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Water, Land, and Freedom: My Journey Through a Decade of Pipeline Resistance on the Yintah and Beyond

Filed under: Action, Canada, Indigenous, Land

— Amplifier Films

Franklin Lopez looks back on grassroots movement media and the creation of the documentary film, *Yintah*.

In the summer of 2011, I was exhausted—physically, mentally, creatively. I'd just finished hauling my feature film, *END:CIV*, across North America, and when I got back to Vancouver, I didn't even have a place to sleep. So, I did what many DIY filmmakers do: I moved into my van.

That's when I got an invitation that would change everything: the Unist'ot'en Clan asked me to bring my film to their territory. I piled a crew of anarchist friends into my old camper van, and we headed north to the Wet'suwet'en yintah (land). At the time, I had no clue I was stepping onto ground zero for a legendary fight against pipelines.

Turns out, the Wet'suwet'en were gearing up to resist thirteen proposed oil and gas pipelines crossing their unceded lands—projects like the Pacific Trails fracked-gas pipeline and Enbridge's Northern Gateway tar sands line. "The Wet'suwet'en" in those days basically meant three people: Freda Huson, Toghestiy (now known as Chief Dini Ze Smogelgem), and Mel Bazil, all determined to protect the Wedzin Kwa River from potential pipeline ruptures. Once I tasted that ice-cold water straight from the river, I understood exactly why they were putting everything on the line.

We started off screening *END:CIV* in Witset (then Moricetown) and Smithers, the nearby settler town. At the time, a major focus of my film work was decolonization and climate change—so the timing couldn't have been better. Like many informed people, I believed that if we didn't halt oil and gas production, our planet would face catastrophic climate chaos. Coming from a family of Boricua anti-colonial fighters, I also found it easy to connect with my new friends on the territory. Then my crew and I headed deeper into the bush to attend an action camp at Unist'ot'en Camp. Back then, it was just one cabin built squarely on the proposed Pacific Trails pipeline route—a bold statement that no pipeline would pass without resistance. Little did we know the strategy sessions in that tiny cabin would spark a movement that would eventually shake Canada to its core.

Documenting Resistance: *Oil Gateway* and the Early Days

During that first visit, I started filming. I talked with Freda, Toghestiy, and Mel, capturing some of the earliest footage from Unist'ot'en Camp. Those interviews would form part of my short doc, *Oil Gateway*, which laid out the bigger picture: the tangle of pipelines threatening so-called British Columbia. At the time, subMedia, my anarchist media project, was basically just me, operating on the principle of "rapid release and share." In other words, frontline struggles need their story told right now, not stashed away for some festival circuit months or years down the road.

After another grueling year of grassroots touring (read: sleeping on couches and eating from dumpsters) *END:CIV* around Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand), and Europe, I promised to return to the yintah. By 2012, the Unist'ot'en Camp had grown from that one cabin into a bustling center for resistance. I was humbled to see around 150 people attend the action camp, with many mentioning they first learned about Unist'ot'en through *Oil Gateway*. It was clear that pipelines were choke points in the fossil fuel machine, and documenting the fight to stop them became my obsession. So I released a second short doc, *The Action Camp*, showing how Unist'ot'en was evolving into a force to be reckoned with.

Planting the Seeds of *Yintah* the Film

In 2012, I met filmmaker Sam Vinal of Mutual Aid Media, who was already passionate about the Unist'ot'en struggle. He wanted to make a full-length doc, but my style—rapid release and share—didn't mesh with the slower festival and grant world. Sam, along with his then-partner, Alexandra Kotcheff, decided to immerse themselves in the yintah, filming extensively at Unist'ot'en. That laid the groundwork for what would become *Yintah* the film—and kicked off a decade-long collaboration between me and Sam.

