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Obscured by the Tule Fog:
Rural African Americans Fade into the San Joaquin Valley

For several years, I have been working to recapture, record, reconstruct, and preserve the story and the history of a number of historically majority African American or all-black rural settlements that span the floor of the San Joaquin Valley. Each time I mentioned my research—rural black Central California communities—the response was always some variation of "Oh, Allensworth." Within public memory is the knowledge that there was a black community named Allensworth, even though most residents have never been to there. When I explained that my research included other settlements, Valley residents often recalled, from the recesses of their memory, at least one other rural black community. In each case, the respondent initially relied upon the common or public memory of Allensworth.

But, in many cases, something else happened. The shared memory of Allensworth, when rejected by my assertion of other rural communities, was augmented by the memory of one or more other black settlements. Once challenged to think beyond the superficial narrative of Allensworth, many Valley residents were able to recall—produce a recollection—from personal knowledge of one or more settlement. This recalled memory came from their own experience: they had lived near, knew former residents of, or had other connections that forged a personal connection – connections that may have made the community commonplace to the point that it could not possibly be *the stuff of memory*.

Collective memory—in this case, Allensworth—comes to the surface, as an automatic reaction. When that superficial, automatic memory is challenged, there is a conscious process of

recollection that calls up individual, private, and personal knowledge. However, both this personal knowledge and the collective memory may be at risk through the process of *forgetting*. Paul Ricœur suggested that, "forgetting is bound up with memory… we cannot simply classify forgetting through the effacement of traces among the dysfunctions of memory alongside amnesia…" (Ricœur 2004). For several years I have been working to document the lives of these communities is to correct the *dysfunction of memory before it progresses to amnesia*.

In what follows, I explore aspects of collective memory associated with forgetting by looking at how different recollections about the history of the San Joaquin Valley sublimate the memory of black settlements and lead to the creation of a memory that ultimately excludes any trace of their existence. What remains is not an incomplete picture, but a false one—what Ricœur would label a "failure of memory" (Ricœur 2004).

For the first example of how the formation of a collective memory includes an element of forgetting, I turn to the late University of California, Berkeley geographer, James J. Parsons who once 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).

Parsons goes on to claim that the first ethnic farm laborers in the San Joaquin Valley were Chinese immigrants. He noted that "anti-Chinese sentiment intensified" with the Chinese Exclusionary Acts of 1882, 1892, and 1902, at which point they left the fields for the urban centers (Parsons 1986).

> 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).

However, Parsons failed to mention that as early as 1884 one ethnic group often sought-after to work 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).

Parsons' omission of African Americans from the Valley landscape is striking. For almost eighty years African Americans were regularly recruited from the South to work in the fields and orchards of Central California where they worked alongside (occasionally in integrated work crews, but more often in segregated groups) 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 *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).

Parsons' only mention of African Americans, sums up the general knowledge—or the public memory—of rural African Americans in the San Joaquin Valley in three sentences. Almost every phrase of the paragraph is wrong. However, it is common for the recollection of the past to be wrong. 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),

Inadvertently Parsons distorted the past by the way he reconstructed it. African Americans did come to Central California during the period of the Dust Bowl. In fact, responding to the call of labor recruiters throughout the Carolinas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, and other Southern states, they arrived in Valley cotton fields from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s (Arax 2002b; Johnson 2006). While Parsons correctly notes that the largest number of African Americans ultimately migrated to the "large valley cities" (Bakersfield, Fresno, and Stockton) he failed to mention that many lived in and near these urban centers while they worked throughout the agricultural sector.

In the paragraph just prior to the one about black migration, 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).

It is clear from every interview I have personally conducted or read from the archives that with the exclusion of the first few words of this quote, every bit of it applies equally well to the so-called black Okies as it does the "white Protestant Anglo-Saxons… immortalized by Steinbeck." Consider the different framing and tone of these two paragraphs.

