

At the Corner of Your Eye: Recollection of Forgotten Communities

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ABSTRACT

Paul Connerton has suggested that the study of the “social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering possible.”¹ In this paper I examine the process of remembering, recalling, and forgetting in relation to several historically African American settlements in the San Joaquin Valley and how memory is potentially used and abused.

Utilizing first-person interviews and oral histories; archival materials, including newspaper articles, and published secondary sources, this paper probes what Paul Ricoeur called the “intermediate level of reference between the poles of individual memory and collective memory, where concrete exchanges operate between the living memory of individual persons and the public memory of the communities to which they belong.”² By examining how the existence of these settlements has been obscured, barred, or eliminated from the public memory and how they are remembered (or not remembered) both within these segregated communities and by the hegemonic valley society.

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For the last several years, I have been trying to recapture, record, reconstruct, and preserve the story and the history of a number of historically African American rural settlements that span the floor of the San Joaquin Valley. Early in my research, each time someone would ask me about my work—rural black Central California communities—people always responded with some variation of “Oh, Allensworth.” Often, I would explain that my intent was to simply include Allensworth as just one community, among others, within my broader study. People, regardless of their background, would suddenly recall— or pulled from the recesses of their

¹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Themes in the Social Sciences (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans., Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

memory—another rural black community. A California State University, Fresno anthropology professor; the husband of a Fresno City College Spanish instructor; West Hills Community College, Lemoore students; and other friends and acquaintances all identified at least one additional community. This is how I was originally introduced to Fairmead, and learned the name of Home Gardens. A Fresno State student first told me about the collection of black farmers on the Valley's Westside. In each case, the person telling me about these communities relied upon the common or public memory of Allensworth to respond to the description of my research, even though many of them knew there were other such communities. Somehow, somewhere, within the psyche of people living in Central California is the notion that there was a black community in the South Valley named Allensworth. Most of these people had, I discovered through conversation, never even been to the Allensworth state park, yet, they knew it existed. Much of this awareness may have been due to the media coverage of a controversy over the proposed building of several mega-dairies on the perimeter of the park.

But, then, in each case, something else happened. I rejected the shared memory of Allensworth, with my assertion that I was working on other, often impoverished, rural communities. This caused, a sudden augmentation of the collective memory by their own personal memory and their individual remembering of another black settlement. Almost every person with whom I talked knew about the existence of at least one of these other communities. Once challenged to think beyond the confines of the superficial narrative of Allensworth, each was able to recall—produce a recollection—from personal knowledge of another settlement. This recalled memory (rather than the public one) almost always came from their own experience with a community: they had lived near it, knew former residents, or had other connections that forged a personal connection. It may have been that this made the community to

which they were personally connected appear commonplace to the point that it could not be *the stuff of history*.

What I suspect happens, in these cases, is that the collective memory comes to the surface as an almost automatic reaction. When that superficial memory is rejected, or called into question, there is a conscious remembering (the process of recollection) that calls up individual, private, and personal knowledge. However, it is my fear that this personal knowledge may be at risk through the process of *forgetting*, and the process of replacing individual memory with an agreed upon cultural, social, and public memory. In this context, I do not mean to imply the forgetting of age or senility, but rather a form of collective forgetting that functions within the creation of public memory. Paul Ricœur suggests that...

[F]orgetting is lamented in the same way as aging and death: it is one of the figures of the inevitable, the irremediable. And yet forgetting is bound up with memory... its strategies and, under certain conditions, its cultivation worthy of a genuine *ars oblivionis* result in the fact that we cannot simply classify forgetting through the effacement of traces among the dysfunctions of memory alongside amnesia... (Ricœur 2004:426).

The urgency with which I have been driven to reconstruct the lives of these communities, and those who lived in them, stems from my personal fear that they will be forgotten and that their role in the history of California will be obscured to the point of nonexistence. Perhaps, in this case, I am trying to correct the *dysfunction of memory before it progresses to amnesia*.

Hopefully, it is not too late.

