Conversation at Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park, Tulare County, California, July 22, 2012

Ashley: What made you guys interested in starting to visit here?

Isaac: We were talking about, reading about and trying to learn about the political idea of *utopia*. One of the things that we talked about was utopia being inherently impossible or completely unattainable or outlandish, but also about utopian projects from a materialist point of view. So talking and thinking about the attempts to envision things being radically different across the board, using what we have available to us in our time, place and conditions.

We were trying to study and understand utopia as it relates to doing our work over at Critical Resistance (CR), as abolitionists, and very early on we talked and thought about Allensworth, thinking, "What if we went there?" We thought about the historical period of white supremacy in which Black people were enslaved, and the utopian visions, imaginations and practices of not only being *not-enslaved*, but working to be *free*. And then, the practices and exercises of freedom in a place like this vis-a-vis land; and, through land, having a liberated or more liberated, or more self-determined relationship to land, to identity, culture, education, so on and so forth.

And so the thing that continues to boggle my mind is the dialectics of utopia: using what you have available to you, which in this case is a social and economic system that is certainly not utopian but oppressive. Based on that, within that, through that, depite that, being able to imagine things being radically different. And then the sloppy, the frayed-at-the-edges and beautiful attempts at making that imaginary thing real, as real as possible, trying it out. And how that trying also becomes part of a further flourishing of the imagination.

Rachel: I've developed this way of talking about Critical Resistance's work through my time doing it, which includes a constant toggling back and forth between what we're working toward and what our material reality both allows and provides. So if *prison industrial complex abolition* is a kind of utopian vision, then what is the *practice* of it? What are the utopian projects? And how does a project like CR fit within an intellectual but also a *practical* history of these kinds of projects, projects like Allensworth?

So when Isaac and I began this studying together, I already had California in my mind, because there are homesteads, colonies, towns, settlements that all got set up across the state as utopian projects. Some were based in religious sects or cults, others were racially-based projects, still others were just large families that wanted to break from mainstream society; but they exist throughout different parts of the state. And I had learned about Allensworth from work that I had done years ago, thinking about Afrofuturism and Afro-Utopianism. So much of that thought is place-based—not only having land but a *site*.

Ashley: So there is *place* and there is *site*, and then I would add that across them both is also the *no place* of utopia—in terms of the word's original meaning, literally as "no place," suggesting it doesn't exist yet, it must be imagined, made, forged. In much Afrofuturism I know of, where "Space is the Place," the place might even be out in the cosmos, on another planet, and that place—real or not—becomes a site for its imagining. A part of what the *no place* signifies is that the place to get to is "not yet"; so it's in the discourse before it's in the land.

In other words, what exists is a placeholder in the discourse: a figure, a *someplace* we'll get to; a mental escape from the present that, in its freedom might become physical; but its conceptualization, its thinking through and testing, that is a practice, where the *no place* is a site.

Rachel: And that goes back a long time in Black history; back to the concept of the *Promised Land*, which some people use in religious ways and some use in secular ways. In secular versions, the Promised Land is not necessarily a specific site, it could be understood as *being* in the making. Religious or not, people clung to the idea that *it must be possible for there to be some place in which they could be liberated.* That belief is incredibly durable, even today, although none of us has seen that nor has necessarily lived it. So I am interested in thinking about utopian-minded places in general, but the history of this Black utopian place particularly piqued my interest. And its location in the San Joaquin Valley was even more curious—how did the Allensworth group wind up here? Given that most of what I know about this Valley *is prisons*, it blew my mind. I hadn't spent time in this part of the state that wasn't explicitly and exclusively about imprisonment until last year, when I came down here twice to talk about environmental degradation for my job, although I did prison visits on both those trips as well, so prisons remained part of my relationship to the Valley even then.

Specifically, my interest in this place is rooted in the early 20th century project of building this place by and for Black people—that it was explicitly not for white people, nor on their terms. My interest is also in the fact that it is located in this place that, today, is so filled up with imprisoned Black bodies, which is one of the primary locations in which Black bodies are situated in the United States right now.

Isaac: And the fact that nobody lives here in Allensworth now, no Black people, but for this entire county the Black population is like 4%?

Rachel: If you don't count the prisons, it's something like 400 people.

Isaac: And then you go to the prison 10 miles down the road, and there are literally thousands of Black people.

Ashley: Corcoran prison is in that direction?

Isaac: Corcoran's that way. [points north]

Ashley: And both Delanos are that way... [points southeast]

Rachel: Both Delano prisons are that way, there's Wasco [points south]. There's prisons *everywhere* right here.

