In a more or less chronological fashion, this wandering-ass story traces routes and haps along the way toward finding the significant ass-in-question and setting out on our never-ending journey together. As it happens, the promise of a special password, which I had first glimpsed in the American Spotted Ass and hotly pursued through various continental crisscrossings, was utterly real. Recognized once again in that loaded invitation from a Tennessee mule trader, which lured me southeastward in early spring 2002, the password led straight to a motherlode. Yes, the ass of my dreams was in fact residing in the dusty obscurity of a cattle farm on the edge of Columbia, just a few miles from the Mule Day grounds. But before I could actually get my hands on her, I had to pass through a sort of dark and swirling portal; I had to follow the lead of another important figure – an astonishing pair of conjoined figures, actually – who (if we choose to follow them) ravel us into spectacular sites of hybrid blasphemous becomings. Watch now as this odd pair shifts and dodges, evading (for a while, at least) the punitive grasp of Powers-that-Be that would try to subdue them. Here
they come, and then there they go... The Tennessee Mule-Woman and Her Big White Ass.

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This is how it happened that, after seasons of dreaming and scheming and promising desert visions, I came to actually meet a real American Spotted Ass in the flesh. I heeded the invitation of a Tennessee stranger to race across the continent and meet her at the Mule Day grounds in Columbia. Mere moments after I found my way to Mariann's encampment, I was sat bareback upon her sturdy spotted-ass gelding, Napoleon (whose image I had admired in the spottedass.com classifieds). And there upon Nap's back, I rode behind Mariann as she reined through thronging crowds on her shiny young bay mule, Atticus, who had a flimsy plastic “For Sale” sign pinned to the saddle-blanket he wore. Being brand-new to Tennessee and dumbfounded by what I was suddenly immersed in, I did not catch most of what was muttered to us by folks in the crowd as we rode around. But after a few repetitions, I began to catch one particular utterance, posed to me repeatedly by grinning old men and boys as they leered up at me on Napoleon’s bare back. Indeed, it was a rare, endemic breed of Tennessee Mule Day come-on: “Hey there,” they would say, “s/he ride double?”

It was clear from their twinkly tones and raised eyebrows that they didn’t mean nuthin’ by it.¹ It was a jo-

¹ *Nuthin’*, that is, except the subtle exercise of gendered hierarchy that allows a man to offer to mount up behind a woman he does not know, apparently acceptable as long as it is presented in a jokey way. But note that it was only old men and teen boys who offered this, whereas it might have been riskier for one in the fullness of his manhood to make such overt gestures to a strange woman and her ass, even in jest. Deborah Clarke presents an interesting discussion of the ways that Faulkner’s Southern male characters use humor to grapple with their masculinity and the specific roles that male humor plays in patriarchal Southern culture at larger scales. Debo-
vial harassment, if you can even call it that. Not a one of those round-bellied, stiff-legged old Tennessee mule-men in overalls or adolescent boys with Big Gulps and sticky cotton-candy hands was really going to clamber up behind me on Napoleon’s back and grab him some bare-back-ass-womanflesh, even if I had happened to call back, “Sure, come on up!” Nevertheless I have often wished for the perfect snappy comeback to all the hidden assumptions and power plays wound up in the “s/he ride double?” proposition, as posed to a woman on a little spotted ass. I have wanted for some kind of rebel-yellish holler, what could summon all the fraught desires and conflicted, mixed-up passions, the grim compromises and subtle, necessary rebellions that the distinct politics and culture of Mule Day in Tennessee manifests. What kind of comeback could undo some of the thick and greasy, knotty threads that lace their unspoken assumptions through that particular, situated-ass “s/he ride double?” come-on? Specific as this provocation is to the unique manifestations of Mule Day, any answer a person could muster would naturally have to arise, alight, and be pitched back with a twist into the fray of that same fraught location.

Very soon indeed, I would begin to see that the response I wished for is just the kind of crazy-ass comeback that Mariann Black and all her ass and half-ass kin had been cultivating within the fray of Mule Day (and rural Tennessee more broadly) for years. And the radical answer she shoots back is this: Yeehaw, she do ride double! Double and then some….

