The Unnaming of Aliass

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Published by Punctum Books

Bolender, Karin.
The Unnaming of Aliass.

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Nameless, Tennessee is a small unincorporated patchwork of farmlands and home plots that sits atop a Cumberland hill, east of Nashville, west of Knoxville, and not far from a manmade lake called Cordell Hull, managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Nameless is barely a dot on the map—grid coordinates G12 in the Tennessee Gazetteer, to be exact. On that day we passed through it in the summer of 2002, Nameless came across as a fairly ordinary Middle Tennessee settlement, typical of the rural, early twenty-first-century US mid-South: a rolling landscape of mostly single-family homes with shades drawn against the heat of day, mostly on paved driveways and an acre or two of mown lawn, and spaced amid crop fields, thickets of prickers and creeper vines, and patches of hardwood forest. A rural American palimpsest much like any other, perhaps, stitched together by shady backroads that turned from asphalt to gravel and back again, flickering with shadows of global petrochemical and other extractive industries and a vague postindustrial malaise.

Ordinary though it may have seemed, I must say this about Nameless, Tennessee: that day in late June 2002—
spent meandering slowly along shady hills and rolling byways of Jackson County amid constant birdsong, leafy brilliance, lawnmower hums, far-off thunder rumbles, and the occasional bray of an unseen mule – was one of the most extraordinary outings I’ve ever experienced. What made this particular passage through Nameless so special that bright-dark summer day was not just the provocative allure of the town’s unlikely name, nor the fragile beauties of its glistening understories, thick as they were with ghostly histories and lively unreckoned meshes. Rather, the most extraordinary thing about Nameless, Tennessee on that particular day was this: I found myself passing through it with a certain wise, luminous, and quietly otherworldly American Spotted Ass.

Who shall remain unnamed.

“Aliass” is a handle by which I have come to know (in some ways), love (a lot), and honor (I hope) the embodied mortal beasthood of a certain wondrous companion, member of the species Equus asinus and also (significantly) a registered American Spotted Ass. This lovely inscrutable beast, whom I was lucky enough to find in Tennessee, helped carry a ridiculous burden of human longings and quandaries into a maze of hot, harrowing miles over a seven-week walking journey across the American South in that summer of 2002 – beginning in Mississippi, weaving through Tennessee, ending in Virginia – all the while bearing her own untold burdens and histories. And so she has been carrying various specialized and mostly less onerous loads ever since, with hardly ever a wrinkled nostril of complaint. And nary a stumble, even in the most uncertain of territories.

In a certain sense, the special she-ass of whom I speak is the unwitting hero of the story at hand. More than that, “Aliass” also stands for something harder to grasp than the body of a lovely little ass: familiar forms of protagonist, setting, and even common narrative tropes turn inside-out inside this “name-that-ain’t,” making
room for unwritten tales and lacunae that abound within shapes and shadows of the myriad lives that interweave in any environment. Over almost two decades now, Aliass and a herd of long-eared associates have been hearty companions within an ongoing, slow and steady negotiation with slippery names, shifting ways of (un)knowing and composing, and ontological grasping-at-straws, all grounded in the daily demands of good ass husbandry in rural US barnyards and roadsides.

As it happens, it was a specific twenty-first-century human morass of conflicted impulses, longings, and shames that drove me and Aliass out on the road that summer of 2002, across three Southern states and beyond. Most of all, though, what drove me (and so her, too) was a ferocious desire to compose truer-to-life and more inclusive stories. We are never really alone in our life stories, after all. Centuries of Western tales spotlight (certain) human enterprises and leave everybody else outside, yet animate worlds are always meshes of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and responding lives that connect and communicate across tissues, membranes, and senses of all kinds. While *Homo sapiens* may be uniquely adapted to the arts of storytelling (such as we recognize them), attentions to wildly diverse lives find significant sequences of events playing out across cells, neural pathways, and porous bodies of many different kinds – from cooperative strivings of bacteria, mycelia, and roots within forest understories to dolphins who make visual puns, rats who laugh, and foxes who mourn and bury their dead. The field of cognitive ethology explores arrays of behaviors that Western thought has long guarded as Exclusively Human, from altruism to self-awareness in species as diverse as primates and mollusks. Crows, sheep, and wasps recognize and remember faces (of their own species and others); elephants express rumblesome joys and suffer PTSD; octopuses plan for the future; even the nematode *C. elegans* has neurochemical states akin to emotions in other spe-
cies. Plants communicate in mind-blowing ways with allies and predators, cooperate with microbial communities, listen and respond to who is chewing on them, and remember and adapt routes of growth to accommodate others.¹

As new insights about others’ lives emerge through scientific and cultural shifts of awareness, we begin to understand how ecologies we inhabit, and the companions we live among and care for, already and always have their own stories – however ignored or denied. In light of all this liveliness, how can we crack open anthropocentric modes of naming and storytelling so that all kinds of bodies might inscribe ongoing life stories, in their own specific ways and idioms, into the mapping of timeplaces?²


² As Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin assert: “We would compound the Cartesian epistemological error if we were to ignore (or forget) that the world already has its own stories. Scientists approach this issue through theories of communication, proposing, for example, that all living things (cells, plants, bladderworts, etc.) are expressive communicators […]. In the social sciences and humanities we are challenged to foster an expressivity that is suited to the connectivities we are exploring and communicating, and that is both vigorous and rigorous.” Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin, “Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation,” *Australian Humanities Review* 31–32 (2004). See also Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76 and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters
In a paroxysmal mission to make room for new kinds of stories, then, the first journey with Aliass departed with a flourish from traditional, humanly exclusive modes of word-bound narrative: literally, swerving off from a little literary pilgrimage to Rowan Oak, the country estate of late modernist Southern author William Faulkner, in Oxford, Mississippi. We set out on this quest as a pair of embodied beasts – one wracked with ethical and poetic conflicts and questions, and the other bound to bear the burdens of them – into these uniquely storied realms of Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapawtapha County and beyond, with the intent of immersing into otherwise place-bound stories. Departing quite literally from sidetracked dreams of authoring an epic (anti)hero’s journey novel, that original trek with Aliass from Mississippi to Virginia in 2002 sought instead to honor tales of untold others, composed with countless millions of other inscrutable lives and erased histories in all the places we passed through. The first long-ass journey sought to gesture toward full-blown embodied-biological-ecological storyings that a lone mind (of any kind) could never author alone but always participates in, in both known and unknown ways.