Ashley: So is there one this way? [points west] Are we literally encircled by prisons right now—is this site surrounded?

Rachel: We're encircled by prisons here.

Ashley: Because Avenal is that way. [points northwest]

Isaac: We are encircled by prisons. And we're talking about Black people having lived here, attempting freedom, the starkness and the life and death of that, and the struggle of life against death…

Ashley: I was thinking about this thing on the way down here, and if this sounds too crazy, we can just keep walking around.

There's the utopia that is really generative, the *productive* utopia. It is the Promised Land, that kind of figure that gives us this ability to mark that without yet determining what we understand "that" to be, because it remains to be found, and it needs to be formed through practice. But driving from Fresno to here, to an early, free Black settlement that is now a ruin and passing by prisons on my way, I couldn't help but think about this utopia and the prison spaces up against one another.

In the prison, in its discourse and enactment, there is another kind of utopia—not the *no place* of possible freedom but the place of *perfection*, and in this case, the perfection of control by the powerful. If we were to ask, "what is the utopia of the oppressor," where the understanding of utopia become more of a *paradise*, it would include the perfected forms of control of the oppressed. It is the undercarriage of the oppressor's "good life," but it's still a *no place* because the oppressor is always imagining themselves as more totally and forever powerful than they are.

Today, our society's utopian visions are so technologically rooted, where "liberation" becomes a getting out of our bodies through all these devices and into the other side of the screen, and its inverse are these perfected institutions—spaces of control and containment that make privileged life possible. We see these spaces represented in images, but they're always stylized and fictionalized, hiding from view the long, boring, bureaucratic and violent administration of these spaces. They are buried—behind the railroad tracks, on the other side of the Grapevine; up over the mountains in spaces of invisible labor and extraction from land; from the space of the good life to the spaces of no life.

Rachel: That's a powerful version of utopia. One in which undesirable people cease to exist, literally and figuratively. It seems to me that that's the white supremacist vision of utopia that's most truthful, where some people just cease to exist.

Isaac: It's a trick to the visionary utopia, right? The antagonism between the forces of life and forces of death. And to be sort of Manichean for a second: Good and Evil, yes, but oppressor versus oppressed. And it brings up Frantz Fanon, where part of what he was saying, in psychological terms and the actual practice of *national liberation struggle*, is this idea of where the oppressed fantasizes about killing the oppressor.

And when Fanon untangles that, I believe he says that even the lunge at that, or even the *fantasy of that lunge* at the oppressor, starts to break apart the oppressor/oppressed situation. Because part of the utopia of the oppressor is that their order is wholly dominant. That there is no tension? But through the fantasy of the oppressed, imagining the "killing" of their oppressor, there is a *wobble* in the whole situation.

For Fanon, perhaps that's what freedom is. Even if that lunge ends up in your physical death, there's that moment of freedom. In that moment of *imaginative action*, the whole arrangement, the whole deal, is broken down. And that makes me think about this place here—the imaginative or the imaginative lunges towards freedom, a practice of freedom itself...

Ashley: But does that chart two different ideas of what it means to make change: one that's confrontational, antagonistic, in the direction of the oppressor; and another that's based in making the world that you want without regard for them, where life just isn't about them (or is that "killing" the oppressor too?). For the other end of the oppressed fantasizing about killing the oppressor is the oppressor's nightmare of being killed. At the depth of the consciousness of the oppressor has to be the presumption that somebody has the fantasy to kill you, and that someone will, at some point, act upon it.

Isaac: Right.

Ashley: It's written so intensely across all of these prisons that surround us, built expressions of the white hysteria that followed the Black Liberation and other movements. It's a pathological geography in that way—a geography invested with the oppressor's paranoia of being killed, whether literally or symbolically as the rulers of the order; an hysterical map of the paranoid character of power.

Isaac: I was once reading about newspaper articles in the South during the time of institutionalized slavery, in which there were daily, hysterical stories of how at any moment there might be a slave rebellion. Constant fear of slave rebellion. But then, at the same time, there were stories about how content slaves were. It seems like there was this total schizophrenia in society based on slavery.

Ashley: Then flash forward to the present, to Hurricane Katrina, the stories that turned out to be complete fiction about "hordes" of Black people storming across the bridge from largely Black Orleans Parish into its more white suburbs, or the supposed epidemic of rape in the Superdome, or just simple perception of Black people surviving *as lawlessness*. It inspired historic levels of gun sales as white paranoia saw Black people who were out of their usual place as being "out of place," as a disturbance of the order, one to be contained, put down, and of course the police, courts and jailers acted accordingly.

