Imagine a woman who’s climbing her way to the top of the corporate ladder. She has a college diploma in hand that maybe earns her a coveted spot at an elite style magazine such as Teen Vogue. Maybe she writes advertising copy for top companies such as Apple or TOMS. Few people would want to leave such comfortable and competitive positions, but imagine a woman who puts in her two-week notice at these jobs, clinging to the simple dream of wanting to bake cupcakes and showcase them on the Internet. This is the story that many women bloggers claim. Emily Schuman, Paola Parsons and Stefani Pollack are three young professionals who say they abandoned successful careers to run cupcake-themed lifestyle blogs. Although foremothers of the second-wave feminist movement would probably roll their eyes at this idea, the popularity of cupcake blogs challenges the credo of finding fulfillment through high-powered careers outside the home. Schuman, Parsons and Pollack have all carved out lucrative careers from baking in the home with the assistance of advertisers and sponsors on their blogs. These bloggers have essentially monetized traditional domesticity. More than quirky Internet personas, these bloggers are at the pulse of a cultural phenomenon that critics call “New Domesticity” – a modern appropriation of postwar craftwork, housework, and attentive childcare. At the core of this movement is the belief that motherhood and domesticity can provide authority and personal fulfillment. Building on traditional narratives of feminine cooking literature, these blogs have gained traction among women readers around the world.

The following article is an examination of the complexities and contradictions that characterize today’s cupcake blogs. There are so many complexities to analyze because young women
bloggers promote a lifestyle that both defies and abides by popular feminist discourse. In this essay, I will first examine the key reasons why many women are again embracing work in the domestic sphere despite making impressive strides in the workforce. Second, I will examine the pressure that many women feel to “have it all” according to the second-wave ideal of being a successful career woman and mother. Thirdly, I will explore how social media drives the New Domesticity movement by forging solidarity among homemakers who often experienced crippling isolation in decades past. This will reveal how the movement of New Domesticity is a reaction to the conflating cultural forces of work-family tension, social media, and foodie politics. Against this complicated backdrop, I will investigate how the cupcakes blogs of Schuman, Parsons and Pollack construct femininity in a post-feminist context.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE BLOGS

The first blog, *Cupcakes and Cashmere*, is written by Emily Schuman. This blog has earned Schuman several corporate partnerships with brands such as Dove, Coach, and Estee Lauder. In 2012, Schuman also released a book version of her blog with the same title, making her a pioneer of the “blooking” trend. Her brand promises to sell a refined and tasteful lifestyle involving dining, fashion and décor. Writing on topics beyond baking, Schuman presents herself as a home guru, teaching readers everything from make-up tips to nail art to executing a proper hair blow-out. In this way, Schuman embodies the traditional trope of the “domestic goddess” who establishes her authority through household know-how. Formatting her blog against a clean white layout, Schuman presents stunning high-resolution photographs of food and outfits that evoke effortless and sophisticated living. Schuman’s blog also promotes a high-end lifestyle since her blogs often involve expensive clothes and products.
Paola Parson’s blog, *Love and Cupcakes*, shares a similar aesthetic with Schuman’s blog, but features journal-like entries that communicate a greater sense of intimacy. As a talented graphic designer, Parsons posts recipes or craft ideas on her blog by overlaying her own striking photographs with minimalist, clever captions. Like Schuman, Parsons also promotes food and fashion brands on her website to generate revenue. But Parsons’ blog is distinct from many others in that she shares her personal story of young wifedom and motherhood by blogging about her recent marriage, pregnancy, and subsequent move from Los Angeles to Richmond, Virginia. Parsons also openly shares her experiences with pregnancy, forging a strong sense of trust with her audience. Compared to Schuman’s blog that promotes higher-end products, Parsons is a self-proclaimed “smart spender,” appealing to young middle-class women who aspire to make crafts and trendy meals on a budget. Despite these differences, Parsons’ blog falls in line with conventional cupcake blogs showcasing one’s domestic expertise.

Stefani Pollack’s blog, *The Cupcake Project*, is one final example and instructive counterpoint to the blogs of Schuman and Parsons. Based in St. Louis, Missouri, Pollack is a corporate technical trainer turned stay-at-home mom who launched her own baking website in 2007. Her blog catalogue over 200 different cupcake, pastry, and snack ideas, featuring ingredients as obscure as hemp and lucuma. Pollack also includes an extensive FAQ list that answers baking and logistical questions for bakers of all levels. In this way, Pollack markets herself as an innovative and professional baker. In the same manner as Schuman and Parsons, Pollack provides high-quality photographs of her food that capture the intricacies of her recipes. She also funds her blog by including advertisements or plugging products in her recipes. While the other blogs
share a personable tone, Pollack’s blog is more muted and professional, typically focusing on the technical aspects of recipes by describing the flavors of foods or offering baking instructions. Through this website, Pollack presents herself as a successful mother who makes money doing what she loves—an inspiring narrative for working and middle-class women.

