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**In the Chasm between Oil and Ag: Immigrant Farmworkers  
on the Frontlines of Climate Justice in Kern County, California,  
USA**

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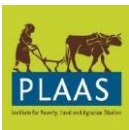


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# In the Chasm between Oil and Ag: Immigrant Farmworkers on the Frontlines of Climate Justice in Kern County, California, USA

*Priya R. Chandrasekaran*

## 1 Introduction

The stretch from Bakersfield to Arvin, California in Kern County, California reveals a great deal about the role of “Big Ag” and “Big Oil” in the wave of authoritarian populism that brought Trump to political power in 2016. This is not a tale about how global and national politics scale down to the local arena, but rather one about how national and multinational corporations are integrated in and control local politics -- drawing from almost two centuries of history and emboldened by the institutional and media clout gained in recent decades due to mergers, corporate deregulation and increasing worker precarity. As Kern County reveals, “the local” is key to how major players in the current global economy renovate the racial and spatial logic of neoliberal accumulation strategies and reproduce their broader dominance. To the extent that global consumption is fueled by agribusiness and the oil-and-gas industry, it also stands on a bedrock of reactionary and parochial politics, a bedrock that has formed, not coincidentally, in places where oil extraction and industrial food production intersect.

Fifteen miles apart, the two cities Bakersfield and Arvin encompass a breadth of political conflicts and environmental hazards. Bakersfield – whose population of roughly 377,000 is 56% majority white – is the starting place of the political career of Republican Kevin McCarthy, the present U.S. House Majority Leader and an outspoken supporter of President Trump.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in 2016, Arvin – whose population of roughly 21,000 is over 90% Latinx – elected the son of immigrant farmworkers *Jose Gurrola* as its mayor. Shrouded in a haze of pesticide drift, Arvin has among the worst air qualities in the country. On the way from Bakersfield to Arvin, the bluffs of Panorama Park abut multi-million dollar and mixed income homes. Looking north and west, an expanse of oilrigs extends beyond the Kern River Oil Field to where the eyes can’t see. In January 2018, Manuel,<sup>2</sup> an environmental activist, noted that by the time the fresh run off from the Sierra mountains reaches this part of the river – a river which a Spanish priest called “crystalline, bountiful and palatable” in 1776 -- it was toxic, having passed right through a Chevron field. Within view from the bluffs is the unincorporated town of Oildale, surrounded by three major oil fields<sup>3</sup>, where many of its residents work. There, 20% of the predominantly white population lives below poverty line; it is a place hard hit by the opioid and meth crises, and where people have a reputation for, in Gustavo’s words, “hating everything not white.”<sup>4</sup>

This network of urban, semi-urban and rural locales, with its neglected and unincorporated enclaves segregated by race, class and industry, its showcased homes on the hill, its vineyards and orchards, its dairy ranches and poultry farms, its processing plants and refrigerated storage facilities, its warning signs about the hazards of the air or water, its billboards celebrating the military and pesticides, its signs proclaiming “We need water to grow food!,” its freeways dotted with go-between farm labor contractors, its upscale boutiques and its shuttered homes that rattle with the incessant motor of derricks comprise a political ecology fashioned largely by agribusiness and Big Oil. This geography relies on far more complex class relationships than the obvious chasm between the ultra-rich and poor,

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<sup>1</sup> The 22<sup>nd</sup> District, which contains some of Kern County is represented by another Trump supporter, Devin Nunes.

<sup>2</sup> This name has been changed.

<sup>3</sup> San Joaquin Valley Geology. “History of the Oil Industry San Joaquin Geology

<sup>4</sup> Kindy, Kimberly, “Trolling for Drugs in a California ‘Heroin Alley.’” *Washington Post*. August 31, 2016

and it both depends on and perpetuates farmworker and immigrant precarity, which, like oil, runs beneath the surface of daily life and forms the lifeblood of the political economy.

