The Unnaming of Aliass

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At first the whole “ass” thing was more or less a joke, a glib and ironic play on a hinged word that swings both ways, with only vaguest intimations of explosive blasphemies packed into it. But the joke was, after all, a little bomb waiting to go off, if in exquisitely slow-motion. And as the slow-ass joke blew open in the midst of word-bound, material bodies, it opened new spaces in static habits of thought and naming, through which new idiomatic “aesthetic” enterprises could flow. And so we set off to trace asphalt cracks and weedier paths, toward a newfangled American ass dream.

Like flowering weeds growing up through broken concrete on abandoned military bases, a kind of idiom took root within an unexpected opening in a seemingly impervious manmade surface. The surface, in this case, is the ironfisted claim of words on the things and bodies they are supposed to name. And the crack, of course, is the darkly luminous and fertile space between, where “ass” blossoms and blooms, that is, the wondrous doublesome pun. Here the “ass” in question grows forth in all its troublesome glory, as by nature any pun destabilizes the assumed grip of names on mysterious, inscrutable, “invo-
lutionary" bodily matters. Where the doubled-up word becomes a gap that fails to encompass its supposed subject, I first caught a solid whiff of alternate ways to think and act with bodies inside/outside language, with all due respect for the meshes of fur and flesh and leaves and seeds that make life worth living (not to mention possible).

Here is how it came to pass. Spring came with dizzying profusion to the Hollow in upstate New York that year, with the deep moans of bullfrogs from the ponds in the woods and pasture, wildflowers (with names like hop-clover and butter-'n-eggs) popping up all over the place, and the big maples budding out with slower oaks in their wake. Like many other blooming things, the radical figure in question blossomed with sudden force in this tremblesome greening. One shiny May morning, I was sidetracked from some unfolding fictive scene of Juniper and Totem’s wayward renegade ride (i.e., the novel-that-never-was), when all of a sudden I couldn’t stop thinking about mules.

I am promiscuously mixing metaphors of bomb blasts and floral forms and energies here, but mixing metaphors in this case may be a strategy akin to what Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers call “involutionary momentum,” which turns from the hard distinctions of individual organisms in evolutionary competition toward a way of becoming that “involves” diversely interwoven “affective ecologies” of many kinds of bodies – specifically, in this case, the interlaced bodily becomings of certain orchids, insects, and human scientists. Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, “Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters,” differences 23, no. 3 (2012): 74–118. Also vaguely present in this floral mix are images of young protesters holding up flowers in the face of soldiers in iconic photographs of 20th-century anti-war and civil rights uprisings, Paris and Prague to name two. This is just one little spot in which to assert the subtle influence of the ongoing US Culture Wars, as they press at the edges and/or implode within this particular American Spotted Ass(backwards) love story. See Susan Harding, The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
Mules? This was an unexpected intrusion; I had never met a mule in the flesh or paid much attention to these hybrid beasts, who were alien hybrid outsiders to the colonial, “pureblooded”-Thoroughbred New England horse worlds I grew up in. More than just weird strangers in that world, mules were charged figures as hybrid, “half-breed,” and queerish, long-eared outsiders (the Ziggy Stardusts of equines, perhaps), but I had known them only as objects of derision when they happened to appear in the stone-walled landscapes of (casually racist and homophobic) late-twentieth-century Northeastern equestrian cultures. The night before, though, I happened to have been reading *Mule Trader*, William Ferris’s colorful ethnography of a Mississippi-based horse trader named Ray Lum, who travelled around the Southern US in the early and mid twentieth century peddling equine livestock. That next morning, the phrase “spotted mule” kept sneaking into my thoughts like a ceaseless, creaky carousel music coming from some indeterminable location. So I did what anybody would do, seated at a laptop screen in the cybernetic rosy-fingered dawn of 2001. I clicked on Internet Explorer, waited through the old dial-up static pop and buzz, and entered the search phrase “spotted mule” at the blinking cursor.

The next click was as fateful as they come. I found myself at spottedass.com.

What appeared on the laptop screen was a confabulated beast, an uncanny hybrid mix of familiar and strange in a pixel-borne form I could barely conceive. It was love at first sight, mixed with horror and disgust, this first vertiginous encounter with the chimeric beast of burden known as the American Spotted Ass. The blast of intuitive recognition when I saw the variegated equine shapes shining and pulsing on the screen was dizzying and gut-deep. This first visual encounter with the figure of the
American Spotted Ass was like coming upon a carnival, or perhaps an old casino, in a supposed wilderness.²

Foremost was the equine beast itself, this so-called “ass,” otherwise known as a donkey – an odd, vaguely abject cousin of the inimitable Horse that reigned over my sense of beauty and desire and the fortunes of my family as far back as I can remember.³ “Donkey” (Equus asinus) is among the many familiar domestic species I and my peers learned to recognize and name as a child, one of many naturalized inhabitants of Old Macdonald’s Farm; but beyond appearances in children’s books, I more or less dismissed donkeys, as their rarely seen, humble beast-of-burden status is eclipsed by the showy, elegant magnificence of their equine cousins, Equus caballus. Part of the buzz of this first encounter was in the fact that, in spite of being one of the most anciently domestic beasts, donkeys get little respect. And yet, this newfangled “ass” I saw blazing out from the laptop screen was another story altogether, a distorted version of a familiar figure, as in a funhouse mirror. The spectacular alterations to an otherwise unassuming barnyard beast caught my attention like a backhand slap – the kind a child might get for uttering a dirty word, but given back.


³ Horses maintain a distinct place of honor in the American imaginary – whether or not this translates to actual care for the real lives of individual equines. Asses, on the other hand, do not enjoy the same honors in the broader American culture, with the exceptions of certain circles that laud illustrious mammoth jacks used to sire mules and the ever-growing and much adored population of pet miniature donkeys. Both mammoth donkeys (over 54 inches tall) and miniatures (under 36 inches) are hot rural commodities, rarely selling for under $500, whereas I have seen ads on Craigslist offering to throw in an average-sized standard donkey jack (36”–54”) for free if you bought the seller’s chicken coop for sixty bucks. In the world of American asses, size definitely matters. Indeed, it can be a matter of life and death.
In light of all the years I’ve since devoted to playing back this slow-motion explosion, I can safely say the most significant aspect of this seminal encounter was the opening I glimpsed in the chosen branding of this con-fabulated breed. The choice of “ass” by the wily founders of the American Council of Spotted Asses (ACOSA) — instead of, say, the perfectly respectable “donkey” or even “burro” — was so blatant in its word-ness, and with that little kick of unseemliness to boot. Given my personal linguistic history with the word “ass,” it hit me obliquely in just such a way, hinting at slippage of boundaries that logos takes for granted — between bodies and the names by which we aim to contain and render them to our purposes. Classifications tend to stand as the bedrock of Western, language-bound species exceptionalism. On these foundations we prop up the complex of assumptions whereby “human” stands apart from “animal.” In that regard, to disrupt our sense of things being just what we call them, whether in the wake of Adam or Linnaeus, is a disturbance that cuts to the quick of epistemological stability. So the word “ass” presented a promising rupture, an intuitive breach of otherwise unassailable boundaries.4

