific studies which assert the positive nutritional benefits of the *types* of foods eaten in the Mediterranean versus the North Atlantic, and two, assertions of different kinds of *sociality*, particularly sociable, leisurely eating, which are said to define the Mediterranean versus the North Atlantic.

The idea of The Mediterranean Diet can be traced to a 1948 Rockefeller funded study of 765 rural families in Crete; 128 families were singled out for particular attention. Every calorie they consumed was weighed and measured, even the waste was weighed and recorded. Employing tactics of American 'nutritionism' and 'healthism' they carefully recorded types of food consumed (fats, proteins, carbohydrates) and the calorie count of each.[3] This is the sort of study which would have made Marvin Harris proud: what people thought they were doing was not relevant, rather it was the 'scientists' who were able to discern health benefits that the locals themselves could not fully comprehend. Breaking down the food of their Mediterranean human subjects into caloric and nutritional elements, it was the Western scientists who could analyze the scientific value of the foods that they claimed resulted in the unusually high number of fit, elderly people, as photogenic as the olive trees of the Mediterranean. They argued that the low frequency and amount of animal fats (particularly meat) in the diets was a key to these positive health 'outcomes' that they found, like longevity and low incidences of cardiovascular disease. This study became central to debates about coronary heart disease and the movement in nutritional science toward public moralizing about everyday diet and disease prevention, which precipitated a debate about 'good' cholesterol versus 'bad' cholesterol, with attendant reflections on the responsible versus irresponsible consumer.[4] This study was part of a larger one which proposed to trace the connection between diet and coronary heart disease studied by Ancel Keyes in the Seven Countries Study (1958–1964) which found the lowest rate of coronary disease was in the Mediterranean countries. The Harvard School of Public Health and Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust (associated with Slow Food) held an influential conference at Harvard University in 1993. The World Health Organization endorsed the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid, which features a very small amount of meat (in contrast to the USDA pyramid) and the 'conspicuous' role of olive oil (Jenkins 1994, 478). Unlike the recent 'Paleo Diet' (a spurious diet that humans supposedly consumed when on the 'first rung of the evolutionary ladder'), The Mediterranean Diet was proposed by scientists and still has broad support in nutrition-scientific discourses, as well as many chefs. Advocates of the Mediterranean Diet, like cookbook author Nancy Harmon Jenkins, emphasize the importance of replacing (bad) animal fats with (good) fat olive oil. Her *The Mediterranean Diet Cookbook: A Delicious Alternative for Lifelong Health* (1994) was also an articulation of a recent critique of the American diet,

with its processed food, high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt. The recipes in her cookbook include the breakdown of the protein, fat, carb, sodium in grams, the saturated and unsaturated fat content of each food, and the calorie count; artful sketches of little sprigs of ripe olives adorn each page.

The scientific findings of the health benefits of olive oil were embraced enthusiastically by olive oil producers; articles that promote this sort of 'olive-oil-as-a-cure-for-all-that-ails-everyone and everything' are a weekly staple in trade publications like the *Olive Oil Times*. Recent headlines claim: Mediterranean Diet Reduces Deadliest Breast Cancer by 40% (9 March 2017, *Olive Oil Times*). In an article entitled 'Three Must-Read Books on Olive Oil for 2017', Ylenia Grannito describes *The 7 Wonders of Olive Oil* (2017) by Cecile Le Galliard and Alice Alech as:

> The book explores the seven key health benefits of olive oil and how it naturally slows Alzheimer's disease, reduces the risk of strokes and heart attacks, strengthens bones, works as an anti-inflammatory, reduces the risk of diabetes, kills cancer cells, and protects, rejuvenates, and beautifies your skin.

The Olive Oil Diet, published in 2017, co-authored by medical scientist Simon Poole and a self-described foodie, Judy Ridgway, proves that the science-food writer alliance remains strong. While advocating a martini that contains not olives but actual olive oil, food writer Curtis Cord recommends single ingredient Chopin vodka with single cultivar olive oil brands to make an olive oil martini (2017).

