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Becoming mothers: narrating adoption and making kinship in Greece

This paper is about the intensive narrative work and the agony of adoptive mothers on how to talk to their children about their lives before the adoption, about a story that was partly unknown, about a past that the parents haven’t lived. These anxieties reveal that this struggle with language and the creation of stories was fundamental to their own becoming as mothers. I argue that a ‘kinning process’ is sustained through the repetition of children’s biographies and that, through the narration and re-narration, of children’s placement and the existence of the birthmothers, adoptive mothers construct relations with their children and also their maternal self.

Key words adoption, kinship, narration, Greece, motherhood

Introduction

‘I told her the story a thousand times’, Maria said to me quietly, ‘since she came here to live with us when she was two years old: how she became our child. She was growing up and asking for more details, especially about her biological mother. I was answering, I was telling, I was the writer of her story, I was placing her at the beginning of her life, I was her mother.’ Then she stopped for a moment, looking at the photos of her daughter all around her living room. She added, ‘there is a period which we miss, we don’t have it and we are trying hard to face it’. Maria had adopted her daughter from an infant care centre in Athens.

This paper is about the stories adoptive mothers tell themselves, their children and their society, and how in this telling they are transformed into mothers and build kinship links with their children. There are many other practices that have been described as ‘kinning’ (Howell 2003) for adopted children; I concentrate here on the narratives of adoption itself as a kinning process. Since I began researching adoption politics in Greece, I have been struck by the intensity of the narrative work (Dorow 2006) and the agony of adoptive parents, especially mothers, concerning how to talk to their children about their lives before the adoption – about a story that was partly unknown, about a past that the parents hadn’t lived. These anxieties reveal that the struggle with language and the creation of stories was fundamental to their own becoming as mothers.

I focus on the kinning work of the narratives that adoptive mothers tell as they construct ‘natural’ biographies for their children and respond to their children’s requests to hear their adoption stories. In this constant recall of the story, which often begins as a fairy tale, as the child grows older, the other mother – the birthmother – is dynamically placed in the narrative, redefining adoptive mothers, their children and their relations with the world. I ask what kind of mothers these adoptive mothers make...
themselves through telling and retelling the adoption stories to their children, and how they make the adoptive children ‘theirs’ – through their doubts about what to tell, through the reaction of the child, through the constant representation of a story that adoptive parents haven’t lived: the life of their children before the adoption. The story that is told at different times is always a different story (Deleuze 1994), bringing into sharp relief the negotiations and modifications that adoptive mothers make in order to situate and address the persons involved in the adoption – especially the birthmother – and to explain a story of a past in different times (Ricoeur 2010). These stories are triggered by a particular narrative of the time of kinship; at different times, adoptive mothers add to and change what constitutes the same story. When the children grow up and ask for the story’s narration, it is always another, new time for the child and the mother, another time in the child’s becoming. Adoptive mothers try to build a story that the adopted child and, in turn, the adopted adult can return to and use to explain their situation to themselves. In other words, adoptive mothers try to create a logical family narrative, with a clear chronological line, and thus to create a place where family memories can be stored and subtitled without gaps or lacunae and in a way that will not be problematic for their children’s futures.

The stories adoptive mothers tell are ‘elaborating a relation to an other in language’ (Butler 2009: 50): a relation with their adopted children. These mothers narrate and ‘bind [themselves] as [they] narrate, give an account of [themselves], offer an account to an other in the form of a story that might well work to summarize how and why [they are]’ (Butler 2009: 66). Through this process, mothers recognise the limits of their personal narration and its temporality (2009: 66). I show how, in the context of Greek kinship ideology, stories of displacements (Jackson 2013), such as those about adoption, create the space for new imaginaries and for the contestation of normative ideologies (such as the production of linearity), so that finally adoptive mothers become not only mothers, but also agents and carriers of a radical discourse.

I argue that these narratives should be understood in the context of contemporary Greek society where, as I heard frequently from such adoptive mothers, ‘society is not open – people cannot accept adoption’. Adoptive parents must be very careful regarding to whom they reveal their familial adoption status, about their ‘kinship with strangers’, and when they simply cannot speak about the adoption at all. Potential adoptive parents go through different stages of consideration until finally they accept the possibility of becoming adoptive parents, and then they reverse, contest or transform the power of sharing the same biological material with their children. I will argue that what these adoption narratives do is dramatise what is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ in kinship, and that they could be seen on a par with new reproductive technologies – as technologies of motherhood¹ that operate through the language of storytelling. While adoptive kinship works through apparent ruptures and sutures, disconnections and connections, my argument is that this illuminates not just the specificity of this adoptive kinship but kinship more broadly. This is important for current kinship theory. I elaborate on this here in this paper’s theoretical conclusion, which I reach through the detailed ethnography of these narratives and contextualisation of these narratives in Greek context in what follows below.

