CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Sociological Studies

Department of Sociology

Master's Thesis

2023 **Bc. Alžběta Jurčová**

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Social and Environmental Mobilization in the Arctic: Exploring the Discursive Strategies of the Gwich'in People

Master's Thesis

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In Prague on July 30, 2023 Alžběta Jurčová

References

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Abstract

This thesis explores the discursive practices of the Gwich'in tribe in Alaska, specifically in the context of the environmental conflict over the proposed oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, an area they have inhabited for generations. Over the years, the tribe has been actively engaged in political activism to protect the Refuge from oil development, with a specific focus on safeguarding the Porcupine Caribou herd that inhabits the area. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of political ecology, the thesis posits that the core of this conflict lies in differing ontologies of nature rather than divergent interests. To address this research problem, the thesis investigates the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in and their evolution, utilizing critical discourse analysis guided by Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach. By analyzing testimonies given by Gwich'in speakers before the US Congress between 2003 and 2019, the research identifies four key discursive strategies utilized by the Gwich'in. The empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that ontological differences underpin the tribe's discursive repertoire. Through an exploration of the Gwich'in tribe's discursive practices, the thesis seeks to gain deeper insights into how their discursive practices contribute to their relative success in resisting development in the refuge. The findings highlight the critical role of discursive practices in environmental and social mobilization efforts, offering valuable insights into the intricate interplay between diverse perceptions and practices concerning nature and their influence on socio-environmental conflicts.

Abstrakt

Diplomová práce zkoumá diskurzní praktiky kmene Gwich’in, a to konkrétně v kontextu environmentálního konfliktu týkajícího se plánované těžby ropy v Arktické národní přírodní rezervaci, kterou kmen obývá již generace. Gwich’in se dlouhodobě aktivně zapojují do politického aktivismu za ochranu rezervace před těžbou ropy, a v rámci své kampaně kladou zvláštní důraz na ochranu stáda karibů, které oblast obývá. Teoretický rámec práce vychází z poznatků politické ekologie a předpokládá, že jádro tohoto konfliktu spočívá v různých ontologiích přírody, nikoli v rozdílných zájmech obou stran konfliktu. Za účelem řešení tohoto výzkumného problému se práce ptá, jaké diskurzní strategie Gwich’in používají a jak se tyto strategie proměnily v čase. Pro zodpovězení výzkumné otázky práce využívá kritickou diskurzní analýzu s sociokognitivním přístupem. Na základě analýzy výpovědí řečníků z kmene Gwich'in před americkým Kongresem v letech 2003 až 2019 identifikuje výzkum čtyři klíčové diskurzní strategie. Výsledky empirického výzkumu potvrzují hypotézu, že kmen ve svém diskurzním repertoáru reflektuje odlišné ontologické pozice. Práce zkoumá diskurzní strategie kmene Gwich'in s cílem získat hlubší vhled do toho, jak tato diskurzní praxe přispívá k jejich relativnímu úspěchu v odporu proti těžbě ropy. Závěry práce poukazují na zásadní roli diskurzní praxe pro environmentální a sociální mobilizaci a přináší poznatky ohledně různých sociálních konstrukcí přírody a jejich vlivu na sociálně-environmentální konflikty.

Keywords

environmental mobilization, environmental conflict, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Gwich'in, political ecology, discursive strategies, critical discourse analysis

Klíčová slova

environmentální mobilizace, environmentální konflikt, Arktická národní přírodní rezervace, Gwich'in, politická ekologie, diskurzivní strategie, kritická diskurzivní analýza

Title

Social and Environmental Mobilization in the Arctic: Exploring the Discursive Strategies of the Gwich'in People

Název práce

Sociální a environmentální mobilizace v arktickém regionu: Diskurzivní strategie Gwich'in kmene

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Introduction

The thesis explores social and environmental mobilization in the Arctic region, with a specific focus on the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in tribe residing in the Yukon and Peel River basins in eastern Alaska and the Yukon. The objective of this thesis is to gain an understanding of their discursive practices concerning the proposed oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Although the Gwich'in tribe's political activism has been extensively discussed in foreign-language literature,[1] it remains relatively underexplored within Czech academia, particularly in terms of their discursive strategies. Therefore, this thesis seeks to contribute to the knowledge on Arctic activism and mobilization within the Czech academic context. The Gwich'in tribe was able to exert a relatively large amount of pressure on both state and private actors for several decades to prevent the encroachment of the extractive industry into the north slope of Alaska, with some viewing it as an evident sucess story.[2] At the same time, the tribe mobilize effectively outside their community and draw international attention to the issue.

Furthermore, the thesis hypothesizes that different ontologies of Nature are reflected in Gwich'in discourse practice and utilized within the discursive strategies that the tribe employs to achieve their objectives. The thesis explores how the Gwich'in achieve their objectives by asking 'what are the discursive strategies of the Gwich'in tribe and how did they evolve?'. Identifying these discursive strategies can guide this thesis research in two probable directions. Firstly, it may uncover new insights into how the tribe employs existing discursive strategies and potentially reveal novel mechanisms underlying their effectiveness. Alternatively, it may identify previously unrecognized discursive strategies that the tribe utilizes to achieve their objectives. To address this research question, a methodological framework is adopted, integrating components from critical discourse analysis. The overall research design approach is explorative in nature.

The Gwich'in Tribe is a small community based on kinship. The tribe practices a form of communal social structure where they depend on each other, and decisions flow from mutual consultation, exemplifying a functioning 'small' social democracy with some deliberative

[1] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 117.

[2] Bodley, 'The Gwich'in: a fight to the end'.

elements.[3] The Gwich'in people have a deep connection to their ancestral lands, wildlife, and natural resources, which is reflected in their way of life. The tribe has a rich history of hunting, fishing, and gathering, and their language, which is part of the Athabaskan language family, plays a vital role in preserving their cultural heritage and identity. Concerns about the development of oil and gas resources in Alaska, which encloses environmental and cultural consequences for local Indigenous communities, and the loss of land rights have created the need for grassroots organizing in the Gwich'in community.[4] Like many Indigenous communities, the Gwich'in have experienced a loss of culture and language due to historical and ongoing colonization and assimilation efforts.[5] They, too, face many social challenges such as disproportionately high rates of diabetes compared to the general US population[6], limited employment opportunities, as well as discrimination on job market[7] and high costs of living in remote northern areas.[8]

The area of dispute is the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), a protected area located in the northeastern corner of Alaska, in the United States and the traditional territory of the Athabascan Gwich'in and Iñupiat peoples. It covers an area of approximately 19.6 million acres and is one of the largest wildlife refuges in the country. ANWR is home to a diverse range of wildlife species, including polar bears, grizzly bears, wolves, and migratory birds.[9] It is also home to the Porcupine caribou herd, which is an important subsistence resource for the indigenous Gwich'in people who have lived in the region for thousands of

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[3] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 114.

[4] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 119.

[5] Bodley, 'The Gwich'in: a fight to the end', p. 27-28.

[6] Graybeal, 'Framing and Identity in the Gwich'in Campaign against Oil Development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 3.

[7] Inoue, 'Hunting as a symbol of cultural tradition: the cultural meaning of subsistence activities in Gwich'in Athabascan society of northern Alaska', p. 92.

[8] Robinson, Fried, 'The cost of living in Alaska'.

[9] Sovacool, 'Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?', p. 349.

years.[10] The refuge is also rich in oil and gas, and there has been significant controversy over the years regarding whether or not to allow drilling in the region.[11]

The conflict over land claims of the Indigenous peoples of Alaska began in the 1960s with the discovery of oil in the region[12], which eventually led to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System operating since 1977.[13] What followed were many attempts by the political establishment to break the protections of ANWR and allow for natural resource development there too. At the heart of the conflict is the Coastal Plain area (also known as the 1002 Area), which the state estimated contains a large undiscovered oil reserve.[14] Many studies have shown that developing oil and gas resources in this area would immensely affect this vulnerable ecosystem.[15] At the same time, it is an area where an entire Porcupine Caribou herd migrates yearly, as it is the herd's birthplace and nursery grounds.[16] One of the key strategies of the Gwich'in advocacy work has been to raise awareness about the potential impacts of drilling on the caribou herd. The Gwich'in claim that their livelihood depends on the well-being of this herd, and oil and gas development will further exacerbate the livelihood challenges already being faced by the Indigenous peoples of this region.[17] Some scholars support this view, arguing that Indigenous peoples already suffer disproportionally under the consequences of extractive industries and climate change.[18] The proponents in support of oil and gas development in the ANWR, both state and private enterprise stakeholders, argue that

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[10] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 538-540.

[11] Kotchen, Burger, 'Should we drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge? An economic perspective', p. 4720-4729.

[12] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 26.

[13] Wells, 'Trans-Alaska Pipeline History'.

[14] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 538-540.

[15] Sovacool, 'Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?', p. 349-353 ; 'Sovacool, Eroding wilderness: The ecological, legal, political, and social consequences of oil and natural gas development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR)', p. 555-557.

[16] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 538.

[17] Parlee, Caine, 'When the caribou do not come: Indigenous knowledge and adaptive management in the Western Arctic', p. 58-71.

[18] Horowitz, Keeling, Lévesque, Rodon, Schott, Thériault, 'Indigenous peoples' relationships to large-scale mining in post/colonial contexts: Toward multidisciplinary comparative perspectives'.

potential reserves would contribute to US energy independence, provide jobs and economic growth.[19] In addition to their cultural and environmental concerns, Gwich'in have also questioned the extent to which they would benefit from oil development in the ANWR.[20] While drilling perhaps could bring economic benefits to the state of Alaska as a whole, it is unclear how much of this revenue would be directed towards supporting the local communities most affected by the drilling.

As a result of these conflicting interests, the struggle over ANWR between the Gwich'in community, the state, and the fossil fuel industry has endured for several decades and continues to this day. Indigenous groups have used a variety of tactics to oppose oil and gas development in the ANWR, including public protests, lobbying policy makers, advocacy campaigns and legal objections. The Gwich'in have managed to successfully mobilize not only related tribes and clans but also to forge critical international alliances and attract media attention. Internationally known activists such as Sarah James and Jonathan Solomon come from the ranks of this tribe.[21] Today, Gwich'in people participate in international conferences and work with other indigenous groups such as Native Hawaiians and Maori.[22] They also collaborate with a large number of environmental movements and organizations. What is worth pointing out about the Gwich'in tribe's collaboration with environmental organizations is that even though they overlap on specific points, they also diverge to a large degree, leading to conflicts within the movement and the tribe itself.[23] This is due to different approaches to environmental issues, sets of ecological knowledge, or priorities within the environmental agenda.[24] These dissimilarities demonstrate the existing diversity of narratives relating to nature and its conservation also within environmental organizing.

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[19] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 14, 66, 81 ; Nuttall, 'Pipeline dreams: People, environment, and the Arctic energy frontier' p. 160.

[20] Delcomyn, 'Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Oil: Canadian and Gwich'in Indian Legal Responses to 1002 Area Development'.

[21] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 117.

[22] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 122.

[23] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 118.

[24] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 123.

In the Gwich'in perspective, every aspect of nature is interconnected and is part of an immense web of life of which humans are a part; relations within the web of life are interdependent.[25] Jonathon Solomon, one of the Gwich'in elders, for example, spoke of the issue concerning the Caribou herd as follows: *"It is our belief that the future of the Gwich'in and the future of the Caribou are the same. Harm to the Porcupine Caribou Herds is harm to the Gwich'in culture and millennia-old way of life."*[26] The Gwich'in community often emphasizes the interdependencies that form their relationship with their land and the importance of continuity. This conception of nature, and the land that Indigenous people inhabit, conflicts with how the state views the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge area, which is foremost a land to be either conserved or developed. John Bodley, the author of *Victims of Progress*, calls the conflict over the ANWR a classic historical clash of scale and values: the perfect example of the global-level capitalist resource extraction machine trying to obliterate traditional small culture.[27] The theoretical section of this thesis aims to present these diverse perspectives and distinct conceptualizations of nature as various ontologies of nature. As this thesis hypothesizes that these can be identified, too, within the discourse on ANWR and, in particular, in the discoursive strategies of the Gwich'in community.

At the same time, these conflicting perspectives shape/construct contemporary society's perceptions of nature, which play an essential role in the approach to the climate crisis and overall policies towards the planet and its 'resources.' This imaginary ontological (asymmetrical) conflict, which takes on actual contours in the dispute over the Arctic National Nature Reserve, can point towards the future nature of such altercations, which will arguably grow in number. This thesis holds that specific social and cultural constructions rather than different 'interests' underlie these conflicts if we are to acknowledge the existence of an indigenous experience of the world. The theoretical section of this thesis is based on the 'ontological turn,' a theoretical orientation within social theory that explores the idea of ontological multiplicity. It also employs the framework of political ecology, which examines

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[25] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 116.

[26] 'Gwich'in Steering Committee'.

[27] Bodley, 'The Gwich'in: a fight to the end', p. 107.

the power dynamics of environmental conflicts and the prospect of other socio-natural worlds, thus align with the critical assumptions of this thesis.

The perspective of indigenous tribes like the Gwich'in is different, too, because the consequences of the gradual environmental degradation of the region directly threaten them. Research has shown that indigenous and small communities are particularly at risk because they are often the first to experience the impacts of climate change.[28] Their daily lives are affected by changes in temperature and gradual warming, which, in the case of the Gwich'in tribe, has led to a declining population of the Porcupine Caribou–their primary source of livelihood.[29] Thus, the ANWR dispute has been about the environmental and social impacts on the community, making it undeniably an environmental justice issue. According to the Gwich'in, oil extraction threatens their way of life, food security, and social cohesion.[30] The goal is not only to protect the nature reserve and stop or limit resource development in the region. The Gwich'in see themselves as sovereign and seek autonomy over their lands.[31] At the same time, they do not frame the conflict over ANWR only as a local issue but warn of the consequences for the global climate if the Arctic ecosystem is disrupted.[32]

In light of the worsening climate crisis, this (local) conflict is gaining relevance due to its potential global implications. The Arctic region is crucial for its unique ecosystem, which provides climate stability for the entire planet.[33] It is also one of the most rapidly warming regions in the world. Over the last 40 years, the average winter temperature in Alaska has risen by 3-4 degrees Celsius[34], leading to increased accessibility of oil and gas reserves in the region. This has opened up new opportunities for resource development in an area known for

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[28] Baird, 'The impact of climate change on minorities and indigenous peoples'; Tsosie, 'Indigenous people and environmental justice: the impact of climate change'.

[29] Fauchald, Park, Tømmervik, Myneni, Hausner, 'Arctic greening from warming promotes declines in caribou populations.'.

[30] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 540.

[31] Bodley, 'The Gwich'in: a fight to the end', p. 108-109.

[32] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 124.

[33] O'Garra, 'Economic value of ecosystem services, minerals and oil in a melting Arctic: A preliminary assessment'.

[34] Jansen, Christensen, Dokken, Nisancioglu, Vinther, Capron, Stendel, 'Past perspectives on the present era of abrupt Arctic climate change'.

its abundant natural resources. As a consequence, the Arctic has gained attention as a potential significant source of future oil supply[35], while at the same time, opposition to such plans has grown. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that 22% of the world´s undiscovered recoverable oil and gas resources are in the Arctic.[36] David M. Standlea emphasizes that the ANWR conflict represents too a crucial moment in world history, where we must choose between two paths: one that prioritizes a sustainable future through fair political-economic policies, and another that favors current values of short-term economic greed and unlimited growth at the expense of the natural world, as well as environmental destruction.[37]

The Arctic region is currently facing a significant conflict between the "interests" of corporations and national states, and the "interests" of indigenous communities, as previously discussed. In general, there are two perspectives on the dispute regarding oil and gas exploitation in ANWR. The first highlights the complex trade-offs involved in balancing economic development with environmental protection and cultural preservation. Meanwhile, the second pits one of the fundamental mechanisms of capitalist production – the appropriation of natural resources – against a local community that fights for the preservation of life, both ingrained in specific ontology. This thesis adopts the latter perspective to examine the discourse practice around this conflict. Future developments and the eventual resolution of such conflicts may set a precedent while pointing to possible alternatives. The conflict over ANWR is too significant as a case study because it has not turned violent, which sets it apart from other global "resource wars".[38] Hence, expanding the knowledge regarding the dispute over ANWR and especially the socio-environmental resistance against resource extraction seems vital as it may aid future reflections on a variety of socio-environmental issues such as extractivism or traditional land rights.

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[35] Harsem, Eide, Heen, 'Factors influencing future oil and gas prospects in the Arctic'.

[36] Henderson, Loe, 'The prospects and challenges for Arctic oil development', p.1.

[37] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 11-12.

[38] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 11.

1. Historical context: Conflict over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) was established in 1960 as a response to concerns about the impacts of human activity on the region's unique ecological and cultural resources. The Refuge is situated in north-east Alaska and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. President Dwight D. Eisenhower designated the ANWR as a protected wilderness area, which was later expanded by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980.[39] The establishment of the ANWR was part of a broader effort of conservationists to protect wilderness areas across the United States, with the National Wilderness Preservation System created in 1964 and since expanded to include more than 100 million acres of protected wilderness areas.[40] The Refuge covers five different subarctic and arctic ecological zones, creating a diverse range of physiographic and ecological features that cannot be found in any other protected circumpolar region. There are 45 species of land and marine mammals found in these ecological zones, showcasing their diverse fauna. The boreal forest zone located at the southernmost part of the refuge consists of a mixture of spruce, broadleaf forest, and riverine communities that are interspersed with lakes.[41]

Oil and gas development has played a significant role in the history of Alaska's economy and politics, generating substantial revenue through royalties, taxes, and other payments.[42] In the early 1920s, there was growing interest in natural resources in northern Alaska, which led to the establishment of the Naval Petroleum Reserve Number Four by the US Navy in Northwestern Alaska.[43] In March 1968, the discovery of a massive oil field in Prudhoe Bay, situated on the North Slope of Alaska, was announced by Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) and Humble Oil (now ExxonMobil). Soon after, in 1968, the controversy surrounding ANWR arose when British Petroleum attempted to expand oil production within the protected areas of the Refuge and territory of the Natives. The move was fueled by

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[39] Sovacool, ‘Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?’, p. 348.

[40] Kaye, ‘Last Great Wilderness: The Campaign to Establish the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’, p. 214.

[41] Kaye, ‘Last Great Wilderness: The Campaign to Establish the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge’, p. 3.

[42] Anders,‘OIL, ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE, AND ALASKA’S DEVELOPMENT’.

[43] Sovacool, ‘Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?’, p. 348.

concerns about the rising cost of oil and the increasing control of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).[44] The Prudhoe Bay oil field was estimated to contain billions of barrels of recoverable oil, making it one of the largest oil fields in the world at the time.[45] The permit for the planned oil development in Prudhoe Bay was contingent on the resolution of long-standing land claims by Alaska Natives.[46]

As part of the effort to resolve Alaska Native land claims, the United States Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. The act established 12 regional Native corporations, granting them control over approximately one-ninth of the state and effectively ending the land claims.[47] Despite not recognizing a Native land claim to the entirety of Alaska, it was considered the first modern treaty in North America and the last Native land claim settlement to be reached in the continental United States, as Mark Nutall notes.[48] ANCSA transferred 44 million acres of land and US$962.5 million to business corporations owned exclusively by Alaska Natives, paving the way for the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. The objective of the settlement was to convert Alaska Native villages into economic entities by creating village corporations. However, it did not automatically translate into contracts and fair employment opportunities for Alaska Natives. At present, many of these corporations are involved in the oil and gas industry.[49] In contrast to most other Alaska Native tribes, the Gwich'in utilized a special clause in the settlement act and decided to reclaim their former lands, establishing "The Venetie Indian Reserve," without forming a village corporation and retaining their authority over their territory.[50]

In the following years, the construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System was completed to transport oil from Prudhoe Bay to the port of Valdez. The pipeline, which is one

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[44] Sovacool, ‘Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?’, p. 348.

