WHAT ONE CANNOT REMEMBER MISTAKENLY

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I chose this title deliberately to provoke. Nothing is more fully agreed than the certainty that memory fails. Memory fails, leaving blanks, and memory collaborates with forces separate from actual past events, forces such as an individual's wishes, a group's suggestions, a moment's connotations, an environment's clues, an emotion's demands, a self's evolution, a mind's manufacture of order, and yes, even a researcher's objectives. In these collaborations, and in others I have not thought of, memory acquires well-noted imperfections. We seek to understand these imperfections systematically if we are scholars of memory in itself, and we seek to correct for them if we are scholars who use memory as a source. As researchers, we bind ourselves to skepticism about memory and to a definite methodological mistrust of rememberers who are our informants. We are fully attentive to the fact that memory fails.

But memory also succeeds. It succeeds enormously and profoundly; for it is fundamental to human life, not to say synonymous with it. A large capacity for memory is an integral component of the complex brain that sets homo sapiens apart. And, without it, the social life that is characteristic of our species would be inconceivable. Thus Nietzsche spoke of memory in terms of our human ability to make, deliver, and collect upon enduring

agreements, an ability from which much if not all else is constructed.[1] So although nothing is more certain than that memory fails, equally, nothing is more certain than that memory succeeds. Systematic thought about how it succeeds, and at what, is thus as much in order as the reverse. Otherwise, we who turn to it as a resource fall into paradox.

My work with my grandmother, Mamie Garvin Fields, in her memoir *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*, offers me a starting point for reflection about what memory succeeds in doing and about the ways in which it does its work, for it is important to refine continually our methods of observing and thinking about memory as a matter of scholarly or scientific enterprise. However, I will also reflect a bit upon this sort of enterprise itself, for it is equally important to refine continually our awareness of certain oddities and particularities that shape this enterprise and that therefore shape our inner attitude as we go about our work. As researchers we systematically doubt what we systematically count upon as ordinary human beings in the routine of daily life.

One of the particularities of the enterprise is the paradox we flirt with when we turn, with methodological mistrust, to memory as a source. This danger was present from the beginning of my work on *Lemon Swamp*. I turned to my grandmother as a source about the past, aspects of which I had few or no other ways of knowing. The book deals with public and private events (from submarine infiltration during World War II to her marriage just before World War I), attributes and assumptions current in her milieu (from race consciousness to notions of proper dress), aspirations (from racial "uplift" to middle-class consumption), judgments both collective and personal (Who is an Uncle Tom? To whom is a moral person accountable?), habits about the body (from details of housekeeping to color consciousness), natural and man-made objects in Charleston and elsewhere (from Calhoun's statue on the Citadel green to Lemon Swamp itself), and much else.

At the time of working on this rich material, I liberated myself from the constraints of scholarship or science by refusing to call it sociology, history, or even *oral* history. (The constraints tightened no less if I added to "history" the modifier "oral.") Grandmother's term for what we were about was "stories" (and I will say something about stories later on); in the end, we settled for the term *memoir—Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir*. I made this liberation clear in the introduction to the book by saying "It is a subjective, personal account of life and work in South Carolina from 1888 to now."[2] Nonetheless, the two of us then, no less than the reading audience we imagined, thought of it as a source about the past. And since I was trained as a sociologist and had done historical research, this liberation remained incomplete. It was not possible for me to run methodological red lights unself-consciously—although I

most certainly ran them. The running of them occasioned reflection about what some of the green lights permit.

Consider, for example, the predicament that arises when we treat informants with the methodological mistrust that is required. A special existential condition arises between two human beings communicating face to face. Contrary to the "face value" methodology of everyday human encounters, ours requires skepticism, suspicion, a certain condescension, and above all a constantly open second channel in which to place those bits of testimony that are destined to float out of the interaction, back toward some source of corroboration. This is alien to normal human communication. (The closest everyday-life kin to it involves police and special agents.) Equally alien to everyday life is the patronizing of an interlocutor with silent knowingness when other information establishes that he or she is wrong or even lying. Suppressing the social commonplaces of contradiction, correction, or dismissal belongs to that special existential condition I am talking about, the one our methodological green lights permit. Now, if the condition of gaining knowledge is first to create a surrogate of human interaction, thereafter deliberately to diminish it, this proceeding demands its own scrutiny—quite apart from the scrutiny the testimony itself gets. This scrutiny amounts to examining our tools in order to see clearly what they are accomplishing above and beyond our intended purpose. When a surgeon sterilizes the knife with which he cuts through flesh in order to repair the heart, he nevertheless still has to attend to the knife's secondary achievements.

