"Corporal Affinity’: the meta-narrative of motherhood and kinship in the era of biotechnology”.

From all the changes that the spectacular progress made in the field of biotechnology have brought about in western societies of the 20th century, the technologization of human reproduction is probably the one which will entail the most irreversible consequences. This is due to the fact that the radical changes engendered by reproductive medicine touch upon all realms of human life, social, economic, moral, legal but mainly because they put to question the fundamental, for western thought, bipolarity nature vs culture.

In the following text I shall endeavour to follow the ruptures, the dismantlements and the re-conceptualizations that the new reproductive technologies have effected in the field of kinship. More specifically, starting with the modern anthropological theories of kinship, the theory of practice and the anthropological perceptions of biotechnology, and based on an analysis of data resulting from a long term ethnographic research I shall investigate through what strategies my informants (in this case the women who are unable to produce ova themselves for various reasons) by "technologising nature and naturalising technology" (Carsten 2004: 174), circumvent and transcend the dichotomic counterpoint of nature/culture, so that the rupture in biological motherhood can “heal” and not actually cancel the aspired sense of normalcy regarding the family and kinship. As it will be demonstrated, the artificiality of assisted reproduction need not be considered as something which contravenes the formation of a family and kinship, since it can actually be converted to a means through which infertile women can take action and develop practices which contribute to the “naturalization” of some bonds, the blunting of others and the invention of some new ones- so that the “biological misfortune” can be reversed and the sense of continuity
can be restored as it happens in the case of “normal” family and kinship\(^1\).

The identification of the genitors and parents, that is the ones that offer their genetic material for a child to be born and the parents that actually raise the child, constitutes one of the most profound, if not the most deeply rooted ideological construction of the western civilization. This means that the “normal” family structure, in which sexuality, procreation, marriage and biological relatedness coincide, is created by a couple of people of a different gender who get married and have their biological children so that, in the eyes of the law, the husband of the mother is at the same time both the biological and the social father of the children. Therefore, the biological basis of parenthood justifies the naturalization and subsequently ensures the normalisation of the structure of the nuclear family (model), as well as its reduction to a core of kinship relations.

However, bearing in mind that the blood relatedness outside marriage may be equally as biological in effect, it is nevertheless characterised as non-legal and inferior when it is contrasted with the legally-based blood relation (i.e the kinship which is formed within the framework of a marriage agreement\(^2\)). On the other hand, we must also take into account the distance between biological motherhood and social fatherhood\(^3\). As a result, we have to accept that despite the stereotypical perception prevalent in western societies that blood ties are formed through biology/nature, biology in its own right produces nothing but deficient relatedness. Only marriage seems to be in a position to do away with this deficiency and restore the “naturalness”

1 The present text presents in a very condensed way the most important conclusions of the anthropological study that I have been carrying out since 2009 in Athens, regarding the re-conceptualisations that the new reproduction technologies –and particularly the egg donation– have engendered in the conceptualization of parenthood and relatedness within the modern Greek society (see Tountasaki 2015). The particular study is based on concrete ethnographic data, which come both from personal interviews with infertile women as well as from attending the psychological support sessions organised by the “Kyveli” (Association for the Support of Fertility), under the supervision of a specialised clinical psychologist, in its office facilities every first and third Wednesday of every month.

2 For example, the comparison between a “legitimate” and “illegitimate” child was not grounded in the lack of biological connection but in the fact that the mother was not married at the time of delivery and for the period (of 6-10 months prior to the birth of the child) during which the child must have been conceived. After all, that is why the terms “illegitimate” and “outside marriage” are used as synonyms.

3 In western cultural mentality there is certainty concerning biological motherhood, since the biological relatedness with the mother is established on labour and delivery. On the contrary, the indeterminacy of the biological fact of maternal egg fertilisation with the paternal semen leads to a changed notion of father descent that takes a legal/social form, since fatherhood is established through a marital union. Therefore the genitor that necessarily exists in the biological domain, in order to become a father for all intents and purposes, to have that is the transfer of his genetic material to the child and subsequently his biological bond with the child acknowledged, needs to have been determined as the husband of the woman through lawful marriage. To quote the words of M. Strathern “(…) motherhood is established through the relation of the mother with the child while fatherhood is established through the relation of the father with the mother” ([1992] 2008: 305).
of kinship. As we can understand, we are faced with a particularly intricate and, on occasions, extremely imperceptible interaction between what is considered to be biological/natural and what is thought to be social/artificial.

