Live and Active Cultures: Gender, Ethnicity, and “Greek” Yogurt in America

Abstract: Using a transnational and comparative cultural studies approach, this essay investigates how yogurt, perceived as a strange and foreign food in the early to mid-twentieth-century United States, became localized through intersectional processes of feminization and de-exoticization. In the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, the dairy industry adopted a postfeminist ethos, which co-opted the hippie and feminist self-care movements that had made yogurt a staple health food outside the purview of the medical-industrial complex and on the margins of the market economy. Increasingly, yogurt was marketed to the prototypical (white middle class) dieting female, expected to discipline her body by consuming pre-proportioned approximations of dessert. The rising popularity of “Greek yogurt” in the early twenty-first century has modified this cultural neutralization by foregrounding a nonthreatening “white” ethnicity—while furthering the feminization of yogurt consumption and obscuring connections to the food cultures of the Middle East.

Keywords: yogurt, marketing, gender, ethnicity, United States, Turkey

In her memoirs, Looking for Palestine: Growing Up Confused in an Arab-American Family, Najla Said, the daughter of famed cultural theorist Edward Said, foregrounds different yogurt consumption practices to signify her gendered and ethnic alienation from white private-school classmates in 1980s New York City. Unlike Said, whose family scooped plain yogurt from large containers to season savory meals, the schoolgirls Said envied ate Dannon yogurt with fruit on the bottom of single-serve cups:

I wondered why my mom never told the teacher that I could have a Dannon yogurt with “fruit on the bottom” for dessert . . . I would stare at these seemingly more special girls as they mixed the fruit for a minute with their spoons and stopped for a moment to dismantle the yogurt top, carefully peeling back the outer edges in order to free the round, coaster-like bit that would be saved and traded with the girls in the other grades. (Said 2013: 61)

Said first comments on the gentle femininity of the white girls who eat yogurt with fruit on the bottom: the meticulous process of delicate little fingers mixing the fruit, pausing, peeling, and saving. The transition from domestic femininity to commodity fetish, however, is nearly seamless and entirely produced by the same material culture that allows the former: the individual serving cup. The coaster-like plastic is freed from the rest of the packaging and traded for social benefits. Within the circulatory network of cultural capital at the private high school, Said’s lack is directly linked to her deficient Americanness, an intersectional category involving gender and ethnicity, perfectly epitomized by a small cup of fruity yogurt.

Said then contrasts this economy of delicate individualism with Middle Eastern practices of yogurt preparation and consumption her parents employ at home. Although filled with secret pleasures of its own, the yogurt consumption in Said’s Palestinian-Lebanese American household appears sloppy when juxtaposed with the culinary habits of her classmates. Spooning plain Colombo-brand yogurt out of a large container onto homemade foods contrasts with the image of “special” girls gently mixing the pre-measured yogurt with the fruit at the bottom of a small cup. The self-serving individualism has been replaced by the affective labor of the mother toward the family, especially the child, who is served yogurt mixed with rice and salt when she is ill. “I loved yogurt with rice and salt; it was my favorite food,” Said confesses. “But at school, I never wanted anyone to know that I ate it that way” (ibid.: 61). Just as the family becomes the main consumer of yogurt, now plain with a strange name in a large container, the yogurt no longer stands alone as a dessert to enjoy after the meal. Both quotidian and therapeutic, it accompanies savory foods at mealtime.

In the same memoirs, Said also describes how her mother made labne, or strained yogurt, long before the “Greek”
yogurt craze of the early twenty-first century hit the United States:

At night, Mommy would put a whole huge container of Colombo yogurt into a special cloth bag and hang the bag over the sink. By the morning, all the water would be gone, and we would be left with a cloth bag full of labne, which she would then put in a dish and we would spoon some out for ourselves for breakfast, adding za’atar and olive oil and scooping it up with warm Arabic bread. I loved it so much. It was another thing that no one at school could ever know about. (Said 2013: 62)

Worth quoting at length, these passages demonstrate a striking, and symbolically charged, contrast between two culinary cultures. Said points to the mainstream American gendering of yogurt as a sweet, girlie snack—a food that marked its consumer as not just feminine but also white and elite in the 1980s. Juxtaposing the small individual cups with the large vat of yogurt her family consumed with homemade meals, she uses the difference in yogurt cultures as a metaphor for the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity, signifying how she felt strange, bulky, and unfeminine next to her white schoolmates.

In her groundbreaking book The Sexual Politics of Meat, Carol J. Adams coined the term “feminized protein” to describe food sources derived from the imprisonment and domestication of female animals, whose bodies are “manipulated as incubators of protein” (Adams 2010: 112). Interested in the intersection of two overwhelming binary oppositions, between human and animal and male and female, Adams’s analysis does not differentiate between, say, milk and yogurt. The recent work of Greta Gaard on “feminist postcolonial milk studies” builds upon Adams’s interventions to historicize and contextualize the femaleness as well as the whiteness of milk. Gaard (2013: 596) writes: “Milk—a commodity that the American dairy industry has marketed as ‘natural’ and ‘wholesome’—is not a homogeneous entity but one that has various meanings and compositions in different historical and cultural contexts.” According to Kendra Smith-Howard, within the modern American context, milk’s capacity to be modified in a consumer-based economy in part drives its (often contradictory) meanings (Smith-Howard 2013: 4; also see DuPuis 2002). The same contextual flexibility is true for milk’s cultured offspring, yogurt, as embodied by temporally and geographically varying marketing and consumption practices. As with milk, the specific color and consistency of yogurt, or even the methods of production, provide no guarantee for the variety of connotations the substance can pick up in its travels through culture.