I ran the red light that blocks arguing with an informant. Liberated from the constraints of scholarship, I said to Gram one day that I intended to corroborate her testimony about the high regard certain white folks downtown had had over many years for the residents of her street, Short Court. I made my announcement after the departure of an elderly employee of the gas company. (Gram has commented that he must have been coming to her home for sixty-some-odd years.) Gram was outraged: one, that I would consider going around behind her to check on stories; two, that I even had the idea of talking about her to somebody who operates gas meters. She was furious at this multilayered violation of our confidence in one another. At one level, I think she thought I thought she would lie. I argued back that scholarly historical work had to go by cross-checking of this kind. She didn't care about history, then. We fought that afternoon over what would and would not be part of my method. In more usual circumstances of doing research, penetration to this level of what is latent in the routine of interviewing most likely would not have come up.

In the end, I could not establish as "fact" that white folks downtown considered Short Court residents to be "aristocratic," in Gram's terms, although I certainly know from other contexts that white Charleston, for

some intents and purposes, distinguished “respectable” black people from others. What our argument did establish is that Gram believed in, and perhaps was invested in, the special distinction, to white eyes, of the stratum to which she belonged. Was Gram remembering an aspiration or a fact? Later on that afternoon, her longtime friend Mrs. DaCosta dropped by to sit a spell on the porch, and Gram by skillful direction obtained corroboration from this dignified lady. (Not only that, we got quite a lot about special distinction of her own family. I should come over one day and learn more. . . .)

Fighting with my informant is a red light I ran on many afternoons. One of these fights was about what is or is not a relevant set of facts in an account of a public event—in Charleston—for presentation to a public much larger than Charleston’s—the future readers of *Lemon Swamp and Other Places*. In this case, Gram did the cross-checking of memory, and it was I who rejected the process. The issue was what can be called the “wedding list” or the “church program” sort of memory.

This sort of memory has quite particular features: the utter necessity of getting it right; the methodological assumption of ordinary folks that any mistake is meaningful; a corresponding anxiety about forgetting on the part of the rememberer; the consequential nature of the result; and, last but not least, a god-awful exhaustiveness that can overwhelm all it touches. Everyone knows the gnawing fear that accompanies this kind of remembering. And I daresay as well, no one has not at one time or another upheld it—by drawing conclusions about omissions deemed incapable of being inadvertent, or, from the other side, by clenching jaws and making omissions with cold-blooded intent. The enforcement of flawless memory of this kind is in the nature of many kinds of sociability. It embodies what not only cannot but must not be remembered mistakenly. But when we shift to our historical mode in regard to memory, even memory aimed at answering historical questions that are clearly embedded in sociability, the wedding list/church program sort of memory is out of place, an encumbrance, and trivial. Such was the scene for a particularly passionate argument with Gram. Standards imposed by sociability battled with others. Decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of details were subject to different rules for the two of us.

Gram was a leader in establishing integrated public day care in Charleston. I put the story in the book’s epilogue. The typescript I gave to Gram said that Charlestonians got together to care for the children of working mothers.

> Grandmother Fields will tell you, reeling off the names of Charlestonian places from which people came to help—“Holy Communion Episcopal, Zion Olivet Presbyterian, Plymouth Congregational, to name those in

> the neighborhood, then St. Phillip's and St. Michael's, which are South of Broad, over toward the Battery, and, of course, Centenary, Old Bethel, and Wesley Methodist." Her list goes on. And you know what? she will go on, reeling off the name of pastors who came forward (p. 243).

When Gram saw this, she got down to historical business. She checked with others in a position to know and added, added, added. My epilogue absolutely would not do. It needed to mention Mrs. So-and-So, of Such- and-Such Streets. It could not possibly be published without remembering Pastor This-and-That. Why, these are the people I have worked with for decades. They deserve the credit. These are the people who have been waiting to see my book, who put their names down to buy the first copies off the press. My rejoinder, that no one outside Charleston would care, did not count: the important audience was in Charleston. If the details got tedious to outsiders, well, we couldn't help that. Gram's purpose assigned those details to what cannot, nay, must not be remembered mistakenly. My purpose consigned them to just as obligatory forgetting.[3]

These details are of a category familiar to scholars who try to reconstruct Africa's history using oral tradition. Gram's church-program memory (or anyone's) is an instance of ideologically tainted memory summoned in view of present political purposes. Like that observed among African groups, it has the function of legitimizing and stabilizing a claim to some distinction. And part of its purpose is to perpetuate, by rendering it creditable to those concerned, a respectable consciousness of we-feeling. In that case memory "tainted" by interest is a dead-serious party to the creation of something true. The "mistakes" it may embody represent an imperfection only in light of the particular purposes scholarship has. Our scholarly effort to get the "real" past, not the true past required by a particular present, does not authorize us to disdain as simply mistaken this enormously consequential, creative, and everywhere visible operation of memory. It may be the case that human memory has it as a large-sized portion of its nature to be, in the psychologist Craig Barclay's splendid phrase, "true but not veridical."[4] Considerations of this sort carry us back to Nietzsche's identifying memory as a building block of sociability.

