

THE AIR WE SHARE

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Introduction

I am a light-skinned, green-eyed, Christian Arab-American born in Salt Lake City, Utah. Although I can fluently speak Arabic, English is my first language. My ability to blend into American society has provided me with a certain degree of comfort. I am not easily categorized, I do not stand out in a crowd, and I do not feel the full burden of being a person of color in the United States. I now recognize the privileges my parents were able to provide for my sisters and me despite being an immigrant, low-income family.

I grew up in a close-knit, sheltered neighborhood with little ethnic or religious diversity. My parents were the only immigrants living on our street, and only a handful of other kids at school spoke a second language. Despite my placement in the Gifted and Talented program throughout elementary school, I was pulled out of class every couple of years for a counselor to test how well I knew the English language. The “test” I recall most clearly involved the counselor flipping through a stack of easily recognizable images—such as bananas, monkeys, and cars—and asking me to name each aloud, even at the age of twelve. I recall feeling inconvenienced, yet I never questioned why such testing was necessary nor did I perceive such treatment as a reflection of any kind of discrimination. Aside from this repeated experience, I had every opportunity that my Caucasian friends had, and I had no exposure to a world where this did not always hold true. The notion that an immigrant or a person of color would ever be mistreated or misunderstood was one I had not considered.

My perception of what it means to be American evolved when I left Utah and moved to Texas. Since moving to Houston at the age of thirteen, I have been exposed to the great diversity the city offers—a diversity that beautifully highlights each of its subcultures and communities. The middle and high schools I attended are both housed in Fort Bend County, one of the most

diverse counties in the nation. The University of Houston similarly reflects the demographics of this city with its rich diversity and its inclusive environment.

In retrospect, each of these experiences, including my process of self-discovery as a daughter of two immigrants, set the foundation for my interest in environmental justice. Unfortunately, I quickly learned that the great diversity I found in Houston is often overshadowed by great inequality. During my time at the University of Houston in particular, I have learned that systematic oppression is a complex issue that encompasses many arenas of life. Houston's pollution, while widely acknowledged to exist, is rarely understood to be an additional piece of this oppression. Houstonians are not polluted equally. The city's low-income, predominantly black and brown communities are disproportionately located in close proximity to pollution sources. These are *fenceline communities*, communities that are directly adjacent to industrial facilities, of which there are numerous due to the absence of zoning laws in Houston. In understanding that, I gained a pivotal awareness that ethnic issues are closely entwined with environmental health and justice issues in my city, and that this was something I could not ignore.

My own health issues related to poor air quality further fueled me to study environmental health and justice. When I moved to Houston, I was welcomed to my new home with swollen eyes and daily sore throats. I was diagnosed with seasonal allergies, and I began taking medication that I would rely on for many years to come. After moving into my college dorm a few years later, my allergies worsened and triggered a cascade of events that would lead to a debilitating state of health.

I progressively became more sick and it turned out I had multiple chronic conditions, the seasonal allergies being just one of them. I believe that if my allergies had not been so bad, I would never have fallen into severe illness in the way that I did. I struggled to find doctors who would

take my symptoms seriously. As a young woman who “did not look sick,” I was accused multiple times of self-imposing my symptoms as a result of anxiety or depression. This inability to find comfort in a system that was supposed to relieve my physical suffering was perhaps more difficult to bear than the symptoms.

By the spring semester of my junior year, I could hardly spend time outdoors without a swollen throat and heavy chest. This was a frightening sensation that got worse on rainy or foggy days. My allergist attributed it to outdoor mold and began treating me with allergy immunotherapy shots. Pollution was never mentioned. Over time, I improved enough to be functional, but on stormy days or days of poor air quality, the familiar tightening of my throat returns. I lost my sense of safety in exposing my body to the environment I live in and I have yet to regain it. Since then, I have taken time to learn about Houston’s air quality history, particularly regarding the Houston Ship Channel and the industries associated with it. I no longer believe that my allergy-like symptoms can be explained by natural outdoor allergens alone. My earlier suspicions regarding air pollution have now evolved into convictions based on my research, conversations, and observations.

Stumbling across the world of environmental justice provided me with a place to root my inclinations and to allow them to grow into knowledge. Once I realized that there are many communities within just a few miles of various industrial structures—including, but not limited to, petrochemical refineries—I realized that I was not alone. Many questions filled my mind, and it would take a long time to answer them. If my personal confrontations with air quality could hinder my life and my goals so heavily, how could people who face more direct exposures carry on? How can city and industry officials continue to neglect these issues? How much more burden could we possibly put on these impoverished, marginalized communities?

It is incredible to me that despite its importance and intersectionality with other causes, the term “environmental justice” was never introduced to me until my twenties. Even so, it is a somewhat ambiguous term that has been defined in different contexts. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “environmental justice” is defined as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.” Further, it defines “fair treatment” as ensuring that “no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies” (“Learn about Environmental Justice”).

The Energy Justice Network, an environmental, grassroots nonprofit based in Philadelphia, provides an alternative definition, rejecting the national EPA’s definition and referring to it as incomplete. The basis of this rejection is that “environmental equity” means “poisoning people equally,” but that true environmental justice would instead be to “stop poisoning people, period.” The complete re-definition they provide is as follows:

Government agencies, like the EPA, have been coopting the movement by redefining environmental justice as ‘fair treatment and meaningful involvement,’ something they consistently fail to accomplish, but which also falls far short of the environmental justice vision. The environmental justice movement isn’t seeking to simply redistribute environmental harms, but to abolish them (“Environmental Justice/Environmental Racism”).

Much of the existing research on Houston’s air pollution has been purely academic. When it comes to scientific work that has political implications, many scientists stray away from publically taking a position in fear of facing repercussions. However, the studies these scientists

produce can provide objective conclusions about Houston's pollution and activists can independently utilize such studies. Despite the potential impact of such work, the voices of the residents in Houston's fenceline communities cannot be captured in objective research.

After reading the works of writers like Joan Didion, Ted Conover, and Joseph Mitchell, I have chosen to write this thesis in the form of immersion journalism. Immersion, or literary, journalism is a form of creative nonfiction that plays an important role in society by telling ordinary, real-life stories and by portraying messages through a form that is accessible to readers of all backgrounds. This form of writing embraces the subjective experience and the lessons learned from it, a feat that most traditional academic studies cannot accomplish. In order to strengthen the credibility of my observations and conclusions, I have included references to various reports and publications throughout the paper.

Due to the nature of this senior honors thesis and associated time constraints, I was unable to thoroughly research, visit, and speak to members from every fenceline neighborhood along the Houston Ship Channel. Instead, I share what I learned about the Manchester neighborhood, the South Houston area, the City of Pasadena, and the City of Baytown. I recognize that the areas I was unable to cover are equally important, and that they have issues that are just as urgent. A few of these are the City of Galena Park, the City of Deer Park, the City of La Porte and the Channelview area.

The continuing growth of Houston strongly depends on the same industries that create environmental health burdens on vulnerable communities. The financial success that the city is known for is a double-edged sword; these industries offer thousands of jobs and yet, most Houstonians are inevitably affected by the resulting pollution in some way. While the communities included in this piece may appear to be extreme examples, they represent more widespread

consequences that we can realistically expect to face in the future. Minimizing future pollution will require a higher level of citizen awareness in all parts of Houston.

Petróleo Sobre Nuestras Mentes

Somber music echoes through the room as a sequence of images of Houston's landscape shifts across the screen. Poetic narration takes over the transition between images of nature's beauty and those of industry's pollution. Familiar structures, familiar locations—looming concrete freeways and bridges that I had passed hundreds, if not thousands of times before—suddenly feel oppressive as much as they feel necessary. I detect threads of my own life in the more specific struggles detailed through the narrative of the film; yet, my ability to react objectively, and while sitting in the safe space of a university classroom, is a privilege that I am well aware of.

Dr. Erica Fletcher, a former professor at the University of Houston, created the community-based film *Oil On My Mind* in collaboration with Texas Environmental Advocacy Services (TEJAS), the Austin Radical Mental Health Collective, Paraspace Books, and the Comité Cívico Multicultural en Houston (COCIMH). The film is built on the framework of her own family's battles with pollution and mental health, and it leads to broader questions of environmental justice stemming from Houston's industrial progress.

The film begins with the words of her sister, a young woman who temporarily fled Houston to live closer to nature after becoming unable to handle her work as a pipe-designing engineer for the petrochemical industry. She lived in nature for some time, but felt drawn back to Houston—a transition that was difficult. Erica, the narrator for the rest of the film, describes “a frenzy” that first came to her mother, and then to her sister. Their battles to reclaim their minds and their wellbeing became tied to her own wellbeing; in turn, their cumulative wellness became tied to their living environment (Fletcher).

“We can never heal. Never recover,” she narrates as images of trash piled among trees and pollution billowing out of smokestacks fill the screen (Fletcher). I imagine our bodies being broken

down and polluted in a similar manner. By visually presenting this analogy, she forces viewers to consider the consequences of disturbing nature and then subsequently expecting to maintain a healthy living environment within the same compromised space. More specifically, she beautifully—and tragically—emphasizes the tie between the irreparable destruction of nature and the destruction of mental health in the context of Houston’s oil-related pollution.

Yudith Nieto, an young woman from the Manchester neighborhood, appears on the screen and provides a unique perspective as a local resident and activist. Manchester is the most polluted community in the Houston area due to the number of industrial complexes within a relatively small area. However, Manchester is just one example of numerous communities along the Houston Ship Channel with the concerns that Yudith discusses. She speaks about how the local residents suffer from anxiety, depression, and various physical ailments that are likely linked to the pollution. They have a recurring issue when it comes to taking action: there is no solid proof. Regardless of how often she observes people around her being affected by the pollution, she is limited with what she can do for them due to the absence of irrefutable proof linking the pollution to their ailments (Fletcher).

Yudith describes the toll this takes on her own mental health and how she copes with it through her community’s traditions. When the members of her community feel as though their spirits have been tarnished by the world around them, they turn to cleansing ceremonies, or “limpias,” as she calls them. Like Erica, they believe that how they treat the land, water, and air affects the state of their bodies. These ceremonies are based in Mayan tradition, and they often replace traditional healthcare for both mental and physical concerns—many of which are suspected to be caused by the pollution (Fletcher).

Doña Tere, a leader within the Guatemalan community and the founder of Comité Cívico Multicultural en Houston (COCIMH), leads many of these ceremonies. COCIMH aims to honor Mayan traditions, and many turn to her for help when they feel unwell. Her wisdom transcends the barriers of language, time and space through the documentary as she speaks about her relationships with the earth and with local pollution. She speaks in Spanish, and the following is a translation:

Everything here is dead. Everything is polluted. The air, the water, your house. You do not have the right to light, the right to thrive, to live in connection with the sun. Everything is chaos for me with regard to mental health and pollution. Pollution prevails over mental wellbeing...It is evident that colonization has meant the extermination of life, of culture, of local science, of traditional knowledge, and a rich way of life, a humane life. The abundance and ambition for power over oil...I do not think it is good for anyone, for us, for humans, if you look at it from the perspective of humanity (Fletcher).

Watching thirty minutes of raw footage permanently changed my relationship with my city. Even the sight of the lengthy, concrete freeways painting the Houston skyline was suddenly altered, tainted by the newfound perspective that progress comes with consequences. The same systems that have fed into Houston's massive growth and economic prosperity are the ones that have failed to be transparent, responsible, and compassionate regarding environmental health; it suddenly became clear to me that this affects me, other vulnerable individuals and communities, and truly, all of Houston, due to the simple fact that air does not remain stagnant. To the rest of Houston beyond fenceline communities, there may be a common perception of normalcy regarding air quality. To the Houstonians in the film, however, each breath they take of the city's worst air is a health hazard that they are well aware of. In their daily lives, dealing with the realities of pollution is unavoidable.

“We continue to tell our stories to make sense of the senseless,” Erica provides us with a reminder that work of resistance serves an important purpose even in the midst of great struggle (Fletcher). On a more personal level, I internalized these words as a call to action. I wanted to share more stories. In the months that followed, I became increasingly drawn to environmental health and justice issues. With one of the largest ports in the world and a ship channel that extends through various Texas cities and municipalities, the Houston metropolitan area has a complex relationship with its industry. Local environmental justice work, and the need for greater efforts, reflects such complexity. Hidden behind all of this are the stories of regular people, and they are ones that deserve to be told.

Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services (TEJAS), the organization that Yudith represents in the film, operates as a grass-roots, close-knit group that works directly with fenceline communities. Along with having cultivated a relationship with the residents over the years, several TEJAS members are actually from fenceline communities themselves. Although they have worked with various areas within Houston, many of their projects and advocacy efforts ultimately focus on Manchester. Following several attempts to reach out to TEJAS with no results, I came across a Facebook event page for a gathering they were hosting: “Lucha Por Nuestra Tierra,” a community art event.

I arrived with a friend on the Saturday afternoon of the event, neither of us prepared with any particular expectations other than to be supportive and to learn. The event was both intimate and casual, hosted in the backyard of an East End law office near, but not quite within, Manchester. The positive energy was refreshing despite the low attendance. Two mothers from Manchester had prepared food and were serving it. The hospitality of the hosts, who were mostly Latino, reminded me of my own culture. The constant pressure to “eat, eat!” and the warm greetings by everyone I

encountered put me at ease despite the unfamiliar setting. I found myself laughing and smiling within minutes. Those running the event, mostly TEJAS staff members, made it clear that every individual in attendance was appreciated for our presence and our support.

TEJAS had set up a table dedicated to their pamphlets and flyers. When I approached the table, I was welcomed and given a general introduction to the organization. I politely played along despite knowing exactly who they were and attempted to contain my eagerness to finally connect with them. When it felt appropriate, I shared that I was a student at the University of Houston writing a senior thesis and that I was interested in volunteering with them. I was introduced to Jessica Lorena and Jessica Hernandez, two young women who work with the group and who would coordinate my time as a volunteer.