In what follows I examine those aspects of collective memory most intimately associated with forgetting by looking at how different recollections about the history of the San Joaquin Valley contribute to sublimating the memory of black settlements and leads to the creation of a memory that ultimately excludes any trace of their very existence. What remains is not only an incomplete picture, but a false one. Ricœur would term this a “failure of memory” (Ricœur

2004:80). The examples that follow come from a variety of sources. The first, taken from a 1986 paper on the geography of the San Joaquin Valley by a University of California, Berkeley geographer actually addresses African Americans within the rural landscape, but does so in such a way that, unintentionally, advances the process of forgetting. The second is an example from another University of California professor: this time a labor historian from UC Riverside. In this example, an extensive history that should have included the participation of numerous ethnic groups that have participated in the rural landscape focuses, instead, narrowly on a single population to the exclusion of all others. The third example comes from one of the most successful farmers who, over the course of his long career in Central California agribusiness hired (usually indirectly) tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of migrant workers to work in his fields of cotton. In this case, he paints a picture in which the participation of African Americans is denied outright, irrespective of evidence to the contrary. Finally, I address some thoughts surrounding the use and misuse of public space, in relation to these settlements, and how such uses contribute to the twin processes of creating a community of social memory and promoting selective forgetting.

University of California, Berkeley geographer, James J. Parsons provides the first example of how the formation of collective memory includes an element of forgetting. In 1986, he described the colorful ethnic mosaic of California's Great Central Valley:

Armenian immigrants... began arriving in the Fresno area in the 1890s... Hanford, Newman and Gustine have large Azorean minorities... Swedes at Turlock and Kingsburg, Yugoslavs at Delano, Dutch at Ripon, Germans at Reedley and Lodi, and Basques at Bakersfield. Italians and Italian-Swiss are concentrated in the wine industry and in dairying... Filipinos... in the asparagus fields of the delta. Like the Sikhs... their valley base is Stockton... Russians in Kerman, Assyrians in Modesto and Turlock, and Japanese around Livingstone... (Parsons 1986:378).

Parsons claimed that the first ethnic farm laborers in the San Joaquin Valley were Chinese immigrants. He fails to mention Native American labor, which preceded the ethnic Chinese in the late nineteenth century prior to the State putting a bounty on Indian scalps. He notes that “anti-Chinese sentiment intensified” at which point they left the fields for the urban centers (Parsons 1986:378). This intensification of anti-Chinese sentiment would have corresponded with the Chinese Exclusionary Acts of 1882, 1892, and 1902.

The Japanese came next but in the end had the same fate, although they were the largest factor in the valley labor market as late as 1909. Today (1986) [Japanese-Americans]... are among the most successful growers in the valley (Parsons 1986:378).

However, as he had done with Native Americans, Parsons fails to mention that as early as 1884, just two years after the passage of the first Exclusionary Act, the ethnic group most sought-after to work in the fields of Central California was African Americans from the American South. This is especially true in the search for skilled labor to work in the fields of cotton which would eventually yield one of the largest cash crops of the region (Cleveland Gazette 1884; Kern County Californian 1884a; Kern County Californian 1884b; Kern County Californian 1884c; New York Times 1884a; New York Times 1884b). In fact, many of the displaced Chinese laborers left California for Mississippi specifically to replace migrating blacks (Loewen 1988). Parsons’ omission of African Americans from the Valley landscape is striking. It might be understandable, even forgivable, to omit the contributions of Native Americans, as that group played only a small role in the earliest days following statehood of Central California ranching and a limited part in the earliest days of the establishment of agriculture. Yet, for almost eighty years African Americans were regularly recruited from the South to work in the fields and orchards of Central California. In both integrated and segregated work crews, they worked with farm workers of Japanese, Filipino, Anglo, and Mexican descent (Torres 1994). It is not that

Parsons failed to address the African American population; he mentions the group most often referred to as the *Black Okies*, (Arax 2002a; Arax 2002b; Johnson 2006; LeSeur 2000)

specifically:

The black component of the Dust Bowlers—and they continued coming during World War II—is confined to the large valley cities. I know of no black rural enclaves, nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work. A small black colonization project in Kings County was organized in 1910, but it fell victim to bad water and alkali. The area is now a state park (Parsons 1986:379).