In his analysis of Japanese exports and imports, Koichi Iwabuchi (2002: 27–28, 33) distinguishes between goods that are marketed for their “cultural odor,” often building on stereotypical associations with a nation and/or ethnic group, and those that become neutralized and “culturally odorless” during the localization process. Focusing on contemporary yogurt advertising campaigns from a transnational, comparative perspective, I argue that yogurt became localized in the United States in the twentieth century through intersectional processes of feminization and de-exoticization, or cultural neutering, to approximate Iwabuchi’s terminology. Scholars of culture have long noted the importance of gender in constructions of the “exotic” as essentially different, inferior, and available for commodification, penetration, and consumption by white Westerners (Said 1978; hooks 1992; Lewis 1995; Yeğenoğlu 1998). Although feminization and exoticization go together in canonical feminist analyses of Orientalism, in the case of yogurt’s popularization in the United States, feminization as a “diet” food has been a significant part of its cultural neutering. In the early twenty-first century, marketing campaigns for “Greek” yogurt have modified this cultural neutralization by foregrounding a nonthreatening “white” ethnicity, while further feminizing yogurt consumption and obscuring connections to the food cultures of the Middle East.

My comparative approach uses yogurt marketing and consumption practices of the Levant at large, with specific focus on my native country of Turkey, where yogurt consumption is not gendered feminine, as a productive counterpoint. After all, the word “yogurt” comes from the Turkish noun for “dense,” yoğur, and the verb yoğurma, “to coagulate, to make dense” (“Yogurt (milk food)” 2014). Moreover, an immigrant from Turkey, the founder of Chobani, can largely be credited for popularizing strained yogurt as “Greek” in the United States. However, I do not wish to make any assertions of Turkish authenticity or intellectual ownership over yogurt or strained yogurt by using Turkey as a foil. Plain yogurt in larger containers is certainly available for sale in the United States, as is sugary yogurt in small containers in Turkey. The differences underlined here stem from different marketing priorities and the pressure exerted by preexisting local food cultures, which are further complicated by histories of immigration and globalization. In other words, the focus here is not on “roots” but “routes,” as well as on metacultural projections of rootedness or newness in advertising and popular culture (Gilroy 1993; Urban 2003: 38).

**Making Yogurt American**

The origins of yogurt are cloudy. Although first recorded references to “yogurt” date back to eleventh-century texts by nomadic Central Asian Turks, cultured and fermented milk products have been produced across the world for much longer than that (Yıldız 2010: 2). Yogurt, and similar foods, have
long been staples for the cultures of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Sahara, and Central and South Asia. The food was a relative newcomer to Western Europe; the word entered English in the early seventeenth century from Turkish (Crystal 2013: 132). Yogurt likely arrived in the United States in small, undocumented batches carried by immigrants in the nineteenth century. It made an appearance as a niche health food in the early twentieth century and as a sweet, processed snack around mid-century (Mendelson 2008: 149–51 and 2013). In 1946, the Los Angeles Times announced that yogurt, “a comparatively little known dairy product,” was gaining popularity in the United States as a “health food” and could be found in bottles in the milk aisle in many grocery stores (Manners 1946).

In the American history of mass-produced yogurt, Dannon, originally founded by a Sephardic immigrant from the Ottoman Empire in Spain, can be contrasted with Colombo, founded in New England by Armenian immigrants and noted for its plain flavor and larger containers (“Colombo Yogurt” 2004).

The Colombosian family began producing the brand that would become Colombo in 1929; Dannon began its American operations around 1947. The Wall Street Journal reported on Dannon’s attempts to “Americanize” yogurt through sweetening and flavoring as early as 1953 (“Yogurt with Vanilla Flavor” 1953). Throughout most of the twentieth century, Dannon had a wider American following and contributed to the “European” reputation of yogurt in the country, whereas Colombo remained popular among immigrant populations like Said’s family even though it diversified its offerings in line with Anglo-American tastes as the century progressed. In 1993, General Mills purchased Colombo and soon dropped it in favor of the expansion of the Yoplait brand.

Mid-century newspaper articles on yogurt often came with recipes, educating the public on the qualities of and possible uses for this new food, which was often defined through the use of familiarizing adjectives, particularly “custard-like,” and with references to milk (for example, Holt 1942; “No Matter How…” 1950). The September 3, 1951 issue of Life Magazine
included an advertisement for “Yami Yogurt” with the tagline, “Now you, too, can eat your way to health” (48). A cartoon image tried to de-exoticize this little-known food product by depicting a happy white suburban family cheering at a giant spoon of yogurt. The text bolstered this symbolic connection to the American Dream by underlining yogurt’s origins in milk, a food product that had become assimilated into mainstream American diets about a century ago (DuPuis 2002). Yogurt, explained the ad, is “the ‘cultured’ milk you can eat with a spoon.”

