

Welcome to California: land of plunder and hypocrisy

I was a fourth-grader in the public schools of California when I first learned about the Gold Rush. I remember our teacher, Mrs Dyer, passing down the story in the manner of lore.

On the morning of 24 January 1848, James Marshall, a New Jersey boy come west, stumbled upon four shiny nuggets alongside the American River. He tried to keep his discovery a secret, but the shout of “eureka” from the dirt streets of San Francisco rang out across the shore. It unleashed a force that could not be contained.

No need for manifest destiny. Overnight, 80,000 dreamers of every color, creed and country poured in.

I didn't know back then how story became myth and myth became story. The sordid details of history would be mine to fill in. The Gold Rush was California's first extraction, a flash that cannonballed the whole mad state into being, and it ended the way all such plunders do. A handful of wealthy San Francisco industrialists made off with the riches. Marshall died so poor he could barely cover the price of his burial.

Hydraulic mining, the state's first invention sold to the world, had blasted out an immense crater in the Sierra Nevada, a desecration that let loose a torrent of environmental ruin. In a landmark decision, a judge shut down the mining industry in 1884. The crater, a symbol of California creation and destruction, was declared a state historic park.

But the fever of gold mining did not pass.

All around me, from inland to coast, the fire of extraction still burns. I have spent more than half my life chronicling the exploitations of California, so I know delirium to be a condition of the land. It took up residence in the body of the infant state and went on to spawn further extractions – a piling-on of audacities – so that one unthinkable taking gave rise to an even more unthinkable taking, and on and on through the generations.

Now, the Golden state has spun itself into a new and more menacing age of plunder: the mining of water and the mining of our minds.

In the San Joaquin valley, farmers divert the great rivers and tap the ancient aquifer to grow nuts, fruits and vegetables. Their irrigated flatland is one of the most dramatic alterations of the Earth's surface in human history. But the water can no longer keep up with the bounty. The drained earth, and all that has been built upon it, **is sinking**.

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In Silicon Valley, lords of tech harness untold amounts of water and electricity to power more data-processing centers. The project of artificial intelligence feeds on human consciousness itself. Algorithms lay waste to our brains. Robots instruct our children how to expertly tie nooses to better hang themselves. Bombs guided by the pinpoint of AI erase Gaza and slaughter tens of thousands of innocents.

Each thing sprouts from the same fertile ground: the soil that is California. From my perch in the middle of the state, I swear I can feel an agitation disrupting the land and its people. Like a drone, it carries the sound of a hum.

California's eternal grab for more has never seemed so desperate.

On a fall day, chasing the hum, I set out on the road to tell the story of two places, without heed, each pursuing one last extraction.

I am driving across the western flank of the San Joaquin valley, heading in the direction of Coalinga, a small town in Fresno county that owes its entire existence, right down to its name, to the digging for earth's riches.

The leveled ground seems to be holding its breath. The nut harvest, nearly 5bn pounds of almonds and pistachios jolted off the trees in a filthy cloud, is already in swing. These are the factories in the fields conceived in the mid- to late 1800s by the same San Francisco barons who pocketed gold's riches.

Year after year, Fresno county, where I was born and have lived most of my life, ranks No 1 in food production for the nation. Our crop counts on a sun that shines 300 days a year, a never-ending flow of water and a workforce that won't tire. What are the men and

women toiling in the fields if not a faithful extraction, whereby the beckoning arm of California, for a century and counting, reaches deep into the rural heart of Mexico for a new generation's fresh bodies.

Our crop also counts on an ungodly amount of poison, which we regard as our dirty little secret never to be broached in a social setting. The year-round drift of insecticides, herbicides and fungicides floats from farms to schools to houses and into so many bodies now riddled with neurological disease. **Parkinson's Alley**, as the epidemiologists at the University of California, Los Angeles have pinned it on the map, is the very road I'm driving on.

I had shut tight my car windows before leaving suburbia, but there's no escaping the air, for this is California's sacrifice zone. Miles and miles stink of dung and diesel. We dwellers of cornucopia breathe in more particulate matter than anywhere else in the country.

