Echoes from stone: Engaging with Autoethnography, Active Embodiment and Mythical Residue in the Cave of the Nympholept near Vari, Greece

This paper explores the Cave of the Nympholept near Vari, Greece through an autoethnographic reflection, engaging with the site as a physical space, a protected archaeological location and a place of mythical significance. Drawing on embodied memory, the cave becomes a site of introspective inquiry—where personal narrative intersects with historical relevance and collective mythology. Using an experiential and embodied experience, the discussion engages with the footprints of those who have walked within this historic cavity across different moments in time. The cave becomes a chamber of transformation where the self remains suspended between myth and memory, past and present, self and society. Autoethnography creates a space for critical interrogation that collapses the linearity of time, allowing the researcher to inhabit multiple temporalities that converge forgotten rituals with scientific enquiry and personal narrative. Drawing on Mnemosyne as the mother of memory, her daughters the Muses, Hesiod, Plato and Plotinus including modern scholars like Castagnoli and Ceccarelli and autoethnographic thinkers including Adams, Ellis and Bochner, this paper starts to unravel the mysteries of the ancient past and why they remain relevant in the present. The cave of the Nympholept is not just a site of ancient history, it is a living archive that invites the researcher to listen, remember and re-position the story of the self. The cave is a haven that holds stories about ancient symbols, myths and practices that prompt us to think about who we are and where we come from through collective narratives across time.

Keywords: *cave of Nympholept; memory; Mnemosyne; Autoethnography; myth*

It is July and the Greek summer heat is living to its reputation. It is swelteringly hot and there is very little shade to offer some comfort or protection from the scorching sun. I am walking along a small, windy, mountainous road. There are numerous hills all around me, shaped by a seismic pre-historic event that leaves it frozen as if attempting to reach towards the sky. Today, I walk through the magnificent hills of Mount Hymettus in the heart of Attica near Athens in Greece. Beyond I see the deep blue sea, stretching all the way to the edge of the world. They cicadas remain hidden but blind the silence with their song. With each step, the rubber soles of my shoes seem to melt into the hot, black tar beneath me. In ancient times, this road must have been gravel. For a moment, my present is disrupted by the memories of the ancient world. I see the silhouettes of ordinary folk, trades people, fisher folk and philosophers making their way across the hills. This place has relevance, meaning. I feel it, through every sense of my body. My presence is not random, my aim is to visit the Cave of the Nympholept and communicate with its memories, to understand how an embodied experience can function as a tool of memory. Drawing on archaic memory practices relating to the mother of memory Mnemosyne, her daughters

the Muses, the poet Hesiod and the ancient philosophers Plato and Plotinus to modern thinkers Castagnoli and Ceccarelli, this paper uses an autoethnographic encounter with the cave as a reference and source to actively engage with memory through the echoes of the past and uncover the mysteries it holds.

I continue through the relentless heat as I search for the natural sign, the marking that ushers me towards the cave. It is subtle and if you are not aware of it, it is easy to miss. Veering off the road, I meander through the stones and rocks, desperately trying not to fall. I am from South Africa, and I have hiked through the bush many times, but this is a new experience. I am not accustomed to nor am I familiar with the insects, stones and boulders of this natural habitat. I am the intruder, perhaps even the unwelcomed guest. I make my way along the twists and turns of the uneven pathway until I reach the protective cage-like structure covering the entrance to this ancient place. The grid is unwelcoming and looms over this fragile spot, reminding me of the present. Simultaneously, I am invited into the depths of this mountainous ravine, captivated by the past and mystery of what lies below but the prison bars that cover the entrance are a harsh and bold reminder of the need to protect this site. The lock has been unsealed by the Greek Ministry of Arts and Culture. They have granted me permission to enter this sacred place. It has taken some time to gain access but now I am here, finally. I walk towards the natural entrance and peer into the cavity below.

