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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of emotions in ontological conflicts: a case of study of the territorial–ontological conflict between British Columbia, Coastal GasLink and the Wet’suwet’en

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Drawing on a methodological approach that involved visual ethnography and combined content and narrative analysis, my research aims to analyse the role that emotions play in the territorial–ontological conflict between British Columbia provincial government, Coastal GasLink and the Wet’suwet’en. Using high-quality online audiovisual material produced by the Wet’suwet’en – allowing a critical perspective throughout the article on the politics of self-representation – I was able to get into the conflict with a phenomenological approach, employing my senses to analyse body movements, tone of voice and language. Theoretically, I articulate a framework made up of Ingold’s phenomenology, Blaser’s ontological conflicts and Escobar’s studies of culture. Then, I build on the spiderweb, a metaphor developed by Ingold, to expand the scope of González-Hidalgo’s emotional political ecologies. The results show that Coastal GasLink, taking culture ‘as a symbolic structure’, proposes as a central mitigation strategy, through their environmental impact assessment, what I call ‘an ontological interruption’ of the Yintakh. Besides, I demonstrate that the processes of political inter-subjectivation sought at the Unist’ot’en Healing Centre help understand the worry, frustration and stress of the Wet’suwet’en facing the world-creating practices of Coastal GasLink. On the other hand, the Healing Centre also reveals how the affections for the other-than-human and their spiderweb (Yintakh or relational world) inform Wet’suwet’en resistance. Lastly, I unveil how Coastal GasLink and the Ministry of Aboriginal Rights, through practices of inclusion and gender equality, seek to blur radical cultural differences, delegitimise the Wet’suwet’en precolonial governance system, and create affections for the Western-modern world.

Keywords Wet’suwet’en • emotional political ecologies • territorial conflicts • relational ontologies • environmental justice

Key messages

- Coastal GasLink world-creating practices entail, at best, the *ontological interruption* of the Wet’suwet’en relational world.

- Disregarding the undoable divisions between culture and nature (and, hence, genocide and ecocide) Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government minimise the Wet'suwet'en cultural differences to mere symbolic structures.
- Wet'suwet'en affection, not only for other-than-humans but their entire relational world, awakes their anger to resist Coastal GasLink aspirations to occupy the Yintakh.

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Introduction

According to the [Canadian Encyclopedia \(2023\)](#), there are 634 Nations speaking more than 50 languages in Canada. Despite the history of racism, discrimination and land dispossession evidenced in the records of the Indian Act and its amendments ([Government of Canada, 1868](#)), many Nations have managed to resist many effects of European colonisation. One of the main historical struggles relates to Nations' territories protection against the execution of modern projects in the name of the development of Canada. Although there have been many advances regarding the recognition of Indigenous rights by international and national institutions and organisations, there are still abuses of power by both the government of Canada and private companies. An example is the historical conflict in Wet'suwet'en territories regarding their right to ancestral lands. Within British Columbia, Wet'suwet'en territories comprise more than 22,000 square kilometres ([Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 1997](#)). Recently (for almost two decades), Coastal GasLink, with the support of British Columbia provincial government, has sought to build a hydrofracking gas pipeline, which would cross a large part of Wet'suwet'en territories. Faced with this, the different clans that make up the Nation, under the precolonial governance system of the Wet'suwet'en, have shown their disagreement, demonstrating their right to land and the negative socio-environmental impacts that the project would cause ([Office of the Wet'suwet'en, 2014](#)). However, in 2014, the Ministers of Environment and Natural Gas Development approved the environmental impact assessment study presented by Coastal GasLink, giving the go-ahead for the implementation of the project ([Polak and Coleman, 2015](#)). Such a decision increased the attempts to invade the territories by Coastal GasLink, which all the clans opposed by reinforcing and setting up permanent surveillance camps. In 2018, after the Supreme Court of British Columbia granted an injunction to Coastal GasLink to access the territories where they plan to build the pipeline, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) violently arrested Wet'suwet'en leaders and other people who were supporting the blockades in the surveillance camps.¹

Beyond being a conflict on a mere distribution of natural resources or environmental pollution, what characterises this conflict is that the actors involved understand, design, and construct/enact the worlds in which they exist, learn and do from radically different ontologies. For instance, for the scientists, bureaucrats and investors linked to Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government,

land (or the colonial/Western-modern land-as-a-resource) is nothing but exploitable inert matter to supply human needs.² Conversely, for the Wet'suwet'en, under the governance of the Hereditary Chiefs, the Yintakh (the word equivalent to land in their language) or the land-as-a-living-being is a being with agency and reciprocally interconnected with humans and other other-than-humans, who co-constructs (with humans and other other-than-humans) the ever-emerging reality to which all of them belong (Office of the Wet'suwet'en, 2014: 17, 112–13). The implications of such frequently overlooked radical differences by investors, scientists and bureaucrats are the creation of power imbalances between worlds (ontologies), which put at risk the existence of ways of being, doing and knowing alternatives to those within the Western-modern world.

Thus, a concern in this research is how political (inter)subjectivation processes, informed by emotions, shape power relations between enacted worlds. While the role of emotions in the defence of the commons has been explored, in the context of ontological conflicts still needs more attention. Throughout the process, the intention is to transcend the modern/colonial episteme matrix of power (Mignolo, 2011). Like González-Hidalgo and Zografos (2017: 62), I use a 'basic notion of subjectivation or subject-making as the political process of forming individual and collective subjectivities'. By political, I also mean 'processes in which diverse mechanisms of power and authority (e.g. [practices], agenda-setting, governmentality, violence, etc.) and how responses to those mechanisms operate' (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017: 62). The prefix 'inter' when I refer to subjectivation processes indicates that I also focus on identifying and analysing subject-making processes outside the Western-modern ontology. As we will see, within relational ontologies, the subject does not exist in isolation but inter-exists within and with a wide range of relations with humans and other-than-humans who actively co-create/co-perform the reality.

Questions that guide my analysis depart from how material and non-material (epistemic) violence and oppression against humans and other-than-humans impact life within relational worlds. In that line, what is the consequence of the ontological occupation of Wet'suwet'en territory by a hydrofracking gas pipeline (a modern developmental project)? How does that affect the territorial relational identity formed in being-with-the-Wedzin Kwah river, being-with-moose, being-with-salmons and so on? Concretely, how does that interrupt the possibility of performing a relational ontology? Besides, how is resistance informed by affection for roles such as hunters, berries pickers, healers, storytellers and so on? Beyond, which are the mechanisms of resistance informed by negative (such as anger, sorrow, fear and anxiety) and positive (love and happiness, for instance) emotions? And how do disciplinary mechanisms (such as discourses and practices of inclusion within modernity) interrupt the enaction of relational worlds by creating affections for the Western-modern world? The theoretical approach to the conflict departs from political ontology and emotional political ecologies (EmPEs). As in all research, the choice of theoretical approach is political. That is to say, as Segato (2015) points out, it is influenced by the goals, values and ideas believed to be relevant and necessary to illuminate. The approach sets the boundaries of the inquiry and establishes the conditions for formulating questions about realities and relationships (Law, 2004). Once the researcher chooses the theoretical approach, the position should strive to be as neutral and objective as possible (Becker, 1967). Therefore, this research employs the framework of political ontology and EmPEs impartially and objectively.

Political ontology departs from the premise that there are worlds that exist beyond – and in constant conflict with – the ‘all-encompassing’ Western-modern world (Blaser, 2013; Ingold, 2022a). Political ontology helps make visible that what is in dispute in some territorial conflicts goes beyond the mere distribution of natural resources, environmental pollution or various values given to ‘The’ Nature (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 1–31). Through those lenses, I demonstrate that in the conflict between Coastal GasLink, British Columbia provincial government and the Wet’suwet’en what is at stake is the existence of different ways of enacting worlds (which involve different ways of being, doing and knowing) alternative to that of the Western-modern world. The relevance of analysing this case as an ontological conflict lies in that ‘the political is not [only] made up of power relations [within a world made of one world], it is made up of relations between worlds’ (Rancière, 1999: 92). For instance, not everybody seeks equal opportunities regarding class, gender and race positionalities within the modern narrative. Others, such as the Wet’suwet’en under the governance structure of the Hereditary Chiefs, struggle for the right of their narrative to exist – which could entail class, gender and race emancipation, albeit outside the modern episteme (see the literature review).

EmPEs, on the other hand, provide a framework to analyse the role of emotions in territorial conflicts (González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017; 2020; Sultana, 2015). Concretely, I assess the role emotions play in the emancipation against, negotiation or reproduction of authoritative power mechanisms that the Western-modern world imposes on other worlds. Emotions are of interest in territorial conflicts as they could determine to a large extent whether counter-hegemonic resistance by the parts affected keeps going, hinders, strengthens or ceases (González-Hidalgo, 2021).

Evidence of the central role emotions play in the case of interest for this study are the rituals in which the Wet’suwet’en interact with other-than-human beings, performing a deep affective bond (strong relationality) that strengthens their resistance for the defence of the Yintakh even in the face of encounters where British Columbia provincial government, through the RCMP, has used intimidation devices and violence to open access to Coastal GasLink to trespass (UnistotenCamp, 2019; Gidimt’en Access Point, 2020a). Another evidence is the Healing Centre built in 2015 near where Coastal GasLink has already started preparatory works to construct the hydrofracking gas pipeline (UnistotenCamp, 2018). The educational programmes of the Healing Centre work as processes of political inter-subjection whereby, contrary to the effects of the enaction of the (Western-modern) world of Coastal GasLink – through excavations, blasting operations and construction of the pipeline – and to disciplinary devices such as the residential school programmes ‘which were used to take “the Indian” out of the child’, the Healing Centre seeks to put the Wet’suwet’en culture back in their people (UnistotenCamp, 2018). The programmes aim to strengthen affective bonds between the Wet’suwet’en and other-than-human beings in the Yintakh to learn how to take care of the Yintakh because, as Freda Huson points out, ‘if we take care of our land [the Yintakh], then the land will take care of us’ (UnistotenCamp, 2018). As the reader gets immersed in this research, I intend to let them understand that the purpose of the Wet’suwet’en strengthening affective bonds with other-than-humans cannot be analysed as a discrete variable. I attempt to guide the reader to avoid understanding such purpose from the grid of the Western-modern ontology. The affective bonds of the Wet’suwet’en for other-than-humans are at the core of what it means being-doing-knowing-in-the-Yintakh. The Healing Centre may thus be considered, as well, as a

centre of resistance, where emotions not only play a central role in informing actions to resist the colonial practices of the Western-modern world but also in showing how a pathway towards true reconciliation in Canada should look.

