



## **Peace Meal Supper Club #21: In Absentia**

Versailles ~ December 2, 2023

For the benefit of Palestine Children's Relief Fund

### Course 1: Identity of the Beholder

Falafel ~ Mujaddarah ~ Yalangi ~ Muhammara

### Course 2: Salvadoran Safe House

Yuca Escabeche ~ Curtido ~ Yacon Chips

### Course 3: Underground Dining Car

Timbal ~ Roasted Roots ~ Succotash ~ Herb Aioli

### Course 4: Right of Return

Hareesa ~ Pomegranate Syrup

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A people *in absentia* have lost the ability to speak for themselves, to represent their needs in the public dialog, to defend themselves against encroaching powers. Are they absent of their own free will, or has their absence been forced upon them in order to silence them?

In the mid-1800s Palestine was described as “a land without a people”—a phrase which has been the subject of intense debate ever since. The statement was grossly incorrect: the Palestinians, an indigenous, Arab, ethnonational group have inhabited the Levant for millennia.

However, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, external imperialistic powers mandated that the Palestinians cede 78% of their territory to another ethnonational group. Since that time, multiple expulsions have sent over 4 million Palestinians into exile, creating one of the world’s most persistent refugee crises.

Expulsion—along with dispossession, restriction of movement, effective statelessness, geographic erasure, and the denial of the right of return—has limited the Palestinians’ presence in their homeland and in the dominant US narrative.

The narrative is clear in the language we use: The “Occupied West Bank” is a normalized term, but should it be accepted as a legitimate place name? Other language surrounding the conflict is coded: *invaders* transform into *settlers*; *seizure* becomes *settlement*; one side holds *hostages* while the other holds *prisoners*.

~ 1 ~

Coded language is powerful—for a while. It effectively denies the rights of others to exist within a space. However, if we see a “land without a people,” we are signaling our motives and our values, often in contrast with reality. In denying humanity to others, are we compromising our own?

~ 2 ~

Conflict in Palestine has prompted multiple diasporas, with the peak years being 1948 and 1967. Many settled in Chile ahead of Pinochet & in El Salvador just in time for their civil war. That war—which saw a dictator supported by imperialistic democracies fighting against a coalition of indigenous farmers and guerillas—triggered a mass exodus of civilians. Many of them reached the US border, where American citizens worked in defiance of the government to provide sanctuary. Though absent from their homeland, their presence in the US could not be ignored. Neither could US complicity in their displacement.

A counterinsurgent tactic known as “drain the sea” was utilized by the Salvadoran military—much like what we are witnessing in Gaza. Its alleged purpose is to root out insurgent forces, but in reality it weakens indigenous voices, silencing them in the narrative.

~ 3 ~

This course represents a refugee’s journey, from the American South to the American North, possibly into Canada. Having already been forcibly displaced once, these people had no chance of returning home. A complex network of safehouses, coded language, defiance, and compassion made the journey to freedom possible.

A physical journey is not always politically successful, and one’s physical presence does not cancel out political absence: African Americans and other people of color still fight for equal representation.

The food represented in this course—a corn cake, root vegetables, squash, peppers and broad beans—offers an indigenous overlay: these foods are native to the Americas and remind us of other absent voices.

~ 4 ~

Displaced Palestinians maintain that they have the right to return home—in accordance with accepted international conventions. However, this right is not recognized by the Israeli government, a denial which is reinforced by Absentee Laws: if you are not present at your property it will be acquired by the government. One cannot return to a property one no longer owns.