Other food writers are less comfortable with acting as direct boosters of particular brands of olive oil. Molly O'Neill, a cookbook author and chef, reflects poignantly on how her own particular fondness for the Mediterranean and its food, including olive oil, co-exists with her desire to keep her own voice. In her influential article entitled 'Food Porn', she writes of the connections between the food industry and popular food writers. She reports on an initiative put forward by the International Olive Oil Council in the 1980s, in an attempt to promote higher quality olive oil extra virgin olive oil rather than the mass produced blended olive oil sold by large American brands. They had a promotional push for research promoting the health benefits of olive oil; they hired food writers to lead trips to the Mediterranean; and sponsored several foodie events. She offers the following reflections (2003):

> I attended several of these events. Some of my closest food-writing friends consulted for the council. I didn't write about the events directly, but over time I found myself cooking more often with olive oil and that shift was obvious in the recipes that I published. In 1994 I wrote a feature story about America's romance with Mediterranean food, fashion, and décor.
>
> The story was legitimate. But was the phenomenon bought and paid for by the olive oil council? Maybe. Or maybe olive oil was in the air and sun-baked Tuscan colors were on the walls of more and more homes, and I was doing my job, responding to public appetite … . More shadowy land lies in the area of justifiable boosterism. Do I, for instance, mention olive oil because it is delicious or because I believe the health claims associated with it? Or do I leap to believe the claims because I've been seduced by the Mediterranean mystique?

Anthropologists are not usually cultivated by the food industry (or I certainly have not been) perhaps because of the usually very low circulation of our books and journals, but the texts that are promoting the Mediterranean Diet are certainly worthy of anthropological investigation. However, the abstract homogenizing 'Mediterranean Diet' hardly

accounts for how food occurs in the everyday lives of people in many parts of the Mediterranean, as the ethnographic work of food anthropologists like that of David Sutton (2001) indicate.[5]

For historians as well as food anthropologists, the interpretation of 'The Mediterranean Diet' differs markedly. Food studies scholar Fabio Parasecoli, among others, notes that the low meat consumption on post-war Crete so enthusiastically embraced by the North Atlantic was the result of post-war privation. An article entitled 'Unpacking the Mediterranean Diet', includes a rarely noted quote from the subjects of Allbaugh's 1953 study, who said: 'We were hungry most of the time' (Allbaugh 1953, 31; cited in Truninger and Freire 2014, 194). What the scientists failed to note is that this 'healthy diet', later celebrated by the likes of Frances Mayes in Tuscany, was called locally '*cucina povera*', the food of the poor. But, just as tourists celebrate the ruinous huts of peasants as 'picturesque', celebrating the food of the poor is different when you are wealthy. In this sense, the adoption of the Mediterranean Diet by the North Atlantic shares a certain similarity with the voluntary simplicity movement, which valorizes restraint and withdrawal from the excessive consumerism often critiqued at this moment in neoliberal capitalism. Yet simplicity looks rather different when it is *involuntary*. To put it another way, it is one thing to refrain voluntarily from certain forms of consumption, and quite another to prevent from consuming by poverty, scarcity, or brutal social inequalities of class or race or both. The way ideas of The Mediterranean Diet circulate are often ahistorical. In contrast, food historians pay heed to the Fascist roots of the Mediterranean diet in Italy where frugal food intake was seen to be not only patriotic, but profoundly suited to a noble heritage stretching back centuries: the restraint of the ancient Romans who praised the health benefits of frugal food consumption (Capatti and Montanari 2003, 30; Helstosky 2004, 100–101; Parasecoli 2014, 169; Sorcinelli 2001, 86–87). Parasecoli notes the growing polarization in food spending in Italy after the 2008 global financial crisis:

> While the few who can afford it enjoy spending at the table, many Italians might fully embrace the more restrained Mediterranean diet that their parents and grandparents were relieved to abandon during the decades of economic growth, as a mark of poverty and backwardness. (2014, 203)

Sociability and The Mediterranean Diet

Along with the scientifically ratified health benefits, the chronotope of the Mediterranean involves imaginaries of sociability, of another way of being in the world that is found to be *lacking* in North Atlantic: these forms of sociability, along with the food stuffs themselves, are asserted to be constitutive of individual bodily health. As Herzfeld notes, the Mediterranean is: 'enmeshed in a global hierarchy of value in which "the Mediterranean" comes somewhere between "modern" and "primitive"'; this is particularly prominent in food discourses when they discuss the sociality which is said to be a distinctive, and salutary, feature of Mediterranean social relationships. As Nancy Harmon Jenkins advocates:

