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Emplacement, Myth, and the Performing Body Exploring Trans Ecologies in the North-East Peloponnese

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Abstract

The emergence of Trans Ecologies as a scholarly field prompts an exploration into the intersection of gendered embodiments and ecology (Seymour, 2020). Such a development aligns with Keegan's (2020) notion that a trans practice may foreground the materiality of trans embodiment to generate new theories and meanings. Concurrently, the feminist concept of 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) has long been embraced by trans scholars such as Wölfle Hazard (2022) who emphasizes the significance of ecological studies being firmly rooted to the land.

This paper responds to these calls by investigating how a 'situated' live art practice, grounded in embodiment and emplacement, can enrich the emergent field of trans ecology. Following the auto-ethnography methodologies of trans studies scholars (Stone, 1991; Stryker, 1994), I argue that an auto-ethnographical live art practice directly responds to place and location, engaging both bodies and land as performing agents. Through a case study set in the densely storied ecology of the North-East Peloponnese, I demonstrate the potential of emplacement, wherein the performing body constitutes a vital component within an evolving ecology of interconnected entities and their historicities (Pink, 2011).

In positioning my video performance 'Ekdysis' in dialogue with works by artists Cassils and Petra Kupperts, my study engages with Tiresias – an archetypal mythological character who underwent a gender-transformative experience on Mount Kyllini. Through an autoethnographic approach, I emplace the performing body within the landscapes of this region, imagining the Tiresian myth as a transecological retelling that foregrounds the marginalised human and nonhuman life.

In conclusion, I demonstrate how the emplacement of the performing body, attuned to the complexity of location, can generate intersectional knowledge that is contextually responsive to diverse ecologies and geo-political regions.

Keywords: Trans ecologies, emplacement, myth-making, Tiresias, performance

The Encounter

April 2017. I am driving to Athens to take my flight back to London after a brief visit to my family. It's raining heavily as I drive through the Argolis valley, in the North Eastern Peloponnese.

On the left, atop of the low hills, lies the acropolis of Ancient Tyrins and further ahead on top of a higher hill, the ancient castle of Argos. On the right, the Temple of Hera and hidden behind the hills, stands the Lion Gate of Mycenae.

This place is steeped in history: palaeolithic caves; major Bronze Age Mycenaean settlements; ancient Greek city-states; Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Frankish, Ottoman, and Venetian architecture.

Parallel to the historical narrative, a nexus of interconnected, overlapping, contradicting and multiple-versioned myths weaves together the fates of humans, gods, deities and enchanted nonhumans in an entangled web, extending over the whole Eastern Mediterranean ancient world and beyond. The war of Troy, the Labours of Hercules, Arcadia, naiads, oreads, dryads, satyrs, river gods, ancient spirits and legendary creatures populate an endless tale of metamorphosis. The myths are told, retold, altered, erased, rediscovered, appropriated, translated, imagined, explained, politicised.

One month earlier, in March 2017, I came across the following story:

Tiresias comes across two snakes copulating on Mount Kyllini in Peloponnese. Somehow upset by the intercoiled snakes, Tiresias kills the female snake with his staff. Hera, the Goddess of women, marriage and fertility (...) turns Tiresias into a woman (...) as punishment. But the curse may have been a blessing in disguise. (...) Tiresias adjusts well to life as a woman. Tiresias marries, has three daughters, becomes a renowned prostitute and priestess. (Cavanagh, 2018, p. 38)

Until then, I knew Tiresias only as the old blind seer, unaware of the myth of metamorphosis – an unfamiliar story with a familiar character. Moreover, the myth allegedly takes place on Mount Kyllini, in the region where I was born and grew up – an unfamiliar event in a familiar setting. Enchanted by the uncanniness of the unfamiliar familiar, I felt the story could lead me to intriguing directions.¹

Tiresias, a frequent character in Greek mythology, is a diviner who lives over seven generations, communicates with birds and crosses boundaries between male and female,

¹ This version is narrated by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*. Other writers have also offered different versions (Brisson, 2002, pp. 116–119).

human and deity, mortality and immortality, the present and the future, young and old age, seeing and blindness, and the world and the underworld.

Tiresias appears in literature and performing arts across the centuries. More recently, North American transmasculine visual artist Cassils engaged with the mythological character in their durational performance '*Tiresias*' (Cassils, 2011). The artist stands naked behind a neoclassical Greek male torso, carved out of ice, which melts gradually as it comes in contact with the heat of their naked body. This endurance performance demonstrates the capacity of the body to elude capture in gender bifurcations and norms, highlighting the material instability evoked by the myth of Tiresias.

Cassils' perspective embodies the transgender subject as a producer of self-knowledge (Keegan, 2020, p. 67; Stone, 1991, p. 16), aligning with trans studies scholar Cael Keegan's suggestion that trans practice might "draw from the material experience of trans embodiment to reveal new meaning" and "recover previously unseen things" (2020, p. 73). While Cassils' re-telling demonstrates the critical capacity of the transgender performing body, the myth's locality calls for an engagement beyond a universal embodied interpretation. Following Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges" as a feminist methodology and trans studies theorist Susan Stryker's auto-ethnographical model, I emplace myself as the performing body within the myth's locale to explore the relationship between embodied subject and material environment (Stryker, 2008, pp. 38–39). From this position, I ask: What other unseen things can be recovered beyond gender crossing? What stories lie beyond the human? How is the trans body implicated with the mountain's ecology?