This particular quest for untold stories (or the more precise, if bulkier “storyings with untold others”) has guided my own specific “assthetic” aims and art practices for nearly two decades. Meanwhile, untold stories composed with Aliass wrangle with authority that is shot through with conflicted desires from the get-go: whatever I might say of the restless dreams and anxious hankerings that motivated that initial excursion for me, the intentions, desires, and feelings endured by my sweet ass companion through those days of harrowing hot highway miles and sweltering gas-station parking lots are another story – and never mine alone to tell. In bottomless grati-

of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
tude and humility, I can say one thing for sure about our adventures together, from that first revelatory and onerous trek across the mid-South to the different dwellings and kinships we’ve inhabited together ever since: The fact that this wise and dainty, white-lashed and graceful long-eared equine is the one I ended up with for the long haul, rather than some ornerier ass antagonist, must be the boon of a lifetime. If she was not who she is, we would have died in a Mississippi ditch. By some lucky stars, she is who she is, and we are still alive.

All this and much more brought me and Aliass to find ourselves wandering the shady hills and hollows of Nameless, Tennessee that day in June 2002 – in many ways a crazy-ass dream come true. We set out early that day from our campsite by the lake at the Wilderness Trail horse camp. Fresh in the early-morning coolness and encouraged by faint and far-off rumbles of thunder, we departed from an empty Baptist church parking lot in Liberty and slowly ascended a long, steep, gravelly hill. We paused often on the ascent, to bask in a passing cloudburst, scrawl notes, remove an eager tick questing for a warm crevice, or to grab a mouthful of roadside grasses. After some time, we arrived, slightly wet, at the crest of that big hill, just as the little storm passed and the sun broke over the land. The tobacco was glistening in the furrowed fields, and the blackberries were fat on the vines. All of Nameless glowed and twinkled in post-thunderstorm light. After clipping along for another half mile or so, we came upon a friendly white-haired lady in her yard, tending to flowerbeds full of towering cosmos and tiger-lilies and other bright blooms. She invited us to stay for lunch and rest a while in the shade of her carport. She offered Aliass an apple and a drink of water and me a sandwich and some sweet tea. When I asked how Nameless got its name, she drew a blank, and then said it must have been that none of its founders could come up with a better one.
I admit to passing through Nameless that day with no small measure of poetic reverie, and even homage to beloved fictions. (I wore a t-shirt that said “Molloy” in homemade yellow iron-on bubble letters). And in a way, this entire project bears the burden of an assbackwards desire to dwell inside one haunting and bitingly paradisical line from Beckett’s inimitable novel: “Yes even then, when all was fading, there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.”3 If only in a dreamy way – dreaming of a quiet escape, that is, from the serrated blades of names and classifications that unjustly cut and cleave bodies (via Karen Barad, “onto-epistemologically”) from each other and from the ecological meshes that sustain earthly lives – we nonetheless plodded on with the full expectation of surveying an average, if pleasantly pastoral, twenty-first-century rural US Southern settlement, with its driveways full of shiny SUVs, trash-strewn creek-beds with rusty runoff pipes dripping suspicious chemicals, and festoons of synthetic yard decor from Walmart. And we did find all this. But we

also encountered other things, less easily traced or identifiable.\(^4\)

Yes even here, in places exhaustively roaded and sign-posted and mapped and mined by bottomless colonial rapacities, haunted by historical erasures and trashed by global economies, the experience of passing through living places in the bright penumbra of Aliass’s special company has the capacity to dissolve static certainties of maps and names, to open flow-ways for new kinds of attentions and attunements. In Aliass’s presence, it becomes possible to notice anew how every place we pass through is comprised of shifting, vibrantly mysterious life-ways – always more than the sum of geographic, material, even perceivable parts and energies. Passing through Nameless, Tennessee in the company of an unnamed she-ass, a person might quietly dwell for a time in the implications and possibilities of Gregory Bateson’s assertion in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*: “The map is not the territory, and the name is not the thing named.”\(^5\)

I might go so far as to say that this special mode of dissolution we tasted along the road to Nameless that day was the hoped-for aim of that entire long-ass adventure in 2002, and so too all its ongoing hope-ridden barnyard habitations. So let us embark, then, from this auspicious point of departure, on an ongoing quest to


\(^5\) As Bateson explains: “This principle, made famous by Alfred Korzybski […] reminds us in a general way that when we think of coconuts or pigs, there are no coconuts or pigs in the brain. Korzybski’s statement asserts that in all thought or perception or communication about perception, there is a transformation, a coding, between the report and the thing reported, the Ding an sich. Above all, the relation between the report and that mysterious thing reported tends to have the nature of a classification, an assignment of the thing to a class. Naming is always classifying, and mapping is essentially the same thing as naming.” Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2002), 27.
make new spaces for more radically inclusive modes of storytelling. Even untold stories have to begin somewhere. In the fertile cracks where words and maps and bodies-in-places implode, slowly but surely, in full-blown, never-to-be-told adventures, we proceed in the company of a certain inscrutable and humbly beautiful spotted beast of burden, respectfully (un)known as Aliass.

“Ass”

Paradoxically, perhaps, this adventure into seamy territories between words and bodies-in-places was initially enabled by the discovery of one small but powerful three-letter word, and a dirty one, no less: the word was “ass.” In creative practice, certain loaded words or images sometimes ignite, like fireworks or dynamite, to blow open unforeseen openings across some previously intractable impasse. Artists have no choice but to trust such implosive obsessions; potent metaphors can sometimes be our only means of getting through. Unlikely figures can lead the way into territories that might otherwise spook the rational mind. Sometimes such passions even offer illuminated paths, like lights that shine along the smoky aisle of an airplane cabin, shining forth to carry cracked hopes through the cold black winds of terrible times.

This is how it was on that wondrous, fateful day I discovered my true ass – the American Spotted Ass, that is. True to the twenty-first-century, I first encountered this enchanting and transformative figure in cyberspace, on the website of the American Council of Spotted Asses (http://www.spottedass.com). At first I thought it might have been a joke. This preposterous website asserted that people all around the US, and especially Texas and the West Coast, were breeding donkeys for what is called “color” in the parlance of equine enthusiasts: that is, a genetic inheritance of multicolored haircoat, also known as “pinto,” “piebald,” “Paint” or, in this case, “Spotted.”
Though I could not have said why at the time, the notion of breeding and thus classifying piebald donkeys struck me at the gut level as ridiculous, possibly even sinister. In the very same breath, I was instantly enflamed with a full-blown passion for a newfangled breed called the American Spotted Ass.