The article is structured as follows: next, I conduct a literature review to articulate the theoretical framework that guides my analysis. The framework is made up of the approaches of Ingold's phenomenology, Blaser's ontological conflicts, Escobar's relational ontologies and González-Hidalgo's EmPE. Then, I provide a conflict's brief overview, going through the Wet'suwet'en ancestral governance structure, the symbolic structures the Canadian government created and the hydrofracking gas pipeline project that Coastal GasLink plans to develop. This is followed by a description of the data collection methods and a critical discussion of the empirical material analysed. The use of audiovisual material produced by the Wet'suwet'en involves a dispute in terms of the politics of representation whereby they take ownership of their cultural representations and identity amid the conflict. Next, I present my positionality throughout this research. Borrowing the expression from Mignolo, my position is critical regarding the modern/colonial matrix of power and attempts to contribute to building the pathways towards recognising the existence of other ontologies/worlds silenced and the implications amid territorial conflicts. Then I answer how the conflict of interest is an ontological conflict and, in parallel to that, the role of emotions in the conflict. Lastly, I discuss what is at stake within and beyond the case study. The findings reveal that Coastal GasLink seeks what I refer to as the Yintakh ontological interruption and the imposition of cultural differences as symbolic structures, or as [Rivera Cusicanqui \(1987\)](#) would say, the creation of an allowed Indian. Despite that, the anger, anxiety and sorrow of the Wet'suwet'en linked to the affective bonds between them, and the other-than-humans (inter-existence, to put it in other words) who co-weave the Yintakh inform their ontological resistance.

Literature review

In this section, I carry out a literature review concerning the concepts and theories I draw on to approach and analyse the conflict of interest. I begin by reviewing concepts and theories within the field of political ontology and decolonial studies. Then, I expand the frameworks of political ontology and EmPEs. Even if the literature of EmPEs does not approach territorial conflicts at an ontological level, it coincides with the literature of political ontology under the umbrella of decolonial studies. Another reason EmPEs and political ontology do not contradict each other in this study is that I expand their scope by taking EmPEs to an ontological level. In other words, I make EmPEs sensitive to ontological aspects and political ontology to the emotions within a more ample field.

The studies of culture as symbolic structure and as a radical difference

The studies of political ontology were inaugurated as a response to the decline of Western critical theories (such as liberalist, Marxist, poststructuralist), which, despite their efforts to relativise culture (the case of poststructuralism), have been unable to transcend the boundaries of the modern episteme ([Escobar, 2012; 2020: 84–96](#)). An example is the understanding of differences from the approach Escobar calls studies of Culture as a Symbolic Structure (CSS) within anthropology. CSS has allowed

the questioning of the supposed homogeneous modernisation processes due to the Western colonisation of other cultures. Studies such as cultural hybridisations, other modernities and endogenous development models emerged therefrom. That assumes that in one way or another, the different cultures of the world have gone through a process of modernisation; or, to put it another way, as Blaser points out, from the CSS, there are ‘more than one [differences], but less than two’ (Blaser, 2016: 557). This quotation critically emphasises that cultural differences are recognised, but only within the confines of the Western-modern episteme. In other words, there are multiple (modern) cultures but less than one because all cultures have been modernised/colonised. The underlying assumption is that the Western-modern ontology is a common denominator that all cultures share. The news, academia, government agencies, development projects’ investors and so forth reproduce uncritically and conveniently such an assimilation. However, when Indigenous peoples bring, for instance, the defence of other-than-humans to the political arena, they shake the pillars of the Western-modern dualisms and let us see radical differences at an ontological level or that other worlds exist in spite of the all-encompassing Western-modern world. Although Escobar does not discredit the CSS contributions, he does emphasise that the CSS is insufficient to understand Culture as a Radical Difference (CRD) (Escobar, 2012). While the CSS approach has taken as a starting point a strategy of sameing, CRD studies, driven by the ontological turn in social theory, have done so from the otherness as an ontological category (Blaser, 2013: 550). The strategy of sameing assumes that all cultures are living and narrating the same single Western-modern (hi)story with little variations. Thereof comes the allowed Indian Rivera Cusicanqui (1987) refers to who is allowed to exist provided that does not undo Western-modern narratives.

In addition to gaining relevance for making visible the radical differences transcending the modern episteme, the CRD has also emerged as an urgent need in the face of the socio-ecological crisis in which we find ourselves immersed in the 21st century (Escobar, 2012: 2). For many scholars, and beyond the academic circle, for many peasants, indigenous movements and some urban minorities, what we are experiencing is a crisis of civilisation; that is, the crisis of the Western-modern civilisation and its ontological dualisms that have privileged reason over emotions, mind over body, culture over nature and so on (Kothari et al, 2019). CRD, taking as a starting point the otherness, has opened the possibility of visualising that other worlds, or alternative ontologies to the Western-modern one, are possible – or what the Zapatistas already promoted for a long time before, that ‘a world where many worlds fit’ is possible, the pluriverse (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 10–21). It is because of CRD that the studies of political ontology have emerged to better understand what is at stake in territorial conflicts, where there is a dispute between the Western world hegemony and other worlds that survive in spite of the of the ‘all-encompassing’ modernity.

The great divide between nature and culture and the West and the rest ...

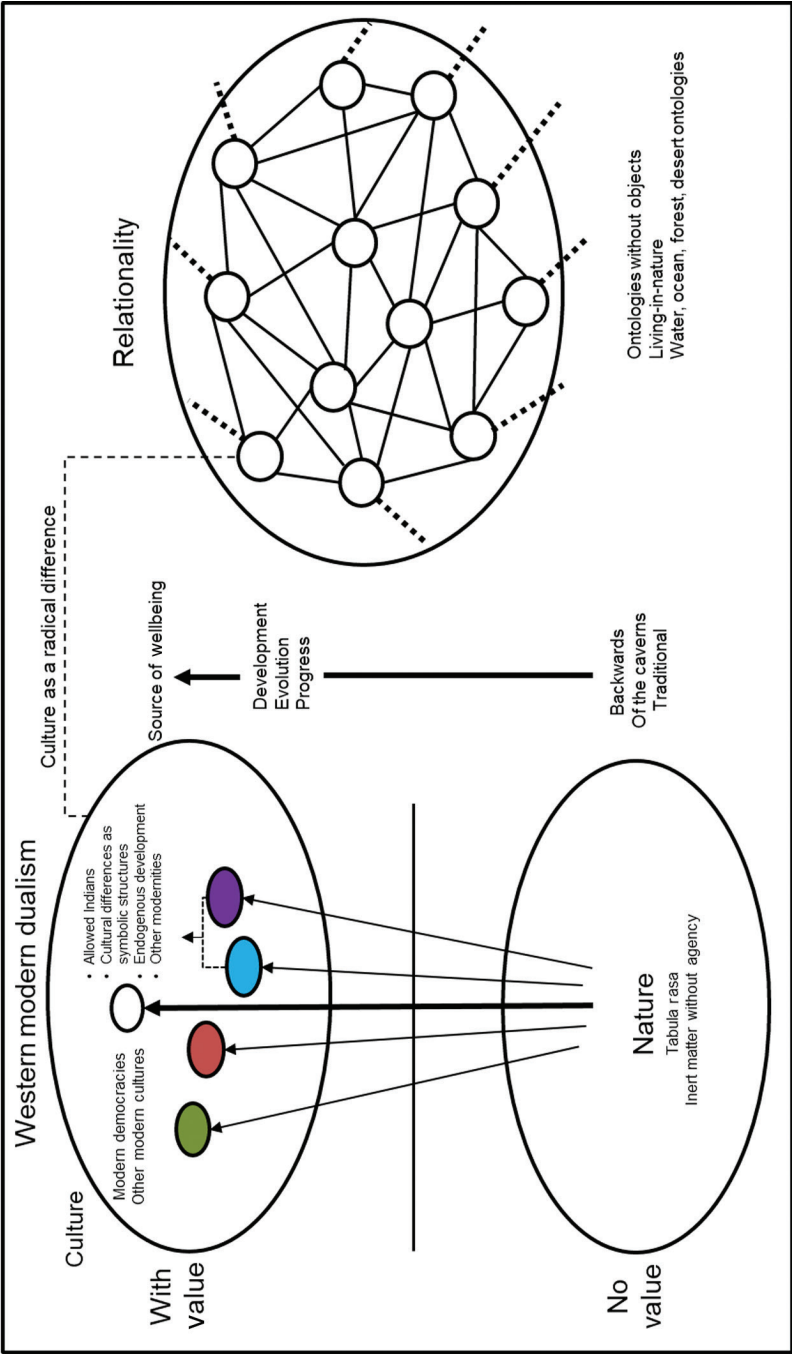
One of the crucial points that political ontology addresses is its criticism of the Western modernity and the dualisms that it has constituted. Mainly, ‘the great divide’ – to use a concept of Bruno Latour (2012) – between nature and culture and, consequently, between moderns and non-moderns. To understand the political implications of such divisions, suffice is to point out that the mere concepts of nature and culture

are Western-modern creations. For many Indigenous Nations, in Canada and other regions, those words do not even exist in their languages. To illustrate, let us take the answer of Sleydo' (a Wet'suwet'en leader) to the question 'What does ecocide and genocide means for you?' Sleydo' replied that the closest explanation she could give from her language was 'a rupture in relations' ([Stop Ecocide International, 2021](#)). Relations with other-than-human-beings or, in de la Cadena's terms (2015), 'earth-beings' (moose, caribous, berries, rivers, salmon, the land and so forth). The reason is that, since time immemorial, with those earth-beings, they have been weaving the threads that constitute the always emergent reality they belong. That is why any rupture in those relationships poses an ontological threat to their worlds/realities and consequently to their possibilities of existence (including their identities). That is also why for Sleydo', there is no distinction between ecocide and genocide. Ecocide entails the latter within her relational world.

