The Unnaming of Aliass

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PART II

ART OF A SULL
Art of a Sull
(Making Stories with Untold Others)

Like “gall” – the antiquated word for wounds to equine bodies caused by ill-fitting saddles or harnesses – “sull” is another artifact of Southern ass dialects, where we find words that have slowly disappeared from most urban vernaculars – words whose uses have mostly vanished with the beasts of burden who once bore them. Where “sull” does crop up in dictionaries, the noun (which also has a verb form) is defined as “a stoppage, or refusal to move (as an animal).”1 But the dictionary does no justice to a singular phenomenon that accomplishes the impossible: as the highest form of recalcitrance that asses and half asses (i.e., mules) are infamous for, a full-blown sull can

1 The online Oxford English Dictionary offers that definition, with a nineteenth-century origin in US dialect back-formation from “sullen.” Of eight example sentences offered, two are from William Faulkner, which says something about that author’s inimitable stature when it comes to Southern dialects in literature. Other good examples include this from 1902: “Dial. Notes 2 246 Sull., to hold a position with imperturbable obstinacy and a total disregard of surroundings, as a possum, or a hog in a corner. 1903 Dial. Notes 2 332 ’My oxens sull whenever they get hot.’” And lastly a gem from Faulkner’s 1959 novel Mansion 10: “All Frenchman’s Bend knew Houston: sulking and sulling in his house all alone by himself since the stallion killed his wife four years ago.”
more or less stop time – or at least gum up the workings of human Progress for a while.

In human–equine worldings, the sull is unique to *Equus asinus* and hybrid offspring (mules and hinnies). Unlike horses, who will mostly flee from painful prods or ferocious flappings, asses have a unique capacity to withdraw deep into stonily inaccessible regions while they ponder potential outcomes of possible actions. These inscrutable processes are inward and invisible, and they persist for as long as it takes the ass in question to weigh all options and arrive at what she deems the worstiest move under the circumstances. Meanwhile, faced with a sulling beast, all a woeful human can do is wait. Oddly enough, when the ass does arrive at a decision (in her own sweet time), likely as not she might spring forth in a sudden burst of action, as if the long spell of deliberation never took place. As to whether she deems the perceived danger worth braving (benefits outweighing possible costs of forward motion), or if she just gives in with a fatalistic sigh to the inevitability of her demise, it is impossible to say.

Like the word that stands for it, the material phenomenon of the sull may come off as obsolete in the mechanisms of first-world postindustrial technocultures, where asses and other beasts of burden have little play anymore. But when we consider the inestimable material contributions of asspower to the colonization of the Americas and other continents and cultures, special possibilities arise where the sull might come to stand for an opposing force to the ass’s otherwise invisible role as man’s “working partner.” At the very least, the sull might make space for

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2 This is not to suggest horses are never contemplative or circumspect in their dealings with humans. But there is a uniquely immovable quality to the assine sull that I have never personally known a horse to exhibit.

3 As one of the first beasts of burden to be domesticated (from the African wild ass), *Equus asinus* still inhabits a number of nomadic
new attention to (and respect for) the wits and survival strategies of one anciently domestic species of desert-tough, long-eared equids, who have carried untold burdens of human enterprises for millennia, as both watchful witnesses and (mostly willing) sidekicks.

“Sull” was not among the words and gestures that Aliass and I learned together in our early Whites Creek days. So it came as a shock that morning after our slapdash wedding at the local park in Paris, Tennessee when – at the moment of our momentous departure for Mississippi – Mariann and I tried to load Aliass, and the little she-ass refused with every atom of her corporeal existence to step onto that house-of-horrors of a horse trailer. More than any fear or premonition of what awaited us in Mis-