[45] Alexander, Van Cleve, ‘The Alaska pipeline: a success story’, p. 443-446.

[46] Inoue, ‘The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan’, p. 185.

[47] Standlea, ‘Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge’ p. 27.

[48] Nuttall, ‘Pipeline dreams: People, environment, and the Arctic energy frontier’ p. 156-157.

[49] Nuttall, ‘Pipeline dreams: People, environment, and the Arctic energy frontier’ p. 156-157.

[50] Inoue, ‘The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan’, p. 185.

of the largest pipelines in the world, spans over 800 miles and has a capacity of up to 2.1 million barrels of oil per day.[51] Throughout its history, Alaska has developed a significant dependence on tax revenue generated from its oil fields.[52] Alaska's heavy reliance on oil revenues is evident from the fact that they fund around 85% of the state budget. This has led some to argue that Alaska became a petro-state in the 1970s and 1980s due to its dependence on oil. Additionally, the total oil production of Alaska contributes over 13% of the U.S. domestic energy supply.[53] In the USA, energy security is frequently used interchangeably with national security. As a result, achieving greater energy independence has become a commonly stated objective in American politics.[54]

The first significant attempt to open up the ANWR to oil drilling occurred in the 1980s when oil companies began lobbying the government to allow exploration in the area. In 1987, the Department of the Interior, at that time charged with the management of the refuge, issued a report to Congress on the coastal oil and gas potential. The report recommended that the entire coastal plain area should be leased for oil development.[55] The proposal for oil development in the area was met with enthusiastic support from the oil industry and the state of Alaska.[56] However, the Natural Resources Defence Council, representing several of the most powerful national environmental groups challenged the Interior's report at the court. The Gwich'in Steering Committee also filed a suit on behalf of the indigenous community involved. Later on, in 1988, the Natural Resources Defense Council issued its own report challenging the findings of the Department of the Interior, representing the first of many studies to follow recording the environmental degradation, including massive pollution and habitat loss, caused by oil development in the Prudhoe Bay.[57] The Reagan administration's efforts to permit oil drilling in the ANWR faced a significant setback due to the 1989 Exxon

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[51] Wells, 'Trans-Alaska Pipeline History'.

[52] Haycox, 'Alaska: an American colony', p. 333.

[53] Nuttall, 'Pipeline dreams: People, environment, and the Arctic energy frontier' p. 147-148.

[54] Keil, 'The Arctic: A new region of conflict? The case of oil and gas', p. 170.

[55] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge' p. 65.

[56] Speer, 'Law: Oil Development and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 42-43.

[57] Speer, 'Law: Oil Development and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 42-43.

Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. This catastrophic incident, which involved the release of approximately 11 million gallons of oil, stands as one of the largest and most environmentally devastating oil spills in North American history. The magnitude of the spill and its severe ecological impact prompted a massive public outcry that ultimately halted the initiative to open up the ANWR to oil drilling.[58]

In the 1990s, the issue of ANWR drilling gained renewed attention when Congress passed a bill that would have allowed for oil exploration in the region. However, the bill was vetoed by President Bill Clinton in 1995[59], and a subsequent attempt to pass similar legislation was also vetoed by Clinton in 1997. In October 2001, the issue of ANWR drilling re-emerged when the newly-elected George W. Bush administration prioritized opening up the ANWR to oil drilling, citing national energy security concerns, following the World Trade Center attack.[60] The administration successfully passed a provision in the budget bill that allowed for drilling in a portion of the Coastal Plain area of the ANWR. However, the bill was subsequently defeated in the Senate. Two years later, in 2003 followed another attempt that was eventually stopped in the Congress.[61]

When Barack Obama assumed office, the push to open the ANWR to oil drilling subsided. In 2015, Obama effectively prohibited oil exploration in the Refuge. While environmentalists celebrated Obama's actions to protect the area from oil development, certain politicians, such as Senator Lisa Murkowski, expressed their displeasure.[62] Senator Murkowski, known for her support of oil development in Alaska, is the daughter of Frank Murkowski, who had previously attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to open the ANWR for oil drilling during his political career.[63] As anticipated, the ban on oil exploration was expected to be overturned when Donald Trump became president.

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[58] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge', p. 66.

[59] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 539.

[60] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge', p. 66.

[61] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge', p. 66-67.

[62] 'What Obama's Drilling Bans Mean for Alaska and the Arctic'.

[63] 'For Murkowski, the Fight to Open up ANWR Was Generations in the Making'.

In 2017, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, passed by the Trump administration, gave approval for drilling in the Coastal Plain region of the ANWR.[64] This move sparked strong resistance and legal battles from environmentalists and indigenous groups, who once again argued that the decision lacked sufficient environmental evaluation and ignored the potential harm to the area's wildlife and communities. During the years 2019 and 2020, The Gwich'in Steering Committee together with other environmental groups filed number of lawsuits against the United States' Bureau of Land Management and complaints to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.[65] In November 2020, the United Nations sent a letter to the United States as a follow-up to a report submitted in 2019 to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). The letter highlighted several serious threats posed by the proposed oil development and announced the beginning of an investigation into the process. The letter received by the committee presents allegations that granting authorization for oil and gas development in the area will have irreparable consequences for both the environment and the rights of the Gwich'in people. It further asserts that the existing domestic legal framework falls short in effectively addressing the negative impacts of these measures on the human rights of the Gwich'in people. Additionally, the allegations highlight a consistent failure on the part of the United States to engage in meaningful dialogue and consultation with the Gwich'in community.[66]

In January 2021, just two weeks before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who had expressed a commitment to protect the ANWR, the Trump administration organized a lease sale for 22 sections of the Coastal Plain. However, the outcome of the sale fell short of expectations, with only half of the sections receiving bids. The Alaska Industrial Development emerged as the primary bidder during the sale.[67] In June 2021, the Biden administration has taken measures to prevent such endeavors by suspending oil and gas leases in the region and

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[64] Zentner, Kecinski, Letourneau, Davidson, 'Ignoring Indigenous peoples—climate change, oil development, and Indigenous rights clash in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge', p. 539.

[65] 'The Privatization of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Is a Violation of Gwich'in Rights to Free, Prior and Informed Consent'.

[66] The Privatization of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Is a Violation of Gwich'in Rights to Free, Prior and Informed Consent'.

[67] 'Oil Drillers Shrug off Trump's U.S. Arctic Wildlife Refuge Auction'.

initiating a environmental review process.[68] The administration is obligated to carry out a second lease sale in the Coastal Plain by December 2024, unless Congress successfully passes legislation to repeal the provision outlined in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.[69]

In March 2023, the Biden administration approved an oil and gas development project in the northeastern region of the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska (NPRA). Known as the Willow project, it is being undertaken by ConocoPhillips and is expected to tap into a potential reserve of up to 600 million barrels of oil. This project had initially received approval from the Trump administration. As President Biden pledged to restrict oil drilling in the area, the project has generated significant controversy. Environmental groups have strongly criticized the administration, accusing it of breaking its promises.[70] As a result, it is anticipated that the project will encounter substantial legal challenges. Already, the Alaska Wilderness League, along with six other groups, has filed a lawsuit contesting the administration's decision.[71] The Gwich'in tribe has publicly expressed their deep disappointment and unwavering determination to fight against the decision.[72] As of July 2023, the Willow project still maintains its approval. However, there is uncertainty regarding the future of the project.

1.1 Gwich'in fight against the oil

The Gwich'in people, who speak dialects of the Gwich'in language, have a rich history as nomadic hunter-gatherers and are recognized as one of the Northern Athabascan Native peoples. Presently, they reside in and around the vast expanses of the Yukon and Mackenzie River systems in the Alaskan interior and northern Canada. However, it is important to note that there are variations in their political and socio-cultural circumstances between Canada and the North American territory. In Alaska, the Gwich'in people inhabit several settlements,

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[68] Davenport, Fountain, and Friedman, 'Biden Suspends Drilling Leases in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge'.

[69] 'Arctic National Wildlife Refuge–Oil and Gas Development'.

[70] 'The Willow Project has been approved. Here's what to know about the controversial oil-drilling venture'.

[71] 'Opposing Alaska's giant Willow oil project'.

[72] 'Vuntut Gwitchin Government Responds to Biden Administration's Approval of Massive Willow Oil Development Project on Alaska's North Slope'.

including Arctic Village, Circle, Venetie, Birch Creek, Stevens Village, and Eagle Village, among others. The population of the Gwich'in tribe is estimated to exceed 7,000 people, as per the Gwich'in Steering Committee. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge lies in the northern part of Gwich'in territory and serves as a crucial habitat for the Porcupine River Caribou Herd. Despite the involvement of many Gwich'in people in industrial material culture, they maintain their connection to traditional practices such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering food. These activities remain crucial to their way of life, and their diet relies heavily on them. Additionally, the Gwich'in community continues the long-standing tradition of sharing food with their relatives and neighbors.[73]

The Gwich'in peoples have been vocal in their opposition to drilling in the ANWR, as they consider the Refuge to be a sacred and ecologically sensitive area. They refer to the Coastal Plain (1002 area) of the ANWR as "the Sacred Place Where Life Begins" (*Iizhik Gwats'an Gwandaii Goodlit*)[74], and believe that drilling in the area would disrupt the caribou (*vadzaih)* migration patterns and reproductive behavior and impact the herd's overall health. The concerns regarding the impact on caribou are deeply felt and widely shared among Gwich'in community. The caribou hold immense significance in sustaining the tribe's way of life, and these concerns are bolstered by research that underscores the vulnerability of caribou during their critical calving period.[75] Caribou form tightly-coupled social-ecological systems[76] with many indigenous people across the Arctic and sub-Arctic.[77] The act of wearing traditional attire crafted from caribou skin signifies a profound sense of belonging to the tribe, while hunting these animals, alongside other large game, plays an indispensable role in shaping the community's social identity. The storytelling and legends that revolve around

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[73] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 184-186.

[74] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 192.

[75] Nuttall, 'Pipeline dreams: People, environment, and the Arctic energy frontier' p. 160.

[76] SES is a holistic approach that views humans as an integral part of nature, where social and ecological systems are interconnected through reciprocity.

[77] Gagnon, Hamel, Russell, Andre, Buckle, Haogak, Berteaux, 'Climate, caribou and human needs linked by analysis of Indigenous and scientific knowledge', p. 3.

caribou and other animals form an inseparable and treasured part of the Gwich'in culture.[78] As of today, a substantial portion of their advocacy revolves around highlighting the paramount significance of the caribou for the tribe. In fact, the caribou has become a powerful symbol representing the campaign against oil development in the Arctic.

In 1988, an oil development plan was announced within the Refuge, which led the Gwich'in to organize a meeting in Arctic Village. It was for the first time in over a hundred years the Nation came together. The meeting was attended by over 500 people and was conducted in a traditional Gwich'in manner. In response to the potential opening up of the 1002 Area to development, the Gwich'in Steering Committee was established at this meeting to "protect our people, caribou, land, air, and water".[79] Following the gathering, the attending tribes collectively adopted a resolution known as the "Gwich'in Niintsyaa" or "Gwich'in Elders Statement." This resolution emphatically urged the U.S. government to acknowledge and respect the rights of the Gwich'in people. Moreover, it specifically demanded the prohibition of drilling activities within the caribou's calving and post-calving aggregation grounds.[80] Recognizing the significance of such gatherings, it was collectively agreed to convene similar gatherings biennially, subsequently coined as the Gwich'in gathering. To prevent the development in the area, the Gwich'in Steering Committee utilized various forms of media to make appeals and requested support from other tribal groups throughout the United States. Despite the development plans announced in 1988 eventually being halted, the tribe's activism persevered, aiming to transform the status of the Coastal Plain in the ANWR into a "bio-cultural reserve.[81]

Among the Gwich'in community, a key figure rose to prominence during this time in their political activism: the Gwich'in Chief Jonathon Solomon. He was the first to recognize the peril posed by oil development in the region and successfully framed the conflict over ANWR as a matter of human rights, particularly those of indigenous communities.

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[78] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 192.

[79] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 190.

[80] Banerjee, 'Long Environmentalism', p. 69.

[81] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 190.

Recognizing the importance of solidarity, he also advocated for alliances with other tribal groups.[82] Remarkably, despite the public interest in the conflict over ANWR and in particular on the grass-root movements, only a few are truly acquainted with the life and achievements of Jonathon Solomon in bringing the entire Gwich'in tribe together, as noted by Standlea.

Not only Jonathon Solomon, but also Arctic Indigenous women played a significant role in shaping the campaign against oil in the North Slope. Among them were Gwich'in activist Sarah James, Iñupiaq activist Caroline Cannon, Inuit activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook, and Gwich'in writer Velma Wallis, along with other influential individuals. Notably, Sarah James, having devoted a significant portion of her life to protecting the Refuge, has emerged as a respected Elder and a prominent figure on the international stage. Her exceptional efforts and contributions were recognized with the prestigious Goldman Prize, an annual honor bestowed upon indigenous activists from across the world.[83] Together, they not only raised awareness about the issue but also shifted the focus from a conservationist perspective to that of environmental justice.[84] Banerjee highlights the significant impact of the collective efforts made by the Gwich'in people over the years, which becomes evident when we reflect on their nearly nonexistent presence during the establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Moreover, it was unthinkable at that time to allow subsistence activities within protected conservation areas. However, today, the Gwich'in community has emerged as a formidable and influential force in the campaign against oil development in the Arctic. This endurance and persistence over a prolonged period of time have proven to be vital for their success in advocacy.[85]

However, Standlea highlights that the Gwich'in people have only recently emerged as a politically active community, driven by their deep-seated worries about the potential consequences on their way of life. A pivotal moment in this development was the establishment of the Gwich'in Steering Committee in 1988. For thousands of years, they were nomadic hunters and gatherers. They reluctantly assimilated into the dominant white culture,

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[82] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge', p. 117-118.

[83] Standlea, 'Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge', p. 117.

[84] Banerjee, 'Long Environmentalism', p. 67.

[85] Banerjee, 'Long Environmentalism', p. 73.

only to form alliances and navigate the system to fight the oil development. However, this assimilation process has caused tensions within the tribe, particularly among the elders, who fear the erosion of their traditional ways. This delicate balance between their indigenous identity and the Western white culture is also evident in their perspective on environmentalist allies. The strategic partnership undeniably yielded positive results in the fight against oil. However, it is crucial to recognize that significant cracks exist within this alliance.[86]

The Gwich'in are hesitant to support the environmentalist notion of "wilderness" because it is a foreign concept that separates humanity from nature, Standlea notes. While environmental advocates view the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a protected wilderness, the Gwich'in perceive it as simply the place they have always called home, devoid of any “wilderness.” The Gwich'in instead emphasize the concepts of subsistence and ecological sustainability, which reflect their imperative to meet basic needs in balance with nature and its resources. When prompted to define or interpret the term "subsistence," the Gwich'in provide various explanations such as "our way of living" and "our way of being."[87] In simple terms, environmentalists and the indigenous tribe may have certain shared goals, and their campaigns might appear to overlap at first glance. However, there exist substantial differences between them. A prime illustration of this contrast lies in the Gwich'in perspective, where the issue surrounding the Refuge is intrinsically intertwined with the loss of their land rights.[88]

To grasp the whole history of the Gwich’in political activism is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, it is crucial to emphasize that the tribe's fight to safeguard the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) is multi-faceted and extends beyond the preservation of the caribou herd's health and well-being. The Gwich'in have effectively framed the issue as not only an environmental concern but also as a matter of cultural identity, firmly rooted in the principles of indigenous rights. Throughout the years, this environmental conflict has revealed itself to be more than a mere contest over land development or management; it is a struggle to preserve the essence of their indigenous way of life. Additionally, it serves as a resounding rejection of the assimilationist and extractive politics imposed by white settlers.

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[86] Standlea, ‘Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge’, p. 110-118.

[87] Dinero, ‘Living on thin ice: The Gwich'in natives of Alaska’, p. 271.

[88] Standlea, ‘Oil, globalization, and the war for the Arctic refuge’, p. 110-118.

This sentiment is further underscored by the Gwich'in's use of their own place names and vocabulary to describe the significance of the Refuge.[89]

In conclusion, the Gwich'in have demonstrated remarkable determination in forging alliances and gaining recognition for their cause throughout the years. However, despite their notable achievements, the future of the Refuge ultimately rests in the hands of the White House. As the demand for energy and consumption continues to surge, the prospects for the Gwich'in to attain their ultimate goal of recognizing their biocultural rights and self-determination within their lands appear dim.

2. Theoretical foundations

The theoretical part of this thesis aims to examine the underlying theoretical assumptions that give rise to conflicting perspectives on Nature and their influence on contemporary attitudes towards nature as a whole and environmental management. By analyzing these distinct perspectives, the thesis seeks to demonstrate their significance not only in the broader scope of environmental conflicts but also in the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in tribe. The thesis puts forward the argument that the ontological difference between Western and Indigenous categories of Nature plays out in contemporary environmental conflicts, including the conflict over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). It argues that specific social and cultural constructions rather than different 'interests' underlie these conflicts if we are to acknowledge the existence of an indigenous experience of the world. Thus, environmental conflicts can be seen as *ontological struggles*, representing a clash between a *different way of imagining life.*[90] The theoretical sub-chapter of this thesis draws upon postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives, as well as insights from the field of political ecology, to support its claims.

[89] Ganapathy, 'Imagining Alaska: Local and translocal engagements with place', p. 106.

[90] Escobar, 'Sustainability: Design for the pluriverse'.

2.1 Ontologies of Nature

Amidst grappling with the consequences of climate change, a multitude of perspectives on how to coexist with or within nature are gaining traction in public discourse. It can be argued that, confronted with the climate emergency, there is a growing interest in seeking political and ethical realignments concerning our relationship with nature. However, when these diverse environmental perspectives collide, conflicts may arise, making it challenging to find common ground. Environmental conflicts typically revolve around the access to and control of natural resources.[91] While shared management institutions have been developed to oversee the exploitation or conservation of resources, these conflicts are not always resolved.[92] These institutions may fail to represent the interests of all parties involved, or disagreements may arise that fall outside the scope of the common discoursive framework. Scholars are increasingly exploring the idea that socio-environmental conflicts involve not only disputes over resources, but also represent a broader social struggle to protect the human-nature relationships that are threatened by the extractive use and management of the environment by both state and private actors.[93]

Indigenous peoples, who frequently find themselves in the midst of environmental conflicts, often defend ‘the complex webs of relations between humans and nonhumans,' rather than solely fighting for access to and control over resources, as Mario Blaser has pointed out.[94] The scholarly contributions of Martínez-Alier and O'Connor further reinforce this perspective. Their research not only conceptualizes socio-environmental conflicts, or ecological distribution conflicts, as arising from issues of unfair resource distribution but also expands the definition to encompass scenarios where divergent worldviews or 'planes de vida' clash. In these instances, conflicting political ontologies and epistemologies regarding the environment, the land, and all living forms become evident, shedding light on the complexity

[91] Blaser, ‘Notes Towards a Political Ontology of ‘Environmental’ Conflicts’, p.14.