The relevance of autoethnography

The term autoethnography is built from and has classical Greek linguistic roots. The structure of the word offers insight into its intellectual lineage: *auto*, relates to the self, one's own personal narrative. This points towards the reflexive positioning of the researcher which foregrounds subjectivity as a legitimate source of knowledge. *Ethno* meaning the socio-cultural, such as people, groups and tribes. It hints towards the anthropological grounding of the research method but it identifies that the individual or self is always rooted within a cultural matrix because the self is always part of a greater reality. Finally, *graphy* refers to writing, description and research. It signals towards the documentation of the research which takes on forms beyond academic writing, such as poetic, visual, creative and other innovational and expressive methods. This means that autoethnography is a qualitative research method where the researcher is both the participant and the observer (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p.740). Focusing on the lived experience to understand broader social and cultural contexts. A key thinker in the field, Carolyn Ellis (2013) writes that autoethnography, 'asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and what we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living' (p. 10). It is important to understand that this approach and method is not appropriate for all forms of research but it is effective for research that calls for an interpretative and unconventional approach that extends beyond

the anonymity of the third person position. In many ways it challenges conventional methods and processes. It, therefore, makes sense that autoethnographic research will take on its own structure and format and will not follow traditional practices in terms of the way it uses and embeds the methodology, literature review and theoretical framework concerning how the research is conducted and how it is reported.

I hold onto the rope linked to the bolt which is permanently attached to the rock and slowly make my way into the cave. The entrance has two tiers, an outer layer and then what looks like a second, indented, sunken layer. Slowly, I descend towards the inner layer of the cave. I stand upright and look at the site before me. The cave has two natural chambers to my left and right. There is a natural pathway leaning towards the right. This side of the cave extends deep towards the belly of the mountain at the back of the cave. To the left is the larger chamber, lit from the sunlight coming through the open entrance above. The gentle warm hues of beige coming from the limestone blending with the yellow hues from the rays of the sun above, creating a warm ambience that welcomes me into this space. I have visited many caves in my lifetime, but this one is special, not only because of its natural layout but because of the memories it holds.

The story of the Cave of the Nympholept

The cave (also known as the Cave of Pan or Cave of Archedimos) is located 'at an altitude of 260 metres on Krevati Hill, north of Vari, on the southern slopes of Mount Hymettus' (García, 2025). It belongs to the Municipality of Vari Voula Vouliagmeni and 'was formed within the calcareous rock, with an almost circular ground plan comprising a vertical, inconspicuous entrance, at the W [western] edge' (Mari et al., 2019, p. 69). The cave was sculpted in the fifth century BCE by Archedimos[1] when he moved to Attica from the island of Thera (probably the Cycladic island). Archedimos believed he was the nympholept, meaning that he did all his work on the instructions from the Nymphs because he was possessed by them and therefore, had the ability to communicate with them (Mari et al., 2019, p. 68). Through his interaction with the nymphs, Archedimos transformed this natural grotto into a sanctuary dedicated to several deities who played a significant role on the lives of the women (namely those entering into adolescence, the phase of marriage, conception, pregnancy and of giving birth and raising children) (Mari et al., 2019, p. 67). The cave was also created to the everyday life of shepherds and farmers (in terms of securing the fertility of their land and of their flocks) (Mari et al., 2019, p. 67). The inscriptions throughout show the Cave is dedicated to the Nymphs, Pan, Apollo and possibly Hermes.

The passage leading towards the darker chamber allures my attention. I walk along it, captured by the remnants of the ancient rituals. There are

[1]There are numerous versions of the spelling of Archedimos' name across different literatures. For the sake of consistency, I have used the spelling of Archedimos as it appears in the Mari et al. article.

inscriptions which are not clearly visible, instructing worshippers to cleanse and wash any offerings outside of the cave (Mari et al., 2019, p. 68-69). To my right, I see a perfectly carved-out spring, 'about a metre in diameter, and half a metre deep' (Weller, 1903, p. 274). Today it stands empty but remains embossed with watermarks, resonating its previous function. I stop for a moment, imagining the visitors from the ancient world cleansing themselves as they enter this spiritual place. Ritual washing was considered and in some religions remains a symbolic act that heightens one's awareness and prepares for ethereal encounters. The natural spring acts as a doorway or landmark, separating the world outside with the inner sanctuary beyond. The pathway is carved quite clearly in front of me but I proceed with caution as I make my way towards the darkness that dominates the back of the smaller chamber. The stalactites and stalagmites stand bold and strong, frozen and forever trapped across time. I cross the threshold, my body casting its silhouetted shadow across the back wall. It is believed, by navigating this short, dark passageway charges the emotions and prepares the soul to elevate and participate in the cult practice in the bigger, naturally lit chamber. I am conscious of what each section of the cave symbolises. Because I am here to interact with the cave's memories, I must be aware of what my presence resonates at particular sections of the cave. I must remember the signification of the passage and I must acknowledge what my short journey through it evokes on an embodied level. I am not here to conduct any Pagan ritual but I cannot ignore that for the Pagans this grotto held deep spiritual relevance and meaning.