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF DOMESTICITY AND FEMININITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

The connection that these bloggers form between femininity and domesticity is nothing new. Throughout American history, these two concepts have been intimately intertwined. Cultural scholars Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush would agree that domesticity has “long been linked with the feminine and the mother” and has relegated women to the home for centuries (238). Many scholars and scientists of the time believed “female nurturance, intuitive mortality, […] were all due to their physical makeup,” thereby asserting women’s natural space was the home (Lavender “The Cult of Domesticity”). This message only intensified during the World Wars when mothers were touted as a bulwark against totalitarianism and the keepers of American tradition (Johnson and Johnson 496). Later, government propaganda and television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* glorified domestic housekeeping as a fruitful and fulfilling lifestyle (Johnson and Johnson 499). These cultural and political discourses drew sharp distinctions between male and female spheres, fusing domesticity with an idealized femininity. Postwar cooking literature also reinforced this ethos, framing cooking as an “important and pleasurable part of the modern woman’s domestic duties.” (Neuhaus 2). Female-directed cookbooks specifically spoke to women in the home by offering cooking tips, relatable anecdotes, and self-deprecating tales of botched baking projects meant to enliven domestic life (Salvio 32-5). These narratives reassured
women they could balance the demands of housework and motherhood by providing convenient recipes. As we will see later, these same themes reappear in today’s lifestyle blogs.

Although the media painted a rosy picture of women’s domestic roles in the 1950s, many women suffered from extreme isolation and self-doubt about their place in the home. Betty Friedan, a college graduate turned suburban housewife, penned her frustrations in the groundbreaking 1963 book *The Feminist Mystique*. Friedan and other homemakers who ached from “the problem with no name” experienced extreme isolation without access to urban centers like their Progressive Era counterparts (Matchar, *Homeward Bound* 40). Friedan’s memoir served as a clarion call for privileged white women who began to question why they were so tied down to the hearth and home (*Homeward Bound* 41). Women’s roles began expanding at this time since they could now own and buy homes, start a business, and even plan births thanks to the advent of oral contraception in 1960 (*Homeward Bound* 42). These changes contributed to the second-wave feminist movement that encouraged women to embrace careers in the public sphere and fight for an expansion of their political rights outside the home.

**The Rise of New Domesticity**

While second-wave feminists encouraged women to seek jobs outside the home and kitchen, modern women today seem to be rushing back. Combining a foodie, environmentalist, and do-it-yourself attitude, followers of the New Domesticity movement today champion a simplified, back-to-basics lifestyle. As scholar Emily Matchar explains, the New Domesticity movement describes “the re-embrace of home and hearth by those who have the means to reject these things” (*Homeward Bound* 12). This seems to have caused a revived interest in baking and
crafts such as knitting and canning. In that case, why are women suddenly embracing these hobbies detested by women just a few generations ago? Some scholars see the movement not as a simple re-appropriation of traditional domesticity, but a détournement—the inclusion of past artistic productions in a new historical era (Bratich and Brush 239). This makes New Domesticity seem like a complicated cultural sea change rather than a quirky, antifeminist fad. To better understand this movement, I will now examine three main cultural forces driving New Domesticity: work and family tension, the rise of social media, and foodie politics.

Work and Family Tension

New Domesticity can be considered a reaction to the feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s. With basic civil rights secured for women—although these rights are still under attack according to many gender equality advocates—many young women no longer identify with second-wave feminist discourses that encouraged women to pursue professional careers outside the home (Gillingham et. al 22). In fact, young women today express different desires than their feminist predecessors, such as achieving personal satisfaction through life-work balance (Oneto 10). Influenced by this post-feminist philosophy, many women are rejecting careers in the public sphere and adopting a more domestic lifestyle. It is the historical activism of second-wave feminists that affords the women of today the choice to work in or outside the home, or both.

At the same time, this freedom of choice might have resulted in increasing strife for women trying to balance both work and family life. According to a profile compiled by marketing research firm Anthem!, 53 percent of women expect to “do it all” while only 44 percent feel motivated to take on this double-burden (Oneto 10). Matchar’s interviews support this data,
finding that many women left the workforce because they could not balance it all by negotiating more flexible schedules or finding adequate support services like childcare programs at work. 86 percent of women who leave the workforce cite these problems as the main reasons for halting their careers (Homeward Bound 5). Gilligham et al. took this idea even further by positing that New Domesticity “can be read as a sign of resistance to a First World economy that unevenly accommodates the material and emotional needs of women and families” (25). According to this interpretation, women are reclaiming domestic life to opt out of a system that neither supports nor values their efforts in the home.