In later years, I would come to unpack certain racist colonial histories inscribed in this genetic coding for equine coat color. Once anathema in the early-twentieth-century US among colonial horse people – loosely due to associations with “half-breed” Indian ponies or gypsy steeds in Europe – the same pinto/paint/spotted coloring on horses began to get appropriated in the later twentieth century as a popular (if ambiguous and shifting) symbol of American patriotism. Though these cultural nodes are scattered and diffuse, the shift of spotted equine hides from a stain of “bad breeding” to hot commodity hit me gut-wise, and sparked both intuitive discomfort and an implosive frisson of radical possibility. Years later, I would come to explore and play with these shifts and their implications more deeply. At first blush, though, the call of this chimeric Spotted Ass figure was primarily visceral. I sensed worlds unfolding in the flickering promise of this humble and unassuming donkey breed, splattered with spots and saddled with a dubious name.6

6 Presumably the founding and naming of a breed is a fairly high-stakes endeavor that one should always take seriously. Harriet Ritvo’s *Platypus and the Mermaid* describes what was at stake in the classification and naming of a breeder’s product in the English eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – how early breeders of domestic livestock competed with multiple claims to scientific authority, whether in burgeoning species classifications or dubbing their own variations on them. The stakes are high indeed; naming a breed is an act of reification, after all, making certain biological traits into a unique exchange of words and flesh. Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997), 75.
tain colonial Western traps and myths, and even find new paths (however slow and assbackwards) into tangles of language and bodies, names and unnamables, and barbed quandaries of gender and species enmeshed in question-able ethics of companion animal and livestock breeding.

Another aspect of the implosive power of “ass” was the fact that it was the one so-called dirty word my mother discouraged me from uttering as a child. She claimed it was “unladylike” and even “crass.” This is one of very few linguistic prohibitions that came down from a mother who had her own mouth washed out with soap as a teenager for telling her little brother to “shut up.” Raising her own daughter, she frowned on “fuck” and “shit,” yes, but for some reason “ass” was the only bad word that she forbade, and in fact I refrained from using it into adolescence and onward. And yet… within the stirring

7 Drawing me into feminist science studies viscerally through the lure of warmly beloved (in this case, canine) bodies, Donna Haraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto* opened my critical awareness to deeper histories, responsibilities, and challenges inherent in the privileges of breeding domestic species to suit cultural and personal tastes, along with the mind-bending ethical issues that arise with cloning and other technoscientific adventures. Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dog, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

8 So the word “ass” was loaded with baggage of class and gender from the get-go. Meanwhile, this might be a good opening for a psychoanalytic theorist to probe my tale to explore why I still, to this day, shy away from using the word “ass” in reference to the human body. No doubt this hesitation lies at the root of some deep shit in my own mother tongue, beckoning deeper exploration. I am grateful for the vital and liberatory wisdom in lively ass spaces reclaimed and explored by Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2015), 84–85; and by Julietta Singh throughout her work, and especially in a scene of poignant mother/daughter ass-wisdom becomings in *No Archive Will Restore You* (Earth: punctum books, 2018), 103. But my own passion in this realm roots less in the precisely anatomical, and more in the promiscuously grammatical and mysteriously metonymic openings of this dirty three-letter word and its special beyond-human possibilities.
possibilities of “ass” as transformed by the multifarious modifiers of “American” and “Spotted” – here representing a relatively rare, humble, and spectacular breed of domestic beast of burden – this dirty word’s forbidden nature bloomed with lovely ambiguities and radical possibilities. Even better, it flipped inside-out with the slip-'n-slide felicity of the double-meaning pun, which by nature undermines the hold of any human tongue on bodies and things it is supposed to grasp. I believe “ass” is the only so-called “dirty” word in the American vernacular that also appears in Holy Scripture.9

“Ass” was just what I needed to implode certain impasses in the mother tongue, to blast through the seams between words and animate worlds that pester every aspiring poet, artist, or philosopher. As the taproot of an idiom, “ass” became something like a skeleton key.10 Mixed with these extraordinary and complex modifiers, “American” and “Spotted,” “ass” became over time a secret and blassphemous password, unlocking gate after gate into labyrinthine depths of psycholinguistic imagination and material incarnation. In other words, I had no better option than to seize upon this kaleidoscopic portal that was the American Spotted Ass, with all the forces of longing for misplaced family of mammals and lost sites of barnyard belonging.

9 That is to say, the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, a text that suffuses and shapes the social and political landscapes of the Southern “Bible Belt” states Aliax and I passed through in 2002 and beyond, as a sociocultural force that is arguably as much if not more powerful than the local/global industries and infrastructures.

10 In Cosmopolitics I, contemporary philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers presents what she calls “a question of creating words that are meaningful only when they bring about their own reinvention, words whose greatest ambitions would be to become elements of histories that, without them, might have been slightly different.” Isabelle Stengers, Cosmopolitics I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13.
On the Road with an American Spotted Ass

This implosive affair with the American Spotted Ass, as such, kicked off a cascade of events and implications that eventually led me and Aliass to find ourselves zigzagging our ways across three Southern states, from Mississippi to Virginia, in the summer of 2002. Haunted as I was by the seeming impasse between human naming and other embodied ways of knowing and becoming, I delighted in the sweet-ass pun because it figured the vast gulf between knowing the name of a species and knowing lives of any kind more deeply. It opened a kind of vital crack in certain assumptions about human language and the authority of the “classifying imagination.” And it was from that wondrous crack of “ass” that possibilities for new modes of storying – toward new ways of making worlds with untold others – emerged.¹¹ In the years that followed, those seven intense weeks Aliass and I spent navigating asphalt and concrete infrastructures, (cosmo)political crevasses and crossings, and tracing otherworldly paths (through slatted barn-darks, colonial pastures, and seedy parking lot carnivals) gave way to decades of making homes in different places, with the aid of specific artistic, poetic, and critical practices. In every opening, I have sought ways to slip through divisive, barbed-wire assumptions laced through languages and the names, hierarchies, and dominant narratives we pass through and pass on.¹²

¹¹ In Thinking Animals, Kari Weil sidles gracefully from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s well-known statement that “animals are good to think with” to her own book’s “premise that it is good to ‘unthink’ animals and so to rethink our conclusions about who we are, who they are, and how we are all entwined.” Kari Weil, Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now? (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xvii. In this regard, the linguistic crack of “ass” invited a space in which to dissolve and “unthink” particular acts and implications of classifications like “animal” and “ass,” as appended to laconic equine friends.