> The fact is that the people of the Mediterranean figured out a long time ago – back, if truth be told, in the mists of time – that good food, skillfully prepared, garnished with little more than fresh herbs, garlic, and olive oil and shared in something approaching abundance around a table with friends and relations, is not only good tasting; it's good for you too. (1994, xiii)

Cookbooks and advocates of The Mediterranean Diet propose imaginaries of place *and* sociability, *ways of being in that particular place*. One of the most celebrated qualities of the Mediterranean Diet is that it is said to be as pleasing to your chef/connoisseur as it is to your doctor. However healthy, it is not austere or pleasure-denying like other punishing, fat-phobic diets which were popular in North America. 'This is food that is good for our bodies and, as I hope the recipes in this book will demonstrate, good for our souls as well' (Harmon Jenkins 1994, xviii). People are said to be *conscious* of what they are eating in the Mediterranean, unlike in North America, but not obsessed with food:

> And beyond individual needs, in Mediterranean countries, there's a real sense of eating as a social act, a way of communicating, of expressing solidarity and relationship. Gathering around the table, literally breaking bread together, is both a symbol of communion and an act of communion in and of itself. (Harmon Jenkins 1994, xv)

The wisdom and practice of *paying attention* to food is said to be inculcated in childhood.

Paula Wolfert, one of the California chefs key to the transformation of cuisine in America away from the hegemony of French haute cuisine toward Mediterranean cooking, wrote several award-winning Mediterranean cookbooks. Writing for the official magazine of the Slow Food movement, *The Snail*, Wolfert (2005) describes her philosophy:

> My approach to the Mediterranean is based on a myth — an ideal, shared by many of us, of a robust, simple, and sensual lifestyle far from the madding crowds of our competitive North American culture … home-made and hand-made food products, regionalism in food production, slow careful cooking and slow eating, the conviviality of the table, taking pleasure in living as well as eating —taking time to, in the old phrase, 'smell the roses'.

Wolfert's (1994) emphasis on sociability as the defining characteristics of Mediterreaneanism causes her to rather unusually include the Republic of Georgia into the Mediterranean because, while olive oil is as alien to Georgian cuisine as it is to Yemen, the consumption of Georgian food is so entangled in the famed sociability of the Georgian table (Manning 2012; Scott 2012).[6] The sociability so celebrated in The Mediterranean Diet elides the fact that hosting and guesting in the Mediterranean and the Middle East are competitive sites of honour and reputation. This ideal sociability presented in the food discourses has no recognition of the dangers as well as the pleasures of hospitality, the potential encompassment, the social hierarchies created or disputed in fierce exchanges of hospitality, or the exhausting work of hosting. Another erasure here (as in the Slow Food movement) is the erasure of the gendered labour of preparing food which is rather different from merely consuming it. The sociability idealized by advocates of the Mediterranean Diet is not a reciprocal hospitality; Northern peoples are not the hosts, but the guests, albeit paying guests.

Commensurability, incommensurability and the contemporary circulation of olive oil

'The Mediterranean Diet' provided a boon for the global circulation of olive oil as a commodity in these places which were not a part of the olive oil as commodity circuits in earlier centuries. As Bevan notes, the circulation of liquid commodities spawned a rise in what he calls 'containerism', a fact that has only increased exponentially in the issue of global circulation of food commodities, which needed both preservation tactics (salt, freezing, chemical preservatives) and containers (amphorae, bottles, cans, plastic) to