In this sense, many young women also see domestic life as a refuge from their high-stress careers, often quitting mid-level corporate jobs and opening craft stores or bakeries. With the rise of Etsy businesses and lifestyle blogs, “founding a successful microenterprise has become a widespread bohemian dream,” according to Newsweek culture writer Michelle Goldberg. This may be an escapist reaction to gender norms that demand perfection as wives, mothers, and public professionals. According to another Anthem! report, researchers found that nearly 80 percent of working women participants said they should “make sure the household runs smoothly,” while 85 percent said they “were expected to be good wives” (Oneto 22). In this sense, women might feel it is easier to achieve mainstream notions of perfection as a housewife rather than a working wife and mother in a corporate setting. Writer Kathryn Hughes dissects this idea and writes, “The fantasy of the new domesticity is beguiling because it suggests a time when it was possible to spend your time doing one thing well” (Hughes). While the domestic lifestyle may relieve women from having to achieve the unachievable (and extremely gendered)
expectation to “have it all,” New Domesticity still requires women to participate in narrow
gender performances that continue to disproportionately affect women.

Regardless, cupcake blogs certainly demonstrate a narrative of liberation and fulfillment.
Pollack describes her transformation from a lowly corporate worker – “Stef from 2007” – to a
multifaceted domestic woman. “I have five jobs!” she announces cheerfully, listing her duties as
a housewife, stay-at-home mother, conference-planner, and freelance writer. Pollack’s fifth job
includes supporting her husband’s photography business, noting that she does “a lot of the work
behind of the scenes” (“About Section”). By elevating her husband’s position while
downplaying her own accomplishments as successful blogger, dutiful mother and supportive
wife, Pollack preserves gender normatives. Nevertheless, she presents this lifestyle as liberating
by claiming that her work in the home is inherently natural and rewarding. Schuman, in
addition, finds fulfillment through her domestic career, framing Cupcakes and Cashmere as the
pinnacle of her professional life, compared to previous experiences as a college intern and
magazine writer. Committed to inspiring “readers through fashion, food, beauty, and interior
design”, Schuman transformed her hobby into a credible blog business that draws on traditional
feminine tropes (“About Section”).

Schuman and other bloggers also legitimate their domestic lifestyles through their financial
success. On her website’s “About” page, Pollack explains that she makes enough money to
consider blogging a full time job. On the Cupcakes and Cashmere blog, Schuman proudly
announces that she earns an income through partnerships and web consulting, turning away
“about 95 percent of offers that come my way” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). Advertising is
the chief way bloggers make money, so all three bloggers host promotional giveaways from companies such as Baskin Robbins, Estee Lauder, or small boutique stores to generate revenue. What most readers don’t realize, however, is that blogging professionally and accruing interest from advertising is extremely competitive and challenging. While blog culture may have originally drawn on democratic ideals of equal opportunity, only 18 percent of bloggers can actually earn enough money to support themselves (*Homeward Bound* 62). The self-made blogging business downplays this competition and sells a seductive story of women who become successful mothers, wives, and entrepreneurs with ease.

Cupcake blogs draw on these themes to promote domestic lifestyles for women today. In talking about her new career path, Pollack says her “corporate” self “wouldn’t quite understand why I wasn’t ‘working’ [at an office]. This is my [new] life and I love it!” (“About Section”). By decrying corporate careers, Pollack make the implicit judgment that the home should be a women’s natural habitat. Schuman also elevates her career over corporate jobs by making domestic life appear effortless and organic—a stark contrast from a corporate office. She casts herself as an expert of domestic living, dispensing wisdom on topics ranging from chores to cooking. Readers can learn Schuman’s advice in the blogger’s “Ask Emily” section, where she fields questions from readers on a variety of topics. On her August 22, 2013 segment, Schuman advises her audience to always make their bed in the morning “to start things on a positive, productive note, even if it seems small” (“Ask Emily #15”). Next, she answers a question about meal-planning throughout the week, advising readers to browse local farmers’ markets for staple ingredients to use for meals. It is no surprise that these tips mirror advice found in postwar cookbooks, revealing how New Domesticity appropriates historic patterns of gender norms.
These blogs seem to value women as nurturing homemakers over working-moms who try to do it all. In the end, cupcake bloggers promote narrow gender performances that problematize the ostensible empowerment of women in the home.