Rachel: That fiction produces a type of racialization that invokes peril and violence that, in turn, props up Black repression. One of the things that's really interesting about a place like Allensworth is the idea of making and remaking oneself. The idea of making again, and that making being what is utopian. The utopian project as not being a resolution or an end point but rather the process itself. So in the case of Allensworth, both distinguishing yourself from white people and establishing your own place, which is itself as a means of establishing what you are and could become.

Colonel Allensworth was deeply committed to both demonstrating the self-sufficiency of Black people and to this town as a means to demonstrate that self-sufficiency. He was invested in racial uplift and redemption, in a way that was consistent with his Baptist faith, and that was part of his leading people out here—being self-contained and self-sufficient enough to ward off incursion by the oppressor. So it's a weird stabilization of that "wobble," which is, "stay still, act appropriately and they won't see us here, and we'll be able to stake out our thing."

That the founders of Allensworth were interested in promoting this as a very self-sufficient place was no secret to anyone, but they also were surrounded by white landowners, and they were beholden to the farming company for water. So there was a drive to demonstrate their worth through being literate, well-spoken and completely self-reliant—meaning owning a home, having a business, and ensuring the town had everything necessary to live a decent life.

And as we walk around, you see it was meant to be that self-contained, so one wouldn't have to go into the white world and the white world wouldn't have to come in to "save" anyone. This is striking to me, as a stabilization or stasis, which is really different than how I normally think about utopia. Because, returning to the concept of revolution that Isaac was raising, when I think about revolution, I don't normally think about stasis or maintaining a low profile. My thought is usually about *upend* of some sort.

Ashley: It's not a "balancing of forces," a treaty of some sort.

Rachel: Exactly. And so that challenges me to think about self-sufficiency *as* upend, at least for the group that founded Allensworth.

Ashley: It's also interesting to see this as a point of intersection between that Promised Land ideology and the US' homesteading or frontiersmanship ideology of that time, to think how they might have come here through that settler moment. If one produced new possibilities, legibilities and, indeed identities through place-making, how much was it set within the idea of the West and its expansionist dispossession? As with the prison, did the conditions for one person's freedom depend upon another's dispossession?

Or when you say you encounter this as a challenge to how you normally think about revolution, Rachel, how do you understand it if Allensworth's possibility was based in part upon Western expansionism? How do you see that in relation to this "stabilization," or the "wobble"?

Rachel: One of the things that it does do is re-situate my thinking about the legacy of Black struggle. I have tended to be a little bit dismissive of the uplift narrative because of the ways in which that narrative calcifies certain kinds of relationships to power, and then forecloses opportunities to expand Black people's actual power. There's a way that it has the potential to re-inscribe the notion that if Black people were just not so lazy, we would have X and Y. If only a person had enough gumption he wouldn't be targeted for death. So anyway I tend to be a little bit stingy with "the uplift."

But I think that imagining a role for stasis within the broader trajectory of Black people's power in the United States creates more room for that uplift to have a role, one that isn't just about "giving up." It reminds me to be more thoughtful about what it may have meant to maintain a community in 1908 for Black people who had not until very recently been anything other than property, who had only just gained the ability to own anything themselves, who still have all kinds of active barriers to establishing social and culture networks, let alone being able to participate in the economy—let alone being understood as belonging to a broader national project.

So it reminds me to be thoughtful about the material conditions of the time, but it also makes me wonder if there is a role for stasis that then lays a foundation for more utopian projects. A more generous scenario could acknowledge that a certain level of stasis creates the launching pad for other things to be possible. So in the case of a self-sufficient, Black town of generations of Black people, if I'm more generous in thinking about that in the arc of Black liberation, it could play a role in situating people to eventually make even greater demands.

Ashley: It makes me think about abolition, and the conversations that happen in CR, discussions about who CR works with—what kind of campaigns, short-term gains and battles are productive toward the long view, rather than jeopardizing that long view by participating in or strengthening the state structure, or throwing other groups under the bus. It's not an individualist architecture—your or my uplift in terms of what we can get personally—but a collective one, a higher platform, and then maybe another platform on top of that—plateaus of movement building.

Rachel: Yeah, and it's just truly radical to move from Kentucky to California to build a Black town in 1905. So maybe when you get here, you keep your head down a little bit more so everyone doesn't get killed.

Ashley: It's also different in that it recognizes more than what the oppressor can see, who can't recognize the intelligence or strategy, let alone the utopian practice behind what otherwise seems like simple survival and compliance. It removes Allensworth from a depoliticizing view to that of a radical history, not made contained, comfortable and flattering to, for example, a white sensibility or sense of hierarchy.

