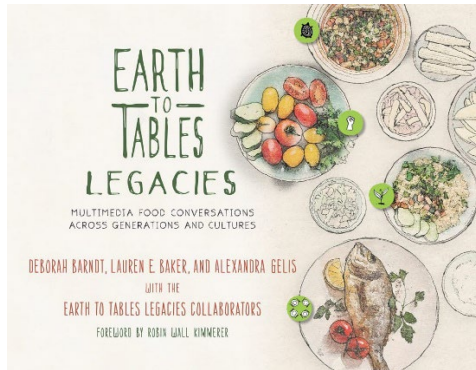


Earth to Tables Legacies: Multimedia Food Conversations across Generations and Cultures.
by Deborah Barndt, Lauren E. Baker, and Alexandra Gelis with the Earth to Tables
Legacies Collaborators. Rowman and Littlefield, 2023. 243 pp. Also
<https://earthtotables.org/>.

Review by Daniel Coleman, McMaster University



The environmental crises we are currently facing have made us belatedly aware that we need to “think like an ecosystem,” by which we mean that our current ways of interacting with the world have tended to be myopic and narrow. Not holistic, not aware of the interdependencies of the living world. If we wanted plants to create more grain, we fed them phosphates, without anticipating that these would wash into the watershed and over-stimulate the growth of toxic blue-green algae. It’s hard to think like an ecosystem, because everything, as the saying goes, is connected, and it’s not easy to foresee all the connections that make up any given biome, let alone series of interdependent biomes that make up the entire planet. Every life ends up being upstream and downstream from other lives who depend on the entire system to stay healthy. There’s no better way to learn how intimately we live our own lives within that interdependent stream than by paying attention to our food and where it comes from.

Earth to Tables Legacies is a book about the food system, but it’s also what its creators call a “multimedia package” that provides free online access to most of the book’s chapters. The book itself is a cross-over—the authors call it “cross-pollination”— between a coffee table book with beautiful photos and illustrations and a workbook with charts, textbox inserts, and suggestions for learning activities. The website adds to these chapters a whole series of supplements that do what a stand-alone book cannot do—provide storytelling videos, offer facilitator guides for classrooms and community workshops, give supplementary materials via online media links. Importantly, the website also makes the project available to its international collaborators by means of the internet, which also makes possible things like Spanish subtitles for media materials.

Earth to Tables Legacies thinks and acts like an ecosystem. It’s a lot of interrelated elements all at once: it’s a media-enhanced workshop manual aimed at developing practices for food justice and sovereignty in the face of extractivist agribusiness; it’s a collection of stories about friendships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous food activists from Mexico through Ohio, Michigan, and New York to Ontario and Gaspé; it’s about how these friendships have grown into

an intergenerational, cross-cultural community who are passing down ancestral knowledge about how to raise and share healthy food; in the process, these relationships are working to break the stranglehold of international corporations on the food system. In many ways, *Earth to Tables Legacies* is a simultaneous cry of pain and song of thanksgiving—pain over the ways the health of earth has been so deeply colonized as to create a system of “food apartheid,” with organic markets for the rich and junk food for the poor all facilitated by racialized migrant workers; and thanksgiving for the ongoing vitality that remains in earth to make good healthy food as well as gratitude for the legacies of local Indigenous knowledge that are informing modern local and urban farming techniques. *Earth to Tables Legacies* celebrates an ecosystem of relationships in order to feed the mind with mindful earth-respecting knowledges and to feed the stomach with quality food that feeds good minds.

Like all ecosystems, *Earth to Tables Legacies* is more interested in relationships than in isolated individuals. The book/media package was composed by seventeen people who hail from Oaxaca and Yucatán and Michoacán in Mexico, from Toronto, Muskoka, and Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario, and Gaspé in Quebec, and as you read either book or website, you realize that Deborah Barndt played a pivotal role as a “co-editor” with Laren Baker and as a “co-producer” with Alexandra Gellis in soliciting the contributions from their far-flung collaborators, whether in the form of video-recordings, interviews, recorded oral stories, artworks or photographs, or pieces of writing that constitute the book and website. The project began in 2015 and was initially planned as a documentary film, but over the course of three in-person gatherings—one in the Muskoka area, a second in Toronto at the Native Canadian Centre, and a third at Six Nations, all before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down international travel, the multidimensionality of the emerging project made the combination of a workbook and website seem the most functional way to convey its multispecies method and intent.