and sedentary pastoralist cultures in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. As one of the oldest domestic beasts of burden, asses have been entangled in human labors and colonial enterprises for centuries. Jill Bough describes the ass’s significant role in colonizing the Americas in Donkey, particularly the chapter titled “Donkeys and Mules Colonize the Americas, Australia and South Africa.” Jill Bough, Donkey (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2011), 76–105. Bough also draws from William Long’s Asses vs. Jackasses, in which the former lawyer makes an impassioned and convincing case to the “Court of Public Conscience” for the recognition of the superiority of Equus asinus over the pernicious calumny of “jackasses” (Homo sapiens). Long waxes in colorful lawyerly language on the roles of asses throughout colonial Western history: “The burro has led the procession in America almost ever since the white man first set foot in this hemisphere. It carried the accoutrements of Cortez to the capital of the Montezumas. It was at Balboa’s elbow when he first caught sight of the Pacific. It journeyed with Ponce de Leon when he sought the fountain of youth, and with De Soto when he discovered the Mississippi.” William G. Long, Asses vs. Jackasses (Portland: The Touchstone Press, 1969), 29. And so on, to the mythic American Gold Rush days, when burros bore burdens of every hopeful miner westward and beyond in time and geographic distribution, just as they continue to bear burdens of every imaginable kind to this day. For more recent history of asses in the Western US, see Abraham Gibson, “Beasts of Burden: Feral Burros and the American West,” in The Historical Animal, ed. Susan Nance (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 38–53.
sissippi, the trailer itself was most likely what Aliass objected to. It was an ominous contraption, spray-painted black inside and out, slatted on the sides with two-by-fours bolted to the metal frame and with rusty metal sheets bolted together at the windowless front, topped off with a moldy, rust-stained canvas roof. The black side slats were splintery and rotting, so the rig shed bits of burnt-looking wood wherever it went. Despite its alarming appearance, Mariann’s neighbor Darryl, a local horse trader, assured us that the floor would hold a Percheron stallion. We confirmed the floor was tight with new, thick oak boards, and the metal frame and axles were solid, too; I had them checked professionally, along with some wiring work needed to match the trailer with the Black Caprice. While the trailer’s underlying structural integrity made it a miraculous find for $250, it did nothing for the overall impression the rig gave off of being kin to some evil-looking jalopy that a dastardly cartoon villain might ride around in. On top of all that, it also smelled weird.

The conveyance was not worthy of Aliass, but it was what we had to work with. On the inside curve of the rusty metal front, someone had scrawled a message that was difficult to make out: over the years I interpreted the mismatched letters to read something like “dOnt UsE thIs TrAiLeR iF YOU CaNt CLeAn iT Out.” Aliass was not privy to this message, writ jaggedly inside the rusting trailer as if by the hand of a dying man, but clearly everything else about the contraption conveyed to her a warning along the lines of “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.” This was a warning Aliass aimed to heed, and she sure as hell was not going to hop willingly into what she saw as a rickety-ass deathtrap.

So the episode that kicked off our grand Southern adventure ended up being one of the ugliest of our lives together. We had ahead of us about a four-hour drive from Paris to Oxford that day, on two-lane highways down through Jackson and Bolivar, Tennessee and across
the border into Lafayette County, Mississippi. The haul wasn’t especially long, but the departure from Paris was a big deal all the same; we were rolling off that day with certain fanfare into the wild unknowns of the big-ass journey ahead. So unfortunately, when Aliass balked at the big step up into the unfamiliar trailer, her hesitation was an offense to the human sense of ceremonial propriety. The conflict swiftly escalated into a violent battle of wills and bodily weights that has likely been raging for as long as humans and asses have known each other. Pressing upon the reluctant ass with all the violent certainty of our purpose’s rightness, we met with the keen impassability of her own special form of resistance, honed over eons in the company of demanding humans on the edges of raging rivers, colonial gangplanks, slippery mountain passes, and the ramps of military-transport trains, ships, and planes headed for France or Afghanistan. That is to say, here was the full-blown, knock-down-drag-out sull.

Sadly at this juncture I knew myths about “stubborn” asses far better than I knew my little long-eared friend. I deferred to experience and stood by mutely while others yelled and stomped and beat on Aliass’s rump with a bloodied stick. If I had known her then the way I do now, I would have anticipated that given enough time in which to conclude that she could not escape the leap into the dark abyss we demanded of her, she would eventually make up her mind to board the trailer of her own volition. In the long run, she taught me modes of patience required to negotiate through seemingly impassable sulls. But on that fraught day, each blow or yank on the leadrope only hardened Aliass’s impassioned refusal to move. She was ready to be martyred. After two awful hours of sweat, tears, and blood in the sweltering Tennessee late morning, the she-ass was laid out flat on the gravel driveway, having slowly backed up further and further against the rope until she sat on her rump and then fell over backwards and lay prostrate on the ground.
This scene was no way to begin our honeymoon. But here is that old festering gall again: despite my best intentions, vows, and pronouncements of love for this special ass — my desire to honor her ways of knowing and navigating places — we are bound up together in a long, twisted, friction-ridden, and asymmetrical histories that both precede and follow us, most of which involve human wills doing various forms of violence to asses and other domestic beasts. Insult to injury, we then make up stories and pass them down from generation to generation, about how stubborn or stupid the beasts are for refusing actions that cause them mortal terror (at the least) and more likely pain or untimely demise.