Despite such advertising campaigns aspiring to normativity, vernacular associations with strangeness remained. In 1957, the Christian Science Monitor published an open letter from an American woman who confessed that her regular ingestion of yogurt made her feel “like a freak” in the United States. “Am I as lonely as I feel?” inquired Margaret P. Beals of Marshfield, Massachusetts, reaching out to other readers who shared her taste (Beals 1957). Her humorous confession brought a rush of sympathetic replies from others, including a few with immigrant backgrounds, who had been turned on to bottled plain yogurt available on dairy aisles, even before sweetened single-serve varieties hit grocery stores (e.g., Kulik 1958).

In 1972, the Wall Street Journal singled out “Arab nations and many other countries including Russia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, Armenia, and India” as places where “just about everybody eats [yogurt]” (Cooney 1972). Tellingly titled “Oh, No, Not Yogurt! Many People Hate It, Yet Many Now Eat It,” the article reported that the most natural, red-blooded American response to “the sour stuff” remains distaste:

“The odd thing about the boom is that most people really dislike yogurt—at least at first. Says Peggy Phillips, a Philadelphia dental assistant: ‘I can’t stand the way it tastes. I don’t like the way it looks. I don’t even like the word, ‘yogurt.’ ”

“Most people,” the newspaper’s code for white middle-class Americans, were supposed to be repelled by the overwhelming, multilayered strangeness of yogurt. It tasted weird, it looked weird; it even sounded foreign. The article attributed increasing consumption to the fact that yogurt manufacturers had managed to produce flavored yogurts that do not “taste like yogurt” and to yogurt’s reputation as a health food, luring pretentious cosmopolitans and hippies.

The countercultures of the late 1960s and the 1970s were indeed instrumental in boosting yogurt consumption among baby boomers. The trend benefited greatly from the back-to-earth ethos of the era and increasing interest in non-Western cultural products and practices. The Last Whole Earth Catalog (1972), the DIY bible of the hippie movement, included a yogurt recipe that did not require any equipment, even as yogurt-making appliances found places on middle-class kitchen counters. Health and natural wellness advocates like Robert Rodale, the founder of Prevention magazine, promoted yogurt as a particularly healthful food (Whorton 2000: 248; 2014: 334). Under the influence of the anti-authoritarian feminist health movement, yogurt also gained a reputation as an underground cure for yeast infections. In 1973, the feminist periodical off our backs reported a raid on a women’s health clinic, in which the police had attempted to confiscate a carton of strawberry yogurt (a staff member’s lunch) and charged another “with recommending the application of yogurt to combat a yeast infection” (Caruana 1973). The 1976 edition of the groundbreaking women’s health manual Our Bodies, Ourselves also recommended yogurt as a preventative and potential remedy for mild yeast infections when applied vaginally (Boston Women’s Health Collective 1976).

Yogurt sales increased by two hundred percent between 1970 and 1980 and yogurt, which had started as a bizarre countercultural foodstuff, came to be relatively normalized, if still associated with “dietetic snobbery,” as the Washington Post put it in 1980 (Hall and Foik 1985; Ercolano 1980). In 1983, New York Magazine announced in a section titled “The Cultural Revolution” that the smallest segment of America’s dairy industry, yogurt, had officially become its fastest growing, as General Mills, Kraft, Nestlé, and Kellogg joined Colombo and Dannon, the latter still holding a quarter of the market share in supermarkets (Kanner 1983:14). As a “healthy” snack food, flavored yogurt also got a huge boost from the rise of “lite” snacks, implying both deliciousness and diet-friendliness, in the late 1970s and 1980s (Belasco 2007: 226). Such health-based postfeminist marketing built upon the preexisting connotations of yogurt, established by the hippie and feminist countercultures, while subverting the anticapitalist, communitarian, and antifeminist ethos of the very same movements. In other words, yogurt consumption was already commercialized, mainstreamed, and feminized in the United States when Najla Said first stepped into her private school cafeteria. Yet, enough difference between immigrant and WASP consumption habits existed to make her feel self-conscious. Strained yogurt, moreover, was virtually unknown and had to be produced mainly at home until the twenty-first century. FACE, the first company to export mass-produced strained yogurt to the United States, did not begin its American operations until 1998 (Mendelson 2013: 645).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, yogurt became a “$4 billion-plus category” in the United States, in part driven by the rise of interest in strained yogurt (“Yogurt” 2011). By the
end of 2014, “Greek” yogurt sales accounted for over half of all yogurt sale dollars in the United States (Ferdman 2015). In this category, the niche financial success of FAGE exports from Greece has been surpassed by the popularity of Chobani yogurts, produced in central New York under the direction of Hamdi Ulukaya, a Kurdish-Turkish immigrant. “Greek” yogurt consumption has so far been constrained by both cultural and economic capital, since it tends to be more expensive than regular yogurt (Block 2011). Companies, however, have continued to push for increased affordability and availability, hoping to replicate the mainstreaming of yogurt in general. In 2010, Bloomberg Businessweek declared that strained yogurt was no longer “a subculture,” as large corporations including Kraft and General Mills began their own Greek yogurt lines on the heels of the success of Chobani (Stanford and Boyle 2010). The mainstream American marketing of primarily sweetened, strained yogurt in single-serve cups, however, differs greatly from the food cultures of both Turkey and Greece, where strained yogurt is most commonly prepared in connection with small plates called meze, meant to be ingested as starters before a main meal.1