This small paragraph is the only mention of African Americans and appears, in the original article, to represent a transition between a larger section about white migration to the region in the years of the Dust Bowl and the history of Hispanic farm labor. I will return to the first section, shortly, however, I would like to focus on the statements (one could even call them claims) made in this short paragraph about African Americans. I have selected this particular passage as the starting point in this exercise because Parsons sums up the general knowledge—or the public memory—of rural African Americans in the San Joaquin Valley in just three little sentences. Every single sentence of this paragraph, however, is wrong. It is not all that uncommon, although often unfortunate, for the recollection of the past to be incorrect. Maurice Halbwachs posited:

The individual calls recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory. In other words, the various groups that compose society are capable at every moment of reconstructing their past. But, as we have seen, they most frequently distort that past in the act of reconstructing it... society, in each period, rearranges its recollections in such a way as to adjust them to the variable conditions of its equilibrium (Halbwachs 1992:182-183),

Parsons, in all likelihood inadvertently, distorted the past by the way in which he reconstructed it here. African Americans did come to Central California as part of the Dust Bowl, and did continue to come during World War II. In fact, African Americans, responding to the call of labor recruiters throughout the Carolinas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, and

other Southern states, arrived in the cotton fields of Kern, Tulare, Kings, Fresno, Madera, and Merced Counties from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s (Arax 2002b; Johnson 2006). While Parsons correctly noted that the largest number of African Americans ultimately migrated to the “large valley cities” (Bakersfield, Fresno, and Stockton) he makes no mention of the fact that many who lived in and near these urban centers worked as field labor.

In the paragraph just prior to the one quoted above, Parsons waxes poetic about the so-called Okies (the white ones, not the black ones):

[W]hite Protestant Anglo-Saxons from Texas and Oklahoma... refugees from drought and poverty. The Okies, immortalized by Steinbeck in his writings, came west along Highway 66 in their jalopies to look for relatives in Weedpatch and Arvin and “the water that tastes like cherry wine.” Their indomitable optimism, their determination to survive and to overcome, was captured in the songs of Woody Guthrie... and the photographer Dorothea Lange. In those days cotton was still harvested by hand, and seasonal demands for labor were large... Today, first- and second-generation Okies occupy dominant positions throughout the valley (Parsons 1986:379).

In addition to the different framing and tone of these two paragraphs, Parsons points out the photojournalism of the great Dorothea Lange, whose images of the people of the so-called Okies occupy the apex of our collective memory of the Dust Bowl years and the plight of the migrants. Whereas Parsons claims that “nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work” Lange, herself, produced photographs of African Americans working in the fields of California at the height of the inward migration of the Okies and Arkies. Perhaps this ability to block out the images of blacks in the field, in favor of those white Okies now occupying “dominant positions throughout the valley” is what Halbwachs had in mind when he wrote:

Society represents the past to itself in different ways: it modifies its conventions. As... members [accept] these conventions, they inflect their recollections in the same direction in which collective memory evolves... We should hence renounce the idea that the past is in itself preserved within individual memories as if from these memories there had been gathered as many distinct proofs as there are individuals... (Halbwachs 1992:172).

It is important to address the difference in tone between the two paragraphs—the ones describing the white and black Okies. In the paragraph about African Americans, Parsons makes statements like “they continued coming” and they were “confined to the large valley cities.” These are factual statements, with little or no judgment. Even his observation that “nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work” does not appear to imply that these were not hard working people, rather that they were just not a part of the rural landscape. However, in his paragraph describing the arrival of the white Okies—a population despised by the local population to the point where Steinbeck’s novel was banned from the Kern County Library (Kapell 1982), he employs an array of descriptions that illustrate a certain admiration for their contributions. He refers to them as “refugees from drought and poverty,” claims that they are “immortalized by Steinbeck in his writings,” mentions their jalopies, and their “indomitable optimism, their determination to survive and overcome.” These are not simply statements of fact. This is painting the image of a people with words. These are the *salt of the earth* people worth remembering. One group is celebrated while the other is catalogued. One group is described as having done lauded deeds and to have been made immortal, while it appears that the other contributed nothing worth noting.

There are two other problematic statements in Parsons’ original paragraph about blacks in the San Joaquin Valley—“I know of no black rural enclaves” (Parsons 1986:379) and “A small black colonization project in Kings County was organized in 1910, but it fell victim to bad water and alkali. The area is now a state park” (Parsons 1986:379). Since the end of the nineteenth century there have been more than a dozen such all- or predominantly-black rural communities in the region. Apparently, Parsons was just not aware of their existence. These communities include Cookseyville, outside of Atwater; South Dos Palos, near Dos Palos; Fairmead, between

Chowchilla and Madera; Lanare, four miles west of Riverdale; Bowles Colony, near Fowler; a collection of black-owned farms outside of Raisin City; Home Garden, southeast of Hanford; the Matheny Tract, outside Tulare; Teviston, south of Tipton; and, of course, Allensworth, the colonization project to which he referred. Additionally, Centerville may have begun life as an all-black community. According to one estimate, as many as forty-thousand African Americans lived, rurally, just in the Tulare Lake Basin by the early 1960s (Arax 2002a).