[92] Castro, Hossain, and Tytelman, ‘Arctic Ontologies’, p. 99.

[93] Hanaček, Kröger, Scheidel, Rojas, Martinez-Alier, ‘On thin ice–The Arctic commodity extraction frontier and environmental conflicts’, p. 2.

[94] Blaser, ‘Notes Towards a Political Ontology of ‘Environmental’ Conflicts’, p.14.

of such conflicts.[95] The theoretical part of this thesis discusses the ontological assumption behind these colliding perspectives. It explores the arguments that show these disagreements are not just dislocated outside the common discursive framework but located in 'different socio-natural worlds.'

The fundamental idea behind acknowledging the existence of multiple ontologies of nature is to accept the potential for the coexistence of various social worlds. Ontological multiplicity refers to the understanding that the world is made up of multiple, interconnected, and often conflicting social constructions of reality.[96] However, contemporary environmental conflicts have rarely been seen regarding ontological differences[97], that is, different understandings of the world we share and ‘what exists'. According to John Scott and Gordon Marshall, ontology in the field of anthropology can be defined as 'any way of understanding the world, or some part of it, must make assumptions (which may be implicit or explicit) about what kinds of things do or can exist in that domain, and what might be their conditions of existence, relations of dependency, and so on. Such an inventory of kinds of being and their relations is an ontology'.[98] Ontological conflict, as defined by Mario Blaser, is the conflict between different realities in power-charged fields.[99] Too, it can be seen as a conflict between different articulations of the 'thing' at stake - nature. Ontologies of nature means the understanding and articulation of *the being of nature*.[100] Simply put, the various ways how the society understand the nature, how people imagine it. What is nature and how it exists, whether it is one or plural and finally, what it includes or excludes.[101] That is consequently connected to how we (as human beings) approach nature. Gerard Kuperus and Marjolein Oele, in the book *Ontologies of Nature*, argue that environmental politics and ethics are, in

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[95] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, ‘The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier’, p. 196.

[96] Blaser, ‘Ontology and indigeneity: on the political ontology of heterogeneous assemblages’.

[97] Castro, Hossain, and Tytelman, ‘Arctic Ontologies’, p. 99.

[98] Scott, Marshall, ‘A dictionary of sociology’, p. 531.

[99] Blaser, ‘Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology’, p. 548.

[100] Kuperus, Oele, ‘Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations’, p. xi.

[101] Kuperus, Oele, ‘Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations’, p. xi.

fact, deeply rooted in ontologies of nature.[102] This chapter aspires to indicate to the reader why ontological differences are relevant to contemporary environmental conflicts, using some of the notions of political ecology.

Political ecology takes a critical approach to environmental issues by recognizing that they are caused by both natural and cultural processes, with the latter shaping society's relationship with Nature.[103] Recent developments in political ecology focus on the relationship between nature and culture, examining relational and dualist ontologies of nature and discussing the diversity of cultures-natures.[104] That is why its analytical tools might help to understand more holistically the theoretical framings behind different perspectives on Nature. Political ecology originated in the field of cultural ecology, analyzing human strategies of adaptation to the environment.[105] Nevertheless, in the 1970s, there was a change in the area as the Malthusian and Marxist theories influenced it. The term political ecology was first used by the anthropologist Eric R. Wolf to refer to the study of how power relations mediate human-environment relations[106]. As of then, political ecology expanded its focus on unequal power relations, conflict, and cultural transformation under capitalism as the main drivers behind human dealings with nature.[107] One of the fundamental critiques aims at the culture/nature divide, arguing for an understanding of Nature as the by-product of human conceptualizations, activities, and regulations – in Arturo Escobar's terms, *the second nature*.[108] That is the second generation of political ecology, formed in the 80s. Escobar argues that this interdisciplinary field profoundly affected new theoretical orientations such as poststructuralism, post-marxism, and post-colonialism.[109] Poststructuralist perspectives profoundly influenced the second generation of political ecology resulting in debates on

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[102] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. xiii.

[103] Escobar, 'Difference and conflict in the struggle over natural resources: a political ecology framework', p. 9.

[104] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 92.

[105] Biersack, 'Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology', p. 3.

[106] Biersack, 'Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology', p. 3.

[107] Walker, 'Political ecology: where is the ecology?', p. 74.

[108] Biersack, 'Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology', p. 4.

[109] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 91.

Nature epistemologies organized around the essentialist/constructivist divide.[110] The poststructuralist political ecology of the 90s then pivoted attention to local-level studies of environmental movements, discursive and symbolic politics, and the power-knowledge nexus.[111] As for research, political ecology implies the researcher pays attention to concrete ecosystems and social movements, especially those that emerge out of conflict over Nature. In this sense, the political ecology becomes a political ontology.[112]

According to Mario Blaser, ontological conflicts are surging because the hegemony of modern ontological premises is being scrutinized.[113] Other ontologies than modern ones are, in various ways seeking recognition and challenging the dominant positioning of modernistic ontology. Recent scientific developments, too, have contested some of the vital elements of modernity, for example, nature/culture dualism.[114] However, it is still widely assumed that modernity is all-encompassing and that all cultures are modern in one way or another.[115] Blaser argues that this is because the category of culture is an ontological category of its own and, thus, is insufficient for dealing with differences. More importantly, as conceptualized, culture contributes to this assumption that modernity is somehow an expression of universal certainty. On that note, it is necessary to make clear the distinction between culture and ontology. As Blaser explains, one way to see ontology is in the sense of an approach, more concretely as a heuristic tool to think through concepts, where the category of culture does not seem to be much of use.[116] The culturalistic approach looks at differences as existing within the same world and is concerned with specific groups rather than not-so-coherent practices

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[110] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 91.

[111] Walker, 'Political ecology: where is the ecology?', p. 75.

[112] Blaser, Escobar, 'Political ecology', p. 165.

[113] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 555.

[114] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 555.

[115] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 548-549.

[116] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 550-552.

and enactments.[117] The ontological approach takes differences seriously to the extent that it argues for the existence of partially related unfolding worlds which interact. Political ontology comes into play here as a term that supposes specific modes of analysis or critique that are *politically sensible*. For Blaser, this political sensibility means the acknowledgment of pluriverse–existence of partially entangled worlds.[118]

Political ontology, too, a heuristic proposition, is concerned with how conflicts resulting from these partial entanglements and intra-actions come about.[119] Typically ontological conflicts are where people struggle to maintain their worlds, resisting coercively imposed ideas of progress and modernity–for instance, the development or conservation projects. Blaser argues that modernity made these different worlds either absent, rendered their demands unreasonable and unconceivable, or pacified them by allowing them to exist only in the sense of cultural difference.[120] The implication is that to sustain the dominance of the modern world, practices that contest the key constitutive elements of modernist ontology have to be kept at bay. Blaser sees the nature/culture divide, the modern/non-modern divide, and linear progressive time as the three defining elements of modernity.[121] With this, when looking at ongoing environmental conflicts, political ontology can serve as a tool for analyzing how to access the gist of these contentions better. From the perspective of political ecology, no less important is to explore the ontological categories we internalize as given without questioning the power dynamics. The process of conceptualization and categorization of Nature, as the fundamental question of the relationship of the human species to the rest of reality, has been central in all historical cultures and to scientific production.[122] Too, it was through scientific production that the Nature was *invented*.

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[117] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 553.

[118] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 552.

[119] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 552.

[120] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 555.

[121] Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political Ontology', p. 555.

[122] Soulé and Lease, 'Reinventing Nature? : Responses To Postmodern Deconstruction, p. 7.

2.2 Inventing Nature

The current Western perspective on Nature idealizes it as a pure, untainted, and awe-inspiring force.[123] Nature is seen as inherently non-social – ontologically separated from the human realm – as captured by the term 'environment'.[124] Nevertheless, through the unfolding of human development, it is on the verge of collapse. Does the idea of Nature, as developed through history, shape society's dealings with the natural world, and, most importantly, do these ideas mirror the ecological devastation we are witnessing today? Many authors agree that the modern conceptualization of Nature, as well as integrating Nature into the capitalist mode of production, ultimately led to the invention of many destructive ways humans act upon Nature.[125]

The idea of Nature has been intrinsically changing throughout history. At first, in antiquity, Nature was seen as an intelligent organism. In the Renaissance, it was the metaphor of a machine that should explain natural laws. In modern thought, there is the notion of progress through evolution produced by natural laws.[126] Modernity brought the idealization of rationality and the mechanical reduction of the natural world. Most importantly, the concept of exclusion of Nature in productive (as a resource) and cognitive (as an object of knowledge) practices from the human/cultural world has become central to both modern science and modernist culture.[127] In this view, Nature as a category is pre-social and, in character, independent of the human realm, which makes it free of power relations and hence apolitical.[128] This chapter will later present opposing arguments to such a vision of the apolitical category of Nature. The modern conceptualization of Nature heavily rests on the Cartesian split[129], the idea of mind-body(matter) dualism and subject-object dualism. Though Cartesian dualism has its long philosophical tradition, the more modern account is closely

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[123] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. 48.

[124] Castree, 'Social nature', p. 6.

[125] See for example: Arturo Escobar, Jason W. Moore, Bruno Latour.

[126] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p.161-162.

[127] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p. 164.

[128] Dingler, 'The discursive nature of nature: Towards a post-modern concept of nature', p. 210.

[129] Dingler, 'The discursive nature of nature: Towards a post-modern concept of nature', p. 210.

associated with René Descartes. In the framework of mind-body dualism, the mind is the embodiment of reason and is superior to the 'bodily.' According to Descartes, animals, who belong to the natural realm, lack reasoning capacity; their senses are not conscious, only physical. The moral underpinning of this binary is that everything that belongs to nature is inferior to humans, who are privileged because of their capacity for reason.[130] Many suggest this hierarchization is the formative force behind modern society's idea and treatment of the natural world.

Nevertheless, it is not to say that the western concepts of Nature would ultimately fail to see the interdependencies and interconnections humans have with Nature. One of the first to recognize the holistic character of Nature was Alexandr Von Humboldt. The Humboldtian view of Nature was that everything in Nature is interconnected.[131] That represented a radically different vision from the dominant scientific paradigm at that time, which focused on studying individual organisms.[132] Moreover, Humboldt saw climate as the primary driver of vegetation distribution[133] and realized its vital role. In this respect, he was one of the first to underscore the impact of humans on the climate and natural world.[134] He, for example, argued that deforestation changes the climate and dries rivers and thus advocated for reforestation.[135] The idea that humans might influence the Earth's climate at that time was not widely perceived.[136] As a result, Humboldt's ideas had a significant impact on science, especially the newly forming discipline of ecology.[137] He also valued indigenous knowledge and knew it represented an expansion to understanding natural processes.[138] However, he came to this realization only later, as at the beginning of his scientific endeavor, he approached indigenous

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[130] Anderson, 'Culture and Nature at the Adelaide Zoo: At the Frontiers of "Human" Geography', p. 277.

[131] Wulf, 'The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt, the Lost Hero of Science', p. 384.

[132] Nature, 'Humboldt's Legacy'.

[133] Pausas, Bond, 'Humboldt and the reinvention of nature'.

[134] Nature, 'Humboldt's Legacy'.

[135] Pausas, Bond, 'Humboldt and the reinvention of nature'.

[136] Nature, 'Humboldt's Legacy'.

[137] Pausas, Bond, 'Humboldt and the reinvention of nature'.

[138] Schneider, 'Indigenous Knowledge—Humboldt's Idea of Intercultural Understanding', p. 197.

people as inferior creatures.[139] In conclusion, Humboldt's departure from the dominant paradigm at the time was evident, as he envisioned humans as explorers of Nature, uncovering its wonders, rather than regarding them as equals or the familiar. Despite this shift, the dualism still persisted.

One of the reasons for this dualism is that how humans interact with the world tends to lean into subject-object dynamics, where these relationships are the totalizing distinction between the two opposites.[140] Another reason is that the dualistic view is based on the assumption that nature poses strict material limits to human existence that humans continuously strive to exceed.[141] Modernism treats nature as separate from culture and, foremost, as inferior to human technological advances. It is also the desire to dominate that accelerated scientific and technological inquiry.[142] The domination over nature through sciences can even be seen as defining historical dialectic of modernity, as argued by William Leiss.[143] Thinkers of the Enlightenment as Francis Bacon and René Descartes, are significant figures because of how they conceived natural sciences. Leiss points out that Bacon formulated the 'most straightforward conception of 'domination over nature'.[144] Bacon's philosophical project advanced the idea of science as a means of domination over Nature and humans. In order to dominate, one has to seek knowledge; hence sciences, particularly experiments, should be utilized to unveil the properties of Nature.[145] This belief that humans can achieve systematic knowledge of nature also relates to hostility to other forms of knowing as religion, traditions, myths, or superstition. With this in mind, it also relates to the idea that the rationalistic ideal of science will ultimately lead to universal truths.

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[139] Schneider, 'Indigenous Knowledge—Humboldt's Idea of Intercultural Understanding', p. 197.

[140] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p.156, p.164.

[141] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p.161.

[142] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p.159.

[143] Leiss, 'Modern science, enlightenment, and the domination of nature: no exit?', p. 49.

[144] Leiss, 'Modern science, enlightenment, and the domination of nature: no exit?', p. 50.

[145] Jung, 'Francis Bacon's philosophy of nature: A postmodern critique', p. 4.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*[146], Adorno and Horkheimer write, 'the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature'.[147] Besides others, this commitment to 'the disenchantment of the world,' displaced the indigenous voices within the modern (colonial) sciences. Modern sciences depend on structure and schematism that renders everything predictable, regular, and subject to natural laws.[148] The Enlightenment contributed to the new knowledge of nature and provided tools to interpret this new knowledge.[149] That inevitably led to the 'provincialization' of modern Western science, a knowledge system with its epistemologies, methodologies, and innate logic. Nevertheless, as Carolyn Merchant argues, Enlightenment thinking has become the meta-narrative through which we think about nature.[150] For Merchant, the decisive shift was when people's perception of nature changed from nature as an organic whole to nature as a passive object of exploitation.[151] Enlightenment rationality removed humans from nature and put men on a pedestal, while technological progress utilized new knowledge of nature, and new forms of domination formed. That suggests how we think about Nature is embedded in one particular socially and culturally constructed ontology.

On the instrumentalization of scientific and technological progress writes Jürgen Habermas, another critical theory scholar, in his book *Toward Rational Society.*[152] In the chapter *Technology and Science as "Ideology"*,[153] he asserts the work of Herbert Marcuse; Marcuse argued that the modern sciences were conceptualized in a way that serves to the ever-more-effective domination of nature and humans. Technological rationality has not just provided the tools to justify the legitimacy of domination. As conquered by sciences, Nature is incorporated into the technical apparatus of production and destruction. Marcuse argues

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146 Horkheimer, Adorno, 'Dialectic of enlightenment'.

147 Horkheimer, Adorno, 'Dialectic of enlightenment', p. 2.

148 Merchant, 'Reinventing Eden: The fate of nature in Western culture', p. 73.

149 Bristow, 'Enlightenment'.

150 Johnson, Murton, 'Re/placing native science: Indigenous voices in contemporary constructions of nature', p. 124.

151 Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p. 159.

152 Habermas, 'Toward a rational society: Student protest, science, and politics'.

153 Habermas, 'Technology and science as ideology'.

that this technical apparatus maintains and improves the lives of individuals while subordinating them, merging technology and domination and rationality and oppression.[154] The scientific-technical progress is thus twofold, as a productive force and as an ideology.[155] Arturo Escobar affirms that the separation of nature and society is the *central* aspect of modern societies.[156] He suggests that nature is appropriated by different cultural regimes, e.g. capitalist regime. He further writes that 'capitalist modernity required the development of rational forms of management of resources and populations based on expert knowledge […]'.[157] In this sense, Nature has been categorized and managed as an object of expert knowledge.[158] The scientific concept of the Nature is hereby a product of ideology, reproduced and exploited in cultural production.

While the Frankfurt School scholars debated the oppressive nature of the instrumentalization of reason and scientific progress, for many, it is simply the dualistic thinking that relates to oppression. Val Plumwood examined some dualistically conceived categories, such as culture and nature, masculine and feminine, and mind and body, and identified a logical pattern of "hegemonic centrism".[159] As she argues, one of the aspects of hegemonic centrism is hyperseparation.[160] For Plumwood, not only are the binary categories constructed as radically exclusive but the one is conceived as inferior. Another aspect of homogenization of these categories is that one of the categories is also defined negatively to the second, and finally, one is considered to be a means to the ends of the superior category.[161] For instance, the production of Nature as separate from humanity is necessary if domination over and appropriation of Nature is to be justified. As Jason W. Moore remarks, most humans were historically excluded from humanity – enslaved Africans, indigenous people, and women – and relocated within the realm of Nature to justify their exploitation. Nature,

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[154] Habermas, 'Technology and science as ideology.' p. 84-86.

[155] Habermas, 'Technology and science as ideology.' p. 90.

[156] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 25.

[157] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 6.

[158] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 6.

[159] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. 163.

[160] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. 163.

[161] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. 163.

women, and colonized people were externalized and, as such, subordinated by force and violence. Such human chauvinism stems from ontological dualism – categorizing what belongs to the natural and human realms.[162] This argument is central in the works of ecofeminists and Marxist feminists. Maria Mies argues that natural resources and women's reproductive labor are expropriated under capitalism, which heavily relies on the appropriation of surplus value produced by what it views as the natural world.[163]

The commonly accepted conclusion of theoretical debates on the nature/culture divide is that it should be challenged.[164] Moreover, dualism is also considered one of the obstacles to future sustainable development[165] because it enhances destructive dealings with nature. There is a continuous endeavor for these cultural patterns to overcome this dualistic thinking. As of today, there is an array of non-dualistic positions. Phenomenological perspectives, for example, hold that things are neither culturally constructed nor naturally given; they are instead becoming through a process of co-construction.[166] We obtain knowledge about the world through active encounters and engagement with it. Or poststructuralist such as Donna Haraway, who debated the complexity of naturalized boundaries and challenged the idea of fixed identities and, therefore, dualist thinking.[167]

Moreover, some writers point out that we might be witnessing the final decline of the ideology of naturalism – the belief in the existence of pristine Nature that is outside of history and human context – and rigid dualism.[168] Some call it the end or the death of Nature—specifically, the end of a particular set of imaginings of Nature and symbolic inscriptions that presumed Nature as singular.[169] In recent years, such notions of Nature have been increasingly subject to critical discussions. For anti-essentialist researchers, Nature is simultaneously real,

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[162] Moore,'The Rise of Cheap Nature', p. 79.

[163] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 221.

[164] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p.155.

[165] Bakari, 'Sustainability and contemporary man-nature divide: Aspects of conflict, alienation, and beyond', p. 196.

[166] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 94.

[167] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 94.

[168] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 1.