The complexity of the issues related to the ways in which the two domains, biology and culture, are intertwined during the establishment of relatedness will be highlighted in a much clearer and intense manner when the consequences induced in the conceptualizations of kinship after the impressive proliferation of New Reproductive Technologies start emerging. As it has been stressed, biotechnology innovations, by enabling the de-sexualization of procreation, the de-naturalization of conception, the detachment of child-bearing even from life itself, the dismantling of motherhood and the distinction between reproduction and kinship, are bound to disrupt perceptions of what is considered to be a “natural” bond and question the fundamental ideological pre-requisites of biogenetic kinship and bring both the subjects involved and researchers up against a long line of problems considered inconceivable in the past.4

Within the Greek society the ability to procreate is regarded as something that goes without saying, it is considered to be a “natural capacity” and of course the desire to have children is also to be taken “naturally” for granted. For women especially, the social construction of their identity, the construction of their “gender normality” or “gender proficiency” (Paxson 2004:12) is directly related to motherhood. The symbolic legalization of female sexuality is realized through reproduction within the framework of marriage (du Boulay 1986, Dubisch 1986, 1992). The impurity of the female nature is “transcended” and transubstantiated through the fulfilment of the sacred destiny of procreation through the assumption of the spiritual role of mother-wife (symbolic shift from the natural woman, Eve, to the sacred form of Holy Mary) always within the framework of the historically ever-strong normative model that the conjugal family constitutes (Papataxiarchis 1992:48). Therefore, cultural convictions and social expectations concerning biological reproduction render motherhood “a highly emphasized social institution” (Rushton 1992:151), a “sacred duty” dictating mentalities and behaviours which have a special weight in the meaning attributed to marriage and family, thus becoming the par excellence desired prospects of life. The intention of procreation proves the desire of the subjects to follow the norm, to opt for the beaten track, socially anticipated and, to a great extent, biologically pre-determined

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course that everyone perceives as “normal”.

Within a biopolitical structure, where the prevalent social construction is the one of reproduction as “natural” and therefore the only “choice”, normalization is what couples seek by having a child (Becker 2000). They try to meet the demands of the dominant cultural ideology, which defines “normalcy” as being in conjunction with social reproduction of specific versions of sexuality, parenthood and family structure. In other words, the social constructions of fertility, parenthood and family, distinguish between the normal and the abnormal/divergent and thus become norms that define the lives of people. Under these conditions, men and women who wish to procreate endeavour, through the birth of a child, to realize their personal dreams for their own lives while at the same time adjusting to and harmonizing with the morally charged definitions that the prevalent cultural ideology imposes. When they are faced with infertility problems during their efforts to have a child then they actually realize that not only they cannot satisfy their personal desire to procreate but they are also failing to comply with normality, as it is defined by cultural discourse - they believe that they are falling short of social expectations and they feel they are socially failing. The inability to reproduce, threatening with cancellation the creation of a “normal” (biological) family, is experienced like a gap in the completion of the evolutionary cycle of life, and constitutes one of the most important reasons of abandoning the procedure, which on one hand signifies the transition to social adulthood of the spouses and on the other hand verifies an expected response to stereotypical representations of gender identity.

Infertility signifies the involuntary divergence from normalcy, nullifies the expectations and desires of the subjects to see their lives follow what is culturally defined as the “natural” and “normal” course of life - that is to become spouses through marriage, become parents through the procreation of biological children, be “normal” by establishing the most natural and fundamental social structure, for western societies: that of a family.

The main legitimizing argument for the orientation of infertile women towards the technique of assisted reproduction, which is described by the term “egg donation”.

5 This is the method of IVF, which on an international level has started being applied since the mid ‘80s and in the Greek language is predominantly denoted by the term “egg donation”. In the use of the particular method the stages of conventional in vitro fertilization are followed but the difference lies in the fact that the procedure in question requires the participation of three people, two women, the donor and the recipient, as well as the husband/partner of the recipient. Initially the donor is subjected to hormonal treatment, so as to induce a controlled ovarian stimulation and ovulation. There follows the interventional retrieval of oocytes from the donor's ovaries, their culture and their in vitro exposure to a processed population of sperm cells retrieved by the husband/partner of the recipient, the in vitro culture
is based on the fact that this reproductive technique allows for the greatest possible simulation of the constituent principles of “natural” parenthood. So, the women who took part in my study particularly stressed the potential of the specific method to safeguard the inheritance of the paternal genetic substance. In other words, the use of third party eggs is approved as the “fairest” solution for the fertile parent. On the other hand the possibility of the particular technique to also salvage, to a certain extent, biological motherhood is also commented in a positive way. Despite limitations, the reproductive impairment of the women is disproved, and more importantly without fully cancelling the biological basis of motherhood, since the natural processes of gestation and labour go on defining the mother-child relation.

