# Candid Colonialism

A case study of Wet'suwet'en land defenders'
strategic digital communications use

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# Abstract

Canada, a nation-state founded on colonialism, "a form of structured dispossession," (Coulthard, 2014, p. 7) has made efforts to amend for harms caused to First Peoples by its racist policies. Yet conflicts around Indigenous sovereignty continue to play out, often in remote territories where mainstream media seldom ventures. At the same time, a resurgence of Indigenous Nations has found expression in a movement to reoccupy traditional territories never ceded to the state, revitalizing Indigenous relationships with the land and increasing the potential for conflict with extractive industry. My Capstone Project examines these tensions through the lens of communications and technology. First, I present a review of contemporary, predominately Canadian, literature on the subject of conducting research ethically with Indigenous communities in the evolving context of Indigenous resurgence and struggle for sovereignty and decolonization in what is now known as Canada. Second, I present a case study of strategic communications undertaken by land defenders of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation in their struggle to stop Coastal GasLink from building a massive gas and oil pipeline through their territory and under the Wedzin Kwa (Morice River) in which I use the methodology of qualitative inductive analysis to identify some central themes in the data.

# Keywords

Indigenous, Wet'suwet'en, CGL, Delgamuukw, Gidimt'en, settler colonialism, citizen journalism, decolonization, case study, qualitative inductive analysis, RCMP, exclusion zone, sousveillance, critical infrastructure protection, news media, online media, social media, relationality, media sovereignty

# Acknowledgements

I would like to respectfully acknowledge the First Nations on whose traditional territories I have lived and worked which are important to this Capstone project:

I conducted research with my friends on the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation.

This paper was written on the traditional unceded territory of the Tsawwassen First Nation.

The MACT program takes place on Treaty 6 territory and a traditional meeting ground and home for many Indigenous Peoples, including Cree, Saulteaux, Niisitapi (Blackfoot), Métis, and Nakota Sioux.

I am grateful to have spent my childhood on the unceded territory of the Tahltan First Nation.

I want to assert my commitment to the process of decolonization as it is envisioned by Indigenous Peoples.

Thank you to Dr. Rob McMahon, my intrepid supervisor, who calmly endured my extended uncertainty while challenging me to explore the source of my doubts, my mother and father, who encouraged me to always be learning and to be inquisitive and respectful of people. Thank you to my MACT cohort, from whom I learned so much and who provided support and ideas and provoked reflection. Thank you to Molly and Jen Wickham, who generously shared their time and insights with me, even as they were dealing with immense challenges.

# Contents

# Chapter 1. Introduction

In the forests of a remote area of Northern B.C. during Winter 2020, Canada's Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) arrested six Indigenous women and removed them by force from their land. Calling themselves Wet'suwet'en land defenders, these women stood in defiance of a court injunction, which prohibited them from impeding construction of the Coastal GasLink (CGL) project, one of various pipeline projects currently under development to transport oil and gas from the interior to refineries. They sang as they were hand-cuffed and marched through the snow to police vans. Despite occurring in an isolated northern wilderness, the event was recorded by the participants and land defender supporters. Images and video of the arrest rapidly spread from social media to mainstream media, including among others, CBC, CTV and Global News. Protests in solidarity with Wet'suwet'en land defenders had begun in early 2019 with RCMP raids, but after the RCMP began arresting land defenders on February 6, 2020, a wave of protests quickly spread across Canada under the hashtag #ShutDownCanada, a slogan which implies the national and colonial scope of the land defenders' struggle for sovereignty on their unceded lands in opposition to the expansion of extractive industry (Gidimt'en Access, 2020; Tasker, 2020).

*Figure 1 Raid on the Yintah, Photo copyright of Dan Loan, used with his permission.*

The expansion of Canada's fossil fuel industry includes many pipeline projects such as CGL, a partnership between TC Energy and LNG Canada, planned to transport liquid natural gas

(LNG) and oil to Kitimat's deep-water port for refinement and export.[1] Proponents of this and similar projects see them as essential to Canada's economic stability and geopolitical position: so-called Critical Infrastructure (CI) that is defined in Canada's Position Paper as including the:

> "physical and information technology facilities, networks, services and assets, which if disrupted or destroyed would have a serious impact on the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians or the effective functioning of governments in Canada" (Canada, 2004, p. 5).

Pipeline opponents, including the Wet'suwet'en land defenders, point to serious threats to health, safety and security of people, the ecosystem and the planet. They argue that the short-term economic gain of these projects does not outweigh the environmental devastation the pipelines would bring. Negative impacts include the release of CO2 during oil and gas extractions, transport and refining, risk of further pollution due to accidental spills or other catastrophes as well as the pollution caused by extraction techniques used in fracking and separating oil from tar deposits.

*Figure 2 Grizzly on the Yintah, Photo by Author*

[1] Other pipeline projects include the Trans-Mountain Pipeline, which will connect the northern oil-producing areas, including the tar sands, to a new port, currently under construction in Vancouver and TC Energy's Keystone XL and Enbridge's Line 3, both of which are planned to bring Canadian gas and oil south to the US. (Cruickshank, 2021).

In the 2019 documentary film *Invasion*, about the conflict between Wet'suwet'en land defenders and CGL, Unist'ot'en Dzek ze' (chief) Freda Huson gestures to the land and says: "This is our critical infrastructure" (UnistotenCamp, 2019, 11:52). This statement is a strategic re-wording that inverts the meaning of CI, to reflect the land defenders' own understanding of the land's value. Shortly after making this statement, Huson was arrested and forcibly removed from her homeland, echoing forced removals of Indigenous Peoples by colonial forces in the past.

*Figure 3 Yintah, Photo by Author*

As these two contrasting examples of discursive presentations of CI demonstrate, struggles over differing perspectives on CI and resource extraction play out across various terrains – from land-based direct action to strategic communications. This Capstone explores these tensions and strategies through an examination of the communications strategies employed by Wetsuweten land defenders[2] in their efforts to block the expansion of the CGL pipeline.

## Context

The context for this conflict goes beyond an injunction granted by the Supreme Court of British Columbia on Jan 7, 2020 that prohibited the Wet'suwet'en First Nation land defenders from hindering CGL from constructing a pipeline through their territory. (Coastal GasLink Pipeline Ltd. v. Huson, 2020). The struggle for Wet'suwet'en sovereignty over their land, the rights and title to which they never ceded, extends to early encounters with Europeans. It is

[2] Notes on capitalization; Taking my cue from land defenders in online texts (unistoten.camp & www.yintahaccess.com), I leave the term 'land defenders' uncapitalized and unhyphenated. The 'p' in Peoples is capitalized in the term Indigenous Peoples, denoting the plural of groups or nations, while the 'p' is uncapitalized in the term 'Indigenous people' when it refers to individuals who are Indigenous.

important to begin this Capstone project with this wider view, which provides a critical perspective on the colonial project that brought us to the point of this conflict. We can trace the historical forces, events, decisions and world-views defining present assumptions of Canada's settler-colonial society.

In positioning my Capstone this way, I use Curran's definition of settler colonialism: "the way that colonization occurs across a geographic landscape through the control of land and people" (Curran, 2019, p. 2). Non-Indigenous people in Canada are, in this view, settlers, either being descended from settlers or having settled on Indigenous land in their own lifetime – as my family did. This framing is not meant to ascribe colonial intention to descendants of settlers – it is to emphasize the source of privilege and advantage that emanates from a system with an in-built bias that stems from the foundational principles on which it was created: seizure and control of "empty" land: the "doctrine of discovery" or "*terra nullius*" (Indigenous Title and The Doctrine of Discovery, 2020).

Canada's recent history suggests there is some willingness to take responsibility for past harms, yet, ongoing conflicts like the one between the Wet'suwet'en and TC Energy call that progress into question. According to CGL, they have signed the required "community and project agreements with all of the elected Indigenous bands along its pipeline route in British Columbia" (Coastal Gaslink, 2018). In an open letter, then-CGL president David Pfeiffer stated that: "The project route being built is fully permitted and is the result of rigorous fieldwork and consultation with Indigenous and local communities" (Pfeiffer, 2020). The jurisdiction of the

Band Councils to unilaterally make land use agreements without consulting with the hereditary Chiefs is a point of controversy; see *Delgamuukw*. [3]

Indigenous academic, Glen Coulthard (2007), takes a critical view of Canada's relationship with First Peoples, claiming that the state legitimizes itself by "enticing" Indigenous people to identify with the "profoundly asymmetrical and non-reciprocal forms of recognition" proffered to them by state and society (p.439) for example, by recognizing unique language and culture while denying land sovereignty, and by extension, through the benefits agreements offered by extractive industry, simultaneously limiting what is shared.

Wet'suwet'en land defenders have asserted their sovereign rights through various actions. They refused CGL entry to the Yintah, the Wet'suwet'en word for their territory; the group "reoccupied Lhudis Bin [a Gidimt'en area on the Yintah] territory, building a clan cabin on the drill pad site where Coastal GasLink pipeline wants to drill underneath our sacred headwaters," Wedzin Kwa, the lifeblood of the Yintah, also known as the Morice River. (Yintah Access, 2021). In response, CGL filed a court injunction, which was approved: "The facts of the case and

[3] Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, [1997] 3 S.C.R. 1010: Some Indigenous Peoples question the legitimacy of agreements made with groups like CGL, because First Nations' Band Councils are the governance structure defined by the Indian Act, the 1876 document that defines the legal relationship between First Nations and the nation of Canada. Elected Band Councils are meant to take the place of existing Indigenous governance; however, those traditional or hereditary systems of governance still exist and play an important role in many First Nations. The extent of the authority of traditional Indigenous governance in Canada is contested. This is important context when understanding the Wet'suwet'en conflict because in 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the validity of oral history to establish the Wet'suwet'en claim on their traditional, unceded, territory that existed prior to contact with Europeans. According to Delgamuukw, "treaty rights could not be extinguished" and "oral testimony is as legitimate as other forms of evidence and stated Indigenous title rights include not only land, but the right to extract resources from the land" (Kurjata, 2017). Wet'suwet'en land-defenders argue that any agreements about land use must be made in consultation with hereditary chiefs. A tactic long-used by extractive industries in Canada has been to negotiate benefits deals with elected chiefs, including agreements to employ band members, while dissenting parties, in the case of the Wet'suwet'en, the hereditary chiefs, "are framed as "defiant," as well as ignorant to the economic benefits of the pipeline project" (Hume, 2021, p. 23). Hume and Walby explore how news media in Canada reproduced the industry and RCMP narratives and suggest that "negative framing and state repression can backfire" (p. 24) leading to "even more transformative mobilizations".

the interests of justice…warrant the inclusion of enforcement provisions," stated the Honourable Madam Justice Church in her 2019 judgement (Coastal GasLink Pipeline Ltd. v. Huson, 2019). In enacting this injunction, the RCMP "indicated that it would pursue peaceful options for arrest that requires minimal use of force. The main operation to secure access per the BC Supreme Court Order commenced on the morning of February 6, 2020" (RCMP, 2020, Aug 19). In this case, "Minimal force" included an overwhelming display of paramilitary troops wearing camouflage and body-armour, carrying semi-automatic weapons, accompanied by canine units, covered by helicopters and snipers.

The tensions associated with these activities are expressed in a visceral way in the stories and images that emerge from events such as the arrest of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders. In February, 2020, a sign hung across the closed gates to the bridge across the Wedzin Kwa to the Wet'suwet'en Yintah that read "Reconciliation" (Unist'ot'en, 2020). Militarized RCMP "sawed apart a wooden gate with the word 'reconciliation' painted on it in bold, black letters" (McIntosh, 2020), extinguished the ceremonial fire and arrested the land defenders, removing them from their land and criminalizing their peaceful protest. To raise awareness of this event, land defenders published and circulated video and images of the raid and arrests along with the hashtag #reconciliationisdead.

From a strategic communications perspective, the final outcome of these events remains open to interpretation, negotiation, and persuasion; this involves a struggle to establish a narrative that appeals to the hearts and minds of people across Turtle Island and beyond. Gidimt'en spokesperson, Sleydo, explains "People aren't going to support us if they don't understand… People have to feel like they know us and what we're doing and the reasons why" (Sleydo, 2021). Facing down a hostile, paramilitary force, in an isolated area of northern Canada,

armed with a belief in justice, a mind, a voice and a cell phone is one challenge; conveying the sense of the situation to the outside world is quite another.

## Purpose of Research

With this research I hope to convey the importance of the subject matter of strategic communication undertaken by Indigenous activists in the context of decolonization to my fellow students and professors, as well as the importance of engaging with Indigenous scholars and students about how non-Indigenous researchers can better participate in collaborative research with Indigenous communities. To this end, I would like to encourage fellow researchers to engage with and support research standards established by Indigenous Peoples and organizations.

My intention in speaking to land defenders about their experience in communicating their story to the wider world is to provide one more way for them to share their insights gleaned from their successful use of media. My research attempts to do this in two ways: 1) Our dialogue about lived experience and their process of mediating that experience strategically may engage non-Indigenous readers and promote a deeper understanding of what that struggle feels like to people in it; and 2) That other socially-engaged media activists might be able to learn something from that experience which they can apply in their own work.

## Research Questions

Considering my position as a settler, trying to distill the conflict to its most basic elements and asking simple, respectful, human questions that were transparent in their assumptions, the two questions that persevered in my mind were: 1) what is the lived experience of Wet'suwet'en people defending their homeland; and 2) why were police officers continuing to

repeat colonial patterns that had been so publicly admitted, criticized and renounced officially in Canada?

I then reiterated these queries in terms of my Masters research project in communications:

RQ1: How did the Wet'suwet'en land defenders, who oppose the CGL pipeline project through unceded Wet'suwet'en territory, create and use media content and events to support their goals and activities?

RQ2: How do Wet'suwet'en land defenders see the relationship between their media use and decolonization?

The process through which I began to grapple with the issue of Indigenous sovereignty, Canada's colonial origins and current manifestation and my own position to and within them, began with an exploration of recent and current literature.

# Chapter 2. Literature Review

## Introduction

This literature review is not exhaustive – there are certainly many authors and texts that I missed both because of my own deficits as a researcher and because of the sheer number of meaningful texts and authors. I have focused mainly on texts written after 2000 that refer to the Canadian context, with some important exceptions.

