Add Rhetoric and Stir: A Critical Analysis of Food Blogs as Contested Domestic Space

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Abstract

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Add Rhetoric and Stir: A Critical Analysis of Food Blogs as Contested Domestic Space

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In this dissertation, I examined how the capabilities of networked digital platforms enable and constrain women as public communicators. Specifically, I studied how female food bloggers can selectively embrace or reject norms of domesticity in order to further their brand and increase their digital sphere of influence (and what influence those tactics have on their audience). After a critical textual analysis of 15 women-authored food blogs and a representative subset of in-depth qualitative interviews, informed by both traditional rhetorical and mass media theories, this project aims to emphasize and strengthen the connections between traditional rhetorical studies and the burgeoning field of social media studies.

Three major findings emerged during the course of this research. I discovered that bloggers use the structural capacities of their websites (including hyperlinks and site archives) to create a similar guided reading experience for a variety of visitors; the capabilities of these digital rhetorical platforms alter the processes of rhetoric, particularly invention, arrangement, and *Kairos*.

Bloggers also express some tension between their roles as self-employed businesswomen and the public perception of women who spend the majority of their time in a home kitchen. Finally, I end this study with an exploration on how bloggers use their websites to rhetorically provoke a parasocial relationship with their readers.

Dedication

For all of the Nasty Women.

Acknowledgments

I am immensely grateful to everyone who given me assistance throughout this journey. First and foremost, I thank my advisor, Dr. Christie Beck, for being the biggest cheerleader for my research even when I started to question it. I could not have asked for a better ship's captain. I also appreciate the hard work of the rest of my committee. To Dr. Tikkanen, who has been with me from day one, I appreciate your willingness to cross methodological boundaries and share your enthusiasm for the wonders of the Internet and social media (and cupcakes) with me. To Dr. Butterworth, I thank you for constantly pushing me to articulate my thoughts, find connections, and be a better scholar. And to Dr. White, thank you for jumping whole-heartedly aboard this project and being an excellent example of an amazing teacher and a supportive professional.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> [I] like bourbon, artichokes, things that taste like burnt sugar and baked goods with funny names. [I am] aghast that there are cooks who actually clean as they go, preferring to leave behind a bombed-out mess of dishes and a thin film of flour behind in her cooking wake. What you'll see here is: A lot of comfort foods stepped up a bit… I don't do truffle oil, Himalayan pink salt at $10 per quarter-ounce or single-origin chocolate. I think food should be accessible, and am certain that you don't need any of these things to cook fantastically. [I've] finally realized that there are people out there that might forgive [me] for such food, cooking and ingredient-obsessed blathering and possibly, even come back for more.
>
> -Deb Perelman, www.smittenkitchen.com

> You should know that I'm totally obsessed with food. I daydream about new recipes. I devour cookbooks. Above all, I love eating food, especially while in the presence of good company. Good food in good company—does it get any better than that? I believe that cooking should be fun and recipes, flexible… This blog is all about celebrating good food… that delights the senses and nourishes the body.
>
> -Kathryne Taylor, www.cookieandkate.com

> My name is Cassie. I'm a compost-making, spatula-wielding, kale-eating, home-brewing, jam-canning, dance party-having, fabric-loving, food-obsessed girl... I spend my free time hobby farming, sewing, being an obsessive sports fan, and drinking beer. Life is good.
>
> -Cassie Johnston, www.backtoherroots.com

In October 2013, lifestyle guru/ex-convict Martha Stewart stated in a video interview on the expanding influence of social media that

> [Food bloggers] are not trained editors and writers at Vogue magazine. I mean, there are bloggers writing recipes that aren't tested, that aren't necessarily very good or are copies of everything that really good editors have created and done. Bloggers create kind of a popularity. But they are not the experts and we have to understand that. (Ruhle & Stewart, 2013)

The remarks were somewhat ironic considering that only one year prior, Stewart delivered the keynote address at a conference of female bloggers; she also owns a blogging network, Martha's Circle. The backlash against Stewart's remarks was swift, vehement, and angry. Bloggers were quick to point out the hypocrisy inherent in her criticism contrasted with her actions, her ingratitude in demeaning a population that has endlessly lifted up her lifestyle brand, and her lack of understanding of the degree of knowledge required to run a popular, successful, long-lasting food blog. Crucially, Stewart's dismissive statement revealed a lack of understanding of the direction that knowledge production and consumption is inevitably headed. Food blogs do not represent a digitized cookbook or recipe collection; they herald the arrival of a public preference for collaborative knowledge-building and responsive author-audience interaction.

Since 2011, the website *www.Saveur.com* has hosted an annual series of competitive food blog awards. With 13 categories and 78 finalists, the awards hint at how massive the food blogging industry has grown in less than a decade of prominence. Finalist rosters frequently include celebrity food blogger names easily recognizable to the domestically inclined, such as Ree Drummond. Drummond, or the "Pioneer Woman," began chronicling her life through a weblog, www.thepioneerwoman.com, in May 2006. What began as a simple way to share the adventures of "an accidental country girl," as Drummond calls herself, quickly morphed into a sprawling website covering primarily recipes and cooking, but also Drummond's husband and children, her adventures in homeschooling, and her various horses and dogs (one of whom – Charlie the bassett hound – became the protagonist in a series of children's books written by Drummond). Drummond takes in more than one million dollars annually from just the ad revenue on her adored blog, not even taking into account her line of homewares, her books, or her successful Food Network television show. Blogging, in other words, can be big business. This dissertation affirms food blogging as a valid and necessary site for examination of the evolving ways in which women construct their identities amidst the conflicting messages of emergent 21st century domestic idylls, post-feminist cultural impulses, and digital rhetorical empowerment.

Deb Perelman of *www.smittenkitchen.com* exemplifies what conscious, dedicated food blogging can evolve into, with fans including the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow and Keri Russell. Her engaging photography, personal recipes, and homemade-couture philosophy have garnered her thousands of fans (and 86,100 Instagram followers), plus innumerable speaking engagements and a double cookbook deal; the first book is an award-winning Amazon bestseller. The list of comparable exemplars is immense; in 2013, blog archiving website Technorati counted over 20,000 food blogs. One year later, the archivers decided the task of tracking every blog available online had become insurmountable (Solier, 2013). The now-innumerable ranks of bloggers and blog audiences alike comprise a significant cultural force in the digital sphere; Barclay (2012), citing the consumer research group Hartman, reported that 40% of consumers look for new recipes online, and 54% say they've shared food tips over the Internet. Both the information seekers and the information givers in this new Internet-driven culinary fascination consider blogs a mainstay.

Emily Matchar (2013) wrote an in-depth articulation of why women are seemingly retreating into the home and domestic sphere, though her account is not limited to the online realm. Matchar explained "new domesticity" as "the longing for a more authentic, meaningful life in an economically and environmentally uncertain world" that pulls devotees toward a do-it-yourself, organic, homemade, self-sustainable aesthetic (p. 5). She describes the typical blogger as a 32-year old stay-at-home mom, and highlights the ability of food blogs to not only make traditionally dreary housework look cool, but also to build female community, imbue domestic work with new value/appreciation, and at least attempt to reclaim domesticity for the purposes of an ostensibly more feminine feminism. Importantly, the widespread nature of Internet access in Western culture constantly redefines community; blogs decenter food authority and create friendships between geographically diffuse but topically like-minded groups of readers. Salvio further explained that "the sense of solidarity generated on these blogs is built by evading the social and economic disparities between men and women and maintaining firm distinctions between their tastes that systematically privilege male power and re-eroticize power relations between men and women" (2012, p. 34). The challenge, then, comes in the delicate balance between creating a space where women can feel free to use domestic rhetoric without judgment and connect to like-minded peers, but that simultaneously does not cement harmful concepts of social hierarchies.

Overall, food blogging reflects a complex interconnection between food, blog writing, and photography, and is emblematic of a cultural shift from media consumption to production (Cox & Blake, 2011, p. 208). These blogs speak to a modern cultural moment in 21^{st} century Western society. The return to home-cooked, gourmet meals, with an emphasis on old-fashioned preparation and locally sourced, organic ingredients reveals echoes of the tensions felt socially after a crippling years-long recession and an extended war on terror that simultaneously induced paranoia and exhaustion. Food bloggers display a yearning for comfort and accomplishment in the home, and food is uniquely situated as something that can be at once a uniquely personal testament to individual taste, a testament to heritage or tradition, and a service done for the community or loved ones. Salvio (2012) explained thusly: "beyond displaying and enacting food-centered stories, food blogs also invite the reader to participate in the life of the blog—and the blogger—more readily than any related medium (cookbooks, food magazines, cooking shows) ever has" (p. 31). When combined with the emergent capabilities of social media, food blogs become a unique contemporary rhetorical platform – and one that has imminent potential as a contained site for research.

A Stepstool, a Foothold, and Personal Connections

I grew up in a cooking household. In the 1990s – a cultural moment full of rabid excitement over the possibilities of frozen dinners and packaged, processed food delights like GoGurt and Lunchables, this was something of an aberration. My mother worked outside the home, but her frenetic schedule did not stop her from coming home at 6:30, tying an apron on over her powerful-businesswoman skirt, and starting dinner. As far back as I can remember, helping in the kitchen was just an assumed responsibility: it began with throwing out scraps and setting the table when I was too young to handle a knife, then standing on a stepstool at the counter to snip off the tails of green beans and painstakingly crack eggs, and then eventually compiling meal components according to my mother's mini-lessons: how to make the perfect béchamel for mac and cheese or how to tell with your fingers when a steak is cooked to perfection.

I took these lessons for granted. They were a bond between my mother and me, but they also came to seem like basic knowledge as I became further immersed in the basics of navigating around a kitchen. Our cooking life wasn't fancy – with two overachieving high schoolers, time did not allow for much beyond getting a protein, a starch, and some vegetables on the table every night. After leaving the home, I was somewhat bemused to discover that my basic understanding of food science and preparation was a foreign subject to most of my teenaged peers – the movie stereotypes portraying college as a vast culinary wasteland of doughy cafeteria pasta, microwaved ramen, and late-night pizza grease bombs were spot-on. After that awakening, my mother's lessons stuck with me even more firmly, an early reminder that knowing how to provide for your own physical needs is not necessarily a separate endeavor than fulfilling emotional needs. Food is complex like that: both an animal need and an infinitely complex cultural signifier.

I first became interested in food blogs when I moved off-campus as a college sophomore and was excited to begin taking advantage of my tiny stove and 8 inches of countertop prep space to make meals for myself and my friends. The sites were comforting and familiar in many ways: the authors employed casual prose to share small snippets of their daily lives, their spouses, their childhoods, all interspersed with recipes in ranging degrees of ease or difficulty and helpful kitchen tips. I began visiting a regular roster of websites even when I wasn't looking for kitchen help or inspiration, following updates from my favorite bloggers. Yet, even as I became immersed in the narratives of these women's lives, I became vaguely uncomfortable with the way both bloggers and audiences talked about the role of women in the kitchen. Many, like me, cooked out of personal enjoyment, but many others consistently implied an expectation that they cook for their husbands and their teenaged sons or picky young children. The underlying themes I consistently encountered of women's natural suitability for domestic or nurturing work gave me pause. Why was I not seeing stories (like my mother's) of women who came home to cooking as a source of personal fulfillment, but also maintained a successful career outside the home? What message were these perfectly lit and edited photographs of homemade, locally sourced meals sending to women who lacked the time or money to imitate such elaborate projects? Is a project really *easy* or *quick* if it requires two specialty ingredients from the Mexican market and four separate vegetables chopped into a small dice before the stove is even turned on? The emerging construction of domesticity was at odds with my own inclinations as a feminist, but clearly demonstrated a widespread desire from women for the ability to express femininity and take ownership of domestic activity. Questions of what drove women to these traditional expressions of care and discourses of domesticity, as well as what such expressions portend for the future of feminism in a culture still struggling with pay inequity, sexual assault and objectification, and overt political misogyny drove the initial consideration of this project.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter Two overviews the literature that informed this study in five relevant areas. critical and invitational rhetoric, post-feminism, food studies, digital participatory culture, and parasocial interaction. My overview of critical rhetoric serves initially as an examination of how definitions of rhetoric have struggled to adapt to the demands of digital rhetoric; I also use McKerrow, Cloud, and Wander to critique the rhetorics of domesticity that persist in American society. Burke and Foss and Griffin are used to analyze the rhetoric being constructed between author and reader in these blogs, as well as to analyze the implications of its co-constructed nature.

In Chapter Two, I also explore brieflywhy, after 3,0000-plus years of history, analysis and criticism of a singular oral rhetorical artifact (especially a political one) still dominates rhetorical study. However, calls for broadening the scope of rhetoric are increasingly common throughout all corners of our discipline. Haiman (1967) writing in the culturally contested milieu of the 1960s, called for a turn away from strict understanding of rhetoric as verbal communication in order to understand the protests and riots sweeping the nation. A decade later, Farrell (1976) pushed for rhetoricians to adopt a new understanding of how and why social knowledge is created, giving a power increase to the audience in a rhetorical situation. When McKerrow's (1989) critical rhetoric burst onto the scene advocating for scholarship as an ongoing contribution to public engagement and a way to examine "the dimensions of domination and freedom as they are exercised in a relativized world" (p. 91), the discipline opened even wider to the possibilities on nontraditional artifacts. At the same time, an ongoing discussion was questioning what the methodological obligations of rhetorical criticism were to be (the contemporary results of this discussion are detailed in chapter 3). Blogs provide a (non-definitive) answer to what an interactive, non-oppressive rhetorical situation can look like.

Next, Chapter Two covers an abbreviated history of American feminism in order to understand the current state of the movement. McRobbie and Gill are used to explore the ways in which post-feminist culture applies pressure on women to act within defined gender roles despite apparent liberation. Then, I take a brief foray into food studies to illustrate how food has been linked to social fears and attitudes throughout history, as well as cultural expectations regarding the preparation and consumption of food might cause conflict within individual identities.

Finally, I define the components of digital participatory culture, using Jenkins, Clinton, Robison, and Weigel's (2006) definition as a base for understanding the ways in which authors, readers, and the Internet itself influence each other. I end Chapter Two with Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction and a discussion of how electronic media has changed and shaped the way individuals relate to public personas.

In Chapter Three, I outline my methods of data collection and analysis. I use Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook's (2015) understanding of participatory critical rhetoric to ground this discussion, and detail my process of gaining IRB approval, conducting a critical textual analysis, and performing ethnographic interviews. Chapter three also acknowledges my own positionality within this research, the guidelines I set to determine who my participants would be, and some of the hurdles I overcame during data collection.

Chapters Four through Six are my analysis chapters. Chapter Four focuses on the ways in which authors use the structure of blogs in their favor. The networked capabilities of the Internet, including hyperlinks that lead to locations both internal and external to the original blogs, alter the invention, arrangement, and *kairos* of digital rhetoric. Chapter Four ends with an exploration of which elements appear consistently across all blogs as building blocks of their individual brands.

Chapter Five delves further into the ways in which blogs reveal the impact of post-feminist society on women as individuals and a community of women. I primarily focus on how bloggers navigate the choice to use their public platform to become an advocate for controversial cultural issues, how the concept of home is constructed and conveyed, and which kinds of emotional states are portrayed as acceptable for women to display.

Chapter Six outlines my proposal for parasocial rhetoric. After a discussion of the differences between the mass media of the mid-twentieth century and networked social media, I propose that digital rhetors benefit when audiences engage in parasocial interaction with them. Therefore, far from parasocial interaction being an illusory phenomenon that exists only in the mind of the audience, as was previously suggested by Horton and Wohl (1956), it is a state that is carefully cultivated and maintained by authors. Chapter Six contains an explanation of my proposal of parasocial rhetoric, as contextualized within previous research, and the four steps bloggers take to enact parasocial rhetoric.

Finally, Chapter 7 returns to my research questions and summarizes my findings. I also review some limitations of the project and its major contributions to the academy in the concluding chapter.

Chapter Two: Food Blogs in Context: A Literature Review

When asked what her long-term plans for her blog *A Cozy Kitchen* look like, blogger Adrianna Adarme responded with:

> I want to wake up and cook every single day for the rest of my life. How that exactly looks and where my money comes from might change, especially since digital media is always rapidly changing. The large picture isn't easy to see since no one has really blogged for twenty years. (Adarme, 15 July 2016)

Adrianna's willingness to embrace the rapidly-shifting scene of food writing is perfectly clear after a close look at her personal repertoire. Beside her blog (now in its eighth year of production), she has written a cookbook, co-produced a culinary-themed coloring book, and partnered with brands from high-end fashion retailer Anthropologie to McCormick Spices (Adarme, "About Adrianna"). She defines the eponymous "cozy" sensation as "that safe feeling that everything is ok, even when it's not" reminiscent of childhood days spent listening to her grandfather and uncle argue over the specifics of tomato sauce (Adarme, 15 July 2016). Adrianna's story closely mimics that of other food bloggers: not satisfied with her day job as a producer for movie trailers, she turned to food blogging in search of creative fulfillment, eventually leveraging that passion into her full-time career. I discuss these themes of creative expression, personal fulfilment, and the various ways in which cooking and blogging support the two prominently throughout this dissertation. This chapter outlines the various areas of literature that inform my assertions, specifically critical rhetoric, post-feminism, food studies, and participatory digital culture and parasocial interaction. While this project is by nature informed by a wide variety of sub-fields, I sought to concentrate here on the most relevant topics.

Due to the expansion of possibilities that digital media has created for public address and mass communication, I depend on Burke's (1950) definition of rhetoric as "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43). He shifted the focus of rhetoric from strictly persuasion to include methods of sharing information, emotions, and experience. Burke's (1950) concepts of identification and consubstantiality provide clarity regarding the intimate, lasting bonds that form between blogger and reader. For Burke, if traditional systems of rhetoric were identifiable by their emphasis on persuasion, a new rhetoric must be characterized by identification. He contrasted the terms:

> Persuasion ranges from the bluntest quest of advantage, as in sales promotion or propaganda, through courtship, social etiquette, education, and the sermon, to a "pure" form that delights in the process of appeal for itself alone, without ulterior purpose. And identification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers, says, "1 was a farm boy myself," through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic's devout identification with the source of all being. (Burke, 1950, p. xiv)

Burke's rhetoric is more cooperative than its ultra-competitive predecessors. To become consubstantial with another person, individuals must find some principle or attitude which they hold in common: "in being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (Burke, 1950, p. 21). Only by discovering in what ways we are similar to and different from other persons can we convince them to adopt a particular attitude or action.

The persuasive bonds formed between authors and readers on these blogs may easily transfer into persuasive power regarding other aspects of personal or political life. Again, Burke can be drawn on here for enlightenment; in 1973's "Literature as equipment for living," he warned that written/interpretive works serve as "strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socialising losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another" (p. 304) – all issues extending far beyond the choice of what to make for dinner. It is not only through significant political or philosophical positions that we identify with others; mundane, daily activities can build up to be powerful sources of consubstantiality.

His revision of contemporary rhetoric to foreground identification rather than persuasion provides an exemplary background for the emergence of digital media, in which community becomes a driving force for rhetorical action. Networked rhetorics in the digital sphere function primarily to enable self-expression, "for the purpose of exploring individual and group identities and participation and creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities of shared interest" (Zappen, 2005, p. 321). Accompanying this proliferation of rhetorical possibilities comes an associated increase in avenues for public deliberation; this chapter will further explore the rhetorical theories underpinning the dominant conceptualizations of digital rhetoric before delving into the nature and capacities of a participatory digital public sphere. Admittedly, the term "digital rhetoric" is a motley amalgamation of a variety of rhetorical and computer-mediated communication theories and strategies – definitions of such a term will always be contextually bound (Zappen, 2005). Regardless, certain theoretical underpinnings have a clear connection to and effect on the discussions grouped under the digital rhetoric classification.

Taking a Critical Perspective

Much of the current discussion on community, identification, and the contested nature of the digital public sphere owes a massive debt to the critical turn in rhetorical studies. McKerrow's (1989) critical rhetoric (inspired by McGee, Wander, Hariman, Condit, and other prominent rhetoricians of the 1970s and 80s) countered the inherited notions of rhetoric as reasoned discourse that scholars had embraced since Plato and Aristotle. Instead, critical rhetoric embraces a "critique of domination" and a "critique of freedom" to understand how power and knowledge are integrated into society; only by demystifying these methods of integration can scholars unearth which intervention strategies may be used to effectively change the status quo (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). A willingness on the part of the critic to become a constantly reflexive advocate, critical of how the critic herself is involved in creating or facilitating the discourses under examination, is a crucial component of critical rhetorical work. Therefore, even scholars of digital platforms who profess to be unconcerned with issues of identity and discourse inherently benefit from the work that has already been done on questioning where the agency lies in rhetoric, who is granted the right to speak or be heard, and how the typical norms of rhetorical address may need to be reconsidered and expanded.

The two critiques espoused by critical rhetoric rely on a Foucauldian understanding of power to explain that power must be understood as it manifests across a variety of social practices, not just official state powers and legislatures (p. 97). While critical rhetoric is a suggested orientation toward rhetorical practice and *not* a strict method of analysis, McKerrow (1989) did provide eight principles to guide critical rhetorical practice, paraphrased below:

1. In contrast to the strictly agent-centered historical approaches, critical rhetoric is inventional (an idea borrowed here from McGee, 1987).
2. Discourse is a material entity: words have the power to make a difference.
3. Rhetoric should be seen as *doxastic* rather than *epistemic.* In other words, rhetoric creates not black-and-white systems of information, but contingent, contextually ground opinions that may enlighten a critic about a scenario or relationship.
4. Naming is the central symbolic act in rhetoric, with the power to interpret or assign a truth within a rhetorical moment (adapted from Kenneth Burke).
5. Influence alone is not sufficient proof or a relationship or causality.
6. What is absent is just as important as what is present when understanding or evaluating symbolic action.
7. Textual fragments are *polysemic,* containing many meanings.
8. Criticism is a performance; the critic is involved in the discourse as an advocate for her interpretation.

The ultimate hope for the rhetorical critic is that these principles, when employed together, will assist in the creation of a new and better rhetorical world – but that world will always be open to new forms of critique. Participatory critical rhetoric embraces McKerrow's ideas and amplifies them to include not just how the rhetorician makes sense of the message, but also how the message is created and how the creator is considered for study.

Ono and Sloop (1992) added to McKerrow's consideration of how the critic informs and is informed by criticism with their description of *telos*, the rhetorician's "continuous, ever changing purpose," as a motivating factor for critical analysis. They specifically pushed McKerrow's eighth principle further by arguing that "critique is enhanced when the critic admits a position within a cultural context and realizes that benefits can be reaped from relinquishing skepticism from time to time during the critical process" (Ono & Sloop, 1992, p. 50). By adhering to a stricter focus on telos, a critic may find more success in tying her arguments to a longer trajectory of the cultural and scholarly past, ideally leading to a better-integrated future.

Critiquing critical rhetoric. As suggested by the revised contributions of Ono and Sloop, the emergence of critical rhetoric provided other rhetorical scholars with a wealth of material to build upon or critique. Charland (1991) also identified the missing element of *telos* in McKerrow's work, arguing that critical rhetoric as originally defined gave rhetoricians no path "out of the infinite regress of negative critique" (p. 71). Primarily, he worried that critical rhetoric lacks the ability to discern between productive and destructive forms of power, particularly within a society that has always contained embedded power structures within it:

> Instead of… constantly undermining the foundations of any power/knowledge structure in a continued process of negative critique, the Critical Rhetorician might best be considered as a *bricoleur,* a kind of cultural tinkerer whose art

> consists of disassembling (deconstructing?) certain formations in order to try out new constructions. (Charland, 1991, p. 74).

In this project, I attempted to balance McKerrow's original critical principles with Charland's urging for a more constructive form of power analysis to discover how food blogs serve as both a harmful reinforcing agent of outmoded gender norms and a productive site for the (re)creation of individual and group identity.

Another strongly critical, Marxist opposition to critical rhetoric emerged from Cloud (1994), who began her argument by strongly stating that "the study of rhetoric, of how power, consciousness, and resistance are crafted, articulated, and influenced in and by the act of speaking, is vital to the project of social change. Yet… discourse is not the only thing that 'matters' in those projects" (p. 141). Cloud's principle objection to McKerrow's materialist stance was that he assumed a relativist or anti-realist position. Idealistically regarding discourse as material can have the effect of negating the tangible cultural or economic factors that prevent discourse from having a strong impact on shaping reality, leading Cloud (1994) to propose that the "discursivity of the material" may be a more grounded, effective term than the materiality of discourse (p. 152). In the two decades since her argument was originally published, advocates of Cloud's historical-materialist perspective have continued a discussion of a mutually influential, dialectical relationship between consciousness and discourse and the material world.

Biesecker (1992) also expressed opposition to McKerrow's essay for his failure to provide a strong argument for *how* to change the status quo: "critical rhetoricians and their discourses do not set practices of resistance into motion but, rather, are themselves set into motion by those practices" (p. 361). Biesecker maintained that it was not possible to resist discourses of power inside their native social frames; only by radically overthrowing those discourses can actual change take place, and critical rhetoric, as originally conceptualized, could not provide a map for such radical actions.

A final criticism of note concerns the intersection of theory and praxis. Hariman (1991) questioned the ultimate utility of critical rhetoric if the attitude cannot be leveraged to restore discursive power to with subjects on the weaker side of a power imbalance, or more broadly, become useful to people outside the academic community. Hariman expressed concern that without a stronger grounding in historical trajectory, and situational specificity, critical rhetoric falls prey to the same trap as other postmodern ways of thinking and actually reinforces the power structures it intends to dismantle. While he recognized critical rhetoric's potential for heightening a subject's freedom of interpretation, Hariman agreed with Charland and others regarding critical rhetoric's ultimate inability to protect powerless subjects outside the pages of academic journals.

McKerrow engaged with concerns over critical rhetoric's utility in a postmodern setting by arguing first, that a modernist self or writing style need not and cannot be completely distinct from a postmodern thought, given the trajectory of academic development; and second, that "a theoretical orientation does not preclude taking a stance as a practitioner," and the concerns about critical rhetoric's lack of utility outside of academe ignore the "ever-present tension between one's life at a moment in time, with a set of power relations relatively intact, and the possibility of constant challenge which would revise that set" (McKerrow, 1991, p. 76). Ultimately, the critiques leveled against McKerrow's ideas underscore the multilayered productivity of critical rhetoric as a tool for understanding how hegemonic cultural ideologies reinforce and create power.

Feminist epistemologies and invitationality. While feminist scholars cannot be said to operate under one, specific "feminist methodology," a feminist epistemological approach to research reliably seeks to illuminate connections between knowledge and power (Doucet & Mouthner, 2006). Like critical rhetoric, feminist inquiry explicitly seeks to produce knowledge or analysis that can be used to address imbalances of power; notably, the material and symbolic positionality of women in society. While the interlap between feminist rhetorical and critical rhetorical approaches are numerous, this project relies most strongly on the concept of invitationality.

The idea of invitationality springs from Foss and Griffin's (1995) explication of invitational rhetoric, which described a form of discourse requiring "not only the offering of the rhetor's perspective, but the creation of an atmosphere in which audience members' perspectives can also be offered" (p. 10). Open discourse is a key component of the structure and capabilities of blogging, and food blogging, in particular, depends on interactions between rhetor and audience (critiques on recipes, shared stories of success or failure, tips for future improvement) to be successful as a medium; because blogs are also largely created for and by women, these spaces comprise a rare example of a majority female co-created community. Foss and Griffin (1995) adamantly affirmed that "change, competition, and domination" are not the only values rhetoric can or should embody (p. 4). Invitational rhetoric hinges on audience members being made to feel safe, valued, and free to express their opinions – the participatory and audience-interactive components of blog necessarily create opportunities for such expression.

While I was initially interested in invitational rhetoric as a methodological lens to provoke the implications and reception of well-constructed exemplars of *functionally* feminist rhetoric that do not display a typically feminist agenda, I am not invoking the entirety of Foss and Griffin's theory here. While I emphatically align with their view of a rhetoric that espouses and promotes feminist values, I propose that the lines that they originally demarcated between invitation and aggression or persuasion have been overdrawn; to suggest that persuasion and invitation cannot and do not work together negates the new abilities and demands of digital, participatory spaces. Additionally, as Lozano-Reich and Cloud (2009) pointed out, the call for civility and reciprocity in Foss and Griffin's original iteration can be perceived as reinforcing the centuries of oppressive tactics used by a dominant heterosexual/patriarchal social structure to keep women malleable subjects. Because of that history of gendered expectations, undertones of aggression and persuasion are already an inseparable part of the origins of invitational rhetoric. Moreover, food blogs by nature are enmeshed in a capitalist system; the authors are reliant on their audiences literally and metaphorically buying into their blog's brand (and any associated published materials) for ongoing success, and many are sponsored by larger food corporations. Because such competitive capitalist associations are fundamentally incompatible with Foss and Griffin's full theory of invitational rhetoric, I instead build on their concept of an invitational space as one that invites audiences to feel free and safe in contributing their opinions and experiences to an ongoing (digital) narrative.

Based on this broader invocation of invitationality, I ask: if women use the tools ostensibly described by Foss & Griffin (1995) as non-aggressive avenues for women to escape the neoliberal patriarchy in an aggressive or competitive way, is their invitation to discourse invalidated? In other words, if a woman speaks out of profit-motive but succeeds in constructing an invitational space, what rhetorical category does that space fall into? Lloyd (2016), in reference to teasing out the "fuzzy" interplay between conflicting theoretical positions, said "we seldom have to kill the giant; it is more fruitful to build a relationship with it. It might just invite us to survey the world from its higher perspective" (p. 104). Therefore, questioning the gray areas of theoretical application, especially in new or blended contexts, pushes scholarship away from dichotomous arguments and toward more productive, convergent lines of thought.

While the nature of the Internet allows blogs to bring together dispersed groups of women to share experience and join in invitational projects of listening and co-constructing understandings based in shared experiences, the same platforms that enable these activities exist in a capitalist, profit-driven sphere; the women who serve as the primary authors/administrators on these blogs depend on traffic to their sites to earn a living. Typically, invitational rhetoric is employed to examine the rhetoric of female politicians or other feminist activists, yet Foss and Griffin (1995) stated 20 years ago that "attention to non-patriarchal forms of communication expands the scope of rhetorical theory and enhances the discipline's ability to explain diverse communicative phenomena successfully" (p. 2). Applying invitational rhetoric to political speech, the most typical rhetorical form, does not fully take up the authors' original call for diversified, subversive forms of communication. Food blog rhetoric provides a chance to analyze how women might be invited to speak up and participate within a traditionally domestic realm and the post-feminist implications therein.

In their extension of invitational rhetoric, Ryan and Natalie (2001) stressed that rhetoric no longer functions as a tool of truth-seeking, but rather a way to seek mutual understanding and access a broad range of truths; intention can then be understood as engagement in an issue, not persuasion to a specific, unitary belief. Further, "balancing a critique of invitation while promoting its opportunities for agency and change reveals less the value of one approach over another than invitation's openings when played out in the larger context, which itself is always changing…" collectively, audiences can "seize the limits of the invitational moment and transform it into an agential sphere of engagement fully of their own making" (Swiencicki, 2015, p. 165). Invitational rhetoric comprises a uniquely valuable inventional tool that can clearly be traced and recognized in digital participatory platforms, but embracing the critiques that have been leveled against the form allows us to view it as one rhetorical strategy rather than a distinct form of Rhetoric, consistent with the complex feminist voice of a rhetor desirous of both welcoming the voices and needs of her audience and maintaining the material demands of a digital platform. Within this understanding of rhetoric, domestic bloggers have a unique position as speakers who have embraced a feminine voice, sphere, and style, yet have nearly complete control over their content and audience. Further investigation is still needed to discover ways to facilitate domestic rhetoric among audiences who are uncomfortable with other discourses without perpetuating harmful, proscriptive gender roles. Burke's (1950) explanation of identification as the primary component or keyword of rhetoric (rather than persuasion) further illustrates the direction in which I argue invitational rhetoric must go to become or remain relevant in a digital context.

The Road to Post-feminism: A Long History, a Contested Present

Cobble, Gordon, and Henry (2014) insisted that, despite widespread distaste for the label of feminism among contemporary individuals of all genders, ethnicities, backgrounds, and political leanings, such detractors are discarding not an accurate reflection of the historical goals and accomplishments of feminism, but rather "a narrow and distorted version of feminism that bears little resemblance to the rich and varied feminist philosophies of the past. Many who… reject the term 'feminism' have nevertheless… been part of the long struggle for women's rights" (p. xvii). The confusion, unfortunately, cannot be separated from that "rich and varied" tradition – the same progression of ideals and philosophies that led to activist gains over the last century have also resulted in a hazy public understanding of what can, or should, be labeled feminism.

Not least among the confusion is the tangled web of definitions surrounding third-wave feminism, post-feminism, and post-structural feminism. My use of post-feminism throughout this project is grounded in Angela McRobbie's (2009) stance, which identifies situations "marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period…" (p. 1). By incorporating isolated gains into a broader repressive agenda, McRobbie explained, women are encouraged by the workforce and by male, heterosexual partners to return to mid-century gender norms, re-stabilizing patriarchal modes of interaction and cutting short close female relationships. McRobbie contended that the insidious social suggestion that feminism has served its purpose and gender equality has been achieved allows women to act in ways that were eschewed by their more staunchly feminist predecessors.

> These young women want to be girlish and enjoy all sorts of traditional feminine pleasures without apology…Feminism, it seems, robbed women of their most

treasured pleasures, i.e. romance, gossip, and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband… It is as though this is the vengeance of the younger generation who had to put up with being chided by feminist teachers and academics at universities for wanting the wrong thing. But, as we know, relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment." (McRobbie, 2009, p. 21)

McRobbie's conceptualization of post-feminism fits here because of its nuanced recognition of a political system that simultaneously acknowledges the gains of feminism, especially in regards to producing capable, efficient, integral women workers, while also subtly or overtly propagating the notion that feminism is "done," given the purported achievement of its goal of gender equality (an ideal that continued epidemics of campus sexual assault and persistent wage gaps clearly don't support). Thus, she condemned "social re-arrangement along gender lines [that are] managed in such a way that it complies with the new requirements of individualized subjectivity in employment, consumer culture, and pop culture" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 148). Critically, then, post-feminism refers in this project not to a culture that has moved beyond feminism, but rather to a culture with broad and powerful social institutions that collaborate to convince individual men and women that the fight for progressive gains in gender equality is no longer necessary or productive.

A brief overview of feminist progress in the United States. Before continuing further with this exploration into the state of post-feminist thought and its relationship to discourses of new domesticity, let us take a brief historical tour through the political and academic legacies that led us to this point in thought and time. Modern American feminism can be traced back to the founding of our modern political institutions; during the second Continental Congress, future First Lady Abigail Adams (1776) wrote to her husband:

> I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticuliar care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. [sic]

Women, such as Adams or her peer Mercy Otis Warren, fought back against the 18th century practices that deemed politics and political writing to be an exclusively male space; along with their Continental contemporaries like Mary Wollstonecraft, they sought to demonstrate the inherent intelligence and humanity that women share with men. Despite the importance of these early voices, feminism did not noticeably begin to cohere as a social force until the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. The Seneca Fall Convention of 1848 is an easy mark to point to as the beginning of the First Wave feminist movement. The First Wave, the Convention, and the notable speakers of the era (including Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony) focused most of their energies on gaining women's suffrage, the most basic measure of civil equality. These women referred to their agenda simply as the "woman movement;" the label for the movement that we recognize today began with the French concept of f*éminisme,* coined in the 1880s by socialist philosopher Charles Fourier (Thorpe, 2015). The women of the First Wave did not yet reject the social emphasis placed on biological differences between the sexes; rather, the suffragettes' case for civil equality rested largely on the argument that women's pivotal social role as mothers and caretakers earned them just as much cultural status as men were granted for their political contributions to society (Cobble et al., 2014). Education and social equality also began to emerge as causes for consideration throughout First Wave discussions; debates over whether women retained a superior moral character to men were deployed to persuade others of why women were not just allowable, but necessary components of the public sphere. The American woman movement dovetailed with women in England, France, and Germany who marched beside the laboring classes in a demonstration demanding "the complete, radical abolition of all the privileges of sex, of race, of birth, of rank, and of fortune" (Freedman, 2002, p. 45). However, the abstractly universal claims of liberal feminism, promising social equality for all, belie the reality of a movement that strictly privileged white, middle-class women in the United States.

Kotef (2009) stated that, while it is easy for us to dismiss the problematic nature of these early feminist movements, landmark representatives such as Angelina Grimké were writing without the benefit of a Darwinist notion of social evolution. Instead, Grimké and her contemporaries were operating under a religiously-based understanding of White persons as the superior race; only once an evolutionary perspective became more widespread did women who spoke of equality speak of a future that included the eventual inclusion of women of color. Certainly not every woman involved in the early years of suffrage and women's equality was willing to sacrifice the progress of Black

Americans; noted social worker Jane Addams (a contemporary of Grimké's) hailed from a well-known abolitionist family and dedicated her life to proving that women were capable of shaping their own destinies (Bellecci-St. Romain, 2004). The more conservative members of the First Wave cautiously realized that pushing for too many goals, too quickly, could jeopardize the success of the suffrage effort; collective efforts such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the American Women's Suffrage Association (AWSA) worked within the existing political system, currying favor with sympathetic male politicians, to achieve their goals. This primary effort successfully resulted in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote. The WCTU and the AWSA accomplished their goals through a measured campaign of lobbying, petitioning, and public speaking; the passage of the 19th amendment opened up an avenue for the more aggressive tactics of striking and marching that had previously been eschewed by moderate proponents of women's rights.