[169] Swyngedouw, 'Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization', p. 71.

collective, social and discursive and, as such, is constructed by discursive processes.[170] For Escobar, this means looking at Nature through constitutive processes and relations. The idea behind this endeavor is not to reduce Nature to a single determinating principle[171], where we are no longer objects of Nature nor Nature is the object. But, humans are rather the subjects in what Norgaard calls the co-evolution of socio-ecological systems.[172] This chapter thereon discusses these endeavors and presents postmodernist/poststructuralist perspectives on Nature.

2.3 Postmodern ontologies of Nature

In the realm of intellectual discourse, postmodernism has emerged as a potent critical approach that casts interrogations upon conventional paradigms. These paradigms encompass established categories such as 'nature' and 'culture,' the dichotomies dividing the modern from the non-modern, and the linear conception of time. At its core, postmodernism unapologetically rejects the rigidity of fixed boundaries, challenging the prevailing binary thinking that has shaped modernity.[173] Moreover, postmodernism raised questions about theories that disregarded the importance of acknowledging difference, partiality, and bias. Theories like structural Marxism, which postmodernists perceive as totalizing, Eurocentric, grand-theoretical, and progress-oriented, came under scrutiny of postmodern thinkers.[174] To locate differences and simultaneously the sameness within the natural and human world, postmodernism proposes the concept of relational ontologies, which seek to identify both differences and commonalities. Relational ontologies challenge the dichotomies between Nature and Culture, individual and community, and the divisive 'us versus them' mentality prevalent in modern ontological frameworks.

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[170] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 1-2.

[171] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.', p. 95.

[172] Swyngedouw, 'Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization', p. 70.

[173] Pollini, 'Bruno Latour and the Ontological Dissolution of Nature in the Social Sciences', p. 26.

[174] Biersack, 'Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology', p. 4.

Many contemporary struggles, therefore, can be interpreted as efforts to defend and revitalize relational communities and worldviews. In this sense, these struggles can be viewed as *ontological struggles*, representing a *different way of imagining life*, to another mode of existence. Relational ontologies recognize the world as inherently plural, embracing the concept of a pluriverse.[175] The underlying motive behind such theorization is to acknowledge otherness without resorting to essentialization and separation. It encourages continuous engagement and negotiation of ideas, emphasizing the inherent absence of certainty.[176]

Postmodern theoretical advancements have played a transformative role in challenging conventional notions of Nature, exposing the disparities between Western and non-Western interpretations of the natural world. As a consequence, it becomes essential to offer a concise introduction to the postmodern ontology of Nature, which actively engages with and responds to Indigenous ontologies of Nature. These postmodern developments scrutinize the products of modernity, unveiling its tendency to suppress Indigenous and subaltern knowledge while concealing alternative perspectives. Postmodernism, in response, seeks to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the world by rejecting the idea of Nature as a singular entity and embracing the plurality of perspectives.

In particular, postmodernism challenges the conventional separation between Nature and Culture, emphasizing the hybrid and multifaceted nature of the natural world. Rather than treating Nature as a controllable and predictable resource, postmodern perspectives underscore the intrinsic complexity and interconnectedness of different ecological contexts and practices.[177] This emphasis on interconnectedness aligns with social theorists' exploration of 'flat alternatives,' where complex social entities or 'assemblages' emerge from interactions among diverse components. Arturo Escobar defines flat ontologies as an endeavor against hierarchical, relational versus binary, self-organization versus structuration, enactment versus representation, and so forth.[178] The process of assembly is crucial, involving diverse social entities coming together to form complex wholes known as 'assemblages.' These assemblages

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[175] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, ‘The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier’, p. 67.

[176] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.’, p. 97.

[177] Escobar, ‘After Nature’, p. 2.

[178] Escobar, 'Postconstructivist political ecologies.’, p. 98.

emerge from interactions among different parts. The aim of such conceptualization is to grasp the inherent irreducible complexity of the world, surpassing hierarchical, binary, and restrictive perspectives.[179]

Similarly, Karen Barad speaks about Nature's performativity and queering.[180] The acts of Nature–its performativity–is the Nature's intra-activity. For Barad, intra-activity represents a contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which presumes the existence of separate independent entities. That speaks also to Bruno Latour, who notes that we (human-beings) are in a network of relationships with different natural entities. Those entities are never passive but actively participating in our lives.[181] Barad argues that intra-activity enacts agential separability – *the agential cut*[182] – the possibility of differentiating between subjects and objects that are already interconnected.[183] For Barad, queering is the radical questioning of identity and boundaries. The example of an atom or lightning bolt shows how Nature is constantly changing, overstepping boundaries and binaries. Put simply, Nature is not confined to its inherent properties; instead, its essence lies in its ever-changing capacities. This reimagining of Barad's notion of performativity, influenced by Judith Butler's theory, compels us to move beyond conventional Western metaphysical beliefs.[184]

In a similar vein, Viveiros de Castro delves into alternative conceptions of Nature, revealing a perspective that transcends the dichotomy between humans and non-human entities. During his ethnographic expeditions across Latin America, he finds that the disparity between human and animal perspectives does not primarily stem from a distinction in their souls or minds, as these aspects are in lens of Amerindian perspectivism shared. Instead, through the lens of perspectivism, this divergence arises from the distinct manners in which different bodies constitute their modes of engagement, inhabitation, and interconnectedness

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[179] Escobar, Osterweil, 'Social movements and the politics of the virtual: Deleuzian strategies', p. 191.

[180] Barad, 'Nature's Queer Performativity'.

[181] Kuperus, Oele, 'Ontologies of Nature: Continental Perspectives and Environmental Reorientations', p. xiv.

[182] *The agential cut* refers to the agential separability, that allows for ontological separability within a particular phenomenon, hence allowing for discussion of differences-within and in non-essentialistic terms. The intra-action does not produce separation, but differentiating and entangling. It is the relational understanding of intra-action between subject and object.

[183] Barad, 'Nature's Queer Performativity', p. 125.

[184] Geerts, 'New Materialism'.

with their respective environments. Viveiros de Castro refers to this framework as 'multi-naturalism,' which stands in contrast to the conventional notion of ‘multiculturalism' that assumes an 'objective reality’. Multinaturalism challenges the Western notions of nature and culture, which typically assume a singular nature interpreted through various cultural lenses.[185] Rather, it conceives multiple natures as structured around the multiplicity of bodies and their bodily perspectives.[186]

In conclusion, the postmodern rethinking of nature presents a profound departure from the traditional view of nature as possessing a fixed and stable (essential) identity.[187] Instead, it illuminates the intricate web of relations and entanglements that constitute nature, portraying it as a dynamic, everchanging and multiple. Embracing these perspectives opens the door to explore the coexistence of diverse modes of being within nature and highlights the potential for otherness within the human experience of the world. Recognizing these possibilities within the natural world holds the potential for profound insights and self-reflection on the language and discourse used to describe them. As we continue to grapple with environmental challenges, embracing other perspectives can inspire a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of our relationship with nature, paving the way for alternative interactions with the environment.

2.4 Indigenous ontologies of Nature

There is a growing recognition among scholars that Indigenous peoples hold distinctive perspectives and profound ways of comprehending and interacting with the world, nature, and one another. Within the realm of political ecology, the concept of indigenous and local knowledge systems emerges as a crucial discourse, encompassing collections of ecological knowledge, practices for managing nature, and traditional institutions. These systems have evolved over time within Indigenous and native communities, with deep-rooted histories of

[185] Mendoza, ‘Can the subaltern save us?’, p. 117.

[186] Hage, ‘Critical anthropological thought and the radical political imaginary today’.

[187] Escobar, ‘After Nature’, p.3.

inhabiting specific places and upholding cultural traditions.[188] Nevertheless, due to the limited range of this sub-chapter, it can only provide a glimpse into these complex systems, highlighting some shared aspects of Indigenous conceptualizations of Nature. As emphasized by Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, caution must be exercised when making generalizations about Indigenous knowledge systems (or ontologies), given their vast diversity. The characteristics attributed to both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems should be viewed as tendencies rather than fixed and rigid traits, and care should be taken to avoid broad generalizations.[189]

In the exploration of these systems, a crucial aspect lies in the conceptualizations of Nature that highlight the essential interdependence and mutual reciprocity between humans and the natural world. Victoria Reyes-García eloquently describes these conceptualizations as those which recognize the intricate web of life, where humans are intricately linked and imbued with social, cultural, and spiritual values within nature.[190] Among these conceptualizations, the notion of stewardship takes center stage. The Indigenous stewardship model exemplifies the commitment of Indigenous communities to act as stewards of their natural and cultural surroundings. This approach fosters a mindset of respect and responsibility towards the land, promoting a cooperative rather than domineering relationship with nature. The profound interdependence between the environment and their communities underscores the importance of preserving these interconnected relationships.[191] Stewardship is, in essence, about time-space continuity, with Indigenous people nurturing the land and environment for generations to come. Inevitably, stewardship is also intrinsically linked with the concept of indigenous sovereignty. In engaging with environmental stewardship, Indigenous communities not only embrace their custodial role but also assert their right to self-governance within their ancestoral lands, economic self-sufficiency, and preservation of their way of life. In this sense, stewardship extends to encompass the right of Indigenous

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[188] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, ‘The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier’, p. 71.

[189] Barnhardt, Kawagley, ‘Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing’, p. 11.

[190] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, ‘The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier’, p. 72.

[191] Ross, Sherman, Snodgrass, Delcore, Sherman, ‘Indigenous peoples and the collaborative stewardship of nature: knowledge binds and institutional conflicts’, p. 240-241.

communities to manage their invaluable natural and cultural resources in alignment with their inherent knowledge systems,[192] fostering practices that guarantee long-term sustainability. However, as our understanding of environmental conflicts informs us, this right to time-space continuity does not go unchallenged.

With this in mind, Kyle Whyte's concept of Indigenous 'collective continuance' is particularly alluring. According to Whyte collective continuance 'refers to a society's capacity to self-determine how to adapt to change in ways that avoid reasonably preventable harms.'[193] This form of collectivity also directly challenges settler colonialism. It can also be understood as an ecological system comprising interacting humans, nonhuman beings, entities, and landscapes that operate purposefully to ensure survival and well-being, grounded in reciprocal and responsible relations with the land. Shared responsibilities drive this continuity, shaping the collective identity and enabling Indigenous communities to adapt amidst disruptions. Conversely, settler colonialism, as explained by Whyte, is a social process in which one society seeks to establish its own collective continuance at the expense of one or more other societies' continuance. In the context of the US, settler colonialism strategically undermines Indigenous people's social resilience and self-determination to cement its prevalent and hegemonic collectivity.[194] This dynamic is exemplified by the environmental conflict discussed in this thesis. The US state's endeavors to undermine the Gwich'in people's cultural and environmental ties within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge through oil development stand as a prime illustration of a system rooted in settler colonial logic jeopardizing the tribe's collective continuance. At the same time, also the Gwich'in are challenging the settler ecologies through stewardship (customary) practices and the embodiment of alternative ontologies of Nature.

Within Indigenous communities, customary management practices regarding the environment act as a platform for integrating diverse conceptualizations of Nature. Many examples indicate that Indigenous and local knowledge systems contribute to ecosystem

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[192] Ross, Sherman, Snodgrass, Delcore, Sherman, 'Indigenous peoples and the collaborative stewardship of nature: knowledge binds and institutional conflicts', p. 240-241.

[193] Whyte, 'Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice'p. 131.

[194] Whyte, 'Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice'p. 131-137

maintenance and restoration.[195] Though the management practices of these communities help to preserve declining biodiversity and protect unique ecosystems from degradation, indigenous people and local communities often find themselves excluded from participation in environmental governance processes despite their contributions. As highlighted by Garnett et al., it is noteworthy that over 40% of government-protected areas coincide with the territories of Indigenous peoples and local communities, yet the formal governance by these communities extends to less than 1% of these protected areas. Research indicates that the decline of traditional management systems disrupts the stability and functionality of socio-ecological systems. Consequently, the erosion of these systems has far-reaching consequences, impacting both the traditional governance systems and the local conceptualizations of nature.[196] One possible explanation for the correlation between traditional management systems and the stability of socio-ecological systems is that Indigenous and local communities possess a wealth of knowledge about their environment. Having inhabited these lands for centuries, they have accumulated and passed down generational knowledge specific to their local surroundings. Furthermore, as Barnhardt and Kawagley note, indigenous societies have relied on their deep understanding of natural patterns and regularities for survival. For instance, Alaska Native communities observe animal behavior and have learned to adapt to changing weather patterns and seasonal cycles. Native elders can predict weather by observing subtle signs. By observing the natural world over time, Indigenous peoples have developed a deep understanding of how everything is interconnected and part of a larger whole in the universe. This holistic perspective is a result of their expertise in recognizing patterns and relationships within complex eco-systems.[197]

The environmental management practices of these communities serve as a gateway to accessing Indigenous ontologies. Matthias Kramm emphasizes that ontologies go beyond mental constructs that depict the existence of phenomena in the world or solely arise from the interaction between the human mind and the world. They are also intertwined with human

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[195] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, 'The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier', p. 71, 73.

[196] Villamayor-Tomas, Muradian, 'The Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology: A Companion in Honour of Joan Martinez-Alier', p. 73.

[197] Barnhardt, Kawagley, 'Indigenous knowledge systems and Alaska Native ways of knowing', p. 11-12.

bodies and connections. Ontologies can be expressed through embodied practices, such as the reverence individuals show for sacred spaces, as well as through relational practices, such as their interactions with non-human animal beings.[198] Protecting forests, mountains, or a species and practicing concrete ways of engaging with a place or a non-human being are examples of such embodied practices that are, at the same time, customary management practices. Once again, the Gwich'in relationship with caribou and their efforts to protect the herd serves as an exceptionally powerful example of such Indigenous embodied practice. Taking this into consideration, the subsequent sub-chapter will delve into the non-Indigenous, Western conceptualization of Nature, which is often seen as opposed to the perspectives of communities such as the Gwich'in. The aim of this sub-chapter is to demonstrate how these conceptualizations fundamentally differ from alternative socio-ecological systems, like those of Indigenous communities. Given capitalism's extensive influence across various realms of public and private life, it is only logical to explore Western conceptualizations of Nature through the perspective of collective embodied practices, such as drilling, mining, cutting, burning, using, trading, innovating, and, above all, exploiting Nature for capital gain. These practices, collectively, can be argued to serve as poignant expressions of the Western ontologies of Nature.

2.5 Capitalist Nature

As of today, the Western constructions of Nature are firmly attached to the capitalist production of Nature. This intricate relationship fosters the notion of Nature as both a resource to be exploited and a pristine wilderness to be preserved, a duality that originates from the foundations of modernity. Nevertheless, it is crucial to critically engage with this perspective, as the famous argument put forth by Bruno Latour contends that we were never truly modern, particularly concerning our responsibility towards Nature.[199] Rather than fostering a genuine sense of responsibility, modernity not only alienated humans from Nature but also absolved them of any duty towards its preservation. As we confront the pressing challenges of a climate emergency, the question of responsibility becomes ever more

[198] Kramm, 'The role of political ontology for Indigenous self-determination', p. 3.

[199] Latour, 'We have never been modern'.

paramount. The hyper-separation of Nature and Culture perpetuates the capitalist viewpoint, which perceives all of Nature as controllable and predictable. In this sub-chapter, we explore the implications of these perspectives on the society relationship with the natural world, focusing on the dominant influence of capitalist production of Nature in shaping Western ontologies of Nature.

The way how capitalism organizes Nature is key to its mode of production.[200] As articulated by Johanna Oksala in her paper *Feminism, capitalism, and ecology*, capitalism goes so far as to create its own conception of Nature.[201] This capitalist Nature is characterized by uniformity, manageability, and exploitation.[202] Capitalist Nature is nature as a *means to*. The capitalist mode of production externalizes Nature as a costless resource and implicitly assumes it to be infinite.[203] Jason W. Moore, in this sense, writes about the 'cheap Nature'.[204] Nature and its resources are under capitalism expropriated, often through destructive or violent ways, as 'free gifts' to subdue the actual costs. The consequences of capitalist plundering of Nature are the negative externalities that societies suffer from, primarily those in the Global South. These processes are, by Marxist theorists, seen as evidence of ongoing primitive accumulation and argue that primitive accumulation is still crucial to the contemporary capitalist mode of production.[205] Oksala defines primitive accumulation as an inherently violent process involving the expropriation of resources without adequate compensation. For instance, historical examples such as the slave trade, with colonialism as the political strategy facilitating these expropriations, exemplify this concept.[206] Primitive accumulation is by most considered to be the process that preceded the industrial capitalist mode of production. But, some contemporary Marxists argue that these practices never truly disappeared; instead, they took on slightly different forms. With motives remaining exact, low

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[200] Moore, 'Capitalism as a Way of Organizing Nature'.

[201] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology' .

[202] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 7.

[203] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 223.

[204] Moore, 'Anthropocene or capitalocene?: Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism', p. 78-116.

[205] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 221.

[206] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 221.

costs allow for a more substantial accumulation of capital. In the case of Nature, extracting raw materials can be seen as an example of primitive accumulation.[207] Oksala explains that under capitalism, nature is valorized, and extracted raw materials are rendered commodities and integrated into the capitalist markets.

The commodification of Nature means that even things that possess qualitatively distinct essence and have value fundamentally incommensurable with money are rendered equivalent and saleable.[208] The functionality of the hyper-separation of humanity from the natural world again plays out, as one aspect of capitalist commodification is alienability – commodities have to be separated from their sellers.[209] That is why this hyper-separation is vital to the capitalist utilization of Nature and, with that, to the unfolding of Western civilization. Noel Castree goes as far as he argues that capitalist commodity exchange is not achievable unless commodities are not separated as ontological entities with their distinct qualitative properties.[210] Another dynamic of Capitalist Nature is the commodification of Nature as nature – as something external to the capitalist system, yet commodifiable – things such as the human genome, plant genes, or bacteria and viruses.[211] The commodification of Nature also can be the effort to internalize ecology into the capitalist market, to marketize and commodify the protection of the environment itself. To do that, nature is fractured into tangible goods or services, wheater it is an area of forest, concrete animal species, or offsetting of carbon and emissions trading.[212]

Many authors also consider the rise of modern capitalism, if characterized by the subordination of the nature to economic growth, as the leading cause of societies' further alienation from Natur and worsening of climate change.[213] While facing the climate crisis, capitalist societies continue to imagine Nature as manageable through the development of

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[207] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 221-222.

[208] Castree, 'Commodifying what nature?', p. 278.

[209] Castree, 'Commodifying what nature?', p. 279.

[210] Castree, 'Commodifying what nature?', p. 280.

[211] Castree, 'Commodifying what nature?', p. 273.

[212] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 224.

[213] Bakari, 'Sustainability and contemporary man-nature divide: Aspects of conflict, alienation, and beyond', p. 196.

technological fixes and climate change as a threat to capital accumulation. Striving towards developing technological fixes can also be seen as the strategy to achieve *the real subsumption of nature*.[214] The real subsumption of nature refers to strategies by which capitalism seeks to transform the biophysical processes to bypass 'natural obstacles', such as climate change, which might hinder production, and at the same time, increase productivity. The logic behind these strategies is to use nature more intensively through biotechnology, improving biological productivity[215] and strengthening its grip on Nature. One such example is when Bill Gates Foundation recently announced that it invested in an Australian climate technology start-up that aims to reduce the methane emissions of cow burps by feeding them with a dietary supplement that is developing.[216] This mobilization of biophysical processes and properties is then presented as progressive[217] and, in some cases, as nature-based solutions, contributing to the endeavor of conserving the natural world.

