

Andromeda's Fold

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Abstract: This article examines 'Andromeda' a multidisciplinary project that fuses mythology, astronomy, and performative methodologies to explore themes of connection, temporality, and collective voice. Through performance lectures, creative workshops, and speculative archival work, the project traces the mythological and galactic narratives of Andromeda as relational and evolving constructs. Utilizing Roland Barthes' concept of illogical conjunction and Laura U. Marks' enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, the research interrogates the interplay of myth, materiality, and cosmological scales. This article is bookended by two performances: one at the Barbican Centre in 2024, and the full text of a commissioned performance by Copy Press in September 2023. The work engages singing as an archival and participatory practice, it proposes a collective re-imagining of cosmic and historical networks, fostering dialogue across time, space, and cultural boundaries.

Separation Anxiety

At a recent research presentation for the Sites and Situations research cluster at the Royal College of Art, I led a walking performance lecture with co-presenter Dr Amy Blier-Carruthers of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Together we conducted a two-hour, six-stop walking tour of the Barbican Centre in London, UK entitled 'Separation Anxiety'.¹ In the performance lecture we explored the following question: *How can we overcome separation to create community?* Blier-Carruthers took the question from her standpoint thinking about connection inside one institution with multiple spaces – literally the Guildhall straddles their site in the Barbican Centre, and across the street at the recently completed Milton Hall. In my research following the relay traces of Andromeda, I presented two sonic works as part of the continued development of an eight-part song cycle exploring loneliness and connection across time (Andromeda as mythic histories) and space (Andromeda as galaxies beyond and before our time).

¹ Sites and Situations is a Research Cluster in the School of Arts and Humanities at the Royal College of Art in London. See: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/projects/sites-situations/>

Handing off the baton, as it were, to speak in a relay fashion, and having just performed the first piece 'Andromeda Forgives' on the ledge of a 'street in the sky' overlooking layers of Roman wall, St Giles-without-Cripplegate, originally an eleventh-Century Saxon church, the Barbican, and the modern skyline, we returned to stand on the Barbican balcony on Silk Street, and looking back to the mirrored glass of the shining new Milton Hall tower. Here I sang 'I See You', the last performance of the day, a song written as a round, and imagined being sung both by us on Earth looking to Andromeda, and by Andromedans there, looking to Earth. A duet of cosmic impossibility, and a metaphor for the impossible act of the faith in connection across such deep timescales.

Before beginning the performance, I grabbed my phone and opened my favourite constellation app on my phone, eager to see (late afternoon as it was) where Andromeda the constellation and galaxy might be, so that we might turn and sing this song, collectively even, to it. We looked up, down, left and right, and suddenly realised that there, caught between Perseus, Cassiopeia and Pegasus, was Andromeda – positioned directly across from us, a cosmic palimpsest between the Barbican and Milton Hall. We sang to both – the galaxy and the hall – finishing the collective performance lecture to overcome separation.

Relays and Folds

I took the relay as a methodological possibility for a creative project I have been working on for some time – Andromeda. This project began some 5 years ago as an album project, a song-cycle, based on Andromeda. Initially thinking a link between myth and galaxy, I began writing the fictional speculative letters that Andromeda wrote as she waited to die on the rock. Part auto-ethnography, part speculative fiction, part 'giving of voice' to a central figure in archetype and in sky, the project expanded as I began to research Andromeda in other ways. As the research began developing, lines of flight emerged that jumped times, geographies, meanings, priorities, disciplines and scales.

As an artistic project, I was less interested in chronological or causal history, and began to understand the emerging 'field' of Andromeda in terms of what Barthes', writing on 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image, Music, Text* from 1977 calls the 'illogical conjunction of the *here-now* and the *there-then*' – a relation of time-space (*here-now* // *there-then*) that reminded me of the relay.² I also am shaping the project

² Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.44, emphasis in original.

with the decision to track a singular story (Andromeda) through felt sense, rather than through a learned methodology of archival order. Here I turn to Maggie Nelson's remarks in 'What's Queer Form Anyway?' an interview with Annie DeWitt in the Paris Review where she says 'paying attention to a singular person or thing can be a way of expressing love, of paying homage to their uniqueness, their difference from everything else that exists. And that paying that kind of attention can be a way of understanding difference as something that holds us together rather than signifying our apartness'.³ A tracing of Andromeda beyond the archetypal myth, but through the relayed relation of elements emerging through a relayed search opened something new for my project. In the steering away from only myth, and / or the contemporary (and valued) project of revisiting or rewriting myths (of Maggie Nelson, of Natalie Haynes and others whose work is invaluable to this project), there is also something of a turn to other ordinary contexts of Andromeda.⁴ This is also perhaps something like what Kathleen Stewart terms ordinary affects, or 'a continuous, often maddening effort to approach the intensities of the ordinary through a close ethnographic attention to pressure point and forms of attention and attachment'.⁵ This is what can make a project about a myth and a galaxy, somehow contemporary, relational, and ordinary. It attunes the research attention to the side, to the overlooked.