Parsons' next claim that "A small black colonization project in Kings County was organized in 1910, but it fell victim to bad water and alkali..." is problematic in a number of ways. Allensworth was the culmination of the so-called Exoduster movement that founded many all-black communities throughout Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and elsewhere. This movement, led by Benjamin "Pap" Singleton and others, spanned the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. It is not unreasonable to consider Allensworth to be the last effort of that movement, especially considering that Singleton's son Joshua was one of the earliest settlers in the small community (de Graaf, et al. 2001:156; Ramsey 1977:85).

However, the moniker of colony, as used in relation to Allensworth, is not taken from the Exoduster movement, but rather from a process that was referred to as the *Great California Colonization Project* that built a number of communities throughout southern and central California (Mead 1916) between the 1890s and the 1920s. The term colony was applied to a collection of tracts (often town lots as well as farm lots) which were marketed around the world to prospective farmers, in an effort to transition from the large landholdings of Miller and Lux, Tevis and Carr, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, and the other early California land barons (Iglar 2001; Morgan 1914; Rayner 2008). The Allensworth colony was built, at the same time, and by the same (white) developer, as the Alpaugh colony, a

few miles away. Few, if anyone, continue to refer to that town, Dos Palos, Madera, Fairmead, Exeter, or any of other numerous communities that were formed as part of the colonization project as a colony. While there were efforts, in the nineteenth century to form a black colony in Baja California (in Mexico) by supporters of Marcus Garvey, there is no connection between Allensworth (or any of the other Exoduster projects) and that colonization effort. To refer to Allensworth as a colony, while no longer doing so for all the other communities that began as part of the colonization efforts sets Allensworth apart. The use of the term makes it sound as if blacks were colonizing California rather than participating in the widespread real estate venture that populated much of Orange County, and the San Fernando, San Gabriel, and San Joaquin Valleys. It makes it sound like a colony is a *black* thing, rather than a *California* thing.

Parsons' suggests (correctly) that bad water and soil were responsible for the demise of the Allensworth community, and ultimately, in a sense, they were. However, the failure of the original developer to deliver a promised water system to Allensworth meant that the residents were dependent upon individual wells, rather than on a municipal water supply. Instead of installing the system that was specified in the contract (something they did do in Alpaugh), the developers, having recouped their investment and earned a small profit, elected to simply give the shares of the Allensworth water company to the town's residents and walked away (Ramsey 1977:49-53). The result, of course, was that Allensworth literally dried up and blew away.

Parsons' final statement "The area is now a state park" (Parsons 1986:379), appears to be little more than the expression of a plain fact. However, it too presents the careful reader with a couple of problems. First, he is correct. There is a state park at the site of the historical community of Allensworth. It is apparently often forgotten (or never known) that there continues to be an unincorporated town, named Allensworth, just south of the Allensworth State Park. That

community includes a mixed population of blacks, Hispanics and whites. The implication, in Parsons' version of events (which tends to coincide with most people's understanding) appears to be that Allensworth ceased to exist and was replaced by a park or a memorial. The memorial has become the reality, and the real town (which physically exists) has faded from vision. Even when one visits the park, the town, itself, appears to be so far from the reconstructed homes and businesses that it does not *feel* like it is part of Allensworth.

It is unlikely that Professor Parsons intended to perpetrate a hoax or fabricate a lie about the history of African Americans in the San Joaquin Valley, yet his apparently well-intended reference to all-black rural communities actually painted a picture that is baseless and inaccurate. It is, however, a story that matches the perceived reality believed by long-time Valley residents. The well-understood narrative of farm labor, throughout the San Joaquin Valley, remains based on Hispanic labor replacing Asian labor, sometime in the early days of the twentieth century.