At the core of these social practices lies a broader discourse on Nature that functions to legitimize particular notions, knowledge, and worldviews. Presently, this discourse on Nature is largely entwined with the logic of the capitalist mode of production. This alignment becomes evident in the state's interactions with Nature, notably in its approach to managing 'natural resources,' a perspective that also permeates debates over oil development in ANWR. In this sense, Nature is perceived as an object to be subjugated, rather than a subject in its own right. Its elements become objects of use,[218] with humans as the enactors who act upon it. These conceptualizations of Nature are often utilized by various actors to justify their interventions, such as the drilling of oil in the ancestral lands of indigenous peoples. Meanwhile, alternative perspectives that view the land, nature, and people as interdependent are often dismissed as unreasonable and romantic by opponents and challenged within public discourse. Due to these rhetorical strategies present in contemporary discourses on

[214] Boyd, Prudham, Schurman, 'Industrial dynamics and the problem of nature'.

[215] Oksala, 'Feminism, capitalism, and ecology', p. 227-228.

[216] 'Climate change: Bill Gates backs Australian start-up targeting cow burps'.

[217] Boyd, Prudham, Schurman, 'Industrial dynamics and the problem of nature', p. 562.

[218] Haila, 'Beyond the nature-culture dualism', p. 157.

environmental issues, it is crucial to recognize the power dynamics at play and the power fields in which they operate.

As Donna Haraway sees it, the contemporary notion of Nature, too, takes the form of a contest over the politicization of Nature.[219] Like when Nature is politically mobilized as a norm against which deviation is measured[220], for instance, to bolster the hegemonic position of heteronormativity in our societies. The term Nature is used in the sense that ‘what is natural, is the norm.' The mobilization of Nature can simultaneously serve to depoliticize it, removing it from the field of public conflict. This rhetorical strategy has been frequently employed in the discourse surrounding various environmental issues, resulting in the exclusion of such issues from political debates. As a result, it is crucial to consider the positions of both actors who employ such strategies and those against whom they are used within the power field. Erik Swyngedouw contends that, despite the increasing mobilization of environmental issues, political discussions on the environment are often framed in a manner that neglects its rightful political dimension.[221] In particular, he scrutinizes the debates surrounding climate change and finds that certain arguments presented in these discussions create a de-politicized portrayal of nature that fails to align with any specific political program.[222] This de-politicization of nature results in its exclusion from public discourse, thus preventing it from being the subject of disagreement, contestation, and dispute.[223]

To summarize, how we convey Nature produces a specific political frame through which some imaginaries of Nature are being formed and hegemonized. These imaginaries are then mobilized when certain practices and dealings with Nature–or socio-natural realities– have to be justified. From the political ecology perspective, the issue thus is not the absence of environmental questions brought into the domain of politics but rather how politics perform

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[219] Soulé and Lease, Reinventing Nature? : Responses To Postmodern Deconstruction, p. 3.

[220] Swyngedouw, ‘Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization’, p. 72.

[221] Swyngedouw, ‘Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization’, p. 70.

[222] Swyngedouw, ‘Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization’, p. 76.

[223] Swyngedouw, ‘Whose environment?: the end of nature, climate change and the process of post-politicization’, p. 73.

within Nature and what analytical tools we have to understand such shiftings on their full scale. Undoubtedly, one conveyable approach to analyzing the politics of Nature and the contestation surrounding it is by examining the language employed in public discourse.

3. Research design and method

From a broader perspective, this thesis delves into the linguistic means employed in the public sphere. The role of language is pivotal in the mobilization of social movements, with movements utilizing different linguistic tools and strategies, both consciously and unconsciously, to achieve their objectives. Through a qualitative analysis of the corpus, this thesis aims to shed light on how communicators employ language and to identify the various discursive elements that contribute to their success. By analyzing linguistic strategies, one can gain a deeper understanding of how social movements operate and how language can be used as a powerful tool for social change. Specifically, this thesis seeks to answer the question of 'what are the discursive strategies of the Gwich'in tribe and how did they evolve?'. Discourse analysis offers a range of analytical tools that are well-suited to explore this question. The objective of this thesis is to explore the discursive repertoire of the Gwich'in tribe and to identify and define specific discursive strategies within a distinct socio-political context. Discursive strategies refer to the deliberate use of language by social actors to shape or influence 'reality' in order to achieve specific goals. A discursive strategy can be seen as a transformative linguistic move that involves the semantic redefinition of an object or actor.[224] Simply put, discursive strategies are purposeful use of language to transform how one perceive or understand a subject by strategically changing its semantic meaning or interpretation. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak define 'strategies' as 'plans of actions with varying degrees of elaborateness, the realization of which can range from automatic to conscious, and which are located at different levels of our mental organization.'[225] Additionally, discourse analysis aligns with the intellectual traditions of the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly poststructuralism and postmodernism, which are central to the theoretical framework of this thesis.

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[224] Carvalho, 'Representing the politics of the greenhouse effect: Discursive strategies in the British media', p. 3.

[225] Gavriely-Nuri, 'Cultural approach to CDA', p. 77-85.

Discourse analysis distinguishes itself from other language analysis methods by focusing on the study of discourses. More specifically, it examines various aspects, structures, and functions of linguistic resources within these discourses,[226] and emphasizes that language is not just a system of symbols, but a way of acting and being.[227] Unlike other areas of linguistics, discourse analysis sees language primarily as a social practice that constructs social reality, rejecting the notion that social reality has a fixed meaning that is simply reflected in language.[228] Discourse, as viewed in this thesis, can be understood as a set of ideas that form a coherent system of meanings that condition the ways of relating to a particular phenomenon or topic. There are different approaches to discourse analysis, each providing the researcher with specific tools to uncover the semiotic dimension of power relations within society.[229] Discourse is shaped through power within the social order, which is why discourse analysis is a particularly useful tool in studying social problems where power relations between actors play a significant role. One dominant approach in discourse analysis is critical discourse analysis (CDA), which focuses foremost on the aspect of power disparities within society. By analyzing the language and discursive practices of social actors, critical discourse analysis aims to expose strategies that may seem neutral on the surface, but in fact seek to shape the way events and people are presented for specific purposes.[230]

For the purpose of this thesis, a critical approach is deemed the most appropriate because it underscores the intrinsic link between discourse and power relations. However, this approach is not limited to deconstruction and ideology critique alone; it also enables a focus on the 'bottom-up' relations of resistance, emphasizing the constructive uses of power. John Flowerdew suggests that if CDA's primary objective is to expose the powerful's abuse of power, then it is fitting for CDA to also adopt the perspective of the less powerful and

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[226] Johnstone, ‘Discourse analysis’, p. 3.

[227] He, ‘Discourse analysis’, p. 429.

[228] Ortega-Alcázar, ‘Visual research methods’.

[229] Johnson, McLean, ‘Discourse analysis’.

[230] Sengul, ‘Critical discourse analysis in political communication research: a case study of right-wing populist discourse in Australia’, p. 377.

document their efforts to resist those in power.[231] This is particularly relevant in the context of social movements, where power imbalances can significantly influence the strategies that movements adopt. And especially salient in the case of the ANWR dispute, which involves a lopsided conflict between the state and local social movement. The Gwich'in tribe, as a small community, are acutely vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and mining, and are at a disadvantage in this conflict. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that this conflict is also steeped in colonial and racial dimensions, as the Gwich'in are indigenous peoples of Alaskan lands who have historically experienced systemic oppression and marginalization. CDA is an actively engaged form of social theory that is explicitly ideologically committed, a characteristic that some critics find problematic. However, it is precisely the admitted ideological nature and specific agenda of CDA that can be viewed as a strength.[232] This critical approach has an emancipatory character and can foster the fight for positive social change or, at the very least, provide support for it.[233]

To achieve the goals of my research, I will utilize some elements of Teun A. Van Dijk's sociocognitive approach of CDA. Due to its comprehensive and integrative character, the sociocognitive approach (SCA) has gained widespread adoption. Nevertheless, Van Dijk emphasizes that SCA is not an independent methodology but rather integrates a diverse range of methods and concepts from multiple disciplines within the field of social studies.[234] Van Dijk contends that to establish a connection between discourse and society, including discourse and the perpetuation of power imbalances and inequality, one must closely scrutinize the function of social representation in the perceptions of social actors.[235] The sociocognitive approach aims to uncover the interconnected webs of cognitive processes, including knowledge, beliefs, prejudices, and attitudes, that individuals utilize during discourse production and comprehension. Its objective is to reveal how this cognitive

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[231] Flowerdew, 'Critical discourse analysis and strategies of resistance', p. 204-205.

[232] Carvalho, 'Media (ted) discourse and society: Rethinking the framework of critical discourse analysis', p. 162.

[233] Flowerdew, 'Critical discourse analysis and strategies of resistance', p. 195.

[234] Gyollai, 'The sociocognitive approach in critical discourse studies and the phenomenological sociology of knowledge: intersections', p. 540.

[235] Van Dijk, 'Principles of critical discourse analysis', p.251.

framework influences the structure of discourse and its interpretation within a specific communicative context.[236] In simple terms, it aims to uncover the thoughts and interpretations of the speaker within a discourse. I find this approach particularly valuable for my research because its interest in 'the cultural aspects', such as knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies, could potentially shed light on how different *ways of being* in the world, are manifested in the language choices of the Gwich'in.

In summary, this research aims to identify the discursive strategies used by the Gwich'in tribe and how these strategies have evolved, by applying a sociocognitive approach of critical discourse analysis. The broader objective is to contribute to a better understanding of mobilizing practices in various contexts, especially regarding social and environmental movements. This description of the discursive repertoire of movements like the Gwich'in tribe is valuable because it can inform further research on discursive phenomena in mobilization. The thesis also seeks to offer a new perspective on mobilization in the Arctic region by investigating the hypothesis that the Gwich'in tribe has developed specific discursive strategies that have helped them succeed in mobilizing.

3.1 Critical discourse analysis: The sociocognitive approach

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory focuses on the cognitive aspects of discourse production and comprehension. The approach can be characterized as the discourse-cognition-society triangle, where cognition acts as a mediating interface between society and discourse.[237] Van Dijk argues that social and discourse structures are very different, which is why these can be related only through the mental representations of speakers, both as individuals and as members of a group. Van Dijk criticizes that even though such cognitive mediation is obvious to many in fields such as psychology, within discourse studies exist viewpoint that limits analysis to what is directly observable and socially accessible. According to Van Dijk, this overlooks the crucial mediating role cognitive processes have on

[236] Gyollai, 'The sociocognitive approach in critical discourse studies and the phenomenological sociology of knowledge: intersections', p. 540.

[237] Van Dijk, 'Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach', p. 64.

discourse. In light of this, he emphasizes the need for a theory that can define and analyze the structures and functions of these mental constructs.[238]

Van Dijk's framework centers around the use of mental and context models. Mental models represent, together with memory and social cognition, three key components of cognitive structures.[239] As Kupolati and Boluwaduro explain, the mental model serves as an individual's cognitive representation, shaped by personal experiences, and acts as a bridge between personal and social aspects. Mental models are closely linked to personal knowledge, beliefs, and opinions, and are susceptible to influences from ideologies and socially shared attitudes. These mental models form the foundation for both producing and comprehending discourse. On the contrary, context models examine which elements of meaning reveal ideologies[240] and are the basis of our 'pragmatic' understanding of discourse.[241] According to Van Dijk, context models most importantly control discourse production and understanding. They are flexible, dynamic and adopt discourse to the social environment. In this sense, context models control 'ways of speaking' and hereby affects appropriateness and relevance of a discourse, as for example style, or rhetoric.[242] These context models are connected to social cognition, which refers to the socially shared knowledge about the world, as well as to attitudes, and ideologies. These various forms of social cognition are often generic and abstract and shared within the same epistemic community. Our mental models, in turn, are constructed and understood based on this social cognition, enabling cooperation, interaction, and communication.[243] In essence, SCA is interested in understanding how mental models are shaped and influenced by socially shared knowledge within a given social context, and, conversely, how these mental models contribute to the reproduction and dissemination of socially shared knowledge.

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[238] Van Dijk, 'Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach', p. 64.

[239] Van Dijk, 'Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach', p. 66.

[240] Kupolati, Boluwaduro, 'Gubernatorial debate sessions in Nigeria: A socio-cognitive analysis', p. 22-23.

[241] Van Dijk, 'Discourse, context and cognition', p. 170.

[242] Van Dijk, 'Discourse, context and cognition', p. 171-172.

[243] Van Dijk, 'Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach', p. 67.

In Van Dijk's theory, ideologies play a substantial role. As noted by Van Dijk, ideologies are acquired, expressed, and reproduced within discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the processes through which ideologies emerge, spread, and are utilized by social groups.[244] Ideologies, as belief systems, are only shared by specific groups of people and are *fundamental*. That implies, that as such they are typically contentious and strive to control other socially shared beliefs[245]; meaning that they are, too, subject to persuasive attacks or defenses within society. Once they are universally accepted and unquestionably embraced by all members of a community, they cease to be ideologies and become established knowledge.[246] Ideologies not only serve social movements and groups as a way to understand the world but also are the basis of social practices of group members; such as the use of language and discourse.[247] They function as the underlying frameworks for organizing the social cognitions of group members, organizations, and institutions.[248] However, as Van Dijk emphasizes, we currently lack a comprehensive theory of this cognitive organization of ideologies. Simultaneously, he proposes the concept of the ideological square, an analytical tool that this thesis utilizes, as a means to define the structure of ideologies.

On the whole, SCA examines how cognitive phenomena relate to the structures of discourse, verbal interactions, and communicative situations, as well as, societal structures.[249] It recognizes that both the speaker and the receiver engage in the construction of subjective mental representations of each other's intentions, identity, knowledge, and overall context to decode and understand each other within the context of a communicative situation. In essence, SCA focuses on what the language users have on their minds and how that is being interpreted by receivers.[250]

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[244] Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse', p. 176.

[245] Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse analysis', p. 116.

[246] Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse', p. 177.

[247] Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse', p. 8-9.

[248] Van Dijk, 'Discourse as social interaction', p. 18.

[249] Van Dijk, 'Critical discourse studies: A sociocognitive approach', p. 64.

[250] Gyollai, 'The sociocognitive approach in critical discourse studies and the phenomenological sociology of knowledge: intersections', p. 542.

3.2 Data selection and analysis

This chapter discusses the process of data selection for the qualitative analysis. The materials collected for the analysis were assessed based on multiple criteria. Namely, (i) the availability of the material and the reliability of access. I aimed to ensure access to all documents of a specific type, such as press releases. However, during the collection of materials, I encountered challenges in retrieving press releases from the Gwich'in tribe in an organized manner based on key identifiers. The available press releases were randomized, making it difficult to analyze their communication patterns over an extended time span, as older press releases were not accessible. Despite reaching out to the Gwich'in tribe and the Committee to inquire about accessing older press releases, my attempts were unsuccessful.

Consequently, I chose to utilize testimonies given by members of the Gwich'in tribe during Congressional/Senate hearings. This turned out to be highly beneficial for my research for several reasons. Firstly, this material is readily accessible on the official website of the U.S. government (www.congress.gov) in PDF format, along with complete transcripts of the hearings, spanning a significant period of time. This accessibility allowed me to retrieve older documents and select a suitable timeframe for analysis. I was able to gather all testimonies made before Congress by members of the Gwich'in tribe from 1990 onwards and organize them, as the corpus size proved manageable. The search tool provided on the website facilitated the identification of documents related to the issue of oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge through the use of keywords. This fulfilled another selection criterion, namely relevance (ii). Additionally, the website's well-organized document structure and comprehensive descriptions enabled me to specifically choose testimonies presented by members of the Gwich'in tribe; hence accurately representing the discursive practices of the Gwich'in community. Another criterion considered was (iii) the type of document. Congressional testimonies serve as primary sources, providing researchers with access to original and firsthand information. Too, they exemplify strategic communication and conscious employment of discursive practices aimed at persuasion. These testimonies are specifically delivered within a context where their purpose is to influence various important actors, including the political establishment and the general public, considering the significant media attention major hearings tend to receive. As these testimonies are readily accessible,

they have the potential to reach a wider audience. Moreover, as primary sources, testimonies establish a direct connection to the historical or contextual events being examined. Notably, they directly address specific legislative proposals in real-time, and their transcripts encompass the entirety of the hearing, incorporating statements from other witnesses and committee members. This comprehensive coverage proves invaluable for subsequent contextualization, as it offers an opportunity to analyze contrasting viewpoints and identify the rhetorical strategies employed. In conclusion, by adhering to these three criteria, I was able to ensure a reliable data set consisting of 9 documents for my research. Table 1 displays the details of the selected documents.

Table 1: Documents for analysis

number	event	date	document type	speaker	number of words
1	hearing "The Need to Protect the ANWR Coastal Plain"	26.03.2019	testimony	Dana Tizya-Tramm	960
2	hearing "The Need to Protect the ANWR Coastal Plain"	26.03.2019	testimony	Sam Alexander	1275
3	hearing "The Need to Protect the ANWR Coastal Plain"	26.03.2019	testimony	Bernadette Demientieff	2371
4	hearing "The Need to Protect the ANWR Coastal Plain"	26.03.2019	testimony	Chief Galen Gilbert	3100
5	hearing "Potential development in the non-wilderness 1002 area, or Coastal Plain, in ANWR"	02.11.2017	testimony	Sam Alexander	1008
6	hearing "Alaska Resource Development-Opportunities to create jobs and strengthen national security"	28.03.2016	testimony	Darlene Herbert	780
7	oversight hearing "ANWR: Jobs, Energy and Deficit Reduction"	18.11.2011	testimony	Sarah James	503
8	legislative field hearing "H.R. 39, Arctic Coastal Plain domestic energy security act of 2003"	05.04.2003	testimony	Jonathon Solomon	3919
9	legislative hearing "H.R. 39, Arctic Coastal Plain Domestic Energy Security Act"	12.03.2003	statement in letter	Jonathon Solomon	406

As for textual analysis, a range of analytical tools commonly utilized by CDA researchers has been selected. Critical discourse analysis studies often center around the examination of linguistic elements, such as word usage, syntactical structures, modality, rhetorical devices and more.[251] Each approach within CDA offers a unique set of analytical tools, and it is typical for studies to combine multiple tools. I have opted to utilize a combination of traditional tools alongside those characteristics of the socio-cognitive approach. These include analyzing word choices, syntactical structures, and rhetorical devices such as metaphors, and intertextuality. In a second step, the analysis incorporates Van Dijk's ideological square framework to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the ideological dimensions present in the discourse.

Van Dijk's ideological square serves as a valuable analytical tool for comprehending and exploring the ideological dimensions embedded within discourse. This framework directs attention to the construction of ideologies, the portrayal of social groups, and the dynamics of power in language. He expresses the pattern of the square as follows:

1. Emphasize positive things about us.
2. Emphasize negative things about them.
3. De-emphasize negative things about us.
4. De-emphasize positive things about them.

