Self-archived version of the chapter published as:

Pasche Guignard, Florence. "Nurturing the Sustainable Family: Natural Parenting and Environmentalist Foodways in Francophone Contexts." In: Pasche Guignard, Florence & Cassidy, Tanya M., eds. *Mothers and Food: Negotiating Foodways from Maternal Perspectives*. Bradford: Demeter Press, 2016. P. 55-69.

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4.

Nurturing the Sustainable Family:

Natural Parenting and Environmentalist Foodways in Francophone Contexts

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Mothers who, to various extents, include "eco-friendly" ideals and practices in their everyday mother work are known in Anglo-American contexts as "sustainable mothers" (Takeshita), "green moms," "eco-moms," or, simply, "natural moms." In a variety of Francophone media, mothers who engage in natural family living are often referred to as *les mamans nature* (the "nature moms"), a label that some of them reclaim, at least within their online communities, while others reject it. This contribution examines only a few of the many research areas raised by the issues of food and feeding within natural parenting. For the Francophone mothers whom I interviewed[1] as part of a larger research project[2] and whose publicly accessible conversations I followed online, commitments inspired by environmentalist discourses are particularly clear in their consumption choices and diets that differ from prevailing norms (e.g., decreasing or avoiding meat consumption, preferring organic food, buying local, etc.). Two important notions are recurring in their discursive strategies of accountability: that of "nurturing the sustainable family" and that of a "sustainable environmentalism." Although both are implemented mostly by mothers in these European Francophone contexts, they may, nevertheless, be read as a form of resistance against the child-centredness of the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays).

Natural parenting can be defined as a cluster of representations, discourses, and practices that borrow most of the basic tenets of attachment parenting and add to them a specific environment-[p. 56]alist agenda. Natural parenting is often in line with lifestyles of health and sustainability (as studied by Emerich) and voluntary simplicity, also known as "frugal" or "simple

living" (Bobel 49). I examined discourses about foodways that are found more frequently though not exclusively among these families where mothers (and often fathers as well) pay particular attention to issues of health and sustainability. That "natural" processes are valued over "artificial" or "technological" ones does not imply an indiscriminate rejection of *all* forms of technology. Rather, natural mothers engage in a careful examination of the benefits and risks of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century technology, especially in the domains of medicine, nutrition, and communication. "High-tech" means are used to communicate and promote lifestyles and techniques of parenting that are perceived as rather "low-tech" and that tend to go against the grain of mainstream parenting in their particular contexts. Generally supportive online communities articulated around shared beliefs and practices give natural parenting an important presence and visibility in the online "mamasphere."

Although natural parenting constitutes a mediated and international phenomenon, my research focused mostly on Francophone contexts in Europe. There, mothers from various socio-economic statuses and levels of education[3] espouse the principles of natural parenting to various extents. Only a few of them would readily self-identify as "green angel[s] in the house" (Redela 195) or as "radical homemakers reclaiming domesticity from a consumer culture" (as in the title of Hayes's book). More than half of the twenty-five mothers whom I interviewed so far (along with a few fathers), work outside of the home for a wage (at least part-time) or expected to shortly return to paid work. Staying at home was not necessarily a "choice" for the mothers who did so: many stayed home because their partners were paid significantly more or because they could not find work, were on extended sick leave, or were temporarily benefitting from financially generous, extended parental leaves (in France and in Canada, but not in Switzerland or Belgium). Many of the at home mothers whom I interviewed nevertheless embraced this situation and insisted on its positive aspects for both themselves and their children.

[p. 57] In the contexts surveyed for this research, both the "attachment parenting" and the environmentalist components of "natural parenting" are subject to criticism coming from (1) conventional Western biomedicine healthcare providers (particularly opposed to practices such as home birth, vaccine hesitancy, or co-sleeping), (2) some feminists (see Badinter), (3) older generations of (grand)parents, (4) parents of the same generation who follow conventional norms, and (5) mainstream media. The latter tend to caricature the *mamans nature* and their practices in a negative light. Among others, natural parenting is perceived as too demanding for mothers who have to be at the service of their children constantly, available on demand (in the case of breastfeeding, for instance), or who have to perform the "extra work" required by some environmentally friendly practices or objects (like using washable diapers)[4]. In France, over 80 percent of the care and

domestic work at home is still performed by women, and having a child accentuates the imbalance between men and women (Régnier-Loilier). This, however, is not a new phenomenon and is the case also for parents who follow conventional styles of childrearing. Environmentalist imperatives alone cannot be blamed for patriarchal domination, gender inequality in the domestic sphere, and all the pressures exercised on mothers regarding children's nutrition. Whether potatoes are organic or conventionally grown does not itself determine whether the mother, the father, or someone else will have to purchase or grow them, prepare and supervise the meal, and clean up the kitchen afterwards.

