

PRECIOUS, PURE, UNCIVILISED, VULNERABLE: INFANT EMBODIMENT IN THE  
POPULAR MEDIA

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## PRECIOUS, PURE, UNCIVILISED, VULNERABLE: INFANT EMBODIMENT IN THE POPULAR MEDIA

### **Abstract**

Despite recent interest in researching and theorising the sociocultural dimensions of human embodiment, the cultural representation of young children's bodies, and particularly infants' bodies, has received little academic attention. This article analyses some exemplary popular media texts and identifies four main discourses on infant embodiment: precious, pure, uncivilised and vulnerable. The discussion looks at intersections between these discourses, and in particular how concepts of 'nature' (both 'good nature' and 'bad nature'), civility and Self and Otherness underpin them. The implications for how adults think about and treat infants, including the spaces and places which are deemed appropriate for infants to inhabit, are discussed. While, on the one hand, infants are positioned as the most valuable, important, pure and affectively appealing of humans, on the other hand they are represented as animalistic, uncontrolled, uncivil and overly demanding: indeed, as less than human. Infant bodies are viewed as appropriately inhabiting certain defined spaces: specifically the domestic sphere of the home. They represented as barely tolerated or even as excluded in the public sphere, positioned as it is as the space of 'civilised' adults.

## **Introduction**

Sociocultural scholarship on the body and the new social studies of childhood have much in common. Both consider their topics of analyses – the body and childhood – to be dynamic cultural forms, structured through social, cultural, historical and political processes and discourses. While at first the new social studies of childhood lacked a strong focus on children's embodiment (Prout, 2000a; Colls and Horschelmann, 2009, 2010; Valentine, 2010), since the late 1990s a literature has begun to develop which examines the situated nature of children's bodies in space and place (see, for example, the chapters in Holloway and Valentine, 2000; the chapters in Horschelmann and Colls, 2010). A significant body of research has also developed over the past two decades which examines young children's embodiment from a sociological perspective, particularly in relation to their health (for example, Mayall, 1993; the chapters in Prout, 2000b; Cunningham-Burley et al., 2006, Williams et al., 2007; Author removed) and eating habits (see the chapters in James et al., 2009).

While this literature provides much of interest in relation to understanding the nature of embodiment for young children, very little research has specifically addressed infants' bodies from a sociocultural and critical perspective. Some sociologists have investigated mothers' perspectives on their infants' health and development (Lauritzen, 1997; Author removed; Murphy, 2007; Keenan and Stapleton, 2009; Wall, 2010; Brownlie and Leith, 2011), but there remains much to explore in relation to the embodiment of the smallest and youngest of all children, including the ways in which they are portrayed in popular culture. Infants' bodies, like other bodies, are produced through and accompanied by discourse and visual

representation from the moment of conception. Such vehicles of representation as advertisements, television programmes, news media reports, popular books and magazines and websites are important forums for the portrayal and reproduction of dominant meanings, practices and discourses around infants' bodies.

Popular media texts such as these contribute to both producing and privileging shared understandings, making it possible to see the phenomenon in question in certain defined ways. The discursive formations which appear in these texts use specific repertoires of concepts, words and images and construct particular regimes of truth (Parker, 1999; Lehtonen, 2000). In relation specifically to bodies, media texts are part of the discursive or symbolic environment which contributes to how the body is 'translated', as Prout (1990: 117) puts it, or incorporated into networks of meaning and practice. These texts select and privilege particular discourses to give meaning to the various types of bodies and modes of embodiment. Media texts may portray certain bodies, for example, as valuable or worthless, normal or deviant, vulnerable or robust, healthy or ill, serving to construct or support accepted practices as well as perceptions around embodiment (Nightingale, 1999).

Despite this importance of textual representation in constructing meaning and practice around embodiment, very little research has addressed this topic in relation to young children. Those studies which have done so have tended to explore representations of the problematic child's body: the victim of crime, the child 'in crisis' or the child who differs significantly from the norm, such as children with disabilities, fat children or those with gender identity dysphoria (examples include Conrad, 1999; Costello and Duncan, 2006; Kendrick, 2008; Matthews, 2009; Kehily, 2010; Evans et al., 2011). There is also some interesting research, predominantly from a feminist cultural studies perspective, which has addressed the ways in

which the foetal body is portrayed in popular media (Hartouni, 1991; Mason 2000; Shrage, 2002; Featherstone, 2008; Stormer 2008). However I have been unable to locate any previous research attempting to identify the ways in which the infant -- the child in the age group from newborn to two years of age -- is portrayed in the contemporary popular media.