Meanwhile, I moved to Montreal and started documenting the movement against oil and gas pipelines in eastern Canada. I teamed up with Amanda Lickers of Reclaim Turtle Island to produce a film exposing the pipeline threats in the region. While covering a Mi'kmaq anti-fracking blockade in Elsipigtog, New Brunswick, I witnessed the lengths the Canadian state would go to to shield private extractive projects and trample Indigenous sovereignty. The violent RCMP raid gave me a glimpse of things to come on the yintah but also gave me hope, as hundreds of supporters descended on Elsipigtog to support the anti-fracking fight, and eventually the fracking company pulled out. During that time, I crossed paths with producer Andrea Schmidt from Al Jazeera—a coincidence that turned out to be huge later on.

In 2014, I was back at Unist'ot'en with Amanda Lickers, interviewing Freda and Toghestiy. During that trip, I also met Michael Toledano, a Vice News stringer reporting on the unfolding resistance. In the footage we captured, Freda made a statement that turned out to be prophetic: if the Canadian government attacked, allies would rise up to shut down Canada.

AJ+ and Going Viral

Soon afterward, Andrea Schmidt, now at AJ+, asked me to produce a short documentary on the Wet'suwet'en fight. I got approval from the camp and went back to film. [That short documentary](#) reached over a million viewers on Facebook, further helping thrust the Unist'ot'en Camp into the international spotlight. It included a powerful moment where Freda confronted an Enbridge executive, telling her they did not have consent to build their pipeline. Soon after, Enbridge's Northern Gateway pipeline quietly died.

In 2015, I got a frantic message from Michael Toledano, The RCMP had rolled up on the Unist'ot'en bridge. One of my best friends was getting married that weekend, but he understood when I told him, "Dude, I have to go." I scrambled to get a plane ticket and headed north. After seeing Michael's footage, I urged the Unist'ot'en women to post it immediately. Rapid release and share! They agreed, [and I edited the video on the spot—it blew up online](#). Overnight, the RCMP faced widespread backlash and backed off—for a while.

Later that year, I produced [Holding Their Ground](#), a follow-up AJ+ documentary that netted nine million views on Facebook alone. This documentary featured a [previously published viral clip](#) of Chevron execs being turned away at the Unist'ot'en bridge, proving that front-line footage can be released in real time and still have a major impact later. This footage is also featured in our film [INVASION](#) as well as in Yintah.

Naval resistance in the west, shutting down pipelines in the east.

While on that trip out west, I got a call from an anarchist comrade, telling me that Tsimshians on the coast needed some visibility for their fight to stop a liquefied natural gas (LNG) port from being built on their waters. I jumped at the opportunity, and while visiting their camp, I captured powerful images of [Tsimshian fishermen blocking Petronas](#) workers from conducting survey work. The Tsimshians continued their fight, and by 2017 the LNG project was dead.

This was a very special time, and it felt like we were riding a wave. My partner was several months pregnant, and she and I organized a series of events in Montreal featuring [Freda, Toghestiy, and Felipe Uncacia](#), an Indigenous leader from Colombia. We also took advantage of this trip to connect them to Kanienkeha'ka (Mohawk) communities in the region, including stops in Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawake, and Akwesasne.

Then that December I [filmed an action in Quebec](#): activists physically shut down an Enbridge pipeline by turning its valve and locking themselves to it. That video went viral, [inspiring similar coordinated valve-turning actions in the U.S.](#) that halted a huge chunk of oil flowing south from Canada.

The following year, my child was born. Watching this tiny, noisy being taking his first breaths made me reflect on the kind of world I was bringing him into. Stepping away from the struggle wasn't an option—I had to stay in the ring and keep fighting against colonialism and capitalism for his future and ours.

2019: The RCMP Raids and a Movement Under Siege

By late 2018, the [Gidim'ten Clan](#) asserted their right to control access to their territory, meaning no Coastal GasLink (CGL) workers could pass. I teamed up with Sam Vinal and Michael Toledano to find more filmmakers to document this pivotal moment. At subMedia, now a collective of four, we churned out videos and [agitation clips](#) and [video updates](#) in solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en.

