The Unnaming of Aliass

Karin Bolender

Published by Punctum Books

Bolender, Karin.
The Unnaming of Aliass.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80768

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2762992
A flashback: One night, way back in the Hollow when my own bones seemed caught in a duel between the limits of human poetic imagination and some impenetrable, monumental Nature-Reality, I was moved to memorize William Faulkner’s 1957 Nobel Prize Acceptance speech from a recording of the Great Author himself reciting it, from a cassette tape a friend had gifted me. After some hours walking circles in wet grass under the stars, I had the whole thing hardwired into my neural pathways. As it was, those days were full of peculiar passions for mostly male, mostly Southern writers and my own fevered efforts to mimic their distinct rhythms and registers in musical prose. Meanwhile, that same period was also full of awakenings to new ecological awareness of myriad hybrid and multispecies voices – whether cyborg songs or eco-acoustical reports of regional amphibian, bird, and insect dialects. Slowly but surely, revelations of multi-species meaning-making began to render utterly asinine Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance assertion that “he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice.”

1 William Faulkner, “Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech,” *Southern Cultures* 12, no. 1 (2006): 71. Weirdly, the speech as memorized that sum-
Meanwhile, I had been intently delving into this one particular Faulkner prose poem story called “Carcassonne” for some time before my first fateful encounter with the American Spotted Ass in 2001. In the same way this surprising ass figure blew open unforeseen paths, something extraordinary happened to the text of “Carcassonne.” With the implosive force of “ass,” this unusual Faulkner text came to seem like a kind of treasure map, which hid in its tangled syntaxes and images a secret skeleton key to open the gates of conflicted mysteries between names and bodies, romantic figures and real-ass flesh and bones. The rollicking text of “Carcassonne” seemed to rumble anew with vague promises and fraught desires, like a far-off thunderstorm on an oppressively humid afternoon. That is to say, here in the text of Carcassonne, I discovered another crack between porous realms loosely known as “reality” and “imagination.”

In the long run, it was this explosive mix of conflicting poetic, political, geographic, and even ontological forces that would make mythically storied Mississippi the inevitable place of departure for our long-ass mission. Mississippi became the point of departure from which to launch into all the untold tales Aliass and I would pass through as we wandered the roads to Nameless and beyond.

Wait, Mississippi? Why *Mississippi*, of all possible places, as the state from which to begin a nascent ass mis-

mer night in the Hollow is still embedded in my synapses to this day (though I can only conjure scraps of it, and only if I imitate Faulkner’s Mississippi accent). I would note that there is much in this speech that still resonates (such as the statement that “there are no longer problems of the human spirit; there is only the question ‘when will I be blown up?’”; but we also do well to cast a critical eye on some of its inherent assumptions. You can find the speech on YouTube, as it happens, with an eerie visual accompaniment of Faulkner’s bust floating and slowly growing closer in dark space, as if video artist Bill Viola turned his eye to ghosts of modernist Mississippi: Artzineonline, “William Faulkner: Nobel Prize Speech,” *YouTube*, July 13, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOg3oJBniki8.
sion? That fall of 2001, I was newly (if shallowly) planted in the Pacific Northwest, having just driven all that way westward to settle in a bustling young (post)industrial city at the westernmost edge of the continental US – a region with its own tortuous, mostly hidden histories. Why turn back to the haggard Deep South so soon, and for that matter to an unfamiliar and fractious state where I had no real ties and knew not a soul? I could not really say, except that somehow these fraught territories demanded imaginative reckoning with questions of home and belonging, the muddles of so-called “realities” and fraught fictions of races and species, specific languages and hidden histories that roil in every storied landscape – but perhaps especially, or at least in special American ways, in the Southern states.