**Social Media**

Perhaps the New Domesticity movement is so powerful because it emerged alongside the social media explosion, forging its ideals through blogs that foster a strong bond between bloggers and viewers around the globe. Food scholar Signe Rousseau explains that the social media revolution has bridged people together like no other time in history (1). This is especially true of lifestyle and food blogs, which build identity-based communities based on common interests and communal learning called *meshworks* (Bratich and Brush 242). Schuman’s post on pumpkin biscotti, for instance, generated nearly 100 comments bonding viewers from all corners of the world over their love of anything pumpkin. As one reader commented, “Thank you so much for sharing this Emily! I will definitely make these and post them on my blog :)” (“Pumpkin Spice Biscotti”). These recipes connect viewers on a global level, reminiscent of interpersonal recipe swaps between friends and neighbors in mid-century America. Although the medium has changed, the instinct to share tips and ideas about food remains an important ethos of feminine culinary culture in America today. As Matchar explains, women “can offer not just sympathy but genuine empathy,” creating virtual solidarity among stay-at-home women (*Homeward Bound* 50). Blogs can also alleviate stress, depression, and marital conflict according to recent studies (*Homeward Bound* 50). With such positive effects, it makes sense that lifestyle blogs on social media have resonated so powerfully among women.
Due to their perceived wisdom and expertise, successful bloggers can amass followings similar to Hollywood celebrities. Rousseau applies the psychological principle of “parasocial interaction” to explain the rise of food blogs (8-9). The mediated experience of interacting with a celebrity online often resembles real face-to-face conversations, establishing intimate relationships between the viewer and the celebrity. In her segment “Ask Emily,” Schuman fields fan questions ranging from how to host in-laws to break-up advice, receiving an outpouring of gratitude from readers. One reader on Parsons’ blog writes, “it’s a bit scary how similar our taste in all things crafty is… so cool!” (“Hello There!”). The conversation mimics an authentic interpersonal interaction even though the two will probably never meet. The close connection between bloggers and readers is especially visible in food communities, which often share stories through their recipes and lifestyle recommendations (Rousseau 9). Such para-social interactions allow readers to identify with the bloggers and adopt similar attitudes and domestic lifestyles.

What many readers might not realize, however, is that the online personas of bloggers can differ drastically from their offline identities. The representations that female bloggers provide highly stylized snippets of life which conveniently hide real life and everyday struggles (Rousseau 10). Lifestyle bloggers, in essence, glamorize domestic life while conveniently glossing over the messes and exhaustion of domestic living. This is evident in all three blogs, which feature stunning photos that capture every glimmering feature of their recipe in high-definition. These carefully crafted images obscure the flaws of their work and have a direct effect on what consumers consider real and true (Rousseau 14). Consumers tend to seek out media that reaffirms their worldview, narrowing their opportunities to learn about different perspectives (Rousseau 13). As Bratich and Brush point out, “even at the moment of affirming women’s
online experience, we need to acknowledge how quickly it can be captured in the confining, gated enclosure model of the cult of womanhood” (241). Consequently, there are dangers to cupcake blogs that normalize a lifestyle unattainable for many working and middle-class women.

The feminine myth, in fact, may actually cause harm to women’s self-image. In her interviews, Matchar found that many women compared themselves to their celebrity idols, expressing dissatisfaction about their own lives and cooking skills (Homeward Bound 64). A reader echoes this self-effacing reaction in response to Parson’s video log of her trip to Peru, saying “Can’t even begin to tell you how much I enjoyed that video! Wish I had a sliver of the talent you and your husband have” (“Our Peru Video”). Readers also dismiss their own cooking ability in the comment section on Schuman’s blog. For a post about Día de Los Muertos in which Schuman baked a red velvet skull cake, several readers compared themselves to Schuman saying “I love the concept! […] but I’m not sure I could decorate it like you did!” and “wow it came out perfectly! mine usually doesn’t make a clean escape. sigh” (“Red Velvet Dia de los Muertos Cake”). In general, Parsons and Schuman do not address these comments. They also do not address the class-based privileges that afford such opportunities as traveling to Peru or buying the ingredients to make a red velvet cake. This problematizes Schuman’s lofty claim that her blog inspires women since it may alienate many women who cannot afford the lifestyle she is promoting. As a result, while social media fosters communities among stay-at-home women, it also popularizes discourses that codify traditional, classist, gender performances.