The present article is an attempt to address this neglected topic, using a critical discourse analysis which combines an interest in the discursive elements of texts with a focus on how power relations are reproduced therein (Fairclough et al., 2011). The texts on infants I gathered for the study included newspaper and magazine texts, television advertisements and material from websites. Over the period spanning January to August 2011, I collected articles on infants appearing in two Australian newspapers (the Sydney Morning Herald and the national weekly the Weekend Australian (including the colour magazine supplements published in both), searched the former newspaper's online forum for discussions on infants and looked at material (including advertisements also used on television) appearing on an Australian-based website directed at mothers with infants and young children and another Australian website for an IVF clinic.

The texts selected for inclusion in this article are exemplars of the main discourses that were identified over this range of texts. They are analysed for the recurring images and rhetorical and discursive devices used to portray infants' bodies. The analysis asked the following questions: How are infants' bodies portrayed using visual imagery? How are their bodies shown in relation to others' bodies? What spaces do they inhabit or are deemed appropriate to inhabit? What rhetorical devices are used to convey meaning about the infant body? To what broader discourses concerning infant embodiment do these visual and rhetorical devices contribute?

For the purposes of this analysis the concept of discourse is understood as a pattern of words, figures of speech, concepts, values and symbols that cohere to form a particular way of describing or categorising concepts, practices and experiences. Critical discourse analysis recognises that discourses are embedded in social, cultural and political settings, and used for certain purposes (Parker, 1999; Lehtonen, 2000; Fairclough et al., 2011).

Four dominant discourses of infant embodiment were identified in these texts: precious, pure, uncivilised and vulnerable. Below I provide exemplars of each of these discourses, accompanied by analysis of how these discourses were expressed in the texts. The discussion section then draws upon relevant sociocultural theory to explain and contextualise the resonance and power of these discourses in giving meaning to infants' bodies.

## **Discourses of infant embodiment**

### Precious

A television advertisement for a brand of nappies shows several scenes of different mothers (and some fathers) cuddling or playing with their infants. The infants are shown in the parents' arms or lying on a bed with the sleeping baby snuggled into the parents' bodies. The parents are laughing and smiling, expressing their pleasure and joy at experiencing these embodied moments of intimacy with their babies. The babies smile responsively at their parents or sleep peacefully next to them.

Another television advertisement, this time for an IVF clinic, uses real black-and-white footage of a woman giving birth. We see the woman grimacing in pain and effort as she goes through labour. Although the setting is clearly a hospital, there is very little footage of health care professionals assisting the woman, but her male partner is shown supporting her. The only sound in the

advertisement is a high angel-like voice singing a hymn-like wordless tune, suggesting that the event occurring is wondrous. The baby is eventually born, and is placed on its mother's chest, still covered with and dripping birth fluids and blood, as she smiles widely and places her arms around it. Her partner leans over to share the moment, also overjoyed to meet and touch his baby. The final image shows a tiny baby's hand grasping a much larger adult male's finger – presumably its father's.

Images such as those described above reproduce the notion of the infant as precious in its sheer tininess, affective appeal, helplessness, lack of artifice and innocence. The image of the peacefully slumbering, angelic baby is very common in visual portrayals of infants such as the first text described above. It is in sleep that the infant is least demanding and most vulnerable. The affective aspects of viewing the sleeping child or cuddling it are also often highlighted in such portrayals: the calm, peace, and perhaps relief felt by the carer as she or he gazes upon the child or feels its relaxed body against her or his own. These somewhat sentimentalised images of the infant body are the stock-in-trade of greetings cards, magazines and websites about infant care and advertisements for baby products. They represent all that is most valued in infant embodiment: the precious, adorable, contented baby who smiles or sleeps, safe in its parent's arms. Parent and infant revel in each other's company, each enjoying the intimacy of embodied contact.