The material in this paper is based on research I conducted between 2010 and 2012 in Greece, mainly in Athens, while researching the politics of adoption. Here I

¹ Compare Paxson’s (2004) account on technologies of motherhood in Greece.
concentrate on women who adopted children or were at various stages of the adoption procedure. These women were actively involved in ‘Amfidoron’, the first Greek association for adoption, of which I was also a member, although I am not an adoptive mother myself. Unfortunately, after almost eight years of existence, the majority of the members decided to disband ‘Amfidoron’, since participation was limited, indicating the resistance of Greek adoptive parents to present their adoptive status in public. Through our meetings and our online discussions in an internet forum for adoption, I came to realise and understand the distress which adoptive parents, especially mothers, felt when it came to deciding how to speak to other people – especially to their own children – about adoption. Although there is no large-scale study in Greece to show the social and economic backgrounds of the people who adopt, my impression is that most of them come from middle-class backgrounds, with many of them holding university degrees and having a high level of linguistic skills and competence.

Making adoptive mothers in Greece

I have often heard about involuntarily childless couples in Greece who are trying to have a baby through in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment, and how difficult it is for them to consider adopting a child. Studies of assisted reproductive technologies (Chatjouli et al. 2015; Tountasaki 2015; Paxson 2004) in Greece have indicated the desire of couples to have their ‘own child’, that is, a biological biologically-related child ideally carrying reproductive materials of both partners, a child who will come into being through conception, pregnancy and childbirth (Chatjouli et al. 2015: 71). Biological processes or mutual biological materials form the genealogical bond between parents and children that ‘constitutes the main axis around which the relationship between a parent and a child is perceived and imagined’ (2015: 71), the normative manner of making kinship. That is why most heterosexual couples in Greece who have adopted or are trying to adopt a child, which mostly means a healthy, white infant, do so as a result of involuntary infertility. Most women in such cases have undergone one, some or many rounds of unsuccessful IVF treatment. Adoption goes beyond this normative understanding and imagination.

In her illuminating ethnography of middle-class mothers in Athens in the 1990s, Heather Paxson has shown how Athenian women perceived motherhood ‘as something to be worked at, achieved, and continuously demonstrated’ (2004: 214). She notes, following Herzfeld (1985), that ‘achieving motherhood is part of a larger moral economy of gender and kinship in which women are concerned with being “good” mothers and “good at being” women’ (Paxson 2006: 482). The desire for the child, which ‘is not only taken for granted but is also viewed as moral’ (2006: 221), is not enough for becoming a good mother. Women have to consider ‘the potential quality of mothering’ (2006: 249). To succeed in this project, women have to make ‘the right choices’, they must be responsible for securing the right and proper conditions for bringing up a child (Paxson 2004: 10), such as having a good husband, a stable home and economic stability, all of which involve ‘rational planning’, as Paxson calls it. Abortion is also a rational choice for becoming a good mother, since it is perceived by Athenian women as a natural form of contraception to regulate family size or postpone having children (2004: 15). Rational family planning demonstrates women’s consciousness and responsibility towards their nation and their future society (2004: 66).
The problem starts when women have planned everything and are ready to become mothers but the child doesn’t come. The most natural ‘unnatural’ way to have children in Greece, according to Paxson, is through the use of medical technologies because, as she has persuasively shown, ‘it is gestation and birth, rather than conception, that is both definitive and emblematic of true motherhood’ (2004: 221). The women Paxson met, according to this ‘Greek kinship ideology’, perceived IVF rather than adoption as a more natural way to have children, and used this technology as a means to motherhood since ‘any recourse to science or technology in the aid of fulfilling that desire is not merely justified, it is deemed natural’ (2004: 221). Expanding Paxson’s argument, I want to include adoption too as a technology of motherhood when all other technologies fail. The failure of IVF impels or drives involuntarily childless women to search rationally for the next reproductive technology – adoption – that would help them to realise their project of motherhood. Due to medical technology failures, adoptive mothers reached an ethical and bodily limit that contested the ‘naturalness’ of these methods and began to give greater significance to the social dimensions of parenting, thus searching for and making way for adoption. Adoption in Greece is the ultimate technology for having a baby in the family, which is probably why the adoption of older children is exceptionally rare.

