The Unnaming of Aliass

Karin Bolender

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Thralls and Galls
(Meeting a She-ass in Tennessee)

And so she was, out there somewhere, nameless in Tennessee: burnt-muzzled, bright-eyed, rough-furred, and muddy. Which is not to say she was waiting for me.

I had plenty of reasons to second-guess the recognition I felt in that first encounter. She was the first spotted ass for sale I had seriously looked at, after all. But she was so lovely, serene and glowing in the dim light of the loamy cowshed. She watched me with wary curiosity as I came in and knelt down beside her in the shadowy barn. Shyly, wisely, she lifted her delicate whiskered muzzle to my face and sniffed my eyes. Then she nuzzled my hands, as if to assess whether she should fear them or hope to find something good there.

A little while later, I leaned on the rusty fender of Mariann Black’s old Ford F-150 in the farmer’s barnyard and sought advice from my newfound, crazy-ass mentor. I had raced all the way across the continent on Mariann’s invitation, to meet up with her at the Mule Day festival, and that was what led us to this farm that Sunday morning – an ad she happened to see in the local classifieds. A longtime breeder and trader of mules and donkeys, Mariann knew a good ass when she saw one. She said this jennet (female ass) was right for the tasks of the journey I
had in mind: good conformation, just big enough to ride, and a fair price at $400. A good trim or two would fix her crooked hooves. “It won’t be easy to find another deal this good,” she said.

I gazed across the metal gate at the elegantly scruffy, ghostly white-faced she-ass standing in the barn gloom. I could make her mine. But there was one hitch. She had been running with a jackass, and so she was most likely in foal. Wouldn’t it be cruel to burden a pregnant jennet with the dangers and travails of the long, hot, roadside trek I imagined us embarking upon that summer? At this stage, I still had no clear destination or timeline for the nascent mission to ride a Spotted Ass across the American mid-South, and for that matter no clue where or when we would land somewhere safe to raise a little ass family.

Even if she was in foal, though, the little ass mama likely had many months to go. Jennets gestate for a full year (two months longer than mares, which Mariann says is the extra time it takes to grow those long ass ears). As a seasoned breeder, Mariann assured me that jennets-in-foal were tougher than most and that walking was good for gestation. As long as the she-ass got enough to eat and did not get overstressed, she would be fine. “Anyways,” she said, “you’ll just have to risk it if you want this one. If she is in foal, you can travel until a month or so before she’s ready to drop, then you’ll just have to find somewhere safe to stop for a while. When the foal is strong enough, you can all travel on together.”

Mariann had haggled with the Columbia farmer for a bulk-buy deal on a gaggle of his miniature jennets, who she planned to breed to her champion miniature jack PT Cruiser (Pete), or else clean up and sell at the big Shelbyville Great Celebraytion Mule and Donkey Show later that summer. So the next week when she went to pick up the minis in Columbia, she generously offered to haul
my ass, too, swinging through Nashville on her way back northwest to her farm in Paris, Tennessee.

And so, that glorious Friday in early April, just a week after the Mutt of Gold and I rolled into pale-green Tennessee from Oregon, bound for Mule Day with a wild-ass dream and no fixed address, Mariann delivered the American Spotted Ass of my dreams – of whom I was now the owner in the flesh – to an overgrown former cattle farm in Whites Creek, Tennessee. Indeed, the same kismet that led me straight to my sweet ass in Tennessee seemed to be work when my buddy Wheatstraw invited us to stay on at the farm in Whites Creek, where we found temporary refuge and camaraderie amidst a diverse gang in prickly thickets of a densely storied landscape.¹

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All over this land, which is said to be your land and my land, officials have erected ornate metal placards that designate particular sites as “the Birthplace of So-and-So.” “So-and-so” is, more often than not, some dead white guy who is ascribed a special role in the mythic histories people paper onto any given place. These “historical markers” that poke up solemnly from lively dirt and grasses are always a little incongruous, as they stand still and self-important amidst vibrant meshes and soundscapes of rustling leaves and birds and bugs and weeds and weathers – as they stand for assumptions that (cer-

¹ Wheatstraw (aka Kevin Hayes) and I had met year or so before this and became pen pals. By an incredible stroke of fortune for my big-ass mission, he was now living on an old farm outside Nashville, just an hour’s drive from my date with Mariann (and destiny) at Mule Day. Given the predilection Kevin had for ever-changing pseudonyms in those days (and in line with the pseudonymous unnaming aims of my project as a whole), I will stick with the name he was going by in those days. Wheatstraw welcomed us into the folds of many good friends and allies we would find in the place known as Whites Creek in the weeks ahead.
taining human stories make places what they are. Meanwhile, the full-blown stories of places are never comprised in lists of human names and dates. In honor of the many kinds of untold stories and unmarked human and other histories that animate places – those of weeds and moths, poplars and hawks and so many nameless kin – I seek to root a different kind of sign into landscapes of the rural American South. This kind moves with the light, flickers and slides like the shadows of passing clouds or wheeling buzzards on the breeze. Rather than staking exclusive claims for limited human histories, it marks sites of opening toward encounters with others, glimpsed and unknown presences and possible ways of being. With this different, livelier kind of sign, then, I hereby designate Whites Creek, Tennessee in the early spring (April 12) of 2002 as the “Birthplace of Aliass.”

Back in 2002, Whites Creek was still a rural settlement of pastures, hayfields, and older homesteads to the north of Nashville’s city limits, tucked between two raggedy wooded ridges in a valley cut through by the roilsome, foamy, wild, and trash-strewn creek for which it was named. The center of “town” then was a cinderblock post office and a tenuous meat-and-three café, surrounded by a cluster of homes and mown yards on smallish lots. The land on the east side of the Pike, nestled up to the ridge behind big wrought-iron gates, was the vast estate of country-music legend and shampoo spokeswoman, Barbara Mandrell. As a sleepy pastoral patchwork of landscapes shaped by hidden histories, and more visibly by the infrastructures of livestock-keeping (fences, rundown barns, hayfields, cattle-guards, and so on), Whites Creek could not have been more a more perfect site from

Two official historical markers stand in Whites Creek: one marks the site where Bill Ryan, a member of the notorious outlaw gang of Jesse James, was arrested in Whites Creek in 1881. The subject of the other is unknown to me.
which to launch a wild ass ride through fraught Southern states. In other words, the perfect staging ground for a nascent Southern ass journey.

