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Mediated Babywearing as Aesthetic Orthodoxy

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Embodiment, values, and media: Babywearing in the twenty-first century¹

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, digital media have become central to the form, content, and dissemination of contemporary babywearing, a practice articulated around the optimal use of a device designed for the specific purpose of carrying a baby or a young child and involved in the practice and beliefs articulated as natural parenting. This chapter highlights how some aspects of babywearing intersect with media representations and deeply held beliefs relating to parenting, early childhood, family relationships, and society.

Both embodied and embedded in materiality, babywearing is more than just a component of a "parenting philosophy." It can also be considered a form of "practical spirituality" as defined in the introduction to this volume. Drawing from Pamela Klassen's discussion of the history and uses of the concept of "practice" in the study of media and religions, in this chapter, I turn my attention "away from doctrinal and official discourses of religions, states, and elites [...] toward the 'everyday' actions, movements, and sensations of 'ordinary' people."² I explore how contemporary Western parents use a variety of online media in order to learn, perfect, and transmit what is to them an "everyday" practice sometimes imbued, though, with "extraordinary" meanings.

Babywearing can be considered as spiritual in the sense that it is based on and expresses values that are not appropriated exclusively by established religious institutions and that transcend the utilitarianism of babywearing and its devices. [p. 18] Babywearing is much more than just

“practical” and thus is at the center of discussions and debates about what constitutes good parenting. Motherhood, a contested institution, is culturally informed by traditions, including religious ones, and is constantly responding to norms that are, in turn, enforced, challenged, or rejected. Babywearing, along with its specifically related devices, is a kinaesthetic and material expression of a set of values related to a particular maternal identity.

Researchers interested in the intersection of religion, media, and everyday life practice might ask not only “What is practical about spirituality?” but also “What is spiritual about a particular practice?” Like other embodied practices such as yoga or martial arts in which scholars detect forms of spirituality emerging outside of traditional religious discourses and institutions or on their margins, babywearing, too, is a “discipline” (in a Foucauldian sense): a bodily technique at the intersection of physical exercise and sartorial aesthetics that holds a promise of practicality, well-being, and wholesome parenthood.

While in many parts of the world carrying young children with the help of different devices remains a normal routine for parents and caregivers,³ it is now considered, in specific Euro-American contexts, as one virtuous option within a wide array of parenting styles and practices. There, babywearing emerges as a choice, often a conscious or a militant one. Sometimes, objects not only express but also create meaning and meaningful lives. Babywearing wraps, slings, and carriers now are part of the paraphernalia of “good mothering” as defined according to the norms of specific parenting subcultures, principally those of “attachment parenting” but also, increasingly, those of “natural parenting.” In this respect, babywearing is a crucial component of these two intersecting, but distinct styles of parenting. These, in turn, are frequently in line with lifestyles of health and sustainability (LOHAS),⁴ and lifestyles of voluntary simplicity (LOVOS). LOVOS, already identified as one “ideological component” of “natural mothering,” is described as dictating a “lifestyle that derives meaning from relative austerity and minimized consumption,”⁵ which does not mean a complete absence of consumption. LOHAS, on the other hand, tends to create meaning through consumption, and in particular through “ethical” or “conscious” consumption of certain manufactured goods, products, and services. “Natural” and “attachment parenting” are easily compatible with LOHAS and LOVOS because of the centrality of this ethical reflection over consumption and sustainability carried on in diverse social circles and through a variety of media. Both alternative parenting subcultures are well represented in online “mamaspheres” that constitute spaces of self-representation and expression [p. 19] for mothers⁶ and, more rarely, fathers. This chapter investigates examples from francophone contexts that I surveyed for a larger research project. In those contexts, babywearing remains an uncommon and controversial practice to which spiritual meanings are attached and that reflects current debates about “family values” and parenting norms.

Media, mediation, and mediatization seem to be contested terms even within the field of media studies.⁷ Scholars of religions attempting to fill the gap in the study of spirituality, material culture, and digital media, too, are left to work with unstable definitions. In this chapter, I understand media first in a concrete sense as the variety of *mediums*, of material supports, used to communicate information and symbolic meaning. As I will argue, a babywearing wrap itself

can become the medium used to express particular identities and sets of beliefs and values. I also use the term in the more general sense of “traditional media” (e.g., print, press, TV, radio) and digital media (e.g., social networks, blogs, forums). Mediation then refers to the process of using such media, whereas I understand mediatization as also including the effects that this use of media may have on a practice, or as Friedrich Krotz formulates it “media change, but also its consequences.”⁸ Media now play a key role in advertising and advocating for babywearing and in the transmission of the necessary technical skills and of discursive strategies to account for the practice in terms of a “right thing to do” as a parent or, even, as a species. Because the practice itself is now influenced by its multiple mediations, babywearing is both mediated and mediatized: taking a selfie with one’s baby in the wrap and sharing it online, or looking at such pictures and their associated comments in order to learn more about babywearing is now an integral part of the babywearing experience for mothers.

These mostly female⁹ users form intentional communities of shared affinities, values, worldviews—and they position babywearing as a central topic of discussion on their specific online platforms. Mediation, thus, is a powerful force both in shaping this distinctive identity and in allowing the emergence of what Birgit Meyer calls “aesthetic formations.”¹⁰ Pictures, moving images, and other forms of verbal and visual discourses relating to a primarily kinaesthetic practice are relayed through a variety of online platforms and, in particular, through social media. Users participate in larger social processes shaping a narrative about babywearing as the *right* thing to do, not only in a technical sense but also in a moral one as well. This practice is assumed to have positive effects on the wearer and on the child, both in the short- and long run. Because of this implied morality and of the expectation that benefits cannot be achieved through practice, babywearing can be considered a practical spirituality.