On Puns (and Other Wordly Associations)

I found sudden, unforeseen power in the doubled-up meanings of “ass,” but it is important to note that puns are dismissed as mere idiocy by some. What is it about puns, these slips between stable meanings, that so unsettle some listeners while delighting others? Even at their cleverest, listeners often receive puns as “low” and

4 I was primed for this embrace of word-as-object by a raw, unschooled passion for écriture féminine, in particular the work of Hélène Cixous, along with a certain postmodernly ironic and deconstructive atmosphere. But these were not the deepest forces at work, as I would eventually discover.
“cheap” jokes, as likely to provoke groans as a good guffaw. Literary scholar Jonathan Culler suggests that puns draw ire because they upset the satisfying grasp of names on material things. They undermine the authority of logos and make our most sensible pronouncements precarious. On a different note, pun enthusiast Walter Redfern has it that, “The associative mind clearly revels in similarities, recurrences, echoes, reminders, assonances, and rhymes.” Oh those associative assonances! More subversive, perhaps, is the call of their raw animal music, where puns expose almighty language’s roots in toothy, lispy, guttural grunts and warbles, that crowning glory that it is supposed to hold humans above all other species – the Word, that is – becomes just so much idiotic scatting, where meaning and authority give way to mere sounds and music.

Drawing on the laconic protagonist of Melville’s Bartleby the Scrivener, philosopher Isabelle Stengers proposes that the mumblings of an idiot (whether in slippery doubled meanings or incomprehensible speaking-in-
tongues) undermine the kinds of certainty we ascribe to linguistic articulation: “We know, knowledge there is, but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don’t consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know.” Indeed, to embrace the “low” pun is to harness the power of its precarity and radical possibilities for rethinking the hold of language on material, epistemological, and political matters. Perhaps this is why Chinese authorities tried to publicly ban puns in 2015. Just how dangerous could puns possibly be, that they would provoke ire in social situations and even compel prohibition by massive global powers?

As it happens, puns also hold great and powerful allure for philosopher Jacques Derrida. The “possibility of puns” sits at the very heart of Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction, the massively influential mode of postmodern thought wherein language becomes a playful surface, cut loose of its bedrock grounding in transcendent human logos. Derrida says, “If I had a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical, and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: plus d’une langue – both more than a language and no more of a language.”

Jonathan Culler takes the power of the pun even further in “The Call of the Phoneme,” to assert that, “Puns present us with a model of language as phonemes or letters combining in various ways to evoke prior meaning

7 Isabelle Stengers deploys the idiot toward this end: “The idea is precisely to slow down the construction of the common world, to create a space for hesitation regarding what it means to say ‘good.’” Isabelle Stengers, “A Cosmopolitical Proposal,” in Making Things Public, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Boston: MIT Press, 2005), 995.


and to produce effects of meaning – with a looseness, unpredictability, excessiveness, shall we say, that cannot but disrupt the model of language as nomenclature.”

10 Derri-da scholar Gregory Ulmer develops this instrumentation into a form he calls the “puncept,” or “the relationship between the pun and concept formation or the order of knowledge.”

11 Indeed, I found that when it comes to the special power of hinged, double-meaning words to open hidden histories and alternate ways of knowing untold others in full-blown places, puns give us the possibility of other stories altogether. As Culler asserts, “Puns can inspire momentous action, as well as narrative. They may also be an instrument of knowledge.”

12 Beckett said it best (as with so many things): “In the beginning was the pun.” And so it was: Like dynamite in the darkest mines, the slip-knotty nature of one specific beastly-burdensome pun came to guide a brand new quest, to blast new paths into a seeming impasse between named human enterprises and nameless intra-mammalian silences. “Ass” was and is precisely this kind of “password” – an abracadabra magic spell that promises to open lively possibilities of lives-lived between more-than-language and language-no-more.

Spotty Histories

While this readymade detourn of “ass” was the first glimpse into the volatile payloads with which this lowly beast of burden is loaded, it was the addition and admixture of “American” and “Spotted” that really set fire to the fuse.

14 Despite genes for spotted coats cropping up

10 Culler, “The Call of the Phoneme,” 14.
11 Ibid., 14–15.
12 Ibid., 15.
14 “Readymade” is a term borrowed from Marcel Duchamp’s radical move to shift the boundaries of art by framing and making mean-
in donkeys all over the world, ACOSA, founded in 1969, is the first organization to maintain a breed registry for this trait in donkeys, and as a result, to stake a certain national claim on asses’s spots as “American.” Hidden layers of American cultural history and Western mythos were splattered across those little long-eared equine bodies in the spectacle of “spots” – a genetic inheritance of splotch-patterned coat color that in horses is called “paint” or “pinto” or even Appaloosa, depending on the colors and pattern involved and their specific biocultural histories. Meanwhile, the sense of play and seeming irreverence in the naming of this new ass breed is complicated by a statement from John Conter, who co-founded the ACOSA and dubbed its primary product as such: “Now, we could call them ‘pinto donkeys,’ you understand that, but there’s no romance in ‘pinto donkeys.’ Whereas when you say ‘spotted asses,’ well then, that means something.”

As another human whose lifelong passion was catalyzed by this breed and its surprising choice of name, I can attest that “Spotted Asses” is indeed packed with meaning – as laden with it, in fact, as the little burros who have carried human burdens worldwide for millennia. Recognition of these loaded aspects of the ass’s spots was intuitive in that first encounter, but I have since come to explore some of the ciphers at play in that swirling massquerade of species and national/cultural identities, where these newfangled spotted hides conjured (and simultaneously made a joke of) latent and watered-down


Wild-West, cowboys-and-Indians associations, which in turn hold violent erasures of specific histories of Westward colonial expansion and genocide in co-opted traces of Native American names and cultural patterns.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} The founding of the American Council of Spotted Asses in 1969 parallels the shift in popularity of pinto horses, from early rejection in certain circles of settler-colonist American horse culture due to associations with half-breed Indian ponies to its current status as the virtual American flag of horse-coat colors, as witnessed in the phenomenal and ever-growing worldwide popularity of the American Paint Horse. The American Paint Horse Association was founded in 1962 by Rebecca Tyler Lockhart, in support of her beloved paint-horse underdogs and with a significant fight at the time against racist and misogynistic forces in her native Oklahoma. Penny Owen, “A Colorful Life, She’s Riding Ol’ Paint to Fame: Ryan Woman to Join Cowgirl Hall of Fame,” \textit{Daily Oklahoman}, October 29, 2000.
Meanwhile, in this swirl of images and hidden associations, the spectacle was working its magic on me. As the “American” and “Spotted” shot through these humble domestic equine bodies evoked the burn-and-twitch of a commodity fetish, a certain horror rose up along with the haunting desires sparked by this alter-equine form. This desire, even as it rooted in longings for absent friends and places in the past, nonetheless implicated me in dominant biocultural regimes of livestock breeding for consumer markets, among other human habits that reduce living bodies and deeper wisdoms they contain to surfaces, pixels, and dollar values.