So it was lucky that in exchange for keeping Em (his grumpy grrrl-dog) company when he was off on tour with his punk-rock-old-time string band, Wheatstraw invited me and the Mutt to stay in his rented cottage on the Whites Creek farm for as long as we wanted. We settled in, for the time being, in the peculiar farmhand's cottage known as the Foamhouse, nicknamed thus for the strange, styrofoamy material from which its walls were made – a substance invented (but tragically, not patented), by the son of the farm's widowed owner. I lay us down a pallet on the floor, and there the Mutt and I curled up in the corner beside the rusty and wheezing baseboard heater, under the cluttered ping-pong table beside Wheatstraw's bookshelf that overflowed with novels by Henry Miller and Blaise Cendrars, poems by Rimbaud and Walt Whitman, and stained and yellowed dime-store Westerns.

A few days after I found my ass-to-be down in Maury County, Wheatstraw and I paid a visit to his landlady, the elderly widow Mrs. T. Even as Whites Creek was poised at the edge of Nashville's rapacious suburban development, much of the land along the Whites Creek Pike was still part of Mrs. T and her late husband's former farm. Once the most prosperous dairy operation in Middle Tennessee, Mrs. T and her kin still held the largest tract of undeveloped land in Davidson County – over seven hundred acres of forest, pastures, and hayfields. As we sat on her porch-swing sipping sweet tea, the widow listened with bright-eyed interest as I haltingly explained my odd ass mission. Whatever I said that day, it resonated with Mrs. T. She offered to shelter the spectral Spotted Ass in her empty barnyard for as long as we needed to get ready for the journey ahead.

Later as we walked back up the lane to the Foamhouse, we passed by the old white barn. The still-naked branches
of shrubs and vines scrawled around its peeling walls, blistering with leafbuds ready to burst. In the thin April sunshine, the pale, rolling, yellowish-green pastures seemed right on the cusp of exploding into bright green profusions of leaves and seedheads. Indeed, the old farm as a whole seemed to creak open like a rusty-hinged barn door. It swung wide, as if the coming of an American Spotted Ass was just the catalyst that all the grasses and low-growing plants, birds and soil microbes and lichens and fungi were waiting for, the spark to light the roaring, slow-green flames of that early-twenty-first-century Tennessee spring. Armadas of bulldozers and concrete mixers, graders and asphalt trucks hummed on the horizon of Whites Creek even then. But in the early weeks of that enchanted spring, Whites Creek would be secretly transformed, if only for a spell, from a grassy patchwork of prime Davidson County real estate into a seamy American Spotted Ass contact zone. That ghost of an old cattle

3 Since the early twenty-first century, Whites Creek has seen waves of development that brings sighs from those who imagine these shifts in the landscape to be vexing for denning foxes, nesting birds, and the rooted trees and shrubs whose options for relocation are more constrained. Some birds and mammals may have moved up the road to the more exurban, northern climes of Joelton and Goodlettesville. Others make do, or die. Still other species learn to thrive in the patchwork of mown lawns amidst the grids of duplex driveways. For a peek at a number of bird species that have adapted well to suburban development, see John Marzluff, Welcome to Subirdia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

4 Donna Haraway adapts the idea of contact zones from a rich scholarly genealogy, gleaning concepts from radical anthropology to developmental biology to limn possibilities of the specific contact zone where she meets her agility dog partner, Cayenne. In “Training in the Contact Zone,” Haraway’s genealogy of contact zones begins with Mary Louise Pratt’s borrowing from linguistic “contact languages” as “improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters.” Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 216–19. Haraway’s dog–human contact zone is a space
farm where the she-ass and I landed and spent our first tender weeks together was the ideal staging ground for a meeting of conflicted human aspirations and the quiet, mysterious ways of a spectacular, sweet-as-black-coffee-and-cherry-pie she-ass.

Not a week ago I had rolled into Tennessee in the Black Caprice with the Mutt of Gold and a skein of conflicted hopes and desires wound tight around the figure of the American Spotted Ass like a wisteria vine. A tremendous freight of past encounters and future hopes was loaded onto that imaginal beast-of-burden figure, as previously described – never mind the cargo of fraught associations regarding the charged and murky landscapes of the American South through which our journey would pass. But it is only when we came together as earthly mortal bodies in this particular Tennessee timespace that the deepest responsibilities and possibilities of our meeting began to matter in new and vital ways. In the wicked green of one millennial Southern spring, we found ourselves – lonesome ass, restless humans, beloved mutts, grasses, swallows and jaybirds, trees, honky wild geese and turkeys, mud-dwellers, honeysuckle vines, pokeweed, raucous coyotes, and countless others, known and unknown – in a brand new kind of barnyard, where name-

in which she frames biological, political, and poetic possibilities, responsibilities, and consequences that emerge in material-semiotic meetings of specific domestic companion species. At the same time, Haraway makes room for unknown others that proliferate at the blurry peripheries of our frames, which become sites of both friction and possibility. So I propose that this season of human–ass encounter within the richly unknowable environment of Whites Creek begins in frictions where multispecies, embodied, and nameless ways tangle with human forms of representation, and so become – in the form of this text if not in Whites Creek itself – a particular kind of material, artistic, and poetic contact zone.

5 For mattering in a feminist materialist sense, see Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
less bodies and forces come together in unforeseen ways and rub each other raw in tender, hidden places.