I follow the path into the larger chamber, thinking about the nymphs, Archedimos, Apollo and Pan and the ancient people who used this space. I stand here today, bringing my own life experiences and knowledge into this space. Time, the past, present and what is still to come become enmeshed. I experience the past within my own existence in this space. I cannot ignore that my embodiment has its own, unique interaction with the memories of the past.

Walking through whispers of silence

My presence in this cave site is not random. I am here to interact with its heritage. My interest is perhaps to find synergies between my identity as a researcher and mother within a space that was made to honour the lives of women. I cannot escape my own identity and must therefore embrace who I am and what I bring to this space. Physical spaces act as memory holders because they assist in how we remember across time. Kobbi Assoulin (2021, p. 166) argues that there are two reasons why memory attaches itself to space, place and self. Firstly, they assist in how we remember because we remember in images, mainly of places and 'the visual detailed richness of places serves as a hanger for our emotional memories' (Assoulin, 2021, p. 166). The environment plays a crucial role because it creates the surroundings for the narrative of the memory. Secondly, places provide the framework for remembering defining moments of the self because in order to be considered a defining moment, that moment has

to be defined because it must bear the character of the moment (Assoulin, 2021, p. 166). In other words, the moment needs to be remembered in terms of its context in space and time. We do not merely remember an event but rather we remember it in terms of its spatial and temporal structure that also includes how we move through it. In other words, the experiences that memory is able to organise in time and space contributes to the constitution of the self because memory is not merely a repository of past events, it is a medium of narratives in locations. This becomes important when engaging with an embodied interaction with a past that is not always aligned with my own physical memories. I am not interacting with my personal memories within this space but it is necessary to recognise that my cognitive and physical encounter are shaped by my own recollections which in turn will influence my interaction with the residue of memory in the cave that are not mine but deeply rooted in the past.

I stand at the far end of the larger chamber. In front of me there is a clearly carved staircase reaching up towards the cavity above on the surface. At the base of the chiselled staircase is a carving, a self-portrait of Archedimos himself. He confirms this by carving his name clearly, twice next to the relief, once to identify who he has carved and once to acknowledge himself as the artist. I look at the self-portrait. It is quite remarkable. Simple, but so clearly a reflection of the man who made these carvings. Archedimos is wearing an *exomis,* holding a hammer and chisel, the tools of his trade. He is carved in composite view and his head points towards the entrance up above. Alongside the figure lies the remains of a shrine, unfortunately, it is no longer possible to read the inscription as the 'shrine has suffered serious mutilation, and a valuable inscription has been lost' (Weller, 1903, p. 271).

Infront of me is the altar of Pan. Next to the altar, to the right there is a clearly carved three dimensional statue of a headless figure. It is believed that the head was made of a different material and was destroyed along with many of the other Pagan remnants by the Christians (Mari et al., 2019, p. 69). The statue 'most likely depicted Apollo. God of light, patron of herdsmen and farmers, leader of the Nymphs' (Mari et al., 2019, p. 69). Towards the end of February in 1901, archaeologist Charles H. Weller conducted the initial excavations with many of his findings including his topographical outline of the grotto remaining the most accurate and primary record of the site. This includes an image of the '*omphalos'*, (Weller, 1903, p. 268), which once stood beside the figure, indicating the cave's spiritual significance, but has since been lost or removed. I stand, I watch, trying to tap into the memories left by so many who came to this grotto to acknowledge and request divine instruction, advice and inspiration.

