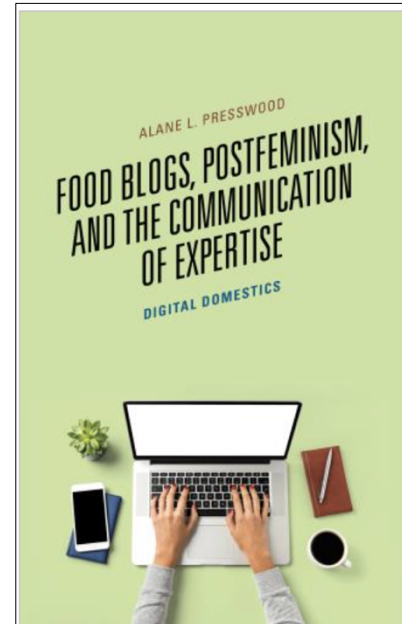


Alane L. Presswood, **Food Blogs, Postfeminism, and the Communication of Expertise: Digital Domesticity**, Lanthan, MD: Lexington, 2020, 172 pp., \$95.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by  
Elizabeth Nathanson  
Muhlenberg College

The relationship between femininity and domesticity has long concerned feminist scholars. Barbara Welter (1966) famously explored how the notion of “true womanhood” dates back to the 1800s and is defined by the values of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (p. 152). If they cultivated these values, women were promised happiness. Of course, this promise worked to bind women ever more tightly to their homes. The ideology of “true womanhood” asserted a natural difference between masculinity and femininity, and this difference was replicated and illustrated by the firm divisions between the public and private spheres. As Welter showed us then, and media scholars like Lynn Spigel would go on to explore, this ideology circulated in everyday texts like magazines and cookbooks but was never static nor uncontested; the rise of new technologies, historical pressures, and social movements shifted women’s roles, even while the impossible ideal of happily domesticated women persisted.

Much has changed since the 1800s and the rise of digital media, in particular, puts into question women’s standing in relation to the domestic arts. With the promise of interactivity afforded by digital media, scholars are prompted to consider how much agency feminized subjects have to engage, appropriate, or resist the long-lasting tenets of “true womanhood.” What does it mean if rather than being relegated to the assumed isolation of unpaid domestic caretaking, women chose to seek joy and professional success through acts like cooking? How do we pry apart universalizing definitions of womanhood and acknowledge how race and class, among other intersectional concerns, impact mediated domesticity? Can women reject domestic isolation, and, instead, use the home to find points of connection and solidarity online? Alane L. Presswood’s **Food Blogs, Postfeminism, and the Communication of Expertise: Digital Domesticity** takes up these themes and makes the case that we should consider food blogs as a site in which ideas about femininity circulate. Presswood examines established, profitable American and Canadian blogs to consider their rhetorical strategies and the impact of those strategies on how women negotiate their agency and forge connections online. Her book contributes to the growing body of literature by scholars like Brooke Erin Duffy, Julie Wilson, and Emily Chivers Yochim, who also explore the meanings of feminized digital labor. Like fashion blogs and other lifestyle media, food blogs raise questions about the nature of online feminine communities, women’s creative and professional opportunities, and the ways in which race and class identities intersect with digital femininities.



There are over 20,000 food blogs with an industry to support would-be bloggers looking to monetize their hobbies or to achieve elite status by contending for awards, such as those given out by magazines like *Saveur*. Presswood establishes the cultural history of food early on, to show how everyday activities of cooking and eating affect the constitution of social groups, class mobility, the environment, and cultural hierarchies. Food writing has a complex history that includes women food writers who published work about the domestic arts at different historical moments, and during waves of feminist activism and backlash. This book makes the case for taking seriously the longstanding tradition of women who write about domestic life as a way to enter into professional journalism, and who use the language of food to address and appeal to the conditions of their time.