By following the structure of this square, we can delve into the linguistic strategies used to emphasize either the similarities or differences between groups. In summary, the adopted analytical framework serves as a solid foundation for conducting an analysis that facilitates a systematic exploration of linguistic features and enables the identification of concrete discursive strategies.

4. Results

In this section of the thesis, the findings of a textual analysis are presented, which aimed to identify the discursive strategies used by the Gwich'in tribe.

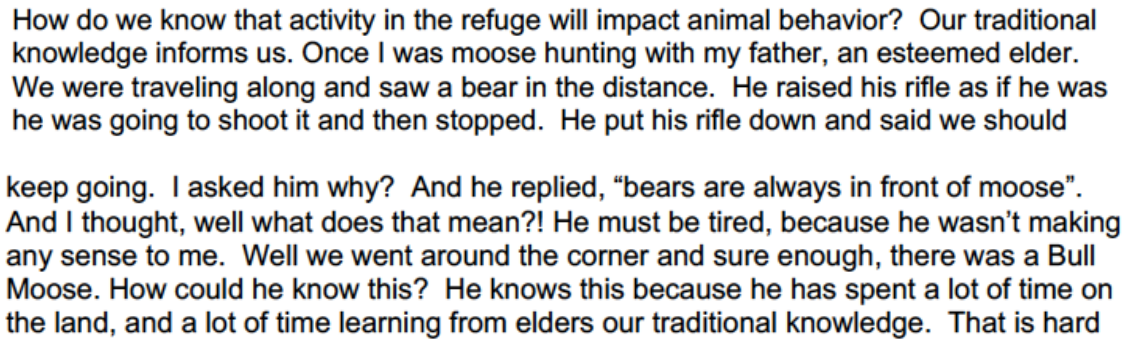
[251] Janks, ‘Critical discourse analysis as a research tool’, p. 335.

4.1 Discoursive strategies of the Gwich'in People

Four discursive strategies have been identified through the analysis of the material. The subsequent section of this chapter will comprehensively describe each of these strategies, accompanied by examples.

(1) The discursive strategy of storytelling and narration

Narration and storytelling were evident in all the documents analyzed. The speakers frequently recounted stories shared by tribal elders, often involving their own family members who also held positions as elders within the tribe. They strategically employed narration to influence the audience's perception of their arguments. The most pronounced use of storytelling by the speakers occurs when they formulate narratives that signify their connection to the ANWR. These stories, in turn, serve as a compelling means to reinforce their position and credibility on the matter. The following example not only depicts one of these stories but also constructs an argument, showcasing how their ancestral wisdom, transmitted across generations, serves as a guiding compass, enabling them to navigate and adapt within the intricate Arctic environment.


How do we know that activity in the refuge will impact animal behavior? Our traditional knowledge informs us. Once I was moose hunting with my father, an esteemed elder. We were traveling along and saw a bear in the distance. He raised his rifle as if he was he was going to shoot it and then stopped. He put his rifle down and said we should

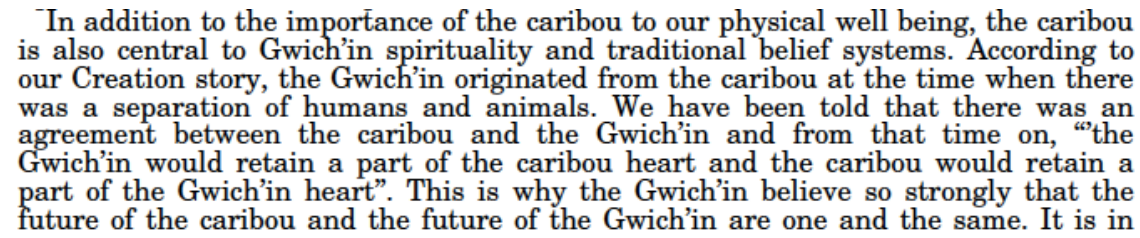
keep going. I asked him why? And he replied, "bears are always in front of moose". And I thought, well what does that mean?! He must be tired, because he wasn't making any sense to me. Well we went around the corner and sure enough, there was a Bull Moose. How could he know this? He knows this because he has spent a lot of time on the land, and a lot of time learning from elders our traditional knowledge. That is hard

Screenshot from document n. 2

This particular anecdote serves as a validation of traditional knowledge, highlighting its capacity for offering valuable insights that may elude those who are unfamiliar with it. Also, the discourse employed by the speaker challenges the hegemony of prevailing scientific knowledge, pointing to an alternative knowledge system. This thematic thread resonates in numerous testimonies, as will be further demonstrated later.

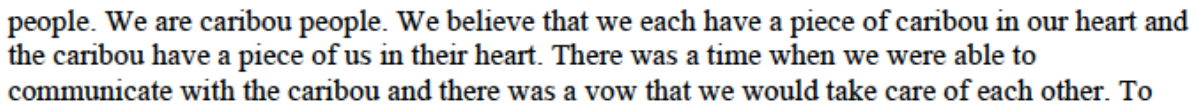
One particular story, the Creation Story, consistently appeared in all the documents, either in its entirety or through subtle references. This story narrates the origins of the

Gwich'in tribe. The Gwich'in individuals, in their testimonies, frequently make reference to this Creation Story to emphasize the significance of the interconnected relationship between themselves and the Porcupine Caribou. As evident from this example:


In addition to the importance of the caribou to our physical well being, the caribou is also central to Gwich'in spirituality and traditional belief systems. According to our Creation story, the Gwich'in originated from the caribou at the time when there was a separation of humans and animals. We have been told that there was an agreement between the caribou and the Gwich'in and from that time on, "'the Gwich'in would retain a part of the caribou heart and the caribou would retain a part of the Gwich'in heart". This is why the Gwich'in believe so strongly that the future of the caribou and the future of the Gwich'in are one and the same. It is in

Screenshot from document n. 8

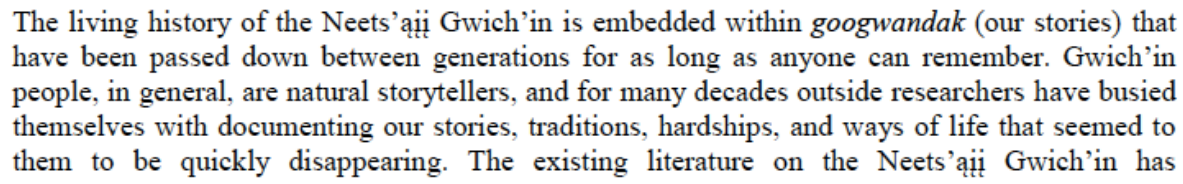
The references to this story took on two distinct forms: either explicitly stating that the Gwich'in hold a literal piece of the Caribou's heart, as exemplified in this case, or subtly alluding to them through mere mentions of a 'treaty', 'pact' or a 'vow'.


people. We are caribou people. We believe that we each have a piece of caribou in our heart and the caribou have a piece of us in their heart. There was a time when we were able to communicate with the caribou and there was a vow that we would take care of each other. To

Screenshot from document n. 3

The persistent inclusion of a specific reference to this particular story not only signifies its importance within the community but also suggests a deliberate and strategic use of such stories to engage and appeal to the audience. By consistently referencing this story, the speaker or author emphasizes its importance and seeks to captivate the audience's attention, recognizing the persuasive potential that lies within its narrative. For instance, when addressing the potential hazards of oil development on caribou, where one might anticipate scientific discourse, the Gwich'in people instead reference their Creation Story, thereby invoking a different form of narrative to convey the significance of the issue. Centering attention on an animal such as caribou also has persuasive potential, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Additionally, the mention of a vow to take care of each other implies a moral obligation and responsibility towards the caribou. It invokes a narrative of reciprocity, where the tribe recognizes their duty to protect and preserve the caribou, and expects the caribou to reciprocate in some way. This is too important, as the topic of 'responsibility' and 'reciprocity' is enhances throughout all testimonies and relates also to how the Gwich'in construct their indigenous identity.

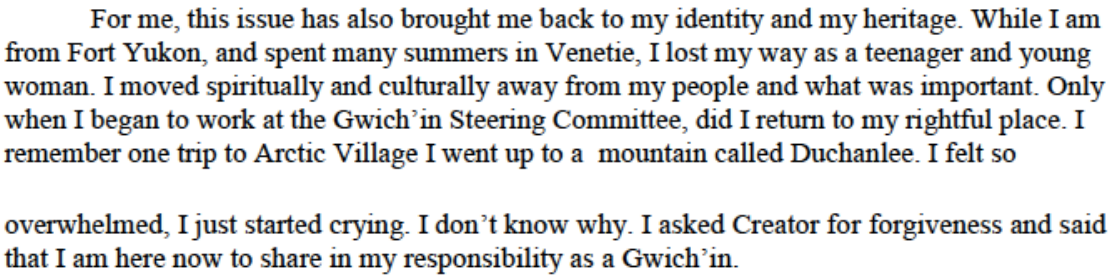
In one case, there was a clear acknowledgment of the profound significance that storytelling holds within the community. The speaker underscored the importance of indigenous knowledge production being passed from one generation to the next.



The living history of the Neets'ąįį Gwich'in is embedded within *googwandak* (our stories) that have been passed down between generations for as long as anyone can remember. Gwich'in people, in general, are natural storytellers, and for many decades outside researchers have busied themselves with documenting our stories, traditions, hardships, and ways of life that seemed to them to be quickly disappearing. The existing literature on the Neets'ąįį Gwich'in has

Screenshot from document n. 4

Another notable aspect of the narratives found in the documents is their capacity for personalization and emotional appeal. The personalization appears on two level, first that the stories often recount events connected to family members, and through the depictions of feelings and emotions felt during these recounted events. Sharing personal stories serves as a means to establish credibility, authenticity, and evoke a profound sense of empathy and understanding within the audience. By openly sharing personal experiences, the speaker creates an atmosphere of shared humanity that can allow for a better understanding of the message that is being conveyed, as shown in following example:



For me, this issue has also brought me back to my identity and my heritage. While I am from Fort Yukon, and spent many summers in Venetie, I lost my way as a teenager and young woman. I moved spiritually and culturally away from my people and what was important. Only when I began to work at the Gwich'in Steering Committee, did I return to my rightful place. I remember one trip to Arctic Village I went up to a mountain called Duchanlee. I felt so

overwhelmed, I just started crying. I don't know why. I asked Creator for forgiveness and said that I am here now to share in my responsibility as a Gwich'in.

Screenshot from document. 3

The phrase 'lost my way as a teenager and young woman' suggests a departure from culturally and spiritually significant values within the community. This framing implies a normative expectation of adhering to traditional practices. The speaker then emphasizes her return to the community's 'rightful place' upon joining the Gwich'in Steering Committee, implying a newfound sense of purpose and belonging through their involvement with the tribe. The committee is portrayed as a source of empowerment and a means of reclaiming her identity. The text's narrative structure follows a trajectory of personal transformation and

redemption, with the committee playing a catalytic role in the speaker's reconnection with the community. This narrative legitimizes the committee's work by presenting it as not just addressing external issues but also fostering a sense of community. Consequently, when applying Van Dijk's conceptual framework of ideological structures, it becomes evident that this narration serves the purpose of highlighting the positive aspects of the tribe and legitimizing their cause.

Both subjectivity, as mentioned earlier, and personalization serve as rhetorical devices that bridge the divide between the speaker and the audience, establishing affective connection. In this context, employing personalized storytelling as a discursive strategy can be convincingly argued as highly effective, especially when the objective is to engage the audience on a profound level and mobilize support. Similarly, anecdotes, also functioning as rhetorical devices, can be utilized by the Gwich'in speakers for various purposes, including the illustration of complex concepts to enhance accessibility and memorability. Anecdotes can also evoke emotions and foster connections by humanizing the speaker.

Overall, storytelling plays a crucial role as a discursive tool and occupies a significant position within indigenous communities and their knowledge production. Consequently, storytelling not only serves as a means to preserve indigenous traditions and facilitate knowledge creation but also functions as a form of resistance, challenging Eurocentric and colonial notions of 'objectivity' and knowledge. Scholars Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes emphasize the importance of recognizing indigenous storytelling as acts of creative rebellion, countering the perception that stories are merely apolitical acts of sharing, often associated with liberal ideologies.[252] The political potential of storytelling becomes evident simply by the Gwich'in's choice to share stories while advocating for the protection of the Refuge in front of Congress–that is in highly politicized context. As the authors assert, storytelling embodies basic qualities of personal engagement, active participation, and agency. Through communal sharing, stories establish spiritual and relational connections, fostering a sense of unity and facilitating a collective comprehension of shared experiences. In this way, storytelling serves as a powerful mechanism for fostering a common understanding among

[252] Sium, Ritskes, 'Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance', p. 5.

individuals within communities.[253] It makes only sense that social movements, and in particular indigenous social movements such as Gwich'in, are employing storytelling as a means of discursive strategy to achieve their objectives.

(2) The discursive strategy of constructing Indigenous collective identity

Across the entirety of the analyzed documents, linguistic features were found that placed considerable emphasis on the unique identity and collective unity of the Gwich'in tribe. One of the most noticeable language elements in the analyzed documents was the use of the Gwich'in native language, particularly when speakers introduced themselves and expressed their thanks to the audience. Additionally, speakers frequently referred to specific places and culturally significant artifacts, such as the Coastal Plain within the ANWR, or certain activities and concepts, using native naming. Other collective identity building features, the predominant use of inclusive pronouns, such as 'we' and 'our,' consistently stood out. Through the deliberate and consistent use of these pronouns, the speakers actively reinforces a strong sense of shared belonging within the tribe that can encourages collective action. This linguistic choice underscores the interconnectedness of the tribe, accentuating a collective perspective that resonates throughout the narratives within the analyzed documents. The following example serves as a clear illustration of this strategic deployment of inclusive pronouns:

> Beyond our duty to be stewards of this land lays another powerful motivator. We protect this land because our connection to the land is the basis for our culture. What we eat, what we wear, what we talk about, the words that we use, our sense of time and space all come from our connection to the land. Our connection with the caribou and all creatures of the land sustain our language. How we communicate the detailed

Screenshot from document n. 2

The expression 'our connection with the caribou and all creatures of the land sustains our language' metaphorically signifies that the relationship with the land and its creatures provides support for the community's language and cultural practices. This metaphorical representation amplifies the emotional and symbolic resonance of the community's bond with the land. According to Van Dijk, metaphors activate cognitive schemata, which are mental

[253] Sium, Ritskes, 'Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance', p. 5.

structures used to understand and interpret information. Metaphors similarly as narration aid to frame discourse and helps to relate abstract concepts to more concrete, helping the audience grasp complex topics.[254] In this example, the deliberate use of pronouns, alongside the strategic employment of metaphoric language, serves to emphasize collective identity and reinforce shared values. However, it is notable that equivalent language can be found across all the testimonies, implying that the construction of collective identity also functions as a deliberate communicative strategy employed by the Gwich'in to articulate their concerns regarding the ANWR issue. I would like to highlight the recurrent use of specific word choices in the testimonies, including 'our land,' 'our connection to the land,' 'our way of life,' and 'one voice,' and 'our people'. This observation is significant as these recurring word choices vividly illustrate the tribe's collective identity and are employed as discursive tools for defining the tribe, and, most importantly, legitimizing their cause. The phrase 'our way of life' commonly defines a specific group, functioning as a means for identity construction. It implies a shared understanding of the tribe's lived experiences and that there is a set of values, norms, and cultural practices to which the tribe adheres to. In similar vein, the utilization of the phrase 'one voice' or 'unified voice' carries significant weight, as it is strategically incorporated into the syntactical structure to not only legitimize the actions of the tribe but also underscore their unity in pursuing their shared objectives. Illustrated in the following example:

> together for the first time in decades. Our elders recognized that oil development in the Porcupine Caribou Herd's calving grounds was a threat to our people. At that gathering, we unanimously decided to speak with one voice against oil and gas development in the birthing and nursing grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Our unified voice is expressed in a formal resolution, Gwich'in Niintsyaa.[2] This resolution calls on the United States to recognize the rights of the Gwich'in People to

Screenshot from a document n. 5

However, when considering the construction of a collective identity, there are additional elements that are even more explicit on how the tribe defines its identity. Across all the testimonies analyzed, the Gwich'in speakers consistently identify themselves collectively as the Caribou People. More importantly, they leverage this identity as a means to advocate for the protection of the herd.

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[254] Van Dijk, 'Ideology and discourse', p. 175-196.

But the Gwich'in are caribou people. Caribou has provided for us since the beginning of time. Caribou is in our tools, clothing, songs and stories. If you marked on a map where the Gwich'in have always lived and also where the Porcupine Caribou Herd migrates, you would see how we live together. If you came to visit me at my village you would find caribou in every house and freezer in town.

Screenshot from document n. 7

By defining the Gwich'in as the 'caribou people,' the speaker underscores their profound connection and dependence on the Porcupine Caribou Herd. Through consistent emphasis, this linkage intertwines Gwich'in collective identity with the caribou, thereby strengthening the argument for caribou preservation. Constructing such a connection is inherently emotionally charged and persuasive, as it implies that if the caribou go extinct, the same fate awaits the Gwich'in people. Furthermore, within the context of self-identification as the Caribou People, the testimonies consistently highlight a sense of responsibility towards these animals, emphasizing the mutual reciprocation between the tribe and the herd. This reciprocal relationship extends beyond the caribou alone and encompasses a profound connection to nature as a whole, being inherent part of Gwich'in identity. The notion of 'stewardship' emerges repeatedly in the analyzed testimonies, explicitly portraying the Gwich'in people's role as caretakers of the natural world. Moreover, this term is utilized in an argumentative manner to differentiate and underscore the distinctive relationship and perception of nature held by the Gwich'in, setting it apart from the Western non-indigenous culture. A more comprehensive exploration of this 'us vs. them' discursive construction by the tribe will be provided later in this chapter. To illustrate, consider the following example that illustrates the usage of the term 'stewardship' in shaping the collective identity:

Caribou form the backbone of Gwich'in life and culture, providing for the physical, cultural, and spiritual health and well-being of our Tribal members. We adhere to the traditional laws and practices surrounding the stewardship of resources, which emphasize respect and relational accountability for all life forms.[6] We take care of the caribou because we need them. It is our

Screenshot from document n. 4

The consistent emphasis on ecological stewardship throughout the documents is significant as it aligns with what are considered to be the core principles of indigenous ontologies. Their relation to nature is further emphasized through what academics refer to as 'the logic of the gift.' This indigenous episteme can be defined 'by reciprocity and a call for

responsibility towards the other'.[255] It centers on maintaining a reciprocal relationship with the environment and fostering a bond of dependence and respect towards the natural world. Within the analyzed documents, this notion consistently surfaced as a common narrative, with a shared emphasis on respecting the land and nature. An example illustrating how 'the logic of the gift' appeared in the documents is as follows:

> How do we repay the land for all that it has given us? As Gwich'in we are bound by tradition to be stewards of the land, for it has provided us so much.

Screenshot from document n. 2

The recurring emphasis on the tribe's conceptualization of nature not only serves as a compelling argument for protecting the ANWR in the testimonies but also supports the thesis that the underlying environmental conflict is rooted in differing ontologies of Nature. This becomes even more apparent as we observe the dual movement of utilizing this ontological difference, not only as a discursive tool for constructing collective identity but also as a means of reinforcing an us-versus-them dichotomy.