My first forays into the literature were guided by a personal concern that my research project live up to an ethical standard that would be acceptable to my friends who are Wet'suwet'en land defenders. An oft-quoted statement from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, renowned Maori academic and author of Decolonizing Methodologies reads: "'Research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (2012, p. 1). Addressing the harms of colonialism, in which academic institutions and scholars played an important part, is not a comfortable process for settlers, and I believe it should not be.

Thankfully, critical Indigenous scholars do not conclude that Indigenous areas of study should be off limits to non-Indigenous researchers, rather that they must benefit the community members, according to the communities' own criteria, which aligns with my belief that research should make the world a better place for everyone. Smith notes that she does not intend to "rule out engagement of activists and researchers with wider non-Indigenous alliances, as indeed such engagements are often unavoidable and are tactically necessary" (2012, p. 217). That isn't exactly an enthusiastic invitation, but, considering the transactional and exploitative history of research and Indigenous communities, that is understandable, and while not directly encouraging, it does define an opening for non-Indigenous contribution.

A central theme in the readings was the harm wrought by centuries of colonialism, including unethical research based on paternalistic, racist world views. A related theme was discussion on how to counter contemporary patterns of paternalism and racism that live on in institutions, society and common assumptions. According to this view, the beneficiaries of colonial structures often help to perpetuate them, even while denying their existence. Many of the texts I read by Indigenous scholars provided clear recommendations on how to ethically conduct research with Indigenous communities. This includes some basic guidelines, who to speak to, from whom to gain permission and what not to do.

During my research I also completed the course, Fundamentals of OCAP™ (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession), offered by The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) and administered through Algonquin College. OCAP™. is a set of principles that reflect First Nation commitments to use and share information "in a way that brings benefit to the community while minimizing harm" (Barriers and levers for the implementation of OCAP™, 2014, p. 3). OCAP™ principles have been used by various organizations and institutions to guide processes and agreements.

Through my review of the literature and participation in the OCAP course, I assembled a knowledge base on how to approach research with Indigenous communities ethically – the primary lesson of which can be summarized as "nothing about us without us" (attribution various), in other words, get input from the community, find out what they want and work with them throughout.

Ever since I began reading works about applied ethics several years ago, I was convinced that philosophical inquiry should be aimed at real changes in society. It was natural, then, that my research about communications should be within the critical paradigm and should seek to

identify asymmetrical power dynamics and analyze how these affected peoples' lives, in this case, how they responded to limitations and incursions by state powers in terms of their strategic communication. I had begun to immerse myself in the social media content produced by Wet'suwet'en land defenders and accessible on their website, www.yintahaccess.com, as well as content tailored to other platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and later, TikTok.

Pressman et al. note that when pandemic restrictions reduced protest activity, activists embraced the advantages for communication and coordination that digital tools offered (2021, p. 4). Land defenders embraced mass online meetings, in the form of panels, rallies and conferences, which were promoted in social media networks, and conducted over video-conferencing software such as Zoom or Google Meet. I attended several such online gatherings, including a video conference, hosted by activist Naomi Klein, featuring Gidimt'en spokesperson, Sleydo; Kanahus Manuel (Ktunaka-Secwepemc) of the Tiny House Warriors; Land Back spokesperson from Six Nations territory Skyler Williams and Mi'kmaq leader Suzanne Patles (Yellowhead Institute, 2020). The conference demonstrated their networking strengths, confidence and an awareness of the importance of the event, not only for its live audience but as a recorded communication to be widely shared and viewed asynchronously, a moment in which respect and legitimacy were shared between the speakers.

In stark contrast to the warmth and community I observed in the conference, were tense, confrontational encounters between land defenders, CGL employees and RCMP officers, recorded on video and shared by land defenders on www.yintahaccess.com and social media. I found the footage disturbing, in the lack of basic respect shown by some CGL employees and RCMP officers, as well as behaviour that raised questions about the quality of cultural training

the officers may have received. While I was familiarizing myself with land defenders' media content, I began to conduct a search for the literature needed to give context to my Capstone project.

## Literature Search Strategy

My literature search began with key texts recommended to me: Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Sandra Lambertus' *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds*; Asch, Borrows and Tully's *Resurgence and Reconciliation*; and Brown & Strega's *Research as Resistance*. These texts provided the foundation for my project; the latter two, being collections, were particularly helpful for starting my search around the contemporary lived experience of Indigenous people in Canada.

I conducted further searches for academic texts on the topics of the relational paradigm, Indigenous knowledge, reconciliation, the nature of community and how communities prevent or allow research, as well as the settler identity versus the concept of being an ally of Indigenous resurgence in the context of decolonization. I began my literature with a list of relevant keywords like 'Indigenous protest,' 'reconciliation,' 'resurgence,' 'land back,' 'Wet'suwet'en,' 'Gitxsan,' 'Delgamuukw' on the EBSCO library search function. I filtered for articles from the present to the last 10 or 15 years, published in peer reviewed academic journals. Using the technique of pearl growing, or "identifying a known, highly relevant article (the 'pearl') to identify terms" (Booth, 2016, p. 115) that can be used to search for other relevant literature, an iterative process that can be applied when a particularly salient article is identified. I scanned the abstracts for relevancy, making an initial selection, and then scanned the references from those texts.

I searched the following databases:

- Communication & Mass Media Complete
- Canada Treaty Information
- Indigenous Collection
- 4 Seasons of Reconciliation
- Northern News Services Online

I found, however, that searching all databases was more productive, because the process of trial and error was expedited by quickly scanning larger numbers of texts and once a few good texts were identified it became easier to then find out what they had in common: authors who shared common citations were the most consistent indicator of the relevance of a text. Given the speed of internet searches, it was productive to quickly compile lists of articles chosen after quickly scanning the abstract and, if it showed potential adding the citation and downloading the full text. Even if I culled the majority on a second, deeper scan, it was more efficient to gather that information right away than it was to do a separate search afterwards.

I scanned terms and links from activist websites, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, blogs and Twitter feeds, saving the links in

Data Matrix for Literature Search

| | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Search Terms | Results | Scholarly | Database | Date Published | Search Limits | Research Field | Methodology |
| 2 | romp indigenous activism | 2 | Y | Ebsco | 2018 | >2004 | sociology | Critical Paradigm |

| I | J | K | L | M |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Notes | No. Cited | Bibliographic Entry / Link | Search Date | Theme |
| Good article, academically sound, good references. Monaghan cited often, though this article has few citations | 3 | HOWE, M., & MONAGHAN, J. (2018). Strategic Incapacitation of Indigenous Dissent: Crowd Theories, Risk Management, and Settler Colonial Policing. *Canadian Journal of Sociology , 43* (4), 325-348. https://doi-org.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/10.29173/cjs29397 | 09.15.2020 | CIP |

*Figure 4 Research Organization Tool – Excel. The image above is a Matrix created to keep track of my search results and maintain all information from my searches. I stopped using RefWorks, preferring this Excel table with hyperlinked lists. Software generated bibliography entries required too much correction.*

my browser bookmarks in a series of nested folders. I saved iterative backups of my bookmarks, so that they constitute a kind of evolving library.

I favoured texts from authors who framed the current conflicts around Indigenous sovereignty and resource extraction industries critically, as serious, systemic issues with political and historical roots, drawing connections between institutions, policies and communities. I avoided texts which framed Indigenous issues as social, psychological issues local to a community. The reasons for this are: 1) the critical approach is concerned with the reproduction of asymmetric power dynamics and patterns of hegemony; and 2) approaches with a narrower scope risked putting the weight of responsibility on the individual and diverting attention from the systemic nature of the problems, thereby helping perpetuate them.

## Literature Themes: Reconciliation, Colonialism Today, Resurgence

Three main themes which emerged from my literature search were: Reconciliation, Colonialism Today and Resurgence. There are biases inherent in organizing the literature in these three themes, such as separating Reconciliation from Resurgence, highlighting the tension between the concepts rather than what they share, or the ordering that places Reconciliation first, followed by Colonialism Today and Resurgence, which could be construed as hierarchical or sequential, which is not what I intended. The themes I chose provided me with a framework I found useful within which to analyze and present my research.

**Reconciliation** is positioned as a large over-arching idea that bridges the past to the present, Indigenous with non-Indigenous, a contested concept that was broadly familiar, as the new framework to deal with the harms of colonialism and move toward a just and equitable future.

**Colonialism Today** provides a framework to speak about contemporary forms of colonial power structures, including CIP; the RCMP; other coercive aspects of the state, particularly in relation to Indigenous people, and the strategies that land defenders found to counter, evade or neutralize them. Historical and current research about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) introduced me to the concept of Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP), a paradigm used by the Canadian state in their approach to Indigenous land-activism and environmental activism, especially when it appeared to threaten large infrastructure projects like hydroelectric dams or highways and resource extraction, such as timber or gas pipelines and associated with the militarization of police forces and rise of domestic surveillance that occurred after 9/11.

Finally, **Resurgence** is a term offered by Indigenous scholars as a framework to understand Indigenous cultural and spiritual revitalization, a movement to reoccupy and reconnect with the land. The term is helpful in understanding the context in which land defenders operate when they make and use their own strategic media and the processes they develop as they occupy online space and grow networks. Resurgence provides a frame to understand Indigenous responses to failings in the project of reconciliation in the nation state of Canada. Indigenous scholars in the literature I reviewed are generally less critical of the ideals and principles of reconciliation than they are of its lack of concrete successes and inability to counteract the continuing asymmetric power dynamic reproducing colonial hierarchies. Resurgence could be described as a cultural reawakening asserting its strength in roots that are outside the colonial paradigm.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the literature I read for my Capstone research, relating it to my research goals and to the three themes that I identified.

## Theme 1: Reconciliation

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, to reconcile is to: “restore to friendship or harmony... to settle or resolve differences... to make consistent or congruous” (n.d.). These texts pertain broadly to the process of self - examination by the state of Canada of the historic injustices perpetrated by European settlers on Indigenous people and the present systemic injustice and inequalities that flow from that past. One important milestone in this process was the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), published in 1996. RCAP envisioned a break from the Indian Act and a new future of nation-to-nation cooperation between Canada and First Nations, in its statement that “After an Aboriginal nation has been reconstituted, it can exercise self-government on its existing territory in core areas of jurisdiction” (Canada, 2016), promising real reform yet suggesting clear limitations.

In 2007 the UN presented the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which is meant to protect “collective rights” of Indigenous Peoples which may not be covered by an individual rights framework; for example, the right to live in their homelands. Nonetheless, Canada delayed becoming a signatory of UNDRIP until 2016 and even then, maintained explicitly that “UNDRIP was solely aspirational” (Boutilier, 2017, p. 2)

In 2006 a class action lawsuit against the Government of Canada resulted in the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which covered compensation payments and laid the foundation for Canada’s inquiry into residential schools, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Canada, 2021, Aug). In 2007, the TRC was established as a process to address the harms that flowed from Canada’s policies about Indigenous Peoples, including Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop that amounted to “cultural genocide” (TRC, 2015b, p. 5). The commission, chaired by Senator Murray Sinclair, lawyer and member of the Ojibway

Nation, heard from more than 6,500 witnesses across Canada over a period of 6 years. The final report included a list of 94 calls to action. (TRC, 2015a). In 2008 PM Harper formally apologized to First Nations people for the harms of residential schools. By 2012 most residential school victims had received some compensation under the Common Experience Payment.

Much as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (Wilson-Raybould, 2017) examination of its country's policy of apartheid had done, Canada's TRC created an extensive, credible, public record of historic wrongs sanctioned by the state, accompanied simultaneously by concrete efforts to compensate for them. The TRC compiled an extensive record of the injustices victims endured, their stories told in their own words and recorded on video and freely accessible online, an official acknowledgement of Canada's wrongdoing against Indigenous people. The TRC declares that the legacy of cultural genocide "is also reflected in the intense racism and the systemic discrimination Aboriginal people regularly experience in this country" (TRC, 2015b, p. 103).

In 2019, representatives of First Nations and the Government of the Canadian province of British Columbia made a joint statement regarding UNDRIP:

> "Today, we have made history. British Columbia is the first province in Canada to enshrine the human rights of Indigenous peoples in law. Bill 41, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples act, passed unanimously on Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2019. The legislation establishes the [UNDRIP] as the foundational framework for reconciliation in B.C., as called for by the [TRC]" (British Columbia Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, 2019).

Reinders states that "While the right to self-determination can conflict with state sovereignty, self-determination as laid out by UNDRIP is focused on securing the social, political, and economic rights of Indigenous people through a practical sovereignty" (Reinders, 2019, p. 8), rather than secession from the state. Yet, Indigenous Peoples in Canada are still governed under the Indian Act, which remains "virtually un-amended with respect to self-determination and self-government" (Reinders, p. 3) since 1876.

In ongoing protests that range in focus from land claims to access to adequate housing and clean water, Indigenous people are expressing frustration with how slowly, how half-heartedly, the recommendations made by the TRC and the principles of UNDRIP are being implemented, often pointing out the discrepancy between the idea of reconciliation and the reality. Many leading contemporary Indigenous scholars emphasize that social, political and economic rights in Indigenous communities are inextricably woven into their relationship to the land. As one Wet'suwet'en hereditary Wing-Chief, Satsan, also known as Herb George, puts it "Reconciliation, as far as Aboriginal title and rights are concerned, is jurisdiction" (Forester, 2020). Article 32 of UNDRIP says that "States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples" to obtain "their free, prior and informed consent" (FPIC) before commencing any project on Indigenous territory, especially extracting natural resources (United Nations, 2007). Yet clearly, some community members are not giving their consent. FPIC aligns with Wet'suwet'en law that requires anyone who wishes to enter their territory to respectfully state their intentions and ask permission, according to the ancient protocols, providing a sound framework for the Indigenous "right to self-determination" (Boutilier, 2017, p. 18). Judith Sayers points out that "it is OK for First Nations to say yes to developments, yet they cannot say no" (Sayers, 2019, p. 2). Sayers expressed hope that the implementation of the principles of UNDRIP

in BC would lead to change, yet four months later, the RCMP destroyed the gate at the Unist'ot'en camp and arrested land defenders.