Such dynamics of human power and privilege in relation to equines and others shaped my growing up, as I learned to manipulate horses’ behavior through various coercive material and behavioral techniques and scare tactics. As Paul Patton observes, even the most humane and respectful training and management methods are grounded in the assumption that we humans should do whatever works most efficiently to bend dumber bodies and labors to our own wills and needs. This belief is old and deeply writ and twisted through domestic bodies and ontologies. As we gather from environmental histories like Alfred Crosby’s *Columbian Exchange*, which traces biological consequences of colonial conquest, European forms of livestock-keeping and their specific companion-species configurations were borne across seas and into

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4 In “Language, Power, and the Training of Horses,” Patton questions the claim to freedom of choice offered to a horse-in-training in Monty Roberts’s Join-Up technique: “If we understand coercion to mean causing an animal to act in ways it would not otherwise have acted, then even such indirect techniques are coercive in the broader sense. The difference here is in more or less sophisticated techniques of exercising power over other beings.” Paul Patton, “Language, Power, and the Training of Horses,” in *Zoontologies*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 92.
prairies in fur, hooves, and guts of herbivores that conquistadors and others transported to the Americas. Old World forms of husbandry spread far and wide, bringing along their invasive plant species (“Kentucky” bluegrass, thistles, and dandelions, to name a few). They proliferated in the crisscrossing tracks of asses, horses, cattle, and human slaves who tended them (and sometimes followed their wild northward flights across the Americas), taking root in every landscape where colonial humans and livestock commingle.5

These same dynamics still pertain between me and Aliass, knotted in the ways I co-opt her labor and leisure to serve my desires, even as I try to care for and respect her needs. From the moment I first beheld the chimeric American Spotted Ass figure empixellated on my laptop screen, through all the miles of adventuring and years of intimate husbandry, Aliass has been hitched to the onerous burden of serving my whims. The cares in which I hold her include a great deal of domestic confinement and, perhaps, boredom, as compared to the lives of wild or feral asses who must navigate social and geographic territories to feed and shelter themselves and protect each other. That said, mine is likely a luckier ass than most. She was born on the right side of an American century,

5 Crosby describes the movement of imported colonial livestock animals northwards, sometimes along with the slaves who tended them and the plants who rode along. As Crosby writes: “The fact that Kentucky bluegrass, daises, and dandelions, to name only three out of hundreds, are Old World in origin gives one a hint of the magnitude of the change that began in 1492 and continues into the twentieth century. Today an American botanist can easily find whole meadows in which he is hard-put to find a single species of plant that grew in America in pre-Columbian times.” Alfred Crosby, The Columbian Exchange (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972), 73–74. See also Virginia DeJohn Anderson, Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Rebecca Cassidy and Molly Mullin, eds., Where the Wild Things Are Now: Domestication Reconsidered (Oxford: Berg, 2007).
in a place where demographics, economics, and pervasive civil- and animal-rights movements allowed for the possibility that a middle-class female artist might find and graft her to the task of forging new kinds of barnyard and roadside relations. Even as we inevitably get mired in the old ones, too.

And so she was. Plucked up by stroke of good fortune (mine more than hers) from that cattle farm on Monsanto Road in Maury County, Tennessee. Other histories, tropes, and myths weigh in here. Whatever I might hope and pitch our association to represent, the pasts and futures of our entwined species subsume us – from our genes to the ways we are represented in names, classifications, political categories, and popular media. We are bound up together in webs of many interconnected species – not just asses and humanfolk but triangulations and crazier geometries of domesticated European grasses, brown-headed cowbirds, ivermectin-resistant strongyles, bull and star thistles, vital bacterial companions, and myriad untold others whose lifecycles intertwine with barnyard doings in ways we seldom even recognize.6

That first traumatic sull in Paris was not the last time Aliass and I would find our wills and weights pulling hard

6 The webs of companion species relations mentioned here all merit deeper exploration, while some demand ethical action in the barnyard more urgently than others. The growing resistance of certain nematodes (especially the many species of strongyles) to the commonly used anthelmintic ivermectin means that people who care for equines must find new methods for reducing their internal parasite loads—in other words, killing the worms. Jacqueline Matthews, “Ivermectin Resistance in Equine Nematodes,” International Journal for Parasitology: Drugs and Drug Resistance 4, no. 3 (2014): 310–15. In these and all relations, Aliass and I are caught up in meshes of what Donna Haraway describes as companion species relations that are always “obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean [...] full of waste, cruelty, indifference, ignorance, and loss, as well as of joy, invention, labor, intelligence, and play.” Donna J. Haraway, Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 12.
in opposite directions. I came to recognize the look of an impending sull – a certain backwards set of her ears and a faraway, glazed look coming into in her eyes. In time I learned tactics to avert it, to assuage her fears (whether reasonable or seeming-to-me unfounded), by sweet-feed or some other diversion. Mostly, though, as I got to know Aliass better, I came to respect her insistence on deciding her own bodily fate. I learned to settle into a sull and wait it out calmly, even peacefully – like one night when we spent hours at the gaping maw of the trailer in an eerie emptiness of downtown Nashville after midnight, hanging out with human buddies under a dim yellow street-light while Aliass and I each leaned with staunch determination on opposing ends of the lead-rope.