Another dominant aspect of these types of portrayals is that of the diminutive infant's body contrasted against a much larger adult's body. This contrast receives its apotheosis in images such as that of the newborn infant's hand grasping the large male finger in the advertisement described above. The tininess, delicacy and helplessness of the infant is emphasised by these kinds of contrasts. When juxtaposed against the body of an adult carer who holds the child in their arms or rests next to the child on the bed, the child is represented as protected, kept safe

from harm while it sleeps. This role as protector of the precious infant is an important one for parents, as I discuss in further detail below in relation to the vulnerable infant body.

The advertisement for the IVF clinic, with its angel-like singing, depicts the birth of an infant as a wondrous event. The mother's efforts in labour and the father's work in supporting her are rewarded with this final moment of family togetherness as they revel in seeing and touching their infant for the first time. The mother holds the naked infant against her skin as the father strokes the child.

The notion of infants and young children as 'precious' has been reproduced in commercial advertising for over a century (Cross, 2004) and continues to receive expression in contemporary texts such as parenting magazines and popular commentaries on childhood (Kehily, 2010). Infants and young children are considered infinitely valuable in contemporary western societies, particularly for their parents. Parents – and especially mothers -- are encouraged to selflessly put their young children's needs above their own, to position them as the most important members of the family. Sociologists have argued that in the context of 'intensive parenting', infants are viewed as requiring much attention, intense love and the best of everything. They are portrayed as providing their parents with a sense of purpose and meaning (Zelizer, 1985; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Hays, 1996).

An important dimension of the precious infant body is the rewards which touching and gazing upon this body provide its caregivers. Some indication of this is given in the examples above, portraying parents enjoying their embodied interaction with their babies. The concept of 'skinship' drawn from the Japanese philosopher Ichikawa (described by Tahhan, 2008), neatly embraces the phenomenology of the embodied intimacy engendered by close, loving touching. Ichikawa emphasises the interembodied nature of subjectivity: that we experience



our bodies and our selves always in relation to others' bodies/selves. Skinship is an important process by which, through touching another's body, one's experience of embodiment is extended to the body of the other. This interembodied experience creates feelings of peace, love and intimacy (Tahhan, 2008).

Part of the positive meanings associated with the infant's body, therefore, is the opportunity to experience skinship and interembodiment, to 'return to the body', to appreciate, acknowledge and revel in the ways in which the tiny body of the infant may be held and touched by oneself, to allow one's 'instincts' to take over from one's rational thinking. As discussed in more detail below, the concept of nature is also important in configuring concepts of the infant body. As found in studies of mothers of infants and young children in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Australia, women often talk about the importance of following their 'natural instincts' and using their intimate knowledge of their child's body to guide them in protecting their children's health and wellbeing (Lauritzen, 1997; Faircloth, 2011; Author removed). Embodied contact with infants allows their carers to escape from the lack of 'authenticity' in human relations, to experience 'natural' feelings and counter the rationalist, overly cognitive focus of contemporary adult subjectivity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

### Pure

A magazine advertisement shows an image of a beatific small infant, white skinned and with very pale blonde hair, dressed in white. The baby is lying fast asleep face down on a carpet and clutching a green leaf in its hand. The advertisement is for the carpet, and the text makes much of its ecological credentials, noting that purchasers will 'Make more impact on your interior and less on the environment' as the carpet 'is made from natural corn sugar and provides new levels of performance

plus enriched softness'. The imagery and text of the advertisement seeks to transfer the meanings of the sleeping baby – innocence, purity, softness – to the carpet.

A television advertisement for a brand of yoghurt features a baby sitting in a highchair, eating the yoghurt from a bowl with a spoon. The baby ends up smearing the yoghurt across its face, laughing as it plays with the stuff. It grabs the pot of yoghurt and digs the spoon in, eating and smearing more while its mother laughs. The advertisement ends with the baby's mother holding the pot and smiling indulgently at it, as the voiceover talks about how important it is for babies to eat pure food. The advertisement ends with a description of the yoghurt as 'The little pot of purity'.