¹² This project as a whole makes the claim that un/naming a she-ass companion is an act of resistance and even hopeful remediation, in
At the beginning of the first long-ass journey, I still operated under the guise of “author.” Secretly, though, I was already determined that our time on the road itself comprised the stories that mattered – not whatever words or sentences or scenes might be wrung from it in the long run. Over those weeks of traveling with Aliass, I became more and more assured that the truest, most beautiful book I could imagine must be a collective enterprise, indeterminately writ (if writ at all), with the full participation of the she-ass in question and every other trace of lives and becoming we passed through. The unnamed ass must be co-author, in her own inscrutable way, as much as I was in mine, along with all those bright little cedarlings and stray dogs and red-eyed cicadas and parking lots brimming with brightly clad Baptists on Wednesday evenings, and all the muds and lichens and roadside creeper vines, turtles and thunderclouds, blowy thistles, and even that old yellow goat who watched idly from her rope on the tiny porch of an aquamarine, single wide trailer home, while a ferocious pack of Pomeranians yapped from inside a chain-link pen as Aliass and I wandered past on Bluebird Road one Tennessee evening. The author of such a journey, any journey for that matter, could never be one human alone. A journey, as such, is always co-composed, however inscrutably, with teeming meshes of lives: every undulating knot of ways, affects,

light of the false ways that names tend to cleave bodies and ecologies. But Mel Chen writes in Animacies that naming practices are always fraught with matterings of all kinds and beyond control, however we pitch them, whether as affectionate nicknames or racial slurs (or sometimes hybrid combinations). Chen reminds us that names are unavoidable as “cognitive processes of mundane object-rendering as a result of everyday cognizing and discourse. [...] Yet it is important to recognize that linguistic objectification is framed by historical, national, and social configurations of power, and is not always able to be recuperated into realms of pleasure.” Mel Chen, Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 49.
and “becomings-with” that ravels visibly and invisibly in all those places in time.\textsuperscript{13}

Both inside and beyond that original journey, though, I struggled to negotiate between sweet-ass dissolutions borne in timeplaces and the seemingly opposing task of sitting down at the keyboard to conscript shared experiences into text, given only limited perspective and vocabulary to draw from. What I really wanted most was to find ways to let wordless interweavings of bodies-in-timeplaces tell their own stories. Co-authored a million times over, and all somehow respectfully (un)told.

Assmilk

Although her condition was not apparent that day we met in the dusty gloom of a Maury County cowshed, Aliass was nearly seven months in foal. Fetal asses gestate for twelve months, often to the day, so at this stage we had a good five months of journeying before we’d need to find a safe place to settle down and raise a little ass family. (Only later, after Passenger was born on September 17, 2002, did I calculate that she must have been conceived around the week of September 11, 2001.) Over the many miles of that first harrowing trek from Mississippi to Virginia – as I walked behind Aliass day after day on

\textsuperscript{13} The kinds of companion-species “becomings-with” elaborated in the works of Vinciane Despret and Donna Haraway, and in affect theory – particularly by Brian Massumi at the intersection of literary/aesthetic and animal studies, and Kathleen Stewart and others in fictocritical fashion – are key touchstones for the process of un/telling slippery-ass stories. See Vinciane Despret, \textit{What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Donna Haraway, \textit{When Species Meet} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Brian Massumi, “Becoming-Animal in the Literary Field,” in \textit{Animals, Animality, and Literature}, eds. Bruce Boehrer, Molly Hand, and Brian Massumi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 265–83; and Kathleen Stewart, \textit{Ordinary Affects} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
city streets and rural backroads, and as we slept nights in random churchyards and patches of woods – a biological fact I absorbed years before in an equine-husbandry class kept coming back to me: a pregnant mammal should never leave her local environment just before giving birth, because her thick first milk, known as colostrum, contains antibodies to the specific pathogens where she has been gestating. By extension, then, all milk is enmeshed with places, made of everything the mammalian mother body eats, drinks, and breathes as she feeds the growing fetus and eventually the newborn.

All across the ferociously hot, haunted, weedy, and bastard-beautiful South that summer, Aliass’s gut and blood and mammarys brewed antibodies to hidden, harmful elements in the places we passed through. Aliass was percolating a super-charged fetal-ass healing brew! This colostrum she made held residual traces of all the places we traveled through, as we waded through roadside weeds and trash and broken glass, glyphosate hazes and thistle-grown hayfields, lonesome crossroads and abandoned train-tracks, and the harrowed traces of bygone mules and ghosts and other invisible residues of the American South. Aliass’s body made this special milk night and day, in the paralyzing heat and in the shade, and from every blade of roadside grass, handful of blackberries, and drink of water from a trickling creek or cracked-edge pond along the way, from the ditch where she sipped as the red sun went down on the Peace Park in Oak Ridge, Tennessee – the formerly secret city where they refined uranium for the atom bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki – to the melting Creamsicles we shared with local kids who followed us for blocks along the blazing, broken sidewalks of Nashville housing projects. So Aliass’s milk-to-be held traces of borrowed pastures and border-crossings, wakeful nights in strangers’ woods, and infinite encounters with countless other be-
ings, both familiar and unseen – held it all like memory is supposed to.

Meanwhile, milks of all earthly mammals these days hold unseen elements that are not so wholesome or hopeful. From flame-retardant fabrics to phthalates to carcinogenic and endocrine-disrupting PCBS and neurotoxins we collect from drinking water and conventional wheat, mammalian bodies accumulate byproducts of industrial processes and chemical pollutions through air, soil, water, and food. Processes of biomagnification, by which toxic chemicals in the environment become concentrated in mammary glands, make that first vital nourishment of newborns into a poisonous cocktail laced with toxic chemicals. As Mirium Simun writes in her recipe for “Human Cheese”: “The list of chemical toxins found in human milk reads something like an acronym alphabet – it includes CDDS, CDFS, DDT, NPS, OWCS, PCBS, and PBDE, as well as dibenzofurans, Triclosan, heavy metals, and bromine-based flame retardants.” And yet somehow – from Rachel Carson’s 1960s revelations about the effects of DDT on wildlife to unrelenting discoveries of human runoffs harming marine life, birds, amphibians, and countless other lives – news of biological porosity continues to shock us. Maybe because the same false distinctions that allow humans to imagine our bodies as singularly imperious to environmental pollutions persist in other ways, in mother tongues where names and classifications supposedly hold humans separate from surrounding webs of

life. At the same time, milk also holds traces of unspoken intimacies and nourishing exchanges we gather on our journeys through times and places. From this thick mix of pollutions and possibilities comes the tainted hope that milk of compromised earthly bodies might still hold unique powers to heal and protect, and perhaps (in the tricky logic of the pharmakon) these powers might even be warily amplified by contaminations.