Our dairies aren't mom and pop but factories of fine calibration that squeeze out milk from the teats of 1.3 million Holsteins. Out the other end shoots a river of shit that never stops flowing. The methane and ammonia toxify the already toxic air. Nitrates seep into the dwindling aquifer, fouling the wells people drink from.

Industrial agriculture was the first modern system of extraction that California exported to the world. It inspired the other systems – ballistic warfare, higher education, suburban sprawl, green energy – that we happily produced on a mass scale, pretending not to notice whether it was wonder or woe we were selling.

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Our abuse of the state's extraordinary gift of natural resources collides with our desire to clean the air and water, shrink carbon's footprint and create solar, wind and battery power. This is California's great paradox, we tell ourselves, a state big and complicated and enough of a work in progress that we can have it both ways.

In the halls of Sacramento governance, where our split personality is a grand exhibition, the recurring chant from Governor Gavin Newsom and his fellow Democrats is

“abundance, abundance”, a magic wand that if waved wholeheartedly can summon the glories of California’s wide-open past.

The abundance agenda, in the fever of their dream, will bring AI prosperity, more housing and less homelessness, and a high-speed rail line that isn’t a boondoggle but will connect rural to urban, coastal to inland, red to blue, so we’ll finally become one. There’s no capitalism, they whisper, like California capitalism. Let it do what it can do once more.

On the outskirts of Coalinga, Chevron’s pump jacks are draining crude from the brown hills, and tens of thousands of cattle fatten up for slaughter in the largest feedlot in the west. There’s a gravel mine, a state prison and acre after acre of pistachio trees growing in dirt that still knows itself as desert. Turbine pumps hum, pulling up water that tastes like the sea. The pistachio, God blessed, is the one fruit-bearing tree that can stand such salt.

Jimmy Anderson pulls up to Coalinga city hall with a rumble. His big white Ford Raptor is gleaming. His leather boots are shiny, too.

He has come to the monthly meeting of the Pleasant Valley water district not from his own cattle feedlot on the dusty edge of town. He’s made the long drive from suburban Fresno, where his house sits along the river on the fifth hole of a country club. Anderson is partial to fifth holes. His multimillion-dollar house on the California coast, the one he flies to in his Swiss-made jet, is a chip shot from the fifth tee at Pebble Beach.

As to any insinuation that he’s a faux farmer, Anderson has a swift and practiced reply. His family on his mother’s side, the Mourens, herded sheep here as far back as the 1860s. This was before miners in Coalinga pulled out the coal that gave the town its name, before wildcatters struck a gusher named “blue goose” in 1898 and turned Coalinga into the No 1 oil field in the state. The Mourens survived hard times to amass tens of thousands of acres. A trust-fund kid now nearing 60, Anderson has been wily enough to add on to the family fortune.

This morning, a look of disquiet in his manner, he takes a seat in the meeting room with fellow farmers and district staff. Together, they listen as a young consultant with a water

engineering firm explains just how dry they are. Whether they're growing pistachios or row crops, overseeing thousands of acres of grazing land or feedlot ground, family farmers or big company men, their dominion as they knew it is no more.

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For a century, California had allowed the full-throttle pumping of groundwater.' Illustration: Matthew Brandt/The Guardian/Getty Images

For a century, California had allowed the full-throttle pumping of groundwater. The agriculturalists believed that the aquifer, straight down to thousands of feet, was theirs to do as they pleased with. Then the drought of 2012 to 2016, the worst dry times, struck. Politicians in Sacramento decided the state couldn't very well regard itself as America's great progressive hope if it kept signaling to agriculture to "get yours while you can".

In 2014, California enacted the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act to limit the mining of our most imperiled resource. To keep the growers from complaining too much, the law came with a decade-long rollout. This led, quite expectedly, to a race to the bottom of the aquifer across five valley counties. Hedge funds, pension funds, the insurer John Hancock and the Mormon church joined a stampede of farmers, planting 600,000 more acres of nut trees and drilling thousands more wells. The land was sinking by the foot.

