



Foreword

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2000. "Foreword." In *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*, by Nicole Loraux. Trans. Selina Stewart. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:29429744>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Foreword

Gregory Nagy

This new book by Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*,¹ is a sequel to *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes* (Princeton University Press 1993).² That work, the original French version of which was published nearly two decades ago, was in turn a sequel to her very first book, the English version of which is *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Harvard University Press 1986).³ A number of distinguished books appeared in the interim, including another entry in the “Myth and Poetics” Series, *Mothers in Mourning*, with the essay *Of Amnesty and Its Opposite* (1998).⁴ Still, the sequence of *Invention of Athens / Children of Athena / Born of the Earth* remains an integral set, a veritable trilogy, exploring a spectacularly wide range of ideas and ideologies concerning the civic identity of Athenians as *autochthones*, men who are “born of the earth.”

Of these three books, *Born of the Earth* is the widest-ranging in its interests and applications. Like the other two, it starts off by focusing on the poetics and rhetoric inherent in a core myth that tells of the birth, from Mother Earth, of a prototypical autochthonous human who becomes the notional ancestor of all Athenian citizens. But then the lens widens, gradually opening into a vision that reaches well beyond the historical context of classical Athens, and this vision keeps on widening until, in the end, it encompasses the present-day realities of

¹ Translated by Selina Stewart from *Né de la terre: Mythe et politique à Athènes* (Paris 1996).

² Translated by Caroline Levine from *Les enfants d'Athéna: Idées athéniennes sur la citoyenneté et la division des sexes* (Paris 1981; 2nd ed. 1990).

³ Translated by Alan Sheridan from *L'Invention d'Athènes: Histoire de l'oraison funèbre dans la “cité classique”* (The Hague / Paris 1981; 2nd ed. Paris 1993).

⁴ Translated by Corinne Pache from *Les mères en deuil* (Paris 1990); the final essay was originally published as “De l'amnistie et de son contraire” in *Usages de l'oubli* (Paris 1988).

local and world politics. *Born of the Earth* ends up confronting today's ongoing political and ideological struggles over definitions of humanity in terms of such all-too-familiar distinctions as gender, race, and ethnic grouping.

This book effectively defamiliarizes these distinctions by comparing the classical Athenian myth of autochthony. In the terminology of this myth about the *genos* of First Man, born of Mother Earth, the word *genos* means not only this man's 'genesis' as a human and civic prototype: it means also (1) his "gender," as distinct from the non-male, that is, from females; (2) his "race," as distinct from the non-human, that is, from animals; and (3) his "race," as distinct from the non-Athenian, that is, from other ethnic groupings. The identity of all Athenians is determined by this prototypical man named Erechtheus (ultimately differentiated into two separate figures, Erechtheus and Erichthonios). Moreover, as Loraux shows, the identity of Athenian democracy itself is "naturalized" by the *genos* of Erechtheus: the genesis of this proto-human comes "naturally" from the earth, like the genesis of a plant. Mother Earth has become a democratic equalizer.

From the comparative perspective of this charter myth about *Homo democraticus*, gender and race are revealed as cultural constructs, not biological determinants. Yes, myths do speak in terms of biology, but their biological story turns out to be cultural determined. The gender of Erechtheus has to be male because only males are citizens, and Erechtheus is primarily the ancestor of all citizens of a democracy, only secondarily the ancestor of humans. The "race" of Erechtheus has to exclude all non-Athenians because only Athenians can be citizens of the Mother Earth that is Athens. The mythical "poetics" of gender and race are arbitrary: in Athenian Black Figure vase painting, for example, color is a code of gender, not race: black is the color for the skin of males and white, for the skin of females.

The arbitrariness of mythical coding can lead to gaps in thinking about identity: the *genos* of all humans comes “naturally” from the wombs of female humans, but the *genos* of the proto-Athenian male human comes “naturally” from Earth. It seems that Mother Nature works differently for the first Athenian man: he is germinated and emerges from the ground like the seed of a plant, while all other Athenian men are conceived and emerge from the wombs of women. For all other Athenian men, notionally descended as they are from the proto-Athenian man, there are two kinds of *genos* that explain their genesis. Primarily, they are born of the Earth because they belong to the Athenian “race”; secondarily, they are born of wombs because they belong to the human “race.”

The problem is, there are people who get left out of this world-view. Only Athenian men can think of themselves as primarily descended from Mother Earth, while other men are descended merely from human wombs. And what about other men who view themselves as autochthonous, just like the Athenians? Let us take for example the natives of the Arcadian city of Tegea, who have a similar autochthonous myth about their own *genos*. In reaction, the Athenians will try to get around this contradiction of their uniqueness by making the Tegeans not unique: they will refer to them not as Tegeans, in specific terms of their local Mother Earth of Tegea, but instead in general terms as Arcadians, since other Arcadians do not lay claim to such a myth of autochthony. It is safer for Athenians to speak of Arcadian autochthony than of Tegean autochthony, since Mother Earth can thus be generalized, stylized, attenuated.

Closer to home, there is a far bigger problem: what if you happen to be an Athenian woman? When you give birth, is the *genos* primary or secondary? What comes first? Is it the birth of a child from a womb or the emergence of a seedling from the earth? In other words, what is modeled on what? When you give birth, are you re-enacting the genesis of the First Man? And what if your child is a daughter? There are other myths about the First Woman, but

these will not fit the birth of *your* daughter - unless, that is, you are already thinking of Pandora. These are the questions raised by *Born of the Earth*. To read this book is not only to seek answers: it is to re-enact one's own humanity.