

OIL COUNTRY: A PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDY OF RESILIENCE IN REFINERY  
TOWNS ALONG THE TEXAS GULF COAST

by

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HONORS THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

“Oil Country” is a photographic research project that explores the numerous refinery towns along the Texas Gulf Coast and the communities within them. These towns, which are some of the most heavily polluted places in the country, struggle to deal with the environmental and health impacts associated with living among the refineries. Still, the people within them remain resilient. When looking at statistics on the pollution levels, cancer rates, unemployment rates, etc. of these towns, the full picture is often not realized. These statistics represent real, human lives and the impact these refineries have on them cannot be effectively shown through numbers. That is why this project uses photography as a geographic research tool. Since its inception, photography has always been an important documentation tool for geographers. This project builds upon that foundation and uses photography not only to document, but to tell a story of place. Travelling from town to town with a medium format film camera, I captured a range of images spanning from landscapes to still-lives to environmental portraits. I talked and interacted with members of the communities seeking to understand the emotions people have regarding the place they call home and incorporated those feelings into the images I captured. These images were then carefully selected down and formatted into a cohesive photobook. The resulting product provides a window into these towns and the reality their people face today. This reality is one that is pertinent to this moment in time and exemplifies humanity’s strength against forces that threaten our existence on this planet.

## **I. BACKGROUND**

There are a total of 30 operating oil refineries in Texas today, more than any other state in the country (Fraser, 2020). The majority of these refineries are situated along the Texas Gulf Coast. The concentration of these refining plants results in this area being one of the most heavily polluted places in the United States (“Texas Industry Concentrations,” 2011). In some areas, harmful air pollutants like sulfur, hydrogen cyanide, and benzene are reported at levels 148 percent higher than normal EPA levels (Collins, 2020). These pollutants cause serious health problems, like respiratory illnesses and cancer. Often, the people that are impacted by this industry are members of marginalized communities who are overlooked by lawmakers. Many do not have the resources to effectively deal with the environmental and health problems that result. This disproportionate exposure and unequal protection by the law and government is called environmental injustice or environmental racism (Maantay, 2002). Many of these refinery towns, like Three Rivers and Texas City, have majority minority populations who live well below the national poverty line. Additionally, within these places themselves, areas closer to the refineries will have a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic populations than the rest of the town, with the majority white neighborhoods being further away (DataUSA, 2021). While these statistics are striking, they do not show the full picture. I wanted to create a project that showed what life is really like in these towns for the people that live there.

## II. AREA OF STUDY



Figure 1. A map of the study area along the Texas Gulf Coast.

### **III. METHOD**

My method of research for this project is photography. The medium of photography has been used as a geographic research tool since its inception, allowing geographers to document and present to others what a place is like. This project builds upon that foundation and uses photography not only to document, but to tell a story of place and create a narrative. I choose photography as my research method because of its unique way of conveying emotion and its powerful storytelling capabilities. Images convey what cannot be captured by words or numbers and show what a place is like at a distinct moment in time. These reasons made it the perfect tool for the type of research I wanted to undertake. Building off some of the great documentary photography works in the past, I chose to shoot this entire project on a medium format film camera, the Mamiya RB67, and present the images as a cohesive photobook. I chose this method of presentation because I believe the experience of looking through a photobook is very personal and helps to craft a narrative, which makes the images more impactful on the viewer.