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Still in the luminous wonder of it: the day this singular beast – with her dark-brown, white-lashed eyes and rough winter fur, scabby muzzle, and crooked hooves – materialized like a rare blossom in the pale green-gold of the early Tennessee springtime. Wheatstraw was out of town, on his way back from opening for Cootie Stark somewhere in the Carolinas, so the mutts and I were the only ones to witness the incarnation at the Foamhouse that afternoon, when the loaded ass rig rumbled up the lane and squeaked to a stop under the sprawling bower of the old oak tree in the front yard. Mariann slammed her pickup door and came around to the back of the rig, where she wrenched open the rusty metal bar of the trailer door with a creak and pushed her way in among the jumble of sweaty little ass bodies. I stood frozen with anticipation. So enthralling was this moment – the faint knocking of hidden hooves on hollow boards, then raw wonder as the one I waited for stepped shakily off the trailer with a little hop onto the pale, root-laced driveway dirt beneath the oak’s majestic bower – that the little rough-furred roan Spotted Ass who appeared might as well have been a unicorn.

And so she was, and in a way remains, a projection, a mysterious vision moving amidst layered veils like some big underwater mammal, always seen from either too close or too far away. Like the modern discovery of the mysterious, 16th-century “Lady and the Unicorn” tapestry, here in the brightness of a Tennessee afternoon was a glorified material-semiotic weave of ancient human fantasies, atavistic desires, twisted-together genomes and phenomes, phonemes and imagos, shaped by thousands of years of beastly becomings. And branded, of course,
with that newfangled “Western” hide that had so captivated the imagination that I had no choice but to hunt and capture this unwitting ass and hitch her to the loaded tasks at hand.

Let us not forget how those spectacular spots that blanketed the ass like a brocaded Renaissance tapestry are what brought us together in gathering folds of Tennessee timespace. Think of this: had my ass inherited, at her embryogenesis, the more quotidian gray donkey-coat color, or even the rarer black-nose genes (like some among that bevy of miniature jennets knocking around in Mariann’s stock trailer in assorted colors that day, like a box of sweet ass candy), I would never have come to know and love her like I do. I would have passed her over without a second glance. Luckily, her so-called “spots” brought us together, from that day to this one, in a seamy meeting of shame and desire and whatever else we might hope to find here.

It was as easy as all that: from the dream of a silly beast chasing a Spotted-Ass phantasm to this real-ass coming-together in rural Tennessee. Here stands the twisted mystery of fates and commodity chains, desires and encounters that bring us to walk in mortal green fields of time with the ones we love. That hide of Aliass’s – the graceful taper of her long white face, framed by the soft twin hollows of her ears and gray-pink muzzle, those eyes that I cannot possibly describe, the spiky peppered mane and coarse white fur of her neck that gives way to silver-gray-brown patches with flecks of rust and black across her withers and back, over the roundness of her flanks and belly, where patches of white float like passing summer clouds and taper down to the dainty articulations of her little white legs and caramel-and-black striped hooves where her body meets the grass and dirt that have shaped and sustained it for spiraling generations. Were it not for this rarefied ass hide, which hides her so spectacularly, I would never have come to meet this ass, and so to load
upon her all those gnarly human desires and hungers to grasp what is hidden inside.\(^6\)

The full 400+-pound weight of it hit me as I took the lead-rope from Mariann’s hand. The living presence of this big-eyed, big-eared, sensitive ungulate mammal, who was blinking and sniffing the air and listening for any familiar sound to help her grasp her new surroundings, gave a new gut twist to the now-familiar question: “what you gonna do about yer ass?” A few answers came easy: to start, she needed a water bucket and some hay. Providing for familiar equine needs was a kind of second nature that felt good. But other aspects of what to do grew more complicated, as in this moment I took on (for as long as we both shall live) a certain responsibility for her happiness. For one thing, along with all the phantasmagoric meanings and possibilities I had already bestowed onto her generic surface, I did not know this little burro one bit. In fact, all I knew of her scant biography was a few details the laconic farmer who sold her had told me: she’d birthed a foal or two, the last of which was stolen from her by a dominant jennet in the herd. She might or might not be carrying a fetus now, but that was her secret; there was no way to tell it just from looking at her.

I intended to befriend her, of course, best as I could.\(^7\) But the prospects of caring for an unfamiliar ungulate, in the midst of nomadic wanderings in blasted landscapes of the twenty-first-century American South, were

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\(^6\) It is worth stressing that it was this and not other qualities (say, spectacular athleticism) that attracted me to her, with the intuition that her spots have very little to do with who she is, even as they become a value-added aspect of her existence. See Karin Bolender, “If Not for Her Spots: On the Art of (Un)naming a New Ass Breed,” *Humanimalia* 10, no. 1 (2018).

\(^7\) Proximity was a start, as Dominique Lestel writes: “The history of significant encounters between humans and animals is from the start an arrangement of duration, space, and the safe interactions that make it possible.” Dominique Lestel, “Friends of My Friends,” *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 19, no. 3 (2014): 142.
fraught in ways I had barely begun to reckon. Ready or not, here she was, in the furry, worried flesh. A gentle, sensitive prey mammal was at my mercy at the end of a knotted rope. Her fate was in my hands as she stood there in the wispy grass of the yard, looking and listening to what I could never know. Her life, and possibly a hidden passenger, were at my disposal, thanks to a bevy of rights bestowed on me by ancient animal hierarchies and rank economies in which certain lives are held as property by others. All mine she was, this inscrutable mammalian stranger whose embodied past, present, and future, whose senses of time and place and remembering I could hardly fathom – never mind claim to “own.”