As per the Western-modern ontology, the more a culture escapes the conditions imposed by nature, the more developed it is ([Blaser, 2013](#): 554). From that optic and enactment of the reality, history has a linear trajectory that cultures must traverse, moving away from nature (see the left-hand side of [Figure 1](#)). The more cultures escape from nature, the more they progress. The arrows upwards reflect a lineal time and associated narratives such as development, progress, civilisation and so on. Any culture that does not escape from nature to objectify and manipulate it as a mere resource to fulfil human needs is thrown into absence, categorising them as primitive, traditional, backward, stagnant, negative or what have you ([Santos, 2015](#)). We find other (or multiple) modern cultures within the sphere of Culture with a capital C. Those are the typical cultural differences that project developers, states – or moderns, in general – recognise and accept as different. Epistemologically, any statement claiming to be rational is filtered out through a Habermasian ([Habermas, 2001](#)) communicative rationality mechanism upon which a modern democracy is built. Beyond such modern background knowledge ([Leff, 2004; 2015](#)), which relies on dualisms (culture–nature, logocentrism–emotions, mind–body, human–non-human and so on), everything is invalid, a mere belief or irrational. Hence, once radical cultural or ontological differences appear in a conflict, exceeding the rationale of modern democracies, Western-modern practices become undoable. Thereof comes Ingold's criticism when he refers to the fact that moderns do not dwell in territories but occupy and modify them. For modern people, 'the world becomes a tabula rasa for the inscription of human history' ([Ingold, 2022a](#): 214).

The opposite occurs within what Escobar calls the relational ontologies of many Indigenous peoples around the world (see the right-hand side of [Figure 1](#)). In those ontologies, the human being does not exist in isolation but rather inter-exists within a fabric of relationships made up of humans and other-than-humans, which is being woven ceaselessly ([Escobar, 2016; 2019; Giraldo and Toro, 2020](#)). Within that fabric (the reality), human beings develop skills to become-with-and-within-the-environment in which they dwell ([Ingold, 2022b](#)). Such skills are mastered through bodily experiences, emotions and intuition that are not preceded by mental representations of a reality 'out there' as in the universalist Western dualistic ontology ([Ingold, 2022a](#)). The concepts of cosmoaction of the Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities of the Cauca's Valley ([Escobar, 2019](#)) or the sentipensares (thinking–feeling) in Latin American literature are related to those practices. For that reason, in relational ontologies, objects do not exist; that is, there are no subjects that observe

Figure 1: Western-modern and relational ontologies



Source: Author's own elaboration.

objects ‘out there’ but there are humans who relate and co-create the reality with other-than-humans (including animals and, for example, the wind, water, fire) who have agency at the same level as the humans (Escobar, 2016).

The emotions within the spiderweb

The ultimate objective of political ontology is to provide decolonial theoretical tools – focused on different ways (not of representing ‘The’ world, but) of practising or enacting worlds – to make the pluriverse visible (Escobar, 2020). Therefore, political ontology is crucial for charting pathways toward post-dualist, post-developmental and, in general, future alternatives to the Western-modern civilisation model. However, considering political ontology aims to understand the realities performed beyond the modern dualist hierarchical divisions, the studies of political ontology have not paid much attention to the supremacy of logocentrism over emotions. To understand the role that emotions and affections might play in ontological conflicts that involve actors belonging to a relational world, let us take a metaphor developed by Tim Ingold. Ingold (2008) draws on what he refers to as an arachnoid-centric perception to shed light on how the reality/the world is perceived, lived and performed within a relational world. Within relational ontologies, humans and other-than-human beings ceaselessly weave the spiderweb (the reality/the world) they inter-dwell. Skills they mutually learn to move on the spiderweb threads develop their agency. Phenomenologists like Ingold would refer to that as living-in-the-spiderweb or an (inter-)dwelling perspective. Hence, humans’ affection for other-than-human beings is not only a matter of loving or caring for an external other. The reason is that the other (human or other-than-human being) has designed, and designs, with me and others, the world in which we exist, do and know. The loss of the other would imply a disruption of that world and the beings that dwell in it – the inherent relation between ecocide and genocide. The existence of the other gives a particular design and identity to the world they dwell in and, thus, associated possibilities of being, doing and knowing – which raises an epistemological threat, when the modernity/coloniality matrix of power imposes. Thus, the subject within relational worlds does not exist in isolation but inter-exists with other living beings (Escobar, 2012).

With this notion of the weave of life or spiderweb, we have a starting point to imagine the role the emotions might play and what could be at stake for a relational world in an ontological conflict facing Western-modern world-creating practices. In Table 1, there is a summary of the concepts I articulate in this research to help answer my first research question: how is conflict an ontological conflict?

To widen the panorama, explore more in depth, and guide my analysis on the role that emotions might play in the conflict between British Columbia provincial government, Coastal GasLink and the Wet’suwet’en, I build on the theoretical framework developed by González-Hidalgo (2021). Regarding her ethnographic work carried out both in Mapuche communities in southern Chile and in Chiapas (southern Mexico), she found three ways in which emotions intermingle with power relations in defence of the commons exposed to conflict: emotional environmentalism, emotional oppression and emotional environmentality. Emotional environmentalism refers to emotions that arise in favour of the conservation or reclamation of the commons. This might involve processes of political subjectivation (or subject-making) informed by emotions, which aim to resist practices that target the destruction of the life of the commons.

Table 1: A comparative summary of the concepts de la Cadena, Escobar, Ingold and Blaser developed and I articulate in this research

| Western-modern ontology | Relational ontologies |
|---|---|
| • Occupation of territories as a tabula rasa for the inscription of human's history | • The spiderweb, the meshwork or the weave of life |
| • Mental representations of a world 'out there' | • Dwelling perspective |
| • Subject-object relationship | • Ontology without objects |
| • Knowing first, to then be able to be and do | • Being-doing-knowing all together/cosmoaction |
| • The land and water-as-a-resource | • The water and land-as-a-living being |
| • Human beings exist in isolation and are superior to other-than-humans | • Human beings inter-exist with other-than-humans and the territories they co-construct |
| • Cultural differences as symbolic structures: sameing | • Culture as a radical difference: otherness |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

An example is the affection for native species that have survived amid the extensive plantation of eucalyptus in southern Chile. Those species remind Mapuche people about how life in their commons was before the irruption of colonisers. Thereof comes their motivation to reclaim their territories. Emotional oppression refers to the negative emotions that effectively break up the resistance in defence or reclamation of the commons. These emotions are related to feelings of lack of dignity and inferiority, which crystallise due to intimidation devices frequently exercised by governments, private or state companies through persecution, criminalisation and murder. Emotional environmentality has to do with the affections for capital induced by private or state companies through disciplining devices or painkillers. An example of such disciplinary mechanisms are the campaigns and workshops organised by private companies in the paper pulp sector in southern Chile. To stop the fires caused as a means of protest by some Indigenous Mapuche leaders against land grabbing, the companies sell the idea that the forest belongs to everyone since it provides wealth (leftovers) and jobs for the region. On the other hand, painkillers are given as infrastructure (such as schools, sports fields or hospitals) that companies build for communities, demonstrating the 'benefits' that their projects provide. Although emotional environmentality is the least ontologically sensitive dimension of González-Hidalgo's work, in this research, I ask how companies and British Columbia provincial government create affection for the modern world via discursive mechanisms and practices. As demonstrated in the result's last section ('emotional environmentality'), pages 24–26, there are inclusion discursive devices that Coastal GasLink uses as a strategy of inviting Wet'suwet'en people to join the modernity/coloniality matrix of power. Such strategies leave the problem of power relations as a matter that needs a solution exclusively within the modern episteme arena, rejecting the right of the existence of an arachnoid-centric world.

In general, the studies of González-Hidalgo theorise the role that emotions play in territorial conflicts concerning the defence of the commons and not at an ontological level. However, I take them as the basis of my analysis seeking to expand their scope to understand widely and in depth the implications that emotions might have amid ontological conflicts. To help answer my second research question (what is the role that emotions play in ontological conflicts?), Table 2 indicates how I expand the scope of González-Hidalgo's studies. Her main contribution to this

Table 2: Expanding González-Hidalgo studies of emotions

| Concepts | Scope | My expansion |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Emotional environmentalism | How do the emotions inform the defence and resistance of the commons? | How do the emotions inform the defence and resistance of relational worlds? |
| Emotional oppression | How do actions inform emotions to effectively rupture the commons? | How do actions aiming to rupture relational worlds inform emotions? |
| Emotional environmentality | How do companies and States create affections for the capital? | How do companies and States create affections for the Western-modern world? |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

study is the phenomenological approach, as it enables us to understand how political tensions between worlds deploy and how power is exerted, and it effectively impedes possibilities of existence in other ways of being, doing and knowing; and which mechanisms activate to overcome oppression dynamics (including inter-subjection processes). Thus EmPEs, through this study, also shed light into understanding resilience amid an ontological conflict.

