Canadian Food Studies La Revue canadienne des études sur l'alimentation

Field Report

Looking back, looking forward: A field report on the Earth to Tables Legacies multimedia educational package

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Abstract

The Earth to Tables Legacies Project emerged in 2015, growing out of personal relationships, but also built on a long trajectory of participatory research, multimedia arts production and popular education. We created an intergenerational and intercultural exchange of food activists working for food justice and food sovereignty with the initial goal of producing a feature length documentary. However, the project evolved over five years to culminate in a multimedia educational package with 10 short videos and 11 photo essays, all accompanied by facilitator's guides. A web series on the pandemic is in production and a forthcoming book is to be published in 2021.

The intergenerational production team included Deborah Barndt (co-director and co-editor), Lauren Baker (co-editor) and Alexandra Gelis (co-director). In this 'report from the field,' the two co-directors Alexandra and Deborah look back on the process of co-producing the visual materials for the interactive website and look forward to its potential use in university classes, schools, and social and environmental justice organizations. Parts of the essay include our zoom dialogue as we revisit our process over the past five years and try to elucidate our way of working, while reflecting on the challenges of the collaborative production and use of multimedia educational tools.

Note that this essay utilizes the same kind of text with hyperlinks that are featured in our website and book. The reader is encouraged to click on the links to learn more about the people

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DOI: 10.15353/cfs-rcea.v8i4.465
ISSN: 2292-3071

and their practices as well as the concept of a non-linear multimedia educational tool and process.

Keywords: Food sovereignty; food justice; intergenerational and intercultural exchange; interactive websites; collaborative production; multimedia storytelling; participatory arts-based research; Indigenous ways of knowing; Indigenous-settler relations; all our relations; video and photography; hyperlinks or visual footnotes; digital gaps; facilitator' guides

Introduction

The Earth to Tables Legacies Project was born in 2015 as an intergenerational and intercultural exchange among a small group of food sovereignty activists sharing their knowledges and practices across big differences—youth/elders, rural/urban, Indigenous/settler, and Canadian/Mexican. Primarily growing out of personal relationships, it also built on a long trajectory of participatory research, multimedia arts production, and popular education. While there was an earlier idea to produce a feature length documentary, the project evolved over five years to culminate in a multimedia educational package with ten short videos and eleven photo essays, all accompanied by facilitator's guides. A web series on the pandemic is in production and a forthcoming book is to be published in 2021.

The intergenerational production team included Deborah Barndt (co-director and co-editor), Lauren Baker (co-editor), and Alexandra Gelis (co-director). Alexandra is from the so-called global South and identifies strongly with the South, but has lived all over Latin America and in Canada for fourteen years. Deborah, born and raised in the U.S. and Canada, could be seen to represent the global North, but has also lived and worked in three Latin American countries during important political moments. Both of us, each in our own way, see ourselves as translators across these South-North differences, but from distinct starting points.

In this report from the co-directors, we look back on the process of co-producing the visual materials for the interactive website and look forward to its potential use in university classes, schools, and social and environmental justice organizations. Parts of the essay include our Zoom dialogue as we revisit our process over the past five years and try to elucidate our way of working, while reflecting on the challenges of the collaborative production and use of multimedia educational tools.

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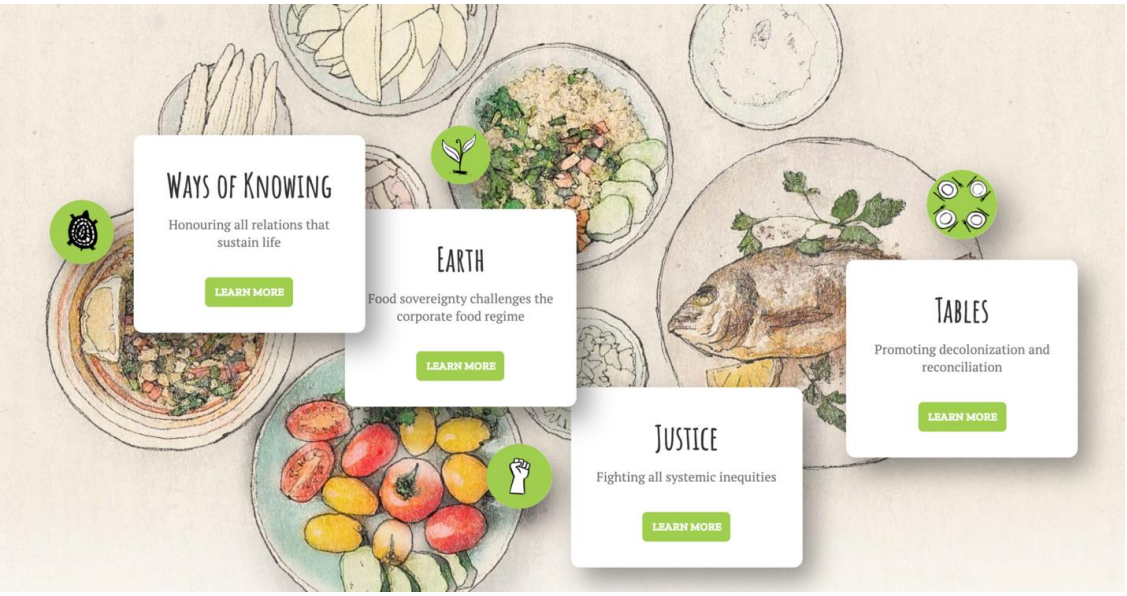
Legacies project as popular education and participatory research

