

Dignity and Joy - Season 3, Episode 1

Seeds of solidarity: On connection, resistance and preserving Palestinian foodways with Vivien Sansour

S3E3 keywords: Palestine, seeds, solidarity, land back, Palestinian, seed library, heritage, foodways, resistance, connection

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S3E1 transcript:

Vivien Sansour (00:00:00) – I have seen humans choose a lot of bravery and a lot of loyalty, and they may not have always been appreciated and may have not always been talked about in all of the history books, mostly written by conquerors. But they exist, and they exist today from revolutionaries in Haiti that decided they will not be enslaved anymore. To folks in every single corner of the world who are not choosing mediocrity, and they're not choosing convenience. And that is really our only hope.

Renée D'Souza (00:00:42) – You're listening to Dignity and Joy, a podcast from FoodShare. On the pod, we confront the systems of oppression that impact who has access to food and the land it's grown on, and who doesn't. Achieving something better will take hard work from all of us, and can only be done if we listen closely to the people who are already leading change in the way we think about food. FoodShare's Sheldomar Elliott delves into the connections between food and justice with folks who have their fingers on the pulse and their hands in the soil. Together, they dream in color and consider what it would take to build a just and hopeful city.

Renée D'Souza (00:01:19) – A city where everyone can feed themselves, their loved ones, and their community with dignity and with joy.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:01:29) – Hi I'm Sheldomar and welcome to this episode of Dignity and Joy, a podcast from FoodShare. Today our guest is Vivien Sansour. Vivien is an artist, storyteller, researcher and conservationist. She uses image, sketch, film, soil, seeds and plants to enliven old cultural tales in contemporary presentations and to advocate for the protection of biodiversity as a cultural and political act. Vivien is the founder of Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, and works with a global network of farmers and seed advocates to promote seed conservation and agro biodiversity. An avid lover of nature and the arts. Vivien has sprouted many projects out of the seed library, including co-founding LBA Arts and Seed Studio and Bethlehem and The Traveling Kitchen Project. A culinary historian, enthusiastic cook, and columnist. Vivien has aimed to bring threatening varieties back to the dinner table to become part of our living culture,



rather than a relic of the past. This has led to collaborations with Dan Saladino from the BBC Food Program and chefs like Anthony Bourdain, Sami Tamimi and Tara Wigley.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:02:36) – While born in Jerusalem, Vivien was raised in both Beit Jala in Palestine and in the US. She is a former Harvard Fellow and currently teaching in the Experimental Humanities Department at Bard College. She is also writing an autobiography that weaves together the stories of seeds with their own personal experiences in Palestine and abroad. Welcome, Vivien, and thanks for taking the time to be here today.

Vivien Sansour (00:03:00) – Thank you for having me.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:03:02) – Wonderful. Well, before we get into it, I want to start by acknowledging that I'm here in Toronto, sacred land that is, the traditional territories of the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and the Mississaugas of the credit. And that this territory is covered by the dish with One Spoon Wampum, belt covenants. At FoodShare, we think it's important to start any conversation on this land by recognizing the many nations of indigenous peoples who presently live on this land, those who have spent time here, and the ancestors who have hunted and gathered on this land. I also want to acknowledge the many people of African descent who are not settlers, but whose ancestors were forcibly displaced as part of the transatlantic slave trade, brought against their will, and made to work on these lands.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:03:42) – At FoodShare, we believe that advancing Indigenous sovereignty is deeply and inextricably linked to black liberation, and we remain committed to advancing both. We often try to reflect on our land, acknowledgement and consider the connections between the words we're saying and the material we're working with on any given day, as well as a meaningful action we can take. Well, Vivien, considering that this is your first time on the podcast, what we often do at the beginning is start off with a few icebreakers. how do you feel about that?

Vivien Sansour (00:04:12) – I am curious.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:04:14) – Okay, well, let's try them out and we'll see how they go. so the first question I got for you and they're sort of like rapid style kind of questions. first one here is what are you looking forward to growing coming this spring season? Because I know that you like to grow.

Vivien Sansour (00:04:31) – Oh, I am looking forward to growing a stronger heart muscle.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:04:41) – I wasn't expecting that. That's a great one. beautiful. And another one here is. What song do you have on repeat right now? Or maybe one that you're going back to.

Vivien Sansour (00:04:50) – Oh my God, a few, but it's the funny one. It's by Jah Cure, a Jamaican artist, and it's called unconditional love.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:05:09) – I got to check that one out. Next one is what would your friends say is your superpower? Is that to describe that?

Vivien Sansour (00:05:20) – Wow. That's a hard one, man. I mean, I should ask them.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:05:24) – I would if I could.

Vivien Sansour (00:05:27) – What my friends would save my superpower. Well, I had a friend recently told me that, she feels. When she talks to me, that as if I have died and come back from the dead to tell some. Some stories of unseen places. So I don't know if that's. A super power, but I guess it might be.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:05:58) – Yeah, that's that's special. Like some clairvoyance, some some wisdom there. yeah, I like it, I like it. I got a couple more here. Is there a board game or a card game that you're competitive at or like sort of win often with? I am.

Vivien Sansour (00:06:16) – Awful. I'm super competitive when it comes to board games, which is like weird, like another personality comes out. but pretty much in all of them, I'm like this, I'm awful to play with. unless you like banter and you want to get like, I mean, but I love to play. A board game. It has to be a board game. I like to play dominoes. Okay.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:06:46) – Yeah, that's a great one.

Vivien Sansour (00:06:47) – I'm not very nice.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:06:50) – I'll keep that in mind. Last one I got here. What is a TV show or movie that you haven't watched, but you've been meaning to or is, like on your list?