Led by Molly Wickham, [Gidim'ten land defenders](#) and anarchists set up a checkpoint to stop CGL vehicles. The RCMP responded with [paramilitary-style force](#), armed with semi-automatic rifles, arresting Molly and several others. Fearing a similar outcome, the Unist'ot'en leadership took down their blockade. It was heartbreaking to watch, and Sam and Michael filmed every moment.

That spring, after 25 years of subMedia, I needed a break. I was burned out, broke, and bummed out. I took my family west, and we visited Gidim'ten and Unist'ot'en, where the sight of cops and pipeline workers on once-autonomous land really sank my spirits. That's when I got the idea to launch Amplifier Films, a new project dedicated to uplifting anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movements across Turtle Island. Around then, Sam and Michael decided to merge their footage to finish the film that had been percolating for years. Freda asked me to edit, and the timing was perfect. That fall, we produced [INVASION](#), a short doc about the daily reality at Unist'ot'en under growing RCMP and CGL pressure. I edited [INVASION](#) at Amplifier Films in Montreal, reusing some of the best bits from my AJ+ docs and subMedia clips, including [a tense confrontation](#) between Tilly (a St'át'imc woman) and Prime Minister Trudeau.

We released [INVASION](#) online right as Freda declared that CGL workers had to vacate the territory or risk being blocked. The doc became a key tool for organizers prepping for another big clash with the police. It also premiered in Hot Docs and other prestigious festivals, despite being freely available online for months. Which just goes to show: rapid release and sharing is what movements need most.

Sure enough, raids began once again, culminating in a full-on assault on Unist'ot'en in early 2020. [The footage of the RCMP tearing down the gate and arresting Freda](#) and other defenders was intense. But it sparked a massive wave of solidarity actions across Canada. Soon after, [Mohawks in Tyendinaga blocked CN Rail lines](#), kicking off "Shutdown Canada" as railways, highways, and ports were barricaded by anarchists and allies in solidarity with Wet'suwet'en. It was a watershed moment for Indigenous-led resistance.

Making *Yintah* and Reaching the Breaking Point

Riding that wave of momentum, Sam and I took *Yintah* to the Big Sky Film Festival in Missoula, Montana. We pitched it to a live audience and secured our first round of funding—enough to produce materials for bigger grants. Then COVID hit, but we pressed on, cutting a trailer and rough scenes for potential funders. Despite having a decade's worth of incredible footage, we struggled to find backing.

That's when Montreal's [Eyesteelfilm](#) came on board. Known for their award-winning docs, they loved our trailer and partnered with us to help secure funding and a CBC broadcast deal. We also asked two Wet'suwet'en women—Jen Wickham and Brenda Michel—to join the team, following the principle of "[Narrative Sovereignty](#)," so that Wet'suwet'en voices could help shape every stage of the film.

By fall 2021, we'd raised over our budget goals for *Yintah*, and I was in the thick of editing. We had more than 1,000 hours of footage spanning a decade. Meanwhile, new images kept rolling in—Coyote Camp rose up with the help of anarchists. CGL equipment was commandeered and [roads were destroyed](#) and blocked. [Haudenauseane allies](#) from out east travelled to the yintah to join the fight. Then the RCMP launched another brutal raid, and Molly Wickham, Michael Toledano, and others were arrested. I spent a weekend trying to bail Michael out and make sure the footage didn't vanish into the RCMP's hands.

Around this time, following [hit pieces in far-right media outlets](#), the [Alberta government](#) launched a petition [asking Canadians to complain to the CBC](#) about my involvement in *Yintah* because I identify as an anarchist. Despite it all, we hit our production milestones. In spring 2022, we returned to Wet'suwet'en territory for a consultation where members of Gidimt'en and Unist'ot'en reviewed the scenes. By June, I had a four-hour assembly edit and a story document. A ten-minute sequence I edited even [won an award at Cannes](#), and we got invited to True/False's rough-cut weekend to get feedback from industry pros.