Land defenders are operating in a highly charged context. They are articulating their message to vastly different audiences, including to members of their own community with whom they maintain close relationships, whose points of view may not align with their own, yet with whom they share connections and obligations. This involves a range of communication challenges that may require provocative non-cooperative protest in one moment and high-level diplomacy the next. They must communicate regularly with law-enforcement, from whom they have come to expect racist, threatening behaviour and rhetoric, yet maintaining civility and achieving their goals require them to be well-versed in the vocabulary of law and government. During interactions in which they face imminent arrest, or even while an arrest is taking place, they must be capable of articulating their position under pressure. In these and other ways, as I argue in this Capstone, land defenders can be positioned as skillful strategic communicators.

### Reconciliation as an Indigenous World-View

Indigenous world views seem to be gaining prominence in conversations about how to live together on the planet. Research on the strategic use of media and communications by Indigenous activists highlights this point. Since the Idle No More movement, Indigenous activists in Canada have shown a political shift from a "rights-based struggle with the state for recognition of their sovereign territories, knowledges, and forms of governance" to rejecting the "land claims and treaty processes" which have "reinforced political and economic assimilation" and "reduced Indigenous territories to individually-owned property tracts," instituting a "flawed form of self-government" (Kidd, 2019, p. 12).

The "Matrix of Resistance," an alliance between non-indigenous environmental activists and the Standing Rock Sioux opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline, is an example of reconciliation in action, a cooperative effort to achieve a common goal, led and guided by the wisdom of Sioux Elders. "Their intervention was defined by a profound commitment to intersectionality, solidarity, storytelling, and direct action that were all embedded in the organizing strategies that Standing Rock's Water Protectors deployed." (LeQuesne, 2019). Deem observed in Standing Rock how "thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people... converged on the camp... taking their cue from the people of Standing Rock, called themselves 'water protectors.'" The "rhetorical switch from protester to protector served to picture the pipeline in terms of violation rather than... political debate... born out by the actions of the highly militarized force of police" (Deem, 2019, p. 9). For non-Indigenous allies, the switch may have merely been a rhetorical one. For Indigenous Peoples the land "is the place where our Ancestors reside" (Simpson, 2017, p. 155).

Wet'suwet'en land defenders living on the land, embody the change they wish to see and the mutual respect and cooperation that land defenders and their non-Indigenous allies show each other could be seen as an example of the "two-row wampum"[4] agreement and of reconciliation in action (Tully, 2018). Similarly, Wet'suwet'en land defenders organize and take strategic action from an Indigenous place, both literally, from the land on which they stand, and intentionally in terms of their vision. Tuck &Yang's 2012 essay *Decolonization is Not a*

[4] "The symbol of the Treaty of Niagara was the Two-Row Wampum, a traditional piece of beaded artwork that expressed the essence of the agreement. On the Two-Row Wampum, the allies — both newcomers and Indigenous peoples — were depicted as two canoes travelling in tandem along separate, parallel streams. That image — First Nations and colonial powers as independent allies bound by Treaty — was the tradition that was constitutionalized in the British North America Act's brief reference to Indigenous Peoples and their land. It bound the new federal government to negotiate with independent First Nations on land questions" (Moore, 2020, p. 4).

*Metaphor* provides a provocative book-end to the theme of reconciliation, stating "decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice" (p. 21). This crystalizes one of the core problems that Reconciliation faces: many non-Indigenous people seem to want to receive absolution but retain the right to define the parameters of recompense, in other words, without giving land back. On the bridge across the Wedzin Kwa, reconciliation is dead and colonialism lives on.

## Theme 2: Colonialism Today

The RCMP's use of "Lethal Overwatch", a term meaning concealed snipers who are "prepared to use lethal force," during confrontations with Indigenous protesters in Wet'suwet'en territory, was first reported in the Guardian in Dec of 2019 (Dhillon, 2019). At that point there was limited reporting in the mainstream Canadian media on the conflict and while there were substantial academic references to Delgamuukw and its meaning for Indigenous land claims, there was little current research focus on Wet'suwet'en. The article was a bombshell. The Federal Public Safety Minister requested an explanation from the RCMP, expressing his concern about "the unacceptable words and phrases that The Guardian reported were used" ('Lethal Overwatch', 2019). This begs the question, why were government officials and the Canadian public first hearing about this from a foreign news outlet? Where was the Canadian press?

### Media Complicity in Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) Framing

"Despite the media reports, this was never about a protest. This was always about occupying and protecting their lands - something they have the legal right to do" (Palmater, 2019). The mainstream media reports in question, where most Canadians get their news (for example, Vancouver Sun, CTV, Toronto Star, Global News), typically portrayed Wet'suwet'en exercise of protocols that restricted access to their territory under the principle of FPIC, as an

illegal protest in defiance of the a more or less united Wet'suwet'en First Nation that had already signed an agreement with CGL, supposedly an almost completed pipeline, delivering LNG to an existing facility in Kitimat (Joseph, R., 2019; Cruickshank, A., 2019; Smart, A., 2019; Penner, D., 2019). Land defenders were able to raise awareness and elicit solidarity by using media to develop and share a compelling counter-narrative directly with the public over social media.

Many Canadians have little or no exposure to mainstream Indigenous news, such as APTN, CBC Indigenous or the alternative press, such as the Narwhal or the Tyee, where Indigenous voices and issues are treated more sympathetically. Therefore, it is easy to see how many non-Indigenous citizens might simply assume without question that courts were justified in issuing injunctions that protected companies' interests over Indigenous land rights and that the RCMP were justified in enforcing them against illegal protesters. In other words, whatever complaints land defenders might have had, the fact that they disobeyed the injunction was basis enough to portray them as radical protesters.

When Indigenous land claims conflict with extractive industry, some suggest that the RCMP sees these conflicts through the lens of CIP. Several scholars describe the official framing of Indigenous activists as a threat to the Canadian state, (Proulx, 2014; Monaghan, 2013; Dafnos & French, 2016; Monaghan & Walby, 2017; Bell & Schreiner, 2018; Boyle & Dafnos, 2019). Monaghan and Dafnos in particular, point to the relationship between CIP, the securitization of Indigenous land-rights issues, and government and law enforcement's framing of Indigenous land-rights activism as a domestic threat to extractive industry projects that are essential to the existence and stability of the Canadian state. The frame of Critical Infrastructure Protection (CI and CIP), has important implications for settler/Indigenous relationships and the implementation of UNDRIP principles because it is a paradigm that hinders any expansion of the concept of

jurisdiction of Indigenous people over their territory. The concept of CIP helps explain the world-view that is behind the heavy-handed police actions to protect extractive industrial projects. According to Monaghan, "Framing rituals of 'Aboriginal extremism' have also arisen in the context of national security policing" (2017, p. 66). Proulx (2014, p. 88) describe CSIS and RCMP reports obtained by the Access to Information Act (ATIA), that "show how Indigenous extremists actually or potentially involved in the sabotage of critical infrastructure" while protesting for Indigenous rights were then "included in the construction of new terror identities." Project SITKA, an RCMP intelligence project which monitored Indigenous activists as national security threats was part of what Howe calls a "long-standing trend of policing Indigenous contestation against settler colonialism" (Howe, 2018, p. 8).

Post 9/11 frames around securitization are predated by Government and law enforcement frames of Indigenous land activism as criminal: Bell & Schreiner note that, in 1995 "Secwepemc protestors from unceded Ts'Peten [Gustafsen Lake] were characterized by the provincial government as criminals and terrorists" (2018, p. 10). In her 2004 case study of media and the Gustafsen Lake standoff, Sandra Lambertus used critical discourse analysis to show how the news media reproduced government and police labels in their stories, noting that "the use of these terms became part of their news production routines." (Lambertus, p. 163). More recently, Bell and Schreiner describe how challenges to suburban development and resource extraction "have been regarded as twin threats to capital accumulation and Canadian (or settler) state sovereignty" (Bell, 2018, p. 10). They then go on to trace the lineage of the RCMP back to the confederation of Canada, describing the RCMP's original purpose as "securing Canadian sovereignty, in part through land and resource acquisition, and the denial of Indigenous sovereignties" (Bell, 2018, p. 1), so-called "civilizing" techniques that continue to the present.

Especially relevant to my research on Wet'suwet'en land defenders' strategic creation and use of media is how these frames continued to be reproduced in the mainstream media portrayal of Indigenous land rights activism. Lambertus (2004) and Wilkes (2010), among others, show how the mainstream media echo the frames presented by the RCMP and both Federal and Provincial Government. A complaint voiced by activists protesting resource extraction projects in isolated locations is that media outlets fail to send journalists to remote sites, while accepting RCMP descriptions of events as fact.

Media framing often repeats messages issued from official sources unquestioningly as news content, reproducing colonial hierarchies and prejudice, entrenching it in the minds of uncritical audiences, part of a process that Herman & Chomsky termed the "Propaganda Model," in which conformity of media outlets to the agendas of the ruling elites is achieved by selection of personnel with similar ideals, combined with working journalists who internalized the "priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 11), rather than "crude intervention".

In their study of media frames used in 1995, *Nationalism and Media Coverage of Indigenous People's Collective Action in Canada*, Wilkes et al. describe how the Canadian media used frames of Indigenous civil disobedience as, among others, criminal, violent and anti-Canadian, concluding that "Coverage of indigenous peoples' collective action in Canada and the United States has been predominantly delegitimizing: stories overwhelmingly emphasize militancy and violence" (Wilkes, 2010, p. 41).

An example of mainstream media framing that calls the Government and RCMP framing into question is Barrera's CBC report that quotes from a 2015 Public Safety Canada risk assessment of the CGL Wet'suwet'en conflict obtained by the Yellowhead Institute via the

ATIA, framing an unnamed Unist'ot'en leader as an "Aboriginal extremist who rejects the authority of the crown" (Barrera, J., 2019).

Wilkes points out that "A consideration of citizenship uncovers the ways that media coverage of indigenous peoples' collective action contrasts indigenous actors with a model of 'proper' citizenry" (Wilkes, 2010, p. 54), noting not only the inherent racism but also the suspicion toward a collective understanding of property has implications to how the concept of FPIC must be followed on their territory.

Comparing Walker et al.'s study of *News media coverage of renewable energy involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada* to Lambertus' observations on media coverage of the 1995 Gustafsen Lake standoff (2004) there is some evidence that media coverage of Indigenous Peoples has evolved between 1995 and the time range Walker et al. studied, 2008 to 2017. According to Walker, "locating narratives that employed overt or even nuanced racist tones were difficult to find," and "UNDRIP, FPIC, the Constitution and the TRC are all mentioned within the context of broken promises and unfair development processes." Walker et al.'s study also showed, however, that "women's and Indigenous voices were largely being excluded from the conversation around Indigenous Peoples and renewable energy in Canada," concluding that to truly change, media needed more women and Indigenous journalists and editors (Walker, 2019, p. 9).

Daniel Morley Johnson, albeit, writing 8 years earlier, takes a bleaker view, asserting that "media outlets continue to perpetuate stereotypes and inaccurate generalizations about Indigenous peoples, and aside from a few independent and Indigenous-owned media sources, the misinformation continues mostly unchallenged and unabated" (Johnson, 2011, p. 2). There has been an increased sophistication from Indigenous communications leaders on the one hand as

well as evidence of increased sensitivity on the part of some media outlets toward Indigenous issues on the other, yet there seemed to be a consensus among Indigenous scholars and critically minded allies that there was still a long way to go.

In 2005, in the Indigenous publication Windspeaker, Young wonders whether "political activism can exist today in the form of warrior societies, which find themselves operating in the shadow of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks" (Young, 2005). Highly visible police action can strongly influence observers' perceptions, especially where no counter narrative is present. Young surmises that a "very public Burrard St. bridge takedown" was made with the specific intention to "discredit the West Coast Warriors, turn the public against them and intimidate the families of warrior society members." Where warrior culture is held up as a positive aspect of Indigenous culture, part of caring for family, it could be perceived by the colonial state as a threat. The negative framing of cultural values is difficult to counter because it is so subtle and ingrained in institutions and assumptions, which is why the possibility for marginalized communities to create and share media independently of those institutions is so meaningful.

### Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds

RCMP tendencies to control the media and to protect industry interests instead of protecting the rights of Indigenous people, are still evident today, however, the media landscape and Indigenous relationship to media has changed dramatically. Sandra Lambertus' case study of the 1995, RCMP militarized assault on a blockade near Gustafsen Lake following a month-long standoff, is an important landmark for my research. The similarities to recent events at Wet'suwet'en and events at Gustafsen Lake in 1995 are disturbing, yet the differences are illuminating.

Sandra Lambertus' book *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds* gives an exhaustive, detailed and highly critical examination of the events and the RCMP's efforts to control the media narrative, providing excellent points of comparison that we can track in parallel with Canada's official measures to acknowledge and compensate for colonial harms, beginning with the RCAP of 1996 up to present efforts to implement UNDRIP. Lambertus' interviews with various participants at Gustafsen Lake, detail how the RCMP failed to negotiate in good faith with Indigenous people and how the entrenched systematic racism and secrecy employed by Canada's federal law enforcement prevailed. These accounts sound fundamentally colonial in nature and they have substantial parallels to RCMP behaviour in Wet'suwet'en.

Today, the RCMP continue to use the tactics that Lambertus exposes and details, despite dramatic changes in the media landscape. National Observer journalist Emma McIntosh reports that, during the Feb. 2020 raids "the RCMP repeatedly interfered with freedom of the press" (2020). This included detaining journalists, threatening them with arrest and blocking their communications, infringements on press freedom that have been condemned by "the international Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, the Canadian Association of Journalists, Canadian Journalists for Free Expression and Amnesty International" (McIntosh, 2020). In short, despite court censure, the behavior of the RCMP during the CGL conflict remains strikingly similar to their much-criticized behavior over 25 years ago.

The RCMP have committed to implementing change along with the rest of Canada's institutions, but omissions in the report they provided to the TRC "demonstrate its resistance to the commission and to the commission's goal of reconciliation" (Arsenault, 2015, p. 22). The RCMP's aforementioned "resistance" refers here to their reluctance to share certain historic

documents requested by the TRC, however, current complaints indicate an ongoing lack of transparency.

As the domestic enforcement arm of Canada's government, the RCMP are one of its most important institutions, and how they implement the principles of TRC will have a significant affect on the process of reconciliation. The RCMP, however, are historically a colonial policing force, and some question whether they can be entirely free of that heritage in their relationship to Indigenous Peoples.