Another noteworthy aspect that pervades the testimonies is how the speakers emphasize their profound historical connections to the land. Throughout the testimonies, there are idiomatic expressions like 'For millennia' and 'time immemorial,' consistently employed to stress the tribe's enduring bond with the Refuge. 'Time immemorial' serves as an idiom that denotes a time in the distant past, beyond memory or recorded history. Simultaneously, the speakers express their concerns about the potential impact of development in the ANWR on their traditional way of life, and their concerns for future generations, as well as emphasize the commitment to preserving their ancestral way of life. By crafting a narrative of time-space continuity, the speakers establish their rightful position as the original stewards of the Refuge and assert their authority in addressing the issue of ANWR protection. Additionally, the strategic cultivation of a strong sense of time-space continuity and deep reverence for ancestors reinforces the tribe's collective identity, as indigeneity itself centers on the interconnectedness and continuity between people and specific places.

In conclusion, the analyzed material demonstrates that the Gwich'in construct their collective identity through shared language choices, including specific phrases or idioms and

[255] Rata, 'Discursive strategies of the Maori tribal elite', p. 369.

consistent usage of exclusionary pronouns. Moreover, they express their distinctiveness in relation to the non-indigenous culture, prominently embodying the concept of stewardship of nature, along with 'the logic of the gift', as evidenced by the selected examples. The speakers' discursive practices align with the notion that indigenous communities perceive themselves as caretakers and guardians of the environment, rejecting a role as dominant exploiters. The language used in numerous testimonies vividly conveys a deep sense of interconnectedness, stewardship, and gratitude towards nature, accentuating the tribe's collective reciprocal relationship with the Arctic environment. This relationship, in turn, serves as a key element for collective identity-building of the tribe. By closely linking themselves to the land and the animals, the Gwich'in speakers set a narrative with 'high stakes involved,' specifically their livelihoods. This is likely to stimulate empathy and solidarity with their cause, influencing the audience. Through the strategic use of collective identity-building, it can be argued that the Gwich'in employ this approach to mobilize support, foster solidarity, and inspire shared commitment within the movement.

(3) The discursive strategy of constructing Gwich'in identity in opposition to the Western non-indigenous culture

Another discursive strategy evident throughout the analyzed material involves constructing an 'us vs. them' dynamic. This strategy aims to establish a distinct separation between two opposing groups or collective identities. It leverages language elements and rhetorical devices to underscore differences in values, beliefs, behaviors, or affiliations. The intention is to foster solidarity and unity among the 'us' group while portraying the 'them' group as outsiders, opponents, or potential threat. The Gwich'in construct this dichotomic dynamic through several overlapping narratives. These include narratives that highlight the tribe's respectful relationship with nature in contrast to the commodification of the environment, the significance of traditional indigenous knowledge in contrast to the hegemony of Western sciences, and the imperative of preserving Gwich'in culture and traditional way of life in contrast to perceived negative aspects of Western culture and lifestyle.

Several documents highlight the significance of traditional knowledge and its profound influence on the Gwich'in community, as already exemplified in the examples above. For instance, concerning climate change, a few speakers emphasize that their understanding of the matter stems not from scientific sources but from their knowledge of the land and observations. Across the documents, few speakers cited research to support their arguments on the environmental impacts of oil development in the area. However, such references were not prevalent, and the dominant trend was the use of speakers' personal experiences from the environment. In this context, stories as those of the Gwich'in speakers serve as a tool that challenges Western notions of 'objectivity.' As Sium and Ritkes observe, it situates the speaker outside the realm of 'objective' commentary and within the sphere of subjective action. This subjectivity underscores the political and intellectual legitimacy of the Indigenous worldview, disrupting the assumption of many in the West that Indigenous knowledge has become obsolete.[256] When employed discursively by Gwich'in, it positions indigeneity in contrast to the dominant colonial-settler culture of knowledge production. This positionality was made especially salient in document n. 3:

> We have occupied these areas for thousands and thousands of years, and we will be the first to be impacted if oil and gas activities occur. Our elders are our scientists. They have hunted and lived off the land far longer than any western researcher. Our science and our traditional knowledge tells us that oil and gas leasing, exploration, and development will damage the calving grounds. It will impact the quality, health, and availability of our traditional resources,

Screenshot from document n. 3

As evident in this example, this dichotomic construction is further accentuated by the deliberate and consistent use of pronouns, which emphasizes an in-group and out-group dynamic. This observation is evident throughout the documents, as previously mentioned in relation to other examples. Moving on to the next narrative, the Gwich'in construct their argumentation for protecting the refuge and the herd by highlighting the negative aspects of Western culture, framing it as a potential threat to their community. This aspect is clearly exemplified in the following passage:

[256] Sium, Ritskes, 'Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance', p. 4

the past into the future in a way in which they may be realized in contemporary ways. The onslaught of technology, alcohol, drugs, and outside pressures from our new non-indigenous partners and their new world is completely changing the ancient world of our culture and lives leave us in possibly one of the most important points in our people's history. How will we continue our way with the land, waters and animals? Will we be able to balance the best of both of these worlds to gift our coming generations a totally balanced and new world in which we have woven our traditional guiding principles into new works? Or will the velocity of alcohol, drugs, and new influences swallow our people, our identities, our relationships, our connections to our ancestors and future generations?

Screenshot from document n. 1

In this example, the speaker constructs a narrative expressing concerns about the impact of external factors on the Gwich'in way of life—a narrative recurrently found across the material. Through the use of dichotomous language, the text vividly contrasts 'our ancient world of culture and lives' with 'the new world' brought about by non-indigenous culture and its technologies. This framing underscores the perceived dichotomy between indigenous and Western worlds, further affirming the assertation that the Gwich'in see themselves, in this conflict, to some extent as detached from the Western culture. Also, the choice of terms like 'onslaught' and 'swallow our people' implies vulnerability and potential harm caused by external forces, while also portraying aspects of the out-group culture as a potential danger to the in-group. This framing of the issue presents it as a direct danger to the Gwich'in community, and this perspective was consistently observed throughout the analyzed material. The logic of 'two different worlds' is very salient in this example:

Today I am here to talk with you about why my people, the Gwich'in Nation, adamantly oppose the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife refuge. As a graduate of West Point and as a prior US Army Special Forces Officer, my people have asked me to speak because I have walked in two worlds: Your world, and the Gwich'in world.

Screenshot from document n. 5

In the given statement, the speaker portrays themselves as having firsthand experience in two distinct worlds: 'Your world' (representing the Western world) and the 'Gwich'in world' (representing their indigenous world). They also assume the role of mediators between these two worlds and mention their affiliation with Western institutions, establishing credibility to discuss the issue within the discourse. This duality indicates their awareness of different ontological frameworks at play, attributing them with credibility in navigating diverse perspectives. Throughout the testimonies, Gwich'in speakers consistently

acknowledge the existence of 'two worlds,' which attests to the coexistence of contrasting ontologies. This acknowledgment proves to be fundamental to the Gwich'in perspective on the Refuge, as their stance on the issue is firmly grounded in their unique worldview, significantly diverging from the Western perspective on resource utilization and land management.

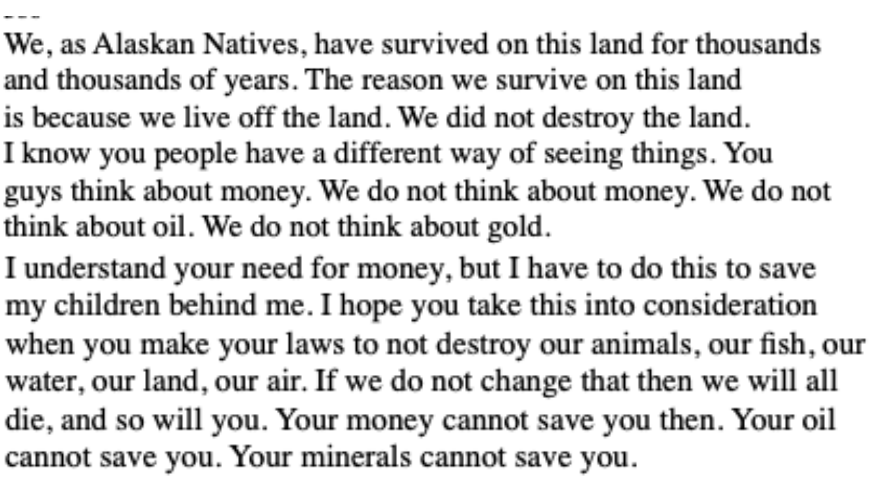
Within this narrative of two opposing worlds, the question of food and sustenance also arises. Several testimonies stress the unsuitability of the Western diet, which is primarily based on highly processed foods. The speakers argued that such a diet is inconvenient and unhealthy for the Gwich'in community. Instead, they emphasize the importance of accessing their traditional diet, primarily consisting of unprocessed animal products, with caribou meat being the most essential. In the following example, the speaker employs narration as a rhetorical device to illustrate the unsuitability of the Western diet for their community.

> What is adequate food? For Gwich'in, the only real adequate food is food that comes from the land— caribou, moose, salmon. We have a hard time eating your "health food." As a cadet at West Point, I tried following a "healthy diet" full of fruits and vegetables and it was disastrous. I found out years later that I couldn't eat tomatoes, apples, and a whole host of other "healthy foods." Over the thousands of years of calling the Arctic home, we had adapted to a largely animal-based diet. [5] It wasn't

Screenshot from document n. 5

In this specific example, the speaker emphasizes the Gwich'in community's perception of adequate food, which centers around food sourced from the land. This argumentation can be seen as an effort to underscore their longstanding relationship with the Arctic environment, signifying a connection to their land and the subsistence it provides. The phrase 'We have a hard time eating your 'health food'' implies a power dynamic between the Gwich'in community and the Western culture, which promotes a particular dietary approach as universally healthy. Through the use of 'your,' the speaker positions the Western notion of 'health food' as foreign and imposed, suggesting a lack of recognition or acceptance of the Gwich'in dietary preferences. The use of quotations can also be observed in other testimonies, and when analyzed in conjunction with additional linguistic elements, it becomes evident that the Gwich'in speakers are expressing their frustration regarding the imposition of particular aspects of Western culture upon their community.

The concept of land holds significant importance throughout the material. The theoretical arguments presented in this thesis demonstrate how asserting the right to land is intertwined with the notion of stewardship, a theme also evident in the testimonies as previously discussed, and a common topic brought into discourse by Indigenous communities. The references to ‘land’ appear in various forms, with a particularly prominent use in an argumentative context, where speakers assert their land rights primarily by invoking ancestral connections to the land and emphasizing their role as responsible stewards. In the following example, this argumentation is notably prominent, employed in a manner that creates a clear 'us vs. them’ dichotomy, effectively bolstering the overall argument.


We, as Alaskan Natives, have survived on this land for thousands and thousands of years. The reason we survive on this land is because we live off the land. We did not destroy the land. I know you people have a different way of seeing things. You guys think about money. We do not think about money. We do not think about oil. We do not think about gold.

I understand your need for money, but I have to do this to save my children behind me. I hope you take this into consideration when you make your laws to not destroy our animals, our fish, our water, our land, our air. If we do not change that then we will all die, and so will you. Your money cannot save you then. Your oil cannot save you. Your minerals cannot save you.

Screenshot from document n. 6

On this example is possible to observe how the Gwich’in speakers build the constrast betweem them and the audience, in this case, the elected representatives of Congress. As previously highlighted, there is a deliberate and recurrent use of personal pronouns to underscore the speaker's identity and establish an in-group versus out-group dynamic. The speaker effectively draws a clear contrast between the values held by the in-group and those of the out-group, accentuating the negative aspects associated with the out-group by emphasizing their presumed preoccupation with monetary gains. This contrast is further reinforced by the speaker's acknowledgment of 'seeing things differently,' aligning with the prevailing tone in these testimonies that reflects a sense of misunderstanding and divergent perspectives, rather than conflicting interests.

In line with the sociocognitive approach, it is beneficial to discuss the use of rhetorical devices, such as rhetorical questions, through this particular example. Rhetorical questions

carry more persuasive force than direct statements, allowing speakers to assertively engage the audience. They also tap into cultural and social norms, reinforcing collective identity through shared beliefs and values. The question posed in this example, 'Your money cannot save you then. Your oil cannot save you. Your minerals cannot save you,' aims to challenge the audience's perspective and prompt reflection on potential harm. By directly referring to the group's portrayal as greedy and money-driven, the Gwich'in speaker reinforces a collective identity that contradict the values accentuated in the rhetorical question, potentially mobilizing action. Altogether, this example presents a compelling and emotionally charged appeal. The speaker directly addresses the audience, evoking a shared collective identity and a sense of urgency ('we will all die, and so will you'), aligning with the rhetorical patterns observed throughout the analyzed material.

In conclusion, the Gwich'in artfully construct an "us vs. them" dichotomy through multiple narratives in their testimonies. The consistent repetition or similarity of these narratives across the testimonies of various speakers indicates a strategic use of language. This was further substantiated by applying Van Dijk's ideological square framework, which revealed that the Gwich'in consistently emphasize negative aspects concerning the out-group. The tribe makes evident efforts to strengthen their collective identity as an indigenous community, distinct in its ways due to its indigeniety, and in opposition to Western culture. This is most prominently achieved through the frequent use of exclusionary and personal pronouns, emphasizing the contrast between the two worlds. The strategic employment of rhetorical devices like rhetorical questions and personal stories further reinforces this dynamic. Notably, the Gwich'in suggests that this difference is rooted in the fact that they come from opposing 'worlds' that do not fully understand each other, with one being perceived as a threat to the other. This strongly supports the assertion of the thesis that environmental conflicts, such as the one about the oil development in ANWR, are not merely about different interests but are fundamentally driven by ontological differences. The Gwich'in's framing of the issue as a threat to their community underscores their conviction that the dominant Western culture could potentially endanger more than just the environment or caribou; it poses a direct threat to the very nature of the tribe's ways of life and existence in the world.

(4) The discursive strategy of caribou-centric framing

The central theme uniting the speakers' testimonies was their emphasis on the well-being of the Porcupine Caribou herd. Every document analyzed underscored the caribou's significance to the Gwich'in people's way of life and survival. When discussing the issue of oil development in the Refuge, Gwich'in speakers strategically use framing, placing the protection of the caribou herd at the forefront of the matter. Framing is a strategy that shapes the audience's perception by emphasizing specific aspects while minimizing others, constructing or presenting reality in a way that elicits particular problem definitions or causal interpretations.[257] By making certain elements more salient in their discursive practice concerning the Refuge, the speakers aim to evoke a particular perspective on the issue at hand and by that anticipate a distinct response from the audience. Moreover, in this context, it is interesting to consider B. K. Sovacool's observation regarding trends within public discourse when discussing loss of diversity and environmental issues. The tendency is to predominantly focus on charismatic mega-fauna, such as large mammals. Caribou, too, fall into this category as charismatic species – animals that people feel more connected to and empathize with, compared to smaller, less anthropomorphic organisms that are equally vital for the Arctic environment.[258] Given this, centering the focus around caribou protection can be a discursively effective strategy.

Examining concrete examples, the speakers frequently establish a causal link between the development in ANWR and the survival of the caribou in their argumentation. This example illustrates the point:

> be respected. We rely on the Porcupine Caribou and the Porcupine Caribou rely on the Coastal Plain as their calving and nursery grounds. Oil and gas activities on the Coastal Plain is a direct attack on our ways of life and to our human rights.

Screenshot from document n. 2

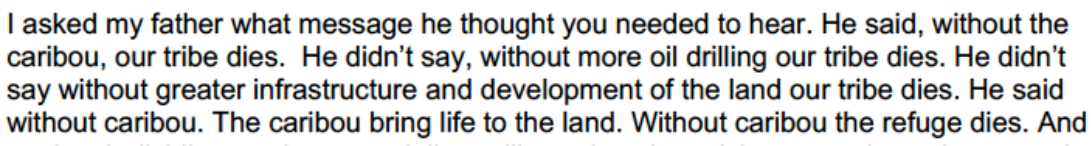
Notably, the speaker employs narration to capture the audience's attention and deliver the forthcoming message effectively. The repetition of the phrase 'without caribou' serves as framing, influencing the audience's perception by mentally linking development in the Refuge

[257] Ademilokun, 'Discursive strategies in select mediatised social transformation advocacy in Nigeria', p. 44-51.

[258] Sovacool, 'Spheres of argument concerning oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: A crisis of environmental rhetoric?', p. 356.

to the potential non-existence of caribou. This repetition becomes a prominent linguistic feature that reinforces the main message of this excerpt. Moreover, the metaphorical language in the statement ‘The caribou bring life to the land’ endows the caribou with personification and agency, amplifying the audience's perception of them as charismatic animals that are easy to empathize with. By employing these rhetorical devices, the speaker effectively communicates a sense of urgency while firmly establishing the connection between the caribou and the development in the area.

The personification of caribou appears throughout the documents, primarily utilized to bolster the case for caribou preservation. Another significant aspect of the testimonies is the connection the Gwich’in establish between themselves and the caribou. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the Gwich’in frame the oil development in the ANWR not only as an environmental issue but also as a matter of human rights. Upon analyzing their discursive practices, it becomes evident that the caribou-centric framing serves as the convergence point between the social and environmental dimensions (from non-Indigenous point of view). By highlighting the potential impact of development in the Refuge on the caribou herd and, by extension, the tribe's way of life, the speakers appeal to emotions and urgency, ultimately elevating the political significance of the issue. The oil development in the ANWR poses a threat not only to the environment, biodiversity, and fauna, but through this skillful framing, it is portrayed as a violation of human rights—an aspect that holds greater resonance in current politics than mere nature conservation. The Gwich’in, with their genuine and profound connection to the caribou, likely recognize the discursive power this framing holds over the audience, as it aids in comprehending the complex effects of development on the environment in a concrete and tangible manner. The following example exemplifies this connection:


I asked my father what message he thought you needed to hear. He said, without the caribou, our tribe dies. He didn’t say, without more oil drilling our tribe dies. He didn’t say without greater infrastructure and development of the land our tribe dies. He said without caribou. The caribou bring life to the land. Without caribou the refuge dies. And

Screenshot from document n. 3

The centrality of the caribou is further attested by evidence from ethnographic studies. Toshiaki Inoue, who attended the traditional Gwich'in Gathering, notes that during these sessions aimed at stopping ANWR development, speakers placed significant emphasis on the

importance of caribou for the tribe's spiritual life. Based on his observations, he further argues that the caribou has played the role of a bond, uniting the Gwich'in people who live separately from each other and in different situations.[259] In the testimonies, the Gwich'in speakers themselves assess that the endangering of the Porcupine Caribou by development brought the entire tribe together with the aim of fighting for the protection of the Refuge.

Overall, the use of personification, coupled with the connection established between the Gwich'in and the caribou, plays a crucial role in framing the issue of oil development in the ANWR as a matter of both environmental preservation and human rights. The discursive strategy of caribou-centric framing effectively communicates the urgency of protecting the caribou and the Refuge, elevating the stakes of the issue in the eyes of the audience.