Earth to Tables Legacies shares its knowledge through community stories. The editing and production team are based in Toronto and thus they turn to local Haudenosaunee protocols for how to introduce an important conversation by invoking what Six Nations people call the *Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen* (Mohawk for “The Words that Come Before All Else”). Chandra Maracle and Rick Hill, Six Nations storytelling partners on the project explain that this speech that thanks all the elements of the ecosystem, from soil and water to plants, animals, sun, and moon, for providing everything we need to live our lives, helps us enter into our deliberations in a “good mind.” In her subsequent video-recorded and written interviews, Maracle demonstrates how healthy food makes healthy minds, so that we meet at our various tables—whether dinner tables or political tables—with clear thinking and wise deliberation. She highlights how important this is by contrast with the Mohawk Institute, Canada’s oldest residential school, which became known as the “Mush Hole” because the Indigenous children who attended the school were consistently fed oatmeal and corn mush, with no access to the nutrition produced by the cows they milked, carrots and potatoes they harvested in the school garden, or apples they picked for market in its orchards. The ethical and philosophical gap between the Haudenosaunee tradition of collectively raising, drying, and “lying” abundant supplies of corn for their populous communities before the arrival of Europeans and the children losing language and braincells on the Mush Hole’s vitamin-deficient diet demonstrates not only how food was weaponized by colonial nation-states, but also what Toronto-based partner and Black Creek Community Farm director Leticia Deawuo calls “food apartheid,” where racialized, immigrant, and poor folk must

pay high prices for heavily processed food in highly policed supermarkets, while white, middle-class folks more easily frequent urban farmers markets and niche organic stores.

Throughout its chapters on “Ways of Knowing: Honouring All Relations that Sustain Life”; on “Earth,” which attends to natural foods from breast-milk to Agroecology and the Animal Food Cycle; on “Justice,” which includes stories about organic agriculture and urban gardens in Mexico as well as in Toronto; or on “Tables,” which focuses on how ceremonially shared meals replenish our minds and souls as well as our stomachs, *Earth to Tables Legacies* provides stories from an eco-system of food workers and activists. These chapters provide statements, photo essays, and video recordings from people such as Valiana Aguilar and her partner Ángel Kú, who are building a traditional Mayan homestead and a *semillero de aprendizaje*, sowing seeds for learning; Leticia Deawuo, of Ghanaian ancestry, who lives in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood of Toronto and works with Black Creek Community Farm to employ people from the neighbourhood on a seven-acre urban farm where neighbours from nearby highrises can buy affordable, locally grown, organic vegetables; Dianne Kretschmar, one of the first organic women farmers in Ontario, who has mentored many young Canadian and Mexican farmers at Grenville Farm near Muskoka; or Anna Murtaugh and Adam Royal who raise cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, and vegetables in New Carlisle, Quebec. Consistently, these stories reach to the legacies of soil-based ancestors for matrifocal teachings—since women so often play leading roles in local food production—that provide not only big-picture critique of corporate agribusiness and the unjust system of food distribution, but more importantly, they offer practical everyday guidance for growing food in one’s local environment.

Valiana Aguilar and Ángel Kú, for example, describe what they learned from the annual ceremonial cycle in Oaxaca, where elders told them “The milpa [house garden] is our way of life. It’s composed mainly of three elements or three sisters: corn, beans, and squash... It begins in January or February by walking through the land and finding a place to offer the sakab [invocation to animals to stay away, then prepare the soil]... In March/April the seeds that will be planted are collected... This is also a good time for a ceremony asking for rain and for a generous harvest. At the end of May, the first rainfalls are expected... The corn takes different amounts of time to grow... The first corn is offered to the four directions... When harvest time arrives, a large meal is prepared and offered to the land as a sign of gratitude. This is around October/November... This is also the season for *ibes* (white beans), *spelón* (the beans that are eaten young), of jicama... The land then rests for December, and in January the cycle of the milpa begins once again” (p.111-112). This kind of legacy knowledge is food for the future, not just knowledge from the past. The ceremonial elements of this cycle from seed to harvest are not extraneous to the cycle: for what is food for, if not to put us in a good mind, and how can we grow good food if we are not in good minds, minds that understand themselves to be part of the ecosystem?

As the writers of the Introduction put it: “Food provides a lens for reflecting on the rapidly shifting state of the Earth and all our relations” (1). *Earth to Tables Legacies* provides a multi-scalar, multi-cultural, multi-species, multi-genre reflection on the place of humans within the larger ecosystems of which we are parts and listens to Indigenous legacies that can provide guidance for restoring health, justice, and equity in these precarious times. Already its facilitator guides and workshop tools are being taken up in classrooms and community organizations in

Canada, the USA, and Mexico, and its multimedia format means that website users are invited to continue to contribute their own knowledge and experiences to its evolving sets of stories and resources.