insure portability. Portability affords the ability of a thing and its qualia to perdure across space and time, producing indexical linkages of circulation and allow 'the Mediterranean' to be experienced elsewhere in bottled form. But just as important to defining the Mediterranean as a region are issues of *commensurability* of its qualia across its very different regions: here qualitative differences must be quantified. The circulation of olive oil depends as much on discourses of commensurability as it does on the materiality of containers. The Mediterranean Diet does try to impose a commensurability where none exists as it tries to standardize a diet that has plenty of subregional variation. Evaluating commensurability was accomplished through nutritional science that broke food down quantitatively into calories and attendant nutritional qualities. In the contemporary period, the key discourse affording the circulation of olive oil as noted above is health science, which in turn is related to a quantifying of purity and distinction. These health benefits are said to attend only (or in the highest quantity) extra-virgin olive oil. The tests for this, as I noted above, involve both a quantitative element (tests of acidity) and a qualitative dimension (expert organoleptic taste-testing). Tests of acidity provide a 'scientific' quantitative baseline, but the organoleptic element provides the distinction of individual tasting. The price range of olive oils, all of which are 'extra-virgin' by the former test, depends a great deal on the prestige conferred by the organoleptic test but is also deeply affected by the relative prestige of place of origin within the Mediterranean. Here the unifying principle of extra-virginity, promise of commensurability of spaces and their products promised by standardized testing been undercut by the possibilities for international sales shaped by consumer imaginaries of origin (Tuscany versus Palestine), for example. Here the theoretical commensurability of nations is implicitly questioned by corruption. As Italian oil, particularly Tuscan, has particular success in accessing global markets, Italian corporations are notorious for buying up cheaper Tunisian, Greek, and Turkish olive oil and marketing it as Italian oil.[7] So all Mediterranean nations are not equally successfully in circulating their oil.

This brings me to my most recent fieldwork, in which I moved from the production of extra-virgin oil in Tuscany, the privileged prototypical instantiation of the Mediterranean chronotope, to the production of extra-virgin oil in Palestine, the abject periphery. As I was to discover, producing an extra-virgin olive oil in Palestine at this particular historical juncture produced problems that were incommensurable with the problems that other producers face in different parts of the world. Palestinian olive oil marketers often note their ancient connection to the Mediterranean: labels that reference quality by announcing 'extra-virgin olive oil' are included with a note which highlights Palestine's Mediterranean history: 'Some of the olive trees from this oil comes from are over 2000 years old, giving this oil a unique link to the ancient Mediterranean and its history'. The only contemporary evocations of the Mediterranean itself have been reduced to statements that note how on clear days, one can *see* the Mediterranean Sea from Palestinian mountain terraces and, if one is lucky, catch a whiff of its beautiful sea air. The 'taste of place' that the terroir concept invokes is evident in the following quote: 'Harvested from the remarkable olives of Canaan's own groves and neighboring farmers on "Bayaada", a hill touched by gentle breezes from the Mediterranean … ' (Canaan Fair Trade). This evocation of the Mediterranean is particularly poignant as now West Bank Palestinians cannot access the Mediterranean Sea without rarely granted permission to enter the state of Israel. Their actual connection to the inclusive potential of the Mediterranean shipping trade has been

squelched by Israel, which allows no unmediated Palestinian access to their former vibrant ports in Haifa and Jaffa, with their remaining port at Gaza restricted from sending or receiving shipments.[8] Olive oil from Palestine was formerly part of the 'maritime-led, containerized exchange in classic regional products such as wine and olive oil becomes Mediterranean-wide, distinguishing the whole area from often less integrated economies beyond' (Bevan 2014, 388). Bevan also notes the potential political implications of access (or lack thereof) to ports, something Palestinian olive oil producers mentioned frequently to me. All the Palestinian olive oil for export can only be shipped through Israeli ports of Haifa or Ashdod. The circulation of Palestinian olive oil is also hampered by the fact that it is not attached to an internationally, recognized country, which presents bureaucratic problems for importers.[9]

It is not enough for Palestinian olive oil to be classified as 'extra-virgin', although, that is necessary because it travels more effectively when it is classified as 'fair trade'. In the marketing of Palestinian fair trade olive, the harsh conditions of production of Palestinian olive oil, where farmers may be harassed or shot at by settlers as they attempt to pick their olives, are stressed as this extra-virgin olive oil is sold as 'solidarity oil' to consumers sympathetic to the plight of Palestinian farmers.[10]