The vision of blacks picking cotton in California fields, or living in rural black settlements, conjures many associations with America's Deep South. Perhaps that association is what many in Central California would rather avoid. Some (both black and white) might prefer to limit an awareness of the exploitation of African Americans in the state. In many of the interviews I have done with African Americans who lived in these rural enclaves, they have proudly discussed the fact that they, and other members of their family, picked cotton (as well as other crops from fruit to beans), or, just as proudly stating that they never had to pick cotton a day in their life (Brooks 1977; Williams 2010). By removing African Americans from the cotton fields, the reality of the landscape becomes *blotted out*, in favor of a different memory. Creating a new collective memory, one that can unify those who share it, often requires that facts are lost or transformed. James Fentress and Chris Wickham addressed this process:

[T]he blotting-out process during transmission is not just a general and gradual loss of factual information... social memory is not always good at conserving facts... They are lost whenever... old information is no longer meaningful; or... because they do not fit into the new... context designed to hold the information... This helps us perceive a general pattern in remembering and forgetting... facts must be transformed into images, arranged in stories... Once memory has been conceptualized into a story, the process of change and of factual loss naturally slows down. (Fentress and Wickham 1992:73-74).

The knowledge of these rural African American settlements is apparently not widespread throughout the region. The knowledge of their existence diminishes as these communities transition from predominately (if not all) black to populations that are mostly Hispanic. Many second and third generation African Americans have left these segregated enclaves and moved elsewhere, including, as Parsons noted, the urban centers of the Valley. This process contributes to the “general and gradual loss of factual information” (Fentress and Wickham 1992:73-74). Unless there is a corrective—something that returns these communities to the collective memory of the San Joaquin Valley—their existence appears to be destined to be among those things of the past that become blotted-out.

I hoped that Devra Weber’s book, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*, was going to help prevent just such a blotting-out. Here was a book dedicated to tracing the history of cotton in Central California. The write-up on the inner flyleaf proclaimed:

The history of cotton in California is defined by the complex and changing relations among workers, growers, unions, and the agents of local, state, and federal governments, and yet these have never before been fully analyzed (Weber 1994:front flyleaf).

Finally, a scholarly work—Professor Weber is a respected member of the History faculty at the University of California, Riverside—that fully covers the story of labor in the cotton fields of Central California. I hoped that this book would be useful in my quest to reconstruct the

history of these rural communities and the people who lived in them. But, as I read farther down the blurb in the flyleaf, I noticed something. It read:

[S]he shows that Mexican workers—women as much as men—consistently developed strategies and organized against the harsh conditions they faced... In 1933, despite the threat of deportation, they launched a series of strikes... unmatched at the time in number and size” (Weber 1994:front flyleaf).

There were a series of agricultural strikes in 1933, among the largest being the Pixley Cotton Strike. However, many of these were organized by outside activists from the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) (Rivera 2005; Torres 1994). Weber claims that between seventy-five and ninety-five percent of strikers in Pixley were Mexican (Weber does not differentiate between Mexicans and Mexican Americans) (Weber 1994:79). Robert Torres and Alicia Rivera have both pointed out that the brief success of this strike was predicated upon the solidarity maintained between three groups of striking farm workers—Hispanics, blacks, and white Okies—and the inability of the growers to divide them and play one group off against the others (Rivera 2005; Torres 1994). Weber does not make it evident, even in her notes, how she came up with the percentages she reported. Her endnote cites a survey and offer no explanation for the twenty percentage point spread, or how the ethnic or racial backgrounds of the strikers were designated or calculated for the report she cites, or how she interprets that data to support her claim. Contemporary newspaper articles state that the crews working in the fields were mixed, white, brown, and black. Eventually, a local editorial from late October of 1933 suggested that:

Perhaps white sheeted Knights might throw the fear of the devil into those whom neither state nor federal authority was able to throw the fear of god. The mystery of what is under a sheet is sometimes a powerful influence (Visalia Times-Delta 1933).

The Ku Klux Klan seldom resorted to racially motivated violence in Central California because the threat was generally sufficient to control minority groups, especially southern blacks. If the

strike was all about Mexicans, the threat of Klan violence would mean very little. However, if a significant number of the strikers were southern blacks, any threat of the Klan would be significant.