Yet this is precisely where—in a carnivalesque atmosphere of fantastic possibility that turned everything inside-out and upside-down—the crack opened a breach between the word “ass” and the familiar/unfamiliar beast it was supposed to name, and that crack gave forth a faint glimmer of possibility for creative interventions. The moment was a vital pause at the edge of what Michael Taussig describes as “the exchange-value arc of the market circuit, where the general equivalence rules the roost, where all particularity and sensuosity is meat-grindered into abstract identity and the homogenous substance of quantifiable money-value.”\(^{17}\) Of course, commodification of bodies—“meat-grindered” as Taussig writes in an apt

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\(^{17}\) Michael Taussig writes: “We need to note that as the commodity passes through and is held by the exchange-value arc of the market circuit, where the general equivalence rules the roost, where all particularity and sensuosity is meat-grindered into abstract identity and the homogenous substance of quantifiable money-value, the commodity yet conceals in its innermost being not only the mysteries of the socially constructed nature of value and price, but also all its particulate sensuosity—and this subtle interaction of sensous perceptibility and imperceptibility accounts for the fetish quality, the animism and spiritual glow of commodities, so adroitly channeled by advertising (not to mention the avant-garde) since the late nineteenth century.” Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 23.
metaphor for what happens to many equines, cattle, and even cast-off dogs and cats in hungry regimes of global capitalism – compromises not only long-eared beasts of burden but all of our mortal bodies and embodied biographies. In the loaded figure of the American Spotted Ass, animated by lively ghosts, I glimpsed what Taussig calls the “phantasmogorical potential” of Walter Benjamin’s take on the commodity fetish, that is, “the surreal and revolutionary possibilities provided by the culture of capitalism for its own undoing, its own transcendence”\textsuperscript{18}

The asses staring out at me from the screen seemed to be asking: How much more vital can this inversion of a commodity become when the object looks back as a full-blown subject, a blinking and breathing body that bucks representation with her own untold biography, fears and desires, cares and hungers?

As I clicked in breathless wonder through image after image on the Gallery pages of spottedass.com, the patterns laced across spotted donkey hides hinted at futures full of mixed promise and possibility, and also danger and doom. In other words, I was falling in love. Like Alice’s long, colorful fall down the rabbit-hole, this head-over-heels (or “ass-over-teakettle,” as my friend Chris would say) tumble bumped and twisted down through an underground labyrinth of images and phonemes, colors and shadows, beloved bodies and mixed-family phylogenies, as if descending deeply earthward toward the common linguistic root of “spectacle,” “seeing,” and “species” somewhere at the core. Indeed, this spiraling journey is one that anthropologist Paige West traces in hopes that we could eventually arrive at some new place, where human ways of worlding through visual re/cognition and naming-calling – so grievously exploited in our age by

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 29.
humanist hierarchies and capitalist schemes – might instead offer fertile grounds for multispecies futures.\textsuperscript{19}

For my part, the feeling of falling head over heels for this spectacular ass breed has never yet hit any kind of bottom. I suspect this dream hath no bottom, as a matter of fact.\textsuperscript{20} From the first encounter onward, the unassuming donkey “enterprised-up” in a coat of many colors became an inexorable calling.\textsuperscript{21} And if we should need further testament to the power of images (whether for good or evil, haw) in human experience, it is worth noting that all this passion came to pass through the mysterious workings of a slow-loading, haphazard gallery of low-resolution JPEGs, long before I ever met a Spotted Ass in the flesh. Indeed, this clash with the hybrid, Western-

\textsuperscript{19} In her entry for “Spectacular” on the ABCs of Multispecies Studies website, West writes: “If we returned to the Latin origins of the Old French word spectacle (the word from which the Middle English term arose in the 14th century) we get Spectacle from the Latin spectaculum, which means ‘a show’ or ‘a place from which shows are seen’ and spectaculum is from the older spectare, which means ‘to see’ or ‘to behold.’ In Latin speciō also means ‘see’ and gave rise to the Latin word species which meant ‘the appearance of a thing’ or ‘its outline or shape’ and which gave us the Modern English word species. So, at its roots, deep in the history of utterances, spectacle connects to species. What if we started to reclaim the idea of The Spectacular from corporations and marketers and big conservation? What if we went back to the beginning of its linguistic roots and decided to see every species intersection as spectacular; something extraordinary to behold? That is part, in my sense, of the multispecies project. To revive the wonder in and of our world through understanding the processes – political, social, historical – that worked to convince us that ‘nature’ was somehow distinct from ‘culture’………… utterly spectacular.” Paige West, “Spectacular,” ABCs of Multispecies Studies, http://www.multispecies-salon.org/spectacular/.

\textsuperscript{20} But of course: “Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. […] The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was.” William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night’s Dream (New York: Penguin, 1967), IV.1–2, 200–210.

\textsuperscript{21} Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 46–67.
historied beast of burden in question was no less than an explosive bray-to-becoming, so thick with transformative possibilities that it may yet take the rest of my mortal days to grasp it. Lo, I stand in wonder here and now, that after all these years of living with Aliass and our rough-furred herd of rowdy kin, I have yet to get to the bottom of that shimmering pool of vague hopes, bright curiosities, and promising inside-outings that rose up in that first laptop glimpse of the so-called American Spotted Ass.

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While this call-to-becoming of the American Spotted Ass was loud and clear at the time, the source of its issuance was harder to ascertain. “Ass” was a password, no doubt. It glowed like a hot golden key into landscapes of pastoral promise, even as these places glimmered invitingly on the other side of an opaque, impassable present. Thanks to Lewis Carroll (who, like Coyote, Cixous, Duchamp, Frederick Douglass, Sun Ra, and other tricksters, knows that logic is seldom the surest road to a destination whence imaginative vision beckons us), I surmised that merely having a key in hand is no guarantee of easy passage.22 There I sat at the laptop day after day, not knowing what to do about my strange newfangled Ass or how to find the places it may haunt. The promise of the Spotted Ass hung in a wondrous space opened by a hinged and double-edged name, but the fervent hopes and desires attached to this odd equine welled up from within a material body whose ways of knowing and inhabiting places have always been pulled and pushed, shaped and affected

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22 Lewis Hyde’s Trickster Makes This World elaborates the trickster’s role and how these particular tricksters powerfully enacted it in their specific cultural situations. Lewis Hyde, Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010).
by the presences of domestic equines, canines, and many others. What I sought in the crack of “ass,” then, could only be found amidst tangles of real, hot, furry hides, shining eyes, hay and grasses, and odd, long-eared sensitive bodies, and in the mysterious, material mesh of shared experiences in unknown woods and fields and weedy roadsides.