In these advertisements, notions of purity and nature intertwine. In the first advertisement, the baby's purity is emphasised by its white garb, its relaxed slumber, its pale skin and golden hair, the leaf it is clutching in its tiny hand. Nature and the baby are one: pure, unsullied, clean but also highly vulnerable, requiring protection from harmful contaminants. In the second advertisement the baby is represented as an instigator of mess, managing to smear itself with the yoghurt it is eating. Despite this, it is still represented as pure, requiring protection from contaminants, including the kind of objects (foodstuffs or otherwise) that it puts into its mouth.

In both advertisements, a dominant cultural meaning ascribed to nature – purity – is shared by the portrayals of the infants' bodies and the advertised products. The reasoning behind these portrayals is that both nature and infants are good, innocent, harmless and wholesome. Infants are close to nature and are as pure and unsullied as nature. Further, both infants and nature are vulnerable, open to contamination (see also the discussion below concerning the vulnerable infant body). A substance that is 'natural' and 'pure', therefore, must be good for infants' bodies, as are those commodities which are able to protect infants' state of purity.

In the IVF clinic advertisement described above, the infant is presented in its most natural state: naked, dripping with birth fluids and blood. The discourse of the preciousness of the infant is aligned with its representation as a 'pure' and 'natural' body: the newness of the infant's body is part of its value as an unsullied, innocent body. This is perhaps significantly important in an advertisement for IVF, where infants' bodies are created through scientific artifice rather than through 'natural' procedures.

As these advertisements suggest, the concept of 'nature' is integral in dominant discourses on infant embodiment. Infants and young children are seen to inspire 'natural' feelings because their bodies are portrayed as closer to nature than adult bodies. Aligned with the positive discourses of the 'precious' and the 'pure' infant body, nature is all that is good. This positive association of nature with the infant's body draws upon the concept of the Apollonian child, close to and even an extension of nature. Nature here bears the valued meanings of cleanliness and lack of artifice. Nature is also vulnerable, requiring protection from the imposts of 'culture' (Jenks, 1996). This perspective on the child was clearly evident in the influential writings of Rousseau in the late eighteenth century, who viewed childhood as the closest to a romanticised Nature and a glorified Feeling humans could find themselves (Coveney, 2005/1967). Similarly, contemporary positive discourses on nature celebrate its closeness to reality, humanity, empathy, refinement and feeling, its distance from what is seen to be the sterility, artifice and overly rationalist nature of 'culture'. Here the infant body may be seen as the apotheosis of all that is to be appreciated about 'good nature'.

### Uncivilised

A discussion in the online version of a newspaper concerns the issue of crying babies in aeroplanes. The discussion is sparked by the findings of a survey of Australian travellers which found that the vast majority voted for infants and young children and their parents to be segregated on overseas flights. An opinion piece in response to the survey argues that travellers should be tolerant of infant behaviour on planes and have empathy for their long-suffering parents. Hundreds of responses from readers to this piece are posted, many of which complained of the behaviour of children and criticised their parents for choosing to even bring them on the flight. One mother who had travelled on a very long flight with her baby noted that ‘however hard it was for other passengers, it was even harder for me’, as her baby would only sleep in her arms and was very fretful and restless when awake. She receives little sympathy from other commentators. One writer claims that ‘I didn’t have children to avoid this kind of thing, and here I am, confronted by the life choices of others’. Another contends: ‘Empathy for parents of screaming children? It’s a gross discourtesy to others to attempt long haul flights with young children’. Yet another critic notes: ‘They banned smoking on planes, yet still allow screaming babies?’

Another debate in the letters section of the same newspaper raises the question of whether dogs should be allowed to accompany their owners to cafes. Some writers claim that dogs are perfectly acceptable: it is babies and small children who should be banned from cafes, because they make too much noise and are disruptive, detracting from other patrons’ enjoyment.