The food practices of the mothers whom I interviewed combine the ethical, health, and environmental imperatives of natural parenting with a typical "French parenting" approach to food and feeding. As described for instance by Druckerman and Le Billon, such an approach emphasizes the fact that adults are in charge of decisions regarding food. My informants take nutritional benefits into consideration, but they are also concerned about the environmental and social impact of their consumption on local and global economies. Their conversations frequently include the topic of the potential damages to what they refer to as "nature," "the environment," "the planet," or "the Earth." As ethical or [p. 58] "engaged consumers" (Dubuisson-Quellier), natural mothers also seek and spread information about the production, packaging, and transportation of food as well as issues such as industrial and domestic food waste.

Seeing themselves as the first in line to implement privatized solutions to what they see as global issues, my informants seek to bring "local solutions to global disorders," as in the title of Coline Serreau's influential documentary referred to by several of them. Because they feel helpless about "changing the world" or "society as a whole," they turn to a form of "inward change." Their motivation is not only an individual and consumerist response to dealing with risk, called "inverted quarantine" (Szasz), but also a small step towards global improvement, which includes "nurturing" children through attempting to convey to them specific values and a desire for social justice and environmental sustainability. These mothers actively reclaim the agency that they have as engaged consumers, in their domestic food practices and through their mothering.

Nurturing the Sustainable Family versus Feeding the Organic Child

Fabienne, one of my informants and a French mother in her early thirties, lives with her three-year-old and her Swiss husband in their newly built eco-house near Geneva. She gave birth at home with a midwife, used washable diapers, and now resorts to homeopathic medicine to treat her not yet vaccinated but rarely ill daughter, whom she breastfed for fourteen months. Fabienne describes

her lifestyle as one of "voluntary simplicity." She prefers buying organic and fair trade products "though not exclusively." Her style of parenting and many of her choices are rather uncommon among her circle of friends and relatives, some of whom have nicknamed her daughter "*le bébé bio*" (the organic baby). This designation resonates with that of the "organic child," coined by Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick in their study on "mothering through ethical consumption" in a North American context.

According to Cairns and her colleagues, the figure of the organic child "reflects the intersecting ideals of motherhood and alternative consumption, which work together to define good mothers as those [p. 59] who preserve their children's purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases" (101). In the following, I contrast their concept of "feeding the organic child" with that of "nurturing the sustainable family." Using the plural figure of the "sustainable family" as a metaphor for this Francophone European approach to the intersection of food and parenting informed by environmentalist imperatives, I underline its characteristics and the emphasis it places on maternal or familial convenience. Real or alleged benefits *to the child* are not the primary focus of such discourses.

The European "sustainable family" and the North American "organic child" should not be understood as radically opposed, however, as both certainly can be found on both sides of the Atlantic and in other contexts as well. Like Fabienne, several of my informants have heard this label of "organic baby" applied to their children, sometimes as a derogatory statement over the present or anticipated results of their unconventional mothering. My intention in contrasting the two figures is rather to point out how discourses by Francophone mothers themselves take into account wider perspectives in defining an alternative norm of "good motherhood." Elements of these definitions might bear similarity, but mothers emphasize and prioritize them differently.

Although practices such as buying certified organic food or cooking from scratch are found in both contexts, the discursive strategies that account for them are different in scope and focus. The mother of the sustainable family does not define her mothering primarily or exclusively through food purchases and alternative consumption, but through a range of other practices and preferences for options that she constructs not only as "healthy" but also as "sustainable." Examples of this holistic and extended definition of sustainability include using or making herbal remedies and homemade cosmetics or refusing to buy certain items, even "healthy" ones, because of the excessive plastic packaging. More importantly, the notion of sustainability extends to the practices themselves and not only to their results: it must be sustainable *for the mother herself* to include environmentally friendly practices, especially those that involve food work, into her parenting style.