First, we suggest four ways that the Earth to Tables Legacies project could be considered a popular education approach to food education: 1) critical content of power relations; 2) collaborative production; 3) multimedia storytelling; and 4) critical and collective use of the material.

Critical Content: Dynamic Tensions



We organized the videos and photo essays around the interrelated themes of the Earth to Tables Legacies project. These four themes coincide with the four dynamic tensions that frame the project, each reflecting power inequities that popular education aims to reveal, analyze, and act upon.

1) The underlying "Ways of knowing" emerge from the tensions between Eurocentric knowledges and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and acting.
2) These ways of knowing are grounded in the "Earth" as a living organism as advocated by food sovereignty movements challenging the corporate food regime.
3) Food sovereignty promotes social and environmental "Justice" or equity for intersectional identities rather than hierarchical relations of power.
4) The "Table" represents the broader political struggle between neoliberal capitalism, colonization, and globalization, on the one hand, and decolonization and reconciliation, on the other.

Collaborative production: Pollinating relationships

Our process in some ways illustrates what might be called arts-based participatory research, often associated with popular education. In the book and on the website, we have named our collaborative methodology as a process of pollinating relationships across many differences: generations, borders, language, histories, rituals, methodologies, mediums, and organizations. We probe the collaborative production process more deeply later in this article.

Multimedia storytelling

Popular education honours multisensory learning and draws upon various forms of storytelling as a central starting point. Our project is built around both individual stories as well as dialogues among collaborators, which have been edited into short videos and photo essays. Ultimately, we have chosen to use digital media accessed through a transmedia book and an interactive website with videos as complementary forms of dissemination. The book (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021) follows a linear logic, while our website (Earth to Tables, n.d.) is non-linear and invites multiple entry points and connections.

Collective use of material: Walking the talk

Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator known globally for his articulation of *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1970), proposed the use of various forms of media to represent people's stories in the forms of "codes." Our project adheres to a kind of Freirean "decoding" process which invites a critical, collective, and creative use of our digital stories. They are not meant to be digested whole and uncritically, but rather to be discussed in groups and made relevant to the specific contexts of the users. As in popular education, our hope is that the critical analysis of these stories will lead to collective action toward a more just and sustainable food system.

Popular education also promotes self-critique and critical collective reflection on a group's process. For the rest of this article, we use this moment to revisit our research creation in the field and in the studio, looking back on what we have learned about collaborative multimedia production, while looking forward to how our interactive website might be used.

Collaborative production as participatory arts-based research

Co-authors filming berry picking in the Gaspé (2018)

Legacies collaborators making cornbread at Six Nations (2019

Our approach to research and creation shares the underlying ideological and methodological positions of practices known as participatory research, community engaged research, arts-based research, decolonizing research—all of which challenge conventional notions of research as individual, objective, neutral, and product oriented. We have found many convergences between these more radical and collaborative approaches and the growing articulation of Indigenous research methods by Indigenous researchers (McGregor et al., 2018).

In our book and website, we identify our approach as "pollinating relationships," starting with our collaborators. As we looked back on our processes of building collaborative relationships, in the context of the pandemic, we decided to have a self-reflexive dialogue through a zoom conversation. This honoured our distinct positionalities and perspectives, and so we offer it here as a conversation.