Research context, methods and positionality

The Wet'suwet'en Nation is made up of five matrilineal clans. Each clan has associated houses represented by a hereditary chief ([Office of the Wet'suwet'en](#), nd). Parallel to the precolonial governance system of the Hereditary Chiefs we see in [Figure 2](#), the [Government of Canada \(1985\)](#) created colonial governance structures with the foundation of the Indian Act in the 19th century. Such structures are known as band councils. For the sake of land grabbing, bands, which resemble the structure of a municipality, aimed to delegitimise precolonial governments ([Price and Gadacz, 2023](#)). Contrarily to the Hereditary Chiefs elected by consensus, each band council elects Chiefs through a voting system. From the creation of band councils, the government of Canada assigned small land reserves to them as compensation. In opposition to the Hereditary Chiefs, Wet'suwet'en Band Council Chiefs unanimously approved the development of pipelines ([APTN News, 2020](#)).

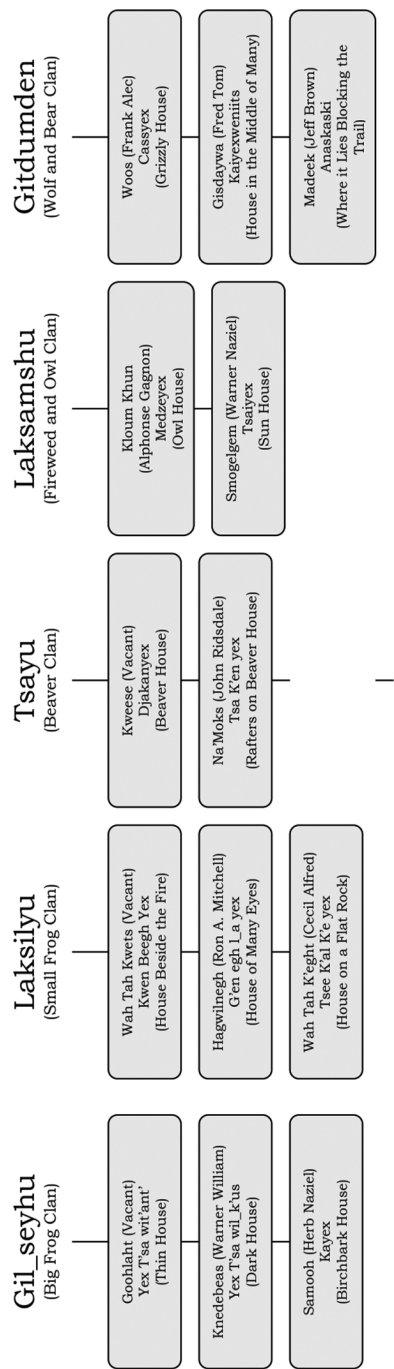
In the supreme court case, known as *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* (1997), the court determined that the Wet'suwet'en represented by the Hereditary Chiefs, had not ceded nor surrendered a territory comprising 22,000 square kilometres. The tiny houses on the map ([Figure 3](#)) represent the two surveillance camps erected to prevent Coastal GasLink and other companies from trespassing. At the [Unist'ot'en camp \(2018\)](#), the Wet'suwet'en erected the Healing Centre in 2015. As its slogan says, it aims 'to heal the land and heal the people'.

[Figure 4](#) indicates the ontological orientation of each actor in the conflict.

The pipeline

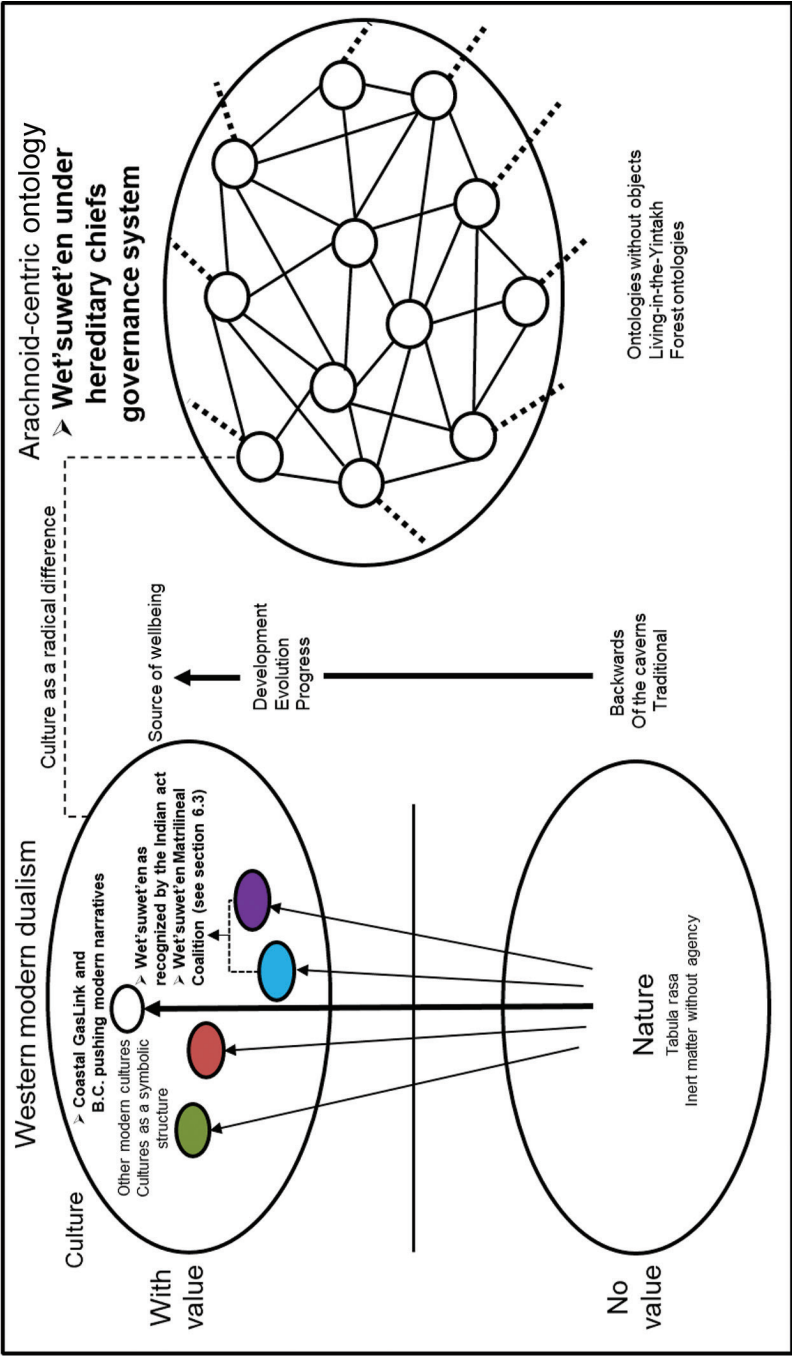
The Coastal GasLink pipeline would be 670 kilometres long, with a capacity to transport 5 billion cubic feet of hydrofracking gas daily. It would transport the gas from the Dawson Creek area (section 1 in [Figure 5](#)) to the facilities near Kitimat (section 8 in [Figure 5](#)), where it would be condensed (or converted to liquefied petroleum gas) at subzero temperatures for export by sea to foreign markets. The region is considered,

Figure 2: Wet'suwet'en matrilineal governance structure



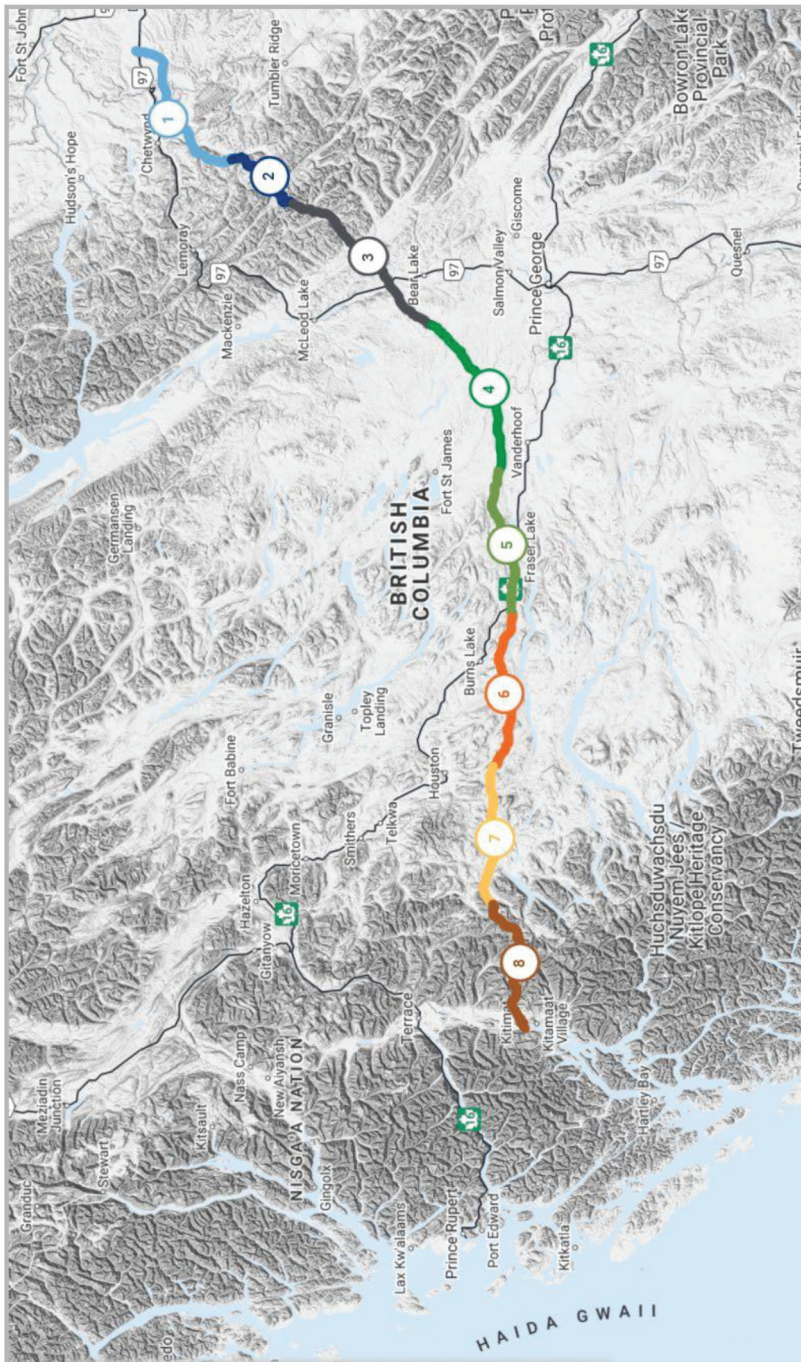
Source: www.wetsuweten.com.

