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The In/Visibility of Mothering Against the Norm in Francophone Contexts: Private and Public Discourses in the Mediation of "Natural Parenting"

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ABSTRACT *Mothers who engage in "natural parenting," an unconventional style of parenting in Francophone contexts, use online media, and in particular online forums, as a source of information, as a place for discussing the variety of authentic maternal experiences, and as a virtual site of community building around shared practices, values, and worldviews. This contribution looks at the ways in which twenty-first-century online mediation participates in the blurring of private/public boundaries in the domain of parenting and how this affects parents who mother outside of the norm, following environmentalist worldviews. It also investigates the association of natural parenting and religion, and the articulations between public and private discourses about institutional motherhood and mothers' experiences.*
KEYWORDS *Anthropology; Feminist/Gender; Religion; Technology*

RESUME *Les mères qui pratiquent le « parentage naturel », un style de parentage non- conventionnel dans des contextes francophones, utilisent les médias en ligne, et en particulier les forums, comme source d'information, comme un endroit où discuter la diversité des expériences maternelles authentiques, et comme un site virtuel de construction communautaire autour de pratiques, valeurs et visions du monde partagées. Cette contribution examine comment la médiation en ligne rend plus floues les frontières entre public et privé dans le domaine du parentage et comment ceci affecte les personnes qui parentent en dehors des normes, suivant des visions du monde écologistes. Cet article examine aussi l'association entre la parentage naturel et religion, ainsi que les articulations entre discours publics et privés sur la maternité en tant qu'institution et les expériences des mères elles-mêmes.*

MOTS CLES *Anthropologie, Féminisme/Genre; Religion; Technologie*

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In addition to more traditional gatherings for parents, such as parenting classes or meetings of breastfeeding support groups, disembodied online spaces now offer a place for conversations that pertain foremost to issues that are clearly embodied, such as childbirth, fertility awareness, or infant hygiene. These everyday life practices—and along with them the worldviews that inform them—usually remain invisible to society [page 106] because most of the care work pertaining to young children takes place in the domestic realm, a space which, in spite of decades of feminism, is still predominantly associated with femininity and the "private sphere." online mediation is one element that contributes to giving a greater visibility to private practices and the values that they carry, both online and offline, among practitioners and detractors of natural parenting. mediation is what relays into much broader public debates the intimate and embodied care work still predominantly performed by women in the domestic sphere.

Before examining the relationships between motherhood and the public/private divide, as well as how this divide is negotiated in the particular case of natural parenting in mostly European Francophone contexts, I first define what this particular "natural" style of parenting concretely consists of, then highlight which issues are at stake in terms of in/visibility and presence in the public sphere for "natural parents." I also discuss how natural parenting connects to mediation and to religion or, more precisely, to a spirituality typical of lifestyles of health and sustainability and their underlying values.

While it is true that the links between natural parenting, religion or spirituality, and media are not as obvious as in other cases, for instance that of faith-based parenting forums, some indirect connections nevertheless need to be acknowledged. The lifestyle choices of some parents bring them into contact with adverse public opinions about their parenting, relayed through a variety of mainstream media (newspapers, TV broadcasts, and reports, etc.). Studying these less explicit links between natural parenting, spirituality, and mediation might help us gain a better sense of what Francophone natural parenting forum participants find by sharing details of their seemingly private lives in online public spaces, under the cover of anonymity. Specialized parenting forums cater to a specific public, and most can be accessed by anyone, often without registration. These discussions taking place in publicly accessible but not pre-eminent online spaces connect to other current debates in the broader public sphere about culturally determined good practices in parenting.

Building upon preliminary results and data gathered for a larger research project entitled "Natural Parenting in the digital Age,"1 the following case study focuses on the issue of visible and invisible practices of parenting and their multiple mediations in Francophone contexts that have rarely been studied, since most scholarship on motherhood and media, some of which also considers religion, investigates North American and other Anglophone contexts. Recent studies have focused on several types of online platforms of communication created and used predominantly by women who are (or will be) mothers, such as mommyblogs (see, for instance, Friedman, 2010, 2013; Friedman & Calixte, 2009; for those classified as "religious mommyblogs," see whitehead, 2013). However, in spite of their relevance and accessibility, online forums where parenting is discussed have received considerably less attention. Nevertheless, they constitute an important source for the analysis of authentic maternal voices and their mediation.

Online aesthetic formations and sensational forms:

Practice, domesticity, femininity, and private life

Even though most of the following analysis focuses on discourse, the notion of "prac-[page 107]tice" remains crucial to an understanding of natural parenting and its mediation in relation to religion and spirituality. Pamela Klassen (2008) writes that the concept of practice

> can help to ground the study of religion and media in social interactions, in the interplay of thought and action, and in economic, political, legal, and historical contexts that foster certain kinds of mediation and not others. ... The virtues of practice, then, are that it both opens an

> approach to the study of religion and media that can account for "everyday life" and larger structures of social organization and calls for a persistent reassessment of what counts as sources for religion, media, and the everyday within the practices of scholars. (p. 146)

"Everyday life" practices of natural parenting (described in the next section) are central topics of discussions in the forums I surveyed. These conversations, however, also include a variety of other issues; spirituality, religion, politics, or even literature. It is paradoxical that these highly material and embodied practices are discussed in materially disembodied cyberspaces, often with the help of typed words alone, and with only a few pictures as in the case of the parenting forums examined in this study (in contrast with individual blogs, where the authors do not necessarily write anonymously). In the conclusion of *Media, Religion and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges*, Mia Lövheim (2013) highlights that

> women draw on the personal and intimate in their articulations of religion because the private sphere of the home and family has situated and still to a large extent situates their lives more than men, but women's articulations of religion also—more frequently than men's—become associated with private life and bodily aspects when taken up in a broader cultural discourse. (p. 185)

A similar observation can be made about participants in natural parenting forums. They write about their experience of mothering, most of which takes place in the domestic space which is, up to this day, still predominantly associated with women and considered as "private space" (geographically) and a "private sphere" (socially).