Collaborators, not subjects: building relationships, creating intimacy

> Alex: We're not working with subjects; we're working with collaborators. In traditional documentary, you'd go, capture the moment, and come back and edit. We wanted collaboration, from production to final editing. Mainly we tried to create an intimacy. And there were already relationships: your partner John had known Dianne Kretschmar the farmer for about twenty years, so there was a relationship of trust. And I had worked before with Jorge and Juan, the other Colombian-Canadian videographers. We already had a connection so we didn't have to talk much while filming. I like to work with a small crew, because it's more possible to create intimacy.

Deb: It's definitely not just a technical process. We've visited our collaborators many times and spent time with them and their families in their homes: from rural Yucatan and Michoacán to Guadalajara in Mexico, from rural Québec to rural Ontario, from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory to the Jane-Finch neighbourhood of Toronto. And they have visited us in our homes, too.

Alex: We were also working in different languages—mainly Spanish and English, but our Indigenous collaborators are defending their own languages: Mohawk, P'urepecha, and Mayan. This richness opened up different cosmologies, revealing different ways of knowing and being. We had the challenge of being physically distant but we visited each other and also brought everyone together as a group three times, so they also got to know each other.

Deb: Now when we're having our monthly Zoom conversations about the pandemic, we feel affection when we see each other on a Zoom screen, and they connect with each other on Facebook.

Alex: When we are editing the videos, we spend so many hours with our collaborators. I need to feel an admiration for the people I'm working with. If I don't feel a connection with them, I don't even turn on the camera. Because I know I'll have to spend twenty-four hours with them. Distance and time give you another possibility of reading the experiences and ideas that you've captured on video. We reconnect with our collaborators and their spaces in the studio, and carry the smells, the tastes, the feelings in our memory and body. In the editing process, you revisit those moments, but you have the commitment to show them in the right way; you can show them as wonderful beings or you can destroy them.

Deb: When they saw themselves and the way we framed them, some felt their daily practice affirmed. Remember when we realized that the two key collaborators represented what could be bookends for the project: Dianne the settler farmer with her hands in the soil, and Chandra, the Mohawk food activist, with a focus on the table. Voilà! That's how we came up with the title "From Earth to Tables." In the end, we realized that the process of developing relationships is as important as the product, and that, in fact, the main message of our product—the multimedia package—also centres on relationships. We began to understand that at the root of the environmental crisis is our disconnection from and inability to care for all other living beings. That the only way to sustainability is through honouring "all our relations."

> Alex: While we wanted to make the process as participatory as possible, we often reached the limits of collaboration.
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> Deb: I kept checking our edits with our collaborators, but then realized that I was asking people to do more than they had time for. John kept reminding me that I was the only one for whom this project was a full-time job. Everyone else has their own lives, their families, and their food work. We couldn't expect that they wanted to be involved at every stage of the process.
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> Alex: Besides, based on our years of visits and conversations, we had developed a relationship of confidence. They trusted us to edit their stories, on video or in photo essays, using our skills as artists and educators. And they always had a chance to tell us if they felt misrepresented. It will be interesting perhaps to see how they feel once their lives are circulating publicly on the internet, and we get more responses from the users.

Challenge of working across differences

Our process was certainly not without many bumps, missteps, awkward meetings and partings. For we had consciously chosen to work across differences, and that is never easy. We focus on three key differences we wrestled with: Indigenous-settler, Intergenerational, and global North-global South relations.

As Chandra Maracle, Mohawk collaborator from Six Nations, states in *The Mush Hole* photo essay: "Let's not fool ourselves. There are still some tough conversations to be had" (Earth to Tables, n.d.). Exploring Indigenous-settler relations was one of the main goals of our project, using food as an entry point for difficult conversations and video as a tool to mediate our dialogues. During the first year or two we attempted to connect with four other Indigenous food activists, who through direct challenge, refusal, or silence chose not to participate in our exchange.

> Deb: I felt strongly that we should have Indigenous filmmakers, because as colonizers we have different identities and worldviews. Here I was, this white woman academic who initiated the project, while it was clear that Indigenous filmmakers have their own media projects and are telling their own stories. "Never about us without us!" is a mantra that is loud and clear.

> Alex: We wanted to respect that the voice of Indigenous people in the project should be captured by them, through their ways of seeing and speaking. They should be deciding how they want to be seen and heard. We didn't want to be invasive and wanted that part of the process in their hands. We never brought out the camera during early visits, even though we never got that feeling with Mohawk food leader Chandra, who was always open to sharing her experience on film. Our relationships with the P'urepecha and Mayan collaborators in Mexico were also more open, not as politically charged as the Canadian context. There's this tendency now for all non-Indigenous people to apologize, saying "I'm sorry I'm white, etc." But there's something in the middle that's called relationships. Trust your heart. Real change doesn't happen just in the naming. It's structural, it's a call to action. Creating relationships of trust is an action in itself, which requires time and commitment.