Foodie Politics
The intersection between gender and foodie culture provides another interesting aspect to explore. After all, many cupcake bloggers adopt the values of foodies and femivores by carefully analyzing the origins of their food. In a chapter entitled “Cupcake Feminists,” Matchar notes that women have become increasingly skeptical of where their food comes from as obesity rates climb and e. coli outbreaks in food become more common (Homeward Bound 97-8). These “femivores” fight against industrial food production that uses harmful additives and undermines the creativity of cooking (Homeward Bound 102). Foodies share many of the same values as femivores. Joseé Johnson and Shayon Baurmann argue that modern foodies mainly eat locally, organic products, “ethnic” food, as well as specialty ingredients. The artsy, time-consuming recipes Schuman, Parsons, and Pollack post align with these values and generally reject mass-produced items found in grocery stores. Pollack’s “Latin-Inspired” plantain cupcakes, for instance, use obscure foreign ingredients to transform traditional cupcakes into an artful delicacy (“Plantain Cupcakes”). Yet, this recipe requires over 20 ingredients and takes over 30 steps to make, clearly excluding inexperienced bakers or bakers with limited financial resources and time. The term “Latin-Inspired” also reflects monolithic ideas of what represents Latin American cuisine, revealing the imperialist tendencies of well-meaning foodies who appropriate “exotic” ingredients without understanding the nuances of the cultures that originally produce these foods. The use of food by cupcake bloggers to resist corporate food culture, as a result, problematizes their mission to inspire a wide audience of women.

Family Narratives

Finally, lifestyle blogs rely on conventional narratives of motherhood, marriage, and love to portray a picture of ideal femininity. Both Parsons and Pollack share intimate stories about
weddings, domestic life, and motherhood that advertise this narrow ideal of femininity. Providing helpful tips and weekly updates, Parsons talks about motherhood with striking openness and warmth. In addition to homemade recipes for new baby-related products, Parsons posts entries that often read like letters: “So far, my pregnancy has been really easy, no morning sickness or extreme fatigue. I’ve been lucky!” (September 13, 2013 Blog Post). This intimate level of detail communicates honesty, forging trust with her audience that reaffirms her brand of authenticity. Following the birth of her daughter, Parsons posted pictures with an accompanying blurb, saying “This little girl is my full-time job now so until I get a better grasp on this stay-at-home-mom thing, the blog will be taking a backseat” (“Hello, I’m Cielo Love”). Parsons and Pollack, consequently, consider their roles as mothers more significant than their careers as bloggers. These bloggers thus imply that a rich domestic life defines womanhood, which may isolate working mothers or women who choose to not have children.

Schuman has written similar posts dedicated to wedding and homemaking tips. Answering a question on what brides should splurge on, Schuman said she and her husband are “really into craft cocktails and great food, so we put a lot of our budget towards that” (“Ask Emily #11”). Another blog post gives tips about throwing a dinner party, stressing that the hostess sets the tone for the evening: “If you're running around in a state of panic, pulling things out of the oven and cursing if something falls to the floor, your guests are going to feel like they're an inconvenience. Instead, focus on putting out relaxed energy that reveals how happy you are to have people over” (“My 8 Entertaining Tips”). For Schuman, dinner parties are a way to prove domestic competence and devotion to marriage. Schuman never mentions her husband’s assistance in hosting, thus suggesting that entertaining guests is solely a feminine duty. Moreover, her
warnings of failure hark back to tales of disaster found in postwar cooking literature that described attempts at perfection and poise from housewives. Such blog posts reveal the ways in which cupcake bloggers like Schuman regurgitate historic narratives defining authentic womanhood.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, cupcake blogs are very revealing of what bloggers and readers consider the proper role for women in American society. Indeed, food literature can show us how contemporary society views women and what it expects from them. Building on a legacy of domestic traditions, it is clear that lingering gender expectations still affect modern women today despite their growing economic and political agency. As a result, many modern women flee from crippling expectations in the corporate world to have it all and do it all in the home. As successful businesswomen and conventionally feminine women, Parsons, Pollack and Schuman offer a seductive solution to these conflicting expectations. Social media, which helps forge bonds through interpersonal communication, only amplifies the persuasive power of these lifestyle bloggers. The “foodies” movement also elevates cupcake blogs and domestic living as a morally righteous and activist endeavor for women. But in order to live this lifestyle, women have to attain a certain amount of privilege and economic status. Cupcake bloggers rarely acknowledge the class privilege that affords them opportunities to stay at home, nor do they show the real burdens that accompany domestic work. Moreover, the bloggers make an implicit argument that real women are devoted wives and mothers, promoting narrow gender performances that undermine the bloggers’ empowering message. This critical assessment of cupcake blogs thus reveals the myth of domestic bliss that these bloggers promote. The blogs of
Schuman, Parsons, and Pollock continue to fuel the debate on whether women can find liberation and fulfillment at home.