### Sousveillance

Another frame that draws on a concept of securitization based on asymmetric power structures and shares elements of citizen journalism is that of sousveillance, which takes the word surveillance and inverts the prefix "sur", meaning "over" or "from above," replacing it with "sous," or "under" or "from beneath" – hence, a reversal of intrusive watchfulness of the state in which the citizens observe the powerful (Mann, 2012 p. 2). Briefly, it's a way to conceptualize how technological innovations provided a way for people to record and share events around them and how that became a way to increase their ability to "mobilize power against a subject at a higher 'institutionalized' position within the system." As "mobile networked devices have been combined with social networks… mobile media (portable media with dedicated internet infrastructures) provides significant opportunities… to capture records of abuse of power… but also to quickly… communicate it to others for political action" (Mann, 2012, p. 9).

Today every cell phone can record video, most at more than 20 times the resolution of the bulky news cameras used in 1995. Cell phones are ubiquitous, idiot-proof, slimmer than a wallet and can broadcast live to social media, effectively giving anyone the capability of recording and sharing events. A continuous flow of candid audio/visual material now routinely emerges from

any kind of public event, especially where confrontations occur. Wet'suwet'en land defenders document all potentially confrontational interactions with video. Using multiple camera angles increases the reliability of their narrative by triangulation. Footage of interactions between land defenders, RCMP and CGL employees is part of a strategy to protect land defenders by creating a record of events and then the same footage becomes part of the material for their strategic communications, aware that some incidents can evoke a strong reaction from viewers, an effect which can be an effective tool to help support their narrative.

According to Bradshaw (2013, p. 3), the evidence presented online by the global justice movement raises "a salient question: Is this what a police state looks like?" (2013, p. 1). While for many people in Canada, this question is preposterous in its implication that our liberal democracy has anything in common with an authoritarian country, the media reaction to the RCMP's actions against activists, including in Fairy Creek and in Wet'suwet'en, reflected a deep discomfort with the brutality, a view shared by British Columbia Supreme Court (BCSC) Justice Thompson, who found that the RCMP's use of media exclusion zones was unlawful, reminding them that they must "take account of the media's special role in a free and democratic society" (Teal Cedar Products Ltd., 2021).

Activists often claim that the police act with impunity, refusing to testify against their own. Despite it being legal to film police, as long as it's not endangering police or the public (Rieti, 2017), police continue to threaten people who film them and in interactions in Wet'suwet'en territory have arrested journalists who identified themselves clearly as such and were not participating in direct action.

Tactics common across the global justice movement inform the Wet'suwet'en media strategy. Indymedia centres, for example, were created to offer "alternative coverage to the

mainstream media during the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle" (Bradshaw, 2013, p. 4). Indymedia provide tools, training and networks to like-minded activists. While the concept of Sousveillance is not a frame land defenders use to refer to their work themselves, I think it is a helpful way to understand how they use video recording devices as citizen journalists, to expose unacceptable behaviour and attitudes of law enforcement. In cases of police overreach or brutality, video evidence may lead to officers' convictions or activists' acquittal. At the same time, the threat of media exposure may lead police officers to show more restraint in their actions.

## Theme 3: Indigenous resurgence in the context of media

Colonialism continues to negatively affect Indigenous people, but Indigenous people also continually assert their self-determination outside of its context. Resurgence, as defined by John Burrows and James Tully in their introduction to the book they co-edit with Michael Asch, *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, is "Indigenous peoples exercising powers of self-determination outside of state structures and paradigms" (Asch, 2018). This definition allows for a wide range of activities and approaches.

For Glen Coulthard, however, resurgence is a response to the liberal politics of "recognition", whereby meaningful change is substituted for a ceremony in which the dominant power demonstratively recognizes the cultural value of Indigenous peoples, providing the state and members of settler society with a sense of absolution, while simultaneously preventing progress towards true reconciliation. Simply put, there is a colonial framework that defines the value of recognition, who is lacking it and how it is given. "Struggle... serves as the mediating force through which the colonized come to shed their colonial identities" (Coulthard, 2007, p. 449).

**Blockades as Resurgence**

Matriarchs of the Standing Rock Sioux "set up the camp of the Sacred Stones on their traditional territory as a center for direct action, spiritual resistance, cultural preservation, and defense of Indigenous sovereignty" (Kidd, 2020, p. 1). Their self-produced media, reached a global audience, challenged "neo-colonial stereotypes, and… emphasized their long-standing environmental knowledge and opposition to their forced relocation by the extractive industries" (Kidd, 2020, pp. 2-3). "Standing Rock water protectors operated from land-based encampments, and articulated and circulated their struggle through a decentralized assemblage of all manner of collectively governed communications" (Kidd, 2015) (Kidd, 2020, p. 3).

In the end, despite the resistance, the Dakota Access Pipeline was built. The success of the mobilization, however, was an inspiration to others, "from the Micmac and Elsipogtog on the Atlantic side, to the Ojibwe in Northern Minnesota, and the Wet'suwet'en camps on the pipeline routes to the Pacific coast… landbased struggles in which Indigenous communities have established camps on their own land from which to oppose the pipelines" (Kidd, 2020, p. 7).

Inspired by other movements, including Idle No More, Standing Rock water protectors "synergized their on-the-ground encampments with social media communities and allies working in independent media channels" (Kidd, 2020, p. 7). "Grounded in the land-based mobilization, they used an extensive array of digital media to connect, draw people to the camps… and fire up decentralized support actions across the country, the continent and the globe."

Yet resurgence has many manifestations. It isn't necessarily at odds with reconciliation; in fact, Anishinaabe academic John Borrows says:

> "Reconciliation with the earth is the kind of resurgence I value most. In my view, resurgent relations with the natural world are key to the revitalization of Indigenous

> peoples' relationships with the rocks, waters, insects, plants, birds, animals, and other forms of life around us. They are also key to our reconciliation with other peoples" (Borrows, 2018, p. 50).

### Indigenous Knowledge

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith "the activist struggle is to defend, protect, enable and facilitate the self-determination of indigenous peoples over themselves in states and in the global arena where they have little power" (2012, p. 221). Despite the systemic disadvantages that Indigenous land defenders face, they are able to wield power with communication that circumvents hegemonic structures. Starblanket et al. encourage Indigenous people to "strategize methods to overcome the barriers imposed through colonialism," including the creative use of digital technologies, which they note are increasingly being used to "archive and disseminate traditional knowledge, and to mobilize collectively at a distance" (Starblanket, 2018, pp. 197-198). Wet'suwet'en land defenders are combining land-based traditional knowledge that exists "in relation to specific contexts" (Starblanket, 2018, p. 175) creatively, adapting to new contexts, with new technologies and strategies, seamlessly combining them.

According to Irlbacher-Fox, "debates over TK [traditional indigenous knowledge] were really about whether, and how, dominant colonial institutions could include Indigenous ways of knowing and being in ways that did not acknowledge that prior Indigenous exclusion had been, at the very least, unjust." (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014, p. 148) Irlbacher addresses how non-Indigenous researchers can fail to recognize privilege, suggesting that the task of working toward critical self awareness is too great for an individual to achieve. This highlights why it is important to develop participatory research in which knowledge or understanding is co-created by sharing time and space and working together to achieve a mutually beneficial goal.

### Indigenous Media

Comparing the Idle No More movement to the Arab Spring, Adam Barker explores how the challenges Indigenous activist organizers faced were overcome with their adoption of social media: “The problems of distance were especially apparent in the north, where both dispersed population and the distance from major media and populations in southern Canada made the speed and accessibility of social media organizing a valuable tool” (Barker, 2015, p. 50). These lessons certainly inform the adoption of social media as an organizing and mobilizing tool for Wet’suwet’en land defenders.

Describing historic ways that Indigenous Peoples in Canada had interacted with media in their communities, “Indigenous peoples and their partners began questioning not only Western derived conventions of representation and distribution but also central issues regarding the ownership and control of media production and distribution. In many cases, they began developing their own communication institutions and media production practices” (McMahon, 2019, p. 4536). Similarly, both context and community affect Wet’suwet’en land defenders’ strategic media use, as they adapt to restrictions that come from such disparate environments as the physical one on their land or the cultural/technical environment of TikTok.

Leanne Simpson (2017, p. 222), in contrast, harbours severe doubts about whether Indigenous self-determination can flourish in an online context: “The internet and digital technologies have become a powerful site for reinforcing and amplifying settler colonialism” and “There are no bodies on the Internet. There is no land. … grounded normativity [a concept used by Coulthard and Simpson to describe the connection between Indigenous knowledge and life ways, understood through being/living on the land] does not structurally exist in the cyber world” (p. 221).

At the Standing Rock pipeline protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline activists "articulated and circulated their struggle through a decentralized assemblage of all manner of collectively governed communications" (Kidd, 2020, p. 2). The enthusiasm of some non-Indigenous researchers for the "collective" aspect of Indigenous leadership spills over into a lack of respect for a decision-making process that doesn't involve aggressively asserting control.

According to Raynauld, Indigenous "producers use media as a means of cultural reassertion involving struggles of representation and identity" (2018, p. 629). Raynauld describes how Indigenous activists took ownership of digital media and used it effectively to mediate between cultures and to inform and motivate within their communities. In addition to the marginalization that comes from being Indigenous, activists often come into conflict with state authority, whereby it is a practical strategy to gain competence, for example in media production, in order to remain independent, both economically and from regulatory restraints.

One of the remarkable aspects of Indigenous resurgence is the networking and solidarity that is not only happening across Canada but also between communities internationally. Indigenous Fijians, Rotumans are "harnessing social media as a means to reassert their cultural identity." Titifanue et al. go so far as to suggest that "Facebook can act as a digital mamfua or Elder" in the traditional role of Knowledge-keeper for the community (Titifanue, 2018, pp. 33-37). Using social media, the Rotuman diaspora can communicate with their extended families and communities, rediscovering and maintaining their cultural roots, despite the vast distance. These networks also allow for political unity and action in the community's interest that would otherwise not be possible.

The above holds true for Wet'suwet'en land defenders, who have built strong alliances not only with several communities across Turtle Island, including with the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee, but also have built connections with people all over the world.

#### Humour

Humour can be an important aspect of social and cultural interaction, to lighten the mood of a group or to expose the ridiculous in an opponent. In Cortney Smith's article she describes a T-Shirt that plays on the American security organization with the caption "Homeland Security – fighting terrorism since 1492," showing an iconic image of an Indigenous Warrior (Smith, 2019). There is irony in Freda Huson's use of the term "Critical Infrastructure" and in a video that lightly mocks the ignorance of an RCMP officer who clumsily attempts to explain Delgamuukw (UnistotenCamp, 2018). While it's not a central theme to my research, I found that it was present both in the interactions of land defenders and in their media use.

## Gaps in the research

The biggest gap identified in the literature is the lack of field research. Theoretical discussions and text analyses must be grounded in actual first-hand experience. There are two central reasons that this is so important, the first being that a purely theoretical and text-based analysis will miss crucial information and insights that can only be documented in the field. The second reason, which is more important to my research, is that the relational paradigm demands it. Indigenous scholars have offered their vision of how respectful research should proceed, and that is, it should proceed in collaboration with Indigenous people. As Coulthard et al. state, "Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity" (2016, p. 254). Accepting the

invitation to visit Wet'suwet'en land defenders on their land was practicing research as solidarity.

## Summary

The themes that I found in the literature: **Reconciliation**, **Colonialism Today** and **Indigenous Resurgence**, provided a rich contextual basis from which to begin my field research. These themes start with an imagined ideal resolution of the colonial tension, exploring the recent history of recognizing Canada's colonial history and its ongoing harms and the beginning of the process of realizing the ideal, then shifts focus to a present where colonialism informs the world view that defines Indigenous relationships with extractive industry and the RCMP, abetted by a complicit mainstream media, which Indigenous activists respond to by finding strength in a revitalization of Indigenous culture that weaves together media-savvy, Indigenous sovereignty and collective mobilization. The following chapter will describe my methodological approach and research design.

# Chapter 3. Methodology and Research Design

## Introduction: #AllEyesOnWetsuweten

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and research design of my project. This "research design can be defined as the systematic process of collecting and analyzing data to increase understanding of the phenomenon being studied…" (Woodard, 2013, p. 38). I discuss the research design as planned and executed in my Capstone project, connecting my project to ethical approaches to research with Indigenous Peoples and shows how I tried to implement that approach by practicing good, open and intentional relations in my field research and interviews, referring to literature from contemporary Indigenous scholars. I also situate my research in the context of the Wet'suwet'en land defender blockade and describe the site. Finally, I explain my data collection process and note some limitations on the data.

The essence of my methodology could be summed up as "visiting"; according to Leanne Simpson, visiting is an Indigenous tradition which is "enjoyable" and "nurtures... relationship building." Yet beyond that, "Visiting is the core of our political system... our mobilization... and our intelligence" (Simpson, 2017, p. 165). Visiting maintains social and political relationships and is a way of sharing information. Building and maintaining relationships is at the heart of the relational paradigm. Starblanket et al. describe the Relational Paradigm as "a relational way of being that is inspired by the principles of interconnectedness inherent in many Indigenous legal and political orders" (Starblanket, 2018. p. 176).

Relationality is the connection that can only be built over time through a network of relationships, a negotiated understanding and trust, maintained through communication and strengthened over time by mutual good will and actions. Relational ethics may be seen as

contrasting with a western European ideal which is based on individual achievement over community good, and a basis for ethics which can be understood independently from community or relationships. The relational paradigm means being present and building and maintaining meaningful relationships, which I hoped I would accomplish through my research. I was motivated to learn more from Indigenous researchers out of concern that my research not damage my relationships to people and by extension their communities.

Anishinaabe journalist, professor and lawyer, Duncan McCue's advice for journalists explains the source of communities' ambivalence toward research:

> "There's a long history of non-Indigenous people coming to Indigenous communities, asking about people's lives, requesting their stories, then LEAVING. Those visitors interpreted what they saw and heard - in books, reports, studies, films, or photos. Indigenous people had little say in how those stories were told; in many cases, the story never even made it back to them" (McCue, D., 2011).