In addition to the concepts of practice, domesticity, and private life, Birgit Meyer's (2010) notion of "sensational forms" might also be helpful in situating natural parenting, even in the absence of straightforward connections to any specific religious institution. According to Meyer,

> [s]ensational forms are authorized modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental that shape both religious content (beliefs, doc- trines, sets of symbols) and norms. Involving religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and patterns of feeling, these forms play a central role in modulating practitioners as religious subjects. Thus, sensational forms are part of a specific religious aesthetics, which governs a sensory engagement of humans with the divine and each other and generates particular sensibilities. (p. 751)

"Aesthetic formations," another notion coined by Meyer (2009, p. 6), adequately [page 108] describes the dynamic character of online communities that are constantly in the *process* of *forming,* dissolving, and re-forming, extending from forums to other online platforms and social media and, slowly, making their alternative voices and positions heard in mainstream media. Both "aesthetic formations" and "sensational forms" are notions that apply foremost to institutional religion in Meyer's work. For the purpose of studying mediation and religion, it is fruitful to extend their scope to forms of engagement with ethical and spiritual aesthetics that involve certain values and lifestyles, but live outside of established religious institutions.

Most of the concrete practice of natural parenting is "sensational," here "under-stood as both appealing to the senses *and* spectacular" (Meyer, 2010, p. 742). This practice is represented and, in part, even staged online for all to see. moreover, it is not only material and embodied, as already noted above, but it is also "sensory," because it is about feeling, touching, smelling, washing, feeding, clothing, monitoring, and taking care of bodies—the mother's own body and the child's body. The particular aesthetics of natural parenting, whether the latest fashion in washable diapers or the most recent colour trends in baby-wearing wraps, is what binds together, though for fluctuant periods of time, these online "aesthetic formations."

Valuing "nature": A description of natural parenting

Natural parenting is better defined as a cluster of representations, discourses, and practices regarding fertility, pregnancy, birth, mothering, and more general topics such as health, nutrition, sustainability, ethics, and spirituality. The mothers who engage in natural parenting, to various extents, are referred to by Francophone media as *mamans nature* ("nature moms") or, sometimes, even self-identify as such, online and offline. *Mamans nature*2 is the name of a section of one of the forums (doctissimo, which is a popular forum on health and well-being), surveyed for my larger research (see note 1). Though some of the informants I interviewed strongly object to this label, "Nature"— in its fuzzy and at times incoherent acceptations—is a central concept in their discourses. "Nature" is constantly referred to and valued as a guiding principle for their lifestyle choices. whenever possible, whatever is "natural" is preferred over what is "artificial."

Without forming a set of mandatory practices, some actions and attitudes are typical (albeit optional) components of this modular style of parenting. Natural parenting may include the following: resorting to non-hormonal "natural family planning" or fertility awareness-based methods of contraception; a preference for alternative medicines (in particular homeopathy); a preference for a model of midwifery care during pregnancy, with limited medical interventions, a home birth, or a "natural birth"; breastfeeding (often on demand and "full-term"); alternative styles of education and pedagogy (such as home-schooling and unschooling); alternative diets (in particular flexitarian and vegetarian); preference for homemade (meals, objects, remedies, cosmetics, cleaning products, etc.), second-hand (for those who engage in lifestyles of voluntary simplicity), or reusable items (typically washable diapers, menstrual cups or cloth menstrual pads). Natural parenting options, in these contexts, are taken among a range of other possible options that are not available to all or everywhere in the world. using washable diapers or no diapers in contexts where disposable ones are not available does not qualify as participating in natural parenting.

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Looking at them through the categories of public and private reveals that some of these seemingly "private choices" often have much greater implications when their consequences are brought into the public sphere. This is the case, for instance, for vegetarian diets, which might hinder children's participation in state-sponsored school- lunch programs, in which meat is regularly on the menu. Vaccine hesitancy is another example. while the decision to vaccinate or to not vaccinate is considered by parents as a private choice that they make for their baby, when considered from a public health perspective, the decision not to vaccinate has public implications (e.g., the risk of resurgence of certain diseases and of epidemics; see below for a more detailed exploration of this example). while the *debates* about all of these typical practices are made public through online mediations, not all of them are public practices. Some of them really are confined to the home. Co-sleeping, for instance, takes place in the "family bed," at home, not in public. Similarly, homemade organic baby food is prepared in the family's kitchen. other practices are being advertised to specific audiences through advocacy discourses urging users to promote their practices. A joke commonly circulated on natural parenting forums runs as such: "How do you know a mother is using washable diapers?"—"don't worry, she will tell you."

Natural parenting combines the most prominent practices of well-known theories of attachment parenting (e.g., breastfeeding, baby-wearing, co-sleeping) with concerns about sustainability, social justice (especially in North-South economic relations), the protection of the environment, and optimal health. Natural parenting fits in a more general framework referred to in recent studies as "lifestyles of health and sustainability" (LOHAS). In *The Gospel of Sustainability. Media, Market and LOHAS*, Monica Emerich (2011) has clearly demonstrated the extent to which LOHAS themselves have been and remain a highly mediatized phenomenon. In addition, LOHAS frequently are complementary to lifestyles of voluntary simplicity (LOVOS), already identified as a key component of "natural mothering," along with cultural

feminism, in the only extensive study on the topic (Bobel, 2002). As other examples in this article show, the implications of such lifestyles and the worldviews that inform them usually extend well beyond the domain of parenting and the private sphere.