Rachel: The work that we're doing now is the utopian project of being free from state terror, which evokes the migration of Black people in particular, as it was also rooted in the imagining of freedom from the violence lived in the South. A lot of the migration stories were freedom from lynching stories, freedom from houses being burned down or bombed, or people being chased through the streets and tarred and feathered, lynched, or both.

It's also interesting to think about what you were raising, Ashley, around the perfection of the prison also as a fantasy about safety and an absence of violence. The idea that if we could just contain people well enough that everyone would be safe. So there's an interesting counterbalance between the creation of a pristine world, one away from hoardes of people rising up, and as a preventative violence or terror, versus utopian projects that seek freedom from state terror.

Ashley: What do you think of when you think about that here, in this very place where we're literally surrounded? We're in this vacated, neutered representation of this space, which maintains a certain gesture of remembrance through its California State Park discourse, but where, like with the man who brought us this water, there are clearly people with particular attachments here, who are pedagogues of this place and its history beyond how the State Park wraps it up.

Rachel: One of the things that immediately springs to my mind is the fact that, in the end, they weren't able to evade state terror, and mostly it came in the form of capitalist exploitation. A lot of their problems were that they got sold land that was drastically undeveloped in terms of water access. They were lied to about that. And that was followed by a denial of access to water rights when they asked. The train refused to stop at the depot here. So they were essentially cut off, their farmland encroached upon, and so on.

Isaac : I believe they did that "I drink your milkshake" thing, like drill in diagonally from outside land, and literally stole water out from under here.

Rachel : Sitting in this empty place that is just a shell of a town in every way possible, surrounded by thousands of people packed like sardines into cages, many of them Black, all around us, I also think about the impossibility of Black liberation and avoiding state terror. Sitting here also makes me think about the war on Indigenous people, like the actual guns-to-heads war on Indigenous people in this area. It's interesting to me that that grounds guy who let us in was also talking about the distinction between what the Spanish colonizers would let Black people do and what the British would let Black people do.

So yeah, that's what it makes me think of. It makes me think it's a miracle any Black people are alive in this country, quite frankly. It is almost inconceivable to me sometimes when I think about the strands of resiliency and fight-back that Black people have. So the fact of coming out of slavery and crossing the country to establish some made up vision of a town and literally escaping death in that way, that's also here. And it also blows my mind to think about how it's possible.