Vivien Sansour (00:07:00) – Yes. There's a movie called A House in Jerusalem by actually a friend of mine. His name is Muayad Alayan, and I have been dying to see it. And literally every time I've had the chance to see it in a festival or something, I missed it. So I would really like to see it, even though I'm sure it's gonna destroy me.

Vivien Sansour (00:07:25) – But I think it's probably a brilliant film.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:07:30) – Yeah, I believe it. I hope you get some time soon to watch that. Well, you know, there's lots that I want to talk to you about today, Vivien.

Vivien Sansour (00:07:39) – But wait a minute. This icebreaker game is not fair. Like you. You get to ask me, I suppose the questions.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:07:48) – Oh, wow. The tables have been turned. Well, you know, I'll give you that power then. What questions might you have for me?

Vivien Sansour (00:07:55) – I mean, I'm just curious. What board game would you play?

Sheldomar Elliott (00:08:01) – It's funny, I I'm a big gamer. Not typically board games like a video game kind of person. I also I can be competitive, but I'm, I, I just like having fun rather than, like trying to win. trying to think. What was a recent one? Have you heard of this game risk?

Vivien Sansour (00:08:26) – Yes.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:08:27) – Yeah. So I played risk. It was like a Game of Thrones edition, so it was kind of cool.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:08:33) – that was a lot of fun. I liked that, but I'm. I'm a really big nerd, and I actually like trading card games. so I play this game called Magic The Gathering. Not surprised if you haven't heard of it.

Vivien Sansour (00:08:46) – No clue.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:08:47) – Okay. Don't worry, you're not missing too much. but that's that's a game I'm really into. And I've been playing it since I was, like, 12, 11 years old. so I try to meet up with friends every couple of weeks to continue playing that serious.

Vivien Sansour (00:09:03) – Well thank.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:09:04) – You. Yeah. Yes. Yeah. Anything else? You know.

Vivien Sansour (00:09:08) – No.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:09:10) – I like the questions back at me. So yeah. Feel free to do that throughout the conversation. well I'm thinking yeah. Like before we get into some of your work and what you're up to currently, I thought it'd be really nice to learn a bit more about yourself and perhaps your upbringing. so, yeah, if you could speak a bit to that. And eventually I feel like it'll get us into the work that you're currently doing today.

Vivien Sansour (00:09:38) – Sure. Like I get asked this question a lot and it's hard to know, like, what dimension of my upbringing I think we all have. Stories about our upbringing. And often as we grow, they shift and change. But but for sure, like in the material sense, I as you mentioned in the introduction, I was born in Jerusalem. I had a very, in a way, typical Palestinian small town village upbringing. I was, a very mischievous child, but I was also like a curious child who pretty much, you know, spent most of my time outside playing outside with the neighbor's kids, with my cousins, climbing trees, exploring mud, figuring out what grass is to eat, what grass is not to touch. falling on my face. and, yeah. And I and I, and I grew up in, In a, in a community, in a very solid community where my idea of food, for example, was something that was always shared. There was no concept of food being a commodity or something that you have to have money to have.

Vivien Sansour (00:11:18) – And not because everybody was rich, but because, there was a sense of, of abundance in the sense that, you know, we even say in Palestine. Although now, of course, the saying has been like invading my my brain a lot, because for hundreds and hundreds of years we always said, nobody goes to sleep hungry. And what that means was always that we will always take care of each other. And so, it wasn't until I came to the United States that I realized that people ask permission to eat an apple when they're in your house and, like, can I have your apple? or like, is this your bread? And and that was a quite a cultural adjustment for me especially. Still still is even sometimes. Now, and kind of I know my friends. My American friends. for them, from their perspective, they're being polite. but from my perspective, they're being offensive. Because. What do you mean? Like it's food? It's for for us. if you're in my home, you're my, like, if you wanted to borrow my sweater, that's a different conversation.

Vivien Sansour (00:12:43) – You should ask. But to eat, it's almost like, it's almost like a commentary on my generosity, which, culturally speaking, it it becomes offensive. Of course, I'm not offended now because I understand the context of it, but, but yeah, food was always something that was shared, and, we didn't have to have every kind of food to have every kind of food because we had a lot. You know, I grew up in, mostly agricultural terrain, with like, people having small home gardens. And that's how people kind of survived, with apple trees and apricot trees in particular. My village is famous for its apricots, a unique kind of apricot and grapes and pomegranates and, you know, all kinds of other, not fruits, which, made it possible to, for example, eat pomegranate even if you didn't have a pomegranate tree, because we have a tradition of sending baskets to each other. like, we have a lot of figs. So we send figs to our neighbors. So our neighbors send back the basket.

Vivien Sansour (00:14:10) – They send the basket back full of whatever they have. Maybe they have pomegranates. I say that because literally our neighbors had a lot of pomegranates and we didn't, we had one pomegranate tree, and I was always excited when they send us back the basket because it didn't have pomegranates. So that's a little bit about my upbringing. very little television, I think we watched television only on Fridays in the morning cartoon, and we had two channels and, yeah.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:14:46) – Yeah, I know that's – thank you for sharing all that. I also love pomegranates. So there's something that we have in common there. And, I'm thinking then just to sort of like fast forward into the now. Like what? What brought you to the US and I believe you're you're in New York, is that correct?

Vivien Sansour (00:15:04) – I am I'm in Upstate. Well, I mean, what brought me to the US is the same reason. That many people, in my shoes came to the US. Some could say by choice, but really, is it, I mean, because what brought me to the US is the US, meaning it's the policies of the US that has destroyed this world.