In conclusion, the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in speakers regarding the ANWR overlap, making them challenging to fully separate, yet they can be defined accordingly. This account of their strategies is not exhaustive, as the aim of this thesis is to identify and describe the prevailing strategies that have evolved over time within the context of analyzed documents. The analysis reveals little evolution in the development of these discursive strategies, with Gwich'in speakers maintaining remarkable consistency in controlling key ideas about the development in ANWR from 2003 to 2019. In particular, employing Van Dijk's ideological square framework, it was demonstrated that the speakers utilize the strategy of polarization, entailing a positive self-presentation and a negative other-presentation. This analysis revealed the underlying ideological dimension of the discourse concerning the ANWR, as the speakers effectively constructed an 'us vs. them' dichotomy to naturalize and legitimize their discourse power. Their testimonies consistently utilize the defined discursive strategies, to effectively convey their messages. This consistency might contribute to the relative success of the tribe in achieving its objectives, and as their discursive strategies remain effective, there appears to be no need for significant alterations or adjustments concerning the dispute over ANWR. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that although the discursive strategies themselves remained relatively unchanged, the analyzed material reveals a notable increase in the frequency of Gwich'in speakers being invited to participate in hearings and testify before Congress in later years. This suggests that

[259] Inoue, 'The gwich'in gathering: The subsistence tradition in their modern life and the gathering against oil development by the Gwich'in Athabascan', p. 200

the state became more anticipative and open to dialogue with the Gwich'in regarding the conflict.

4.2 Discussion

This thesis explored the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in in their testimonies presented before the US Congress, particularly concerning the proposed development plans within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The research design drew upon selected methodological elements from a critical discourse analytical framework. Within this sub-chapter, the identified discursive strategies are discussed in regard to the initial research problem, and an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the overall completed research design is provided.

The research problem addressed in this thesis focused on the Gwich'in tribe's relative success in achieving their objective of preventing the encroachment of the fossil fuel industry into their protected wildlife refuge. Additionally, the thesis aimed to explore how different ontologies of Nature might influence the Gwich'in discourse practices in this context. To explore this research problem, the thesis sought to identify the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in tribe concerning this environmental conflict. Based on the analyzed material, four discursive strategies were identified and described; (1) *the discursive strategy of storytelling and narration*, (2) *the discursive strategy of constructing Indigenous collective identity*, (3) *the discursive strategy of constructing Gwich'in identity in opposition to the Western non-indigenous culture*, and finally (4) *the discursive strategy of caribou-centric framing*. Through the identification of these strategies, the thesis gained insights into the Gwich'in discursive practices regarding the proposed development in the ANWR. The empirical results further strengthened the thesis' hypothesis that different ontologies of Nature underlie environmental conflicts like the dispute over ANWR, and these ontological differences are also evident in the discursive strategies employed by the Gwich'in tribe.

As mentioned at the outset of the thesis, the exploration of discursive strategies can result in two potential outcomes. It can offer fresh insights into how the tribe employs existing discursive tactics and shed light on the underlying mechanisms that make them effective. Alternatively, it can uncover previously unnoticed discursive strategies that play a role in the

tribe's relative success in achieving their objectives. Regarding the findings, it cannot be asserted that previously undisclosed discursive strategies have emerged. Instead, the research revealed that the Gwich'in utilize well-known discursive strategies such as polarization, identity-building, narration, and framing. Indeed, the way these strategies are utilized reflects the Gwich'in tribe's distinctive perspective, which is shaped by their specific socio-natural reality.

Shifting the focus towards the concrete strategies, it is crucial to emphasize the Gwich'in's adept utilization of these discursive tools. The Gwich'in strategically employed storytelling and narration to influence the audience's perception of their ANWR arguments. Their testimonies, interwoven with narratives like the Creation Story, emphasized their deep connection with the Porcupine Caribou. By employing emotional storytelling, the Gwich'in personalized their struggle, transcending conventional environmental activism. Through Creation myths, the speakers made complex environmental concerns accessible and challenged notions of objectivity. This approach shifted discourse from objective analysis and detached commentary to a more emotionally compelling subjective realm.

Regarding the strategy of constructing collective identity, the Gwich'in tribe utilized their Indigenous identity and unique way of life in discourse to mobilize fellow members and strengthen a shared sense of unity. Linguistic choices emphasized the tribe's interconnectedness and shared perspective on ANWR's oil development. They portrayed themselves as "caribou people" with a strong relationship of stewardship and the 'logic of the gift' towards nature. This relationship became a key element in building the tribe's collective identity. By closely tying their existence to the land and animals, the Gwich'in speakers highlighted the 'high stakes' involved, particularly their livelihoods, potentially evoking empathy and solidarity with their cause.

The Gwich'in strategically employ their identity to counterpose Western non-indigenous culture. This 'us vs. them' dynamic emerges through narratives that contrast their respectful relationship with nature to the commodification of the environment, traditional indigenous knowledge to Western sciences, and the preservation of their culture to negative aspects of Western lifestyle. Dichotomous language highlights in-group values and negative aspects associated with the out-group, leveraging discursive power to legitimize and naturalize their

perspective within the discourse. The prevailing tone in these testimonies asserts a sense of misunderstanding and divergent perspectives between the two groups. The Gwich'in contends that this difference arises from opposing 'worlds' that lack a comprehensive understanding of each other, with one world perceived as a threat to the other. This has a dual effect. Firstly, portraying the out-group as a threat strengthens the sense of collective identity. Secondly, highlighting the danger to the group's livelihood can foster solidarity with their cause.

The discursive construction of danger is reinforced through the strategic use of caribou-centric framing by the Gwich'in speakers when discussing the issue of oil development in the Refuge. By placing the protection of the caribou herd at the forefront, they shape the reality to emphasize certain aspects over others. Focusing on charismatic species like caribou elicits greater empathy, making this framing discursively advantageous to their objectives. What makes this particular use of framing by the Gwich'in novel is its convergence of social and environmental dimensions (from a non-Indigenous perspective). At this juncture, it can be argued that the caribou symbolize the environmental resistance in the Arctic region, bridging the environmental issue with social justice. By highlighting the potential impact on the caribou herd and, consequently, the tribe's way of life, the speakers evoke emotions and urgency, thereby elevating the political significance of the issue.

Overall, the Gwich'in tribe's discursive strategies offer valuable insights to the broader field of discourse analysis and environmental mobilization. They illuminate the ways in which language is strategically employed to effectively communicate environmental concerns and mobilize collective action, providing a source of knowledge for scholars and activists seeking to understand how movements achieve their objectives. The Gwich'in's discursive practices also shed light on the importance of identity construction in environmental resistance. The use of the 'us vs. them' dynamic and the emphasis on their unique Indigenous perspective highlight the pivotal role of collective identity-building in shaping environmental movements. By comprehending these identity-based strategies, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of socio-environmental struggles and how marginalized communities assert their rights and protect their way of life. Moreover, the research findings suggest that the core of such environmental conflicts extends beyond mere competition over resources and articulation of specific interests. The empirical and

linguistically informed analysis of the Gwich'in tribe's discursive strategies illustrates how ontological differences are integral to the ongoing conflict over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Throughout their testimonies, Gwich'in speakers consistently acknowledge the existence of 'two worlds,' signifying the coexistence of contrasting ontologies. The acknowledgment of contrasting ontologies serves as a fundamental aspect of the Gwich'in perspective on the Refuge, firmly rooted in their distinct perception of Nature, symbolized especially by the logic of stewardship. This perspective significantly diverges from the Western viewpoint on resource utilization and land management. Understanding these ontological differences enhances our comprehension of the complexities underlying environmental conflicts and the varying perspectives that drive them.

Returning to the theoretical foundations of this thesis, the theoretical chapter aims to demonstrate the diverse perceptions of nature and how they shape practices concerning the natural world. The argument put forth is that to comprehend ongoing environmental conflicts, we must engage with different ontologies of Nature. Scholars such as Escobar and Mario Blaser, cited in this thesis, highlight that an individual can experience multiple natures. Acknowledging this multiplicity entails recognizing that places and spaces can be perceived *differently*.[260] Barbara Bender similarly asserts that people's perceptions of Nature are significantly influenced by the unique social, political, and economic conditions that characterize their existence.[261] The Arctic, particularly the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, serves as a prime example of a location where conflicting interpretations of its identity and purpose are currently being negotiated.

In general terms, place refers to something local and still, but for many political ecologists, it is locational and relational; it is *the grounded site of local-global articulation and interaction*.[262] That means that places are constructed historically and discursively, and in a way that spatially transcends the local. The question of articulation is, in particular, of implication. Articulations are critical in defining the specificities of any place as its native

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[260] Castro, Hossain, and Tytelman, ‘Arctic Ontologies’, p. 100.

[261] Escobar, ‘After Nature’, p. 1.

[262] Biersack, ‘Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology’, p. 16.

qualities.[263] Environmental and social movements, including the Gwich'in in relation to the protected area of the Refuge, exhibit concrete cultural articulations of territories. They produce narratives about nature that stem from collective practice and integrate them into their strategic repertoire. This process aligns with Arturo Escobar's concept of 'hybrid natures,' which involves the negotiation of alterity and cultural affirmation. For social movements, hybridization allows them to incorporate different constructions of Nature into their political strategies when engaging with the dominant discourse, while also maintaining cultural cohesion.[264] The Gwich'in's incorporation of their ontologies of Nature into the discourse on the Refuge, as evidenced by the research findings, presents a compelling case of hybridization. By utilizing ontological differences, the Gwich'in speakers effectively negotiated with other actors regarding the fate of the Refuge, while also reinforcing their collective identity.

However, the completed research does have its limitations. Although the research sufficiently addressed the research question by identifying and describing four discursive strategies, the conclusions drawn about their evolution over time could have been based on more robust data. While this study considered congressional testimonies as a suitable document type for analysis, as explained in Subchapter 3.2, the available material might not have been sufficient enough to determine how these discursive strategies evolve conclusively. The thesis posits that the observed evolution was minimal and that the Gwich'in remain very consistent in their discursive practice, a conclusion that may still hold with more material available. Nevertheless, from a research perspective, having access to more data would better enable us to answer how these strategies have evolved.

Another aspect that this thesis did not fully address is the broader context of the hearings in which the testimonies took place. This was mainly due to the limited scope of the research, and after analyzing the documents, it did not appear necessary to directly answer the research question. However, examining the discursive nature of the entire hearings and the responses from the audience to the testimonies could undoubtedly add another layer of depth to the analysis.

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[263] Biersack, 'Greenberg, Reimagining political ecology', p. 16.

[264] Escobar, 'After Nature', p. 13.

Moving forward, considering that this thesis tackles an ongoing environmental conflict with global implications, it would be insightful to integrate findings from scientific research to better understand the potential consequences of the proposed oil development in the ANWR. Regarding environmental concerns, there is a substantial amount of scientific literature detailing the possible negative impacts that oil and gas development in the Arctic region could have on the environment.[265] The extraction process poses threats such as oil spills, pollutant discharge, and contamination of soil, which can severely harm local flora and fauna.[266] Petroleum hydrocarbons not only result from major spills but also from continuous low-level inputs, natural seepage, and the discharge of toxic chemicals.[267] Whatmore, the extraction of oil from ice-covered waters currently lacks reliable techniques, rendering it impossible to prevent potential oil leakages and spills. Additionally, the rate of oil decomposition tends to slow down in colder environments.[268]

In terms of cultural impact, extensive research has been conducted on the potential impact of oil drilling in the 1002 area on the caribou herd, yielding compelling evidence of a significant decline in their population.[269] In January 2023, a study[270] was published in the journal Nature, indicating that changes in temperature and snow conditions (including snow depth and duration of the snow season), both of which are affected by climate change, have a significant impact on the distribution of caribou, as well as the perceived availability of caribou among hunters. The study suggests that these factors could increase the herd's vulnerability to the effects of rising global temperatures and delayed snowfall. Furthermore,

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[265] See for example: Casper, 'Oil and gas development in the Arctic: softening of ice demands hardening of international law'; Stohl, Klimont, Eckhardt, Kupiainen, Shevchenko, Kopeikin, Novigatsky, 'Black carbon in the Arctic: the underestimated role of gas flaring and residential combustion emissions' ; Burkett, 'Global climate change implications for coastal and offshore oil and gas development'.

[266] Casper, 'Oil and gas development in the Arctic: softening of ice demands hardening of international law', p. 834.

[267] Margesin, 'Biological decontamination of oil spills in cold environments', p. 381.

[268] Nevalainen, Helle, Vanhatalo, 'Estimating the acute impacts of Arctic marine oil spills using expert elicitation', p. 782.

[269] Russell, Gunn, 'Vulnerability analysis of the Porcupine Caribou Herd to potential development of the 1002 lands in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska' or see: Griffith, et al. 'Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain Terrestrial Wildlife Research Summaries'.

[270] Gagnon, Hamel, Russell, Andre, Buckle, Haogak, Berteaux, 'Climate, caribou and human needs linked by analysis of Indigenous and scientific knowledge'.

the authors emphasize that maintaining a robust caribou population and upholding cultural practices of sharing could potentially alleviate some adverse outcomes associated with climate change.[271]

Regarding the relevance of this research findings for sociology, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the discursive strategies used by environmental movements in their resistance against fossil fuel development, as well as the factors that contribute to the varying levels of success among these movements. Additionally, the exploration of differences among resisting communities holds importance, as it sheds light on their unique forms of activism, including their discourse practices, as evidenced in the case of the Gwich'in tribe. Given the anticipated increase in environmental conflicts due to the worsening climate crisis, it becomes crucial for the scientific community not only to analytically describe the distinct dynamics of these conflicts and their contextual nuances but also to comprehend the underlying reasons for their diversity. It is equally important for the field to engage with research related to indigenous communities and their social experiences, given that historically, these experiences have been systematically distorted or even erased. In this thesis, it was hypothesized that at the core of some conflicts lie different ontologies of Nature, rather than mere differences in interests. As the debate surrounding ontological differences still remains largely theoretical, this thesis presents an attempt to bridge this theoretical discourse with an empirical research. By delving into the role of ontological multiplicity in shaping environmental conflicts, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in these complex socio-environmental struggles. Moreover, the research's utilization of critical discourse analysis contributes to the growing body of literature that explores 'bottom-up' relations of resistance and the constructive uses of power. This approach extends beyond mere ideology critique, showcasing the versatility of critical discourse analysis in studying various dimensions of discourse and power dynamics.

In future research, a promising area of inquiry would be to examine how social movements can seize 'discursive opportunities,' a concept introduced by Koopmans and

[271] Gagnon, Hamel, Russell, Andre, Buckle, Haogak, Berteaux, ‘Climate, caribou and human needs linked by analysis of Indigenous and scientific knowledge’, p. 5

Olzak, by strategically employing discursive strategies within the public sphere.[272] This would involve exploring not only the rhetorical aspects but also the interactional features of mobilization, considering how deliberative practices of reciprocity contribute to effective mobilization within a community. Such research, however, would necessitate on-site fieldwork. Additionally, a promising avenue for further investigation would be to examine how democratic institutional structures can both positively and negatively impact the capacity of Indigenous communities to successfully achieve their objectives in resisting oil development. Furthermore, this thesis aspired to incorporate Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow's framing theory, which proved to have broader implications beyond the scope of this research. Benford and Snow propose that effective mobilization relies on social movements' ability to engage in core framing tasks, including 'diagnostic framing,' 'prognostic framing,' and 'motivational framing,' each serving distinct goals.[273] Their conceptualization of collective action frames has made a significant contribution to the field of social movement studies. In future research, the applicability of this framework could be explored to analyze the discursive practices employed by the Gwich'in or other Indigenous communities in their environmental mobilization efforts.

Conclusion

With global superpowers vying to claim the energy reserves of the Arctic, the region has become a focal point of contemporary geopolitical struggle over its potential natural resource riches. Energy is fundamental to economic growth under global capitalism and one of the principal components of modernity in an ideological sense.[274] Our energy-intensive societies are constructed upon the notion of perpetual progress stemming from abundant energy resources. Nevertheless, the extraction of oil in Alaska's Arctic region carries the potential to exacerbate global climate change by introducing additional fossil fuels into the consumption

[272] Koopmans, Olzak, 'Discursive opportunities and the evolution of right-wing violence in Germany'.

[273] Benford, Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessmentp'.

[274] Peet, Robbins, Watts, 'Global political ecology', p. 307.

cycle.[275] This dynamic has raised concerns and added complexity to the region's geopolitical dynamics. As a result, the Arctic is foreseen as a site that could witness one of the most significant and conspicuous future geopolitical conflicts, given the competing interests and potential environmental consequences for the planet.[276] This indicates a rising necessity to organize among communities, including the Gwich'in tribe, who face and will continue to face the most significant impacts of resource development plans in the region. Moreover, the rise of environmental and social mobilization in the Arctic has generated considerable interest among researchers, highlighting the pressing need for research that delves into the causes and underlying dynamics of these conflicts. This thesis made an objective to contribute to this field of research by examining the discursive strategies employed by indigenous community to resist natural resource development in their ancestral territories. By identifying the discursive strategies of the Gwich'in tribe, this thesis sheds light on underlying aspects of environmental conflicts, such as the dispute over oil development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and what factors contribute to the potential success of communities like the Gwich'in in achieving their objectives. Through the use of critical discourse analysis, the research highlights the empowering use of discursive power by Indigenous communities that often face disproportionate marginalization, especially amid the worsening climate crisis. The thesis explores the influence of diverse perceptions of Nature on practices concerning the natural world and how these ontological differences can be strategically utilized by environmental movements within their discursive repertoire. The environmental conflict surrounding the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge serves as a crucial case study, emphasizing the importance of studying resistance in regions affected by the escalating climate crisis.

[275] Casper, 'Oil and gas development in the Arctic: softening of ice demands hardening of international law', p. 827.

[276] See for example: Zellen, 'Arctic doom, Arctic boom: the geopolitics of climate change in the Arctic', 'Ebinger, Zambetakis, The geopolitics of Arctic melt', or Dadwal, 'Arctic: the next great game in energy geopolitics?'.

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Analyzed documents

Document n. 1:
“The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain”. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/109126

Document n. 2:

“The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain”. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/109126

Document n. 3:

“The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain”. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/109126

Document n. 4:

“The Need to Protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Coastal Plain”. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/116th-congress/house-event/109126

Document n. 5:

S.Hrg. 115-491 — POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE NON- WILDERNESS “1002 AREA," OR COASTAL PLAIN, IN THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE. (2023, August 1). https://www.congress.gov/event/115th-congress/senate-event/LC65167/text

Document n. 6:

S.Hrg. 114-497 — ALASKA RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT--OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE JOBS AND STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SECURITY. (2023, August 1). https://www.congress.gov/event/114th-congress/senate-event/LC51965/text

Document n. 7:

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON “ANWR: JOBS, ENERGY AND DEFICIT REDUCTION." PART 1. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/112th-congress/house-event/LC1937/text

Document n. 8:

H.R. 39, ARCTIC COASTAL PLAIN DOMESTIC ENERGY SECURITY ACT OF 2003; AND H.R. 770, MORRIS K. UDALL ARCTIC WILDERNESS ACT. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/108th-congress/house-event/LC14737/text

Document n. 9:

H.R. 39, ARCTIC COASTAL PLAIN DOMESTIC ENERGY SECURITY ACT. (2023, August 1st). https://www.congress.gov/event/108th-congress/house-event/LC15602/text