I have a family connection to the Wet'suwet'en community: my close friends, sisters Molly and Jennifer Wickham, are Wet'suwet'en of the Gidimt'en clan. Molly Wickham, Gidimt'en spokesperson, was given the traditional name Sleydo by an Elder. It is an honour which comes with duties and responsibilities. Hereafter in the text, I will use the name Sleydo in citations. Jennifer Wickham, Gidimt'en media coordinator, goes by Jen and hereafter in the text I will use the short version of her name in citations. They are my two interview participants.

Our families have known each other for twenty years connected by a network of mutual friends. These relationships are important to me and that is a strong reason for me to approach this research from a relational perspective. A further reason is that the people who have

supported me throughout my research project have suggested that I do so. Authors, teachers, philosophers, thinkers and leaders whose work was recommended to me and whose words spoke to me adhered to the relational paradigm. Finally, this research is a response to an invitation from Wet'suwet'en land defenders to come to the Yintah to support their direct actions. Mohawk scholar Leanne Simpson asserts that the acts of physically traveling overland and visiting "builds empathy, trust and the ability to give each other the benefit of the doubt" (2017, p. 221). Visiting is how I first experienced relationality in action. I grew up on a homestead in northern BC on Tahltan territory. I remember families would be "just driving around" their territory and "drop in for a visit."

Métis scholar Adam Gaudry writes: "There is often no better metaphor for describing a researcher than as a witness to everyday life" (2015, p. 254). Gaudry describes dominant research practices as "extraction research" (p. 245) and he proposes four principles for what he names "Insurgent research":

> *"1. Research is grounded in, respects, and validates Indigenous world-views*
>
> *2. Research output is intended for use by Indigenous communities.*
>
> *3. Researchers are responsible to Indigenous communities for the decisions that they make, and communities are the final judges of the validity and effectiveness of research projects.*
>
> *4. Research is action oriented and inspires direct action in Indigenous communities." (2015, p. 248)*

Gaudry rhetorically asks: "Can non-indigenous researchers also do insurgent research?" His reply is to simply refer the reader back to the four principles. I find these principles align well with OCAP™ and serve as a reminder that Indigenous Peoples are, as Sleydo noted in her

interview for this project, the "experts in their struggle," and, as Gaudry's third principle states, it is they who must assess the "validity and effectiveness" of research projects. Gaudry's fourth principle, on the other hand, seems to aim more at Indigenous researchers, considering it emphasizes leadership within communities.

To me, visiting in person is an essential component of collaborative, ethical research that could not be replaced by video-conferencing. Shared conversation is important, but so too is sharing the shifts in the weather, the work of camp life, the sense of the challenges and threats that the land defenders faced every day. Margaret Kovach described the preparation process for her conversational method of data collection, saying that "within Indigenous methodologies preparation also included interpersonal, relational preparation (i.e., participation in ceremony, visiting community)" (2010, p. 46). As I was going to be visiting friends who I had not seen for a long time and I was going to be asking them to share their personal stories with me, for the purpose of analysing and then sharing those stories, I felt the need to re-confirm our bonds of trust by accepting their invitation and making the journey to the Yintah to observe and participate in the Wet'suwet'en camp, and conduct my interviews with land defenders in person.

## Field Research Plan

Responding to this invitation to allies to come and stand with land defenders, I visited the blockade at Coyote camp October 24 - 29, 2021 as a supporter and observer. This involved careful planning to fit the ethical and professional requirements of the University of Alberta. Given that land defenders had been served a legal injunction ordering them not to interfere with CGL's pipeline construction, they were under constant threat of arrest by the RCMP. Being sensitive to the land defenders' urgent request for supporters to bear witness to the unfolding situation, yet requiring formal permission from the University of Alberta Ethics board as well as

a safety assessment for Field Research, I was worried that the window to honour my invitation to visit the camp might end before the required permissions were in place. Fortunately, permission to conduct field research was granted in time for me to spend time at the blockade, an experience that provided fundamental context to my understanding of the challenges land defenders faced, both personally and in producing media.

To prepare for the trip, my supervisor and I met with staff in the Research Ethics Office who provided advice regarding ethical requirements for the project, and I completed a Field Research Action Plan, which was reviewed and approved by the Field Research Office. In case of an interaction with law enforcement, I planned to assume the role of Legal Observer, a term described by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) as a volunteer who represents "the watching eyes of civil liberties groups such as the BCCLA… an impartial, neutral, and objective witness; not an activist, protester, or participant in a demonstration" (British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, 2014, pp. 3-4). The term does not guarantee special protections, yet, the handbook was made by legal experts with the intention that the observer follow rules that should keep them from being arrested, first and foremost making their identity as non-participators explicit. A legal observer does not participate in direct action or protest but keeps a written record of any interactions between activists and the police or CGL employees. I felt being a legal observer would be compatible with my position as an ally of the land defenders, while still adhering to the neutrality demanded by my role as a researcher. However, when the RCMP raided Coyote camp on November 18 they arrested "Elders, legal observers and media" (Simmons, 2021).

Another challenge to my field research plan came in the form of COVID-19. In early 2020, shortly after the arrests at Unist'ot'en, the pandemic arrived, along with restrictions

prohibiting travel to the community to conduct research. It seemed that remote research had potential to lead to misunderstandings or reproduce the colonial hierarchies the land defenders were fighting. I felt the reciprocal value of showing solidarity by physically standing with land defenders wouldn't be as powerful in an online setting.

The lockdown, however, did not stop Wet'suwet'en land defenders from mobilizing. They continued their work successfully online, building up an even stronger social media presence and found new ways to share their message. Virtual rallies and panels provided an unexpected sense of immediacy and active participation. As the communities were vaccinated, the pandemic began to slow, restrictions eased and finally, field research was an option again.

To address COVID-19 health protocols, I performed a daily health check as recommended by Alberta Health Services, and took the following precautions to mitigate risk of contracting COVID-19: I isolated for ten days, including five days before travel, two days traveling and three days in Smithers, wore protective mask, maintained social distancing when conducting interviews, washed hands after conducting interviews and checked information with the local territorial health officer to confirm that COVID-19 was not present in the community before conducting surveys.

## Field Research Report: Trip to Wet'suwet'en territory

As I have pre-existing relationships with both participants, who are Wet'suwet'en land defenders, and who had invited me to come visit them on their territory, they were able to advise me on travel, safety and cultural protocols. Visits to various camps and check-points throughout Wet'suwet'en territory were conducted on the basis of free, prior and informed consent, which was largely granted informally. Nonetheless, the protocols were respected and the research was conducted at the hospitality of Gidimt'en spokesperson, Sleydo.

I left Vancouver on Saturday, October 16th, to travel north to Smithers to visit my friends Molly (Sleydo) and Jen Wickham and their family. They belong to the Gidimt'en clan of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, whose traditional territory, or Yintah, lies along the Wedzin Kwa river in a remote area of small lakes and forest, outside of Houston BC. The Yintah is accessible by a well-maintained gravel Forest Service Road (FSR), used by the few residents of the area, including Wet'suwet'en, a few settlers, the logging industry and CGL. In the last few years, it's also been regularly patrolled by the RCMP. The two-day drive from Vancouver to Smithers was followed by seven days of socially-distanced visiting, with Molly and Jen's family and then a sixty-three-kilometer trip down the Morice River FSR to Lynx checkpoint and finally a twenty-minute walk up to Coyote camp.

The six days and five nights I was embedded at Coyote camp, I participated in the day-to-day work required of everyone, attended general camp meetings and visited with people staying in the camp in the evenings. I did not attend meetings pertaining to security or communication. Following ethnographic methodology, I made field notes of my observations throughout the day and engaged in "participant observation and field interviewing" (Tracey, 2013, p. 49). On the afternoon before I left, at the Tiny House, which is the field command centre of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders, I conducted the planned interview with Sleydo. The second interview was conducted a day later in Smithers.

*Figure 5 Lhudis Bin near the drill pad on the Yintah. Photo by author.*

I had planned to record my interviews on video, feeling that the "focused ethnography" method of embedded, participatory, videography was appropriate. Once in camp it became clear that would be intrusive. There were already people who had accompanied them during the Unist'ot'en and Gidimt'en blockades and arrests, whose ongoing work I could potentially have impeded.

## Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

When planning my interviews, I purposefully selected participants based on the multiple roles they inhabit in the Wet'suwet'en land defender movement. That is, they are leaders in their communities, they are communicators, they are creators of media and spokespersons, they are activists and they are organizers, they have skills in media production, they are experts in their own cultural movements as well as in strategic media creation and use, they are decision makers, and they take a leading role in creative and aesthetic decisions and developing content. They possess "bridging capital," (Shirky, 2009, p. 222) or high degree of connectivity within several heterogenous groups, belonging to networks that span Wet'suwet'en, environmentalist, social justice, media and social media communities. To stay within the limited scope of the Capstone project, and to respect the time of my interview participants, I decided to conduct two in-depth interviews. These interview participants both gave their permission for their names to be used in this Capstone project: Molly Wickham, referred to as Sleydo (her name as supporting chief and Gidimt'en spokesperson) and Jen Wickham, the Gidimt'en Media Coordinator. Both have been active in organizing and participating in online events, content creation, including documentary film, social media and communication with alternative and mainstream media.

As I have pre-existing relationships with both participants, my empathy toward the participants and my bias toward their cause limit my objectivity. While I recognize that may

reflect some selection bias in the selection of interview participants, it also reflects the principles of ethical Indigenous research methodologies, which stress the importance of relationships and connection in data collection processes ("Indigenous methodologies embrace relational assumptions as central to their core epistemologies") (Kovach, 2010, p. 42). The purposeful sampling of participants within a single movement greatly reduces the ability to make generalizations from the findings, as does the small sample size.

My interview protocol consisted of two thematic question sets. The first part of the semi-structured interviews covered aspects of media-making and strategic use of media in the context of their activist work. The second part covered broader aspects of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Altogether, the interview questions sought to elicit information about media skills and strategy, and then asked about Indigenous people and media in recent history, touching specifically on Gustafsen Lake and Oka and asking about the use of exclusion zones and finally the role of their strategic media in the process of decolonization.

Although the interview questions did not explicitly bring up the relational paradigm or the concept of visiting, these were reflected in many different points of the conversation. The interviews seemed to point back to visiting as being the way that dialogue happened and relationships were built and maintained, including my own trip up north. Therefore, the concept of "visiting" was an important way of connecting to the relational paradigm and the Indigenous world view that I encountered in the literature, especially from Indigenous scholars.

One concept that guided my development of the interview questions was citizen journalism, the practice of non-professional individuals documenting events in which they were participating with their own equipment, usually a smartphone with a video camera. Another

concept that shaped the questions was sousveillance, which covers a more specific aspect of citizen journalism: that is, observing and documenting the representatives of state power, in particular law-enforcement. Sousveillance was not introduced as an explicit concept in the interviews, but is a fitting way to describe and make sense of the physical processes and many of the more immediate goals of Wet'suwet'en land defender media making, as well as feeding into the strategic use of media as a persuasive, mobilizing, communicative tool in social media contexts.

The RCMP tactic of exclusion zones to control media access came from Lambertus' case study of the Gustafsen Lake standoff and was a key point of inquiry in the interview because of how the controversial tactic remained in use twenty-five years later. As discussed in my analysis below, exclusion zones are used to limit the movement of Indigenous Peoples on their land which has implications for the implementation of UNDRIP and aligns with the historic mandate of the RCMP and the contemporary lens of CIP, in addition to being a standard RCMP tactic used to control the narrative of conflicts. The interview questions aim to understand how current media strategies such as citizen journalism or sousveillance work in the context of exclusion zones.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants, a day apart, under extremely different circumstances: the first, with Gidimt'en spokesperson Sleydo, took place at the Coyote Camp blockade in the crowded, busy, Tiny House, while the media team continued to create, receive, process and transmit strategic media and the checkpoints continued to report ongoing RCMP and CGL activity in the area. The second took place at a calmer hub of activity, at Gidimt'en Media Coordinator Jen Wickham's living room in Smithers as various people came

and went, bringing food, taking the opportunity to have a hot shower or picking up equipment and supplies that had been delivered.

I recorded the interviews and transcribed them using a voice-to-text program called Sonix.ai, which produced a text with over 90 percent accuracy. I then reviewed and edited the written transcript online in real time using the Sonix.ai interface to check the audio with the transcript. I typed up field notes and observations I had collected in my notebook on my trip for reflection and analysis.

## Data Analysis: Qualitative Inductive Analysis

This study reflects a Qualitative Descriptive methodology. Semi-structured interviews provide rich, detailed data, however, having only two interviews and staying at the field research site for such a short time limited the scope of the research. Analysis of the data drew on features of the generic inductive approach which focuses on "themes and interpretation, comparing cases to each other" (Liu, 2016, p. 130). The qualitative inductive approach provided an appropriate framework for this exploratory research. As Woodward (2013, p. 39) writes: "The purpose of using an inductive approach is to immerse oneself in the details and specifics of extensive and varied raw data in order to unearth important patterns, themes, and interrelationships in a brief, summary format."

During the analysis, the interview responses were categorized and compared, where interesting contradictions or similarities arose, those observations were summarized in narrative form or quoted directly. "The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the raw data into a model or framework. This model contains key themes and processes identified and constructed by the evaluator during the coding process" (Thomas, 2006, p. 240).

From early on, I planned to use the case study of the Gustafsen Lake standoff of 1995, as described in Sandra Lambertus book *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds* to provide an historical context to the conflict in Wet'suwet'en, a long-simmering conflict involving Indigenous resistance to a pipeline project built through their territory that has boiled over into violence in recent times. Comparing and contrasting these two cases in my analysis helped highlight the patterns in the relationship between the RCMP and the media, and show how different factors played into similarities and differences in the current situation.

In Richard Harp's Media Indigena podcast of Feb. 9, 2020, guest Dr. Candis Callison compares RCMP tactics vis. a vis the media at Gustafson Lake to Wet'suwet'en noting "this book about Gustafsen [Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds], makes it really clear that media are continually prevented from really showing what's going on and how difficult it is to actually report on these situations" (Callison, 2020).