Although most typical practices of both LOHAS and natural parenting (for instance, vegetarian diets and washable diapers) are not new, their recent mediations have given them a greater visibility, both online and offline, and a coherence that they do not have when considered separately. mediation forces their inscription into broader frameworks, attaches new meanings to them, and provides discursive strategies to account for these practices, which is especially important in contexts where they are not prevailing. more significantly, because online mediation on forums tends to generate highly personal narratives, it emphasizes the idea of "individual, private, and informed choice" and suggests ways to visibly mark one's adherence to specific sets of values. Autonomy, responsibility for individual choices, empathy toward others and in particular one's children, resilience, carefulness, and simplicity count among those typical values. Care for the environment, sustainability, and social justice are core issues for people engaging in LOHAS. Their everyday decisions, including those that pertain to consumption and to parenting, are guided by consideration for such issues.

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Indirect connections: Natural parenting, spirituality, and religion

As mentioned above, the connections between natural parenting and spirituality are not direct. They transit through mediated discourses that bind together several clusters of ideas, representations, and practices often because of the simple fact that they take place in the same online spaces.

Natural parenting is generally inscribed in broader LOHAS and LOVOS lifestyles, which are in turn linked to ethical motivations. Because of these connections, I view natural parenting and its most typical features as expressions of a "practical spiritualit[y] in the media age" (see Emerich & Coats, in press). moreover, the notion of "conscious- ness," often interchangeable with that of spirituality in LOHAS discourses (Emerich, 2011, p. 3), is also key to understanding the spiritual and ethical components of natural parenting. These parents insist that they make "informed" and "conscious" choices for themselves and for their children. Some of them are also aware that their private choices will have an impact on society at large. Sometimes their ultimate hope is that, through non-violent education and an emphasis put on empathy, they are raising peaceful children and potentially future peacemakers in contemporary troubled times.

Natural parenting discourses offer alternative sets of values to their intended public (parents and future parents) and to their secondary public (those who criticize these practices and discourses). The specific online spaces that I surveyed in this re- search (see Table 1) address primarily a Francophone audience of (a) (future) parents, mostly mothers, and (b) advocates,3 but also (c) detractors of this parenting style, or (d) persons who are simply curious about natural parenting and also occasionally frequent these open forums.

As alternative as they might appear, these other models of motherhood and parenthood still function as normative ones within the communities that accept them. These discourses are disseminated online through images, video clips, and texts that provide a model not just of "the good mother" but of "the good *natural* mother." In the particular Francophone contexts in which I carried out my research, this alternative model of "the good mother" is in many ways at odds with dominant and deeply held beliefs about what constitutes good parenting, as several examples will show.

A second line of unexpected associations further connects natural parenting to religion. Natural parents share some of their typical practices with those of religious groups, even if they account for them in very different terms, by putting an emphasis on health and on an idealized concept of "Nature" that is

not necessarily connected to a creator God. Their justification of fertility awareness-based methods of contraception is an example of discourses that typically do *not* stress obedience to the moral teachings of a religious institution. Similarly, home-schooling is another shared practice stemming from different motivations and a topic frequently discussed on natural parenting forums, even if it is implemented by only a few of their participants. This overlap of some of these practices with those of religious groups is sufficient to make discourses of natural parenting *appear as* religious to the general public.

Moreover, some women speak of their becoming a mother as a transformative spiritual experience, often lived and reflected upon outside the realm of established religious institutions. The title of a Francophone multi-authored blog advocating ex-

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Table 1: Summary description of the principal online forums studied for the larger research project*

	Main audience in terms of geographical location of users	Main focus of the forum in general	Focus of specific sections on parenting	Comparative degree of activity (number of messages posted in relative time)
Doctissimo.fr	France, Francophone participants (including from Québec)	Health and Well-Being forum; Information about Western biomedicine for a general public Subsections Mamans nature,	Natural birth, homebirth	Very high, several per day
Bebe.ch	Francophone Switzerland and other Francophone participants, mostly European	Parenting in general	Two subsections relate to some typical features of natural parenting: one on maternage proximal (attachment parenting) and the other labelled bio et écolo (standing for biologique and écologique, organic and environmental)	High, several per week Lower in the specialized section about natural parenting
Eco-Bio.info	France, Francophone participants (including participants from Québec)	Environmentally sustainable and healthy lifestyles	14 different sections dedicated to an "ecological approach to birth and childhood"	Low, less than one per month on average, particularly low in the sections about parenting

*See note 1; last accessed Eco-Bio, Bebe.ch, and Doctissimo forums on February 2, 2015.

[page 111] tended breastfeeding is *Je suis une seinte,* meaning "I am a saint," but written with a pun on the word *seinte,* a combination of breast (*sein*) and saint (in the feminine form). while some mothers who engage in natural parenting reclaim religious terms for them- selves in positive ways, most

of the mainstream coverage of natural parenting in Francophone media tends to portray natural parents negatively, with a range of vocabulary reminiscent of that used to describe religious fanaticism. mothers are featured as "extreme" or "indoctrinated."

Finally, even if religious mothering or spiritual mothering is rarely studied per se within the specific field of motherhood studies, several scholars have seen the connections in western society between religion and motherhood and use religious terms, at least metaphorically, to describe and analyze the object of their study (see Thurer, 1994, and Douglas & Michaels, 2004, quoted in this article). most prominently, Sharon [page 112] Hays (1996) speaks of "the sacred child" in her critique of the "ideology of intensive mothering" (p. 97) and Judith warner (2005), writing about the ways in which "motherhood in America has unmoored from reality and turned into theology," (p. 134) affirms that motherhood in itself can be a religion.