Figure 4: Ontological orientation of actors in the conflict



Source: Author's own elaboration.

Figure 5: Coastal GasLink Pipeline route



Source: <https://www.coastalgaslink.com/whats-new/news-stories/2020/coastal-gaslink-workforce-grows-to-more-than-1000-in-january/>. Permission to use the map was granted by the author.

identifying meanings and indicators of categories that would explain aspects of the research topic, and an interpretation. The bases for establishing categories were this study's research questions and the concepts articulated in the literature review. Such concepts are the making of cultural differences as a symbolic structure (or the making of an 'allowed Indian'), radical cultural differences, reasonable politics, emotional environmentalism, emotional oppression and emotional environmentality. These concepts/categories set a boundary and a filter concerning the scope of the sampling process. The units of analysis were paragraphs and phrases within documents, interviews and transcriptions of dialogues. For the first research question, the meanings and indicators relate to colonial governance structures, land ownership, Western-modern ecological mitigation and restoration practices, and genocide/ecocide as an undoable division within a relational ontology. For the second research question, the meanings and indicators were Wet'suwet'en ceremonies and roles (as hunters, berry pickers, fishers) and discursive practices that create affections for the modern world. Since meanings and indicators have embedded narratives, this led to a narrative analysis in the interpretation phase. Analysing narratives was pertinent to this study since they are a component of ontologies. They express everyday practices, and the way people construct and perform their identity in a given context (Neuman, 2014: 495).

Drawing on audiovisual ethnography (AVE) throughout the multisensorial place-making process (Pink, 2021), I used the video records filmed mainly by the Wet'suwet'en. In Retsikas's words (2008: 127), ethnographic fieldwork involves 'the deployment of the fieldworker's body as a living, physical, sensing, and experiencing agent enmeshed in practical and intimate encounter within a range of spaces and places'. Even though AVE does not involve the researcher's embodiment, it offers other 'multimodalities' for a phenomenological construction of realities and subjectivities – for instance, the perception of body movements, tone of voice, gestures, landscape images and sounds, shapes, and people's actions and interactions. On the other hand, since the sole video recording action is political because it builds narratives on the case of interest, AVE allows us to politicise and, thereby, understand how people perform ways of being, doing and knowing outside the modern episteme – which dominates the political discourse via court cases, laws (Indian Act), environmental assessment studies, the news, Canadian government energy security discourses and so on. The diffusion of the Wet'suwet'en rich archive of audiovisual records concerning their daily life experiences amid the conflict is part of the historical indigenous counter-hegemonic use of Western-modern telecommunication tools (Ginsburg, 2016). That has involved a dispute in terms of the politics of representation. Over the last decade, the Wet'suwet'en have been disseminating video recordings, whereby they take ownership of their cultural representations and identity. As the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti says: 'If you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is by telling its story and to start with secondly' (cited in Adichie, 2018). The news, companies' consultations, state representatives, and researchers are no longer the only ones communicating what the conflict means for the Wet'suwet'en. Consequently, I would recommend the readers to, in the first place, read, listen and watch the Wet'suwet'en videos and then read this article. It is important to point out that it is totally different to start the story of the Wet'suwet'en with the Indian Act than with that of the Hereditary Chiefs and spokespersons such as Sleydo' and Freda Huson.

The video recordings available online allowed me to (virtually) get into the Yintakh. Through them, I was able to use my senses (visual and auditory) to analyse

body movements, tone of voice and language (drawing also on content and narrative analysis). This mixed methodological approach let me ‘identify noteworthy incidents out of the flow of ongoing activities ... pay attention on the social and interactional processes through which members [perform/enact], maintain and alter their ... worlds ... and document a series of incidents and interactions of the same type and look for regularities or patterns within them’ (Emerson et al, 2011: 24–9).

Positionality

My ethical-political position is reflected throughout this research. Even though as an urban middle-class mestizo living in a Global South country (Iximulew-Guatemala) has not meant living under the most oppressive dynamics induced by the modern world than it could be for others, as Segato (2019) points out, all of us, in Benjaminian terms, from this side of the world were born as the defeated bodies and minds of history. From my father’s lineage, I come from a Kaqchikel Indigenous peasant family who migrated to the city – going through the ontologically painful transition of peasants to urban city roles. From my mother’s lineage, I come from an urban low-income orphan autonomous woman who, since I was a child, imprinted in my imaginary narratives of women leaders challenging patriarchal norms. Therefore, my interest in emotions and political ontology as anti-establishment theory tools of the Euromodern episteme. As a researcher my ethical-political stance lies in my commitment to using appropriate tools with the intention of ceasing to be ‘complicit with the silencing of popular knowledge and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge, sometimes performed even in the name of allegedly critical and progressive theory’ (Escobar, 2016: 13). However, paraphrasing Santos, the theoretical approaches of this research are, at best, within the efforts building the bridge towards the no longer, but not yet, of the critical theory (see Santos, 2015). In this sense, I do not claim to have articulated decolonial theoretical frameworks and concepts to guide my analysis. Borrowing the expression from Mignolo, the framework is critical regarding the modern/colonial matrix of power and attempts to contribute to building the pathways toward recognising the existence of other ontologies/worlds and their implications amid territorial conflicts.

My purpose is also to raise awareness among modern people. In this sense, my research has a pedagogical intention that does not target Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples know much better than me from the frontlines of their resistance what is at stake. My political commitment is to spread this research as a means of advocacy for Indigenous rights and the pluriverse.

Results

The Indian Act and jurisprudence: the making and unmaking of cultural differences

It is not possible to understand the conflict between Coastal GasLink, British Columbia provincial government, and the Wet’suwet’en without making a brief analysis of the divisions among the Wet’suwet’en, created and motivated by the government of Canada, originated since the foundation of the Indian Act. The Act is a clear example of the intentional erosion of radical cultural differences and the making of cultural differences as symbolic structures. From

its inception, the Act intended to disregard authority, autonomy and sovereignty of the Hereditary Chiefs' government system. Through the Act, the government of Canada created a governance system represented by band councils, which are coupled with, controlled by and resemble the modern-Canadian governance structure ([Canadian Encyclopedia, 2022](#)). The intention was clearly to create, in the words of [Rivera Cusicanqui \(1987\)](#), *Indios Permitidos* (allowed Indians) to whom cultural differences are recognised but provided that those differences keep Western-modern practices doable. In the conflict, such practices correlate with the Western-modern narratives of sustainable development, progress, clean energy, carbon dioxide emissions reduction, to name some of them ([Coastal GasLink, 2023a](#)). However, despite the creation of the band councils, the Wet'suwet'en precolonial governance neither disappeared nor ceded or negotiated their rights of access to their territory, autonomy and sovereignty.³

Regardless of that dark past imprinted in the Indian Act and its amendments, there are cases that prove that the Supreme Court of Canada and British Columbia, on various occasions, recognised the limitations of modern laws (and implicitly, modern democracies) to address some of the radical differences that exist between the modern-Canadian culture and that of the Wet'suwet'en ([Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 1997](#); [Canadian Forest Products Inc. v. Sam, 2011](#)). The most relevant case was the so-called *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*. There, the differences between the modern concept of land ownership (manifested in Coastal GasLink's practices) and the equivalent (radically different) within the Wet'suwet'en ontology, were exposed. There, Judge La Forest pointed out – getting a little close to Ingold's concept of dwelling:

Aboriginal title is based on the continued occupation and use of the land as part of the aboriginal peoples' traditional way of life. This sui generis interest is not equated with fee simple ownership; nor can it be described with reference to traditional property law concepts ... if aboriginal peoples continue to occupy and use the land as part of their traditional way of life, it necessarily follows that the land is of *central significance* to them. ([Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 1997](#): 1119, emphasis in original)