*Figure 6 Confiscated CGL equipment adorned with red dresses, representing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada. Photo by author.*

## Summary

My research aimed to highlight the similarities and differences between media's role in 1995's Gustafsen Lake standoff and the current blockades of CGL in Wet'suwet'en, exploring how Wet'suwet'en land defenders created and used media to further their goals and strategies to assert sovereignty on their territory. The following chapter consists of a presentation and analysis on the findings of my field observations while embedded with the land defenders at Coyote

Camp and the contents of semi-structured interviews with land defenders involved in the media campaign.

# Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter presents my discussion of data collected from the interviews and field research. I relate these data to my two research questions, and divide my analysis into categories associated with these questions. I used qualitative inductive analysis to identify themes in the data, and connect my observations to existing literature.

## RQ1:

*How did the Wet'suwet'en land defenders, who oppose the Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline project through unceded Wet'suwet'en territory, create and use media content and events to support their goals and activities?*

## RQ2:

*How do Wet'suwet'en land defenders see the relationship between their media use and decolonization?*

## A Professionalized Form of Citizen Journalism

While the reoccupation of Wet'suwet'en land by the Wet'suwet'en centres sustainable living in harmony with the natural world, the Gidimt'en media team enthusiastically embrace media production technology, especially video-making tools, and the power of network effects in social media. Both participants emphasized the key importance of media to the Wet'suwet'en land defender movement as they worked to achieve their goals, calling media "one of our most critical tools" (Sleydo) and "absolutely integral [to our work]" (Wickham, J.). As Jen stated:

> "Without these social networks, which modern technology has made more accessible to everybody and anybody with a cell phone, none of the things that we've seen in support and solidarity with our Wet'suwet'en fight for sovereignty would have happened."

The professionalism and strategy inherent in this process was evident in my field observations. I watched as the media team quickly and quietly went about setting up for a shoot, while Sleydo went over the script of a brief update they were planning to shoot when the light reached a certain angle. Content featured the majesty of the land itself, the Yintah, and the Wedzin Kwa river. Videographers took footage in different settings, under a variety of lighting conditions, taking advantage of seasonal changes and the geography to create a visual vocabulary to present the Yintah. Aerial shots were used to get a sense of the vast space, as well as the severity of the destruction caused by the pipeline corridor.

The Tiny House functioned both as a command and media centre. Someone continuously monitored the radio for updates and then relayed the data to the next checkpoint, because the radios had limited ranges and reduced function without a line of sight. Raw video footage was edited into media appropriate for the different platforms on laptops in the Tiny House and uploaded at excruciatingly slow speeds over their internet connection.

Sleydo described the decision-making process that goes into producing a new media product: "We'll identify, as leadership in the movement, what we feel is important to our message and what, when we should be doing a video, when we should be updating." They work as a team, drawing on the expertise of allies who bring professional media production skills; as Sleydo explained: "Everybody's got their own job".

When asked to describe the goals behind their media, Jen said: “It’s really getting the information as concise as possible and then making it really visually appealing and engaging people’s senses.” Jen described the production style as “very clean,” with consistent aesthetic elements that had been honed over time. New people joining the media team were “mentored by the folks that have been working with us the longest” to reproduce that look and feel. To help achieve consistency, media producers worked from an extensive library of footage that they had shot that included “things that [Wet’suwet’en land defenders are] doing in their everyday lives that really bring to life the things that they’re talking about protecting,” activities like hunting, tanning a moose hide, and scenes of the territory that showcased the natural beauty, like crystal clear Wedzin Kwa or the dense, evergreen forest. The visuals were supported with sounds from Wet’suwet’en culture, such as drumming or songs and natural sounds like the wind, water and animal cries.

Noor (2017, p. 2) defines citizen journalism as “the act of non-professionals, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information.” While filming an event on a cell phone is something anyone can do, mobilizing a movement, documenting activities and sharing a message effectively, is arguably, a much bigger challenge, requiring a sense of what you can create with the tools available to you, on what channels it should be shared and how the content has to be adapted for different platforms. For Wet’suwet’en land defenders, media production and distribution were imbued with strategic purpose.

## Sousveillance for safety

As a description of media strategy employed by Wet’suwet’en land defenders, sousveillance provides a useful framework to illustrate the asymmetrical power dynamic that

favoured the RCMP and CGL, and the methods that land defenders used to fight back to level the playing field to some extent.

The land defender media team was also always prepared to document unplanned events: "We have journalists and media people on site wherever we are, that are recording, that are there to see, any police presence, police activity" (Sleydo). At times, this process was strategically deployed as a form of sousveillance, which served to document interactions between RCMP, CGL employees and land defenders as a matter of security; as Sleydo said: "It keeps us safer."

Being in Coyote Camp, 63km on a gravel road from the nearest town, the isolation of the blockade put into sharp focus the RCMP's superiority in numbers, the weaponry, and the casually threatening authority of its officers I briefly encountered. Since the injunction had been served, anyone still in Coyote Camp was under threat of arrest. Lookouts at the checkpoints up the FSR kept each other informed about any movement on the road, so the camp would probably have been warned about any significant movement of RCMP, however, that meant being prepared for a confrontation within a short amount of time (approximately 30-60 mins). The possibility that the RCMP could come by helicopter was also mentioned, although deemed unlikely.

Eve Tuck asserts that, "it is important that we put settler state violence under scrutiny" (2018, p. 156). Sousveillance is a tool well-suited to precisely this purpose. Sousveillance can be used for self-defence and wielded against abusive law-enforcement officers who hide behind uniforms or the politicians who direct them to act against citizens. While Citizen Journalism covers a much larger range of media producing activities, Sousveillance is a tool used by activists for protection and to further their strategic goals (Mann, 2012). When violence, intimidation or harassment occurred recording the interactions gave land defenders a way to hold

RCMP and CGL employees accountable, one of the prime purposes of sousveillance. The use of media tools such as video for this purpose was accompanied by the involvement of legal observers who were on-site to record the details of any interaction, especially in case of any violation of the activists' rights. There were activists at Coyote Camp with extensive experience as legal observers within other movements, who advised me on how I should conduct myself. To avoid provoking the RCMP, they said, I should record my observations primarily in writing, and only resort to filming if I witnessed an egregious violation.

While Wet'suwet'en land defenders never used the term sousveillance, many of the tactics and strategies could be understood as such, particularly in the way that they document the militarized enforcers of state power from a relative position of powerlessness, using commonly accessible channels of networked communication to share evidence that might not be covered by mainstream news media outlets, aiming to expose and prevent injustice, while helping to inform the public.

## Raising Awareness

Yet, while the act of filming the RCMP and CGL security as a protective measure was important, the primary purpose of media production was to serve Wet'suwet'en land defenders' strategic goals of raising awareness of their struggle. "There are undeveloped allies in the majority of the population, that are just ignorant, by no fault of their own" (Wickham, J.) Wet'suwet'en land defenders use social media to get basic information about Indigenous history and colonialism to people by packing as much in as possible, to be "engaging so that people actually listen to your entire message" (Wickham, J.). They definitely try to reach "people who are sitting on the fence… to educate them and inform them" (Sleydo).

As Jen said, “I want to optimistically believe that a lot of people are not taking action and not being supportive for a lack of knowing.” She argued that their fundamental strategic communications goal was education, including raising awareness about the history of colonialism, genocide, residential schools, Indigenous sovereignty, the TRC and UNDRIP; things affecting Indigenous communities which “a lot of Canadian citizens didn’t know.” She added that land defenders feel that most Canadians still do not know about Wet’suwet’en title and the Supreme Court ruling in the Delgamuukw case. Sleydo also noted the importance of sharing the history of the Wet’suwet’en struggle for rights and title and land defenders’ fight against the CGL pipeline, stating that “People aren’t going to support us if they don’t understand why we’re doing what we’re doing.”

Another core audience for the land defenders is other Indigenous communities. As Sleydo noted, “Some people don’t care about Indigenous sovereignty, but they care about the climate crisis. And so sometimes we have to focus on our commonalities with different groups.” She explained that they talk differently with their own people, with other Indigenous communities than they do with environmental NGOs. “Trying to find that common ground with a bunch of different people is often challenging,” so they keep their message about Wet’suwet’en land-sovereignty and self-determination consistent while drawing the connection to people’s own concerns.

“We’re trying to meet people where they’re at,” Sleydo said. Meeting people “where they’re at” on social media, may be understood as an extension of the custom of “visiting,” in which people interact with each other in a virtual space, representing themselves in an authentic way, building relationships, sharing ideas and information, mobilizing and organizing cooperative action in the online space.

Several videos on yintahaccess.com show people having conversations, some while walking out on the land, some while sitting around the campfire. They include Wet'suwet'en Elders and Indigenous supporters from across Turtle Island, including Wet'suwet'en hereditary Chief, Dinï'ze' Woos; Gidimt'en matriarch Teddybear; Skyler Williams, Mohawk and 1492 Land Back Lane spokesperson; and Donna Silversmith of Snipe Clan, Cayuga, showing how Indigenous supporters are coming to meet the Wet'suwet'en land defenders where they stand, visiting them on the Yintah.

In the relational paradigm, visiting is a key context to build and maintain relationships. Visiting means "sharing oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being" and visiting is also "fun and enjoyable" (Simpson, 2017, p. 165). Visiting offers a context for people to interact and resolve issues and cement bonds through agreements that rely on mutual trust and a sense of responsibility woven into relationships with family, community and with the natural world.

Visiting is a basic activity by which relationality can be exercised. In accepting an invitation to visit my friends, to stand with Wet'suwet'en land defenders in solidarity, it was my intention to recognize the legitimacy of their movement, their claim to place and of themselves and their family, culture and community.

## Mobilizing, Organizing, Eliciting Solidarity

One of the things that stood out to me about Wet'suwet'en land defenders' use of strategic media was their successful social media presence and the way they seemed to inspire solidarity in their networks. Authenticity, real connection and sharing of experience seemed to be guiding principles for Sleydo and Jen in their online activism. To do this, Wet'suwet'en land defenders use a broad array of social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, where

they post images, text and live streams, the latter of which can be viewed asynchronously, as well as YouTube videos, TikTok videos, Twitter text and images, video and links, press-releases, podcasts, and live events such as conferences, panels, seminars, radio, television and vlog interviews that can also be viewed asynchronously. “We are producing all kinds of media,” said Sleydo. This includes two long-form documentaries currently being made in cooperation with film-makers embedded in the movement, one of which, Yintah, will be co-directed by Jen and is currently being presented by the directors at Cannes (2022). The film is funded by the CBC and has a planned release in 2023.

Each platform serves a different purpose and demographic, while their presence on each platform has links funneling all viewers to their website, at “yintahaccess.com”, which houses a wealth of information including longer videos with more in-depth information, maps, time-lines and press-releases. To effectively use social media, it’s necessary to understand the trends, to know who can be reached on each platform and to know how to craft the message for the audience. “We used to rely heavily on Facebook and then that shifted to Instagram. We have a much larger following on Twitter,” Jen explained how the social media landscape keeps changing.

We want people to “not just understand but [be] willing to take action and hold their governments accountable” (Wickham, J.). At Coyote camp, supporters were willing to risk arrest, committing their time and energy to travel the “sixty-three kilometres out on a logging road in the middle of nowhere” (Sleydo) to stand with Wet’suwet’en land defenders. Their crowdfunding campaigns have also been successful at raising money for various needs, including a substantial legal defense fund in anticipation of the ongoing legal action land defenders have typically faced.

Using network effects to leverage "the information and communication power that makes it possible to grassroot the networks and to network the grassroots" (Castells, 2013, p. 413), Wet'suwet'en land defenders made use of the political channels of social media to raise awareness and build solidarity. Wet'suwet'en land defenders, armed with cell phones and social media accounts, leveraged the power of platforms' "network effects," whereby the value of social connections is potentiated by the size of the network (Srnicek, 2017, p. 45).

As Sleydo explains, "people are spending a lot of time on social media, but they're learning a lot of things through social media as well. And that's an opportunity to do some of that work or share some of that work or have some of those conversations. Which has been pretty useful and successful, I think."

As of April 4, 2022, Gidimt'en Checkpoint's Facebook page has 63,800 followers. Their current active campaign in March 2022 is aimed at pressuring the Royal Bank of Canada to divest of its investment in CGL, and includes a post by Hollywood star Mark Ruffalo, who, along with celebrities like Greta Thunberg and Leonardo DiCaprio, have shown support through social media. While Ruffalo's post had accrued only 479 reactions by April 3, 2022, a post with the title *Police Harassment* from March 24 had accumulated 2100 reactions by April 3, 2022. Such observations have limited meaning, coming as they do from a single platform, Facebook. However, overall, the number of supporters, the ability to garner celebrity support, and the fundraising can be assessed in a range of ways – on the one hand, it shows that their efforts have had some success; on the other hand, the goal is to bring about political change. So, the measure of success is the affect their efforts have on corporations and governmental institutions that command the state-sanctioned wealth and power in Canada. Sleydo notes that CGL and the government are "more concerned about how they respond to us in terms of what that's going to

look like and not because people think they're bad because they don't care if people think they're bad, but because of what people will do in reaction to what they're doing." In other words, Wet'suwet'en land defenders are leveraging strategic media to influence public perception with the intention of making the kind of waves that cause investment groups to divest and governments to change policy.

## Evolution of Media Strategy

For all the continuing importance placed on reaching out to people on social media to build relationships, to network, to raise awareness, to educate and to elicit solidarity, the main strategic focus of Wet'suwet'en land defender's media use has evolved. Land defenders have shifted the main focus of their strategy from calls to action that try to put pressure on government or the RCMP (for example, through letter writing campaigns) to "putting pressure on the investors and where the money is coming from and really hitting them where it hurts, which is in their pocketbook" (Sleydo). To target investors in the CGL project, such as major CGL shareholders Aimco and KKR, Wet'suwet'en land defender media publicizes "the fact that [CGL] don't have free prior and informed consent; they're participating in genocide and they're trespassing on Wet'suwet'en territory. And so that, of course, does not make investors and owners of projects happy to be getting that kind of attention" (Wickham, J.).

In other words, what Sleydo has called "a critical piece of the media strategy" is getting the companies to worry about the consequences of supporting genocide in terms of public opinion. Sleydo related the changes she's observed at the individual level; "there have been people that have come up to me in recent years and have said, 'I was pro-pipeline, I was supporting it [or] I work for them or whatever. But what the RCMP did to you and what the company did to you was wrong, and we don't agree with it'" (Sleydo). Wet'suwet'en land

defenders' success in bringing awareness to their cause is remarkable in a communications arena where powerful companies like CGL hire "their own media companies to go out and do propaganda" (Sleydo).