> Deb: There are two good examples of this tension: *The Thanksgiving Address* video (Earth to Tables, n.d.) was really four years in the making. After the first year, we realized that, in greeting and thanking all the elements that sustain life, the Thanksgiving Address best represented the core message of "all our relations", and what we settlers could learn from Indigenous cosmologies and protocols. Our Mohawk partners had different views among themselves on whether or not such a sacred ritual should be shared publicly on film, even though there are now multiple online representations of it by Haudenosaunee leaders.

It took many visits as well as the hiring of a Mohawk videographer to film Ryan DeCaire offering the address in Mohawk; but in the end Chandra felt comfortable with Alex filming her offering the English version. The contribution of both Rick Hill's artistic drawings of the elements, Alex's video clips to illustrate some elements, and Juan's support in filming and editing a revised edition, all came together for an evolving collaboration that took over a year.

Then there was the serendipity of hearing Chandra and Rick's daughters drum and sing in their bedrooms as we filmed the final narration; so, in the end, they provided live music to join with their parents' narration and artistic pieces. All this could only happen after five years of building relationships.

> Alex: It was a moment of being able to understand another way of knowing. It was about sound, we heard them in their bedroom. It was a moment to understand the drum as a language. They were in a circle, making music together; they were singing to the land, to the family, to the ancestors. It was young people expressing themselves in their daily life.

One of the photo essays, *From the Mush Hole to the Everlasting Tree School: Colonial food legacies of residential schools*, tackled head on some of the dark history of colonialism and long-term impact of residential schools (Earth to Tables, n.d.). It features Chandra in dialogue

with settler historian Ian Mosby who has studied the food in residential schools. This photo essay exposes not only the cultural genocide and health impacts of children being torn from their families, land, and traditional foods, but also celebrates the ways that Indigenous communities are resisting by recovering cultural practices (including hunting and gathering as well as agriculture), and food education through alternative schools such as the Everlasting Tree School. But it doesn't gloss over the uphill challenge of changing unhealthy food practices. Chandra excavates the trauma of colonization that Indigenous people carry in their bodies and, through the psychology of eating, she wrestles with the emotional process of trying to change deeply ingrained habits. In the editing and re-editing of the photo essay, Chandra insisted on recognizing the contradictions of not only Indigenous communities but of all North Americans whose diet is based on the five whites, flour, sugar, salt, lard, and dairy; "gifts" of the Europeans, and processed through the industrial food system.

This photo essay drew on footage co-produced with Red Door Productions, the media production company at Six Nations, who documented the CORNvergence gathering that Chandra organized to explore, among other issues, the colonial history of food in residential schools as well as the creative alternatives being nurtured in Haudenosaunee communities today. It also drew on in-depth research that Rick Hill was undertaking about the history of The Mohawk Institute (known as The Mush Hole for its bland tasting porridge), with photographs that reflect visually the way the schools attempted to "take the Indian out of the child".

Intergenerational differences among collaborators were starkly revealed through our different levels of comfort with the technology. While we were producing multimedia tools to communicate with young people, we experienced intergenerational tensions around the digital gap among ourselves. Everyone has their own preferred mode of communication. An older partner prefers a landline telephone with no answering machine to speak with those who only communicate via Facebook or WhatsApp. Partners include those who prefer text message over email to rural Mexicans who have spotty internet service. Nonetheless, we have managed to bring some folks into conversations via FaceTime and Skype, and more recently, most have been able to join our Zoom conversations during the pandemic, though tropical storms have interfered.

The video *Who will feed us? The farm labour crisis meets the climate crisis* focuses on the challenge of securing farm labour both in terms of young peoples' interest and in the broader context of climate change and migration (Earth to Tables, n.d.). We consider the intergenerational relationships between Dianne and her son Dan who will inherit the farm in Ontario. In the Mexican context, we hear from Fulvio Gioanetto as well as his daughter Serena and son-in-law Miguel who learned agroecology from him in Mexico, and then came to Canada to share organic agricultural practices and to learn market gardening with Dianne.