Vivien Sansour (00:15:31) – I just described to you, right? My pomegranates and my trees and and that world that I just described to you is, as we speak, being destroyed and has been under

attack for, So many years, by policies of this, of this country, which has before destroyed also the beautiful world of the people of this land. So I'm, I am another. really victim of, this system that has been and continues to destroy our worlds and then tries to sell us. it's it's world in these packages that we consume. So I'm also a consumer. So I am here because, like many of us in this world trying to survive and find little. Safe nooks and crannies to live in the pretence of. Safety.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:16:50) – That's, I feel that. And that's that's very real. makes me think about my family coming from Jamaica. of course not the same, but there's some similarities there. and I'm also just trying to find some safety and some care, amidst this gigantic system of oppression. So, yeah, there's a lot there that we can dive into, and perhaps we can use food as a sort of way to expand on that, because I know that you started the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:17:28) – Perhaps you can speak to what that is. And what does it do?

Vivien Sansour (00:17:30) – Sure. Well, yeah. The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library came out of a lot of longing for that world that was taken away from me, you know, like, was taken away from me, was taken away from my community. And I watched, my people every day, new generations, be severed from that thing that that made us who we are in a lot of ways, and our ability to interact and be part of our natural terrains. And so we were being transformed into, yeah, really, into these subjects. and it was kind of a rebellion against that, but also a kind of a return to love, like in a sense that, you know, you return, you know, you're taught that something is not worthy. It's not. You need to become more like Europeans, and you need to be more like Americans, and you need to wear suits, and you need to wear different clothes. And everything about you is primitive and shameful.

Vivien Sansour (00:18:49) – And being a fella or a peasant is is shameful. You need to change your accent. You need to go to college. And so I, of course, drank the Kool-Aid like everybody and I and I and I did that for a long time until I discovered that actually, who I am and where I come from is already not just good enough, but so much of value that the world, even the so-called sophisticated world, longs for and needs. and as my mother always says, you know, when people try to, like, shame, shame us about, oh, you're from Allah, you are fellahin. Although today L.A. tries to be a city with I mean, all these terraces have disappeared. And she would say, if anyone ever tells you that, remind them that country folk put food on the table for city folk like we are the ones feeding, the people in the city, so they ain't got nothing on us that's real. and so, it was really, a grief. It was a deep grief that I was going through, realizing that, Wow.

Vivien Sansour (00:20:09) – I've always had something so beautiful, so precious. Like, people here want to send their kids to nature camps, and, well, that was my childhood. You know, I didn't need to go to a nature camp. I grew up in nature as part of my life. It's not like something I go to also consume. and so I slowly I was in a PhD program, in the US, and I decided, you know, screw this. I don't want to learn from these books. I have, elders and grandmas and

grandpas I can go talk to. And so, in a way, I chose my own learning, like, what works for me. this is not to say, like some other people learn differently, and. And I just went and followed my joy, which was to sit with the elders and to learn. I wanted to learn about myself. And. And to learn more about, you know, my, my people, because we were not allowed to learn about who we are in a healthy way.

Vivien Sansour (00:21:18) – And so started like this. And the more farmers I spoke to, the more conversations came about seeds. And particularly, there's the famous story of the watermelon where, I had never heard of this watermelon. It's called the Jadu'i. And I would talk to elders mostly in Jenin area in the north. And they would talk about, the Jadu'i. The Jadu'i. And I'm like, who is Jadu'i? Like, who do you keep calling this? Jadu'i and I want to know who that is. And it's a watermelon. And, and they talk about this watermelon, you know, women. And, I always tell the story because it was fascinating to me. Like, women would talk about giving birth while in the watermelon fields. hiding in the watermelon fields during the war. men talk about shipping these watermelons with their fathers in trucks to Lebanon, to even Turkey, like. So this watermelon, which also, people talked about how delicious it was and that and in fact, just recently, I didn't realize that also in the South where, I'm from, that they did that tour because I heard my mom talked to a friend of hers recently about how they also used to hide the watermelon under the bed, and it kept cool.

Vivien Sansour (00:22:51) – So even by December, they could still eat watermelon. Wow. Kept that long. And then I learned that this watermelon is part of, the ba'al seed system, which is, a collection of of seed varieties and varieties that grow with no irrigation. So they were developed, like in a process of co-creation between human and non-human, the soil, the elements, the seeds itself, to develop, the intelligence to to grow, to grow and to give fruit, deep in the soil, without any irrigation, just living off of, the moisture retained in the soil from the rainy season, from the winter. And we do. And, of course, that meant that, you know, there's a whole system of knowledge around, how do you how do you prep the soil for that? what do you also grow next to it? when do you put it in the ground? Like also paying attention to time and seasons. So not everything you just do whenever, whatever, like we do now. And so I, I thought this was pretty genius.

Vivien Sansour (00:24:17) – and how come we don't learn about this in school, but we learn about the unification of Europe, like, okay, I mean, we should learn these things, but, why did we not learn about that? And so when I, you know, the more they talked about it, the more I wanted to taste it. Okay, fine. You made me fall in love. Now can I meet my lover, like, please? And, And everybody was like, no, we can't like, there's no, there's no seed. nobody has them. you're looking for the dinosaur. Are you crazy? We're just telling you a story from the past. And so I think the idea of the seed library came out of this, that I don't want my food, heritage, my my whole history to be history. I wanted for it to be a living culture. Just the way I ate those pomegranates. I wanted future generations to also and myself to taste our history again and to make it part of our bodies again, and for it to be part of our living, living history, living right now, like, not something that we can talk about, like a past story.