To consider where contemporary food blogs stand in relation to historical and social contexts, Presswood predominantly relies on Angela McRobbie's (2009) conceptualization of postfeminism, a definition that argues that postfeminist discourses espouse individualism and work to divide feminized subjects rather than unite them. This definition enables Presswood to explore how food blogs navigate tensions between "isolation" and "female community and solidarity" (p. 39). The book unpacks the community-building potential in the rhetorical strategies of food blogs, to understand how readers are hailed and enter a participatory relationship with the blog writer. The unique aesthetics, formal, and industrial qualities of food blogs invite audiences to participate in the conversations about food and feel like members of a community. This "community," of course, serves the professional needs of bloggers struggling to get and keep readers in a fast-paced, crowded blogosphere. These readers are "consumers," not just members of a group of like-minded individuals, and successful blogs work to hide monetization. Here, Presswood could explicitly delve into the neoliberal implications of her claims; the book shies away from unpacking how and why the entrepreneurial imperatives of these blogs are rendered invisible in the interests of hailing a group of readers seeking a pleasurable read. Through a more detailed analysis of the industrial strategies of digital media beyond blogs, Presswood could engage the larger body of literature that considers how neoliberal ideas of selfhood proliferate through online media and postfeminist discourses.

Presswood is less concerned with the conditions that create desire for a feminized community or the historical dynamics of commodification than she is in the rhetorical strategies used by food blogs. Her analysis of the "blogging voice" unpacks the power and privileges deployed by food bloggers as they hail readers (pp. 63–86). Like much digital media striving to be relatable, food blogs present bloggers as simultaneously expert and approachable. This inherent tension undergirds the appeal of the bloggers, who must represent themselves as authoritative while appealing to the reader's sense of self. Bloggers use a range of tactics, such as a sense of humor, to negotiate their statuses as simultaneously expert and ordinary. Online affordances require that we reconsider historical relations of power between "producer and consumer," and, on this point, Presswood illustrates how definitions of authority have shifted on food blogs. Through her exploration of the way food bloggers invoke their expertise, Presswood critiques how authority circulates through ideologies that reify hegemonic power structures. The book begins to pry apart differences within the category of "woman" by showing how food bloggers denigrate packaged foods and uphold notions of healthy living that celebrate youthful, White privilege. Like postfeminist media, in general, feminine food blogging authority depends upon dominant notions of affluent Whiteness, a point that is crucial for understanding the privileged position from which this rhetoric is uttered.

The privilege embodied by food bloggers is built upon postfeminist notions of femininity, a subject position that elides feminist advocacy in the interests of celebrating individualized femininity and selfhood. Presswood's work considers the political potential of postfeminist food blogs, a theme that has been of interest to scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser, Maureen Ryan, and Jessalyn Keller. Rather than celebrate diversity and unpack systemic inequalities, however, Presswood shows how food blogs emphasize traditional femininity and universalize womanhood. Food bloggers display "good" emotions and celebrate domestic pleasures, positions they can presumably adopt because they identify as White and financially well-off. These themes are illustrated by Presswood's case study of Ree Drummond, a food blogger whose online success was parlayed into a range of other media, namely the Food Network TV show *The Pioneer Woman* (pp. 113–132). Drummond epitomizes how food bloggers transform their supposed relatability to readers into professional success. This monetization of readers raises significant ethical concerns, especially when we consider how Drummond reifies gender binaries by representing different foods as associated with either masculinity or femininity. Presswood could have engaged scholarship that has addressed the historical, aesthetic, and industrial relevance of food television to better situate *The Pioneer Woman* within its generic context. This last chapter reminds us, however, that while domesticity offers resistant and community-building opportunities, scholars must always stay attuned to the circulation of hegemonic norms.

Presswood concludes her book with an account of her own experiences in the kitchen, thus offering us a reminder that domesticity is always already both a personal and political place. Mediated domesticity is fraught, offering opportunities for liberation as well as continued circulation of dominant ideologies. As the global pandemic forces us to keep in mind, the home is a complex space, one that can be at once a refuge, a site of leisure, and a site for work. In the past year, millions of women have left the workforce, facing the challenges of unemployment, systemic underpayment, and most keenly, the challenges of caretaking, as already weak social support networks crumbled (Brower, 2021). And as is evidenced by the continuing popularity of "momfluencers" during the pandemic (Petersen, 2021), women's digital media production remains a key site of interest for communities of women grappling with tensions inherent in their domestic lives. Presswood's book promises to help future scholars seeking to understand such an evolving relationship between media, femininity, and domesticity.

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