This quest for the transition from the actuality of “abnormalcy” to the ideal “normalcy”, via the mediating involvement of the egg donor, indisputably brings to the surface the greatest of fears and the most crucial of doubts, both on a cultural and on a social level. Women are torn between their ardent desire to have a child and the desperation generated by the threatening -and inescapable- necessity to resort to the “help” of a third person. Resoundingly present through the very act of donation, a stranger, however, and anonymous\(^6\) and for this reason all the more mysterious and threatening, the donor initially seems to dominate. Indeed, in the words of my informants one can sense a strong preoccupation about the role and the intentions of this unknown woman, her origin, her personality, her physical and mainly her mental health.

However, after the completion of the biomedical intervention that signifies the success of embryo-transfer and the beginning of a pregnancy, the women recipients of the eggs consciously choose to do away with any circumstance that threatens their effort to fuse (non biological) procreation with social reproduction. The donation itself is de-personified, the donor becomes invisible and is objectified while the eggs, detached from her body, are turned into abstract material entities, they acquire the

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6 According to current legislation (law 3089/2002, law 3301/2005), the clinics of medically assisted reproduction are the ones that bear the exclusive responsibility for the choice of the donor. Equally explicit, with the prohibition of any kind of financial return to the donor, the legislative texts impose absolute anonymity among the parties involved, as well as the child to be born. So the identity of the egg donor is not made known to the future parents and, vice versa, the identity of the child and his/her parents is not revealed to the donor. The only accessible information regards medical data, concerning clinical and lab tests, to which the donors are obliged to be subjected in order to rule out the likelihood of hereditary genetic or contagious diseases transmission (Article 8, section 9, L. 3305/2005).
properties of a “drug” which is destined to “cure” the recipients’ infertility.

“I didn’t want to know nor find out anything at all. I didn’t want to think that there exists a person [meaning the donor] in order to feel it [meaning the child] more something of mine. I didn’t want to have any contact whatsoever. And since that time I haven’t even talked about it with my husband, never said anything about the subject, it’s done and that’s it, since the day of the embryo-transfer, that’s it, we have never, ever mentioned anything about it at all. It’s like taking a medicine to get well. I have never thought about her [the donor], ever again. Now I have forgotten all about it. When I found out about the study you are carrying out I said to myself: Oh yes! I, too, have done this sort of thing, and that about covers it. Now, is this good or bad? I don’t know. I’m over it. If I wasn’t concerned about health issues, the only thing that troubles me is whether or not she had some kind of health problem that could be hereditary and my daughter could be at risk”, I wouldn’t think about it at all (Ismi, 9/11/2010).”

Converging with or drawing from legislation and the current practices of assisted reproduction clinics, my informants stressed the urgent necessity to find strategic practices which will efface the donor as a person or rather reduce it to the level of the “impersonal gamete” and therefore eliminate it and allow themselves and their husbands to normalise the use of third party eggs and at the same time safeguard for themselves total exclusivity of parental identity. In this way the established anonymity covering all parties involved, the total concealment of the use of third party genetic material, the de-personification of the donation and its insulation within the limits of an impersonal commercial transaction become fundamental mechanisms which, by enabling the recipient/candidate mother to appear as the true biological parent, contribute to the ability of this biomedical method to imitate the natural reproductive process.

“This is not a donation: I gave money, she gave eggs, nor is it borrowing because I am not going to give them back. They are from a stranger, offered for a fee. In this way there is no likelihood of this ever getting out in the open, nobody else knows but the couple themselves. I don’t see why it should be announced to the child, this is no adoption with documents involved, in which case somebody knows and word gets out in the circle of acquaintances and therefore it is better to tell the child while young. Now, however, the child doesn’t need to know, besides it is your child alone and cannot find the donor anywhere, there is anonymity established, how can he/she look for her? In adoption the child may ask you to reveal the identity of his/her parents in order to find them and then choose what to do. But in the case of the donor what can you possibly say, it’s like directing him/her towards a tunnel, lost in space, searching to

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7 In the extracts of discussions and interviews quoted in the text the names of the interviewees are all pseudonyms and the dates denote the time of the interview. In the case of extracts from conversations made within the framework of the “Kyveli” meetings (in which case the name of the KYVELI Association is denoted by Capital letters) the date regards the time of the respective session.
find who he/she really is and asking you then why you don’t know the identity of the donor and since the law prohibits your finding out your child will only wonder where he/she came from” (KYVELI, 15/9/2010).