The process of producing extra-virgin olive oil required the training of Palestinian olive oil professionals in the techno-scientific/aesthetic gustatory regimes of organoleptic evaluation, under the tutelage of French and Italian advisors, paid for by international aid donors. Tasters of extra-virgin olive oil learn how to shape their appreciation of certain tastes, and turn this appreciation into a linguistic form: like all tasters, they need to learn how to talk about it. As I have noted (2014a), 'discourses of distinction' are used in particular ways in the Palestinian context. It is very common in contemporary food movements to have 'local' foods presented in contrast to industrial foods (the Slow Food movement is a case in point), and 'authenticity' needs to be established. But the idea of 'taste of place' is particularly charged when your place is being taken from you. In Palestinian marketing, the ancient cultivar Rumi has been stressed because it indexes a time *before* the establishment of the state of Israel. One foreign advisor suggested establishing a DOP as a way of staking further claim to the land that is already Palestinian land, but which is under continuing threat of confiscation. The tasting regimes in Palestine are shaped by the externally imposed political regimes of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Because of the checkpoints, roadblocks, and claustrophobic bureaucracy of the Israeli system of permits, which restrict Palestinian movement in the West Bank, there need to be three tasting boards (one each in Jenin, Ramallah, and Bethlehem) instead of one 'national' board.

While 'the Mediterranean' chronotope is often critiqued for being homogenizing, we need to consider how invocations of 'the Mediterranean' in food discourses such as those embedded in international tasting regimes can be exclusionary as well as inclusive. The Mediterranean International Olive Oil Competition, Terra Oliva, was held in Jerusalem in 2015, at the Olive Tree Hotel, an Israeli hotel built in the Palestinian East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Shaykh Jarrah (with an ancient olive tree 'from the time of King David' in its lobby).[11] While this international competition featured oil from far and wide, even Australia and New Zealand, Palestinian olive oil producers were more or less excluded as Palestinian agricultural products cannot enter Jerusalem, nor can West

Bank producers without rarely granted Israeli permits. The 'Mediterranean' that the Israelis invoke can often be one without Palestinians and their olive oil.[12]

Conclusion

When grand narratives of change become less persuasive, and neoliberal body-as-project narratives are common, especially in dietary discourses, food commodities, food production, can be imagined as food consumption as a space for creating a better life, which seems to be the case in 'the Mediterranean Diet'. Although food historian and cookbook author, Clifford A. Wright, notes that, 'Foods moved about the Mediterranean like immigrants, yet culinary preparations can be identified only locally, for there is no pan-Mediterranean cuisine outside of a general impression given by the presence of olive oil, wine, wheat, garlic, vegetables, and herbs' (1999, 679), these days, food and olive oil seem to travel with a great deal more welcome than the people. At this moment in time, however, 'the Mediterranean' as a healthy and bucolic spot has been dealt a serious blow by images of freezing, desperate refugees washing up on the shores of debt-ridden countries; the Mediterranean Sea is no more forgiving than any other when you are in a fragile boat and the Mediterranean Diet itself no help when you have no food. In the spirit of our editors requests for a critical revaluation of what 'the Mediterranean' might mean for allowing us to grasp transnational relationships in a new way, we can look at how in recent times, culinary/travel discourses (reinforced by the 'science' of the Mediterranean Diet) collided with refugee discourses. The Mediterranean Sea, which in these moments is depicted as ruthless, as ruthless and unrelenting as any other sea, is especially so when it is in alliance with equally ruthless human traffickers, a seemingly thriving entrepreneurial class in our contemporary world, capitalizing on the desperation of migrants fleeing bombing and conflict, who are thwarted by national and international legal boundaries and cruel legislations which depict the refugees, especially those from the Muslim part of the Mediterranean, as inherently threatening. Here we see the continuing relevance of Said's *Orientalism*, where Islamophobia seems to trump more positive imaginings of others from the Mediterranean, as Naguib (2016) argues for Norway. We need to reflect upon how a critical analysis of popular discourses about 'the Mediterranean' can shed productive light in an age when transnational imaginaries are in tension with national imaginaries and fixations on borders and who can be included within them and who must be excluded.