In the late summer of 2002, after seven weeks on the road from Mississippi, Aliass and I settled on a magnificent hundred-acre farm near the small hilltop town of Fincastle in the Appalachian foothills of southwest Virginia. Beyond the slatted walls and lofty, owl-habited beams of the rambling barn, a stunning landscape of wooded ridges, vast pastures, and secret pawpaw groves spread out in splendorous wild mystery along a rolling mountain creek. Here we dug in and waited, as Aliass grew rounder and wider into the coming autumn. Passenger was born at long last in mid-September. After riding along in utero the whole way, the newborn spotted she-ass stood wobbly to suckle on that rich colostrum, which

15 Manmade toxins move through biologies of all kinds, affirming in fearsome ways that bodies are less impervious to environments than we like to suppose. While not an antidote, exactly, Stacey Alaimo elaborates on the generative rethinking of this ill-conceived separation through the “material turn in feminist theory,” whereby scholars theoretically extend “the paradigms of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural studies in ways that can more productively account for the agency, ‘thought,’ and dynamics of bodies and natures.” Stacey Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” in Material Feminisms, eds. Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 242.

16 As Brian Massumi notes, we might be alert to a troublesome, “dominant self-defining” characteristic embedded in the notion of the pharmakon, wherein humans tend to pitch ourselves as the only antidote to our own earthly poisonings: “What gives pause is that this maintains unchanged the human sense of its own nature, and its position at the apex of the pyramid of nature in the wider sense.” Massumi, “Becoming-Animal in the Literary Field,” 265.
held traces of our whole long-ass journey, along with sustenance from the sweetly fleeting peace-of-ass we found, tucked in those old hills in its aftermath. Passenger grew up her bones and thick fur and gut on the microbial, nutritional, and other elements of Aliass’s milk. Meanwhile, from its pasture grasses and woods and local hayfields, Fincastle nourished all of us in sublime material and affective ways. But as the years passed, and our adventures on the road began to fade, the notion of Aliass’s milk holding unnamable immunological essences and epigenetic residues of places we had passed through became more and more potent in my imaginings.

We all live in landscapes and languages that hold—and mostly hide—traces of lost kinships and human and ecological atrocities. I pondered this often through that summer of wandering the South with Aliass. I liked to imagine that somehow the elements of weeds she ate along that byway in Tennessee that parallels the Trail of Tears, or her sips from the murky Tallahatchie waters silted with traces of racial violence in Mississippi, could be
transformed as they passed through her muzzle tongue, stomach, blood, and glands, to become something more wholesome: foremost, of course, as the colostrum that would nourish Passenger, but also a metaphorical substance. So Aliass’s milk became a figural container for all the unique encounters and onerous hopes and longings we each carried all that distance, from Oxford, Mississippi to Nameless, Tennessee to Fincastle, Virginia and beyond. Assmilk came to hold the untellable stories, and all the experiences and becomings a person could never find words for.

On the Road Again...

Ways of being on the road are ways of being in worlds. Living stories unroll with their own momentum and casts of untold millions. After the first journey with Aliass, I could not get past the sense that representing our shared experiences by traditional narrative tropes seemed both ethically inadequate and woefully narrow. Because time lived on steamy summer roadsides in meshes of mammalian senses and plants and microbes and weathering waters is not linear. It is looping, recursive, slow, and repetitive – not a human hero’s journey but “something more warped and glancing,” as poet Fanny Howe describes a state of bewildered, wide-open wandering. At the same time, most of the Western monomyths and tropes I grew up with – especially those that erase violent colonial tracks and bear hidden assumptions of teleological Human Progress – trample efforts to attend to delicate and fleeting configurations. The bulldozing forces of heroic Human Progress too often blunt our ability to notice and respond

within what Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose call “entangled storyings.”

How we make stories within living places matters, because as Thom van Dooren describes, “the stories we live by” shape worlds, as “they ‘rearticulate’ us as beings at stake in one another’s lives in various ways.” Yet the dominance of Eurocentric human exceptionalism most often excludes other species’ ways of knowing and narrating, thereby vanquishing prospects for more inclusive worldings in the stories we make and pass on. On the road with Aliass, I wanted to inhabit and frame such entangled storyings, to invite all kinds of meaning-making bodies, forms, and substances into the journey’s unfolding – or at least to gesture to various shaping contributions and experiences of all kinds of bodies and affects. Being a human hitched irrevocably to language, though, I continued to be moved by a desire to let nameless interweavings of bodies in time somehow be the text. I found that even in the aftermath of that first journey with Aliass, this desire remained stuck in a double bind, a kind of poetic no-man’s land: with no choice, it seemed, but to suck it up and claim the sacred burden of human authorship, or… what?

To this day, this “what” remains an open question at the heart of a slow, site-specific, interdisciplinary ass

19 As Van Dooren and Rose write, “[P]laces are co-constituted in processes of overlapping and entangled ‘storying’ in which different participants may have very different ideas about where we have come from and where we are going.” Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, “Storied-Places in a Multispecies City,” Humanimalia 3, no. 2 (2012): 3.

20 Following philosophers Val Plumwood and Vinciane Despret, Thom van Dooren goes on to say in Flightways that, “The affective separation of human exceptionalism holds the more-than-human world at arm’s length: human exceptionalism plays a central role in the active process of our learning not to be affected by nonhuman others.” Thom van Dooren, Flightways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 150–51.
art practice. And so with bottomless apologies to the donkeys in question, I have to report that our forays on Southern US roadways did not end with arrival in the pastoral peace-of-ass of those exquisitely beautiful, mountain-ringed pastures of Fincastle, Virginia. In the summer of 2004, a team of asses (Aliass and a big-boned ringer named Brawnson) hauled a strange and peculiarly American vehicle known as the Dead-Car Wagon on a slow crossing. (Passenger, who was still too young to pull, tagged alongside.) Departing from the gates of a rural Virginia NASCAR speedway, the Dead-Car Wagon rolled south, over the state line, to end its travels in an abandoned church parking lot in Eden, North Carolina.

