

## Istanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi

INVITED REVIEW

### Belonging is Hard Work: Food & Climate Dilemmas

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#### Chapter I – Arizona

Before one makes the move to a different country, I am not sure that they think too much about belonging at first. There are more pressing concerns such as visas, permits, school or job applications, language barriers, saving money etc. The first few years are usually busy trying to get all these things lined up. The excitement and trepidation around the transition kicks survival instincts into high gear. Only after getting a little more settled in one's daily life does one start thinking about the way it truly feels, especially if this is to become the way of life for the long term.

I have been an immigrant in the U.S. for 27 years. And looking back now, I can see that I arrived with a naïve confidence about fitting in. Overall, I did not have major difficulties in establishing a social network. I capitalized on my exotic quota to make myself interesting for potential friends, something their American born and raised friends perhaps couldn't provide in quite the same way.

Over the years, as an immigrant, I have thought a lot about belonging, both in my daily life as well as in the academic context. As I worked through these concepts in my thesis and dissertation, I focused largely on political and legal frameworks of (national) belonging, studying things like citizenship and generational status, and how the state viewed its migrant subjects (Kilic, 2006).

So much happened during that period of my life; it was mostly spent in Arizona after a year in New Jersey, where I became a citizen, got married and divorced, graduated from Arizona State University with Masters and Ph.D. in sociology, worked as a senior researcher, and worked with the Turkish American Associations on and off campus. Most importantly I became non-white in my consciousness after arriving as a 23-year-old, self-assured in her Caucasian identity back in the early 1990s. All of this is to say that by the time I moved to Alaska in the summer of 2008, I felt settled in my Turkish American identity, and certain of my belonging in this land. Even if it

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wasn't the deep comradeship Benedict Anderson mused about in *Imagined Communities* (1983), I carved a sliver of my own space where I felt like I belonged as a naturalized American citizen, as a Turkish immigrant.

Moving to Alaska marked a seismic shift in my North American existence. Something I didn't expect at all happened all over again: I did NOT belong to this land. I thought living in the scorching hot Sonoran Desert made me resilient and I felt like a chameleon-put me anywhere on this earth, I said, I will find a way to belong, to make it my own. So why did it not work out here in the frozen tundra?

## **Chapter II- Alaska**

My move to Alaska should have been much easier compared to my initial move to the U.S.: I spoke the language fluently, my brother and close friends lived in Anchorage (hence I already had a place to live, with built-in social and emotional support), I was a citizen with no worries around visas or work permits, and I had a job. I had visited Alaska twice before and was familiar with what it had to offer. Yet I dove into a slight depression as soon as I moved here. I couldn't explain it, but the long, cold and dark winters weren't my cup of tea. I was unhappy. I took skiing classes, dance classes, yoga. Nothing seemed to help. I wasn't productive at work - the kiss of death on a tenure track job. But, *Why now?* I asked; what was my problem exactly, in my seemingly full life?

I turned to my cooking to feel a sense of ease and to reclaim what was lost, in a space I knew for sure that I belonged – my kitchen. This, strangely, made things worse. As someone who grew up in the Mediterranean, local food felt alien. Moose, caribou, salmon, halibut, and never ending root vegetables didn't feel second nature. The more I tried to cook Turkish the worse it got – produce wasn't great after the long trek up here, it felt wrong to consume a tomato due to its big environmental footprint, and so I felt lost in the kitchen too. Everywhere I looked I felt a sense of lack, as if trying to push a square peg into a round hole. It seemed that belonging to a different climate as an eater was so much harder than belonging to the larger nation as a political subject. As a researcher, it was natural to question the mechanism behind this feeling. Was it because I was too urban and didn't dream of sleeping under the stars? Was it because I was too Middle Eastern to want a moose burger? Was it just too cold for my Mediterranean bones?

[Sandi Hilal](#), a Palestinian architect, who worked on architectural interventions in West Bank camps to create a sense of home, community and belonging, shared that when she moved to Sweden she felt a similar disconnect with the climate and what that climate signified about social relationships. She told me about many depressed Syrian refugees in Sweden, settled in a town 80 miles from the Arctic circle, and a few who managed to create [interiors](#) that were unapologetically sunny and Syrian to ease the doldrums of the harsh climate and isolating architecture they found in the

small military town of Boden. She talked about the importance of becoming a host as an immigrant, regaining one's agency, and not remaining a guest, where one can bring one's past and future together. Was that the thing that kept me feeling like I didn't belong in Alaska, that it never felt home enough to become a host because of its distinct foodways and climate? Was I trespassing like a guest although I chose to settle here?