"I think one of our biggest successes has been through our media efforts. We have been able to educate people about the differences between traditional governance systems and elected band council systems," which has contributed to such a substantial shift in the public eye that it's resulted finally in policy change. "Everything that happened in 2020 brought the government to the table on a provincial and federal level and signed an MOU [Memorandum of Understanding (Canada, 2020, May)] around implementing our title" (Sleydo).

Yet, as Jen notes, "It's been a year and a half, and that hasn't happened, so I don't know how much faith I put in that process." Indeed, that a MOU by the government of Canada that specifies action within three months should not be acted on after a year and a half is troubling, especially considering that in that time, the conflict around the land itself between CGL and Wet'suwet'en hereditary Chiefs remained unresolved while CGL continued with construction of the pipeline, using the legal strategy of the injunction to silence Wet'suwet'en opposition.

## Decolonization – flaws in the framework

The second research question sought to understand whether and if so how, Wet'suwet'en land defenders used their media to achieve broader goals of self-determination and changing the colonial system, to decolonize, as it were. The scepticism that the term "decolonization" elicited for my two interview participants put its appropriateness to the context of this research in doubt. Decolonization is, perhaps, too broad a term, or doesn't suit a movement engaged so actively with what it identifies as colonial structures. Jen explained that decolonization was a complex, ongoing process, without a set end point, so that using the frame of decolonization as a context

for Wet'suwet'en land defenders could mislead people into thinking that specific, concrete goals, such as stopping CGL from drilling under the Wedzin Kwa could be equated with measurable progress toward decolonization. She said:

> "…we'll continue to do it until we're satisfied with the state of our lands and our culture and our languages and our families, and the health of our people as a nation and our ability to enact our jurisdiction and assert our rights and title as we did for millennia. And that's going to look different in different areas of people's lives."

One might argue that processes and institutions in the nation state of Canada are deeply intertwined within a colonial system and while decolonization may provide a framework for critiquing the system, and that critique may lead to adjustments that make the system more accommodating of Indigenous interests, the system isn't going to change fundamentally. Jen, who is a trained teacher, explained:

> "Most people that are talking about decolonising the academy or… decolonising whatever, are actually talking about *indigenizing* [emphasis added] those spaces… trying to make those spaces safer for indigenous people… if somebody is comfortable with saying, 'this is decolonizing media or decolonised media then people feel like, 'the work is done'" (Wickham, J.).

This critical insight into the limitations of the frame of decolonization illuminated the scope of the struggle and underlined the challenge of sustaining the movement beyond clearly defined conflicts. The participants' responses to the interview questions about decolonization, nevertheless, did provide insight into how Wet'suwet'en land defenders used media to work towards the larger goals of Wet'suwet'en sovereignty and self-determination.

## Land defender media strategy and decolonization

Sleydo emphasized the importance, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, of drawing connections between the struggles of different Indigenous Peoples worldwide, and then drawing the connection between those struggles and other social and environmental issues. As Sleydo explained:

> "This is a part of a bigger thing. This is part of colonization. It's part of capitalism and it's part of patriarchy. It's part of all these systems that are really hurting everybody in the world… addressing the way colonization works and the way capitalism is working is going to address the climate crisis" (Sleydo).

However, for land defenders, mainstream media falls short in critiquing this system. Jen stated, "We cannot trust the mainstream media to accurately represent the facts as we know them." The mainstream media "aren't covering the stories that matter to Indigenous people unless there's violence involved," said Sleydo. For the interviewees, the development of Indigenous led media outlets like APTN is a double-edged sword; "We, as in Indigenous people, I think gravitate more towards APTN, for example, as a news source because it's Indigenous," said Jen. The concentration of Indigenous content in Indigenous media "kind of takes pressure off of other mainstream news sources" (Wickham, J.). While Jen sees a lot of progress in representation of Indigenous Peoples within mainstream media, Indigenous people as leaders and stories that aren't just about violence and despair, "a lot of the things are still really framed that way, like a lot of coverage on [Wet'suwet'en], for example, mainstream media will focus on the injunction or the division within community. They won't do a story on Wet'suwet'en sovereignty and how we're being wronged" (Wickham, J). Statements by Wet'suwet'en spokespersons are treated as hearsay, while RCMP press releases are "quoted verbatim, as fact"

(Wickham, J.) while journalists from mainstream news outlets have seldom made the journey to Wet'suwet'en. The local news in Smithers has a small section dedicated to Indigenous news but the conflict in Wet'suwet'en, which made a top headline in the internationally known, UK-based, news outlet, the Guardian, has never received more than a sentence or two, according to Sleydo, "Never once have they sent out a reporter to report on anything that's happening out on our territories. Not one time."

"I think mainstream media has a really long way to go," said Jen, summing up the coverage. Smaller and independent news outlets, including the Tyee, the Narwhal, Canada's National Observer and Ricochet Media have regularly sent journalists to Wet'suwet'en. The arrest of Likhts'amisyu Wing Chief Dsta'hyl on Oct 2021, was a flagrant violation of UNDRIP, according to Jen, yet she noted, there was "hardly a peep" from mainstream media.

To Jen, it is essential that Indigenous people tell their own stories "because we come from an inherently different worldview and have a different lens and a way of telling the story that is authentic to our lived experiences" (Wickham, J.). While the mainstream media fails to report on Indigenous issues, social media offers communication channels that Indigenous citizen journalists and activists have learned to use effectively.

## Decolonization and RCMP tactics

At the Gustafsen Lake standoff, almost twenty-seven years ago, the RCMP were the ones telling the stories. They had near complete control of the media, using their press conference to implement "a strategy to ruin the credibility of the protest, and the people involved" (Lambertus, p. 121). As Lambertus discovered, the RCMP were able to do this because of their "knowledge of news production practices, and their authority as the most important media source" (Lambertus, p. 122). The press, which was behind an exclusion zone, was desperate for

information and relayed what the RCMP gave them, unable to confirm the story "because the RCMP did not allow them beyond the barricades" (Lambertus, p. 123).

The RCMP use "their exclusion zones to restrict movement of Wet'suwet'en people and hereditary chiefs as well as media. They, within the exclusion zones, did arrest media and legal observers" (Wickham, J.). Wet'suwet'en land defenders often point to Canadian law that protects journalists who are doing their work and the principles of UNDRIP, which protect Indigenous Peoples.

> "They're doing things that are illegal even among their own standards and doing violence to people and doing things that are violating human rights and Indigenous rights. And so, they definitely do not want media to catch any of that or to know about any of that. So, they go to great lengths to prevent that from happening, including arresting media" (Sleydo).

"They wouldn't let media within a certain distance or whatever, which of course, they said was for safety, which is ridiculous because the Unist'ot'en women were in ceremony. They were not being violent or aggressive or doing anything to absolutely anybody to create an unsafe situation" (Wickham, J.). Critics often point to the lengths that the RCMP go to in serving and enforcing injunctions for extractive resource corporations compared to their efforts to investigate Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. The video footage taken by Wet'suwet'en land defenders documenting their interactions with police clearly shows a massive discrepancy between the assembled, predominately male, force of the militarized RCMP and the few, unarmed, mostly female Wet'suwet'en land defenders.

"They've gotten some pretty horrific things on camera. And those are the same RCMP officers that are going to be coming back to Wet'suwet'en territory" (Wickham, J.), referring to the Community Industry Response Group (C-IRG), an RCMP group that was created to deal with "energy industry incidents" (RCMP, Oct, 2020), and which is notorious for its heavy-handed approach to activists, for example at the blockade at Fairy Creek in 2020.

In the case Teal Cedar Products Ltd. v. Rainforest Flying Squad, the British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Douglas Thompson ruled that "the RCMP has not shown that their exclusion zones and associated checkpoints are reasonably necessary to carry out their enforcement duties. In short, these RCMP blockades are unlawful" (2021, Aug). Yet, despite Thompson's ruling, the RCMP continues to use exclusion zones. Sleydo said, "There's no real accountability on the part of the RCMP." Jen echoed Sleydo, stating that "there's no consequences for [the RCMP], and there never has been."

Wet'suwet'en land defenders' interactions with CGL employees have also not been fruitful, according to Sleydo, "CGL employees aren't allowed to say anything. Obviously, they've helped block media out. They've also blocked out Wet'suwet'en people from being in their own territory. They do a lot of things that are also illegal, but of course, the RCMP don't ever enforce what they're doing" (Sleydo).

The common theme linking the case of Gustafsen Lake in 1997 and Wet'suwet'en in 2021 is the RCMP's ongoing attempt to control the narrative by defining exclusion zones that keep the media from witnessing any events at all. Through an examination of these exclusion zones, we are able to identify how the RCMP use the justification of public safety or interference with police operations to keep stories from the public. The RCMP's use of exclusion zones keeps Indigenous stories out of the news and the non-Indigenous population from seeing colonialism in

action. “They definitely… have prevented media from witnessing and getting the story about what’s happening” (Sleydo). However, we are also able to see how in 2021 the tools of citizen journalism can change the dynamic of information control and break through the exclusion zone.

“A bunch of media outlets banded together and took the RCMP to task about their exclusion zones” (Wickham, J.). However, Jen didn’t observe a change in the behaviour of officers on the ground. The lack of balanced, investigative reporting from reporters on the ground from mainstream media outlets allows the narratives set by corporate communications and the RCMP press releases or reports to dominate the news that most people read.

> “The Narwhal actually did an FOI last year. And got documents that proved that the government and industry, the day after the Delgamuukw decision came out in nineteen ninety-seven, formed a committee to strategize on how they could suppress the outcome of our court case so that they could still have access to our resources” (Wickham, J.) (Lukacs, 2020).

Yet, “The Narwhal was the only one that printed it. Nobody else picked that up,” said Jen, and so most people don’t know about it.

Exclusion zones are a way to limit the mobility of Indigenous Peoples on their territories and journalists trying to fulfill their function “to bear witness such that violations of human rights can be documented” (Callison, 2020, 13:42). The conditions that have been

*Figure 7 FSR after a light snow. The RCMP create exclusion zones in this isolated, forested area, such that police interactions with land defenders can easily be obscured from observers. Photo by author.*

imposed on Wet'suwet'en land defenders include not being allowed free movement on their territory, which goes against UNDRIP, of which Canada is a signatory, and which protects their right to access their territory, not to be removed from their territory and to free, prior and informed consent for anyone wanting to enter their territory.

## Achievements in decolonization

While the word "decolonization" met with some scepticism, the participants continued to wrestle with its use in the context of their strategic media work. Their work has given them the opportunity "to provide information and an analysis of the situation from a decolonised perspective" and allowed them to shift the narratives by sharing their own stories. It's "what we strive to do and what we've been pretty successful at doing" (Sleydo).

The MOU with BC regarding rights and title and the increased awareness among non-Indigenous people in BC and in Canada regarding the difference between traditional governance structures and the band council system were important, but though these distinctions are not yet widely recognized, awareness seems to be growing.

Addressing her work with NGOs, Sleydo said,

> "I feel like there's an interest and a shift in moving from having token representation to actually having moving towards real relationships and real solidarity with different groups, like environmental groups. So, I don't think that we're quite there yet, but I think that there's a genuine shift in how people want to relate to Indigenous issues and Indigenous land-defense" (Sleydo).

The direct action incited by the #ShutDownCanada campaign evoked strong reactions of both support and condemnation, but the conversation may be becoming more nuanced, both in

the mainstream media and among non-Indigenous Canadians. This may be in part due to the successful implementation of land defenders' strategy of education and capacity to build bridges and engage, and in part to a combination of an erosion of trust in the RCMP (because of their use of heavy-handed tactics against Indigenous and environmental activists) and in the oil and gas industry (because of the burgeoning costs of its projects, both monetary and environmental).

On the other hand, Chief Dsta'hyl was arrested and removed from his own territory, a breach of Article ten of UNDRIP and there was little mention of it in the media. Jen noted "maybe, unfortunately, it wasn't sensational enough" (Wickham, J.), which is sadly, a credible explanation. The most difficult challenge for land defenders to overcome, may not be physical threats or legal action but rather sustaining the energy of their resistance.

Many forces are converging around the conflict to give them hope, including changing attitudes about the severity of climate change and Indigenous sovereignty as well as an economy adjusting to these new trends in society that may create pressure on investors to divest of oil and gas projects. Wet'suwet'en land defenders are actively engaged in influencing these forces with their strategic media.

# Chapter 5. Conclusion

A central critique that Coulthard levels against the politics of recognition is that it presents colonialism in the past, ignoring not only continuing trauma but reproducing the very structures and goals of land seizure and control. As Wet'suwet'en land defenders put it in the hashtag #AllEyesOnWetsuweten, they are imploring the world to bear witness to their struggle. There is a need for critical discussion and respectful dialogue that is both necessary to achieve a deeper understanding as well as to prevent corporate and state actors from defaulting to violence to enforce their aims and quell debate. In order for that conversation to occur in a meaningful way, people must go to the land, stand with the Wet'suwet'en, and listen.

"It's indigenous people that are the experts in their struggle and their movements," said Sleydo, noting that it was important for allies to follow Indigenous leadership, when supporting Indigenous struggles for sovereignty. Both interviewees expressed similar sentiments, leaving the impression that some would-be supporters had ended up centring their own agendas over that of Wet'suwet'en land defenders. Be willing "to accept a 'No'. I think so many people whose hearts are really in the right place and they want to help, come in with a preconceived idea of what the story is going to be," said Jen.

Their advice aligned with that of the Indigenous scholars whose texts I'd read, reminding me that any doubts about how to engage positively with Indigenous Peoples in their struggle against settler colonialism, could best be addressed by building relationships with Indigenous people and having conversations with them about the best way to move forward.

A situation where the needs of industry take precedence over the needs of a community and where police take exceptional measures to keep their actions from being observed and

recorded by the press and the public requires critical engagement with the institutions and organizations that normalize the situation by using historically-based, prejudicial rules and racist assumptions to criminalize and isolate their opponents. There is substantial evidence to support claims that such systemic injustice is occurring in Wet'suwet'en, warranting investigation.