Because the secret of Mule Day that Mariann taps into is this: The dominant, nostalgia-ridden, socially conservative, patriarchal-white-nuclear-Christian-family-oriented political sway of the Mule Day festival as a whole is deliciously belied by the inherently subversive hybridity of

the mule herself. Born of a horse (Equus caballus) mother and sired by a jackass (Equus asinus), the mule is an always sterile beast of burden, unable to reproduce, always the beginning and end of her own family tree. How’s that for subversion of the heteronormative nuclear family model, not to mention a number of others? Indeed, through Mariann’s blasphemous interventions, my own experience of Columbia Mule Day has been so influenced by this subversive hybridity that the “King Mule” logo – head of a big-boned draft mule wearing a cock-eyed crown and a glimmer in her eye – comes to wink like a trickster, brimming with all kinds of queerly transformative and liberatory possibilities. This wink of the King Mule (often female) gives a sort of sandpapery feeling in the gut, like something rubbing from underneath against all those enforced categories of gender, race, and species that empower some while excluding others. So this winking half-ass figure erodes categories from below while nobody (no one supposedly in charge, at least) notices.

Such is the mule’s slippery oddness: like a kind of secret, long-eared slit of opening in the lacy veil of Southern decorum. Older than the Gilgamesh/Enkidu split, it is the charge of the doubled figure who is no one recognizable beast, both more-than-one and none-at-all: s/he who rides and hides and runs astray with subtle powers

to elude easy definitions, swing and dodge and wink between different breeds-of-being at once, never fitted to just one category or classification but always many, in buzzing swarms of beastly becomings that flicker and survive in muddy spaces between names and in/visibly entangled lives of all kinds. That is to say, the one who may escape....

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Even as Mule Day officially sighs with nostalgia for by-gone, “simpler,” animal-powered days (in tones typical of conservative rural Southern cultures), what I found when I arrived that Saturday morning to meet Mariann Black and her assorted herd was a site rich with seamy contemporary worlds among marginalized beasts of burden – most of all the mules, asses, and certain humans on the fringes who care for them. For the mule is no mere nostalgic symbol in Columbia: Mule Day in Tennessee revolves around the presences of shiny-eyed, ear-flicking, fur-hided living bodies of odd long-eared equines, and many of their short-eared mothers and half-siblings (i.e., horses), along with humans, of course, and many other unacknowledged mammals, insects, nematodes, microbes, and plants who also inhabit and comprise these worlds.

Columbia, Tennessee is the (self-proclaimed) “Mule Capital of the World.” For over a century and a half, the Southern motherlode of mule culture, at least during Mule Day week every early spring. Beginning as a mule swap in 1840, the Mule Day festival as it is known today

3 Other Mule Day festivals exist around the US, from relatively small events where the mule is mostly symbolic to the long-running weeks-long event in Bishop, California, where mules and donkeys from all over the US compete for national championships in every kind of equestrian event. But Columbia claims the oldest and most important Mule Day – the King of Mule Days, even.
kicked up in 1934, when some Depression-era hucksters saw a chance to make a buck on a spectacle as muleskinners convened from all over the Southern states and beyond to trade and admire long-eared equine wares. From midcentury onward – through world wars, diasporas, bloody race riots, and even (especially?) the displacement of good ole mules themselves by mechanization and rural-to-urban migration, Mule Day plodded on, growing steady and inevitable like the global human population.\footnote{A significant race riot occurred in Columbia as racial tensions erupted in the immediate aftermath of World War II. See Carroll Van West, “Columbia Race Riot, 1946,” \textit{Tennessee Encyclopedia}, Tennessee Historical Society (October 8, 2017), https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/columbia-race-riot-1946/.
}