I see the man Archedimos, the nympholept possessed by the nymphs, carving according to their call and command. In Greek mythology, the nymphs 'represent the spirit of nature and are considered the personifications of the life force found in the natural world. Nymphs are seen as divine entities and supernatural creatures that embody the beauty, vitality, and mystery of the natural environment, and they play important roles in maintaining the balance and harmony of nature (Eidinow, 2023, p. 24). Although Nymphs remain minor nature goddesses, they reside and remain on earth, taking care of their natural

surroundings (Atsma, n.d.-a). They are able to communicate with the gods and mortals as mystical and mysterious beings who exist in both worlds. They are often portrayed as young and graceful maidens, with 'their feet unshod, their arms bare to the shoulder, their hair loose over their necks, their eyes sweetly smiling' (Connor, 1988, p. 170). I stand at the back of the grotto, looking at what remains of the inscriptions and carvings, contemplating Archedimos, the nymphs, the Pagans, the Romans and the Christians, each making their mark according to their own belief system. Today, I bring my own beliefs, customs and agenda that combines the mystical with the scientific and my own corporeality. I will not make my mark on a physical level, but my presence and movement within this space will leave its own invisible brush strokes.

My interest is to focus on why the cave was created and perhaps to have my own spiritual connection with the residual memory of the nymphs. My presence in this space embodies particular aspects of my being: mother, researcher, participant, writer. This is why I turn to autoethnography as a research method and process because it eschews 'rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be, influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). I am the participant who sits at the centre of this embodied encounter, but I am also the researcher and the writer. This cave is also dedicated to the lives of women, my role and personal experience forms part of who I am in this cave. I cannot deny this influence in being here and what it ignites. Autoethnography gives me the space to acknowledge and accommodate the 'subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 274). Who I am plays a significant part in why I am here and how I am interacting with this site.

Archedimos was inspired by the call of the nymphs but as I stand and look at the various inscriptions and carvings I cannot ignore the significance and connections of nature to archaic memory. Apollo's altar reminds me of his interaction with the nymphs in his role as god of light, truth, music and prophecy. Mnemosyne acts as the epistemic site of memory, whereas the Muses are the agents and voice of memory. Apollo shapes how memory is articulated and crafted through poetry and song whereas the nymphs activate memory through body, place and experience. They dance 'insofar as Pan plays his pipes and provides the music for their movements (Laferrière, 2019, p. 207). The trigger, however, remains embodied through a sensational act of being in a space, encounter and/or experience. As an autoethnographer, memory does not exist as a repository that needs to be called on but takes shape through the visceral and creative process (whether this is writing or any other medium). My presence in the cave of the Nympholept ignites a conversation around the archaic notions of memory that emerges through my physical presence within the cave. I engage with memory as an active site that takes shape alongside my impressions and perceptions. Contemporary autoethnographic practice is often considered a 'new' or modern approach to research that emerged and became prominent

during the 1980s due to the 'crisis of confidence inspired by postmodernism' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). It changed the positionality of research by shifting the focus towards the researcher but actually the philosophical approach towards inward enquiry and reflection has a far longer lineage, one that takes us back to Archaic and Ancient Greece.

Remembering through passages of time

I am in a natural, protected site that stores memories of the nymphs but in trying to remember, I must consider the roots of memory itself. I will start with the Archaic and Ancient world because I am in Greece. The poet Hesiod, a humble shepherd, claims to have received messages from the Muses (the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne). Hesiod calls upon them for knowledge, truth and inspiration because they are seen as 'benevolent guides and powerful forces that influence human creativity' (Rogerson, 2024). The reference to creativity is relevant to me because I am also a writer and filmmaker. My interest in Hesiod and the Muses also points towards their mother, Mnemosyne who in Greek mythology embodies the concept of memory itself. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Mnemosyne is referred to as the 'Titan goddess of memory and remembrance and the inventress of language and words … required to preserve the stories of history and the sagas of myth before the introduction of writing' (Atsma, n.d.-b) see also (Işman, 2017, p. 135). Mnemosyne is important as the beholder of memory that extends beyond personal experience. She embodies the curation of collective stories and preserves the memory of the past. I identify with Mnemosyne because I find myself in a place that oscillates between the preservation of stories through research and writing but I am also a mother who has a familial role to play as the beholder of memories and the curator of stories. As a researcher, writer and curator my work is shaped by different types of memory that linger within space and place. I cannot ignore that my academic journey is always accompanied by my own experiences which extend, influence and include my relevance to and within the research. For example, my presence in the cave ignites the memories of the nymphs, Archedimos, Apollo, Pan as well as my own recollections of innocence and youth. Both these interactions are deeply intertwined and it would be ignorant to try and separate them. I, therefore, focus on the point of connection, the synapse that links my intellectual enquiry of being in the space with my own personal encounter of it. In thinking of memory, which personal memories are triggered? Perhaps it is my responsibility to use what I have learnt about memory to offer a greater understanding about time concerning how past experiences shape and prevail in the present.