Alas, there in the new-millennial spring of 2001, the American Spotted Ass beckoned from somewhere ambiguously “out there,” beyond the peaceful rolling pastures and wooded, stone-walled horizons of old pastoral upstate New York. Here the ecstasy of the American Spotted Ass grew as spring turned to a deep, dark summer, with a growing sense that this urgent calling was also a calling-out that would demand massive transformation. Like Alice peering through a keyhole into a strange landscape into which she watches the White Rabbit beckoningly vanish, I saw limned in the shape of the Spotted Ass a world I had to find my way into somehow. The mottled hides of these mimsy beasts seemed like a shimmering penumbra of a distant magical place, a land of wondersome, inside-out adventures, where one might even stumble into a forest, field, or barnyard where things have no names, and names no things.23 Needless to say, I became a

Incidentally but not insignificantly, I once numinously fell into a site like this myself for a hot minute, after an intoxicating series of solo rollercoaster loops on the Tennessee Tornado at Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Come to think of it, that revelatory evening at Dolly Parton’s homegrown Smoky Mountain theme park had proffered such profound and surprising revelations and unravelings – mind-bending fluidities of genders and geologies, seamy-sweet-insectoid dissolutions of species and kingdoms – that I might have guessed it from the get-go. This briary path onto which I stumbled in search of my American Spotted Ass must lead (back) to Tennessee in the long run, and go deep and deeper into its most clandestine, sequined wildernesses. Yes, in the fantastic (if slow and assbackwards) lines of flight and fancy that would eventually lead to meeting Aliass in the dim, loamy light of that Maury County pole-barn on Monsanto Road, I would need to find and follow all kinds of buck-
passionate card-carrying, t-shirt-wearing member of the American Council of Spotted Asses, with a sense of irony that hid deeper desires, lacks, and longings that were embedded in this figure like barbed-wire swallowed in the flesh of a tree.

While somewhat geographically isolated in this regard, I was not alone in falling hard for the romantic allure of American Spotted Asses. On a homegrown website made in the early 1990s by a former Arabian horse-breeder-cum-Spotted-Ass aficionado named Ruth Kalenian, I fell into a swirl of images, personal anecdotes/travelogues, and gems of information detailing what happens when a person’s dreams are suddenly and unexpectedly hijacked by colorful asses.24 One particular photograph on this web-


24 More than decade later, when researching events around my discovery of spotted asses, I happened again upon Ruth Kalenian’s website, which to my astonishment still floated in cyberspace like a relic of
Fig. 3. Heart B Mister. Oil on wood. 2001. Courtesy of the artist.
site captured me so fiercely that I can still recall the tremblesome, quicksandy sensations I felt when I would gaze at it in those early times. It was almost like a promise of pastoral paradise (almost pornographic in the intensity of sensations it stirred). The image revealed an endless spotted-ass pasture somewhere in the wild western Montana territory, so glowingly full of lively promise that I felt it could not possibly be a real place. But what if it was out there somewhere, this magical rangeland – was this an image of a destiny manifest, somehow, someday, somewhere over the rainbow...?

Restless, those summer nights I got in a habit of staying up all night long, drinking cold coffee, listening to the apocalyptic growl of Royal Trux and Lightning Bolt records, and painting an icon of an American Spotted Ass in oil on wood. The small painting was based on a promotional headshot of a Mammoth Spotted Jack named Heart B Mister, who had recently been sold and transported from his Idaho home to stand at stud in Montana. I had seen him advertised online, and in a fit of admiration I wrote to his new owners requesting a photo, which they kindly sent without questions. Late into the buzzing summer nights, I pored over the ass’s enigmatic expression with breathless concentration, like an acolyte seeking prophetic revelation. And there it was.

As I traced the glints and shadows of bones under fur, something urgent and invisible built under the skin of the emerging image. Mister seemed to know something – something like the punchline to some vital and terminally slow and funny joke that he would never tell, but that I might grasp if I could just capture the sly tilt of dark in his long hollow ears and the glimmer in his deep-set eyes. With every layer of oil paint, the secret seemed to shimmer and recede, shimmer and recede, like a ghost-interwebs past, a treasureful trace of her labor of cyber-ass love in the mid-1990s. Sadly, the server can no longer be found.
Fig. 4. Space-Dog Malyshka. Oil on wood. 1996. Courtesy of the artist.
ly aura playing just beneath the surface of the spotted jack’s spectacular hide. Grasping to conjure contact, power, and possibilities of transformation layered in this elusive animal figure, this painting was an act of mimesAss – an impulse as old as the Paleolithic and arguably at the root from the get-go of Homo sapiens becoming with the world of self and/in others.25

As it happened, the Byzantine-style icon of Mister was prefigured by a portrait series of another preposterous figure with a (more literally) explosive natural-cultural payload. For years, I had a ferocious obsession with Laika, the first dog sent into Earth’s orbit by the Russians inside Sputnik 2 in 1957. The first time I heard the tale of this strange Space Age episode, I was gut-struck with bewilderment, akin to the intense frisson the American Spotted Ass evoked years later. I soon learned that Laika was not the only orbital canine of her kind, and the fascination with this strange new breed of space dogs expanded into a practice of painting semi-ironic, Byzantine-style icons based on the late canine cosmonauts shot into outer space by the USSR in the mid-twentieth century.

After years of thinking and feeling through this intuitively confounding hybrid figure of the dog-in-outer-space, I finally began to grasp what made it so haunting. Dogs stood for the safety and warm familiarity of “home” for me, and outer space was definitively not-home, the absolute unfamiliar and unwelcoming in the most profound and lonesome ways. To catapult a dog into space was a rupture, an (in)human(e) act of supreme ecological – and for me, ontological – violence. (“Doggone it,” said the astronaut, on a LP recording of a space mission that I

found at a yard sale and listened to over and over again, late at night, for many years.) And somehow, here in the cosmic chimera of the American Spotted Ass, a similar pulsing mass of tensions was at work. I could not tease apart all the different snarls, so instead I painted and sketched and dreamed like a fiend of mysteries hidden inside these incredible visions of space-dogs and spotted asses. These image-making acts sought to conjure contact with the other, the outside, the unknown, feeling blindly along seamy cracks between names and bodies, into spaces where unknown voices, nameless presences, and indecipherable messages proliferated.

Late one August night that final summer in the Hudson Valley Hollow, I was bent long and late over the emerging image of Mister when a sudden, uncanny cry came ripping through the night. It came from somewhere out in the dark rolling pastures. I had never heard anything like this astonishing sound, roundly familiar, with both canine and feline edges, but otherwise alien. The seemingly sourceless voice electrified the darkness, then faded in scratchy pulses like static at the beginning or end of old 78 recordings – fulsome even in its caesura. The Mutt of Gold and I stood side by side at the open screen, hardly breathing, listening hard into the dark of the night outside. After a long-seeming pause, it came again, still without locus. It was a call as much as a cry, clearly full of portent, though not at all meant for us. It did not sound like pain or fear, exactly, but a strange urgency carried through in its volume and repetition. For maybe half an hour, it kept coming, high and sharp at the top and then fading away rough-edged to a tensed silence stretched across the gaps. Then the interval ended, and faint nocturnal buzz slowly covered over the hole in the night that the cry had opened.26

26 Inscription of this experience owes an intertextual debt to James Agee’s rendering and gorgeous essay of a similar listening experience
The next morning one of my landlady Alice’s retrievers came skulking across the yard with an awkward shape dangling from her muzzle. From Mary’s soft jaws, I pried the cold body of a juvenile bird, like none I had seen before—a long-legged, long-necked, mostly naked fledgling, with scaly yellow legs and a few spiky blue feathers on its translucent wings. A few minutes later, one of the other retrievers appeared with a second dead fledgling. I gathered up the avian carcasses and studied them with fascination and the sad wonder that comes in the presence of any death, the pocked pale skin and hollow primary feathers, the tiny insects scuttling in the folds of their cold pale necks and in and out of their earholes. With their half-closed eyes, the fledglings were like envoys from a different world—little rips in the veil. It seemed like their appearance was heralded in the cries we’d heard the night before, but of course there was no way for me to know, knowing so little about goings-on of the Hollow nighttime.