Only recently had the free-for-all exhausted itself, and the law showed its teeth. One million acres and more of valley farmland, one-fifth of agriculture's footprint here, will now have to be fallowed to achieve something close to sustainability. The axe, as it should, will fall first on the farmland beyond the reach of a river.

Sustainable isn't a word that rolls off the tongues of growers. When they figured out what sustainable meant – that California would be curtailing their draw of groundwater to no more than what the rain and snowmelt replenished each year – they did what entitled men do. They hired high-priced lawyers and reached for each other's throats – a good ol' western water war.

In Pleasant Valley, no river runs through the land. Instead, the groundwater is replenished by creeks that come alive only in hard rains. This has left the cattle ranchers

and pistachio growers feuding over a small, briny aquifer that has plummeted 125ft since the first orchard was planted in 1991. The rancor over how they might share their dwindling resource has the sound of a reckoning long overdue.

Pleasant Valley measures 14,000 acres of permanent crops. To grow nuts and vegetables worth tens of millions of dollars each year, the farmers are pumping the aquifer to the tune of nearly three acre-feet of water for every acre. This is enough water to supply 90,000 households for a year. Such an extraction won't outlast the next long drought. Sustainability's bottom line is brutal. To meet the state's demands, farmers in Pleasant Valley are going to have to cut their pumping to a new level every five years. By 2042, their draw of the aquifer will be reduced by nearly two-thirds. At that point, having achieved a "safe yield" in the eyes of the state, their land will be radically altered. Six-thousand acres of pistachio orchards will need to be ripped out.

"That's what sustainability is going to look like here," says Brad Gleason, the district's board president. "We'll have to get smaller or smarter."

I've known Gleason since the seventh grade, and when he says "smarter" I get what he means. There's another option available to wealthy farmers like him: they can build a pipeline and haul in river water from northern California. This way, they'll still comply with the state law and not drain the local aquifer dry. And they'll be able to ship in enough water to keep every orchard bursting with nuts.

It won't be cheap, Gleason says. The pipeline will cost \$8m, and they'll pay \$3m a year for the imported water. But by simply extracting snowmelt from up north, the footprint of irrigated agriculture in Pleasant Valley can stay the same. Only the tired old delta, where the northern rivers converge, will feel the loss. This is how the growers plan to outwit the law.

Jimmy Anderson, the biggest landowner in Pleasant Valley, who not only ranches cattle but raises pistachios, has a different plan in mind. To maximize his draw of the local aquifer, he needs to change the district's formula on sustainability. By late fall, he's figured out the numbers. But before he can execute his move, he has to wait out Gleason's tenure and then assemble a new board that will install him as president.

“Jimmy wants to undo everything we’ve worked on for the past year,” says Gleason, who lives near Anderson on 17-Mile Drive in Pebble Beach.

Gleason’s main duty as president is to meet the sustainability goals of the state and avoid costly sanctions for the district. His board, he believes, has adopted the fairest way forward. Standing in his orchard in the desert, he paints a future of environmentally friendly farming. “I was the first farmer to plant pistachios in this ground,” he tells me. “Agriculture still has a place here.”

Silicon Valley used to be known as ‘the heart’s delight’ for its plums, pears, apricots and cherries

Before Gleason is able to hand over his plan to the state, however, his tenure as board president ends. By the second meeting of the new year, Jimmy Anderson has executed his takeover. Not only does he make himself president, but with a majority of board members loyal to him, he sets in motion a scheme to monetize the water for his own gain.

As it plays out in stages, one rival board member marvels at Anderson’s execution. Like jiu-jitsu, he says, you must see his moves in slow motion to truly appreciate their craftiness.

Anderson starts by altering the math of sustainability. The new numbers make sense, at least from the cab of his Ford Raptor. He expands the district’s category for irrigated acres from 14,000 to 22,000 by changing the definition of “irrigated”.

Under Gleason’s plan, “irrigated acres” meant land in Pleasant Valley that was planted and watered year after year. This definition honored a certain code. The landowners who farmed the ground on a continual basis, putting the aquifer to “beneficial use”, would have first dibs on the water.