My presence within the cave is to search for synergies that prevail across time. One cannot speak about memory without considering time. In trying to understand my current context, memory plays a crucial role here because it is the only way I can connect to a world that no longer exists in my present. The archaic and ancient worlds are relevant to me because they are the origin of philosophy, critical thought and the search for truth and knowledge. In archaic

Greek culture, memory is not seen merely as a cognitive function but a divine principle that connects the past to the present. Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory 'advocates that the past is never truly lost; it can be revisited and reinterpreted through memory' (Greek Mythology, 2024) Memory is all I have left to work through what has occurred previously, within the present moment and the possibilities of the future.

Luca Castagnoli (2020) looks at memory in terms of its divine origins, firstly, with reference to truth and secondly, with reference to time. He turns to Hesiod to discuss how true knowledge is inseparable from memory and that divine knowledge is a direct consequence of the creative, performative and poetic power of the Muses. He starts with Mnemosyne and her role as the Memory goddess, holding the 'intuition that memory can give us access to something that is remote from us in space and time [which] is embodied in the genealogy and power of the Muses' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 83). This positionality suggests that memory is not merely psychologically human but extends beyond us. It is something we can mediate through the Muses because in archaic Greece 'the Muses represented omniscient sources of super-human knowledge to which human beings can have only indirect access' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 84). This interpretation suggests that the Muses hold divine memory, which humans can tap into but because humans are receiving a narration of true memory, Hesiod reminds us that the Muses my speak truths or falsities (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 84). This explanation points towards the creative and poetic power of memory.

Castagnoli also draws our attention to memory as not being something that is retrospective because for the Muses' 'memory-knowledge concerns not only the distant past … but also the present and the future: the Muses sing "what is, what shall be and what was"' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 84). With this interpretation, memory precedes us as individuals because it is more associated with true knowledge rather than a cognitive recollection of an event that has taken place. What is, presents the present truth, what shall be, presents the future truth and what was, addresses the past truth. This interpretation of memory is non-linear and omni-directional implying it exists outside of us but also across, through and within all perspectives of time. Humans can only remember the past but the Muses and Mnemosyne remember everything, for they are the 'goddesses and are in all places and know all things, while we hear only report and know nothing' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 84). Perfect memory comes from the divine. It is the source of sagacious, preeminent and celestial knowledge that exists in a multidirectional interpretation of time. This is where the poet comes in because the poet is not merely a historian or storyteller but the mediator between the gods (who hold true memory) and humans (who do not).

This multi-lateral approach to time is important to me because in trying to work with the memories within this space requires a different approach to my perception of time and memory. Hesiod's perception of the Muses' ability to think through the past, present and future defies the linearity of the remembered, the lived and the imagination of what is to come. My interaction with the memories within this cave places me in a continuous present that is simultaneously haunted by the void in the present with the memories of the past

and the ability to know that the future will always be tainted by what has come before. The memory of the past becomes synonymous with an ancient relic because it is considered a material trace of true memory. However, as humans, true memory is an impossible plight because we will always be plagued by forgetting. For Hesiod, memory is not static, it is an act of constant creation because 'the poet (*aoidos*), like his counterpart the Muses, sings the songs of heroes and, most importantly, can be called the "servant" of or "ritual substitute" (*therapôn*) for the Muses themselves' (Collins, 1999, p. 242). Memory is therefore a divine, communal and culturally embodied force where the Muses preserve and ensure cultural knowledge for the collective. The poet becomes the conduit of communicating ancestral memory, which may include conflicts, traumas and pain.