[p. 20] Embodiment and mediation are at the center of this chapter, which explores the relationship between a predominantly maternal experience of embodiment and particular modes of mediation and representations of babies and mothers as well as their connection. These constitute selective aspects of this mediatized culture of babywearing in the dominant framework of neoliberal and material(ist) culture of “conspicuous consumption”¹¹ (Veblen 2007) in which (good) motherhood can be performed through the purchase and the use of specific goods,¹² now complemented by their display through online and social media.

Babywearing at the intersection of attachment parenting and natural parenting

“Natural parenting” is better known in North America as “natural family living,” “natural mothering,”¹³ “green mothering,” “sustainable motherhood,” or, for some of its components, “paleo parenting.” It is constructed as “a gender- specific and individualistic environmentalism in a neoliberal society”¹⁴ enacted in the domain of parenting and frequently extended to housekeeping or even homesteading. As mentioned above, babywearing is a crucial component of two compatible but nevertheless distinct styles of parenting: natural parenting and

attachment parenting. In spite of their similarities, they do not exactly overlap (even if mainstream media tend to conflate both). In the same way that not all “natural parents” are into babywearing (even though most interviewed were), babywearing parents do not necessarily subscribe to environmentalist ideas and values, although many of them do. One can coherently claim to be an attachment parent—breastfeed, cosleep, and carry one’s baby as much as possible—and yet still use disposable diapers, purchase toys regardless of their possible unsustainability, eat processed food from conventional agriculture, and forego recycling and composting. While sharing many tenets of attachment parenting, natural parenting adds to it an environmentalist agenda with an emphasis on health and sustainability.¹⁵

Natural parents not only hope to raise healthy and well-adjusted children, they also do their best to mitigate their impact on the environment. For instance, whenever possible, they use washable diapers and prefer alternative medicines and special (often organic, vegetarian, or locavore) diets. They engage in Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) and make intentional choices for their everyday consumption that they justify through ethical discourses articulated [p. 21] around social justice and environmentalist imperatives. As shown by Monica Emerich (2011), LOHAS media construct sustainability as ethical practice, as the *right* thing to do. This idea of doing something right through ethical consumption, for instance, is taken as a moral stance by people who adhere to and engage in it. Acquiring, properly using, and displaying certain objects becomes an expression of how we should live with and treat one another as well as of respect not only for our immediate environment but also for the planet as a whole. From this perspective, an ideally constructed idea of “Nature” or, in the discourse of my francophone informants, of “the natural” (*le naturel*) becomes central, valued, and almost sacralized, although not as directly and intensively as in instances of what Bron Taylor calls “dark green religion.”¹⁶ Babywearing—as a key practice of natural parenting, and, in turn inserted into wider LOHAS and LOVOS frameworks—participates in a wider, spiritualized conversation and sentiment about how humans should relate to each other and to Nature.

Moreover, babywearing aligns with the idea that the mother’s and the child’s bodies must remain in proximity, especially during the first weeks after birth, and that “natural” processes should not be disturbed by anything artificial, in particular by medical technology. However, natural parents do not systematically reject technology per se, especially when it helps enhance “natural” processes such as bonding.¹⁷ Neither do these parents shun high-tech communication technologies used to promote such generally low-tech lifestyles, online media in particular.

Whether this is frowned upon or prescribed in the context within which they parent, babywearers de facto embrace bodily proximity with their own children. This idea of bodily closeness and maternal intimacy is often brought up when parents are asked to account for their babywearing. They frequently characterize babywearing with a wrap as “natural” or as “physiological” (*un portage physiologique*), adjectives also used to describe a birth with no or very little medical intervention. The maintenance of maternal intimacy with the child and the attention paid to the closeness of two bodies can be read not only as “care” but also as “love,” with the possible implication of a mothering of superior quality and morality. “Wrap you in love” is the title of a webpage in English promoting babywearing with wraps.¹⁸ In French, babywearing

instructors recommend that the head of the baby should not be “close at hand,” but rather also “à portée de bisou” or “à hauteur de calin” (“close at kiss” or “at hug’s height”). As Marcel Mauss noted in his 1934 essay *Les techniques du corps* where he addresses “the history of carrying,” it takes the distinct bodies of “two interrelated beings, mother and child” to babywearing—and the practice has different implications for both. Mauss [p. 22] points out the “psychic states [that] arise [from being carried as a child] that have disappeared from infancy with us,”¹⁹ and that being carried “next to [one’s] mother’s skin for two or three years”²⁰ might give individuals a different attitude toward their mothers and, probably, a different sensory perception of the body and of the world as well. The debate as to whether such sensory practice or its absence also has spiritual implications is left open.