At work are three interlinked processes. First, as agribusiness production and oil extraction intersect in Kern County, immigrant and farmworker families absorb, survive and resist the brunt of democratic and neoliberal failures – a toxic mix of air and water contamination, political disenfranchisement and state-sanctioned violence. With the election of Donald Trump, pre-existing anti-immigrant sentiment has latched on to, and been emboldened by, national xenophobic discourses. Second, the collaboration between oil and agribusiness functions through fostering racial animosities between their respective workers -- setting the economic interests and basic needs of oil workers and farmworkers at palpable odds. Moreover, refrains of identity, belonging and “American” aspiration renovate this antagonism, making it insidious and resilient. Third, the precarity of immigrants and farmworkers in this region represents an immediate impact of anthropogenic climate change and solutions that are good for these residents are also good for the climate. This fact, once acknowledged, challenges the shortsightedness of the breed of cosmopolitanism that has framed most national and global conversations about climate change, including criticisms of the Trump administration. Together, these illustrate how rural and semi-urban populism has been positioned against environmental justice and the climate crisis.

## **2 Bodies on the Line: Racism at the Intersection of Big Ag and Big Oil**

The Golden State Highway cuts through the eight counties of Central Valley that has been essential to California’s “golden” bounty since it became the thirty-first state of the US in 1850 after battles with Mexico, which have become part of its folklore. It is endowed with both extractable natural resources and fertile soil, comprised of sediment deposits from an evaporated sea and the formation of the Sierra mountain range. Today, the San Joaquin Valley produces roughly 13% of US agricultural production, and Kern County’s 8163 square-miles produce more food than most states and accounts for approximately 75% of the oil extracted in the third largest oil-producing state in the US.<sup>5</sup> The clear majority of California’s current fracking occurs here.

Despite being a less than two-hour drive from Los Angeles and California’s “liberal” coast, Kern remains a “Reaganomics” conservative stronghold. It has, as Manuel explains, “a long line of Republican” leaders, but for “corporate Democrats” who “use their Latino identity to get Latino votes but care nothing for those voters.” Local politics have long seemed intractable, though this in fact has taken work and money to achieve. The strategizing has been four-fold: (1) “Oil and gas magnates fund[ing] the districts,” (2) ensuring that “people of color don’t really have a political power base,” (c) employing state-sanctioned violence to fracture Latinx families and instill anxiety and (4) investing in media campaigns that make the effects of this appear like causes.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these functions in and through racism, and by keeping economic base of Latinx “rather dismal” and ensuring that many remain temporary or seasonal workers rather than business owners or “major players in the Chamber of Commerce.” In 2011, new map of Kern County’s Supervisor Districts was redrawn to so that north Kern districts, like Delano and Shafter, with large Latinx populations were linked with majority non-Latinx white places like Kernville to dilute the Latinx vote. The fact that Arvin (and Lamont) remained a majority Latinx district gave its constituents more political recourse and enabled them to vote in a Latino mayor.<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump’s election has tapped into this history, making the expressions of racism more “aggressive and a lot uglier.... So

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<sup>5</sup> Benson, Elly. Kern County OKs Big Oil’s Request to Fast Track Drilling and Fracking for Decades, Sierra Club. November 20, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with Manuel and Dr. Mark Martinez, political scientist at California State University Bakersfield, January and February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Freeman, Daniel. “Judge rules against Kern County in redistricting lawsuit; plaintiffs hope for new map before June.” Kern Golden Empire. February 26, 2018.

many people, undocumented especially, are living a nightmare every day.”<sup>8</sup> This in turn is bringing activists together, but it is also preventing immigrants from challenging more insidious attacks on their health and well-being.

I interviewed a paralegal Maria who has been assisting and educating immigrants, many of whom are Latinx or Filipinx, with public benefits, including access to health care in the larger Bakersfield region for almost twenty years. She chose this professional route because “litigation and impact cases take years,” and in the meantime “people need help.” Maria explained that fear has long played a role in “keep[ing] people from applying for benefits” they are eligible for; however, these fears have intensified so much after the election of Trump that families were afraid to call officials even after “smelling heavy smoke” when there was a fire a few days earlier in a rural area between Arvin and Bakersfield. “When people hear about [federal] raids [on immigrants], they stop going to store or their jobs.” Word spreads around, erroneously, that they should not apply for any assistance if they want to change their residency status because they should not “make [their] family look like a public charge.” Though California state policies “have been liberal in providing benefits for immigrants,” families are afraid to get health insurance or access food stamps even for children who are US citizens. In reality, many immigrant farmworker families are eligible for public benefits.