[p. 60] In the discourses of most *mamans nature*, the focus shifts away from the child and his or her health as the measure of "good motherhood" to be replaced on the family as a whole, with attention also paid to its adult members (including themselves and the father). Holistic notions of local sustainability, fairness in international trade, social justice, convenience, pleasure in taste, and feeding children often take precedence over notions of risk, health, and purity that appear to be central to the motivations of the Canadian mothers studied by Cairns, Johnston and MacKendrick. I asked mothers from France why they breastfed and often did so for a time longer than average in a context where the breastfeeding initiation rate is only sixty-nine percent (according to a 2012 study conducted in France, see Salanave et al.) and weaning of most babies occurs within the first few months. Their answers were varied. These are some of the common reasons they mentioned: "Because it is convenient" or "Because I am too lazy to prepare and wash bottles or get up at night" or "Because I enjoy breastfeeding and it is easier than bottle-feeding." One mother who was trying to live a more radical form of frugal living even expressed the idea that refusing to give her money to industrial agribusiness corporations was an act of "resistance against an unfair system" (*un système injuste*). She saw her breastfeeding as a form of boycott and as a personal empowerment: her lactation placed her into the active role of food producer rather than in that of dependent consumer.

A few mothers also pointed out the environmental dimension of breastfeeding and that of "proximity," echoing both the notion of "*maternage proximal*" (a term used to describe a range of attachment parenting practices emphasizing bodily closeness) and that of locavore ideals. Just as the groceries that these mothers purchase come from trusted local producers or retailers (such as farmers markets or cooperatives), their own human milk, too, comes from a trusted and local source and needs no packaging and transportation. One vegan mother also explained to me that human milk does not derive from animal exploitation (of dairy cows), which she opposed on ethical grounds through anti-specist argumentation.

The mothers whom I interviewed never denied that breastfeeding benefits babies, but this was not always central in their discourse. [p. 61] Rather than reciting the "breast is best" motto,[5] which would also work to qualify them as good mothers (at least for the first few months) in this context, they emphasized that this type of infant nutrition was their "choice," a convenient one for them, and a "natural" one at that, despite the paradox (see Bobel).

Health is not the only criteria in the principles guiding the feeding practices and consumption of the *mamans nature*. Most of them are well aware that "organic" does not always equal "sustainable." Each one of the mothers I talked to has particular demands (on herself and other family members, as well as on retailers or producers). Their criteria for food choices range widely: most have expectations that are idealistic but not always enforced, and some, more rarely,

implement a strict ethos that binds the mother as the family's principal shopper or producer, in the case she gardens or is an active participant in a food co-op.

Most my informants adhered to the idea that a mother is responsible not only for the health of all family members, including herself, but also for the consequences of their consumption on the family and on the planet. Moreover, many also insisted that the practices involving some supplementary planning and domestic work should be a voluntary *choice* that they engage in out of conviction and not a burden. Johanne, a Swiss mother of two children aged one and three, repeatedly underlined that whichever choices she made in her parenting and lifestyle were *hers* and taken in complete agreement with her husband, though never imposed by him. For instance, she chose to no longer resort to hormonal contraceptives, to avoid vaccinating her children, and to use cloth diapers for her children and washable menstrual hygiene products for herself. She insisted that she was completely in control, coherent, and not influenced by any group or doctrine while making these choices. Johanne defined herself as "apolitical" and as a "non-practising Christian," not as an active member of any religious or cultural association.

When I asked Johanne about decisions regarding food in her household, she answered the following, using the French indefinite pronoun "*on*" (here translated as "we"), thus speaking in her and her partner's voice:

> We favour what is local, organic, and biodynamic[6] within [p. 62] the limits of our budget [*dans les limites de nos finances*].… Now we [rent] a house with a garden, so we can have a vegetable garden [*jardin potager*], but we are not rigid about it…. [For instance, if we want] strawberries, we do our best to wait until they are in season. [We normally] try to [eat] fruits only when they are in season. We are lucky to live beside a [farm] centre that has a self-service biodynamic garden [*potager*]. So, automatically, we tap into it. But it is true that, for instance, if I feel like having an avocado, I will buy an organic avocado, even if it comes from Peru. So, we are not going to restrain ourselves because the fruit has been transported for thousands of kilometres. We are not completely rigid about this. We practice an environmentalism that is … I want to say "smart" but this is not the [appropriate] term. We are not aggressive, sectarian, or whatever. We practice an environmentalism that we can sustain and that allows us to live. We are careful with electricity and water. We tend to be into "degrowth" [*on est plutôt en décroissance*]. We buy almost exclusively second-hand items. But if we need a new computer, even if the old one still works, but is too slow, then we will buy a new computer…. We try to do a conscious environmentalism [*une écologie consciente*], but, sometimes, we go further than other [people go], also out of economical reasons [*aussi par économie*] … For instance up to three quarters of our cupboards are filled with clothes from Caritas or the Red Cross [thrift stores] because this participates in such an effort, but [it is] also an economical one.