I do not wish to suggest that Weber's work consciously seeks to suppress the memory of other subaltern groups in the fields of California, simply on her description of the strike of 1933. Throughout the work, I did find a handful of references to blacks. The first implies that although African Americans may have been considered for work in the cotton fields, they were neither pursued or considered to be ideal labor. Describing the state of the labor force in the mid-1920s, Weber remarks:

San Joaquin Valley growers began to compete for workers, attempted to entice workers away from other ranches, and placed advertisements in local and southern newspapers to attract pickers, spurring rumors that southern blacks would be imported, much to the consternation of those who had feared all along that cotton would eventually "saddle [California] with a negro problem" (Pacific Rural Press 1925) (Weber 1994:36).

In fact, recruiters had actually brought in black labor from the South, specifically to work in the cotton fields of the Valley, since 1884, when the first group arrived to pick cotton on Kern Island (now Bakersfield) (Cleveland Gazette 1884; Kern County Californian 1884b; New York Times 1884a; New York Times 1884b). Recruiting and hiring African Americans, from the South, continued through the early 1960s (Arax 2002a; Arax 2002b; Arax and Wartzman 2003). As I already mentioned, I have interviewed dozens of African Americans, and read numerous oral histories of others, most of which picked cotton at some point during the four decades leading up to the establishment of the mechanical means to pick cotton in the mid-1960s (Brooks 1977; Cooksey 2007a; Cooksey 2007b; Cowlings 1977a; Cowlings 1977b; Digby, et al. 1976; Hannibal and Watkins 1977; LeSeur 2000; Pilkinton 1977). Later, Weber acknowledges the existence of blacks in the fields (something that might surprise Parsons):

A man whose wife first said it “nearly killed him” to work under a black contractor later developed respect for his boss. Two months after Texans had demanded the expulsion of Mexicans from the Arvin camp, the unit elected a Mexican worker to the camp council. Mexicans, blacks, and Anglos were later to work together in the Workers Alliance and in Unions (Weber 1994:149-150).

There are three significant points in this short excerpt. First, she points out that a black man worked as a foreman, or crew boss, in the field (over white and Hispanic labor). She continues to address racism and bigotry when she tells writes about whites pushing for exclusionary practices to be implemented in the labor camp. Finally, she specifically points out that the three groups “Mexicans, blacks and Anglos” worked together in the union (Weber 1994:150).

She reiterates this last point when she mentions that during the Cotton Strike of 1938, “Mexicans, Anglos, and blacks met... nightly for strike meetings” (Weber 1994:183). Weber makes just two more, similarly brief mentions of African Americans throughout the rest of the book. On the book’s back flyleaf, it states “...Mexican farm workers emerge for the first time as historical actors shaping their own destinies” (Weber 1994:back flyleaf). This framing tends to downplay the role played by African Americans, as well as poor whites during the Depression, to focus on that of Hispanics in the fields of cotton.

I do not want to diminish the importance of Professor Weber’s work. This is a well-researched, authoritative examination of the role of Hispanic farm labor in California’s cotton industry. This is a must-read for anyone hoping to understand California agricultural labor, with the caveat that the story she tells is actually the story of *Hispanic* farm workers and their relationship to cotton, not the definitive work about labor in cotton, nor on agricultural labor, in general. Weber’s book demonstrates that “the past is... reconstructed on the basis of the present” (Halbwachs 1992:40). Today, the vast majority of those working in the fields, groves, and vineyards of Central California (regardless of crop) are Hispanic, therefore, the narrative that Mexicans and Mexican Americans work in the fields of California Agribusiness is a narrative

that is not to be questioned. It becomes a case of ‘it always was,’ even though the reality is that ‘it wasn’t always.’

If Parsons’ *forgetting* is as problematic in its unintentional nature as it is in its inaccuracy, Weber’s transgressions, on the other hand, are little more than her overstatement of the narrative of one group to the (inadvertent or deliberate) exclusion of others who can make similar claims. In both cases, public memory suffers from the forgetting of much of what we would call *truth*.

There are other ways that blotting-out of the memory of African Americans in the cotton fields of Central California serves to blot-out their presence. One striking example of this was when one of the most powerful titans of California Agribusiness, J. G. Boswell, said, in 1999, “Blacks? We don’t really have any blacks in this town” (J. G. Boswell, quoted in Arax and Wartzman 2003:19-20) in reference to his hometown of Corcoran, California. Besides having Arax and Wartzman point out that Boswell’s long-time foreman was African American, it should be clear to anyone that what he said is just not true. This is made most evident by the fact that just outside the city limits of Corcoran sits the one-time, all-black enclave of Sunny Acres.