The Dead-Car Wagon's material body was resurrected from the stripped-down carcass of a rusty orange 1980 Ford Pinto, pulled by the ass team and driven by two human drivers with questionable aspirations to move poetic imagination off the page and out into the world in new ways. The Dead-Car Wagon was incarnated in collaboration with poet Jack Christian, whose ideas, words, and labors shaped the Wagon's form and fate. It was physically powered by the brave team of Aliass and Brawnson, after it found its ever-precarious form with the help of badass visionary engineer Fred Taylor and local angel-of-asses Cheryl Haas. This Wagon, as such, was an ironically post-Fordist vehicular articulation, heaving with specific burdens of troubled (agri)cultural and industrial histories and cultural appropriations and other cargo, powered by the reluctant labors of sensitive bodies who were harnessed to its fearsome and unwieldy bulk. For three beastly hot days, the Dead-Car crossing performed a creaky meditation on American senses of place and passage, in light of car-culture infrastructures and suburban sprawl, Manifest Destiny and colonial ravages. The Dead-Car Wagon nodded in passing to hordes and herds of rural ghosts along the way, in the kinds of wayside exchanges that become impossible when landscapes and all their
slower, photosynthetic and plasmodial lifeways – never mind the more or less familiar mammalian ones – are nothing but terminal blur in windshield glass.

As an in-car-nation of poetic imagination, fretful environmental aspirations, and a surprising (and slightly ominous) material articulation, the Dead-Car Wagon opened spaces for unpredictable conversations with/in places it passed through. Almost every human inhabitant of that haggard rural stretch of Henry County backroads had a sparked memory to share, from Kodachrome-tinted recollections of their own ill-fated Ford Pintos to Granny Lankford’s recollections of riding bareback on her daddy’s mule to local country dances. One may speculate on other affective connections, but a certain assurance came with the sense that the dead-car crossing resonated in local environs in ways a written text on a page could never do, especially in a region where most (human and otherwise) do not read poetry as a pastime. One afternoon as

Fig. 3. Brawnson and Aliass take a rest from pulling the Dead-Car Wagon in the blazing heat, stopping across the road from the home of Bertha “Granny” Lankford and her son David Harris in Ridgeway, Virginia. Photograph by Jack Christian.
the Wagon creaked past a row of dilapidated, abandoned-looking mobile homes on a rural Virginia backroad, an old woman came out of her trailer holding a quivering Chihuahua to her chest. As the Wagon rolled past, she pointed at the strange equipage and talked softly to the little dog. Her words, audible only to the Chihuahua, were part of the weaves of unwritten tales and possible poems that the Dead-Car Wagon rolled out to compose-with-others, from its origins in a strange vehicular vision to its final sad abandonment under a weepy black walnut tree, in a lot beside a doomed home-appliance store in postindustrial Eden.

All of the projects performed in the (un)name of Aliass navigate a push-and-pull between traditional expressive forms for creative imagination and a drive to honor and explore nameless ways of knowing and becoming. The Dead-Car crossing, in particular, began to articulate certain implosive “aesthetic” impulses of the first long-ass journey in relation to historical and contemporary performance-art forms, theories, and practices – specifically durational, site-specific, and ecological performance. Through years of living with Aliass, what began as a stubborn refusal to claim sole authorship of shared stories became an apprenticeship in what I have come to call “the art of a sull.” The sull takes its name – and so too its assbackwards method of resistance – from the old-fashioned term for a specific mode of refusal-to-move practiced by long-eared equines in the face of unwelcome coercion. The sull is, in fact, what gives asses their worldwide infamy as paragons of stubbornness. In the sull, every atom of an ass’s (or half-ass’s) embodied life is fully dedicated to the act of not-moving in a given direction, which of course is most often the direction some willful human wants that ass to move. We will take up the unique dynamics and wisdoms of the sull in more depth later on, but suffice to say its spirit of resistance infiltrates the shape and methodology of this text.
through and through. As incorporated in the arts of unnaming Aliass, the sull becomes a distinct *Equus asinus*-affected performative mode of refusing certain colonial human(ist) assumptions of linear progress and narrative, toward the aims of framing multispecies tales we invariably make together. Different forays with Aliass over the years have all hoped to open vital cracks in anthropocentric modes of storytelling, seeking ways to more deeply attend to different whos and whats and hows of places we pass through.

In this sense, our journeys-as-performance follow paths explored by some contemporary artists, curators, and critics who aim to make space for perspectives and experiences often excluded from art institutions: The art of the sull stands for a different breed of art practice, as a kind of rural-roadside and barnyard-bound "relational aesthetics." Yet in their nomadic wakes, projects like the Dead-Car Crossing and subsequent forays left frayed questions of who and what actually benefits from these seemingly well-intentioned excursions. As art critics Helena Reckitt and Miwon Kwon illustrate in their respective critiques of relational and site-specific art practices, many contemporary socially engaged projects erase vital histories, labors, and experiences both within and beyond art institutions, even as they open new spaces for others. 

21 Nicholas Bourriaud articulated theories of relational aesthetics that have been taken up by many contemporary artists and curators. In an important essay called "Forgotten Relations," Reckitt draws attention to the ways that Bourriaud's deployment of relational aesthetics fails to acknowledge the political and artistic groundwork laid by feminist artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles and others in the late twentieth century, while she also describes curatorial tactics that combat this erasure. Meanwhile, Miwon Kwon offers a critique of relational art practices that intervene "site-specifically" but remain heedless of deeper ways in which every place has its own complicated, mostly unknown histories, partial connections, and implosive energies. See Nicholas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," in
Fraught questions of inclusion and exclusion become even more complex when the others-in-question are not humans. In places where interconnected lives of all kinds are threatened by toxic chemical and cultural legacies and uncertain climate futures, all relations (assthetic or otherwise) are haunted by questions of belonging and responsibility that lace through soils and waterways, roots and tissues and mother tongues. Beyond dominant artistic forms, systems, and institutions, how can we practice modes of storying so inclusive that they might hold spaces for unknown (even unimaginable) biographical agents, from asses to grasses to microscopic bacillus?