Francophone online communities of babywearing mothers: The JPMBB case

The following sections focus on a heterogeneous but long-standing online community of users who discuss their experience of babywearing with a specific brand of wraps and slings in a francophone context. This case study offers a remarkable contrast that shatters some of the claims to universality and several of the tenets and values that are often brought forward mostly by North American advocates of babywearing. My informants and the participants whose conversations I followed on a variety of blogs, forums, and social media live for the most part in France, but also in Switzerland, Belgium, and francophone Canada. As opposed to some of the mothers whom I interviewed for this research, I do not consider myself as a technical expert in babywearing. Nevertheless, through my personal practice, I have acquired proficiency in using different babywearing devices, including the specific type of wrap discussed in this chapter. I’ve learned from certified babywearing instructors and from mothers who were willing to share with me technical advice, their own motivations for babywearing, and what they believed about the effects of babywearing both on them and on their child/ren.²¹

Babywearing with “*Je porte mon bébé*”²² (I carry my baby) or JPMBB wraps and slings is the main topic of the daily conversations of parents (mostly mothers) who contribute to the open Facebook group examined here.²³ While many online groups and pages are dedicated to babywearing, the peculiarity of this Facebook group is that it brings together users holding general consensus that JPMBB wraps and slings are the best or, at least, their favorites. The group does not feature the prominent debates about the “better” type of wrap, sling, or carrier that frequently take place within larger communities of babywearers. Most posted pictures are of mothers using JPMBB products. Other images include “bad babywearing” positions (such as “facing the world”), alternate uses for the wrap (for instance, as a hammock for a sleepy child), and customized wraps.

[p. 23] Users ask questions and provide answers, post comments on their experience of babywearing with JPMBB wraps, and share advice and information. They also use the Facebook group as a place to advertise babywearing workshops and to swap, buy, and sell new and used

wraps. Other topics of discussions related to attachment parenting or natural parenting more generally are also discussed.

The wrap as media: Collecting colors and customizations

A wrap can be used as a medium to voice a critique or rejection of specific norms and beliefs and to proclaim the adoption of alternative ethics of parenting. But, it is through processes of mediatization that this social value is now articulated and made manifest. The wrap itself can be customized through dyeing, embroidery, or silkscreen printing. It reveals culturally determined and often implicit convictions about what constitutes appropriate care of children. By using a particular type or brand of wrap, the wearer expresses belonging in a wider social framework or in a specific subculture that resists that framework.

The issues of conspicuous consumption of babywearing wraps and of sartorial aesthetics in relation to mediation deserve a discussion that exceeds the scope of this chapter. As a way in which to contextualize this case study, however, some of the significant aesthetic and technical characteristics that distinguish the JPMBB wrap from other brands include the availability of a wide range of colors (with new additions every season) and a pocket at the center of the original wrap bearing the JPMBB logo.

As one of the Facebook group users pointed out in a discussion about the controversial practice of collecting wraps, there would not be all this “frenzy around the wraps if they were all of the same color” and if users would not share pictures of their “stash” on Facebook. “There is no such thing as too many wraps,” responds another poster. Even as a fashion statement, wearing an empty wrap would not make any sense. One cannot babywear without a baby: babywearing is the privileged practice of people who, on a regular or temporary basis, care for young children. Because only one wrap can be worn (and displayed) at a time, social media have become the alternative public space where users can share pictures of their collection, which may include up to fifteen JPMBB wraps and slings in different colors (not counting other types of carriers which appear in some of the pictures including customized babywearing wraps that include not only images such as trees, hands, animated cartoons characters, and abstract designs but also mottos such as “Keep calm and carry on,” “Close to my heart,” [p. 24] or “I carry the treasure of my life”²⁴). Some wraps are customized with the child’s name. For instance, “*Lalie à portée de bisous . . .*” (Lalie close at kiss) was the motto printed on one of the pictures publicly shared on the JPMBB users Facebook group. A mother had customized her wrap with the name of her child and she considered as desirable that this baby should be close enough to receive maternal marks of affection (kisses) while in the wrap (and, probably, the rest of the time as well). As will be further explained below, such proximity is deemed suspicious within mainstream French culture (and more largely other European francophone contexts, too). Babywearing is considered by some as detrimental not only to the upbringing of the child, but also to the mother and to society at large.

Freedom and connection: Babywearing as “gift” and “experience”

To better identify the beliefs and values that underlie babywearing and to understand how the JPMBB online community contributes to the construction of a “practical spirituality,” it is necessary to situate babywearing more precisely against the backdrop of attachment parenting and natural parenting. In turn, these two parenting subcultures must be considered in their contemporary francophone context.

The founders of JPMBB (the firm is legally and administratively established in France but operates internationally) present themselves as parents who have experienced the “adult-child connection” much valued in attachment parenting theory along with other benefits claimed by advocates of babywearing.²⁵ On the JPMBB webpage, they write:

Our “philosophy” is to pass on babywearing not only as a convenient tool, but mainly as a great way for parents to listen to their child and to themselves, to gain self-confidence and regain free will and autonomy, which isn’t [*sic*] easy to keep during pregnancy.

To us, babywearing is as important as any other aspect of parenting, because it usually happens at the very beginning of parenthood and of the adult-child connection. It is decisive and helps build the foundation of the future communication between the adult and the child, who in turn will become an adult.

We discovered babywearing when we were given a wrap as a gift after our first child was born.

[p. 25] Babywearing started as a gift and remained a gift to us: a gift both to the adult and the child, that’s how we experience it and how we want to share it.

Babywearing is a lot about sharing “knowledge”: know how to trust yourself, know your Baby, know his needs and reality.