Vivien Sansour (00:25:36) – And so in the process, I was looking for these seeds. I found some, we've been working to grow them again and to bring it back to the, to people's kitchens and under their beds. but also, yeah, from that developed kind of, more and more of finding stories and finding more varieties and, and just like at that time, I was posting about them on social media because I was just excited. I had, you know. I had just come back from dropping out of my PhD program and trying to figure out what to do, taking side jobs here and there and posting about the seeds. Right. And all of a sudden, you know, I of course, discovered I'm not the only one who's longing for this. And, also a lot of people were curious and a lot of people were starting to remember their own stories and their own, traditions from different microclimates from different villages. And so it's kind of, the seeds sort of, saved me or chose me rather than I saved them.

Vivien Sansour (00:26:56) – People often say, oh, you save seeds. And I, I really find this, not true because I feel like they found me. And if you really think about it, there's. They have such powerful energy. they are life, you know, they they hold in them so much life. And so, Yeah, that's how it started. And now it's kind of, the seeds have developed wings, and they are now flying all over the world, and, Yeah. And, and hopefully telling stories and, and and feeding people.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:27:38) – Wow. That is so beautiful. Oh, there's so much I want to pick up on. But I have to know, did like, how good was the watermelon? I know that's like a it's not like a real question, but I guess you got to try it I'm assuming.

Vivien Sansour (00:27:56) – Yeah, it's the real question though, because, we are still in the process of, of breeding it back into its original form as much as possible. Right. because soil has changed so much.

Vivien Sansour (00:28:10) – And that was part of its loss, because of the introduction of agribusiness, the introduction of hybrid seeds. Israel is big on like, agro industry. So since the Zionist movement, there was a move towards, quote unquote, modernizing the Palestinian farmer, introducing all kinds of, chemical inputs into the farms and, of course, hybrid seeds and new kinds of seeds and, and for sure, that has changed. It's changed a lot the, the soil and the seeds. So and actually, if people want to be part of this breeding project, they should contact us because, it's now happening everywhere that we have folks, growing it and trying to figure out, like, how to get it back to its most, original form. As much as that's possible. Which. And so it's no surprise that it did the best in the North where it comes from, because, as we say in Palestine, the seed knows the soil. So even though they've been separated for a long time, they they kind of recognized each other, you know, in the same union.

Vivien Sansour (00:29:35) – So, so it it tastes nice. It's just not as sweet and magnificent as I heard about it. But it's possible that I also, like, had such a buildup about it. But I think it's it's definitely that the seed has changed and we need to do a lot more work.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:29:56) – Yeah, I hear that. Well, who knows, maybe, you know, you can send some seeds up here. We could try it at the farm that I'm at. I'm. I'm definitely open to that collaboration.

Vivien Sansour (00:30:06) – Oh, okay. Well, we are looking for someone willing, and able to grow some heirloom cabbage. That's a threatened variety. Okay? And we need people in cooler areas, so if you're interested. Yeah, you know, it it over winters and stuff. So it's a two year commitment. And we can't find a lot of people who are willing to do that. So if you're down, call us.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:30:31) – Yes we'll we'll keep in touch I love it, I love it. there's lots that you said there.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:30:37) – And honestly, a lot of your story really resonates with me. And if I could just share for a little bit, you know, I just said, like, my part of my family is from Jamaica. The other part is from Portugal. but I'm a person of the diaspora, and I was born and raised in Toronto. And food to me has always been that thing that connects me to the sense of belonging from, like these cultures that I know I'm a part of, but I don't often feel a part of. And some of my earliest memories, are of of actually being in the garden with my grandmother, growing like tomatoes and cucumbers and all these different. Things. You know, fast forward to me being a little bit older. I had, again, this deep realization of not feeling connected. And food was always that that piece of the puzzle. so when I turned to my dad in particular, who was Jamaican and was like, you know what? I think I'm going to start farming.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:31:30) – It's nothing serious, just like some urban farming, just to keep my hands in the soil and specifically grow culturally appropriate crops. he looked at me like I was wild. And, you know, I, I recognized, like, on a really deep level. There's still a lot of stigma attached to working on the land, specifically as black and, Caribbean folks, just due to being forced to that for hundreds of years. But it really gave me a sense of connection, to to land's, to food and really to myself. so there's something there that you said that, like, prompted even my own memories of being young and being outside. And, you know, it's funny. Also, this nature piece you brought up around, like, nature camp for kids. I was having this conversation recently with some friends about being so grateful to my mother, who at a really young age took my brother and I camping with her and just started fostering this relationship with nature. And like I, I grew up just, you know, I was always a tech kid.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:32:32) – I was always inside doing my thing. But I really looked forward to being outside and looking forward to those camping trips. And to this day, like I booked camping trips throughout the summer and whatnot. because I recognize that, like, we are nature and some people might look at me sideways and I say that, but, like, we really are. and I try to have these kind of conversations with my younger siblings and my younger cousins, and they think I'm. I'm like the nature guy. Like, whenever I see my younger siblings now, they're like, are you still nature guy? Like, do you still like hanging out beside the trees? As if that's like a wild thing to do? but that's I love to do that. And I'm just I'm noticing there's even greater disconnect and

separation happening specifically for younger folks. and even people of my age and older, like, really anybody that, like, we feel like this, like nature is sort of beneath us. I feel like there's something there about trying to sort of reconnect us to nature and sort of amend that relationship.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:33:33) – because it's deeply important, not just for the planet, but for our well-being, for our communities, really for life. but, yeah, there's a lot there that you just said. It made me think about all those things.