Since becoming a public festival, Mule Day evolved as a nostalgia-tinged Southern gathering, featuring “family-friendly” entertainment such as white Christian gospel music and pig-calling contests, rows of booths hocking turkey legs, kettle corn, airbrushed t-shirts, and rebel-flag bikinis. Always on Saturday, a massive, spectacular parade draws crowds of thousands. Which is all to say, what began as a “Breeder’s Day” in 1840 – a regional gathering for the exchange of mules and banter – has become a really big deal in the twenty-first century, so much so, in fact, that in 2006 the Mule Day Parade appeared on the Department of Homeland Security’s National Asset Database as a possible terrorism target.\footnote{Oh we got your assets here, alright! Eric Lipton, “Come One, Come All, Join the Terror Target List,” \textit{New York Times}, July 12, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/12/washington/12assets.html/.
}

Mariann’s loaded, out-of-the-blue invitation to Mule Day had brought me reeling into this vibrant scene. The grounds we rode around that Saturday morning encircle a stand of white-washed wooden barns, indoor and outdoor stalls, and two big arenas with floodlights and grandstands, often full to the brim and spilling spectators like the overflowing trash cans. The heady air was
full of odors of diesel fuel and manure and fried dough, and the soundscape rippled with uncanny cries of mules (a haphazard mix between whinny and bray) like the calls of exotic jungle birds. A constant clip-clopping grind of shod hooves and wagon wheels on gravel and asphalt persisted all weekend, as wagons and riders cruised the road that circles the inner grounds.

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It did not take long to discover that Mariann’s Tennessee was rough-ass country, in many different ways. In search of an American Spotted Ass, with an unspoken desire to sidestep categorical exclusions of certain bodies and the (sometimes) hidden hierarchies that enforce them, I was escorted into the fray of Mule Day by Mariann and her then teenage son Sebastian, their asses Napoleon, Connie, Sweet Pea and half-asses Atticus and the mini-mule Caesar, and the inimitably itchy and snaggle-toothed English bulldog, Daphne. And here we became instant allies in strategic blasphemies, even kin, in ways that lasted for a decade of Mule Days and beyond. Mariann generously welcomed me into her crazy ass world (and later me and Aliass both into the frazzle of her “funny farm” in Paris, Tennessee), and she became a vital and bottomlessly generous source of hard-won ass wisdom, skills, and material tools and equipment. Over many years and Mule Days to come, I came to witness and admire how it can be that a big-hearted, worldly woman and champion of underdogs of all kinds – who finds herself bound to the arduous challenges of making a precarious living as a single mother and husbander of hybrid and mixed-breed herds in rural Tennessee – becomes a subversive warrior and trickster on the frontlines of US Culture Wars.

As a worldly woman of countercultural bent who had traveled many lands and seas (working on cruise ships in her younger years), Mariann was presently shackled to
the farm and those she cared for in Paris, Tennessee, what happened for her to be an oppressive, violent, and even dangerous atmosphere, where she struggled to protect her loved ones of various mixed species and races. A ferocious maternal mulewoman-of-the-world, she tried hard to provide health and safety for all her dependents and their ridiculously diverse needs on a scrappy farm of broken down barns, rotting fences, and weedy pastures that backed up to the poor and mostly Black housing projects on the outskirts of Paris. Maybe most fraught of all was the struggle to maintain a safe home in which to raise her son, whose biracial identity was further complicated by the fact that his Jamaican sea-captain father had been out of the picture for a long time, while Mariann’s current husband was a dangerous and destabilizing presence.

But in a special, chain-linked corner campsite of the Maury County Mule Day grounds that was her domain for nearly a decade (marginal and central at the same time), things were different. In the carnivalesque atmosphere of Mule Day that revolved around the equine companions she loved, Mariann could let off steam by acting out against social and political oppressions that plagued her back home in Paris. And here in this alternate space, she cultivated leopard-printed, ass-pun blasphemies to the hilt, with often risky tactics for subverting “socially conservative” hierarchies of race, gender, and species – as if Mule Day was an intensification of the specific lively morass within which she struggled to live well and care for others every other day at home. As it happens, some of those significant others would also come along to Mule Day, in a rusty stock trailer stuffed with long-eared characters of various shapes and sizes, who often were rescues from some abysmal circumstances in which she came upon and could not leave them. Mariann’s distinct

ways of caring for (un)loved others in fraught environs conjures a vision of one of her most beloved companions, Sweet Pea, known lovingly as her Big White Ass.