Narrating a displacement

Through various different narrations, adoptive mothers try to explain the child’s ‘entry’ to their family and to create biographies for them. The ‘trouble’ caused by the movement of a child from a biologically related network to another non-biologically related one differs and changes in relation to society and the time of its occurrence. Several studies of adoption in the Western world have indicated the intensive work adoptees and adoptive parents need to do on subjectification, that is, on how they situate themselves in the world, on how they answer questions such as ‘who am I’ or ‘what am I to this child’ (Carsten 2007; Dorow 2006; Kim 2010; Modell 1994; Fonseca 2004; Howell 2007; Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). Yngvesson and Mahoney noted, while studying adoptees’ struggles to find an identity, that “Broken” versus “unbroken” stories expose the modernist compulsion to generate order from disorder, and the anxiety produced when a fixed point of origin cannot be supplied’ (2000: 78). In their efforts to tell the missing story of childbirth, adoptive mothers are propelled ‘to search for ways of reconstructing and archiving the children’s origin story’, as De Graeve and Longman (2013: 144) have indicated for Belgian parents who adopted children from Ethiopia. By archiving family memories and children’s entrances into this world, adoptive parents create their mutual genealogy with their children in their telling, since genealogy involves exactly this kind of archiving – recording the past and imagining the future through the present.

Observing contemporary queer novels, films and art exhibitions in Greece, Dimitris Papanikolaou noticed that what was so evident in people’s family archive were ‘the ways it is haunted by the unfinished histories, the unclaimed territories and the untold stories of the past’ (2018: 180). He identified a trend whereby subjects went back to the past in an effort to face and resolve it. Adoption stories, we could say, are also queer stories, since they say something about the out of the ordinary that demands its constant negotiation, with its articulation possibly disturbing the fabric
of the ordinary and the subjects involved. The protagonists of adoption stories are haunted by feelings and by the same need as queer selves to return constantly to their past to heal the ruptures.

Gabriela, an adoptive mother and an active member of the ‘Amfidoron’ association, adopted her daughter from a public institution when she was 18 months old. During their first few days together, she had already begun telling her a fairy tale about a poor goat with children she couldn’t feed, and another one without little goats of her own who had plenty of grass but who was lonely and sad. One day, the lonely goat asked the other one, ‘Why don’t you give me one of your little goats to raise as my child?’ And she replied: ‘I’ll give you one. Besides, my little goats are suffering and are starving to death.’

For Gabriela, poverty is a strong reason for a birthmother to decide to give the child she birthed for adoption, and it is exactly this decision that allows the birthmother to be included in the category of the mother as (birth)mother. Since, for various reasons, the birthmother couldn’t handle having an abortion, she decided to give birth and give the child to someone who would provide the suitable conditions for raising it. A child is moved from its poor environs to somewhere with the possibility of a better life. In the specific pattern of narration, this trajectory, signifying ‘the child’s benefit’, constitutes an act of parental love and not rejection. The social history file Gabriela took from the adoption centre states that the birthmother was an economic migrant from Romania who lived alone in Athens and had been working for the last ten years as a house-cleaner. She told the social services that she became pregnant by accident and, although she wished to keep the child, her precarious conditions did not allow her to do so. She worked all day and half her money was sent to her other children in Romania, who were being raised by their grandparents.

In such stories, a birthmother’s love for the child (the basic quality of being a mother) is proved by her decision to give the child to another mother who could raise it properly, in a way ‘saving’ her child. Gabriela’s fairy tale implies the difficult situation in the Greek context: to become a parent in an environment where the children would grow up neither ‘properly’ nor ‘well’, in the terms Paxson (2004) has described. There are vivid memories of times in recent Greek history – during the Second World War and the civil war – of people living in extreme poverty with many children. Then, in a more recent era from the late 1970s, family planning was introduced in an effort to regulate family size for the benefit of children’s well-being. This family planning discourse was imported from, and based on, similar northern Euro-American family programmes and was incorporated – with major contradictions and ambiguities – in the Greek case (Paxson 2004: 159). In this ideology, families with a lot of children who cannot be raised properly were perceived as acting like animals without the ability to control sexuality (Friedl 1962: 50). The logic of a woman giving up the child that she gave birth to constitutes a repair of unplanned childbirth. Reversing the convention according to which the ‘maternal body’ gives birth, adoptive mothers reconstruct the ‘maternal’, building on the ‘desire’ for the child and on their ability to offer it a ‘proper’ environment.