Vivien Sansour (00:33:45) – Yeah, well, and thank you for sharing. And it's really beautiful to obviously hear that. I mean, I have anyone who knows me, knows I have a very soft spot for Jamaica and, well, particularly like, I mean, the whole Caribbean, but, but yeah, I mean, when you go to Jamaica, it's, it's such a beautiful, fertile place. Like, it's so mind blowing that we should have people in an island like that going hungry like that. That's like that should tell us about what's wrong with our world. and then, you know, when you really think about it, what's happening is, like, literally Jamaican soil, literal soil is being taken out to build these resorts for people who are disassociated from nature and want to go and have a sanitized, quote unquote natural experience.

Vivien Sansour (00:34:49) – And, and it's sold to like, China is buying Jamaican topsoil. You see signs, topsoil for sale. And so what does that mean? when we're actually selling our soil. And it's not because Jamaicans don't love their soil, but they are like. Most most countries around the world. Most peoples around the world, are being severed by the capitalist system from from, their nature, their also their way of life, their foodways. and so I think you also brought up in what you shared about this idea of, oh, are you still the nature guy? And that we are nature? Well, definitely we are nature because, what else are we? We if you think of our function, it's not very different than a seed and a tree. You know, it's like we are seeds and, we, we need to have very specific climate to, to grow inside our mothers and then become, living humans who then continue to interact with other living beings. but I actually been thinking a lot recently about what that means, because in today's world, I'm starting to think that, we're not only nature like it seems that we are moving towards what feels to me like a hybrid human existence, because we're so attached to our technology that it's hard to like.

Vivien Sansour (00:36:39) – Do you distinguish yourself from your phone? Like, are we still human? Like, are we still human? And I think this is a real question, as we also explore ourselves as a species in the in in these really, really, dire times, of both, like, so much insane, murder and torture and, and and also like, in this constant hospice thing, like we our whole planet is in hospice and we walk around as if we're not part of that or something. And so. I think. I don't know, I always think about how we're in this kind of, transitional moment and who we want to be and what we choose, what seed we choose to plant in the metaphorical as well as the literal, will decide what kind of design we have for the future. And, and maybe some of us will move into massive hybrid human existence, and some will be dinosaurs. Like, in the sense that I feel like a dinosaur. I feel like a dinosaur every day. because of, like, how, I have a

resistance to a lot of technology, even though I use it and we're talking through technology right now, I'm resentful.

Vivien Sansour (00:38:18) – I haven't yet embraced it. So what's going to happen to people like me who still like to write with paper and pen? I mean, maybe I'm rigid too. Like, maybe there is a way that we move forward. more consciously into whatever we're becoming like. That's the natural evolution of things or not natural, whatever. That's how things. But but if we are part of this, flow, whether we like it or not, how do we kind of take a pause and, and even though it hurts, figure out, well, okay, this is happening. What what are going to be what are we going to choose right here, right now. Right. I think that applies to everything from what we eat to how we eat and who we eat with.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:39:14) – Absolutely. And my mind is going 100 miles an hour thinking about like, all the connections there specifically. Like, I think you touched on this idea of a sort of I've heard it put in this word of like hyper reality of like sort of being enabled to like, distinguish reality from, like simulation reality.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:39:36) – And I think the best example is like social media, for example, not trying to bash social media. I could do that all day long. But just as an example, you know, I think that's yeah, a lot of us might feel our self-worth or, like feel that that is a part of us rather than like, like just turning that thing off and realizing that that's like not a real reality. And I'm, I'm also constantly rejecting that this reality that we know it today with climate change and capitalism and militarism, like all of these different systems, working together like this doesn't have to be our reality. and I'm much more interested in dreaming and contributing to creating an alternative that is like founded in love and care, and justice. But that's not an easy thing to tell people who are in the grind, as we all are. just trying to make ends meet and making sure that we have food on the table for our families, etc.. it's not easy. And sometimes I'll speak for myself like, I feel like a dinosaur, like you just said.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:40:47) – I think that was the best way to put it, because I'm sitting here being like this, this things don't have to be this way. And we're just sort of one way or another agreeing that it is, but it doesn't. and like, how can we go back to, I don't know if it's go back, but like, how can we create something that's better? and I know technology can play a role in that. And I've seen examples of like solar punk worlds or like these other ideas where technology is not being used to do what it's doing to us currently. but who knows if the powers of will, we'll let that happen or not. Well, the.

Vivien Sansour (00:41:26) – Thing is, you don't have to worry about about it in a way. Meaning, not that we don't have to worry about it, but meaning that a change is happening whether we like it or not. Like. Right. climate change is real. Like we are flooding. We are drowning. We are, you know, experiencing, we're burning also, like, so it's not something that, oh, whether we like it or not, do we want to change or not? Whether we want to or not? the truth is, like most of us, including, I would like to say ourselves, like, you know, we we put our head in the sand because, oh, for now, I can breathe.

Vivien Sansour (00:42:15) – But, you know, there was a time in the summer and you're in Canada. we couldn't breathe, right? You know, we couldn't. And, And why wait? Why wait till something so, impossible to survive occurs for us to start actually engaging in real, rigorous imagining, rigorous design, real, rigorous conversations about this is happening. And, But I think we're too comfortable. Like, not not everybody in the world, but people. A lot of people in especially, this empire, are too comfortable. So when you're too comfortable, you're not as, pressed for solution. You know, there's no, but if you talk to people like, in the Maldives, I mean, they're pressed for solution. They're drowning. you know, it's it's important that, I don't know. I feel like it's important for us not to wait till it's too late for us to be like, oh, let's, let's, let's think about what we want to do. And. Yeah, and we have, we have science, technology, whatever.