While the 19th Amendment was widely recognized by conservative and aggressive women's organizations alike as a massive victory, the loss of the most obvious driving factor behind gender-based inequality (voting rights) caused the schism between feminist camps to widen even further (Freedman, 2002). The 1920s became a decade of tense disagreements between "social justice feminists" and the members of Alice Paul's National Woman's Party, who fought for an additional Equal Rights Amendment; tensions between the two groups lasted well into the 1970s, and aftereffects of those social disagreements can still be felt today in popular dismissals of feminism or confusion over what feminists claim as their chief goals (Cobble et al., 2014). The National Woman's Party (NWP) saw the passage of the 19th as a sign that the political climate was ripe for securing additional constitutional protections for women. Alice Paul and her co-author Crystal Eastman's original version of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment asked that "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" (Hanover College Historians, n.d.). Paul, Eastmen, and their like-minded fellows were solely focused on gaining legal equality with men, or on knowing that they could not be discriminated against in the workforce or public realm specifically based on sex. Other concerns on continuing issues of voter access or increased workforce/social discrimination among communities of immigrants, low-income workers, or women of color were dismissed by the NWP as issues for race and class advocates to address, not gender equality advocates (Cobble, Gordon, and Henry, 2014). While the goal for equal treatment under the law was and is laudable – and remains an issue that women in the United States and certain other countries across the world continue to struggle with – that specific focus was a contentious source of debate for early and mid-century feminists. Alice Paul herself exemplified much of the root of the conflict: Paul was raised by financially secure, White, Quaker parents in New Jersey. She attended college (Swarthmore) in an era when university women were still rare. Not satisfied with that accomplishment alone, she went on to attain a master's degree and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania before heading back to school after the passage of the 19th Amendment to gain three additional law degrees (Gallagher, 1974). Paul's priorities were laudable, but inextricably tied to the privileged background that she shared with many other founding members of the NWP.

Conversely, the social justice feminists, including organizations such as the National Women's Trade League Union, the National Consumers' League, and the

YWCA, focused more cohesively on the disadvantages that women faced in all levels of public and private life due to their sex (Cobble et al., 2014). They were also distinct from the NWP because of their advocacy on behalf of other disadvantaged segments of society; social justice feminists recognized that women's rights could and should be linked to other ongoing struggles for equality based on race and economic status. Predictably, they were far more diverse in race, class, and culture than Alice Paul and the other members of the NWP. Mary Anderson, appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to be the first director of the U.S. Women's Bureau, put it well when she said "the 'woman question' was interrelated with other 'great social questions…' to insist only upon women's legal rights no matter what happened to other rights could result in greater inequality" (Anderson, 1925, p. 52). The core distinction between Equal Rights feminists and social justice feminists became the conflicting opinions regarding whether feminism was strictly about legal equality, or whether the movement was about uniformly equal treatment or about addressing the nuanced and different needs of women and men at various levels of society to ensure that everyone can attain success, regardless of their circumstances.

Backlash to the ERA came in many forms, from many corners. The social justice feminists were concerned that a blanket measure of legal equality could actually destroy some of the gains that working women had made – paid maternity leave, for example, was not an issue of "sex equality" in the workplace but was still a much-needed measure that would be easy to eradicate under ERA language (Gordon et al., 2014). On the other hand, noted E.R.A. opponent Phillis Schlafly and her followers opposed the amendment due to personal convictions that pursuing career success and individual wealth outside the home were selfish desires that conflicted with a woman's historically-appropriate social roles of wife and mother (Miller, 2015). Despite the surficial popularity of the amendment, with heavy opposition from social justice feminists, working class women, and opponents of feminism, the ultimate failure of the E.R.A. came as little surprise. The amendment was authored and initially proposed in 1923; while it eventually received 35 votes out of the necessary 38 state ratifications, the amendment failed to pass the final extended deadline for ratification in 1982.

The gains and the momentum of the liberal feminism of the First Wave, in addition to the struggles over labor, class, and the social role of gender that emerged between 1920 and 1960, built to the eventual emergence of the Second Wave in the 1960s-80s. Situated amid the Civil Rights movement, early LGBT movements, and anti-war protests, the Second Wave abandoned the liberal feminism of old in favor of a radical feminism advocating for a complete overthrow of oppressive cultural institutions. While First Wave progress focused narrowly on legal equality, Second Wave feminists branched out into sexual health topics, including reproductive rights, birth control, and issues of marital rape or domestic violence. The nuclear family unit, heterosexual relationships, and typical tropes of femininity ranging from lipstick to the Miss America pageant were all labeled as oppressive tools incompatible with women's freedom and female community or solidarity. This era gave rise to Betty Friedan's (1963) "problem that has no name" (p. 15). Friedan built on the legacy of the woman movement and captured the way in which many isolated women wrestled with the domestic expectations that confined them:

> Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, at peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – “Is this all?” (Friedan 1963, p. 15)

While the First Wave was, by necessity, concerned with eminently practical obstacles, the Second Wave welcomed theorizing and paved the road for modern Women’s and Gender Studies scholarship.

Problematically, however, the Second Wave’s call for solidarity and sisterhood continued to whitewash the critical differences in lived experience that women of color, low-income or immigrant women, and LGBT/gender-minority women underwent. With the feminist movement constantly broadening their scope and concerns, the largely White/middle class aims of the First Wave and most of the Second Wave crumbled under social demands for intersectionality. Friedan’s famous manifesto, for instance, was a revelation for well-off married women with children who had aspirations beyond the domestic. The problems of women who had no husbands, education, or children remained mostly unclear and unaddressed. bell hooks (1984) brought these issues to light by pointing out that Second Wave feminists who hoped for equality with men were ignoring the fact that all men in America were far from equal, and all women were not equally oppressed either:

> Feminist emphasis on "common oppression" in the United States was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they

> shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests. (hooks, 1984, p. 6)

Members of the National Organization of Women (NOW), founded in 1966, did their best to see past their own relatively privileged upbringings and involve a variety of women from labor unions, differing professions, and political life (Cobble et al., 2014). Despite these efforts, the movement largely bypassed the one-third of American women who were already in the workforce in low-paying, service oriented industries, whose needs drastically differed from the needs of the educated White women who felt suffocated under the expectations of their domestic lives.

This is not to say that the gains the movement did make were insignificant, however; addressing the needs of a select segment of the population still creates progress for that segment. One of the primary tactics that differentiated Second Wave feminists from their predecessors was the widespread popularity of consciousness-raising groups. Women who had previously been kept isolated by their domestic duties now found themselves free to discuss their lives, their questions, and their shared ground with other women. The phrase “the personal is political” gained new relevance as Second Wave feminists asked each other who benefited from a sexist society, how sexism intertwined with other forms of discrimination, and how men fit into their burgeoning new consciousnesses (Cobble et al., 2014). These groups pushed the development of feminist theory and encouraged women to recognize that the gains of previous feminists and the acquisition of a college education had not eclipsed oppressive social and personal practices.

The Third Wave of feminism, as it emerged in the mid-1990s, was heavily influenced by other critical turns in scholarship (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism) and demanded consideration of how class, race, nationality, sexuality, and other ambiguous concerns impact feminism. An embrace of ambiguity also negated older binary oppositions to feminine displays of attractiveness or domestic skill, re-introducing a space for femme-inism. Now, 20 years past the onset of the Third Wave, much debate continues concerning the current status of feminism. Feminists who fit a textbook definition of Second or Third Wave can still be easily identified, yet many feminists also decry previous movements as overly optimistic or insensitive in the face of transphobia, gender fluidity, and other marginalized gender or social minority issues. Additionally, as Dejmanee (2016) argued, while Third Wave feminists may strive to separate themselves from the more problematic racial and class divides of their foremothers, the whole of feminism cannot be extricated from its history – nor should it be, as understanding that history is key to resolving crucial ongoing issues of access and justice. Further, the total rejection of feminist history poses the risk of alienating potential White allies, a thread clearly visible throughout the domestic discussions that occur throughout the blogs under analysis in this project. This complex state of affairs and the continuing questions over how intersectional overtures can be made to all women returns me to my initial starting point: post-feminism.

Defining post-feminism. Genz explained that post-feminism advances a complicitous critique that is "always compromised and controversial, setting up a negotiating site that problematizes dualistic constraints" (2006, p. 341). That "complicitous critique" fails, however, when mass media or popular narratives on feminism push us to accept the idea that all feminist goals have been accomplished, so women can drop their picket signs and go back home. Encouraging a female return to home and hearth, by necessity, isolates women from each other.

For decades, the solution to the sense of isolation felt as a result of domestic confinement has been female community and solidarity. Allen described solidarity as "a kind of power that emerges out of concerted action – as something that is achieved through action in concert, rather than as the sister-feeling that automatically results from the sharing of a pregiven, fixed, and hence, repressive, identity" (1999, p. 104). Without exposure to other women in similar situations, such concerted action never has a chance to begin. Problematically, in post-feminism any conceptualization of solidarity is lost: post-feminist selfhood "requests of the female subject that she, with the support available to her, finds the resources within herself to regain the self-esteem which is always and inevitably lost" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 111). Our contemporary moment lacks the strong organizing principles that may be found in the First, Second, and Third wave movements via hindsight; because fighting a perpetually losing battle for self-esteem severely weakens women's ability to recognize, fight against, or accumulate power, this lack of cohesion works in favor of oppressive institutions and attitudes. For example, subtle (or overt) social messages that consistently urge women to make their nuclear family units or the good of their workplace their superordinate goals result in women who see time to seek and nurture female community as an impossible luxury. Additionally, discourses that undermine the incredible effort that women enact in the domestic sphere – effort that is already historically dismissed and devalued – reify the self-esteem loss that McRobbie warned about as a crucial factor in the loss of feminist momentum in the contemporary moment. A retro portrayal of domestic bliss is easily enabled online in food blogs:

> These bloggers use the opportunity of the public space generated by new technologies to make public their claim of happiness. This claim is also an insistence on the error of feminism and on the importance of instructing women on how to be happy… Such blogs typically include recipes, tips on doing housework, thoughts on mothering… The image of the happy housewife is repeated and accumulates affective power in the very narration of her as a minority subject who has to reclaim something that has been taken from her. (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 52-52)

To be sure, not all bloggers reflect the mid-century stereotype of a happy housewife. But even those who strive to promulgate the complexities of being a self-employed entrepreneur in the digital arena cannot escape the layered connotations of home cooking as traditional domesticity.

While many discussions of post-feminism result in dour outlooks, some scholars argue that post-feminism merely presents the next, evolving step on what we can clearly see to be a history of messy, nonlinear, contested progress. Genz (2006) insisted that, despite the critics who condemn post-feminism as an apolitical, disorganized politic that produces "a retrogressive and reactionary conservatism" (p. 336), if we reject the polarized distinction between those who view post-feminism as a cultural return to antiquated norms and the academics who use the term in conjunction with post-theoretical and postmodern thought, we arrive at a phenomenon with vast potential to explain the multiple sites of female agency in contemporary society. Matchar's (2013) “new domestic” blogger, struggling to reconcile her desires to be feminine with her desires to be a feminist in light of women’s cultural history exemplifies the productive potential of a post-feminist lens when applied to a context as contentious and multi-layered as women’s historic and contemporary relationship to the preparation, consumption, and symbolism of food.

Creative expression, domesticity, and the question of power. The problems of isolation and happiness inherent in the post-feminist state, the pursuit of civil and social equality seen in our national history, and the critical rhetorical concern with discourses of power may all be doubly observed in the long history of women and domesticity or domestic arts. Hedges (2014) explained that women’s association with/restriction to the domestic sphere prevented them from gaining access to and recognition within the realm of fine arts; because this barrier could not negate the creative drive and talent women possessed, their artistic inclinations took alternate forms, including quilting, needlework, cooking, and baking. A recognition of the socially imposed barriers between the male-dominated arts of sculpture and painting and domestic craftwork has led to “rethinking of what is, and what should be, contained within the official definition or canon of fine art,” especially as it concerns “the relation of what we commonly call ‘high’ art to what have been regarded as minor forms of visual expression” (Hedges, 2014, p. 11). The labeling of men’s creative products as high art, while women’s creative products were relegated to low arts/craftwork, reinforces centuries-old social proscriptions of worth and power. Meyer and Schapiro (1978), for example, illuminated the inherent unfairness of collage as a creative technique being attributed to Picasso by art historians, when in fact women had been using collage in quilts and fabric works long before Picasso put brush to canvas.

Problematically, even if society recognizes the creative accomplishments of domestic arts and retrospectively grants them value equivalent to more traditional high arts, such recognition does not negate the fact that women's domestic arts were "art born of oppression" (Hedges, 2014, p. 14). Instead, the division stands as a permanent reminder of one of the many ways in which women are consistently separate from the scope of public life. To be sure, critical feminist scholars have long known that dialectics of power can be appropriated by the less privileged members of the power relationship in subversive ways. Matchar (2013), for example, highlighted the historical function of quilting and craftwork circles in serving as a space for women to come together to escape isolation and freely discuss issues that were important to them. However, the appropriation of tools of power does not negate the ultimate lack of freedom that the domestic sphere has historically imposed upon women, and that lack of freedom continues to be felt today in discourses regarding socially-preferred domestic practices, including standards of parenting, food preparation, sustainable purchases, and do-it-yourself attitudes and aesthetics.

Food Studies, or, The Search to Disprove Our Baser Instincts

Food causes conflict in scholars. It is undeniably life-giving, a basic necessity that must be addressed before we can even think about forming other relationships or complicated higher-order thinking. Food research draws attention (and methodology) from anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication, philosophy, and others. Interest over the past two decades has become vast and established enough to merit annual conferences, journals, and anthologies of comprehensive work. Critical/cultural food studies is typically considered a separate body of work than the biological, nutritional, and health science work being done by chemists and biologists, who tend to not place their work inside the larger socially contextualized canon being built by food studies scholars. Food amounts to more than the sum of the chemical effects that our diet has on our bodies and our physical survival; food communicates important messages about our culture, relationships, and individual preferences or aspirations. As French epicure Brillat-Savarin stated, “tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” (Belasco, 2008, p. 1).

The topics covered by scholars under this broad umbrella are correspondingly diverse. A major question addressed by food scholars concerns how the items we produce and consume shape our identities, a question that subverts the assumption that food is merely a cog in the bodily machine that keeps us (literally) running. Belasco (2008) explained:

> Dining is much more than feeding. While all creatures feed, only humans dine. As the French cultural theorist Barthes suggests… what we consider ‘food’ extends far beyond nutrients, calories, and minerals. A meal is much more than the sum of its parts, for it encompasses what Barthes calls “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior.” (p. 15)

Clearly, the way we produce, prepare, and consume food strongly impacts cultural and individual identity. The problematic implication of this equation is that the social connections we ascribe to food correspondingly become attached to the identities of the individuals who work with the food. Sometimes the imposed cultural identity aligns with the chosen individual identity, as in the case of a wife or mother who enjoys and prioritizes the preparation of meals for her family. However, when the cultural associations of femininity with domestic food preparation does not align with an individual's chosen path, the identity conflict can result in internal or external emotional conflict. Historically, women who were assigned the social roles of preparing and serving food experienced empowerment, agency, and pleasure as creative providers for their loved ones, but also entrapment and objectification as barriers are erected to prevent her from breaking from such proscribed roles. When women lacked a voice in a more public, political sphere, food has given them a mode of expression; sometimes as a solo, and sometimes – in the case of a community cookbook or a food blog – in a unified chorus (Belasco, 2008; Hauck-Lawson, 1992).

More than the plight or attitudes of an individual or culture, food can also reveal sweeping social trends, preferences, and preoccupations. Salvio (2012), for example, linked early 21st century food blogs back to post-World War II discourses of domestic comfort, enacted through soft, warm comfort foods and notions of love, popularity, and social harmony. According to Salvio (2012), "The preparation of cake stands as the historical battleground for the ways in which women established authority in the kitchen throughout the twentieth century; baking a cake also generated quite a bit of anxiety" (p. 35). In other words, times of social unrest command women to retreat to the kitchens and produce consumable goods that will conjure thoughts of well-being and happiness; failing in that task would signal a precarious increase in stress and disorder in the household. Other examples include the rhetorical construction of beef as a signifier of typical American masculinity (Heinz & Lee, 1998) and the post-recession American obsession with food waste (Frye & Fox, 2015). The ways in which cultural constructions of gender roles intersect with practices of food preparation and enjoyment are magnified and highlighted by the connective, public nature of food blogs. Social trends (and the ways individual women either support or undercut them) can be selectively examined and teased apart through the multiplicity of content options in digital platforms: original written content, conversations between readers or between one reader and the author, a clear progression of content over time, and visual content, including the lay-out and design of the blog as well as photographs and illustrations.

Visual content, and food photography especially, calls attention to the difficulty of separating the presentation of food from the overt sexualization of the feminine form that so dominates Western civilization. Dejmanee (2016) explored the stylistic conventions of “food porn” – gratuitous short of drippy icing, oozing egg yolks, and other explosive edible imagery that evokes strong reactions in the viewer – as a replacement for the posed sexualization of the female form in the highly feminine food blogosphere. Whereas typical images of the female body as used in mass marketing are controlled by an external power and geared toward a male gaze, however, blogging puts agency and creative power back into the hands of women. Ostensibly, by re-appropriating some of the discourses surrounding rich, evocative, pleasurable images, these amateur content producers can reclaim their position as an active, discerning participant rather than a passive subject. The woman taking photographs of glossy, viscous egg yolks is anticipating the pleasurable actions associated with eating brunch – in that moment she is not concerned with the pleasure that her form can give to the eyes of an Other (Dejmanee, 2016). The issue with food porn mimics the problem seen across multiple layers of the blogosphere: regardless of the author’s intentions concerning the pornographic food photography, the audience is still receiving imagery that reinforces traditionally sexualized images and associations. The digital capabilities offered by the blogging platform uniquely enable this reassertion of creative capacity for women, but blogs simultaneously negate the impact of moving through the world in a female body. When the feminine form is visually replaced with food photography, the blogger herself becomes an empty signifier for the audience to project a myriad of values and a myriad of values and ideals onto. Further, the ghostly presentation of complex food preparations in a neat sequence belies the serious effort, skill, and hard work put into producing domestic creations; this negation of labor echoes a long, complex history of feminist struggles to establish the value of work traditionally done by un(der)paid women within the domestic realm.

Plugged In and Logged On: Food Blogs and Digital Participatory Culture

The question of how to define a blog seems a suitable place to begin our inquiry into digital participation. Blogging emerged prominently in the late 1990s; LiveJournal, Xanga, and Blogger all launched in 1999 and were primarily used as personal diaries or record-keeping outlets. These platforms were originally coined "weblogs," much like a captain's log (the Internet: the final frontier). The word "blog" is commonly attributed to designer Peter Merholz, who noted that the contracted form of weblog bore an entertaining auditory resemblance to the noise made when vomiting, and therefore considered it an appropriate nickname for a site designed as a haphazard or amalgamated source of information (Garden, 2011). As the nomenclature shifted, "blog" became both noun and verb, and the purpose and functionality of blogs shifted as well. Personal diaries gave way to specialized, targeted, mediated forms that filled unusual instructional niches.

The structure, content, and definition of blogs has been in near-constant flux since their introduction, but the critical difference between these original blogs and their descendants Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn can be understood as matters of length and chronology. A blog is dependent on long, detailed posts; the average is 750 words, with many posts reaching 1,250 words or more (Dunlevie, 2014). These posts are arranged on a website in reverse-chronological order, showing the most recent entry in an orderly progression backward through time. Audiences depend on this order and structure to build a friendly, trusting relationship with the blogger. This stands in stark contrast to microblogs like Twitter, with each post set to a 140-character limit and a stream or feed that prioritizes what other viewers found favorable instead of a linear chronological organizational schematic. The term “long-form” is appropriated here from search engine optimization professionals as an easy distinction between content-heavy forms of social media designed to foster a relationship between poster and audience, and platforms that prioritize short slices of life designed to give the viewer a broad overview of multiple topics and authors simultaneously and in real time.

Blogging is described unfortunately often in tautologies (a blog is what a blogger writes). This vagueness and the ensuing confusion results from a lack of knowledge concerning whether blogs should be discussed as a platform or a product, as a genre or a medium; additionally, mass media, technical professionals, and academics all seem to be working on independent conceptualizations of the term that may or may not align with how bloggers and their readers define their activities (Boyd, 2006). I side with those who regard blogs as a platform; the easiest way to access what counts as a blog is by questioning whether it shares a distinct set of characteristics, including hyperlinks to other locations on the web or within the blog itself, a relatively static homepage, the reverse-chronological order previously mentioned, and (most importantly) reader comments and audience participation marking the site as a shared space of meaning creation (Garden, 2011). Viewing blogs as a platform distinct from other social networking sites or websites acknowledges the subtle variations and diverse possibilities afforded by them. Pfister (2014) specifically pointed to this broad-ranging amalgamation of interests and sub-specialties as largely responsible for the vast and rapid expansion of the "blogosphere," defined as "the 'communicative intercast' of posts, hyperlinks, trackbacks, and comments among the multitude of blogs" in a given genre (p. 4).

The 20,000-plus food blogs on the Internet may comprise just a fraction of the 227 billion blogs available overall, but they reach a vast and hungry audience. Academia has recently begun to take note of the potential of these digital platforms: studies have examined the psychosocial impact of blogging (Cox & Blake, 2011), the implications of feminism in digital platforms (Garcia-Gomez, 2009; Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Salvio, 2012; Seddon, 2011; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012; Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2007), the health capabilities of blogging (Sanford, 2011) and the political capabilities of blogging (Davis, 2009; Shaw, 2012). The gender implications of the blogging platform itself, however, remain underexplored.

As a platform, blogs contain undeniable and inherently gendered connotations. Hans, Selvidge, Tinker, and Web (2011) stated that men overwhelmingly dominate the blogosphere; in just five years, that statement no longer holds true, with the rising popularity of food and domestic blogging (aided by the 2010 launch of Pinterest) largely responsible for the demographic shift. In fact, according to Stavrositu and Sundar, women are not only more likely to have a blog, they are also significantly less likely to abandon their blogs (2012, p. 369). The authors further explained that the modern blog offers authors empowerment via four major capabilities: autonomy, control, perceived influence, and interconnectedness, which all feed into the major categories of agency and community. Stavrositu and Sundar added that the more embedded comments a blogger receives on their work (excluding negative/flaming comments), the more likely they are to feel emotionally fulfilled and like they belong to a warm, supportive community of like-minded individuals (p. 376). Agency and community emerged as a vital part of the feminine blogging experience in direct response to the restrictive social norms typically placed on women in society.

Disputed control: Guided reading versus decentered authority. The female-run and female-centric blogosphere neatly subverts the typical power dynamic between men and women that both physically and socio-culturally gives men the ability to dominate women. In the online space, women sit as the ultimate arbiter of both their content and that content's reception. This creative authority may be partially attributed to the structure of blogs and websites. McCarthy and Wright (2004) noted that technology use has evolved far beyond its origins as a simple computing tool; contemporary digital capabilities are strongly tied into our emotions and our everyday experiences. Savvy blog creators strive to engineer a user experience that hooks into an enriching emotional state and becomes a harmonious piece of an established daily routine. To that end, consistent structural practices are broadly observable across most food blogs. The proliferation of large, color-saturated images that break up segments of text in a post catches a reader's eye who might otherwise just scan over a page and click away; authors understand that

Internet users, especially younger generations who have grown up in a multimodal climate (sometimes called digital natives), are disinclined to comprehensively read over large blocks of prose (Baird & Fisher, 2006, p. 11). When attention and clicks equal profit, eye-catching tactics that keep readers on your blog for a longer time directly correlate with blog success. While the struggle to gain and retain a significant share of an audience is not a novel concern for media professionals, the flexibility offered in terms of content and structure on blogs became the guiding format for most later evolutions of social media; as one of the primary "native genres of the Internet," blogs set the standard for networked, permalinked, interactive digital sites that did not need to strictly abide by the old print metaphors of "pages" that had previously dominated website creation (Pfister, 2014, p. 5). These structural innovations are a crucial aspect of understanding why and how the blogosphere has also shifted some key foundational concepts of public deliberation and rhetor-audience relationships in the digital sphere.

Social media networking reinforces the immediacy and friendliness of the blogger-audience relationship. Part of what distinguishes a blog from more traditional forms of food writing (cookbooks, food memoirs, newspaper restaurant reviews) is its perpetual accessibility. 64% of American adults carry a smartphone; with constant Internet access in her pocket, a woman can pull up her favorite blog to check the ingredients list on a recent recipe post while she stands in the produce section of the grocery store (Anderson, 2015). Linking her food blog to a wide network of other social media outlets (most commonly Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook, although photo-sharing app Snapchat is beginning to rise in popularity for highly visually-driven bloggers) serve several functions for bloggers. First, it creates a cemented, omnipresent brand spanning across all media accessed by readers. Second, it takes up McCarthy and Wright's (2004) call for technology to feel non-invasive, a natural part of our everyday lives and resources, and third, it draws in new readers who might not have accessed a stand-alone website.

Herbig and Hess (2012) argued that "developing ways of studying audiences should not only account for both what and how people consume but also should involve them in the production" (p. 272). Blogs are participatory by nature; they cannot be studied comprehensively without paying attention to both author and readers. This idea, coupled with the embeddedness of an individual blog within a larger Internet/social media context speaks to the Internet-fostered rise of what we may call a participatory culture, defined as a culture with:

> 1. relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
> 2. strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
> 3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
> 4. members who believe that their contributions matter
> 5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (Jenkins, Clinton, Robison, & Weigel, 2006, p. 7)

Jenkins et al. continued to explain that, when the elements of participatory culture are combined with spaces in which persons feel free to discuss their preferred hobbies or interests, differences of class, age, race, and gender can be bridged by shared expertise and communal learning. Baumer, Sueyoshi, and Tomlinson (2008) found that readers identify as a part of the blog itself, with a strong connection to the author or content and a vital role to play in the continued existence of the blog. These connected, participatory understandings contribute to making blogs an interactional, routinized part of both author and reader life.

Doomsdayers and naysayers like to dramatically herald the networked media age as the death knell for all forms of community as we know it (see Putnam, 2012). Realistically, however, the digital sphere presents many opportunities for community-building; whether people choose to embrace those opportunities remains, as it has throughout history, a completely individual matter. Jones (1997) highlighted the differences between a virtual community and a virtual settlement. Drawing on archaeology, he explained that a virtual settlement can be thought of as the digital grounds where a community may grow, identified by digital “artifacts” of posts, content, and website structure. A virtual settlement occurs when there are a minimal number of public interactions with a variety of communicators in which there is a minimal level of sustained membership over a period of time (Jones, 1997; Blanchard, 2004). Clearly, the range of variables in defining a virtual settlement makes pinning down an exact blueprint for what to expect when you find one difficult; this inclusive ambiguity allows for the digital entrepreneurs who constitute the majority of the blogosphere to customize their own virtual settlement as they see fit. Once the artifacts of a virtual settlement have been established, the relationships and feelings that are built on top of it create a virtual community. The virtual community may then be assessed via the corresponding “sense of community,” including feeling of membership, or a sense of belonging and integration within the community; feeling of influence on or a sense of being influenced by the community; a feeling of mutual support within the community; and shared emotional connections within the community, possibly taking the shape of a shared history or new intimate relationships (Blanchard, 2004; McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

The highly interdependent nature of the blogosphere encapsulates why Pfister (2014) advocated for the term "networked media" to gain prominence over social media, new media, or digital media. He explained that the digital nature of the technology is not what truly sets it apart, nor is it the multimodality of these platforms (as even centuries-old leaflets combined text and illustrations): rather, according to Pfister (2014), "networked media, as a truncation of *Internet*worked media, reflects a core dynamic at work in new digital technologies with a more optimal balance between richness and precision" (p. 10). This degree of specificity explains the continuing prominence of blogs, nearly two decades after their emergence in the digital sphere, despite the momentous rise and fall of a multitude of other networked/social media outlets.

The same consideration can be applied to Pfister's (2014) use of "networked rhetorics." While the common term "digital rhetoric" places emphasis on the technology that rhetoricians use to disseminate their message on the Internet, "networked rhetorics" highlights the crucial differences in the actual communicative practices occurring online. To understand the emplacement of networked rhetorics on networked media, Pfister recommended coming to grips with the rhetorical imaginary, or the "collection of conceptual terms… that constitutes the landscape of communication practice in any particular public culture" (2014, p. 11). Social roles, functions, features, norms, and values all factor into a rhetorical imaginary, which draws its roots from psychology and sociology.

Pfister relied on philosopher Taylor's definition of a social imaginary, which includes "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions that underlie these expectations" (Pfister, 2003, p. 23). The imaginary (both rhetorical and social) is predicated entirely on how an individual sees herself fitting into a broader social sphere; that self-perception becomes a driving force behind participation in digital rhetorical platforms. Drawing on Lacan, Gunn added that "the illusion of the imaginary is that one exists for oneself, when in actuality one is always in need of the Other, the social and, hence, the symbolic for any notion of self, divided or complete" (2003, p. 44). Thus, the imaginary is both uniquely individual and inherently communal, tied to both the personal mind and the existence of a social other.

Pfister (2014) further posited four principles for critically exploring the blogosphere through the lens of a rhetorical imaginary. First, "the significance of blogging, and the broader networked public sphere, can be appreciated by toggling between panoramic analyses of broad cultural formations and fine-grained exploration of specific communicative practices" (p. 13). Significant research into networked media and rhetorics frequently examines multiple levels of connections, reactions, and gratifications. A productive examination of digital communities, for example, explores not just the benefits of an expanded social network for the individual Internet-user who frequents a blog as a way of sharing her passions with like-minded global peers, but also takes into consideration the broader impact that digital communities have on traditional in-person groups and gatherings, posing questions regarding whether such virtual communities bolster, replace, or merely co-exist with more traditional rhetorical communities. The same critical approach to combining and comparing perspectives may also clarify some of the pervasive confusion surrounding the definitions of new/social/networked media.

Pfister's second principle for critical analysis of the blogosphere is that "theories of blogging and the networked public sphere must be developed with a pragmatic spirit" (2014, p. 14). He argued that a pragmatic mindset is necessary when conceptualizing or defining observed rhetorical practices; scholars must avoid falling into binary pitfalls of assuming the communicative changes wrought by digital technologies must be utopian/dystopian.

Cox and Blake's (2012) examination of food blogging as a spectrum of professional-amateur-public activity provides a solid example of digital scholarship that attempts to break down communicative phenomena online into a practical, utilitarian set of cultural tools. They stated that food blogs can be classified into different categories depending on the intentions of the author. Completely amateur bloggers – those who make no profit from the activity – are typified as hobbyists, and typically consider the blog to be mostly a personal device. For them, food blogging is a way to store memories of otherwise ephemeral experiences, or perhaps keep records of what they have tried and liked or disliked. These hobbyists generally have some other job that occupies most of their time, and blogging might not be a significant part of their identity. This amateur classification recalls Marwick and boyd's (2009) findings on Twitter that perceptions of who a social media user's audience depends highly on their familiarity and comfort with the platform and overall goals, suggesting that certain aspects of user activity are consistent across both long- and short-form blogging.

For professional bloggers, on the other hand, food blogging is considered an integral part of their identity; as one of Cox and Blake's (2011) participants stated, "I'm not a cook writer, I'm a writer who cooks" (p. 210). For these individuals, whose profit and career identity is tied up within the blogosphere, the fundamentals of the activity might be the same as they are for the hobbyists, but the motivation and degree of investment is vastly different. Professional and amateur bloggers differ based on the quality of information-giving that their audiences perceive. While expectations for the quality of information given on an amateur blog is lower, so is the risk of being discovered to have perpetuated misinformation. On the other hand, a professional blogger might enjoy the benefit of the doubt that the information she is distributing is tested and accurate – but the potential blowback if this is discovered to be false is much greater, feeding back into the observed greater involvement with audience preferences and expectations (Cox & Blake, 2011). Professionals can also be identified by their relationships with external partners – companies may give them products to test and endorse, which can either build or erode their credibility, depending on transparency and audience. According to Cox & Blake (2011), "the 'collegial audience' was important to all of the interviewees. All the interviewees had made friends with other food bloggers," and used blogrolls "to both support these friends and find inspiration for their own work" (p. 213). This finding reinforces previously mentioned discoveries of emotional connections and feelings of community prevailing on blogs.

Perhaps most interesting, however, is Cox and Blake's (2011) discussion of a class of blogger that is neither professional nor amateur, but rather a "serious leisure" blogger. Serious leisure "recognizes the personal and social value of leisure when pursued intensively," and is characterized (among other things) by dedicated effort to acquire new skills, external career demands, pursuit of self-actualization/gratification, and perseverance despite severe obstacles (Cox & Blake, 2011, p. 206). In light of both serious leisure pursuits and the increasingly graying distinctions between the public and private sphere, differentiating between an amateur and a professional is harder now than ever before. To further complicate that, amateurs and professionals exist in a mutually beneficial paradigm: amateurs look to professionals for inspiration, and professionals depend on amateurs to read, comment on, and advertise their blogs. Pfister (2014) was quick to note that once a well-developed pragmatic theory of blogging has been developed, however, scholars must remain aware of new ways in which their scholarship might be co-opted or misconstrued, particularly by industrial or political powers.

Pfister's third principle is that "representative anecdotes of blogging contain the emergent lexicon of the networked rhetorical imaginary" (2014, p. 14). Burke's (1969) representative anecdote allows the rhetorician to engage an extensive body of discourse despite narrowing that discourse to a smaller set for closer analysis, also known as a "motivational calculus." As Burke (1969) contended, in selecting a set of texts as the representative anecdote, the motivational calculus should guide analysis and discussion; it "must be representative of the subject matter" and "must be supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate. It must have scope. Yet it also must possess simplicity" (p. 60).

Finally, "metaphors of communicative practice mark cultural sensibilities" (Pfister, 2014, p. 16). Blogs do not exist in a vacuum; the language and idioms that emerge on their pages are enmeshed in a broader communicative and social network, reflective of the cultural and digital milieu in which they are anchored. Pfister further explained that the metaphors developed by rhetors serve as encapsulations of the broader representative anecdotes that arise on blogs, creating a customizable shorthand for discourse. In the super-saturated media climate of the Internet, these patterns of metaphor and representative anecdotes cement the author's rhetorical brand and help catch the attention of likeminded viewers. Once the audience's attention has been secured, the blogger-reader relationship begins to grow in predictable patterns.

Overall, Pfister's principles for using the rhetorical imaginary as a guide for critical analysis of the blogosphere provide an addendum onto earlier conceptions of critical-rhetorical analysis for an updated digital age. Pfister's explanation of the metaphors of communicative practice builds on McKerrow's (1989) discussion of rhetoric's materiality and interpretive power. A blog's representative anecdotes question which narratives are influential and what the impact of absent voices is. The pragmatic spirit of blog analysis echoes the doxastic qualities of rhetoric, and finally, the first principle regarding both micro and macro discourses networks with McKerrow's discussion of influence and polysemy. Combining the two viewpoints underscores one of my chief goals for this project: to demonstrate that digital rhetoric is not just a new outlet for old forms of communication, but rather a burgeoning site of rhetoric that deserves new, specific forms of analysis (in addition to valued theoretical approaches of the past).

Parasocial Interaction: Making Sense of Nonsensical Relationships

Some key concepts from mass media studies illuminate the patterns that dictate the formation and growth of these blogger-reader relationships. For centuries, rhetoricians and other scholars of communication had a relatively narrow set of artifacts and speaking styles to examine: one rhetor could address an audience, two individuals could have a conversation, or a small group might have an interactive discussion. The gradual emergence of mass media – radio, television, movies, and now Internet-enabled social media forms – has drastically expanded the scope of public address and interpersonal communications. Correspondingly, the ways in which scholars examine dialogue and address stretched to accommodate these new media. However, centuries of communicative norms are difficult to overcome, for laypeople as well as academics. Horton and Wohl's (1956) theory of parasocial interaction illustrates one way in which communicators attempt to make sense of messages delivered in "new" media forms by applying familiar frameworks from face-to-face, interpersonal dialogues (and additionally, serves as an apt example for why Pfister preferred the term networked media over new media when discussing tools like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter).

Parasocial interaction concerns the "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer," such as between a nightly newscaster and a local viewer, that forms through repeated exposure to the same media personality (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). These relationships are characterized by their asymmetrical nature, governed by the behaviors of the performer regardless of the viewer's behaviors or responses. The media performer in cases of parasocial interaction is not oblivious to the attachment of the viewer. The performer uses techniques of direct address to invoke a sense of dialogue with the individual viewer, who responds in turn. The accumulation of address and response builds to an imitation of a conversational give-and-take, but the ultimate one-sidedness of these parasocial relationships will always prevent the discussion from evolving or adapting in a way not guiding by and intended by the media personality.

Parasocial interactions between media performers and audiences are directly encouraged by quiz shows, game shows, panel discussions, and other television programming that relies on fostering a sense of intimacy with a home audience (Horton and Wohl, 1956). In such cases, the sense of intimacy that a viewer develops regarding their relationship with the performer strengthens with repeated viewings until the viewer considers the personality to be a good friend; in extreme cases, the viewer may consider himself closer to the personality than to any of his "real" friends or family (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Such cases occur more frequently when viewers have few or no opportunities for in-person socialization, and their effects can grow over time; the viewer remembers particularly engaging or effective moments from previous broadcasts and carries that emotional affect into future viewings, compounding the overall parasocial relationship. Furthermore, Meyrowitz (1985) argued that electronic media removed the barriers that previously defined various cultural places, including not just locations but also social roles and hierarchies. Without such limitations, "previously isolated groups [gain] a new form of social access and movement" and can build communities based around taste and similarity instead of geographical or socio-economic limitations (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 181). Meyrowitz was referring primarily to television, but social media drastically compounds this phenomenon; while television programming was/is decided by network administrators, individual Internet users have the agency to seek out interactive communities of like-minded people around almost any topic imaginable.