Since the last amnesty for immigrants was in 1981, many families have members who have been in the region for decades. Thus, contrary to the view that all farmworkers are undocumented, farmworker families have a “complex” combination of statuses, and “if you don’t ask, you don’t know.... Someone may say that I am legal permanent resident and my husband is undocumented and my child is a citizen.... Often immigrants don’t know they have legal status.... There can be a US citizen child who does not speak English.”

The fears immigrant families now feel are rooted in the historic role of the Kern County sheriff’s office. It is the kind of history Trump’s Attorney General Jeff Sessions hailed in his February 2018 speech to a group of sheriffs in when he noted US law enforcement’s “Anglo-American heritage.” Since Trump’s election, Kern County has become both a local battleground between federal and state governments and a site of rebellion by local law enforcement to the state. When the California legislature passed “SB 54” declaring California a sanctuary state in October 2017, Kern County’s Sheriff Donny Youngblood, who tried to make English the city’s official language a few years earlier, attempted to pass local legislation declaring Bakersfield a “non-sanctuary city.” However, a coalition of activists banded together and mobilized so quickly against it that it was squashed. Around the same time, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a complaint against sheriff and police abuses here.<sup>9</sup> By March 2018, Donald Trump’s Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the US Justice Department is suing California over policies “that limit state and local cooperation with federal immigration enforcement efforts.”<sup>10</sup> This intensifying dynamic has meant that while local law enforcement might protect immigrants from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in places like Los Angeles, here ICE collaborates with what one activist called “the deadliest cops,” whose abuses have largely gone “under the radar.” “ICE has been unleashed... Under Trump, they didn’t just get the memo but the message that ‘we can go after anybody we want.’” This has meant targeting people who formerly believed they were safe if they performed their periodic check ins. “People are afraid of what will happen to their families not just themselves... if you take away farther, brother, mother, you destroy families.”<sup>11</sup> As if to remind people of the possibility, the Mesa Verde Detention Center and an ICE office have a home in Bakersfield’s city center.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez.

<sup>9</sup> The ACLU will be opening a temporary office in Bakersfield.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Jamil. “Jeff Sessions Is Suing California, and I Feel Fine.” *Rolling Stone*, March 9, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez, February 2018. A documentary recently made by California State University Bakersfield’s Center for Social Justice Documentary begins with a distraught young man who attends a group information session just after finding out his wife, a political refugee from Mexico who had testified against narco-traffickers, had been detained during her periodic check in with ICE because someone “screwed up on the paperwork.” They “deported her just like that,” to put her back in the hands of people she has run from.

If the more overt racism is silencing immigrants, it has also banded together immigration lawyers and advocates “so people know their rights,” said Maria. In November 2016, the Immigrant Justice Collaborative (IJC) – a group of pro bono attorneys representing diverse facets of law including family, immigration, child support and criminal – formed because they could “see what was coming with the new administration.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly other legal organizations working in Bakersfield began doing more outreach in places like Arvin, Lamont, Taft and Delano, “going to people’s homes and knocking on doors” to give undocumented communities legal clinic on their civil rights and responsibilities, and to let them know that “yes, you do have rights even if you are not a citizen.”<sup>13</sup> They also educate immigrants about “what they are supposed to do” if police or ICE “come to their jobs and homes.” According to SB 54 “police should not ask additional questions” beyond names unless someone is being accused of an exempted crime and “cannot ask about immigration status because someone doesn’t understand English.” However, this also includes informing legal permanent residents that “they are not simply safe from deportation because they have a Green Card;” drinking and driving or domestic violence can put them at risk.