That evening I sketched their bodies. Then—not knowing how best to honor them, with no idea where they came from or where to return them—I took them to the deep black pond at the back of the farm in the woods. I laid them in the leaf litter at the edge of the dark reflective water: this was not a resolution of any mystery but a gesture meant to take place against a backdrop of “unknown, invisible presences”—a gesture that in its way held the vague hope or anticipation of participation in


27 I am guessing they must have been fledgling Great Blue Herons, because I know of no other long-legged, long-necked, blue-feathered bird like that. This seemed especially odd, though, because I read that herons raise young together in a rookery, and surely we’d have known if a rookery was nearby, right?
what Isabelle Stengers calls “cosmopolitical” assemblages, where “cosmos refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable.”

In the Hollow pastures that last summer were yarrow and spotted knapweed, hop-clover and bird’s-foot trefoil and butter-’n-eggs. Goldfinches stitched the afternoon air. Big-eyed flying squirrels emerged at dusk from the gnarly maple by the back porch, where the cranky white-breasted nuthatch shuttled upside down like a tiny freight elevator all day. Chickadees harangued us from the canopy of old oaks in the backwoods, and over the years the Mutt and I crossed paths with roving bands of does, chipmunks and field mice, a rose-breasted grosbeak, and the bright orange oriole and flocks of cedar waxwings passing through in spring. Many different woodpeckers tapped out regular rhythms in the woods, and once we met an ancient snapping turtle, trailing green slime as it hurried across the pasture just before a thunderstorm, moving from the murky depths of one pond to another.

The Hudson Valley farm was a lovely and peaceful place, as far as landscapes in twenty-first-century United States go. But even as I wandered the pastures and woods with the Mutt of Gold in all seasons, as she chased hot trails in grass and leaf litter and I learned the names of easy wildflowers and common birds and struggled with the seemingly hundreds of species of oak, the many kinds of pine, I was beginning to grasp the dangers of believing that naming is the same as knowing, or that bodies are namable at all. Hidden forces of history, ecology, and invisible presences that shaped this pastoral idyll I adored, or for that matter any landscape, were not as timeless or

tame as the pretty, peaceful, millionaires’ summer-home estates of the rural Hudson Valley would lead one to believe. Meanwhile, I felt keenly that all the paradigms I lived by were mostly only blinding me to realities of deeper, hidden webs of connections. I knew I had to leave the solipsism of the Hollow, but I did not know where to go or how to seek whatever I was looking for.

But there was this: Pompey’s Pillar, Montana – the mythic place of origin of the American Spotted Ass, according to the official history on spottedass.com. It lay to the west, as did a circle of close friends in Portland, Oregon. Westward seemed as good a direction as any. So it was. At the end of the summer we would leave the Hollow and go West again (like so many before us) to seek a new way of life in the Pacific Northwest, me and the Mutt and whatever I could fit into the trunk of the Black Caprice. Westward we would chase the dream of a humble, hybrid, doubled-up figure who somehow promised to reconcile all the deepest and spikiest conundrums of millennial wonderings and to open up unforeseen passages for possible past- and future-ass becomings.

29 This former agricultural region is two hours north of New York City, and in the nineteenth and early twentieth century its farms served the city’s needs for milk and meat and crops. With twentieth-century changes, the landscape became premium real estate for wealthy city folks. A few scattered ancestral farms still operated at the turn of the millennium. Soon after I left the Hollow, though, I heard news that the last working dairy farm in Dutchess County had finally folded. Old farms sold for millions to heirs of New York global finance royalty. So much for country innocence. However much I liked to imagine myself a rural hermit, my living in those Hollow years, in terms of income and social life, was entirely dependent on being within New York City’s colossal economic and cultural sphere of influence.
Westward Haw!

This is an old story, despite its idiomatic assemblages. Across the so-called US of A, centuries of migration, displacement, and strivings for better lives are written in asphalt lines and other, less visible traces that crisscross every landscape. Mythical-material realities of the North American highway system, along with other specific human histories and privileges, allowed a person like me in the early twenty-first century to chase swirling ass visions across deserts and plains, across the girth of a massive continent, more or less on a whim. Call it what you will: road-trip quest, assbackwards hero’s journey, Kunstlerroman, odd-ass odyssey, or twenty-first century Gilgameshian epic dream.... In any case, this is a road-bound tale that weaves through haggard tropes of migratory adventures that ultimately strive toward some kind of homecoming – or homeward coming-of-age, maybe.\(^3\)

But if it is an old story, the desire to blast it open for new multispecies engenderings necessitated a newfangled strategy, born of its particular times. For nomads of a so-called new millennium, destinations may seem to hover on the horizons of uncertain futures, or even pasts – never right here, anyway, kind of like the far-off “shadow places” Val Plumwood admonishes us to acknowledge for the sake of earthly integrity.\(^3\) Sometimes, though, we come suddenly to recognize “shadow places” are not

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30 Roadways are fraught territory all over the globe. See Anna Tsing’s *Friction* for a description of ways that Indonesian logging roads, in particular, act as pathways for flows of global capitalism, opening ways of moving in forest landscapes for some while constraining or endangering them for others. Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Stephanie LeMenager’s *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) limns the ways that oil economies are rendered invisible by their omnipresence.

so far off after all, but right here in our midst, weaving across porous bodies, where rich webs of beings and becomings thrive or fade at the frayed edges of driving perception, attention, and care.

It was so easy (in some ways) to uproot and go west from the Hollow home in upstate New York, to float off dreamily in the Black Caprice on the smoothly paved and networked surfaces of the national highway system, fueled by cheap oil and high-limit credit cards, sung onward by the recorded voices of American balladeers and their longingful songs of the highway, from Woody Guthrie’s “Hard Travelin’” to anything Townes Van Zandt ever sang. To breeze past infinite strip malls and fast-food drive-thrus, gravel yards and sludge dumps and reeking feedlots, to curl up with the Mutt and Molloy in a surreal, red-curtained El Paso motel room, after hours of desert darkness lit only by tiny constellations of distant cities far off on the plains... all the while spinning toward a bright “green” El Dorado of urban hipster culture in Portland, Oregon. Where I aimed to put down shallow roots, for however long.