### **Chapter III – (Tables of) Istanbul: A Turk in Turkey!**

“[C]ommunities are about exclusion as well as inclusion; and food is one way in which boundaries get drawn, and insiders and outsiders distinguished.” (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 91)

The question of food becoming the symbolic departure for my belonging in Alaska made me curious. What would it mean if I didn't cook or eat like a Turk? Why did this become so significant to my daily contentment after 15 years in the U.S.? In my resistance to this new place and its foods, I reclaimed and performed my passion for my homeland cuisine, marking myself firmly as not-an-Alaskan in the process. The more I made this connection explicit in a way to maintain my difference and distance from this place, the more I realized that I didn't know all that much about what I claimed to be mine in the first place. Van den Berghe said that ethnic cuisine “only becomes a self-conscious, subjective reality when ethnic boundaries are crossed” (1984, p. 395). For me, that moment came into focus when I crossed a geographical boundary, feeling a bit like a culinary refugee.

I started thinking about Istanbul as a place to dive into what makes a cuisine in people's minds: Geography (climate)? Religion? Ethnic/racial/regional/national identity? Social class? Migrating to Istanbul from various regions in Turkey would have to have some similarities with my experiences of moving to Alaska, wouldn't it? Wouldn't a migrant from Trabzon have some serious considerations about *lakerda*, possibly, the way I eyed caribou stew or salmon roe? Did other people in Turkey think about these questions as significant as well? Or was my immigration to the U.S. unlike what a domestic migrant within a national territory experienced?

I was a strange Turk in Turkey, at times perceived more American than Turkish (my Turkish is not as fluent after more than two decades of being away). Just as years ago, enticing people into my circle with stories of Turkish landscapes and yummy food in the U.S., I found myself doling out fishing and bear stories, and handing out smoked salmon. What? Was I now an Alaskan in Istanbul, performing an interesting expat story for the Turkish audience?

The more I pondered about food and place, the more I realized the similarities I shared with others. All my experiences in the U.S. centered around me being an “authentic” Turkish subject, who cooks “authentic” Turkish food. That is the secret sauce that makes me desirable to potential connections as it sets me apart from their established social network. As an immigrant I always capitalized on this when I wanted

to claim someone as a friend. The irresistible allure of baklava usually meant people said yes to meeting me. Once the Turkish food cracked open the door to a relationship, now it was up to me to charm the pants off them with my character to keep them as friends. Food wasn't the thing that made me friends, but it was the perfect *amused bouche* that made them want to explore more.

Of course, there is nothing authentic about my baklava at all, which is why I always serve it with a side of apologies to Turkish friends. But somehow, I myself appeared authentic, an expert on Turkish cuisine (indeed Turkish anything). The more people asked me about the food's history, origins, or etymology, the more I became aware of my lacking knowledge of Turkish food. But I wasn't alone, was I? It wasn't just the immigrants who experience this, even domestic migrants knew this to be true. My colleague Liz Snyder mentioned how after moving to Alaska, everyone expected her to make biscuits, shrimp and gravy as a Southerner and as a result she ended up ordering southern cookbooks to match the expectations her social circle had of her. So, it seemed that perhaps any migration was at the root of the experience? Or was it about religious heritage, for example, knowing what can be served at a Sabbath dinner, or eaten during Lent? Better yet, was it about social class? Is it simply a preference to want the gourmet pork products while turning our nose down at Spam or the humble hotdog? Could a low-income migrant with three kids, living on the outskirts of Istanbul afford *levrek* (sea bass), or wild caught *çipura* (sea bream)? Are they refusing Istanbul's fresh seafood cuisine because they don't like it or because they cannot afford it?

Turns out, this process of finding answers in Istanbul, for questions that arose in Alaska, wasn't all that bad. Most of the interviews mentioned geography as a central concept, refusing to define cuisine through its ethnic or national associations. They alluded to the fact that geography is ultimately the decider of what product you have, and hence what techniques you develop. Migrant families I ate with reported that even after two or three decades of living in Istanbul, they still stick to their regional cuisines, resisting Istanbul dishes, even buying ingredients directly from their hometowns. On the flip side, geographer [Pierre Raffard](#) warned me about what people say compared to what they actually do. During his research with migrants from Gaziantep in Istanbul, he heard similar stories; but when he asked to look into their fridges, he saw a different food story with remnants of Istanbul, such as fish. In any case, it seems that migrants are invested in maintaining an identity that sticks to its origins, or at the least a narrative that paints this idea. Is this what I was doing with my resistance to becoming an Alaskan?

In all honesty, when I was spending up to five hours a day on Istanbul's public transportation going between my interviews, I did miss Alaska, and my 12-minute commute to work, a little. I did miss the quiet hiking trails, majestic mountains, and yes, even salmon dinners when I saw people in Istanbul eating overpriced salmon that

looked slightly beige and unappealing to me. I became instantly a snobby Alaskan, refusing to touch anything that was called “salmon” in Turkey.