Returning again to our own opinions, however, we can take such considerations as a way of reminding ourselves of the biases scholarship requires us to adopt in our vocation to correct for bias in our data and to select what is "significant" in terms of a given research program. In our dealings with informants, we constantly look beyond the encounter toward a scientific horizon where what matters is literal facticity, veracity, representativeness, general applicability, relationship to a set of questions generated by theory, and above all, relevance in terms of scheme that des-

ignates what we need—and what we do not need—to know, what needs to be remembered and what is legitimately forgotten.

Although I did try to compromise, I did not make all my grandmother's amendments, which she crammed into the margins and which still spilled over onto extra pages—publishable remembering required their deliberate forgetting. On the other hand, I have kept them for our archive, well imagining some future historiographic predicament from which these names and places may provide a scholarly exit. Nonetheless, this action did not provide Gram an exit from her social predicament. It has troubled me ever since to reflect that preparing *Lemon Swamp* for publication required of me a certain condescension toward Gram and her compatriots.

This certain condescension was essentially no different from the systematic condescension toward the not-great with which we routinely tax documentary sources. I ask myself, now, how the church-list episode with Gram was different from what happened to my grandmother's Great-Great-Uncle Thomas, who she said accompanied his owner's sons as their valet, when they were sent to Oxford to have the rough edges knocked off their "aristocratic" South Carolina slaveholders' upbringing. Having been taught by those boys during slavery, Thomas educated his own and others' children, in a clandestine school—English, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, according to Gram. In consequence, Thomas's children were among those well-educated freedmen whom the missionary churches recruited to be leaders. Face-to-face with a remarkable set of facts, and trained to mistrust such claims, I deputized a friend, off to Oxford for studies, to find out what he could about slaves resident in the colleges in the 1830s or thereabouts. The answer: records of who lived there 150 years ago were scarce; names of servants resident with them were nonexistent—because irrelevant. What would have been the conceivable purpose of remembering one "Tom," who laundered the shirts of Masters So-and-So and Such-and-Such Middleton? Those details held no more interest then than somebody else's church program list does for us now—or that Gram's list of Charleston luminaries in the day-care movement has. Only a then-unimaginable future historiography could make the names of slave servants resident at Oxford worth remembering. So while the contents of my grandmother's communication about her Great-Great-Uncle Tom are rich and suggestive about a number of issues, Gram's communication could not be transformed into information.

I did, however, take one more stab at transforming Gram's story about Thomas Middleton into information about Charleston's past. The source for most of the stories about dead Middleton kin had been Anna Eliza Izzard, whom everyone called Cousin Lala. Lala had graduated from Avery Institute, a private high school for freedmen established by the American Missionary Association, and then from Claflin University, established by

the Methodist Church. (One of Thomas's sons, J. B. Middleton, was among those recruited to Claflin's first board of trustees.) After earning her B.A., Lala established a private school at her parents' home in Short Court. There she taught "black history," part of which was family history, including the saga of Thomas. Now, sometime in the 1920s a black doctoral student named T. Horace Fitchett had come to Charleston to collect oral testimony from local black people. Gram told me he collected a great deal from Lala. Thereafter he had taught for many years at Howard University. Reasoning that his notes and papers might yield corroboration, I contacted Howard's Moorland Collection, and through it, his widow. Mrs. Fitchett told me his papers would eventually be turned over but that tragic circumstances at present made my consulting them impossible. Thus ended for purposes of the book my attempt either to make of Gram's story a bit of information or to discredit it as that. The historical fact that neither could be done appears in the text as the naming of Gram's sources—mainly Lala and a less distinct figure called "Aunt Jane." Therewith I abandoned a would-be "fact" on the less respectable territory, so far as scholarship is concerned, of mere communication.

But then, not long ago, I happened to read an essay that made me think further about this respectable territory of verifiable fact: "The Storyteller," by Walter Benjamin.[5] In it he observes that the main form communication takes in the modern world is that of information, a form which, in his words, "lays claim to prompt verifiability." He goes on to characterize this development not as an advance but as an impoverishment. Storytelling dies, he says, as this new form of communication arises. Storytelling's successor, information, represents an impoverishment because, and to the degree that, the producer of information accomplishes precisely what we scholars strive to do: namely, to induce some body of material to deliver up explanation of its own accord, without our adding anything to it. "But the finest stories," according to Benjamin, "are characterized by the lack of explanation." Because the hearer or reader is left to interpret according to his own understanding, "the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks." If it involves our own participation, achieving this "amplitude that information lacks" is precisely what we as researchers strive not to do. Therefore while we seek narrative from our informants, we are specifically precluded from handling it in such a way that it remains what it was at birth.