After meeting everyone, I took a seat to participate in the planned activities. The activity that struck me most deeply was a ring-tossing game complete with cardboard rings shaped in the chemical structure of benzene. One by one, the kids attempted to toss the benzene ring onto a cone that was shaped like a smokestack. With a dual sense of silliness and seriousness, the adults played a round as well. The resilience of this community was unlike anything I had encountered in Houston. To the young children, this was just another game, but to the adults, this was a way to be reminded of, and then to take control of, the unclean air they are forced to breathe. They had created a game out of very real and oppressive circumstances, demonstrating that even the most informed members of fenceline communities do not view themselves as a group of helpless victims. It turns out that many people have oil on their minds, too.

Cloud Machines

The children living in Houston's fenceline neighborhoods believe in cloud machines, machines that create beauty rather than take away from it. They wonder why on certain days there are sour smells in the air, but nobody tells them that the white, cotton-like smoke rising out of the smokestacks is filled with chemicals and does not constitute clouds. They believe in a world that is fair, in adults who behave responsibly. Eventually, someone will tell them that the oil refineries are not cloud factories, that these "clouds" are toxic, and that compassion does not always prevail.

Jessica Hernandez was the first person to tell me about this idea of "cloud machines". As an employee of TEJAS and as a community activist, she organizes children's programs at the Hartman Park Community Center in the Manchester neighborhood. Prior to connecting with her, and with TEJAS more generally, I familiarized myself with the basics of Manchester—who lives there, its geographic location, and the facilities that surround it. This idea of cloud factories, however? That was a first, and it reminded me that I knew very little about the experience of actually living there.

Manchester is a sort of real-life laboratory—an exhibition of just how toxic a residential area can become. It is the most isolated part of the Manchester-Harrisburg super-neighborhood, and it directly lies on the Houston Ship Channel in Southeast Houston. Air, water, and soil quality experts travel great distances to use Manchester as a model of the effects of petrochemical pollution, and yet most Houstonians are completely unaware of the neighborhood's existence, let alone its struggles.

Part of the reason those living in more affluent areas rarely concern themselves with air pollution issues may be that they are not exposed to its most devastating effects. There is stark contrast in toxin exposure between east Houston neighborhoods, including Manchester, and

wealthier neighborhoods, such as those in west Houston or in the suburbs. This becomes immediately clear to anyone who takes the time to visit a fenceline community; the scents, sounds, and proximity of industry are undeniable. What is less obvious and more difficult to prove is the prevalence of pollution-related illness in fenceline communities. This requires engaging with the residents and formally collecting data, and even then, most evidence is anecdotal.

However, a recent comparative study done in Houston helps begin to fill this gap. In 2016, TEJAS and the Union of Concerned Scientists released a report, “Double Jeopardy in Houston: Acute and Chronic Chemical Exposures Pose Disproportionate Risks for Marginalized Communities.” The report compares data from four of Houston’s neighborhoods: Manchester-Harrisburg and Galena Park in East Houston and Bellaire and West Oaks/Eldridge in West Houston. Investigators found that the two east Houston neighborhoods housed many more industrial facilities in comparison to their west Houston counterparts. Additionally, the report found that the marginalized communities living in the two east Houston neighborhoods face higher pollution concentrations and thus, higher pollution-related risks of illness than those in the more wealthy west Houston neighborhoods. For example, ninety percent of Manchester’s residents reside within just one mile of at least one Risk Management Plan (RMP) facility regulated by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), while less than fifteen percent of Bellaire and West Oaks/Eldridge residents live within one mile of this type of facility (TEJAS and UCS).

The term “double jeopardy” used in the study arises from the reality that in addition to the daily toxin exposure from nearby polluters, fenceline communities face higher risks during natural disasters. More specifically, this points to the difficulty of evacuations and to the nearness of facilities housing dangerous chemicals, many of which are not built or maintained to withstand severe storms. The difficulty of evacuation in Harrisburg-Manchester is due to its isolation. For

many years, there was only one two-lane, two-way road used to access the neighborhood. To make matters worse, this road is intersected by a railroad track. To even visit Manchester through this entrance, there is a chance of being stuck waiting for a train to pass for anywhere between minutes to hours. After a man passed away because an ambulance could not get to him quickly enough, a bridge was built and named after him—the Bernie Guerra Bridge. According to this report, this bridge now provides the only escape route [not blocked by railroad tracks] in case of disaster, and this road also has just two lanes, one going in each direction. This is extremely problematic when there are over three thousand people in Harrisburg/Manchester who would need to be evacuated (TEJAS and UCS).

This report also helped me better characterize Manchester through statistics that are surprisingly difficult to find and to confirm. I had previously done many searches and had only been able to find bits and pieces of the area's demographics and history. Fenceline neighborhoods are nearly always characterized by poverty, and are often also composed of minority populations. In Manchester, ninety-seven percent of the residents are people of color, ninety percent of them are low-income, and thirty-seven percent of them live under the poverty line. The neighborhood is surrounded on all sides by industrial facilities, two major highways (610 and 225), numerous railroad tracks, and the Houston Ship Channel. Overall, more than 30 industries that emit wastewater, air contaminants, and hazardous waste are housed in Harrisburg-Manchester (TEJAS and UCS). The Valero refinery adjacent to Hartman Park is the facility that the community has the most direct contact with. There is nothing more than a narrow, unpaved road separating the grassy edge of the park and the massive Valero refinery. I had previously been able to see and photograph this on the ground myself, but now I understood Manchester on a broader scale.



Fig 1. Image showing the close proximity of the park to the Valero refinery: Mousa, Lydia. 2017.



Fig. 2 Image of the Valero Refinery taken from the park: Mousa, Lydia. 2017.



Fig. 3 A closer look at the Valero Refinery: Mousa, Lydia. 2017.



Fig. 4 The playground at Hartman Park with the Valero refinery in the background:

Mousa, Lydia. 2017.

On the back wall of the community center hangs a mural painted by the children of the community (see Fig. 5 below). The perspective portrayed in the mural is difficult to digest and to understand. From an external standpoint, it would be simple to assume that the children feel fear, anxiety, and frustration. Instead, the mural depicts bright colors and playful scenes that display an honest portrayal of what is, to them, a perfectly normal backdrop to their lives. The smoke stacks and train tracks are painted as beautifully as are the green grass and the swings. To me, this mural serves as a reminder of a common humanity and an innate inclination to seek happiness regardless of circumstance. A new piece of the narrative begins to be shaped here: these children do not view themselves as victims.



Fig. 5 Image of mural on the back wall of the Hartman Park community center:

Mousa, Lydia. 2017.

Jessica Hernandez and I met at Bohemeo's, an artsy, eclectic cafe in the East End that attracts everyone from college students to local East End residents. Although we had only briefly met before, I was drawn to Jessica's work, and I was eager to hear more. She had also mentioned that she grew up in Pasadena, a Houston-area city that also lies along the ship channel.

I started working at the community center in Manchester with the kids and uh, they don't notice the pollution. We went in the other day to do a presentation...well, we walked around the community center and asked them to tell us if they saw anything that was not right. Some of them pointed out the trash, plastic bottles and things like that, but they never mentioned the refineries. So, we brought it up, which made them start asking questions: why is it here? What does it do? And things like that. So, that was a bit hard because you don't want to scare them, right? It's like...you live there and you don't have the option of moving out. I tried to not say too much because I don't want to scare them.

"So do the kids know that the structure next to the park is a refinery?" I asked her.

Mm, I think kids mentioned that it makes clouds, which is horrible because I think that I used to think that too when I was growing up in Pasadena. I can't remember exactly, but I feel like I did. Make clouds? No, that's not what it does.

"Can you tell me a little bit more about your experience growing up in Pasadena?" Pasadena is the second largest city in Harris County following Houston, and it houses several petrochemical facilities. Many of these are in close proximity to residential areas that are fenceline communities as well. This misperception of refineries as cloud factories was a common thread between Manchester and Pasadena, and I wondered how else the two compared.

I live in south Pasadena, not north Pasadena. The north side is closer to Highway 225 and to the refineries. So from where I live, you can't see the refineries. I don't think I can smell them

either, but I mean, the air travels. It's not like it stays in just that area. I'm not sure if I've been personally affected, like, health-wise. When I was little, we used to drive past the refineries and smell strong odors. We don't question it, because no one talks about it. We don't even question the big refineries and the big, metal-looking things because nobody talks about it. I think nobody talks about it because they're just not aware of what they do. And a lot of the community also works at the refineries, so that's their income. So, they see it as a benefit because it provides them with money. I'd like to know, once you start working there, if you are advised with some sort of health...guide or something that would say you're prone to this or that if you work here. That's something that I have to look at.

I had not realized that Pasadena had two “sides,” and that one was more exposed than the other. Although Jessica shared with me all that she knew, her experience was limited. She suggested that I reach out to Jessica Lorena, the other TEJAS staff member whose family happened to live in north Pasadena.

“So, what was it then that got you interested in air pollution and ultimately led you to TEJAS?”

I work part-time with TEJAS. Before working with TEJAS, I didn't even know about Manchester. I think it was connections that led me here. Someone was doing a workshop, a presentation on TEJAS and the effects of Superfund sites. She was doing a presentation on that, and we just started connecting. She was doing a presentation with...my teacher from high school has a group called Más Maestros, related to Mexican studies. She was doing a presentation there...so then, I started volunteering and then they brought me on the team.

Then...I guess just being involved in what they were doing. We went on a tour, a 'toxic tour' of toxic sites and fenceline communities, and one of the sites they took us to was Manchester.

That was the first time I had ever been there. It was crazy because there was a home that stood out to me because it's right next to a tank.

“Well what about in Manchester? Do they talk about the pollution more than they do in Pasadena?”

Last week, we went around canvassing a little bit, and we talked to the people there. I only talked to... maybe four people. Out of those four, only one couple mentioned the smells, the noise, the vibrations under the houses--because there are pipelines running under the houses, which is super dangerous because if something happens, the whole community is affected.

One of the families there moved in right after Hurricane Harvey, and the dad knew what the refinery was. They could feel the vibrations at night. He knew it was bad for them. I didn't ask for details, so I'm not sure what made them move there. They were renting, so it's possible that they came because the rent was low in Manchester.

“So, does that mean that the kids have trouble playing outside? What have you noticed when you work with them?”

Well, there's a certain smell that comes from the molasses that they store...so it kind of always smells like molasses. Last week, it was really, really strong. I had never noticed them saying 'ew' to being outside before, but that day, they didn't want to be outside. It was pretty strong. They go outside about three times throughout the whole day, so they're exposed to it all the time. I have been going to work with the kids throughout the summer, and I've probably been about eight times. I try to do outdoor activities or activities focused on sustainability. I want them to learn to use their resources, to use what they already have. You don't always have to go to the store to get things if you can make them. I showed them all the things they can do with plants, like making medicine or lotions out of them. I brought in some herbs, which they were amazed by. I told them

all the benefits of the herbs. It may be a small activity, but if I were to continue it for several summers, they can eventually get really interested in nature.

I think even the vegetation around there is not...good. Around the park, you don't see flowers. It's just so much dry, somewhat green grass. I think it's hard to grow things there. Someone had mentioned that their lime tree...the limes turned black. You can just compare that to your body.

“What about Valero? I have heard that they interact with the community.”

Yeah, and people do go to the events they host. There are Christmas events, I think this past Wednesday there was a back-to-school event in the community center--the same place TEJAS was trying to do the back-to-school event. So, it's so hard because we are trying to put out a healthy aspect to everything that's going on, but then Valero is like, 'We are giving you this free backpack with our name on it,' which is just more advertising.

Even at the churches....um, we were also canvassing there, standing outside and as they were coming out, we were handing out flyers to them. A few people, not too many, made faces and were like, 'no thank you' because they're in contact with the refineries. So, it's a lot of like...brainwashing people by being friendly, by having these free events that the community can come to. I just think that they could do so much more. If I were Valero and I knew that I was contaminating your community, I would at least provide some like...water filters, better air monitoring, air filters for the air conditioning, stuff like that.

I don't think anyone teaches the kids about what's going on. It's hard to get into the schools because at times they receive funds from the refineries. The refineries stretch about thirty miles or something, from Manchester to Baytown. Sometimes I go to the community center in Baytown, and they receive scholarship funds from Exxon. Sometimes it's the schools, I think, but the community

centers get money to start programs—which is good, but it's like...I wouldn't want to receive your money. But it's also like, how do you say no to money?

So, in Baytown, and even La Porte, where the sign says 'Welcome to La Porte,' it also says Shell or Exxon or something on the bottom. It's everywhere. And that's mainly white people living there, in that area. Those areas down closer to the bay like Baytown and La Porte...even though they are exposed as well, they look nicer. The areas are nicer. The roads aren't ugly, and there isn't trash everywhere. In Manchester, you see tires everywhere...you just see waste that's not supposed to be there, but you don't see that in those areas, even though they're just as close to refineries.

After Hurricane Harvey, I think things got worse. There was a conference I went to that showed the correlation between asthma and Harvey, and it did get higher. People did have a reaction to what they were exposed to because the tanks overflowed, so there was spillage of oils and chemicals into the water and into the communities. There were some people with pets...like, they'd let their dogs out and a few days later, they died. So maybe they drank the water or it soaked into their skin.