While the infant’s body may be often positively associated with nature, there is another, negative side to the symbolic meanings of nature: ‘bad’ nature. ‘Bad’ nature can be wild, chaotic, uncontrolled, confronting in its lack of civility. So too, as the above texts suggest, infant bodies can wreak havoc and challenge notions of acceptable behaviour. They are closer to animals than humans in their lack of control over their emotions. As such, their presence in public spaces where adults congregate is deemed inappropriate. These small bodies often erupt into crying or ‘screaming’, as several people participating in the debate about infants in

aeroplanes and cafes put it. They offend adult sensibilities concerning behaviour in public places. The loud noise that issues forth from a crying baby disturbs peace and order, and encroaches upon others' personal space. Infants are 'out of place' in public spaces such as aircraft and cafes: they should be confined to privatised spheres, such as the home, where only their parents need endure their uncivilised bodies.

The Dionysian child shares the negative meanings associated with 'bad nature': unruly, uncontrolled, wild, uncivilised (Jenks, 1996). This perspective on the natural child was evident in nineteenth century social thought, in which the child was portrayed as akin to the 'savage' of non-western cultures. Both the 'savage' and the child were viewed as closer to nature and the animal world than 'civilised' people. Similarly 'savages' were viewed as more childlike in their supposed lack of sophistication of thought, moral action, rationality and behaviour than people in western cultures. As a consequence, both 'savages' and children were portrayed as further down the evolutionary scale than western (male) adults. An evolutionary model was adopted, in which the child developing into the adult was seen to progress from simplicity to complexity, from irrationality to rationality and from nature to culture (Jenks, 2005/1996; Prout and James, 2005/1990).

Contemporary notions of embodiment retain categorical ideas about which kinds of bodies are considered 'civilised' and which are not. Several theorists on the body have contended that in contemporary western societies, bodies which seen as not tightly contained, controlled and distinct from other bodies are represented as inferior, contaminating, grotesque and deficient (Douglas, 1980/1966; Stallybrass and White, 1986; Turner, 2003). Feminist theorists have pointed to the ways in which the female body is stigmatised and rendered culturally inferior via discourses that emphasise its symbolic lack of boundaries, leakiness

and marginality (Kristeva, 1982; Grosz, 1994, Shildrick, 1997; Longhurst, 2001). So too, a critique of representations of the infant body might also point to the ways in which very young children are culturally portrayed as inferior by virtue of their lack of containment. As infants, their bodies are supreme examples of loss of containment and control in terms of both the body fluids that seep or erupt from them and must constantly be cleaned away as well as their uninhibited expression of emotion. It is only their affective appeal, their cultural positioning as 'precious', as 'not knowing any better', that infants are generally saved from the kinds of disgust and revulsion accorded older children or adults who are unable or unwilling to regulate and control their bodies (Murcott, 1993; Murphy, 2007).

Images of the crying infant are rare in advertising, which, as noted above, tends to rely on sentimentalised depictions of smiling, content infants to evoke a positive affective response. Nonetheless, the portrayal of the happily messy infant or young child is quite common in this medium, as in the yoghurt advertisement described above. In such texts the infant is portrayed as uncivilised in its lack of propriety and its inability to keep itself clean. However such advertisements lack the forceful condemnations of the kind evident in the newspaper debates on infants on flights. The messy infant is instead represented as endearingly uncivilised, simply 'being a baby'. Because it is shown as within the home, this messy infant does not offend others' sensibilities: it simply makes work for its mother, who does not resent this work because she is caring for her 'precious' infant.

### Vulnerable

A television advertisement for a brand of spray cleaner shows a woman uses the cleaner and wiping surfaces in her home. The home is shown to be sparkling clean and sunny. Images of the woman happily cleaning are interspersed with images of a baby sitting in its high chair eating food from its spoon and the baby crawling on the floor, putting a toy into its mouth and pulling itself to stand. The

baby is also shown in a bathroom setting, crawling towards a toilet, as the mother is shown laughing and picking up the infant before it can touch the toilet. The voiceover discusses how ‘invisible germs and dirt can be everywhere’ and asserts that to ‘protect your family’s health’ the advertised spray cleaner should be used.

A news magazine report tells the story of an infant who suffered severe side effects as the result of receiving an influenza vaccination. The child, aged 11 months at the time of the vaccination, is now two years old. She suffered brain injury and global organ damage due to the high fever and seizures she experienced following the vaccine. A full-page photograph of the infant embraced by her mother illustrates the story. The child is shown gazing down with a blank expression on her face, an oxygen tube in her nose, and standing assisted by a back brace. The opposing page shows a smaller photograph of the child taken before the vaccination, looking directly at the camera and laughing, an apparently normal infant. Her mother is quoted as saying that “She was perfectly healthy and happy, the most beautiful baby.” Following the vaccination, however, at the age of two years she ‘cannot hold up her head or crawl, let alone walk or talk’.