According to Benjamin, it is the nature of every real story to contain "openly or covertly, something useful." And the utilities of stories include "counsel." "[C]ounsel," he goes on, "is less an answer to a question, than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story that is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. . . . Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling

is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out." Anyone who said in a conference on oral historical method that the researcher sought "wisdom" or "counsel" from his informants would, I believe, be met with stunned silence. We are usually free not to attend to these possible features of what we hear. But when we exercise this freedom to disregard an inborn feature of what we encounter, what does this do to memory contained in it? What have we done, and what have we foregone, by carrying out surgery so as to put "fact" in a specimen bottle while throwing the unexamined rest of the body into the disposal unit?

My own freedom from the constraints of scholarship went along with unfreedom in this regard. Since the project of doing *Lemon Swamp* did not change the relationship of grandmother and granddaughter, the elements of "wisdom" and "counsel" were not ignorable and hidden but explicit and obligatory. She was, after all, addressing the child of her child. Gram was didactic. My attempt to transform another of her communications into information, into something that laid claim to prompt verifiability, engendered another fight. In this case, the offending deed was to take a photograph of the Calhoun statue for inclusion in the book, offering readers thereby a kind of "proof" for an observation of Gram's, thus replicating the trip I made to see the object she referred to. Key points of the story were not verifiable, as I will now show. Let me start by quoting her on the subject of the statue of Senator John C. Calhoun, the indefatigable defender of slavery and states' rights.

> [W]e all hated all that Calhoun stood for. Our white city fathers wanted to keep what he stood for alive. So they named after him a street parallel to Broad—which, however, everybody kept on calling Boundary Street for a long time. And when I was a girl, they went further: they put up a life-size figure of John C. Calhoun preaching and stood it up on the Citadel Green, where it looked at you like another person in the park. Blacks took that statue personally. As you passed by, here was Calhoun looking you in the face and telling you, "Nigger, you may not be a slave, but I am back to see you stay in your place." The "niggers" didn't like it. Even the "nigger" children didn't like it. We used to carry something with us, if we knew we would be passing that way, in order to deface that statue—scratch up the coat, break the watch chain, try to knock off the nose—because he looked like he was telling you there was a place for "niggers" and "niggers" must stay there. Children and adults beat up John C. Calhoun so badly that the whites had to come back and put him up high, so we couldn't get to him. That's where he stands today, on a tall pedestal. He is so far away now until you can hardly tell what he looks like. (p. 57)

The point of that story, made repeatedly in many different ways, was that even during the ascendence of Jim Crow, even when it appeared from the outside that black people had capitulated to their defeat, they resisted; even the children resisted. The counsel was, You resist, too. Be a worthy descendent of Thomas and J. B. and Lala and the others. You do it, too. “You do it, too” is not something we researchers are prepared to take seriously from informants. Indeed, this aspect of the narratives we hear for our scholarly purpose raises a danger flag, marking bias, ideological special pleading, and the like. The flag marks a familiar site of misremembering, where the “should-have-been” displaces the “was,” where wishes fill the blanks where facts are to be placed by dint of our own industry.

I proceeded with industry. I made myself conspicuous in the reading room of the Charleston Historical Society, depository of many documents pertaining to the past of a very historically conscious city. Conspicuous: because I, like other black people of Southern heritage, still do not enter such formerly segregated places unself-consciously or unnoticed. I spent two days searching for “information”: I expected or hoped to learn that “rowdy” members of the “colored race” had vandalized this public work of art. Instead I learned something that prevented the facts from speaking for themselves, that pushed into a dead end my search for mere information. What I found out was much more interesting. It opened out instead of pinning down Gram’s story.

It turns out that in 1854, the year Calhoun died, the Ladies’ Calhoun Memorial Association began planning the memorial. In 1879, they were finally able to commission A. E. Harnisch of Philadelphia to execute a bronze statue of Calhoun on a Carolina granite pedestal, surrounded by allegorical figures—Truth, Justice, the Constitution, and History—at a cost of forty thousand dollars. But Harnisch in the end built the memorial with only one of the female figures—and she in such a state of disrobement that some of the ladies are said to have fainted at the unveiling. When the white folks recovered themselves sufficiently for straight thinking, they found historical fault with the clothing besides the aesthetic fault with the nakedness: Harnisch had put Calhoun into a Prince Albert coat, an anachronism. Black Charlestonians figured in the city-wide uproar in a curious way. The public work of art began to be called, in Gullah syntax, “Calhoun and he wife.” A newspaper article says, “Because of the female figure’s state of disattire, the nickname greatly distressed the ladies of Charleston and Mrs. Calhoun who was still alive.”