Portland seemed especially sad and dark in the gloom of confused post-9/11 American reckonings. Disturbing forces percolated under the shiny surfaces of millennial Stumptown, like a mysterious oil leaking up from the spectral Black Lodge in the woods of Twin Peaks or vague rumblings from the Cascadian subduction zone. This sense of fissures crumbling beneath the bright surfaces of Capitalocene urban green culture, in a postmodern Western city built on tides of displacement and rapacious industrial extraction and racial exclusions, is tapped with visceral brilliance by Vanessa Veselka in her 2011 novel, Zazen. From the opening scene, in which punkrocker-geologist narrator Della observes a stranger sobbing hopelessly in a yoga class, the narrative struggles with uncertainty amid regimes of hidden global forces and explosively fragile means of response. Veselka’s novel evokes the angst Della feels within shifting terrains of class, race, and activist urban youth culture caught in a desire to respond meaningfully to threats of ecological catastrophe but paralyzed by hidden traps of global capitalism and its various erasures. Says Della: “There should be some kind of price to pay for all this ugliness, especially the pretty kind: especially the kind you don’t always see.” Vanessa Veselka, Zazen (New York: Red Lemonade, 2011), 3.

If you listen to Rev Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, listen hard to what rumbles and twists through his voice when he says, “Mississippi.” It is a chilling, ominous, yet beautiful and promising thunder that cracks with hope and history in a way you can’t hear anywhere else. LogistiKHD, "Martin Luther King | “I
Truth be told, the Mississippi I knew best was not the asphalt and concrete infrastructures of twenty-first-century Lafayette County but rather the fictional “past-that-is-not-past” of rural landscapes, characters, settings, and scenes found within novels and short stories of Faulkner’s imaginary realm known as Yoknapawtapha. As it happens, Yoknapawtapha stands uniquely for authorial creation of regional place in modern American literature, Faulkner’s famous literary claim to his “own little postage stamp of soil.” As a fervent fan of Faulknerian apocrypha, I was long under the spell of this model of godlike literary creation of place, whereby the august human imagination draws from reality to “create out of the materials of the human spirit” works of aesthetic wonder “which did not exist before” (as Faulkner describes the artist’s job in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech).

Though I would not have articulated it this way at the time, it was against the old idea of proper, patriarchally authored “reality” of any beastly place, and toward possibilities of more inclusive multispecies storyings, that the “Little Pilgrim of Carcassonne” foray with Aliass sought to simultaneously blast out from and go deeper into Faulknerian Mississippi in a particular way, turning away from patrilineal modes of writing, naming, and knowing within the sway of great modernist Southern literary tradition and its tropes and assumptions (and even its

Have a Dream Speech,” YouTube, August 28, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I47Y6VHC3Ms.

4 As Faulkner famously told Jean Stein in an interview, “Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top’ (LG 255).” Robert Hamblin, “Carcassonne in Mississippi,” in Faulkner and the Craft of Fiction, eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), 169.

lustrous dirty lyricism). So the long-ass journey sought to forge new kinds of stories in imaginal/real Mississippi, with other kinds of authority (or perhaps none at all?) grounded in movement through hot, insect-ridden, unfamiliar Southern territories.

“Little Pilgrim of Carcassonne”

But beyond the lore of Yoknapawtapha that lured my ass to Oxford, Mississippi as a point of departure was a different pseudo-geographic, out-of-the-way junction of Faulknerian cartography, “Carcassonne.” More lurid prose poem than short story, “Carcassonne” is shot through with distinctive swirls of unbridled italicized passages that read like conjuration or crazed sermon. At the same time, the text unfolds a rather wry conversation between an aspiring poet’s imaginings and the grave wisdom of his skeleton. In the context of this conversation, “Carcassonne” presents a dreamy confabulated site, where a gossamer vortex of lyrical language pits “reality” and “imagination” against each other in a literal duel, like the perennial haggard figure of Don Quixote and his monster windmills. Flat on his back in a garret over a cantina in Rincon, the prone poet dreams of a frenzied horseback gallop that twists and scrolls through histories and landscapes of ancient medieval Crusades: “I want to perform something bold and tragical and austere he repeated, shaping the soundless words in the pattering silence me on a buckskin pony with eyes like blue electricity and a mane like tangled fire, galloping up the hill and right off into the high heaven of the world.”