Contrary to this pattern, Venetia, a woman who also adopted a child from a public infant centre, told me: ‘I would definitely not tell my child that it had been abandoned because of poverty, and this is why I asked the people at the infant centre to give me a child that had been abandoned for other reasons’. The story she tells her son begins with another pattern, which is equally common:
I used to tell him about a lady who couldn’t keep her child and sent it over to a little children’s home, a house with children. We were a sad and childless couple and one day we decided to visit the house of the children and take away with us the sweetest little boy, and make him our own child.

Poverty, according to Venetia, causes a lot of problems in the narration because the child may say, ‘If you become poor will you give me to another mother?’ A discourse of poverty makes more obvious the privileged position of the adoptive mother. She has the child instead of the birthmother; she has the privilege to be able to raise the child because the woman who gave birth to him ‘couldn’t keep him’. The narration of poverty, Venetia feels, threatens her relationship with her child. Her explanations may also be implicitly based on a Greek history of poverty, but she translates this differently from Gabriela. Hundreds of war children were held in child protection institutions without being orphaned, because of their poverty, in order to survive. A lot of those children were adopted, mostly in the USA. On this connotation of poverty, abandonment and adoption, the international network of adoptions was built through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s so that children might have a better life rather than starving to death (Van Steen 2019). Years after, in the 1990s, these stories came to light with the revelation of a scandal that children had been adopted as orphaned with fake certificates and names, giving adoption and poverty in Greek collective memory negative connotations. This is a history of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997) that Greeks know well but find hard to speak about. Venetia, contrary to Gabriela, expresses that connotation. Poverty reminds Greeks of a painful and sad history and leads to different subjective choices about how to deal with their collective story.

By invoking specific narration patterns, such as ‘I loved you from the first time I saw you’, or ‘I loved you long before I met you’, the adoption is adorned with a touch of fate, a touch of something previously preordained in this relation. In this way, kinship in the West ‘is always a previous relation: it comes from the past, and it is important to discover preceding connections in order to construct future relations with a child. When the new body lacks these prior connections through conception, some other previous relations have to be found on which to build the enduring and intimate solidarity of kinship’, as Marre and Bestard (2009: 67) suggest for Catalans. The invocation of fate in some of these narratives serves to construct a past and an irreversible condition, just as the condition of blood kinship does. Relating this story and the fairy tale again and again are part of the ceaseless iterative work undertaken by the adoptive parents in their attempt to connect the dots between the story of their child and their own, and thereby to restore the narrative order of kinship. The belief that ‘we loved him even before his birth brought us closer’ reinforces the feeling of fate and of ‘something’ which pre-existed their contact.

Luck and fate are materials of kinship here; luck brings children. According to Paxson, the concept of fate is employed by people in Greece ‘in order to carry on in a world not under their immediate control’ (2004: 94) and ‘permit people to manipulate circumstances behind the scrim of public scrutiny without upsetting the dominant

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2 See Fonseca (2004) for Brazil, where the politics of transnational adoptions are based in the dichotomy between poor and wealthy nations, poor birth parents and wealthy adoptive ones.

3 See Van Steen (2019) for overseas adoption in Greece and Brouskou’s study (2015) for the public nursery of ‘Agios Stylianos’.
ideological order’ (2004: 95). The notion or experience of abandonment is subverted and filled with the content of love, as the initial abandonment is narrated as a story of the birth parents’ love for the child. Whether due to poverty or for any other reason, all parties involved decide to proceed with the adoption for the ‘benefit’ of the child. They have made the right decision and acted out of love in deciding in favour of the child’s mobility. In the context of the fairy tale, the elements of choice and magic explain why these children ‘are ours’ and why there was a shift in the child’s environment.

Explicating the placement of the child, again and again, adoptive mothers realise that the stable story they try to provide often brings up contradictory feelings. Venetia told me about the sorrow she feels every year on her son’s birthday:

Four years ago, a tragedy occurred that led to his birth and abandonment. I’m thinking of this infant, who was separated from his mother, who had been all by himself for days and nights. I’m thinking of my child’s birth, which is anything but a pink fairy-tale.