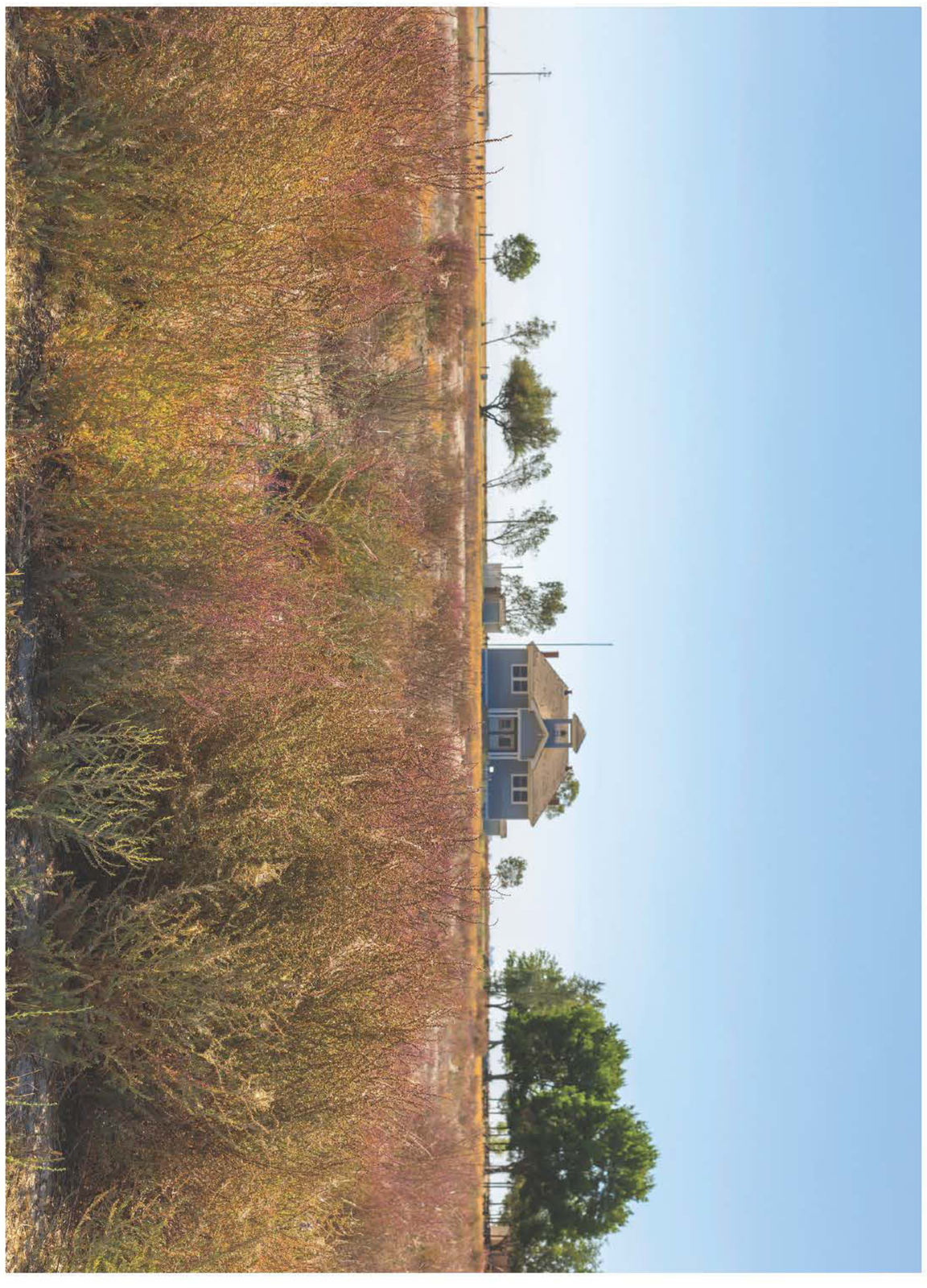
Isaac: That becomes a place too—a *place* and a *no place*. We can think of traveling through that, and you think about all the violence, being chased out, or whatever else. It's hard not to think of it, however hyperbolically, as a "hell mission," *Through the wasteland*. Or like a wasteland that itself is trying to kill you. I think about Trayvon Martin, and how it's fine to go ahead and kill Black people, and how that's been legally fine, completely legally fine. Thinking about these different hell missions, these different perilous terrains over which people are forced to move, or choose to move, I think about the work of Paul Gilroy, or Stuart Hall, how they always point out that that going back and forth and back and forth, that being displaced or having places changing out from under you, through colonialism, "post-colonialism", and so on—that from these transitions, we also get culture springing up. We get music, art, "crazy" ideas, a crazy idea to come all the way out here. It seems unconquerable—that strand of humanity amongst inhumanity, which seems to say: *not only will I somehow live, not only will there somehow be life, but there will also be a beautiful life.* So it's not limited to just not-starving, or living ten more years, but it's also creating something. However a shell this place is, the shell is still here.

Rachel: It's interesting too to think about who else was here during the period and how Mexicans were being moved, how Indigenous people were being moved, how white people also were being moved...

Isaac: And categorized; California was a terrain where what it means to be white was very much being worked out. You see that for Mexican people: In one period, "you're white," and then it turns out, "not so much, because now we want to steal your land." The project, the white supremacist project, is something that's active and being worked out very intensely at the same time as the establishing of this place.

Rachel: Yeah, in this same place during that same period.

Ashley: When did this start?



Conversation between Rachel Herzing, Isaac Ontiveros and Ashley Hunt

Pictured Left: Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park, Allensworth, California, a town founded and governed entirely by African Americans who followed a vision for Black self-sufficiency, intellectual and industrial freedom, begun in 1908. Named for its founder, Allen Allensworth, who had escaped slavery to fight against it in the Civil War, the town persisted through the 1950s, despite the surrounding, white-led towns that worked to undermine its viability. Named a State Park in 1968, today it sits encircled by 20 prisons and jails that hold 35,879 prisoners within a 55-mile radius:

California State Prison at Corcoran (3,028), North Kern State Prison (4,618), Kern Valley State Prison (3,713), Wasco State Prison (5,281), Avenal State Prison (3,675), Pleasant Valley State Prison (3,192), Shafter Modified Community Correctional Facility (640), Golden State Modified Community Correctional Facility (700), Delano Modified Community Correctional Facility (578), McFarland Female Community Reentry Facility (300), Central Valley Modified Community Correctional Facility (700), Taft Modified Community Correctional Facility (512), California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility (5,654), and seven jail and detention facilities of the Kern County and Tulare County Sheriffs (3,288).

Statistics obtained from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation population report of May 31, 2017, and the stated number of beds by the Tulare and Kern County Sheriff Departments.

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