Making Yogurt Feminine

Both continuing and subverting earlier vernacular associations with the second-wave feminist health movement of the 1960s and 1970s, yogurt has gained a reputation as an acceptable way for hard-working American women to spoil themselves: “like a glass of wine, but for the daytime” as a 2012 Washington Post commentary put it in relation to frozen yogurt (Dvorak 2012). Greek yogurt’s rise was tellingly built upon preexisting American constructions of yogurt in general as a low-calorie snack. Light Greek yogurt, with its reduced fat content, is a central force driving the commercial success of Greek yogurt (“Chobani Simply 100 Greek Yogurt . . .” 2014). My search among popular, nonacademic newspapers and magazines in The Corpus of Contemporary American English between 1990 until 2012 found that the three most common adjectives associated with the noun “yogurt” in the United States were “low-fat” (2,855 instances), followed by “Greek-style” (98 instances) and “non-fat” (79 instances).2 “Greek out!” Weight Watchers Magazine proclaimed in its September–October 2012 issue (26). “Greek” yogurt, in this formulation, simply implies higher protein content within the same restricted amount of calories.

The gendering of yogurt, and Greek yogurt, as an acceptable treat for health-conscious (read: weight-conscious) women can be found in most yogurt commercials and has drawn the attention of feminist media activists. “Target Women with Sarah Haskins,” a series of satirical videos about gender-based marketing, for example, has dedicated a whole segment to yogurt. In this short video available on YouTube, Haskins jokingly declares, “Yogurt is the official food of women.” She shows example after example of how ads for flavored yogurt in single-serve containers depict dieting women who have the “I have a master’s, but then I got married” look (Haskins 2013). This gendered construction is also made jarringly obvious in a parody of a real Yoplait commercial, prepared by students in my Gender and Popular Culture class at the University of Notre Dame in Fall 2013 (Male Yoplait Commercial 2013). In this video, a young man spends a long time in front of the fridge, staring at a piece of chocolate cake, thinking about how he could get away with actually eating some of it. His options include eating just a small slice, because he “was good today,” a medium slice with celery sticks so they “cancel each other out,” or doing yoga in between bites. While he is lost in thought in front of the open fridge, his buddy comes in and casually grabs a “banana cream pie”—a banana cream pie–flavored yogurt, that is. The first man comments that the second has lost weight, to the latter’s delight, and also grabs a dessert-flavored yogurt, leaving the chocolate cake uneaten in the fridge. “Yoplait Light. With thirty delicious flavors all about a hundred calories each, it’s just what us guys want,” declares the disembodied male voice at the end of the commercial as we watch the first young man sitting alone on a couch, dreamily spooning yogurt into his mouth.

Launched in 2008, Yoplait’s dessert-flavored yogurts epitomize the marketing of yogurt as an acceptable indulgence in the United States, contrasted with “bad” foods like actual pies and cakes (“Yoplait Light . . .” 2008). The original version of this ad was pulled off the air in 2011 after activists accused it of promoting eating disorders; it certainly encourages an incredibly problematic relation to food (“Yoplait Pulls Ad . . .” 2011). Having young men replace the women in this case follows a recent trend in media activism in which “gender flipping” deconstructs the normatively gendered source text. As Patrick Jung, the co-creator of the parody video with Nick Taylor, wrote in his paper about this piece, gender flipping makes us ask, “If it is uncomfortable to look at these flipped versions, then why was the original acceptable?” It, of course, would not have been but for a specific brand of capitalist patriarchy predicated upon policing women’s bodies (Wolf 1990; Bordo 2003; Farrell 2011). Although the original Yoplait commercial is no longer available on TV, the ethos that has fueled it remains strong in most American yogurt commercials.

Even nondiet yogurts make references to the control of the female body, such as the slim, fair-skinned stomach featured in Activia yogurt ads—a functional food which claims to benefit the digestive system (Contois 2014). Similarly Chobani’s new
light line of Greek yogurts seems to take its cues from Yoplait Light, boasting “Simply 100 [calories]” in each cup. According to this logic, the single-serve cup makes self-discipline possible, allowing flavors to be ingested only in numerically controlled portions. This is, of course, merely the symbolic language of marketing; mass-produced “lite” snacks are actually notorious for encouraging overconsumption due to the illusion of healthfulness, increasing customer spending on elaborately packaged foods in small quantities, and, therefore, expanding corporate profits and landfills (Belasco 1984; Geyskens et al. 2007).