Leaving aside debates about defining "religion," which is beyond the scope of this article, it is suffice to say that the heuristic and encompassing comprehension of "religion" used here is influenced by the "family resemblance" analysis (Saler, 1999) and by the "polyfocal approach" to religion proposed by scholars like Kocku von Stuckrad (2003, 2010), calling for a "communicative turn" in a "discursive study of religions" whose focus should be on "two components ... of crucial importance: *communication* and *action*" (2003, p. 263; italics in original), or, in other words, discourses and practices. This apprehension of the online mediation of natural parenting through terminology and concepts normally applied to religious practice is in turn informed by scholarship that considers practices and objects of popular and material culture that would not be obviously defined as "religious." David Chidester's (2005) work on *Authentic Fakes* is an example of such studies that look for instances of religious behaviour or religiosity outside of established religious institutions and explore the religiosity of seemingly non-religious or even secular practices. Contested terms such as transfers of sacrality, secular religion (*religion laïque*), or *Le sacré hors religion* (see Champion, Nizard, & Zawadzki, 2007) have been used by scholars to describe such new forms of religiosity, including in Francophone contexts.

Furthermore, in contrast with Jonathan Z. Smith's challenging statement that "there is no data for religion" (1982, p. xi; also see Smith, 1998), there definitely *is* data for motherhood. even though "motherhood" seems intuitively easier to define than "religion," both are socially and culturally constructed concepts. It is also useful to our examination of an intersection of religion with motherhood in the media age to revisit

Friedrich Max Müller's (1873) famous statement laying comparativism as the fundamental basis for an academic study of religions: "[S]he who knows one, knows none" (p. 13). There is no *R*eligion or not *one* religion, but a diversity of past and current trends that we, as scholars, label as "religion*s*" and do our best to situate historically and culturally. In ways similar to religion, motherhood also has a range of different forms and denominations (complete with orthopraxies and orthodoxies) within an increasing number of various "subset[s] of moms" (Podnieks, 2012, p. 4). The "natural moms" are among these.

Discussing natural parenting on online forums: Speaking for themselves and to each other

In opposition to "Western dominant discourses about motherhood that historically position mothers too often as objects rather than subjects" (see Podnieks, 2012, p. 5), online forums are media platforms where mothers are not silently spoken *to,* spoken *about,* or spoken *for,* but actually *speak for* themselves, *about* themselves, and talk *to each other.* As one of the examples in the following section will demonstrate, their expectations about privacy vary greatly, but generally most participants are aware that the platforms they use can be accessed by anyone connecting to the Internet, even without formally registering as a participant to the forum. The sharing of alternative [page 113] information and authentic

experience is a key component of forum participation for the mothers I interviewed and whose conversations I followed online.

The possibility to participate under a pseudonym in online conversations, the risks associated with this, and the consequences of offline negotiations concerning maternal and children's health are particularly important issues to consider when studying discussions of mothering and motherhood online. online mediation affects mothers' participation in such discussions and changes their status, vis-à-vis both their online peers and their offline relationships, in particular mainstream health practitioners. In the following section, I discuss several of these elements and relate them to selected material retrieved from both online exploration and interviews with natural parents who are regular online forum participants. my selection of sources for this discussion comprises specific subsections of two representative forums, doctissimo.fr and Bebe.ch, dedicated to parenting, and among the most popular ones in the Francophone context. I also surveyed material from another specialized forum focused on environmentalism, LOHAS/LOVOS. This forum features a particularly well developed section pertaining to an "ecological approach to birth and childhood" (*approche écologique de la naissance et de l'enfance*), with 14 specific subsections (on birth plans, washable diapers, home-schooling, alternative pedagogies, etc.). In addition, I considered a few other forums dedicated to parenting, including faith-based ones, for contrastive purposes.

Public discussions on these forums are like the tip of an iceberg, as many private conversations are taking place simultaneously, underground, invisible to the general public and to me, as a researcher. In order to protect their intimacy, mothers who develop trust in one another on a particular section of a forum might at some point "mi- grate" to another platform, such as a "secret" (closed and invisible) Facebook group, where they continue sharing on similar topics, potentially under their real names and thus giving away many more identifying details. They often advertise such a move on the public sections of the forum, but the rest of the process of the creation of new closed groups is discussed through private communication. Following standard ethical protocols, I excluded such discussions from the material surveyed and focused instead on forums and social media groups and pages where participants had no expectation of privacy, even though anonymity was to be guaranteed to foster participation.

Though some participants attempt to circumvent this rule, participation in a forum can never be totally undone; once a message is posted, it belongs to the forum, to the community of users; it can be quoted, commented on, and it is no longer the exclusive property of its author. Although participants had a good sense that their complete anonymity was far from guaranteed, this anonymity was conditional to al- most all of my informants' *active* participation through writing. If they had to use their real name, they would not be *writing* on the forum, or maybe not as much, but would still be *reading* it. writing constitutes a higher degree of interaction with the online platform and with other users than just reading the forum, which anyone can do with- out even registering or signing in.