Here then here is the rub, the rub that becomes the gall. “Gall” is a word we learn the hard way among beasts of burden. When part of a harness or girth is ill-fitting, the pressure and frictions of various labors rub away fur and open a sore in the flesh, which becomes an aggravated open wound that often goes unnoticed under the offending tack. A gall is like a blister, but deeper and harder to heal. The history of human–equine becomings is full of harness galls and saddlesores, both recognized and hidden. In time, one learns tricks for treating these sores – old folk remedies or over-the-counter hemorrhoid ointments. Even better, we sometimes find ways to anticipate and thus avoid them in the first place: fleece coverings for girths, harness pads, and so on. But one trouble with galls is that they tend to be hidden by what causes them, and as long as the pressure continues, the wounds keep getting reopened. Sometimes a gall becomes a scar, a hard hairless spot on the hide. Older work mules often have galls all over their bodies, but I have also seen and even inflicted such traces of ill-fitted pressures on all kinds of equine bodies, from scuffs and scars on old rodeo broncs to saddlesores on sleek-coated thoroughbreds and fancy show ponies. Scars like these on withers and flanks are one kind of visible trace that marks encounters between
human cultures and equine beasts of burden over many millennia.

Painful sores and possible slaughter are not the only features of shared domestic lives in the American stable and barnyard. Often with respect and careful attention toward embodied wisdoms and “entangled emphathies,” we pursue and maintain diverse and admirable becomings with equines and other domesticates.⁸ That said, there is no getting past this fact: The bright spring day my Spotted Ass arrived in Whites Creek was one of singular bliss for me – an affirmation of human imagination’s conjuring powers – while at the same time, that day was inevitably a catastrophic one of loss and fearsome uncertainty for her. With no forewarning, she was hazed from her herd, chased onto a stock trailer, and ripped away from everything familiar to her – pastures, shelters, friends, and kin – with no way to ascertain where she was being taken or what lay in store. Now that I know this gentle beast, who is most at peace when routine prevails and everyone she cares about are in their familiar places, the abyss that yawns between my thrilling acquisition and the grievous fear experienced by my little long-eared friend on that day is all that much more gut-wrenching. Neither my own past experiences of interspecies amities nor a vast bibliography of scholarly resources changes the fact that she was scared and lonesome and grieving as she stood hitched by a rope halter to a metal t-post, captive in an unfamiliar place among lurking human and

canine strangers. Her misery was hidden within various apparatuses that erase the emotional lives of “livestock” from our recognition. Her feelings were further obscured by the characteristic stoicism by which donkeys hide pain from possible predators. To this day, though, I can still remember the fear and grief that were plain to see in her tight muzzle and sad eyes and ears.

In an essay called “Judas Work: Four Modes of Sorrow,” Deborah Bird Rose gives a gut-wrenching account of “Judas donkeys” who are used to find and cull wild ass herds in Australia, where donkeys came as beasts of burden for settler colonialists and went feral, thus earning themselves the fatal designation of “pest.” The Judas model, used by managing humans in a number of scenarios where members of a social species will unfailingly seek companions, involves in this case separating a jennet from her herd and fitting her with a radio-collar. Officials then set the jennet free in the outback to go find another wild herd to join. They follow her signal and eventually show up and massacre all the others. Rose reports that after one or two traumatic experiences, the Judas jennets stop seeking others and live the rest of their lives alone. As social mammals who live within the law of safety in numbers, not to mention all the other aspects of social kinship that keep them healthy and happy, these jennets must experience this self-exile as a misery worse than death. Humans ceaselessly inflict this kind of emotional suffering on other species, mostly through denial that kindred social mammals, with whom we share the evolution of our own emotional capacities, have them at all.

Those first weeks in Whites Creek, the lonesome ass and I commenced a “training” regime. We wandered the pathless grasses and dewy vetch of the meadows, me and the nameless she-ass and the Mutt of Gold. We explored

the buzzing fields and back-woods of Mrs. T’s farm beside the pike and beyond the hill, coming to know each other’s odd ways as we explored the unfamiliar yet welcoming landscape. The she-ass was “green” that springtime, as they say – meaning she had barely ever worn a halter, never mind become accustomed to human-led tasks and handling. But thousands of years of domestication – ever since her wild ass ancestors submitted to bear the burdens of humanity – had prepared her for this match-up with a bossy, blustery, entitled human, who was all of a sudden telling her what to do and binding her up in tangled knots of buckles, reins, bits, and straps.

Even so, over those weeks in Whites Creek where we became more familiar with each other in the barnyard and fields, the she-ass and I struck up what I would like to think of as a friendship. Each morning I brushed her, and she gradually shed her rough winter fur to reveal a sleek summer hide. She seemed to like this ritual. I picked out her little hooves, still crooked and cracked as I had yet to find a good ass farrier. We spent the bright, still-cool mornings training in the back field past the pond, mostly lingering in the spring sunshine and the blowzy, buzzing, blossoming of meadows in bloom beyond the wooded hills. The Mutt of Gold sniffed around in the primrose thickets, and the she-ass ate grass and, sometimes, mud (for the iron in it, I suppose). I sipped coffee from a plastic Lost Sea travel mug and sometimes read aloud to the Mutt and she-ass from Beckett, Cixous, or Jean Genet.

As the days and weeks wore on, the she-ass learned to tolerate my fumblings. She tried to escape only once that I know of, early on, when a wild turkey flushed from the weeds right beside us on the old farm road to the back meadows. She spooked and bolted so hard that I had to let go of the long lines, which flapped around her legs and tangled up as she bucked and fled away down the dirt lane toward the barn and the pike beyond, gathering up a raft of sticks and weeds in the tangled reins. Com-
Fig. 1. Training on the long lines in the back fields of the Thompsons’ former dairy farm in the hills of Whites Creek. Photograph by the artist.
ing down the hill after her, I paused with hard-beating blood as I watched her pace back and forth at the lip of the cattle-guard, looking like she was bunching to jump and make a run for it. I still have to wonder where she would have gone, if she managed to get free and make it to the pike. But she did not make a break for it that day. She let me catch her and lead her back to the barn, where I untangled the long reins from her legs with some effort and then, with a sigh of relief, turned her loose in the little fenced yard to graze. In time she came to anticipate that I would provide for her most basic bodily needs. And that I did not intend to eat her, at least in the immediate.\textsuperscript{10}

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I had done a good deal of becoming-with domestic equines, if not \textit{Equus asinus} specifically. Through the story of Clever Hans, Vinciane Despret advances her theory of “becomings-with” by reframing the well-worn story of the famous horse who learned to do math. Vicki Hearne and others have also examined the so-called “Clever Hans Fallacy,” as it has been known among behaviorists seeking to reduce the capacities of horses and others by claiming that Hans was “only” learning to read the most minute muscles twitches of humans expecting particular answers, rather than performing mathematical calculations.