As these two examples demonstrate, discourses concerning risk and danger are also a prevalent way in which the infant and young child’s body are represented in contemporary culture. As noted above, infant and young children’s bodies, in their purity and closeness to nature, are considered to be especially fragile, vulnerable and open to contamination by outside agents such as the ‘invisible dirt and germs’ to which the first text refers. The first advertisement presents both the infant’s body and the product as ‘pure’. The infant’s body requires protection from ‘germs and dirt’ because of its purity. Even though the home environment which the baby inhabits in the advertisement is portrayed as very clean, the implication of the text’s words is that because the ‘germs and dirt’ are ‘invisible’, mothers need to take extra precautions to remove them. The product itself is portrayed as ‘pure’ in its

lack of ‘harsh chemicals’ that ‘harm the environment’. Instead it uses ‘natural ingredients’ which, by implication, protect both the baby and the environment.

The second text acts as a warning to parents as to how a routine practice – vaccination – may alter an infant’s body forever if something goes wrong. This is every parent’s worst nightmare: the normal child who suddenly becomes severely physically and mentally disabled, requiring life-long care (Brownlie and Leith, 2011). While there is no suggestion that the parents were at fault for taking their infant to be vaccinated, it is implied that one’s infant’s health and wellbeing should not be taken-for-granted, and that parents should be on guard for how best to protect their infants from such calamities.

By virtue of the fact that the infant is unable to control its body, keep it clean and proper and regulate the kinds of objects or foodstuffs that enter it, it is needful of constant adult regulation and surveillance. This imperative of surveillance is heightened in the context of the increased awareness of risk in western societies, in which risks are viewed as ever-present and ever-threatening the health and safety of infants and young children (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Gill, 2007; Kehily, 2010; Lee, Macvarish and Bristow, 2010). Interviews with mothers of newborn infants in Sweden and Australia have demonstrated that they are highly aware of the risks that may threaten their infants. The mothers reported often experiencing fear about their infant’s susceptibility to injury, serious infection or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and many felt the need to constantly check on the infants to ensure that they were still alive (Lauritzen, 1997; Author, 2011). These studies, as well as others carried out in the United Kingdom and Sweden (Murcott, 1993; Brownlie and Leith, 2011; Lauritzen, 1997) found that common across these groups of mothers was the notion that the



infant immune system is very weak and undeveloped and therefore particularly open to invasion by germs.

The discourses representing the infant's body as precious, pure and uncivilised are all interrelated with that of the vulnerable infant body. Precious infants must be carefully protected because of their high value, their affective ties to their parents, their small, helpless bodies. Because their parents love and value them so much, their distress, pain, injury or illness are unthinkable, and must be avoided. Pure infants' bodies, like 'good nature', are conceptualised as highly permeable open to contamination by outside pollutants imposing themselves on their bodies. Uncivilised infant bodies are unable to protect themselves and may even introduce contaminants into their own bodies (by swallowing the wrong objects/foods or touching dirty surfaces, for example) because of their lack of knowledge about the world and their inability to control their bodies and the substances which emit from them (Murcott, 1993; Lauritzen, 1997; Brownlie and Leith, 2011; Author removed).

## **Discussion**

I have identified above four dominant ways of representing the infant body in popular culture: as precious, pure, uncivilised and vulnerable. These meanings interact with, contrast with or complement each other in various ways. The vulnerable infant body draws part of its resonance from the precious and pure infant body: the uncivilised infant body represents a challenge to the precious and pure infant body; the positive meanings associated with the pure infant body contribute to those of the precious and vulnerable infant body.