Horton and Wohl (1956) stressed that these parasocial relationships were at least partially engineered by television producers through the conventions of film and broadcasting. Blogs afford even more of an opportunity for the blogger to control the parasocial experience through completely autonomous, individual control of the platform. While a television show is a collaborative effort put forth by a massive team of producers, writers, directors, marketers, actors, and assorted stakeholders, most food blogs are written by one person, and the elements of the site – the style of the webpage design, the photographs, the written content, any hyperlinks to external content – are all shaped by one person and therefore well-suited for inducing parasocial interaction. Ballantine and Martin (2005) explained that this consistency of voice, character, and experience naturally lends itself to a higher propensity for the development of parasocial relationships.

The characters or personalities that serve as half of a parasocial relationship are known as personas:

> The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it. (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216)

Media consumers grow familiar with these personae in much the same way that they grow close to friends in face-to-face contexts: repeated exposure, observation, and tailored responses. Hartmann (2008) distinguished parasocial interactions that spawn long, sustained habits by referring to them as “paracommunication,” which occurs when an audience member becomes convinced that the persona is symbolically communicating specifically with them, and knows about and perhaps even depends upon the reaction and behaviors of the audience.

This discussion of personae reveals an overlap between Horton and Wohl's mass-media based discussion of parasocial interaction and the rhetorical tradition. The concept of persona, of course, is familiar to rhetoricians from Black's (1970) description of First and Second Personae. According to Black, First Persona is the speaker's own ideal projection of self, and Second Persona is the implied audience constructed through discourse. Both concepts revolve around ethos: First persona, as the management of the speaker's own image, was an aspect of communication that Black intended to be intensely, purposely managed (Darsey, 2007). Similarly, an analysis of the second persona in a rhetorical performance does not only reveal the rhetor's disclosed opinion of his audience, it also grants agency to a specific segment of the audience. However, if First and Second Personaes aligned well with a Neo-Aristotleian vision of rhetorical criticism, a later addition of Third Persona introduced a more critical aspect of analysis. Wander's (1984) conceptualization of the Third Persona pushed Black's ideas toward Wander's own earlier discussion of ideological critique, which invested itself in historical perspectives and political struggle. The Third Persona specifically seeks to identify and understand the audience rejected or negated by the speaker, speech, or situation:

> "being negated" includes not only being alienated through language… The objectification of certain individuals and groups discloses itself through what is and is not said about them and through actual conditions affecting their ability to speak for themselves . . . negation extends beyond the "text" to include the ability to produce texts, to engage in discourse, to be heard in the public space. (Wander, 1984, p. 210)

If Second Persona reveals who amongst an audience is empowered to act or respond to the rhetor, Third Persona specifically identifies the audience who is denied any agency or subjectivity, and is therefore is a crucial component of understanding the invisibility of non-White and/or hired domestic laborers within the sphere of domestic rhetoric under analysis for this project. Horton and Wohl's version of a persona presents an intriguing combination of elements of first and second persona: "the persona's image, while partial, contrived, and penetrated by illusion, is no fantasy or dream; his performance is an objectively perceptible action in which the viewer is implicated imaginatively, but which he does not imagine (1956, p. 216). In summary, the persona and the viewer become inextricably bound together through a series of intentional movements made by the performative team of actor, producer, cinematographer, and audience. Once the persona has been established as a reliable friend of the viewer's, the persona loses a certain degree of autonomy over his [sic] own performance; the expectations and needs of the viewer now must be fulfilled to satisfy the mandates of the entertainment sphere.

Transferring these concepts of paracommunication from old-new media (TV and radio) into new-new media (Facebook, Twitter, and blogs) heavily invokes issues of character perception, reciprocity, and authenticity (Hartmann, 2008). First, while in more traditional forms of mass media a persona might only have an abstract concept of how she is perceived by her audience, a blogger has a much more direct line (via comments, emails, and extended social media profiles) to how she is perceived by her audience. Therefore, the audience can reasonably assume that when the persona makes changes to her website or style, or implies that a specific post was created in response to a large number of questions that were emailed in, that the shifts occurred as a direct result of behaviors they enacted to let the persona know how she is perceived. This is a much greater level of control than previous audiences were ever able to experience with the object of their parasocial relationship.

Networked forms of media also shift the (non)reciprocal nature of the paracommunication. Originally, Horton and Wohl (1956) stressed the asymmetrical nature of parasocial interactions. Social media, of course, gives the voice of the audience a volume boost that those authors could never have imagined; while a persona might have originally assumed their audience was behaving or responding in a given way and tailored their performance based on those assumptions, an online persona knows quite well how the audience feels about the way her content is currently being delivered, as discussed previously. However, in a case such as the one discussed above, when a persona makes an alteration to her style or content, the audience member can only assume that the persona has seen their specific contribution, rather than someone else's similar comment. In other words, while the audience as a crowd may have sway over the persona, the persona still has a far higher influence on an individual audience member than the individual audience member can be sure they are having on the persona.

Paracommunication is also strengthened by how authentic an audience member judges the persona to be (Hartmann, 2008). The mass media personalities that Horton and Wohl were originally considering were viewed by the audience in real time; viewers could see and hear newscasters or performers, observing their intonations and expressions and judging how similar their responses are to the actions a viewer might perform. On blogs, however, participants build a relationship based mostly on text and photographs, media perceived to be more intensely edited and produced than a live news broadcast.

Bloggers face a disadvantage from this lack of dynamic style, as audiences are more likely to form a strong bond with a character perceived to be authentic, down-to-earth, and relatable. This discrepancy accounts for blogger's tendencies toward discussing their real-life challenges and shortcomings, including professional shortcomings like a failed recipe but also personal difficulties like depression or heartbreak.

This emphasis on appearing "real" also explains the burgeoning network of social media outlets that bloggers are unanimously building; the live video features of Instagram and Snapchat allow these women to appear in real-time in a variety of locations, demonstrating their flexibility, humor, and relatability to an audience that might easily perceive them as "too perfect." While the conventions of social media as compared to television or radio may in some ways weaken the characteristics of parasocial interaction, in others the blurring of lines between parasocial and interpersonal relationships that occurs on networked media benefits personas.

Finally, the symbiotic effects that networked social media and parasocial interaction have on each other becomes even clearer through the application of influential computer-mediated communication scholar Walther's (2007) Hyperpersonal Model, which posits that, contrary to prior beliefs, relationships on the Internet can become deeper even faster than face-to-face relationships through the anonymous, disinhibiting effects of the medium and the intensifying feedback loop that forms between communicators. Walther's (2007) model can be layered on top of Horton and Wohl's (1956) ideas to gain a more complete understanding of the ways in which audiences become attached to figures on social media. As Walther (2011) argued, social media and computer-mediated communication "may facilitate impressions and relationships online that exceed the desirability and intimacy that occur in parallel off-line interactions" (p. 460). In brief, the Hyperpersonal Model explains that because senders can portray only the best parts of themselves, and receivers can interpret those messages in whatever fashion best suits their needs and desires, intensely close relationships. These relationships are characterized by an intensified feedback loop, wherein the communicators feed off of increasingly positive, flattering messages to maintain the idealized versions of self that have been created. Famous social media personalities such as Kim Kardashian work this model to their advantage; releasing small pieces of personal information or asking the audience intimate interpersonal questions leads to fans heaping on more praise in an exemplary intensifying feedback loop (Lueck, 2012). Social media facilitates ascensions to stardom for dedicated celebrities, athletes, and public figures because it enables individuals to feel close to their chosen persona by eliminating the traditional role of gatekeeper from interactions; now, rather than call in to a radio interview to give an on-air host questions for a celebrity, fans may log in to Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit and ask questions themselves (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Therefore, intimate relationships (especially on social media) can easily arise from seemingly one-sided relationships given the proper combination of factors: a predictable communicative routine, a seemingly authentic/relatable rhetorical persona, and an audience's perceived give-and-take with a persona.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed relevant literature on critical rhetoric, the trajectory of feminism in the United States, a basic understanding of food studies, the current state of a participatory digital culture, and the concept of parasocial interaction, borrowed from media studies. I sought to highlight the interplay between these fields, particularly concerning the impact of cultural constructions of domesticity in feminist thought and food studies and the emphasis found on audience and agency throughout critical rhetoric, participatory digital culture, and parasocial interaction. These theoretical underpinnings led me to four research questions:

> RQ1: What type of woman[hood] is produced through women-authored food blogs?
>
> RQ2: [How] do these spaces reflect patterns seen in women's issues throughout broader social issues?
>
> RQ3: Why do audiences participate in these blogs?
>
> RQ4: How do women bloggers interact with their audience, and what are their expectations for that audience?

As I move forward and address these questions, chapter 3 will outline and discuss the methodology I used to complete this dissertation, including an overview of how I understood and implemented participatory critical rhetoric. Analysis, findings, and criticisms are discussed in chapters 4-6. Finally, chapter 7 summarizes my research and connects it to the broader state of rhetoric, women's studies, and new media.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter Overview

When Midwestern blogger Kathryne Taylor described her ideal food day, she dreamed that breakfast would begin with big, rich mugs of French-pressed coffee, dinner would end with cups of Italian gelato, and all of the meals would be shared with good friends (Kosann, 2012). To capture and expand on such visions, Kathryne began the blog *Cookie + Kate,* based in Kansas City, in 2010. The "Cookie" referenced in the title is actually her impish multicolored Schipperke/Dachsund/Australian Koolie mix. She eats a vegetarian, plant-based diet and feels strongly about sustainability. Actually, Kathryne feels strongly about many things; she worries about not having found someone to settle down with yet, and sometimes resents blogging couples who present a stereotypically gendered face to the world (in which the woman cooks and the man does the website accounting). Most importantly, she believes that learning to cook was "super empowering, as an individual trying to take good care of myself, and I think that all individuals should take care of their health and food is a giant part of that" (K. Taylor, personal communication, 13 June 2016). Like Kathryne, many bloggers have some sort of core blogging principle that guides their decisions; this chapter will detail the methodology I used to study these food blogs, as well as describe my approach to gathering data and any problems that arose during the process.

To address the multifaceted relationship between food bloggers and their audiences, I conducted a study in two parts: first, I completed a close textual analysis of 15 selected food blogs, and second, I led ethnographic interviews with six out of my 15 selected bloggers. While qualitative and rhetorical methods of inquiry have at times had a contentious past, the utilization of the two in tandem addresses the unique demands of this interdisciplinary critical-rhetorical project. Critical rhetoric demands attention be paid to a diverse range of rhetorical practices, including the mundane or the everyday, but the practices of everyday communication are questionably suited to traditional methods of rhetorical inquiry, which have historically privileged political rhetoric and other forms of great men speaking well. This historical privileging of larger political or broad public sphere discourses explains why "recent rhetorical scholarship has recognized the need for an expansion of rhetorical methods to incorporate new theoretical perspectives, especially those that are interested in the everydayness of rhetorical discourses" (Hess, 2011, p. 128). Scholars on both sides of the rhetorical/qualitative inquiry divide have acknowledged the occasional need for both forms of study to learn from and grow alongside the other, but in recent years serious interest in incorporating the two methodologies has resulted in a growing body of work defining and contributing to the methodological mix currently referred to as "participatory critical rhetoric" (Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook, 2015). I begin this methodological discussion by defining and exploring the commitments of participatory critical rhetoric, including how it builds on the more established concept of critical rhetoric, before progressing to the specific plan of action I used to examine the realm of food bloggers and their audiences.

Understanding Participatory Critical Rhetoric

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) explained the increasing intermingling between rhetorical and ethnographic methods as a result of critical scholars' approach to cultural studies, indeterminate textuality, and participatory audiences overtaking the traditionalist approach to textual criticism in overall popularity. For instance, Blair and Michel's

(1999) essay on the entwined effects of the Orlando, FL theme park atmosphere on the Astronauts Memorial at the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Center would not have been possible without the authors' willingness to admit that their initial traditional rhetorical approach to the memorial failed to completely capture the communicative processes happening at the site. Their piece contains an insightful straightforward rhetorical analysis of the chosen site of memory, and also an explanation of why the authors chose to return there after an examination of the context in which the site is situated revealed that most audiences were not leaving with a similar rhetorical understanding of the scene. By displaying both sides of their scholarship and the natural evolution of the project, Blair and Michel illustrated how "rhetoric typically does not address the material presence of practices of audiences" and therefore lacks to ability to understand the significance of a material experience, as well as the capacity to unpack nuances of differences in contextual readings of a site or text (1999, p. 69). As critical/cultural studies enjoys its continuing era of popularity within communication studies, nuanced mixed-method studies like Blair and Michel's (or Vanderhaagen & Ray, 2014; Aden, 2015; and Herbig & Hess, 2012) pull together the sometimes-disparate trajectories of rhetorical studies, ethnography, performance, and cultural studies in a coherent and productive way.

Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres (2011) defined rhetorical field methods as "the rhetorical intervention into rhetorical spaces and action in which we engage when we describe and interpret insights gained through in situ rhetorical study," and explained that "rhetorical field methods focus on the processual forms of rhetorical action that are accessible only through participatory methods (and that are flattened when those forms of rhetorical action are reduced to exclusively textual representations)" (p. 387). Their definition of a rhetorical ethnography hinged on a crucial understanding of the importance of both a practical and theoretical embrace of the liminality of such approaches across the boundaries between critical rhetoric, ethnography, and performance studies; merely lifting the methodological tools of study from one tradition without understanding the theoretical gap that is being addressed undermines the point of conducting a rhetorical ethnography in the first place. No particular method (textual analysis, participant observation, interviews) eclipses another, but rather all stand in concert to create a new whole with the critical potential to "reveal similar questions encountered by researchers and new possibilities for accessing (un)common – common in that they happen every day, uncommon in that they are typically undocumented – discourses to theorize how rhetoric constructs everyday life" (p. 389). The needs of a digital social media platform, in particular, demand innovative methods of study, as the site provides both a traditional written rhetorical text and a constantly shifting, interactive dialogic space.

Similarly, Hess (2011) argued that critical rhetorical ethnography provides a previously unprecedented way to access firsthand information on a specific vernacular discourse – the best of both rhetorical and ethnographic worlds, in other words. "Critical rhetorical ethnography supplies scholars of rhetoric with a locally situated and experiential approach to the process and production of rhetorical texts;" the difference is that "rather than seeing deliberation as it *occurred,* rhetorical ethnographers see deliberation as it *occurs,* and most importantly, participate in its action" (Hess, 2011, p. 128-129; emphasis in original). The emphasis on the continual unfolding of deliberation is particularly relevant to malleable digital forms, and the domestic rhetoric enacted on food blogs provides an exemplary look into vernacular discourses of the everyday as these women see it through the lens of their kitchens (or at the very least, how they portray a stylized version of the everyday in edited photos of their set and manipulated kitchens).

These previously separate definitions of rhetorical ethnography or rhetorical field methods were consolidated in Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook's (2015) book explaining and defining participatory critical rhetoric as a variety of research in which rhetorical critics pursue lengthened forms of interaction, participation, and observation within the specific rhetorical community under analysis, giving critics the chance "to stand with, for, and among the people whose rhetoric we study" (p. xiv). Participatory critical rhetoric is not drawn on here to offer a straightforward toolkit or guiding set of analytical structures, but instead to provide a framework within which the researcher's assumptions and commitments can be owned and incorporated into research in a way that strengthens relationships between qualitative and rhetorical traditions. To that end, participatory critical rhetoric relies on three key assumptions: first, texts are embedded in social practices, performances, and contexts; second, a participatory epistemology enhances rhetorical theory and criticism; and third, embodied or emplaced understandings of rhetoric reveal its intersectionality (Middleton et al., 2015, p. 14-22). A closer look at these assumptions illustrates how apt participatory critical rhetoric is for the study of interactive digital rhetorical spaces.

Key assumptions of participatory critical rhetoric. Middleton et al. (2015) built participatory critical rhetoric first on the assumption that texts are embedded in social practices, performances, and contexts (p. 15). This embeddedness constrains rhetoric by the context in which the scholar finds it, but it also inherently enables rhetoric to transform the ideas and practices associated within the context in which it is embedded. Additionally, emphasizing the embeddedness of texts forces the rhetorical critic to rethink how we define a text in the first place. Acknowledging emplaced or embodied rhetorical practices challenges the historical privileging of oratorical speech, opening up the field of analysis to unstable or malleable artifacts like memorials, protests, artworks, social movements, or digital platforms; even the traditional rhetorical address becomes fundamentally altered when scholars incorporate critical discussion of audience and social context or the personal constraints of the speaker. This view built on McGee's (1990) explanation that "text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse" (p. 288). Especially in the digital context, acknowledgement of the shifting, co-constructed nature of the text is integral to gaining a complete understanding of how and why messages are perpetuated.

The second assumption of participatory critical rhetoric states that a participatory epistemology enhances rhetorical theory and criticism (Middleton et al., 2015). Being present during the creation of rhetoric directly allows the critic to participate in meaning-making and observation of the multiple possibilities inherent in communicative events as they unfold in real time, in material contexts. This assumption becomes clearer when considered together with the authors' reconceptualization of the role of the critic within rhetorical criticism. The authors de-privilege the critic, making her no longer an expert on a pedestal far removed from the unspooling of rhetoric in action, but rather a participant in distinct social or cultural communities who is tasked with collecting "fragments" of rhetoric and assembling them into a cohesive text (McGee, 1990). This version of the rhetorical critic is not only enabled to act as an advocate, but practically required to. Pezullo (2010) further pushed the connections between theory and participation (or pedagogy and epistemology) by noting that in light of the many well-documented problems within the world of United States higher education, particularly concerning discrimination based on race, sex/gender, religion, ability, or any other protected category, "attention to such identity-based rights… is not a distraction from our lives as academics. It is vital for us as a diverse community to be able to perform as professionals at all" (p. 451). Under such a consideration, the traditional separation in the social sciences between theory-building, praxis, and advocacy is not just unnecessary, but hypocritical.

The final key assumption of participatory critical rhetoric is that "embodied and emplaced understandings of rhetoric reveal its intersectionality" (Middleton et al., 2015, p. 19). To gain a complete understanding of the meaning behind the rhetoric, researchers must leave the discourse within its natural multiplicity of considerations, including the "visual, aural, affective, aesthetic, tactile, visceral dimensions of meaning making" (p. 19). The rhetoric of food blogs is well-suited for this emphasis on connections between text, body, and culture; a good blogger's livelihood depends on directly evoking in her readers a succession of bodily sensations. We, as blog readers, experience a stint in the kitchen alongside the blogger. We anticipate the repetitive motion of finely dicing an onion, feel its sting prick tears in our eyes, hear the sizzle as the vegetable hits hot oil in a sauté pan, smell the savory aroma as the onions begin to brown and caramelize. This deft communication and elicitation of daily embodied actions exists alongside discussions of assumed gender roles, business dynamics, and individual heartbreaks over international terrorist attacks and a young nephew's first tooth, all at once. The powerful oral, textual, and visual components of websites – the way they utilize short videos, long written passages, sequential photographs, and embedded hyperlinks – purposefully create these experiences and discourses for communities of readers.

Doing Participatory Critical Rhetoric

Once convinced of the value of participatory critical rhetoric in regards to bridging a methodological gap, a curious researcher might be uncertain of how to enact such scholarship. To offer a starting point to rhetorical scholars such as myself interested in participatory critical rhetoric, Hess (2011) described three guiding principles for the method: first, rhetoricians should consider themselves advocates; second, advocacy must be conceived of as a form of invention; and third, rhetorical ethnographers are obligated to pay careful attention to *kairos*, or rhetorical timing. Paulesc maintained that "if once upon a time one could assume that the critic does not have to move from his armchair to get to the object of his/her criticism, a more mobile type of critic is today compelled to move and to experience… the places he/she writes about" (2013, p. 7) Therefore, when adhered to, these principles push ethnographic methods continuously closer to rhetorical concerns and vice versa.

Rhetoricians as advocates. To advocate for a cause requires the rhetorician to consider the situated, contextual boundaries and demands of the site. As Hess explained, "if critical rhetoric is to approach sites of vernacular discourse, a change in the notion of the critic is necessary toward one that attends to power as it is expressed and contested in spaces of advocacy" (2011, p. 134). Modern ethnography has witnessed much discussion of the role of the researcher in considering the embodied aspects of participants, sites, and researchers themselves; the traditional anthropological notion that researchers should remain completely impassive and objective is rejected as part of the understanding that researchers are, after all, human: complete with the attendant opinions, visceral responses, and emotional highs and lows that accompany that status. Hammersley expounded on these ideas when he explained that

> …ethnographic accounts can still claim to represent reality, but they must make explicit that they are fallible constructions that are necessarily selective representations of the phenomena to which they refer. Furthermore, they should provide the reader with the information necessary to assess their validity and relevance, rather than presenting themselves as definite, unquestionable truths. (1993, p. 30)

To position oneself as advocate, then, is to take the loss of objectivity and point it in the most productive direction possible; to discover how rhetoric is acting on local communities and creating (im)balances of power. Rhetorical ethnographers seeking access to these communities, then, are obligated to critically assess how and why they are interested in marginalized or minority voices.

Ono and Sloop (1995) wrote that "if one thing has remained a consistent practice in rhetorical criticism at least since Kenneth Burke's 'The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle,' it is a critical focus on the discourse of the empowered, discourse of those who control, design and create the public space… however, the focus on evil power is not the only way to study power" (p. 19). The authors continued to advocate instead for the study of vernacular discourse: speech that resonates specifically within a local community, not discoverable in its entirety but able to be accessed through texts and situated cultural artifacts or practices (Ono & Sloop, 1995). Hauser (2008) concurred that the vernacular wields its own brand of power by using

> …a culturally and socially specific language of class and identity that differentiates its users from those whose social status and alternative literacy constitute the official language of power. Although its speakers often are excluded from the power elites… they share local knowledge, awareness of local concerns, and fluency in local meanings, modes of arguments, value schemes, logics, and traditions. (p. 444)

The geographic dispersion of the women participating in food blogs may not constitute the typical "local community" that Ono and Sloop or Hauser envisioned, but their shared common interests and position inside the domestic realm (a traditionally silenced discursive sphere) easily position them as a vernacular community.

Advocacy as invention. Cicero's *De Inventione* describes invention as the conception of true or probable topics, leading to the formation of a valid argument. Rhetoric, throughout its many periods of historical discovery and rising/falling popularity, remains an inherently inventional art. According to Hess (2011), rhetorical-ethnographic invention "is the direct participation in advocacy within the scene of research as well as in the collection, preparation, and representation of data" (p. 137). What separates rhetorical ethnography from traditional modes of rhetorical invention is a heavy emphasis on enactment; participating in discourses and being part of a community better enables the researcher to make sense of diverse positions and problems. For example, my position as a well-established food blog reader for years before beginning this project afforded me a familiarity with the norms and practices of these specific communities that made turning a critical eye on the unspooling of their associated discourses considerably easier than approaching them from a completely uninitiated point of view.

Rhetorical-ethnographic methods also allow scholars greater freedom in creating and defining their texts. McGee (1990) told the field that "our first job as professional consumers of discourse is inventing a text suitable for criticism" (p. 228). The notion of inventing the text itself is especially salient for rhetorical scholarship in the digital realm, where texts are not only open to continual re-editing by the original author, but also are malleable for the audience. How and when we access these digital sites can radically alter what version of a given text we may find. Thus, "rhetoric is striving, albeit slowly but rather successfully, to add to the fold of its analytical attention more and more 'texts'"… this effort "moves one away from the implication that only writing and speech can be expressions of rhetoric (Paulesc, 2013, p. 6). This broadening of what counts as an artifact allows rhetoricians to more intimately comprehend the cultural quirks and commonalities within a population and simultaneously displace and critically question those cultural findings (Hess, 2011). Therefore, minding the connections between advocacy and invention encourages both the researcher and the researched to become active participants in the definition of texts and lived experiences. When even the smallest discursive fragment can reveal crucial information about the disciplining effects of discourse and community, the freedom to piece together those fragments into a revealing whole drives the rhetorical ethnographer's critical agenda.

Kairos and rhetorical context. As traditionally referred to, *kairos* invokes the timeliness or appropriateness of speech; questions of *kairos* ask if a speech was given at the right time and/or under the right circumstances. The discourse communities well-suited to rhetorical ethnography are firmly situated in a vernacular context, and lend themselves easily to discussions of *kairos*; firm attention to rhetorical context spurs creativity in the face of unforeseen analytical challenges or seemingly chaotic discourses. For a rhetorical ethnography, "*kairos* is the development of a local and contextual knowledge through the constant interaction with participants in the research field" (Hess, 2011, p. 138). Abandoning pretenses at objectivity and engaging in perpetual self-reflexivity promotes awareness of the minute details of interaction between individual rhetors embedded in a particular context. Middleton et al. (2011) clarified the importance of *kairos* in participatory critical rhetoric by explaining that rhetoric is best understood as a part of social practice; structure, perspective, and social interactions all hold the potential to dramatically shift rhetorical meaning. When taken in conjunction with this understanding, Hess's guiding principles of participatory critical rhetoric assist rhetoricians in considering their own shifting, malleable positions as researchers, advocates, and participants (or in my case, a fan or loyal audience member) within a given culture group or belief system.

Middleton et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of unique or unusual rhetorics when they stated, "practitioners of rhetorical field methods aggressively seek out intimate interaction with marginalized communities to understand how sedimented ways of doing rhetoric and power can be reconfigured based on the invention of minor rhetorics by these communities" (p. 390). Issues concerning the unraveling of power reveal the centrality of critical rhetoric to current attempts to meld rhetorical theory or practice with ethnographic techniques.

Participatory critical rhetoric is, of course, inextricably tied to earlier foundations of critical rhetoric, described in chapter 2. Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook embraced McKerrow's ideas and amplified them to include not just how the rhetorician makes sense of the message, but also how the message is created and how the creator is considered for study.

My Research Plan

Burke (1973) warned that written or interpretive works serve as "strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socialising losses, for warding off evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another" (p. 304). Even a seemingly mundane text can provide a critic with information on popular attitudes, trends, and social fears; these issues extend far beyond the (pedestrian, but necessary) choice of what to make for dinner and contribute to a broader understanding and diagnostic of culture. Therefore, in an attempt to gain a comprehensive understanding of how food blogs function as rhetorical platforms and what benefits they give to both their authors and their audiences, I approached this project in two parts, initially consisting of a close textual analysis of selected food blogs, incorporating both the authors' original content and audience comments, using research questions one and two as a launch point.

Before proceeding, I must acknowledge one additional item. A key facet of participatory critical rhetoric is the attempt to gain closeness and understanding with the rhetorical actors under study. Naturally, then, participant observation occurred throughout both phases of this project, understood as “the craft of experiencing and recording events in social settings” (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 135). Participant observations, in the form of studying how a reader chose to interact with other readers or the blogger, which posts were most likely to draw replies, and which reader names turned up consistently across years of a single archive or multiple blogs gave me an angle into the food blogging realm to access “what ‘their’ people believe; what makes them laugh, cry and rage; who they love, hate and fear; and how they choose their friends and endure their relations” (Delamont, 2004, p. 206). When combined with the assumptions of participatory critical rhetoric, these observations created a more comprehensive understanding of the embodied or lived aspects of this group’s specific rhetorical culture.

I transferred the concepts and practices of participant observation into the digital sphere specifically to observe how the visitors to these blogs interact with the authors, the content, and each other without interference. Helpfully, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) specifically posited three useful claims for digital fieldworkers. First, researchers must conceptualize the boundaries between online and offline communication as constantly negotiating, evolving products of communication between participants. Second, an effective digital researcher must master the nondiscursive character of a chosen site, displaying a comprehensive understanding of how participants produce and consume texts. And finally, the traditional process of note-taking must be allowed to breathe and evolve into an expanded interpretation of the copious electronic records automatically generated by sites such as blogs, chatrooms, or social media profiles. These persistent ideas of flexibility, responsiveness, and embeddedness significantly shaped both parts of my study.

Part one: Textual analysis. The first phase of my study involved a textual analysis of selected posts from 15 assorted food blogs. The blogs included in my project were selected based on four major criteria. First, bloggers needed to have been active for at least two years. This requirement is a reduction of my original proposition of five years, for two reasons: newer bloggers I generally found to be more likely to continuously focus on growing and solidifying their brand, making them more present on their website in general, and they also received more buzz from other food media as up-and-comers. While established voices in the blogosphere have correspondingly established audiences, newer bloggers benefit greatly from the attention given to them by magazines or other websites, making them more likely to seek out such attention to increase their readership. As I still needed a significant archive to be able to complete my analysis, two years was a compromise I settled on to be able to access emerging popular bloggers but still have access to an adequate archive of text for analysis.

The second criterion for inclusion was that bloggers must make a profit on blogging and blog-related activities (a spin-off cookbook, ad revenue, or sponsored posts, for example). In practice, this profit requirement included titans like *Smitten Kitchen* and *Pioneer Woman* who easily have six-figure net worths, but it also included women whose blogs started out as part-time ventures and eventually grew large enough for them to quit their day job or bloggers whose Internet income supplements the more prominent household income of a husband. The profit requirement is included based on Cox and Blake's (2011) distinction between amateur and professional bloggers: to avoid any potential differences in motivation and categorization, all bloggers included in this study are considered professionals.

Third, to be included in my analysis women needed to actively blog a minimum average of three times a month since January 2014 (or, roughly once a week with exceptions for travel and life interruptions like childbirth). Women also must be active in the comment section of their blog, appearing at least once in active threads to respond to questions or suggestions directed at the blogger. Both conditions were intended to guarantee that participating bloggers prioritize their connection to their readers, as a steady stream of content and a reliably interactive author are guarantors of a dedicated audience (Hunter, 2016). For example, Perelman (2013) has a standing policy on *Smitten Kitchen* that readers may ask a question or post a comment at any time on any archived post and she will still do her best to answer as quickly as possible; this accessibility is largely what endears her to such a wide and enduring audience. I made one exception in my requirement for authors to be active in comment sections for Ree Drummond, who has not been active in responding to her reader comments since the earliest days of her blog in 2006. I granted this exception to Drummond because *The Pioneer Woman* is an excessively popular website, with multiple awards and comment sections on posts that regularly exceed 600 distinct reader voices. Not only would it be an additional full-time job for Drummond to address all of those audience voices, but the proliferation of her fans made her voice critical to include in this project (even if she as an author is less responsive on her website than others).

Finally, while many popular blogs are run out of varied locations across the globe, this study was limited to blogs based out of the United States and Canada to prevent cultural differences and expectations from presenting as complicating factors. All of these guidelines were intended to ensure that participants are continuously involved in the process of blogging, as compared to individuals who might have started a blog and then abandoned it that due to a lack of available time, resources, or mental energy. A complete roster of the blogs included in my analysis is attached as Appendix A.

To begin to identify websites that would be suitable for my analysis, I turned to the prominent yearly food blog awards hosted by food magazine *Saveur.* The *Saveur.com* awards cover expansive categories such as special diets, family cooking, regional cuisine, desserts/baking and overall best cooking blogs. The awards list readers' choice winners as well as editors' choice, plus a list of runners-up. Initially, I pulled women authors from the lists from years 2014, 2015, and 2016 (excluding anyone whose blog has fallen into inactivity) and grew a snowball sample from there based on bloggers' connections. Many popular blogs include blogrolls – side lists of blogs that the original author finds relevant, engaging, or thematically similar – that proved to be excellent additional opportunities for snowball recruiting.

Once I compiled a full list of blogs, my next task became narrowing down a subset of posts for analysis. Total number of posts on these blogs ranged from over 750 (*The Pioneer Woman*) to just over 100 (*The Salted Plains*), making a numerical selection of posts difficult. Additionally, I wanted a sampling strategy that would allow me to have roughly the same experience on a site that a reader might have after arriving on one specific recipe page for the first time (perhaps after a Google search) and then following hyperlinks within the site to read more content or learn more about the author and her style. A randomized sample would not allow me to access posts deemed popular by a blog's readers, and was generally unnecessary considering that (with one exception for the temporarily co-authored *Big Girls, Small Kitchen*) these websites are the product of a singular rhetorical voice. So, rather than using a randomized number generator or a similar randomized sampling method, I chose to select posts for analysis based on the categories of posts typically featured on these blogs. My initial survey of my sample blogs produced 8 categories of recipe posts: entrees, baked goods, desserts, snacks and appetizers, breakfast, soups and salads, drinks, and professional/lifestyle posts (commonly either an update on the blogger's pregnancy or children or a report on how the blog itself is functioning, frequently including advice on the mechanics of blogging for other professionals). While the names used for the posts varied from author to author, all of these categories could easily be identified on each of the 15 websites. Initially, I decided to pull three posts in each of these eight categories: one from the blogger's early years, one from the middle of their website's life, and one representative of their current blogging style. The dates that constituted early, middle, and current career varied depending on how long a woman had been blogging, but I kept the time allocation between categories as even as possible. For instance, when examining a website that began in 2010, early career was defined as 2010-2011, mid-career was defined as 2012-2013, and current career was defined as 2014-present. Within each of those time periods, I let the popularity of posts within the categories guide my ultimate selections. Popularity here was determined by the number of comments a post received comparative to the rest of the blog; for a highly popular website like *The Pioneer Woman*, this might mean 700 or more comments. For a newer author, it was more likely to mean approximately 20 comments.

So, this framework of eight major recipe categories and three time frames across 15 websites initially produced a sample for analysis of 360 blog posts. However, after completing analysis on three websites, I began to realize that analyzing 24 posts on each blog was producing unnecessary redundancy; I was consistently reaching saturation for one blogger's voice before completing my per-website sample. This initially surprised me; after concluding my data collection, however, it became obvious that this phenomenon was a result of my profit/professionalization requirement. Each of my participating bloggers was a professional writer; their livelihood depended on their ability to create, establish, and maintain a consistent persona so that readers would know what to expect. As such, wide variability among the themes, content, and style of one site would be a hallmark of a blogger who, to be frank, was not that good at her job (this trend toward identifiable brand consistency will be explored in depth in the upcoming chapters). Consequentially, however, I reduced my sample size to 18 posts per blog, not 24. I chose to drop the drinks and professional/lifestyle posts, since those categories had consistently produced the shortest posts and the least-rich data in my initial three website analyses. After this adjustment, my final text analysis contained an examination of 270 individual posts, plus a variable number of reader comments left on each post.

Using these finalized guidelines, textual analysis continued until theoretical saturation had been reached and continued analysis provided no noticeable new themes or novel observations. Again, I found more coherence in themes across blogs than I originally anticipated. I purposely excluded blogs from my sample that owned a narrow perspective or lens (such as blogs that only cover special-diet recipes like Paleo or blogs on just one regional or ethnic cuisine, like Tex-Mex) in order to hopefully facilitate a broad range of topics, opinions, and styles. What I found instead, and what the bulk of my analysis will discuss, is that the type of authorial voice that is allowed to speak on these digital rhetorical platforms – or at least, the voices that are being heard and perpetuated and awarded – all belong to a quite specific demographic and ideology.

Handwritten notes from my preliminary textual analysis filled two 100 page, 7.5"x9.75" composition books. Each website entry is prefaced by a table including all of the posts selected from that blog; my analysis and thematic observations per post follow, with a concluding section for each website noting overall trends, stylistic choices, additional questions, or prominent observations. This analysis proceeded in the model of Lucas (2008), "probing the discourse microscopically--at the level of the sentence, phrase, word, and syllable." After collecting detailed notes on the narratives present on the blogs, I used Excel to begin sorting the posts for easier visualization of how frequently the authors were embodying different themes. After analysis, I found myself with five meta-themes: the structural conventions of food blogs (, blog branding, idealized sense of community, expressions of shared humanity, and digital enactments of friendship. I identified these meta-themes out of 45 sub-themes that emerged from my textual analysis. In the broadest sense, themes tended to emerge concerning one of three points of discussion: how the bloggers discuss themselves, how they discuss their blogs and/or their job, and how they discuss their readers. My analysis chapters originated from these three broad discussions, and sub-themes will be articulated therein.

I also coded reader comments on the posts in my sample, and while I approached these comments with the same methodology and standards that I used in my coding of the blog posts, I identified a different set of themes. Reader comments reliably fell into nine themes: stories about being a caretaker, nostalgia, praise for the blogger, criticism for the blogger (by far the least frequent type of comment), parasocial expressions of a relationship with the blogger, advice for other readers, general informative tips about cooking, recipes, or ingredients, dependence on the blogger, and expressions of regional affiliation or adaptation.

Part two: In-depth interviews. Phase two of this project entailed a set of qualitative, ethnographic interviews with a representative subset of the bloggers used in the rhetorical analysis. These interviews were purposefully secondary to my textual analysis, aimed primarily at addressing research questions three (how do women bloggers interact with their audiences?) and four (what do women food bloggers expect out of their audiences?). I originally intended them as a means to supplement and cross-check the discoveries found during textual analysis, rather than comprise the bulk of this study. While they remained a secondary component to my textual analysis, I did find RQ five (How/do these spaces reflect patterns seen in women's issues throughout broader social issues?) becoming a more prominent influence of my interview protocol. Especially as the 2016 election cycle became more heated, and as women's issues began to factor more heavily into those political discourses, the women I was interviewing made their political inclinations – or the reasons they refused to be politically inclined – more known.