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It is in context of this political landscape that the region’s environmental toxicities must be viewed. Racism has systematically determined and justified which places have become dumping grounds and which people become subject to the worst contamination. Years of organizing around immigrant rights have given Caroline Farrell, the Executive Director of the Center for Race, Poverty and Environment based in Delano, the insight that Kern County’s environmental issues – including poisons from chemical pesticides, methane emissions from state-subsidized dairy farms, industry waste water disposal, air contamination from gas flaring when fracking for oil, and ground water contamination from horizontal oil well seepage – are “all connected.” These connections are intricate and layered, as companies devise ways to “recycle” waste, intensify production and access water. For example, an activist trained to “notice things” pointed out a smoke smoldering in a fallow citrus field outside of Arvin. These trees that no longer adequately produced were chopped and burned for days, releasing chemicals embedded in their biomass into the air. Similarly, he told me, agricultural waste is often “filtered” with nutshells in “mixing ponds” (rather than undergoing more rigorous cleaning like reverse osmosis), then re-sold to grow food.

These processes converge onto the bodies of those most politically and existentially vulnerable, whose labor in fact sustains the local economy. This occurs through legal mechanisms and/or by deliberately targeting places where people have less access to political power, less property ownership and “less time to go to city council meetings because they have labor-intensive jobs.”<sup>14</sup> In the 1980s, the Los Angeles-based lobbying firm Cerrell Associates “presented a demographic analysis [to the California Waste Management Board] identifying low-income communities of color, and rural and less educated communities...as target locations for new waste facilities” in the infamous ‘Cerrell Memo,’ which helped to launch California’s environmental justice movement.<sup>15</sup> There was already agribusiness and oil industry waste in Kern County, but with new methods of extraction, this has intensified. Old wells have been “re-stimulated” through technological innovations that put pressure on, and contaminate, the region’s water supply, whether through matrix acidizing (high on acid and less water), fracking (pressurized water, sand and chemicals) or de-oxygenated water stimulation. These methods use varying degrees of water, but all produce upwards of 10 million barrels of waste water a month.

Yet, in Kern County, still, the burden is not on corporations to show that their practices are safe, but “on the people to show the water [and air] is dirty.” Immigrant farmworker families, including children, face a host of ailments such as nausea, asthma, cancer, nose bleeds, migraines and respiratory

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez, February 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Maria and a United Farmworkers Foundation outreach worker, January 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Manuel, January 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Matsuola, Martha, November 8, 2012. Huffington Post. “LA’s History Lesson on Environmental Justice and Waste”



illness. These have worsened since California's "green" Governor Jerry Brown expedited oil fracking, which requires flaring gas into the air. The Central Valley Air District and Central Valley Water District are unabashedly pro-industry. Though there are "tons of regulations," many are not enforceable, and laypeople are "scared of getting sued" by powerful entities. In addition, loopholes enable "the worst offenders" to get away with a lack of monitoring and high amounts of contamination.<sup>16</sup> The oil and agriculture industries pressure how the local jurisdiction calibrates to state mandates, and the updates to oil and gas laws are so frequent that it's virtually impossible for working people or a grassroots organization to attend the related "public" hearings. One activist showed me on his computer a list of seventy-nine emails that had come in only in the past few days. One of the issues he was contending with in was that the Eastern Kern Air Pollution Control District was attempting to reduce risk guidelines for the cancer threshold, and it was possible that even if the state denied this the federal government could overrule it, and likely would, based on the Trump administration's approach to environment. Moreover, "small producers" were exempted from many regulations on gas flaring and gathering or distributing data on their air contamination. But they can still produce 6000 barrels/day and are often subcontracted by larger oil companies. In 2015, when Kern County changed its oil and gas laws again to benefit the industry and paved the way for more oil extraction in potential "hot spots," one of which is in Arvin. As Manuel says, "Activists are fighting hard."

Furthermore, the fluidity between urban, semi-urban and rural places that comprise the county meld into a web of private roads, incorporated and "no man's lands" of unincorporated places within cities that maps onto a visible ecology of political disenfranchisement. Thus, there are places that are governed by the county "but county doesn't feel accountable."<sup>17</sup> A paralegal working with the immigrant community in Bakersfield and the surrounding areas explained to me, you see a "big difference" between unincorporated areas like agriculture dominant Lamont (near Arvin) and its incorporated surroundings in the quality of "the sidewalks, buildings, stores, services and sewer systems." The unincorporated places have less avenue for political recourse and therefore are more likely to become dumping sites for environmental waste.