\textsuperscript{10} She was wise to keep this in mind as a possibility, given the fact that being eaten by humans has been one of her species’ beastly burdens for a long time. She knows this in her bones and in the muscles that flinch and bunch when any human makes a sudden or unexpected movement. But the certitude that I will never eat this ass is a situation specific to our time and place. Equines are eaten by European humans. The demand of Asian markets for boiled donkey hides is so intense that it potentially threatens their earthly populations, both domestic and feral. See Alistair Leithead, “Why Are Donkeys Facing Their ‘Biggest Ever Crisis’?” \textit{BBC News}, October 7, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41524710.
in his head, without even the help of fingers to count on.11 In this regard, there is the sense that in certain ways I was available to the ass because I have learned how to move and perceive among horses’ expressions and sensory apparatuses. I am sensitive to what she might pay attention to, the kinds of sounds and rustlings that are liable to spook her, along with the lush clover she likes to eat, and so on. Affect: my mouth waters when I see a patch of lush green grass. But it is important to note that not all becoming-with is happy and equitable for all involved—ethical and material frictions abound. Galls persist, even as we are sometimes lucky enough to lose definition for a bit amid the different bodies rubbing together.

Nevertheless, I experienced distinct affective satisfactions as my equine-affected body fell into familiar grooves, slow and steady movements set to put prey ungulates at ease, tying special slipknots of lead-rope to fence posts, hefting haybags and water buckets, and always moving around the nervous equine with the careful choreography that hundreds of sensitive horses taught me in many different places and situations. Yet the ass

11 Vinciane Despret and Vicki Hearne both come to the conclusion that what Hans actually was doing was infinitely more interesting than what he was “failing” to do. Vinciane Despret, “The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthropo-zoo-genesis,” *Body and Society* 10, nos. 2–3 (2004): 111–34 and Vicki Hearne, *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 4–5. As an interesting recent twist on this, research using a technique called EquiFACs (Equine Facial Action Coding System) has shown that equines possess a dynamic facial musculature that allows a wide range of meaningful facial expressions, by which they can communicate feelings and desires to others of their own and different species. I did not necessarily need this scientific study to confirm that I can tell from equines’ faces whether they are feeling sad or miffed or upset or even more vague and inarticulable emotions, but this anatomical and ethological data and methodology is fascinating nonetheless. Jeremy Berlin, “So That’s Why the Long Face,” *National Geographic*, October 2017, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/10/explore-animals-horse-facial-expressions/.
was different from horses I had known, and not just in physical size and strength or the comical hugeness of her ears. With a few exceptions, she is more inclined to freeze than to bolt when sudden sounds or movements spook her. Likewise, she insists on taking her sweet time to mull over choices, no matter how adamantly I prod her to move. This reluctance is a distinct trait of asses and half-asses that leads people to call them lazy or stubborn, while the same tendency leads others who know and respect them to understand this reluctance to do whatever some crazy-ass human tells them to do as a specific kind of assine intelligence.

Significantly, this tendency of asses to insist on thinking for themselves and thoroughly contemplating every action more or less nullified most skills I had gained from decades spent with horses. In particular, the she-ass vaporized the swagger of my “Monty Roberts Preliminary Certificate of Horsemanship,” which I earned in the UK after college when, like millions of other horse-lovers across Europe, Australia, and the US, I was caught in the spell of Monty Roberts’s “Equus™” – that is, the method of training that leverages the “horse’s natural language,” which Roberts poses as a central to his training method. The she-ass made it clear right away that she did not speak “Equus.” Asses do not respond to the forms of pressure and release on which Roberts’s “join-up” method re-

12 See Monty Roberts, The Man Who Listens to Horses (New York: Random House, 1997). Roberts’s Join-Up method, which shook the global-Western horse world in the 1990s, is built on the principle that an equine is respectfully offered a choice, using techniques modeled on the horse’s own language (Equus™) about whether to respect the human (who is chasing her in a confined space) as a (dominant) member of her herd. I came under the spell of the Monty Roberts phenomenon in 1997, enamored of these more respectful training techniques than the ones I grew up with, even as some of their underlying assumptions remain troubling. See also Paul Patton, “Language, Power, and the Training of Horses,” in Zoontologies, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 83–99.
lies. Try to “send her away” by flicking a long rope at her heels – a maneuver that usually sends horses careening off like a fired shot to the farthest edge of a round pen – and the ass might look at you quizzically or simply avoid your gaze and ignore your flailings entirely. In more ways than one, our human–ass encounters in Whites Creek and the adventures that lay beyond would require the making of brand new modes of communication.

Despite a certain measure of control I had over the whereabouts and material entanglements of her scruffy body, the she-ass in question remained mostly a mystery. She was like a ghost in the barnyard – a lonesome, liminal, and eerily quiet presence. While some of her needs and desires were obvious – she made no secret of wanting to graze on the lush grass – others were strange, alien, and subtly wild. The funhouse-mirror equine familiarity of her presence and outward form gave me a deep thrill and satisfaction. Being near her was like coming home to claim a brand new colony: those familiar, delicate bulges of her little knee and hock joints, where bones and tendons articulate under swirls of fur and vestigial toes; the lively swishes of wiry tail-hair and ear-shaking against the flies; and loveliest of all her delicate muzzle, with its soft folds of whiskery velvet nostril curves rounded by underlying hardness of herbivorous jaws and teeth. Here were all the familiar curves and folds, silhouettes of embodied desires, constraints, and shapings that humans have projected on equines through long and tangled co-histories of meetings and journeys together through time and uncharted places – from primal encounters to Columbian crossings to after-the-Gold-Rush whims of the American West that gave this ass her special spots and brought us together in that dreamy Whites Creek prelude.