The natural evolution of my interviewing process recalled Geiger's (1990) insistence that scholarly attempts to come to an understanding of another individual's experiences and motivations must not be heavily guided by preconceived notions about what should be found important, lest the researcher ends up obscuring a minority viewpoint or hidden theme. As I struggled to make sense of what these women were telling me, I at times struggled to shelve the strong opinions I had developed about the nature of their job and responsibilities – opinions formed by my privilege as a woman in the academy. Most tellingly, I quickly discovered that even approaching the interviews with a pre-designed interview protocol and set research questions (my original interview protocol is attached as Appendix B) sometimes made women feel uncomfortable, or confused about where the conversation should go. To adapt to that emerging pattern, I kept the simply demographic questions I was using to attempt to find some similarities between the women who were drawn to a career in blogging, but otherwise let the conversations unspool as organically as possible. One woman talked easily and enthusiastically about her career and her opinions with virtually no prodding from me. Another made it quite clear that she had strict limits on what she was willing to discuss, and that as she herself had a Ph.D. (from Stanford, no less), I had better not attempt to use any researcher wiles to sidestep her proscribed limits. Another was relatively new to the blogging world, seemed bewildered at the idea that anyone would find her career worthy of study, and needed heavy encouragement to share any of her thoughts. Regardless of circumstance or attitude, I approached all of my participants ready to understand their individual perspectives and avoid imposing my suspicions onto their lived, professional experiences. However, I did not remove myself entirely from the experience of story-telling. As Anderson and Jack (1991) explained:

> Women have internalized the categories by which to interpret their experiences and activities, categories that 'represent a deposit of the desires and disappointments of men,' [so] what is often missing is the woman's own interpretation of her experience, or her own perspective on her life and activity… Looking closely at the language and the particular meanings of important words

women use to describe their experience allows us to understand how women are adapting to the culture within which they live." (1991, p. 19)

I frequently found myself as the interviewer in the position of pushing women to trouble assumptions they made about the habits, motivations, or knowledge bases of their readers, as well as why they assumed such positions were commonplace. Further implications surrounding the departure these interviews took from the importance of the reader to the blogger to the blogger's own immersion in cultural goings-on became a central component of my data analysis throughout this project. To assist in this process of monitoring and adapting to the needs of my interviewees, I remained reflexive about how my own experiences, history, and opinions (particularly on cooking, writing, and domesticity) might be impacting these interactions. Because "the thing that we study" and the way that we study it" usually converge, I paid particular attention to how my participation in these dialogues (as a young, educated, food-literate White woman) might affect the final product (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 284;). All research is influenced in some way by the attitudes and practices of the researcher, despite attempts to remain objective, but researchers who focus on any historically marginalized population bear a heightened obligation to consider how their experiences obscure or misrepresent the words of their participants (Harding, 1991; Jorgensen, 2011). I have sought to minimize these distortions by reflecting the input of my participants in extended passages throughout my later analysis chapters; when my voice is layered on top of or against the words of the bloggers, I make explicit note of it to avoid appropriating their experiences.

Because these interviews were always meant to be secondary to my textual analysis, I initially sought to secure about half of my total bloggers for interviews. After sending out a total of thirty interview requests, I ended up with 6 interviews. While I would have ideally preferred another one or two interviews to round out my data, I quickly discovered that when these women are regularly getting requests for interviews from other outlets that are either offering monetary payment or, at the very least, exposure to a broader digital audience, participating in my small scholarly contribution is not high on their list of priorities. Consider my ego bruised. Ultimately, after restructuring my list of participating blogs several times to accommodate this difficulty in securing interviews, I decided that the rich consistency I found within my textual analysis made up for slightly undershooting my ideal interview goal. And bloggers having regular access to other compensated interview outlets was actually a blessing as well as a curse; published interviews serve as an additional source of insight into how these women portray their lives to the public, and they are referenced and cited throughout this project when appropriate. Many of the bloggers I studied include links to their published interviews or guest posts under the "About Me" tab on their blogs, which conveniently facilitated this additional line of information. My interviews averaged about 42 minutes in length; I always aimed to be considerate of my participants' time, as I was repeatedly told that summer is the "busy season" for bloggers (several were on their way to various conventions and conferences occurring during the warm weather months – these conferences also accounted for many of my polite rejection emails).

As bloggers can do their job from any location with an Internet connection, my interviewees were dispersed across a wide variety of geographic locations. Therefore, all of my interviews were conducted electronically via Skype. Interviewing face-to-face has obvious benefits and privileges: chiefly, physical presence facilitates the reading of interviewee proxemics, giving the interviewer more cues with which to guide the interview. However, video interviews provide their own set of benefits. Interviewees may find inviting an unknown researcher into their home their home threatening or uncomfortable, but conducting interviews in neutral third-party locations can sometimes stifle organic discussion due to distracting environmental influences or fears of being publicly overheard. Video interviews, apart from negating the problem of physical distance, allowed me to glimpse bloggers' domestic workspaces without actually intruding into their homes. Several of the bloggers were eating during our interviews, one was keeping an eye on her napping newborn, and one's street-level California apartment was so filled with the noises of downtown Los Angeles that I felt it was possible to step directly into her world of sunshine and palm trees. All of these quirks gave me a more intimate picture of the day-to-day life of these women.

To protect participants, all interviewees were given a choice of interview technology; all interview subjects were also given the option of having their identity hidden in the final project, though only one woman opted to take this option and use a pseudonym. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) acknowledged that interviewers must be cautious to avoid a certain set of methodological pitfalls; namely, individual social actors are not generally an objectively reliable source of information. However, in a case such as this – geared at understanding individual experiential narratives – the ethnographic interview remains the best way to gain knowledge that cannot easily be observed in any other way.

After the conversations ended, all interviews were transcribed, with some paid help from the transcription service Scribie. Because this project is focused on thematic analysis and not conversation analysis, no particular effort was given to ensuring totally verbatim transcription for all interviews; significant pauses or moments of hesitation signaling thoughtfulness or uncertainty on the part of the interviewee were noted by me (including on the paid transcriptions), but normal moments of disfluency, stuttering, and repetition were eliminated for the sake of consistency across transcripts. After transcription, the interviews were coded in the same way as the blog posts described above.

Ensuring Methodological Rigor

As this project does involve personal conversations with public figures, my first task toward ensuring a rigorously sound product was to clear my plan through Ohio University's Institutional Review Board. Because the information accessible on an Internet-published and archive food blog is considered public record, and because my interviews concerned women's individual experiences and posed no threat of physical or mental anguish, I was able to request an exemption from formal review for my project. The IRB granted me my exempt status on April 22, 2016, including a waiver for participant signatures on interview consent forms since we would only be meeting digitally. The email message I used to contact women for interviews, as approved by the IRB, is attached as Appendix C.

During the course of my data collection, I used Tompkins's (1994) four standards of rigor in qualitative research as ethical research guidelines. Lightly paraphrased:

1. Writers should assume the burden of proof in establishing that there is no reason to believe that the textual evidence provides an *un*representative picture of the people or discourse studied.

2. All textual evidence must be carefully examined for consistency and representativeness.
3. Textual evidence should be verified when other readers or reviewers cannot readily access it.
4. When appropriate and possible, researchers should report how their participants respond to their scholarly conclusions. (Tompkins, 1994, p. 49)

Initially, Tompkins emphasized representativeness as a baseline method of ensuring rigorousness in textual research. The sampling procedures I outlined earlier in this chapter were partially informed by Burke's (1969) description of the representative anecdote, as defined in chapter 2. The representative anecdote facilitates a researcher's goal to understand a broad section of the grassroots level of a community. In this project, for example, two participating authors are relative celebrities within the blogosphere, but the other 13 are women who are quite representative of the population that statistical data tells us is reading these websites and using them as a space to find community or inspiration. I strove to create a textual sample or blog posts that were individual representative of one author's persona in addition to an overall data set that represented a fair scope of the woman-authored food blog scene.

Next, Tompkins (1994) advocated for consistency within both public and private texts. All of the blog posts used and cited within this project are still publicly available and may be referenced by the reader at any time. Happily for the digital rhetorician, rhetorics on social or networked media play with the traditional "fixity" of rhetoric in the established face-to-face realm (Clark, 2010). No longer is a rhetorical artifact bound to the time and place in which it was originally delivered, a la the Gettysburg Address;

digital rhetorics may be consumed by any manner of audience member at any time. While this facility of the Internet makes it exceedingly easy for readers or reviewers to approach whatever piece of address is being referenced in scholarship, it simultaneously alters the topoi of the rhetoric being studied; new readers are often not standing in the same rhetorical stream. Edits to text or photos, updates on recipes, pingbacks from more current posts, and additional reader comments may have all acted as hypothetical rocks in the stream of the original text to divert the overall rhetorical flow, even if only slightly. To mitigate this factor as much as possible, I note the dates I looked at the post rather than only the date when it was originally posted.

Tompkins's (1994) preference for demonstrated consistency within private texts may potentially send rhetoricians who shudder at the mention of "verifiability" running for the hills, but he is fundamentally concerned here with Burke's concept of recalcitrance. Recalcitrance concerns a scholar's interpretations of events or a specific point of view, specifically regarding "the factors that substantiate a statement, the factors that incite a statement, and the factors that correct a statement" (Burke, 1959, p. 97). Functionally, this issue concerns whether a scholar is faithfully representing the voices of the people being studied. While I do not claim this project is an oral history, I do make every effort to accurately represent the opinions and perspectives of the women whose work made this project possible.

I must additionally stress the wide variability in experiences, identities, and opinions even within a population as narrowly defined as mine; too often, women and other minority populations are grouped into a monolith. Sangster (1994) warned that "negating an understanding of experience as a 'lived reality' for women carries with it the danger of marginalising and trivialising women's historical voices and their experiences (however varied) of oppression" (p. 23). I would add that even assuming a particular woman feels oppressed under a given situation or phenomenon drives that woman's experience in a direction that may be contrary to the truth of her story. It can be tempting for researchers and the popular press alike to say they have found *the* defining narrative of any group. However, claiming to have found the ultimate definition of a woman food blogger (for example) destroys the nuance present in the infinite variations of experience and testimony, reaffirming my efforts to keep the professional journeys and opinions represented in this project distinct and faithful to the women who expressed them. I cannot, however, promise that all 15 women whose voices are represented in this project would agree with every critical conclusion I draw throughout this project.

Before I further detail my findings, I want to note that I will be referring to the bloggers I studied during this project by their first name alone. While this contradicts standard APA style, it mimics how the women refer to themselves on their individual blogs and provides a clearer reading experience than noting the full name and blog title every time an example is mentioned. For clarification on which blogger belongs to which blog, please refer to Appendix A.

In this chapter, I have described the framework I used to approach this project, the theoretical guidelines that I used to monitor my data collection, the specifics of my rhetorical analysis and my interviews, and a few major hurdles that arose along the way. The following chapters will explore my findings in detail.

Chapter 4: The Rhetorical Structuring of Food Blogs

Smitten Kitchen mastermind Deb Perelman grew up in New Jersey, got a college degree in psychology, and worked as an art therapist and technology reporter before she became the woman behind *Smitten Kitchen*. It hardly seems like an obvious recipe for a successful food blog, but Deb is consistently ranked among the most popular writers in the food blogosphere (Shaw, 2017). *Smitten Kitchen* began (much like the art of blogging in general) as a personal diary but quickly became food-focused and morphed into its current incarnation in 2006. The praise heaped on Perelman is lavish, covering her photography (said to be more artistic than the instructional photo sequences of her competitors, revealing her fine arts background), her unpretentious cooking style, and her well-honed authorial presence (Kaufman, 2012). In 2012, *Smitten Kitchen* won SAVEUR's Best Cooking Blog award, the Bloggies' Best Food Weblog award, and was named one of Forbes's top 100 websites for women (Perelman, 2013). Deb's cookbook debuted at number 2 on *The New York Times'* bestseller list that same year and stayed in the top five for months.

In that same year, I began following *Smitten Kitchen* and the food blogosphere in earnest; like many of Perelman's readers, I have grown to consider her a virtual friend and reliable source of kitchen advice, particularly for a dependable cookie recipe or unusual vegetarian main dish. Her candid, yet uncontroversial revelations of motherhood and picturesque depictions of Manhattan cement the popularity of *Smitten Kitchen*; after five years of reading and exploring many other blogs, Perelman's is still my personal favorite. In a 10-year retrospective on her blogging journey, she explained:

> Food blogging, in the eyes of other people, was many things: this wild disruptor that came out of nowhere, a shameless explosion of unprofessionals trampling the gates of food writing's exclusionary system... Blogging was simply a way that people who weren't being invited to publish by people who published could publish anyway, I'd have told you. But it's hard to read that sentence now and not see how much bigger that made it than I flippantly gave it credit for. (Perelman, 2016)

Deb was right – blogging is explosive and disruptive, and the peer-to-peer power of the platform gives it much of its power. While blogs as a platform and the history of the blogging medium (as discussed in Chapter Two) partially explain this power, the interactivity of food blogs cannot be fully understood without examining the ways in which bloggers themselves specifically structure their websites to create a guided reading experience that is homogenous for every reader. This chapter, then, will discuss how authors structure their food blogs to create that experience. The structural conventions of blogs function in two major ways: first, their design encourages all readers to have similar experiences on the site. Specifically, authors employ hyperlinks to reinforce the reader's perception of the internal value of the blog and define the relevant components of the Internet that complement the website, combining to uniquely affect the rhetorical invention and *Kairos*. The structural conventions of food blogs also promote and sustain the blogger's identifiable brand by establishing her as an authoritative, adaptable woman, considerate of the needs of her readers. Then, once established as a flexible and friendly authority figure, the veracity of the blogger is further emphasized by establishing a relatable popular culture context that gives readers additional grounds for identification.

Manipulating the Structural Conventions of Food Blogs

In describing the nearly five years of on-and-off challenges that she faced in attempting to perfect a recipe from infamously tricky chef Thomas Keller, Deb summed up her trials by telling her readers, "This recipe… is worth fighting for because in the end, you will totally conquer it, everyone will love it and then you get to do this" (Perelman, 6 April 2012). When removed from its original context within *Smitten Kitchen,* the "this" at the end of that sentence becomes confusingly ambiguous due to the hyperlinkthat Deb inserted into the end of her original post, directing readers to another page showing a GIF of actress Tina Fey doing a wildly enthusiastic dance. The networked capabilities of the Internet are an obvious response to the question of how food blogs deviate from a printed cookbook or collection of recipe cards; while an individual blog can and does stand as an independent text, it is also inextricably enmeshed in the broader digital environment.

Hyperlinks and the contextualization of food blogs. Hyperlinks are embedded features on a web page that allow readers to ‘‘click on a word, phrase, or graphic image in order to jump to another piece of information or website’’ (Dimitrova et al., 2003, p. 403). Borah (2014) explained that hyperlinks serve a myriad of functions within online texts: they help readers understand stories in-depth, provide an engaging amount of interactivity to heighten reader involvement, increase the sense of agency readers have in the information-gathering process, and generally broaden the scope of information available surrounding a relevant topic. One of the most common structural elements that food blogs have in common is the recurring presence of internal and external hyperlinks within blog posts. Internal links take readers back to relevant posts on the same blog that the author wants to highlight for some reason. External links take the reader to a location on the Internet outside of the blog – often to highlight a product for sale that the author used in the recipe, such as a highly specific variety of vegetable peeler. Previous studies have found that hyperlinks in the news reporting/mass media sphere boost the credibility of the outlet or speaker which employs them (Borah, 2014; Johnson & Wiedenback, 2009). In fact, Johnson and Kay (2004) stated that Internet "users may find Weblogs more credible [than traditional media outlets] because they are independent rather than controlled by corporate interests; bloggers may discuss issues traditional media shy away from because they might hurt corporations" (p. 624). Just as political news seekers are drawn to blogs because they break tradition with established forms of reporting, women who read food blogs purposely seek cooking and domestic information in a format that breaks from what their mothers and grandmothers were accustomed to (Borah, 2014; Barclay, 2012). Therefore, hyperlinks are not a mindlessly inserted entertainment function; they contribute to the foundation of a blogger's credibility. According to Denveater, "it's… the emergence of hypertext… that makes blogging such a compelling form in the post-postmodern era, when… authority has long since been decentered [and] voice has long since registered as polyglottal" (2009, p. 45). Hyperlinks that lead to external points on the Internet can demonstrate a food blogger's connectedness to the blogosphere, help readers in acquiring or understanding ingredients, and provide context for the blogger's likes, dislikes, and everyday life that facilitates the friendly nature of the blogger-reader relationship.

Sometimes, these external links illustrate a blogger's connection to other food bloggers. Kathryne confided to her readers that despite her love for eating frittatas when prepared for her in a restaurant, she was always too afraid to prepare the dish on her own – until a fellow blogger posted an easy-to-follow tutorial that clarified the steps she was uncertain of (Taylor, 3 December 2010). Adrianna, author of the Los Angeles-based site *A Cozy Kitchen,* casually refers to her friend/competitor *Joy the Baker* only by saying that she is going to make "Joy's pull-apart bread" and encouraging her readers to do the same (Adarme, 23 December 2011). The casual use of the first name and the assumption that readers will of course be familiar with this other Titan of the food blogosphere suggests that bloggers, despite their highly trafficked websites and impressive media presence, can indeed be referred to as friends, and this reinforced friendliness reduces the social distance between bloggers and readers.

Alternatively, hyperlinks allow readers to follow along with a blogger's professional journeys and accomplishments. Brooke, the blogger behind the Portland-based *Chocolate & Marrow,* shared her experience of traveling to a fitness conference and delivering a lecture on food photography (Bass, 25 July 2016). Hyperlinks pointed readers toward the website for the conference as well as the personal site of the keynote speaker that Brooke saw while she was there (a former Olympic gold medalist). These casually placed references allow the curious reader to learn more about the daily goings-on behind the scenes of the website she frequents; the author becomes not just a nameless presence on the screen, but rather, a more fleshed-out individual who impacts the world around her and can be impacted in turn.

External links can also be used demonstratively. Within a post on her healthy living blog *Wholefully,* started in 2010, Cassie used a hyperlink to show her readers where her favorite brand of quinoa may be purchased online (Johnston, 7 June 2012). In doing so, she gave readers who might have been unsure about a possibly unfamiliar ingredient an easy way to pick up a brand recommended by a trusted voice. Similarly, Tessa of *Salted Plains* linked her readers to a tutorial on peeling and deseeding pomegranates when she called for the juicy arils as a topping on a spiced winter cake (30 January 2015).

In a different type of demonstration, Lily (the charismatic redhead behind the relatively young Los Angeles blog *Kale and Caramel)* hyperlinked her readers to a news article from *The Guardian* during a discussion of the inefficacy of dietary cleanses. She asserted, “I need a moment to rant about cleanses… science has shown that you can’t actually detox your body. Starvation isn’t healthy” (Diamond, 28 December 2015). In a pre-emptive defense of a position that could be unpopular among a base of young female readers who are frequently searching for an easier way to change their eating habits, Diamond backed up her opinion with a well-known newspaper article, deflecting criticism from her own viewpoint, and then referenced the viewpoint of a fellow blogger to offer up an alternative, healthier way of thinking about changing your eating habits and listening to your body. This three-step sequence – provide her own opinion, back it up with research, and then offer a blog-approved alternative approach – created a cradle of credibility for *Kale and Caramel* around what could potentially have been an off-putting post.

Hyperlinks and the creation of internal consistency. Not all hyperlinks lead outside the blog; food bloggers frequently use hyperlinks to lead readers back to older posts within their own archives, reinforcing their own voice, style, and brand. These internal hyperlinks might be used to provide alternatives for a reader who isn’t interested in the most recent post, or maybe prove a blogger's adaptability. Kathryn, in a post on *Cookie and Kate* for a vegan kale and chickpea soup, humorously inserted a link back to her own chocolate chip cookie recipe in the midst of an introspective discussion on her personal need to shift to a more healthful style of eating after a period of indulgence (Taylor, 5 January 2012). Conversely, internal hyperlinks can point a reader toward other posts that a blogger has written which fall closely in line with the current post. In a post describing a dish that uses spiral-cut daikon radishes in place of rice noodles, Jeanine of *Love and Lemons* provided two links back to other recipes also using the spiralized-vegetable technique (Donofrio, 9 May 2016). On the surface, these built-in hyperlinks seem like an obvious source of assistance to blog readers – an established reader may be reminded of previous recipes that she has tried from the blog, and if the previously attempted recipes were successful, their reference in this new post suggests that the reader will also enjoy this recently posted addition. A new reader, meanwhile, may be more inclined to delve further into an unfamiliar blog when evidence of recipes similarly to one they were originally searching for is readily presented.

Internal links can be helpful for readers in clarifying a piece of a blogger's previously-discussed backstory or clarifying an in-joke that might have arisen during the course of the blog's life; on *The Pioneer Woman,* Ree Drummond gave a link back to her self-proclaimed "best ever" lasagna and related the many complaints that she received from Italian readers over the inauthenticity of the pasta dish when explaining why she was again using the "best ever" moniker (this time, indisputably) for a chocolate sheet cake (Drummond, 2 June 2007).

Regardless of their specific purpose, hyperlinks combine with other structural elements of the blog to subtly reinforce the bonded nature of the relationship between blogger and reader. The ways in which hyperlinks benefit the reader are clear – the reader stands to gain information about food news and history or the blogger that she is invested in following. However, a blogger stands to gain a far more concrete set of benefits from the structural capacities offered by networked digital platforms. Building a network of hyperlinks to websites offering goods for purchase (like Cassie's links to her preferred brand of quinoa) nets a blogger money from affiliate links, which will send her a small share of all profits resulting from her site traffic. Links to other bloggers improve her own reputation as a good digital citizen and networker, and internal links to her own older posts cement a reader's dedication to her voice, style, and brand. The purpose of following a hyperlink is easily discernable to a reader, but the benefits that a blogger receives from inserting them into her work is not as readily obvious. These intrinsic structural conventions which lead to financial and professional benefits to the blogger further separate food blogs from more traditional food writing media (cookbooks, food memoirs, and newspaper columns), not just through their ongoing methods of profit-gathering, but through the adapted deployment of the traditional canons of rhetoric.

Digital platforms and evolving rhetorical processes: Invention. Digital capabilities particularly affect rhetorical invention, shifting the creative processes of writing and content production and decentering the author even as they give her more power. As Eyman (2015) explained:

> Invention, as a function of digital rhetoric, includes the searching and negotiation of networks of information, seeking those materials best suited to

> creating persuasive works, as well as knowing which semiotic resources to address and draw upon (aural, visual, textual, hypertextual) and what technological tools are best suited to working with those resources. (Invention section, para. 2)

Tomlinson (2011) added that “digitized rhetorical invention encompasses aspects of both idea creation and discovery, particularly as manifested through writers’ audience considerations” (p. 63). A traditional cookbook writer could depend on her audience using her book as a stand-alone reference; food bloggers cannot make the same assumption. Their inventive process becomes multilayered as they assume responsibility not just for developing quality recipes and engaging content, but an entire networked sphere of references via hyperlinks. As Tomlinson suggested, this process must consider the audiences’ needs to be effective; bloggers anticipate the areas their readers will have questions, or the areas that are suitable for reinforcement via internal links to their blog archives. However, the process of invention does not stop once the blogger chooses to publish a post; the reader also creates the version of the post that she wants to see, by choosing which links to follow or which aspects to pursue. Fundamentally, the blogging platform shifts the process of invention into an unprecedentedly dualistic realm, creating new types of texts, interpretations of meaning, and methods of knowledge production along the way (Eyman, 2015). This new wealth of agency afforded to the reader puts the blogger at a disadvantage. Because in the Web 2.0 context, readers can always turn to another source of information, bloggers face the task of further manipulating the structure of their website to persuade readers to remain on their platform, rather than jumping ship to a competitor’s site. So, while the hyperlinks are a necessary part of establishing context and inventing a broader digital context for one blogger's content, a delicate dance must be performed to avoid creating so much inventive space for the reader that the reader ceases to be a member of the original audience.

Digital platforms and evolving rhetorical processes: Arrangement. Furthermore, the immersive and interactive capabilities of blogs combined with the distinct reading experience co-created by bloggers and reader shifts the canon of arrangement within digital rhetoric. Eyman (2015) and Brooke (2009) explained that individual blog posts can be understood as digital texts, but they also constitute and are inextricable from the larger text of a digital archive – in the case of food blogs, they become part of both a site-specific archive and the broader, always-and-never permanent archive of the Internet. A blogger can hope to structure and guide the reading experience of their blog, as I am attempting to show here, but she cannot nullify or overcome the reader's agency in choosing to arrange whatever version of the text she finds appealing in the moment of reading. Rather, the blogger focuses on arranging the many facets of her blog to create an atmosphere or affect that persuades readers to become lasting members of the blog's specific community. The hyperlinks discussed that lead both within and outside of the blog are integral to this creation of rhetorical atmosphere, but they are not the sole players in a bloggers symphony of affect. The font and background colors chosen, the number of photographs that accompany every post, the arrangement of the posts in the blog archives (by month and year? By recipe category? Both?), the choice to install (or not) buttons at the bottom of posts that lead readers to older or newer posts, links to similar posts on the same, and hyperlinked lists of other blogs that the author enjoys, seeks to emulate, or finds similar to her own style are all distinct components of a blog's atmosphere, arranged to suggest the blogger's desired impressions to the reader.

The carefully arranged and manipulated components of a food blog exemplify the importance of *Kairos* in digital rhetoric (introduced in Chapter 3). As traditionally understood, *Kairos* concerns the timeliness of speech and the ability of the rhetor to tailor the pace and impact of an address to best suit the needs of the audience and the rhetorical situation (Poulakos, 1983). However, digital rhetoric is not being addressed to one cohesive audience simultaneously; readers come to the rhetoric on their own time, in their own terms, and they co-create the message alongside the rhetor. This process shifts *Kairos* from a question of temporal suitability to a question of situational suitability, thereby broadening our ability to critique the rhetors' management of their readers (Kinneavy and Eskin, 2000). Thompson distilled digital *Kairos* into the more broadly applicable "ability to detect what matters" and explained a successful digital rhetor as one who can create memorability, a balance between novelty and repetition, and ideological suitability (p. 10). Without a memorable brand, consistently enforced across all aspects of the platform, bloggers cannot compete with the countless demands on our attention that pervade all corners of the Internet. Therefore, all components of a blog, from the choice of font and background colors, to the promoted photographs, to the hyperlinks and archives, to the style of written content are responsible for constructing *Kairos*.

Contrasting two of the most popular food blogs – *Smitten Kitchen* and *The Pioneer Woman* – clarifies the reinvention and place of *Kairos* in the blogosphere. To be certain, blogs almost all follow the same general layout: a title graphic at the top of the page, followed by a toolbar with links to recipe archives, an "About" or frequently asked questions page, a “contact me” page, and perhaps a blogroll link or a link to some of the press coverage the blogger has received. Then, the posts unfurl below in reverse chronological order, usually featuring a photograph accompanied by a post title and maybe a short text preview. Advertisements and featured content hyperlinks accompany these posts in a sidebar. Within that format, however, aesthetic and design choices make drastic differences. Deb’s *Smitten Kitchen* reveals her background as a graphic designer; the site heavily relies on soothing white space and the font used is a muted blue-gray sans serif. A simple column dominates most of the page, showing posts in reverse-chronological order: one photograph for each with an accompanying sample of the text for the post. To the right, small, colorful, square photographs serve as link to the recipe categories in the *SK* archives. Even the *SK* logo is trim, tidy, and understated, invoking Deb’s guiding principle of accessible, unfussy food.

The Pioneer Woman, on the other hand, aesthetically echoes Ree’s motto of “plowing through life, one calf nut at a time.” Her site adheres to a homier country aesthetic. The top of the page features a full-color, illustrated banner depicting a scene of idyllic winter farm life. Her *Pioneer Woman* logo features a curling, antique-looking cursive script, while all other type is set in a traditional serif font. Colorful illustrated squares and icons that echo that page-hear banner accompany full-length posts, and the site is visually much more cluttered than *SK.* Ree and Deb ostensibly occupy the same demographic – both are White mothers in their 40s who have built cookbook deals and fame off the platform of a food blog. The difference between the two is their attention to *Kairos*; the unique usage of visual and written rhetoric to clearly convey Midtown Manhattan versus Oklahoma Cattle Ranch.

One of the questions that began this project asked what women food bloggers expect out of their audience. This analysis of how bloggers structure their websites and embrace the altered *Kairos* of digital rhetoric further underscores the unbalanced nature of the relationship between bloggers and readers, positioning bloggers as caring friends but readers as consumers. That relationship dynamic has a massive tangible effect. Digital media experts estimate that Deb earns $20,000 in one month from a single ad running on *Smitten Kitchen*, and she also received a $400,000 advance for her first cookbook; this monetary success directly relates to a blogger's ability to harness the purchasing power of her audience, a demographic that (in Deb's case) earns more than the average Internet user: $75,000 annually (Kaufman, 2012). This relationship between blogger and reader, formed initially through a savvy set of structural moves, is further developed via two more structural blog content conventions that position the blogger as an undeniable and unique expert.

Reinforcing the Food Blogger as Resident Expert

To keep a reader invested in her blog over an extended span of time, a blogger must consistently assert her own authority. The goal is to position herself as a natural expert, or a woman who already knows more than the reader could hope to ascertain without hours of research, yet not so disparately knowledgeable that she loses her seeming relatability to the women who patronize the website: a difficult rhetorical balance indeed. To strike this balance, bloggers casually insert informative tips or "secret" tricks for success into their post. These assertions of authority and expertise are included not in the recipe itself, but rather in the personal narratives that precede the recipe, creating an emotional sense similar to watching a trusted older family member – a grandmother, mother, or aunt – cooking dinner and tossing bits of wisdom over her shoulder.

For example, Adrianna hastened to assure her readers that her crepe recipe is not in fact too fancy for their everyday breakfasts – they don't need a crepe pan, just a nonstick skillet and the willingness to burn their fingers a little bit (Adarme, 8 April 2015). Similarly, Deb was quick to helpfully tell her readers the difference between red and green lentils, as well as which variety is appropriate for her Russian potato and lentil salad (Perelman, 21 January 2014). These offhanded remarks contribute just enough information to establish the blogger's familiarity and comfort with a range of ingredients, equipment, and techniques in the kitchen.

Sometimes these insertions preemptively reassure potentially wary readers. Kathryne, in reference to a photograph of an otherwise ordinary slice of pumpkin bread bearing suspicious yellow flecks, tells her readers: "it's millet, which you may recognize as bird seed, but people can eat it, too! It took a couple of slices for me to warm up to the crunchy element, but now I really like it" (Taylor, 17 October 2011). By anticipating possible objections to a foreign ingredient and heading them off in her introduction to the recipe, Kathryne is able to soothe reader anxieties and serve as a trusted reference point. These informative assertions must walk a careful line between helpfully informative and alienating; too much emphasis on teaching readers about advanced cooking techniques or obscure ingredients runs the risk of scaring away readers who are looking for an affable digital presence and recipes that can reasonably be interpreted in an average home kitchen. Tessa discussed the technicalities of those decisions:

> One comment that I get a lot of in different forms is “that’s a creative way of doing that recipe” or “I wouldn’t have thought of using that particular flour in that sense.” Sometimes I wonder, what does that indicate? Is that meaning it’s too difficult for people, so that [they] don’t want to even do it, or that they might try it themselves? I’m kind of using that as a meter. I’m aware of that when I’m using, like… teff flour. That’s not an ingredient that’s common to most people and so the first thing I’m thinking… is are people going to know where to find that? What is it? So, I always try to make sure that those options are out there. I’m trying to kind of figure out, was this a useful recipe. (T. Fisher, personal communication, 8 August 2016)

Bloggers navigate that tenuous distinction by disseminating only advice that aligns closely with the overall “brand” of their website. Deb, for example, tells readers in no uncertain terms that her blog is devoted to “comfort foods stepped up a bit,” and she particularly prides herself on providing readers with easy guides on tackling kitchen projects that she feels have falsely received a reputation for being overly difficult – things like poaching an egg or preparing homemade pie crust (Perelman, About).

While these assertions of authority serve the important purpose of shoring up the ethos of a blogger and reaffirming the audience’s confidence in the advice of the woman they are following, the ability to assume that position of authority also holds critical benefits for the blogger herself. Matchar (2013) noted that blogs are largely responsible for the resurgence of domestic activity, explaining that women who end up in a homemaker role today are still highly educated and have grown accustomed to the consistent accolades and affirmations offered in through grades, promotions, and pay raises in school and the workplace. The feedback one gets in return for assuming the authoritative position of successful blogger replaces those forms of external praise, warding off the homemakers' plagues of disaffection and purposelessness described by Friedan in 1963. Sanford (2010) labeled validation as one of the four primary means of social support that bloggers experience via blogging (along with the opportunity to vent or seek advice, remain accountable for their goals, and experience empathy). The function of validation on food blogs can be better understood through the concept of expansive realization, described as the use of the Internet to realize or gain recognition for abilities that have no outlet in everyday life, due to the blogger's personal circumstances (Seddon, 2011, p. 307). Expansive realization of a blogger's talents goes beyond familial appreciation for preparing dinner. Deb explained how the process of relaxing into her blogging career, rather than struggling through her former day job as an art therapist, allowed her to blossom creatively: "I do a lot more creative work now than I did before I decided not to be an art person. I might not do much painting or drawing these days, but I've really gotten into photography since starting my blog" (Perelman, 2015). The expansive realization of a formal dinner party, or a complicated scratch-baked seven layer cake, complicate older cultural assumptions about women's obligatory role as a meal provider in the home; Cairns and Johnston (2015) wrote that, while women are generally critical of outdated notions of "women's work," they simultaneously "emphasize the social and emotional significance of cooking as a source of joy" (p. 148). The laborious act of baking and decorating a wedding cake, for example, communicates the depth of the maker's love and appreciation in an easily understood social context. Once the expectation of preparation is lifted, opportunities multiply for women to use the possibilities of culinary work to express their creativity, whether that creativity takes the form of an essay about finding the best hot tamales in the Mississippi delta, frosting the perfect rose on a baby's first birthday cake, or shooting a balanced, luminous photograph of your latest roast chicken.

Acknowledging the Business of Blogging

Bloggers spend a considerable amount of time and effort convincing readers that their particular blog is worthy of the readers' time and dedication, as long-term, repeat visitors are the bread-and-butter of any blog. However, while a blogger may strive to create an atmosphere that is friendly, welcoming, and approachable, readers are still aware that blogs are a business (Huang, 2014).. As much as a dedicated reader might feel close to and friendly with the blogger, the blogger is still known to be doing a job (even if it's a job portrayed as an enjoyable passion) while the reader is pursuing a hobby. Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) further complicated this relationship when they explained that when the business side of a blog is revealed, the audience becomes ready to receive persuasive messages, but their likelihood of resisting such messages also increases. To mitigate the unevenness of this relationship and potential audience backlash, bloggers structure their content to highlight two primary aspects of business – disclosures of sponsorships and travel/location updates.

The impact of sponsorships in the blogosphere. Sponsorships hold a contested position in the blogosphere. According to Matchar (2013), women are twice as likely to purchase a product endorsed by their favorite bloggers as they are to purchase a product endorsed by a magazine. Their large followings, not only on their flagship blog but on Twitter and Instagram as well, give bloggers impressive power in the eyes of corporations and advertising executives. However, opinions about whether it is ethical to accept sponsored products vary widely among individual bloggers. Deb flat-out refuses to accept any sponsors, despite the lucrative appeal of her vast audience, saying that she "couldn't imagine even suggesting that someone consider shelling out for something when [she] didn't do the same" (Perelman, 23 October 2013). Other bloggers, like Lindsay or Cassie, will accept sponsorships for products that they like, with a message or brand philosophy that aligns with their blogging philosophy – although the details of such an alignment are left up to the reader's interpretation, more often than not.

The profit power of a sponsorship is one of the biggest factors that skews the power dynamic between bloggers and readers toward the blogger; bloggers are profiting doubly, from the money or product that the sponsoring company is providing as well as from the affiliate links that make money for her. If the reader buys the recommended product and likes it, the blogger also profits in increased trust and authority granted from the reader. However, this is not to say that these sponsorships never benefit the reader. A sponsorship can be a legitimate way for a reader to learn about an unfamiliar product, and an ethical blogger legitimately tries her best to only recommend outstanding products. Cassie, for example, is sponsored by Wisconsin-based Rushing Waters Fisheries because she approves of the company's sustainable, eco-friendly, organic, hand-harvested fish farming (Johnston, 27 January 2012). This example aligns with van Reijmersdal's (2016) finding that by aligning their sponsored content with their personal values, bloggers may mitigate some of the hostile audience response to persuasive advertising effects.

Audience resistance is also mitigated via the concrete benefits that sponsorships can produce for readers: namely, prize giveaways. In the example given above, for instance, Cassie gave away a sampler pack of smoked salmon to a reader. Typically, the sponsoring company provides these prizes as incentive for participation and do not come out of the compensation provided to the blogger (although they may be negotiated by the blogger as part of a sponsorship deal). Again, though, on closer inspection, prize giveaways appear to be a benefit to the reader at first glance but actually serve a greater purpose for the blogger. Gifting unique or high-quality foodstuffs to her audience communicates that a blogger is actively trying to do good by her readers, multiplying the trust and goodwill in the relationship. While these sponsored posts are always marked as sponsored, the full details of the how the sponsorship came to be, how much the blogger is receiving in compensation, how long the sponsorship will endure, and other details remain unrevealed. By disclosing a minimum of information about these business deals, bloggers satisfy a general preference for transparency yet preserve a tight leash on the specifics of their business and financial affairs.

The impact of location updates. By consistently notifying readers of their location and travel plans, bloggers subtly reinforce their position as resident expert. If a writer is not at home, readers will always hear about it – travel updates are an ingrained facet of the blogger/reader relationship. Sometimes, such as when Julie shared her story of traveling to Toronto to participate in a festival kicking off the World Health Organization's International Year of the Pulse (that was a thing), travel anecdotes broaden and strengthen the ethos of the blogger. A blogger must take for granted that a loyal reader imbues her with a certain degree of authority, but that authority is certainly bolstered by sharing stories of officially sanctioned participation in expert situations. While a blogger might gain authority by sharing the accolades and awards she has received, she can also gain standing by sharing with her readers her efforts to improve herself and deliver even better quality content. Kathryne, for example (one of only two bloggers in my sample who are childless and romantically unattached) shared her decision to uproot from her Kansas City home and rent a house in Austin, Texas for a month with another food blogger friend to “soak up some of the city’s youthful energy and open up to new possibilities” (Taylor, 20 January 2015).