One technique that activists, from the Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN) has employed is to bring science to the people so that "everything is generated by the community for the community" so communities have the tools to target waste dumping sites or negligent corporations the same way they have been targeted.<sup>18</sup> For example, they created a reporting platform where anyone can send a picture or video or leave a message, which automatically gives GIS location, so these locales can be mapped and monitored. They've taken immigrants to public hearings about issues related to oil/gas legislation. They have also helped communities set up air pollution kits made by researchers from the University of Colorado on their homes or fence lines. These include white boxes that measure the volatile organic compounds (VOC) and oxides of nitrogen (NOx) that produce Oxone. They are also teaching communities to "grab" contaminated air with a 5-gallon food grade bucket.

Because Arvin is located at the edge of the foothills, it forms a "valley inside a valley" where noxious fumes get trapped. In early January 2018, a thick layer of smog hung over South Kern, and the air around Arvin reached 286 parts per million (PPM) of particulates; the "normal" amount is 40. The population here comes mostly from Oaxaca and Guanajuato, Mexico. They work in citrus, grape and almond fields, as well as packing houses, juicing plants, processing plants and storage facilities. As oil and gas extraction has increased over the past decade with new methods of stimulation, they are not only "exposed to pesticides daily in their work places," but "then they go home to the pollution of gasses like methane and BTEX [benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene, which are found in crude oil]."<sup>19</sup> In March 2014, eight households 185 feet from the well pad reported a gas pipeline leak. After

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Manuel, January 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Caroline Farrell, Executive Director of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment, January 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Manuel, January 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Toxic site visit with Manuel, January 2018.

about a month and a half away in temporary housing in Bakersfield, their “migraines, nose bleeds and chest congestion” disappeared. When they moved back, the symptoms reoccurred even though the leak had “supposedly been fixed.”

On the day I visited Arvin, an activist from CCEJN immediately noticed something “hissing.” He explained that he had become trained to “know where to look” and to tap into his sense of hearing first, and “next start smelling” for petrol, chemical or gasses. He noticed a generator was on, even though they had “shut the operator down” and this was an idle well. He then also noticed a new pile of open dirt on the fenced in premises, though the company is not allowed to dump open (possibly contaminated) soil. “This is a good time to take a picture,” he said. The fight against the leak in Arvin prompted a California bill AB-1420 that any active pipeline older than ten years that is smaller than 4 inches diameter near an environmentally sensitive location must be monitored on regular basis.<sup>20</sup> It also requires operators to submit an up to date map. For example, in Arvin, they discovered that the owner of the property did not even know where the almost century-old pipelines were – and discovered they were right beneath some of the houses. Their win in 2014 “gives hope that we may win bigger fights like stop fracking or banning pesticides like Chlorpyrifos.”<sup>21</sup>

### **3 Oil and Ag: Industry Collaboration through Labor Antagonism**

It is easy to find signs around Kern County expressing the sentiment that oil-and-gas and agribusiness live in harmony and represent “the same people.” The local economy has built up around these industries, both directly and indirectly; and the industry retains a tight hold. The executives, lobbyists and lawyers in general “belong to the same rotaries” and “attend the same parties.”<sup>22</sup> Yet the region is by and large a working-class place where “religion” is strong, “drug use is high,” “college rate [is] low” and there is lots of “guns and violence.”<sup>23</sup> Racism bridges this class chasm, but it does so through the mythology of oil, evident in the motto repeated in videos promoted by the conservative think tank Kern Citizens for Energy: “I am the oil industry.” The oil industry has succeeded in cultivating a deep belief that anyone “against it is against us” – “us” being those who belong to Kern and “the political rank and file.”<sup>24</sup> As one activist explained, people are “institutionalized their whole lives” to think this is “the best they’ll get.” And the oil-and-gas industry functions in ways like a church; it has filled in some holes of neoliberal austerity. Chevron helps fund the university, local businesses, the hospitals, Christian churches, Sikh organizations, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Cinco de Mayo parades. One Latino man in his mid-twenties who grew up here described how schools “teach you to love oil and gas,” and bring in guest speakers to laud the industry and the military. And it is “giving people jobs.” In turn, the oil-and-gas industry cultivate a culture where people glorify Chevron and are expected to remain virulently “faithful.”