Oh, in time we would find harmonies a-plenty on the roads ahead – foremost for me in the constant current of wonder and tranquility that comes with immersion in Aliass's singular aura. But that first awful time, that high noon showdown in Paris, Tennessee, Aliass’s blood and the blood of her ancestors was on my hands. Despite all the tender exchanges that came later, or the hundreds of times she jumped without hesitation into that same trailer in years to come, likely as not Aliass has never forgotten that day. Deep in her body she can never fully trust me, and she is right to feel this way. I do know it took a few days – after she was finally heaved stiff-legged onto the trailer by several of Mariann’s burly neighbors – for her to acknowledge my presence when I spoke to her or tried to stroke her. When I pulled the rig over in a strip-mall parking lot outside Jackson, Tennessee later that afternoon and tried to offer her a carrot through the trailer slats, she would not even look at me. So the grand mission to “ride a Spotted Ass across the American South” – with all its lofty aspirations and shadowier drives – begins on a dismal note: Aliass in the rattling trailer – angry, sore, and stoic – and me in the driver’s seat of the Black Caprice, driving deeper and deeper into
the vague, dark, and conflict-ridden longings, regrets, desires, and shame that suffused our adventures together through north Mississippi and beyond.

Learning the Subtle Arts of a Sull

My dear Aliass, for so long I tried to respect your so-called “silence” by refusing to trespass with exclusive human authority on our journeys together through beastly time-places. Given the dangers of betraying embodied and ineffable ass tales, I stood fast at the edge of an Impasse, regarding human logos and authority (in the form of writing) on one side of an abyss and embodied wordless weaves of lively ecologies on the other. In a passionate sull of my own – in this case, a stoppage or refusal to proceed in specific narrative ways – I have been deeply engaged in weighing what is at stake, what dangers or brighter possibilities lurk in the leap toward authoring our journeys together from Mississippi to Virginia and beyond. Because here is the closest thing I know to a fact: I could never grasp or author the infinite stories of biological and affective becomings that swarm in and around me and Aliass as we wander through places. I would not trample with wordy tropes on this delicate bewilderment and perplexity. I would not lay a tale down on those old Western teleological tracks, if I could help it. And this embrace of nameless ecologies and untellable storyings has been the aim of performing immersive, material journeys, in lieu of writing in whatever forms, all along.

In this stance, I’ve balked long and hard at the risks of mounting up to take the authorial reins of a freighted journey narrative, where trope-tangled emplotments

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7 As poet Fanny Howe observes, “Aesthetic circling around an interior silence has to be delicate. Your consciousness of misappointment is very great.” Fanny Howe, “Bewilderment, or the incarnation of the author,” Raddle Moon 18, no. 2 (2002): 56.
might reinforce the sense that human stories are the only ones that really matter. The risks seemed too great that to render our experiences into grammatical prose – into a language where asses and other “animals” are objects at best, and also killable commodities – would betray the dream of our wanderings as nomadic co-exploration and resistance, spaces in which to share and frame respect for embodied ways of storying. Meanwhile, these risks did not bother the various reporters whom we met (or who chased us down) along the way, from the TV news crew who ambushed us on a Tennessee backroad to the diligent newshound who came upon us at a gas station in Roanoke; but that’s another kind of story. Given all this, I have resisted bending to pressures of neoliberal market economy, within a dominant culture that might just as readily render Aliass into dog food as spotlight her fifteen minutes of fame on a local newscast. And I cast a long sideways ear at the temptation to hawk a romantic fantasy where a solo (white, female) traveler on the open road appears as an embodiment of heroic adventure or personal freedom. Maybe so, but freedom for whom?

In The Mushroom at the End of the World, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing reminds us how Western cultures assume time as a linear force, how the “forward march” of “progress” underlies “democracy, growth, science, and hope” and leads us to “expect economies to grow and science to advance”; but this progress is “embedded […] in widely accepted assumptions about what it means to be human” in ways that lead us to believe humans alone are inside history while all other species are outside of it, at our mercy for exploitation or salvation. Meanwhile, “every living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion”; in following the lifeways of matsutake mushrooms from the forests of Oregon’s Eastern Cascades to migrant picker camps to Japanese markets, Tsing demonstrates how “we might look for what has been ignored because it never fit the time line of progress.” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 21.