Besides, the statue’s construction was poor, the pose bad, and “his right index finger pointed in a different direction from the others, a habit peculiar to him in speeches, but in this instance exaggerated to the point of deformity.” The various discomfitures continued until 1895, when the *Charleston Post* was able to report that “the old statue which has so long

been a thorn in the flesh of the ladies of the Calhoun Monument Association . . . to say nothing of the general public, will be taken down and consigned to oblivion." Massey Rhind of New York won the commission to execute Mr. Calhoun No. 2, erected in June 1896. No. 1 found his resting place in the Confederate Home Yard. A finger (it is not said which) was placed in the Charleston Museum. There ends the story obtainable at the Charleston Historical Society.

There is no mention of the oddly tall pillar that stands on top of the grand, wide conventional pedestal with its luxuriating scrolls at the corners and its dignified plaques of speeches on each side. No explanation is offered for the remarkable disproportion of line that the pillar creates nor for the fact that if you want to study Calhoun's features with your eye, or with that of a camera, you are interfered with by the sun and sky. Nothing I could find notices certain Charlestonians' notice of the statue beyond the raucous Negro laughter implied by the nickname "Calhoun and he wife."

Gram and I fought about the picture I took of the statue. Innocently, I had intended it to illustrate her story. Gram said she would never have a picture of "*that man*" in her book. She was still passionate about a personage dead by then for nearly a century and a half. She intended, with malice aforethought, to exclude him from the list of guests—just as surely as the ladies' society intended to include him on their own.

I have already devoted more time to topics regarding the color line than my grandmother would have approved of. I need to pause to say something about this fact. Gram would be the first to say that *Lemon Swamp* is about her own life: it is not about the racist system that partly enclosed it. Matters of race and color are a permanent presence without being her principal subject. They are constituent to life, but they do not define life. So, for example, Gram fondly remembers the details of her very fancy wedding—a black affair, from beginning to end—but yet notices that curious white people from the neighborhood slipped into Wesley Church's gallery silently to behold the occasion's splendor. On the other hand, when she decided to go to Boston to get her trousseau and took the Clyde Line Ship, she did not at first remember whether it was segregated. The point was the adventure. She did not pay attention to where white people were on the ship. And in her story of the time she collided with a car driven by a white man, the initial subject had been proper dress, the motto mothers and aunts of all colors tell their nieces and daughters, "Dress, you never know." It turned out that she had thrown a coat atop her nightgown on the day of that accident. Her Aunt Harriet, severe exponent of "Dress, you never know," was proved right (such women usually are!) as Grandmother made her way through downtown offices after the accident. But the fact that all the officials were white and all the aftermath

unfolded downtown, among "downtown white folks," colors for her in a distinctive way a comeuppance anyone could have had. I would call these features "involuntary memory," if the term had not already been filched from Proust and assigned a technical meaning. I use the term "unintended memory" instead, and I sometimes think it is also unintendable.

Even so, such features are often not the main subject of the story, from Gram's point of view. This point needs emphasizing because, as I continue exploring matters of race and color here, I acknowledge that these did not command Gram's front-burner attention as they do mine. They are there in the way Mount Kilimanjaro is there in Africa. For many intents and purposes, it is *merely* there, rising to its snow-capped peaks over the luxuriant topicality of the town of Moshi: it is hardly to be missed yet hardly to be noticed, at once native and alien to the life around it. Tourists are the ones who preoccupy themselves with looking at it. I am saying this to give warning that, as Gram's interlocutor, I was a tourist to her life with a tourist's habit of gawking. Gram criticized me more than once for my preoccupation. She called me "angry." Once she even called me "ugly" on the subject and asked, "What must those people be doing to you up there?" ("Up there" was Massachusetts at the time.) So I invite you to exercise methodological mistrust in my case, to be suspicious of the selections I have made in my own exercise of remembering. It is a fact that I cannot help gazing at Kilimanjaro.

The Kilimanjaro I gaze at, not always uncovered by clouds and mist, often comes into view in the form of unintended or unintendable memory. The inner horizon of the South's racial order is not the aspect we generally tend to think of first. It is easier to think of the South's Jim Crow regime in its outward and visible signs—its laws, its segregated spaces, its economic arrangements, its intermittent physical atrocities, and its civic iconography, items such as Calhoun's statue. But one learns through the testimony of inhabitants that it can at the same time be mapped out as an inward and invisible topography. It has objects analogous to mountains, rivers, and the like, which must be climbed, crossed, circumambulated, avoided, or otherwise taken into account. At the same time that these are not visible to the naked eye, and not immediately obvious to aliens on the scene, to insiders, much of the time, they are not specifically noteworthy. They remain, in the phrase of Harold Garfinkel, "seen but unnoticed" features of social life.[6] As such, they enter human memory. They often emerge in oral testimony as unintended memory. In actual life they emerge above all as social order.