Furthermore, though many are multinational with a significant number of elites living in or near Bakersfield, the wealth here is understood as “old money.” Despite recent attempts to revitalize the city, has not become “global” because of active steps these industries have taken to block anything that might cause competition (like high-speed rail in the valley) or challenge the credo of “no taxes!” In response to a recent initiative for “very tiny tax” to improve the Bakersfield’s public library, “every chamber of commerce and every major group came out against it.” As a resident explained, this is one reason that Bakersfield would not win the bid to house Amazon’s second US headquarters: “Companies like Amazon are going to look at this – if we can’t even have a basic library, that sends a message that we aren’t modern ‘free marketers.’”

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<sup>20</sup> California State Legislature, Assembly Bill 1420, Chapter 601. Filed with Secretary of State October 8, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Caiola, Samuel. “Chlorpyrifos Makes California List of Most Dangerous Chemicals.” Capital Public Radio, December 1, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez, January 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Toxic site visit with Manuel, January 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews with Manuel and Dr. Mark Martinez, political scientist at California State University Bakersfield, January and February 2018. Kern Citizens for Energy website.



On the drive between Arvin and Bakersfield, one observes a sea of oil derricks enmeshed with white-pesticide coated citrus orchards. If symbolic of the joint hegemony of those agribusiness and the oil industry, its institutional reason for being is also telling about the less obvious foundations of this collaboration. California's land tenure system enshrines this difference between land (the surface) and minerals into law: someone who owns land does not have automatic rights to what exists beneath it. This legal distinction accounts for the minerals beneath agricultural fields being leased to or owned by oil magnates. Similarly, the hegemony of oil and agribusiness magnates in Kern County has relied on forms of labor antagonism, and it is predicated on symbolic and racial opposition.

If oil runs below the ground here, it is also runs deep in the origin story of (colonial) settlement. Though settler agriculture in Kern dates even back farther than oil extraction, it was oil (and gold) that called settlers here "from out east," from places where the agricultural life was hard, to strike it rich in the mid to late-1800s. Thus, from the start of its capitalist extraction in this region, oil was both a symbol and a mechanism of white social mobility. As new white migrants came from other states -- like the "Okies" from Oklahoma in the 1940s which John Steinbeck depicted in his novel the *Grapes of Wrath* -- and faced discrimination, oil stood as a symbol of belonging. That oil ran deep in the ground and needed to be brought to the surface with entrepreneurship and hard work linked the materiality of the substance with a myth of an ideal of "America."

That ideal was, from its incipience, entangled with the desire for and "necessity" of racial conquest, one that provides a font for anti-immigrant sentiment today. Oil extraction, from its onset, was hinged on theft of native lands and appropriation of their knowledge and then subjugation of their forms of living. Centuries before its commodification in Kern, the viscous substance comprised of fossilized plants and animals that we now call and interact with as oil was interwoven with indigenous social life. For example, the Yokuts developed practices of collecting tar that seeped up from natural asphalt lakes to use for a variety of purposes. This was how settlers learned that they could use tar to, among other things, waterproof their roofs before they began mining tar for profit. Within less than a decade after the first oil well in Kern County was hand dug in 1899, Bakersfield became a boom town and "a forest of wooden derricks sprang up overnight" to make the region among California's top oil-producers.<sup>25</sup> Before long, Standard Oil Company began constructing the county's first oil pipeline, which extended north, and the "Independent Oil Producers Agency" incorporated -- a harbinger of the petroleum associations that continue to wield incredible power here. By 2014, Kern County had 44,518 producing oil wells, and oil produced from the larger San Joaquin Valley comprised roughly 4.8% of United States production.