And freedom from what? And can we ever fully recognize that we are never solo, after all, but always comprised of worldings with infinite others – complex and intimate responsibilities we can never really get free of?

Still Life with an Unnamed Ass

Lo and behold, at an impasse where a sull stills forward movement in a particular direction, and thus disrupts the flow of habitual movements, new and tender awareness and affective possibilities find cracks from which to emerge. As Kathleen Stewart describes in “Still Life,” contemplative pauses open attentive space for unforeseen insights, and even the emergence of newfangled practices and hybrid articulations: “A still is a state of calm, a lull in the action. But it is also a machine hidden in the woods that distills spirits into potency through a process of slow condensation.”¹⁰

Over the course of that first slow, spiraling, hot and moonshiny wander with Aliass across the Southern states – and more especially in the aftermath, sat at a keyboard facing the impasse of words – I found new ways to respectfully inhabit the insistent wisdoms and distillate possibilities of a sull. As on those fraught occasions when I had no choice but to stand still with Aliass and wait through a hardcore sull, while she pondered and processed a possible move, and I could tune in to quieter presences at the margins – bird rustlings and frog calls, ants and beetles crawling along, hushes of leaves and roots entwining, not to mention the subtle shifts and twitches of mind and mood in Aliass’s body and my own. Practices bound to living and traveling with Aliass continuously seek newfangled forms through which to explore and respond to promises of richer multispecies sto-

ries we find through immersion in barnyards and other full-blown, overlapping and mapless territories.

Learning to negotiate through conflicts borne of differing perceptions and experience would become a vital aspect of our long-ass journey, a source of its most difficult joys and intimate frictions. While the ancient becomings of domestic asses and humans both precede and evolve in our midst, Aliass and I had to learn brand-new, embodied ways of becoming open to each other as we went along through unfamiliar places in the course of that long ass journey. And in coming to respect a wary she-ass’s unique intelligence and self-preserving needs, I have learned that a sull is never without good reason. More importantly, the stakes on either side of any such conflict are seldom, if ever, clear to everybody involved. To sit deep and move in slow motion through a sull with Aliass is to enter, as Donna Haraway describes in the *Companion Species Manifesto*, “the world of becoming with, where who and what are is precisely what is at stake.”

Indeed, the weighing of ‘what is at stake’ is always what goes on at the heart of a sull, where inscrutable beasts consider possible threats to life and limb through the limits of what we know or don’t, all the while trying to decide how to proceed (or not) given such fearsome opacities, dangers, or promises of greener pastures hidden in invisible infrastructures, manifest myths, and other shadowy places.

**Toward a Multispecies Relational Aesthesetics**

From out of this impasse – the staunch refusal from the get-go to write our journey as a linear narrative memoir from beginning to end (an ancient, inherently teleological structure that a journey almost seems to demand) – I discovered other creative strategies by which to artfully resist and intervene in certain pressures toward domi-

nant forms of meaning-making. As a creative practice, the sull encompasses not just a tactic of resistance but more so a vital, hopeful, and generative mode of pro cessual stillness and refusal-to-move in a particular direc tion – in hopes of coming up with a better one. Bound to Aliass, I have found the long-ass sull becomes a thick and habitable practical space in which to performatively frame the deepest quandaries, questions, and hopes tangled up in our asymmetrical relations.

Over the years, the art of the sull has evolved as a distinct engagement of ecological performance-art practices, in particular those that pull contemporary relational aesthetics across species to resist single authorship and buck violent ontological hierarchies and exclusions. While barnyard-bound and so inherently distanced from mostly urban art centers and institutions, the art of a sull still inherits from certain art-historical legacies, especially later-twentieth-century feminist and ecological performance practices that address social and environmental inequities in different ways. From John Cage’s indeterminacy to the feminist blurring of Art/Life to Beuysian social sculpture, performance-art practices provide vital conceptual frameworks wherein artists address complexities of places and the less-recognized lives they hold, many of which might otherwise be ignored or dismissed as insignificant noise. Building on aesthetic and

12 The history of contemporary performance art, especially traced through feminist and ecological legacies, provides diverse creative and radical ways to frame attention to indeterminate site-specific and time-based becomings. John Cage’s most well-known piece, “4’33’”, introduced a method of framing indeterminacy in creative musical compositions. The pianist David Tudor performed by ceremoniously seating himself at the piano and proceeding to play “nothing” for the duration of the piece, while the audience either absorbed or rejected the invitation to listen deeply and differently to the unexpected murmurs, hums, clicks, coughs, and ambient vibrations happening in the concert hall. Later, feminist and Art/Life pioneers like Yoko Ono, Mierle Ukeles, Allan Kaprow, Carolee Sch-
political concepts in performance art, twenty-first-century relational practices have evolved in some directions to invite participants into thick habitable experiences and encounters with invisible or overlooked processes, presences, and affective possibilities. In this sense, relational art practices may work to resist the assumption that the singular Human Artist is always primary author of whatever action or encounters unfold within a given artwork.