The poet's connection to the Muses becomes a synonymous model for how we remember through cultural and familial memory. Autoethnography follows a similar pattern because it draws on and links personal experience to cultural meaning-making. Our self-identity in the world is shaped and formed by what has preceded it. Although our experience of the world is individual, it is also positioned and framed by other contexts whether they are social, political, cultural, familial, or ancestral narratives. I am also engaging with the cultural memories of the deep past that have no inherent link to me but somehow become enveloped in my visceral experience and engagement with them. My understanding of what I am experiencing in the present includes the rupture, destabilisation and transformation of the self, which in many ways are all defining moments as discussed by Assoulin (2021, p. 166). My response is also influenced by my emotions which are framed by what I carry through my genealogy as well as my inherent physical and metaphysical embodied encounter within this cave. I am working across and through time but also across and through ethereal realms. Autoethnographers 'seek to put their readers *in the experience*, appealing to their hearts and senses as well as their intellects' (Bochner, 2022, p.9). I cannot ignore this within an autoethnographic framework.

Plato acknowledges and argues that the world exists of two realms 'the *physical world* [original emphasis], which people could comprehend with their five senses, and the *World of Ideas* or *Forms* [original emphasis], which people could comprehend on with their intellect, or in other words, by thinking' (Burgin, 2018, p. 7). In many ways, my embodied experience is engaging across these two realms. I am using my senses to engage with the space and engage with its memories but I am also trying to tap into the spiritual significance and sanctity of the space. Plato transforms 'the traditional divinely-grounded *mnemonic* [original emphasis] wisdom into a human *recollective* [original emphasis] process of learning' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 85). For Plato memory becomes 'the label for the (re-)discovery of the truth within ourselves, by means of individual philosophical inquiry and dialectical reasoning, and the re-appropriation of our true, best (divine) natures' (Castagnoli, 2020, p. 85-86). Plato creates the conceptual space that forces an individual to look inward to find their deepest potential through questioning, reasoning, self-reflection and personal meaning

making. Memory becomes something that unwinds not just in the cultural and mythic field but it also exists deep within the immortal soul.

Plotinus inherits Plato's metaphysical approach but extends the interpretation to include different levels of the soul. Firstly, there is the intellect in its highest form which has no memory because it is timeless and is already fully knowing. Second is the body, which is the lowest level and has no memory because it is instinctual. In between these two lies the self (*hēmeis*), which according to 'Plotinian terminology, the *hēmeis* is neither god nor animal, but rather the power to become either one' (Aubry, 2014, p. 310). This is the embodied, self-conscious, practical, narrative subject who is shaped by experience. The moral, psychological and narrative self has the capacity to move towards being driven by instincts and impulses (animal) or to be governed by the intellect and contemplation (god). The self is a field of becoming, implying that we are not a static entity but rather a dynamic source that is in a state of transformation and change. For Plotinus, memory is an active power and 'not just a conservation of impressions' (Plotinus, 2018, p. 481).

Similarly, autoethnography is 'both process and product' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 273) which forces the researcher to consider their own experiences when finding relevance to why they are conducting research. Critical investigation is not merely about finding the information but rather looking at what you find through the self. This is transformative because the research process repositions the self as a valid object of enquiry to create new possibilities of knowledge, understanding and meaning. Autoethnography does not delve into the complexities of the self, the soul and the divine (like Plotinus) but it does see the self as a fragmented entity that is constantly evolving through and with experience. For Plotinus, the self is multilayered, 'a microcosm, on the model of the intelligible universe rather than the physical universe' (Regnier, 2021, p. 150). Autoethnography relies on working through the self as a source of knowledge rather than focusing on external observation. In other words, the self is a legitimate site of knowledge that is philosophically significant and not just a product of reason. According to Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 15), we are drawn to a life of research according to life experiences that changed and deeply affected us. In working through the emotions that accompany my perceptions, I oscillate and negotiate an understanding that moves between my instinctive impulses and raw emotion with my intellectual critique.

My interaction within the cave is not merely narrating my story, but rather creates an opportunity to look at how my story discloses something beyond and before my existence. The positionality of myself in the cave is also part of a collective engagement that extends beyond physicality. The big question – how is this achievable?