R.A.W. Assmilk Soap

In the spring of 2005, I received a surprise gift from my friend Chris, who had just returned from a trip to France. There she had happened upon the phenomenon of savon au lait d’ânesse, or “assmilk soap.” Aliass was no longer making milk for Passenger by this time, but even so, when I first held in my hand that paper-wrapped, ylang-ylang-scented French ass soap, all the metaphorical possibilities of assmilk that I had pondered back on the road with Aliass took a sudden and surprising physical form. It felt like somebody had just given me a formula for a foamy Philosopher’s Stone, or the blueprint for a Magnum Opass. Here suddenly was a material form in which to hold the wordless bodies’ storying, inscrutable tales traced in substances made of time and places and suspended, present but untold, in a solid inscrutable bar of Assmilk Soap.

This synthesized material object offered a way to hold and solidify assmilk, a substance by nature perishable and elusive, and to transform its immunoglobulins and phospholipids into a cool magical little stone, with properties of both cleansing and healing.\textsuperscript{22} With its double-barreled (material and metaphoric) cleansing powers – combining the immunobiology of milk and the unique chemistry of an artisanal cleansing product – Assmilk Soap became an even thicker figural substance for holding untold stories. Here was a form that could hold both the material–biological and parapoetic elements of assmilk and perhaps nourish hopeful, imaginative action. Assmilk Soap presented a foamy, rarefied solvent for polluted environments, languages, and psyches.\textsuperscript{23}

As an artistic project, Assmilk Soap aspires to the modes of contemporary ecological artworks that involve both material and metaphorical acts of biological remediation, where artists frame systemic processes to address particular environmental woes. For instance, Jackie Brookner’s 1996 installation, \textit{Prima Lingua} (First Language/First Tongue), demonstrates a cycle whereby the biochemical filtering processes of mosses, plants, and volcanic rocks cleanse water polluted by agricultural runoff. As the dirty water runs over the rock – shaped pro-

\textsuperscript{22} Here with “magic stone” I echo the French poet Francis Ponge, who wrote an entire treatise (simply titled \textit{Soap}) on the nature of a slippery proposition that poetic figurations could cleanse languages of their latent stains. Francis Ponge, \textit{Soap}, trans. Lane Dunlop (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 19.

\textsuperscript{23} I am grateful to Ida Bencke and Dea Antonsen of the Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology, who have sewn R.A.W. Assmilk Soap into their vital curatorial platform through the lens of parapoetics. The Parapoetics Series, edited by Bencke and featuring innovative works by poets Amanda Ackerman, a. rawlings, and others, pitches parapoetics as “investigation into the array of possibilities and problems for a transspecies semiotics in various aesthetic modulations. Parapoetics exorcises the all-too-human quest for monopoly over voice, inscription, worlding...” http://www.labae.org/past#/para-poetics/.
vocatively like an extended human tongue – the plants and minerals absorb pollutants, over time cleansing the water and also the surrounding air. Drawing on its own sources of pollution and possible remediative actions, Assmilk Soap seeks to dissolve residues of sticky exceptionalism that separate “human” and “animal” – distinctions that tend to justify the ways many human systems exploit and desecrate earthly others and exclude embodied wisdoms.

It took another few years to assemble the material means to actually manufacture Assmilk Soap. In 2008, I made a first experimental batch under the auspices of a long-term barnyard-based performance called the Rural Alchemy Workshop (R.A.W.). The R.A.W. was founded in Carnesville, Georgia, where for several years our familial herd lived in a long-neglected, hardscrabble homestead on a ten-acre plot of forested hills full of majestic oaks and poplars, gnarly old fruit and nut trees, and piney paddocks of patchy grass and mud. To make the place habitable, Sean and I spent the first sweltering summer in Carnesville building fences, clearing invasive privet, poison ivy, and plastic trash from the paddocks, and engaging in a surreal and sf-esque battle with the ferocious reign of fire ants (which, by the way, they almost won). We labored to make an amenable home within the farm’s

24 R.A.W. Assmilk Soap is informed and inspired by ecological artists like Brookner, Ruth Wallen, Deanna Pindell, Helen and Newton Harrison, Mierle Ukeles, and Suzanne Lacy, along with contemporary indigenous artists like Anne Riley and Cease Wyss who practice forms of decolonial remediation of bodies, languages, and places. A now-classic example, Mel Chin’s Revival Field (1990–ongoing) uses several different plant species called hyperaccumulators to draw up toxins from poisoned soil in the Pig’s Eye Landfill in Minnesota; Chin draws poetic resonance from cycles of plant growth and harvest as they cleanse the soil over time. See Linda Weintraub, To Life! Eco Art for a Sustainable Planet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and Eben Kirksey, ed., The Multispecies Salon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
old weathered wood and cinderblock structures, and so too within the dominant political, municipal, and neoliberal asphalt-and-phthalate Dollar-Store and interstate truck-stop infrastructures of rural northeast Georgia. Though ultimately doomed, this enterprise changed all of our lives. For all its compromised beauties, the Carnesville farm offered a shady place on a forested dirt road in which to ground radical forms of husbandry. And it was here that a secret ass dairy operation came to produce R.A.W. Assmilk Soap, on a very small scale, in a landscape that goes a long way toward demonstrating how “the Dirty South” got its name.

Every time it rained on our little ass farm, shards of broken glass and shattered mirrors, scraps of burnt plastic, and bent tangles of rusty metal surfaced from the paddock dirt. This trash was left behind by the farm’s previous inhabitants, buried in the heart of the barnyard where the herd lived on bare hooves. In a pile in the feed room, I collected artifacts that surfaced from the mud, until it got too overwhelming. Trashy treasures included old cassette tapes and pink plastic mud-filled My Little Pony™ change purses, jagged metal lightbulb ends, whole antique medicine bottles, and ancient rusty pull-tab beer cans. But mostly the collection was just sharp and dangerous shards of old burnt and broken things. These dangers in the Carnesville barnyard haunted me with a deeper need to know: How deep down does the pollution go? What about the other side of the hill, where the municipal/global powers-that-be bulldozed the hardwood forest and left an apocalyptic mess of ruts and slash for the buzzards to patrol in advance of the coming industrial park? If I dug down deep enough, could I ever find earth that’s fertile, dark, and clean?