At the same time, art critic Helena Reckitt reminds us that even where relational practices claim to create radical new spaces for social equality and collaborative exploration, social and political power dynamics are always at play in the shaping of these spaces. In “Forgotten Relations,” Reckitt calls out the tendency of contemporary relational aesthetics (especially those under the influence of Nicholas Bourriaud) to ignore the insights of earlier feminist practices, such as Mierle Ukeles’s Maintenance Art. Reckitt writes that relational projects often lose vital elements of the “criticality and ambivalence” that early feminist works manifest. Instead, writes Reckitt, they tend to invite visitors into “a frictionless environment, unencumbered by the claims of responsibility,” which in turn “suppresses the key feminist insight that neither ‘art’ nor ‘work’ are ever just that, but are always subject to neeman, Linda Montano, and Joseph Beuys (to name a few) adapted modes of framing indeterminacy toward exploration and critique of aesthetic, political, and environmental systems. Contemporary ecological art draws on legacies from early Dada and surrealist performances to cutting-edge bioart, while ecological artists disturb traditional boundaries between bodies/environments, humans/nature, and any other dubious dualisms. While ecological art comprises a diverse field of practices, its artists tend to share what Linda Weintraub calls an “ecocentric” (as opposed to more traditionally anthropocentric) focus. See Linda Weintraub, To Life! Eco Art for a Sustainable Planet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), and Andrea Liss, Feminist Art and the Maternal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

conditions of who does what, for whom, and under what terms.”

While the art of a sull might idealize certain aesthetic and political aims of creating more equitable spaces, it also recognizes that our proceedings can never be frictionless, especially when encounters within them are shaped by asymmetrical power dynamics that hold some participants as biographical beings and others as killable commodities. This critique becomes especially relevant for a practice that aims to wrangle with “assthetic” questions of who does what and for whom in our specific barnyard relations. For the most part, institutionalized relational art practices (and their salient critiques) pertain to dynamics of human political and social relations. But some contemporary artists also work to extend the relational framework into broader multispecies fields, to encourage curiosity and newly impassioned attention toward other species and ecological meshes. Toward this end, Steve Baker describes artistic strategies that seek to disrupt “the notion of an originating author,” in the words of artist Mark Dion. Baker explores projects that employ a kind of “unassuming ‘complex authorship’ responsible for the production [of artworks] […] most strikingly evident not only in Olly and Suzi’s collaborative ‘hand over hand’ technique, but in the occasional participation of animals themselves in the mark-making.”

Meanwhile, the art of the sull also draws vital insights from the work of contemporary bio-artists, who intertwine imaginative and critical exploration with scientific knowledge-making practices. While the biopolitics of twenty-first-century technoscience may seem a far cry

from the rural ass barnyard, these debates are relevant to anyone who has and/or loves living bodies in our so-called “Biological Century.” In caring for Aliass and herd, I make decisions about deworming schedules and vaccination practices, and in doing so I recognize that the laboratory is never as far from the barnyard as we might suppose. Perhaps even more important for my aspirations of making stories with untold others is this admonition from science studies scholar Joseph Dumit, his “Microbiopolitical tactic” that advises: “Never think you know all of the species involved in a decision. Corollary: Never think you speak for all of yourself.”

Meanwhile, emergent practices in bio-art and multispecies storytelling seek to honor and respect the ways of those who experience and weave the world otherwise, while at the same time pitching critical and creative interventions into environmentally harmful human habits and systems. In the *Multispecies Salon*, Eben Kirksey gathers a diverse arrays of ethnographic, artistic, and practical interventions in specifically troubled sites; here ecological performance, bio-art projects, and even biopolitical recipes from artists and scholars Mirium Simun, Lindsay Kelley, Kim TallBear, and others invite radical multispecies inclusivity and demonstrate hopeful tinkerings that (re)frame invisible and complex, inner and outer encounters among diverse mammals, insects, plants, and microbes. Beatrix da Costa and Kavita Philip’s collection, *Tactical Biopolitics*, gathers bioart practices that radically question the boundaries of artistic and scientific practices. From Kathy High’s exploration of entangled empathies with laboratory rats, with whom she shares a disease, to Eduardo Kac’s unsettling genetic modifications

of human–plant hybrids and bioluminescent rabbits, bio-artists challenge and frame affective and biopolitical encounters always unfolding in naturalcultural sites. Dissolving stubborn categories like nature/culture and human/animal, which hinder efforts to find ourselves more wholly within earthly environments, these artistic practices give material forms to specific modes of (re) thinking systems and hierarchies, which in turn become part of what Charis Thompson originally dubbed “ontological choreography.”