More subtly, sharing stories about travel communicates to readers that the blogger holds them in high regard. Typically, individuals confide stories of intimacy and privilege with family and close friends – persons for whom they care dearly. So, when Emily gushingly told her readers how “ridiculously gorgeous” Spain is, or when Brooke shared cherished memories of her many trips to San Pedro island – a bittersweet location where she both honeymooned with her husband and spread her sister’s ashes – readers increasingly gained a sense of trusted camaraderie and familiar closeness (Stoffel, 19 November 2014; Bass, 25 August 2015). Stokes and Atkins-Sayre (2016) explained that these stories and memories surrounding food are exactly what gives eating and cooking so much rhetorical power and why readers continue to seek out other people’s food stories. I would add that when bloggers remove the expected sensory accompaniments of food and eating – touch, smell, taste, and sound – their stories carry even more weight, as readers let their own memories and empathetic experiences fill in the sensorial gaps.

These stories, and the shared structural and content hallmarks that shape them (hyperlinks, informative tips, travel updates, and sponsorship discussions), matter because they combine to subtly and insistently form a bonded relationship between the blogger and readers that unilaterally benefits the blogger. Casually inserting informative tips amidst stories of holiday parties, cozy Sunday evenings, or funny child-rearing moments impresses on readers the authoritative nature of the blogger. This strategic deployment of information gains the trust of the reader and establishes the blogger as a source of expertise, to the point where readers frequently ask basic questions about substitutions or recipe steps and wait for a response from the original blogger, rather than turn to Google for an immediate answer. Again, this dependence on the blogger spurs the readers to check back regularly for additional tips and life updates. Updating from remote vacation locations further cements that reader loyalty because it communicates that the blogger prioritizes their online relationships over other aspects of her life, encouraging the blog voice to become a dependable constant in the lives of readers. Overall, bloggers use the structural conventions of the website and the norms of food blogging to shift readers into a lopsided relationship of dependence.

Finding the Right Voice: Promoting and Sustaining the Blogger's Brand

In a landscape of more than 16,500 food blogs, creating a distinct voice is exceedingly difficult. Instead, the top tier of bloggers (famous personalities like Deb Perelman or Joy Wilson of *Joy the Baker* who earn significant annual salaries from their blogs) deploy popular topics and fads, which then trickle down to the mid and low tiers of bloggers. These bloggers constitute "opinion leaders," or women who "elaborate media information they receive and then pass it to other people, thus enhancing its influence" (Magno, 2017, p. 142). Once popular blogging opinion leaders deploy a trend, readers become an influence in how popular a given topic becomes (Zhang, Zhao, & Xu, 2016). With this input from both popular audience consensus and the elite tier of food bloggers to guide their style, mid-tier bloggers experience a greater freedom to invest their time into deciding what kind of food should be highlighted on their blog, where they discover culinary inspiration, and how they want to situate themselves within the realm of popular culture.

What kind of food gets blogged about? Food bloggers frequently try to portray themselves as just another woman in the kitchen – a friend who embodies the same life circumstances and constraints as the women reading about their adventures on the other side of the screen. A critical disconnect becomes obvious, however, when we contrast the actual cooking habits of Americans with glossy blog pages. The average American spends only 27 minutes preparing a meal, and only 60 percent of meals eaten at home are actually prepared at home (Pollan, 2009; Ferdman, 2015). A meal like Tessa's spinach and artichoke galette requires the cook to prepare her own crust and chill it for 30 minutes before the crust can even be rolled out and filled, let alone baked for 30 minutes – and this is a recipe explicitly described, twice, as "simple" (Fisher, 4 May 2015). Where is the disconnect between blogger and home cook happening, and why are readers remaining loyal to bloggers who do not reflect their own practices?

The clearest way that food bloggers break with the documented practices of the American home cook is through a hatred of prepackaged, shortcut food items. Kathryne noted:

> Ever since I started making simple baked goods from scratch, I've wondered how boxed mixes ever became mainstream. Sure, you don't have to measure out flour and baking powder, but you still have to add liquid and crack the eggs. That hardly saves much time, and comes with the additional cost of preservatives and ingredients that should never be in your food. (Hydrogenated oil is the devil.) (Taylor, 13 March 2014)

Literally labelling store-bought foods “the devil” represents the most blatant level of bloggers’ overt preference for homemade, from-scratch cooking, but this bias toward what many bloggers refer to as “real food” exists on many different levels. Jeanine relates a story from her own childhood, remembering that she would often beg her mother to buy brightly colored sugary breakfast cereals at the store. However, she would only eat one bowl of the commercial cereals before deciding “sugary soggy flakes and blue milk were not for [me]” when her mother regularly made pancakes, muffins and doughnuts from scratch (Donofrio, 4 March 2013). Jeanine acknowledged that she consistently saw the colorful boxes of cereal at the homes of her friends, but did not acknowledge the reasons why a different mother might choose to feed her children Froot Loops and Lucky Charms; cost, time, and resources are entirely absent from the conversation.

Bloggers also dismiss the use of shortcut components within a larger prepared meal. Lindsay acknowledges and embraces her Midwestern heritage by telling fond stories of her mother and grandmother preparing casseroles using cans of condensed soup, and in nearly the same breath tells her readers how to make their own cream of chicken soup to use as a base for recipes: “nothing from a can. Everyone = happy” (Ostrom, 3 February 2014).

Sometimes the recommendations advocating for homemade over store-bought really are simple; Joy, for instance, pushes her readers to make their own brown sugar for a chocolate chip cookie recipe (Wilson, 16 August 2010). Making brown sugar only requires combining regular granulated sugar and molasses, adding just one step to the overall cookie process. However, brown sugar is a cheap ingredient, and when most cooks have so little time to devote to the kitchen, the question of why precious minutes should be spent on recreating easily-purchased items is left unanswered. Joy does not tell her readers whether the homemade sugar makes any noticeable difference in the final product, allowing readers to draw the conclusion that they should orient to homemade as the better or more wholesome version of a product.

Bloggers also set themselves apart from everyday home cooks through an insistence on using and promoting seasonal or local ingredients and cooking styles. Deb waxed poetic about the benefits of finding fresh local scallions at the Greenmarket after a long winter of duller, starchier vegetables: “part herb and part baby onion, recently from the ground they’re amplified, with more green freshness and more bite” (Perelman, 21 April 2010). Bloggers typically present seasonal delights romantically; Kathryne called Midwestern peaches in July “perfectly sweet and juicy” and “simple summer comfort food at its finest” (Taylor, 22 August 2012). Similarly, Cara shared memories of watching her mother prepare artichokes for her when she was a child and the associated joy she feels when these “seasonal treats” show up in beautiful piles at summer farmer’s markets (Eisenpress, 17 June 2010). Cara and Deb both live in Manhattan, in proximity to the Union Square Greenmarket, a year-round farmer’s market that hosts 140 different vendors and 60,000 unique weekly shoppers (Early and Gaterman, 2016). Their approach to seasonal eating epitomizes the privilege of many food bloggers, who by virtue of their locations, professions, and experiences both know what it means to eat seasonally and possess easy access to seasonal or local produce. Women who lack easy access to seasonal produce via farmer’s markets are left to parse out on their own what it means to attempt to eat foods that are in season. To further complicate matters, Wheeler and Chapman-Novakofski (2014) reported that farmer’s market produce is more expensive than grocery store fruits and vegetables, meaning women must make a conscious choice between what foods will be easiest on their household budget and what foods will be easiest on their (global and individual) conscience.

Both subtle and overt emphases on prepared-from-scratch foods and seasonal/local ingredients funnel into another distinct categorization of food on the blogosphere: what kinds of food count as healthy? Lily explained:

> My body—and yours—naturally gravitates towards what it truly needs at any given moment. There are weeks when all animal products fall out of my diet, and weeks when I crave much heavier foods. At the end of the day, it's all about listening closely. About quieting the noise and really communicating with your body. (Diamond, 28 December 2015)

Similarly, Tessa gave her readers a recipe for making pizza with socca (chickpea flour) and praised the dish for its protein, fiber, and "staying power" (Fisher, 15 July 2016). She detailed a rationale for her reliance on gluten-free flours in her "About" page:

> I was diagnosed with Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, an autoimmune disease, and I have done much reading up on the fact that having a gluten-free diet along with other dietary changes helps with the symptoms of this disease. I strive to use whole ingredients and bake without refined sugar whenever I can, often using my favorite natural sweeteners–honey, maple syrup, and coconut sugar. (Fisher, "About")

Undertones of guilt can frequently be observed alongside such obsessive concerns with healthful eating. Brooke's November discussion of her favorite carrot cake recipe is inextricable woven together with the guilt that she assumes we all share following

Halloween candy binges: “the week after Halloween. The one week out of the year when Americans shun sugar, bellies still aching from an overindulgence in tiny packaged candies the weekend before, guilt looming large from the unhealthy eating habits to which we’ve succumbed” (Bass, 6 November 2014). Brooke continued to write in her post that, at least by offering up her carrot cake recipe, she could move forward into the spirit of the holiday season that follows Halloween while still making an attempt to eat vegetables and whole wheat flour.

Jeanine expressed similar sentiments in her post on an almond peach cake. She hastened to assure her readers that her cake recipe is not “super decadent;” in fact, the vegan and whole-grain recipe could just as easily be prepared in muffin tins and eaten for breakfast (Donofrio, 26 August 2013). Furthermore, Julie stressed to her readers that enjoying recipes with limited ingredient lists does not need to mean feeling limited: “this particular tossed noodle salad… is gluten-free, wheat-free, dairy-free and vegan, and yet all you notice when it comes to the table is all the stuff that’s in it – not all the stuff that’s not” (van Rosendaal, 24 July 2013).

The reasons that bloggers provide for this emphasis on healthy foods – when an emphasis is given at all – tends to surround doing right by oneself. Lindsay, for example, enthused that choosing to eat a light citrus salad might make you “feel like the most beautiful thing alive” (Ostrom, 3 May 2013). In thinking about what this collection of examples has in common, we understand a consistent emphasis on doing the individual body justice. From a health standpoint, this is plainly good advice. However, in returning to my research question– what kind of womanhood is constituted in these blogs – we can observe that ingredients listed as healthy by these women, including flax, chia, alternative sugars and flours, even a colorful variety of fresh vegetables, are a) prohibitively expensive and b) not widely available outside of select stores. Contrast Lily's approach to food, which prioritizes seasonal/local foods, listening to the individual body's rhythms, and introducing superfood ingredients like spirulina, with Shannon's story:

> A white single mother living on social assistance, she must devote immense time and energy in an effort to nourish her daughter on their very limited income. "I coupon big time," she explains. "I'm definitely a spend-time-with-the-flyers-on-Thursday-night girl." Shannon has developed a range of strategies for making food last, but there are issues beyond her control that leave her frustrated. (Cairns & Johnston, 2015, p. 2.)

Shannon's story is appropriate here because she is a self-professed woman who loves to cook and cares intensely about the environment, sustainability issues, and the quality of the food she feeds her child. Ostensibly, Shannon is the perfect audience for one of the blogs included in this project, yet the stress of being unable to mimic the lifestyle seen on those webpages compounds already-overwhelming feelings of guilt concerning the carbon footprint of the global food industry and the humiliation she feels when her only resources are the nutritionally devoid prepared foods available at food banks (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). Some blogs do, indeed, cater to budget lifestyles; www.budgetbytes.com, authored by former microbiologist Beth Moncel, currently ranks in the top-10 most popular American food blogs (Shaw, 2017). Unfortunately, they rarely (if ever) overlap with the serious-minded aesthetic and ethical discussions on the blogs covered here. The blogosphere clearly articulates a false choice – women care about issues like chlorophyll supplements and carbon footprints only when they are affluent enough to do so easily, and women struggling to feed their families are happy to receive any inspiration, even if that inspiration uses packaged ramen noodles. Women like Shannon are left in a liminal space, unaddressed and feeling few of the benefits of community, empathy, and validation afforded to other members of the blogging community. Their food does not deserve to be discussed. Bloggers do not necessarily purposefully reject women with high aspirations and low resources; rather, this bias reflects an overly simplistic view on the scope and reach of the Internet. As Boyd (2009) argued:

> In a networked world, people connect to people like themselves. What flows across the network flows through edges of similarity. The ability to connect to others like us allows us to flow information across space and time in impressively new ways, but there's also a downside… Information can and does flow in ways that create and reinforce social divides. (Homophily section, para.1-2)

To illustrate, when I asked Kathryne to describe a typical reader of her blog, she promptly told me, "I think they look a lot like me. I know from Google Analytics that the biggest age group is 25 to 34. I'm 30, I'm smack dab in the middle of that. And I think they tend to be more well-educated than the average bear, and I think that my whole foods philosophy resonates with people" (personal communication, 13 June 2016). Kathryne's assumption that most of her readers likely share her demographic is statistically valid, but her assumption that only middle-class well-educated women share her concern with a "whole foods philosophy" limits her potential audience, as seen via Shannon's story. Taken together, these stories testify to the value that is placed on the middle- or upper-class woman's experience of buying and cooking food, at the expense of other women.

Addressing culinary inspiration. The final (slightly less consequential) way in which bloggers define what kinds of foods deserve to be talked about is through their handling of creativity and kitchen inspiration. Given the effort that bloggers expend to meticulously define and maintain their individual brand, I initially expected bloggers to claim solo credit for many of their culinary creations. However, while independent recipe development certainly occurs and is noted when it happens, bloggers are meticulous about crediting the sources for their posted recipes.

Sometimes these credits tell an unusual food narrative; the reader can vicariously experience something through the blogger that she would otherwise be unable to access. For example, Lily lives in Los Angeles. She related her story of hiking with her father through the city's green areas – "urban forests" – in search of usable herbs and plants. The anecdote stands as a unique experience on its own, but also testifies to Lily's childhood on Maui:

> [My parents] believed in a new world, a new paradigm, a life outside the norm. They rebelled against their families… and made their own rituals. They believed in no religion but love. They moved to a tiny town on a cliff at the edge of North America—Bolinas—and then they leapt off that cliff into the ocean to move to Maui. I grew up close to the plant spirits, knitting my own dolls, baking my own bread, making my own medicine. I don't know whether or not I am vaccinated. My parents gave me every possible tool to become the best human they could imagine—they gave up all that they knew to give me a life they themselves had

> not had, a life free of as many of the confines of religion and patriarchy as they could imagine. A life close to the plants, always listening to the earth. (Diamond, 8 September 2014)

Through this narrative surrounding the origins of a white peach-sage jam recipe, Lily wove a story of one day in the city with her father together with an evocative description of her upbringing. The readers gained a deeper understanding of the genesis of this recipe in particular (the harvest of an unusual variety of flat-leaf sage), but more importantly, they gained a broader sense of how Lily approaches food and understands food in general.

The isolated rural reader, or a reader without access to fine dining opportunities, may eagerly take in Brooke's description of her candle-lit experience at a "Portland modernist fine dining hotspot" (Bass, 6 April 2016). Brooke's description of the nine-course dinner begins during a rain-soaked dash to the restaurant's front door, meanders through the tasting experience, and culminates on her recreation of the chef's signature soft brown bread. The completely immersive description bypasses the boundary of recipe inspiration into complete escapism; for a few minutes, the reader is transported away from her own couch/desk/counter into a cozy, yet exquisite experience. No fine-dining price tag required.

Acknowledgements of various sources of inspiration also serve to reinforce a blogger's situatedness within the blogosphere. Bolstering another blogger's cookbook or recipe post is a win-win for a blogger; she gains the credibility afforded to a food critic, is saved the effort of developing a new original recipe, and she gains the goodwill of a fellow blogger, who will likely promote her website in return for the publicity and send new traffic her way. These types of shout-outs also give a hint to how interconnected the blogosphere is: Jeanine credited Kathryne as her inspiration for a brunch-appropriate baked oatmeal. Kathryne admitted that she eagerly follows Lindsay's international vacations on Instagram. This sense of interconnectedness became even clearer in my personal interviews with bloggers. Tessa described the importance of having a network of blogging friends and mentors:

> You bounce ideas off of each other, you see what has worked and what hasn't. There seems to be a big push to really support each other and let other bloggers know this was not a good road to go down, so don't do it. There's not that competition where we're not sharing what has really helped, you know, it's quite the opposite… Everybody's helping each other out, which has been huge for me. I've had some mentors [who] have reached out to me and been really, really helpful when otherwise I would have no idea what I was doing. I was blown away by the network of women that pulled me in. (T. Fisher, personal communication, 8 August 2016).

Sara[1], however, cautioned that that web of support can backfire and become hurtful:

> If you have one blogger who's very active and commenting on all the blogs and then she's *not* commenting on a hand full, it can sometimes feel the opposite of support, right? That's almost like, "Why doesn't this person like me?" And I know that we all struggle with that. I mean I can't tell you many conversations I've had with woman bloggers who are like, "She follows you on Instagram? She doesn't

[1] A pseudonym, at the request of the interviewee.

> follow me on Instagram. She follows everyone on Instagram." It's this weird thing that we all have to kind of just be like, "Is that a slap in the face or is it just she doesn't know me or just isn't interested." …community building can certainly happen, but it's not always the most positive experience because those comments and likes and whatever else can be hurtful… when you're comparing yourself to others in the community. (S. Young, personal communication, 16 August 2016)

Even Sara's example of the negative functions of the interconnectedness between bloggers, however, underscores the extent of the relationships that emerge between these women.

How bloggers demonstrate their right to talk about food. Bloggers structure their blogs, content, and photographs to reflect the idea that only certain kinds of food are worth discussing, but they also shape expectations regarding what kind of woman has the right to discuss food in the first place. Bloggers reinforce their position as resident expert by branding themselves as authentic, adaptable food authorities situated within relatable popular culture contexts. This dialectic of authority versus relatability arose during my analysis and became a guiding factor for much of my work here. While the two qualities may seem irreconcilable at the outset – authority by nature requiring an imbalance of power, and relatability by nature require consubstantiality – I seek to illustrate how blogs became an aspirational space, somewhere between informative and entertaining.

Becoming and maintaining one's status as a food authority without any formal culinary training requires a delicate rhetorical mélange (not unlike balancing the flavors in a complex beef braise). Food bloggers typically have no formal culinary training; rather, they base their claims on lifetimes of preparing good food for family members and friends. This story is consistent across bloggers. In the FAQ section on *The Pig and Quill,* Emily reported that she earned her "culinary degree from the University of Hey, My Husband Kinda/Sorta Likes It! And, of course, my momma's kitchen. I had the great fortune of growing up surrounded by parents and grandparents highly proficient in getting their feed on and it kinda just…soaked in" (Stoffel, About). The most recognizable names in blogging, like Deb Perelman, Ree Drummond, and Joy Wilson all began as self-taught cooks and bakers (inspiring the animus from Martha Stewart discussed in Chapter 1). Because they lack the legitimized authority of a formal degree, these women build their ethos in different ways. Once the structural conventions discussed thus far have been cemented on a blog, a blogger may turn her attention toward rhetorical assertions of authority.

In keeping with the friendly, welcoming atmosphere many bloggers seek to cultivate, these assertions of authority are often casual, tongue-in-cheek humor. Joy is known for her desserts – thus the handle *Joy the Baker*. Thus, as the final line on a post about a chicken casserole, she off-handedly told her audience, "incidentally, if you're upset with me for all of the savory recipes… well… make yourself some Fruity Banana Bread. I'm in charge here" (Wilson, 30 December 2010).

Bloggers know that readers often use their websites as escapism, appreciating the ideas of the recipes and the beautiful pictures but rarely translating such dishes into the reality of their own kitchen. Sometimes, an authoritative tone is employed to attempt to push these readers into action. On an unusual recipe for blue cheese biscuits, Deb commanded, "make the whole batch; then scramble up an egg, crisp up some bacon and have breakfast for dinner tonight" (Perelman, 21 April 2010). Kathryne gave her readers a similar push to try and involve them in her extended social media presence (Snapchat, in this case): “please follow us! Send me snaps of your Cookie and Kate cooking, too. I would love that” (Taylor, 30 June 2015). On other occasions, these enthusiastic exhortations leave the realm of cooking and kitchen advice completely in favor of popular culture advice and observations. Emily, in the midst of a reminisce about the role creamed spinach played in her early childhood, provides an excited description of her current Netflix addiction and orders her readers (twice) to “go watch it right now” (Stoffel, 26 March 2015).

Part of the authoritative food blogger persona is built by proving an author’s adaptability. Bloggers depend on readers consistently returning to their website to maintain their livelihood, and therefore are conscious of the ways in which they run the risk of alienating readers. So, when Deb provides a recipe for a from-scratch, whole wheat cinnamon bread that calls for multiple varieties of whole grains, she advises her readers to avoid picking and sorting through the loose grains in the grocery store bulk bins in favor of purchasing one bag of prepackaged 7-grain cereal mix and names her favorite brand. Saving home cooks from the anticipated hassle of acquiring the unusual ingredients, and saving them the trouble of storing ingredients in their pantries that they likely won’t use up before an expiration date, communicates to readers that Deb is concerned with the everyday workability of her recipes, not just with providing some aspirational food porn.

Kathryne demonstrated that sometimes adaptable is demonstrated by providing readers with a loose format for a basic dish, rather than complex instructions for a Sunday-dinner challenge. She gives her readers a loose guide for an oven baked frittata that includes a call in the ingredients list for “vegetables, spices, salt, pepper, and whatever else you want to throw together" (Taylor, 3 December 2010). These guides give readers a novel way of approaching ingredients that they already have on hand, regardless of what those ingredients are; the ability to turn a mélange of scraps or odds and ends into a fulfilling meal is one of the traits that marks bloggers as expert. They have the ability to create a delicious meal out of nothing, with just the barest set of instructions – and they can give you that ability too. Cassie made much the same point when pushing the value of a protein-packed egg breakfast over the more standard sugary pastry or cereal: "you can pretty much take this concept and do whatever makes your heart happy… Go crazy! And if you do, report back on your favorite combo" (Johnston, 13 August 2012). As an added bonus, these acknowledgements of adaptability encourage the reader to flex their own culinary muscles, chime in to the comments with their innovations, and thus become even more interactive and involved with the community of a specific food blog.

Highly adaptable recipes also increase the likelihood that a blogger's recipe will reach an increased number of people, therefore expanding her potential readership. Ree chatted about the benefits of her kale pasta salad: "the great thing about this dish is, it's great as a cold salad…but it's also delicious heated up in a bowl and served warm. I'm planning on whipping up some more on the Fourth, when approximately nine million people will arrive at my house" (Drummond, 2 July 2014). By combining her testimony on the versatility of the dish with her own plans to serve it as a gathering, Ree suggested to her readers that they, too, might be able to make and serve the dish at a variety of different occasions, with no need to worry about difficult-to-manage preparation requirements. As a blogger, Ree receives multiple benefits from this kind of demonstration of adaptability. Her story pushes her audience to consider what kinds of events or crowds might enjoy such a dish, making them more likely to actually prepare it (as opposed to simply read about it for vicarious enjoyment), and consequently, if her dish is eaten and enjoyed by a variety of persons after the original reader presents it, those contented diners may request the recipe and be directed back to the *Pioneer Woman*. With one easy rhetorical step, Ree both strengthened her connection to an original reader and possibly secured additional audience members.

Contextualization within popular culture. Bloggers also convince readers to accept their status as relatable food authority by situating themselves within an identifiable popular culture context. As previously discussed, bloggers are not and do not claim to be analogous to food writers or professional chefs of old; most take pride in their self-taught, home experience based origins, and they realize that their audience read blogs specifically to see how women who look and sound like themselves cope with daily life and find inspiration in the kitchen. In fact, Nichols (2009) reported that while a moderately high percentage of food-journalism readers check printed food publications or food magazine websites weekly, or a few times a month, food blog readers check their favorite once or more daily, “crediting their increased usage to a food blogger’s candid writing style, diverse voice and range of topics, as well as their approachable personalities” (para. 3). To enact those “approachable personalities,” bloggers rely on creating links to other topics of fascination in the broader popular culture sphere; in the burgeoning golden age of streaming television, these cultural call-outs often take the form of Netflix references. However, they may also serve as a more general cultural fencepost, like when Cara disclaimed that readers might want to halve the baklava recipe she shared, as her original made quite a lot since she was bringing the dessert to a viewing party for the Academy Awards (Eisenpress, 5 March 2009). These off-hand mentions serve to let readers know that bloggers are not recipe-producing robots; they are real people, with a variety of interests and commitments, just like the women on the other side of the screen.

Emily is the most skilled of the bloggers in my sample at creating consubstantiality with her readers based on popular culture products. For example, Emily asked her readers:

> Can we just address THE JINX? Have you guys watched it? We were completely sucked in and polished off the whole mini-series in, like, three days. (I'm a liar. Two days.) And then went totally down the rabbit hole reading everything The New York Times has ever written on that squirrelly little muther [*sic*]. It's only six eppies, you guys" (Stoffel, 26 March 2015).

Emily's exuberant, friendly tone recalls the type of conversation readers might be familiar with as casual workplace banter, the kind of conversation you might have with co-workers on your way into the office or with a barista you see every morning as you pick up your coffee. The use of slang and purposeful misspellings contributes to the casual, intimate vibe (more on this in chapter 6). These kinds of exclamatory revelations are common throughout Emily's writing:

> I'm… streaming delicious amounts of *The Carrie Diaries* and *Revenge*. I like my TV programs with a fatty dose of enviable style. As in, when I grow up I totally want to be the girl fashionably stuck somewhere between a teenage Carrie Bradshaw and a middle-class Emily Thorne. (Stoffel, 29 December 2013)

These references to popular culture can also appear with less explanation, as an easy referent point for readers. Just as a picture is worth a thousand words (and blogs are packed with photographs), then a mention of an artist, politician, or other pop culture touchstone serves as a descriptive shortcut. Julie said, of her approaching to icing an au courant batch of pumpkin scones, “I like splattering things. It’s my attempt at being artistic and Jackson Pollok-y in the kitchen [*sic*]” (Van Rosendaal, 1 November 2015). Brief references to items, people and places assumed to be easily relatable to the popular consciousness can also reveal the assumptions bloggers make about the lifestyles of their audience. Jeanine and Emily breezily noted frequent trips to Whole Foods, while Adrianna and Lindsay invoked Chipotle; the readers of blogs are correspondingly assumed to be a) financially secure enough to afford high-end groceries and an $8.00 burrito, and b) geographically located with access to such retail posts. (Currently, the closest Whole Foods to me is 69 miles away, which as an avid foodie, I do find vaguely depressing.)

Joy combined the tactics of relatable whimsy and descriptive shortcuts with this bit of soup-making fancy:

> I feel like Mary Poppins would be a really wonderful soup maker. I’m not talking about the spoonful of sugar. It’s that magical purse she carries around. If she can pull a coat rack and house plant out of her nanny bag, imagine the things she could coax from a giant soup pan. Dreams! I imagine the most lovely and effortlessly delicious soup, with a dash of cream like whaaat!? Wait… can Mary Poppins make us all soup forever and always? (Wilson, 21 April 2013).

Joy's reminisce encapsulated Matchar's (2013) assertion that domestic blogs are "a curious combination of unvarnished honesty and high-gloss fantasy" (p. 69). These websites, while overtly concerned with food, cooking, and other affairs of the kitchen, differ from mid-century issues of *Ladies' Home Journal* and their other domestic forebears in how strongly the young women writing them explain cooking as just one part of a messy 21st century identity – an identity also including feelings about becoming a mother, moving to a new state, adopting dogs, considering a tumultuous political climate, and realizing anew just how creepy the animatronic alien in the movie *E.T.* looked.

The function of these representations of popular culture and the blogger's situatedness therein aptly fit with Burke's (1950) definition of identification. As defined in chapter two, we can recall identification as Burke's cooperative counter to the previously assumed standard that persuasion was the end-goal of rhetoric. Quigley argued:

> Identification involves at least three types of processes or states: 1) the process of naming something (or someone) according to specific properties; 2) the process of associating with and disassociating from others--suggesting that persons (and ideas or things) share, or do not share, important qualities in common; and 3) the product or end result of identifying--the state of being consubstantial with others. (1998, n.p.)

The second process explains the importance of providing these popular culture reference points and broadening the scope of the commonalities between blogger and reader. Once the blogger demonstrates that she has more things in common with her readers than an interest in cooking, the readers identify more strongly with her, strengthening the relationship I have already discussed; the inherent unevenness of the blogger/reader relationship (which is always a relationship of seller and consumer) is mediated and smoothed by the heightened degree of consubstantiality.

Additionally, these processes of identification help to clarify why I have included content hallmarks in this chapter's discussion of structural conventions. While chapter 5 discusses some of the most integral themes present in the ways bloggers present themselves and highlight aspects of their personalities or upbringings, the themes of business acknowledgements (travel updates, sponsorships) and personal branding (authority, adaptability, cultural references) specifically fulfill the first process Quigley identified. These themes together identify the author as a food blogger and let the reader know what to expect from her site, laying the groundwork for further rhetorical illustrations of personality.

Conclusion

Just as a poet might spend years learning the technicalities of meter and rhyme just to feel comfortable writing in free verse or a makeup artist might spend an hour carefully applying product to achieve a dewy bare-faced effect, bloggers invest a massive effort into seeming like a casual, fun-loving, trustworthy friend. In this chapter, I discussed the structural conventions that bloggers rely on to create a consistent experience for all readers, including the use of internal and external hyperlinks, and the rhetorical effects that hypertext and Internet world-building have on the process of invention and *Kairos.* The effort that bloggers put into shaping their websites, and therefore the reading experience of their audience, will be further explored in chapter 6 when I delve into the steps of parasocial rhetoric.

Next, I explained how bloggers prioritize content that will reinforce their position as an authority figure on the blog, particularly through a measured distribution of informative tips and a selective disclosure of business practices, and how bloggers brand themselves as an adaptable food authority within a relatable popular culture context. This discussion introduced a partial answer to my research question concerning the kind of womanhood constituted on food blogs; the women who are granted the privilege of speaking about food are simultaneously granted the right to concern themselves with larger cultural food issues like supply chains, environmental impacts, and appropriate dietary considerations for an individual body. More specific details of the persona that enacts these food behaviors, as well as detailed consequences for the women stranded in the liminal space of caring deeply about food discourses but lacking the resources to fully participate, will follow in chapter 5 as I delve deeper into the constitution of post-feminist womanhood on food blogs.

Chapter Five: Constituting Post-Feminist Womanhood through Food Blogs

When I asked food bloggers what their day-to-day professional lives looked like, most gave me a nuts-and-bolts rundown of how they approached recipe creation, photography sessions, managing social media and website editing, and maintaining motivation as a self-employed entrepreneur. Lily Diamond, the creative mind behind *Kale and Caramel*, generally prefers to buck the norm, referring to food writing as an opportunity to "play in my kitchen and generate as much beauty as I possibly can on a daily basis" (Diamond, 2015). Such a response is typical of Lily's unusual whimsy and holistic approach to her business, her love life, her family, and her position within both the food blogosphere and the American social and political spectrum. Lily exuded a radical honesty that starkly contrasted with the other women involved in this project. During our interview, she told me:

> I've heard from so many followers… that have messaged me about the stories that I've done in the past two days. And honestly, I could just kiss every single one of them. Like, I don't know these people at all and yet they're why I've been able to build my business and why I have a book coming out next year. And so to me, it's incredible to be able to hear from them in that way. I think that the immediacy of video is a little bit scary because it definitely makes other [food blogging] formats obsolete in a way that I don't want to think about, but it also provides this opportunity for people to feel like, oh my gosh, there's this person that I've heard talk about, like, her heartbreaks and her mom dying and… now I can actually see her and say hi easily in a way that just feels different than leaving a comment in

> sort of a static liminal space. (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

Her passion for her work and her community shone through during our widely ranging conversation on inter-blogger political feuding, intellectual copyright, the obligations of a public persona to speak about political topics, and the aspirational qualities of 7-layer cakes. Part of that passion comes from Lily's unique background; she grew up the child of self-professed hippie parents on Maui, scavenging the Hawaiian Islands for peak-ripeness mangoes and avocados. Her personal experience with foraging and local food cultures is extraordinary even among the blogging community.

Lily now lives and works in Los Angeles, in an apartment filled with the vibrant sounds of the city: sirens, shouts of busy people, sudden blasts of loud music. Her various stations in life have taken her through phases of vegan, raw, vegetarian/pescetarian, and omnivorous lifestyles, but throughout it all she has maintained the position that everyone should eat, cook, and mix "with your own two hands" because "the food likes the love" (Diamond, About). Her blog features artful photographs of unusual foods ranging from pale green jasmine matcha cookies to squash blossom carpaccio, arrayed on earthy background hues of gray and tan that contrast with the sparse, bright colors of her posed dishes. Her recipes frequently contain ingredients like amaranth, hemp seeds, and spirulina powder (clear vestiges of her self-proclaimed vegan hippie days), but she also showcases simple homemade ice creams and jalapeno cheese waffles.

Kale + Caramel is only five years old (a newborn blog compared to titans like Smitten Kitchen and The Pioneer Woman), but it has made waves. Lily's "Press" page lists 30 different interviews or guest posts that she has written around the Internet, and her first cookbook will arrive on shelves in May 2017. She maintains a consistent presence within the blogosphere, popping up sparingly but regularly to offer advice or congratulations in the peanut galleries of her fellow bloggers, occasionally receiving a "ping back" recipe credit from another writer. What most sets Lily apart from the rest of the food blogging crowd, however, is her insistence on using her public platform to communicate her ethical and moral stances. She advocates in terms of individual wellness (offering natural skincare advice) and social justice, explaining that she struggles with posting business-as-usual recipes when pressing political issues are dominating the news cycle:

> The week that Alton Sterling and Philando Castle were both murdered, I had a post that was supposed to go up that I ended up pushing back with the [sponsoring] company and just telling them, "I'm sorry. I will post this eventually, but I can't post this now." And I ended up reworking it and kind of finding an opportunity to post it in a way that felt appropriate. And so I went through this phase where I just felt really angry, I felt really heartbroken, I felt really helpless and I also felt like if I can't, like, use this platform [to] say what I'm actually thinking to a hundred thousand followers that I have, then what on earth is this for? (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

Lily's position as a conflicted advocate for holistic bodily and social wellbeing exemplifies the theme of this chapter: the constitution of post-feminist womanhood through the rhetoric of food blogs. This analysis primarily concerns two meta themes from my analysis, namely, the defining characteristics of an idealized community and a conviction that humanity is bound together by universally shared experiences and emotions. These issues correspond largely to my fourth research question: [how] do these spaces reflect patterns of women's issues throughout a broader mediated context? To address how these digital spaces reflect patterns in women's social issues and the kinds of woman[hood] that are constituted on food blogs (research questions one and four), I draw on a representative subset of 22 subthemes from my textual analysis, excerpts from my interviews with individual bloggers, and quotations from bloggers' various external media appearances. I answer these questions through three discussions: the individual and collective decision processes that occur when controversial public issues converge on the blogosphere, the blogger's evocation of "home" and what that term means in this context, and the positive and negative emotional states that are collectively agreed upon by bloggers as safe to portray and share with a wide audience.

Food Blogs, Controversial Social Discourses, and Advocacy

While Lily's position on spreading important messages to her audience is clear, not all bloggers agree on a blog's place as a platform for social advocacy. In fact, the placidness of the idealized, unified image of culinary community portrayed on the surface level of the blogosphere belies the vibrant tensions that exist between professionals behind the scenes. Cassie, for example, has spent hours considering her role as a public voice against her self-employed status as the brand manager of *Wholefully.* She feels especially conflicted when posing her self-identified social liberal beliefs against the stated healthy living goals of her blog. "I don't think anyone knows that from my social media, especially because I live in a super conservative part of the country," she reflected, musing on her own tendency to get "riled up" over political issues.

> I am the CEO of a company. My job is to follow my mission statement, and that's to help people learn how to eat healthier. I don't consider myself a celebrity, I don't consider myself an influencer.... I consider myself the CEO of a brand, and my job is to keep that brand on track. And just like Coca-Cola wouldn't put out a message saying whatever about a social thing for fear of alienating people, I don't want to do that too. Not only because it's bad for business, but also because it can get in the way of me doing my mission of helping people. If someone who is very conservative sees me spouting all this liberal propaganda stuff, that I truly believe in, that might dampen any impact I could have to change their life or help them out. (C. Johnston, personal communication, 19 August 2016)

Where Lily spoke from a fired-up position of civic obligation, and Cassie gave a carefully measured consideration of her role as a self-employed CEO, Sara mulled over the personal ramifications of disclosing personal political positions online. While she felt that other aspects of a blogger' personal life – kitchen habits, husbands and children, childhoods – could be mediated and managed through the technologies of the Internet, Sara worried about her own ability to manage potential backlash if she explained her take on sensitive issues. "I have very strong opinions," she slowly responded when queried about her position on using her blog as a political platform. "My opinions towards topics such as gun violence are very personal... I mean, we all have personal opinions, but they're emotionally charged for me based on… lived experiences and things I don't share on my blog about my past." Her tone became more defiant as she elaborated further: "yeah, I hear everybody saying we need to use this as a platform and our voice, but… some of us have pasts that make those issues a little bit emotionally charged and maybe that's why we're not sharing it" (S. Young, personal communication, 16 August 2016). While the reasons for the decisions to share or not share vary, the decisions are taken seriously, and these women are in contact with each other behind-the-scenes to navigate where their field is headed, and what role they should take in that process. *The Pig & Quill's* Emily likened the process of finding other bloggers to discuss these professional and technical decisions with to blind dating:

> You just find people that you kind of fall in love with. The bloggers that I have close relationships with are those that insert a lot of themselves into their posts. So there are people like Lily Diamond from *Kale & Caramel*… the instant that I read her blog I was like, "This girl needs to be my friend." She's one of those people where, like, her self shines through her blog really well. Those are the types of folks that I really gravitated toward, and fortunately, it's been mutual. So, what's really fun is getting to meet people in person and seeing whether or not… they are what you imagine. (E. Stoffel, personal communication, 7 July 2016).