When doing the instruction booklet and tutorial videos, we were careful to keep on passing this on, with responsible sales and marketing practices, for those who cannot come to a workshop.²⁶

JPMBB mediatizes itself as a dynamic brand created *by* parents *for* parents and their babies. The company clearly outlines their ethics (“responsible sales and marketing practices”), obliquely addressing potential consumers engaged in “ethical consumption,” and pays attention to issues of social justice in line with lifestyles of health and sustainability.

The connection between adult and child, the reinforcement of this alleged special bond, the convenience afforded by the babywearing wrap, and a restored freedom for the wearer tend to receive a great emphasis in the francophone contexts studied. Child-centeredness was less prominent. Unlike in North American discourses advocating babywearing, immediate response to the baby’s needs was rarely mentioned first. Rather, my informants gave “convenience,” “practicality,” or even “freedom to resume regular outings and activities” as their main reasons

for using a wrap. This is the case for “Vanessa,” a babywearing instructor and work-at-home mother in Switzerland. When she gave birth in 2009, she used the wrap for many activities including visiting museums and dining out with her husband. They lived in a big city at the time and Vanessa emphasized how much more convenient the wrap was than a stroller when using the subway system. Shifting the focus away from the child and placing it on practicality and on the freedom babywearing affords users to fulfill aspirations outside of motherhood is part of a discursive strategy used by many of the francophone mothers interviewed, especially those from France. This emphasis is also perceptible in the images shared with the Facebook group, and online generally. By posting pictures of themselves with their babies in the wraps not only in their homes but also in the cultural, historical, and natural sites they visit, mothers strive to present babywearing as a socially acceptable and public practice.

Some mothers post such pictures and captions as an explicit response to allegations that babywearing and attachment parenting practices (in particular breastfeeding) confine women to domesticity. Such criticism against babywearing is part of a more general condemnation of the “naturalist ideology”²⁷ that [p. 26] supposedly pushes women back into their homes for the sake of environmentalism and conflates “women” with “mothers.” However, as opposed to the use of washable diapers,²⁸ babywearing does not require “more work” from parents. On the contrary, the babywearing advocates and practitioners interviewed such as Vanessa repeatedly stated that their JPMBB wraps allowed them more freedom to venture out and ensure continuity in their social life. In contrast with the prominence of the child-centered benefits of attachment parenting in its North American and Anglophone expressions, discourses of francophones tend to be more matricentric and rarely prioritize the child’s needs over those of the parent.

French parenting versus babywearing: Exotic, marginal, and dangerous

Natural parenting locates a lost parenting wisdom either in the distant past or in far-away cultures, unblemished by harmful technological innovations. Like many discourses about health and spiritual well-being, natural parenting tends to revere these idealized past or distant “Exotic Others” as repositories of valuable relational, spiritual, and practical wisdom to be reclaimed and embraced. By contrast, prevailing French views on parenting are generally informed by an efficiently mediated ideology of “scientific motherhood,”²⁹ usually expert-guided, and driven by progress and technological innovation rather than by intuition. In spite of its increasing popularity, babywearing is still predominantly portrayed in a negative light in most European francophone contexts.

Babywearing mothers often are prompted to account for their practice both by relatives and strangers. A user on the JPMBB users Facebook group posted the following message (translated):

Today, I persuaded a 50-ish years old lady who almost called me a bad mother when she saw my son in the wrap! She starts by telling me off, saying that my baby had no coat and must have been cold in my “rag” (*chiffon*) ([though] it is 20° C degrees . . .). . . that here we were not in Africa . . . Then I explained to her the benefits of babywearing! She asked me many questions, in particular “why not a baby carrier (*un porte-bébé*) rather than your “rag”? I explained [everything] to her, and then she completely changed her mind. This is pleasant, but when I heard her [initial] discourse, I realized her prejudice and this is desolating.³⁰

Allusions to a generic Africa, recurring in many (usually negative) remarks about babywearing,³¹ position the practice as exotic and foreign³² and links it [p. 27] to imaginary contexts where mothers cannot access the technical comforts of modern motherhood. In the opinion of the older woman who confronted the JPMBB user, such a practice should not take place in France or is tolerable only for mothers who actually are of African origin and thus cannot fit into the (unachievable) stereotype of the “ideal French mother” anyway. Many mothers who share their experiences on the JPMBB Facebook group have experienced the prevailing negative prejudice against babywearing. They report that they are the only ones in their neighborhood or town to use a wrap or a sling. They recount uneasy feelings about situations of social surveillance similar to that above where people not only stared at them and their baby in the wrap, but also made comments (or even tried to touch the baby). Some comments are positive, humorous, or stem from genuine ignorance about babywearing or concern for the baby (“Can he breathe?”; “Won’t she fall down?”; “Is he not too cold, warm, tight, loose?”; “When will she finally learn how to walk?”) or for the mother (“Don’t you have back pain?”; “Can’t you afford to buy a stroller?”). Other remarks, though, are perceived as highly offensive and some tend to be implicitly racist.