Oil keeps flowing because the industry strategically keeps workers morally invested in their identity as "oil workers," as a form of distinction and white pride. This identity is reinforced through networks of family, friends and acquaintances and how oil is rooted in family lore and existence, being passed from one generation to the next. Oil is an ancient (seemingly inherent) and deeply rooted resource. While it can be transported in its crude form for refining, its extraction is undeniably place-specific and indicates Kern's untapped natural wealth. The historical shift from coal to oil, as Timothy Mitchell writes, reflected a shift to a vertical and less collaborative structure of labor, diversified labor in smaller numbers and power consolidated at the top. This vertical structure, for working class laborers in the oil industry, signifies the possibility of class mobility: moving into the mixed income homes of Panorama Park. Even though the San Francisco tech boom and "gig economy" has been accompanied by a rise in worker precarity and college tuitions, oil workers can make \$15 an hour. Many of the older workers "moved their way up from field hands to operating oil derricks to being a side manager. Even if they don't have a HS education, they may be making 150 thousand dollars a year, and they get cousins and siblings with the oil industry."<sup>26</sup> Thus, oil represents a life that still offers a vestige of "America" as an ideal of achievement. It also **gives Kern a place that matters in the national and global economy, and to US military expansion.**

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<sup>25</sup> San Joaquin Valley Geology. "History of the Oil Industry San Joaquin Geology

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez, February 2018.

In contrast, as long standing as the history of agriculture is; as much as agriculture has shaped Kern County's geography and socio-political life; and as much as agriculture is made possible through a natural bounty parallel to that of oil, agricultural commodities appear on or near the surface terrain with far more apparent susceptibility to human action. Their production also requires a different kind of toil and labor structure. In Kern County's agricultural fields or processing units, hundreds of farmworkers doing similar tasks simultaneously and seasonally. Agricultural commodities do not flow through pipes and cannot be extracted through a single point.<sup>27</sup> In agriculture, the exploitation of farmworkers turns on their expendability and interchangeability – a largely horizontal structure, with a clear delineation between those at the bottom and those at the top, with far fewer options to “climb.” This steady supply of what Karl Marx called “surplus labor” needs not only the political and existential precarity of those laborers, but for that precarity to be perennially manifest. Patterns of labor in Kern's agricultural sector are dotted with interruptions that comes with living in the shadows and working for sub-contractors who make money from buffering corporations' accountability for workplace risks. Belonging to and finding a (secure) place in “America” often means seeing farmworker labor as a rite of passage, so their children to have a different option that would allow them to leap above this ceiling on possibility and the violence of political disenfranchisement.

The politicians attitude, says Manuel, is “if you don't like it, leave.” But many first-generation born children of farmworkers stay for a variety of reasons that include the affordable cost of living here compared to many other parts of the state, their sense of obligation to family members and commitment to community to “stay to change it [the air and water pollution].” He explained that “community” is “not a word that makes sense or connects with oil workers” because they industry cultivates an aspirational pull to own a house on the hill and model American individualism as the pinnacle of success and white identity. In addition, industry magnates, those with the most power and wealth, “think in terms of me and my stakeholders” or “my family.” So, for oil workers “community” has come to mean “a subset of poor people. It also means dark people. It also means powerless people.”

However, for immigrant and farmworker families, “community” has been a survival strategy and rallying concept. Out of their shared vulnerability, health risks due to environmental threats, ceilings on class mobility and political disenfranchisement, a strong collective identity has emerged. A history of farmworker resistance in this region has been a source of pride and courage, as well as another means by which farmworkers have made a claim to “American” belonging. **The United Farm Workers of America** has roots here. This is also where the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the National Farmworkers Association, led by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez, organized the five-year Delano Grape Strike and boycott in 1965 to demand living wages. Drawing on this intergenerational legacy, both Manuel and his brother have followed in the footsteps of their father who worked with Cesar Chavez in Blythe driving a tractor for lemons, before he started organizing part-time with the United Farmworkers Union and then began a career devoted to the struggle. “Instead of going to Disneyland when I was kid, we went to Sacramento and joined marches.” Manuel's own expertise about Kern reflects a claim to place. Similarly, an immigrant advocate whom I interviewed had once been a farmworker who worked in grape fields when the United Federation of Farmworkers organized a successful strike because they had “no wheelbarrows or tables and had to work on the ground.” The hope that came out of these kinds of “small victories” led her become a part-time union organizer. Now, at a time of intensifying immigrant fear, she is “knocking on doors” and spreading knowledge about “know your rights” so members of the community “can teach each other.”