As I commented earlier, texts, discourses, material objects and practices interact in the 'translation' of bodies, including how bodies are cared for and touched. It is evident that the

ideas about 'good' and 'bad nature' in relation to the infant's body identified in the textual analysis presented above also underpin infant care philosophies. In contemporary western societies there exist a range of views on how the infant body should be regulated and disciplined. These views draw on the kinds of discourses identified above to position the infant in a certain way and therefore in need of particular kinds of bodily care. Two extremes may be identified which draw for their logic on either the infant as 'pure (good nature)' or the infant as 'uncivilised (bad nature)' discourses.

The 'pure infant discourse receives expression in an approach to parenting which has been entitled 'natural parenting', 'instinctive parenting' or 'attachment parenting'. In conceptualising the infant's body as a 'natural' phenomenon, this approach requires 'natural' approaches which do not distort or suppress the needs of the child. Such a parenting approach is represented as based on instinctive responses of both parent and infant and as genetically hard-wired from millennia of human development. Parents who follow this approach are highly responsive to their infants' distress and do not believe that they should be left to cry or left alone, that they should be carried by the mother or other intimate caregiver for much of the day and that they should be breastfed on demand (Miller, 1997; Faircloth, 2011). Such practices as allowing children foods with chemical additives or sugar are viewed as corrupting the 'natural' and 'pure' body of the infant. So too, giving infants toys other than hand-made 'natural' wooden objects is disapproved of because of the positioning of mass-produced plastic toys as tasteless, non-educational and aggressively masculine or feminine, thus again 'corrupting' the child to adopt capitalist and sexist values and ideas of which their parents disapprove (Miller, 1997).

In sharp contrast to ‘natural parents’ are those parents intent on controlling the infant’s bodily habits rigidly, attempting to establish a strict routine of eating, sleeping and even cuddling of the infant. From this parenting position the infant is positioned as an ‘uncivilised’ being which requires much training to render its behaviour acceptable for entering human society. Popular baby care writers such as Gina Ford, a British ex-nanny whose books are bestsellers in the Anglophone world, advises parents as to the importance of such scheduling to ensure a ‘contented baby’ who does not wake its parents at night (see Ford’s official website [ContentedBaby.com](http://ContentedBaby.com)). From this ‘scheduled baby’ perspective, establishing the autonomy and individuated embodiment of the infant is a priority, and the recommended bodily practices accord with this goal. The infant’s body in this approach is conceptualised as chaotic, threatening to order and disturbing its parents’ usual routines and autonomy. The discourse of ‘training’ the infant, as if it were an animal, to conform to adults’ expectations and to fit adults’ ideals of autonomy is common in these accounts.

Representations of infants as animalistic, untamed, chaotic bodies bespeak at best ambivalence, and at worst, a certain hostility on the part of adults towards the infant body. These emotional responses may at least partly be a result of the clash between expectation and reality. The precious and pure infant so dominant in popular cultural representations is quiet, clean and proper, angelically sleeping or smiling happily. It causes no trouble for its carers or others around it. These visions of infant docility inevitably create unrealistic expectations of infants in real life. The uncivilised infant, which all infants inevitably become at least sometimes, is demanding, noisy, crying, whingeing, disruptive, disorderly, grating on adults’ nerves, provoking frustration, annoyance and frustration. Such ambivalence or downright hostility and anger rarely receive expression in the popular media for they are so confronting of cherished ideals about parenting and infant-parent relations. It is often those

who do not have to care for young children regularly who feel freer to express their hostility towards the uncontrollable infant body, as in the viewpoints espoused by the commentators on infants in aeroplanes and cafes described above.

The discourse of the precious, pure and vulnerable child is in direct counter-opposition to these feelings: how can one feel hostility or anger towards such a highly valued, adorable, helpless infant who needs one's protection? Yet it may be precisely these discourses which contribute to the provoking of such negative affect. Precious, vulnerable infants require constant devotion and self-sacrifice from their carers to maintain their pure status, and their ever-incipient propensity for uncivilised behaviour must be constantly checked and controlled. These discourses encourage mothers in particular to invest a great deal of time and energy into providing for and protecting their infants, relinquishing much of their autonomy and suppressing their own desires and needs. They also make it very difficult for mothers to acknowledge that they too, may experience their infants' bodies as uncivilised, animalistic and overly demanding, and that these aspects of infant embodiment may be challenging, at least sometimes, to mothers' commitment and love.