In the United States, yogurt continues to be related to some overtly stated or implied defect in the female. In addition to its use as a dieting tool, yogurt retains an underground reputation as a remedy for yeast infections and is marketed as a solution to the apparently female problems of irritable bowel syndrome and constipation (Vidali 2010). Functional yogurt commercials echo Emily Martin’s observations regarding metaphors of failure used for female reproduction in medical texts, depicting a female body that is always already at the cusp of failure and disorder (Martin 2001). The neoliberal quest for bodily discipline takes an even bolder turn in popular accounts of the American Gut Project, a scientific attempt to map the genome of microbes inhabiting the American gut. These hundred trillion microbiotic organisms, residing in our bodies and carrying a so-called “second genome,” have become the next level of responsibility for the individual, who turns out to be a veritable “superorganism” or “ecosystem” upon closer look. “But while your inherited genes are more or less fixed, it may be possible to reshape, even cultivate, your second genome,” writes food guru Michael Pollan in the New York Times (Pollan 2013). The language of right and wrong is easily applied to the bacteria that must be cultivated (and culled) the way Edwardian women cultivated talents. Yogurt producers have jumped on the buzz around good culture. In fact, the title of this essay, “Live and Active Cultures,” is the exact wording of a marketing seal provided and promoted by the National Yogurt Association, available to companies who meet certain dietary requirements and pay a fee for each product intended to carry the seal.

Such marketing ploys, however, overlook significant scientific doubt regarding the benefits of packaged probiotics. Research on gut bacteria is far from being translated into public policy recommendations. Scientists have not determined with any certainty what exactly would constitute the “ideal” gut ecosystem (“Me, Myself, Us” 2012). One study on identical twins found no difference in gut bacteria upon eating yogurt (McNulty et al. 2011). This outcome is hardly an anomaly: mass-produced products containing probiotics, including yogurt boasting “live and active cultures,” usually do not change the gut ecosystem because the strains used tend to be selected for ease of manufacturing and transportation (Yong 2016: 222). None of this, of course, has stopped the utilitarian claims of yogurt producers marketing a new technology of self-government and self-optimization to women, and increasingly to all Americans (e.g., Activia 2014).

The marketing of Greek yogurt as “healthy” builds upon the previously established symbolism of yogurt in general, with a few differences. Despite focusing on the marketing of nonedibles, Roland Barthes’s classic essay “Soap Powers and Detergents” provides an excellent antecedent for the differentiation of “Greek yogurt,” as it shows how advertising can essentialize texture, connecting the product to a specific “relationship between the evil and the cure” (Barthes 1972: 35). Activia ads, with their yellow arrows pointing down on slim bellies, emphasize yogurt’s fluidity as a cleansing force, pushing waste products and “bad” bacteria out of the system and lightening the load of the woman consuming them (Contois 2014). Strained yogurt’s less fluid, thicker texture, on the other hand, signals a high protein count and the potential for satiety. While other functional yogurts like Activia are celebrated for their ability to leave the body, taking unwanted wastes with them, Greek yogurt is cherished for staying inside to keep bellies full, even as they both promise to make those bellies thinner in the long run.3 The emphasis is not on what has been removed during production (whey and water), but on what has been gained for consumption and ease of self-policing. This insistence on the “fullness” and healthfulness of Greek yogurt conveniently obscures how mass strained yogurt production leads to the generation of vast quantities of acidic whey as toxic waste, endangering societal health in the long term (Elliott 2013).

“So why is Greek yogurt better for weight loss than other dairy products?” asks Toby Amidor (2014: 9) rhetorically in her cookbook, The Greek Yogurt Kitchen. She answers, “Because it’s so much higher in protein. Since protein takes longer for the body to digest, it helps you keep fuller longer.” Since strained yogurt is an ingredient in many appetizers in the Levant, this promise of consumption prevention is not a dominant part of the food’s meanings in countries where it has long been a part of folk foodways. Yet associations with weight loss, with help from protein and “live and active cultures,” has deeply influenced strained yogurt’s commercial success in the United States.

Making Yogurt Turkish: Men’s Appetites, Women’s Labor

Multiple studies focusing on Western societies have found the consumption of yogurt to be gendered feminine, with women...
being more likely to consume yogurt as a snack and as part of their general diet than men (Contois 2014). This particular gendering of yogurt, however, is neither universal nor inevitable, despite yogurt’s status as a “feminized protein” produced through the manipulation of female mammals (Adams 2010: 112). As a comparison, whey protein supplements, which are also produced from dairy, are not specifically marketed to women and remain a favorite of bodybuilders of all genders. Thus yogurt’s femininity is culturally determined and culture specific. Indeed, this feminine gendering and association with thinness is not the primary aspect of Turkish yogurt commercials, which reveal differently gendered constructions around coagulated cultured milk.

“...In Turkey, milk is not drunk, it is eaten,” the saying goes. According to a 2012 study, yogurt is the most commonly consumed processed milk product in the country, with a yearly consumption rate of 28 kilograms per person (Ulusal Süt Konseyi 2012: 64). Plain, whole milk yogurt remains a best-seller in Turkey, with fruit-flavored yogurt increasingly popular among “children and youth” and lite yogurt sales gaining speed in cities (“2 Milyar Dolarlık...” 1999). Despite the popularity of yogurt in general, brands still have to compete to stake out territory in a two-billion-dollar yogurt market, even in a country where many know how to make their own yogurt. Yogurt advertising campaigns usually get a boost during the month of Ramadan and contain visions of the family meal shared around a giant vat of yogurt. In these ads, featuring family feasts and the promise of a bellyful of myriad homemade foods seasoned with full-fat yogurt, yogurt is far from a low-calorie, “diet” food for women.