In my historical research, for example, I might find and explore a sculpture of Andromeda from 1851 by John Bell, yes, but also the rate of pay for an unnamed life model at the time of Andromeda's casting, also held in the Royal Academy archives in London.⁶ I might trace the sculpture to its foundry at Coalbrookdale Iron Works yes, but also find a poem written by Thomas Poole in a notebook held in the Shropshire archives (where much of the company records are held) where lines describing

³ Annie DeWitt, 'What's Queer Form Anyway? An Interview with Maggie Nelson', *The Paris Review* (blog), 14 June 2018, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/14/an-interview-with-maggie-nelson/> [accessed 2 December 2024].

⁴ See for example, Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2015); Natalie Haynes, *Stone Blind* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2022); Natalie Haynes, *Divine Might: Goddesses in Greek Myth* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2023).

⁵ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p.5.

⁶ Martin Myrone, *Making the Modern Artist: Culture, Class and Art-Educational Opportunity in Romantic Britain*, (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2020).

Coalbrookdale Works sit side by side with an elegy for an unnamed woman who drowned in the Severn.⁷ Water and gendered bodies across time and spaces, here folded together side by side in a single folio.

In a longer text I've published in AA Files last year, I introduce the term 'relay' in this context, in terms of its grammatical capacity as a noun and as a verb. In it, I write:

In short, I wonder what a relay relays (noun verb) and how to relay relays (verb noun). In writing and thinking about this method, I come to 'relay' parenthetically thinking it through as a spatial relation (the relay race), as a material conduit (the telegraph, the semaphore and their multiple histories and antecedents), as a repetition in time (the anniversary) and as a matter of interpretation (relayed translation and pivot languages).⁸

This sense of the relay as method connects to new work by philosopher Laura U. Marks on the fold. In *The Fold: From Your Body to the Cosmos*, Marks invites us into the textured depths of a folded cosmos. It is not merely a description but a call to inhabit this folding—a cosmos that stretches itself across time and space, drawing connections as it folds and unfolds. Marks begins with a deceptively simple proposition: 'Every entity mediates across folds', she says, conjuring an image of the universe as an intricate fabric where each thread touches countless others, sometimes imperceptibly.⁹ Marks frames media artifacts as carriers of these folds, suggesting, 'images, which I define as all perceptibles, cycle through time and space to reach our body and our senses, collecting noise, interference, augmentation, and diminution'.¹⁰ Through this cyclical process, like the relayed method of Andromeda, media and perception become tools for unfolding cosmic and historical connections, turning everyday or ordinary encounters into acts of cosmic participation. This is not a static cosmology but one in constant motion, where mediation becomes an act of longing, of connection, and ultimately, of unfolding oneself into the vastness of being.

⁷ Thomas Poole, Notebook, Ref: X516/516/13, Shropshire Archives [accessed 23 November 2023].

⁸ Adam Kaasa, 'How to Relay Relay; or, to Follow Andromeda is to Follow the World', *AA Files* 79 (2023): pp.106.

⁹ Laura U. Marks, *The Fold: From Your Body to the Cosmos* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), p.5.

¹⁰ Marks, *The Fold*, p.6.

Marks uses her concept of ‘enfolding-unfolding aesthetics’ as a method to experience the cosmos as both infinite and intimate.¹¹ She tells us, ‘The senses are constantly actualizing latent bits of the cosmos’, suggesting that each act of perception is a reaching toward something immeasurable, a brush against the infinite that leaves traces in us.¹² This is a cosmos alive with ‘soul-assemblages’, a term Marks offers to name the complex, relational networks that emerge from shared histories, affects, and materialities.¹³ These assemblages are the folds we live within and through. ‘Experience is not mine but ours’, Marks declares, underscoring the collective nature of these cosmic encounters.¹⁴

But this cosmos is not without its griefs. Marks confronts the finitude of our world—the shrinking capacity of our planet to sustain its inhabitants, its folds pressed under ecological devastation. She acknowledges the limits of this shared fabric, yet she compels us to see hope in its folds. To live in this cosmos, she argues, is to participate in its becoming, to enact an ethics of relationality and care. ‘Becoming more real entails becoming more capable to be affected by others’, she writes, making clear that unfolding is both an act of openness and responsibility.¹⁵ Something in the ambition of the song-cycle of *Andromeda* as both a relayed history through the felt sense, and an act of participatory collective song/voice gestures towards Marks’ call for collective methodologies of experience.