The prone poet muses on the timeless, flaming glory of his imaginary courtly ride, even as his own bones dryly remind him that he is a mortal body bound to time: “He

lay beneath an unrolled strip of tarred roofing paper. All of him that is, save that part which suffered neither insects nor temperature and which galloped unflagging on the destinationless pony, up a piled silver hill of cumulæ where no hoof echoed nor left print, toward the blue precipice never gained.”

In an essay called “Carcassonne in Mississippi: Geography of the Imagination,” scholar Robert Hamblin writes: “In [Faulkner’s] curious geography of the imagination both Oxford and Carcassonne are part of Yoknapatawpha. And the only map on which that fabulous land appears is the one the artist himself drew, the one signed by ‘William Faulkner, Sole Owner & Proprietor’.”

Meanwhile, it so happens that the real Carcassonne from which Faulkner takes his title is not in Mississippi at all. It is, in geographic fact, a medieval walled castle and surrounding city in the rolling, fertile Languedoc region in the South of France. The marvelous towered ramparts of Carcassonne’s castle complex have stood since medieval times, and as a famed tourist destination since the site was reimagined by visionary architect and restorationist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in the nineteenth century. “Carcassonne” is a site where mythical pasts and modern realities merge, medieval literary traditions and modernist innovations chafe – a situation of which Faulkner was likely aware. Modern tourists love to visit places like this, as they evoke feelings of immersion in a bygone past – as if History was a static and monumental geographic space one can drop into and not just another mode of

7 Ibid., 895.
8 Hamblin, “Carcassonne in Mississippi,” 169.
story constructed and maintained by human words and hands. Here in this fraught and fabled realm of “Carcas-
sonne,” Faulkner sets up a contest between “reality” and “imagination.”

The dueling forces of “imagination” and “reality” seem to echo Wallace Stevens’s modernist admonition that all poets (and artists, by association) must somehow reck-
on with the notorious predicament of Don Quixote. As a believer in outmoded romantic fictions, Quixote is alternately a fool, a dangerous madman, and an enduring hero. Faulkner’s precarious poet’s circumstances seem to echo this prescription that poets and artists must address quixotic delusions if they hope to contribute meaning-
fully to their age. At the same time, the prescribed duel between Imagination vs. Reality in “Carcassonne” affirms other hierarchal dualisms that linger in Western art and literature. As Hamblin has it, the duel is between “the power of the creative imagination to reshape and trans-
scend the narrow world it inhabits.” And this, Hamblin holds, represents the author’s “overall conception of art”: The poet/artist “as omnipotent god” creates a fabulous space of representation wherein the glorious force of hu-
man creative Imagination wins out against the “shabby, sorry world” of Reality. Whether or not the testy conver-
sation between poet and bones in “Carcassonne” stands for Faulkner’s entire “conception of art,” the critic Ham-
blin echoes an enduring tendency of Western thought to view human imagination as a separate and transcendent force of nature, which mysteriously hovers above the muck of the muddy material world where the lower, less imaginative, less technologically adept, and all-around beastlier beings toil and strive and go the way of the flesh

10 Wallace Stevens, “Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” in The Neco-
11 Hamblin, “Carcassonne in Mississippi,” 151.
in mortal time. For what it’s worth, Faulkner himself described the poet-protagonist of the story as “a young man in conflict with his environment.”\textsuperscript{12} Here he is, the isolated (male) artist, separated from the muck of the Real World so as to draw forth immortal beauty \textit{sui generis} from the dross and shit of worldly entanglements, transforming the shabby everyday reality into poetic gold.

“Women are so wise. They have learned how to live unconfused by reality, impervious to it,” writes Faulkner in “Carcassonne.”\textsuperscript{13} Taken out of context, this could seem pejorative. But from another angle, such imperviousness to certain versions of reality may be seen as a heroic trait, a kind of resistance, if for instance the reality in question is the global neoliberal capitalist dominion for which There Is No Alternative, as Iron Lady Thatcher famously put it. Medieval castles, monumental modernisms, and global capitalist schemes are not the only sites where patrilineal versions of what is “real” hold sway, of course. Our ontologies, mother tongues, and creative practices also reify certain ways of worlding along these lines. Despite decades of postmodern, feminist, and environmental artistic interventions, we find traces of separation between what is still considered the exceptional faculty of “human imagination” and the messy material makings of multispecies worlds.