Although women are almost always cast as the main meal preparers, the consumption of yogurt in these ads is gender neutral, even slightly on the masculine side. In this instance, too, mass culture builds on vernacular understandings of yogurt consumption. A famous folktale featuring Turkey’s best-known jocular character, Nasreddin Hodja, depicts men with a huge appetite for yogurt:

One day Hodja was washing his yogurt pot and pouring the leftovers into a lake. Some people wanted to make fun of him when they saw him.

– “Hodja, what are you doing?” one of them asked.
– “I am turning the lake into yogurt,” Hodja replied.
– “Can a little bit of yeast ferment the great lake?” the man asked while others laughed at Hodja.
– “You never know, perhaps it might,” Hodja replied, “but what if it does?” (Gürkaş 2008: 220)

Many Turkish commercials build on this stereotype of the man who dreams of lakes of yogurt. A recent commercial for the SEK dairy company provides a counterpoint to the gender-flipped commercial shot by Notre Dame students, as the yogurt-obsessed consumer here is a male, worrying about the dinner being incomplete without it. We see a young businessman leave his office and call his wife. “Darling, what’s for dinner?” he asks. He continues excitedly, “Stuffed grape leaves (dolma)? There is yogurt, right? Yogurt, yogurt? My phone is out of charge! What if there isn’t any at home?” (SEK Yoğurt 2012). The last line is repeated as a disembodied male voice begins singing, “What if there isn’t any at home?” The young man drives from store to store, all of which close before he can get inside, even chasing SEK yogurt trucks to no avail. It begins to rain and he must go home, despondent. Yet, upon arriving at the well-lit apartment, he smiles, seeing dolmas on the well-set kitchen table next to a giant container of plain, whole milk SEK yogurt. He sits down and begins to eat with gusto, as his beautiful young wife wipes his brow, gazing at him lovingly.

This formula of male endorsement and large yogurt container placed in relation to labor-intensive foods prepared by women can be found in many Turkish yogurt commercials. Sıtaş, for example, has the entire family enjoying plain whole milk yogurt at a picnic table filled with homemade meals. They all begin eating when the father figure tells them to begin (Sıtaş 2013). A multigenerational family sits down for a similarly large homemade Ramadan meal, prepared by the young wife, in a commercial for Ulker İçim (2009). The family passes the large container of yogurt from hand to hand and we are treated to yet another spectacle of yogurt being spooned onto dolmas. Like dieting in American commercials, the dolmas appear to be the sine qua non of the Turkish yogurt commercial, coding for hours of affective and material labor performed by the women in the family and for a general sense of tradition and slow food. Even though the man gets to sit at the head of the table and the whole family eats yogurt with the meal, the mass-produced plastic vat of yogurt would be utterly meaningless without the women’s “congealed” labor (Marx 1993: 128), represented by the time-consuming dishes. The wives/mothers and their homemade meal symbolize the persistence of “tradition” in the face of industrialization, an effect of which has been the mass production and media marketing of yogurt in Turkey.

Plain strained yogurt in medium-sized containers is available for purchase in Turkish supermarkets; however, strained yogurt ads are rare, as many families strain their own yogurt like Said’s mother once did. The only ad for mass-produced strained yogurt I was able to locate so far continues the trope of yogurt paired with women’s culinary labor and depicts disembodied female hands cooking and serving a traditional stuffed eggplant dish (imam bayildi) seasoned with strained yogurt (Yayla 2015).
As of the summer of 2016, there were no sweetened, single-serve cups of strained yogurt produced in or exported to Turkey, despite robust and increasing yogurt consumption rates in general. This will likely change since Turkish food production and consumption habits are not immune to the influence of Western food trends. Western companies Nestlé and Danone (Dannon) have long been a part of yogurt aisles in Turkey, the latter partnering with Sabancı, one of the country’s largest corporations, to produce several varieties of yogurt, including those marketed for their “probiotic” and “lite” qualities. Activia, available in the usual sugar-laden versions and marketed as a specialized bowel aid for women, has similarly found willing Turkish consumers.

We must, therefore, be wary of a romantic, Orientalist binary opposition between Turkish tradition and American commercialism. Turkish and American ads for mass-produced yogurt both exemplify what Sut Jhally (1995) has called the “image-based culture” of modern capitalism, which causally links positive emotions to the consumption of commodities. In all cases, the empty signifier of coagulated milk sold under a brand name is enriched with signification borrowed from pre-existing values. Similarly, ads in both countries are gendered in rather limited and stereotypical ways. While Turkish ads primarily incorporate folk foodways and the communal practices of food-based nurturing (provided by women) and hearty ingestion (showcased by men and children), American ads focus on individualized feminine consumption for “female”ills.

Yet if staring at a fridge in doubt for minutes on end and eating controlled portions of artificially flavored yogurt alone on a couch is oppressive, what about slaving away at the kitchen all day to make sure store-bought yogurt can be consumed, mostly by others, alongside appropriately labor-intensive foods? Yogurt becomes “localized” through gender in Turkish ads, too, despite and through its long culinary history in the region.