According to Sharon Hays, who coined the term “ideology of intensive mothering,” the current hegemonic model of motherhood in North America says child-rearing is (or should be) labor-intensive, child-centered, and expert- guided. Mothers must devote time, resources, and energy to child-rearing. The success of attachment parenting theories has certainly contributed to the rise of this ideology, but its hold on francophone mothers living in Europe seems more limited. Detractors fear the progress of what they coin a new “maternalism” and its alliance with environmentalist agendas and the so-called naturalist ideology.³³ Even though they are not restricted to the geographical boundaries of France, some principles can be considered more typical of a French child-rearing style than of most contemporary parenting trends in North America: the desire to render the child autonomous as early as possible, early socialization and schooling, and a rather strict training to comply with parents’ and caregivers’ instructions. All of this is embedded in the generally guilt-free use of state-sponsored collective structures. Moreover, prevailing in this context is the idea that a woman should find satisfaction and self-realization not only through motherhood and domestic and family life but also through her relationships with adults of both sexes and through personal activities.

The belief that child-rearing requires training and regular schedules defined more by society’s and adults’ convenience than by the child’s physiological needs [p. 28] (though both can coincide) is still widely accepted in this context. It is seen not only as necessary but also as highly

desirable that a child be autonomous as early as possible and be fit to be cared for by caregivers other than the mother. This affects the prevailing perception of babywearing as a marginal, exotic, dangerous, and socially unfit practice (sometimes all together). If the baby is carried in the arms or in a wrap too much, too often, or at her own will, she will grow into *un enfant gâté* (a spoiled child). From this perspective, babywearing, or at least its intensive practice chiefly determined by the baby's needs rather than by those of the caregiver, is better avoided lest the mother wants to turn her child into a "tyrant" and herself into a "slave." Media relay and amplify such fears and suspicions, in particular when mainstream medical professionals are featured as experts and discourage the practice, mostly on social rather than on medical grounds: the fear is that the child will become *capricieux* ("fussy and picky"). Because babywearing is suspected of producing unruly children, it is also seen as socially irresponsible.

Babywearing is not perceived as a spiritual practice uniformly across cultures. Where babies are commonly carried, babywearing has no particular and separate spiritual dimension, although rituals might take place to mark the first time the child touches the ground or takes her first steps. However, where carrying babies is no longer the norm, media amplify advocacy narratives that exalt the maternal bond with the child or, conversely, the discourses—usually by male medical experts—that criticize this bond as too intense. Mainstream media and online platforms used by mothers themselves determine not only the spaces and forms of the discussion, but also their contents, especially when users and advocates of babywearing collectively moderate these spaces. They also set a tone for the discussion, either suspicious and accusatory or, at the opposite, apologetic. Such discourses reflect the difficulties that some users have in their practice of babywearing, but will rarely call into question the practice itself.

“Never alone with your wrap”: Online communities

As noted, babywearing is much more than the purchase of an object; technical knowledge about its optimal use should be acquired. The following statement by JPMBB was posted in response to a debate about whether the group should remain visible and public on Facebook:

It is part of the JPMBB experience to never be alone with one's wrap. There are the videos, this FB group, the detailed [user's] notice, the instructors (*monitrices*) [and] each one of these [has its own] specificity. Before being a brand, JPMBB is [p. 29] an experience lived every day by parents, something strong, something useful, something that one wishes to share when one has lived it.³⁴

This statement testifies to the mediation and mediatization of babywearing: the brand is present online, and so is the community of users and they reflect on their presence there. To users of the JPMBB wrap, this “experience lived every day” goes beyond the purely utilitarian. Mediation, here understood as the use of a variety of online platforms and social media, serves several interconnected purposes. Mainly, it allows the sharing of experience and knowledge concerning (1) the adult–child bond in parenting, and (2) the specific capacities that the wearer gains or regains through babywearing. More pragmatically, mediation is also used to transmit

(3) technical skills necessary for using the wrap correctly, and finally it contributes to (4) the building of a fluctuant community of users willing to share “something strong”: similar values, interests, and an attraction for a similar aesthetic. Such communities are constantly in the process of forming, dissolving, and reforming, migrating from one platform to another. Mediation plays an important role in the building of these “aesthetic formations,”³⁵ these heterogeneous “imagined communities”³⁶ of affinity that place a particular aesthetic and the embodied dimension of babywearing at the center of their common interests.

At the collective level, in addition to forming communities of users, online media is also integral to making babywearing visible and for the reclaiming of public space. For instance, babywearing flashmobs and strolls take place regularly in France, Switzerland, and Belgium. Other similar meetings in the public space such as breastfeeding sit-ins are held with the intent to make visible, normalize, and promote practices still considered marginal. Videos of babywearing choreographies performed in several cities in France during International Babywearing Week have been posted on YouTube. Successfully organizing such flashmobs would be difficult without using social media to advertise and recruit. For the babywearing choreography, participants could learn the steps of the dance ahead of time through video and join the group on the day of the event, without even having met the other babywearers-dancers ahead of time.

Media transmissions: Learning “from scratch” or “from screen”

In contrast to other types of baby carriers—which only require positioning the baby, clicking buckles, and adjusting the device—a wrap requires specific know-how in order to be tied correctly and securely. Advocates generally [p. 30] present babywearing as natural, necessary, instinctive, timeless, and universal. For instance, an author of the Feminist Breeder blog writes that babywearing is “what Mother Nature intended for us to do. Because of how we evolved as a species, we NEED to do it for our babies.”³⁷ Such polysemic characterization of babywearing, relayed and amplified by media, conflicts with the reality that effective use of a wrap is not instinctive, but must be learned. Furthermore, the few paleoanthropological and historical studies about devices used to carry tiny humans insist on their technological or artificial dimension, as noted by Timothy Taylor in *The Artificial Ape*.³⁸ Baby carriers have evolved into fashionable—but still practical—artifacts the optimal use of which requires specific training that is often acquired through online media.