On the other hand, when a small group of people manages to network and mobilize solidarity across communities and nations, despite operating in a colonial context that hinders their activities and goals, then it seems important to discover more about their strategies and motivation. Wet'suwet'en land defenders' implementation of diverse communication tools and tactics in various and changing contexts over time and across generations and cultures deserves a deeper examination.

Solutions to issues involving Indigenous sovereignty, environmental sustainability and Canada's reliance on resource extraction for its wealth and power will require different groups of people to come together and bridge the gaps in sympathy and understanding. We may look to the relational paradigm and listen to those Indigenous leaders and scholars who can advise how we might navigate the dialogue between various stakeholders in a respectful and thoughtful way.

An example of how the relational paradigm might help ease hardened positions to further productive dialogue might be found in the communities themselves that have experience in functioning despite a highly pressurized and externally exacerbated division. Meanwhile, however, extractive industries, under the protection of the RCMP, keep tearing at these same communities that are still dealing with intergenerational trauma perpetrated by the colonial system that continues to justify land acquisition by force.

The land defenders demand attention with the hashtag #AllEyesOnWetsuweten, a rallying cry to raise public awareness of the ongoing injustice, and centre the conversation about their future, their Yintah, on their struggle to assert sovereignty on their land. Those eyes include politicians, industry representatives, the press, non-Indigenous public and researchers. How settlers respond to the growing Indigenous resurgence and its assumption of sovereignty in traditional, unceded territories, will likely have deep and lasting consequences on the success of the reconciliation process. How both Indigenous Peoples and settlers succeed in the reconciliation process will likely have lasting consequences on our transition from an extractive mode of living to one that is sustainable for our environment.

Wet'suwet'en land defenders are creating and using media to attain strategic goals in the face of a massive power disadvantage and the outcome of their struggle could have repercussions, not only for themselves and their community but for Indigenous rights and human rights across Turtle Island and beyond. Land defenders have used media tools, communications skills and social networks to extend the concept of relationality, visiting, building alliances, sharing, organizing, mobilizing, educating and having rich, fruitful exchanges that have led to real actions of solidarity and invitations that have led to journeys across the land to visit face to face. Through media creation and media use land defenders have gained knowledge, skills and experience and they have been able to teach, guide and lead. Adapting to different platforms and channels with various technical advantages and restrictions, they have successfully engaged with a wide range of audiences to successfully present their authentic story.

Actively connecting with audiences online creates openings for critique and land defenders face both supporters and detractors, some of the latter reasonable and respectful, others dismissive, even hostile. The online environment can be treacherous, enabling the ad hominin

attacks of internet trolls or more subtle attempts to undermine or call into question the legitimacy of land defenders and their claims.

In overcoming these challenges and the concrete challenge of the state itself threatening land defenders with removal from their land, land defenders' strength will probably be ultimately defined not by the media tools and processes they've mastered, but in the human relationships of solidarity they've built through these technical innovations in communication that enable human communication skills in storytelling that finally can win audiences' hearts and minds.

Wet'suwet'en land defenders successfully created a counter-narrative to negative media portrayals of radical protesters, isolated from the community of their own Nation by presenting themselves and their story calmly, authentically and consistently, even in pressurized interactions with law enforcement. They created media artefacts with clarity and appeal and shared them on the broad, active networks they had grown. The key to their success lay, I suggest, in their ability to convey who they are as members of a vibrant culture, of community, of family, with a connection both to the local place, the Yintah and to the wider world and the different peoples and cultures there; a connection to the super-contemporary and to ancient roots.

Wet'suwet'en land defenders' struggle against colonialism is not new; it is ongoing, and understanding where it is located temporally in history and geographically on the land, how it relates to a wider struggle for survival on the planet, are questions that deserve further inquiry.

*Figure 8 the Yintah in the morning. Photo by author.*

## Further Research

Key research material for Sandra Lambertus in *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds* was acquired through ATIP requests for internal RCMP and Government memos, logs, reports and training material and this is one area where more research is needed. A CBC article claims that the RCMP have a massive backlog of ATIP requests (Tunney, 2020), indicating their resistance to transparency and perhaps the existence of communications that may provide evidence of malintent or wrongdoing against Indigenous land defenders. It may be difficult to obtain the more sensitive information, such as body cam footage, yet a training manual about interactions with Indigenous groups or individuals or about interactions with the media, could help to shed light on their actions and help change things for the better.

While limitations on my research preclude conclusive results, I hope there is enough substance to show that the ongoing media strategy of Wet'suwet'en land defenders is important in the context of Indigenous Resurgence, decolonization, media criticism, environmental justice and as a case study in strategic communications. The successful Wet'suwet'en land defender creation and strategic use of media may provide positive examples for Indigenous and activist media producers and organizers. I hope that my research can help draw particular attention to the potential for land defender produced media (media sovereignty) to be an important tool in the struggle for land sovereignty.

As the "experts" in their own movements (Sleydo), Wet'suwet'en land defenders are themselves the keepers of this knowledge and I hope that their future knowledge creation can be centred on the Yintah where they practice grounded normativity (Coulthard, 2016, p. 254) without having to fight extractive industry. In light of that, I hope that my research inspires

future researchers to stand with Wet'suwet'en land defenders, or, if it is not possible for them to travel to the Yintah, to conduct research in the spirit of the relational paradigm and in conversation with Indigenous people on their lands.

Without attempting to imagine the outcome of Wet'suwet'en land defenders movement to prevent CGL from building a pipeline through their territory, it seems that the conversations that have been started around the struggle alone warrant further investigation and analysis; that these conversations are historical in their magnitude and can be traced back to the time of first contact between First Nations and colonial settlers, to the establishment of the Canadian state, to the Indian Act, to Canada's professed policy of cultural genocide in the guise of education, to the current arenas of the conflict, the blockade and the courts.

An essential component in the Wet'suwet'en struggle for sovereignty on their land is the strategic communication with which land defenders seek to establish their narratives within the public consciousness; to win hearts and minds, and to make some sort of sense out of the Delgamuukw Supreme Court decision that promises so much but leaves so much undecided. On the one hand are very public attempts at demonstrating contrition by Canadian politicians, like PM's Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau, who espouse the rhetoric of reconciliation and UNDRIP, and on the other hand is the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada by the institutions of the Canadian state which those politicians represent. Between these two poles and at times focused on neither, is a rising movement of Indigenous people, including leaders, academics and youth who reject the politics of recognition, who aren't relying on the promises of the state and who are working to shift the awareness and the understanding to expose the mechanism of the colonial state and show that it has consequences not only for Indigenous

and other marginalized people but also for the environment and for all people living on Turtle Island.

Finally, reflecting on the three themes of contemporary research that emerged from the Literature Review – Reconciliation, Colonialism Today and Indigenous Resurgence – while the conflict in Wet'suwet'en appears to exemplify a failing of Reconciliation and the Colonial nature of the Critical Infrastructure Paradigm, the Wet'suwet'en land defenders' revitalization of ways of life connected to the land is a living manifestation of Indigenous Resurgence and it is this positive, life-affirming aspect of the movement that may offer the most valuable lessons for the future.

## November 2021 Arrests and Aftermath

On Nov 1 (2021), I left Wet'suwet'en territory, grabbing a coffee from Two Sisters' Café in Smithers and driving back south, past the Canfor Forestry Service Road that leads to the Yintah. Now, instead of taking the gravel road up through the checkpoints and camps at Grizzley Den, Lynx, Coyote Camp, Hawk's Nest and Timberwolf, I continued on through Houston and headed south, away from the conflict.

On Nov. 14, chief Woos made an announcement via Facebook that the Wet'suwet'en were evicting CGL and the RCMP from their territory. Ten hours later, land defenders used CGL equipment to make the road impassable, enforcing the eviction.

"November 18th, dozens of heavily armed RCMP officers raided the Gidimt'en Checkpoint at the 44 km marker on the Morice Forest Service Road" (Gidimt'en Checkpoint, 2021, Nov 19) arresting 15 people, including journalists and legal observers.

On Nov. 19 the RCMP arrived in military gear at Coyote camp with K9 units, weapons drawn and forced their way with an axe into the tiny house which serves as the command centre. “Eleven people were arrested at Coyote Camp, including Gidimt’en Checkpoint spokesperson, Sleydo, and Dinï’ze Woos’ daughter, Jocey. Four more were arrested at 44km later that day, including Sleydo’s husband, Cody” (Gidimt’en Checkpoint, 2021, Nov 20).

“It is not possible to paint a comprehensive picture of the breadth of state sanctioned police violence and excessive or unlawful use of force in British Columbia due to inadequate reporting and lack of publicly available data” (British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, 2021, pp 48 - 49), underlining that “the prime function of journalism in these sorts of situations is to bear witness such that violations of human rights can be documented and further action can be taken such that the state has someone watching as a surrogate for the public” (Callison, 2020, 13:42). Among the most shocking information to come to light has been the RCMP “use of lethal overwatch, or ‘sniper observers,’ which are part of the ERT [Emergency Response Teams] units, are used as lookouts” (Barrera, J., 2021).

In their 2021 article on their Critical Discourse Analysis of media coverage of the 2019 conflict between Coastal GasLink (CGL) and Unist’ot’en land defenders of the Wet’suwet’en Nation that culminated in raids and arrests in February 2020, Hume and Walby discuss how the mainstream media “In the context of the struggle in Wet’suwet’en territory” framed the issue “in terms of whether or not a pipeline should be built on these lands” (Hume, 2021, p. 522), rather than address issues of Indigenous Sovereignty and the violent nature of the RCMP actions which were in glaring contrast to Government rhetoric. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s public embrace of reconciliation seemed particularly incongruous as he simultaneously presided over the militarized suppression of an Indigenous Peoples’ struggle for self-determination.

That pattern has continued and once again (Nov. 18 and 19, 2021) the RCMP have invaded Wet'suwet'en territory and violently arrested land defenders, journalists and legal observers, deploying dogs, snipers and using tactics of intimidation and their own media interactions to deny or justify their actions.

Writing Nov. 28, 10 days after the first arrests on the 18 of November of 2021, and a cursory search for online articles reveals some reaction in the mainstream Canadian press: 8 articles in the CBC, 5 on APTN, 4 in the Toronto Star and 5 in the Financial Post, focusing on Indigenous rights, the actions of the RCMP with regards to Indigenous land defenders, journalists and energy (Critical infrastructure protection). International media focused heavily on journalists' arrests (the Guardian). The alternative press (the Tyee, the Narwhal) continued to report on the issue, framing it as primarily an environmental issue, an issue of Indigenous self-determination and land-sovereignty or a combination of the two.

Furthermore, on March 10, 2022, TC Energy announced it was making 10 % of its vastly over-budget project available for investment by First Nations with whom it has existing agreements. (TC Energy to sell 10% stake, 2022) and (Simmons, 2022). Whether this is purely a tactic to gain support for an increasingly unpopular and over-budget project or a genuine gesture of reconciliation is unclear.

Meanwhile, according to a semi-private social media post, the freed land defenders are regrouping to strategize and to help each other come to terms with the trauma of the arrests. Sleydo was freed under the conditions that she enter her territory solely to pursue "cultural" activities, and maintain a distance of 75 metres from CGL work areas. She and other Wet'suwet'en representatives decried the conditions as a violation of her right to self-determination which is deeply connected to the land. Conditions for other Wet'suwet'en land

defenders were somewhat less restrictive, requiring keeping a distance of 10 metres. Indigenous allies of the Wet'suwet'en from other First Nations, including the Haudenosaunee partner of Chief Woos' daughter, Jocey and Skyler Williams, the prominent Haudenosaunee activist, were prohibited from entering Wet'suwet'en territory. This has been presented as another violation of Wet'suwet'en sovereignty, as the Haudenosaunee men were invited guests. Non-Indigenous allies were freed under the condition that they not return to Wet'suwet'en territory.

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## Appendix A: News Outlets that explain Wet'suwet'en traditional governance

*The articles below, from a variety of news outlets, vary in their political orientation and quality but all of them attempt to make sense of the history and dynamics at work.*

*Mainstream:*

- *https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/blockade-railway-mowhak-wet-suwet-en-1.5467234*
- *https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/wet-suwet-en-what-s-the-difference-between-the-elected-band-council-and-hereditary-chiefs-1.4811453*
- *https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/why-some-elected-wetsuweten-councils-signed-agreements-with-coastal-gaslink*
- *https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-dissent-and-acrimony-threaten-historic-wetsuweten-accord/*
- *https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/hereditary-chief-in-b-c-says-community-needs-lng-pipeline/*
- *https://nationalpost.com/opinion/opinion-we-are-wetsuweten-but-the-coastal-gaslink-pipeline-protesters-dont-represent-us*

*Alternative:*

- *https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2021/03/08/Globe-Column-Wetsuweten-Accord-Further-Divides/*
- *https://thenarwhal.ca/bc-coastal-gaslink-indigenous-identity/*

*Indigenous:*

- *https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/the-difference-between-hereditary-chiefs-and-elected-chiefs*

## Appendix B: Acronym Glossary

AFN - Assembly of First Nations

APTN - Aboriginal Peoples Television Network

ATIP - Access to Information and Privacy

BC - British Columbia

CBC - Canadian Broadcasting Co.

CGL - Coastal Gas Link

C-IRG - Community Industry Response Group (within RCMP)

CI - Critical Infrastructure

CIP - Critical Infrastructure Protection

CSIS - Canadian Security Intelligence Service

CTV - Canadian Television

EBSCO - Information Services (educational & research databases)

ERT - Emergency Response Team(s) (within RCMP)

FDA - Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

FNIGC - First Nations Information Governance Centre

FOI - Freedom of Information (request from government)

FPIC - Free, prior, and informed consent

FSR - Forest Service Road

ICTs - Information and Communications Technologies

IKCS - indigenous knowledge communication systems

IRSSA - Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement

KKR - Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. (No. American oil & natural gas)

LNG - Liquified Natural Gas

MOU - Memorandum of Understanding

NGOs - Non-Governmental Organizations

NTSC - National Television Standards Committee

OCAP - Ownership, Control, Access and Possession

PM - Prime Minister

RCAP - Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

RCMP - Royal Canadian Mounted Police

SCC - Supreme Court of Canada

SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

TC Energy - Trans Canada Energy

TK - Traditional Indigenous Knowledge

TRC - Truth & Reconciliation Commission

UNDRIP - United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Yintah - Traditional Territory