Memory, a thread across time

One answer would be to look at memory itself from a modern perspective. Luca Castagnoli and Paola Ceccarelli (2019, p. 1) acknowledge that the

interpretation towards memory in the present day is no longer seen as merely a cognitive function. They argue that it is also 'essential to our self-definition as individuals, to direct our actions and shape our experiences and feelings in our everyday life' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 1) but they extend this understanding to include larger communities and groups. For them, memory is a 'way to locate ourselves in the world, as individuals or communities, [and] is central to our human existence: deprived of memory, as individuals we lose not only a fundamental share of our knowledge of the world, but also our sense of self; and without shared memories a society loses its unity and coherence in time' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 1). Within this space, memory is not individual but socially rooted in engaging and sharing experiences and stories. Collective memory, which Mnemosyne embodies and communicates through her daughters, plays a crucial role in cultural narratives, influencing how communities remember their past and envision their futures (Greek Mythology, 2024). Autoethnography becomes an important framework to look at because it encourages us to look at our own stories and experiences within a cultural and social demographic. It is not only about telling the story but about how our story is shaped by cultural perceptions as well as how the story is perceived by its audience/reader. In essence autoethnography focuses on the position of the reader because the 'I' in the story can tell us a lot about how the 'I' fits within culture and a way of life. For Ellis (2004), 'Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives' (p. 46). This speaks to Castagnoli and Ceccarelli's perspective that different memory practices, which rely on personal memory and narrative can 'reveal fundamentally diverse conceptions of human psychology, the relation between human nature and the divine, and the way in which human beings, as individuals and societies, construct and preserve their knowledge, identities and interactions through time' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 2).

We cannot rule out that memory is also a cognitive experience that consciously involves the act of remembering or recalling past experiences. It brings events from deep within our mind back into our present. How and what we remember will always be influenced by our present, because our need for recollection will always be triggered by something that is taking place in the now. Because we can never return to the past as it was, we therefore, rely on memory to re-member the past. This aligns with the archaic interpretations that human memory is mediated and reconstructed rather than repeated, the only difference to the original archaic thinkers is that we are now the mediators of our thoughts which are biologically reconstructed rather than reliant on a divine and sacred source. Memory turns into an experience through the act of remembering. Narrative is the structure that allows us to re-tell the events. It is a cyclical pattern which suggests that events may recur, but they are always influenced by the memories of those who lived them, who remembers and how (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 20). Memory is recalled, rewritten and reconstructed through narrative, which draws attention to its instability because it is subjective and

personal but more importantly, it is always accompanied by forgetting. How I remember today will more than likely differ, even partially from how I may remember the same sequence of events tomorrow. Autoethnography aligns with this unfixed process because it treats memory as active, changing and something that crystallises and manifests according to circumstances. Autoethnography also allows us to engage with our experience of a narrative, which in turn may change and draw on a different reaction each time we read it (Bochner & Ellis, 2026). Our present context will therefore, not only shape our recollection of an event but it will also influence our interpretation of that recollection.

It is not possible to look at memory without considering forgetting or amnesia. My aim is to keep memory alive with the understanding that my memories are forever changing and situationally triggered. I must also acknowledge that each memory is accompanied by a certain degree of forgetting because 'memory is fallible, that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 282), see also (Tullis et al., 2009). According to Castagnoli and Ceccarelli (2019), 'Choosing what to remember must entail also the choice of what to forget, what to pass over in silence, and what to obscure' (p. 20). It brings me back to how the present shapes how memories are triggered. For example, my interaction with Archedimos and his callings from the nymphs triggers my memories and interactions that are shaped according to my role as mother and researcher and writer. My memories will also be shaped by who I am and how I perceive myself in the world at each moment in time. The exact details will change each time I remember because they will be influenced further by what prompted them in the present.

Today, I stand in the Cave of the Nympholept enveloped by the rock formations all around me. I engage with what each of my senses trigger in this natural cavern. The enclosure is washed by the warm rays of sunlight protruding through the entrance above creating a sense of peace and tranquillity. I imagine the other people who have walked through this space over thousands of years. Each footprint remains embedded on the granular terrain whilst the spores and molecules released with each breath linger in the air and on the rock surface.

Moving forward with the echoes from stone

I remain standing at the bottom of the cave in the larger chamber, looking up at the entrance above me. The cavity takes the shape of a ripple-like crease moving across the ceiling of the larger chamber, almost as if it is protecting me from the world outside. Gently, it allows the natural light to filter its way through. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, sensing the smell of stone entering and amalgamating with my body. I absorb the smells accompanied with my own memories and the residue of those that remain within this space. With my eyes still closed, I engage my thoughts with the darkness and the silence.

