In an interview with me in 2006, a Palestinian olive oil producer, holding aloft a bottle of Holy Land Olive Oil, said, “This is very expensive oil. Expensive because a farmer risked being shot by a 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.” 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 commodities become imbued with the experiences of Middle Eastern bodies. Marx noted that in classic commodity exchange the labour of the worker gets erased: the contribution of the producer to the product is rendered invisible to the consumer, hence severing ties between producer and consumer. Both Marx and Mauss were concerned with the transformation from pre-industrial to industrial society. Mauss thought these crucial connections between person and object and between people who exchanged objects were present in production and circulation in a pre-industrial gift economy, but lost under the conditions of industrial production and commodity circulation.

Palestinian olive oil 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, marketers highlight how the labour 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. Attention is also drawn to the danger farmers must face if their land is close to hostile and Israeli colonists 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 labour fraught with danger. Palestinian friends have told me that in the past the olive harvest was 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 are picked as swiftly as possible. Those Palestinians who have land that is close to a settlement, an Israeli army outpost,
a bypass road, or any other space or structure that the army or the settlers deem to require a “security zone” will only be allowed partial and unpredictable access to their own olive groves. Often permission to access the land is only granted to the immediate family, who cannot provide enough labour 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, myself included, have become involved in some way in promoting or circulating Palestinian olive oil.

“Blood, sweat and tears” are concretized 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. The packaging on Holy Land Olive Oil features a quote from the famous and 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 insure 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 long standing NGO which also markets the oil on behalf of the Palestinian farmer, is working toward achieving organic certification. After noting that the product is fair trade, the label ends by asserting that the oil contains “no genetically modified products.” The particular suffering of Palestinian labourers which is congealed in the oil is highlighted on the label along with other, international qualsigns 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 qualsigns 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 a long and convoluted one. 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 circulation of its food commodities. 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 that 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.

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. Therefore, exporting olive oil out of the West Bank 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”) 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. All of this infrastructure of control produces what Raymond Williams (1977) has called a “structure of feeling” that permeates life in contemporary Palestine: one 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 onto 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 since he is never certain he will be able to keep them. As Amahl Bishara (2008: 522-523 fn 17) notes for Palestinians more generally, the cellphone 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”
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 circulation of Palestinian olive oil depends 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 hopes of evoking another embodied emotional state – empathy -- in the consumer. As Bornstein (2007) notes for ISM 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 difficulties, emotionally and physically, 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. Whenever I give papers about this, I’m always asked “what’s with that extravirgin thing?”

“Extra-virgin” may evoke an ultra pure super-virgin in the imaginaries of many, but it is also a legal and bureaucratic term now. 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 .8% 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 labour opportunities after the Separation Wall.

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. 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. What I will note here is only the most obvious and immediate consequences of the transformation of the Palestinian olive oil industry, a flattening out of regional distinctions (Bayt Jala versus Nablusi olive oil, for instance) in favour of “Palestinian” olive oil and a concomitant genericizing of the “Palestinian farmer”. But the production of the extra-virgin olive oil that consumers abroad demand is very sensitive to time, and time is seemingly one of the elements of existence that the Israelis want to “steal” as Julie Peteet (2008) has recently noted. Ironically, the 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 cannot be graded as extra-virgin anymore.)

Olive oil’s long association with peace make it an apposite symbol for those who oppose the conflict which 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 which market Palestinian olive oil. Another aspect of circulation of Palestinian olive oil is that its commodity status is underplayed while the discourse of the gift is foregrounded. As a Canadian olive oil dealer notes:

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 “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 a peculiar combination of the promotion of peace as a vague goal and the promotion of it 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’ve called elsewhere (2008) “occupation time”.

I was curious that none of the several 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 back in
Palestine in November 2008, I asked one Palestinian olive oil professional point blank 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,” noting the unfairness of the stereotype that Palestinians are “naturally” or inherently inclined to violence. She was suggesting 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 that is for another time.

Postscript

All eyes are now on Gaza, although Gazans are recipients of olive oil, in the form of food aid, rather than producers of it. 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 4th 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 the
networks along which fair trade Palestinian olive oil flows that are also used to mobilize the protests against
the devastation of Gaza and its people. Yet I cannot help but wonder how many bottles of Palestinian olive
oil would have to be sold to offset the $3 billion dollars in military aid that the US gives annually to Israel,
facilitating both the occupation in the West Bank and the astoundingly brutal recent incursion into Gaza.

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1 A recent example is Sandra Beth Doherty’s article on plastic surgery in Lebanon (2008).

2 These marketers, both Palestinian and international, are not usually professional, but
volunteers who want to try to help the Palestinian farmers.

3 Anthropologist Jeff Halper notes that the Wall “…will de facto annex 10% of the West
Bank, including some of the richest agricultural and olive-growing land” (2005:12).
These Israelis are more frequently known by the less accurate and misleadingly benign term “settlers.”

These are roads constructed for the exclusive use of illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank. Palestinians are forbidden to use them.

Aside from giving talks to student groups, I have acted as a “courier” delivering cases of olive oil and olive oil soap to university fairs or to interested colleagues.

Some olive oil purveyors, like Zatoun (Canada) include a brochure which outlines in point form some of the effects of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian agricultural production.

I’m 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. The competing claims to “The Holy Land” are reflected in the naming of olive oil.

Obviously, a place that is not internationally recognized as a state faces particularly problems when trying to export its goods.

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 procedure of crossing the checkpoint.

I address this complex topic elsewhere (Meneley 2008, Meneley nd).

Although the traditional thick and aromatic dark green olive oil is beloved by Palestinians and early Israeli peace activists is not easy to sell to customers abroad as it is decidedly not extra-virgin as it is high acidity, and is an acquired taste.

Speed of picking, pressing, and shipping are essential to retaining the high quality (extra-virginity) of olive oil.

European aid organizations often 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. This was as of June 2008; I can only anticipate that this form of food aid is now as disrupted as other food aid.