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As it happens, I was not the only peripatetic woolgatherer in Whites Creek, Tennessee who was alert to the thralls and galls of the she-ass’s ghostly presence in the otherwise empty barn and pastures. The morning after the Mutt and I arrived, I had made the acquaintance of L-Haw – that is, Lydia Peelle, fiction author and future partner in an artistic collaboration we call She-Haw – over coffee in the kitchen of the old pink farmhouse where she lived in those days, and we had talked eagerly around the strange allure of hybrid equines and other far-off, seamy places we had known. Over weeks that followed in the fertile (if toxic and trashy) creekside mud and fields, we discovered that we had each arrived in Whites Creek through crisscrossing rural places and urban-suburban cultures, dark-rich composts and conflict-ridden memories of stable-yards and libraries. Along different paths, we each came (not unscathed) through fathomless mudholes of adolescence where passions for pretty unicorns, happy-ending heroic equestrian stories, and old-style Breyer model horses give way to contortions necessary for growing up into worlds of grim livestock sale barn betrayals, glue factories, slaughterhouses, and muddy backyard abandonments, even (often more insidiously) the glitzy glamor of the wealthiest show barns and high-dollar arenas. These are the fraught spaces in which childhood

13 Not incidentally, this also happened to be the morning of Mule Day of 2002. Later that same morning, I would head down to Mule Day in Columbia for the first time to meet Mariann Black. And then the next day, Aliass. In the pale green light of that bright Tennessee Mule Day morning, the seed of a future collaboration called She-Haw secretly shot its blind, hungry taproot into a humus of barn-dark pasts and future-ass becomings.

14 Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard write achingly of the ethical, political, and practical problems that come with bearing witness to suffering of cows, pigs, horses, birds, and other domestic species that goes on in places like auctions and slaughterhouses, and how these frictions change the witness herself. Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard, eds., *Critical Animal Geographies: Polit-
loves may get torn and frayed, torqued between curious admiration and cautious intimacies with other big-eyed mammals, in their different bodies and sensitivities, and the gut-wrenching recognitions that we grow complicit with hierarchal systems and stories that exploit and commodify friends and kin.\textsuperscript{15}

The old pink farmhouse where L-Haw lived was also part of Mrs. T’s landholdings, and it was just up the pike from the barnyard, pastures, thistly fields, and wooded hills of the farm, which L-Haw often wandered, thinking about old friends and places left behind. Here, where from the crest of the hill one could see the robotic spires of Nashville’s skyline poking up on the horizon like some kind of dystopian El Dorado or Oz, she had been meeting weeds and mosses and honky geese on the pond, being ululated at by the rambunctious coyote pack, coming across tracks and bones and teeth buried in winter grass, and glimpsing gangly blue herons and assorted ghosts of pastures-past. And there I blew into Whites Creek with the Mutt of Gold in the Black Caprice, hot on the trail of a spectral American ass; and here was L-Haw already nomadically (up)rooted in Tennessee, where she had been poetically and peripatetically mining the hybrid ghosts of White Creek’s landscapes for half a year – that same half year in which I was feverishly brewing the spotted ass mission in the rainy Pacific Northwest.

Which is all to say, with my whirlwind arrival in Tennessee, followed so soon by the coming of Aliass, it almost seemed like all that speculative wandering around the old farm’s fields and woods had unwittingly harrowed and seeded these very fields for the coming of a Spotted

\textit{tics, Intersections, and Hierarchies in a Multispecies World} (London: Routledge, 2015), 203–5. The show barns are another story.

Ass. So when the mortal, rough-furred, living, breathing and blinking, wise, beautiful and otherworldly mystery of the lovely ass in question appeared like a conjured dream on the ungrazed landscapes of the Whites Creek farm that April day, L-Haw was as enthralled as I was. We each might have dreamed it, but that’s not to say we foresaw how dramatically the she-ass’s presence would transform the old farmscape into a wildflowery, barbed-wire pasture-palimpsest, where pastoral longings overlapped with welts of mysterious, visceral excitations alongside newly present knots and chafing asymmetries. The ethereal presence of that scruffy, graceful, long-eared ungulate kicked up conspicuous absences in the former cattle farm, in the seas of grasses and lonesome gloom of the barn. Where were the warm herds of mud-caked, lowing beasts who had been here once, whose traces remained, and who the lonely she-ass longed to be among? Was she, this peculiar alter-equine form, a long-eared revenant of the landscape’s agricultural past? Or was she more like a visitation from some distant future moon-colony rodeo or Westworldian™ cyborg laboratory?¹⁶

Neither L-Haw nor I could have predicted the durability of the bewitching wonder and kinships that bloomed that April afternoon when the real, flesh-and-blood, possibly pregnant spotted she-ass materialized in the yard of the Foamhouse in the faintly green, early-spring glow of Whites Creek. The coming of her humble, spectacu-

¹⁶ The she-ass had just come from a cattle farm where mixed-species herds intermingled in sheds and pastures. How lonesome it must have been for her to locate herself among these brimming absences in Whites Creek. Yet another burden this beast has to bear, where she is like a medium who must hold the place in our imaginations for herds of beasts who used to be here. She gracefully bears any burden set and buckled upon her by human hands or imaginations. More importantly for She-Haw, the beautiful she-ass’s incarnate presence cast a long inverse-shadow across the land (which is to say a bright, prismatic path) into obscure visions of future-ass becomings.
lar, rough-furred, and quietly lonesome presence into the vacuum of that dusty whitewashed barn stirred raucous new callings and pressing responsibilities for new kinds of composings and becomings, within the roar of pastoral futures that suddenly loomed much closer than we had imagined.

Which is not to say we weren’t waiting for her.