The act of recollection has been relevant across philosophical contemplation from its archaic inception of Mnemosyne, as the mother of memory and the

authority of cultural recollection to her daughters, the Muses and the custodians of collective memory. The shepherd Hesiod becomes the mortal link to this mythical world when he claims the Muses breathed into him wondrous voice, so that he 'should celebrate things of the future and things that were aforetime' (Hesiod, 1988, p. 4). He constructs himself as a vessel of memory, which is divinely sourced and created to preserve historical and cosmic order. He becomes the point of origin of collective memory which is later internalised and transformed by philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus. Plato alters memory from external, cultural authority (Hesiod) to an internal, epistemic event of recollection (*anamnesis*). Plato creates and provides a philosophical framework for which collective memory is subjectively experienced because all human souls have access to the same realm of Forms from which they originated. He alters and remodels 'the traditional idea of divinely grounded, orally transmitted mnemonic wisdom' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 12) into a 'human, creative, *recollective* [original emphasis] process of learning to be pursued through dialogical inquiry' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 12). For Plato, the process of recollection involves the soul remembering the divine Forms it once new before it became part of the body (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 12). As mortals, we can access this knowledge by looking inward through philosophical reasoning. Plotinus extends Plato's metaphysical hierarchy into a multi-layered structure where the soul does not remember the Forms from a position of recollection but rather the act of remembering is something that exists continuously and divinely within the soul, across time. Plotinus 'develops the singular theory of the two memories: two distinct memories correspond to the separated soul and to the soul linked to the body, one that preserves the intelligible trace of the object, the other, the sensible trace' (Gwenaëlle, 2014, p. 312). Plotinus develops the position by introducing the idea that the soul has the timeless, higher soul which is untouched by mortal emotions, the lower soul which understands and experiences temporal memory and the third, which sits in between. This is the level of the conscious ego which has the potential to look up towards the divine or below towards material and physical experiences. For Plotinus, 'the study of memory has the crucial role of revealing the soul's internal structure, with its different and hierarchically ordered metaphysical and cognitive levels' (Castagnoli & Ceccarelli, 2019, p. 46). This interpretation identifies that memory is not only about how we recall but it also gives us insight into the inner layers and structure of the layers that make up the soul. The metaphysical level refers to the spiritual essence of being whereas the cognitive level can relate to perception and intellect or to instinctual drive and sensory perception.

Autoethnography speaks to many of the ideas originated by Plato and Plotinus because it relies on that inward turn that identifies the lived experience of the researcher as a site of knowledge and truth within larger cultural contexts. For Ellis and Bochner (2000),

> Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth, autoethnographer's gaze, first, through an ethnographic wide-angle lens,

> focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (p. 739).

By working through the layers of consciousness and considering how the personal connects to the cultural opens pathways for interactions. The focus is inward towards the vulnerable self that possibly finds and proposes new interpretations and understandings. Reflexivity becomes not simply about my story but more importantly about how my story discloses something beyond my existence. This positionality could align with Plotinus because it relies on multiple layers of meaning. The raw feeling and emotion that comes with experiencing life equates to Plotinus' lower level of the soul. This is the place that is immediately impacted by the physical world because it is closely connected to the body, senses, emotions and reactions.

Memory plays a fundamental role in this process. In this place of memory, the recollections of my life experience interact with the historical, spiritual and philosophical residue that remains in this place. My thoughts frame how I see this place, it speaks to me because its relevance triggers my engagement with my own past through the mythical, metaphysical and philosophical. The space itself becomes synonymous with how I am interacting with my raw emotions, intellectual perceptions but also the need to engage with the metaphysical world. How do my memories and experiences shape and reveal deeper truths about the very structure of my soul?

I open my eyes as I exhale the residue of my memories now forever entangled with the memories of this place. Silently, I acknowledge the altar of Apollo and Hermes as well as the altar of Pan. I turn to the sculpture of Archedimos' self-portrait. His carvings throughout the cave are quite extraordinary … perhaps he really was possessed by the nymphs … My attention turns towards the perfectly carved out staircase against the natural slope that leads towards the entrance. It is time. As I ascend the stairs, I make my way towards the exit, taking with me the echoes from stone.

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