Sweet Pea, otherwise known as “The Pea” or “Her Royal Pea-ness,” was a rare, all-white mammoth donkey, meaning Sweet Pea was the size of a horse or mule, but solid ass through and through. “Her Royal Peaness” was Mariann’s pride and joy, the reigning dignitary amongst the odd flocks and gaggles of singular beasts who populated the “funny farm” in Paris. It is hard to imagine ears as long and wide and hoary-white as Sweet Pea’s, and as such her likeness to a giant white rabbit, or perhaps some other kind of body hidden inside a giant Easter Bunny costume, was unavoidable. (Interestingly, Sweet Pea may actually have been spotted. The breed registry was interested in her because she had one tiny black speck on one of her eyelids, meaning that her entirely otherwise white body may actually have been one giant spot.)

Up close and personal, Pea became even harder to pin down. Embodied in an improbable thick-legged, coarse-furred white body and looking back with suspicious curiosity in her deep-set brown eye, here was a character of such odd proportions and contradictions as to utterly confuse any eager taxonomist. Sweet Pea was like no other, truly. Her big white ungulate physique brought to mind any number of other species, from a gentle beluga whale to the imaginary Silly Wabbit who used to peddle rainbow-colored, sugar-ridden Trix™ cereal to kids. It seemed possible that the Pea might even have been some kind of elusive, part-bovine unicorn, who had somehow lost or withdrawn her magical twist of a horn.

In manner, Sweet Pea could be as sensitive as a blossom or as impassive (often immovable) as a limestone boulder – an enigma of opaque stoicism hiding inscrutable and explosive will. One could seldom tell what Pea preferred, until she was all of a sudden barreling like a runaway train toward some destination or objective
known only to her — or, in the opposing mode, refusing to move at all, stuck with her head or entire body wedged between trucks, walls, or other obstructions. While Pea herself was a mammoth mystery, her relationship with Mariann was that much more fascinating to see for the chaos and melee of tempestuous passions they brought out in each other. For this and other reasons, the strange and often strained communion of Mariann and Her Royal Pea-ness is a good place from which to observe Mariann’s distinctly blassphemous strategies.

On the one hand, Mariann loved each beast with a fierce maternal protectiveness and sought to protect their bodies and inscrutable souls from insults and injustices that whizzed around like bullets. She was as disgusted by disrespect for mules and asses as she was by blatant racism or misogyny in human social spheres. It was Mariann who solemnly taught me the ethical injunction that mules and donkeys “do not wear hats.” (You would be surprised how many otherwise thoughtful humans delight in the sight of a donkey in a sombrero.) I have known few individuals so committed to extending respect and justice to all, at least in word, gesture, and other oblique ways. At the same time, Mariann was a breeder and trader of “livestock,” and so she bought and sold, propagated and traded and displayed her stock (mules and asses, horses and goats, chickens and pups) like raw wares on Market Day (which perhaps it must always be in the era of eBay and spottedass.com classifieds). Not to say the trade was ever without conflict. Once a man hung around the camp for hours, so determined was he to buy the rare Big White Ass. He just kept raising his price, even as Mariann insisted that Sweet Pea was absolutely not and never would be for sale. After offering what was an astronomical amount (given the fact that a person could get an aver-

7 I recently learned the term “asshat,” which is what one might call a human who is acting particularly stupid.
age ass for a fistful of dollars), the man walked off angrily shaking his head. As soon as he was out of sight, Mariann stepped behind her trailer and broke down weeping.