Occasionally, however, an event happens that makes even a normally-neutral blogger use her platform to speak out. Emily, a blogger who typically restricts her non-food-related commentary to Netflix and *The Bachelorette*, struck an unusually grave tone when she said:

> Chances are, if you live in the US, the past couple of days have been a trip. An SNL sketch that has gone on and on, until you're starting to feel more than just a little uncomfortable for the actors. And I say this not as a woman or a parent or a proponent of preserving love and withholding judgement — though I am all of those things. I say this an American. And I think that, regardless of which way

> you voted, you probably feel the same. Things got a little circus-y. Or more fittingly, we let things get a little circus-y. And now it's time to take down the tent, shovel up the elephant shit, and act like grown-ups. (Stoffel, 10 November 2016)

Emily, of course, is referring to Donald Trump's victory over Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. That victory took much of the country by surprise; many political forecasters had predicted that Clinton, with over 3 decades of public service and a strong international reputation, would win easily (Turkewitz, 2016). When Trump, a real estate/reality television billionaire with business ties across the globe but virtually no political experience, became president elect, his campaign rhetoric about creating a border wall, banning Muslims from entering the U.S., and dismantling trade agreements spurred many Americans into fearful discussions of their civil liberties. The presence of new Vice President Mike Pence, who enabled strongly anti-LGBTQ policies during his tenure as governor of Indiana, and Clinton's popular vote victory of more than 3 million ballots only compounded these emotions of uncertainty and distrust (Krieg, 2016). This tumultuous climate provoked bloggers who otherwise reserved their public presence for more on-brand discussions to take a stand and proclaim support for all populations who felt targeted by the goals and actions of the new administration.

Lily captured the sense of stunned uncertainty that pinned down many citizens in the wake of that election and inauguration. "I am speechless. The days feel like skeins of yarn slowly unraveling themselves around the spool of the sun, dying quietly with the early winter sunset," she explained. Hearing it from the mouth (or keyboard) of another person made the events, and the sorrow that surrounded them, more immediate for women desperately seeking some sense of affirmation. At the very least, these messages of solidarity gave women the knowledge that they were not alone in their fear that things were different now, and that that difference is dangerous:

> Every morning brings fresh cuts into the fabric of our democracy—strikes against the environment, the land, women's bodies, education, immigration, scientific research, the list is endless. Last week, I vowed to keep tabs of all the changes… but I find myself so beaten down by each single strike I'm not sure I can handle them en masse. Am I weak? Am I cowardly? Am I overly pessimistic? Or am I just a privileged white woman who's never been called on to fight like this before because it never felt so personal? …I notice, with dagger sharp clarity, that joy has drained from most moments. Living without joy—that natural human ebullience babies and children exhibit so freely—is many difficult things, but mostly it is exhausting. The thought of even getting up, of enduring one more headline, of slogging through one more round of emails, is a leaden weight. But then I decide—I know—that I cannot live like this, joyless, cowed. (Diamond, 26 January 2017)

Allen and Sachs (2007) explained that women's history of being exploited through and oppressed via domestic work correspondingly gives them a unique vocabulary for and site of resistance. Lily, in the above excerpt, acknowledges her privilege both as a White woman who has never had to struggle with systemic racial oppression and as a professional whose career could be perceived as trivial. Yet, her blog serves as a crucial site of catharsis for readers who fall in line with Allen and Sachs's discussion of the comfort that women feel in using a domestic space to discuss uncomfortable topics from the public sphere. Lily's audience expressed gratitude for her ability to articulate what they cannot and for her assurances that a sense of desolation is widely shared. As one commenter named Jodie told her, "it's nice to find a little bit of comfort in this absolutely insane political climate, and I hope you know how wonderful your words are for that" (Diamond, 26 January 2017). Because women bloggers have already established themselves as a trusted voice (see chapter 4), women feel comfortable turning to them for advice and support. An inviting space for discussion is particularly important when the issues on the table involve women's bodies or political crises, areas of social concern that historically has seen divisions of opinion along sex/gender lines. Meyers explained that forms of communication that are both historically associated with women and typically regarded as unimportant – such as gossip – play a critical role in allowing women to "negotiate dominant culture together" (2015, p. 71). Women-dominated blogs, regardless of their content focus, become a site of cultural production by virtue of how they allow discussion to arise and the forms that discussion takes.

Brooke gave another example of solidarity, saying "I've felt spiritless both on [my blog] and in the kitchen. Disillusioned. Hopeless. Anxious" (Bass, 30 January 2017). Brooke had announced before the election that she and her husband would be traveling abroad for a year, and that decision, combined with her career as a food blogger, caused her to question her ability to make any substantial change in her community:

> I worry that in leaving for this year spent cruising the Caribbean, I'm abandoning the country I've called home in perhaps its greatest time of need (at least in my lifetime). I worry that I'll be so separated while we're at sea that I'll lose touch with the reality of what's happening here–the reality that thousands upon

> thousands of good people are being hurt and harmed by the stroke of a pen. I worry that whether I'm spending a day cooking, or a year at sea, it will be taking away from all of the other more important things I should be doing or feeling. (Bass, 30 January 2017)

In response to the frustration that Brooke clearly expressed, readers soothingly offered advice to stand firm in the knowledge that a community of like-minded women have her back. A reader named Jessie, for example, told Brooke not to worry, because "everything happens for a reason, and we can only control our decisions today, not yesterdays or tomorrows." Another reader, Edlyn, advised Brooke to "take your time settling into this new normal," because readers would all be "right here when you decide to say hi again" (Bass, 30 January 2017). Matchar (2013) related this sense of feminine community that envelops women online in times of trouble to older forms of all-women communities like knitting circles or quilting clubs. Through the lens of an overtly feminine activity, women have the chance to come together and discuss their fears, anxieties, and hopes without pressure or alienating influences from people who do not approach issues from a similar standpoint.

Bloggers torn between wanting to make a statement and not seeming divisive to readers seemed to gravitate toward the call to band together and overcome differences. Lindsay, for example, is more cautious about broaching the subject of political unrest than Emily, Brooke, or Lily. She approached the topic in a circumspect way, first telling her readers about a vacation she had taken with friends to the beach and sharing some photographs with the reunion. The discussion of celebration and reunion slowly turned toward the tensions that can result from differences of opinion: "we are four people who voted differently last week in the 2016 election… How can this even happen? That friends don't see eye-to-eye on what feels like such a big major deal?" she joked, before taking a more serious tone. "When we get down to the real life stuff of the world right now, you and I?... We're all doing this together. You're not the only one feeling frustration or hurt in your relationships as a result of this election" (Ostrom, 17 November 2016). Lindsay then moved one step beyond offering the catharsis found in empathy to providing concrete steps for action:

> We had just one Election Conversation during the whole trip, and that one conversation? Not awesome. Hard, vulnerable, generally un-fun… We didn't suddenly agree on everything and we had to actively work to listen to each other without reacting first. But we DID try to ask questions and really listen to the answers, to seek to really understand the other side, and to learn from each other. And we DID end the conversation with misty eyes and tight hugs, saying firmly: I don't agree with you, and I still love you. And that conversation – I really think it was important for us to have. Because to be fully loved, you have to be fully known. You have to let yourself be seen and *you have to try to see others*. Like, REALLY, actually, through-and-through see and know and love them. (Ostrom, 17 November 2016, emphasis in original)

Her apolitical sentiments were accepted and interpreted by readers on either side of the political aisle. Reader Christina, for instance, responded with her own experience of struggling with interpersonal political disagreements: "thank you for respecting both sides of the election. I can't tell you how sad I was to unfollow so many blogs and people on Twitter and elsewhere due to such venom and specific agenda's" [sic]. Similar sentiments were expressed by reader Amy, who felt she was no longer welcome in other corners of the blogosphere: "I had to unfollow a few blogs that completely unloaded their opinion… – a few bloggers [who] aren't even U.S. residents yet were chiming in with their… dismal thoughts on the state of our great and beautiful country" (Ostrom, 17 November 2016). Lindsay's advice to her readers anticipated infighting and offered cautious advice on how women might turn inward and re-examine their own connections to family and friends to find their way through this period of division and confusion. This focus on the interpersonal effects of social struggle rendered *Pinch of Yum* a safe space for women who felt that their opinions were being drowned out in other women-dominated digital spaces.

Even Lily, who readily admitted her liberal positionality and explained how she had been taking action by calling her elected representatives to express her dismay with policy decisions from the new Republican administration, offered her readers the solace of introspection, mindfulness, and self-care. She described her ongoing practice of seeking "refuge" in the "artists and poets of the resistance… surrounding [her]self with the encouragement and dogged work of others who are as ready for change as [she is]" (Diamond, 26 January 2017). The women's emphasis on taking care of the self, caring first for your inner circle even as you strive to make societal changes, follows closely along with the broader narrative found on these blogs of how women should treat their bodies, prioritizing the rhythms and needs of the individual beyond all else.

Of course, not all social issues taken up by bloggers carry such heavy political weight. Most frequently, bloggers chime in on social issues related to food or femininity – or both. These links to more relevant broader existing social discourses are also the most likely to be explicitly stated by bloggers. For example, Julie recognized the dominance of various healthful eating trends when she suggests bringing her orchid-lime pasta salad to a picnic: “I’m hoping there will be another opportunity to bring something to someone else’s back yard on a hot summer night – as a bonus, this particular tossed noodle salad thing is gluten-free (if you use tamari instead of soy sauce), wheat-free, dairy-free and vegan” (Rosendaal, 24 July 2013).

Similar to Julie’s emphasis on specialty diets or limited intakes, Lindsay pulled on the social preference for non-modified, natural foods when speaking of her sponsor, Wholesome! Sugars: “they are also the largest supplier of organic, non-GMO and Fair Trade sugars, syrups and honeys here in North America. They actually pioneered the certification process for Fair Trade honey to the United States” (Ostrom, 2 October 2015). Lindsay is not the only one with environmental concerns on her mind; Emily inhabited the tensions of a never-ending mountain of conflicting food news when she said her tofu faux-bolognese was “by all means lighter and simpler — and a little less environmentally intensive than its mootiful counterpart. Though, tofu being a soy product, I suppose even that is somewhat debatable…” (Stoffel, 30 October 2015). Cassie, too, worried over the impact food trends and arbitrary designations over what types of meals or proteins. “I usually try to avoid farm-raised seafood, when possible. But after doing some research I found out that [my sponsoring company uses] all natural and organic farming practices and truly care about the fish they raise and the end product. They actually still harvest each and every fish by hand! Something almost completely unheard of in today’s fish farming industry” (Johnston, 27 January 2012). Cassie’s fretting echoed the concerns of many other bloggers; these women want to eat well, and they especially want to eat foods that have been deemed rich in healthy fats, lean proteins, and a variety of difficult-to-get vitamins, but they do not want to do so at the expense of their conscience.

To be sure, the desire to cook and eat mindfully is shared throughout a large portion of the non-food-blogging American public, as well. A survey of 1,003 American citizens revealed that 43% of the public will readily admit to “wanting to do their part to protect the environment and natural resources;” the numbers increase when considerations over the increase in perceived healthiness and improved taste of organic or sustainable ingredients are taken into account (Omnicom, 2014). Again, however, financial resources present as a limiting factor in home cooks’ ability to follow through on those expressed concerns. The luxury of worrying about the environmental impact of farmed salmon cannot outrank the material restrictions set in place by the reality of preparing a meal every night for 3 people (the average American family size), even with a rise in dual-income households (Pew Research Center, 2015). So when the mail-order trout and salmon service that Cassie was reviewing offers buyers salmon packages that cost up to 55 dollars, that expenditure is unthinkable (regardless of personal investment in sustainability) for the 51% of Americans who allot less than $150 to their total weekly grocery budget (Mendes, 2012). The cognitive dissonance that arises from reading expressions of support for sustainability, including the personal health ramifications of such choices, when a woman cannot financially make the same choices for herself and her household only increases the sense of homemaker guilt that is cultivated on these blogs.

Unfortunately, mothers and families on a budget do not have a monopoly on the market of food and purchasing-related anxiety. Cara spoke to the anxiety that urban women experience when they try to keep to create and maintain an image of a locally-oriented, health-conscious cook when she opined that "there should be a single word for the anxiety you feel when you know your CSA or farmers' market vegetables might go bad in their picturesque bowl on the counter before you get a chance to cook something delicious with them" (Eisenpress, 18 August 2014). This "anxiety" is discussed lightly – Cara knows that she is lucky to have the "problem" of too much food available for her to prepare and enjoy. But on a deeper level, food blogs have a deep relationship with women's anxieties over portraying both themselves and their homes as enviable and fit – the bodies are physically fit, equipped with organic, home-made foods, while the homes are fit for the pages of a magazine (online pages, of course – possibly even the pages of another domestic blog or a digital aggregator like Pinterest). Lily, who had been confident and larger-than-life in all of her opinions throughout our interview, grew sober and tentative when I asked her if she had anything else she wanted to get off her chest about food blogging. "There is so much to be said about eating disorders and food bloggers," she said hesitantly. Lily appeared to be thinking deliberately about her point as she slowly told me:

> This is totally off topic. I'm only telling you because I feel like, as someone in academia studying this, it's a really worthwhile issue to look into, and it's really, like, disturbing me… really I can't – if – once I know that there's some – there's, like, some eating disorder issue… Those who are, you know, brave enough will often share that they're dealing with that, but then the really tricky part is that

> often, very often, there are bloggers who are making extraordinarily indulgent, unhealthy foods and so… it's just like looking at this psychological disaster at large and it's so disturbing. (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

As she struggled for words, Lily simultaneously desperately needed to convey the intensity of her opinion, yet she was also highly wary of broaching the trust and privacy of her professional colleagues. The inarticulateness of this response, especially in contrast to the lyrical prose on Lily's blog, speaks to the insidiousness of the image problem facing bloggers. Matchar explained that food celebrities "like Michael Pollan and Alice Waters set expectations so high that it sets women up to see themselves as failures… we have become so obsessed with food… but people need a reality check about the effort it takes" (2013, p. 115). This effort negatively impacts the women behind the glossy food blogs, many who, as Lily explained, become caught in a vicious cycle of telling their readers that they can make deliciously indulgent meals at home and still maintain a socially-mandated form of feminine beauty.

These standards also negatively impact the women readers who see the highly-manicured end results of both the obsessive food intake and the expensively maintained homes. The dueling emotions expressed in response to such lifestyle performances range between and among envy, jealousy, respect, and resentment. Often, these emotions combine to reinforce readers' position as dependent on the blogger and lessen the self-reliance of an individual audience member. Cooking is alternately art and science, and readers understandably want to be able to adapt recipes to better fit their needs, lifestyles, and pantries. As a home cook gains experience in the kitchen, she also gains comfort in making the appropriate changes to a recipe; such changes might include a more intuitive sense of how many teaspoons of cayenne pepper create a preferred level of spice, or when whole-fat, unflavored yogurt can be used as a lower-calorie substitute for sour cream, for example. However, when commenters regularly display that they feel more comfortable asking the blogger for advice on a posted recipe, even when answers to their questions can be found with a simple Google search, it signals a level of dependence in the rhetor-audience relationship that seems counter to the blogs' oft-purported goals of helping and teaching women at home. So, when Jessica asks Lindsay if she can substitute gluten-free flour in a caramel apple crisp, or when Lana asks Natasha how she got curls of chocolate to adhere the side of a layer cake – instead of attempting a trial-and-error tactic or conducting an Internet search – the cultivated blogger persona of relatability is overtaken by the expert-status bestowed on the food writer. Cassie referred to this dependency on the blogger as an expert resource as both a "blessing and a curse," and explained:

> I get a ton of those [questions and] I just think, "I would have just Googled this, or asked my husband." But the flip side of that is it's obvious the reason I'm getting asked this question is 'cause people see me as an expert. And as an expert, I have the power to work with brands, recommend products, change lives. So maybe they actually see asking me that question as a better solution than asking Google who maybe they don't consider an expert… And so I try to see it as a positive thing. They're asking me these "stupid questions" because they think I am going to provide them with a reputable answer. (C. Johnston, personal communication, 19 August 2016)

After noticing this trend of dependency on the blog for permission to alter a recipe, Natasha's philosophy of "if you can read (a well-written, tested and trusted recipe), you can cook" and Deb's mantra that food should be accessible to everyone, regardless of equipment, acquire an unspoken addendum: cooking should be accessible to all… but the authority to make advanced decisions about cooking remain a privilege reserved for an elite set of authorities.

What is Home, and How Do We Inhabit It?

Bloggers' discussions of what they are concerned about impart to readers a distinct version of what social discourses are relevant to their lives and what kinds of choices readers should make in their everyday lives. As domestic writers, they also construct and disseminate a remarkably consistent version of "home," and all of the rituals, habits, and feelings that typically accompany it. Familiarity is one such component of home, even down to the little details that seem like mundane, background considerations.

To illustrate, Kathryne, feeling anxious after a move across state lines, said "this new city is starting to feel more like home. At first, every noticeable difference served as a startling reminder that I am not home, but I'm starting to accept the gray squirrels, with their skinny tails, and the brown dirt as the new normal" (Taylor, 22 August 2012). At 30 years old, Kathryne is solidly within the Millenial demographic, a group that has an especially contested relationship with the concept of home. Barely 34% of Americans under age 35 own their own home, a record low (Rampbell, 2016). Student loan debt and uncertain employments fields doubtlessly contribute to those numbers, but whatever the reason, Rampbell (2016) explained that one-third of young adults under 35 still live with their parents, despite continuing dreams of home-ownership. Phoebe is one such young adult:

> Full disclosure: as of last week, I moved back to my parents' apartment for the summer and have begun subletting my room to my friend… if the state of my childhood bedroom (with piles of clothes lining the floor) is any indication, I am still in denial about where my home currently is. …I'm going to have to get used to sharing frying pans, remote controls, and daily routines with my parents. (Lapine, 19 June 2010)

For a woman making her living in the kitchen, the loss of her own space becomes especially affecting. However, closer generational ties to parents also have an upside. Lindsay explained how proximity to her childhood home became a career-saving convenience when her own house was undergoing comprehensive renovations, leaving her unable to do the recipe preparation and production necessary to run a food blog. "Since I didn't have the equipment I needed to make my biscotti dreams come true at my HOME home, I decided to pack up my baking shtuff and head home," she said. Realizing the potential confusion inherent in that statement, Lindsay clarified, "I mean my other home. The one I grew up in, and the one with a functional and large and very pretty kitchen that's currently not being reno-ed, which is just a handy dandy one-hour drive away." The difference between Lindsay's story and Phoebe's story derives from the permanence of their respective situations; Phoebe spoke from a tenuous point of uncertain, not knowing what direction the next few years of her life would take.

Wetzel (1990) explained that the traditional notion of a nuclear family unit in a stand-alone house has been declining in reality since 1950; multi-generational family households or non-family households are now the norm, as many young Americans know all too well. Again, the privilege of financial stability presents as a dividing factor between women who might otherwise share the same interests and perspectives. Lindsay knows her comfortable life as a married woman who shares a home with her husband is still a reality, and her foray back into her parents' house is presented as a joyful vacation. For her, the cozy, holiday feelings associated with pairing a homemade biscotti and a strong cup of coffee perfectly represented "how it felt to be back at home, with a working oven, baking something dunkable and very delicious with my mom and her friends laughing and clinking silverware in the next room" (Ostrom, 15 October 2014).

The celebration of holidays and other special occasions also emerges as a defining factor in how food bloggers constitute "home." The promotion of specifically Christian, American holidays, particularly Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, reaffirm the privileging of the White, middle-class voice on these food blogs. After explaining that she loves to gift homemade chocolates to friends and family for Christmas, Cassie said "I have such fondness for all the glitter and joy and love that is the holiday season… One of my favorite parts of the holiday season is showering my favorite people with handmade gifts." After explaining that she simply could not get on board with popular sentiments that professionals like petsitters and mailmen would rather receive money than homemade treats, she summarized, "it brings me such joy to craft something special for the people I love and appreciate" (Johnston, 16 November 2015). Emily exhibited the nonchalance with which food bloggers assume women will have time and resources to celebrate holidays with "a full-on holiday feast," prepared at home and enjoyed with a circle of friends and family (Stoffel, 26 March 2015). Holidays are, above all, a time for putting in special effort and attempting recipes that would not otherwise make it into a household rotation, such as Jeanine's molten chocolate lava cake: "it's a blast when you get it right, it's still fun when you don't, and no matter what you're still eating chocolate with the one you love. There are worse ways to spend a night" (Donofrio, 12 February 2015).

Finally, while these women may be comfortable speaking as a solo voice on their websites, or running a business on their own, an acknowledgement of the man (it's always a man…) who drives them forward is always waiting around the corner. Home, as portrayed in food blogs, is never quite complete unless a woman shares it with a partner. Ree, as might be expected from her country-girl brand, is one of the most prolific exhibitors of this theme. Her "Marlboro Man" and his needs as a rancher feature prominently as a source of inspiration in the kitchen: "after a long, hot summer day of grueling work, this can count as a meal for both Marlboro Man and the punks" (Drummond, 13 June 2008). Ree simultaneously apologizes for and plays up the gendered differences in eating styles and preferences across many posts in her blog: "swiss cheese and mushrooms are not a cowboy's idea of a good time. I'm sorry about the sweeping generalization, but on this cattle ranch, I have found it to be true" (Drummond, 27 June 2013). *The Pioneer Woman* might be considered an exceptional case, because Ree archives her recipes not just based on the typical categories found across most blogs (breakfast, entrees, desserts, appetizers, et cetera), but also into a "Cowgirl Food" category and a "Cowboy Food" category. Ree's specific brand suggests to her readers that the conventional gender dynamic that she plays up is excusable because of her living scenario, as if rejecting inherent biological differences between the sexes while enmeshed in a family business that is inextricably tied to the realities of physical labor would be ridiculous. Problematically, that assumed distinction does not actually correspond to the way the Drummond household is described. Ree readily admits that she does plenty of work with the farm animals and the land on the ranch, but her physical effort (sweeping, shoveling, digging, riding) is far less emphasized than the men's – who are, indeed, consistently portrayed as hardworking laborers in a classic Manifest Destiny, American-dream way.

Even if Ree were excused for her gendered assumptions due to the specifications of her branding, the tendency to perpetuate gendered stereotypes via dining habits persists even amongst bloggers who live in urban locations. Phoebe, living in the heart of New York City, breezily recounted a male friend stating that a girl grilling for him on a first date would make him uncomfortable.

Guilt can serve as a motivating factor for reaching back to June Cleaver-esque household roles. Julie explained that when she noticed she had perhaps slipped too comfortably into a routine of feeding her husband Mike and their children frozen pizza and/or waffles for dinner, she sprang into action:

> I did some laundry, and folded the fitted sheets nice and proper, and picked up the ingredients to make Swiss steak – Mike's favourite childhood dinner, which I've made maybe once since we started going around in 1988. (The closest thing to Swiss steak at my house, my Dad's beef stew, was my least favourite dinner. Flank steak simmered in stewed tomatoes to the consistency of wet rope.) Mike was duly impressed when he walked in the door at 5 o'clock, turned on the news, and got a plate of Swiss steak for dinner. I nagged W to finish his, and B had

> soccer practice, and now I'm folding more laundry (rather than tossing it onto the laundry chair – that's why people have furniture in their bedrooms, right?) and overseeing homework. I may actually be a grown-up after all. (Van Rosendaal, 24 September 2012)

A sense of misbehavior, of not doing things the way her upbringing or the media instructed her to, spurred Julie into forsaking her own preferences and performing a more "grown-up" sequence of domestic behaviors.

While Julie's guilt was internal, expressed approval (or lack thereof) from a boyfriend or husband is also credited as a motivating factor in the kitchen. Natasha, telling the backstory behind a variant of Russian donut holes she had been tinkering with, said:

> I made a second batch and thought – yes, this is it! I served that 2nd batch to my hubby and he was not impressed. I then proceeded to throw a small fit letting him know he was being ridiculous and that they were good enough to share. I also rashly told him I was quitting making donuts (lol). I slept on it, came to my senses and worked on the recipe some more. My husband was right… (Kravchuk, 19 April 2016)

Sometimes discussions of spousal approval take a more tongue-in-cheek turn, as seen when Jeanine poked fun at her husband's expense: "Jack likes to make fun of me when I make things like this… calls it 'mac & sauce' and 'vegan velveeta.' In the end he always eats his words. And most of the food on the table" (Donofrio, 31 January 2013). Regardless of whether these acknowledgements of spousal input are deferential or defiant, they belie the independent authority bloggers often seek to establish through other forms of content on their blogs.

Disarticulation within the Food Blogosphere

To return to the question of how food blogs reflect patterns of women's issues throughout a broader mediated context, when taken together, the themes discussed herein suggest an unnecessary and possibly harmful degree of separation between women. McRobbie (2009) attributed the gulfs in understanding that arise between women to the disarticulation of feminism in the 21st century. Specifically, disarticulation "defuses the likelihood of cross-border solidarity," even within a community of White, female foodies who might reasonably be expected to espouse a fairly unified cultural standpoint (McRobbie, 2009, p. 27). When women focus on envy over other women's portrayals of an immaculate domestic space, energy that might otherwise be directed toward external causes of dissatisfaction (political or broader socio-economic causes) instead is directed inward.

The trend of disarticulation only increases when the lens is turned on voices that are *not* typically included in the conversation. When viewing these blogs as a collective, the type of woman who possesses the right to speak about food, healthy living, and culinary lifestyles is quite clear: she is White, she is between 25-40, and she has ample access to equipment and supplies. The comparative absence of voices of women of color and women with fewer economic resources raises questions about inclusivity and intersectionality – the same questions that arose, for example, during the Women's March on Washington that occurred in January 2017. The March was planned to immediately follow the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States; the goal, as described by the protest organizers, was to proclaim "to the world that women's rights are human rights. We stand together, recognizing that defending the most marginalized among us is defending all of us" (Mission & Vision). Despite that stated goal to raise up minority voices, the March struggled to accurately represent equality. Social media pages dedicated to planning and organizing the event soon became filled with testimonials from women of color that expressed their dissatisfaction with the mostly White women running the March effort, asking them to "talk less and listen more" to comprehend how the sense of fear and unease that White women experienced post-election had been a constant state for the P.O.C. community for centuries (Stockman, 2017). Lily described a similar moment of listening that she experienced when she began to discuss the Black Lives Matter movement on her blog:

> It was uncomfortable in some ways… I had some readers come forward… who were people of color, women of color, who thanked me for saying something. And I was so shocked that, for whatever reason, like, that the situation felt so or was so dire they felt like they would have to thank me for saying something. And I understand it, but it also really took me back and… it felt really serious. Like wow, if these people feel so marginalized that, you know, I'm not used to hearing from them, maybe, or maybe I am and I just didn't know… I do think that it's easy to become myopic about thinking that we are just writing for ourselves, but I know that I'm not. (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

Women of color are marginalized as authors, as well. Food blogs written by people of color often end up pigeonholed as diva food or soul food, rather than fitting into the general scope of blogs like *Smitten Kitchen* or *Pinch of Yum*. This distinction is important because it nudges minority voices even further out of the realm of consideration for awards and recognition, which are already disproportionately dominated in food blogging by White men. Out of the fourteen categories that comprised the *Saveur* awards in 2016, only one category went to a Black author – Michael Twitty's *Afroculinaria* won the Food and Culture Essay category (Saveur, 2016). Even this award reinforces the concept of Black authors as specialty voices without general appeal.

In acknowledgement of the food blogosphere's sensitivity to criticism about its own shortcomings, (White male) blogger Tim Mazurek argued that "food media mostly exists as a circle of white, liberal arts grads with enough financial security to have interned for free during college, live in Brooklyn, and eat out every night;" problematically, the consequences of this fact "are far more serious than just the armies of whiteness staring back at us from mastheads. It is creating an insular, homogenous, and out-of-touch world that does not reflect our actual world and excludes many people" (Mazurek, 2015). Reflection from bloggers like Tim and Lily, as well as trends in recognition and classification, highlight the need for intersectionality at all levels of social life. Collins and Bilge (2015) defined intersectionality as "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences," influenced by the ways that race, gender, class, and sexuality combine to form systems of privilege or oppression (p. 2). When Deb described food blogging as a way to subvert the former power-holders in the food writing industry, the statement was true according to her experience (Perelman, 21 September 2016). However, as Crenshaw argued (2015), we cannot give women equal opportunities "just by saying words." Until the efforts of women of color and lower-income women are recognized beside the lauded voices of affluent White women, the food blogosphere will continue to fail to meet its full potential to be an accessible, communal space.

The use of a feminine community as a safe, exploratory space is commendable insofar as it encourages women to talk who might otherwise remain silent. However, an over-emphasized focus on self-care and communal emotional support at the expense of calls to political action only reaffirm traditional notions of women as carers or nurturers rather than engaged civic citizens. McRobbie (2009) explained that the effect of such consistent re/framings is to shape a "feminine 'public sphere' dominated by consumer culture" (p. 28). While, again, giving women a space to speak privileges a voice that has historically been outright silenced in any form of public sphere discussion, and the public sphere has arguably always been comprised of many smaller heterogeneous spheres, carving a separate political space for women's voices couched within domestic language erodes the hard-fought progress that has been won in getting those voices heard in the broader political realm.

The refrain of "yes, but…" doggedly follows through the accomplishments of food and domestic writers. Yes, creating a space where women feel free to revel in their domesticity has reaffirmed a pleasure in cooking that a generation of women previously felt they were no longer allowed to enjoy, and has aided in creating a minor surge in self-employed women, not to mention given many girls and women increased self-sufficiency via the ability to prepare their own meals… but the cultural influences that push young women to desire domesticity under the guise of self-improvement (including make-over shows and consumer culture media such as *What Not to Wear* and *Say Yes to the Dress* as well as the programming on HGTV, the Food Network, and the DIY Channel) cannot be ignored.

Yes, emphasizing a concern for sustainability and healthy food choices promotes individualized well-being, but it also reifies distinctions between middle-class women and women with restricted financial means, exemplifying "how the social categories of class are now materialized through reference to the female body" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 127). It is exactly this trend of acknowledging surface accomplishments (a platform for individual women to voice political concerns, the elevation of health over appearance) while dismissing underlying problems that embodies the post-feminist climate described by McRobbie, Gill, and others. According to Gill (2016), the act of championing women as a vague, generic whole, rather than engaging in substantive critique or praise of individual feminist/feminine actions is key to understanding why the feminist movement as a whole has stalled out in our contemporary moment. In digital media, I am extending that sentiment to platforms, like the food blogs I've described here, that claim to be for and by women but do not enact that role with any identifiable purpose.

Additionally, the influence of disarticulation problematically enables bloggers like Kathryne, Tessa, or Lily to dismiss their own role in perpetuating gendered assumptions about domestic work. Individually, these women express little-to-no discomfort with their public persona as a woman in the kitchen, instead framing their domestic work as self-care that all adults should engage in, or prioritizing their digital entrepreneurship over their recipe work. While these views on their personal roles are valid, they cannot combat the centuries of entrenched social ideas about women's hierarchical role in the home (a role that is constantly visually reinforced by a proliferation of photos of bloggers laughing and smiling while standing over the stove or holding cake and pie). Ironically perpetuating gender norms, unfortunately, still perpetuates gender norms – especially in the eyes of casual readers who do not have access to the specific duties of running a digital business.

The Emotional Highs and Lows of Post-Feminist Womanhood

To summarize thus far, food blogs have a flattening effect on the diversity of the gendered experience. This final section will explore how the rhetoric on these blogs works to smooth out the disparities of experience by allowing for positive and negative emotional experiences to be expressed within a contained set of parameters. Loosely, the emotional experience of womanhood portrayed across blogs as a collection can be distilled into the "good" emotions, categorized as joyful, caring, or indulgent, and the "bad" emotional experiences, primarily expressed as limiting or inducing feelings of inadequacy.

On the most basic level, food bloggers portray women as individuals capable of experiencing immense joy. Deb exhibits the power of food blogger to uphold small pleasures as perfect antidotes to life's small (and sometimes large) unpleasantnesses. Instead of complaining about the bitter chill of a Manhattan winter, Deb turns to memories of her childhood and her mother's adaptation of Julia Child's boeuf bourguignon, describing her vegetarian-ized mushroom bourguignon as "heavenly, warm, and comforting… the best antidote to this shivering January" (Perelman, 15 January 2009). Ree tells a similar story of familial tradition as a source of comfort and happiness, recalling how her mother's cinnamon rolls induced "primal groans of pure joy… they really are that good" (Drummond, 1 June 2007). Food is described as having the joyous power to interrupt otherwise irritating, contentious, or quotidian situations, whether those situations are as mundane as a blossoming New Orleans hangover cured by the perfect basket of French fries – “gilded, criss-crossed ovals of late-night munchie heaven” (Bass, 27 April 2015) – or the evanescent childhood memory of fighting scarring branches for a perfect berry on a hot summer day, “clutching these jewels in your hand, weaving your way through tall and thorny raspberry vines, ducking under encroaching palm fronds, feeling the pulse of the earth under your bare feet” (Diamond, 2 December 2015).

Along with the simple, elemental joys that food brings, food bloggers convey the value of gratitude, including thankfulness for their readers, their ability to engage in their chosen career, and the power of food to bring women together. Jeanine, for example, teased out the beginnings of her induction into the world of artful food styling through a remembrance of her mother’s Valentine treats: “brownies cut into heart shapes and cupcakes topped with poofs of pink frosting… a heart shaped breakfast before we’d put on pink dresses and head to school to trade tiny envelopes with our little friends…” (Donofrio, 10 February 2016). Jeanine acknowledges how lucky she was to have such positive memories of growing up, and thanks her mother for continuing to support her and push her when she falls behind due to illness or unfortunate circumstances. Blogger’s gratitude for the help of other women extends beyond the mother-daughter relationship; Natasha enthusiastically credits her cousin’s wife for sharing a recipe for almond croissants that turns out to produce a “wonderful treat” she describes as both “delicious” and “easy to make” (Kravchuk, 1 November 2013). Cara, rather than crediting another woman with helping her in her food career, credits food with helping her stay connected to her friends. After discussing the beautiful evening that she spent with a group of close, long-term friends, Cara said, “one of the ways we’ve all stayed friends for so long is through potlucks and dinner parties… you can’t underestimate how much a love for food… can keep a group together” (Eisenpress, 23 June 2014).

While bloggers consistently attempt to lift up the women who have aided them on their life paths and continue to help them in their journeys, they also emphasize the importance of paying attention to themselves. While previously I have discussed this focus on the self in terms of attention paid to the kinds of ingredients used and the quality of food prepared and eaten, the notion of self-care is expressed throughout blogs in other ways, too. Joy, for instance, blithely discusses her formula (not even quite a recipe) for “breakfast nachos,” advising her readers to “just let this happen” and toss on “anything that makes you happy” (Wilson, 4 July 2012). Lindsay described her struggle to balance the exhilarating challenges of her blog with her day job as an elementary school teacher, before she made her website her full-time job:

> Today I’m back at work after a delicious weekend at an apple orchard in Washington, and I think it’s pretty obvious that I’d really rather be sleeping on a pillow of this cake than putting on the ol’ black dress pants and hanging a five-point scale on a lanyard around my neck and saying things like “show five” in my pretend calm voice all day. Personal cake day, I think that’s what they call it, and I need it ASAP. (Ostrom, 30 September 2013).

Her tone was cavalier, but Lindsay’s experience showcased the anxiety plaguing women trying to balance an overabundance of social roles. The frenetic drive to simultaneously enact all of the social roles that are available to women (worker, domestic goddess, wife, mother, caretaker, sex object) may be partially attributed to an effort to mimic the speedy pace of living set by cable television food celebrities like Rachel Ray, but it also reflects a bigger social pressure to effortlessly juggle the competing demands of family, labor, and personal fulfillment (Nathanson, 2009). The capabilities of networked digital media can increase the weight of these pressures by providing alluring images of perfection supposedly achieved by other women, but conversely, the work-from-home trend recently popularized by online careers can also alleviate some tension by subverting the typical expectations of a working woman, including the pressures of commuting and maintaining a spotless home despite spending 8-10 hours in an office setting. Tessa acknowledged the freedom her blogging schedule gave her, particularly in combination with the academic schedule of her husband. “To have the summer months off together is truly a gift, and one that neither of us take for granted,” she explained, crediting the time together as invaluable for a food blogger interested in making meals that fit her family, not just her fan base. Kathryn, in her own contemplation of self-care, rejected the idea of mandatory deprivation: “say yes to health, and no to self-deprivation! Get yourself to a yoga class…” she urged, introducing a common theme of doing good things for yourself rather than withholding bad things from yourself (Taylor, 5 January 2012). The distinction is critical, especially in consideration of Lily’s anxious concerns over incidences of disordered eating in the food blogosphere (discussed earlier in this chapter).

The final expression of positive emotions that consistently appears in the food blogosphere is a sense of indulgence, or an expression of being able to enjoy food and life simply “because you’re worth it” (to borrow from L’Oréal Paris). Ree, who lives on a large amount of private property in Oklahoma, told her readers how excited she becomes when she has a reason to trek to the nearest town and visit Starbucks, often treating herself to a purchase of multiple cappuccinos at once so she will have several to enjoy throughout the day (Drummond, 8 April 2010). Often, these indulgences are to satisfy a whim of the blogger, such as when Jeanine whips up a cheesecake parfait to settle her "intense craving" for a secret family recipe, or when Lindsay indulges in the use of a pre-prepared, refrigerated tube of biscuit dough – definitely against the standard locavore, organic, from-scratch blogging aesthetic – to produce an easy 3-ingredient dessert, preemptively declaring to her readers, "It could have more if you wanted to make it more complicated and sophisticated. I won't judge. I might even join you someday. But not today. I have too much to do" (Ostrom, 4 March 2011).

In a break from older mediated expressions of domestic bliss and/or responsibility, from Ma in *Little House on the Prairie* to the newspaper food section editors of the 20th century, food bloggers feel comfortable expressing emotions that do not portray them in a happy or satisfied light. These negative expressions often manifest as expressions of guilt, insecurity, and frustrations, typically surrounding smaller, everyday tragedies rather than major life upheavals.

Food bloggers' discussions of their personal and professional failures presents perhaps the most interesting departures from the depictions of domesticity common in past eras. Deb, in a move characteristic of the approachable attitude that endears her to her many fans, actually lists a category simply titled "disasters" in her recipe archives, including self-proclaimed failed experiments like a clementine clafoutis, a roasted artichoke dish, and an attempt at candied grapefruit peels. The recipes contained in the “disaster” files are not markedly different than the recipes that comprise the more successful pages of *Smitten Kitchen,* and the reasons given for their failures vary.