The proposed cleansing powers of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap are not just about apprehending visible scars of industrial wastelands, but more so attending to hidden pollutions — poisons born of exploited bodies, lands, minerals, and
other earthly systems – and the ways these toxic residues linger in tissues, thoughts, and utterances. So the inner realm is where Assmilk Soap really finds its potency, calling upon imagination to bring buried stains to the surface, at least to attend (if not to assuage) them. But what kinds of stains are we talking about here? What kinds of shames and fears? And how can I claim R.A.W. Assmilk Soap works to cleanse them, or even acts as a conduit for hopeful gestures in specific landscapes blasted by past horrors and present complex global economic and biopolitical forces?

These are questions of home, belonging, and home-making in cosmopolitical American ass barnyards: Who all lives here? How can we make any place safe and clean for the bodies we care for, while at the same time recognizing that every caring gesture toward loved ones is also often a killing blow to others? As we grasp the many different ways that lives matter in places, we become responsible even to “unloved others” whose fates are entwined with those we knowingly care for. Can we find ways to move beyond the paralyses of fear and shame, knowing our global systems flood some places more than others with invisible toxins, poisoning soil and watersheds and entangled livelihoods that depend on them? How can we reckon with all that is being lost at our hands?

For all its claims to attend to various contaminations, R.A.W. Assmilk Soap is by no means itself clean or free of stains – not by any stretch of the imagination. It is a product of its time and place, which is to say, its manufacture is tied up (often blindly) with global petrochemi-

25 Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren explore the concept of “unloved others” in the context of extinction studies; in an issue of the Australian Humanities Review, they gather multispecies scholars to ask: “what hope could there possibly be for the other creatures who are less visible, less beautiful, less a part of our cultural lives?” Rose and van Dooren, “Guest Editors’ Introduction,” Australian Humanities Review 50 (2011): 1.
cal and agribusiness industries, and its material form is suspended in tense, quivering webs of domestic exploits that connect even the most intimate ass dairy to industrial feedlots, far-flung research labs, and slick-floored slaughterhouses. Every gnarly soap bar is a composite of myriad lives and labors, mostly unrecognized and asymmetrically rewarded. I may seek to justify the questionable ethical knots of everyday barnyard exchanges with my beloved asses by caring for their well-being in both practical and artistic ways. But what can I say to the naked plantations of Indonesian oil palm trees, whose plundered fruity seeds make up the bulk of this soap, at the expense of so many untold others? What can a limited parapoetic gesture like this offer in the way of antidote to, say, billions of invertebrates ushered to extinction by chemical manufacturers like those who produce the so-

of sodium hydroxide (lye) I use to invest Assmilk Soap with the bite of its supposed cleansing powers?

As an artifact of an art practice that hopes to honor earthly wisdoms and recollect that our embodied lives are always composed with innumerable others, Assmilk Soap must also reckon with its own inherent stains. From reliance on chemical-industrial systems to its requisition of others’ bodies to feed a distinctly human hunger for meaning, Assmilk Soap is sullied with murky accumulations and omissions. Yet it remains the most potent “material-semiotic” form I’ve found in which to hold space for messy, ineffable stories, composed through knotted generations, at multiple scales of loving and living with one unnamed ass and a herd of significant familial others. As we grasp that all bodies-in-places have their own stories – most of which human perception may not even fathom – how can we learn to participate with humility and careful respect in the present lives and possible futures of others, rather than always asserting the dubious authority of names, maps, and capitalist ventures that too often erase or bulldoze worlds of living tales and territories?

Untold Stories from the Road to Nameless
(and then some...)

As Vinciane Despret writes in What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?: “To create stories, to make history, is to reconstruct, to fabulate, in a way that opens other possibilities for the past in the present and in the future.” Let’s imagine the same could be true of creating untold stories, too. Such stories are “un-told” in more

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27 On “material-semiotic” as a framework for recognizing significant, signifying others, see Haraway, When Species Meet, 26.
28 Vinciane Despret, What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?, 178.
ways than one. First, perhaps, through unraveling certain worn-out, violently exclusive Western colonial narrative forms that assume only (certain) human protagonists are capable of making and inhabiting meaningful (auto)biographies. Still other stories are untold because they cannot be grasped, as such – at least not by narrators who lack means to transcribe or even recognize them.

All of this musing brings us back (if assbackwards) to the quietly fabulous day Aliass and I spent wandering through Nameless, Tennessee in the middle of our journey in 2002 – and more so to the ways any given time-place is full of stories no one authoring body can tell or know. For all the thinking and writing, scheming and dreaming one human author might do, the true ass story remains beyond the grasp of even the most dexterous tongue. Cracking open the ancient human hero’s journey to diverse and ineffable becomings is a task that matters urgently, if we hope to make truer stories in the places we pass through.

What follows aims to be as true as possible to meshes of storying woven by and through myriad protagonists with whom we cross paths on the road to Nameless and beyond. All kinds of earthly storytellers (never only human) recognize each other in creative ways and go on composing novel assemblages, even while struggling with rising tides of extinction, changing climates, and toxic burdens. In honor of diverse forms of storying both in and beyond any known library or database, let us explore what life stories can do when their supposed boundaries imaginatively crack open to the multitudes who are always co-composing hybrid bodies, secret maps, and inscrutable autobiographies.29 In this quest, we plot

29 From (para)poetic forays that billow and press against the limits of human language, to artistic collaborations that hold new spaces for commingled agencies, contemporary artists are expanding wild possibilities for multispecies thinking, acting, and storying. Despite certain impasses between traditional humanist tales and respect
a course by what Donna Haraway describes as a “very interesting definition of truth, one rooted in material-semiotic dancing, in which everybody has face but no one relies on names.” And so, in the dusty penumbra of the Name-that-Ain’t, in the glow of an otherworldly, laconic, and beautiful white-lashed beast of burden – and most of all in honor of what we might cultivate in the fertile spaces-between assumed names and unnamed meshes of lives in timeplaces – let the untellings begin.

for worldly complexity, Brian Massumi describes instances of literary writing that sustain generative relational modes of becoming, wherein “[a]ffective distance, the asymmetry of otherness, the unease of difference [are] honored.” Massumi, “Becoming-Animal in the Literary Field,” 279. For more on hybrid creative practices that cultivate relational ecologies, see Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

30 As Haraway goes on, “I like to think that this is one treasure for Derrida’s hunt ‘to think the absence of the name as something other than privation.’” Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 26.
Fig. 5. Aliass on the road to Nameless, Tennessee, June 2002. Photograph by the artist.