Trafficking in assflesh is what brought us together at Mule Day, after all (lest we forget, self-proclaimed “Mule Capital [sic] of the World”). I initially met Mariann because I was nosing around her ass, Napoleon, in the online classifieds, and eventually she helped me find and strike a deal to buy the Tennessee ass of my dreams. Yet when we met, and before that in the glimmer of the secret password deployed in her first email, we discovered hidden in each other’s wanton ass puns a deeper shared regard for kinships and untold stories of long-eared friends and others. And so it happened that inside the fray of fraught situations like Mule Day – or any average day in which love and respect for others struggles to survive in places that threaten to reduce all lives to commodities and surfaces – we found and grounded a secretive shared desire to cultivate specific, strategic blasphemies, in different forms of unauthorized love and resistance to impassable contradictions and commodifications that we must all try to survive.

Like the password found in the doubled-up space between “ass” and the sensitive, storying beast it is supposed to contain, blasphemies work to hold open possibilities in seamy spaces-between – in this case, between desire to respect happiness of an ass or mule and the need and/or will to trade that embodied life as an economic object and commodity. As Donna Haraway has it, blasphemy is a strategy that is about “the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary

8 And is “chattel” not the root of “cattle” and also “capital,” after all? Middle English chatel, movable property, from Old French, from Medieval Latin capitāle; see cattle. The Free Dictionary, s.v. “chattel,” http://www.thefreedictionary.com/chattel/.
and true.” In this regard, Mariann’s particular modes of Mule Day blasphemy were both a high-stakes rebellious revelry and at the same time a desperate survival strategy. After only an hour or two hanging around Mariann’s campsite at Mule Day (and then for ten years thereafter), I saw how this gathering was a prime locus for her to cultivate resistance to the many “incompatible things” and inhospitable forces she lived within, in the thick of the mostly politically conservative, evangelical, racist, and patriarchal horse and mule-trader’s world of Tennessee.

Mariann Black is hardly the only lover of underdogs who must seek creative (and evasive) strategies to counter numerous subtle but powerful hierarchies and economies, enforced as they are by dominant figures and institutions. Nor is she alone in the need to hold together lives and cares in a mess of contradictory truths and incompatible necessities along shifty political and cultural zones in the contemporary US South, or for that matter anywhere on earth these days. Indeed, the stakes are high for anyone who cares about the welfare of living bodies excluded from the rights afforded to certain economically and racially-privileged human groups in the dominant naturecultures.10

9 Donna Haraway writes: “I know no better stance to adopt from within the secular-religious, evangelical traditions of United States politics, including the politics of socialist feminism. Blasphemy protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method.” Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

10 One site-specific example is this: The distinctive, high-stepping gait preferred by breeders and trainers of Tennessee Walking Horses, known as the “Big Lick,” is not inborn but often cultivated through painful soring of their hooves and legs, along with heavy-weighted shoes that make the horse’s natural stride impossible. Like the
Over the years, I saw how living within these cultural tensions in West Tennessee shaped Mariann’s keen sense of injustice and rebellious reactivity, always in overdrive. At Mule Day and elsewhere, she always sought out any one, of any species, who might be suffering, which often led to more suffering as she seized every opportunity to mock or rectify perceived political and ethical injustices – be it a mule left in a stall without water or some good ol’ boy’s casual racism or homophobia. She would joke with her son Sebastian’s friend, Josh, the teenaged Black kid from the Paris projects who often came along to Mule Day – about disrupting the veneer of white conservative Mule Day in various ways. Josh’s presence itself was a disruption of the predominantly white demographic inside the Mule Day grounds – though not within broader Columbia, where the Black community expresses a mix of feelings about the city’s massive annual festival and exactly what history and community traditions it celebrates. Never one for decorum, Mariann cooked up the horses’ fetlocks made raw from caustic chemicals, the “Big Lick” is a sore subject in the politically powerful Tennessee horse world. In 2016, a “Big Licker” – someone who practices and supports controversial techniques of achieving the unique gait of Tennessee Walking Horses – allegedly tried to drive his pick-up truck over a protestor with the Citizens Campaign Against Big Lick Animal Cruelty (CCABLAC), who were picketing a show at the same Maury County park that hosts Mule Day. The plight of Tennessee Walkers continues to gain attention in legal and on-the-ground clashes between animal-rights advocates and the Big-Lickers who breed, train, and make their livings from lucrative cultivation of horses’ bodily distortions. A graphic undercover video by the Humane Society of the United States shows the “Big Lick” soring process and its effects on horses, and it has been viewed over a million times. The Humane Society of the United States, “Tennessee Walking Horse Investigation Exposes Cruelty,” YouTube, May 16, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxVlxT_x-f0/.