Parsons also singles out the photojournalism of the Dorothea Lange whose imagery occupies the apex of our collective memory of Okies during the Dust Bowl. Whereas Parsons claimed that "nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work" Lange, produced photographs of

African Americans working in the fields of California at the height of the inward Okie migration. 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).

In the paragraph about African Americans, Parsons states "they continued coming" and they were "confined to the large valley cities." These are presented as factual statements, with little or no judgment. Even his observation that "nor are blacks often seen doing agricultural work" implies that blacks were 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 resulting in Steinbeck's novel being banned from the Kern County Library (Kapell 1982), he displays an admiration for their contributions. He refers to them as "refugees from drought and poverty," 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 people worthy to remember. One group is celebrated while the other is simply mentioned. One group is described as immortal, while the other suffers from a mortality that removes it from collective memory.

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) 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). Parsons admits to knowing of "no black

rural enclaves," and although there have been more than dozen such all- or predominantly-black rural communities throughout the region, apparently he 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, Allenworth, the colonization project to which he referred. Additionally, Centerville may have begun life in the nineteenth century 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 spanned the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. However, the moniker of colony, as used in relation to Allensworth, is not taken from the Exoduster movement, but rather from a real estate marketing process that was referred to as the Great California Colonization Project that built a number of communities throughout southern and central California (Mead 1916). California colonies consisted of town and rural tracts marketed in an effort to sell off the large landholdings of Miller and Lux, Tevis and Carr, Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and the other early California land barons (Igler 2001; Morgan 1914; Rayner 2008). Even though the goal was to establish an all-black community, the Allensworth colony was built and marketted, at the same time, and by the same

white developer, as near-by Alpaugh. Few people continue to refer to Madera, Fairmead, Chowchilla, Exeter, or other communities created as part of the colonization project as *a colony*. Doing so, in relation to Allensworth makes it sound as if African Americans were literally 'colonizing' parts of California, rather than simply participating in a commonly practiced form of real estate development.

Parsons' wording implies that bad water (and soil) was responsible for the demise of the Allensworth community, in a sense, it was. However, the failure of the original developer to deliver the 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 promised in the original contract, 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). The promised rural irrigation system was never built, the local water was not good, and the town literally dried up. However, these were conditions that were well known to the developer, but not advertised to potential buyers.

Parsons' final statement "The area is now a state park" (Parsons 1986), appears to be little more than the expression of a plain fact. However, it too presents several problems. First, he is correct. There is a state park at the site of the historical community of Allensworth. However, it is apparently often forgotten (or never known) that there continues to be a town, named Allensworth, just south of the Allensworth State Park. That unincorporated 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 continues to physically exist) 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 he tells a story that matches the perceived reality believed by long-time Valley residents. His story represents the shared, common, and public memory

The vision of blacks picking cotton in California fields or rural black settlements conjures associations with the Deep South. Many may prefer to avoid that image and limit awareness of the exploitation of African Americans in the Valley. African Americans who lived in these rural enclaves have proudly discussed the fact that they, and other members of their family picked cotton, and other crops from fruit to beans, while others, just as proudly insist that they never had to pick cotton a day in their life (Brooks 1977; Williams 2010). By removing African Americans from the California cotton fields, the reality of the landscape becomes *blotted out*. Creating a new collective memory 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).

The presence of these rural African American settlements is not widely known. The awareness 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

mentioned, the urban centers of the Valley. This process contributes to the "general and gradual loss of factual information" (Fentress and Wickham 1992). 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).

Finally, a scholarly work that fully covered the history of labor in the cotton fields of Central California. But, as I read farther down 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).

There were a series of agricultural strikes in 1933, among the largest being the Pixley Cotton Strike, organized by outside activists from the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). 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 (Rivera 2005; Torres 1994). Contemporary newspaper articles indicate that the crews working in the fields were mixed, white, brown, and black. 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).

Although it maintained a strong presence throughout the region in the first half of the twentieth century, the Ku Klux Klan seldom resorted to racially motivated violence in Central California because the threat was typically 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, 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 the recruitment of Southern African Americans for work in the cotton fields was little more than a rumor.