Tiresias, as a true oracle, does not give "straight answers" (Kuppers, 2011, pp. 212 & 224), and I accepted the challenge. Over the past six years, I have explored the myth through an autoethnographic transecological lens in my project '*Ekdysis*' – through site performances for the camera, live art, installations, and a moving image work (Niya B, 2021).

The Journey

I drive a rental car through the citrus orchards that cover the flat fertile land of the Argolis valley, much like the performance scholar and community artist Petra Kuppers did in the Arizona desert, in search of Tiresias (2011, p. 212). Kuppers' '*Tiresias Project*' included photography and writing workshops across the US, dance workshops, a community performance, a '*dancepoetryvideo*,' and an exhibition featuring photographic portraits of disability culture performers and writers. Her embodied creative writing delves deep into the complexity of Tiresias, patriarchy, the myth's settings, and non-human characters. She asks:

What were the snakes that Tiresias killed, setting in motion his own transformation?

(Kuppers, 2011, pp. 215–216)

Kuppers is fascinated by this question, and so am I. In her chapter *Tiresian Journeys* (2011, pp. 212–225), she explores the taxonomy of snakes, linguistic interpretations, and snake-related myths from diverse cultures, including Northern Arizona Hopi, Greek mythology, pagan England, and Aboriginal peoples in Australia. Unlike Cassils, who views Tiresias as an atemporal, non-located symbolic myth, Kuppers engages in a complex poetic exploration across terrain, time, cultural traditions, and world mythologies.

This dance is mesmerising, but I grow dizzy from hopping across places and continents. I need stable ground beneath my feet. Beyond Tiresias' gender crossings, bodily transformations, and symbolic encounters with deities and snakes, I reclaim the story's locale through an autoethnographic journey. I follow this familiar yet unfamiliar character as they tread on a specific land— a land I have stepped on before.

Driving through the valley of Argolis, the scent of the flowering orange trees fills the air. Ahead in the distance, the Mount Kyllini emerges in its impressive volume, its top covered in snow. The mountain brings back stories and childhood memories: telling the weather by observing the moon and the flying patterns of birds, foraging wild herbs and fruit, the scent of rain on dry soil, the sweet taste of ripe fruit, and wild play in nature.

As class, gender and local ecologies seep into my narrative, my gaze travels towards Mount Kyllini in the distance, and I recall the 'second day' of my ritual performance.

Body of Water

I am on Mount Kyllini, standing knee-deep in Lake Stymphalia. My feet are buried in the mud, in this multi-species archive of stories. Preserving and composting. Among the ancient ruins, bones, feathers, scales, organic matter and inorganic silt, a fish in a slippery dress sinks into the liminality of existence.

Lake Stymphalia, one of Greece's rare mountainous lakes, dries up completely in summer, due to the misuse of water. Despite its precarity, it remains home to a small endemic fish, the Stymphalia minnow (*Pelagus stymphalicus*) (Barbieri et al., 2015, p. 58), known locally as 'dáska'. Dáska survives the drought by sinking into the mud and forming a slippery envelope around its body (LIMNI STYMFALIA, n.d.).

I feel an affinity with the liminal state of this fish; its body transformation reflects my own changing body. Moreover, dáska's resilience to the fluctuating water levels of Lake Stymphalia speaks to the resilience of my trans body in volatile political and social environments.

Figure 1

Still from moving image *Ekdysis* (Niya B, 2021).



Emplacement entangles my trans embodiment with the '*naturecultures*' (Bell, 2010, p. 143; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018, p. 269; Haraway, 2003, p. 2) of this multi-species '*storied-place*' (van Dooren & Rose, 2012, p. 3). The performing body not only offers embodied knowledge, but is also a vital component within an evolving ecology of interconnected entities and their historicities (Pink, 2011). Van Dooren and Rose (quoting Edward Casey) argue that a living being is emplaced through its body: that places are formed between bodies and the terrains they inhabit" (2012, p. 2). They ask "who stories (...) these places? Whose stories come to matter in the emergence of a place?" (van Dooren & Rose, 2012, p. 3).

In what I call the '*densely-storied place*' of NE Peloponnese, Greece and more broadly the Eastern Mediterranean region, shaped by history and mythology, I align with Lorna Hardwick (2017) who suggests:

Revisiting and re-imagining Greek myth (...) may help to retrieve the lost voices of the past [and] most notably (...) the lost voices of the more recent past and those of the present that we do not easily hear, or may not want to hear. (p. 22)

To Grow a Body

Tiresias, as a familiar unfamiliar character, eludes capture in a simple narrative, leading me on multiple journeys through history, myth, science, and both human and nonhuman stories. In examining selected sections of my auto-ethnographic film '*Ekdysis*', I demonstrate how the emplacement of my performing body within the locale of the Tiresian myth enables a

trans ecological reimagining. Here, marginalized and endangered human bodies, such as transgender individuals, and nonhuman bodies, such as fish, snakes, and the lake, converge to recover previously unseen things. This might be a good place where trans ecologies can be formulated.

After a while the rain stops and a rainbow appears on top of Mount Kyllini.

I smile. Tiresias is offering an oracle.

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