At the beginning of the adoption process, adoptive mothers in Greece try hard to make sure that their children will have a linear biography. What is striking, though, is that as much as they fill in the gaps of the line with more elements, the more ambiguities arise in their linear biographies. This is because although linear biographical idioms are basic to the formation of subjectivities, as Sophie Day observes in following up the stories of sex workers in London, they are ‘yet so clearly untrue to life’ (2007: 173), which is especially obvious to the people who live disrupted lives. Day shows how people with disrupted lives may employ different or multiple biographies against the usual biographical idioms because otherwise ‘relationships cannot be managed and mistrust cannot be contained or domesticated’ (2007: 176). In one way or another, this is something that we all do, Day argues, since we all have disruptions in our biography, we all make choices about what to narrate and what to conceal in order to create a narrative that will allow us to be situated in our world and to belong somewhere (2007: 189).

This chronological time helps genealogy to be constructed, since modern time in which we live is perceived in our western world in Euclidian terms. But if we look closely at attempts to narrate linear stories, we may see the ruptures better. In Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov’s account of the work of ‘teleological time that eclipses the present into its historical end, and often desperate[ly] attempts to prevent fragility and stop decomposition’ (2006: 371), in a Soviet exhibition of birthday gifts to Stalin in 1949, we actually see that, much as we try to present a time line, we in fact witness ‘several temporal disjunctures’ (2006: 356). It could be argued that something similar takes place in my material in a very different context: that of the attempts of adoptive mothers to present a linear story to their children, in these mothers’ efforts to create a biography, a genealogy for their children based on the linearity of events. I argue these mothers also face the paradoxes of the linear as they try to fix this timeline of the past while thinking about what kind of adults they want to create, and think about future subjects through the facts and challenges of the present.

While very young adoptees accept these narratives, as they grow up and gain awareness of the cultural scripts of blood kinship, they demand and assert their own involvement in the story of their adoption. Quite often, they find it hard to accept the fact that they entered the family in the way presented to them. This is distinctively
shown in the stories posted on the forum by Danae, the adoptive mother of a nine-year-old girl who was adopted when she was 18 months old:

One evening, she came to my bed before going to sleep; she wasn’t crying, but her voice was cracked and trembling, her chin was also trembling and her facial muscles contracted, she was worked up emotionally, and told me: ‘Mum, I’m so sad that you didn’t take me out of your tummy. Do something, mummy, I want to come out of your tummy, too.’

What the child expresses is essentially the desire for a linear bodily continuity, following the dominant narrative of her peers in school. This reveals how, eventually, the story escapes the parents’ control and is appropriated by the child. Hence, in many cases, I observed that the initial excitement expressed by the adoptive parents and their openness when it came to talking about their child’s adoption slowly evaporates. As children grow older, they lay claim to their privacy. At a certain point in time, Danae’s daughter asked to go to another school because, as she said, everybody knew that she was adopted, and she wanted to go to a school where nobody knew. Danae asked her: ‘Why? Are you ashamed of it?’ and her daughter replied: ‘No, I’m not. I just want to be the one who says it to whoever I want to, instead of you.’ At first, Danae wrote that she felt sad about this, but when she thought it over again, she understood that now this was her daughter’s story, it wasn’t hers to tell any more.

The adoption story is as much a story about the making of a relationship as an attempt to explicate abandonment in a way that recreates the maternal body. Hence, in the context of adoption, the narrative as a creative process seeks to explain how birthmothers and children are separated – a phenomenon that actually lies beyond the realm of intelligibility – and how non-birthmothers can lay claim to motherhood. Working on unintelligible conditions constitutes a hard and painful process, requiring adoptive mothers to be organised and to have a concrete plan. By adding new elements or omitting others, recounting a story that is constantly under construction is part of the process of connecting a parent and a child.4 This connection cannot be achieved without an origin, a narrative beginning and a separation that would make the adoption possible. Mothers create these stories with reference to the birthmothers, themselves and the child’s body, although the hardest part is to describe and discuss the birthmother.

**Positioning birthmothers**

Once parents begin to create and narrate the child’s story, they are faced with the task of explaining who the birth parents were, and their own relationship as well as their children’s relationship with them. These are questions that call for an answer to be passed on to children as clearly as possible. Revelations are gradually woven together from these questions and, in each case, the parents provide their children with more or less information. Demetra, who adopted her daughter at the age of three months, told me: ‘I always talk about the biological parents with love and affection, I have become a mother thanks to that woman who decided to keep her baby and didn’t have an

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4 See Reece (forthcoming) about how family stories ‘harness crisis to reproduce and realign kin relationships – and thereby make selves’.
abortion.’ Contrary to the rational planning of children, birthmothers, by not planning well, got pregnant but in the meantime they considered rationally and decided to give the child up for adoption so as to be raised properly by another mother. Exactly this decision situates the birthmother in a position where they can also be called mothers – birthmothers.