Bloggers also use their own more laughable moments of failure as a chance to relate themselves to their audience members. Deb told her readers, during a post on pumpkin muffins, that not only did she accidentally purchase pumpkin pie filling rather than canned pumpkin puree (a mistake most recipe writers sternly warn against), she got home with her groceries and began prepping the muffins only to realize that she was completely out of sugar (Perelman, 24 October 2006).

Recipe failures are not always portrayed as lost causes. Adrianna happily advised her readers that “some of the best stuff isn’t planned,” and accidents can in fact be delicious. She also displayed awareness of the aspirational/inspirational role, saying, “You’re actually supposed to be staring at cute little baked oatmeal cups. I pictured you whipping them up for a Mama’s Day brunch and setting them alongside blood orange mimosa, iced coffee and super pretty flowers…” Acknowledging the drabness of the 9x13 beige pan of baked oatmeal, Adrianna admitted that “I failed to bring the cuteness, I think. But that’s okay” (Adarme, 9 May 2012). By promoting these occasional failures to embody the Pinterest-ready, perfectly photogenic norm of food blogging, bloggers can assure their audience that they are relatable, fallible presences – not too intimidating and easily able to understand the challenges that home cooks undergo.

Additionally, failures of a more personal nature can be used as introspective moments to encourage personal growth. For example, Brooke realized that, despite, the cultural pressure she felt to perform her role as a young woman in Seattle a certain way, the habits that worked for her peers did not all work for her: “it turns out I suck at meditating... Last week I went to a yoga class, which ended with a period of guided meditation," she said, telling her experience of realization. "When we first began, I put every ounce of my energy into focusing on the process of being mindless… When the instructor spoke up to bring the class to a close, however, I realized my head was somewhere else entirely (Bass, 30 January 2014). Brooke used this story to convey to her audience that the experience taught her that cooking was her meditative space, and trying to achieve happiness by pursuing it through a pre-defined, one-size-fits-all path only led her to frustration and failure. This kind of admission of personal failure can also be seen in Joy's confession of the ways in which she commonly sabotages her own personal and professional success:

> Sometimes I am a destroyer of myself. It's the strangest thing… aren't we designed to self-preserve? It feels like the most bonkers counter-intuitive part of me. My destroyer-self has tendencies… like… drinking way too much wine under stress or duress… telling lies that need not be told… believing the demons inside that say that I'm never ever good enough so why even try. (Wilson, 1 August 2012)

Despite the dismal outlook of such a confession, Joy continued on to advise her readers that self-destruction is not inevitable. Like Brooke, she urged her audience to consider the habits that would be most successful for them in combatting individual behaviors that we indulge in to lash out or punish ourselves: "thank goodness there are tools. My tools of prevention include: brunch with a best friend, a super honest conversation with a stranger (taxi drivers are wonderful for this), words on the Lord, and the sharing of a cookie cake" she explained, before simply summarizing, “let kindness prevail inside and out” (Wilson, 1 August 2012).

Insecurity and guilt also serve as acceptable negative emotions in these domestic digital spaces. Insecurity manifests in many ways, from bloggers’ personal lives, to their careers, to their love lives. Kathryne discussed her ongoing discomfort with living on her own and being self-employed when she wistfully explained, “maybe it’s silly or childish, but I often catch myself craving recognition for these tiny everyday accomplishments… An occasional “good job,” or pat on the back goes a long way, though” (Taylor, 15 November 2013).

Self-deprecating expressions of body insecurity also abound. Emily expressed her fears over a lack of appropriate femininity: “I feel like how The Rock looks in pretty much every F&F franchise movie… dripping with perspiration to the point where you just assume there’s a tiny person off camera… soaking him down with a tiny mister of baby oil” (Stoffel, 15 October 2015). Physical insecurities are not always cosmetic, however. “For about 15 years I carried around with me an element of fear that a migraine would hit and I would have no choice but to halt what I was doing [and] take some kind of med as soon as possible...” said Tessa, in a post explaining why she pays such careful attention to what she eats. “I feared that things I was so looking forward to would be ruined – graduations, vacations, reunions with friends, my wedding. Fear had a much greater hold on me than I ever really realized” (Fisher, 22 May 2014).

Lily expressed her professional insecurities via her imperfect equipment, specifically an oven with tilted, unevenly heating interior racks: “it will bake imperfect things. Which could, I suppose, bring me terror in a situation where I am called upon to make something like a layer cake. Not just a two-layer cake. A multi-layered cake…" Lily again uses this confession to encourage her readers:

> Which is all to say that, if there is any small part of you that feels fear in your heart at the mere suggestion of busting out a multi-tiered cake in the comfort of your own home, I am living proof that it can be done. From a kitchen with a tilted oven, no counter space, and without a stand mixer. (Diamond, 26 April 2016).

Deb described the way that daily grind of food blogging wears on authors, explaining the challenge of calmly returning to a recipe that just will not work out correctly despite multiple versions replete with tinkering and adjustments. "One of my worst cooking traits is that when I get frustrated with a recipe, it can take me years to get back to it," she explained. "I mean, I'm theoretically too old to be having tantrums, kitchen or other, but there's no other way to describe this behavior where I get frustrated, throw my jangly measuring spoons in the sink and huff off…" (Perelman, 8 January 2015). Exasperation or frustration with small professional details of food blogging were common assertions across all blogs, from Natasha's reported indulgence in throwing "a small fit" after a recipe failed multiple times in a row to Cara's call for understanding from her readers after her laptop (and the collection of edited recipe photographs stored on it) died (Kravchuk, 19 April 2016; Eisenpress, 2 May 2013).

When it comes to the larger life calamities, however, negative emotions are stifled or hidden in favor of expressions of hope and gratitude. When Emily announced her breast cancer diagnosis, it was with the acknowledgement that "beneath the overwhelming feeling of fear and the sans-feeling feeling of shock was the constant hum of thankfulness… if I were anything but thankful at this point, I'd just be asking for a karmic asskicking" (Stoffel, 26 November 2016). In her trademark colorful language, Emily clearly conveyed that a life event of this magnitude could only be overcome by facing it with optimism and gratitude for a well-formed network of social support. Similarly, when Lindsay filled in her audience on the loss of her baby (a son, Afton, born prematurely at 23 weeks) via a 10-part series of blog posts on the experience and her grief, her retelling touched on feelings of anger and denial, but mostly focused on a journey to acceptance, a search for peace in crisis, and expressions of gratitude to everyone from her online community, to her parents, to the hospital staff (Ostrom, 26 January 2017). A focus on uplifting or positive emotional states in the face of major trauma can have a cathartic effect; however, focusing exclusively on gratitude and hope at the expense of working through a complex set of emotions associated with varying levels of loss risks doing more harm than good to the individual striving to overcome the challenge. Parkins (2012) noted through an analysis of gendered emotional expressions online that while women are generally more expressive than men in digital spaces (just like they are in real life), this expressiveness does not expand to the portrayal of anger, which remains a characteristically masculine state of mind and feeling.

In summary, understanding these expressions of emotion provides a much clearer understanding of what kinds of woman[hood] are constituted on food blogs. Primarily, the woman evoked through digital food rhetoric is trapped in an arrested state of girlhood, as seen via her self-deprecating fixation on the body, her nebulous relationship to home and the elevation of the blogger's parents, and her inability to express anger. As McRobbie explained:

> While the qualities of girlhood are not in themselves inherently harmful or dangerous to womanhood, they nevertheless play a kind of boundary-marking function, leaving seriousness, angry humor, and being perhaps old for one's age rather than by necessity youthful at 32 in some other undesignated space." (2009, p. 24)

If excessive gravitas or anger is not appropriate in moments clearly marked by the bloggers as life-altering (a cancer diagnosis, the loss of an infant, a political catastrophe) the reader would be right to assume that such assertive emotions are better avoided in general. Thus, political objections are cushioned with vacation stories and personal triumphs are attributed to an external support system rather than the hard work of the woman. Such emotional deflections recall Meyer, Fallah, and Wood's (2011) suggestion that 21st century women avoid emotional extremes due to the lingering effects of the emotional woman's association with madness throughout history; better to demure and deflect, girls are told from a young age, than to exhibit unstable displays of uproarious happiness or volatile anger that might unseat the people around you. Ahmed further explained that bloggers, especially, find themselves in a double bind of socially-appropriate emotional displays. Bloggers receive clear positive reinforcement for portraying a "happy housewife" role, and through exposure to such domestically-induced "happiness," readers are doubly encouraged to pursue happiness through the same angles. Paradoxically, the work that goes into producing and maintaining a food blog only becomes relevant when a critic claims that a blogger is not, after all, a housewife due to her self-employed status. Post-feminism is affirmed either way, and the women who struggle to discover valid forms of emotional expression find themselves caught in a web of such double-binds. Women are free to choose their own lifestyle and strike an individual balance between professional and personal time, post-feminism claims, but look – doesn’t that balance look an awful lot like mid-century domestic roles? Salvio (2012) explained that these kinds of insidious rhetorical questions are ironically raised in the mind of the reader to reassure women that sexist stereotypes or gender norms are relics of the past, and therefore firmly not issues they should concern themselves with when enjoying food media. In such a fashion, the restrictions on women’s emotional expression and expectations that pit women against each other and create class gaps are allowed to proceed, untroubled.

This chapter has explored how food bloggers selectively position themselves as social advocates during high-profile political events, how they create a distinct vision of home, and how they define and perform acceptable emotional states. In combination, these discourses encourage distinctions between women and promote a girlish ideal that affirms a post-feminist, consumer culture state. In combination with the effects created by the structural capabilities of digital platforms, discussed in the last chapter, these discourses continue to build readers’ sense of dependence. Chapter 6 will formally define the parameters that rhetorically create a parasocial relationship between reader and blogger.

Chapter 6: Building Loyalty Among Digital Audiences with Parasocial Rhetoric

In her own words, Emily Stoffel is "kind of the Pig behind *The Pig & Quill*, although it's never very clear… if I'm being the Pig or eating the Pig or walking that dangerously cannibalistic line somewhere in between" (Stoffel, About). To me, the title of her blog always evokes shades of a mid-twentieth century bar populated by the likes of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Em herself, however, is not in the least evocative of Hemingway; slight in stature, with dark eyes and dark hair that are replicated near-perfectly in her baby daughter Lana, Em was deferential and hesitant during our interview. She began her blog in 2012 as a part-time experiment in sharing recipes and popular culture observations, and she still feels uncomfortable referring to it as her full-time occupation:

> About a year before we had Lana, I quit my job. I was working in marketing for a renewable fuel company and it was really fun, it was a startup, a little stressful… We were trying to have a kid for a while and my husband said, "Maybe we should just eliminate a stress factor and just see how you feel, like maybe working on your blog full time… And so I was kind of, like, fun-employed. I guess, technically, I was doing the blog full time at that point, but I still wasn't doing it to the point where it was a reliable source of income.... It was still just kind of something that was satisfying to me and I didn't wanna work myself to the bone, 'cause the whole point was to eliminate the stress factor for this experimental year. And then something in that year worked and we got pregnant and had Lana. And my husband has very generously just allowed me to stay home with her and the blog, again, it's not gonna make us or break us if I do it or don't do it, So… it's

> probably at this point like 50-50 between what I considered to be a hobby and a business. (E. Stoffel, personal communication, 7 July 2016).

The same sense of self-deprecation can be seen on her blog, where she jokingly explained that she earned her culinary education "from the University of Hey, My Husband Kinda/Sorta Likes It!" (Stoffel, About). Despite Emily's ambivalence about the profit potential of her blog and the relative newness of her site, she has already made waves around the blogosphere. She regularly appears as a guest on culinary-themed podcasts or other blogs, and she has been featured as a kitchen tour on popular food-cultivation website *The Kitchn.* In total, *The Pig & Quill* has garnered 33 guest appearances or shout-outs around the Web since January 2015, including outlets such as Yahoo Food, Buzzfeed, Women's Health, the Food Network, *The Huffington Post*, and the *Today Show* (Stoffel, "Press"). Her unusual recipes highlight ingredients like miso, Spam, eggplant, and furikake, revealing her Asian heritage, and her frequent use of slang, casual language, and an abundance of popular culture references testifies to a life spent mostly in California (Sacramento and San Francisco).

I discussed Emily's decision to forego her typically light and airy tone in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election in chapter 5. Two days after Thanksgiving, she uploaded another somber post to *The Pig & Quill*: the story of the breast cancer diagnosis that she had received just over a month prior. Expressions of love and support poured in on the blog and Emily's other social media accounts:

- I am so sorry you and your family are going through this, but am confident you will come out on top, smiling and radiating giggles and joy, per usual.

- Wishing you and your family the best of luck, strength, and grace. You're brave and super badass, and I'm sure you'll make it through together.
- You know I got your back. Huge fucking hugs and love to you, beautiful strong mama.
- I love your amazing outlook and that you are so ready to kick this boobie cancer's ass!
- Stay strong lady… you and your immune system are going to kick cancer's ass.

The unanimous support came in from friends and family members who knew Emily personally, digital coworkers who knew her as a charming online presence but had yet to meet her in person, and readers who had never had a personal interaction with her on or offline. Despite having established her small corner of the blogosphere as a lighthearted space for recipes and jokes about drinking too much wine or Lisa Frank stickers, Emily was easily able to retain her audience for this switch to a graver, more intimate topic. That ability to carry an audience across contexts and retain their engagement reflects the theme of this chapter: bloggers' ability to build loyalty and enduring personal connections amongst digital audiences via parasocial rhetoric. While discussions of parasocial interaction historically focus on the behaviors and preferences of audience members, I aim to describe the steps a rhetor takes in the realm of digital networked media to encourage an audience to form a parasocial relationship with their online persona. My explication of parasocial rhetoric builds on past discussions on invitational rhetoric and parasocial relationships, as outlined in Chapter 3, and it will address my third and fourth research questions: how do women bloggers interact with their audience, and what do women food bloggers expect out of their audience? This discussion primarily draws on Horton and Wohl's (1956) original explanation of parasocial interaction, Hartmann's (2008) extrapolation on paracommunication, and Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational rhetoric to answer these questions and push parasocial communication beyond the boundaries of the audience's imagination.

Finding a Place for Parasocial Rhetoric

My inquiry into these topics began as an extension of or challenge to Foss and Griffin's (1995) invitational rhetoric. Invitational rhetoric is guided by the three feminist values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination, rather than the traditional patriarchal norm of dominance. Initially, I was drawn to IR because of the core notion that it "constitutes an invitation to enter the rhetor's world and to see it as the rhetor does" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 5). I have devoted considerable time in this study to exploring how the blogger portrays herself, including strategic displays of vulnerability and authenticity. The story that opens this chapter – Emily's breast cancer diagnosis, and the ensuing posts she wrote about battling through chemotherapy and her fears over whether she will be able to have a second child – is an excellent example of the candid disclosures that are shared on these websites, disclosures that are not necessitated by the older forms of professional food writing that predate blogs.

These disclosures are a near-perfect fit for the first form of invitational rhetoric described by Foss and Griffin (1995): the offering of perspective from the rhetor to an audience. As Foss and Griffin detailed, an offering differs from a persuasive appeal in that it merely describes, in detail, the rhetor's individual experiences and then leaves the audience to deal with said experiences in whatever way benefits them personally. So, when Lindsay wrote a post describing her experience with pregnancy in the first trimester, she knew the content might not be appealing to her readers who came seeking typical food blog fare. Rather than try to persuade her readers of the relevancy of her choice, she simply described her experiences and ended with this disclaimer:

> To you mamas who have been there – I'm so glad we can share our experiences. and thank you for creating a space that is non-judgemental and welcoming of all. [sic]
>
> To you mamas who are still trying to get pregnant or recovering from loss – we see you, we love you, we're cheering for you and your babies. ♡
>
> To you readers who are in a completely different life space altogether but still show up to be friends on the Internet – umm, you're the best. XO (Ostrom, 21 December 2016)

Lindsay thus makes space for readers to interpret her story through their own experiences, or to simply hear her account and accept it as one narrative among many. In creating this space, bloggers convey their openness to readers and implicitly place value on whatever lenses readers are experiencing their content through.

The second form of invitational rhetoric entails the fostering of a collection of external conditions that encourage audience members to share their own perspectives in return. These conditions include safety, or the convictions that an audience member's perspectives will be welcomed and respected; value, or the acknowledgement that everyone has intrinsic worth and all voices are worth hearing; and freedom, or the lack of restrictions imposed on interactions by the rhetor in regards to topic and style (Foss & Griffin, 1995). When I turned to explore food blogs through these three conditions, the suitability of invitational rhetoric became less clear. On the surface, all bloggers promote their sites (and extended social media outlets) as places where readers' voices are welcomed, safe, and encouraged. Sometimes this construction takes the form of a literal disclaimer, like the one Emily lists above her comment sections: "Join The Pig & Quill convo by commenting below (I love, luv, lurve comments) and hang out with me on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest" (Stoffel, 15 October 2015). At other times, it may look like Brooke's extended statement of gratitude for her audience, discussed later in this chapter. Despite these avowals of interest and welcome, bloggers fundamentally cannot display the "willingness to yield… to call into question the beliefs they consider the most inviolate and relax their grip on those beliefs" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 7). Because a blog functions as both public rhetorical platform and professional livelihood, the maintenance of a rhetor's authority is too important to truly allow these women to incorporate the perspectives offered back to them by their audience in any lasting, meaningful way. This gap between the acceptance and incorporation of perspectives creates a false front of invitationality in these digital spheres: bloggers encourage audiences to offer up their experiences and perspectives with the knowledge that readers would feel empowered by doing so. Bloggers perpetuate an approachable, relatable persona and offer up authentic, vulnerable experience to solicit audience perspectives, yet never intend to let those perspectives shape their rhetoric.

This rhetorical space, therefore, sits somewhere in between Foss and Griffin's egalitarian ideal and traditional patriarchal norms of persuasion. The more time that I spent with the blogs and the rhetorics therein, the more I became convinced that I should be looking for an answer not within feminist rhetorical criticism, but rather within digital rhetorical criticism. Enter parasocial interaction.

Originally, Horton and Wohl (1956) defined parasocial interaction as the "seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" that arises after repeated exposure to the same personality (p. 215). While parasocial interaction can easily be reduced to little more than the idea of a viewer having an obsessive crush on a television character or performer, the potential of a parasocial relationship in the digital networked media era extends far beyond such simplistic conceptions. Kassing and Sanderson (2009) explained that the capabilities of Internet platforms selectively reinforce the more interactive components of parasocial interaction, particularly "relational appropriateness, expressing gratitude, advice giving, and play" (p. 199). To further understand the way that networked media complicate older notions of parasocial interaction, it is necessary to probe the levels of differentiation that mass media scholars have proposed to Horton and Wohl's original idea in the intervening 60 years.

While "parasocial interaction" and "parasocial relationships" have become conflated in recent scholarship, the two terms are not technically synonymous (Hartmann, 2008). The original explanation of parasocial interaction referred to a one-time behavior from a media performer (perhaps a wink to the camera, or a recurring joke that makes regular viewers feel in-the-know) that elicits feeling in the audience member of being directly, intimately addressed (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A parasocial relationship evolves from a collection of these interactions; Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that parasocial relationships are more likely to arise from parasocial interactions if the audience member gives her relationship with the public persona heightened importance in her life, and that this effect is increased even further when the persona is perceived to be a particular effective worker (such as a food authority, in this case). Further, parasocial relationships imply that the audience consistently displays "identification with a persona, interest in a persona and a feeling of group interaction" (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, pp. 79–80). Simply put, viewers and readers develop lasting attachments to personas who they assume to be similar to themselves, who they would want to hang out with interpersonally, and who seem popular amongst other like-minded audience members. Now, Horton and Strauss stated that the interactivity and intimacy of a parasocial relationship are totally "illusory" and only experienced in the minds of the audience (1957, p. 580). Personally, I doubt that parasocial communication is ever completely unintentional; viewers with deep, intimate senses of connection to a television personality cement the bottom line of a given network or production company, and therefore performers and media outlets have a vested interest in catering to these kinds of attachments, and the power of television to blur the distinctions between public and private behavior has been long established (Meyrowitz, 1985). Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011) further supported this position by positing that television performers use techniques of bodily address (posture, gestures) to increase the enjoyment viewers experience during a viewing session, signaling awareness or intentionality behind increasing audience attachment.

The final rung on the ladder of parasocial interactivity is paracommunication. Hartmann (2008) described paracommunication as a form of parasocial interaction that begins to incorporate elements of interpersonal relationships; this more complex form of parasocial interaction "is likely if users think that the mediated character performs symbolic behaviour towards them and is aware of or at least anticipates their social reactions" (p. 181). In the hypermediated milieu of networked digital media, paracommunication becomes increasingly common while traditional notions of parasocial interactions retreat further into history. As audiences become more convinced that a persona is aware of their actions and responses, more occurrences of symbolic behavior designed to encourage deeper involvement can be observed from both the audience *and* the persona. So, to take the highest-profile example, 4,333,298 people "like" Ree's public Facebook profile; 972,000 fans follow her on Twitter. Fans who are hoping to connect with Ree cannot be sure that she will ever read a given individual comment or tweet, but the capabilities of these media enable fans to receive casual updates and possibly experience personal exchanges that were unimaginable via traditional fan mail. Ultimately, however, while public personas *can* interact socially with fans on social media, such direct interaction is still rare compared to the other ways in which personas promote content and utilize the capacities of digital networked media (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Paracommunication, then, constitutes an always-ongoing form of parasocial interaction because it involves the consideration of how a persona *might* respond to a certain set of behaviors, rather than just the behaviors and the resulting effects.

Because of those altered dynamics and instantaneous connections, networked digital media indisputably blur traditional boundaries between parasocial interactions and interpersonal relationships. I define parasocial rhetoric as a series of rhetorical behaviors used by rhetors on digital platforms to encourage their audience to develop a parasocial relationship with them over time. I am placing parasocial rhetoric closer to paracommunication on the scale of interactions, rather than an isolated parasocial interaction or even a parasocial relationship, because it describes the continuous attitudes a persona assumes in order to produce a desired result. When employed effectively, parasocial rhetoric creates the illusion of a participatory rhetorical space while allowing the rhetor to maintain a degree of distance from and authority over the audience. This proposal builds on Burke's usage of identification as the key term within rhetoric, rather than persuasion; rather than using rhetoric as a tool strictly designed to persuade others to fall in line with a designated way of thinking, rhetors constantly seek ways to connect (sometimes even subconsciously) with other members of society. Burke described this as the state of being consubstantial:

> A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (Burke, 1950, p. 20-21)

In short, most people long to find groups of individuals who are already similar to them in thoughts, beliefs, and behavior. The Internet enables this longing by design: the algorithms behind search engines and smart phones track a users' interests and data over time and delivers information accordingly, without the input of the user. Our technology facilitates the discovery of consubstantial communities by analyzing what we prefer and delivering more of the same to us, meaning that our identity (the information we receive, what we purchase, who we talk to) is shaped, in part, by digital technology. Digital rhetors may take advantage of this fact to increase the loyalty and engagement of their audience via parasocial rhetoric. My proposal of parasocial rhetoric encompasses four rhetorical actions: building rhetorical authenticity, granting response agency to an audience, maintaining asymmetry in the rhetor-audience relationship, and encouraging the audience to perceive itself as a peer community.

Building Rhetorical Authenticity

Hartmann (2008) explained that audiences evaluate mediated personalities based on how much they can trust that character, or to what degree that personality feels like someone the viewer/reader might know in person. Therefore, the first step a rhetor must take to create a parasocial rhetorical space is establishing herself as a viable, lifelike friend. Bloggers create a sociable, authentic persona primarily via minor confessions of consubstantiality, nostalgic recollections of growing up, and admissions of vulnerability and personal failure. Taken together, these rhetorical tactics differentiate the blogger from a purely digital presence (a bot) and encourage readers to engage in paracommunication.

The authenticity of a blogger's persona is built through small memories and moments that demonstrate how a blogger experiences daily life relative to the average reader. For example, Deb played up the simple pleasure of fulfilling a sudden craving when she described the origins of her one-bowl everyday chocolate cake: "sometimes you just want a slice of cake. Often those times are Tuesday night" (Perelman, 3 August 2010). Commenters enthusiastically responded, saying that the recipe was perfect for "those midweek cake cravings for no reason at all" or expressing gratitude for an easy recipe that could satisfy a "craving for chocolate in the middle of a blazing summer's day" (Shaina, 2010; Brian, 2010). These small demonstrations of consubstantiality cannot replace the bigger expressions of authority and expertise discussed in chapter 4 in terms of establishing a bloggers' overall ethos, but they are an integral part of creating a welcoming atmosphere on the blog that encourages readers to feel like they have a space to contribute and a voice that is welcomed in this arena.

These smaller moments of authenticity are also conveyed through memories of childhood and growing up. Adrianna has established her blog, *A Cozy Kitchen,* as a space largely dedicated to baking. To ease the intimidation factor of a blog that advises readers to purchase cake flour for the perfect biscuit crumb, Adrianna relays a story about a more approachable time in her biscuit-making life:

> I grew up making biscuits, I just didn't grow up making *homemade* biscuits. It was one of those way 90s biscuit commercials, where there was like this close-up of the biscuits, as someone tore its layers apart and steam rose all crazy (and fake-like)… I remember staring at that commercial in awe… After that those biscuits sold in those canisters were permanently placed on my mother's shopping list. On Saturday mornings my brother and I were obsessed smacking the cylinder filled with biscuits on the edge of the kitchen counter so they'd make that loud pop! sound. We were so into it. (Adarme, 19 November 2012).

Adrianna's brief childhood reminiscence demonstrates to readers that her talents have grown and expanded over the course of her career. The position of self-made professional with an ever-expanding set of talents is more relatable to audiences than the far-removed, static figures of television chefs of yesteryear. While Julia Child may have inspired a new generation of American home cooks to tackle complex projects, her pedigree and her consistent appearances on television (always in her ever-recognizable kitchen, now immortalized in the Smithsonian) made her a role model: an aspirational figure, but not a relatable one. Personalities like Adrianna, however, can alternately adopt the persona of role model and friend, doubling their importance and usefulness to the audience.

I discussed personal and professional failings of bloggers in chapter 5 as a permissible form of emotional expression on the public platform of blogging. These moments of perceived weakness are also a crucial component of the perceived authenticity of a blogger. When Julie casually admitted that “on mornings that require some recovery from the night before, I don’t go running to plates of greasy bacon and eggs, but to soft-centred carbs with craggly edges that I can nibble with copious amounts of coffee,” she invited readers to consider the similarities between her story and their own instances of over-indulgence (Van Rosendaal, 1 November 2015). Individually, such admissions might be easy to overlook, but the regular inclusion of such humanizing missteps solidifies a reader’s perception of the blogger as a real voice, not a manufactured presence. Hartmann (2008) explained that allowing a digital persona the flexible breathing space of failure, mistakes, and changes of opinion boosts the audience perception of the persona’s intelligence and intentionality.

Moreover, a balance between highlighting adeptness or positive emotion and failings or negative emotions pushes back against the encroaching realm of the uncanny valley. Coined in 1970, the uncanny valley describes the eerie sensations experienced by people observing animatronic or robotic equipment that too-closely mimics human performance (Mori, 1970). Later research has suggested that it is not only the physical likeness of a nonhuman entity that can cause such discomfort, but also the mental similarity. Stein and Ohler (2017) found that people are also repulsed by a digital creation that has an emotional range too similar to a human's, regardless of the physical appearance of the avatar. Therefore, a blogger who exists only in digital spaces for her readers must carefully balance her expressions of emotion to maintain the sense of an authentic, lived human experience – and not a too-close facsimile of such an experience. Additionally, Kathryne thoughtfully posited that portraying vulnerability or otherwise relatable human moments staves off digital attacks: "most of the time, I feel like people respect that I'm a person," she told me. "I think it helps to have my picture in the sidebar, and I'm responding to people, and people can relate to whatever I'm going through in life. Most of the time people seem to get that…" (K. Taylor, 13 June 2016). So, while authenticity is a key facet of encouraging audience members to build lasting relationships with a rhetor, it serves the additional benefit of preventing arguments or detracting comments from disrupting an otherwise immersive experience for other readers.

The final way bloggers that emphasize the authenticity of their experiences and their personhood is through a recreation of poignant moments of maturation and growth. Emily, for example, explained the inspiration behind a homemade sweet-and-savory hand pie recipe by sharing a story about an instance of childhood food consumption that made her feel sophisticated and grown-up:

> Do you remember going to the mall when you were like, 15, and getting a little plastic cup of cream cheese smashed up with pepper jelly from the nice lady at Harry and David and scooping it up with one of those super salty tortilla chips and feeling just so fancy because grooving on things that are sweet and savory and spicy was, like, way grown-up? (Stoffel, 18 October 2014)

Through her childhood mall story, Emily shows a glimpse of her history and the lifelong penchant for flavors that led her to become a food blogger in the first place, but she also phrases the story as a question to create an increased feeling of relatability and universality.

Lily, too, mused on her own growth as a food-centered spirit, in her own characteristically poetic style. "Sometimes growth is slow, so slow you don't notice the shifts in perspective, your slightly greater ease of being, the gradual way in which your body moves more comfortably through the world," she wrote; on the other hand, "sometimes growth is tangible, snappy, thrilling—a new song learned on an instrument, a new word acquired in a foreign language, a new dish made in the kitchen… that shows you who you are in the moment you're making it" (Diamond, 16 October 2015). Lily's assertion that "change is good" gave both herself and her readers permission to make mistakes, to change their minds, to believe that choices we make now are neither more or less viable than choices that were made in the past or choices that will be made in the future.

The theme of growth and exploration was picked up by Brooke when she told of her experiences in her first experience away from New Orleans, where she had grown up, as a young working woman in Chicago. "That year in Chicago, where I was alone and lost in more ways than just my winter wardrobe, was also a year for finding my way through the kitchen" she remembered, calling the space her "very first, shared with no one, make-whatever-the-heck-I-want-for-dinner-even-if-it's-just-cereal-and-wine kitchen. It wasn't fancy… But it was in that tiny kitchen that I made my first Christmas dinner..." (Bass, 1 December 2015). Brooke's story emphasized her own roots as a beginner, providing a comfortable context for readers to share their own responses when Brooke asked them to share their own tales of early kitchen mastery. Meredith responded, "I would say the first dish I mastered was wonton soup. I would spend hours putting together the meat pockets then poaching them in the soup. My parents were so supportive and really hid their cringes as I destroyed the kitchen." Another commenter, Heather, replied, "I think the first thing I really mastered in the kitchen was probably pies. I've been baking pies since I was 8 and love the whole process!" Responses covered a diverse range of experiences, from those like Heather and Meredith who began experimenting as children, to Erika's attempts to cook a kosher dinner for her college roommate, to Dena's omelette-making challenges in culinary school. Brooke took the time to respond personally to each story: "Wonton soup? What an amazing and inventive first dish to master." "I still struggle with pies sometimes." I wish I'd had a roommate like you in college." These personalized responses added further evidence that she values the experiences and contributions of her audience. Overall, a blogger's efforts to demonstrate both her own vulnerabilities and the value she places on her audience's stories and contributes succeeds in humanizing herself, gaining credibility, minimizing the number of conflicts that arise with dissatisfied readers, and creating a space that encourages more readers to feel comfortable sharing perspectives.

Granting the Audience Response Agency

The second step in parasocial rhetoric involves granting the audience the ability and opportunity to respond, increasing the conversational legitimacy of a mostly one-sided relationship. Lueck (2015) found in a study of celebrity Kim Kardashian's posts on Facebook that the audience was most likely to respond to intimate solicitations of advice that might be asked by a personal friend, such as questions about personal appearance or altering grooming habits; these requests implicitly suggest that the knowledge of the readers is wanted and respected. Under such conditions, audience members may feel that the personas they are following "see them as significant individuals and appreciate and attend to their uniqueness" (Foss and Griffin, 1995, p. 12). I authors successfully convey that they view their audience members as whole people, rather than mere demographic numbers or impetuses for increased profit potential, readers demonstrate an increased willingness to respond with in-depth stories and observations. A reader using the handle darbodeluxe, for example, told Brooke a 567-word story about their trials in attempting to light a fire in a rain-soaked Alaskan campground, and the pay-off once their group of campers finally tasted fresh Alaskan salmon cooked over a campfire (Bass, 31August 2016). The time and energy invested in retelling such an extensive story within the comments space of a blog testifies to an individual reader's involvement with the blogger.

Evidence of such involvement sometimes appears even more obviously. In Ree's case, her readers simply tell her outright how much they adore her. Lois, for example, conveyed both her appreciation for Ree's tutelage and her perception of the blogger as a friend when she commented, "I have tried to make anything with yeast for so many years…You could pound nails with everything I baked. Not these!!!!! My family is in awe. Now, how about a really good bread recipe? I feel like I can even do that now! I bow before you!" (Drummond, 1 June 2007).

The space of food blogging provides distinct opportunities to directly invite the audience to participate via sponsored giveaways or requests for input. Cassie offered a $100 gift card to one lucky audience member in exchange for their stories about go-to healthy weeknight dinners; she received 150 answers on the original blog post, plus additional responses on Twitter. Responses ranged from quick chicken dishes that mimicked Cassie's original recipe, an easy stir fry, to homey favorites like tuna noodle casserole or dishes like tacos and curries, inspired by a home cook's heritage and memories of other dinners prepared in the past by loved family members. These giveaways not only provide a tangible benefit to readers and increase the exposure of the sponsoring brand or organization; they also helpfully clue the blogger into what her audience is cooking on a regular basis and what they might like to see more of in the blog's content.

Sometimes, invocations of togetherness are more casual, such as Joy's demand that "we really just need to let this happen" in regards to her post on breakfast nachos (Wilson, 4 July 2012). Joy takes a food topic (nachos) that she knows is universally rather popular, puts a personal spin on it (breakfast and fried eggs), and then discusses it using language that conveys her utter faith in her readers' ability to create delightful things without her help: "feels silly to write a recipe for nachos. It's more about how hungry you are." After giving such free rein to her readers, she encouraged them to "go for it" and "get on in there." In response, her readers felt empowered to share their own combinations with the community; Rebecca said "I'm picturing some salsa verde on mine with chopped tomatoes possibly some sliced black olives and cilantro! good thing I have to pass by the grocery store tonight anyway…." Joy's casual tone and easy use of plural pronouns also created a space where readers felt comfortable sharing their own stories of comforting Tex-Mex experiences. Madeline shared her story:

> This really reminded me of the “chilaquiles” my dad made for me all the time as a little kid. He’d bring home freshly fried tortilla chips, and later when they were stale-ish, toast them in the toaster oven. He’d scramble eggs over the now-crispy chips in a skillet, smother the whole thing in salsa and top with cheese and avocado. Always served with fresh OJ from super-tart oranges off our tree. Half soft, half crunchy super spicy deliciousness. I can’t think of a single dish I’d rather have right now.

As did Shawn: “Your dish reminds me of an Austin favorite: Tex-Mex Migas. A breakfast food that never fails to fill me up and make me feel better (especially after those nights of too many *cough* sangrias *cough cough*).” Kassing and Sanderson (2009) explained that, just as encouragement and support are vital for a healthy parent-child familial dynamic, so too are expressions of encouragement necessary for a community of fans or like-minded hobbyists to maintain and strengthen their bonds with a public persona. While bloggers like Emily and Kathryne create an encouraging space by actively responding to as many comments as possible, Ree works in the up-front text of her posts to solidify her presence as both maternal advice-giver and casual girlfriend. When giving instructions, she directly addresses her readers using playful diminutives: “can I call you baby? Can I call you schnookums?” (Drummond, 9 July 2012). When readers “hear” Ree address them in the same terms of endearment that she uses to refer to her husband, kids, and extended family, the message that they, too, are considered family is heard and welcomed. As reader liz (sic) enthusiastically responded, “yes, you can call me baby!”

The encouragement of parasocial bonding does not stop within the borders of the blog, however. Cassie recognized the value of allowing her readers to have input into her blogging process beyond just responding to the occasional comment on a recipe post. “There's this concept, the idea of your "super fans," and how they are the most important people because they are the ones that are gonna spread the word about you even without you doing anything,” she told me, “and so, I have a secret Facebook group, just with my super fans in it, that I ask questions and I share previews of things, and I really appreciate their feedback, and I think they appreciate being part of that” (C. Johnston, personal communication, 19 August 2016).

Maintaining Asymmetry in Rhetor-Audience Relationships

The natural question at this point in the discussion of how bloggers foster and encourage a parasocial bond with their readers is: are these relationships truly parasocial, or have they simply crossed the realm into a social relationship? Admittedly, I have explored how digital rhetors are active in responding to reader comments and even sometimes create unique private spaces just for those voices to be heard. The key factor in understanding why these relationships remain firmly in the parasocial realm is the asymmetry that fundamentally shapes them. Horton and Wohl’s (1956) original description of parasocial interaction specified that interactions between a personality and an audience member could never be equal by nature. “The crucial difference in experience [between parasocial and interpersonal relationships] obviously lies in the lack of effective reciprocity” between the public/performing personality and the audience member (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). In other words, while an audience member gains explicit knowledge about the rhetor, the rhetor only observes overall trends about audience reactions and does not develop in-depth knowledge about viewers as individuals.

The capabilities of networked digital media have shifted this dynamic towards a more mutual interpersonal relationship, but the digital rhetor ultimately remains able to disclose far greater amounts of personal information than a single reader; all readers gain the same increase in knowledge about a blogger's background, experiences, and preferences from one text post, while a commenter can never be certain which of her comments a blogger has read and remembers. Lueck explained this "illusion of actual social interaction and intimacy" that arises when audiences respond with "sincere advice based on their own life experience and the sharing of highly personal and sensitive information" as key to enduring paracommunication (2015, p. 99).

