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Copper Stain: Asarco's Legacy in El Paso. The Environment in Modern North America. By Elaine Hampton and Cynthia C. Ontiveros

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Copper Stain: Asarco's Legacy in El Paso. The Environment in Modern North America. By Elaine Hampton and Cynthia C. Ontiveros. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. vii + 189 pp. Illustration, maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

The term “obligated exposure” represents one of the most useful and terrible concepts offered in Elaine Hampton’s and Cynthia C. Ontiveros’s *Copper Stain*. It embodies the idea that the (mostly) men who worked at the El Paso, Texas ASARCO copper smelting plant and the surrounding community acquiesced to the toxic chemicals produced in order to gain “economic resources” (p. 129). Based on sixty-five interviews (only one woman), the story offers a searing and horrific study of highly risky work conditions that included dangerous machinery, molten fire, and hazardous chemicals. It suggests that place (border) and region (the West) play a significant part in the story of a Texas city’s mining industry. In the process, the book offers a reconfigured understanding of sociologist Ulrich Beck’s “risk society.”

The worker interviews structure the book, with chapters examining the history of the plant, the dangers of the refining process, the kinds of toxins workers and community residents were exposed to, the kinds of diseases caused by such toxins, and the various responses made by workers, owners, community members, regulators, and politicians. Focusing on the experiences of workers from the 1970s onward, this work would not be considered historical. Yet it recovers and preserves the stories of workers’ labor. The book would be suitable for undergraduate history, science & society, and public health courses.

One shocking episode that helped shift public opinion against the plant came when hazardous materials sent to a ASARCO waste management facility in Corpus Christi, Texas, were then illegally transported to the El Paso smelter to be incinerated over a six year period. Plant management kept the illicit activities hidden even after they were fined by Environmental

Protection Agency; the 2006 revelation of their actions angered workers and community members. Capitalist production sacrificed its workers, in the process intensifying risk society's already uneven distribution of harm along racial lines. There is abundant evidence of the company's racist manufacturing practices – who got what jobs, where Mexican and Mexican American workers lived, and the amped up production when the wind blew toward Ciudad Juarez, Mexico.

The authors chiefly overcome some major challenges in the paucity of corporate and other sources and the difficulties in linking chemical exposures to workers' illnesses. *Copper Stain* provides a scathing critique of the corporation's continual and shameless efforts to avoid their obligations for environmental remediation, not to mention workers' health care and pension funds. The study indicts the mining, chemical, and waste management industries; the legal community; regulatory agencies; and political leaders for their failures in addressing the contamination of not just one, but two, border towns. The book gives voice to ASARCO workers and in the process reveals the contamination that continues to blemish a community.

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