Vivien Sansour (00:43:36) – We have a lot of things in our hands that can help us forward rather than, help us downwards, if you will. Yeah. but, you know, I don't think, I mean, there is movement. I think there is movement, and there are days when I am like, I talk to my students and I am optimistic because I feel like the new generation is less likely to accept mediocrity. Right. And that is something hopeful. But at the same time, you know, there are, as you said, a bigger forces. But then in my own, spiritual belief, there are also even bigger forces. So I agree.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:44:23) – Yeah.

Vivien Sansour (00:44:25) – Maybe it's not as, I don't know. Maybe that's the way I keep myself from. Collapsing. You know, there are days when I don't feel like getting out of bed, but, But we have to at least imagine some, some threads of, some threads we can weave into a new future.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:44:53) – Absolutely. I don't think that could have been said any better.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:44:57) – You know, taking it back to food and seed saving as resistance. I know I'm I'm involved in a lot of sort of food sovereignty projects and initiatives in the city of Toronto. just also recognizing that land and seeds and food are important not just for nourishment, but quite literally for life and keeping us connected to each other, and nourishing the soul, kind of per se. And I'm thinking then with the heirloom, seed library. What is the significance of the heirloom seeds? And, Yeah. Perhaps you can just speak a bit to that.

Vivien Sansour (00:45:36) – Yeah, I mean, I can and I just want to say that these days, honestly, if I'm being transparent, it's hard for me to even talk about what that means today in the same way that I maybe would have before, because I work in the world of food and seed, and my whole project was all about, you know, making sure we don't go hungry and that, you know, the seeds that our grandparents gave us and passed down to us are going to be our salvation.

Vivien Sansour (00:46:20) – and that might still be true, but I'm also, talking to you. While yesterday I was talking to my people in Gaza, and we are running out of seeds, and also the soil has been completely destroyed, that it's so toxic. we cannot bring any seed. And people are literally being starved to death. And so I am I'm conflicted internally because I'm in so much pain about, like, have we failed? Like, I mean, we've clearly failed. but then someone in the midst of

shelling figures out how to write a message to say, you know, I found some a handful of seeds with so and so or oh, so and so on. This has a plot that hasn't been attacked or, you know, it's just, these little spaces of. Of of life in the midst of all of this, which is it's like forcing life despite so much terror. And in like you have you're you have to figure out how to even have the will to, to think about that. You know, when you say heirloom seeds, heirloom seeds are literally the seeds that have been passed down to us that we can grow and grow the next year and every generation after generation.

Vivien Sansour (00:48:06) – That's how like, for example, you have the heirloom cassava, which is the zucchini that we make stuffed zucchini with a very famous Palestinian dish. and every year the seed is passed down, and then the same causa grows the next year and the next year. And so you keep cooking the same dish every year. But what if this disappears? Like what? What do you do like, does, does the, you know, now you have to invent the new you kind of a new a new variety that will express a new thing. So, so heirloom seeds in the way I would talk about them today are really other than the technical part of like, how they are, you know, mostly open pollinated. They are seeds that we can reproduce to same, have the same character as the year before, farmers can save them and regrow them, blah, blah, blah, all of that. But today, like when I think about heirloom seeds, I also think about, well, these are the seeds that are going to have the possibly the only memory of our people and, and are ways that are being destroyed, like if you're destroying everything, perhaps these heirloom seeds are going to be the carriers of a people who.

Vivien Sansour (00:49:42) – Are killed. People who are being exterminated. So. It's. I don't know. It's really hard for me to talk about these seeds now in just like the romantic sense, but more of like they are. They are the subversives. And they they have to. They have to survive for us to survive.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:50:11) – Yeah, exactly. Yeah. And I'm just sort of sitting here with a heavy heart because everything you're saying is very striking and very honest. Yeah. And it quite honestly makes my blood boil. and my, the pit of my stomach is on fire. but I, I appreciate you sharing all that. I really do.

Vivien Sansour (00:50:41) – Thanks. And I actually, if you don't mind, want to say one more thing, which is that, you know, we're here in a in a podcast about food and food justice and food this and food that. And for the majority of the food movement, we feel massively betrayed. Like, where are all these people? I mean, they love to invite me to seed conferences and seed this and seed that and oh, let's talk about they love to talk about like my friend Ron White.

Vivien Sansour (00:51:16) – I'm sure you've heard of her. You know her? she's an indigenous, seed saver and grower and a beautiful, human and poet. And she always says, you know, they like to talk about us as dead. You know, that's when you want to talk about Native American, right? You don't want to talk about a living Native American. Really? and and the same like, where is this very conscious, awake food movement? right now, you know, silent, complete silence. And so I'm not, I am taking note of this clear note of this in the sense that, you know,

you know, there's all this conversation about our planet, our planet, food justice, this and that, and then silence, when literally a whole population is being intentionally starved to death. A population that has held a massive amount of the agro biodiversity they keep harping about. So there's a lot of injustice within the food justice movement. It's not just and I think it's time that we actually talk about this more openly, because there's a lot of like, sweetness that's fake about how we talk about, you know, we all care about the planet.