For Johanne, buying an imported (but organic) avocado is the exception that confirms the rule. She characterizes the choices that she and her family engage in as an "effort." Nevertheless, Johanne does not let a strict environmentalist agenda dictate all of her choices, and she used this example to illustrate her flexibility. At the time of our interview, Johanne and her husband both worked in education and research, but she held a part-time position. Their minimal income did not prevent the lifestyle sought by Johanne. That such practices are valued in lifestyles of voluntary simplicity [p. 63] and that they also participate in an environmentalist effort allow mothers to rebrand them as "good practices," that they embrace with awareness rather than under constraint.

Just like the Canadian mothers "feeding the organic child" studied by Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick, the Francophone mothers I talked to mentioned health issues and the fear of pesticide residues and other chemicals as a motivation for buying (or growing) organic food, along with a general distrust of conventional agriculture and of processed industrialized foods. In addition, many of them also mentioned their desire to support local economies through purchasing their food directly from small local producers and farmers. This was the case for Gwenaëlle, a French mother in her forties living in Britanny. For health reasons, and after many experiments, she had adopted a paleo diet that required her to consume considerable amounts of high-quality meat. Her husband and their eight-year-old son also were following this diet, though less strictly. After mentioning that her spouse was doing most of the cooking at home, she added that he bought their meat from local producers whom they "trusted" ("*on leur fait confiance*"). Well aware that she lives in an area of France famous for its meat production, Gwenaëlle also emphasized her desire to support the local economy. Other informants mentioned the absence of long-distance transportation, freshness, taste, and a generally superior quality of the produce as incentives for buying from local producers or farmers markets. For many of them, the preference for locally sourced food frequently trumps the criteria of *official* organic certification.

Food, Feeding, and Natural Parenting in Francophone Contexts

Prevailing discourses *about* natural parenting or *by* mothers who engage in natural family living in Anglo-American contexts tend to focus on the expected benefits to the child of following certain principles and practices, such as those of attachment parenting (Faircloth, *Militant Lactivism;* "Attachment Mothering"). Other factors in their food choices, such as promoting sustainable local economies or fair trade, add to common concerns centred around [p. 64] the contested topics of appropriate nutrition, risk (of contamination and deficiency), children's health (illness, obesity), growth, and acceptable body shape. In keeping with dominant discourses about food and parenting

in France and the wider Francophone area, mothers rarely place their children's taste preferences at the centre of their choices. The motivations of the mothers who "nurture the sustainable family" tend to shift the focus away from feeding the individual "organic child" and place it on themselves or on their family as a whole, while they acknowledge their insertion into wider and complex networks of social and economic interactions at local and global levels. Even though they engage in individual efforts, mostly in the domestic sphere through ethical or minimized consumption, the *mamans nature* refuse to endorse the full responsibility for preventing pollution and environmental degradation. They also challenge the notion that "we each can protect the earth by changing our day-to-day practices" (Takeshita 129). In the short term, what they really seek to change (or maintain) is their family's lifestyle and an increase in the quality of their living standards (*qualité de vie*) that include tasty meals cooked with fresh, quality ingredients. Although their rhetoric partially corresponds to that of individualized and privatized strategies of North American "sustainable motherhood," Francophone mothers also are critical about "green washing" marketing and about the enforcement of a form of green *total motherhood* (Wolf) on them. Instead, their discourses do not spare criticism against exploitative and unsustainable agribusiness and unfair governmental policies on health and agriculture, even if they concentrate their efforts on individual, privatized, and domestic efforts, where they feel that they have the most effective and immediate agency.

Taste and pleasure in meals taken in (good) company are central to the French acceptation of "commensality" or eating together (in the sense of sitting together at the table to eat the same meal at the same time). Giving children a food education that includes not just knowledge about nutrition but also proper table manners and a sensorial taste literacy (*une éducation au goût*) is a duty attributed chiefly, though not exclusively,[7] to mothers. In addition to such norms about food and feeding children, the mothers in my study also emphasized their engagement with "sustainable [p. 65] environmentalism" (*une écologie durable*). Sustainability is given as one of the principal reasons for following organic diets, whenever this made sense to them ethically, financially, and practically. Choosing their food with care and paying attention to their consumption habits were perceived as central to an everyday practice imbued with a sense of morality and responsibility towards the environment, their own children and future generations as well. The idea of "nurturing the sustainable family," thus, conveys the idea that such choices are explained to children and communicated to them as representative of a certain ethic (based on values such as compassion, responsibility, and coherence). Although the notion of preserving ecosystems, near or far, is important to them, my informants rarely claim to engage in environmentally friendly practices for the sake of "saving the planet" or of nature[8] itself. Rather, they emphasized a better quality of their present life as their immediate goal. The ecofeminist and often spiritualized notion of "Mother

Earth" or "Mother Nature" is almost absent from their discourses. The only mother that matters is the one who does the actual job of nurturing the sustainable family.