**Why Is Greek Yogurt “Greek”?**

As Warren J. Belasco (2007: 246) notes, in the heyday of “countercuisine,” it would have been impossible to predict that yogurt would soon become an American supermarket staple. There is still a sense that sour, whole milk, plain yogurt’s original home, remains “out there,” in lands Anne Mendelson (2008: 7) romantically refers to as “Yogurtistan” in her popular history of milk. Yet, as the *Multicultural America* encyclopedia puts it, “yogurt, a Turkish word meaning ‘to thicken,’ has become one of the most popular foods in the United States” since the 1980s (Thursby 2013: 894). As the twenty-first century rolled around, yogurt even lost connotations of elite snobbery and came to be incorporated into McDonald’s menus and found on gas station shelves. When Hamdi Ulukaya first began to market his Chobani strained yogurt to supermarkets, he noticed that yogurt in general was “a boring category,” in need of shaking up (Needleman 2012). Flavored yogurt has simply become another convenient snack servicing the national sweet tooth, although its associations with the feminine gender remain strong and consumption among African Americans remains significantly lower than the rest of the population (Fulgoni III et al. 2007). “Culturally odorless” in Iwabuchi’s terms, yogurt is targeted to the mainstream and stripped of associations with strange foreigners.

Given this stasis, the “Greekness” of strained yogurt, whether sweetened and flavored or not, does important cultural and commercial work. Ulukaya has resisted attempts to read into the “Greek” label, arguing:

> Everyone asks me why someone Turkish is making Greek yogurt. In Greece it is not called “Greek yogurt.” Everywhere in the world it is called “strained yogurt.” But because it was introduced in this country by a Greek company [FAGE], they called it “Greek yogurt.” It doesn’t matter whether it’s Greek yogurt or Turkish yogurt, as long as it’s a good yogurt. (Prasso 2011)

Indeed, it is clear that practical, market-based considerations, like the preexisting elite market for FAGE, were foremost on Ulukaya’s mind as he set out to develop a Greek yogurt brand for the American masses. Consider the brand name he chose for his product. Chobani comes from the Turkish word for shepherd, çoban, but is entirely meaningless in its Anglicized form with the “-i” suffix, which breaks Turkish vowel harmony. Unlike FAGE, however, Americans can pronounce it, which factored greatly into the naming (Mead 2013).

Supposedly value-neutral market-based considerations, however, do overlap with hegemonic constructions of race, gender, class, and national origin and are not immune to pushback on political grounds. Not only has Ulukaya’s decision to call Chobani “Greek” ironically popularized this label for all strained yogurt, it also led to a lawsuit by FAGE claiming only yogurt produced in Greece should be called Greek yogurt. Chobani’s lawyers, on the other hand, claimed their use of “Greek” represented not a country of origin but the nontrademarked process of straining (Astley 2013). Turkish media pundits have complained about the perceived appropriation of traditional “Turkish” yogurt as “Greek” by foreigners. “Not only do we lose everything that belongs to our culture and us constantly, but also something we have produced enters the world lexicon, but it carries another country’s name,” complained one columnist (Özyiğit 2011). Ulukaya’s role in furthering this development in the United States, however, is not popular knowledge. Overwhelmingly, Chobani’s success
was represented in the Turkish press as the success of “Turkish yogurt” against “the Greeks” (i.e., FAGE), who only made expensive yogurt for the elite, and “the French” (i.e., Dannon), who only made “sugary and colored yogurt” for unsophisticated Americans (“Türk Yoğurtu . . .” 2014).

A Kurdish-Turkish immigrant’s marketing of strained yogurt as “Greek” at a time of rampant Islamophobia and anti-Middle Eastern racism in the United States certainly calls for more analysis. bell hooks (1992: 21) has famously noted how “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” Too much dangerous foreignness, however, risks alienating mainstream consumers, which would have clashed with Ulukaya’s goal of popularizing strained yogurt. The “Greek” label banks on American constructions of (ancient) Greece, and the Mediterranean in general, as the locale of healthy diet and robust bodies (Baker 2012: 46). Like Italian food, the first immigrant cuisine to become mainstream in the United States, the label of “Greek” yogurt imparts some cultural capital to its consumer without being “too exotic”—it is foreign enough to be exciting, but not strange enough to be repelling (Inness 2000: 97).

Since the 1970s, popular American constructions of normative whiteness have pushed against the symbolic WASP and instead begun to celebrate white “ethnic” cultures, such as Greek, Italian, and Irish immigrant ancestries (Jacobson 2006). Both a product of and a backlash against the civil rights movement, this aspiration for a “special whiteness” beyond and within whiteness has boosted interest in “ethnic dining,” making available a cosmopolitan identity to those who can claim it by heritage or travel and consumption (Bailey 2007: 47; see also Cook and Crang 1996; Narayan 1997; Long 2003; Pillsbury 1998; Gabaccia 1998; Probyn 2000; Inness 2001b; Heldke 2001, 2003; Negra 2002; Duruz 2004; Johnston and Bauman 2009; Slocum 2011: 307–9). Mass-produced Greek yogurt offers a tame version of this gastronomic cosmopolitanism to the masses. Of course, like more extensive practices of “eating the Other,” it does so without challenging the structural racism that generates asymmetric access to culinary adventurism (hooks 1992; Hage 1997).