Lo and behold, what happened on this one fraught American crossing, the fall of September 2001, ruined the dream of carefree relocation, as one terrifying night in a blown-open desert brought new revelations to bear on every place, all at once. Where awareness had been growing this way for some time, one fateful night in the Badlands of South Dakota precipitated an unforeseen cracking-open, of bodies, geographies, and even timescapes, along with dominant histories, identities, and maps that are supposed to classify and contain them. In the wake

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32 This was hardly the “hard travelin’” Woody Guthrie sings of, where in ballads that track displaced farmers and migrant laborers, folks say “so long” to the harrowed dust of their homelands and criss-cross the continent seeking “pastures of plenty.” Woody Guthrie, “Hard Travelin’” and “Pastures of Plenty,” The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1–4 (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1999).
of that disturbance, seismic shifts in the terrain called for some kind of urgent response. And this is where the journey, in hot tracks of the phantasmagorical American Spotted Ass, really begins.

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We rolled west out of New York in early September, with a car-full of boxes and loose belongings. A college friend named Adam B was along for the ride with me and the Mutt of Gold, to help with the weeklong drive and then visit his family in Seattle when we got to the other side. We decided to take the northern cross-country route, planning (why not?) to take our time and visit iconic national parks, famous roadside stops, and other tourist attractions along the way. But leaving friends and familiar places in New York was harder than expected that September morning we rolled out, and the first day on the road was mournfully solemn and silent. Ominous storms hung over Ohio, where the blackest daytime sky I ever saw threatened to drop like an anvil as we blew through Toledo. That early evening we came into the Wisconsin Dells, a green and stormy scene where we stood in the parking lot of Tommy Bartlett’s Robot World roadside attraction and gawked at roiling thunderheads shot through with rainbows.

Around dusk we checked into a Madison motel. While Adam showered, I sprawled on one of the beds and flipped through an issue of The Spotlight, the quarterly publication of the American Council of Spotted Asses. What happened next must have been some kind of ontological hiccup, a fleeting and momentary “dark night of the soul.” In any case, some mystical term of medieval origin must exist for what happened in that next dizzying moment, as I stared at the cover of The Spotlight, where a champion Miniature Spotted Jack named “Country Music’s Merle Haggard” posed with his proud owner, a portly man in a
bolo tie and big black cowboy hat. I looked a little closer at the photograph, and all of a sudden it pixelated in my vision and began to dissolve. The motel room swirled and I felt a sharp sinking in my guts: I had been made a fool of. Spotted Asses did not really exist. After all, I had never met one in the flesh, and it was all too far-fetched – a Photoshop hoax, a hybrid joke, like Sasquatch or the antlered-rabbit “jackalopes” on squeaky postcard racks in truck stops across the American West. For a long hellish moment, this was the truth of it. And the world went a little darker outside the synthetic blackout curtains of the Motel 6.

But the moment passed as swiftly as it came. Like a wave of grace backed with impassable doubt, my faith in the American Spotted Ass returned – or else I decided that it didn’t matter if spotted asses really existed in the flesh or not. I’ll never know which mattered more in that moment, the fact or the faith. Even if the spotted ass was a mere figment, I could still believe in it. After all, how many religious and political and cultural institutions – how many histories and species, even – are built on collective human will to invest in figures and the allegories and narrative tropes that bear them like flotsam through the world? So my faith in the magical powers of the American Spotted Ass was restored to preeminence by the time Adam emerged from the steamy bathroom, and in relative contentment we went off across the motel parking lot to dine at the Denny’s. We slept soundly that night in Madison and woke to another long day ahead of us on the interstate.

**Badlands**

At what must have been about 8 a.m. on Tuesday, September 11, I woke up to the Mutt of Gold shaking her ears and tags in the Motel 6 in Mitchell, South Dakota. Out for a walk at the grassy edge of the parking lot, we
saw a dark-haired woman wandering around, apparently distraught, holding an empty cardboard box. She came up to us and whispered that something was going on in New York, something about the World Trade Center. I returned to the room to wake Adam and we turned on the television. Media reports of the events unfolding in New York and Washington were fragmentary. Nobody knew what was going on, except that two different planes had crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington had apparently been attacked. Structures were collapsing. Everything was in flames.

We tried for an hour or so to get phone calls through to friends and families back east. Then, not knowing what else to do, we got back on the road heading west. I recall a long silent moment, idling the engine of the Black Caprice at the turn to the interstate ramp, wondering if we could get back. But it did not seem possible to go back to New York. We spent ten hours that day at a Dakota roadside stop famous for cream pie and 5-cent coffee, while Adam, who worked for a major Wall Street firm, hung on the payphone trying to help his team in the city. Then, in shock and profound bewilderment, we drove west into the setting sun, keeping with our plan to camp that night in the Badlands.

The Badlands National Park is a singular landscape, an endless-seeming expanse of beautiful, forbidding hills and prairie grasslands. The Caprice’s radio did not work, so once we left the roadside restaurant we were in a void, a lacuna where the only news was the presence of rolling desert prairie and unearthly hills that spoke in a secret language we did not understand. We arrived at the campground in the Badlands National Park near dusk and walked out into the surreal landscape. The arid ground under our feet and paws was crazed with cracks and faintly purple in the fading daylight. The land felt both desolate and full of hidden life as the sun sank be-
yond jagged cliffs to the west. As the sunlight faded on that day of shock and sadness, we found ourselves in the most stunning and alien landscape we’d ever seen. It’s not for nothing they call this place the Badlands.\textsuperscript{33}

Back at the campground, a cold wind came up fierce and sudden with the dark and blew hard across the land. We pitched the wildly-flapping tent without speaking. And what was there to say? It was not possible to settle in the chaos of so many ruptures and urgent unknowns, so I put the Mutt of Gold on her leash and we walked out from the campground onto the empty asphalt road, heading east where we came from and into the wind. The darkness that engulfed us was entire except for the stars – more stars than I ever thought possible, millions and millions of them. Everything we knew of the home we’d left was possibly annihilated, at the very least in danger and despair. Yet the stars still shone and the wind still blew.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this experience of the events now known as 9/11 was radically different from what those in the midst of smoke and flames and wrenching horrors at the scenes of the attacks went through, and different even from the trauma felt by those millions watching images on televisions across the US, a country full of citizens convinced until that day of the nation’s absolute imperviousness. Adam and I did not see the burning images; we did not hear the latest chaotic

\textsuperscript{33} Besides being a gem of the US National Park system, the Badlands as a broader geo-psychic construct maintains certain cultural/poetic capital in American cinema and song, being the title of a classic film by Terrence Malick, which in turn inspired iconic recordings by Bruce Springsteen on the album \textit{Nebraska}, not to mention a little-known cameo in the loose plot of Emmylou Harris’s story-album, \textit{The Ballad of Sally Rose}. (I mention this because of a prophetic dream about Emmylou, sometime not long after that Badlands night – something about tattoos on wombs and that sharp light glimmering off the lake as we came around that highway bend in Coeur D’Alene....)
news updates. Out there in the Badlands, what was happening in New York and Washington might as well have happened to dead civilizations thousands of years past, or on another planet.