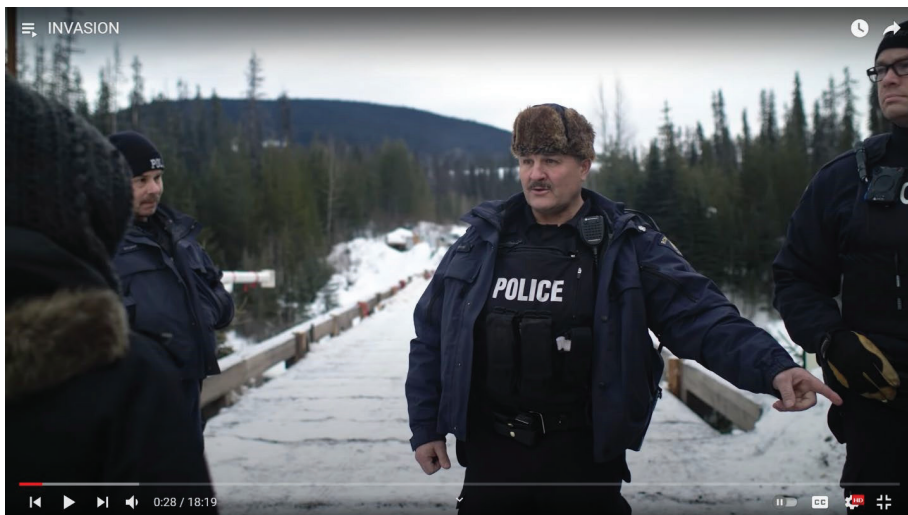
What is the traditional way of life that Judge La Forest indicated? Here is where the radical difference lies. Some practices that define Wet'suwet'en identity are moose and grizzly bear hunting, salmon fishing and berry picking ([Unist'ot'en Camp, 2019](#)). Even if, for the court interest, those practices/roles were considered only as part of a subsistence economy that proved a distinctive/traditional occupancy ([Delgamuukw v. British Columbia, 1997](#): 1037, 1052–5, 1072), we will see later that they go beyond. For the moment, it suffices to stress that such practices relate to the relational world the Wet'suwet'en co-produce with other-than-humans in the Yintakh; and that they differ from the Western-modern people practices that, in the words of Ingold ([Ingold, 2022b](#): 214), occupy territories (a *tabula rasa*) for the inscription of their history. Such an inscription is being reflected through the actions that Coastal GasLink already initiated for the construction and installation of the pipeline: tree clearing, topsoil grading, excavations, blasting, construction of facilities, and other activities that interrupt the relational world of the Wet'suwet'en ([Gidimt'en Access Point, 2020a; 2020b; Coastal GasLink, 2023a](#)).

*Emotions in ontological conflicts emotional environmentalism**Wedzin Kwah: a living being who weaves the spiderweb (the Yintakh)*

In 2009, the house that is known as Unist'ot'en, belonging to the clan of the Big Frog (Gil_seyhu) – one of the five clans that make up the Wet'suwet'en Nation under the governance system of the Hereditary Chiefs – set up a permanent surveillance camp to prevent the invasion of the territory known as Talits Kwa (AJ+, 2014; UnistotenCamp, nd). As a result of a ceremony carried out on a bridge that divides Wet'suwet'en territories from others across the Wedzin Kwah River, the police arrived after receiving 'complaints that there were lots of activities last night' (UnistotenCamp, 2019; and see Figure 6). With an attitude and tone of indignation due to the constant criminalisation suffered, Freda Huson – Unist'ot'en spokesperson – told one of the RCMP guards that what they were doing the last night 'was a water ceremony ['activities', as per the guards] because they [Coastal GasLink] are trying to destroy our water' (UnistotenCamp, 2019). To this, one of the guards answered, 'So, you were blessing the water last night on the bridge or ... [the guard waits for the response with a gesture of superiority]' (see Figure 7). Freda, with an assertive tone and gestures, replied, 'We were doing prayers for the water because it's in danger right now!' But, in danger from what threat?

To develop the pipeline, Coastal GasLink needs to drill in the Wedzin Kwah River. How does this affect the river, the Wet'suwet'en and the life in the Yintakh? And how does this inform their resistance? Among the impacts that Coastal GasLink expects to cause, the Wet'suwet'en fear because their environmental assessment findings indicate drilling operations would affect the river's water quality and life in water (through the possible extinction of salmon; Office of the Wet'suwet'en, 2014: 4). But are not water quality and life in water Western-modern parameters? Yes, nonetheless, the

Figure 6: Screenshot taken from the film *Invasión*



Source: UnistotenCamp, 2019b. Permission was granted by the author to use the screenshot. See also: <https://unistoten.camp/media/invasion/>.

Figure 7: Screenshot taken from the film *Invasión*



Source: [UnistotenCamp, 2019b](https://unistoten.camp/media/invasion/). Permission was granted by the author to use the screenshot. See also: <https://unistoten.camp/media/invasion/>.

Wet'suwet'en, from their relational ontologies, expand its scope. Here is an excerpt of what this means for Sleydo' (from the YouTube video 'Protect the Headwaters! Wet'suwet'en Resist Coastal Gaslink'):

This is the sacred headwaters where our people have come to hunt, to fish, where the salmon come to spawn, that feed all of our people. It's so important because it's one of the last places where you can drink water right out of the river. It's one of the last places in the world that we can safely do that, that provides absolutely everything that we need to live, and we cannot afford to lose that ability right now, in this time, in our history ... We have to protect what we have at all costs. ...

We live in a colonized world and we know that everything in the world is trying to make them not Indigenous. Everything in the world is trying to assimilate our children. It's important to me that they know these places intimately, that they walk these trails, that they know how to get here, that they know that we come here and for Winny, for my youngest, that she knows the smell of a smokehouse, that she knows the taste of dried moose meat, that she knows the taste of Wedzin Kwah water ... These foods nourish us. They're part of us and who we are. They're part of our bodies. They're part of our DNA ... Coastal GasLink looks at this place as a construction zone, as a construction site ... These are sacred spaces to the Wet'suwet'en. ([Gidimt'en Access Point, 2020d](#))

In this excerpt, Sleydo' stresses that, in various ways, their affections and emotions associated with the Wedzin Kwah River inform their concerns and resistance. In her words, they make them 'protect what [they] have at all costs'. First, the river provides absolutely everything they need to live. The river enables the conditions for the salmon to live, for the berries to grow and for all that lives in the Yintakh to

exist. Beyond the river as a supplier of Wet'suwet'en and other-than-human biological needs, there are emotional links to how the river and what they hunt taste: 'We come here and for Winny, for my youngest, that she knows the smell of a smokehouse, that she knows the taste of dried moose meat, that she knows the taste of Wedzin Kwah water'. Going further, Sleydo' indicates that what they drink and feed off is part of their DNA, part of their bodies. Hence, any disturbance to the river means harming their bodies and other-than-human bodies. There is no boundary between the Wet'suwet'en and the river. Drilling the river also means doing so to Wet'suwet'en and other other-than-human bodies.

On the other hand, this all implies that the river is a living being with agency. The way the river flows and behaves allows certain conditions of existence. In the words of Ingold, the river is a weaver on the spiderweb (the Yintakh). But the river is neither an independent source of life nor is its agency independent. The river inter-exists within a spiderweb (the Yintakh) that is also weaved by others. The Wet'suwet'en affection for the river is not only associated with the river itself but with the Yintakh as a whole. Without the river, as it is (as it flows, as it tastes, as it sounds, as it looks and so forth), the Yintakh could not be and, consequently, the Wet'suwet'en neither. Hence, the inherent relation between ecocide and genocide within the Wet'suwet'en relational ontology.

The Healing Centre: a centre of political inter-subjection

The Wet'suwet'en belonging to the Unist'ot'en House erected the Healing Centre in 2015 (Figure 8). Contrary to what disciplinary mechanisms such as the Western-modern residential school programmes aimed at and what the Coastal GasLink practices are causing, the Healing Centre aims to decolonise and restore the identity and dignity of the Wet'suwet'en through educational programmes (UnistotenCamp, 2018). The programmes

Figure 8: Screenshot taken from the video *Unist'ot'en Healing Centre*



Source: UnistotenCamp, 2018 Permission was granted by the author to use the screenshot.

include fishing, hunting, berry collection, dance, storytelling and everything related to learning to relate (with humans and other-than-humans) and dwell-in-the-Yintakh (Unist'ot'en Camp, 2019). More than just teaching practices linked to a subsistence economy, the Centre seeks processes of political inter-subjection. The prefix 'inter' indicates subject-making processes within relational ontologies. As Escobar (2012) says, the subject does not exist in relational ontologies but inter-exists within the spiderweb or weave of life with other humans and other-than-human beings. Such inter-subject-making processes help us understand, on the one hand, more about Wet'suwet'en's worry, frustration and stress facing the Coastal GasLink practices; and, on the other hand, how affections for the other-than-human inform Wet'suwet'en resistance. Fishing, hunting and berry collection, among others, are roles at the core of what it means being-knowing-doing-in-the-Yintakh for the Wet'suwet'en. As Sleydo' expressed in an interview, co-hosted by Raven Trust and Stop Ecocide International, concerning the consequences of the practices of Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government:

We are actually seeing the destruction of our territories in real time with our own eyes on a daily basis ... and is really, really challenging for us on a micro level because our roles are being stripped away from us; our roles as medicine gathers, as storytellers, as hunters ... these roles are being taken away, our purpose in life according to our culture ... We can't have culture, language and songs and dances, those are all representations of our relationship to our land. And so, when that is being destroyed, we are being destroyed ... What is culture without land? We just can't do it ... we are dying a slow death because we don't have that land base, we don't have that connection and that's where all of our art comes from, and that's where all of our songs come from, that's where our legends come from ... And it is very stressful being out on the territory in this kind of situation. It is hard emotionally, spiritually ... There is so many people [the RCMP, the CGL and other companies] that are there to hurt the land and they're there to hurt us, and to take us off our land and drop us on jail. (Stop Ecocide International, 2021)

'What is culture without land?' What is a culture without the moose, grizzly bear, salmons, ...? To understand the implications of their roles, we must recall Ingold's metaphor. Thus far, I have already addressed what it means, within the spiderweb, that beings inter-exist and co-weave it. Another element of the life-in-the-spiderweb is how beings perform their agency. According to Ingold, beings constantly gain agency through the skills they learn to dwell in the spiderweb (to move on the spiderweb threads). Eliminating one of the beings who designs the spiderweb (the Yintakh) poses not only an ontological threat but an inherent epistemological one. Such dimensions (the ontological and the epistemological) help us understand why the Wet'suwet'en's affection for the other-than-human and their roles inform their resistance. They are aware that what is at stake is their ways of being, knowing and doing.