There was also a time when there was an explosion or some sort of issue at Valero overnight, and a few kids got sick and went to the hospital. At first, they thought it was a stomach virus, but then they saw that their neighbors were having the same issues. There was no alert at all, it just happened and Valero didn't say anything. I'm not sure if it happened before or after Harvey, but it was something that occurred in Manchester. The companies are not following protocol for what to do when this does happen. They're not letting people know and they're not being fined. During Harvey, the tanks overflowed, but there was no record of how much was spilled out. The refineries kept on going; they kept on working as well. That's when they turned off the

monitors that track what was going on. So, they kept working during the [beginning of the] storm but what they were releasing wasn't tracked.

“What, in your experience, would you say is most important if someone wants to help?”
This was a question that was always on my mind, becoming increasingly urgent as I continued to learn more.

A lot of people come in doing studies, doing soil testing and water testing and monitoring the air...and they leave with that information, and then they never come back. They don't do anything. I've been told that the community feels very tired of them coming in and doing these studies that are not...they don't see an outcome. What I think would help, or what I would do, is ask them what they would need, and then help them with that and then stay consistent with that help.

They don't have a grocery store nearby. I was just telling my mom...where we live, I know that there's an Aldi, Walmart, Kroger, Mi Tienda, Fiesta, and Foodtown. There are like, six grocery stores really close, less than a mile from us. Over here, you don't see that at all. It's crazy, just the differences that five miles can do. I don't know exactly why...I'm sure it has a lot to do with councilmembers and the fact that a lot of the residents are immigrants. They are not able to fully express themselves to someone that doesn't speak Spanish, someone who wouldn't understand fully what they're going through or what their needs are. Just now knowing...like if you know information, you can start questioning things. If you don't even know about something, you can't question it...if that makes sense.

I think we need to work on that. I feel like we've focused a lot on Manchester, which is good, but then there are other communities. Jessica Lorena and I are from Pasadena, so we're trying to build that connection and get more involved with the people there. We should really go

canvassing over there, give out pamphlets or talk to the people over there because it's really, really so important. I have never before valued how much sharing information and just building connections can really help, all just by going out there and talking to people.

Financial Dilemmas

Manchester is a difficult community to engage with, particularly for a young woman with poor Spanish-speaking skills like me. From what I could figure out, the residents had grown distrustful of strangers after being exploited time and time again in the name of academia. Keeping this in mind was key each time I met someone who had connections in Manchester, and it never felt quite right to be too aggressive with my inquiries. With patience and the help of a mutual friend, I eventually connected with a young woman who was comfortable speaking to me about her experiences.

Eva only recently began to reflect on her childhood in Manchester. After being raised in her grandmother's Manchester home until the age of thirteen, she moved to Pasadena, where her mother still lives. She now resides in South Houston with her partner and five-year-old daughter. When I asked if she would be willing to speak to me, she seemed surprised yet comfortable. It seemed as though I was the first person to ever ask her about how, or even if, living in Manchester had affected her life.

She sent me the address to a Starbucks off of Interstate 45 in the South Houston area. As I parked, I spotted her by the entrance with her daughter by her side, grasping her hand and looking in my direction. I joined them, introduced myself, and we found a table inside the shop. It was clear that Eva was not at ease, particularly regarding her own authority or credibility. From the moment we sat down, she appeared shy and anxious that she would be unable to provide me with helpful information.

“So, I already know a little bit about Manchester. I’ve driven through it and know some basic things, but I’d really like to learn more. This is really casual, and I’m only recording this for myself so that I don’t forget anything.” I hoped beginning with this would ease her nervousness,

but my efforts seemed to have the opposite effect. Visibly timid, she seemed unsure of where to begin.

Yeah. Well...I know a lot of people who used to live there don't live there anymore. They were getting sick and just, like, the air...a lot of things have been changing there. Now when you go, not as many people live there anymore. Sometimes the plant buys the houses. They buy them to destroy them. That's what my grandma is fixing to do now. She's going to sell the house to the plant. They offered to buy it from her twice in the past but she said no, but now she just wants to get rid of it and save the money.

"Is it because they want to expand?" I asked. The homes have been there for decades, so it seemed odd that Valero was suddenly interested in buying out the residents.

They want to expand the plant. That's why they are trying to buy it.

"Do they pay them enough for the houses?"

Yeah...from what I've heard, they pay them enough. My godfather used to have his house there as well, but he sold it and now he lives in Cleveland, Texas. With what they gave him, he built his own house over there. It's just crazy how they keep expanding.

"Do you feel like people living there know that the air is bad for them?"

Yeah...they know. There are a lot of Mexicans who live there. I haven't really met anyone myself who has gotten sick, just because it's been so long. I know that in general, the chemicals in the air cause breathing problems and stuff, but maybe my aunt would know more specifics.

"I don't know if you've seen the mural that the kids made for the community center, but it's crazy to see their perspective. When you were a kid living there, did you think everything was normal?"

Yeah, I really did. I didn't question it at all. It was just something normal for everyone. It actually just looked fun to us, and nobody was telling us what it really was.

"I spoke to a someone who works with the community, and she was telling me that the kids think that the refinery is making clouds."

Yeah! That's actually what I first thought before I knew what it was. I thought it was just, like, a cloud maker and it looked fun. After I learned what it was, I was just like, what the heck?

"What about people feeling like they can fight for themselves to make things better? Do you think they do?"

Hmm, no. I don't think they do. I think if people were really unhappy with it, I feel like they would've been out a long time ago. I think they just feel like they have to put up with it.

Eva's daughter was playing a game on her mom's cell phone, and she kept interrupting us to ask how to do this or that. I didn't know them well, but she was a sweet little girl and I found some comfort that she is able to grow up outside of Manchester. It is a strange thought, as there are many kids who have no other option, whose families cannot afford to move elsewhere. I wondered if the kids living there today have similar experiences as Eva did. It seemed as though nothing about her childhood felt remarkable until I pointed out specific things that she can now look back and realize were not normal.

"What about places to play, like parks?" I wanted to keep the conversation going, and I could sense her continued hesitance to speak up without being prompted.

Hmm, there was only one park, and it was the one right next to the refinery. She was referring to Hartman Park.

"What about hearing weird sounds and things growing up? I have heard that the pipes literally run beneath the homes."

Yes, I hear that too. That if anything ever were to happen, everyone there would basically be...screwed.

“What about Pasadena?” As she was older during her time in Pasadena, I hoped that maybe she knew more about the area’s pollution issues.

We didn’t really have issues in Pasadena, because we lived more towards this side...the side further from the refineries. The entire reason we moved from Manchester was because of the chemicals. So we came to this side. We were like, by Beltway 8 and I-45, around here. We just tried to get away from it.

I wondered if those living on the “cleaner” side of Pasadena were actually breathing less polluted air or if it was a misperception based on a few extra miles. I noted to myself to dig into this later on.

“So, your grandma still lives in Manchester?”

No, but my aunt still lives there. She said she personally hasn’t noticed anything but that she knows of other people in the neighborhood who are affected, because you know, everybody there talks. It’s so small, so everybody talks. The people who live there...basically everyone knows each other because they’ve all lived there for so long. A lot of the people who live there now are the same people who lived there when I did.

“So a lot of the homes are like, family homes that are passed down?”

Yes. Basically.

“So, most of the time if they do sell, is it because they’re scared?”

Yes, or let’s say they just want to try to get away. She paused, visibly lost in her thoughts.

It really is dangerous to work there, and I know that because my husband works at a refinery. It's dangerous...everything you breathe, literally everything around you...and if there's one little incident, that's all it takes.

“Do they inform them of the risks? Do they make them sign anything?”

Yes, they do. They tell them why it's dangerous and they sign papers.

“I have heard that they sometimes do short contracts with employees...where they'll hire them and then fire them after a certain amount of time so that they aren't obligated to give them benefits.”

Yeah, they do that. It all depends because there are, like, jobs for a certain amount of time. There's like a turnaround time...but they do let them know that like, we only have this job for a certain amount of months and after this, we aren't going to have anything. I just...I really don't know a lot of things, because it's been awhile. She turned to her daughter to help her with the phone again.

“I'm sorry. I feel like I'm putting you on the spot.” I turned off the recorder. Knowing it was off, she seemed to ease up and needed less prompting to casually speak to me. She opened up more about her personal life and her family's lasting ties to the petrochemical industry. She told me that her boyfriend has worked at the refinery for several years now, but that she couldn't remember the name of the current one, as his contracts are usually short and he switches companies frequently. I asked why he works there despite her obvious concern about all of the involved risks.

“I got pregnant,” she says with a shrug. “He has no choice because it pays well.”

Before we left, we called her aunt to see if she was home. She kept insisting that her aunt would probably know more, as she still lives in Manchester and has friends within the community. She was not at home, but she stiffly agreed to follow up later. While this response was not an

outright rejection, I sensed that asking again would be an imposition. I decided that in the absence of clear willingness, I should move on to the next lead.

Discovering Pasadena

As TEJAS mainly focuses on Manchester and the East End with their work, I wanted to connect with additional organizations in order to reach lesser-known or less central fence-line neighborhoods. Through an online search, I discovered a coalition called “One Breath Houston,” a group with a dual objective: to educate Houston’s residents and to share their air pollution stories. The latter coincided with my own goal of elevating the voices of Houston’s most affected residents, and when I reached out to the group, they were receptive to working with me. One of the organizations within the coalition, Air Alliance Houston, was actively working in Pasadena back in May of 2018 when I contacted them. The coalition, fully backing this work, was holding an event at the end of the month at the Baker Ripley Community Center in Pasadena. They invited me to attend and to volunteer. My role was mainly to help collect the contact information of any attendees who were willing to share their stories with me, either for my own work, for the coalition’s website, or for both.

On the Saturday morning of the event, I drove to Pasadena for the first time. The Baker-Ripley building was known to provide support to Pasadena’s residents, and many of the residents who often utilize the center’s services had come out for this community meeting. There were many women, a few men, and even some children. Many of the residents were victims of Hurricane Harvey and also happened to live near refineries. The event had several purposes. One was to offer resources for those who were still struggling to recover from Harvey’s devastation about nine months later, another was to empower them by reminding them of the injustice they face every day, and lastly, attendees were invited to share their stories about how Hurricane Harvey or air pollution in general affected their wellbeing.

My limited Spanish and lack of familiarity with the community were barriers I failed to overcome. With the help of someone translating, I spoke to a few people and even saved a few phone numbers; most of these leads would be dead-ends due to busy work schedules, discomfort opening up to a stranger, or lack of childcare. Ultimately, I was not helpful to anybody and ironically, I felt like an outsider who did not belong there—despite the kindness of the community. With this miniscule taste of being in a room where I felt out of place, I knew that I would never understand what it is like to live in a marginalized, often-overlooked community.

When residents were asked to raise their hands and share their stories with the group about how they feel about the air quality or about how Hurricane Harvey affected them, nobody volunteered until further prompted. A young mother named Sandra was one of the few to share. In addition to being willing to speak about her experiences, she spoke English fluently, allowing me to more easily communicate with her. I approached her and asked if she would be willing to meet with me at a later time. As we exchanged phone numbers, I learned that she had moved out of Pasadena and into a nearby neighborhood a bit further from the refineries. She agreed to an interview nonetheless, and she asked me to follow up with her in a few weeks when she had more free time.

“A lot of people helped me out after Harvey,” she told me. “I really enjoy helping others now too in any way that I can. I hope that I can help somehow.”

Hurricane Harvey

I cannot discuss air pollution without writing about the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, and I cannot write about Hurricane Harvey without connecting it to environmental justice. Hurricane Harvey was the worst of three major storms to hit Houston in a three-year time period between 2015 and 2017. During Harvey's catastrophic flooding, the aforementioned idea of "double jeopardy" proved to be a sort of omen for what happened in these communities. Although Hurricane Harvey affected an unprecedented number of people in all parts of the Houston area, those living in fenceline communities faced the greatest burdens.

On August 24-25, one year after Hurricane Harvey, various environmental and social justice organizations came together to host the People's Tribunal On Hurricane Harvey at Texas Southern University. I heard about this event through TEJAS, one of the collaborating organizations. Others include the Texas Sierra Club, the Houston Organizing Movement for Equity (HOME) Coalition - which includes Texas Housers, Texas Organizing Project, SEIU, AFL-CIO, Workers Defense Project, West Street Recovery, and the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School for Public Affair at Texas Southern University.

Panels of professional "judges" were selected for each section of the event, tasked with raising important questions and ultimately guiding attendees to potential solutions. The majority of the event was composed of Harvey-related testimonials, by both hurricane victims and activists, both in-person and in pre-recorded videos. What was particularly impactful was that the effects and implications of Hurricane Harvey were discussed in the context of other social and environmental struggles that Houston's most vulnerable communities face.

The first night was a general introduction to the tribunal. On the second day of the tribunal, Saturday, August 25, the presentations and testimonies were split into four tracks: housing,

environmental justice, immigration, and labor. Although the environmental justice track was most directly relevant to my research, these other aspects of Harvey's effects—work, housing, and immigration—absolutely overlap with pollution issues.

When I arrived at Texas Southern University, a historically black university in Houston's third ward, I realized that it was my first time visiting the school despite the fact that it is walkable distance from my own university, the University of Houston. Many of the organizers and speakers were unfamiliar to me, but I recognized a few of them. One of the co-chairs of the event, Dr. Robert Bullard, was previously the Dean of the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs at Texas Southern University, the department hosting the event. He is currently Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy, and he remains active with Houston-area environmental justice groups. The other co-chair was Juan Parras, the founder of TEJAS, and I had met him a few times before the tribunal. Juan's son, Bryan Parras, also played a huge role in organizing the event through his role with the Texas Sierra Club.



Fig. 6 Perspective from the audience during Hurricane Harvey Tribunal: Mousa, Lydia. 2018.