Whenever we start from a remove in time or space, these topographical features begin to seem less substantial than they are. We tend to think of them as movable by a mere movement of thought. Consider, for example, the seventeenth-century English revolutionaries whom Christopher Hill

describes in *The World Turned Upside Down.* These people embark on militant political projects by shaking and quaking, talking in tongues, and listening for the voice of prophecy. To us, they seem to be making a bizarre detour around a God present on the ground of ordinary experience that we nevertheless cannot see. To us, it seems there are more practical, straight-ahead routes. It is as though we watch from above as human beings walk, as we might walk, across a flat heath. But, unlike us, they then turn to walk around what seems to us a nonexistent obstacle. Of course the obstacle is really there, unavoidably and materially there; but the knowledge of what it is, where it is, and *that* it is, they carry in memory.

The memory I am talking about is not the individual's own. It is instead the fruit of a collaboration among the inhabitants of a common social locale. Having said this much, I think I can avoid the troubling yet expressive term *collective memory*,[7] although I mean something like it. Or, rather, I mean to say that fundamental features of human memory are not grasped at the level of the isolated individual. Upbringing—or, to use my discipline's term, socialization—provides the context in which the human brain's, and mind's, imperfect capacity for memory develops. It is also a process by which human beings acquire things that cannot be remembered mistakenly. I want to present one example of this that emerged as unintended memory.

Last spring while I visited my grandmother, a middle-aged woman dropped by. This woman and her brother had been Gram's pupils on James Island. They started to reminisce about those school days over forty years ago. After a time, Gram spoke about the brother. What a fine, bright pupil he had been over the years. And very cute as a little fellow: his mother had liked to dress him in outfits with Peter Pan collars. And, oh, he was smart; he had a grand future because of his mind. The conversation seemed to be humming along in trivial sociability (generous recollections about someone's family being very good form), but then I heard my grandmother saying, What they did to him was such a tragedy. How they could take that fine young man and put him in jail for all those years! How it broke the mother down! They both shook their heads in commiseration. My antennae went up. When I finally got my question in between the head-shaking, the sister turned to me. Well, he didn't do it. The other boy did it, but he never would admit, *never would admit*, so all those years my brother was in jail for what he did. He walked all around among us big as day, year in, year out, may he rot . . . and so forth in that vein, the anger at the other boy coming alive again, boiling, and engulfing the English syntax. Well, what happened? What happened: He never did ask for no drink of water, they said he sassed that white girl, talking about how he want some water, my brother ain't do that, know better than that. Ain't stop to ask that girl nothin'. That other boy did, and *my* brother went to

jail, never would own up that *he* ask for that drink of water. My brother went to jail in place of him. In a rush of renewed emotion, the woman had arrived at an invisible mountain and begun to walk around it.

I piped up that neither one of them should have gone to jail twenty years over the asking for a drink of water, not your brother and not the other boy either. If I hadn't seen the mountain yet, the awful way she looked up at me, and then ignored me, let me see it. I let further comment die in my mouth. I then saw what she saw, a black teenager who let his friend be convicted in his place. She did not see what I suddenly saw, a Southern tableau: the impressionable white girl and her oppressive male kin (or perhaps the oppressive girl and her impressionable kin) enforcing an unjust etiquette of domination. A black young man did not ask a white young woman to address any sort of personal or bodily need. Her outrage at the wrong injustice revealed the Jim Crow order with an immediacy that intentional testimony never could. For this kind of unintended memory, I submit that cross-checking is redundant.

For those of us who try to glean from personal testimony the movement of history, as well as history's congealment in an order, what is interesting in the end is the ferment. We want to glean from people's recollection what territory remained unsubdued, perhaps unsubduable, by the Jim Crow regime's obligatory remembering. We want to find out when and how they come to note, and wonder at, the positively audacious presence of Kilimanjaro. Not accidentally, it is in the domain of education that we find continuous evidence of such ferment and continuous guerrilla war, for education is about what we agree that the young should carry in their minds: what schoolbook lessons and what nonschoolbook lessons they should receive, about where they stand in the world and what that world is made of. In the 1950s, when the issue was desegregation, the guerrilla battles to fill the mind differently made the transition to conventional warfare.

But in the 1920s and 1930s, Gram's heyday, this fight proceeded in the South on a personal or local scale, underground, and hit and run. But I would maintain that the larger fight that later entered national awareness is inconceivable without it. One recent Tuesday night, PBS's "MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour" ended with one of its learned essays about national life. Roger Rosenblatt invited us to contemplate how Dwight D. Eisenhower, the "sleepy conservative" president, surprised those who had elected him, by "launching the civil rights era." His memory could not have been more mistaken. The launching was done by the people whose business it was.