Niki narrates her story on the forum:

When I first saw my older child, I felt so many positive emotions for the women who chose to respect their children’s life and give another woman such a gift, even in their absence. It is this respect shown to life – instead of opting for the easy way out by having an abortion – that makes me consider them as mothers, and this is why I use the term ‘biological mother’, which is totally understandable for my older son, although he feels that it’s not of his concern, since he has his own parents. The younger ones, who would be confused by this term, have come up with their own solution, coining the expression ‘my old parents’ or ‘my old mum’. I think this is a very tender way to put it and it is equivalent to the conception of the old in the context of the family: it’s something that used to be, yet is too far away; we may not even remember it, but we can still love it (like our old toys, our old house and so on).

When Yorgos’s adoptive son asked him: ‘Is the lady who carried me in her tummy my mum as well?’, he told him that he only had one mother. But the child went on to ask: ‘I know, but wasn’t she my mum for a little while?’ Yorgos was puzzled and, not knowing how to answer, he turned to the ‘Amfidoron’ forum to ask for help. The answers given by adoptive mothers were abundant and there was a lengthy conversation, which highlighted the significance of the matter and the concern felt by all adoptive parents. An adoptive mother told him: ‘I was asked a similar question once, and I told my daughter “No, she’s not your mum, every person has only one mummy and one daddy. There aren’t people with two mums or two dads.”’ Somebody else told him:

No, the other one is not a mummy. There is only one mummy, for all the things she offers and because she will be here forever, whatever happens – adopted children may suffer from such anxieties. So, I would say that he only has one mum, and this other lady is his biological mother.

Another mother replied:

I would tell him that he was born by a mother, just like everyone else, that he didn’t grow on a tree! There was some relationship with her – maybe not an affectionate one, because we do not really know this woman’s feelings – but she did care about him, she did her best to offer him a mum and a dad who will be forever. So, she is not a mum like his own mum BECAUSE MUMS ARE FOREVER, WHATEVER HAPPENS AND WHATEVER THEY MIGHT DO, unlike a biological mother – he is mature enough to understand this word. You could also go on to say that we have quite a few mothers: our mum, your mother-in-law (I hope your mother-in-law is nice enough), the Virgin Mary (Jesus was also adopted by Joseph) who is everyone’s mother, and so on.’ (Capitals in original).

The most difficult part of this narrative construction has to do with negotiating the relational positioning of the woman who has given birth to the child and the (im)
possibility of having a second mother. The narratives unveil the contradictions included in the conceptualisation of motherhood, and the problematisation of what to include in the category of the mother. Eirini Tountasaki noted in her study of women in Greece who used egg donation that most of them would have had difficulty in choosing adoption because they didn’t know how to speak to the children about the fact that another woman had given birth to them (2015: 254). In the stories I analyse here, the birthmother acts properly as a mother who decides to continue with her pregnancy, giving birth to the child to hand it over to another mother to raise the child properly, while the action of moving the child from one mother to another includes within its meaning a kind of abandonment. Within this contradiction, both mothers act ‘properly’ in the terms Paxson (2004) has elucidated – the birthmother by not undergoing an abortion and choosing to give birth to the child to be raised by an adoptive mother, and the adoptive mother by having decided to forge kinship with a child with whom she is not biologically connected. But interestingly, this passage also alludes to other kinds of mothers – the mother-in-law as a not necessarily good mother, and the Virgin Mary, the perfect and emblematic mother, as well as the one who introduces adoption into the figure of the Holy Family.

The relationship of the child to its birth parents remains a recurring question, especially as the child grows up, leaves the world of fairy tales and demands more realistic answers from its parents. What this abandonment means is another recurring question. For example, Andreas, the son of Venetia mentioned above, before going to school was accepting without question the reference to the woman who gave birth to him as ‘the lady who carried you in her tummy’ or ‘the lady who gave birth to you’. Venetia didn’t want to confuse him by referring to two mothers, and she never used the term ‘biological mother’ when talking to him, as she emphasised instead that ‘not every mother can be a mummy’.