The environmental justice track began with two testimonies. The first was by a nurse and community activist who had worked with fenceline communities post-Harvey and was continuing to advocate for the aid they still needed one year later. She spoke about an area unfamiliar to me, the Lakewood Forest neighborhood. During Harvey, the neighborhood's low-income, mostly Latino residents were trapped in their homes, waiting for help that never came. Despite not living in the area herself, she told us that she is traumatized by the stories that others have told her—stories of fear, stories of devastation, and even stories of standing in trash washed in from a nearby landfill. Yudith, the community activist shown in *Oil On My Mind*, was the second person who testified. As she began to speak, it struck me that to do this work for so many years requires a unique perseverance. The tribunal was held about two years after *Oil On My Mind* was filmed, and she was still fighting for her community. With her permission, I transcribed her testimony, as it reflects her more recent experiences.

My name is Yudith Nieto and I grew up in Manchester. I'm hearing all these stories and I mean, this is something that we see and live through every year. Every hurricane season, my family gets really nervous. We don't know if we should leave or if we should stay. Usually, the community doesn't flood, but we are surrounded by industry, so a lot of the time, the industries lose power and malfunction during rain and hurricanes. So, there are a lot of emissions during and after the events. Um, my family usually gets really sick right after. During Harvey, I actually wasn't here, but I was on a text message thread with my family, constantly giving them alerts. From the outside, I was looking at all the news, and I'm getting all these alerts that all these refineries are malfunctioning. By then, they couldn't leave, because everything around them was flooded. So, they were trapped in Manchester under this toxic plume.

Still, since then, the refineries have not been the same. They continue to malfunction constantly and there are always explosions. There was even an event a few days ago...my grandmother took pictures because I wasn't around. The floor at the park, at the playground, was burning up. There was like...a fire underground and we couldn't figure out where it was coming from. We think that maybe it was a rupture in one of the pipes. There's expansion happening right now at the Valero refinery down the street from where my family lives, so it could have been a fire underneath the ground that they couldn't put out and it was coming up and burning the ground at the playground.

These are things we see every day, and people in the community just kind of learn to deal with it and accept it. A lot of the time, they don't know how to engage in changing these things that are happening because they see it happen so often and they see it just...go under the rug. They see that the elected officials and the people who could do something or say something don't do anything at all. They tell the people that it will be fine, that they're safe, and that the refineries they are living next to are the safest in the country...that they are going to expand, that they will offer more jobs, and that the people living in those communities will actually be able to have those jobs. So, people just kind of let it go. I do see that more and more young people are becoming more anxious and nervous about being in the neighborhood because they see that their parents, their grandparents, are getting more sick. We have generations of families dying from cancer—grandmothers, kids from the same families who grew up in that community.

That's a scary thing to think about when you are living in a community where you can't really afford to live anywhere else. With development happening all around the city, it's becoming more and more expensive. There is no other place to live. Even if Valero decides to buy out the community, there's no other place that they could afford to live, and the community doesn't want

to be separated from each other. It would be wonderful if the whole community just got relocated together, but that's something that's too hard to think about because in Houston, we have so many communities just like that. It would be so hard to think about how to relocate all of them. To be equitable, you know, we have to include all of these communities, no matter how big they are.

Manchester is a predominantly Latino community. A lot of undocumented people live there, as you probably heard earlier. A lot of low-income people live there. So, they don't really have the resources to just pick up and leave. The PTSD issue, I think, is a really important issue. You know, mental health is very real in that community. I know that that is also not being talked about, because really, the first thing people want to talk about is their lack of resources. Already, their houses are being affected by the explosions and the big booms that happen in the community that crack the foundation and break the windows. So, now you add a climate disaster, and you know, it's just...unthinkable. They're not able to have that capacity to think about what [moving] would look like.

It just...it doesn't seem like people outside of Manchester really realize how impacted the whole city is. It's not just an issue of Manchester, or like, it's not just them living with these issues. It's the whole city; we're all living under this nasty benzene cloud. The sky hasn't been the same. I don't know if you've noticed that. Any time that it rains, it just becomes this really weird color, and the next day, it's just really misty. You [can't] even see downtown from the ship channel anymore, when you used to be able to do that. Now it's all foggy and misty. It's physical evidence that there's something in the air constantly.

It's just really beautiful to see all of these people from different communities coming together and finding intersections between what we are all dealing with because this isn't just an issue of climate change and environmental justice. This is an issue of immigration, and you know,

all of these other “-isms” we’re dealing with because of, you know, institutional racism and environmental racism... not acknowledging the people who are most impacted (Nieto).

The next presentation was by Antonia Juhasz, an energy analyst, author, and investigative journalist. She described the great difficulties of gathering information about all of the emergency chemical releases conducted by industry during Harvey. I learned that in addition to displaying a complete disregard for the consequences of their releases on surrounding communities, all of the companies that had released chemicals during the storm failed to provide clear documentation and publication of the amounts released. Very few regulatory investigations and enforcements have been completed post-Harvey, both at the state and federal level. In particular, she reiterated and discussed the findings of a report by the Environmental Integrity Project released a little over one week prior to the tribunal. Prior to the report’s release, information about the storm’s effects had been scattered and incomplete (Juhasz).

“Preparing for the Next Storm: Learning from the Man-Made Environmental Disasters that Followed Hurricane Harvey,” is the title of the report released by the Environmental Integrity Project on August 16, 2018. The report shows that in total, 8.3 million pounds of unpermitted, Harvey-related air toxins were released. Approximately 5.6 million pounds of this was within the Houston area. This number only considers the pollution that exceeded the permitted amount, meaning that the total amount of pollution is a combination of both regulated and unregulated amounts. Additionally, the report notes that these figures may be underestimations due to Governor Abbott’s suspension of reporting regulations during and after the storm. This suspension lasted an entire eight months following the storm. Apart from the millions of pounds of air toxins released, there were sewage and industrial overflows, and flooding of numerous Superfund sites. Some of

these wastewater overflows were reported as “0 gallons” by industries despite admitting that overflows did occur (Environmental Integrity Project).

One of the factors contributing to such high releases was the lack of urgency displayed by Houston’s industrial facilities in preemptively shutting down. On August 23, three days before the heavy rains began, Governor Greg Abbott declared a “state of disaster.” While this prompted seven industrial plants to quickly shut down in Corpus Christi, the La Porte and Houston-area plants did not shut down. When they finally did shut down during the heavy rain, many of them shut down within 24 hours of one another, and they did so in great haste. Some still did not do so until power outages forced them to. As a result, the average amount of pollution released by the Corpus Christi plants was less than the average amount emitted by Houston and La Porte plants (Environmental Integrity Project).

If I had not attended the tribunal, I would likely have never been exposed to these alarming statistics. The general public has no idea. I was then haunted by a thought—would most people even care about this?



Fig. 7 Collage of the four posters made for the tribunal from: “Power at the People’s Tribunal on Harvey Recovery in Houston.” *Texas Sierra Club*. 29 August 2018.

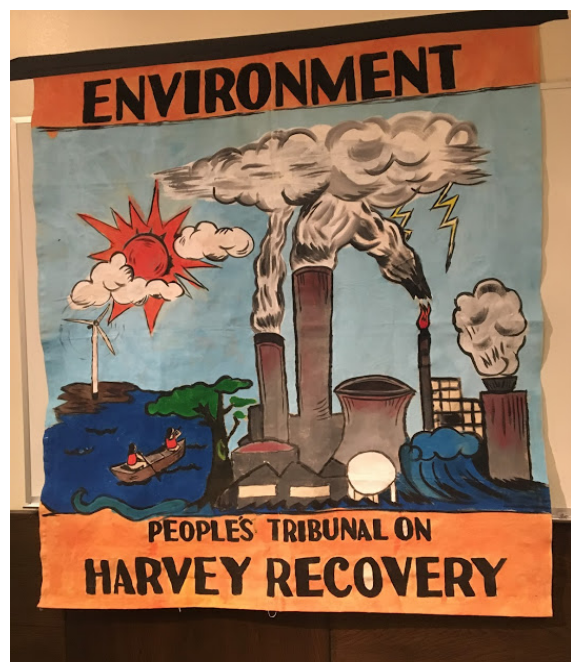


Fig. 8 A closer look at the environment banner: Mousa, Lydia. 2018.

Post-Harvey Stress Disorder

Sandra, the woman I had met at Bakery-Ripley in Pasadena, had lived most of her life near industry. She grew up in Galena Park, moved to Pasadena as an adult, and most recently, relocated to the South Belt area. She was kind and flexible when I reached out to confirm our meeting, and she sent me the address of a coffee shop to meet at. We met inside and sat at a small table near the entrance. I asked if she wanted a coffee, and she politely declined.

“Please excuse my t-shirt. Nowadays, I wear the same clothes every week. I just rotate them around,” she mentioned before we began the interview. “I lost most of my clothes in Harvey, and it’s made me realize that I don’t really care about fancy clothes.”

“Oh no, I completely understand and agree. I’m just glad that you and your family are okay,” I replied with what I hoped would be understood to be a supportive smile. I was at a loss for the right thing to say. “Would you like to begin by telling me where you live and going from there?”

I live in the South Belt area on 45 and Beltway 8, in Astoria. The air doesn’t smell there like it did in Pasadena, but right before Harvey, they started building these domes about a mile away from our house...just like the ones in Pasadena. I left Pasadena because of the chemicals, but I guess they followed me.

There is also a Brio Superfund site across from the San Jac south campus. Back in the 80’s, there was a refinery there. There used to be kids who played baseball in that neighborhood and a lot of them got cancer. Eventually, they tore down the whole neighborhood but the chemicals are still buried there. That’s close to me too, so I’m like, uh, I wish I would’ve known. They said it was considered safe, but when Harvey came and it got flooded, I’m sure that the water got contaminated and stuff.

Hurricane Harvey was really bad for us. We got like, six feet of water close by and the street got four feet. Our house was sitting up a little higher so uh, I know it was three feet in the garage, and inside the house it was two feet. It was a swamp out there. It looked like a big ol' swamp. People had kayaks and were just walking like, waist-deep in there.

The day of, the water was gurgling in through the door, so we started putting stuff on top of other stuff, whatever was most valuable. The water was so much that there was nowhere to go, you know? And, everybody was like, posting on Facebook, you know, calling 911, but 911 wasn't answering because they were overwhelmed. People just had to wait to be rescued the next day so what we did, we just climbed on top of my bed because it was the highest. We were all on top of there like it was a little boat. And I do have pets, we have dogs...we brought them in with us also. We made like, a plank with buckets and put plywood on top. We were just there for like, the whole night until the next day and then we were able to go out and see, you know, how bad it was. So um, the next day, it was still raining...the water was still going up, and my husband and I started worrying about my daughter's health.

Right before the storm, like in the beginning of July, my daughter got diagnosed with type one diabetes. She went into ketoacidosis and she had to be in the hospital for about a week or so. It was really life-changing, and then here comes Harvey...which really turned our lives upside down.

So my husband was like, "Babe we've got to get her to safety and get her some supplies." We had some rafts and we filled them up and put the kids on there and went down the street...we were in the water, the water was like...sort of up to my chest and my other daughter is short so it was already above her neck. My little one, we put her on top of the floaty and put our dog on top

of there. We had to go down the street because everybody who had to be rescued had to go to the side streets.

So, we were going out there, but they were saying—the rescuers were saying—that the water was like six feet high where we were walking to, where people were being rescued at. And...there was like a bayou so it was like, be careful because the current was sweeping people away. So my husband was like, we don't want to take that risk, for one of us to get swept away. At the corner of our street, where we thought there was a vacant lot, like an acre and a half, there were some ladies standing out there and it ended up being that they lived on that acre and that they had a house way deep in there.

They were like, "Where are you guys going? If you need somewhere to stay, you can stay with us. My house is in the middle of the acre, it's up high." The water didn't even get to her actual front yard. She has her house up on four feet of cinder concrete blocks or something, pillars or something like that, so it didn't get any water in it. So, um, we didn't have a choice. The water was too deep for us to keep going. We weren't six feet tall.

We walked a long way to get there, but we walked in there and saw that her house was actually dry...and we stayed there about a week. The water went down days later, I want to say about a week. We really got to know them. They were nice people. They were all women so my husband decided to stay home with the dogs. He would go back and forth every day, and we'd share food between us...whatever we each had because everything was underwater—all the stores.

Since we were in the water, we all had like, stomach viruses for I want to say three weeks. It was horrible, but I mean, I did hear on the news that it was because if you were in the water...well everything that was mixed in there, like the feces, oils, and whatnot in there, chemicals...a lot of oil...you could see it floating. So, we were sick.

We finally went home when the water started subsiding, we walked over to the house and of course the grass was all mushy, and the wooden floors were all buckled...everything was ruined. By the time we went back, the beds were soaked...I guess because the kids didn't pick up the sheets so the sheets had soaked up the water and it got into the mattresses. Everything was pretty much ruined. We had mold all up on the walls. We thought the clothes were safe, you know, they were hanging up pretty high...no, they had mold on them. Like at the bottom. It was fast, and it was moldy everywhere. We started opening the windows and everything, airing everything out but everything was...it was kind of sad to see because right before the storm, we had remodeled our house. We had changed our kitchen cabinets, you know, and everything wasn't working.

I was going to school and trying to be a full-time student so I could graduate, so what I did have left of my savings I spent on the remodeling. I thought, once I graduate, I'll get a job and you know, everything will be perfect because we already had everything we wanted in our house; we just had to upgrade the cabinets. But then Harvey came and took our normal life, I guess you could say, or like, our stability away...we had to start all over. But, it did make me realize that material things...we don't need material things because they can be gone in the blink of an eye. You can work so hard for all those years so you can, you know, accumulate what you have, and then for it to be taken away in just like...it was hard. It was really, really hard. You know, I wasn't working and then my daughter...up to now, I'm barely having the time to learn about type one. You know, the house is pretty much set...like, we have our furniture, simple stuff...you know, just like the sofa, the entertainment center and TV, the dining table...you know, just the basic stuff and that's it. So, now that I have more time to kind of relax now and kind of see how the outcome is starting to look better...but for a while there, it was really overwhelming emotionally and, like, physically.