Anderson’s definition – call it a cattleman’s bent on things – regards the land as a shifting shape. The 8,000 acres he’s added to the ranks of irrigated grow no permanent crops. Many of the acres sit parched. At best, some tracts have been irrigated now and then for vegetables or grain. It’s all the same to Anderson. If a piece of ground has sipped water for a single season over the past decade, he considers it irrigated and thus forever eligible to draw from the aquifer.

Of these entitled acres, it's no surprise that the lion's share, 5,000 acres, belong to Anderson and his kin. How much of their ground is farmed or fallowed isn't a question Anderson cares to answer. To him, the matter is moot. The entire 5,000 acres are now counted as "irrigated." For each acre, Anderson gets a credit. In his case, the credits add up to no trivial prize: they're worth 1.5bn gallons of real water that can be lifted from the aquifer each year.

Anderson can either bank his credits for drought times or sell them now on the local market. And who will be lining up to buy his credits? Well, that would be his fellow pistachio growers, the same ones who lost their collective draw to 1.5bn gallons when Anderson became president and threw out Gleason's plan.

As brazen as it sounds, Anderson is now poised to sell his neighbors the same quantity of water he just seized from them.

"The Johnnies-come-lately are the ones who pumped our little aquifer dry," he says bluntly. "They bought the land for cheap and planted it wall to wall with pistachios. They knew it couldn't last."

Gleason and his farming partner, Brian Whelan, an attorney by profession, argue that Anderson used his status as the district's biggest landowner to commandeer the board and adopt a water allocation plan that mostly benefits himself. More than 3,000 acres of Anderson's "irrigated" lands have long been barren, they argue, and should never have been awarded irrigation credits. "This isn't farming crops," Whelan says. "It's farming water." They intend to file a lawsuit.

Anderson isn't too worried about the boundaries he's pushing. He knows the state's groundwater management act doesn't spell out the meaning of irrigated. Neither does it outlaw agrarian cunning. As long as agriculture throttles back its pumps and keeps the valley from sinking more, each district can decide its imperfect way.

"I've got records showing I planted that land in garlic, onions, carrots, safflower and wheat," he says. "[Gleason and Whelan are] either blind or ignorant."

Anderson is confident his sustainability plan will fly with the state. In the meantime, he's wheeling and dealing, selling his credits for \$200 an acre-foot. If he sells all of them – a decent bet – he'll make close to \$1m this year alone.

Gleason and Whelan, in a strange turn, are among the desperate buyers. They've wired Anderson \$200,000 for the privilege of his water--1,000 acre-feet to be exact, enough to help irrigate their pistachios for this growing season. "Jimmy's got us over a barrel," Gleason says. "Until we can build a pipeline to bring in water, we have to pay him to keep farming."

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iThe Golden state has spun itself into a new and more menacing age of plunder: the mining of water
and the mining of our minds.' Illustration: Matthew Brandt/The Guardian/Getty Images

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I cross the Pacheco Pass through the Diablo range and come down into Silicon Valley, a place that used to be known as "the heart's delight" for its plums, pears, apricots and cherries. It's a different valley now, one devoted to a strange fruit, the algorithm, and its unimaginable harvest.

The algorithm ascertains our thoughts and emotions creep by creep and then feeds them back to us, over and over, until the information we're consuming no longer even requires us to chew. By the time the whole process is finished, we're eating our own regurgitations. It goes down so smoothly, the slurp of Gerber baby food, that we might as well be infants again.

My interrogations of California over the past 35 years have largely steered clear of this place. Its language is one I find foreign. Its gadgets hold no thrall for me. Yet there's no remaining aloof from the fallout of Silicon Valley's greed. Artificial intelligence is the final mode of its human capture. If I get challenged by a techie or two about the nature of this extraction, I know what to do. I'll trot out Gemini, part of Google's DeepMind.

"Yes artificial intelligence is actively mining the human mind in several ways," Gemini coughs up, "functioning both as a tool that extracts and analyzes human data to understand cognition and as a force that is actively altering or rewiring human cognitive processes." In human words, AI isn't simply picking our brains in a supreme act of

mimicry but atrophying our brains each time the software performs a thinking task for us.