Why should our society demand that a woman be a mother just because she happened to be pregnant? This is a biological act, the baby grew on its own inside her womb. It entered her womb accidentally, and it ruined her life because this is often a deathblow for a woman, being pregnant and unable to have an abortion for various reasons. Before she gave birth to it, she stated that she didn’t want that child – which was the case with our story. And then, thirty years later, a grown-up person may come and ask her to account for his life, and ask her, why did you abandon me? Why, for instance, in cases of egg donation don’t they tell the children that they have yet another biological mother? It’s all the same for me. Those women who donate their eggs are not called biological mothers after the birth. Therefore, I think it’s a bit unfair to put the weight of maternity on these biological mothers.Venetia is here trying to cancel the meaning of giving birth, referring to ‘a woman who happened to be pregnant’ as a simple biological action, a woman who didn’t have an abortion, as is expected in the Greek context. A birthmother, in her view, is like an egg donor, who according to Tountasaki is never called a biological mother by Greek recipients (2015: 255). In Greece, inclusion in the category of mother has above all to do with birthing bodies, and that is why the mother-in-law is included in the above commentary. The work of Greek adoptive mothers seems to be extremely hard in this cultural universe where, on the one hand, they try hard to emphasise upbringing⁵ as the most important part of motherhood and, at the same time, include the birthing body as part of their narration.

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⁵ Something which occurs quite often in parts of the non-western world. See Carsten (1997) and Weismantel (1995), for example.
When Andreas went to nursery school, at the age of five, his teacher assigned the children a project about family, and they had to create their genealogical tree using photographs. From that point on, Andreas bombarded his adoptive parents with questions about his birthmother. Venetia narrates the story:

One day he told me: ‘Dad is more dad than you’. I asked: ‘Why?’ ‘Because he’s my dad.’ ‘And I’m your mum,’ I replied. ‘Yes, but you didn’t carry me in your tummy.’ I explained the same things to him. I thought he understood. Then some days later he told me, ‘You are a step-mother, like in the fairytales.’ I said ‘No, I’m not a step-mother, I’m a mum and I’m your adoptive mother. The other lady is your biological mother, she is a mother, too, but she is biological because she carried you in her tummy.’ And then he understood and never asked me again. This means that I had to explain. It was not enough to say that she’s a lady, I had to say that she’s a mother too.

Venetia finally used the word ‘mother’ for the birthmother when she felt that her child could not comprehend the whole procedure after his socialisation at school, but carefully used the adjective ‘biological’ to make clear that it was impossible to have two ‘mums’. Although adoptive mothers may work hard in their choices of what and how to tell, and what content will give to conventional terms, they cannot erase the wider society. Unsolved problems keep coming up after children begin socialisation at school. The dominant discourse of a nuclear family, with a clearly defined ‘dad and mum’, has to be secured, so that the family’s history can be set in order. Children can only refer to their birthmother either in terms of time, as in ‘the old mum’, or in terms of biology, as in ‘the biological mother’, so that any emotional load borne by the terms ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ can be released. When ‘the lady who carried you in your tummy’ was named ‘biological mother’, the child understood ‘and never asked again’, precisely because childbirth had to be urgently situated. Even though Venetia tried to weaken the meaning of childbirth in the beginning, later she understood that, as her child was growing up, this was impossible, and childbirth had to be brought back into the story she tells, but with another meaning.

Such ambiguities arose constantly in how to narrate birthmothers and the relations adoptive mothers and their children have with them. Mirto, an active member of the association and adoptive mother, wrote on the forum:

I believe that my family and the biological one are like communicating vessels … Sooner or later she’ll come to realize that she is missing certain important parts of her life puzzle. This is why I wonder whether I’m making a mistake by saying again and again that Mum is the one who raises the child. Because the kid was born to another mother. We don’t know her; we can’t tell whether she was good or bad, but even if she was bad, does it make any difference for the child? One minute we’re telling her the story of her adoption, the next we are disfiguring one of her realities. We say, ‘Listen, I adopted you, so you only have one mother, me!’ But how come one plus one equals one? In other words, we pose a dilemma for the child, to choose between me and her, while the only thing she wants is to be recognized as a complete person.