With Mrs. T’s cattle long gone, the little ass was the lone large domesticate on the farm. The Foamhouse had a hog-wire fence around the yard, surrounded on several sides by lush pastures. Having been warned of the desert-evolved ass’s metabolic efficiency, though, I restricted the she-ass’s calories in draconian fashion and limited her grazing to a couple of hours a day in this little yard. Another farmer’s cattle lowed from the next field over, and she seemed to listen to this intently from inside her own thoughtful silence. She never brayed, though, and after a week I began to wonder if she might be mute. Then one afternoon in early May, I happened to be in-
side watching from the window when she laid back her ears, opened her muzzle wide, leaned her whole body forward, and let out what must have been the longest, loudest, longingest bray the world has ever known. Her entire body shook with the force of the sound it emanated, and it my shook my insides, too. All of Whites Creek throbbed and trembled as that bray rang through the hills and valleys; it pounded into groundhog holes and fox dens and wet, weedy, frog-frilled ditches, and it seemed to go on forever. When the last echoes finally faded away in the stunned landscape, the little she-ass pricked up her long ears to the south and listened hard. I will never know who she was calling to, but assuming it was some lost long-eared kin of hers back in Maury County, there’s a damned good chance they heard her.

So the days and weeks rolled on in the exploding green of Whites Creek. Then came the rainy afternoon when I mounted her for the first time. The classic Western bucking-bronco scenario seemed unlikely at best, but I waited until an afternoon when Wheatstraw was at home to make the move onto her back, just in case something other than the ass got “broke.” The episode proved an anticlimax. By then we had been together pretty constantly for weeks, so she was accustomed to my strange intrusions. When I slipped my leg over her round withers and eased my full weight up with a little jump, she barely paused from grazing. Again, I will never really know whether this was because she trusted me, or if she just gave in, as she would again and again over the years, to the inevitability of her fate at my hands, or more so to the burdens set upon her by my troublesome tongue.

Unlike the fateful scene of asymmetrical seduction in Nabokov’s Lolita, I did not even need the ploy of a bright red apple to lure her into my lap, or rather to get my lap onto her back. Haw, Humbert, maybe you would have been better off if your father (or long lost mother) had been a humble ass farmer. Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (New York: Vintage, 1997), 58–59.
Apophasass (The Unnaming of Aliass)

Weeks deep into our time in Whites Creek, departure for Mississippi loomed and still the ass in question had no proper name. I could find no way around the impasse. Everything seemed to be at stake in this unavoidable act; the whole mission hung in the balance of getting this one thing right. The prospects were more fraught than ever now that she was a real and true friend, to whom I was responsible in everyday practical, as well as philosophical, ways. How could I presume to invent and bestow a name onto this inscrutable other mammal, the nameless ass whose embodied stories, loves and losses, longings and fears, even immediate perceptions were mostly unknown to me?

If we cannot avoid galls altogether, we can at least try to recognize and assuage them where they fester within our most intimate relations. Bring to light the sorest spots, where humans put pressure of various kinds on others’ lives to serve our own special hungers, often failing to fit our demands to the forms of life we hitch to them. Specific failures come to light as researchers in ethology continue to demonstrate the poverty of anthropocentric systems when it comes to grasping the emotional and communicative richness of other species’ lives, from dogs and dolphins to ants and dragonflies. Most of all, these acts of overlooking such complexities seem to be failures of respect, of the kind Donna Haraway describes as “seeing again, respecere, the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem.”

In this same way, galls of other kinds – less visibly material – persist in the stories we tell about others and ourselves. Galls arise even in the names we bestow, whether

slapped on as categories like “animal” or “ass,” or granted in proper names that grasp for connection or reinforce hidden hierarchies, the names we give to others of all kinds matter, marking and making differences in lives and places. Take “ass,” for instance. The friction between this categorical word and the unique individual being it is supposed to contain bothered me long before this she-ass and I ever met in Tennessee. From “animal” to “live-stock” to “ass,” I was aware with shame and desire that my mother tongue was whipping her into shape before she or I was born. Loaded with all its assumed human rights and privileges, the name chafes. Bound up in abstraction and hierarchical categories, taxonomies are powerful means we have mastered to capture, control, and exploit bodies of all kinds with violent efficiency, the most powerful of which might be the free pass we grant ourselves when it comes to the category of “animals.”

In The Animal That Therefore I Am, French philosopher Jacques Derrida exposes (himself to) the fact that one word, “animal,” is supposed to contain the infinite range and richness of all other-than-human lives. He brings attention to this “asinanity” with a typical Derridean portmanteau that makes us aware of the word itself, l’animot: “The suffix mot [word] in l’animot should bring us back to the word, namely, to the word named a noun.” That a single nomination, as such, is supposed to contain all life except for the human is, according to Derrida, a failure of massive proportions: “The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime.” If we take Derrida at his word here, then it fol-

20 Ibid.
lows that the bestiaries and endless rounds of Old MacDonald in which we learn to shape our lips and tongues around “the animals” as children make criminals of us from the get-go. Hence the shame, but also the sense of liberatory possibility, that blossomed up through the cracks of that slippery word, “ass.”

Names are powerful, and they may well be inevitable for *Homo sapiens*, as they evoke mental images and connection to an absent (real or possible) other. Naming is certainly a responsibility as a well as a privilege, and many acts of naming are invested with care and love. That said, while a proper name like “Popsicle” or “Fido” may grant affection and even familial inclusion, types of names can mark fatal exclusions, too. In her “Pet Cemetery Project,” artist-researcher Linda Brant traces changes over time to pet gravestones in rural and urban Florida. She documents shifts in pet memorial gardens from fairly simple granite slabs marked with antique names like “Patience” and “Spot” to later-twentieth-century “Nuisance Fiske” and “Kibbles Lovey Lumpkins” to ever more elaborate monuments and familial nominations for pets, such as the grave marker for “Harry James Kliemovitch,” emblazoned with a photographic image of the late guinea pig and the epitaph “Forever in our Hearts.”21 We can presume that these material-semiotic memorial practices might reflect other kinds of changes in the lives of deceased feline, canine, or other domestic loved ones. In other words, the ways we name are practices that come with grave consequences and responsibilities.