During the years when California saw a large influx of the so-called Okies, hundreds of African American field hands who worked on Boswell’s land lived in a labor camp at one end of Corcoran, referred to by locals simply as “Nigger Town.” The tarpaper shacks and tents of the labor camp were supplemented by juke joints, brothels, and churches. Eventually, many of the black families looking for a more healthy environment moved out of the labor camp, across town, to a forty acre plot of land originally known as Boot Hill. Tulare’s Edwin Matheny, a travelling salesman, sold the land to black residents (when no one else in the area would), for a low down payment. He financed his clients himself.³ Eventually, during the summer of 1964, the

³ Matheny is also responsible for financing African Americans in a development outside Tulare, known today, simply as the Matheny Tract.

local residents, while working to get a water and sewage system for their settlement, renamed the rural enclave Sunny Acres, (Arax and Wartzman 2003:258). Yet despite this history that spans at least half a century, in which African Americans lived (at one point) in both a segregated labor camp and a segregated settlement, Boswell was able to claim, with no reservation, that few, if any blacks, ever lived in Corcoran.

Perhaps, in all three of these previous cases, it is important to try to ascertain the motives behind the authors. In the case of Parsons, the passages I dissected are from a piece on the physical geography of Central California, into which he inserted a small section on the human landscape. As for Weber, apparently her work was always intended to cover the history of Hispanic labor working in the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley. Boswell, on the other hand, may either have had a reason to diminish the contributions of African Americans in his own fields, or, as the product of a southern family, he may have retained prejudices and predispositions that skewed his thinking and his expressions. Regardless of the motivations, however, the end result is the same. Each of them removes African Americans from the cotton fields of Central California. Without blacks working those fields, there is no logical explanation for the existence of non-urban black communities throughout the Valley. If the only black community that ever existed was Allensworth—and it failed—there is no place for blacks (other than a memorial space) within the shared memory that represents life in the San Joaquin Valley. This creates a narrative within the shared memory that blacks only live in urban spaces in the San Joaquin Valley and the only attempt to create an all-black, non-urban space, was Allensworth, and it failed.

Although, seemingly not directly related to forgetting, there is one additional thing about the town of Allensworth, the related state park, and its use as a public memorial that needs to be

addressed. The following observations are intended to provide a starting point from which to examine some of the questions surrounding the park and its uses. As I mentioned, earlier, Allensworth is known, almost universally, throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Part of that common knowledge comes from the physical existence of the park itself. Locals see signs for the park along the highway and read about conflicts between supporters of the park and her neighbors (disputes over land use). Local news stories usually carry some background about the founding of the community, and its ultimate fate. Basically, there is a loose narrative known by most Valley residents concerning Allensworth. Parsons' provides much of this story above, however, for the sake of what follows I am going to paraphrase it something like this:

A long time ago, some black people tried to build an all-black town in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. They built a library and a school and had lots of plans, but—probably because of poor planning and a lack of administrative skills—the town had been built on bad soil with little water and it failed. Years later, to honor the ill-conceived attempts made by these black people, the State built a park on the site to which, every year, a bunch of African Americans from Los Angeles and Oakland visit the park to commemorate the failed effort.

Although this may appear to be (and, of course it is) an oversimplification of the story, it is not too far from the various versions I have heard from Valley residents. Allensworth has become part of the collective memory, yet, its story is not a positive one. In fact, it is a story of failure, of bad decisions, and of a group of people who obviously did not know what they were doing, or who, at the very least, made some very bad decisions. Viewed in this light, the park has become a monument to a failed enterprise. Every June, people gather to celebrate Juneteenth, the commemoration of the end of slavery in the United States. The commemoration at the park also celebrates Colonel Allen Allensworth and those who had the dream that the original town Allensworth (and now the Allensworth park) represents. The event repeats and reinforces a narrative about the founding of the doomed community, and the connection of those present to those who originally participated in that dream.

The circumscription of the narrative is thus placed in the service of the circumscription of the identity defining the community. A history taught, a history learned, but also a history celebrated... A formidable pact is concluded in this way between remembrance... and commemoration (Ricœur 2004:85).