Barnyard Ontological Choreography

Possibilities for new kinds of storytelling thicken where human modes of perception and meaning-making meet and mix with other species who perceive and make meanings differently. In When Species Meet, Donna Haraway describes an ontological choreography comprised entirely of encounters, where “all the actors become who they are in the dance of relating, not from scratch, not ex nihilo, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to this encounter.” Kin to Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-


19 In a significant passage, Haraway sniffs out traces of human exceptionalism, embedded even in the insightful work of ethologist Barbara Smuts, whose studies with baboons provide vital contributions in contemporary ethology. Haraway says: “Writing about these introductions to baboon social niceties, Smuts said, ‘The baboons remained themselves, doing what they always did in the world they always lived in’ (295). In other words, her idiom leaves the baboons in nature, where change involves only the time of evolution, and perhaps ecological crisis, and the human being in history, where all other sorts of time come into play. Here is where I think Derrida and Smuts need each other. […] If we know how to look, I think we would see that the baboons of Eburru Cliffs were redone too, in baboon
action” – where “interaction” is dumped for its inherent implication that discrete things and organisms bump against each other while remaining essentially unchanged – ontological choreography reckons with shaping forces of constant, dynamic encounters, which leave no party unaffected.  

As a concept, ontological choreography ripples out from discourses among cultural anthropologists and science and technology studies (STS) scholars, who explore fault lines of Western paradigms that dubiously claim to separate and elevate (some) human actions above all other embodied kinds. Charis Thompson’s *Making Parents* – a seminal ethnographic study of how parents and children come into being through “ontological choreographies of assisted reproductive technologies” – explores clinical sites where a number of seemingly distinct worlds come together around certain reproductive goals. In this case, biological processes and technological tools fuse around the goal of human conception, and traditional categorical distinctions of Nature and Culture dissolve into webs of relations between rhythms and apparatuses that constantly shape and remake each other. Exclusive human authority gives way, and (as Haraway has it) “relationships are the smallest possible patterns for analysis; the partners and actors are their still-ongoing products. It is all extremely prosaic, relentlessly mundane, and exactly how worlds come into being.” Whether written or performed in other embodied ways, ontological choreographies of thinking and material action frame inde-
terminate, unscripted haps in specific timeplaces. This thinking in turn creates openings for more inclusive unfoldings to materialize as grounds for storying with diverse, site-specific, and unnamed agents as authors.

And all of this brings us back, if by unexpected paths, to the art of the sull. All of these ideas and contemporary practices of multispecies theory and art-making shape ways and means for making untold stories with Aliass. While grounded in material performance and daily care-takings, the sull as a space from which we might co-compose untold stories is kin to the ethnographic tactic that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls passionate immersion.23 Emerging practices of multispecies ethnography draw on Tsing’s attention to “[i]mmersive ways of knowing and being with others [that] involve careful attention to what matters to another – attention to how to how they craft shared lives and worlds.”24 Indeed, in the work of living and crafting shared worlds with Aliass over time, I have learned many new tactics, skills, and modes of attention, while also gaining humility alongside my long-eared friend as we navigate fearsome impasses in ways I would never find without her.

The Overpass

In June 2002, Aliass and I made a preliminary foray on the eve of our departure from Oxford. It was just a couple of miles and barely an hours’ walk, across the south part of Oxford, Mississippi. That morning we left the residential neighborhood south of town, where we were staying the night with friends of friends, Amos and Coulter, and made our way to William Faulkner’s estate, Rowan Oak, which

sits at the edge of town on the other side of a major highway bypass. As we set off that morning, I walked behind Aliass, guiding her with a pair of long driving reins, as I had learned that urgings from behind are the only way she will move steadily forward. (If I try to lead her from in front, she barely moves at all.) We stuck close to the gutter as we clicked along the asphalt roadway and wove into strip-mall parking lots to avoid passing cars where possible. We were clipping along at a good pace and feeling fine. The morning was clear with a tiny breeze, with the exception of a brief cloudburst. A half mile into the trip, we came to an overpass. I had seen it looming ahead but failed to anticipate the way an elongated span of blocky concrete and cracked asphalt suspended over a roaring stream of speeding traffic would look to a wary ass who had never encountered such a thing. I had not considered the way the change of sound underneath her hooves would strike her, as solid earth dropped away beneath her into thin air and a hellish pit of revving engines below.