Dan asked us to film him walking through the old barn sharing his dream for the farm. This was before he even told his mom, a day before we brought them together to talk about the future of the farm. So, the camera mediated their conversation.

The project became an instrument for them to negotiate their different visions: Dan wants a more efficient farm that can become a community centre; Dianne is most concerned with the ongoing stewardship of the land, the animals, and the production process. She wants to ensure that it doesn't get sold to someone who wouldn't care for it in the same way.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Fulvio and Maria created an organic fertilizer business, and hoped it would keep their children working at home, and not migrating north. However, Serena and Miguel chose to combine work in Mexico half the year with farm work in Canada the other half, in part to finance their own farm in Mexico. When Fulvio visited them in Canada, and saw them on the videos, he appreciated their work in a new way. Now, stuck in Mexico with COVID-19, they are bringing back some of the organic agricultural skills they learned abroad.

There is also a digital gap in these parent-offspring relationships. Dan manages the Zoom conversations that involve his mom, Dianne. Fulvio is quite tech savvy for an elder, and has been using *The alchemy of agroecology* in agroecological workshops around Mexico (Earth to Tables, n.d.). Now that the pandemic has kept him home, he has been reviving a family garden while Serena and her brother Bryan film this resurgence of local production on their cell phones.

global North/global South

With Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators from three different communities in Mexico, we also represent an exchange between what is sometimes labelled the global South and the global North. To further complicate these identities, we realize that these categories are meant to distinguish not just geopolitical but also class, race, and rural-urban differences, and so there is global South in the North, and vice versa. One of the ways this affected our exchange is the differing access to technology and communications networks. Those of us who live in cities, whether in the South or North, had better internet access, while it tended to be spotty not only in rural Yucatan and Michoacán but also in rural Québec and at Six Nations is rural Ontario. Cell phones and their cameras have democratized communications and video production, so most partners are now able to film their own food activities, though they may need some training in their effective use.

Choice and use of mediums: visual stories

We recognize that our project is part of a broader movement of non-fiction community-based new media projects, as a vital part of the digital sphere creation, uses participatory modalities presenting projects from physical encounters, screen interactions, and interventions

(Zimmermann, 2018; Auguiste et al., 2020). We identify with scholars working and thinking on different affordances of storytelling and the co-creation in documentary as in the case of Ecocinema, interactive documentary (i-docs, web docs, database docs, non-linear stories, procedural narratives and more documentary oriented new media forms), and the ways in which digital media technologies and cultures are shaping (and are shaped by) documentary practices (Ivakhiv, 2013; Nash et al., 2014; Aston et al., 2017). Research creation is also a site of ongoing experimentation, as innovative knowledge-making is informed by gender and feminist studies, Indigenous practices, and new materialism—a meeting place of academia, artistic creation, and the wider audience.

We locate our collaborative process within the field of arts-based research and research creation, an approach that honours other ways of knowing, artistic modes of inquiry, and alternative forms of cultural expression (Finley, 2008; Loveless, 2020). Central to all artistic expression is story—all of the pieces of the online platform are drawn from oral sources: people telling their food stories grounded in their own contexts. As Mexican-based collaborator Fulvio concluded: “This is the strength of the Legacies project—gathering life histories of real people in specific places and in the sound of their own voices.”

Photography and video were key tools in documenting the activities of our storytellers, and feeding back to them their ideas and practices in edited form, as videos and photo essays. Some commented that it helped them understand their work in a new way and they felt their knowledge and experience valued.

The camera could both enable and inhibit communication, depending on the circumstances. The set up and testing of multiple cameras and mics required time and patience. Some, like Dianne, became so accustomed to the filming that she would stop us when a passing train threatened a good sound recording, or call us to document her experiment of growing mycelium to regenerate the soil on her farm.

As mentioned earlier, we hired a Haudenosaunee videographer to film *The Thanksgiving Address* and contracted Red Door Productions at Six Nations to edit all Haudenosaunee videos. As well the videos of *Black Creek community farm* involved racialized filmmakers in documenting the multiracial project (Earth to Tables, n.d.). All videos and photo essays were vetted with the people appearing within them, before going public.

In two cases, we gave cameras or microphones to young participants and instructed them to film relevant activities in their communities. Often the young people made their own videos with cell phone technology; Chandra and Rick's daughter Olivia, for example, produced a short video of the corn processing workshop Chandra offered to Dianne in her kitchen, and presented it to us at the end of the day. In Mexico Fulvio and his sons got so used to the cameras and the visual methodology that now they are developing their own series of educational videos around medicinal plants in Spanish. This is one way that our process continues, especially as we are now creating a new piece based on the coronavirus pandemic. These local productions are shaped by monthly Zoom conversations of all partners, with Alexandra offering online technical support.