Meanwhile, in a galaxy far from Yoknapatawpha and Carcassonne – and let’s say specifically in the realm of twenty-first-century feminist science studies – we observe how the shabby, earthly “reality” that the Modern Poet must transcend has always been a construction,

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Faulkner, “Carcassonne,” 898. In an interesting turn, Faulkner scholar Deborah Clarke pitches the idea that some of Faulkner’s female characters, like the unflappable Lena Grove, can be read as “outside” voices that push against patriarchal boundaries of their settings. Deborah Clarke, “Gender, Race, and Language in \textit{Light in August},” \textit{American Literature} 61, no. 3 (October 1989): 398–413.
even a reconstruction to suit modern tastes (like Carcassonne reimagined for bourgeois tourists by Viollet-le-Duc). In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Donna Haraway parses how the “real” is constructed, specifically in scientific discourses (and so, in many ways, contemporary Western secular society): “Reality has an author. The author always has a proper name, but it has a way of disappearing into declarative sentences or even graphs embedded in published papers issuing from well-funded laboratories.”

How do we come to ground in this maze of multiple realities? In recognition of worlds made of complex meshes, we are duty-bound to balk at the claim of any universalized version of a Real. Old-fashioned cleavages of “transcendent” human imaginations from dirt and flesh and fur betray immersions in specific ecologies, in kaleidoscopic multi-authored realities. Against this betrayal, relational creative practices work to honor them, in places where earthly habitations need these interventions. Which is all to say, when I set out with Aliass to punily pound the Mississippi dirt and asphalt, it was not so much in hopes of accessing some timeless, universal Human Real that Faulkner happened to tap and extract from the landscape like a miner with motherlode. Instead, alongside Aliass I hoped to humbly inhabit new kinds of largely indeterminate, ecological reals, always present and evolving through bodies-in-timeplaces, in every wild, weedy, multi-authored place we pass through.

**Going Asstray...**

Rumblesome, crackling energies resounded from “Carcassonne” and soon gave way to cracks and crevasses in the text and new, brackish spaces between names and maps

---

and mortal territories. As if the words emitted a kind of radio static transmitting from some distant island continent believed till now to be uninhabited – maybe even that “last red rock hanging tideless in the red and dying evening,” where Faulkner’s poet stands alone and laureate on an Olympus of high-blown prose with his “inexhaustible voice.” I was compelled to listen to its crazy music with special fascination, with an ever-lengthening ear cocked sideways. And then suddenly one day there it was, hidden in plain sight. From a literary node where transcendent (phal)logos, language, and authority battle the dirty realm of “dumb” bodies, up it flared like a secret signal of rebel life hidden within our overwrought fictions: CarcASSonne.

Once again, that powerful little pattern of sounding letters, this little unassuming phoneme, blew open the ramparts between words and bodies, names and things, and made a new opening in the possibility of storying places. “Ass” blasted through the textual surface, shattering assumptions about the unimpeachable grip of logos and language on material (and even poetic, material-semiotic) reality. Lo and behold, this one particular “assinanity” – in the tension between real/imagined Mississippis and other kinds of timeplaces – made “Carcassonne” a vital site for intervention and resistance, and in the long run even an inevitable-ass destination.¹⁵

Though it could not serve as a real geographic destination for our journey across the US South, this cracked-open textual surface became an attachment site, a jumping-off place for a departure that might interrupt the surfaces of dominant narratives and representations of

places, so as to dive toward untold stories of myriad lives. In choosing to depart (both literally and figuratively) from Faulkner’s land-lorded literary landscape, the journey with Aliass became an artistic strategy kin to what Ronald Broglio describes as “minor art” in *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s discussion of “minor literature,” with their example of Franz Kafka’s “impossible writing” as a Jew in a German-speaking Austrian world, Broglio proposes works of “minor art” whereby certain voices or kinds of meaning that are traditionally excluded from “major,” established hermeneutic social circles discover moves that allow them to breach “the impasse that bars access.”