But the unrelenting pressure eventually took its toll and our dedicated team was submerged in conflictual tensions. Panic attacks, brutal insomnia, and not being there for my family forced me to make one of the toughest calls of my career: after three years on *Yintah*, I quit.

Reflections, Redemption, and Moving Forward

I spent the next couple of years in a dark place, hit by slanderous rumors about my departure and uncertain about ever picking up a camera again. Then, in spring 2024 right as *Yintah* was premiering at True/False—I found myself freezing my 52 years old ass off at another blockade, camera rolling, helping an Indigenous community in so-called Quebec document their fight against destructive logging. And once again, the rapid share & release footage proved useful in defending the land.

That fall, I finally got to watch *Yintah*. I was thrilled to see so much of the editing I'd done remain in place, including the [Shutdown Canada sequence](#) (what my friends call "Yintah's subMedia moment") set to The Halluci Nation's "Landback." A lot of the overall structure still followed the story outline I'd left behind. Its reach blew my mind: [Netflix picked it up for North America](#), Canadians can watch it free on [YouTube](#) (VPNs work too), and it even got pirated on YTS! For a movement doc, that's about as mainstream as it gets.

The scope of this whole saga is still jaw-dropping. A small cabin at Unist'ot'en grew into a global symbol of Indigenous sovereignty, standing against a massive corporate onslaught. But the fight isn't over—with Coastal GasLink completed, Land defenders continue to face [state repression](#) and Canada has approved more pipelines to cross Wet'suwet'en yintah, and [other neighboring Indigenous territories](#).

As for me, I'm pouring my energy into Amplifier Films. One of our first projects is "A Red Road to the West Bank," which tells the story of Oka Crisis vet [Clifton Ariwakehte Nicholas](#) during his trip to Palestine. Our goal is to explore the similarities between the plight of the Palestinians and that of Indigenous people in Turtle Island. Stay tuned for that.

Ultimately, this story is bigger than pipelines. It's about land, future generations, and what it means to be free. The Wet'suwet'en have shown the world what unwavering resistance looks like—anarchists have demonstrated the power of solidarity, and it's on all of us to keep that flame alive.

Postscript: *Yintah* Missing Credits

There are a number of people who helped with *Yintah* who were not listed in the credits, but whose free labor, particularly at the beginning when we had no cash, was priceless.

Cybergeek Antoine Beaupré for his creation of the custom software [video-proxy-magic](#), which allowed me to crunch 80TB of video into a 5TB drive while keeping the folder structure intact. This helped us share all the footage with the other producers and assistant editors without having to spend thousands on large hard drive arrays.

Many thanks to the post-production interns from the University of the West of England Bristol who helped us organize footage during the early days: Charlotte Butler Blondel, Robert Henman, and George Willmott. Also, much gratitude to Stephen Presence of the [Radical Film Network](#) for connecting them with me. A shout-out as well to Marius Fernandes, who did a short stint as an assistant editor.

Ryan Hurst was the first editor for Yintah a few years before this incarnation. A few of his sequences made it in the final film and I rebuilt a lot of his edit projects when doing the footage review.

Big ups to Macdonald Stainsby—he is thanked in the credits, but it should be known that his work in connecting Freda, Toghestiy, and Mel to other troublemakers like me was invaluable. His anti—tar sands organizing and his critiques of environmental NGOs had a huge influence on my work.

Finally, I want to extend my deepest thanks to all the anarchists and anti-authoritarians who poured so much of themselves into this struggle. Your tireless solidarity—often at great personal risk—helped propel the fight farther than anyone imagined. We couldn't have come this far without you.

Thank you for reading and for standing with the Wet'suwet'en and Indigenous communities everywhere defending their homelands.