There is no doubt that the most important implication engendered as a result of the necessary mediation of third party eggs concerns the annulment of the maternal genes’ contribution to the genetic make up of the child and consequently the rupture in the biological continuity of kinship on the mother’s side.

In western societies the dominant ideology of kinship, as it is condensed in the proverb “blood is thicker than water”, demands to regard as “true” the kinship that emanates from the biological connection of the genetic parents with their children. The blood proves to be a synonym of biogenetic substance, which through the reproductive procedure is passed down to the descendants and becomes in this way the statutory principle of kinship. Up until the diffusion of new reproductive technologies the knowledge of biological ties safeguarded and at the same time justified the kin relatedness, to the extent that by definition genitors and parents became one and the same thing, as mentioned above and the children were regarded as a result of their fusion following conditions of absolute equation of the biogenetic material of both genetic parents. This means that the western representation of bilateral kinship comes from the acknowledgement of the equal contribution of both maternal and paternal genes for the conception of a child. According to this rationale the annulment of the mother’s biological contribution seems to be annihilating the very identity of motherhood and at the same catalysing maternal inheritance. The sense of a “foreign” genetic material which, penetrating their body, will carry along the biological inheritance of a “foreign” line of genealogy causes the recipients intense fear and even panic while it raises questions in their minds regarding the maintenance of family identity and the inclusion of the child in the parents’ kin network.

“My grandfather wanted grandchildren, to carry on the line. My mother only had one child, me, my uncle -who was the boy and the apple of his eyes – had no children whatsoever and as a result I am left with a burden on my shoulder, which is difficult to bear. I can tell you that I am the last branch of the family tree and it is entirely up to me to carry on our family line. Precisely at the time when I wanted to have a child this news came down on me like a ton of bricks, and all things combined, menopause included, everybody is turning to me too eager to hear the good news and now what am I to tell them, what can I fight against- and let me tell you seriously that I would rather die than have my mother find out. I have told her about the IVF, she believes that it will be with my own eggs and that because of my age my ovulation is not good [meaning that is why I am going ahead with the IVF in the first place], I have told her so many lies but I don’t want her ever to find out about this thing for as long as she lives
and this is because of the lack of kinship- that is I don't want her to find out that I am going to have some stranger's child and that in effect our family line on the side of my grandfather is over. I don't want her ever to find out, lest she gets hurt, lest she suffers. To me the child will be no stranger and I believe that my mother will love him/her, I don't have any concerns that her behaviour would be different otherwise, however I know that unable to help it she may cry herself to sleep at nights. For her it would be the end to our line. It will signify our end. When I got engaged my uncle actually said to me “I am waiting to see a positive pregnancy test and then I really will be overjoyed”. So, it feels like a mountain has fallen on my shoulders and I am faltering, struggling to stand on my feet to carry it, there is the succession of the family line involved. I wanted to carry on, to perpetuate their blood. The name has not been passed down, you and me may think these things ridiculous based on cold logic, unacceptable given my education and ideology, however my heart and soul is still struggling to cope and now I am waiting for the moment when I become a mother in order to choose family names, if I have one child I shall name him/her after my uncle or grandfather so that their names can be heard again. I feel this weight crushing me, this unbearable burden and it is absurd and I can see the absurdity of it all and I've been trying to use my reasoning and rationalize it and get it off my chest” (Myrsini, 20/10/2010).

So, no matter how much women fear that the donated genetic material undermines the normal models of parenthood and relatedness (which is precisely those that it is called upon to support and ascertain) they prefer, nevertheless, to proceed to rearrangements and re-definitions which will allow them to make peace with the “alternative” -and therefore socially questionable as non-acceptable- form of motherhood, which the biomedical technique of egg donation can offer them. They adopt radical ways in order to bring their desire to “create a child” to fruition and to experience motherhood, verifying the opinion that Ch. Thompson (2005) held, analysing her own research data, that timely desire for procreation governing parental plans does not only aspire to the creation of children but also equally serves the objective of the construction of parenthood (making parents) that is the construction of parental identity through the birth of a child.

“You become a parent through having a child, which means that it is the child that makes the parent. From a person you become a parent. Literally in the sense of construction, like making a thing” (KYVELI, 18/11/2009).