This launching was done not only by those who put their hand on the plow, and their eyes on the prize, in the 1940s and 1950s, but also by others who began long before that. Gram loved to tell the story of old Mrs.

Burden, who lived on the same James Island where black people in a thousand ways were inculcated with the unjust etiquette I described. No doubt in many of those ways Mrs. Burden was inculcated, too. But as a military widow, she was collecting a pension, which meant that she had to collect her check from the downtown white powers-that-be. When Gram began to teach her pupils' parents and grandparents, Mrs. Burden made it her business, old as she was, to learn to sign her name. People asked her why she bothered and asked Gram why she bothered with a pupil so old. But Mrs. Burden kept on coming and brought the teacher, Gram said, "more eggs than the law allows." She was determined to be able to walk into that office of downtown white folks one day and sign for her pension properly. Mrs. Burden was after a schoolbook lesson; she was after a non-schoolbook lesson. She was determined to stop having to put herself down as "X." Gram said, "The day Mrs. Burden could go into that office and write 'Mrs. Samuel Burden,' she almost didn't need her walking stick." In fights as small-scale and personal as this one—the fight to be known by one's own name—the guerrilla war went on in the worst of times, blasting away bit by bit the invisible mountains of the Jim Crow South.

Let me close by saying that, during my time of liberation from scholarly constraint, Gram assigned me a part in a continuing guerrilla war in which memory is not only a source of information about the past but also a force in creating the future. But, in a development that gave me many hours of methodological bad conscience, coming to grasp history in this immediately human sense involved departing from rules that define its incomparably paler counterpart, a mode of scientifically disciplined study. In the process, I had to think again about what this scientific discipline is for, what a present-day scholar's pursuit of knowledge is and is not, and after thinking again, to see how called-for modesty is about what it can add to civilization. What does inquiry disciplined by the ideals of science accomplish—if it is neither here nor there in terms of the growth of the individual, if it must by its nature remain silent, as my mentor Max Weber says, on the question What shall we do, and how shall we live?, if it paradoxically says that one way we shall live, as researchers, is according to an ethics of research that pertains to research and aught else, if it cuts through the flesh of human communication to expose for viewing an internal organ but marvels not at the act of surgery, if it is passionately committed to a search for truth that is not, cannot, and must not be a quest for wisdom?

None of this is meant to disparage the scientific model of knowledge; but it is meant to take note of the possibility that the very prestige of this model in an Age of Information may obscure what is particular and odd about it and thus obscure what vital tasks this mode of pursuing knowledge leaves undone, unconceived, perhaps even unconceivable.

With this conundrum about method, I leave off speaking for myself and let the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz say what I think I have come to understand.

> "To see" means not only to have before one's eyes. It may mean to preserve in memory. "To see and to describe" may also mean to reconstruct in imagination. A distance achieved thanks to the mystery of time must not change events, landscapes, human figures into a tangle of shadows growing paler and paler. On the contrary, it can show them in full light, so that every event, every date becomes expressive and persists as an eternal reminder of human depravity and human greatness. Those who are alive receive a mandate from those who are silent forever. They can fulfill their duties only by trying to reconstruct precisely things as they were, and by wrestling the past from fictions and legends.[8]

It is by trying to reconstruct things as they were by *all* means—those that partake in scientific method, and those that display the method's limits—that we fulfill our historic duties and, at the same time, fulfill our quintessentially human desire to know with nourishment worthy of it.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Second Essay. 'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscience,' and the Like," in *The Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Horace B. Samuel, Vol. 13, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 59f.
2. Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), xiii.
3. I note in this connection that it is very good form in church-program memory to thank people for effort they did not expend—yet.
4. Craig Barclay, "Truth and Accuracy in Autobiographical Memory," in *Practical Aspects of Memory: Current Research and Issues*, *Vol. I. Memory in Everyday Life*, ed. M. M. Gruneberg, P. E. Morris, and R. N. Sykes (New York: Academic Press, 1978).
5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 83-109.
6. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967).
7. I find this notion to be fascinatingly explored, in all its riches and some of its troublesomeness, in Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Collective Memory and the Stakes of

Power: Reading of Popular Zairian Historical Discourses," *History in Africa* 13 (1986): 195-223.