As an imaginal site full of flaming manes, thundering hoofbeats, and conflicted poet-skeleton musings, “Carcassonne” presented an odd little outpost on the map of the most majorest Southern literature there is. From the grand patriarchal literary dominion of a “major literature,” as mapped across Faulkner’s Yoknapawtapha, I set out with Aliass to embark on a thunderously explosive (if puny and humble) literary pilgrimage, seeking to “run astray” – wildly astray, even – from dominant modern modes of storying in which only human ways of wor(l)ding matter. Meanwhile, a certain irony flickers in the

16 Ronald Broglio’s work resonates here all the more so because he is interested in exploring the ways that “minor art” makes new kinds of spaces for thinking “alongside animals” and “against the power of representation, the power of major literature, and, one might add, established aesthetics”: “Man and animal are linguistic subjects only within a properly established language. Once a ‘minor literature’ [or art] begins dismantling the common-sense ground on which meaning is established, man and animal become fragile signifiers that may run astray or ‘detrerritorialize.’ They become available for ‘asignifying intensive utilization of language.’” Ronald Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 107.

17 Ibid., 105.
notion of working against Faulkner’s corpus as a “major literature”; in the realms of broader American literature, Faulkner has been considered by some to be a regional (read: minor) writer. While some readers revel in that special sound and fury that characterizes Faulkner’s most gloriously obfuscate prose, other critics claim Faulkner’s “thunder and music” are his downfall. As with the low-ass pun, unbridled lyricism allows language’s musicality to ride roughshod over meaning, illuminating the limits of human logos to lord over material worlds.\(^\text{18}\) So it was that with a coy but hopeful notion of immersing in the thunder and music of untold Mississippis, Aliass and I would bring our own puny ass thunder into the midst of a blown-open “Carcassonne” – where even Faulkner’s lonesome “last red rock hanging tideless in the red and dying evening” becomes a more riotously full of life place than we ever thought possible.\(^\text{19}\)

Coming into Como (Mississippi Hill County Blues)

The distinct musical thunder of Faulkner’s prose certainly played a role in opening paths for the “Little Pilgrim of Carcassonne” mission, but it was a different and unexpected bodily encounter with another kind of Mis-

\(^{18}\) In an essay called “Faulkner’s Patriotic Failure: Southern Lyricism versus American Hypervision,” critic William Meyer holds that Faulkner’s “music” is his great failure as an American artist. Faulkner remains a regional (read: Southern) writer, because his overblown lyricism excludes him from the ranks of what Meyer calls the great “hypervisual” American tradition. At the same time, and significantly, Meyer opines that this “failure” is also Faulkner’s underdog greatness, tangled as it is in historical, social, and environmental “failures” tied to the South’s defeated “past” and enduring racial, class, gender, and environmental frictions. William E.H. Meyer, “Faulkner’s Patriotic Failure: Southern Lyricism versus American Hypervision,” in Faulkner and the Craft of Fiction, eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1987), 105–26.

\(^{19}\) Faulkner, “Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech,” 71.
sissippi thunder that made the act of going back to that land with the spotted ass necessary. It was the same kind of thunder I heard throbbing in Sun Ra’s “Nuclear War,” which echoes and throbs with hidden violent histories and frayed hopes. And here is a strange but true detail. The first time I heard this special thunder, and came to know it in my bones, was at a place just a few miles from the same Mississippi highway exit for Como/Senatobia where I was struck and transformed by the Arkestra’s explosive query – “what you gonna do about yer ass? – on that icy New Year’s Day, 2001.