Manipulating established stereotypes that dictates paternal and maternal genes to contribute equally to the conception of the child, the recipients of the eggs /intended mothers attempt the re-definition of bodily substances hierarchy in what concerns their contribution to the establishment of motherhood, so that the emphasis be shifted from the biogenetic substance to gestation, labor and delivery and, afterwards, maternal
breast feeding. This is about the “dismantling” as M. Strathern calls it, of the intricate entity reflected in the figure of the mother in order to distinguish between its different constituents and to attribute a different gravity to the components that make up the role of the mother (2008 [1992]: 310). In this light, oocytes, gestation and labour, which are the biological foundations of “natural” motherhood, acquire a different meaning through processes of cleavage and split into well-distinguished separate entities.

During this process, the thwarting of genetic inheritance due to maternal genes through oocytes is downgraded and hushed up while, on the contrary, the importance of gestation is highlighted emphatically so that all biological signifiers be attributed to the pregnancy and the delivery of the child. The intervention of the uterus of the candidate mother, which safeguards the necessary environment for the growth of the foetus, is presented as something that constitutes a statutory condition, perfectly capable of nullifying the consequences of absence of genetic substance. According to my ethnographic data the blood-relationship ties with the mother appear not to emanate from the genetic inheritance of genes but by birth itself, in the broader sense of the word, which alludes to the gestation-labour complex. The body substances, the blood and placenta that feed the embryo until the end of the gestation period, are called upon to make up for the deficit of maternal genes and in this way to form the biological background of the connection between the pregnant woman and the child.

“It feeds on my blood, lives because my heart is beating, biologically speaking if you were to take this embryo and leave it in the environment it would die, it is in my body that it will become a human being, it will live, I will give it life, I'm providing the environment it needs to survive, it will feed through my body” (Myrsini 20/10/2010).

This is an important reversal of the current western conceptualization of kinship: from the genes we are now passing to the “consubstantiality”, the significance of the “same substance”, which however is no longer defined based on the share of genes, but the physical substances transferred from the body of the pregnant woman to that of the embryo during gestation. D. Schneider, reducing the concept of “substance” to an analytical term for the study of kinship underlines that in the Euro-American society blood relatedness is a relation of common and shared substance, it is the relation created through the inheritance of biogenetic material ([1968]1980: 25). Thus the blood, identified with biogenetic substance is elevated to a statutory symbol of kinship. However, the metaphorical significance of blood for the conceptualization of relatedness does not necessarily constitute an axiom and a foregone conclusion that blood is to be identified with genes. As J. Edwards suggests we do, we must now take
into account the “multivalency of ‘blood’” when we examine the significance of genetics and genealogy in what concerns the establishment of kin relatedness in modern European societies. Established convictions, according to which blood alludes to biogenetic relations and denotes biological descent, are shaken— if not altogether discredited— by the ethnographic data of recent anthropological research, which indicate that in the conceptualization of agents, the blood ties are not “forged ” by exclusively following the passing down of genetic material and, therefore, biologically grounded relations are not necessarily identified with the genealogical ties that go back to genes. “The notion of shared blood as constituting relatedness is powerful, but it cannot axiomatically be reduced to either the biogenetic specifically or to biology more generally” (Edwards [2009] 2012: 10).

Indeed, the analysis of what my informants claim allows me to reach the conclusion that the symbolic and metaphorical significance of blood retains its weight in what concerns the establishment of motherhood, however the blood is not necessarily acknowledged as coterminous with biogenetic substance. The interviews I had, clearly reflect the way in which the genetic contribution of the ovaries is downgraded, while the blood that flows between the uterus and the embryo, the nourishment and the somatopoetic practice of gestation are highlighted as the fundamental values that govern the biological connection between mother and child. In the linear hereditary transmission of the paternal and maternal blood there comes the blood of gestation to be added, blood which may not be genetic but it is transferred through the umbilical cord from the mother to the embryo, establishing motherhood and constructing the maternal relation in terms of biological continuity.