8. Czeslaw Milosz, *Nobel Lecture*, 8 December 1980 (Oslo, Norway: The Nobel Foundation, 1981).

COMMENT

Alphine W. Jefferson *is a professor of history, black studies, and urban affairs at the College of Wooster. Jefferson has focused his work in oral history on black studies, most recently on blacks and Jews in Chicago. Here he draws on Fields's essay to discuss the role of memory in establishing cultural—especially racial—identity.*

Karen Fields's paper is called "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly." Being provocative, this title implies, as the paper states, that memory fails. In so doing, we are cautioned to remember that all oral documents, like written histories, are themselves enduring agreements, representing not what actually happened but what we—the interviewer, the interviewee, and the larger culture—need to remember mistakenly. Let me say a word here about sources. Although I was trained as a traditional historian, I have always been suspicious of traditional historical sources. The written word is said to be sacrosanct, immutable, and uncontaminated. Yet, I am also aware—and I caution you to be aware—that just as memory fails, so is there failure in the creation of those sources. The written word, which traditional historians hold so dear, is not more unbiased or biased than any oral document we can create. We all walk around with a set of cultural presumptions and social assumptions which determine how we experience the world, and thereby make judgments, including historical judgments. By way of reemphasis, let me say that memory fails and that humanity is frail. Thus, all academic documents should be treated with equal skepticism and examined with rigor. I resent those who say that oral history is trendy and popular. It is, in actuality, the oldest form by which any culture remembers, even if mistakenly, its collective past.

A few remarks about Professor Fields's book *Lemon Swamp* are in order here. She must be commended for such a brave undertaking. For though she claims to have liberated herself from the constraints of being sociologist, historian, and granddaughter, all of those variables, as well as

several other prominent ones, figure importantly in this work. As the grandmother told stories, Professor Fields, the sociologist, historian, and granddaughter—all gathered information. I am not suggesting that she is schizophrenic here—I'm simply saying that we filter information through what we are. A key to the presence of these variables is the regular argument she had with her informant and the dichotomous sense of what priorities would determine what information would go into the book. Her grandmother wanted things which were correct, proper, and even necessary information to tell this story the way she understood it, even if mistakenly. There is a major difference between the interests of the researcher and those of the informant. I simply say here that for all the objectivity Professor Fields claimed—like the rest of us, who also claim that—we cannot transcend our own demographic specifics; they are important forces and should be understood as such, informing any document, oral, visual, or written.

I am going to comment on a few things that sort of jumped out at me and demanded that I say something about them. The first is the condescension Professor Fields mentioned she feels toward her grandmother. I suggest she *had* to feel that, *needed* to feel that, in order to distance herself to create as objective a document as possible. This is an academic posture we all try to claim, we all seek to obtain; however, we seldom do so. History is not neutral. The writing of history or anything else is a self-conscious political act, and though we may seek objectivity in the interpretation of our sources, in so doing we are rendering the past in a certain fashion, whereas someone else would use the same material and render the past differently. Professor Fields is no exception here. We all carry around this condescension—for want of a better word, arrogance—so I came up with the phrase, "intensity of indifference." It is not easy to transcend the barriers of ethnicity, race, class, gender, and religious upbringing. An awareness of these crucial differences is especially important in oral research.

What leapt out at me very clearly was the story about her great-uncle who probably went to England to be a valet to the good Southern white boys. In her search to uncover material on this, she found nothing. However, the value of this search is that if such materials were available, they would be extremely important to us historically because these kinds of materials are not created with an historical self-consciousness. Thus we use them simply as the documents which are available to us. The story about oral information being passed on to give counsel is very important, and it is a very important part of black culture. Information is often given in a circumvented way, through tales and stories and fables and Biblical passages. I was always told by my mother that "pride goeth before destruction." She would never tell me that I was being prideful; she would

just simply quote that to me. Or they would always tell me I was always looking up in the air, and I would never find money because I had my nose up in the air; I should look down on the ground. In this way, also, black people communicated, and historically have done so, information about how to succeed. One of the things that black females have always taught their daughters was to “keep yourself up,” “keep yourself up.” That sort of meant keep your skirt down and be cool and don’t do certain kinds of things. But they would never approach that taboo subject, the subject of sex directly, so they would say “keep yourself up” or “don't come home holding the bag,” as one woman told me she was told. She came home pregnant, but she certainly wasn’t holding the bag.

The point about Mount Kilimanjaro also jumped out at me. And I think it is instructive for the study of memory. If I may quote one of my poems, I think it summarizes it:

> I live in the world.
> I see it with these eyes.
> I feel it with this heart.
> I touch it with these hands.

For most of us, nothing is merely “there,” as Fields cautions us. Everything informs our being, be it a mountain, an identity, or an experience. So whether we are conscious of it or not, we are all seeing Kilimanjaro all of the time.

That some black people are full of rage—Fields mentioned her grandmother telling her that she was full of rage, and I can understand that—should not be surprising to any of us, given the history of black people in the country and the continued racism and discrimination. What is sad is the fact that so few people recognize the source of this rage and continue to perpetuate the very circumstances which create it. Obviously we all remember mistakenly.

Karen Fields’s paper reminds us that we often choose to remember mistakenly what we *need* to remember in order to preserve our individual and collective identities.