It happens in the previous fall of 2000, in a place called Como not far from the junctions of the state route and Yellow Dog Road. Down from New York on an aesthetic quest for rare “social music” of the American South, Adam Lore and I are hoping to gain an interview with Otha Turner, the 92-year-old king of Hill Country fife-and-drum music, and glean insights into the endemic and endangered fife-and-drum picnic tradition for Adam’s zine, 50 Miles of Elbow Room. We have a set of sketchy directions to Turner’s place, where the annual Turner Family Fife-and-Drum picnic is held every Labor Day weekend. The picnic is hardly a secret; at this turn of the millennium it has been happening for generations as a gathering for locals, but recent media interest in Turner and a new record release by his Rising Star Fife-and-Drum band means the yearly gathering has begun to attract a new demographic of middle-class white folks, and even Yankees like us. All are welcome, especially if they bring cash to buy goat-meat BBQ sandwiches and moonshine and hand-made cane fifes.

Coming into Como, the directions bring us along a grid of rural backroads. Single-wide trailers stand on weedy

20 For photographic documentation of this place and its players in the 1960s, see George Mitchell, Mississippi Hill Country Blues 1967 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).
lots amidst vast swathes of harrowed crop-fields. We find Otha Turner’s place, a few acres that sprawl out around a central shack close to the road, surrounded by scattered wooden structures hammered together from plywood scraps and old peeling signs. We pull up on the roadside in front of the shack, across the road from a steep weedy pasture where a billy goat watches from across the barbed wire, and park the Caprice. We then proceed to get out of the car and walk across the yard, blithely at first, still more or less comfortable in our skins, toward where two men sit on a wooden bench in the shade of an open slant-roofed structure in the steamy late August morning. One of the men is middle-aged and grizzled, and he watches us with a quizzical look as we approach. The other man is Otha Turner himself, and he watches us from his weathered wooden bench with an ancient, pale blue and ice-cold stare like nothing I ever saw or dreamed before. His gaze is as opaque and unwelcoming as a darkening sky – a sky that might rip open any second and lash a body with terrible lightning.

In the distance (thirty feet? thirty seconds? a thousand miles?) that we move across the yard in that withering gaze, I learn some things – or rather unlearn them. With every step, each and every tactic I acquired in the makings of a social human – ways I learned to behave over a lifetime among others in a variety of situations – fails utterly, one after another. I scramble inwardly for some kind of composure to click into place, but nothing fits this moment, this encounter. Every means I know to ingratiate myself – to signal goodwill, assume subtle power, or even (last ditch) suggest hair-twirling, girlish innocence – is blankly refused. Never have I felt with such fierce atomic clarity how every identity we perform is a scripted story we tell, and how every gesture and twitch is part of this performance – from the slant of shoulders to the ways we wear our faces. And what makes this so painfully, viscerally clear in this encounter is that Otha
Turner does not give a shit about any story or identity we bring. He plumb rejects any little biography we might offer up, whether in words or the ways we carry our bodies. He gazes at the air around us as if to locate the buzzing of gnats he’d swat away.

Somehow we keep walking across the yard. Adrenalin makes every detail of a passing moment as distinct as if it is frozen in time. In the dirt yard behind the shack, several goats with slit throats hang by their hind hooves and drip blood into plastic buckets. Their carcasses sway slightly in the breeze, and the glint of their eyes is not yet dimmed entirely. A rangy dapple gray colt stands watching from behind a few strands of rusted wire, hind leg cocked and tail flicking slowly back and forth against the flies. A dusty, dark old Buick sedan sits in the middle of the yard with windows rolled down and the radio blaring a thumping blues station. The air is viscous as oil and full of unfamiliar sounds and smells. We make it all the way to the edge of the shade under the slant-roofed structure where Otha and the other man sit. I have the vague, anachronistic sensation – borne of medieval fairy tales or more recent ones, maybe – that we are approaching a king on a throne, cowering for mercy and facing certain doom. My companion Adam summons the courage to speak, to introduce us and explain that we have come down from New York City in hopes of an interview. He says he spoke to someone on the phone a few weeks ago, who said to come on down early and try to catch Otha before the picnic preparations get crazy. Otha looks away toward the tall pines and mumbles, “I don’t know nuthin’ bout no New York.”