Through the counterpoint of genes and blood the genetic constituents to the maternal role (genes) are distinguished from the biological, non-genetic ones (blood, placenta). The oocytes donated are not acknowledged as capable of attributing the capacity of mother to the donor. The genetic identity here is not necessarily followed by a social relation. Therefore, the stereotypical notion that condenses the most basic axiom of western essentialism is transgressed, which means that “blood can in fact be thinner than water” when that the biological connection of the child with the donor is to be breached. With these conceptual paradigm shifts, the break-down of the genetic connection between the child and the woman pregnant with it, is counterbalanced. The child-bearing is re-naturalized, it gains the features of a natural phenomenon and, in the end, the body of the intended mother does not lose its functional significance for the
The establishment of motherhood. The nourishment of the embryo until the time of gestation completion by the body of the intended mother and then, after birth, lactation, upbringing, and the care of the child now become dominant features of the maternal role.

“Motherhood begins inside you from the time the little baby starts to move and you know that it is feeding through you, through your own blood, and it feels what you feel through the placenta. It is then that you feel that it is something of yours, a part of you, it is from that time that you start loving the little child and of course when you give birth to it you truly adore it. When I gave birth and they brought me the baby to breast-feed you could see that need, opening the little mouth and asking for milk, crying and I kept thinking at that moment that the baby needs me and wants me to feed him with my milk, when you see him needing you from such a young age it is then that maternal affection starts, you are overwhelmed with emotions and you can’t help thinking that such a tiny little creature needs me, to feed him, and not only that but to protect him in life, in every domain of his life, to give him money to study, to dress him, to be by his side for whatever he needs, in sickness and in everything else, even when he starts his own family, because you know that the Greek mother does not get everything over when the son gets married, on the contrary she gets in deeper I would say, she babysits for the grandchildren, in fact I will enjoy this, looking after the kids, that is I would like to be active and useful throughout the course of his life (Thalia, 14/7/2010).

The genetic bond, which pertains to the donor but does not allude to the creation of a kin relatedness, is circumvented so that the “epigenetic bond” can be assimilated. The latter bond is established through gestation, lactation and child-raising. If the anonymous donor, who by the way is never mentioned in the words of my informants as the genetic mother, offers the oocyte, the intended recipient mother offers the biological substances of her body. The notion of body substances offer denotes active participation, the intentional action of the recipient in order to establish her relation with the child as a maternal one- in contrast with the passive contribution of the donor for whom the concession of the oocytes signifies at the same time her refusal to acknowledge any biological relatedness with the child. The use of ovaries does not have consequences for the social reproduction of the donor or, as M. Konrad points out, “the donors produce but are not reproduced” (1998). The relation with the donor is then determined by the biogenetic determinants of genealogy criteria, however this is a relation which the implicated agents choose never to render active, since for the donor the egg donation does not signal her intention to cultivate and therefore experience blood relatedness with the child. Moreover, on the opposite side, the intended recipient

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8The term “epigenetic bond” is proposed by G. Delaisi de Parseval, who distinguishes it from the genetic one, stressing that “epigenetics describes the unison of environmental processes which influence the expression of the genetic bond” ([2008] 2013: 288, footnote 259).
mother with her husband impose the absolute delimitation of the third party biological presence so that this presence will be bound to remain “without history”. Neither the parents, nor the child later, will ascribe a social use or a social acknowledgement to this presence, in fact the parents will not allow it, lest it should lead to entering into procedures of social and symbolic exchanges with the donor. Thus the genealogical connection with the donor, remaining inactive and inert, is excluded from the realm of practical kinship, from the privileged nexus of practical relations which, as P. Bourdieu stresses, includes all genealogical relations that through a constant labour of maintenance are kept in an active state in order to meet the demands of every day reality ([1980] 2006: 267).

“In the case of adoption he/she [the child] is ravaged by why they were abandoned by their mother, thinking perhaps I should meet her because things could be better by living with her . While here you know with absolute certainty that it never crossed the donor's mind to have the child herself, she just offered the genetic material. I believe that no donor would look for the child, while a mother who placed her child for adoption may want it in the future, but a donor who has only given an egg can't have feelings of some kind, I don't think so because I suppose they do this [donating eggs] many times” (Alkmini, 17/12/2012).

After all, the special physical connection between the mother and the child during gestation seems to work in an equally offsetting way as well as in regard to the absence of the inherited “biological” resemblance. That is, while the passing down of the maternal phenotypical characteristics is annuled, the placenta and the body substances are thought to “transmit” elements and properties which influence decisively not the physiognomy but definitely the character of the child, so that in the end similarities with the mother are “constructed”, and in fact they are so readily identifiable that they can totally mask, in the eyes of the wider circle of relatives the absence of maternal biogenetic substance.