Emotional oppression

In December 2018, disregarding Wet'suwet'en 'Anuc niwh'it'en (laws) and voices, the Supreme Court of British Columbia granted an injunction to Coastal GasLink to access Wet'suwet'en territories (*Coastal GasLink Pipeline Ltd. v. Huson*, 2019). Right after, the

company, with the support of the RCMP, began works in the zone where they intended to develop the pipeline. Thus far, Coastal GasLink activities include clearing trees to build streets and facilities to house more than 1,500 workers. Such activities are already affecting active hunting zones for the Wet'suwet'en (see [Figure 9](#)). The company is not only impeding access to those zones, but also affecting the migratory patterns of goats, moose, wolves and bears ([Gidimt'en Access Point, 2020c](#)). In the words of Sleydo': 'our roles are being stripped away from us; our roles as medicine gather, as storytellers, as hunters ... these roles are being taken away, our purpose in life according to our culture' ([Stop Ecocide International, 2021](#)). Are those not the more effective means of imposing (Western-modern) subjectivities and a world made of one world? Even if Coastal GasLink claims that they will restore the landscape, which will take eight years, being colonial, that means, at best, an ontological interruption of the Yintakh. In other words, the Wet'suwet'en will not be allowed to be themselves in their territory for eight years, and 'it is very stressful being out on the territory in this kind of situation. It is hard emotionally, spiritually' ([Stop Ecocide International, 2021](#)).

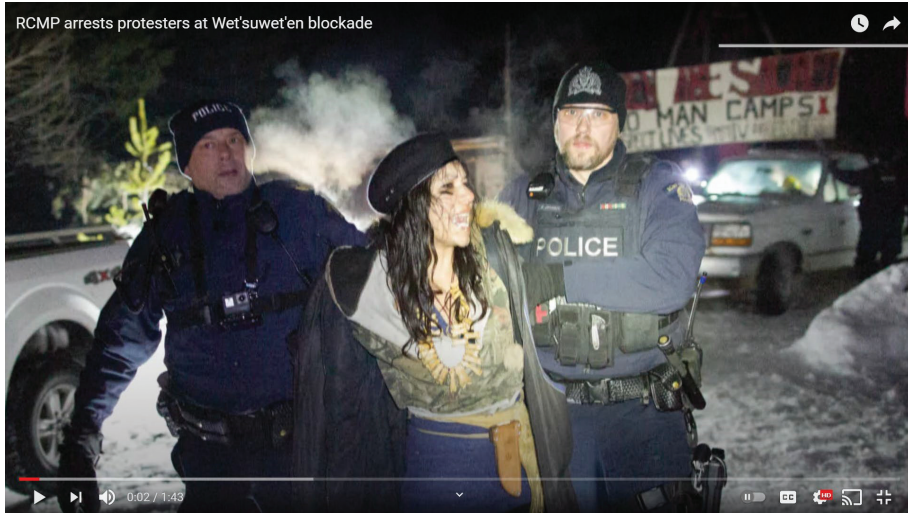
The climax of the violent interventions against the Wet'suwet'en arose on 6 January 2020, when the RCMP arrested 14 people (including Sleydo') at the Gidimt'en camp (see [Figure 10](#)). Those arrests came after the Supreme Court of British Columbia renewed, in December 2019, the injunction granted to Coastal GasLink in 2018 to trespass on Wet'suwet'en territories. Despite an eviction letter issued by the Hereditary Chiefs to the company on 5 January 2020, they continue invading, and transgressing Wet'suwet'en sovereignty ([Wickham, nd](#)). The acts of repression and criminalisation have attempted to hinder any manifestation of resistance against the project. Despite the prime minister of British Columbia points out that arrests were not the outcome they were expecting and that they will continue promoting dialogue, those acts of punishment have been there, through the RCMP, British Columbia provincial government and Coastal GasLink, to remind the Wet'suwet'en of the Western-modern world hegemony and power over other worlds. The implications of taking

Figure 9: Screenshot taken from *Hunting Interrupted*



Source: [Gidimt'en Access Point, 2020b](#). Permission was granted by the author to use the screenshot.

Figure 10: Screenshot taken from the video RCMP arrests protesters at Wet'suwet'en blockade



Source: [Winter, 2020](#). Permission was granted by the author to use the screenshot.

the Wet'suwet'en off their land and dropping them in jail are a disconnection from their Yintakh and their ways of being, doing and knowing.

Such acts of repression awakened the solidarity of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in British Columbia, elsewhere in Canada and around the world, expressing their repudiation through mass protests on the streets ([APTN National News, 2020](#); [Briggs, 2020](#); [Taylor and Rodriguez, 2020](#)).

Emotional environmentality

The creation of affection for the Western-modern world has been induced through discourses and practices of inclusion. The Band Council Chiefs have given their approval to the project, justifying that Coastal GasLink will bring jobs and help them get out of poverty ([Global News, 2020](#)). Recall that the Wet'suwet'en Band Councils, as noted earlier, are the colonial parallel governance structure that the government of Canada created with the foundation of the Indian Act. Also recall that, in *Delgamuukw*, the Supreme Court of British Columbia recognised that the Wet'suwet'en, represented by the Hereditary Chiefs (not the Band Council Chiefs), have never ceded nor surrendered a territory that comprises 22,000 square kilometres. Hence, according to the jurisprudence generated at the Supreme Court of British Columbia, the only authority legitimate to make decisions concerning the Yintakh on behalf of the Wet'suwet'en, are the Hereditary Chiefs, who must respect the decisions agreed in the Bahlats (feasts). The Hereditary Chiefs' authority does not come from an election voting system but from a consensus reached by the Bahlats.

What does it mean that Coastal GasLink includes Wet'suwet'en in the project to take part in the benefits? Do the inclusion practices reflect that the company understands the Wet'suwet'en radical differences (their ontology and epistemology) and that they ensure and respect Wet'suwet'en autonomy and sovereignty?

In 2015, Coastal GasLink, with British Columbia provincial government, through the Minister of Aboriginal Rights and Reconciliation (MARR), financed the creation of the Wet'suwet'en Matrilineal Coalition (WMC). The main goal of the WMC was to communicate the project's economic benefits and foster an inclusive decision-making process among the Wet'suwet'en. The three founding members of the WMC were the Wet'suwet'en Gloria George, Darlene Glaim and Theresa Tait-Day. [The WMC \(2017\)](#) foundation did not arise from the Bahlats, and hence it had the approval of neither the Wet'suwet'en clan members nor the Hereditary Chiefs.

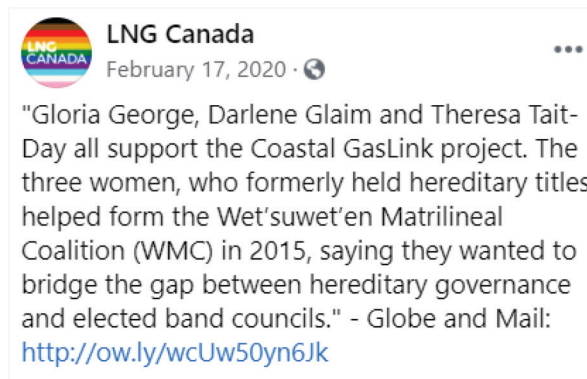
As per [The Globe and Mail \(2020\)](#) British Columbia, the purpose of the WMC was also to bridge the gap between the Wet'suwet'en Band Councils and the Hereditary Chiefs. [Figure 11](#) shows an excerpt cited by LNG Canada on their Facebook fan page.

Considering the ontological and epistemological dimensions it entails, is it possible to bridge a gap between a precolonial and a colonial governance system? Via blurring radical cultural differences and the making of CSS (as the government of Canada did with the creation of band councils to bypass and modernise the governance system of the Hereditary Chiefs)? What was the purpose of bridging the gap? To find, anyhow, approval for the Coastal GasLink pipeline? Through a series of workshops (not in the Bahlats), financed by Coastal GasLink and the MARR, the [WMC \(2017\)](#) planned to inform the Wet'suwet'en concerning the project benefits. The purpose was explicitly to create emotional links to the capital. As the Office of the Wet'suwet'en exposed:

We recognize that they [the MARR and Coastal GasLink] are throwing all sorts of money at our people in an effort to persuade them to support their pipelines; we as Chiefs cannot fault our people for accepting these short-term opportunities. We the dinize' & ts'ake ze' have come today to provide an unequivocal statement that was reached by consensus of all five Clans that we do not sanction or authorize this Matriarchal Society to speak or act in any way, shape or form on behalf of the Wet'suwet'en Nation ... ([Office of the Wet'suwet'en, 2016](#))

On the other hand, another argument that justified the WMC foundation was that the Wet'suwet'en women were under a governance system of oppression where

Figure 11: WMC supports the Coastal GasLink Project



Source: [The Globe and Mail British Columbia, 2020](#), cited in [LNG Canada, 2020](#).

only male house Chiefs had the authority to decide what to do with the natural resources in their territories (Forester, 2020). Hence, supporting the WMC, the Coastal GasLink project was not only presumably fostering an inclusive decision-making process – when women’s voices were being silenced – but also hiring them to take active participation in the development of the pipeline (Coastal GasLink, 2023b). However, as Sleydo’, Freda Huson and other matriarchs pointed out, on repeated occasions, the Hereditary Chiefs do not have the authority to speak on behalf of clan members without any consensus reached at the Bahlats (APTN News, 2020). Beyond the creation of affection for the capital, what Coastal GasLink and the MARR intended to do, through their support of WMC, was to create affection for the Western-modern world. Through inclusion practices, they invite the Wet’suwet’en to lose their identity, embracing Western-modern subjectivities.