The spiritual (and often actual) descendants of those who participated in the original project often attend the event, as well as the curious who come to the park to see what *might* have been. Here is where the notion of collective memory and the role of forgetting and recollecting come into play with the notion of commemoration and memorialization. Allensworth has, within our shared memory, come to represent the attempt by African Americans to build their own community in the San Joaquin Valley. Ricœur links identity to narrative, which is reinforced by the collective commemoration. Therefore, part of that identity becomes linked to, not just the dream of the community of Allensworth, but the failure of community as well. There are numerous historically African American communities in the San Joaquin Valley. Most of them sustained larger populations for longer periods of time than Allensworth. However, none of them has ever entered the collective memory. They have not entered the narrative because they do not serve the narrative. Not only does the existence of these other communities remove the uniqueness of Allensworth as the only all-black rural community in the Valley, but, these communities represent alternatives to Allensworth's failure. With fewer resources, and fewer expectations, these other communities survived, even if they did not prosper. Over the years, they provided homes to hundreds of families. Each settlement has supported churches and (to varying levels of success) businesses. From these communities the grandchildren of slaves and their descendants attended school, some went to college and entered professions, and many of them moved beyond the confines of these segregated settlements. Yet, every year, these communities are left out of the celebration at Allensworth, and out of the collective memory. Each year, they step farther back into the fog of time, where, unless their stories are preserved,

they will eventually fade away, and the only community that will be remembered will be the one that failed. Teviston and Sunny Acres are each less than twenty miles from Allensworth. Few of the Juneteenth celebrants are aware of the existence of these communities, nor the history of the thousands of African Americans who made these, one-time, all-black communities their home. If, as Paul Connerton suggests, a commemorative celebration is where a “community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative” (Connerton 1989:70) then, the Juneteenth celebration at Allensworth is, in fact, reinforcing a specific narrative. On the positive side, the celebration commemorates the hopes and dreams that went into the foundation of that community. Perhaps the nostalgia for a community that never was is the representation of a “potential space of cultural experience that one has shared with one’s friends and compatriots that is based neither on nation nor religion but on elective affinities (Boym 2001:53). On the inverse, the Juneteenth celebration reinforces, in the minds of some, the failure of African Americans to fulfill that dream. Once again, we may be seeing that “the past is... reconstructed on the basis of the present” (Halbwachs 1992:40). What does this say about present conditions, both within the hegemonic community that has framed the narrative and those subaltern groups that find themselves excluded? How might the story change if all of the rural black Valley communities were celebrated at the Juneteenth celebration? Would recollecting (re-collecting) the pasts of these communities change the observance? Would doing so change the master narrative?

Some of the examples in this paper—specifically parts of the Parsons publication and Boswell’s remark about blacks in Corcoran—I have used in conference papers. I have had several long conversations with colleagues and friends about other examples—such as my thoughts on the Allensworth Juneteenth celebrations and Weber’s book. However, up to this

point, my thoughts—and the words that came from them—have tended to express, on one hand, my frustration that the stories of these people may be lost forever, and on the other hand, a righteous indignation brought on by the apparent injustice of these people having lost the ability to be heard or seen. I have, often times, seen myself as some crusader seeking historical justice for the victims of this cruel twist of fate that has excluded their story from the narrative of Valley history. However, this is the first time in which I have attempted to try to address the processes behind this injustice or historical miscarriage. It is the primary processes of collective memory—recollection and forgetting—that are at play here. My job, as a scholar, continues to be one of championing a certain level of intellectual integrity, which, hopefully, will result in restoring this part of the historical narrative. Ricœur sums up the processes and the dangers:

Too little memory... can be classified as a passive forgetting, inasmuch as it can appear as a deficit in the work of memory. But, as a strategy of avoidance, of evasion, of flight, it is an ambiguous form of forgetting, active as much as passive. As active, this forgetting entails the same sort of responsibility as that imputed to acts of negligence, omission, imprudence, lack of foresight, in all of the situations of inaction, in which it appears after-the-fact to an enlightened and honest consciousness that one should have and could have known, or at least tried to know... social agents remaster their capacity to give an account (Ricœur 2004:449).

So, I will continue my crusade. I will continue to try to bring these stories back to the narrative.

Because, by doing so, the narrative becomes more noble, more inclusive, and more human.

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