I would like to return to the issue of hospitality which has so characterized anthropological discourses about the Mediterranean, recently revisited in a special issue 'The Return to Hospitality' of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Candea and da Col 2012, see Herzfeld 2012 for an incisive summation). In food discourses of the Mediterranean, the agency of the food provider (the host) is rarely considered, as the enjoyment and health benefits of the consumer (the guest) are stressed, even described in quite romantic terms for dietary discourses. Marketers and manufacturers seem to collude in this emphasizing of the consumer/customer and their preferred 'choices'. The northern consumer of the Mediterranean Diet is presented as contented, steeped in enjoyable eating with health's pious halo. The Northern Atlantic host of Mediterranean peoples in their own countries, on the other hand, receive guests with considerably less enthusiasm. In fact, one gets a certain 'Leave the people, take the olive oil' (if one will forgive the reference to the Godfather:

'Leave the gun, take the cannoli') to the reaction of the Northern Atlantic countries to the refugees, as if they were more comfortable being the guest/tourist, visiting the Mediterranean countries and consuming their delicious produce when they please, rather than being the reluctant hosts to hungry Mediterranean guests/refugees at a time determined by *their* need for a space of refuge.

Notes

1. See Kashdan (2017) for an insightful discussion of how Elizabeth David, Claudie Roden and Paula Wolfert who as cookbook authors with different connections to the region, were profoundly important to shaping the imaginaries of the Mediterranean. Thanks to Harry Kashdan, for drawing my attention to his lovely article and for our productive conversations during the *Making Levantine Cuisine* conference (Georgetown University, 8 June 2019).
2. This organic extra-virgin olive oil is from the Chauteau Miraval, the estate which they bought and on which they were married in 2014. It sells for 85 Euros for a 500 ML bottle, providing an apt modern day example of why olive oil was referred to as 'liquid gold' in ancient times, and why so many olive oil producers are anxious to have their olive oil certified as 'extra-virgin' as it can be sold at a much higher price. The olive oil will survive their marriage, it seems, described as the estate's manager, Mark Perrin, as 'an investment for the family and the children' (Al-Zoubi, 21 March 2017).
3. This way of describing food still has a resilient hegemony; despite all the criticisms of it (see for instance the incisive work of Julie Guthman (2014) in University of California Press' food studies journal, *Gastronomica*, special issue on Critical Nutrition, Fall 2014).
4. Three excellent contemporary ethnographies of contemporary American food have recognized how these scientific critiques of animal fats, particularly from red and dark meat, need to be part of ethnographic understandings of food productions, both industrial and alternative. See Striffler (2005) on the chicken industry; Weiss (2016) on alternative pork production; and Paxson (2013) on the American craft cheese industry.
5. For example, Sutton recounts a different role for olive oil and olives, and feta cheese for Greek students in England where they provide a Proustian memory of the beloved tastes of their home when they are longing for it (2001, 80).
6. This in her *The Cooking of the Eastern Mediterranean* (Wolfert 1994*)*. See Kashdan (2017, 9) for his reflections on Wolfert's counterintuitive inclusion of Georgia in the category of 'Mediterranean'.
7. This decades long practice is well documented in Rosenblum (1996), Mueller (2012), as well as in frequent recent articles in the *Olive Oil Times*.
8. Indeed, Gaza as a port in recent times has been a site of not a functioning infrastructural port for commodities (including olive oil) as it was once famous for, but rather now famous for the freedom flotillas for political activists trying to bring commodities *to* Gaza as relief for the Israeli severe restrictions on the circulations of commodities to the Gaza Strip (see Allan and Brown (2010/2011) on the Turkish Mazi Marmara, for example).
9. For instance, fair trade Palestinian olive oil imported into Canada is routinely stopped at the port in Montreal to be searched because there is no obvious slot for border officials to put it in. The importer is therefore charged an additional $1500 CDN for the search (Robert Massoud, Beit Zatoun, personal communication.)
10. For further detail on the entanglements of fair trade and solidarity networks see Meneley (2011, 2014a, 2014b). For a sophisticated analysis of the complexities of 'fair trade' see Besky (2014).
11. Squadrilli (2015).
12. A similar effect happened when a conference on Mediterranean food in 2010 was hosted at Ben-Gurion University in Israel. The papers from the conference, published in the special issue of *Food, Culture and Society* 2013, with the exception of one paper, were about Israel. Although

the special editors Nir Avieli and Ravi Grosglik (2013) did not mention it, the difficulty of permits for Palestinians and those from other Arab countries to enter Israel, or solidarity boycotting as the conference was held at an Israeli university, may have been part of it.

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