Discussion: within and beyond the conflict

In this research, drawing on an articulated framework made up of Ingold’s phenomenology, Blaser’s ontological conflicts, Escobar’s studies of CRD and González-Hidalgo’s EmPEs, I analysed the role that emotions play in the conflict between British Columbia provincial government, Coastal GasLink and the Wet’suwet’en. First, to answer the research question, how the conflict of interest is an ontological conflict, I use concepts such as the making CSS, epistemicide ontological interruption and reasonable politics, the hierarchic divisions within the modern narrative (culture–nature, especially), and epistemic disobedience to unveil that the political arena of the conflict goes beyond the mere distribution and access of natural resources or environmental impacts, narratives of power relations in terms of class, race and gender within a modern democracy and, thus, beyond the modern episteme – an ontological conflict thereof.

I found out that the government of Canada, aiming to keep Western-modern world practices doable, has historically reduced the radical cultural differences of the Wet’suwet’en precolonial governance system to cultural differences as symbolic structures. Such reduction is not only a matter of the past, given that there are still strategies that seek the same in the present and the precolonial governance system of the Wet’suwet’en still exists. In the 19th century, the government of Canada attempted to modernise the governance system of the Wet’suwet’en Hereditary Chiefs with the creation of the band councils. In the present, with the support of Coastal GasLink and the MARR, the same strategy is sought through the WMC. Since the presentation of the pipeline’s proposal, both Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government have been utilising band councils and the WMC to modernise, bypass and delegitimise Wet’suwet’en clans represented by the Hereditary Chiefs. The studies of CRD help us understand that the Wet’suwet’en narratives, histories and practices are beyond the Western-modern episteme.

Despite the jurisprudence that proves that the Supreme Court of Canada and British Columbia (*Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, 1997) recognised the centrality that the land (Yintakh) has for the Wet’suwet’en (represented by the Hereditary Chiefs), none of them resolved accordingly in recent cases. For the Wet’suwet’en, not only the land is of central significance within their relational world/ontology, but all the living and sentient beings that dwell in it. Ontologically, this entails an undoable division between nature and culture. Hence, ecocide and

genocide are also two sides of the same coin (they are inherently interconnected). The negative impacts of Coastal GasLink through their world-creating practices (deforestation, drilling, excavations and the like) in Wet'suwet'en territories are not only creating environmental problems. By changing the migratory patterns of the moose, goats, wolves and grizzly bears, Coastal GasLink impedes the enaction of the Wet'suwet'en relational world (including their ways of being, doing and knowing). For them, hunting is not only a subsistence economic activity but is also associated with their identities (including their ways of being, doing and knowing). The reason is that other-than-human beings co-weave/co-design the Yintakh with the Wet'suwet'en. Their extinction or migration entails the loss of designers and the disruption of their relational world. That is why the Wet'suwet'en ask themselves and others, 'What is culture without the land?' And, extrapolating, what is a culture without moose, wolves, bears, salmon and goats? Epistemologically, on the other hand, the impacts of Coastal GasLink mean, in the words of Santos (2015: 92), an epistemicide – the murder of Wet'suwet'en knowledge. Wet'suwet'en agency is determined by the skills they learn to move/live on the spiderweb (the Yintakh) threads. That is achieved through their intimate encounter with other-than-humans in the Yintakh and the performance of the Kungax (oral stories) in the Bahlats. Therefore, at best, being an optimist (and colonial), what the impacts and ecological restoration plans of Coastal GasLink mean is the *ontological interruption* of the Wet'suwet'en relational world by the world-creating practices of the Western-modern world.

By disregarding the undoable divisions between culture and nature (and, hence, genocide and ecocide) in their environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies, Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government minimised the Wet'suwet'en radical cultural differences to nothing. But how could that have been different? The Office of the Wet'suwet'en assessment study gives some insights into rethinking the inherent Western-modern nature of EIAs. For the Office of the Wet'suwet'en, their relationship with the land (the Yintakh) was the backbone of their study. Despite the various Western-modern expressions and concepts that one can find in the Office of the Wet'suwet'en study, we must recall that Indigenous people's resistance has been since the colonisers arrived in the continent centuries ago, with one foot in the modern/colonial world and the other in their relational world (see de la Cadena, 2010). Blaser (2016) explains this need through what he defines as reasonable politics. The concept points out that the only world legitimate to determine what a problem can be is the Western-modern. Others only speak in terms of myths and beliefs. How can it be possible to say that, without bears, the Wet'suwet'en cannot be themselves in the territories affected? That is a non-acceptable argument for Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government. To be legitimate, the Wet'suwet'en must express themselves within the confinements of the Western-modern categories. There is, on the other hand, a pedagogical reason for needing to be partially connected to the Western-modern world and their relational world. The Wet'suwet'en must explain with Western-modern categories what the company's impacts imply for them. As Melissa Mollen says, 'We are teachers, we are protectors, we are ... it is a lot of job, and then we have to convince them' (Stop Ecocide International, 2021). To understand the deepness of such a hermeneutical challenge, we must recognise that, despite their radicality, not even the terms genocide and ecocide alone are able to grasp what is at stake amid ontological conflicts. That has not only been confusing

for radical green environmental movements but also for scholars who think that discourses such as the rights of nature alone help transgress the modern episteme.

Recognising those limitations, many academic activists have decided, in recent decades, to work hand in hand with grassroots movements to formulate new tools that help understand the dimensions of what is at stake. Academic activists such as Santos have adopted terms such as epistemic justice to make visible that what is in dispute is also the existence of other forms of knowing – beyond modern science – that the Western-modern world often throws into absence whenever those epistemologies make the practices of the all-encompassing modern world undoable (Santos, 2015). For that reason, and the many given through this research, as Mignolo (2009: 161) points out, we (the moderns) must act in epistemic disobedience to move away from the colonising practices of the Western-modern world. Without such disobedience, it would be impossible for modern people to understand and make visible (among us) other worlds, or a world where many worlds fit – the pluriverse.

On the other hand, as Sleydo expressed, what is at stake is ‘the sustainability of life itself’ (Stop Ecocide International, 2021). Western-modern civilisation has proven to be unsustainable over the past centuries. For many Indigenous people, grassroots movements and academic activists, this is what the socio-ecological crisis has been shouting. We must recognise, as Santos points out, that ‘we face modern problems for which there are no modern solutions’ (Santos, 2015: 44). The pathways towards a civilisational transition depend on the existence of other worlds. This is where my interest in the second research question formulated for this study came. In answering what the role of emotions in ontological conflicts is, I revealed through this research that emotions have the potential to determine whether resistance to modern/colonial practices by other worlds keeps going, hinders, strengthens or ceases.

While the work of Ingold, Blaser, Escobar and de la Cadena shed light on how the affection for the other-than-human informs Indigenous people’s resistance, as González-Hidalgo and Zografos (2020: 242) criticise, their perspective tends to ‘optimism’, where affection mediated by love and care are predominant, impeding the micropolitics of every day’s analysis. Drawing on Ingold’s spiderweb metaphor to expand the scope of González-Hidalgo’s EmPEs (and vice versa), I demonstrate that the processes of political inter-subjectivation sought at the Unist’ot’en Healing Centre help us to understand, on the one hand, more about the worry, frustration and stress of the Wet’suwet’en facing the practices of Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government. On the other hand, they reveal how affection for other-than-human (sometimes through, but not restricted to, sensorial experiences like the river’s taste, the dried moose meat taste and other bodily experiences) informs the resistance of the Wet’suwet’en. By interrupting the hunting season and provoking the migration of moose, bears, wolves and goats through their world-creating practices (clearing of trees, drilling, excavations and so on), Coastal GasLink induces fear, frustration and stress to the Wet’suwet’en because of the impossibility of being themselves in their territory. Through such practices, Coastal GasLink effectively imposes Western-modern subjectivities. Hence, in 2015, the Wet’suwet’en erected the Healing Centre at Unist’ot’en, to heal their relationships with the other-than-human historically harmed by modern-capitalists and government residential school programmes. The Wet’suwet’en know that to protect the bears, the rivers and other sentient beings is to protect designers who, with them, exercise agency in designing the relational world in which they dwell. Their affection not only for

the other-than-human but their entire relational world is what awakes their anger to resist the Coastal GasLink ontological occupation.

Lastly, through this research, I also demonstrated how Coastal GasLink and British Columbia provincial government, through the MARR, create affection not only for the capital but for the Western-modern world. Their discourses and practices of inclusion are part of the historic reforms of the capitalist hydra (a monster with several heads) that reinvents itself, over and over again, to present itself as inclusive and sustainable. We have the example of ‘women in development’ during the 1970s and 1980s (Escobar, 2011), and now, to support neo-extractivist discourses and practices, we have ‘women in mining’ and the WMC. While I do not intend to imply that those practices of inclusion are not, in part, the result of Western-modern feminist historical triumphs, those practices are not the result of decolonial feminist struggles. There is a great deal of decolonial feminist literature, but it has not been a purpose in this research to conduct a related review, much less make an analysis through those approaches. That can be part of future research that would be important to develop. For me, it suffices to point out that both Sleydo’ (Gidim’t’en spokesperson), Freda Huson (Unist’ot’en spokesperson) and many other Wet’suwet’en matriarchs, under the governance system of the Hereditary Chiefs, clearly understand this from the frontlines of their resistance. That does not imply that they might not have their own struggles against patriarchal practices within their Nation but that their inclusion into the Coastal GasLink project ‘benefits’ would entail the death of their relational world (including their ways of being, doing and knowing). We urge to understand with Ranciére (1999: 92) that ‘the political is not [only] made up of power relations [within a world made of one world], it is made up of relations between worlds’ or relations within a world made of many worlds.

Notes

¹ See <https://www.yintahaccess.com/> and <https://unistoten.camp/>.

² As you can read in the section ‘The pipeline’, the Canadian government, and investors (including scientists who develop environmental impact assessment studies) consider Wet’suwet’en territory an energy corridor. For them, nature is a mere resource with market value. With all its political implications, this is the reality they perform in the territory interrupting Wet’suwet’en ways of being, knowing, doing.

³ See <https://www.wetsuweten.com/>.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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