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21 Linda Brant’s “Pet Cemetery Project” is a critical and creative documentation of dramatic cultural shifts in the places of “pets” in American culture. Brant creates images that juxtapose shifts toward care for certain domestic companions against the treatment of other less-beloved species. For instance, her image of the lovingly remembered guinea pig is paired with an image of an anonymous laboratory rat. http://www.lindabrant.net/#!pet-cemetery-project/cstx.
Whether as acts of love and care or more shameful kinds of name-calling, the ways we learn to call others by names, and thereby to tangle them into our ontologies and narratives and material becomings, are at the root of our mother tongues. We get a primal charge from the real or imagined connections that naming affects for us as languaging beasts. As if thinking and saying, tasting and rolling these names around on our tongues is akin to a taste, reciprocal touch, or maybe even a kiss, even as we sense that these names we give to others may be kisses of life or death. As Paul Shepard says in *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*: “Naming may ‘predicate on a previous presence or on the subsequent presence in a current absence.’ When the little human primates, mother-bound like no others, contain their fears by representing the absent mother by speaking her name, the first step is taken in bringing all the creatures into imaginal presence.” Meanwhile, all of these conflicts, complexities, and indigestions embedded in matters of naming, rooted deep in the mother tongue and particular haunting bodies and barns, brought me headlong to the impasse I met in Tennessee that spring, when it came to the act of naming my sweet inscrutable ass.

Still, the sweet she-ass needed a handle. I tried different configurations on for size, but nothing ever quite fit. Then one day I realized that what I really needed was a way to unname her. If the hope was to hold open spaces within human thought, language, and action for different ways of knowing and storying together, then the naming of this singular ass companion must be an act of unnaming. In honor of her wordless ways, the name she would go by had to reflect the kind of thinking described by Derrida, “however fabulous or chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word oth-

erwise, as something other than a privation.”

Traditionally speaking, apophatic writings are religious texts that address the dilemma of ineffable transcendence, whereby authors draw attention to the paradox of language’s absolute inability to name the unnamable, or eff the ineffable. The tortuous convolutions of apophatic writing practices—like the work of thirteenth-century Beguine nun Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake for her “heretical” treatise on divine love titled *The Mirror of Simple Souls,* or the more amiable if still mind-bending poems of unsaying by Sufi mystics like Ibn Arabi—sprung to mind as I stood at the edge of this aporia that was the ass’s (un)name, given the wish to respect all the aspects of her being I could never claim to know or grasp.

In a book on apophatic writings called *Mystical Languages of Unsaying,* Michael Sells describes texts “in which unnameability is not only asserted but performed.” In this sense, since there was no way to sidestep naming altogether, the name might assert itself as the very impasse it could not breach. The name had to reveal itself nakedly as a word, a veil over a lacuna. Ass such, the magic phone-meme had to present itself in the name, too. As a kind of liberatory crack that erupted from within the “bad word” I was forbidden to say as a little girl, amplified by various registers of hope and shame, “ass” became a rarefied realm of possibility in which to honor and respect all the lively, unwritten, and embodied stories woven together

24 Traditions of apophasis—“mystical languages of unsaying,” as the title of Michael Sells’s brilliant book calls them—proliferate at the edges of mystical traditions across (in this case, Western) religions. Sells describes apophatic discourses that maintain “a rigorous adherence to the initial logical impasse of ineffability that exerts a force that transforms normal logical and semantic structures.” Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.
25 Ibid.
in a place of meeting, possibility, and new ass becomings in Tennessee.

Derrida’s animots make a similar gesture, but the lively possibilities of this specific she-ass unnaming come most fully alive in the animots of philosopher Hélène Cixous. Words and names in all their inherent limits and possibilities become not grappling hooks in fleshy beasthoods but rather openings for respectful recognition of unknown, entangled otherness – the inextricable ways we come together in worlds of mutual making, both within and beyond language. As Kari Weil observes, Cixous’s animots witness both “the violence produced by categories like ‘animal’” and at the same time recognize “the hybrid communities that have always been effected in and through language.”26 In this regard, the ass’s (un)name could hold both violent asymmetries that go with calling her “ass” and also invite recognition and respect for the unnameability of her embodied wisdoms. Most of all, it makes a space for the hybrid worlds of words and fleshes we make together.

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One afternoon in mid-May, a thunderstorm was fixing to burst as I came out of the local branch of the Nashville Public Library in Bordeaux, where I went daily to check email. It was about to rain on the bale of hay I had strapped to the roof-rack of the Black Caprice, but I paused for a moment anyway in the parking lot, to admire the roiling purple sky. And that was when it came to me, the only possible name for the singular, enigmatic she-ass, who would soon accompany me through the

thick mazes of Southern landscapes and nameless time-places ahead, must be no name at all.

The cloudburst came with all the booming thunder and cracks of lightning one comes to expect from a late spring thunderstorm on the Cumberland Plateau. The rain fell in sheets as I wove along shimmering byways back to Whites Creek. The storm moved fast, and by the time I turned off the pike onto Mrs. T’s farm lane, scattered sunbeams were already breaking through the thunderheads. As I rolled past the old white barn, I peered hard through the wet windshield glass and the glittering lace of leafy understory branches and vines, heaps of rotting boards, and rusted rolls of fencewire scattered around the barn, seeking a glimpse of that long lovely pale face floating in the shadows of the barn. The dusty tractor loomed behind her, and migratory swallows were coming and going from the barn gloom in which she stood – quiet, impassable, and darkly haloed. The so-called American Spotted Ass who shall remain nameless.

“Aliass.”
Fig. 3. Aliass in the Whites Creek barndark. Photograph by the artist.