The multimedia package privileges the visual and digital—video and photographs allowing us to tell stories in ways not limited to words. Even the photo essays that are two dimensional constructions with still photos are made more dynamic by the use of hyperlinks, which the non-linear technology makes possible. They act as "visual footnotes" or references, to expand on the text. For example, in the photo essay *The animal food cycle*, you not only read about Gaspé-based Adam and Anna and their children's relationships with the bull, pigs, turkeys, goats, and kittens. When you click on a highlighted phrase, short videos are activated to bring these animals alive. You can *hear* Adam milking the goats, you can *see how* Anna makes cheese from the goat's milk, you can follow four-year-old Katherine running with the goats, snuggling with their kitten, and laughing with her two-year-old brother at the pig pooing and peeing.

For younger people, the multiple digital forms speak in a language that many already dominate. But we are also challenged to "decolonize the digital" by offering frameworks and promoting processes that challenge dominant knowledge systems, and honour Indigenous and other non-western ways of knowing. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's classic *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012) lists methodologies that can offer a framework for how online Indigenous knowledges can contribute to Indigenous resurgence (Wemigwans, 2018). They speak to the kind of process that went into creating Earth to Tables Legacies' digital pieces as well as how we hope they will be used: from "reframing" to "connecting" and from "negotiating" to "envisioning."

There are many examples of digital technology feeding cultural renewal and education, multiplying voices of Indigenous peoples, marginalized communities, and food activists of all

ages. But there is also a risk of becoming more disconnected from and destructive toward physical environments. Starblanket and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2018) warn that "these technologies are transforming our approach to living in-relation…and we forget the unique benefits of being situated physically in relationships (pp. 198)." This contradiction in the use of online tools has been accentuated by the coronavirus pandemic, with self-isolation and physical distancing pushing many to revert to creating and communicating through digital web-based software.

We hope that our multimedia website can be a resource for teachers seeking online resources in this pandemic era of internet-based education. But we also have integrated into the facilitator's guides ways that the videos and photo essays can be mere catalysts for critical and collective discussion, and have suggested hands-on activities, where relevant to the topic. For example, while the video *The soil is alive* (Earth to Tables, n.d.) may show Dianne in Ontario and Fernando in Mexico with their hands in the soil, the computer screen cannot give students the sensation of putting their own hands in the soil, or testing soil quality, which are activities proposed in the facilitator's guide.

Walking the talk: Critical, collective, and creative use of website

From the start, we wanted our multimedia material to be used in schools and communities, and to be engaged critically, collectively, and creatively. As in popular education, an ultimate goal was to get people to move toward taking action. In the fall of 2020, we launched the interactive website, in part to get this online educational package to teachers for their fall classes. Since then, we've gathered feedback on what works and what doesn't work, and received suggestions about how to make the site easier to navigate—for different ages, for people who prefer linear to non-linear paths, etc.

In working with Helios Design Labs to create the interactive site, it was important to emphasize our primary pedagogical purposes. Thus, when each video or photo essay appears on the screen, the viewer will find three icons to the left:

"Digging In" offers key terms and concepts, decoding questions, specific questions, hands-on activities, prompts for intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, and suggestions for individual and collective action.

"Continuing the Conversation" includes commentary on the specific video or essay by an academic expert in the field or an activist immersed in the issue. This broadens the perspectives beyond our small group of thirteen collaborators, limited in terms of identities, geographic and cultural contexts.

In “Digging Deeper” we offer resources for further research and action, including other videos and websites, articles and books, organizations, and even relevant music.

This is what distinguishes our multimedia package from other websites; the videos and photo essays are not meant to be definitive or to stand alone. Rather they are to be used as catalysts to encourage diverse viewers and users to explore their own specific contexts and practices. Already we are hearing from teachers and activists who will offer short videos about how they are using the material—this is the real test.

Finally, we recognize that the material is primarily coming from a North American (read: white) framework. It needs to be translated, not only in terms of language (into Spanish, French and Indigenous languages) but most importantly in terms of cultural and political context. If it is to be useful in other places, whether Indigenous communities in the North, Mexican schools, or social movement organizations, we must continue pollinating across these differences both within Canada, within the hemisphere, and perhaps with food sovereignty activists globally.

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