We were working day and night trying to fix the house, gut it, and you know...FEMA did help us, but it wasn't enough to cover everything, to rebuild. Then of course we had, like, price gouging...they were like, super high. So pretty much everything FEMA gave us went to the contractor just to put up the walls and the insulation, just the basic stuff. And of course...we should have waited until everything calmed down, it probably would've been cheaper, but we were so desperate to get back into our house. We were at the hotel in La Porte for...I want to say, seven to eight months maybe. We just moved back in February. We moved back because the kids were like, mom, we don't want to keep driving back and forth, back and forth. That's when we really only had one vehicle because we lost a vehicle in the flood. And then, once insurance paid and reimbursed us something, we were able to purchase a new vehicle but then again, like I said starting all over with like payments, rebuilding your home...it's like, you know, starting all over again. Trying to rebuild your life and your home, clothes, and stuff like that. It was hard...to watch everything be washed away, pretty much.

I can't believe I'm talking about this without crying. I used to not be able to without crying all the time...I still kind of feel it, but it's not...I can see the outcome now. I can see the future now, that it's going to be okay.

But during that time, I did notice that we were all coughing for a very long time. I want to say that I stopped coughing probably, like, in May. Everybody had this cough that just, like, wouldn't go away, and we were hoarse, a lot, and it felt like allergies or something. And um, yeah like I said the cough just wouldn't go away...coughing, coughing, and then of course, stomach virus, so it was like oh, you know...and we had a rash too, that we didn't know where it came from, and the doctor just said, 'oh well you were in the water, you don't know what was in it...all the

bacteria and everything you could think of in there,' so our bodies just had to fight it as long as we didn't have no fever or anything.

Afterward, there was debris everywhere...there were fish in the middle of the street...dead fish of course. And then you see all the cars that couldn't drive anywhere. The whole neighborhood was smelling like fish, really bad with piles of debris and the neighborhood smelled really bad...I think maybe that's where some of the allergies came from. There was a bunch of mold out there, and it was really bad.

As Sandra described the devastation that she and her family experienced post-Harvey, it struck me that it had been months since I had given any thought to the effects of the hurricane in my own neighborhood—all of which were very mild. Affluent neighborhoods that had been heavily affected had already recovered, and there was no media coverage in these neighborhoods that still needed aid and attention.

So now every time it rains after a while, it um, it kind of gives me anxiety. Right now, I know that we are still working on cleaning out the gutters, the bayou, you know, where the water drains at the reservoir...so that scares me because I think in our neighborhood, we are still waiting for them to come clean. Recently, when it rains, the streets get flooded so fast. And with all that construction that's going on, it gets pretty flooded, you know...and it doesn't get all the way to our house but it's scary to think that if it keeps raining, it will come back up, you know?

In the same areas that got flooded the first time, even if it rains for just like, half a day, just an hour or two, it gets pretty flooded. The water rises up and it kind of makes you wonder...like we can't go through this again, you know? We're just barely getting it together. We did buy insurance, because we didn't have any flood insurance. Actually, the whole neighborhood didn't have flood insurance because it wasn't mandatory, and I think that it hadn't flooded in over 40 years?

Nobody had insurance, and that's why a lot of people did move out. A lot of my baby's friends and everything...and all of our friends, they all had to move. They were either renters or they couldn't afford to fix things because nobody had insurance. My husband had to take some time off. Thank God that, you know, his work understood and were compassionate enough to let him off and let him work on the house. A good thing was that it did show that the world still has like, you know, loving and compassionate people that are willing to help.

I still sound hoarse sometimes. It's like ugh, I can't get rid of it. It's better now, I think, than what it was before. At least, I think...I don't know. Maybe I got used to it. Sometimes I get this cough and it starts up again, and you know...or like I said, I get hoarse, or my nose...I kind of blame it on the allergies, I don't know. Things have gotten worse after the hurricane.

You can have your savings and you're still not prepared because you need to rebuild your house. But it also...it humbled us, you know, the way we think about life and how the stuff that really matters is not material things. What really matters is that your family is okay. Everything else can be replaced, but they can't. I think that...that we got something good out of it. We learned to love each other and to not take each other for granted, you know, to appreciate the things that we do have.

You know, um...a couple months ago, I was very emotional about it. But now the more I talk about it, the more I feel like I heal, and the more I can like...I don't feel like my life...it was a traumatic experience and I don't wish it on anybody, but I know a lot of people went through it and I think it made us better people. We want to help others just like they helped us. We want to go out there and help the less fortunate, be more active and share love in this world nowadays. And like I said, material things shouldn't matter...because Harvey showed us that they can be gone in a blink of an eye. So just enjoy life every day, be with your family and people that you love.

“We Prefer the Term Latinx”

I came up with a new, unanswered question for each answered one. How did so many people end up living in these unsafe neighborhoods? Why are they mostly Latinx? How could I understand environmental justice, both before and after Hurricane Harvey, in the context of the historical struggles of these communities?

While attempting to answer these questions, I realized how important it is to view the histories of these communities in the context of Houston’s larger history. The early history of Mexican immigration into Houston is closely tied to the history of the Houston Ship Channel, and thus to the development of the entire city. Without early Mexican labor, the ship channel may not have thrived enough to be what it is today. However, the current negligence of Houston’s fenceline communities, many of which are Latinx-majority neighborhoods, can also be tied back to the attitudes developed during the ship channel’s early development. The exploitation of Mexican labor by Anglo-Americans back in Houston’s early years established a foundational negative attitude toward those of Latinx heritage that continues today.

According to historian Thomas H. Kreneck, the Mexican-American identity in Houston has a foundation of being labor-based. When the Allen brothers officially began to establish Houston in 1836, they recruited Mexican laborers to do the work (Kreneck 12). It took longer to build cultural communities within Houston than in San Antonio, as the original appeal of coming here was simply to work. This quickly-growing population was integral to the growth of the same port city that would neglect their health and wellbeing. In contrast, other cities in Texas such as Laredo, San Antonio, and El Paso, were partially developed by Spain and thus, they ultimately became more immediate culture centers for immigrants from Mexico. Houston’s Harris County region was initially owned by Spain, but was not developed by it (Kreneck 7).

In the early days of the ship channel, laborers' families often lived in cramped, unclean spaces and struggled to lead healthy lifestyles. Such neighborhoods were separate from those of Anglo-American settlers, and there was a huge gap between each group's standard of living (Kreneck 31). I suspect that without this foundation of isolation and neglect, industries would not have been able to normalize the act of polluting the neighborhoods of minority populations as they do today. Additionally, those living in fenceline communities have yet to overcome the many barriers preventing them from leading healthy lifestyles. They are still being polluted, they are still isolated, and their issues are still overlooked.

Despite making great strides in the early 1900's, these Latino communities were continually subjected to the same negative perceptions. Beginning in 1910 and onward, they started expanding and building more of their own neighborhoods, forming more organizations, and opening businesses. Even as Mexican-Americans thrived in medical careers, owned successful businesses, and so on, newcomers were still exploited through underpaid labor near the ship channel. Any aid or support for these laborers was only provided within the Hispanic community (Kreneck 30-31).

Magnolia Park in the East End, a neighborhood not far from Manchester, became the first stable community for Mexican Houstonians, particularly for those of the Catholic faith. For years after, Magnolia Park was the central hub for Mexican Houstonians in terms of culture, political life, church life, sports, and more. The presence of these organizations and activities helped provide the community with togetherness and familiarity, as many of them were immigrants who had left their friends and extended families behind (Kreneck 30-35). Many of the landmarks built during Houston's early growth years in Magnolia Park still stand today, such as the Our Lady of Guadalupe church.

Over time, as industries increasingly thrived and capitalized on cheap minority labor, prominent and wealthy families began to move away from these areas and integrate into other parts of Houston. While the East End and many of the other areas near refineries still have majority Latinx populations, they are now largely low-income neighborhoods and their voices are often suppressed and their exposure to pollution remains unresolved.

“We prefer Latinx,” the text response from Jessica Lorena reads. As I was writing this section and reflecting on “Latino” heritage in Houston, I struggled to determine the best term to use to characterize the community as a whole. The term “Mexican-American” does not begin to cover the diversity, the word “Hispanic” has become widely contested, and I was uncertain about continuing to use “Latino” with the danger of failing to be inclusive of all individuals. I texted Jessica Lorena from TEJAS, as she is at the forefront of Latinx issues, including everything from immigration to pollution. Until this moment, my own misperception had led me to use the term “Latino.” She thanked me for taking the time to ask, helping me realize the importance of taking the time to listen and learn in order to demonstrate the utmost respect to populations other than my own. My usage of “Latino” in prior sections remains unedited, as this transition played a crucial role in my learning journey.

One City, Two Sides

I had failed to find someone to speak to from Pasadena at the Baker-Ripley event, but I still wanted to learn more about the city. As Jessica Hernandez had suggested during our conversation, I asked Jessica Lorena for an interview to hear about her family's experience living in the north side of Pasadena. She invited me to the TEJAS office to chat while she waited for a client.

She greeted me with a hug and invited me inside. This was the second time I had been in the TEJAS office, and I recognized a few of the other TEJAS staff members working around us. As always, they all greeted me warmly and made me feel welcome.

"So, the other Jessica told me you live on the side of Pasadena that is closer to the refineries, yes?" I asked her. Jessica is a strong activist who has experience speaking to people, so I had a feeling that I would not have to lead the conversation.

I live in the north side of Pasadena. So, Pasadena is divided into two parts, north and south. The south part is...the south part of Spencer. Spencer highway is like, the division. There's more infrastructure there and most of the money is being invested there. It's predominantly Caucasian, middle-upper class.

And so...the north part is like, a dead zone. It's close to the refineries, poverty levels are very high, and there's not much infrastructure being built. Most of the police officers are on the northern side, and it's a predominantly undocumented community that lives there. Pasadena has about seventy percent Latinos...and that seventy percent lives in north Pasadena. We have Pasadena High School. At Pasadena High School, one in every four students is undocumented. Yeah, it's pretty segregated.

So, I moved there when I was fourteen. I started high school there my freshman year. We lived in Houston before that, and I remember that whenever the realtor took us to that home, she

took us through 45 South and Beltway 8, which is the back way. So, we never saw the refineries...well, maybe my parents did know, but hadn't really been exposed to it that much. We saw the house, and it was affordable, because north Pasadena is generally pretty affordable because it's so close to the petrochemical plants. So, my mom was like, great, yeah...and we were just talking about that the other day, that she didn't know she was in Pasadena because of the way that the realtor took us there.

It wasn't until they signed the paperwork and they saw the address, they saw Pasadena and my mom was like, we're living in Pasadena? And the realtor said yes. And my mom was surprised because she was like, well this is not what I thought Pasadena was like...until we were done with the realtor and we had gotten the house. We went to go see it after we signed the paperwork, and we were going to meet the realtor there. And when we met her there, we had our GPS, and it took us through 610 and 225 because that was so much closer. That route is nothing but chemical plants. My mom and my dad were very confused about how close we were and how well it's hidden. Yeah, I don't think we knew what we were getting ourselves into. It's just very cheap property, and that's really what happens anywhere...most of the vulnerable communities that are living in dangerous areas live there because the property is cheap.

So, once we moved in, instantly we realized that there was a lot of dust. That was my chore, to dust. In Houston, I probably only had to dust once every...I don't know, three weeks or so. But in Pasadena, I had to do it about once a week because my sister began to develop asthma. My sister was going to Red Bluff Elementary, and most of the children who went to that school had asthma. My sister was not born with asthma. She developed it once we moved there, and it was quick. Probably about one month in, she was getting really bad coughs. When my mom went to the teacher to tell her how my sister now had asthma, the teachers already knew how to deal with it.

They actually train their teachers how to deal with asthma. When you're living on a fixed income, there's not really much you can do. It's not like you have the privilege of packing your things and going elsewhere. That's not an option. Financially, that's not an option.

In Pasadena, I think one of the things that we have to talk about is the amount of poverty that there is. And so...people see the petrochemical plants as the holy grail because they start you off at a really good pay. Everybody's goal is to end up working there because you are able to provide for your family.

I went to Pasadena High School. At Pasadena High School, you can see the plants right through the windows of the school. It's right on the other side of 225. And so, the programs that were given at the time in 2006, 7, and 8... were um, how to get licensed to be like...a fork-lifter or um...I don't know what they do. But it was licenses particularly so you could go directly after high school to the petrochemical plants.

Even one day after school at a financial aid session, we were there because we were looking for financial aid options for undocumented students for college. There was a group there to speak about FAFSA for citizens, and then there was a group there to speak to undocumented students.

Then there was a woman there from, I think it was the Valero petrochemical plants saying, 'Let's be realistic, our children are not that smart sometimes. Just because they're not as smart doesn't mean that they don't deserve to make good money. And this is a way that they can, if you know and your child knows that school is just not for them.'

So, she's saying this to all the students, and the parents were like...you know, let's be realistic. They were pretty freaking convincing because they were saying, what's one way you

child can make money without going to school? And your only option should not be to go to the military. Your option can be something else and your child can stay here with you.

The dropout rate was really high. Most students would not pass their...their required exams to graduate. So they were pretty convinced by this woman that, you know, this is where you need to go and that this was the industry your child needed to get into, the oil and gas industry. Literally, whenever the presentations were over, they had their own tables and the table that was most filled was the Valero table. This is because she talked about their pay rates, she talked about how you can work your way up, she talked about the benefits, she talked about how once you're there for a certain amount of time, they will actually pay for your training for school so you can raise yourself up, right? And so everybody was like, wow this is ideal. This is better than sending my kid off to the marines or to the army, right? It's either that or it's, do you really want them to gain debt trying to go through college knowing that that's not for them?