The website of the association Babywearing International states:

Parents and caregivers often benefit from thinking of babywearing as a skill they can learn, rather than as the result of a product they can buy. Many babywearing techniques can be learned in just a few minutes. Some techniques, such as carrying a baby on your back, take more time and practice to master, but the extra effort is rewarded with liberation and increased comfort.³⁹

This statement reflects the disjunction between owning a product and having the skills to use it.

The complex tying of a wrap becomes easier with practice, and some people learn faster than others. Various media fill the gap between consumption and a learning process that requires “extra effort” but offers rewards including “liberation,” not unlike progression on a spiritual path.

Mediation plays a key role in the transmission of these skills, in particular in contexts where they are no longer passed down within families as a mainstream cultural practice.⁴⁰ “Vanessa” runs an online boutique where she sells items related to babywearing. She also is an instructor certified by the JPMBB brand. When I interviewed her, she was enthusiastic about transmitting her knowledge and “passion” to new parents. She organizes workshops, offers private classes, and even gives a few basic tips, free of charge, to parents who purchase their first wrap from her. When asked what she thought of the rise in popularity of babywearing, she said she was happy about it, but identified as a problem that even though the *object*—the wrap or the carrier—was becoming more widely used in Switzerland, the *know-how* and skills necessary to its proper use were often missing. Some parents use the wraps suboptimally or even dangerously. Vanessa said that “large department stores,” unlike her “small online boutique” (*petite boutique en ligne*), sell the wraps along with users’ manuals, but do not offer a live demonstration nor the proper, accompanying training. They [p. 31] do not “care” for their customers, which is also part of the JPMBB retailers’ philosophy.

When they do not attend workshops such as those organized by Vanessa, parents are left with several meters of fabric, a baby, and no technique. If they cannot “learn from scratch” by following the static illustrations and instructions in the owner’s manual, and if they do not have an experienced friend to help them, their only alternative is to “learn from screen.” New users seek to emulate moving images found on the many tutorial videos available on a variety of video-sharing platforms. Although JPMBB sells products for profit, the firm strives to make the know-how associated with them available for free, at least to some extent. The company provides many free tutorial videos on its website and through its YouTube channel⁴¹ that featured 66 videos and had 2,588 subscribers at the time of submission of this chapter. The second most popular video, after the one for tying the basic knot, demonstrates a position that enables breastfeeding in the wrap. It has been watched more than 200,000 times. The demonstrators appear at ease during the manipulation, and the videos are carefully edited: potential failures, such as a baby fussing or the carrier dropping the baby, are edited out. A musical soundtrack is added, and visual clues are superimposed on the image.

JPMBB was founded in 2007, and Facebook was made available to the general public in 2006. Most mothers who are currently buying and using wraps are proficient media users, and the youngest among them even qualify as “digital natives.” Social media and other online platforms (e.g., forums) constitute a primary source of information on child-rearing issues. When asked whom they turn to solve a nonlife-threatening emergency parenting issue, most parents I interviewed said they would first look online. Because a majority of their own mothers (and possibly even grandmothers) were not familiar with breastfeeding or babywearing, the mothers I interviewed generally ruled out older generations of women in their family as experts on such issues. Instead, they tended to turn to models outside of their immediate relatives, and their

discourses emphasize this collective dimension of online communities of mothers constituted through and taking place mostly on mediated spaces. Online mediation thus is a key instrument in their reappropriating of these skills and in their reclaiming of babywearing as something they can feel good about in their mothering.

On videos posted by JMPBB and by authentic users of their products, some viewers post thanks for the tutorial while others bash babywearing in general and still others post precise criticisms of what they think is a poor performance of babywearing or a tutorial of low quality. Similarly, on the JPMBB Facebook group, many first-time users—almost exclusively women—post pictures of [p. 32] themselves with their baby in the JPMBB wrap, hoping for advice on how to achieve the perfect position. Posting a picture of a “perfect” *portage* gives a sense of achievement and pride. New users try to emulate this aesthetic orthodoxy. The insistence on the right technique is amplified by its media reproduction, helping to turn babywearing into a form of orthopraxy. Within the truncated context of these videos, pictures, and comments, the reasons for babywearing matter less than its correct performance. Whether a mother uses a wrap primarily to soothe her baby’s colic or to regain the use of both her hands to make herself a sandwich is not important here. Examples of “bad babywearing practice” are publicly vilified online, even though most group participants would not likely confront a mother in the street about her erroneous tying of the wrap. Participants regularly announce that they are “leaving the group,” irritated by critiques that they feel “tend [to be] on the verge of extremism.”

The social and relational dynamics of a live babywearing workshop differ from those in the mediated space of the Facebook group, where some users ask for feedback and more experienced users give advice or criticism. At the live workshop, all participants are there to learn and give new parents a chance to socialize and interact. Workshops are advertised, often through social media, as an occasion to learn in a safe and relaxed environment with immediate, constructive feedback provided by the instructor, face to face. Although not all participants will engage in babywearing to the same extent after taking a workshop, it is likely that they all share, at least, an interest in safe and efficient practice, but maybe not enough to form a community of affinity.