The importance of mediation

In the twenty-first century, like many other aspects of people's lives, motherhood has [page 114] become highly mediated. Recently, diverse styles of child-rearing have attracted media attention. Among others, a stereotypical model of the "Chinese mom" emerged after public discussions of Amy Chua's best-seller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011). Another model has also emerged: "French parenting," which particularly focuses on training and eating habits. even when the majority of parents might not actually follow them, some of these models are seen as advisable, others as acceptable, while others still are perceived as inappropriate, antisocial, or even dangerous in some respects. This is the case of natural parenting in mostly European Francophone contexts, where prevailing child-rearing norms encourage early independence rather than attachment. In particular, an excessive bond between mother and baby is

seen as dangerous. Because natural parenting includes many of the tenets of attachment parenting, while adding an environmentalist agenda, it is not seen as a recommended mode of parenting in French society nor in most contexts influenced by French culture.4

Online mediation is important for all mothers who can access the Internet (at least in most western countries). They "use the world wide web to share their stories, increase their personal and collective visibility, record their grievances, construct online communities, and facilitate social activism" (Stadtman Tucker, 2008, p. 201). mediation is even more crucial for mothers engaging in natural parenting, because this style of child-rearing is not normative in the Francophone contexts considered in this research. It is not only upheld by a minority of parents, but it is also frowned upon and misrepresented in mainstream media. Information about natural parenting's typical practices is now available through a variety of books, including in French. mainstream media, in particular TV channels, rarely relay such types of alternative information. when components of natural parenting are reported on, they are mostly criticized or caricatured. online media provide natural mothers the alternative spaces they need to publicly, but anonymously, discuss in their own terms their uncommon practices informed by values and worldviews that the rest of society does not necessarily share.

Masks of motherhood on forums: On and off

Just like other online spaces, online forums can potentially be sites of "empowered mothering" (O'Reilly, 2004) and of resistance to normative motherhood. In these spaces, maternal ambiguity and the "repertoire of socially constructed representations" (Maushart, 1999, p. 6) of motherhood are more likely to appear than in mainstream media and in particular parenting magazines that contribute to constructing models of "good" or even "perfect" motherhood. other types of online media, for instance personal blogs, may contribute to reinforcing what Susan Maushart refers to as "the mask of motherhood" (p. 6) that "keeps women from speaking clearly what they know, and from hearing truths too threatening to face" (p. 7). Because they are not private and individual, but rather public or semi-public and collective online spaces, forums are places where traditional "myths of motherhood" (Thurer, 1994) are debunked and where the emerging "mommy myth" and the "new momism" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are deconstructed. more than personal blogs, forums allow for a plurality of discourses and opinions to be expressed, often under the cover of anonymity. This might stem from the collective moderating of these spaces. They are not anyone's specific page, but rather form an online commons. Sub-[page 115]communities of affinities are created, but no single participant can structurally dominate the discourse, as opposed to a mommyblog's author, who both provides content and moderates other people's comments on her posts. In the following discussion of the links between anonymity and authenticity, we will ask whether the relative anonymity of this particular environment binds this mask of motherhood even more firmly to the eyes, mouth, and ears of mothers, or if they can take it off more easily because they are anonymous participants in a collective online discussion.

On the one hand, some natural mothers keep on the mask of motherhood while they share narratives of their successful stories in their own—but conformist and conditioned—voices. Narratives of successful home births are stories that give shape to an alternative model of "good *natural* motherhood." The mask of motherhood is kept on when the offline performance of "good motherhood" is extended, under a discursive form, to forums. This also happens through more visually oriented media, as in platforms such as Pinterest or in personal blogs where not only texts, but also images feature ideal(ized) mothers and their daily activities (e.g., sharing recipes and posting pictures of healthy and savoury home-cooked meals). Images give practices the greatest visibility, but descriptive and narrative texts also contribute to it. The highly individualized signature line used by participants in the forum is another place for expressing this redefined identity as a "good *natural* mom." It is not uncommon to read users' signatures that provide an almost exhaustive list of the natural parenting practices implemented with

one's own child/ren (see Figure 1). Successful "natural" or home births and the exact duration of breastfeeding are frequently mentioned.

The masks of motherhood can also be taken off. In the very same spaces, a number of other maternal narratives expose the difficulties of motherhood in general and the complications in following the tenets of natural parenting in particular. These alternative stories contest, and even ridicule, this unachievable standard that combines

Figure 1: Signature of a user

The original image has been edited for privacy purposes.
Translation: I have been breastfeeding my son for 3 years, 9 months, 4 weeks and 2 days.
I am the mom of a small pépette* and a small minus*, [indicates nationality], born May 2008 and April 2010, in water, in a birth centre. Intensively carried in a baby wrap, kissed, massaged, used washable diapers, and co-slept with … pure happiness!
Baby wearing workshops in [name of city] // appointments on my website: [address of commercial website]
Free meetings about washable diapers (advisor for [name of brand]) [address of commercial website]
My small blog: [address of personal blog]
*affectionate terms of address for children
This signature typically embeds a "ticker" that displays an automated countdown to or from a specific date in the future or in the past (in this case, the starting date of breastfeeding, which is probably also the date of birth of this mother's youngest child).

[page 116] intensive mothering, attachment parenting, and environmentalist expectations. Participants consider their forums suitable and safe spaces for sharing the harsh reality of the mothering experience, what they resent as maternal failures, as well as their doubts about the adequacy of natural parenting for shaping "their children's growth in "acceptable" ways" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 21) in their particular social context. Because of the authenticity of most of their users, forums can play the role of a confessional. Addressing one's familiar and empathetic community, this specific public of like-minded mothers, some participants "confess" to being tired of breastfeeding, to abandoning the use of washable diapers, or, more dramatically, a few of them admit to occasionally spanking a child, an act contrary to their usual ethical principle of non- violent education. mothers share as little or as much detail about their life as they see fit: their fertility or birth narrative, their child's disability, a failure in contraception and its consequences, or their favourite recipe. They explain how hard it is to find or construct their maternal self and to nurture their families while saving the planet from environmental degradation at the same time. on forums, a vast majority do so under a pseudonym that confers on them a relative anonymity. This public anonymity guarantees authenticity.