The ambivalent feelings that mothers may harbour for the children, including, on occasion, anger, hatred and frustration as well as deep love, has yet to be fully explored in academic research. Nonetheless, pockets of research carried out in Australia, the United Kingdom and Finland have identified some of these difficult-to-acknowledge feelings, demonstrating that mothers can find it difficult to lose their autonomy and freedom and are sometimes resentful of this loss, as well as experiencing great fatigue in dealing with the bodily demands of their infants (Miller, 1997; Author removed; Sevon, 2007; Read et al, 2012). So too, a 'confessional' literature has recently emerged in the United Kingdom and the United States,

written by professionally successful women who have found motherhood a struggle and are willing to articulate in detail their negative feelings about motherhood. Such confessions articulate emotions which have often been viewed as the unspeakable and repressed because they transgress and confront norms of the 'good mother' who is not resentful of her infant's demands (Quiney, 2007).

Underlying many of these dominant representations is that of the Self/Other binary opposition. Children are continually represented as Other to the adult subject, partly because of their association with disorder and the affectively charged dimensions of their bodily interaction with the world (Jones, 2008). Infants' bodies are coded as Other to adults by virtue of both positive and negative attributes. Their bodies are represented as helpless, vulnerable, uncontrolled, dirty and leaky in opposition to the idealised adult body that is powerful, self-regulated, autonomous, clean, its bodily boundaries sealed from the outside world. This Otherness of children's bodies, in a binary opposition with the privileged Self of adult embodiment, shares its meanings with the Other bodies in other symbolic oppositions: men/women, white peoples/non-white peoples, human/animal. In each of these oppositions, the inferior Other, while also often possessing positive attributes, is frequently portrayed and treated with disdain, contempt or even fear, in their divergence from what is considered to be the appropriate norm. The purity of the spaces which these Others traverse may, as a result, be regarded by the symbolically superior as defiled and disordered. Thus, in the above arguments against allowing parents to travel on long-haul flights with their very young children or to take them to cafes, the depiction of the infant body as Other -- as uncivilised, annoying, lacking self-control -- is evident.

### **Concluding comments**

To conclude, the dominant discourses which I have here identified as giving meaning to infant embodiment in popular cultural texts are important ways of thinking about infants' bodies. More than that, they contribute to the 'translation' of infants' bodies: not only do they reflect common attitudes to infants, they also have the potential to influence or contribute to the ways in which parents and other caregivers treat infants. As I have argued, there are clear resonances in the ways in which popular cultural portrayals of infants' bodies receive expression in child rearing practices. As symbolic representations, they form part of the heterogeneous network of discourse, practice, objects and bodies that construct and deal with infant bodies.

These discourses – those of the precious, pure, uncivilised and vulnerable infant bodies – bespeak a deep ambivalence and even hostility in contemporary western societies about their youngest members. While, on the one hand, infants are positioned as the most valuable, important, pure and affectively appealing of humans, on the other hand they are represented as animalistic, uncontrolled, uncivil and overly demanding: indeed, as less than human. Infant bodies are viewed as appropriately inhabiting certain defined spaces, specifically the domestic sphere of the home. They are barely tolerated or even excluded in the public sphere, positioned as it is as the space of 'civilised' adults. 'Adult' spaces are symbolically 'spoilt' by the presence of these uncivilised infant bodies. Whether celebrated for its preciousness, or resented for its lack of self-control and containment, the infant body is routinely positioned as Other to the Self of the adult body.

The texts analysed here were generated in the Australian context. As there are no equivalent studies analysing popular cultural representations of infant bodies in other countries, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions about how the findings here discussed may be

generalised across other western countries. Nonetheless, the research conducted by others concerning mothers' concepts of infant embodiment, upon which I have drawn above to support and give depth to my textual analysis, has emerged from a number of other western nations, particularly the United Kingdom, but also including Scandinavian countries. This suggests that many of the meanings I have here identified may well be shared across geographical contexts shaped by the cultures of the global north. Further research which investigates cultural representations of the infant body in different geographic locations would be a welcome contribution to the current literature on the discourses and practices which given meaning to and assist in the 'translation' of the infant body.

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