Vivien Sansour (00:52:49) – Let's get together and have these little community farms. Oh, but wait, don't talk about, you know, certain things and and. Oh, no, this is not political like this. when actually, the history of agriculture in North America is, is full of blood. If you eat here, you're eating blood. I'm sorry. Like, this is a conversation we have to have. Like, I'm here in upstate New York every time I walk, I feel it in my body like this. This place was full of plantations, right? Plantations. But also before that, also people, Mohawks who love this land. They just love this land. They know this river. They. But they were made refugees not once, twice and ongoing. So, I don't know, like, I really would hate to be on a food podcast and not talk about these things, because I don't want to be polite, and I don't think polite is what I expect of people who really, you know, your blood should be boiling, my blood is boiling.

Vivien Sansour (00:54:05) – And not just for Palestine, by the way. I mean, look at like Sudan. Like Sudan is like a cradle of so much biodiversity. So, I mean, it's being destroyed under our watch. Who are the beneficiaries? Who are the beneficiaries of of of of all this destruction, be it in the destruction of Congo, the destruction of Jamaica, the destruction of Haiti, the destruction of Palestine.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:54:34) – No. And again, thank you for your honesty and I. Yeah, please let it rip like we can we could talk all about that. Honestly. and I think this is a common theme that I've seen in the food world and other sort of like, social justice movements kind of thing is like, it's a performance, right? Like everyone wants to talk the talk but not really walk the walk. And I know food. Should we try our best? Of course. We can only do so much. But it's. Yeah. It's, It's a lot, and I'm sort of at a loss for words because it it forces you to be super reflective on where we're at and how we benefit from this land.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:55:29) – and that it's completely stolen, like all of Turtle Island is, stolen, and is constantly being, extracted from and reaped for the benefits of the wealthy, the 1%, whomever you want to call it. But that's really part of the settler colonial projects. And we're seeing this happen as you just made example, like not only Palestine, but in parts of the African continent and the Caribbean and continuously across these lands. it's yeah, it's it's wicked and quite abhorrent. If I could, if I can call it that.

Vivien Sansour (00:56:09) – Again, if you're not hungry and you're eating, well, you don't care, right. And that's the sad part, because it's a failure to see your connectedness. And it's and that's where I also say it's a hybrid human existence, because you cannot be one with nature if you cannot be generous. It's, it's it's an oxymoron. Like you can't nature in itself with its wrath.

And when it's with it's nurture, it is generous. I mean, agriculture in its foundation, one could say, is violent.

Vivien Sansour (00:56:57) – Because nature always provided. And we just decided. We want more and we want to dig more. And I mean, this is this is this is a question, but it continues today. Like, why? And actually the people who are quote unquote not hungry, they're also getting more sick. You know, it's important to know like that. They're also living the illusion, right? I mean, in the end, maybe they'll go to the moon and have whatever. But in the end, I mean, we are we, I think. Most people love the ocean. For example, everybody likes to go to the ocean, but the ocean is going to start to show us some things we don't like.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:57:52) – And there's something there like about. I'm glad that you, you call it like this hybrid human because it really puts things into perspective. And I had a conversation on the podcast a few episodes ago now about what happens sort of when we, we lose connection to one another. And the context was, there is this podcast and this person was talking about how humans will always choose convenience, over loyalty or over connection.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:58:23) – And we're seeing it today, like, you can get all your food delivered to your door and all your groceries, everything you need without interacting with the human. But what does that do then? To that person, to that community, to that society, when, like we are detaching ourselves from one another, but also are sort of rejecting this idea of like interconnectedness, of nature, of food and the the non-human beings, the animals, the plants, like everything. and I think we're sort of seeing that unfold today with how we I don't want to speak for everybody, but I've noticed that, a lot of us are just in our silos, and we're like, only thinking about me and mine and not worrying about the folks around us. I think about this daily, considering that I live in a condo and I still don't really know my neighbors, and I keep having ideas of like, trying to get something going so I can form a better community and connection. but it's it's it's quite terrifying.

Sheldomar Elliott (00:59:27) – And honestly, it's it's concerning, just trying to think into the future and, Yeah, just kind of seeing where this thing will go.

Vivien Sansour (00:59:38) – But I like to just maybe conclude to your point, I disagree with your friend. I don't think that, humans will always choose convenience over loyalty. I think we are capable of choosing courage. And many of us. Try our best and have. And I'm not even talking about us sitting in our comfortable homes. I'm talking about farmers today all over the world who are still choosing at the risk of their own lives, including those people in Gaza. I'm telling you about who are choosing. To put seed in the ground, even when literally their life is on the line for it, right? I'm not sure that, humans will always choose convenience. I have seen humans choose a lot of bravery and a lot of loyalty, and they may not have always been appreciated and may have not always been talked about in all of the history books, mostly written by a conquerors.

Vivien Sansour (01:00:58) – but they exist, and they exist today from revolutionaries in Haiti that decided they will not be enslaved anymore. To folks in every single corner of the world who are not choosing mediocrity and they're not choosing convenience. Right. And that is really our only hope.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:01:20) – Yeah. I couldn't agree with you more. I really could not. Well, you know, I'm thinking that we've been in here for almost an hour now, and it's wild how time flies when you're just in the flow of things. but I just want to acknowledge the moment that we're in, and, I know there are daily developments of what is happening in Palestine. and I know that, yeah, there's a lot going on in the political sense, a lot of talk per se. but I kind of want to give you the floor to sort of maybe share and maybe look into the future, thinking about some of the things we just talked about and perhaps centering it on liberation and solidarity. Anything you'd like to share? Because I, I'm sort of at a loss for words, to be honest with you.