The tech lords are no less barefaced in their aim to take us to a place they call “post-human”. Elon Musk, for one, has long believed the transition will work out rather seamlessly, that the smartphone has so softened us up as targets that we’ll go there willingly, with neural chips planted in our brains.

“Your phone is already an extension of you. What most people don’t realize is they’re already a cyborg,” Musk told podcaster Joe Rogan in 2018. “The merge scenario with AI is the one that seems like probably the best. Like if you can’t beat it, join it.” He’s repeated this belief many times since.

The hothouses where the hereafter germinates in blind arrogance (read the billboards from Palo Alto to San Francisco to understand the conceit) are off-limits to outsiders like me. What I want to explore instead is the infrastructure they’ve built – a clutch of land, water and electricity – to make such a future true.

On the borderline of Sunnyvale and Santa Clara, I meet up with Masheika Allgood, a lawyer turned techie who worked at the chip giant Nvidia before losing faith in the AI rush. She had agreed to act as my tour guide. “I won’t be driving a Tesla or a Porsche,” she’d said. “Look out for the Nissan Altima.”

I hop in and off we go, past gleaming corporate headquarters and office parks, past \$1.5m ranch houses and strip malls with sprawling parking lots where the prunes once dried. Across the expressway, we enter the bleak industrial heart of Santa Clara, stuffed full of datacenters edged by small power plants and diesel-fired generators, the second-most AI farms of any city in the nation, buzzing a hum that gives the place a fit of tinnitus.

Allgood is among a growing band of California activists asking questions about datacenters – questions that neither the state nor local governments are able to answer. How much water are they using? How much power? What do the emissions from the diesel generators mean for human health? If whole parts of AI go bust, who among the

ratepayers of the Pacific Gas & Electric Co, the investor-owned utility whose electricity is the most expensive in the nation, will be left holding the bag?

How much water are datacenters using? How much power? What do diesel generator emissions mean for human health?

The AI boom, cloaked in opacity, is exempt from even the most basic inquiry. “There’s absolutely no doubt that the environmental impacts of datacenters are significant,” Allgood says. “How can they not be given that they operate 24/7? But when it comes to water and electricity, we can’t peg anything down. The only answer we get from government is: ‘Don’t worry about it.’”

The California legislature passed a bill last September that required datacenters to disclose and certify their water consumption as part of their local business licenses. Calling the measure too onerous, Newsom vetoed it. He’s done the same with other proposed guardrails that would have addressed the more existential harms posed by artificial intelligence.

Yet it is also true that California, under his leadership, has become one of the few states to adopt measures to protect children from some of AI’s more base appetites.

“Newsom’s adopted a few regs, so he’s not nearly as bad as Trump,” Allgood says. “But for the most part, he’s given the tech billionaires free rein.”

I confess to her that I spent four years writing Newsom’s memoir, *Young Man in a Hurry*, and saw up close the grit he summoned to tell a family story marked by suicide, alcoholism, mental illness and ties to the Communist party and the wealthy Getty clan. The governor’s sister and wife pressed him to remove details they found unsettling, but he held true to our probing vision of the book.

At the same time, I had watched the politician in him embody the state’s great paradox. He could speak and even act with passion to address the gravity of climate change and fight back against Trump’s ceaseless environmental assaults. But then he could turn around and embrace a paean to growth that was little more than a hunt for the next bonanza.

The houses California kept planting in the path of wildfire, the warehouse distribution centers paving over the beleaguered inland, the giant tunnel the governor was seeking

to build so that billionaire farmers and suburban housing developers could siphon more water out of the delta – at what point in critical times did paradox turn into hypocrisy? As for Newsom’s alliance with the tech bros, it traced back to his days as San Francisco’s mayor. He admired them. He considered them pals. And he was taken with their gadgets, so much so that he could summon the details of an evening in the Fairmont Hotel when a young Steve Jobs unveiled to him, Sergey Brin and Larry Page an early version of his futuristic phone. Jobs lifted the device from his pocket and swiped the sleek screen.

“Whoa,” they chanted. Jobs let Newsom swipe it, too. “Whoa,” he said. The way the governor recalled the unveiling, it was its own shout of “eureka”.