Like Najla Said’s labne secrets, “Mediterranean” (as opposed to Arab) restaurants, and “Persian” (as opposed to Iranian) venues, a Turkish immigrant’s popularization of “Greek” yogurt implies a continued problem of naming the Middle Eastern or Muslim presence in the history of American food production and consumption practices. Yet, strained yogurt’s rising popularity has not meant an increasing appreciation of Greek food cultures either. The “Greek” label simply imparts a type of vaguely ethnic, ancient, but still white pedigree to the snack’s health claims, even as the specific food cultures associated with strained yogurt are obscured. Both The Greek Yogurt Cookbook (Kelly 2013) and Greek Yogurt Kitchen (Amidor 2014)—two impressive testaments to the rise of “Greek” yogurt in the United States—contain a variety of recipes, some marked by a purported country of origin and some not. Both emphasize health benefits over cultural context in their introduction. The authors compare “Greek yogurt” favorably to “traditional yogurt” in terms of calories, protein, and sugar content (2013: 9; 2014: 4). This use of the term “traditional” is jarring, because there is no reason why strained yogurt would not be considered “traditional” as far as Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean food cultures are concerned. However, the use of the term does epitomize American perceptions of “Greek yogurt” as an exciting new ethnic food, as opposed to the boring, “exhausted whiteness” of yogurt in general (Negra 2002: 62).

Showcasing the intersectionality of race and gender in American yogurt marketing, the feminization of yogurt has opened the way for advertisements that fetishize the Greek man’s “special whiteness.” This has boosted the star of the California-born actor John Stamos, of partial Greek ethnicity on his father’s side due to immigrant grandparents. Stamos’s Greekness operates as a pun in the many Dannon Oikos Greek yogurt commercials that depict white American women sexualizing and objectifying him. In one commercial, two ordinary housewives’ consumption of cups of flavored Greek yogurt while standing in the kitchen has the power of making their potbellied, pasty white husbands appear as John Stamos (Oikos 2013). In another, John Stamos shows up in an office to let two white women know that Oikos Greek yogurt is like “the perfect man,” because it is both “healthy” (high protein, no fat!) and “tasty” (creamy!) (Oikos 2014a). Similarly, a 2013 Activia Greek yogurt commercial featured an undercover Jamie Lee Curtis cheating on her “first love,” i.e., the bowel-regulating Activia, with her “Greek passion,” i.e., a high-protein, nonfat “Greek” yogurt. Thanks to Activia Greek, she realizes she can have it both ways, in perhaps the saddest sense of the term. Such commercials hail the “average” American woman with the promise of an affair with a proximate other from Europe’s own dusky frontiers. In a postfeminist maneuver, they then contain the danger of actual sexual transgression by casting dieting and fighting “bloat” as the true indulgences.

Perhaps the most famous Greek yogurt commercial starring Stamos is “Spill,” which debuted during a 2014 Super Bowl commercial break (Oikos 2014b). In approximately thirty seconds, this commercial embodies all the elements that have
defined the popularization of yogurt in the contemporary United States—individualization, feminization, and cultural neutering—despite its superficially risqué content and hints of irony. Stamos is sitting down, facing a young, white American woman (played by Jen Nikolaisen) in the close quarters of a kitchen, eating a single-serve cup of Dannon Oikos Greek Yogurt. “You have something on your . . . right here,” she says and removes some remaining yogurt from his lips with the swipe of a finger and licks it off. He does it again, on purpose, and the flirting escalates to her kissing him, as she moans with pleasure and anticipation. Suddenly, accidentally, a bit of yogurt spills on his pants. They make eye contact; she smiles seductively and bites her lip, appearing ready and willing to move on to the next stage. Just then, the two other main male characters from the Full House TV series, which originally made Stamos famous, enter the kitchen and interrupt their foreplay. One yells, “Take off your pants, Greek boy!” as the other sprays cleaner in his general direction. The woman takes the rest of the yogurt and leaves Stamos in the middle of a domestic, infantilizing, disciplinary scene—he stands in the kitchen, helpless in his boxers, yelling for her to come back, as the two other men clean his pants. The commercial is a perfect signifier of the limits of mass-produced Greek yogurt’s exoticness and nonnormative gendering as constructed within the contemporary American marketing milieu. Like desert romances, which simultaneously “mine and moderate” the eroticism of the Arab love interest, and with even less racial/civilizational contamination at stake, the sexualized “Greek” yogurt commercial giveth and taketh away (Jarmakani 2015: 110). Through the alchemy of acceptable foreignness, the spilled yogurt in this commercial is first transformed into the male seminal fluid. This is perhaps a refreshing change for a product that has long been associated with female bodily chaos and fluids, most markedly the outcomes of irritable bowel syndrome and fluids. Based on my observations, the consumption of strained yogurt at breakfast seems more common in Greece than in Turkey.

REFERENCES

1. Strained yogurt is the main ingredient in multiple mezes including haydari and češek (tzatziki in Greece), and is also served with roasted eggplants and red peppers. Based on my observations, the consumption of strained yogurt at breakfast seems more common in Greece than in Turkey.


3. This opposition became destabilized with the introduction of Activia Greek in 2013.

4. This and all other translations from Turkish are mine, unless cited otherwise.

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