Vivien Sansour (01:02:12) – Well, I don't know what to say, other than it means a lot to me that we are in this conversation. Of course I'm in deep grief. My heart is massively broken. And I know that I'm not by myself. And of course, it's very personal to me because of who I am and being Palestinian. But I think a lot of people are in grief with me. And, With us. And I think because maybe and I don't know, but it feels like. This moment is calling us to deeper existential questions. Sadly, it's come at the. Cost of so many lives that continues and the torture of of people. And. I obviously don't know the future, and I, and sometimes the pain kind of overshadows any thoughts of anything hopeful. Like, I wake up and I. First. Can't believe. Why am I waking up in my bed still alive while my people are? Many of them are not. And I look at the news and I wish for something a miracle.

Vivien Sansour (01:03:55) – And that may be my feed today will not hold so much tragedy. Maybe there will be a piece of good news. And, It has not come yet, but. I want to still like when we believe in the seeds, even as it goes in the dark underground, that maybe one day we will experience this miracle and. That I pray. Really, my prayer is that we will never become like those who are now killing us and torturing us, and that our true victory will be. If we and when we survive and we don't become like our oppressor. And I think that would be the greatest gift Palestine can give the world to. Hopefully. Can we break the cycle of. Oppress being oppressor and vice versa. And I know some folks might say this is an early conversation, but I think this is an important conversation because what this moment is calling us, whether from climate change to genocides, it's calling us to ask the deep question, the real question, who do we want to be? Who do we want to be? In this moment and moving forward.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:05:37) – Ah, that was perfectly said. Thank you, Vivien, so, so much.

Vivien Sansour (01:05:43) – Thank you.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:05:45) – I really appreciated this conversation and I hope viewers will too. I think it draws so many lines. you know, talking about the great stuff and the not so great stuff. And I think also, you know, bringing those just sort of understanding the settler colonial project

may look different in different places, but it's an ongoing thing. And, folks understanding that this is happening here, too. I don't want to go off, like, I think what you just said was perfect, but I have something written here that I thought was so beautiful, and you can feel free to speak to it, but, while I was looking up some of your work before we ended up having a conversation, I. I think I heard this or I read it somewhere, and I don't know if you said it or you're quoting someone, but it was like a paraphrase of, like, the belly is a garden.

Vivien Sansour (01:06:41) – Oh, yeah.

Vivien Sansour (01:06:44) – that that's me.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:06:46) – That's you. Okay, I don't know, this is just stuck with me. It's stuck with me over the past few weeks, I. And it's I only have that portion, so I don't know if it belongs to a, like, a larger context or a bigger piece.

Vivien Sansour (01:06:57) – It doesn't actually. Thank you. You read my mind through the ether, because when I said to you, thank you, because we're here together, having this conversation, I was thinking a lot about that. And, that is actually the name of a, a performance I did at Bard College, but it's also the name of the course I teach at Bard College. And, it comes from the Palestinian saying Elberton, Boston. And it's a saying that we use when we see, like two brothers and they look very different, but they're from the same mother. and they say, oh, we're brothers. And you go like what your brother is, you know, you have green eyes, the other person is just brown eyes, whatever.

Vivien Sansour (01:07:48) – And then, you know, people say, oh, well, albatn bustan. The belly is the garden, meaning that the the the mother. It's the same belly and it produces and gives life to a whole array. Like what can happen in the nature of our womb is, is diverse and it doesn't negate the other. And so when I say. Like I emphasize it. And when I say thank you for us being here together, because it is a reminder just for us being and talking about this, that we are kin and we are, children of the same mother. And we might be different in many ways. but we don't negate each other. We don't have to, we can actually be, a good thing for each other. and we can live at the same time in our difference, in the same space. And that's really what this saying is about. And I think, again, even linguistically, as an Indigenous culture, we knew that that's why we say it. But in Boston, the belly is the garden.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:09:12) – Oh that's wonderful. Thank you so much for. For sharing more about that. And, yeah, I'll definitely be carrying that into the future with me. And I think it's also important that we continue having these conversations, especially the hard parts, as you emphasized. Thank you. Of course, of course. Well, yes, that is the end of our discussion today. But, if folks want to follow and support your work. Vivien, where can they do that?

Vivien Sansour (01:09:39) – I mean, people can follow me on Instagram. Vivien Sansour. but, we are working at the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library and creating a new website. And, in my current website right now, VivienSansour.com, people can email, there's a place for email and

you can email us at art dot and dot seeds at gmail.com. and we also are launching, what we call the seed protectors project. And it's a project where we're trying to have growers all over Turtle Island, growing seeds from Palestine, in order to save them and keep them alive.

Vivien Sansour (01:10:30) – and so if people are interested in becoming growers, if they are interested in learning more about this, contact us or just stay tuned. Hopefully within the next few months, we'll be having, more presence online after we've done the work on the ground more. So that's it in a nutshell. And and just keep growing. Whether it's the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library or not, just look in your local community and be a good seed.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:11:02) – Exactly, exactly. I know I'll definitely keep in touch regarding that cabbage. yeah, I'm looking forward to that.

Vivien Sansour (01:11:12) – There's something good that came out of this, but sure.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:11:15) – We got some tangibles. Definitely.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:11:20) – Dignity and Joy is a podcast from FoodShare Toronto, where a food justice organization advocating for the right to food and working to challenge the systemic barriers that keep people from accessing the food they need to thrive. You can learn more about our work at Foodshare.net. If you have feedback on the pod, we'd love to hear from you! You can send us an email at info at Foodshare.net or on our social media.

Sheldomar Elliott (01:11:40) – We're @FoodShareTO on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. Dignity and Joy. Produced in collaboration with Lead podcasting with sound engineering and editing by Mar Tezak. The production team at FoodShare is Renée D'Souza and Andrea Thompson. Special thanks to Amanda Cupido. Thank you so much for listening.