Soul Sistah Serrata E. Boson Amos wrote an op-ed in the Columbia Daily Herald in 2013 that describes some of the mixed feelings of Black Columbia residents around Mule Day. Many older people remember the violent and traumatic Columbia race riots of 1946, in
idea with Josh that he should run into the arena and ask to compete in “coon-jumping,” an event where mules and asses display their unique method of jumping obstacles from a stand-still. Like many of Mariann’s acidic jests, this one relies on (semi)hidden associations of the word “coon,” where in Mule Day “coon-jumping” people may politely assume “coon” to be slang for the “raccoons” hunted by men on jumping mules. Yet many ears can’t help but still hear this word as a racial slur used against Black people.\footnote{“Coon” as a slur is still in use, particularly among older white folks in the Southern US states. In rural Georgia after the 2008 presidential election, we more than once overheard conversations in which someone used this term to refer to President Barack Obama.}

Gender norms were fair game for Mariann’s deliberate improprieties as much as racial ones. One year she rode into the arena, apparently nude, on spotted mule. She was dressed for a costume class as Lady Godiva, the legendary medieval noblewoman who supposedly disrobed and rode naked through the streets of the town, draped only in her long hair, to protest her lord-husband’s oppressive taxation of the townspeople. Another time she and her gritty protégé, Koti, rode in the Mule Day Grand Parade dressed authentically as Civil War-era whores who made their livings following the movements of battalions on muleback. While most of Mariann’s interventions were subtle enough to go uncensored by the Authorities, the heady atmosphere of Mule Day stirred these boundary which lives were lost, Myths persist in the Black community about mules and slaves being sold together from the courthouse steps in the old days (which is untrue, says Boson Amos, though slaves were certainly present at the mule sales). Meanwhile, she describes how younger people often see Mule Day as an opportunity for fun and income, as it brings 200,000 hungry visitors to Columbia in one weekend each year. Soul Sistah Serrata E. Boson Amos, “Mule Day: A Lasting Community Tradition,” \textit{The Daily Herald} (Columbia, Tennessee), March 31, 2013, https://www.columbiadailyherald.com/article/20130331/LIFESTYLE/303319921/.
crossings and illicit actions, against more or less unspoken assumptions and enforced regulations, into a volatile mix of good fun and something more dangerous.

Leaping into the future for a moment, I can report firsthand that from that first wild 2002 meeting onward, Mariann’s renegade Mule Day campsite became a vital site of attachment and return – a place to gather and stage impromptu collective blasphemies and little acts of resistance and multispecies escap(ades). Tucked in the northwest corner of the grounds, a merry band of humans, dogs, asses, mules (and even secret hinnies) became a kind of porous multispecies family herd, not by bloodlines but through other hybrid articulations of bonds and kinships, borne across state borders and species lines. Over a decade of Mule Days, ranks of friends and allies came together at this site, in what we might call (via Hakim Bey) a “Temporary AutonomAss Zone,” a fleeting assemblage that grounded enchantment and dark thrills, disgust and despair, and hopeful possibility, and most of all certain sweet-ass kinships, all of which rooted in a haze of smoky camaraderies in a spot of muddy grass beneath a tall spindly pine tree in a bad-ass corner of the official grounds, near a line of portapotties. Here in this special TASSZ, a multispecies Mule Day fam-

13 Hinnies are like mules, half ass and half horse, except that their mothers are asses and fathers are horses. Mules are the other way around, with horse mothers and ass fathers. Hinnies are less common because female asses do not conceive as easily from stallions as female horses do from jacks. For this reason, hinnies tend to be surrounded with a certain mystique; one Mule Day we learned that a champion mule named Crow, much admired because he radiated some special difference and charisma, was actually a hinny. This news was whispered from ear to ear with an air of drama and revelation, and not without a certain whiff of bitter irony, given troubled histories of secret ancestries and “fatal drops” of mixed blood in US Southern slave culture and elsewhere.