Concluding remarks

Babywearing in the media age reflects some of the changing values that (re)define and express prevailing and culturally specific norms of “good mothering.” Media, mediation, and mediatization directly affect the practice of parenting and the objects associated with it such as babywearing wraps. Parenting choices are framed as part of different lifestyles and broader conversations about society and about how to parent as mothers inserted in specific social and natural environments.

Because of their materiality, wraps, slings, and carriers serve as customizable media for expressing this maternal identity. Particular spaces of social media such as the JPMBB Facebook group enable the transformation of a practical object into a (fashion) statement of identity and

values. In turn, social media [p. 33] extend such identity statements beyond offline practice by providing spaces where users can demonstrate their authenticity and authority in the matter of babywearing. Specific brands of babywearing devices such as JPMBB address their actual and potential consumers through these same media and encourage users to discuss their experience with their products and to solicit solutions to the issues they encounter.

While mainstream francophone media tend to present babywearing as harmful to children, mothers, and society, online social media that advocate for natural parenting and attachment parenting provide a friendly and safe space for users to discuss in their own terms the values that sustain their everyday practice and the benefits they achieve through or expect from it. Babywearing thus often is one element at the center of discussions that take place mostly online within communities of parents drawn to lifestyles that emphasize healthy living, sustainability, bonding with one's children, and practicality.

Whether practiced in public spaces or mediated through the online sharing of pictures and videos, babywearing can function as a statement of a maternal identity that is at odds with dominant conceptions of proper childrearing. Babywearing embodies proximity and intimacy with one's baby, whereas the dominant discourses in the particular contexts I surveyed emphasize early independence in children and generally recommend distasteful parenting techniques. There, when babywearers account for their practice, they insist on the practicality and freedom that they regain through it, as mothers, women, and participants in society. This freedom of movement includes reinvesting public spaces and showing it through the performance of babywearing flashmobs, or gatherings, among others, that are then also mediated.

Now that parenting is discussed and debated online as much as—if not more than—it is offline, babywearing has turned into a mediated performance accompanied by proselytizing efforts. In addition to being “brand evangelists,” some mothers become guardians and promoters of an “orthopraxy” of babywearing. In line with this religious analogy, babywearing can be a “profession” in a double sense: some babywearers start *professing* to other mothers, teaching them a gospel of babywearing, leading by example and convincingly passing on their knowledge, often through online media. Taken to the next level, this can become a *professional* activity for some of them who decide to become certified babywearing instructors (as in Vanessa's case) who actively use online media to publicize their activities, along with word-of-mouth advertising.

Babywearing workshops and social media play an important role in disseminating a new culture of babywearing in contexts where it is not part of [p. 34] mainstream parenting skills. Because properly tying a wrap is a kinaesthetic practice that involves two bodies and complex manipulations, video clips are one of the best media to demonstrate it. Social networks and video sharing websites are thus among the social media platforms used both by wrap retailers and manufacturers and by their users. Through shared images, video tutorials, narratives, and comments, new aesthetic and physiological orthodoxies are constituted online. Social media are used to transmit not only practical skills but also to model discursive strategies to justify going against the grain of conventional child-rearing modes in certain contexts. Further, they reinforce the users' convictions that they made the right choice in using the wrap, even if their immediate

friends, relatives, and healthcare providers say they have not. Such sensibilities are enabled to emerge transnationally and to be expressed in a variety of ways, both individually and collectively.

Contemporary mediation contributes to the regeneration of babywearing, while attaching new meanings, identities, and markets to it. Manufacturers and retailers of babywearing devices address primarily a specific community of consumers and market the practices as a transformative experience that eases transition to parenthood. As claimed by its advocates, babywearing indeed is not a new practice. The need for devices to carry infants preexists its mediation. Although media did not create this market segment, they have amplified it and transformed it into a community, through, for instance, popularizing certain brands of wraps as fashion accessories or through promoting the idea of collecting and displaying pictures of wraps. Media have also given babywearers greater visibility and a place to form online communities. They have contributed to transforming an object of consumption into one that indicates status, identity, and belonging to a community of shared beliefs, values, and practice.

[p. 210 - Endnotes]

Chapter 2

1. The material in this chapter was collected in the framework of a larger and still ongoing research project titled "Natural Parenting in the Digital Age: At the Confluence of Mothering, Religion, Environmentalism and Technology" funded through two mobility fellowships of the Swiss National Science Foundation and hosted by the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. Interviews were conducted in conformity with the ethical protocols for research with human subjects at the University of Toronto (protocol reference number 28397). Informed consent was secured from all interviewees and respondents' names have been omitted or changed. The interview with "Vanessa" was conducted on January 24, 2013, through audio-visual communication. Other online materials quoted in this chapter were or still are publicly available contents. I wish to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for its support and the Department for the Study of Religion for hosting my postdoctoral research stay.

2. Pamela Klassen, "Practice," in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (London and New York: Routledge), 136-47, esp. 143.

3. Itie C. van Hout (ed.), *Beloved Burden: Baby-Wearing around the World* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2011).

4. Monica Emerich, *The Gospel of Sustainability: Media, Market, and LOHAS* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

5. Chris Bobel, "Resisting, but Not Too Much: Interrogating the Paradox of Natural Mothering,"

in *Maternal Theory. Essential Readings* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007), 782-91, esp. 49.