A young Newsom, “the Great Gavini”, loved performing magic tricks for his family at holiday gatherings. What was the alchemy of AI if not a conjuring? His directive that placed ChatGPT genies in every classroom of the California State University system – the biggest partnership between AI and higher education in the world – was a gift of young minds to a handful of thieves. To feed their robots, the AI giants had stolen nearly the whole of the humanities, my own books among the fodder.

On the San Tomas Expressway, Allgood drives into the dystopic wingspan of Nvidia, where CEO Jensen Huang churns out the chips that power AI, amassing a personal net worth of \$164bn. His towering new campus brings to mind a giant spaceship aiming to get to Mars.

Like Pleasant Valley and its growers, Santa Clara and its 57 datacenters have run up against a limit line. The city’s own utility, Silicon Valley Power, is tapped out. Datacenters are sucking up more than 60% of Santa Clara’s electricity, subsidized in part by higher rates charged to residents.

Even so, city leaders aren’t in the mood to entertain any doubts about their pact with AI. They’re too busy expanding the grid to bring on more datacenters for the future.

If I’m looking for a city whose embrace of AI is even more gung ho than Santa Clara, we need to go to San Jose, Allgood says. Led by Mayor Matt Mahan, the state’s third-most-

populous city is vowing to become “the west coast’s premier destination for datacenter development”.

San Jose is **partnering** with PG&E in a \$1.5bn deal to triple the city’s electrical capacity over the next 10 years. The giant utility is even covering salaries and benefits, \$670,000, for two city hall employees tasked with growing as many as 20 new datacenters.

On Great Oaks Boulevard in south San Jose, Allgood points to a behemoth rising out of an 18-acre tract of land. “There it is,” she says. The city’s newest and grandest datacenter stands in a historic part of town called Edenvale, surrounded by schools and \$1.3m houses, commercial strips and business parks, and a cluster of smaller datacenters that preceded it.

We park in front of a tall, black, iron fence that borders the new building. A security guard with a strange haircut bounds out of his cubicle. “This is private property,” he says. “What’s your business?” I tell him I’m a writer, which is just about the most laughable thing I could have uttered. “You need to move on,” he says.

The distance we move on, a half-block, is enough to appreciate the structure in all its colossal infliction. On a plot of old hay ground where residents had envisioned a community park, a fortress of the carceral form has come to be. It’s rectangular, topped with security cameras and painted shades of dull. Where is the front door, where is the back door, where is a window? There’s no telling. What else to read of its architecture but the unwelcome of the human being.

Allgood drops me off at my car, and we say our goodbyes. Only later do I learn that the new datacenter isn’t one digital farm but three. When fully built, the cluster will measure 547,000 sq ft and house endless racks of computing equipment cooled with refrigerant and drinking water. A power substation and three dozen diesel-fired generators will be added to the mix. This is the backup that datacenters require in the event PG&E has to shut off power, a now-and-then occurrence in a land of wildfires and drought.

I find a small group of residents who protested the project back in 2020. The alarm they expressed in meetings and letters – “You’re going to put this thing in our backyard?” – fell on the deaf ears of bureaucrats and regulators. “I saw greed. I saw corruption. I saw

so many of my neighbors bury their heads in the sand," says Mimi Patterson, a longtime resident.

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‘In the dark explains how we blithely accept big tech’s assurances that the water it uses is no big deal.’ Illustration: Matthew Brandt/The Guardian/Getty Images

She counts seven datacenters, including the new ones, built in her part of town. While these models aren’t the monsters going up in Nevada, Texas, Louisiana and Virginia, their side-by-side impacts are cumulative. The noise and fumes are only half of it. How to measure the assault to neighborhood scale and flow and civic pride? And yet the city of San Jose, documents show, never bothered to do an environmental impact study. If you knew the history of San Jose’s southside, government laxity of this sort seems unforgivable.

In the late 1970s, right in this same neighborhood, Fairchild Semiconductor, the first maker of silicon chips, began leaking hundreds of thousands of pounds of volatile organic compounds into the soil and groundwater. The spills explained the mystery of so many miscarriages and children born with cardiac defects and dying of cancer. Fairchild landed on the EPA’s superfund list, one of 23 toxic sites across Santa Clara county, more than any other county in the nation.