ily came together to nurture alternative forms of “family fun,” literally “making kin” in new ways inside the chain-link borders of Mule Day’s unruly political, aesthetic, and economic power dynamics. \(^{15}\)

Here we found grounds from which to stage radical, if subtle, interventions against various oppressions, while embedded inside this circus of dominant cultural regimes. Our doings were mostly hidden from view as we tucked into various illicit substances and political leanings. From that first meeting in 2002 through ten years of gatherings in the unpredictable weathers and atmospheres of Maury County park, a makeshift Mule Day family became a rhizomatic network that stretched across many different bastard-beautiful sites, where bodies and biographies struggle like half-wild lives caught up in barbed and twisted histories of race, sex, species, and old-time beastly burdens, all of us trying, for whatever it’s worth – whatever it might mean in dangerous, divisive places – to help each other get more free of the fearsome names and faulty frames that trap us all. \(^{16}\)

That said, one must wonder what such subtle blasphemies as ass puns might actually do as countercultural acts of resistance to shape and change lives, as deployed in the troubled languages and naturecultures where every body must make lives and livings. I can say this

\(^{15}\) In domains that literally enforce “family fun” as acceptable activities of a nuclear heterosexual human group, unauthorized family fun is more like what Haraway describes as “kin-making,” where “making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story.” Donna J. Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–65.

much: Where dominant deployments of words, names, and classifications reify and shape the worlds we make and inhabit, Mariann’s special blasphemies in the heart of the Mule Capital of the World offered radical moral and material support for my own nascent investments in puns and unnamings, pitched as hopeful resistance to the dominant commodifications that such namings and classifications reinforce. Wordplay may be a questionable means of bucking dominant economic and social structures, but it is clearly not impotent. Where words matter in world-making, puns matter, too. If nothing else, that first pun exchanged between Mariann and me proved to be an opening into unforeseen worlds and strategies of becoming I might never have discovered otherwise.

So from her first cross-country email invitation, I found a fierce ally and ass mentor in Mariann Black, whose gratuitous and necessary rebel acts come with loving beastly bodies in worlds that exploit bodies of all kinds. Even in the midst of intense personal, social, and financial efforts to maintain a stable home and safe pastures for those she loves, Mariann provided bottomless moral and material support toward the realization of my own aspirations, along with wild camaraderie and much-needed skills, advice, tack and tools – from the first rope halter and antique child’s saddle to the machete she insisted I hang on the saddle for personal protection and bushwhacking. Like some kind of leopard-print-clad, muck-booted barnyard shaman, she even led me directly to the ass of my dreams – the very next day after we met, as a matter of fact. As it happened, her ass-for-sale Napoleon was a champion, and out of my price range. But in the Columbia classifieds she saw an ad for an ass-herd liquidation at a local farm. She suggested I drive back down to Columbia the next morning and we could go over to the farm together and check out the stock for sale. And so we did. And in the dim dusty light of a pole barn on Monsanto Road, there she was, the soon-to-be-unnamed
she-ass, suddenly solid and real, if still wholly mysterious in her mud-caked, furry, and watchful way. And the rest is (untold) history.

Meanwhile, the possibilities of responses to that coy Mule Day “She-ride-double?” come-on present a perpetual invitation. We don’t go to Mule Day anymore, since Mariann finally escaped Paris, Tennessee for life as a beach-combing expat animal-rescuer in Belize. But we do go on seeking lines of flight and transformation – secret backwoods passages to new grounds for frazzled hopes and surprising kinships cultivated within inescapable, ever-compromising configurations. In fiercely inhabited stories of past and future ass (and half-ass) reckonings, we go on, growing our slow and dirty jokes in newfound muzzle tongues, making new sites in barnyards and beyond for blasphemies yet to come.