“During the pregnancy period the baby will get some things from me, too. It will feed through my blood, surely the baby won't get my external features, however I believe that it will take after my habits, my virtues, my flaws. I believe that upbringing ,too, plays a major role. First of all I will be feeding the baby with my blood but also with my behaviour. It will have a part of me, too” (Alkisti, 15/10/2010).

At the same time my material reveals that the care, the affection and the total devotion to the upbringing of the child also create the conditions for the “construction” of resemblance since the emotional bond contributes once again so that the child can “take after” the mother in many different ways.

“Don't worry, when you take care of it, you will bring it up day by day, it will feed on your
love, it will take after you, too. The baby takes the eyes of the person that looks after it” (KYVELI, 3/11/2010).

Where the absence of biogenetic substance threatens to create a breach in the cohesion of relatedness, the selection of an egg donor whose cast of features are similar to those of the parents is also employed as a strategy, so that the construction of maximum possible outer appearance resemblance, mainly between the child and the mother, can restore the continuity of kin relatedness on both a visible and a physical level.

The insistence on finding and recognizing similarities indicates that, in the case of third party genetic material used, there is a great effort made to validate the incorporation of the child in the family group through the achievement of its physiognomical resemblance with the members of this group. In other words, an endeavour is made to undermine the lack of continuity in the domain of biologically grounded relations with the continuity that appearance similarities make up for as regards visible and physical features. Where the lack of biogenetic substance threatens to create a breach in kin relatedness cohesion, similarities “even if they are not always biological nevertheless always serve a positive purpose” (Marre & Bestard [2009]2012: 78), raising them to a fundamental means for the acknowledgement of family identity and the strengthening of kinship. Physiognomical similarities, even if they cannot be reduced to hereditary transmission of biogenetic substance are equated to biology, to the extent that they concern the body, in its visible and outer form (Fortier 2009: 272). Under these conditions the construction of physiognomy resemblance provides the opportunity for re-conceptualizations and redefinition of a quasi biologically grounded relation between the mother and the child. This means that through the effort to achieve physiognomy identification between the mother and the child the neonate is enrolled in a genealogy line (relatedness group) which is not based on biogenetic inheritance but endeavours are made to structure it based on the kinship that similarities establish between their bodies. In other words, the demand for the construction of phenotypical similarities aims at the strengthening of ties with the parent who does not establish parenthood in conjunction with the transmission of his/her genetic material by subverting the precariousness of kinship relations that the lack of biological connection entails. In this way, despite the cancellation of the mother’s biogenetic contribution, resemblance goes on functioning as an indicator of family identity, it goes on safeguarding the reconnaissance of kinship ties, so that family continuity can be ascertained. The verification of the physiognomy similarity of the child with the
parents, and if this is not absolutely possible, the resemblance with any other member of the bilateral kinship group, serving the cultural demand of inheritance continuation, allows for the circumvention of the cancelled genetic contribution on the part of the mother without placing biological parenthood under threat.

So, the meaning of transmission and contribution of physical substances, in conjunction with the construction of physiognomical similarities denote the active participation, the intentional action of the intended recipient mother who, in order to counteract her lack of maternal genes contribution, establishes her biological connection with the child. Therefore the establishment of motherhood and kin relatedness is once again reduced to biological terms, blood ties, only this time blood is not regarded as synonymous to genes. When women are faced with the medically diagnosed irreversible infertility of theirs they approve on one hand the option of egg donation and on the other hand they allow some room for themselves to acknowledge certain biological characteristics, to “shape” them, to assemble them and to circumvent, dismantle and deconstruct some other features in such a way as to annihilate their cultural significance and then proceed to re-conceptualizations and redefinitions of kinship relations. To the sperm and eggs which, according to G. Delaisi de Parseval, are acknowledged as the par excellence “bodily agents of kinship”, blood and milk are added, illustrating that in reality all these constitute “social and fantasy secretions which are readily re-interpreted both by society and by the unconscious of the users (the recipients) but also the “providers” (the donors)” ([2008] 2013: 277-278). My interviewees construct their relatedness with the child through the “same substance” of the bodies, through the common substances, which are transferred from their body to the body of the child and also through the physiognomy likeness that they create between these two bodies. This is in fact a new form of biological relatedness, which, even though it is not expressed in terms of a common biogenetic substance, it is not identified with the bonds that genes are thought to transmit, it acquires a meaning as biological, since it goes on drawing on the body and therefore it is rightfully considered equally strong. I think that here we can actually talk about a “corporal affinity” (parenté de corps), expanding the notion that C. Fortier introduced in order to define the kinship that, in the cases of heterologous in vitro fertilisation, is interwoven between the candidate parents and the child based on the construction of physiognomical resemblance (2009:274). In the basic distinction between genetic bonds, which emanate from the transmission of biogenetic substance during the process of reproduction and
the purely social relations, intervene the biological/corporal parenthood as a result of intentional construction. It is not a “natural” process but is built through processes of kinning, which as we said are formed on the basis of blood, not as a biogenetic substance but as a constituent substance to gestation, maternal milk, the care of upbringing and the construction of phenotypical similarities. In other words through performance or accomplishment. When my informants are faced with the cancellations/change of plan that infertility entails they become involved in what Ch. Thompson calls “ontological choreography”, they handle and put together elements from different ontological categories (nature, culture) in order to manage to harmonize their conscious desire to have a child with the biological demands of the western conceptualizations of kinship. It is all about a dynamic combination of “surprisingly everyday strategies for naturalizing and socializing particulars traits, substances, precedents, and behaviours” (Thompson 2001:175).