Despite some extra labour involved, which their discursive strategies tended to minimize, the mothers whom I interviewed stress the pleasure they derive from practices that they frame as environmentally friendly, such as breastfeeding, cooking from scratch, or gardening. They repeatedly refute the idea that such choices are enforced on them (whether by an individualistic neoliberal environmentalist ethos, by their male partners, by their alternative healthcare providers, by specific religious groups, etc.). Although they recognize the necessity of someone engaging in practical care work that includes providing, preparing, and serving food, they generally emphasize that they, as mothers, are not the only ones who can do it. Far from completely embracing (as described in Paltineau 122-134) the ideal of "intensive mothering" (Hays), these Francophone mothers resist it to some extent by shifting the focus away from the child and back onto themselves. When this was the case, they insisted that their (male) partners were as much involved (or more) than they were in domestic, food and childcare work and were willing to allocate sufficient resources to support such choices.

[p. 66] "Feeding the organic child" (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick) is not seen as an ultimate ideal to be reached but rather as a potential result from a larger perspective that consists in "nurturing the sustainable family." This includes a desire for "green living" through ethical consumption and ideals of voluntary simplicity or even, for a few among the mothers most radically engaged in frugal living, that of *décroissance*, with all its political implications (Latouche).[9] Their notion of sustainability usually is far reaching: this lifestyle must be sustainable for all, including mothers themselves. This means that compromise is acceptable. Mitigation of certain demands sometimes is recognized as a necessity and not as a failure, neither in mothering nor in the commitment towards environmentally friendly diets and lifestyles. In addition, other criteria, such as proximity or seasonality, are privileged over the consumerist imperative of "*buying* organic." More importantly, ideological agendas, including environmentalist ones, should not render a mother tired and unhappy. As it is understood and implemented in the European Francophone contexts I surveyed, natural parenting requires awareness, extended planning skills, some supplementary work, but no sacrificial attitude. The potential constraints or restrictions arising from extending the principles of lifestyles of health and sustainability to parenting and food work are not seen as oppressive by my informants but as necessary, and sometimes even pleasant, efforts. For most of them, the goal is not to reach an ideal but to tend to it. These mothers emphasize the quality of life that their environmentally minded mothering immediately affords them and not just their children.

They acknowledge their own incoherencies and imperfections while deriving satisfaction from the practices that they engage in.

Notes

1.Research interviews were conducted in French. All translations in this chapter are my own. I use pseudonyms to name all of my informants in this contribution.

2.I acknowledge funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation for two postdoctoral mobility fellowships granted for the completion of the research project entitled *Natural Parenting* [p. 67] *in the Digital Age. At the Confluence of Mothering, Religion, Environmentalism, and Technology*. I thank the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto for hosting me during this project.

3.The socio-economic status of my informants has a wider range than that of Bobel's American informants (most of whom were middle-class wives and mothers). Her study on the "paradox of natural mothering" is based on fieldwork conducted in the U.S. in the late 1990s.

4.Lalanne and Lapeyre have discussed the specific case of washable diapers. For a more general criticism, see Badinter.

5.There is no widespread equivalent in French to the catchy expression in English "breast is best."

6.Biodynamic agriculture is a holistic and sustainable method of organic farming that often goes beyond the demands of regular organic certification. It is inspired by the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), and it is popular among proponents of anthroposophy.

7. In France, this responsibility is partially shared with schools that offer hot school lunch programs to all students (*la cantine*) and that include in their curriculum activities in "taste education," such as the "week of taste" (*la semaine du goût*).

8. For a mostly secular context (especially in France) and in contrast with specific North American discourses that derive meaning from spiritual or religious traditions, my Francophone informants rarely draw from ecofeminist positions. Concepts such as "Mother Earth" or "Mother Nature" are more popular in certain North American discourses on sustainable motherhood but are not characteristic in similar Francophone discourses.

9.There are several definitions for the economic, political, and social concept of *décroissance* that I translate here with the English word degrowth. One of the main ideas it conveys is that unlimited economic growth is not necessarily beneficial to society and individuals. Although this is technically imprecise, several of my informants used the term "*décroissance*" to refer to their own practices of ethical consumption, minimized consumption, lifestyles of voluntary simplicity, frugal living, or participation in collaborative economies.

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