The wind blew hard as we walked on, and it was so dark that I could just barely make out the ghostly swish of the Mutt’s pale tail-fur waving a few feet ahead. We pressed on along the empty asphalt road without destination into the wind and starry dark, leaning into the place-in-time like the viscous substance it was. And that was when it happened. In a slow unraveling of assumptions, American and Human taken-for-granteds that had knitted together reality as I knew it, something otherwise took form in the fulsome dark. Even the terror and disillusionment and seemingly huge import of this night in History, at least for certain humans, the desert was what it was – wind and stars and warm mammals and roosting birds and insects and myriad unknown and nameless others living their lives, not without or outside history, as such, but holding and inextricably layering millions of knowings beyond human grasp, unwritten, or rather inscribed in claw-scratches, pawprints, blown seeds and shale cut by waterways and infinite movements and happenings that were and have been happening, then and now and always.

What happened out there that night was a kind of opening that will not stitch shut. But strangely, when I revisit the memory of that experience, always after a sob of grief and sadness for those who lost lives and loves in the events known as “9/11,” what I find inside the swirl of dissolutions is not a sense of loss but a profound reassurance. In that collapse of so many human structures and assumptions, even my own monumental Humanity as I knew it, I felt the grounding of real, inimitable webs of presence. Moored with the Mutt in our familiar bodies, while at the same time dissolving into the weaving world that we felt and heard and smelled but could not
encompass, we were immersed and indeterminate in the blown-open and fully inhabited electric darkness. And the strangest thing of all is that in this emptyfullness, or fulleemptiness, came the apprehension of something I had been waiting and hoping for without knowing it: the sense or nonsense I sought in the mysterious eye-shine of confabulated asses and long-gone space dogs, in the cracks and gaps between words and warm, winding mortal bodies. It is incongruous, but I think true nonetheless, that even in the grievous shock of violent upheaval, the cracking-open of beings-together that night in the Badlands was a kind of homecoming. We came home, if only for a passing moment, into infinite constellations and assemblages of bodies and becomings that are never the ones we think we know.

Reams of indecipherable pages full of burning words and ashen numbers and names blew loose all through the night across the desert landscape. A fierce wind from the east belled the thin tent fabric inward against shivering bodies inside. The coldest night I ever knew. In the sharp bright morning, we woke to the clatter of the magpies’ metallic hammering on the bottom of the Mutt’s overturned water bowl, a silver orb in which a tiny far-off speck of hard sun was reflected. For the magpies of the Badlands the world this day was unchanged by the far-off flames and rubble of violent Human histories. The sky was clear and blue. The stark shale hills rolled on, swathed in flowering grasses and folded with gold and purple shadows.

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Days later, we limped into Portland in a fog of post-9/11 grief, exhaust, and confusion. Airplanes began to reappear in the skies, and Adam, my Brooklyn-born traveling companion, was finally able to fly home to the smoking ruins of New York City. Downstairs beneath my rented
room in northeast Portland, the TV blared news about anthrax attacks, and al-Qaeda leaders warned Americans to get on our horses and ready for bloody battles to come. Meanwhile, each morning at a desk in the dank and cobwebby basement, I tried to pick up where I had left off with the fictive ride of a renegade wrangler and stolen pinto toward a lost Virginia home. But a new and different urgency steamed up through the cracks, which had begun with the looming “ass” question and widened to crevasses in the dark of that Badlands night. Whatever authority I claimed in its aftermath had to issue from those vital dissolutions and openings; whatever forms of meaning I might try to make hereafter must be responsible to the swarming unknowns, indeterminacies, and material intimacies of different bodies and energies fused in timeplaces, cut loose of any kind of humanist teleology.

In his dusty 1951 essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Wallace Stevens wrote the following:

This much ought to be said to make it a little clearer that in speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive. A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow.34

My copy of The Necessary Angel was yellowed with age, and Stevens was mostly speaking of political and artistic

tensions that prevailed in centuries past. But the big poet’s words resonated nonetheless in millennial Portland in that frayed American fall of 2001, with respect to the responsibilities of a “possible poet” in the violent pressures and uncertainties of a so-called “New Reality” of a still-bleeding, post-9/11 “America.”

In the flash-bang reverberations of warmongering words and their terrible, smoke-and-mirrors consequences, “What You Gonna Do about Yer [American Spotted] Ass?” transformed to a whole new form, from Sun Ra’s koan to a sudden and inevitable physical imperative. Here it was, then, the supreme (and perhaps the only possible) response – to Isabelle Stengers’s call for a slowed-down idiom of unknowing; to Wallace Stevens’s poetic admonition; to George W. Bush’s blundering post-9/11 “Let’s roll, America!” and even to Sun Ra’s onerous koan. I would blast into this new American “reality,” light out for territories both storied and nameless, in the company of a humble, spectacular beast of burden. Instead of writing the fictional tale of a long reckoning ride to a lost Virginia homeland, I had to Do it: Cede the helm of authorship and perform the journey as a real immersion in specific timeplaces. As a mortal organism immersed within untold meshes of others, I would implode the old hero’s journey I had been imagining for so long as a word-bound narrative.

The gist was this: I had to ride home on an American Spotted Ass.

35 That is, “America” as spoken in those days in the distinct accent of George W. Bush, and as heard in the soundings of the terrifyingly ambiguous “sixty words” of his official declaration of the War on Terror, otherwise known as the “Authorization to Use Military Force.” “60 Words” is the title of a 2014 Radiolab podcast in which the show’s presenters “pull apart one sentence, written in the hours after September 11th, 2001, that has led to the longest war in US history. We examine how just 60 words of legal language have blurred the line between war and peace.” “60 Words,” Radiolab, WNYC Studios, April 17, 2014, https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/60-words/.
Beasty Places

What began with a raw paroxysmal directive – “Ride home on a Spotted Ass!” – evolved with a slow and steady momentum. An assurance grew that this absurd mission was absolutely necessary, as aesthetic, political, and ethical action, this turning away from writing the fictional Ride to undertake “for real” a long trek with a Spotted Ass into terra incognita was somehow the truest act I could ever perform. And so from a stark, desert-born revelation, the ridiculous ass mission evolved a more nuanced psycho-geographic articulation, in a speculative stitching-together of real and imaginary places toward new kinds of immersion in unforeseen, full-blown beastly geographies. By midwinter of 2002, the mission was this: I would ride an American Spotted Ass across the US South, from Mississippi to Virginia.

Back when I was a Hollow hermit furiously hammering out scenes of The Ride, the narrative was driven by the grim pull of a vague, unnamed destination. Kin to Flannery O'Connor’s Hazel Motes, the singular protagonist of her classic 1952 novel *Wise Blood,* fictive (anti)hero Juniper Ales was driven by volcanic urges toward redemption of losses and disappointments she could not fathom, as she wandered solo on a stolen pinto toward an unnamed Appalachian state. If she had made it all the way to her destination, she might have set the old family barn ablaze and watched it burn to ashes before slinking away into the shadows of cedar and hardwood-forested hills. But she never got there, because her tale was waylaid by the very events and dissolutions that conspired to charge the figure of the American Spotted Ass with unforeseen transformative powers and imagined imperatives. From the haggard hero’s journey of The Ride, turned inside-out, came the vision of an assbackwards journey that would immerse in infinite untold storyings, into storied Southern states that were charged in different geograph-
ic, cultural, political, and personal ways. More importantly, every mile of roadway and acre of landscape is blasted and blowsy with webs of hidden lives and histories. From different dissolutions and meltings in specific landscapes arose intuitions and longing hopes for new kinds of cracked-open belonging. Strange dream though it was, this mission pulsed with promises of dissolute homecoming and nameless redemption. So it was with a sense of mildly melancholic irony that I named the journey’s destination after the colonial mid-Atlantic state where my family’s farm and herd had blown apart like a seedy dandelion a number of years before, and where so many tales of nameless others lie untold. So I would ride my speculative spotted ass to “Bewilderness, Virginia,” the impossible home. More than any mapped or named or deeded property, it was toward an inside-out, timeless, unbound sense of “home” and possible new kinds of belonging that the journey aimed.