Mostly authentic

Apart from obvious and provocative trolling (users exposing a fantastic situation just to provoke indignant answers and stir up flaming), most narratives appear as undoubtedly authentic. However, there have been rare cases where frequent users have admit- ted to fabrication. on one such occasion, a well-known and long-term participant to the Doctissimo's forum *Mamans nature*, revealed that she had lied about her situation. while parts of her narrative still contained authentic facts, she admitted to having greatly exaggerated the symptoms and consequences of the disease she alleged both her children suffered from. even after her explanations, it remained difficult to disentangle fact from fiction. This stirred up contentious debates among regular participants to the forum who had commented on her post. Her motivation for abruptly revealing that she had posted invented stories on the forum remains unknown.

Without entering here into the details of this former participant's story, what interests us are the contrasting reactions of other participants. most reacted strongly because they felt deceived and cheated, principally because they had repeatedly taken the time to reply to her postings with personal words of kindness, empathy, and encouragement. many mothers who share their difficulties on the forums are looking for this form of community support. Some users were outraged, while others blamed it on mental health issues and hoped that this mother would get the necessary medical attention she needed. others also expressed relief at the idea that these children were in fact not as ill as their mother described. In all cases, such reactions reveal that most users think of their forum as a space of free speech, truth—as selective as it might be— and authenticity. In the aftermath of her public apology, this user consequently edited most of her posts (thus rendering unintelligible some of the conversations she had taken part in) and deleted her account. moderators also closed some of the threads in which she had participated. once archived, they nevertheless remain accessible, though it is no longer possible to add a new post.

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Anonymity and online pseudonyms

What May Friedman (2013) observes about mommybloggers and anonymity is also relevant to participants in forums:

> For many mommybloggers ..., it is possible to present the contradictions and tensions of maternal life because of the anonymity offered by the mamasphere. Anonymity comes with certain pitfalls, however. A rich blogging life must be concealed from friends and families. ... [A]nonymity allows for an authenticity that may increase the potential for ambiguity and disruption, as well as the potential for the individual mother's hybridity to whine through. (p. 58)

Disruptions of traditional models and discourses of institutional motherhood are possible only under the cover of anonymity. Rare are the participants who use their complete offline name on the forums, or even just their first name. A close reading of the forums in the long-term—over several years as in the present case study—nevertheless reveals that frequent and active users are not indistinct or generic participants, but recognizable persons whose coherence can be read through their various posts. The constant use of an online name makes one's public presence and participation in the forum traceable and testifies to an authenticity that, in turn, leads to an authoritative position in the forums. Because older posts are archived, it was possible for me to follow the path of the personal life story of some of these mothers through their postings: when they got married, if they had a miscarriage, their due date, which type of birth they wished for themselves, et cetera. This type of data sometimes was corroborated by their highly customized "signatures." willingly displaying so much information in one's signature for everyone to read is different from providing such data when registering as a user on a forum for statistical

purposes (often coupled with marketing strategies). As mentioned above, these signatures may contain lists of natural practices, but also other personal details. The mention of details such as the length of their menstrual cycles, the year or exact date of birth of their child/ren, their marital status, their nationality, or, more rarely, their religious affiliation contributed to blurring the categories between private and public data. This, of course, is not the whole story of their mothering, nor of their life. These are only fragments of what they are willing to share anonymously with the rest of the connected world and, for some of them, what they agreed to talk about during a semi-structured interview.

Risky pseudonyms

Creating one's pseudonym is the first step toward expressing one's personality on the forum. Some online names reflect parts of one's life (e.g., combining one's children's names as part of the pseudo, adding a number which is one's birth year or postal code). others are inventions. But even under the cover of a pseudonym, sharing intimate de- tails about one's life is not without danger. when they sense that their real identity is jeopardized, or that their offline acquaintances might be able to link their online dis- courses to them, some users do not hesitate to change their pseudonym. mothers may express on the natural parenting forums details and opinions that they would not share with their friends, their relatives, state authorities, and health professionals.

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For instance, Sandrine (name changed), a mother from France, whom I recruited for an interview from the Doctissimo forum mentioned above, told me that she first created her pseudonym by combining three letters of her first name and three letters of her last name. At some point, she realized that she could easily be identified, and this started to worry her. Friends and relatives who knew her real name and her interest for natural parenting would have been able to trace her down on the most active and open forum on natural parenting in the French language. She also had mentioned in several posts that her family had recently moved from France to North America. At some point, in part because they openly criticized her unconventional style of mothering (e.g., she was still breastfeeding her three-year-old son at the time of the inter- view), Sandrine had some difficulty in her relationship with her in-laws. She openly expressed concerns about this on the forum, without giving any names, but with enough peculiar details about her situation. Suspicious that her mother-in-law might be "spying on her" on the forum, Sandrine then decided to change the pseudonym she had been using for more than one year.

This was not an easy decision to make. Sandrine first had to delete her account before she could create a new one. doing so implied that she lost her "status" as a frequent user on the forum.5 Caroline (name changed), another French user I interviewed, also mentioned that she had changed her username at some point and had consequently "lost" (*perdu*) the blog attached to her former profile when she created a new one. She first regretted this, because her blog had become "quite popular" (*bien suivi*), but then saw this as an opportunity to start anew. The loss of this public status as a frequent user in turn implied a loss of authenticity and of influence in the forum's conversation, as long-term users frequently are seen as having more knowledge, experience, and expertise in the specific domains of natural parenting. After creating a new profile with a new pseudonym, Sandrine then had to notify other long-standing users, with whom she had been in conversation previously, including those via private messages, that she was still present, but under a new pseudonym. other instances of users deleting their accounts and starting anew with a more cryptic pseudonym include cases of a lost password or username after a period of long inactivity and cases of suspicion that one's husband, friends, relatives, or colleagues might be "spying" on the forum and find out about details that these mothers were not ready to share with them. Additionally, the permanence of text on the forum bothers some participants. one's profile can be deleted, but in order to erase any trace of participation to the forum, every single message must be edited

or deleted. This can be a tedious task for users who have written hundreds of posts. Thus, some users request in their signature line: "Please do not quote me!" as quoted messages can no longer be edited or deleted by their authors.