6. Judith Stadtman Tucker, "Mothering in the Digital Age: Navigating the Personal and Political in the Virtual Sphere," in *Mothering in the Third Wave*, ed. A. Kinser (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2008), 199-212; M. Friedman, *Mommyblogs and the Changing Face of Motherhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

7. Friedrich Krotz, "Media, Mediatization and Mediatized Worlds: A Discussion of the Basic Concepts;" in *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age*, ed. F. Krotz and A. Hepp (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 72-87; Nick Couldry, "When Mediatization Hits the Ground," in *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society* [p. 211] *in a Media Age*, ed. F. Krotz and A. Hepp (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 54-71.

8. Krotz, "Media, Mediatization and Mediatized Worlds," 74.

9. The highly gendered dimension of parenting and babywearing cannot be engaged with directly in the limited scope of this chapter.

10. Birgit Meyer (ed.), *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6-11.

11. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Cosimo, 1899, 2007).

12. See Janelle S. Taylor, Linda L. Layne, and Danielle F. Wozniak (eds.), *Consuming Motherhood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

13. See Chris Bobel. *The Paradox of Natural Mothering* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002) and Bobel, "Resisting," for the most extensive studies on the topic.

14. Chikako Takeshita, "Eco-Diapers. The American Discourse of Sustainable Motherhood," in *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*, ed. M. Vandembeld Giles (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2014), 117-31, esp. 118.

15. Florence Pasche Guignard, "The In/Visibility of Mothering against the Norm in Francophone Contexts: Private and Public Discourses in the Mediation of 'Natural Parenting,'" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 40, no. 1 (2015): 105-24.

16. Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

17. The use of a breastpump, an electronic technological device used to extract breastmilk, is an example of a welcomed technology that enables mothers to continue (or enhance) their breastfeeding, considered by many in this milieu as the (only) "natural" way to feed babies.

18. "Wrap You in Love," accessed August 10, 2014, <http://www.wrapyouinlove.com>.

19. Marcel Mauss already situated babywearing as a practice of the "Exotic Other," which is clear from his referring to his contemporaries and compatriots by specifying "in us" and by marking distance with babyworn babies "unlike our children." See Marcel Maus, "Techniques of the Body," in *Incorporation. Zone 6*, ed. J. Crary and S. Kwinter (New York: Zone, 1934 edition in French, 1992), 455-77, esp. 466.

20. Ibid.

21. The author wishes to thank informants and participants for allowing the use of parts of conversations as material for this chapter.

22. "Je porte mon bébé" and the JPMBB logo are registered trademarks.

23. JPMBB is a popular French brand of wraps made since 2007. I gathered most of the material analyzed in this chapter from the official JPMBB Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/jeportemonbebe>) and from that of an open Facebook group for JPMBB users called "Le coin des utilisateurs Je porte mon bébé (JPMBB)" (JPMBB [p. 212] Users' Corner). JPMBB administrates this group page, though without monitoring it as closely as the company's official page, and without using it predominantly for advertising new products.

24. Such examples can be seen on the Face book page of the open group of JPMBB users.

25. Claude-Suzanne, Didierjean-Jouveau, *Porter bébé. Avantages et bienfaits* (GenèveBernex-Saint-Julien-en-Genevois: Jouvence, 2006).

26. "Our Philosophy;" jeportemonbebe.com, accessed January 14, 2014, <http://jeportemonbebe.com/en/>.

27. Elisabeth Badinter, *Le Conflit. La femme et la mère* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

28. Michèle Lalanne and Nathalie Lapeyre, "L'Engagement Écologique Au Quotidien A-t-il Un Genre?" *Recherches Féministes* 22, no. 1 (2009): 47. doi:10.7202/037795ar.

29. Rima Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

30. JPMBB users Facebook group, posted April11, 2014.

31. This alluding to "Africa" is such a frequent trope that an article written by a member of the Swiss Association for Babywearing (ASPB, Association Suisse de Portage des Bébé) and available through its website addresses this specific concern (see Alexandra Aubert, *Le Portage à travers le monde et les époques, Swiss Association for Babywearing* [Association Suisse de Portage des Bébé], last modified November 6, 2012. [http://www.aspb.ch/association/ASPBB%20-%20Leo/o20portageo/o20ao/o20traverso/o20le%20monde%20eto/o20leso/o20epoques.pdf](http://www.aspb.ch/association/ASPB%20-%20Leo/o20portageo/o20ao/o20traverso/o20le%20monde%20eto/o20leso/o20epoques.pdf),

2012).

32. See Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," 1934.

33. Badinter, *Le Conflit*.

34. Users of JPMBB Facebook page, accessed January 14, 2014. Author's translation.

35. Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 6-11.

36. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

37. Natasha Chiam, "Babywearing: Beyond the Cute Baby Carriers:" Retrieved from The Feminist Breeder. Accessed January 30, 2015, <http://resources.thefeministbreeder.com/babies-toddlers/babywearing/babywearing-beyond-thecute-baby-carriers/>.

38 Timothy Taylor, *The Artificial Ape. How Technology Changed the Course of Human Evolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 109-19.

39. Babywearing International, accessed July 22, 2014, <http://babywearinginternational.org/pages/whatisbabywearing.php>.

40. Babywearing skills have been forgotten in Euro-American contexts due to the widespread use of strollers for more than a century in charge of caring for and carrying a younger sibling, and thus acquire knowledge about babywearing directly.

41. Jeportemonbebe, YouTube, accessed November 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/user/jeportemonbebe/featured>.

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