The different kinds of mothers I have mentioned who fill the content of motherhood are women who gave birth to children – either bad or good mothers. The quotes I have
given show the (im)possibility of sustaining motherhood through this narrative work alone. Malvina continued this conversation:

Well, I say that birth and life itself is not a line in the course of which this and that happened (the adoption, or the divorce, or the parents’ death, or I don’t know what). I mean, in my opinion, its pattern is not like this: --/-- (where ‘/’ is a certain event) but it goes by the pattern of an explosion (I can’t render it in a linear way) at a point of which a certain event occurred AS WELL, but it was not the only one. (Capitals in original)

Those two mothers reveal the frustrations and ambiguities they face in their efforts to suggest biographies for their children. Malvina, articulates how, just as in Day’s example referred to above, in real life, and especially in ruptured lives, it is hard to achieve biographical linearity; instead, events may be experienced as unexpected explosions.

**Conclusion: kinning and narration**

The past, our previous histories – as Janet Carsten has observed while studying adoptees in Scotland searching for their birth kin – determine who we are. In the West, people are constantly trying ‘to form [a] coherent narrative about their lives’ (2007: 86), which ‘in turn inform[s] or shape[s] a sense of identity’ (2007: 87), contrary to some other parts of the world where people are ‘more concerned with producing kinship in the present and future than with remembering particular kinship ties in the past’ (2007: 88). In adoptive kinship there are many gaps, many broken stories, many unanswered questions that demand explanation, narration and articulation. Storytelling, Michael Jackson argues, ‘remains one of the most powerful techniques for healing ourselves and restoring order to a broken world’ (2013: 23). Children carry with them the expectation of becoming an adult, a full person, which is a powerful discourse of late modernity that also carries with it the assumption that the self has the capacity to narrate herself (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000: 79; Jackson 2013; Butler 2009).

Sensitive information about the other mother forms the subjectivities of all persons involved in the adoption. In Euro-America, Marilyn Strathern notes that “biological” information has immediate (simultaneous) “social” effect’ (1999: 75) and how people handle this information are choices about what kind relationships they want to have with biologically connected people (1999: 77). This is obvious in adoption information, which immediately gives an identity to the child as well as to the adoptive mother, as they both have to be related in some way to the birthmother. The choices of what information will be transferred by the adoptive mother to the child, but also which elements of the story that the child, as it grows up, will later choose to keep, are choices over what kind of relationship they both want to have with the birthmother.

Adoptive mothers narrate the story of their child in a maternal, emotional language, while at the same time integrating the story of the child’s abandonment, after being born to another woman who was unable, for various reasons, to be a mother to it. Kinning mechanisms, through which adoptive mothers claim motherhood, involve repeatedly narrating the child’s biography, embedded in the discourse of initial abandonment, which ultimately allows them also to create a legitimate maternal space. Due
to the prime significance of giving birth for motherhood in Greece, adoptive mothers have particular problems situating childbirth and the birthmother in the biography of their children, and in gradually recognising other qualities and idioms besides linearity in biographical construction. By narrating the birthmothers’ detachment, they build their own attachments to their children and (re)configure the lost story of their unshared past, a past that in the western world forms our subjectivities, our kinship and subsequently our social world (Carsten 2007).

Time changes the narration of the story: as children grow up, go to school, start having another life beyond the family, they bring home new categorical kinship meanings. All these meanings under formation led Venetia to say in the end, ‘When you raise a child, you shouldn’t subtract anything from it, you should only add. She has a prehistory without you, which belongs only to her. We are made up of DNA, places of birth, places where we grow up. All of that is significant to our making as human beings’. And this is exactly how, finally, adoptive mothers change themselves through their telling of what is apparently the same story. Adoptive mothers, in their becoming, add other elements to what constitutes kinship and, importantly, they thus produce another discourse in the making of kinship.

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Devenir mères : raconter l’adoption et construire la parenté en Grèce

Cet article porte sur le travail intensif et parfois douloureux des mères adoptives de raconter à leurs enfants leurs vies avant l’adoption, une histoire qui reste partiellement inconnue, comme
il s'agit d’un passé non-vécu par les parents. Ces anxiétés révèlent que l’enjeu de trouver une façon acceptable dont parler ainsi que la création d’histoires fait partie intégrale de leur propre devenir en tant que mère. J’avance l’argument qu’un processus de ‘faire parent’ est soutenu par la répétition des biographies des enfants et que, par la narration répétitive du placement des enfants et l’existence des mères biologiques, des mères adoptives construisent des relations avec leurs enfants et leur soi maternel.

**Mots clés** adoption, Parenté, Narration, la Grèce, maternité