Singing Archives

Beyond a creative archival exploration, the project also uses singing as a method of archival interrogation – literally singing with the archive. It is a form of practice-based research as much about the material of the prompt, as it is about singing in relation to one another, and as an improvisation group claiming the speculative fiction of being a signal repeater in the long relay of *Andromeda*. At recent workshops at the PAF (Performing Arts Forum) in France, and with Boston University, I led groups of established and novice sound makers through a series of vocal workshops, and improvisations, leading to sonic scores not as representation of the archive, nor necessarily as interpretation in a traditional historic sense of a methodology. Rather as a collective signal, borne from a previous one (the

¹¹ Marks, *The Fold*, p.6.

¹² Marks, *The Fold*, p.6.

¹³ Marks, *The Fold*, p.40.

¹⁴ Marks, *The Fold*, p.11.

¹⁵ Marks, *The Fold*, p.14.

archive) repeated in a new time and space, and so setting the signal resonating again, to be picked up in some other moment.

The song cycle of Andromeda is about connection, longing, and about 'source' – looking for source or origin (in history [time] and in the sky [space]) – it imagines and speculates about a set of bodies in the Andromeda Galaxy who sent us, the Earth, a love letter some 2.5 million years ago (that is how long it would take a radio signal to get here), and us, just receiving it, sending out a collective howl, a song, a note, a cry, a love song back to our nearest neighbour, knowing the answer will not get back to them for another 2.5 million years. It is about hope beyond human time, about call and response, about receiving a message, and sending one in return. Public sharings have been held at PAF, Swedenborg Hall, Boston University, and Matt's Gallery in London.¹⁶

What I will share with you below is the full text of a performance piece that emerged out of a failed residency application to develop the question of 'source' in historical and astronomical research by way of the metaphor of a river with mouth and source – and asking the question what is the source of 'voice'?¹⁷ In particular, I had in mind the voice as in 'song' but also the historicised 'voiceless' Andromeda, building off the work of the author Miriella Jiffar who rewrite the classic myth from the perspective of Andromeda, giving her 'voice'.¹⁸ This particular residency would have traced the Guadiana River whose mouth lies at the border of Portugal and Spain on the Mediterranean, and whose source lies south of Madrid. In the middle of this trace lies the Alqueva Dark Sky in the middle of the Alentejo in Portugal – where another source would be visible to the naked eye – the Andromeda constellation and in particular, the Andromeda galaxy. I ended

¹⁶ Adam Kaasa, 'Trans-Andromeda'. Performing Arts Forum Summer University, Saint-Erme-Outre-et-Ramecourt, France, 21-23 August 2023; Adam Kaasa, 'Andromeda's Howl', at Copy Press's *Mad About Justice*, Swedenborg Hall, London, 23 September 2023, Adam Kaasa, 'Andromeda's Howl', Boston University – London, 6 February 2024. Adam Kaasa, 'Andromeda', performing as Bliss Carmxn with *ILĀ** and Coda Nicolaeff, co-founders of Trans Voices UK, in *Almost Coming Home Pt 2*, curated by Anne Duffau, Matt's Gallery, London, 28 June 2024.

¹⁷ This is in reference to the 'Particular Universal: Identity, Memory, Landscape, at Castro Marim' residency in 2023. See <https://particularuniversal.pt/en/> [accessed 2 December 2024].

¹⁸ Miriella Jiffar, 'Andromeda: A Myth Written in the Stars', *Iris: The Virginia Journal of Literatures, Arts, and Culture* (21 March 2023), <https://iris.virginia.edu/andromeda-myth-written-stars> [accessed 2 December 2024].

up completing this residency on my own (without residency funding). On arrival at the Alqueva, where the Guadiana River floods into a large reservoir, I happened upon the three nights a year when cloud covers the sky. Sometimes we do not get to see what we came looking for.

Andromeda's Howl¹⁹

[Standing centre stage, staring straight ahead.]

Find your voice.
Make your voice heard.
Speak up.
Use your platform.
Shout from the rooftops.
Voice your concerns.
Voice your opinion.
Give voice to the voiceless.
Use your voice.

[Now moving casually across the stage, speaking directly to, and making eye contact with the audience.]

I wonder about voice and its source.

Oh it's the breath I've been taught – the intercostal muscles, the cords, the diaphragm. Or as my grandfather, the actor, would say, it's in the tip of the tongue, the lips the teeth, the hard and soft palate and the alveolar ridge.