The impact of online participation on offline negotiation: Home birth and vaccine hesitancy

Discussions about decisions in the domain of healthcare also point to the importance of anonymity and authenticity for forum participants. Home birth is a most striking example. Addressing other like-minded women on specific sections of the forum, such as the one dedicated to home birth on the doctissimo forum, some participants freely [page 119] discuss their plans to have a midwife-supervised home birth (which is legal, but difficult to access in France) and how they actively and enthusiastically prepare for it. They also share which strategies they use in order to hide their actual plans from their usually worried relatives and from their regular gynecologist-obstetricians, most of whom vehemently oppose home birth.

Analyzing conversations about another controversial example, that of vaccine hesitancy, does not provide accurate data about effective vaccination rates among the children of the forum's participants, but it is fair to state that vaccines are a much de- bated topic. In contexts where vaccines are strongly recommended and some even are mandatory to register a child in public school, some parents comply to official vaccination schedules, while others choose vaccines selectively or delay specific injections, and others resort to various strategies to *completely* avoid vaccination. In certain con- texts, particularly in France, parents who choose not to vaccinate—often insisting that this is a private and informed choice—might face administrative and legal issues. mainstream media also relay such polemics through reporting the reactions of official health authorities in infrequent cases of preventable disease outbreaks and by shining the spotlight on the extremely rare cases of parents sued by state authorities for not vaccinating their children. Regularly, some mothers post calls for help in finding a physician or a pediatrician who would be "open to non-vaccination" or be ready to "sign the vaccination card" (*vacciner le carnet* is the typical expression), thus providing an attestation, but without effectively vaccinating the child. while they ask for the real names and addresses of doctors who could help them, these mothers would not give their own real names. For most of them, such options cannot (or no longer can) be discussed with their regular health practitioners. The forums are the only spaces for them to debate the topic and search for alternative information.

Motherhood, mothering, and the blurring of the public/private divide

In *Of Woman Born*, feminist thinker Adrienne Rich (1995) laid a fundamental distinction between

> two meanings of motherhood one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution,* which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (p. 13; italics in original).

In motherhood studies, this first meaning is often referred to as mother*ing* and is also understood as women's experience of being mothers. Rich also remarked that the institution of motherhood "creates the dangerous schism between 'private' and 'public' life, [and] calcifies human choices and potentialities" (p. 13). Nearly 40 years after the first publication of *Of Woman Born* (in 1976), a wider range of "choices" in parenting styles has emerged, but the "potentialities" for women, as mothers, still remain limited by the constraints of institutional *motherhood.* moreover, this "dangerous schism be- tween 'private' and 'public' life" (p. 13) has been mitigated to some extent: not because of a significant progress toward gender equality in fathers' participation in child-rearing care work, but, rather, because of some of the most recent developments of information and communication technologies ("the Internet" and, more

specifically, "social [page 120] media"). These have contributed to increasing the blurring of boundaries between "private" and "public." Furthermore, the "present generation of mothers is reluctant to surrender the public visibility and cultural inclusion they enjoyed in their pre-maternal lives" (Stadtman Tucker, 2008, p. 201). In recent years, motherhood, mothering, and various options in the domain of parenting have become highly mediatized: on the one hand, parents increasingly re- sort to media to access information and discuss parenting skills, as well as to promote particular practices; on the other hand, both mainstream media (TV broadcasts and daily newspapers) and the specialized press (parenting and women's magazines) have reported on a range of existing parenting styles, not without any bias. Some of these options remain, at least, unconventional or, at worst, unacceptable. As noted above, this is the case with "natural parenting" in contemporary contexts, in particular in France, where it is commonly associated with a regression of feminism, due to the sup- posed threat to turn women into slaves to their children and confine them to domesticity—the ultimate private sphere. The former misunderstanding derives from an exaggerated interpretation of this emphasis that attachment parenting discourses put on responding to the child's needs through practices that allegedly require more avail- ability (and domestic work) from parents and, in particular, mothers. The latter stems from the valuing of "home" as the main (but not the only) site where natural parenting is to be performed or implemented, as in *home* birth, *home*-schooling, *home*-cooked meals, or *home*made remedies, for instance. This insistence on the "sacred space of the home as a refuge worth of protection" (Bobel, 2002, p. 111) turns it into the primary place to uphold specific values and gives it the status of sanctuary. This contributes to further associate natural parenting negatively with religious movements that have similar discourses and are known for their rather conservative views on gender roles in the family (father as breadwinner and mother as primary caregiver) and in society in general: if society and the public sphere are doomed, it is nevertheless possible to remain virtuous at home, in one's private life and private sphere.

Concluding remarks

On par with other online media spaces, specialized parenting forums are important platforms where idealized and alternative models of motherhood are represented, shaped, performed, contested sometimes, and where the messy reality of mothering and its diversity are discussed. The existence of online spaces where one can share experiences and ask questions anonymously is important for all parents, but it is even more crucial for mothers who choose to parent against the prevailing norms in the contexts they live in. This is the case for Francophone mothers whose "natural parenting" is inscribed in wider lifestyles of health and sustainability, often intersecting with lifestyles of voluntary simplicity and attachment parenting. Typical practices of attachment parenting such as co-sleeping, baby-wearing, or on-demand and extended breastfeeding are not a norm in their context and are usually frowned upon. other choices, presented as environmentally sustainable, are seen as too demanding for mothers. Generally, a total absorption into one's role as mother that could lead to for- getting about other private and public aspects and roles of one's life (such as wife, employee, consumer, or citizen) is not considered favourably in the mostly European [page 121] Francophone contexts surveyed for this research. Typical practices of natural parenting rarely are recommended by mainstream healthcare practitioners and relayed through mainstream media. Alternative information can be found through in-person participation in various advocacy and support groups or through books, now also available in French. However, "asking on the Internet" remains a primary mode of accessing in- formation about natural parenting for many of the mothers I interviewed.