### **Chapter III. a. – Why would a sociologist make a movie?**

As I grappled with these existential questions, I realized that I didn’t want to write an article to be published in an academic journal, where perhaps 300 colleagues would read it. It seemed to be such a universal conversation that I wanted the opportunity to converse with many people from all walks of life, not just scholars. What medium would serve that best, especially given the current context where we read less, and consume more and more digital and visual material? I settled on a documentary as a result. The only problem was that I didn’t know how to make one, nor did I have the money. I was to become yet another migrant in the land of visual media, delving into skills I didn’t have, having to prove that I had an interesting story to tell (on a topic I apparently didn’t know that much about), and establish myself in a new language (film). What could go wrong?

Making a movie was a process of learning a completely different skill set and I had immense fun working with a team of cinematographers, editors, and technicians. Most academics lead a solitary research life, collecting data and making sense of it alone. This particular research project was long days of setting up shots, chatting casually with the interviewees while we waited for the team to set up and mic us, eating together and getting additional footage to support the interviews, which was foreign but interesting for me. I particularly appreciated the production and post-production crews’ never-ending desire to add to the project, suggesting more and better filming locations, a different angle, repeating shoots if they weren’t satisfied with the quality etc. It was such a joy to be part of a team who invested and believed in the project that I thought was simply mine, and they were only there because they were paid. In reality, it was my idea, but the end product was the team’s achievement. That was a wonderful experience for me as a researcher. These days, I utilize creative and artistic assignments in my classes (such as the [Unessays](#) and [Family food podcasts](#)), simply because of this project and the joy it brought to my professional life. And students report that although doing things they never had to do in the academic context was daunting, they ended up learning more and enjoyed the process once they let go of the fear of the unknown.

After we completed the movie and I started to have Q&A sessions following screenings, I got my wish of chatting about these issues with other people who had no stakes in academia. I must say that, as much as I love our scholarly and relentless critical engagement, there was something refreshing and endearing about people responding to *Tables of Istanbul (Sofra Sofra Istanbul)* from their gut. They talked about what they loved, which was also such a different experience for me as an academic. There was no push back, no “why didn’t you look at it from this perspective?”

type of questioning. It was about what resonated with them as Turks, as Americans, as domestic or international migrants, as mothers, cooks, chefs, etc. My first academic screening however had this immediate line of questioning regarding why I chose to talk about the dinner table as a bridge, and what one colleague saw as “the cliché” approach to how Istanbul bridges East and West. The contrast between two audiences is so stark but also important, because we need to be able to answer these critical questions to make our research better, more transparent and add to the knowledge base in a positive manner. For me, the bridge metaphor is important to include in this movie because that is how the majority of the world sees Istanbul and the dinner table. By addressing it, I can also address the divides it cannot bridge, such as social class, the gap between rich dinner tables and the nutritional experiences of poor households, and the way we make sense of these as we address food systems issues. Many people I interview in the movie have concrete ideas about what we should do about farming, agricultural policies, food production practices, and food consumption. But do they look at these issues through additional lenses of social class, religious affiliation, climate, geography and belonging?

Lastly, this adventure into filmmaking had one unintended consequence: I was able to talk about my research with my parents as equals in the kitchen and at the table as never before. They have always struggled with questions around what I do. Many times, I overheard them telling friends that I was a professor, social something or other, half the time not remembering the sociologist part, although they never seem to forget that I studied economics for my undergraduate degree. In truth, they didn’t know what I did beyond teaching. Interviewing my family for this project also made me realize that these people I thought I knew so intimately still had many insights and quirky preferences they haven’t shared with me about their food world. I didn’t know, for example, that my brother despised cooking because there were too many steps involved – unlike, say, laundry; or that my mother missed homemade cheese, yoghurt and tomato paste; or that my dad loves bread and olives because they were luxuries growing up in a single mother household with seven kids; or that when I talked about food in the context of belonging, all my second cousin could think of was cooking and eating to discipline the body, and for weight management. Food means something and so much to all of us, and I believe that film as a medium allows me to continue that conversation long after the interviews are done. Every time someone sees the movie, the discourse opens up yet again, and I learn some more.

Sandercock and Attili (2010) argue that film can be used as a propaganda tool through a top down approach, or it can be used to “probe the capacities of multimedia as a mode of inquiry, as a form of meaning making, as a tool of community engagement and as a catalyst for public policy dialogues,” invoking Hegel’s thesis “that the best inquiry is the inquiry that produces stories” (Churchman, 1971, p. 178 as cited in Sandercock & Attili, 2010). In many ways, my movie adventure was a self-reflexive

practice, and a digital ethnography of my own confusion regarding how to belong to a climate with a distinct (and foreign) foodways. Because I had so many questions and the project was more exploratory in nature, I covered a large ground which necessitated the use of narrative voice to connect these pieces together. In the narration, I was able to reflect more on my own struggles in the US/Alaskan context and make connections to Istanbul weaving the larger themes of class, religion and identity/belonging, where the topic of geography and climate loomed large.

