

Politics of Solid-Phase Bitumen

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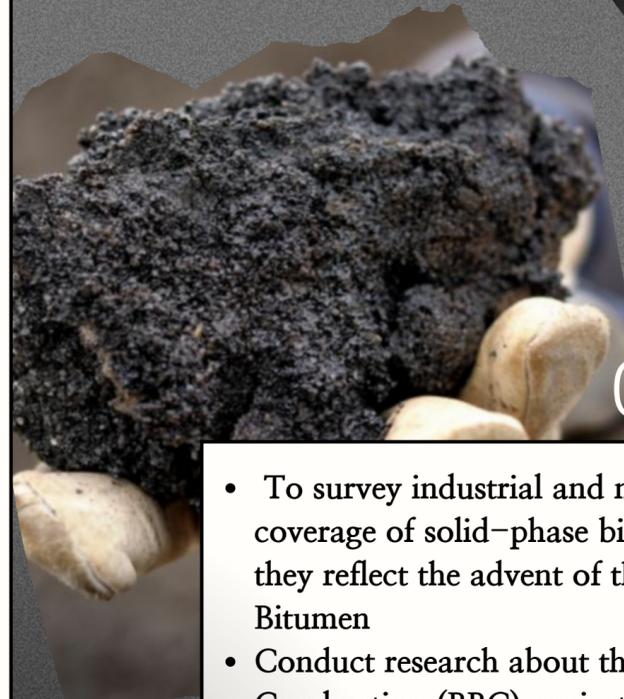
Abstract

Energy Media: The Politics of Solid-Phase Bitumen is a research project by professor Darin Barney and his PhD student Hannah Tollefson. Their project pays attention to the materiality and the communicative function of solid-phase bitumen. Therefore, their project treats solid-phase bitumen as a case in which politics are mediated by materials and the infrastructures that facilitate their extraction, storage and transportation.

As a part of this project, the goal of my ARIA internship was to examine the characteristics of public communication, such as media coverage, promotional and industry materials, scientific papers and political representations surrounding the emerging formats of bitumen. In doing so, the learning objective was to conduct comprehensive, qualitative search analysis across a number of sources, formats and venues.

Background

Solid-phase bitumen, unlike the conventional viscous oil, is encapsulated within conformal shells in forms of pucks, pellets, or bricks – chemically or thermally sealed. These solid-phase bitumen are represented as technical solutions to the various environmental risks associated with transporting liquid bitumen, such as leakage, spill and ignition. It also represents a potential solution to the political problems involved in the transportation of liquid oil, such as the politics surrounding the transport of bitumen by pipeline.



Objectives

- To survey industrial and media literature for coverage of solid-phase bitumen, and whether they reflect the advent of the new formats of Bitumen
- Conduct research about the Bitumen Beyond Combustion (BBC) project led by Alberta Innovates, as well as the discourses surrounding on the commodities arising from bitumen for non-combustion purposes
- Provide a profile of the asphalt market in Asia, and a brief report on uses of bitumen prior to commercial refinement for combustion.
- Produce a final database of searched materials on Zotero, using tags



Review

I was able to develop a preliminary analysis through encounter with the materials I've found. For example, the BBC program promotes the development of products designed for new possible endings, which can be used for combustion purposes or other commodities. However, each of these have different environmental considerations and they are not well explored in publications I've examined.

Moreover, the ways solid-phase bitumen are represented in media show the potential success of these products relies on increased public awareness and fear of spills and leaks. Because solid-phase bitumen is buoyant and do not saturate the ground or disperse in water, products such as Canapux and BitCrude are promoted as technical solution that can mitigate the risks of leakage and spill. Nevertheless, this doesn't eliminate some of the other environmental and political liabilities of these products.

Thus, whether bitumen is for combustion or not, it seems to remain that that the oil industry will continually invoke land politics around extraction and transportation, which will perpetuate the ongoing crises that Indigenous peoples experience, in the face of the transnational extractive industries. This is where I realized it is important to analyse the social, material, and temporal dimensions of how energy is produced, deployed, configured and used. I came to realize that bitumen in Alberta context, as a form of elemental media, embeds certain meanings and practices, and is also embedded in discourses, national identity, and larger institutions.

Further Questions

If mediation is about how bitumen comes to the world as a material substance and as a cultural construct and idea, there are also other kinds of mediations of bitumen that is not about combustion nor the BBC imaginary. There is an alternative to the dominant media imaginary, and they are represented as other ways of mediating bitumen that represents whole other sets of aspirations, history, and much more. This as an unresolved question and prospect, but I am interested in further examining other ways of representing/mediating bitumen before/or beyond combustion that might be emerging from Indigenous communities that doesn't look like the mediations that this project has looked at.