## IV. RESULTS

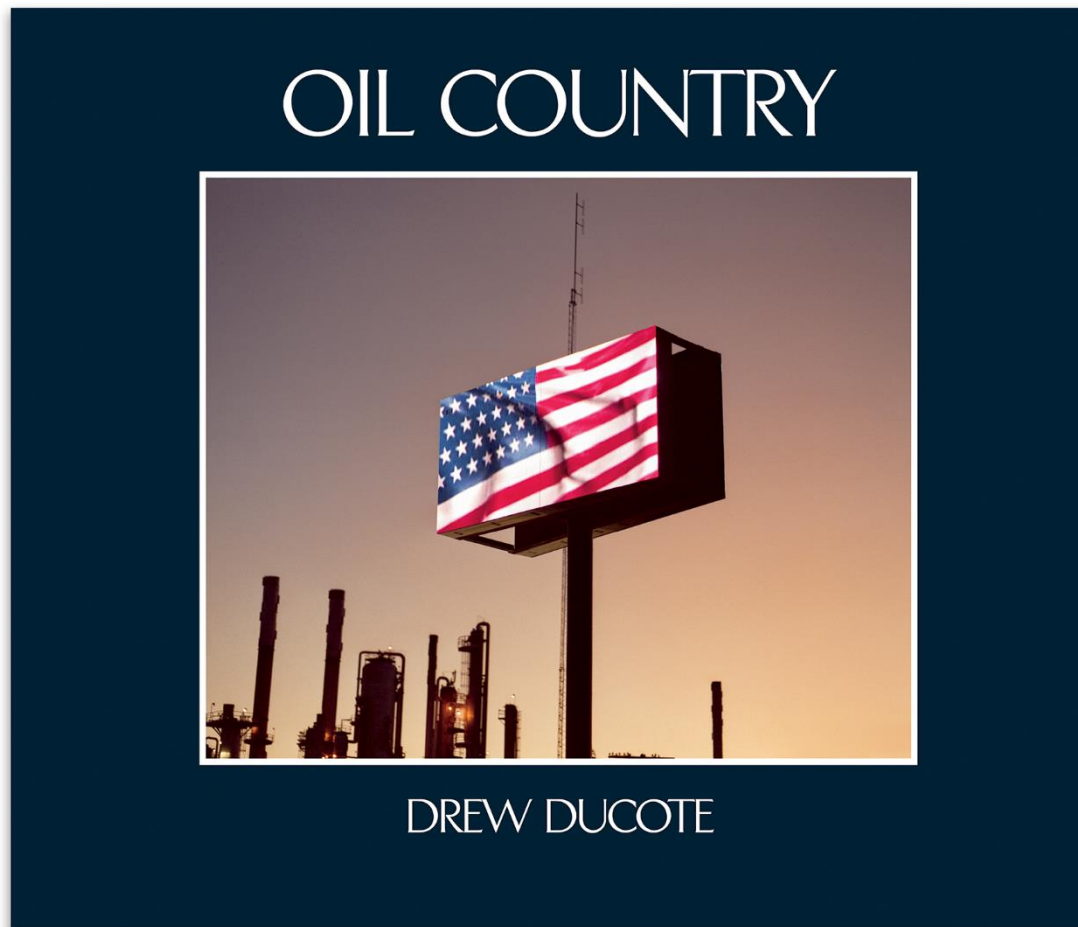


Illustration 1. Oil Country photobook front cover. Photograph of holographic American Flag in front of Valero refinery. Three Rivers, TX.



Illustration 2. BP Refinery sits behind marshland in Texas City, TX.





Illustration 3. Mynon working the register at Boyd's Bait Shop in Texas City, TX. She told me living near the refineries isn't too bad, there just "isn't much going on for young people."



Illustration 4. Oil Tanker sits in Corpus Christi Bay. Corpus Christi, TX.





Illustration 5. Russell moved to Three Rivers, TX two years ago for work. Since the beginning of the pandemic, things have been tough in that regard for him.



Illustration 6. Refineries dominate the horizon while overlooking Whataburger Field and Hurricane Alley Waterpark, Corpus Christi, TX.





Illustration 7. A man sits at his favorite fishing spot next to the Valero Refinery in Three Rivers, TX. He works as a truck driver and frequently makes deliveries at the refinery. Whenever he can, he stops to fish here and relax.



Illustration 8. Trucks sit idle outside of Three Rivers, TX.





Illustration 9. Chris and his sons together in their front yard during a barbecue. Corpus Christi, TX. They told me that they do not mind living close to the CITGO refinery since new filters were installed to limit pollutants. They enjoy their neighborhood because it is quiet and there isn't a lot of traffic.



Illustration 10. Michael on his bike in Texas City, TX. He has lived here his whole life and does not plan on leaving. He explained to me that it was a rough area to live, not necessarily because of the pollution or effects from the refinery, but because there was a lot of poverty and crime.