So, people were like, I'm not letting my child go through that. Let's be realistic. Let's go here. That was in high school and that's when I realized that maybe there was something wrong, but I also was under the impression that that was the holy grail. You pass by 225, and it's 225, it's high up, and then Pasadena High School is right here. You pass Pasadena High School, you pass the track that's right next to the school, and then right on that track, there is a large billboard that offers jobs like...forklift...that's all I really know, because that's the one I recently saw. It says the pay that they start you off and then the contact information. Then it says like, no experience needed, blah blah blah. So if you pass by there, you will see how influenced it is. They don't train their children to think about being doctors or lawyers or to think about going into the nursing field or doing something else like engineering. They were like, let's be realistic, this is what makes money, this is what makes money here in town. So, like, the girls, they were influenced to go into

cosmetology, and the boys were influenced to go into petrochemical jobs and that's just how it was.

Most girls graduated being like, nail technicians...which, there's nothing wrong with that, but I definitely feel like they were pressured into it. We definitely were pressured into picking option one or two, and if we went to college, we were taking a really big risk because our high school was not the best high school and most students flunked out their first semester or first year.



Fig. 9 View of Pasadena High School's running track on the left, the highway that runs alongside it, and the sign advertising forklifting jobs (top right, words not visible): Mousa, Lydia. 2019.

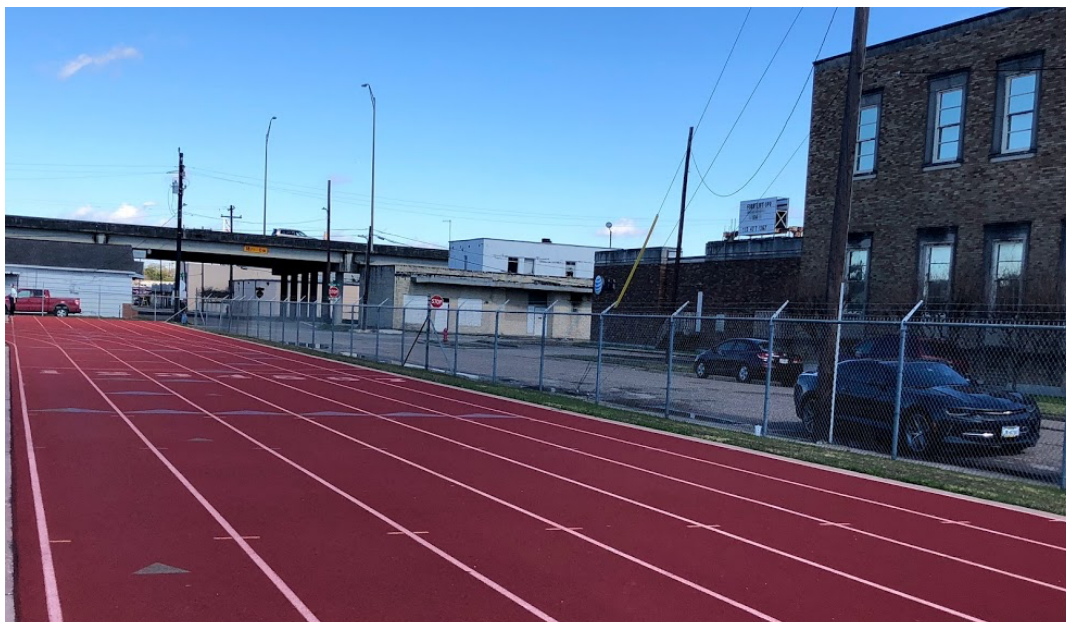


Fig. 10 View of highway and job-advertisement sign from the track: Mousa, Lydia. 2019

But, how did I get into it? Well, I didn't really start realizing how bad of an issue it was...my issue was always immigration, because I am undocumented, so it was always my main priority...but I didn't start connecting the two until Hurricane Harvey.

During Hurricane Harvey, I was in Pasadena, and our street did not get flooded, but all of the streets around us did. Most of the people there were undocumented, and so...we opened up a distribution center in South Houston near Pasadena... and so we were giving out clothes, and I was in charge of giving out diapers, baby formula, hygienic products for women, and medicine. So, all of my people were like, moms with toddlers, newborns, whatever. And so, we realized that moms were coming back for diapers and we were giving them a ton of diapers.

I didn't think to ask but there was a woman who was standing in line, and it was so hot...she was standing in line, and she had her baby. I get to her and I tell her what she needs, and I ask her for the size of diapers she needed, and she needed a size zero. So, she had a newborn. So, then I told them, let me know if you want any medicine...I'm not going to remember to ask you so just tell me. She asked me for medicine because she needed medicine for her baby. I asked her how old her baby was.

Her baby was five days old. She was undocumented, and SB4 had gone into effect, and the people who were doing the rescues were actually ICE. They were on the boats, on the shafts. They had ICE vests. So, a lot of the undocumented community was not coming out or going to the George R. Brown because ICE was there too. She gave birth in the attic. Her first floor was flooded, and she gave birth in the attic. And when they were coming out, the baby had contact with the water. So, she was five days old and she was already sick.

That's when I was like...okay, these moms are coming back because their children are sick. And so, I started asking them and they all said, they're sick, they're sick, they're sick, and then

they came back for ointment because the kids were developing fungus on their feet, on their belly buttons, on their hands. They had diarrhea and they had high fevers, because as they were evacuating, four feet of water would be fine for us but for a three-year-old, they were swallowing a lot of the water.

We realized that the Arkema plant [in Crosby, TX] had had an explosion, and I wasn't working with TEJAS at the time, but we were in contact, and they asked us to do testing on the water. It was obvious that the water was contaminated. So, then, when I approached local officials with whom I had a very good connection because they were very pro-immigrant...I started telling them, hey look, this is what's going on, this is what's in the water. The undocumented community is being affected, and we should do something against these plants. All of a sudden, I wasn't getting the same support that I would usually be getting from them.

If I would've said, this family's being deported, they'd help, and I didn't understand why they weren't helping anymore or why they weren't listening to me anymore. That's when I started learning about how most of them are funded by these plants and how they work very closely together, so that's just a sensitive topic that they don't touch.

That's also when I started realizing that you cannot speak about immigration without speaking about climate change, and you can't speak about climate change without touching up on immigration. Those two go hand in hand in every single part of the world. So, that's how I started being more involved in the environmental justice movement and making sure that I make those connections with the undocumented community...because of Pasadena, because of north Pasadena.

After Harvey, there were a ton of children who were sick and their families were getting hospital bills. The families were like, we don't know what to do. They didn't have the means to pay

for those types of bills, and a lot of them were still living in the same contaminated apartments and couldn't move because they didn't have the money to break the contract. The managers would be very aggressive toward them, saying things like, if you leave, I'm going to call immigration. So, their children were still living there, they were still sleeping on the same sofas and mattresses; they were just taking them outside during the day so that they could dry up then they'd put them back inside because they don't have the means to just throw away all the furniture and say we're buying all new furniture...especially the ones renting.

Around eighty percent of people in Harris County one, did not have flood insurance, and two, many are renters. There's a high population of renters here. So not only were they not getting any help from FEMA because they didn't own anything, they weren't getting any other type of financial assistance because they were undocumented. So all that led up to them getting sick, because they were living in these extremely contaminated areas. I think that was a big, major turning point for me, especially shadowing some of the workers here at TEJAS and realizing how many toxins these plants actually release into the air—and then being able to connect that with my sister getting asthma, the amount of dusting chores that I had to do, and how that's like, a ripple effect.

Most of us in high school were undocumented. When you're undocumented, your voice is very limited. What you speak up about is very limited. We don't speak up with our families. It's very taboo. You know, we're just here to work, go home, work, go home. If we're making ends meet, that's all that matters. Don't worry about anything that's around you—that's very taboo. So nobody was saying anything.

My freshman year of high school, it was very shocking because as you're walking from one classroom to the other, like one building to another, it was very shocking to me that you could just

see the plants right there. There's a building that's right in front of 225 that looks over the petrochemical plants particularly, and that's the science and math building. And so, that's a two-story building, and on the second floor, as I was walking to science, I thought it was very weird that you could see it. I wasn't used to that. Most people in Pasadena have grown up there, were born there. When they grow up there and are born there, they see it as an everyday thing. Their parents work there, or their family members work there, and they're like we're good. We're good financially. They're thankful for the plants, even. It's the complete opposite of what we see, right?

It's very difficult to bring awareness to something that you see, but it's not physically affecting you right then and there in a visible way. I'm pretty sure if everyone started getting...chicken pox, and it was somehow linked to the petrochemical plants, then they would be able to see it and be like, this is wrong. But when it's things like asthma or a cough, they don't link it together. A lot of the toxins being released into the air...like if these plants go above their limits for what they can release, that's not information that's shared. You have to look for it. And a lot of people don't, right? Nobody looks at it as a bad thing, nobody discusses it as like, something we should do something about. People from the community will be very quick to shut you down because you're trying to take their money away. They will shut you down completely.

I have a friend who went directly to the plants, right? She is very much well off, and I think she's like, a health worker as well within the plants. She just got trained and certified. But I don't know what their definition of health is.

Things don't always show up right away. So with asthma, it's not really developed until children are about seven years old. If you're born in that area, asthma won't really develop until you're about seven years old. People don't instantly connect it to something that they're so numb to and are so used to seeing.

There are reports of Pasadena being one of the highest ranking small cities with lung cancer and brain cancer...nobody knows that. Everybody just thinks it's a very rare thing, or maybe they think that it's because they smoked every once in a while, and they'll link it to that. They'll link it to everything except for the obvious, right? Because they just don't see the plants as a bad thing. They see them as money-making machines. They refer to it as the pot of gold.

Johnny Isabelle was the mayor for like 30 years in Pasadena. A little background on Pasadena- it was the KKK headquarters. A lot of the things that we don't have now, like public transportation, is particularly because they didn't want people of color in Pasadena. We have a very large conservative population, a large population that supports this current administration. Our mayor, Johnny Isabelle, finally decided to leave last year. But our mayor now, Jeff Wagoner, is no different at all. Very conservative.

It's very difficult to put pressure on anything because, particularly in Pasadena, things are very much controlled by the church. They're all members of the same church on the south side. It's a really big church. The mayor goes there, the previous mayor went there, and they are usually the ones who make sure to vote and they're very...white and conservative.

Last year, cities around us were suing SB4, the bill that says that police officers should basically act like ICE officers as well, and so when we finally pressured Mayor Turner to sue against SB4, everybody was excited. I was excited. But then I was like, I don't even live in Houston, so why am I excited? I put in all this work and effort into pressuring the mayor, and I don't even live here. So the first time that I ever went into the mayor's office in Pasadena, into one of their city council meetings, and one of the audience members asked why there wasn't an ICE bus waiting for me outside.

You have a very large population of undocumented people, you have a very large population of Latinos in general, so this is something that is worth your attention. And they were just like, no. We're done with you. And so...as I started organizing to pressure them to sue SB4, the mayor went back to his church and started asking church members to come out. There were a lot of them. Nobody usually comes to city council meetings because the mayor has a lot of power as to what goes on the agenda, what can be spoken about, and if he doesn't agree with it, it'll never be spoken of. So even the councilmembers... we have three really good council members, but there are eight of them in total, so we'll always be outvoted even if they want to bring something to the table.

I don't understand if people living on the south side think that the air pollution stops at Spencer highway, and that it doesn't go to the south. It definitely still goes to the south. It's all within...probably a ten-mile radius. It's directly impacting us the worst, yes, but there are definitely still effects in the south part of Pasadena. Obviously, it probably just goes back to them being funded...that's really what it is. The way they get to their homes is also through I-45 and Beltway 8, so they don't even necessarily drive by the refineries. Us living in north Pasadena drive by it. They're more around the Beltway 8 area. So, they never...they never see it.

I think that Pasadena actually received a grant to do air quality studies, but then the mayor denied it. It was a really good grant too. One of the city council members reached out to me and we were trying to vote against it, but we're the underdogs. Yeah, the mayor there has a lot of power. It makes it hard because when these studies are denied, we don't have the statistics to share and say, "50% of your people are..." blah blah blah. We don't have the permission, the support, or the resources to be able to say, we're going to do a study directly on Pasadena.

I think we've tried directly working with A&M, but A&M is focusing on Manchester and Baytown. During Harvey, we had students coming in from A&M just trying to test the regular flood water and they were stopped by a police officer. And when they went into a Superfund site to try to get water, there was an attorney waiting for them there denying them access. And then the attorney called the police and the police kicked them out. It's just really hard to get support.

I had a really hard time explaining this to the officials I usually rely on because it's like...yes, you're very much pro-immigrant, but you're still...killing us, in a way. You're still being funded by companies that you know are getting us sick and are killing us. So that's not very pro-immigrant.

As Jessica was speaking, two women had entered the TEJAS office, one of them with her children. They watched her expectantly, and one of them appeared eager to contribute.

“¿Hola, como están?” Jessica greeted them.

They had come to sign some sort of official complaint that Jessica had assisted in writing. One of the women, the one who had brought her children, sat quietly and waited for her friend. The other eventually spoke after appearing to be contemplating whether it was worth it.

“You know, it's very bad for the kids in Manchester. I don't live there but my friend here does.”

She continued with what she came for, apparently not expecting any response. I'm not sure how I would have responded. After the women left, I asked Jessica what she believed was the best way for people, particularly those living in Houston, to help.

