

## Abstract

Stanford-McIntyre, Sarah, "Processing the Past into Your Future: Uncovering the Hidden Consequences of Industrial Development in the West Texas Petrochemical Industry," *Contested Expertise and Toxic Environments*, Ed. Brinda Sarathy, Vivien Hamilton, & Janet Brodie, Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press – Forthcoming.

Odessa and Midland are two adjacent cities that sit at the geographic and economic heart of the West Texas Permian Basin. Both sustained by a mid-twentieth century, regional oil boom, in particular, the petrochemical industry became a vital source of local employment, remapping the two cities' industrial and human landscapes to facilitate constant growth. With industrial wealth making local civic boosters and community leaders almost unanimously complicit in the oil industry's expansion, it was not until the 1980s - and a disastrous drop in oil prices - that a sustained, public discussion about the environmental and biological consequences of oil extraction and underregulated petrochemical production began to take place.

In my paper, I use legal documents, industry publications, advertisements, and union records to place this dialogue within the region's intertwined, yet overlooked, history of industrial contamination and labor activism. I focus on the rise and fall of El Paso Petrochemical, the main employer in Odessa and, at mid-century, the largest petrochemical plant in the world. Built in 1955 in the city center, the plant was advertised nationally as an engineering marvel and as symptomatic of regional, biological health. I contrast this language with a wave of complaints from nearby residents and plant workers of mysterious ailments, bad air quality, and groundwater contamination, to reveal a growing, bottom-up awareness of the consequences of industrialization well before the 1980s. In contrast with the nascent environmental movement, this awareness was articulated through shifting definitions and redefinitions of "public good," with concern for the environment, the land, and its human residents lumped together within an at

times myopic popular understanding that equated public health with regional full employment.