> 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).

Recruiters brought black labor from the South 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). Later, Weber, almost as an aside, acknowledges the existence of blacks in the fields:

> 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).

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). Weber makes just two more, similarly brief mentions of African Americans throughout the rest of the book.

Weber's book demonstrates that "the past is… reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1992). Today, the vast majority of those working in the fields, groves, and vineyards of Central California (regardless of crop) are Hispanic. The narrative that Mexicans and Mexican Americans work in the fields of California Agribusiness is a narrative that is taken for granted. It becomes a case of "it always was," even though the reality is that "it wasn't always."

If Parsons' *crimes* of forgetting are as problematic in their unintentional nature as they are in their inaccuracy, Weber's transgressions, on the other hand, may be little more than her overstatement of the narrative of one group to the exclusion of others. Both result in the situation where public memory suffers from the forgetting of much of what we would call *truth*.

There are other ways in which the blotting-out of the memory of African Americans actually serves to blot-out the acknowledgement of their existence. One striking example of this was when one of the 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) in reference to his hometown of Corcoran, California. It should be clear to anyone who has ever been in Corcoran that what he said is not true. 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 moved out of the labor camp, across town, to a forty acre plot of land originally know as Boot Hill. Tulare's Edwin Matheny sold the land to black residents (when no one else in the area would) for a low down payment and monthly installments. During the summer of 1964, the local residents renamed the rural enclave Sunny Acres, (Arax and Wartzman 2003). Yet despite this history that spans at least half a century, in which African Americans lived 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 have skewed his thinking and his expressions. Either way, 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.

There is one additional thing about the town of Allensworth, the related state park, and its use as a public memorial that concerns me. Allensworth is known, almost universally, throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Part of that common knowledge comes from the physical existence of park itself. Locals see the signs for the park along Highway 99, read about land use disputes between the park and her neighbors. Local news stories usually carry some background about the founding of the community, and its ultimate fate. Most Valley residents know a loose narrative. Parsons' provided much of this story, however, 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 attempts made by these black people, the State built a park on the site to which, every year, a bunch of black people from Los Angeles and Oakland visit a park to commemorate the failed effort.

Although this may appear to be an oversimplification of the story, it is not too far from the various versions of it that I hear from Valley residents. Allensworth has become part of the collective memory, yet, its story is one of failure, of bad decisions, and of a group of people who, at the very least, made some very bad decisions. The park is a monument to a failed enterprise. Every June, those interested in the history of the park gather at the park to celebrate Juneteenth—the end of slavery—and those who had the dream that the Allensworth park represents. The event repeats and reinforces a narrative about the founding of the ill-fated 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).

Here is where the notion of collective memory and the role of forgetting and recollecting come into play. Allensworth has, in 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 the community as well. There are almost a dozen historically African American communities in the San Joaquin Valley. Most of them sustained larger populations for longer than Allensworth existed. However, none of them has ever entered the collective memory. They are not included in 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, they represent alternatives to Allensworth's failure. With fewer resources, and fewer expectations, these other communities survived, even if they did not prosper. Each 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. Teviston and Sunny Acres are each less than twenty miles from Allensworth. Few of the Juneteenth celebrants are aware of the existence of these other communities, nor the history of the thousands of African Americans who made these, one-time, all-black communities their home over the years. 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) then, the Juneteenth celebration at Allensworth is, in fact, reinforcing that narrative.

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). Once again, we see that "the past is… reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1992). 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. One can only wonder how the story might change if all of the black communities, as well as earlier colonization attempts, were celebrated at the Juneteenth celebration. Would recollecting (re-collecting) the pasts of all these communities and the role played by blacks in Central California agriculture for almost a century change the observance? Would doing so change the master narrative?

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 entrils the same sort of responsibility a s that imputed to acts of negligence, omission, imprudence, lack of forsight, 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).

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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