Now confronted by the race for AI, residents are concerned that local and state regulators are greenlighting datacenters by way of streamlined review. If a center requires no more than 100 megawatts of backup diesel power, enough to light up maybe 75,000 houses, the California Energy Commission exempts it from a more demanding regulatory process. Of the 15 datacenters fully vetted for such an exemption since 2011, not a single one was denied.

Toxic emissions from diesel generators trouble the regional Bay Area air district and the powerful California Air Resources Board, but not enough for the state to insist that datacenters use green energy for their backup power. With their dirty fuel, AI and its robots will enjoy the privilege of never having to suffer a power outage like the rest of us.

“Instead of asking hard questions about AI, California has chosen to operate in the dark,” says Robert Sarvey, a retired cobbler who has papered the state with lawyerly briefs critical of its oversight.

In the dark. That's the state of our mind when it comes to AI. It means forgetting **the energy crisis of 2000-2001**, when California and its utilities built too many natural gas-powered plants. The panic turned into an energy glut and saddled ratepayers with billions of dollars in costs for infrastructure that sits idle today.

In the dark explains how we blithely accept big tech's assurances that the water it uses is no big deal. Or how we ignore that datacenters, once constructed, hardly employ a soul. The centers sell no taxable goods. The property taxes they do yield are made to sound like a windfall. But what's a windfall in California where property taxes are capped? We're a state where land is valuable and water scarce, and building more houses and reducing carbon emissions are longstanding goals. Might we have just told the datacenters to pound sand elsewhere?

When San Jose's mayor cancels a meeting with me – he's running for governor and **raking in** millions of dollars in campaign dough from the tech lords – I call his deputy city manager, Manuel Pineda, who oversees AI infrastructure. I tell him I come from a valley where the agricultural fields, for all their environmental peril, produce a crop I can touch, smell and taste, one that feeds the nation and the world.

What is the crop that's coming off the fields of datacenters?

He seems confounded by my question, and so I venture a run down the list: pornography, robot friends and lovers, deepfakes erasing the line between real and unreal, cheaper research for lawyers, more diagnostic tools for doctors, more profits for bankers and billionaires, more carbon spewed into the environment, mass joblessness, mass surveillance, AI-generated genocide.

I might have gone on, but he breaks his silence with a chirp of abundance. Datacenters are good for business, he says. They keep the oligarchs, who suffer from wanderlust, tethered to Silicon Valley.

There was no reckoning to be found here.

The unearthing of gold in California progressed like all plunders do. By the 1870s, the San Francisco barons had grown tired of their miners merely digging for nuggets. In the northern Sierra Nevada, at a place called **Malakoff Diggins**, they erected a first-of-a-kind

hydraulic system – dams, reservoirs, canals, ditches, flumes, pipes and hoses with nozzles – that industrialized gold's taking.

There was a force of the ice age now in the hands of man. Big cannons shot jets of water at such velocity that they blasted out an immense crater in the mountain.

Cascades of brown water, boulders, cobblestones, pebbles and mud poured out. The ruin ran great distances, clogging up the rivers and delta and the San Francisco Bay.

Vast tracts of farmland on the alluvial plains suffocated under the debris.

The road I'm driving climbs to the lip of that crater – the most enduring symbol of California's first extraction, now a state historic park. I get out of the car and stare down into the abyss. The skull of the mountain is gone, the innards hollowed out. What's left in the emptiness a century and-a-half later is not easy to fathom: a mercury-tainted pond with a few ducks and turtles, a stand of bulrushes, a scattering of contorted little pines and twisted manzanita.

The sheared-off walls, jagged with rocks, are leaking mottled red iron. The blood stained. The wound was eternal.

What lore of a last extraction would get passed down to the next generation staring into a new abyss, this one blasted out by a force of a far graver magnitude, this one infinitely wider and deeper, a plunder of all things that made the human race human?

At crater's bottom, what scattering, if any, might someday be found of us?

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