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From any logical standpoint this journey-mission was utter nonsense – as illogical a response as you could imagine to various New Realities and broader US cultural and political shifts at the turn of the millennium, and maybe especially those precipitated by 9/11. Even so, over the rainy Pacific Northwest winter of 2001–2002, the imperative – to ride home on an American Spotted Ass – did not fade or falter. Instead it gathered momentum and visionary fuel, in daily walks with the Mutt of Gold along wet sidewalks and mossy wanderings farther afield, through

wild tangled grasses and bramblesome blackberry paths on Sauvie Island and along the banks of the Sandy River. So a vision gathered force through that dim, desperate winter full of Lynchian scenes in all-night karaoke bars, strip clubs, and moss-dripping forest trails. All through the winter in gloomy PDX, I dreamed of hot flesh-and-fur asses somewhere “out there.” But where is “out there” to be found, exactly?

I knew this much: a person does not find pastures of plenty by sitting idly, sipping soy lattes in vegan cafes. The territories I needed to light out for, in hopes of finding my true ass, were not concrete urban enclaves but rural roadways and muddy barnyards, where radical possibilities for new ass stories are caught in webs of furry hides, colonial grasses, and tangled barbed-wire ecologies. But where does a person go to begin hunting the ass of her dreams? I was not sure. So I went back to the only place I knew to reliably glimpse the spotted asses I so longed to grasp, cyberspace, that is, and more specifically, spottedass.com.

Through the portal of that magical website, nearly a year from my first discovery of spottedass.com, the password to which I had attached so much hope and desire revealed its special power to materialize bodies and connect to real ass worldings. Lo and behold, the revelation came in the form of an unlikely invitation. That early spring of 2002, I had happened to email a Tennessee mule and donkey breeder named Mariann Black, querying about some gorgeous Spotted Asses she had listed for sale on the spottedass.com “classifieds.” Her message shot back, “We love to show our asses! Come to Mule Day!”

I had never heard of Mule Day, nor to my memory ever met a mule in the flesh. Back then the only mules I knew were multitudes of dead ones that litter the landscapes
of American, especially Southern, literature. On the official Mule Day website, I was told of a yearly festival for all things mule-related, held every early spring in Columbia, Tennessee since 1840. But it was Spotted Asses I was after, so what did I want with mules? Yet I also recognized that it had been William Ferris’s *Mule Trader* ethnography that originally led me (cybermagnetically) to the American Spotted Ass in the first place. And further research revealed massive overlap between mule and donkey cultures and markets. Wherever mules are, so must asses be, given the basic necessity of a jack-ass (intact male member of the *Equus asinus* clan) for mule-making.

Given the ambiguous designation of Virginia as the erstwhile destination of the big ass mission-in-the-making, it made some sense to head back east at this stage, even if the West where I was situated actually has more truck with familiar and untold ass histories of the colonial US. More than all this, though, the decision to head headlong to Mule Day in Tennessee (and right away!) was determined by something more elusive, a kind of subtle energy I could just barely make out, like crackles of distant dial-up static, in the words of that message from the mule trader, Mariann Black. Once more, it was the promising crack of a password that came through her message,

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37 The trope of the poor old “dead mule” is so omnipresent in Southern fiction that it is a running joke. I once heard that someone meticulously counted the numbers of dead mules that appear in William Faulkner’s and Cormac McCarthy’s corpuses, for instance. Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* features a scene of a mule’s untimely demise. There is even a literary journal called *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, whose motto states, “No work of Southern literature is complete without a dead mule.” Meanwhile, the material and cultural infrastructures of the agricultural South are unimaginable without the actual historical labors and cultural capital of the “good ole mule,” even as oil-driven technologies like tractors and trucks made ghosts of them in early-twentieth-century landscapes, as Lydia Peelle achingly describes in her story, “Mule Killers.” Lydia Peelle, “Mule Killers,” in *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 1–17.
in her joyful and (as I would soon discover) strategic deployment of the unseemly pun in her declaration: “We love to show our asses!” All this is to say: when I decided to accept Mariann Black’s loaded injunction to race across the continent and meet her at Mule Day, I had no way to know that this invitation from a crazy-ass mule trader – cocked-and-loaded, coded with tell-tale rumblings of a blassphemous pun – would be like a shamanic spell, opening paths into thorny thickets of cultural, economic, and material ass worlds in the twenty-first-century US South. But so it was. And now I had a destination and even a date, a bull’s eye target in the form of the Maury County fairgrounds in Columbia, Tennessee in the first week of April 2002.

From this point forward, I did not hesitate. All that mattered now was to find my ass – capture, befriend, and shape to my whims this chimeric beast of peculiar burdens, so that the real journey could begin. Somewhere out there, the spotted ass of my dreams was waiting, waiting for our fates to entwine and chafe as they might in the domestic-wilds of weedy backroads, barnyards, and all the other seamy places we pass through, as we each find ways to push, pull, and prod our beastly burdens into the maw of unforeseeable futures.

So I loaded a few boxes of belongings and the Mutt of Gold jumped into her spot in back of the Black Caprice, and we headed furiously back east, hell-bent for Mule Day in Tennessee. A day or two into the trip, something happened. I was racing across the Western desert states – retracing the previous fall’s crossing by a different cross-country route, blasting Emmylou Harris cassettes and hoping to make good time to Columbia. All of a sudden, seemingly out of nowhere, a vision appeared in the Arizona desert (not far, as it happens, from the site of the catalytic “Nuclear War” crash in Safford two years earlier). It was a genuine, flesh-and-blood American Spotted Ass – the first I ever saw – just standing there in the bright-
ness of day in a barbed-wire paddock out in the middle of the desert. No other landmarks or structures were in sight – just a mare standing a little ways off, presumed to be his mate. I swerved the Black Caprice onto the dusty roadside. Wide-eyed and panting, I scrambled around the mounds of snacks and trash and cassette tapes in the passenger seat for an offering.

As the Mutt of Gold watched curiously from the back, I got out of the car and walked across the road, where I reached through the wire fence and tried to offer the ass a granola bar. He blinked and flicked his ears at me mildly but did not move. I returned to the Caprice and we drove on into the days to come, exalted by the sighting of this rare beast in full furry flesh. Posed against a desert horizon in his native barbed-wire habitat, the unexpected appearance of a Spotted Ass could only be taken as a hopeful sign of things to come.