#### **Chapter IV- Alaska, Take Two**

Two days after I returned from working for a year on my documentary *Tables of Istanbul* and fieldwork for a book, I was on a panel titled *What We Eat, aka Eating Alaska* (2017), organized by curator Jimmy Riordan (funded by the Alaska Humanities Forum), and moderated by the award winning journalist and food writer [Julia O'Malley](#). As Istanbul and the centrality of geography were still fresh on my mind, O'Malley posed a question to us panelists that changed my attitude towards Alaska. She said: "One of the things that has come up in a lot of discussions about how Alaskans see food is two kind of polarities: one would be deprivation, and the other one would be abundance. Because, just like the light comes and then goes away, so, too, does the abundance of local food." I realized in that moment that I chose to look at Alaska from a lens of deprivation. It wasn't Mediterranean enough! I saw clearly how I framed my experience- not just as different, but simply not as good. I of course couldn't ignore how different the geography, or the climate was, and hence what was locally available as food, which I wasn't well versed in (yet!).

Alaskan foodways was however abundant and complex. Imagine a bowhead [whale harvest](#) that feeds an entire village for a year and brings honor to the young man who caught it, while capturing attention of wildlife activists and bringing death threats, questioning cultural rights of subsistence. Or foraging blueberries and spruce tips, filling your freezer with fish and moose meat. Why was I ever deprived? At that panel I made a commitment to marry my Turkish culinary side to Alaskan bounty. At the end of my *Food for Thought: Identity at the Table* class in Spring 2019, my student Eric Shenk, an avid outdoor enthusiast and hunter donated stew meat from the last caribou hunt he went on with his father and brothers. I made *Hünkar Begendi* (Sultan's Delight) with it and we had a class dinner at my place. It tasted strangely like *ciger* (liver). Next up is Moose köfte, I made a mental note, after our son-in-law brought over some moose meat. After all, as Susan Kalcik mentions "one does not have to be authentic to be ethnic" (1984, p. 56). Being ethnic in Alaska was, and is, a process, mingled with judgment and dislike, resistance and performance, loyalty and curiosity.

Food facilitates belonging in major life transitions, such as moving away for college, moving to a village to teach, immigration, etc. (Kilic, Passini, & DeFeo 2019). For

me, it was initially a hindrance in my Alaskan journey, the thing that made it hard for me to belong. When I converse with other immigrants, I realize that not many make it as big a deal as I have. Globalization has delocalized food so much that we can purchase pineapples in Anchorage in December. My middle class, liberal sensibilities around environmental impact of such behavior, coupled with a desire to eat seasonal and local meant that I would largely discontinue making Turkish dishes as I knew them for most of the year. It was one thing to buy tomatoes in November in Arizona, but an entirely different proposition to do so in Alaska.

On the other hand, my assumption that Alaska Native people fit perfectly in this climate while I stuck out like a sore thumb doesn't necessarily hold true anymore. Federal subsidies interfered and changed Indigenous subsistence practices in favor of unhealthy processed foods, especially for younger generations. Some people eagerly wait for fast food restaurants to show up in their village. Economic and job market challenges or leaving school or work for subsistence reasons make it harder for younger generations of Alaska Native people to live in unison with the land, especially for those who live in urban centers. Shifting climate is particularly apparent in places like Alaska, where the permafrost is melting for the first time in the state's history and making some places uninhabitable. With these changes in the sea ice or permafrost we see changes in animal migratory behavior and shifts in harvest times and generations-old hunting grounds. Even the elders say they don't know Alaska like this. So perhaps, we are all climate refugees in the future, and we all have to continuously adapt to the changing climate and ensuing shifts in the ecosystem.

With the trepidation of a baby trying broccoli or lemon for the first time, I shall dip my toe into glacier-fed rivers in search of salmon, even contemplate a 5-day backpacking trip on the historical gold mining route from Skagway into Canada. Will these make me an Alaskan? I do not know, but I know that allowing the possibility of such local behaviors soften my stubborn Turkish presence in the kitchen. Whether I choose to thrive in the abundance of Alaska, or shiver in the deprivation of Turkish anything in this place, it will be my choice, constrained or facilitated in many ways by the geography I inhabit. Belonging is hard work, but I think I am willing to do it now facilitated by curiosity and an engagement with the local foodways, only after 12 years of residence here. Better late than never?

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