But where does it come from?

We have mouths at the end of long flowing tubes from deep within our bodies. So do rivers. And we trace the river's mouth to its source. So what of voice?

¹⁹ Originally commissioned for Copy Press 'Mad About Justice', London, 23 September 2023.

Is it here? In here? From here? My voice traps me in geography. Tells people where I'm from, I'm told. It's a kind of clumsy cartography. So is my voice from there. Not from here, but there? Is it from the there I grew up in? The spruce trees? The lake? The alleys and asphalt? The snow? The malls? The friend's car? The underground pedways I ditched class for? The people who taught me? The people who hit me? The people I slept with? The people I didn't? The ones that left me? The ones I left behind? Is my voice them? Is it from there? Is my voice sandcast by river-valley mud? Or etched by the acid petrochemical ice?

Is it a wave form from that progenitor of energy waves, the Sun. Does my voice comes from a ray of light 8 minutes away; A ray that morphs and transforms until at some point after being heat in a water droplet, a flap of fat in an emu's neck, the light of a laptop screen, a current in mycelium, the drift of a current, the crow of a crow, a line on the dance floor, a 'I forgot, but I won't do it again', the transgression of grief and consent in the looking through of a dead person's things, carbon life pulped as paper in an archive in Mexico City, it arrives deep in my mitochondria, and it bursts, converts, and compels and pulses nerves and muscles in my living corpse to burst out of a balloon-like sack some shapes to the otherwise voiceless shifting of air from one place to another.

[Audible breath in and breath out.]

Maybe voice is the project of moving air from one place to another.

[Audible breath in and breath out.]

Maybe that's the point. It's in me, then it's in you, and it's been in all of us. All of it has been in all of us.

So maybe I want to hear your voice.

And I want your voice, your source, to help bring forth a kind of source of another mouth – the mouth of Andromeda – a word, a myth, a constellation, a galaxy.

We are hearing now, a call from Andromeda – from the galaxy, landing in infinitesimal radio waves. Blue, red, yellow, hush hushing their way

through deep deep thickness of dark matter and picking up frequencies and dust, morphing the message, the medium as it moves from source to ear – like the breath in our bellies, moving up to the alveolar ridge and out out out to another ear drums thump thump thumping rhythms to a knowing, aware, being's brain.

I need a bit of your help for this part. When I gesture to you, I need you to say 'ANDROMEDA' because it makes no sense to speak of it in the singular, when clearly this is a message of a collective.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...is a myth that has been a relay of oral histories, material sources, images, representations and morality.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...has been papyrus paper at one point in time and an iron sculpture at another, cast by John Bell and bought by Queen Victoria at the Great Exhibition in 1851.

The language, the word, the semantics and the etymology of...

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...is like an anniversary. Each time it is repeated, it reinforces some origin.

But just what is that origin, or source, when...

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...is a myth? And like all myths, is sourced and sourceless, save for its repetition, its relay.

The constellation...

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

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...has been drawn, configured, photographed and measured, once even by Michel Scot the 12th Century scholar, appearing in Dante's Eighth Circle of Hell, and described as one whose ribs are thin and small.

Visible to the naked eye, the...

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...galaxy is a smudge, a blur, something like a cluster or cloud not dissimilar to the Great Nebula that inspired Kant's 'island universes'.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...has been a glass plate taken on Mount Wilson Observatory in 1923 and the classification system developed by Henrietta Swan Leavitt to look at variable stars at the Harvard College Observatory.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...is also our closest neighbour, and in a cosmic love dance with us; the Milky Way and will, after all, collide, hug in about 4.5 billion years.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...the myth is relayed in time, through story, to us.

[Gesture hand – audience says 'Andromeda']

...the galaxy is relayed in time, through space, to us.

The light of it we see is already 2.5 million years old when it reaches our eye, and so acts as a perpetually updating archive, or an impossibly slow telegraph line between two galaxies.

So why does it feel like this message from two and a half million years ago is really a message from the future?

The message is one of waves.

And the wave is a song.

And the song asks for a reply.

The love letter, this two and a half million year old love letter, wants one back.

And so I ask if you will, help me craft it's opening note.

It goes like this. And for this, I'll need voice, as in tone, as in your sandcast geographies, your acid etches, those who've shaped what comes out of your river mouths, and all your mitochondria to sing with me now.

We break down Andromeda, to call back to it in song.

[Singing to the audience to teach them the lyrics and tune.]

An – Dro – Me - Da

[Audience joins in song for a call and response of 'Andromeda' until it hushes and quiets and dissipates up into the sky.]

[End.]

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Culture and Cosmos