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<sup>27</sup> This difference parallels one between coal and oil production which Timothy Mitchell (2009) remarks on in *Carbon Democracy*. Coal miner strikes had been key in European working class and democratic struggles.

Thus, the material survival and identities of farmworkers and oil workers in Kern County are set at odds with each other. When farmworkers and activists fight against industry waste or toxins being dumped near their homes, schools and places of work, they appear to oil workers as racialized “communities” that are challenging the source of white livelihood, but white identity, belonging and “religion.”<sup>28</sup> If the oil industry is using new methods of to renovate and stimulate old wells, it is doing the same with racial tropes. “Oil companies are good at exploiting the racial difference. [They say to their workers] you are labor, but you are not that labor.”<sup>29</sup> For example, the oil industry brings oil and gas workers to public hearings about oil legislation and infractions to intimidate immigrants who may come. This is one reason why environmental justice organizations have had a hard time getting immigrants to attend. At these hearings, Manuel explained, “there is me and my three to five people,” against “lobbyists and lawyers with Rolexes talking about playing golf and eating steak.” When “they see [Manuel] go up to speak, they see a short, young, Latino activist and they have this attitude of ‘How can you say anything about anything?’” Oil workers who are brought in as “hecklers” see this performance of wealth and whiteness and it “trickles down.”

The oil industry has stoked this antagonism to deflect its accountability to its workers at a time do profound volatility in the global oil market. Oil prices soared in 2008 to trade at more than \$126 a barrel, then plummeted since 2013, taking a massive blow on the region’s workforce. In 2015, there were an estimated 2,500 local oil-related layoffs. The Bakersfield housing market has been equally volatile – peaking in 2005 and then crashing in 2007, with Kern County experienced triple the national rate of foreclosures before it began to climb again in 2012. Rather than blaming the new forms of fossil fuel extraction or oil executives who wield power in this system that causes workers’ livelihoods to be so precarious, workers are encouraged to throw blame and anger onto the “Middle East” and “OPEC,” who signify industry and regional competitors – reflecting, once again, a racial alliance.<sup>30</sup> This taps into and fosters an oil-saturated white regional identity.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the anger about the recent rise in unemployment, foreclosures and poverty gets redirected onto Latinx immigrants who erroneously accused of benefitting from “handouts” without a rightful claim to being American. In reality, as notes Maria, “farmworkers contribute to the community. People are misinformed, they think [farmworkers] are ‘taking resources from us,’ they are filling up our schools, taking our jobs.” Moreover, this misinformation spreads faster now as conservative media outlets use social media to exploit fears, promote Trump and intensify xenophobia.<sup>32</sup>

#### **4 A Growing Political Base and A Growing Fissure between Ag and Oil**

*This last brief section (still in revision) discusses a burgeoning political base among Latinx groups, new activist collaborations since Trump’s election, and a growing fissure between agribusiness and the oil industry due to climate crisis and industry expansion. It also discusses the role of climate change and climate justice in activist work. I can discuss those findings during the conference.*

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<sup>28</sup> Toxic site visit with Manuel, January 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Caroline Farrell, January 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Dr. Mark Martinez, February 2018.

<sup>31</sup> During World War II, the Japanese were interned in Arvin and Delano.

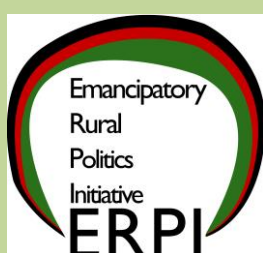
<sup>32</sup> Interview with Manuel, January 2018.

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**Priya Chandrasekaran** received her PhD in anthropology from the CUNY Graduate Center and is a Postdoctoral Lecturer in Princeton University's Writing Program. Her dissertation, funded by the National Science Foundation, analyzes what the new value of finger millet as a global commodity and national biodiversity resource means for small-scale women farmers in Uttarakhand, India who have been written out of the story of "modern India." In 2016, when Traveling Faculty for the International Honors Program in Climate Change, she met activists working for climate justice in California, including current collaborators from The Center on Race, Poverty & The Environment (CRPE), an organization that works with grassroots groups in low-income communities and communities of color.



**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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