High noon in Como, we stand abjectly in the dirt of the yard. Adam presses on, and eventually Otha’s friend, Abron Jackson, exchanges some small talk with us in a bemused way. As for me, I am gone reeling. Cannot not look up from the pale dirt... vaguely aware of a low rumble of voices, but words are indistinguishable and very far away.
I have fallen out the bottom of the scene somehow, as if in the failure to present into the human social sphere in any appropriate or recognizable way, I have slipped into another kind of presence, beyond the sphere of social humans where I suddenly find myself so unwelcome. Like a child who is not capable of performing an adult social role, and so falls free to tune into everything else, I dissolve into the environment surrounding us and find, lo and behold, this is where the shit is really going down. In this moment I understand the significance of a scene from *Space Is the Place*, when a drunkard stumbles up to Sun Ra and says, “Hey man, what’s happenin’...” And Sun Ra slyly, solemnly intones: “Everything is happening.”

The dirt is happening, humming along with strange sounds and smells of Otha’s farm vibrating the thick and rich steamy late summer air, meshes of reverberating bodies, all held together in a visceral, immediate, and boundless substrate of living becomings of and in an earthly place. The gray colt stands yonder with his hind leg cocked, tail swishing, familiar and unknown. The shiny eyes of Otha’s coonhounds peer through the wooden slats of their kennel, beyond where the goat carcasses sway and drip in the faint breeze under the screaming jay-blue sky, insects buzzing, pokeweed towering and vibrating in the heat, heavy with wine-dark bursting berries that possums and mockingbirds like to get drunk on, vines everywhere twining skyward, the stink-bearded billy goat watching and wandering in the weedy lot across the road, a three-legged dog basking in the middle of the hot asphalt road – a thousand wet and shining eyes, invisible beating hearts and lungs, flowing roots and insect tunnels and flight ways of birds and beetles in the sky above, and the thump-thump-thump and moanful twang of that Blues station coming from the dusty Buick. No el-

---

ement separate from any other, no that or this or them or us, if only for a swirling moment. All dissolved in tremendous and tremulous opening, this dissolute immersion in a place both familiar and strange.

Over the years, this encounter in Otha Turner’s homestead remained indelible, as a submerged and haunting scene of a world radically unzipped and yet somehow more whole, in a place (un)known as Mississippi. That visit to Como was a bone-shaking wake-up call to real and present, mostly erased histories bound up in historical, political, social, colonial, and ecological conditions both visible and hidden in that (and most any) landscape. Raw shame in the minefields of old and ongoing racial injustices, rooted in distinct ways in the American South, scared me deeply. But it was much more than that, too. Not until all these years later do I come to understand that it was this visceral, fearsome, and ultimately joyful dissolution in a wholly unreckonable Mississippi – more than any love for the “thunder and music” of literary fiction like Faulkner’s or even the sublime gut-deep thump and cry of fife-and-drum music endemic to that place – that made me have to come back to Mississippi in the humble, long-eared listening company of a nameless she-ass.

Fearsome as the encounter was as a terminal crack in the edifice of white history and privilege, the experience at Otha Turner’s farm that day was also a momentous opening, unfolding multiple Mississippis and eventually all (his)storied landscapes to new reckonings and complicities in their possible futures. That visceral experience – akin to dissolution in the Badlands but more grounded in a specific place’s hidden ecologies – demanded immersion as a way of being in and becoming with places, listening into histories and untold stories hidden in flesh, soils, glands, roots, and sounds of environments. Como called for new and deeper reckonings with old stories we get told and believe about places, stories that shape
the ones we tell ourselves about who and where we are, what is “real” and what is “imagined.” So Como came to demand a different, full-bodied mode of radical listening and responsibility to different ways-of-being-in-places.

In the long run, it was to this blown-open, unmapped “Mississippi” that I was most deeply compelled to go with Aliass, to immerse and walk and listen deep for other histories than the redacted ones I was taught (and with a little prod from Sun Ra along the way). From Como came the hope that shedding dangerous kinds of naming and claiming to know might open more inclusive modes, tuning instead into real-ass presences and unfolding possibilities within them. As if this kind of stripped-down immersion might carry us into dreamy swamps and harrowed histories of Mississippi, Carcassonne, and so many other nameless places we never thought possible — yet always find ourselves passing through.