Part of this asymmetry derives from the blogger's total control over the direction of her content and posts. Cassie, for example, began her blog with a much stronger emphasis on overall lifestyle elements, including her passion for crafting, sewing, and gardening, not just cooking. After the birth of her first child, however, her brand began to shift out of necessity. As she explained it:

> One of the biggest things that I struggled with when I first started was accepting that as you change, your brand will change, and your blog will change, and people have to get used to that. You evolve as a person, I hope everyone evolves as a person, and that's going to be reflected in your online presence… And so I've cut back a lot on the gardening just because when my daughter was born we ran out

> of time. And I got some pushback from people that are like, "Oh, you're not the person we thought you were." And I was like, "You know what? That was four years ago, and I've evolved." … it can be hard to [accept] that you are who you are, and that's gonna be reflected in your blog, and people are gonna have to get used to that” (C. Johnston, personal communication, 19 August 2016).

In chapter 5, I discussed bloggers’ strategic positioning as a food authority; by positioning themselves as dependable, trustworthy sources of information and answers, bloggers position themselves as a go-to resource in their readers’ lives. Magno (2016) suggested that “a cultural blog’s content quality is of little relevance if the blogger is not able to establish an emotional bond with readers. In fact, the establishment of a trust-based emotional bond makes followers willing to trust and comply with the suggestions of the blog” (p. 147). Therefore, in a hyper-competitive digital space, providing solid recipes alone is not enough to stand out from the pack. Only by becoming both a reputable authority and an emotional confidante can a blogger compete to secure and maintain an audience, and audience size drives profit - by establishing a solid audience, bloggers receive more money from ad traffic and more offers from brands interested in sponsorship deals.

Notably, digital rhetors are not omniscient master manipulators; audiences have a strong, undeniable role to play in these relationships. Tessa, in exploring the role that comments and audience response played in her creative process, explained that while she appreciated receiving simple positive feedback, offhand comments such as “how creative!” were not the most useful to her in regards to connecting with her audience. In contrast, when contemplating her online relationship with the mother of a son with life-threatening allergy issues, Tessa explained:

> I really connected with her. She runs her own business and she's always supportive of me and vice versa, and I order her products, and so we follow each other on all of our social media channels and you feel like you are always in touch with that person. (T. Fisher, personal communication, 8 August 2016)

Kathryne echoed those feelings of reliance. She told me "I literally wouldn't have become a food blogger if I hadn't gotten nice feedback on my first couple of recipes. So, [audience] encouragement keeps me going and I love to know that they're actually cooking what I make, 'cause otherwise what is the point? And it's really just heartwarming to hear from people who are improving their health or their family's diet... It's amazing what people have told me over the years" (K. Taylor, personal communication, 13 June 2016). Brooke said, thinking back over her first two years as a blogger:

> You want to know the truth? The absolute, no fluff, probably-too-honest-but-I-don't-give-a-damn truth? I knew nothing… I was woefully ignorant about what blogging, as either a hobby or a profession, actually looked like. I've met some extraordinary people from behind the 13-inch screen of my laptop in those short two years… I've found my voice in a way I never knew I could and have learned to coexist with imperfection. To be comfortable with it, even… I really have you to thank for all of that. I'm not sure I would've continued on at certain points if it weren't for all of you. Sometimes I'm not sure readers realize this little thing. Your feedback, engagement, support…it may not be necessary. But it matters.

> Your comments and emails have made me smile all the way up to the creases in the corner of my eyes before. They've made me spit out my coffee in laughter. At times, they've even dredged up fat tear drops that prick at the corners of my eyes… Above all, they've reminded me how intensely connected we all are. (Bass, 2 February 2016).

The challenge of the digital rhetor comes in presenting themselves both as autonomous experts and as responsive to input from audience members.

Encouraging a Supportive Peer Community

The first three steps of parasocial rhetoric that I have described in this chapter have focused on explicit author actions to encourage readers to form a parasocial relationship with her. The final step, the encouragement of a peer community on the blog, broadens the scope of interactions to include all readers, not just the implied dyad of an author and an individual reader. The blogosphere, as has already been mentioned in this project, is a vast, interconnected network. Chapter 4 discussed how the capabilities of that network can be leveraged by bloggers. The same sense of blogs as a networked community make this final step of parasocial rhetoric possible; bloggers rely on the interactions between readers to solidify the blogger's reputation as resident expert without additional action on her part. In this way, what began as a concerted effort on the part of the blogger morphs into a self-sustaining system of engaged, long-term readership.

The influence of the peer community on parasocial rhetoric is illuminated via an understanding of perceived social distance. Hartmann (2008) defined perceived distance as the degree of separation that a viewer or reader interprets as existing between themselves and a given public persona. These perceptions of distance are increased by the audience's belief that their actions have no impact on the rhetor; perceived distance decreases with the audience's belief that the rhetor is a valid, authentic human being.

The peer community is vital for preventing blogger burn-out. As Kathryne explained, "I end up getting really frustrated with… comments that I feel are just silly or could be answered by a Google search, but I try to be patient with people… and explain things as best I can" (K. Taylor, personal communication, 13 June 2016). Kathryne self-identified as "a little more sensitive than [she] should be," and admitted that if a given recipe receives 19 positive comments and one negative comment, it is the negative feedback that will stay with her. To illustrate, one of the most popular posts on *Cookie & Kate* is a honey whole-wheat banana bread recipes; the page has 412 comments, outstandingly high for this particular blog (Taylor, 6 May 2011). One of those commenters, Cathy, left the following negative review: "I chose this recipe as I thought it seemed different from many others and therefore interesting……don't make the same mistake as me…..find another recipe, this one isn't nice, I had to feed it to the birds. What a waste. I had followed the recipe properly." While the hundreds of five-star reviews on the recipe could perhaps have stood alone as counter-evidence to this particular opinion, Kathryne's fans took it upon themselves to shut down the criticism. Reader Martha shot back in response, "don't listen to the negative reviews,,,i have made this over 20 times, and everytime it has been gobbled up by my family within 48 hours. It is a great low sugar alternative on my son's lunch too (sic)."

Such crowd-sourced dismissals of negative criticisms appear across blogs and allow the authors to step back and avoid becoming involved in an argument (and risk losing some of their likeability) while still retaining their expert-status, thanks to the defensive efforts of their community. So, when a reader critically asks Ree why she buys supermarket beef to cook with when she lives of a cattle ranch, four other readers are ready to jump to the Pioneer Woman's defense with explanations of the differences between beef and dairy cattle as well as recommendations for where in the archives the critical newcomer can search out Ree's own fully-articulated discussion on the very subject (Drummond, 9 July 2012). Ree never has to step in, thus avoiding seeming defensive, the new reader receives all of the information she was searching for, and the established readers remind themselves of what they love about the site and increase their stake in it by becoming active advocates. Similarly, when Lana expresses her dislike of a salad recipe Ree posted due to the inclusion of green peas as an ingredient, the reading community hastened to encourage her to not give up on the recipe entirely, spurring a conversation between women about various substitution possibilities or experiences that they had in overcoming their own prior food aversions (likely through the magic of Ree's shared recipes) (Drummond, 30 August 2010).

"I'm a Food Blogger, Not a Surgeon:" Interactions with Readers

When asked what her typical reader looked like, Kathryne answered without hesitation that her readers were women who were like her: around 30 years old, well-educated, interested in following plant-based/whole foods philosophy. In contrast, Lily confidently told me that assuming all of her readers were similar to her was "myopic" and prevented bloggers from working harder to reach diverse audiences. While initial responses regarding how they conceptualize "audience" clearly varied, certain facets of blogger-audience interactions remained constant across all of the platforms I examined.

These women generally conceive of themselves as having two audiences. As Cassie explained:

> We have the one-off, coming in from Pinterest, or just Googling a recipe [audience that] is honestly the audience that pay the bills. They're the ones that give you millions of hits, and share your stuff, but they're not the ones you're connecting with. That is such a small percentage, and it's really changed how you connect with that small percentage. Like, no longer is it about, "I'm writing this post about what I'm doing this weekend," it's about, "Let me send you an email. Let me connect with my Instagram or Snapchat." And it's like, having those people that have been with me for so long means so much to me that I'm willing to take that extra effort to connect with them outside of the blog. (C. Johnston, personal communication, 19 August 2016)

This distinction between the readers who come for the “meat” of the content (pun intended) and leave after getting a desired recipe versus the readers who make an investment and become extended family explains the disconnect seen in bloggers’ discussion of their audience. When Kathryne said, “I refuse to feel like I’m on call to answer recipe questions… I don’t feel there should be an emergency. I wanna be able to answer everyone's questions definitively but I cannot because I'm not a recipe robot,” her frustration was directed at the first audience (the “pay-the-bills” audience). Lily, on the other hand, referenced the second type of audience when she noted:

> What I hear in terms of feedback from readers is that vulnerability and… my willing[ness] to just basically be authentic and talk about all the things that I’m talking about with my friends or myself anyway. You know, realizing that these

> are conversations that a lot of young women are wanting to have and a lot of young women… feel like they don't have a space to have them with each other. And so this is a place where we can kind of chat about them [with] simultaneous intimacy and anonymity. (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

While this easy willingness to split readers into one-off recipe gatherers versus invested digital friends has a proven basis in Google Analytics, it also makes it easy for bloggers to continue shaping and structuring their websites in a way that manipulates the reading experience. If bloggers feel that the readers who truly feel a personal connection with them are reaching out via email or another more personal form of communication (rather than the blog comments), then the guilt that they might otherwise associate with downplaying reader responses is alleviated by the inordinate amount of "extra effort" paid to that dedicated "small percentage."

Paradoxically, though, bloggers do expect readers to know what is going on in their lives and follow the narrative thread of their website. This expectation comes about as a sort of pay-off to the vulnerability and self-disclosures that factor prominently into food blogs. This expectation of attention is enabled by the structure of the websites, discussed in chapter 1. For example, if a reader missed the original explanation of how Deb planned to write a short series on her adventure creating a tiered and decorated wedding cake for her friend, Deb provides hyperlinks back to the earlier explanation of her efforts. Without an understanding of these stories, the rhetorical authenticity of the authors is undercut.

Additionally, bloggers have the basic expectation that readers will at least occasionally attempt to make the recipes they write about: "I love to know that they're actually cooking what I make, 'cause otherwise what is the point?" (K. Taylor, personal communication, 13 June 2016). Lily took a matter-of-fact approach to this desire and explained that "people relate to blogs… in a very aspirational manner, which is why I always feel so special like when I hear someone actually made something. I do think a lot of people go to blogs or read blogs without necessarily ever intending to make what they see…" (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016).

In summary, while bloggers are concerned with creating a safe and welcoming space for their readers, the motivations behind these efforts are not completely altruistic. The interplay between the drive to persuasively secure a large audience base (and therefore increase the earnings of a blog) and the more typically feminine urge to create a cooperative space trouble the typical distinctions created between persuasion as inherently violent/masculine and feminine/feminist rhetoric as inherently empowering. The implications of this liminal type of rhetoric will be further addressed in chapter 7.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

My grandmother, a White septuagenarian, was widowed several years ago. Never the type to remain idle, when the initial shock and grief of the relatively sudden loss began to dissipate, she turned herself toward various ways to stay active. These occupations including knitting a variety of hats for good causes and serving as a poll worker in the 2016 election. Most relevant of her hobbies, however, is her fondness for participating in the comment sections on *The Pioneer Woman*. While I knew that my Nana was a tech-savvy senior citizen and that she liked to cook (in fact, she would often text me pictures of various meals and desserts she had prepared), I did not know about her frequent participation in this specific digital community until I stumbled across her comments during my dissertation research. She posts through a linked Facebook account, so when I see her name and her profile thumbnail photo (just two bespectacled eyes and an abundance of fluffy white bangs against the stark-black of her trademark eyebrows) pop up in strings of conversation and questions, I inevitably smile. When asking if the batter for a pancake recipe could be frozen (as she lives alone and does not eat in large batches), she signed off her question with a cheery "hugs to one and all" and thanked the woman who gave her an answer with a succinct "you're a peach!" On another post (serving up an oozing butternut squash mac and cheese recipe), she offered other readers an insider's tip, explaining that halved squashes would roast faster in the oven if they were placed face-down to steam in their own moisture. Each comment ends with some variant of "hugs" for all the other PW fans reading along with her (October hugs! long-distance hugs! nine-rainy-days-in-a-row-in-upstate-South-Carolina hugs!). My grandmother has multiple clubs and groups that she participates in to provide face-to-face friendship, and her family visits often; clearly, this digital community gave her something in addition to those interactions. Despite the months that I had spent taking detailed notes on these websites and interviewing their creators, seeing the regular cheerful updates from my grandmother (in a space where she had no idea I was observing) made me consider their purpose anew.

This project began with the goal of examining how the capabilities of networked digital platforms enable and constrain women as public personalities. Throughout the previous chapters, I have discussed how food bloggers selectively embrace or reject old-fashioned and re-interpreted norms of domesticity in order to further their brand and increase their profit margins and digital sphere of influence. At the outset, I posed four research questions to guide this study:

> RQ1: What type of woman[hood] is produced through women-authored food blogs?
>
> RQ2: [How] do these spaces reflect patterns seen in women's issues throughout broader social issues?
>
> RQ3: Why do audiences participate in these blogs?
>
> RQ4: How do women bloggers interact with their audience, and what are their expectations for that audience?

This final chapter briefly revisits and summarizes the answers to these questions and the takeaway implications of this work, before addressing the lingering limitations of the study and a few possible directions for future research.

Post-feminist Women versus Post-feminist Society

Far from being a distinct space, removed from the "real" world, the Internet is intrinsically connected to and mediated via our lived experiences in society (Ibrahim, 2015). Correspondingly, the women who make a living by putting their stories and creative content on the Internet cannot do so in a vacuum from ongoing current events in society. This fact presents a challenge when combined with the expectations that food and the women who prepare it will serve as an escape from the contentious battlegrounds of politics or social struggle; as Salvio (2012) explained, if the success of a party meant to provide a moment of celebration in the midst of a time of unrest hinges entirely on a homemade cake, the failure of said cake would be a catastrophic event. Today's food blogging women carry not only the problematic legacy of gendered expectations regarding the succor of comfort food, they must also navigate the mine-filled territory of choosing whether or not to utilize their public platform as a space for social advocacy. While the most heartfelt of stances still runs the risk of incurring a vehemently angry response, the pay-off for speaking out about their opinions and finding that those words of resistance have helped an audience deal with trauma is usually worth the struggle for most bloggers. Even so, women find themselves caught in a loop of disarticulation, or the strategic leveraging of differences between women (family status, career choices, income levels, physical appearance, portrayals of home) to make the likelihood of women bonding as a force of social or political action less likely (McRobbie, 2009).

While individual bloggers struggle with what it means to be a woman in the kitchen in 2016, Genz (2006) insisted that, if we can only find the right lens to employ it within, post-feminism can provide us an ideal way to understand feminine agency in the

21st century. The crux of the issue comes down to disjunctions between an individual woman in post-feminist culture versus the broader context of post-feminist society overall.

Definitions of what it means to be feminine have radically shifted in the last 20 years. While the gender roles of the mid-twentieth century and before were undeniably restrictive, they gave women a clear framework within which to articulate their identity (either in agreement with the role or in stark opposition to it). The women who write and populate domestic blogs labor under the legacy of those roles and the morass of political and social conflict that has persisted surrounding women in society in the intervening decades. This conflict is evident in the way that women discuss their emotional states; conflict, loss, and trauma are welcome, but only insofar as they support women bloggers use minor rejections of femininity, like admitting occasional failure, as a sort of post-feminist shield against more critical observations of bigger domestic patterns. Bloggers admitted to me that, while they sometimes struggle with the optics of being a woman often seen in the kitchen, their self-concepts highlight the work that they know goes into maintaining a successful blog: the day-to-day operations of managing email and social media, finding partner brands to collaborate with, editing their writing and tweaking the code for their websites, or learning more about the digital photography equipment that makes their chosen career possible.

I agreed with Foss and Griffin (1995) when they stated that "attention to non-patriarchal forms of communication expands the scope of rhetorical theory and enhances the discipline's ability to explain diverse communicative phenomena successfully" (p. 2). However, in the past 20 years, the distinction between persuasion as masculine and feminine forms of rhetoric as non-competitive has contributed to overly simplified understandings of gender norms and performance.

Just as the bloggers I talked to were simultaneously happily domestic women and shrewd business owners, female rhetors in the digital space can simultaneously exhibit characteristics of a welcoming, safe rhetorical space while also benefitting from competing against other authors to persuade the audience to remain most loyal to their specific voice. Lloyd (2016) described this rigid distinction as dichoto-negative rhetoric, or the division of an issue "into an either/or choice which not only favors the rhetor's thesis, but explicitly or implicitly, and most often unnecessarily, dismisses other arguments as irrational, defective, irresponsible—even dangerous" (p. 80). Instead, he proposes a "fuzzier" approach to rhetorical criticism, in which the critic examines not whether a theory/artifact/rhetor is inherently feminist, but rather, whether the object of study is *practically* feminist in a given context; this, Lloyd (2016) explained, is much closer to the way we make snap-judgments in the heat of the moment based on ongoing contextual understandings. Indeed, evidence of this "fuzziness" exists in the application of non-competitive rhetorical principles to men; Cooper (2009) analyzed President Obama's rhetoric as an exemplar of both classically masculine and classically feminine styles, but concluded that "to the extent that Obama's feminization was only enabled by his male (and even black male) privilege, his being unisex does not necessarily portend the loosening of identity constraints" (p. 660). What works for men, and especially men in power, does not yet work for women, and unfortunately, the field has yet to catch up to embracing women as both competitive and feminine.

Finally, much of this discussion is clearly limited to and concerned with the representations of domesticity and food consumption/production as it relates to White American women. As previously discussed, all of my participants were White, and they reported that their website data indicates that many of their readers are also a fairly homogenous group. While I have addressed the problematic implications of this fact, more productive findings also deserve to be heard. While White women are a shrinking demographic in the United States, they still constitute 32.6 percent of the national population. These women occasionally present as a political and social enigma; analysts were bemused, for example, when Donald Trump won the vote of White women over historic candidate Hillary Clinton, flipping expectations of a gender-solidarity vote (Malone, 2016). These women never directly experienced Friedan's "problem with no name." They never donned the totemic white of the suffragettes to march for the right to vote. Many came of age during a time when women were beginning to out-graduate men from high school, college, and graduate school. In other words, gender solidarity (and in some cases, cross-gender animosity) is not a guaranteed motivating factor for White American women. What this project reveals, in fact, is that young White women are more interested in having their achievements and interests within the domestic sphere afforded equal value as the activities of the public sphere, than they are in having equal access to the public sphere itself. I am not claiming that women do not believe in equal access to the public sphere, but rather, that the post-feminist mindset has succeeded in creating a significant population of women who have re-prioritized their own interests above broad-scale, intersectional accessibility and equality.

Much of this is evident in the way that women discuss their hobbies, such as when Kathryne equated cooking skills to an individual's ability to care for their own physical well-being. In such a view, domesticity is reframed not as women's work, but as work that is associated with the business of adulthood and independence. While this outlook is in many ways a healthy step forward, in that it encourages participation in the domestic sphere regardless of identity, it also minimizes the historical reality of women's oppression – not unlike the amended recognition of craftwork as high art, discussed by Hedges (2014), cannot reconcile the systematic exclusion of women from centuries of formally recognized creative expression. For feminist scholars looking to bring lapsed White women back into the fold of political gender-equality action, the take-away is this: we cannot reclaim their interest solely by playing up the accomplishments of a century that many find (to echo one of my own recurrent themes in this project) unrelatable. Only by incorporating progressive feminist goals into a structure that does not penalize women for displaying interest in traditionally domestic activities can we begin to bridge the gap of interest and action.

Striving to Find a Place in Online Food Communities

Food is infinitely more than the sum of its parts. It conveys and inspires ideas about "consumption, pleasure, morality and renewed aesthetics" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 3). Through the easily understood referent point of food and cooking (or parenting, do-it-yourself project, quilting, and décor, to cite other popular blog topics), women have a forum in which to discuss the intricacies of their everyday lives, including common issues such as difficulty relating to the demands of extended family members, sadness over children growing up and leaving the home, and personal insecurities over appearances or achievements. Thus, food gives women a discursive starting point that is approachable and accessible to all – assuming that they have access to the digital platforms where the conversations occur. In the lowest income brackets, up to 20% of American adults still lack access to the Internet at home (Rainie, 2017). This population is less likely than more affluent populations to have cooking knowledge and experiences more lifestyle stressors than other population brackets (Smith, Ng, & Popkin, 2013). They could gain valuable emotional and technical support from access to these forums, but remain locked out.

I have discussed the tensions between relatability and authenticity throughout this project; ultimately, this dialectic reveals the aspirational nature of food blogs. According to executive chef Chris Cosentino, people who do not or cannot cook watch food television "to live through others' actions… A lot of people want to feel the same passion that chefs do, and TV is the closest way to get to that" (McBride, 2010, p. 46). Now, television is no longer the medium with the highest degree of immediacy. Blogs allow women to communicate with the individuals they admire, specifically describing what aspects of a cook's personality or style they find the most inspiring, and often receive rapid feedback from that persona (even if it's just a word or two). The reception and delivery of stories in interactive forms such as blog communities are a constructive component of the discursive formation of individual identities (Page, 2013). Summarily, for women like my grandmother, blogs are a preferred (but not a necessary) form of gathering with a community of like-minded individuals within a safe discursive net. Members of the community can be reasonably sure that other members will understand their references and experiences and welcome them, regardless of differences that might arise in more targeted political or social spheres.

Do readers realize that bloggers are portraying a level of domestic perfection that may not be as relatable as they hope? Expressions of reader jealousy and resentment chronicled by Matchar (2013) or Cairns and Johnston (2015) suggest that they do. The relatability of these bloggers, then, comes not from the way they currently portray their lives, but from their discussions of humbler beginnings. Much like a middle-class American might not strenuously object to economic benefits to the highly wealthy out of a small spring of hope that one day they, too, will belong to that class, a blog reader wants to see glossy, perfect images of domesticity because such images and stories provide aspirational/inspirational fodder. By tacit agreement from both bloggers and readers, blogs remain a space always teetering on the boundary between informative and entertaining.

She Works Hard for Her Money (Managing Audience Expectations)

I have established that food bloggers perceive themselves as having two audiences: a consumer audience that visits the site primarily to gain information and a peer community that follows the narratives of the blogger and comes to embrace her a s a close friend and trusted authority. Bloggers manage the sometimes-competing needs of these audiences by leveraging the structure and content of their blogs to create a uniform, consistent reading experience for both kinds of audiences across the entire context of the blog.

Structurally, bloggers use the capabilities of the networked digital platform (particularly hyperlinks and website archives) to grant the audience agency in co-

constructing the reading experience while simultaneously reinforcing the over-arching life narrative and brand of the blogger. Utilizing similar structural tactics and stylistic choices allows digital rhetors to circumvent some of the rhetorical work that more traditional speakers would need to continually re-engage in. A digital rhetor, for example, does not need to re-tell stories for new audience members because blog archives contain all previous stories in their original form. A digital rhetor does not need to spend time detailing external circumstances because she can simply provide a hyperlink to a first-hand account. Therefore, my discussion of the structural conventions of blogs in Chapter Four is not an addendum or a sideline to my ongoing exploration of digital rhetoric, but rather a crucial facet of understanding how digital rhetorical platforms are informed just as much (or more) by their style and structure than by their content. Because the power of hyperlinks, archives, and graphic design supplement and reinforce the blogger's ethos and the *Kairos* of the blog, the blogger is remarkably free to continue adding content that furthers her personal brand, growing her overall digital influence.

Having maximized the structural capabilities of the blog, bloggers then utilize parasocial rhetoric to strategically shape the content of their blogs, ensuring that readers perceive them as a friendly, yet dependable source of advice and expert information. This relationship, which inherently grants more power to the blogger via her increased power in choosing what forms of reader input she wants to consider and respond to, results in a reader community that is unafraid to take up rhetorical arms to defend the blogger against interlopers in "her" community who attempt to criticize (and therefore, de-legitimize) the space and the blogger's expertise therein. Through these structural and content adjustments, blog audiences are encouraged to sustain and perpetuate the relationships that benefit bloggers.

Finally, bloggers undeniably use demographics to their advantage. Nearly 85% of food bloggers are women, and 73% are American (Foodista, 2012). The bloggers informed me that most assume that their audience resemble themselves: White American women. This similarity bias enables bloggers to assume a baseline of familiarity off which to build popular cultures references and experiential touchstones. It also likely accounts for why blogs that are not authored by middle-class, 20-40 year old White women are restricted from using the general label "food blog," instead being pigeonholed as a Chinese food blog or a Mexican food blog. The privilege that allows these authors to blithely assume that everyone shares their experience is problematic, insofar as it alienates large swathes of potential readers. However, it is undeniably a successful tactic for creating deep connections with a core audience.

Project Limitations

In a perfect world, this section would be unnecessary. As things stand, I must recognize several factors here as limiting in the final iteration of this project. The first concerns a deviation from my original research plan. While I always planned for my interviews with the bloggers to be secondary to my textual analysis, I remain frustrated that I had such difficulties connecting with bloggers and securing interviews. I recognize that for these women, their time is literally money – when news or lifestyles outlets are offering to pay money for a short interview, it is not as appealing to surrender your time to a 26-year-old researcher in Ohio whom you have never met, especially knowing that that conversation will not result in any increased traffic to your website. Factor in the public's general aversion to talking on the phone, and it's probably surprising that I secured even six conversations. While I was happy that the interviews I was able to secure produced remarkably consistent results in many ways, I recognize that the six women I talked to cannot be representative of the whole industry, and I do not claim them to be.

Additionally, I had hoped to make greater use of my coded audience responses. For every blog post that I coded, I also coded audience comments on those posts. These comments factored into my final project in only a minor way. However, the wealth of detail that arose through the main coded themes on the blog posts was so extensive that I felt it did greater justice to my guiding research questions to focus on unpacking the contents of those themes, rather than summarily including the comparatively less-dense themes of audience comments. That wealth of critical textual analysis also eased my worries over the smaller number of interviews informing this project.

What Comes Next? Directions for Future Research

Throughout the process of completing this project, two major areas of inquiry arose that I was forced to shelve due to time constraints or other limitations produced by the nature of the dissertation. The first concerns the use of visual rhetoric on domestic blogs, and the second concerns areas of audience preference and identification.

The images and photographs on a food blog are a huge component of the success of any given site; their massive impact is actually exactly why I chose to exclude them from this project. There was simply so much information available through the visual aspects of these websites that addressing it encompasses a completely different dissertation-length project. Various analyses of the photography on food blogs have been undertaken before (see Dejmanee, 2016a; Ibrahim, 2015; Nathanson, 2015; Salvio, 2012; White, 2015). And, of course, various levels of scholarly interplay exist between scholars of food, visual culture, and visual rhetoric (see Belasco, 2008; Bottinelli, 2015; Garner, 2015; McBride, 2010). What most intrigues me, however, is the increasing strength and relevancy of the images that bloggers choose to cross-post on social media outlets, especially Instagram or Pinterest. Lily mentioned that primarily-visual media outlets actually change how her audience interacts with the content on her blog:

> I've actually found that… if I tease a story that is interesting to [readers] on Instagram, they'll click through on Instagram… I can track the whole cycle. [They will] give me like a like on Instagram, go click through, read the link, come back to Instagram and comment about what they've read on Instagram. I think it's some people feel like… it's just easier to leave a comment on Instagram. There's definitely shifting tides in terms of how and where people comment. (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016)

Given these shifts in audience behavior that Lily describe, and my own observations of blogger reliance on telling stories to gain trust and build rapport with audience, I am curious about how the increasing emphasis on visual platforms will impact these women. Will there be an even bigger split between the two audiences that Cassie described (one that finds recipes and pays the bills, and a smaller group that reads all of the stories and becomes a friend)? To further investigate the effects of this shift, research needs to address how an author decides what image is representative of a thousand-word blog post, what kinds of images are most likely to gain traction/go viral, and what themes are present in imagery across different author's outlets.

Additionally, as I mentioned in my discussions of the limitations of this project, I have a rather extensive set of coded blog comments that are largely not included in the version of this project that you just read. Those comments, across all 15 blogs I analyzed, almost unanimously fell into just seven themes: personal connection/friendly parasocial interactions, discussion of being a caretaker, nostalgia and the sharing of memories, connections based on regional lifestyle trends, dependence on the blogger for advice or clarification, general praise of the bloggers' abilities and expertise, or criticism of a recipe that did not work for the reader. Parasocial interactions were folded into chapter 6, and questions of dependence were utilized in chapters 4 and 6, but given time to pursue this project further I would inquire further into the impact of being a caretaker in connection to notions of domesticity and the recollections of nostalgia or regional similarities in terms of how they impact which bloggers a reader chooses to follow.

Also on the topic of audience identification with bloggers, a dark side of food and lifestyle blogging fell outside the scope of my discussion in this project, but my participants expressed concern about it. Lily brought to my attention that "there is so much to be said about eating disorders and food bloggers… it's really disturbing me. …those who are, you know, brave enough will often share that they're dealing with that, but then the really tricky part is that very often, there are bloggers who are making extraordinarily indulgent unhealthy foods. So it's like – it's just like looking at this psychological disaster at large…" (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016). She was particularly troubled by the idea that her peers were continuing to put themselves in situations that exacerbated their psychological illness: "there are two [bloggers] in particular that kind of came out in the last year as being… anorexic or [having] extremely disordered eating that were both heavy-duty baking blogs and it's just crazy. It's so intense. I'm like I can't go there with you. I honor your journey but step away – don't kill yourself" (L. Diamond, personal communication, 4 August 2016). The transcript can be read as flippant, but Lily was anything but during our conversation. Her concern was enormous, to the point where she struggled to convey an articulate message. The connections between food blogs and unhealthy attitudes toward food is not an untouched area of study; Huovila and Saikonen (2016) explored how dieticians can use digital platforms to spread a credible message, and Lynch (2012) explored how digital depictions of food and exercise reveal attitudes about restrictive dietary habits. These studies, however, all focused on explicit narratives of health. The subtler ways in which female rhetors in a domestic sphere incubate possibly unhealthy attitudes of self and appearance, in conjunction with the broader struggles women face when trying to integrate domestic and professional identities, may provide fruitful ground for exploration.

Plating Up Broader Implications and Disciplinary Connections

Ultimately, my goal for this project was to push rhetorical studies to be more relevant to the burgeoning field of social media studies. This study began with a definition from Pfister (2014): "networked media, as a truncation of *Internet*worked media, reflects a core dynamic at work in new digital technologies with a more optimal balance between richness and precision" (p. 10). I hope to see more work from rhetorical scholars exploring how networked media as a platform for public speech fundamentally shifts our understanding of rhetoric, particularly in regards to the invention of a particular piece of rhetoric and the ongoing ethos of a digital rhetor. This project was partially inspired by Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook's (2015) exploration of pulling traditional rhetorical inquiry and qualitative/ethnographic methods of research together to better explore in situ rhetorics; it is this spirit of adaptability and the whole-hearted embracing of new methods for the 21st century that I aimed to emulate here. In a discipline that is thousands of years old, it can be too easy to cling to traditional methods of work, but enthusiastic attempts to adapt rhetoric for new technologies and populations are unquestionably necessary to bolster the continuing relevancy of the field.

This project is also ultimately a critical inquiry into the impact and value of domestic digital spaces in a post-feminist culture. It would be easy to flippantly claim that just as corsets painfully shape women's bodies into unrealistic ideals, food blogs foist unrealistic concepts of domestic bliss onto audience, and are therefore a negative force in the pursuit of digital and/or rhetorical equality. However, such a statement is simply not true, or at least, not all the way true.

What is true is that blogs, when examined together as a collective, have a flattening effect on the experience of womanhood. Middle-class and affluent, White, youthful or early-middle-aged voices are amplified and echoed, while women of color and women of lower socio-economic status struggle to gain access to conversations and avoid being pigeon-holed and reduced to cultural stereotypes. Even the women within the privileged group experience restrictions on their expressions of identity. Subtle social expectations reinforce which emotional states might be acceptably displayed in a public, digital forum. Individuals' tendencies to only highlight their best, most manicured versions of their selves and their homes creates immense pressure on others to match an exacting, unrealistic standard of behavior or appearance, sometimes even leading to disordered eating or other psychological distress.

And yet, despite the obvious down sides, food blogs also stand as a unified community of support. When Emily received her cancer diagnosis, or when Lindsay suffered the loss of her prematurely-born son, their online fans, friends, and coworkers rallied immediately to their sides. Women like my grandmother and the other commenters cited throughout this project view food bloggers as both trusted sources of information and friendly voices that exist close at hand when they desire a funny reference or calming anecdote. As Matchar (2013) and Salvio (2012) discussed, the size and scope of the new domesticity phenomenon cannot be solely attributed to social pressure; many American women feel a strong desire to reacquaint themselves with the arts of the home (cooking, crafting, knitting, sewing, canning, preserving), and they desire a space in which they can discuss those activities without presumptions that they have regressive or oppressive social beliefs. Ultimately, then, food blogs exist as simultaneously beneficial to individual authors and readers, and an inextricable part of a larger harmful social structure. Showden (2009) cited British feminist Natasha Walter when she argued that "if feminism wants to 'build on all the new female confidence that exists,' it cannot be 'a rigid ideology that alienates and divides women'" (p. 171). This effort requires meeting women where they are, rather than where scholars assume them to be; I will continue exploring these tensions in the future, and hope that this research will help others in communication studies and feminist studies to do the same.

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Appendix A: Identifying Information on Blogs and Bloggers

Blog Title, Author	Hyperlink	Location	Average posts/ month	Year of origin
1. *Smitten Kitchen*, Deb Perelman	www.smittenkitchen.com	Manhattan, NY	6	2006
2. *A Pinch of Yum*, Lindsay Ostrom	www.pinchofyum.com/blog/	Minneapolis, MN	13	2010
3. *Cookie and Kate*, Kathryne Taylor	www.cookieandkate.com	Kansas City, OK	10	2010
4. *Natasha's Kitchen*, Natasha Kravchuk	www.natashaskitchen.com	Meridian, ID	11	2009
5. *The Pioneer Woman*, Ree Drummond	www.thepioneerwoman.com/cooking/	Pawhuska, OK	8	2006
6. *Wholefully*, Cassie Johnston	www.wholefully.com	Southern Indiana	13	2010
7. *Kale and Caramel*, Lily Diamond	www.kaleandcaramel.com	Los Angeles, CA	9	2012
8. *A Cozy Kitchen*, Adrianna Adarme	www.acozykitchen.com	Los Angeles, CA	10	2009
9. *The Pig and Quill,* Emily Stoffel	www.thepigandquill.com	Menlo Park, CA	4	2012
10. *Love and Lemons*, Jeanine Donofrio	www.loveandlemons.com	Austin, TX	4	2011
11. *Chocolate and Marrow*, Brooke Bass	www.chocolateandmarrow.com	Portland, OR	4	2014
12. *Salted Plains*, Tessa Fisher	www.saltedplains.com	Kansas City, MO	3	2014
13. *Dinner with Julie*, Julie Van Rosendaal	www.dinnerwithjulie.com	Calgary, Canada	8	2008
14. *Big Girls Small Kitchen*, Cara Eisenpress (help from Phoebe Lapine)	www.biggirlssmallkitchen.com	Brooklyn, NY	8	2008
15. *Joy The Baker*, Joy Wilson	www.joythebaker.com	New Orleans, LA	13	2008

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Career:

1) Describe the purpose and goal of your blog.

   Probe: (How) have those points changed over your blogging career?

2) What originally drew you toward food blogging?

3) Did you always see food blogging as a viable means of income?

   Probe: If no, what made that opportunity apparent to you? How soon did that realization occur in your blogging career?

4) Describe your relationship the food blogosphere.

   Probe: Do you follow a guideline, such as the 90/10 rule of content creation, to guide your relationship to other bloggers? Have you had any noteworthy positive or negative experiences as a result of engaging with other bloggers?

5) How do other people in your life perceive your career?

Food and Gender Roles

6) Who lives in your household? (spouse, children, etc.)

7) Do you receive household help? (including other household members and professional services)

8) What role has food played in your life?

9) Does your blog reflect your daily life and personality?

10) Describe your kitchen or workspace.

    Probe: what memories or feelings do you associate with your kitchen?

Audience Interaction

11) What does your audience mean to you?

12) What types of comments did you originally expect to see from your blogging audience?

13) Were your expectations met?

Probe: Why or why not?

14) Can you recall a time when audience input significantly affected your posts?

15) What sorts of questions do commenters most frequently ask?

Probe: recipe requests, clarification/substitution, family matters….

16) What is your strategy for addressing comments and questions?

Probe: How has it evolved over your blogging career? What tactics are particularly (in)effective?

17) Has an interaction with a commenter ever led to an extended online or offline relationship?

18) Do you have any particularly memorable interactions with commenters?

19) Is there anything else I should know about your blogging experience or interactions with audience members?

Appendix C: Contact Letter

Hello,

My name is Alane Presswood, and I am a PhD candidate in the Communication Studies department at Ohio University. I am currently working on dissertation research concerning relationships between professional food bloggers and their audience. Specifically, I'm interested in knowing what bloggers expected from commenters when they began their careers, how their interactions with commenters shaped those expectations, and how both practices evolved with time and experience; these queries are part of a larger exploration into how digital platforms provide a space for women to build community and interact with each other.

I will be conducting interviews with all willing participants in order to record their stories; interviews may be conducted face-to-face or electronically to best fit your schedule and needs. This interview will be audio-recorded for my records, but the files will not be available to anyone outside the research team. If it's desired, I will assign you a pseudonym to protect your privacy, and I encourage you to ask any questions you might have regarding the safety of your information or this study as a whole.

If you are willing to participate or would like additional information about my research project, please contact me via email or by phone. I sincerely hope you will consider helping me conduct this research project, and I look forward to your response!

Regards,

Alane Presswood

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