ON THE EDGE of the Sacramento river, 60 miles from San Francisco, sits the town of Oakley, California. Oakley delineates the Greater Bay Area from what Bay Area residents refer to as “the Delta”—an expansive, inland river estuary that winds its way through a series of rice farms and rural settlements. If you are new to San Francisco—or even if you aren’t—you’ve probably never been to Oakley. Oakley was, midway through the last century, a farming town with a population of 1300, growing various nut crops, produce, and wine grapes, providing livelihoods for small to midsize farmers as well as migrant farmworkers.

Oakley has mostly urbanized in the last two decades and now has a population of 44,000. Old-growth vines planted by Portuguese settlers over a century ago that once defined the landscape of Oakley still remain, although the town is now characterized more by 7-Elevens, car washes, and sprawling Amazon warehouses than by its historic vineyards. These vines in a way operate as a sort of monument to the beginning of European Settler California. At 100 years old, a vine has gnarled in ways that make it look like a bonsai’d oak tree—indeed it was the Oaks that these vines replaced. Vineyards were often the first thing planted when Spanish colonizers began to subject Indigenous people to the demands of a European world. It was vines that brought hard agricultural labor to Indigenous people who lived off a river that was full of salmon, bass, and all sorts of edible aquatic life. This form of labor persists to this day, on farms all over California.

Why protect the vines? Oakley is a place that is representative of the greater shift that is occurring in agricultural communities across California. Oakley is home to 100-year-old vineyard plantations, the ruins of a Dupont Chemical Factory, and three Amazon warehouses. In the last 150 years, industrial work regimes have transformed rural workers, land, and non-human life across the Delta and California. While labor exploitation and environmental degradation in California’s industrial agriculture system have been well-documented over the last century or more, industrial farms, paradoxically, are often the last line of defense against other forms of development that turn California’s land to concrete.

Rural landscapes worldwide are undergoing rapid conversion from agricultural production to warehousing and logistics-based economies owing to the unprecedented growth of online retailers—such as Amazon, Walmart, and Alibaba. This has been caused in part by shifting global consumption patterns accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Amazon doubled its warehouse space during the pandemic, building massive warehouses that decimate local ecologies and act as a final act of destruction that strips all life from the land. These warehousing transitions are transforming rural land and life, with impacts on rural workers and communities more broadly, and in Oakley, these warehouses are replacing old-growth vineyard landscapes.

Okay. Let’s get beyond the scholarly language. What if the world figures itself out, and industrial production no longer destroys plant and animal life or exploits migrant workers from the global south? What if everything falls apart and nature has the opportunity to reclaim the land? What are the enduring impacts of these industrial regimes? Why should we defend vineyards as a last stand against industrialization?

These vineyards, this factory, this property, Oakley—they are all over your life. Head to the grocery store, and you can find Old Growth wines made from Oakley’s grapes (look for Bedrock Wines or Cline Cellars and Contra Costa County as the origin of the grape). That’s the simplest piece of the story. But there’s more: between 1958 and 1998, Dupont dumped 1.5 million gallons per day of wastewater into the Sacramento River from the plant, polluting local soil, groundwater, plant, human, and animal life with “forever chemicals”—chlorofluorocarbons, fuel additives, and titanium dioxide. The soil and water surrounding the old factory still contain toxins from 40 years of dumping that finds its way into local groundwater, vineyard soil, and in the fish that travel from the Delta out to Ocean Beach, and maybe to your plate.

A striped bass caught and eaten in the surf at Ocean Beach in San Francisco is likely carrying the remnants of toxins dumped into the water by Dupont from a factory that very few San Franciscans are aware ever existed. After the factory was demolished in 1998, it sat for 20 years while the site was “cleaned up”. In 2020, Amazon decided to turn the site into the home of three massive warehouses. (If you check the codes on your Amazon packages, you can actually see if your package passed through one of the warehouses on its way to you. Look out for **SCK8**, **TCY9**, **DFO2**. That means your package passed through Oakley, and right by these vineyards). These three gargantuan warehouses sit directly next to these 100-year-old vines. The farmworkers who work the vineyards are exposed to the air pollution that is well known to accompany Amazon warehouses, with the constant movement of Amazon cargo trucks and delivery vehicles, taking goods from the warehouse to your door 51 miles from Oakley to San Francisco.

Anthropologists for decades have been exploring the complex economic and ideological realities of rural workers across the world. The arrival of a factory in a farm town is the classic scene for critical analysis into agrarian change. This scholarly genre attempts to understand how states and corporate development projects may reduce key metrics like “poverty” and “unemployment”, while fundamentally shifting the lives of rural people—often in ways that are in opposition to historical community value systems, thereby reducing the sovereignty of communities over their social and economic lives. Poverty is a form of state control. And, often, so is the development that comes to “fix” it.

My work as an anthropologist is primarily focused on bringing awareness to the exploitation of marginalized communities, unearthing and addressing the power dynamics inherent in industrial labor regimes—regimes that have historically taken advantage of and reproduced structural inequalities based on race, class, gender inequality, and a continuing coloniality.

Here are the bones of the thing. 95% of farmworkers in the United States are from Latin America. 95% of farm owners are white. There are 616,000 acres of wine grapes in California. That’s the size of Rhode Island. 69% of the total market share of wine in the United States is controlled by 4 companies. Yeah, it’s still about race and class, but it’s also that we are living in a corporatocracy, and not just in the wine world. The individuals doing the work—the cellar hands, the farmworkers, the local kids, the migrant workers escaping poverty imposed upon them by state violence—they will never own land. And if you or your children don’t make it big in tech or AI, you most likely won’t either. The question is not: are vineyards worth saving? But rather, which vineyards are worth saving? Whose wine is worth drinking? How can drinking wine become a moral act?

The most beautiful days of my life were spent on vineyards. The best nights of my life have been sharing bottles with friends and getting into mischief. I spent 4 years studying winemaking at Cal Poly and seven years going back and forth between working as an assistant winemaker in the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere, from South Africa, to Australia, Argentina, France, and here in California. I now am working on my PhD in North Carolina at UNC Chapel Hill. The wine industry gave me the opportunity for a brilliant life in my early twenties. At the same time, stepping onto someone else’s plantation only revealed to me the parts about our plantations that I was ignoring.

These vines replaced forests that I grew up in. Every time I came back from harvest abroad, more of the redwoods in Russian River Valley where I grew up swimming with my Irish immigrant grandparents were being cut down for vineyards. But I learned how to care for wine before I knew how to care for myself. These vines fed me. But only enough to keep me working for the billionaires and corporations who asked me to take pay cuts when the fires came year after year. I had an umbrella. I always had a roof to go back to at my parents’ house if things got bad.

But to the farmworkers who worked the vines; the fires meant thousands of dollars that could not be replaced, doctors bills unpaid, kids unfed, trips home to see dying family members never made. Who knows for how many people, the fires were the last straw for a life of suffering under the vines? Those stories are largely untold. There are good people working the vines—farmworkers, vineyard techs, winemakers, small farm owners. They aren’t the ones with the power to make things better for the people on the land. The workers I knew, everything about our lives was caught up in the land—land we would never have.

It was the vintners that were destroying my home. The people who came from afar to buy the land as a hobby, or a tax writeoff and had never laid a bare foot or a finger in it. And yet their power governed my whole reality and those of everyone around me. They were the same as the land barons of old, grabbing land and water and treating California like a rich child’s playground. Below are some of the excerpts from a novella I’ve written that aims to bring to light the lives that live within the vines and the power that, in a just world, would be undone.

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