

YINTAH and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty

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FILM REVIEW

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YINTAH and Recognition of Indigenous Sovereignty

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YINTAH

Documentary film (2024)

Directed and Produced by Jennifer Wickham, Brenda Michell, and Michael Toledano

Runtime: 1 hour, 50 minutes

More information at:

<https://www.yintahfilm.com/>

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt31841789/>

YINTAH (2024) is an Indigenous-made documentary that follows the decades-long battle of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation against the Coastal GasLink pipeline project, which seeks to expand through their traditional territory. *YINTAH* centres on Howilhat Freda Hudson and Sleydo' Molly Wickham, whose activism is informed by the 1997 Delgamuukw-Gisdaywa Supreme Court of Canada decision, which affirmed that the Wet'suwet'en people never ceded title to their land. Despite this legal victory, Canadian governments and corporations have continued to attempt to claim control over the territory.

By providing an account of the Wet'suwet'en land defense, the film documents this conflict. The documentary took over 10 years to create and captures standoffs between Wet'suwet'en land defenders and RCMP forces along with the private security officials hired by Coastal GasLink and other companies. Over the course of the film, viewers bear witness to officers storming the blockades defending Wet'suwet'en territory, arresting land defenders and filmmakers alike. Between shots of the blockade, Wet'suwet'en families are shown engaging in and working to revitalize their traditional practices. They hunt on their traplines, walk the forests, and draw drinking water straight from the lake. These smaller, intimate moments framed within the greater conflict demonstrate that *YINTAH*, at its core, is about Indigenous sovereignty.



Borders are an important aspect of sovereignty, especially unrecognized borders. Wet'suwet'en borders are not recognized by state maps, but for the Wet'suwet'en people, these borders are demarcated by their hereditary governance system, which has been present since time immemorial. As the film explores, these borders

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are clearly drawn around Wet’suwet’en land and are steeped in lineage, stewardship, and traditional responsibility. These historical Indigenous borders remain unrecognized by Canada’s legal and political systems, even after the 1997 decision recognizing Wet’suwet’en territory as symbolic and not sovereign. This tension is the focus of the film: the state publicly recognizes Indigenous land rights yet simultaneously denies their enforcement. *YINTAH*’s conflict comes from this contradiction. Land defenders occupy their territory and block pipeline construction, but are criminalized as trespassers on their own land for enforcing their laws within their territories.

YINTAH captures the spatial dimension of Wet’suwet’en resistance through the physical creation of border enforcement, road checkpoints, pipeline construction sites, and Wet’suwet’en encampments. A great deal of the film’s runtime is devoted to these camps, especially to the Unist’ot’en Camp, which was the largest camp and was built directly in the path of the pipeline in 2010, establishing a checkpoint that is shown to be enforced throughout the film. These physical border checkpoints are constantly shifting through the film, which covers the repeated dismantling of the camps by the RCMP, with armed officers often exercising force in their removal of Wet’suwet’en land defenders from their lands. These scenes contrast with another form of Wet’suwet’en resistance: resisting by simply being on their territory. *YINTAH* shows us how Wet’suwet’en families build their homes, raise their children, walk their traplines, and hunt for their sustenance. These actions reinforce their claim to the land, despite encroaching industrialization and the Canadian government’s refusal to recognize their sovereignty. By presenting these smaller stories about cultural revitalization for

the Wet’suwet’en people, *YINTAH* ultimately shows us that Indigenous sovereignty is a vital goal that the Wet’suwet’en people are actively working towards.

Sovereignty is not a political concept but a lived reality with the land, law, and community that exists outside of colonial frameworks. Wet’suwet’en sovereignty is ancestral, coming from the land itself and being passed down through a hereditary system where there are no rule makers but instead caretakers and knowledge holders. Through the everyday stories filmed in between the conflict, *YINTAH* shows the viewers how Wet’suwet’en families live, hunt, fish, and raise their children on their traditional territory. In documenting these moments, *YINTAH* shows that living on the land itself is an act of sovereignty and resistance. For Wet’suwet’en land defenders, protecting their traditional land from industrialization is not only a political stance but an expression of legal and spiritual responsibility. *YINTAH* demonstrates this again by documenting cabins being built, ceremonies being held, and food being gathered. These are acts of resistance but also assertions of presence, law, and belonging. *YINTAH* demonstrates that sovereignty is not a verbal agreement or a legislative document, but rather the sum of interconnected everyday actions.

YINTAH is a beautiful film that explores how the Wet’suwet’en nation occupies their lands, maintains their laws, and builds futures rooted in Indigenous sovereignty. In doing so, *YINTAH* provides a glimpse into a future where Indigenous systems are not suppressed or forgotten and are instead living and evolving structures of governance and care. The type of future that *YINTAH* documents is one in which Indigenous sovereignty, care, and community are embedded into everyday life.