Some fifteen feet onto the overpass, Aliass froze in terror in the middle of the lanes where cars were traveling both ways. Cars began to back up behind us. It was less a sull than a panic attack, really, but either way it amounted to an immovable ass in the middle of a busy commuter roadway. She would not budge in any direction. I tried pulling, clucking, and even pushing her from behind. Nothing would move her. The minutes stretched out like strains of hot tar, as bemused faces behind windshields grew less friendly. All of a sudden, Aliass jolted forward. With all the force in her 400+-pound body, she charged across the lane of oncoming traffic and dragged me to the opposite side of the road, where she hopped up onto a sidewalk that ran the length of the overpass to land on the other side. Yep, a sidewalk. Determined to follow the rules of the road for bicycles (as extrapolated to “livestock”), I was determined to stay in our lane of traffic, and so I had not even noticed the four-foot-wide,
protected passageway on the opposite side of the road. But Aliass saw it, and somehow she was drawn to its purpose in spite of never needing such a thing before (far as I know). Once she got up on the sidewalk, Aliass clipped swiftly across the length of the overpass and delivered us safely to solid ground on the other side.

A few minutes later, we gathered our wits in a gas station parking lot beside a little flower shop. Aliass pooped in relief, and before I could pick up her droppings with the little yellow plastic kid’s shovel I carried for that purpose in the saddlebag, the florist popped out of the shop and requested the manure to feed her seedlings. Then slowly but steadily we went on, past a few blocks of mown antebellum lawns and stately homes until we came to Rowan Oak. Once we arrived on the parklike grounds of Faulkner’s grand neoclassical mansion and estate, we ambled around the mannered grounds where the great author hammered out the bulk of his massive, influential literary corpus. I rode Aliass (as on occasion she permitted) around the grounds of the estate, and through a little, low labyrinth of boxwood bushes near the columnned neoclassical façade of the mansion. We each plucked bright daylily flowers from the prim shrubbery and chewed the orange petals. I found a shiny black feather on the ground and stuck it into Aliass’s bridle. And so we meandered in the gentle melodious cacophony of the early-summer Mississippi late morning: American crows, mockingbirds, cicadas, lofty cedars and gnarly old oak trees, coastal grasses rhizoming their twisted ways across pale red dirt, trellised vines and trim boxwoods, and human ass conversations (with and about Aliass and our present purposes; with an Oxford Eagle newspaper reporter; and then with a cocky, college-circuit comedian playing it cool in a do-rag), all the while immersed in the cawing and twining, breathing and chattering of a distinct, ever-shifting ruckus of myriad voices and lives less audible.
The creative and critical practices borne through the art of a sull and bound to the Unnaming of Aliass begin in an Impasse – in stubborn refusals to name or claim authorship in given ways. But the art of a sull also recognizes that to immerse with Aliass in performative journeys is not really to propose that we sidestep the shaping influences of human language, narratives, economies, or infrastructures. The art of a sull simply holds that in certain circumstances we might learn to deploy a specific stance (picture the ass sitting back on her haunches in a hard sull) that resists galling assumptions and hierarchies that tend to bulldoze more true-to-life, inclusive, and respectful forms of meaning-making. The art of the sull unfolds where we (fail to) go forth in a particular direction (rational? philosophical? phallogocentric?), in the hope that from such time-warping, contemplative intervals of resistance and contemplation might come new kinds of co-composition and barnyard tales, and perhaps even unforeseen overpasses across menacing divides.

These interdisciplinary arts of unnaming and inhabiting untold stories with Aliass may be speculative, but their consequences are not imaginary. What happens in a sull matters – not least because it turns certain authorities and assumptions on their long, furry ears in local and specific ways. At the very least, a hardcore sull reminds any immodest muleskinner that her ass (or half-ass) is never a mechanical agent of human will. This is not to say one little ass could ever win against global forces of anthropocentric-technocratic-neoliberal-capitalist dominion all on her own. But it is to say (with all due respect and immeasurable gratitude) that her unique assine form of resistance is a venerable tactic, nonetheless. When it comes to insistent balking at the edge of troubled crossings, so as to weigh every possible strategy (when escape is not an option), I have learned some special skills from the very best.
Fig. 1. Aliass on a highway overpass just outside Oxford, Mississippi, June 2002. Photograph by the artist.