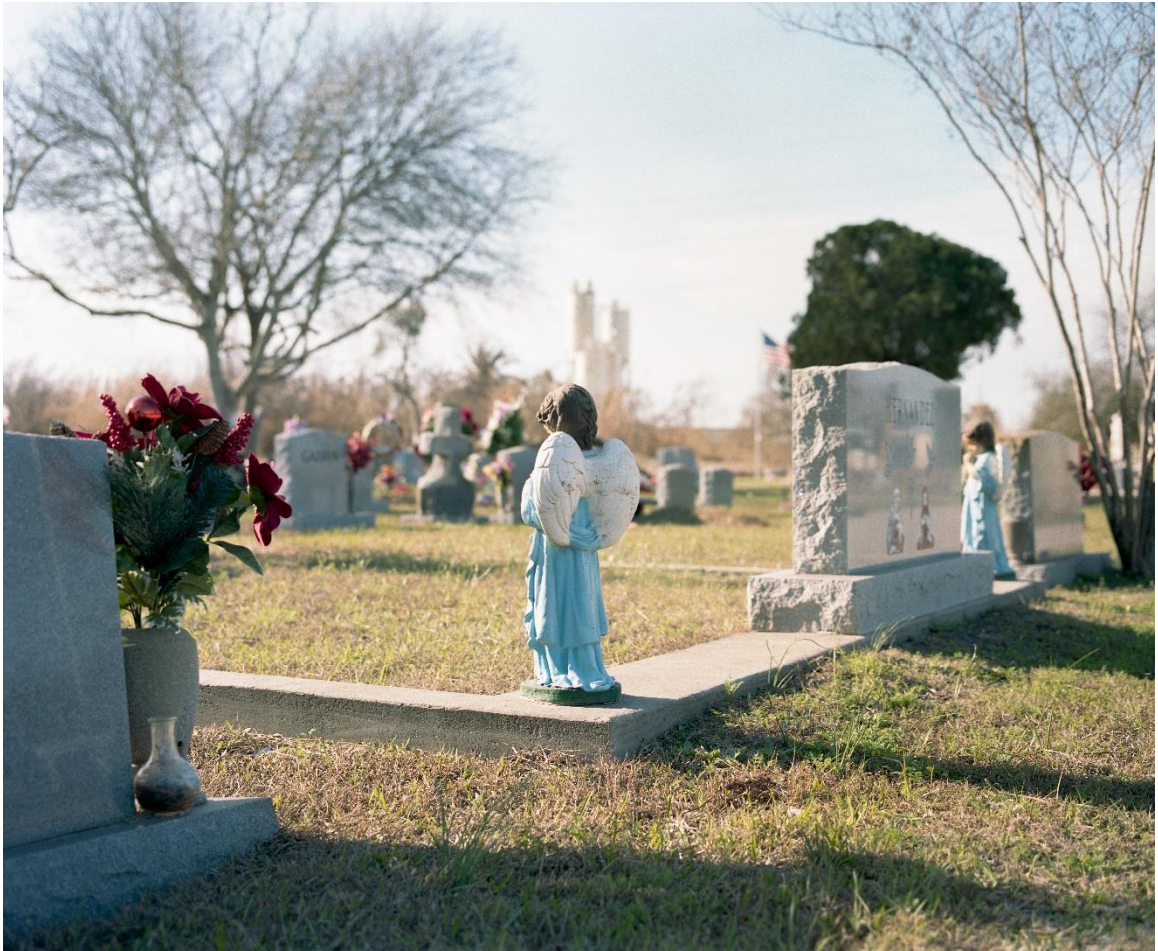


Illustration 11. An angel statue sits alongside a gravesite in a cemetery. Portland, TX.

This project is viewable in its complete photobook form [here](#), and as a pdf submitted alongside this document.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

The people of these refinery towns were welcoming, compassionate, and unified. Almost everyone I spoke to was interested in my project and explaining to me their way of life. Many of my participants expressed no concerns about living so close to the refineries. In fact, it seemed to me that there was a sense of pride among these people regarding the industry that dominates their landscape. Multiple community members claimed that environmental regulations such as air filter requirements have made air pollution no longer a significant problem. Despite this, data shows that unauthorized air pollution continues to increase each year.

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