In conclusion, according to my findings my informants, faced with their medically diagnosed inability to procreate, do not abandon their parental project to “create the child”, nevertheless. On the contrary, by choosing to reduce the state of the medical and social liminality to which their infertility condemns them, they normalise and naturalise the biomedical method of egg donation. Within, but also against the dominant structures, the agents activate a wide range of strategies: gradual overshadowing of the mediating intervention of third parties (doctors and donor) and entrenchment of their contribution in the limits of an economic transaction, devaluation of the contribution of the third party genetic material and limitation of this material in what concerns the creation of the new person's identity. On the other hand, the conceptualization of kinship by blood in terms that allude to the “gestational” (meaning non-genetic biological) and not the “genetic” meaning of blood and the establishment of motherhood in relation to terms that concern gestation, birth, lactation, the care involved in upbringing but also to the timeliness of the recipients' decision to “make an effort ” to have a child, all of this is turned into strategic practices in the hands of the women, capable of composing that non-biogenetic kinship which can also be “real” or, in other words, indicating that genetics is not the only factor that can create a “natural” bond.

With the re-conceptualizations and the redefinitions of biological data, through “a constant movement between the significance and insignificance, the foregrounding and backgrounding, the emphasis and underestimation of biological connections” (Edwards [2009]2012:14), my informants seem to refute the axiom that nature necessarily
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constitutes the fundamental basis of sociality. By ascribing meaning to their kinship relations through new compositions of elements, symbols and metaphors, biology is stressed at times and nurture at others, without caring about determining each time what is innate and what is acquired, the women “deal a new hand in the cards” of kinship. The way in which social agents conceptualize and experience kinship, a way that renders clear the content of counterpoint between nature and nurture, what is stable and what remains to be formed, what is and what is to be done, in the end leads to the acknowledgement that kinship should not be exclusively considered to emanate from being but also from acting. The intended recipient mothers can reject the monolithic subordination of kinship to biology and, conversely, legitimate the kinship that is constructed through achievement. Their action highlights the cultural interventions in the biological facts of reproduction and, therefore, the establishment of relatedness. In this manner, nature which is subjected to the intentional interventions of human ingenuity is turned into a place of artificiality, since it is realised by means of human practice. The analysis of my ethnographic data seems to corroborate the final conclusion reached by P. Wade that “the dividing line between 'nature' and 'culture' is by no means clear, since it is characterised by ambiguity and is subject to expediency strategies. Furthermore, it seems that culture is capable of shaping the human character and the human pattern of relatedness not as a coating of nature but within the framework of a competition on equal terms between the two” ([2002]2009: 223). The strategies of dismantling and re-assembling biological facts that the subjects endeavour denote the normalisation of hybrid conjunctions of the natural and the artificial and highlight the transformation of nature through technique, the perception of nature as “modelled on culture understood as practice. Nature will be known and remade through technique and will finally become artificial, just as culture becomes natural” (Rabinow 1996:99).

On the whole, assisted reproduction has led both the subjects themselves and the field of theoretical analysis to important dismantlements, re-conceptualizations and revisions, which problematise the established for western societies identification of kinship with the “naturalness” of biogenetic connection. And it may be the case, as I implied at the beginning of the present text, that the nature/culture interaction has always rendered feasible, possibly more than we believe, the manipulations and negotiations on the level of kinship but I think that with reproductive biotechnology we can now speak of a “shift of tectonic plates”, fundamental changes in the way we shall
think about kinship and experience it in the future.

**Bibliography**


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