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Mining Contradictions and Struggles

Producing Alberta's Tar Sands: Oil, Ideas, Rents, and New Enclosures

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ABSTRACT

The production and transfer of knowledge are essential for producing oil. In this paper, I examine the nexus between a subnational quasi-state publicly funded hydrocarbon research program and a novel knowledge-production regime and explore how this relationship resulted in the production of oil from Alberta's oilsands. In particular, the paper highlights the significance of the Alberta Oilsands Technology and Research Authority (AOSTRA), a quasi-public institution credited with financing research, which among other finding, made the in-situ oilsands' mining method steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD) commercially viable. SAGD proved essential in enlarging the Province's oil reserves, but this paper focuses on AOSTRA's novel intellectual property regime. Under that regime the intellectual property AOSTRA (the Provincial government) held the licensing rights to the research it funded and commanded its future revenues. In contrast to accounts of the development of the current mode of

entrepreneurial knowledge production that emphasizes the new knowledge-enclosures of the biosphere, I suggest this was a novel system of knowledge-enclosure of the "necrosphere." I stress how this knowledge-production-transfer regime only emerged in Alberta because of the specific material characteristics of bitumen and the Provincial government's tripartite role as resource rentier, funder of the research, and owner of the resource.

KEYWORDS:

Tar sands (oilsands) | knowledge rents | state entrepreneurialism | intellectual property regimes | AOSTRA

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