I think it's about learning how to enter a community properly. You can't just come in and say you're going to help and then just kind of leave. And I think people don't realize how bad the situation is, so they make all these promises and then they realize how hard it is to change things.

The things that can be done are very limited because the community is scared to come out. On September 20 at 7:00pm in Hartman Park in Manchester, Valero will be doing a community meeting because they are trying to get a permit to release more hydrogen cyanide into the air. This is going to be the second meeting. For the first meeting, we were passing out flyers, trying to get people to come out, and they were saying that they have been coming out to these meetings and that they feel like they aren't listened to. The community is done. They just don't come out anymore.

Um, I think it's definitely also getting to know the community first before you tell them what your reasoning for being there is. Getting to know them first and going to community events first...kind of getting a feel for what it is that they're about before going in and saying, 'I'm here to test your soil.' I don't think people have that emotional connection to Manchester, and that's why they can just leave and use it as a funding opportunity.

We have a large number of people who have moved to Houston over the past ten years. I think that they should take the time to come check out what is going on, because like... just because they don't see it, doesn't mean that the air is staying in one area. This is affecting everybody. I went to a meeting in Harris County, and Harris County has been surpassing their ozone limit...since the 1970's, every single day. Every single day. The [Environmental Protection Agency] wasn't doing anything about it, they were just like, oh yeah. It's an everyday thing, they're not enforcing their code. And so...Harris County is Cypress, Harris County is the Heights, Harris County is Galleria area, downtown. It's not just the Manchester area. I think if people actually understood that, and came out and saw what was going on, and had a fact sheet, or had more of this information, then maybe they would be a little bit more against it.

Bringing Out the Big Guys

On the Sunday before the community meeting with Valero, I volunteered with TEJAS to hand out flyers to the community and to encourage them to attend. We met at the organization's office in Harrisburg, the neighborhood adjacent to Manchester, to split up the flyers and assign locations.

I was assigned to St. Alphonsus, a Catholic church in Manchester, with three other people, and I was provided with several warnings. Most of the church-goers would primarily speak Spanish and would have limited English if they spoke it at all. I was also told to remain on the sidewalk bordering the church instead of standing on the church's property. Ana, one of the co-founders of TEJAS, distributed her phone number and told everyone to call her if there was any trouble or any police encounters.

At the church, my broken Spanish failed me for what felt like the hundredth time, and I became a silent observer more than anything else. Note to self: practice my Spanish. The church had back-to-back mass services, so those both leaving and arriving were passing by where we were stationed on the sidewalk. Everyone politely accepted our flyers, but only one older woman paused long enough to listen and to share with us. She conversed in Spanish with one of the other volunteers, and I only understood pieces of the fast-paced conversation. She had a soft smile on her face as she walked away, the kindness in her eyes conveying an appreciation for our work—yet it was an appreciation lined with pity. She seemed to somehow feel bad for us, perhaps because of the sweltering Houston heat or maybe she detected a naiveté she had let fade away years ago.

“What did she say?” I questioned after she was out of hearing distance.

“She said that her husband died of lung cancer years ago. He worked at the Valero refinery before getting sick. She still lives in Manchester.”



Fig. 11 One version of the flyer being circulated prior to the September 20 public meeting with Valero from: Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services. 2018.

All of the parking spots at Hartman Park had been claimed by the time I arrived for the community meeting with Valero on September 20. After circling the park a few times, I eventually inched my car into a parallel-parking space between two others that were parked on a small side road. Several vacant spots lined the Valero facility, but I feared that they would tow anyone who breached the property line in order to attend the meeting.

The community center was full of concerned Houstonians, yet it was immediately clear that many were not local residents of Manchester. This was positive in the sense that people who would not be directly affected by any changes cared enough to show up but there was also a dual sense of sadness that most local residents did not feel that their attendance would make a difference. Jessica had told me that at the first meeting, many residents had attended only to become further discouraged by the responses given by Valero's representatives.



Fig. 12 Image of banner posted on the wall of the Hartman Community Center during the September 20 public meeting with Valero: Mousa, Lydia. 2018.

Valero was required to have this meeting after a request was placed by TEJAS upon discovering the company's latest permit request. The TEJAS staff had to actively and specifically request this information in order to even attain it. Without anyone doing that work, any increases in chemical releases would have been completely undetected by the public.

The petrochemical giant had sent several representatives, each of whom displayed very little compassion for the concerns of the community. They appeared to be hardly listening, instead pondering where else they could be and what else they could be doing. Even when the few local residents in attendance took the microphone and shared words of their fears and their experiences, the expressions the Valero men had plastered on their faces failed to change. One of them appeared outright annoyed the entire meeting, particularly when he was forced to answer questions.

The TCEQ, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, had also sent several representatives. While the official role of the TCEQ is to remain neutral in all disputes and to regulate industrial chemicals in a manner that is as safe as possible for communities, these representatives spoke in defensive tones when asked difficult questions. While to a lesser degree than the Valero representatives, they similarly appeared eager for the meeting to end. One of these TCEQ representatives was drilled by a local activist for several minutes about the safety of the substance in question, hydrogen cyanide. Instead of expanding on the potential dangers of increasing the legal release of the substance, he repeatedly insisted that the TCEQ regulations are adequate and will be upheld—but never specifying exactly how.

“Nobody should be getting sick from the amount that Valero is requesting to release,” this was essentially the only answer he gave, in more or less words, to many valid questions and complex concerns.

As an observer in the audience, I realized that there would always be a counter-argument to discount the validity of human experience. It is not a simple task to establish indisputable correlation between pollution and illness. It is perhaps the subtlety of these injustices that mask how damaging they really are. When I had first set out to hear and to share these stories, I had anticipated stories of great sorrow, stories that would be shocking and tragic. Now I know that it is not always so dramatic or clear, and even more rarely, easily documentable or even provable with access to such limited resources. The studies that are being done are not widely circulated and are not always fully considered when deciding on regulations due to external pressure from industries. What can break these cycles?

What is the most heartbreaking to me is not necessarily that these people have accepted that their health is being compromised, but more that they have internalized a sense of having a lesser worth and a lesser potential to thrive. Whether or not they believe that living in a fenceline community is fair, there seems to be a common sentiment that as low-income people of color—many of whom are undocumented—it is inherently their societal duty to accept what is offered to them.

I was still unsure of how I could be helpful to these communities without overstepping, enacting my privilege, or disrupting the lives of people who would view me as an outsider. I also found myself questioning each of my own beliefs, my own opinions and perceptions of Houston's pollution, and even my own right to complain about my own symptoms. As I continued to navigate these emotions, I reminded myself that at the end of the day, I get to return to a home that is not as immediately dangerous as the homes of these people I was trying to understand. Any discomfort I encounter is relatively miniscule in comparison.

The Dirty Bay

Baytown, Texas is a heavily industrial city about thirty miles from downtown Houston. Today's Baytown is a city composed of three industrial towns that merged in 1948: Goose Creek, Pelly, and Baytown. The city houses two petrochemical plants, Chevron Phillips and Exxon, the latter the second largest refinery in the nation. Other industrial facilities in the area are smaller, but are equally integrated into the community, such as the Covestro Industrial Park. Many Baytown residents are employed by one of these companies. Local residents have nicknamed the city, "the dirty bay" due to the appearance of the water and the quality of the air.



Fig. 13 Image of "Welcome to Goose Creek" sign in early 20th century showing that the town has always had strong ties to industry, from: "Baytown Historic Photos." *Baytown Library Local*,

www.baytownlibrarylocal.org/piwigo/



Fig. 14 Image of “Welcome to Baytown” sign in early 20th century showing that the town has always had strong ties to industry, from: “Baytown Historic Photos.” *Baytown Library Local*, www.baytownlibrarylocal.org/piwigo/

Baytown was the most challenging area to connect with, perhaps because it is the most isolated from central Houston life. The high school teacher that Jessica Hernandez had mentioned in her interview, Agustin Loreda, happened to live in Baytown. I reached out to her and she connected us. Agustin Loreda is a teacher at South Houston High School near Pasadena, but he lives in Baytown. I met him in the front office of his school, but we decided to discuss in the quiet teacher’s lounge. He wore a Frida Kahlo t-shirt and greeted everyone he passed with an enormous

grin; I immediately knew that I would like him. As he led me through the hallways to the teacher's lounge, multiple students greeted him with smiles, high fives, and smirks as though they shared some sort of secret friendship. When we sat down, he suddenly grew more serious and we dove into the topic right away.

I live in Baytown, specifically in uh...a lot of people know the area as Old Baytown. I've lived there my whole life, except for two years in San Antonio. My dad was actually born in Baytown in 1930, but due to, it was called repatriation, he had to go back to Mexico. He was raised in Mexico until he was fourteen, and then he came back to Baytown in 1947. So my family has consistently been there. They were there from like, 1924, because of the refinery. They went back to Mexico in the 30's then came back to Baytown in '47 and my dad's family has been there since.

Originally, there was a lot of need...my dad actually worked in Shell in Deer Park when he came back in early '47 to Houston, then in late '47 he came to Baytown. Um, they would send them up the smokestacks and they didn't have safety harnesses. They just had like, ropes...they'd have to go up there and work on the smokestacks, on the flares—I guess that's what they're called actually.

And um, my grandfather in the 20's, and my great-grandfather, um...my dad's family, even though his mother and father were from the same area in San Luis, they met in Baytown. My grandmother's family was already here, working at the refinery, and my dad's father, my grandfather, he came looking for work. He had gone to Lubbock, and then he went to Baytown to work. They worked in the refinery, and I suspect that because of the great depression, a lot of people were deported and 'repatriated,' as the government called it...but a lot of my dad's friends stayed, people who were born in the same area. My dad was born in the area we live in now.

There were small houses there built by Exxon, and that's where everybody lived, including the executives. Then slowly, with the community growing out...a lot of Mexican families started moving into the neighborhood and now, the neighborhood that used to belong to Exxon executives, which is like I said, Old Baytown...it's completely full of Latinos. But they were all there for refinery jobs. My dad, when he came back in the '40's, there was a little bit of a lull. After the world war, a lot of people came back looking for work, a lot of soldiers, so my dad joined the merchant marines for Exxon. He was the guy who brought out food and fixed the rooms, but he got to go around the world a few times on different ships for Exxon.

Even now, we just found out that they're building like a...I think 1.5 million dollar expansion to Exxon. There aren't enough people to fill in those jobs, so a lot of people are coming in for the jobs...and it's just booming right now. It's a lot of growth.

I would say that most of the community...if they don't work for Exxon, they work for some sort of...maybe not for Exxon directly, they may work for a contractor or they may work for an industry that's heavily impacted by the petrochemical industry. The reality is...between Exxon, Chevron, and Covestro, that's why Baytown exists.

My kid and I—I mean, I'm on the school board there, and I know, I realize what Exxon does...and I appreciate the fact that they're in our town, you know, but recently they moved their headquarters from Baytown—their gigantic main headquarters—to the Woodlands. I don't think that was an accident.

Why would you move your executives from the backyard of what you're creating? They would argue, well, a lot of our executives live in the Woodlands. Well, why do they live in the Woodlands? Why don't they live where they work? Oh, because there's stuff that may be coming out that they don't want their children to have. You know, that's a practice that started changing

maybe in the...in the 90's, late 80's or 90's, when the executives started leaving Baytown. It's kind of like Rex Tillerson, you know, he used to be a CEO for Exxon. He said yeah, I don't want fracking in my backyard. You know, why not? You're doing it everywhere else, and it's the same thing.

One of the running jokes in our family is, as soon as it looks like it's going to rain, the refineries start billowing, like the stuff just comes out of the flares. The big joke in my house is, oh, you smell all the benzene? But you know, everyone says, it's because there's going to be a lot of clouds coming...and if they release...well, what they're releasing looks like clouds. It's kind of a joke, but it's true...and like I said, I appreciate what Exxon has provided as far as economics for our community, but at the same time, I would like for them to be held responsible.

You know, I belong to a civic association, like literally we are maybe less than five, six blocks from the entrance to Exxon. At night, you can hear the flares when they're letting stuff out. Um, we are directly affected to some extent from that. We have an Exxon representative that comes to our meetings, very nice young lady...but, come on, they can't tell me that they can't be more responsible.

I'm not trying to create a crusade. I'm just a concerned citizen. My big focus in the work that I do is mostly education because I'm a teacher, I'm on the school board, I'm a parent, I'm very focused on education. But, when I do engage in conversations with people who work for the refineries, they do almost get offended. It's like hey man, you know, you're still getting paid...let's be realistic. They tell me stories. You know, I've known people who've gotten injured because they walked by a pipe, not even because they touched a pipe...but just because of the amount of heat and pressure, you know.

Not too long ago, we had a couple of deaths in DuPont, which is across the ship channel, literally, from us. Um, in the front of my house, you can see Exxon, and in the back you can see

the Fred Hartman bridge...at the foot of the Fred Hartman bridge, at the La Porte side, there's the DuPont facility. I don't know, maybe about three years ago, there were two brothers, a lady, and another gentleman that were killed and from what I understand, the chemical that killed them...you don't even have to touch it and it kills you. There was a leak or something, and one of the brothers was in there, and the other brother went in to save his brother but it was too late and they both perished.

So, like I said, my biggest concern toward these companies is...I know what you're doing, and it's okay...I mean, ideally it's not okay of course, but um, just be responsible. You know, I know it's easier for you to pay fines, and cheaper for you to pay fines, than to be more responsible. You know, they'll tell you all day long, oh you know, we're taking care of things to make sure that we're trying to be cleaner, but really?