Online media provide this alternative space of discussion, support, community building, and advocacy where the predominantly anonymous participation and the lack of formal identification do not prevent authenticity and authority. only online can such options be openly discussed and made visible, whereas in the public space, mothers would preferably remain silent about most of these choices, in

particular the most controversial ones: home birth and vaccine hesitancy. In the semi-private space of the medical consultation, when they negotiate with their regular healthcare practitioners generally opposed to these practices, some mothers will just try to remain as discreet as they can on their practices and the values that drive them. on forums, and under the cover of anonymity, they will seek support from their peers and expose their dilemma in very personal terms. They will also reaffirm their motivations and the worldviews that support their choices: a quasi-religious faith in "Nature," autonomy, resilience, respect, and empathy. one of the consequences of the mediation of natural parenting is the challenging of traditional medical or even social authority. Forums and other discussion groups, both closed and open, on social media have given alternative options in the do- main of parenting a greater visibility. This, in turn, has led to a challenge of official authorities for some parents who get access to information they would not have heard of if not through social media. The new extent of vaccine hesitancy and, to a lesser extent, the unmet demand for home birth in certain countries are two examples of practices that are on the rise and increasingly visible in public debates.

The individually authored narratives and collective discussions that take place in online media, and in particular in forums, make publicly available details of what is usually considered to be a very private business: making and having a baby. Forums generate collective conversations, often started by the sharing of intimate narratives of events that happen mostly in the domestic sphere, still overwhelmingly associated with femininity and considered as the ultimate private sphere. In the domain of parenting, most of the care work and "everyday life practices" would remain invisible without "the public" though anonymous online sharing. These practices might still be criticized by close relatives who witness them. However, reactions to such criticism can be shared online with other forum participants, who can suggest strategies of accountability and ways to respond to such critiques.

Because mediation serves as a major site of debate in the absence of fair representations of alternative practices in mainstream Francophone media, notions of public and private spheres are increasingly blurred. The consequences of these private choices are challenged in the public sphere. Inversely, because of online mediation, the public health guidelines that are meant to inform private choices in the domain of children's health now are competing with these other, highly personal narratives expressed through online media.

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Twenty-first-century mothers who use online spaces to share their experience of mothering might still have some sense that "the personal is political," as in the 1970s consciousness-raising feminist cry.6 However, through the various affordances of the Internet, this "personal" has also become "collective" and "publicly displayed," in spite of the increased "privatization of motherhood" over the last decades of the twentieth century (O'Reilly, 2010, p. 17). Before even being perceived and discussed as political issues, personal decisions in the domain of parenting are, primarily, subject to regulatory social surveillance. Because of the mediation of both motherhood and mothering—that is, the representation of mothers *in* the media and the *use of* media *by* mothers—the borders between public and private are less sharp than they used to be. There is a call for new paths of research from an interdisciplinary perspective that focuses on the mediation of mothering and motherhood as it intersects with new expressions of religion and spirituality. I suggest that our questions should no longer revolve only around a public/private classificatory dichotomy. Rather, they should be articulated alongside continuums of more or less anonymous spaces, ranging from "shared" to "secret," from "open" to "selective" or "closed" groups. They should also include notions of "collective" and "individual" participations in a variety of media, willingly or unwillingly, sometimes under the cover of a pseudonym, for the purpose of sharing selected but authentic data in online spaces.

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Notes

1. The larger study was entitled "Natural Parenting in the digital Age. At the Confluence of mothering, Religion, environmentalism and Technology." In complement to surveying forums, blogs, pages on social media, video sharing websites, and other types of websites, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 parents, mostly mothers, whom I easily recruited through these same online platforms. In parallel, I also surveyed an archival selection of widely read Francophone newspapers, magazines, and mainstream parenting magazines.

2. See Table 1 for details about this and other forums and specific sections of the forums considered in this larger research.

3. I make a distinction between "practitioners" and "advocates" by considering the latter as persons who are *actively* engaged in promoting one or several key features and ideals of natural parenting, through interaction on social media; within local, national, and international associations; or through a consistent proselytizing discourse. examples of advocates include La Leche League leaders or baby- wearing instructors.

4. Iinterviewedmostlymothersorcouplesfrom FranceandSwitzerland,acouplefromBelgium,and others who were French and Swiss expatriates. A forthcoming series of interviews with mothers specifically from Québec and other Francophone areas of Canada will be conducted and the results contrasted with those of European mothers.

5. Afterpostingacertainnumberofmessagesontheforum,usersofdoctissimoautomaticallyreceive a line in their profile that indicates that they are "frequent users" (*habitué*, *fidèle*). Their status then goes on to indicate *doctinaute* (a term referring specifically to users of the doctissimo forums) of [page 123] "bronze, silver, gold and diamond." These automatically updated profiles testify to the degree of involvement of a user with the forum and, often, of her seniority in the forum.

6. Although it is difficult to determine who really coined the sentence "The personal is political," feminist writer Carol Hanisch published an essay under this title in the 1970 anthology *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* and it is thus widely attributed to her.

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Eco-bio, http://www.eco-bio.info/forum/upload

Bebe, www.bebe.ch

Doctissimo, http://forum.doctissimo.fr/grossesse-bebe/liste_categorie.htm

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