I mean, look what the TCEQ...when Harvey hit, they relaxed the regulations...they haven't gone back to regulating things the same, as far as I know. When Chevron was attempting to get back online, they were hiring people and they were so desperate. I think the per diems were \$100 a day for electricians to come in and work because they couldn't get their generators back on, and meanwhile, every time they did, there was black smoke...and that's not in my neighborhood, that's on the north side of Baytown, but there was stuff coming out. I mean, I'm not going to lie to you and say, hey, everyone I know is dying of cancer...that's not happening either. But, there are concerns.

You know, we had a, uh, a gas leak, where the shelter in place apparently didn't get out to where it needed to be. The reality is, I know now, but I didn't know at that time that there was a shelter in place. I had no clue. So, when we had our civic association meeting, it was in the next neighborhood over...because there's our neighborhood and there's a street called Bay Way Drive

and then on the other side of Exxon, there's another neighborhood, and that's where the leak was...maybe two miles from where we live, not even. And so...we had this leak, and they had a shelter in place, and nobody knew. There was another lady—before the one we have now—that was a rep for Exxon, and she was like, oh you know, we had this leak, did everyone get the shelter in place?

No.

“Oh, that's a city job.”

Wait a minute, YOU got the leak, and the city has to call me? You know, um, so then we asked, ‘Whose pipe was it?’

“Oh it's another company's.”

So, who's the company that owns it?

“Well, see, what happens is, we work under different umbrellas...”

But it's an Exxon pipeline? So it WAS Exxon?

“Well see, what happens is...”

No, stop. You own the pipeline. All you had to say was, it was our pipeline, and we had a leak, and we'd be okay. But now you're trying to cover up—what, why are you attempting to cover something up that shouldn't be covered up?

That's what I'm tired of. You expect me to have transparency with what I do in my job every day, you know, you expect me to be honest, to do what I need to do. I expect you to have good company policies. I expect you to have good, positive, solid practices that can minimize the amount of things that go into the air, and at the very least, if you have an accident, because it is...you know, the law of the world, things go wrong, be honest enough and say, hey, you know, we did this and we're sorry, blah blah blah. Don't try to cover it up. But you know, I mean, the other

part of it is, they've been there for a long time, and they know where to send people to say it's going to be okay...it's very frustrating for the community at times.

If you haven't gone to Baytown, I invite you to go to Fred Hartman bridge on the way from La Porte—you can go on 225. As you're coming down, you see the enormity of Exxon. And if you look over the horizon, you see the enormity of Chevron. You look even further, and you see the enormity of Covestro. And I really, really invite you to go back at night. It's lights. It's a city.

Nobody knows what happens there because they have their own emergency response. We know that sometimes our windows shake, and we know what that means. Um, sometimes we hear the booms. Sometimes we hear the weird lady on the intercom, and I don't know what she's saying, it's just weird...it's kind of creepy. That doesn't happen too often. And the lady who comes to our civic association meetings, she's like, I've never heard that.... Oh! And sometimes they play that close encounters, dun duh dun duh...yeah, it's creepy. My kids when they were little, they'd come in like, papa are we at war? And I'd say no, that's just Exxon. If we were at war, we wouldn't even hear the music.

That's just Exxon. You have all these other companies and pipelines and you know um...in my work on the board, we had to shut down an elementary school because of pipelines. They were on two sides of the school, but they were supposedly far enough away from the school that they were okay. We were going to build a library as part of a bond package, so when we went to start building the annex for the library, we needed a geographic study. Well, when they were doing the geographic study, they found that there were pipelines under the school too.

So, we had to pay a bunch of money for this leading expert at Texas A&M to come do a study, and he contacted all the pipeline companies that were involved to ask what was in them, because apparently there's a difference between explosions and implosions, what can detonate

and what cannot...there's all these things, they send these little pigs—not real pigs, obviously—these little machines down the pipelines to make sure there aren't any inconsistencies, and they couldn't tell us what was in the pipelines. Or, they wouldn't—that's what it was, they wouldn't tell us. And that's not Exxon—those are pipeline companies. They said, well, there's nothing to worry about. Eh, unless you can give me a zero percent chance of something ever happening, which they couldn't...you know, maybe a year before we closed down the elementary, a pipe about two blocks up had a leak and there was a shelter in place for that area.

But, if you ask...there's this one gentleman, he's Exxon ride-or-die, he'll say, well there's no danger. But we can't consciously put even a one percent risk on a child's life. A lot of the public was upset that we closed it.

There was another school that had been closed down before my time. There was a company called Texas something...and they owned all these...if you Google "Baytown Goosecreek Oilfields," you'll see a ridiculous amount of oilfields and pumps. Apparently what they used to do was take the reservoirs and just put them in the ground...so it's years of storing petroleum and stuff, and so um, after awhile they said hey this isn't really a good idea, we shouldn't put this in the ground. So they took them out and filled in the holes.

Somewhere in there, Exxon acquired that land and donated it for a school to be built, a high school for African-Americans. And you know, after segregation ended, it became an elementary. I think in the very early 90's, maybe mid-90's, kids were outside playing and all of a sudden, there's black stuff bubbling up from the ground...and they're like, what? What is this stuff?

So Exxon was like no no no, don't worry about it, just close down the school and we'll pay for it. So they closed down the school, tore it down, cleaned it up, and now there's this big gigantic fence—in this neighborhood—where there's a historical marker that says here lies Carver

Elementary. You know, nobody's allowed in there...it's very eery, you know, the way that the place looks.



Fig. 15 Photograph of Goose Creek oil fields in 1917 from: “Baytown Historic Photos.” *Baytown Library Local*, www.baytownlibrarylocal.org/piwigo/

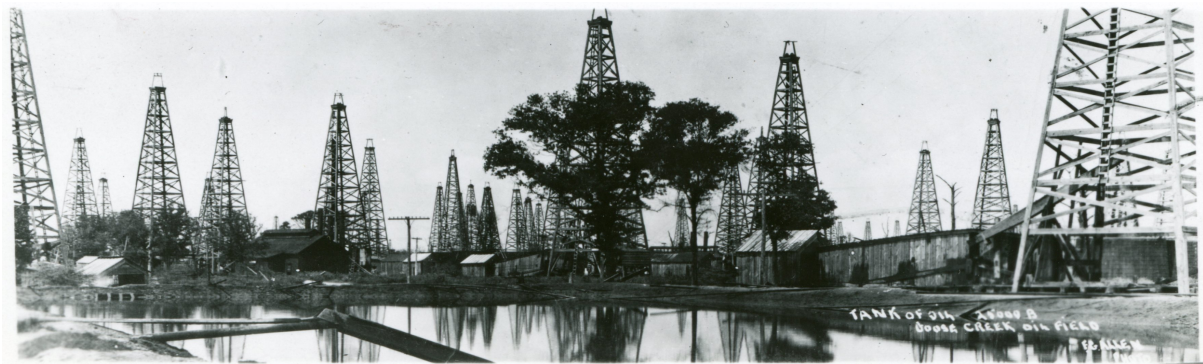


Fig. 16 Photograph of Goose Creek Oil Fields circa 1924 from: “Baytown Historic Photos.” *Baytown Library Local*, www.baytownlibrarylocal.org/piwigo/

Once again, I understand that the technology then was not what we have now...but it's just another example of how this community has to cope with situations that aren't necessarily fair to the community. If you ask a bunch of people in Baytown, you'll find two kinds of people...they'll

say like, yeah, everybody's dying of cancer. That's not true. I think we have more issues in Highlands with the waste pits than we do with Exxon. But, once again, it doesn't take away from the fact that they have a responsibility to the community to try to keep it as clean as they can...and there are some online articles talking about how they have preferred to pay fines than fix the situations that they have. Those are very public articles.

Baytown is its own city. You know, Manchester is...a neighborhood. I think in Baytown, it's in the mid-40's of Latino population, maybe thirteen percent African-American, so there's not a majority of whites. I know it's less than fifty percent, I just don't know how much less. In the school district, though, we have mid-sixties percent of Latinos. There are pockets...there used to be a country club, you know, white area...but now, there's money to be made and people are coming.

If you work in the refineries, you're going to make money. I think the operators make like nineteen dollars an hour, and if you multiply that by sixty, you have a decent wage. If you're a pipe-fitter or a welder or an electrician, you're making...thirty dollars an hour. If you have your little NCCR, you're making thirty bucks an hour, plus you're making a per diem. You're going to be able to afford a nice house because you're making at least a hundred grand a year...eighty to a hundred thousand dollars a year, and all the overtime you want. They don't have enough workers, so they're finding more workers right now...so you can make a lot of money. So, as far as those pockets being all white people, not anymore. Not in Baytown, because like I said, it is its own town.

The unique thing about Baytown is that you have Exxon in the southwest side, you have Covestro on the west side in Chambers County, you have Chevron on the north side, and then you have, right north of there toward Mont Belvieu, you have Exxon there as well. It's equal opportunity, except for the engineers who go home at night.

It's hard to tell if things got a lot worse after Harvey. I know that right after, it was really, really bad. I mean, you could see it on Facebook...people were posting about the pops and the booms happening on the north side. We noticed in our neighborhood, how bad it was getting. But you know, how can you measure, when you see it every day? It's hard for you to kind of gauge.

There are some people who live across the street from Exxon, and we have an issue with their traffic, with their contractors' traffic. Hmm, they've attempted to buy a lot of the neighborhood. They've bought complete neighborhoods already and tied a green belt around it. Like I said, you hear the flares, and sometimes at night, it looks like daytime. Not all the time, but sometimes, and that can't be...that can't be good. Like I said, we want them to be...responsible. We know where we live and we know what we're into. We know that there's not going to be a magic button they can push and everything just comes out squeaky clean. We realize that.

But, you know, I've had chronic allergies since I was born. I don't know if it has to do with Exxon, you know...but I can remember being a kid, and I just had allergies. They've gotten better as I've gotten older because I take like, vitamin C and stuff and I take care of myself, but even through my 20's...until my 30's maybe, I had a lot of allergies.

I've known people who've lost family members to cancers and stuff over the years, and we live in a town where you smell it...but it's gotten a lot better. It was bad when I was a kid.

The interpolitics of our town...they're starting to change now that we've become so big. For a long time, it was a company town, just like Deer Park. Deer Park is not going to talk bad about Shell—they're a company town. Manchester will because those people aren't making money off of Valero. Pasadena...those people aren't all working at those refineries. But in Baytown...everybody is somehow affected economically by the refineries.

Our community is one of the communities that directly borders Exxon. In my neighborhood, we're the oldest, most active civic association. There are maybe ten, fifteen of us, but we are very active. I'm on the school board, one of our other members is on city council, we have a guy named Fred Aguilar—everyone goes to him. We have a lady who used to be on city council, and she has no problem telling you how she feels. We have a group of people who are like that. I know someone in TEJAS was talking about setting up some infrared cameras. Exxon said they already did it. That's one of the arguments I had with one of my friends. He's like, they already did it and they said everything is okay. And I'm like, nah bro, come on. If you're going to tell me for me to regulate myself, I'll do whatever is good for me.

I know that TEJAS is working with a company trying to develop an app to report things immediately because that's one of the issues we have. But because they don't belong to the city, per se--they're not annexed. They're like their own little entity, and the city can't go in there. You know, they've done that on purpose. So if anything happens in there that would be an environmental hazard, unless they tell us, we don't know. We don't know what we're breathing. Maybe we've been lucky, that they're not exposing us to like...you know, Texas City has explosion after explosion after explosion in the last thirty, forty, fifty, sixty years. You know, lack of health and safety standards.

So, you know, I don't have a problem with people coming and testing soil and doing what they have to do because ultimately, that's how you make people responsible. Like I said, I appreciate what Exxon has done for our community...but I know that in the past few years, things have been...I really got irked when they moved their headquarters because it's not a good sign for them to do that.

“Oh we’re just moving because...” Because nothing. This is where you work, this is what you’ve created, and you should be here. Join us. They decided to leave and that’s not cool.

I will say this. My dad worked for Exxon for twenty-one years. Because of what he did, he didn’t make a lot of money per se for that time, but you know, he was able to get a little stock here and there. So, I mean, we own some because of my dad’s work. You know, I don’t think that’s a crime. He was just trying to take care of his family.

But they do have responsibilities to the community. Throwing money at a community doesn’t fix what they need to do. And truth be told, that money that they’re giving away to prevent cancer isn’t coming to the community that needs it which is...one of them is ours, it’s not going here. They’re putting things in other parts of the town...but that’s a story for a different day.

Reflections

Environmental justice issues in Houston are multi-faceted, include many communities, and have complex roots. The term “fenceline community” may appear to have a simple definition of living in close proximity to industry and its daily pollution, but I have learned that the experience of living in one is exponentially more complex—because human life is complex. Those living in fenceline communities are the same people who are the most physically isolated from society, are exploited for relatively cheap labor, are barred from equal opportunities, and are affected (and then neglected) the most when we have unexpected natural disasters. The people I have met and have heard about cannot solely be defined as victims; they, like any of us, do the best they can with what they have. Despite their resilience, they deserve better.

An early suspicion was also confirmed—industry truly does not care about the communities they pollute, no matter how much they insist that they do. Whether they are blinded by wealth, are brainwashed by biased information, or are simply too busy to worry about communities they are not part of, the outcome is the same. The moment I completely understood this was when I watched several Valero representatives face members of a community they abuse on a daily basis and show no sign of compassion or willingness to listen. The disconnect between industry and community is not only intentional, but is also crucial in order to uphold the financial success of the petrochemical industry.

Lastly, I learned that regardless of how dire the circumstances may appear, there will always be good people if you take the time to find them. I connected with new friends, discovered new role models, and became further inspired to continue this work in the future. The newfound hope I gained comes from the work of those who have been fighting for environmental justice long before me. This hope is also abundant in the fenceline communities themselves, and this is

something that surprised me. It is a hope for happiness, hope for better days, and hope for hard work to pay off.

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