Trying to restrict her range: The backlash in response to Ree Drummond, “The Pioneer Woman,” and Drummond’s agency in constructing and profiting from a 21st century pioneering persona

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Trying to Restrict Her Range: The Backlash in Response to Ree Drummond, “The Pioneer Woman,” and Drummond’s Agency in Constructing and Profiting from a 21st Century Pioneering Persona

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“Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.” –E.B. White

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Abstract

Ree Drummond is the creator of the wildly popular lifestyle blog, thepioneerwoman.com, and star of the Food Network show, “The Pioneer Woman.” This thesis analyzes the rhetorical practices of Ree Drummond, as “The Pioneer Woman,” and how critics’ responses to this constructed persona have taken shape on blogging platforms. To conduct this analysis, I examined a variety of artifacts from Drummond’s public persona including her blog, cookbooks, television episodes, as well as YouTube videos of her public appearances and speaking engagements. I also analyzed the forums in which people respond to “The Pioneer Woman”; this includes op-eds on the Internet, blogs such as The Pioneer Woman Sux, commenting forums, and independent academic pieces such as a dissertation. Overall, this project discovered that blogging is a medium that people turn to for self-expression and community; a space in which ordinary people can feel a sense of belonging. Thus, the backlash surrounding the rhetorical practices of Ree Drummond suggests that critics do not identify with the Pioneer Woman persona that she is constructing because they do not recognize the text and images that Drummond conveys online and onscreen, as being congruent to their idea of what a “real” pioneer woman should look like. To express their feelings of “estrangement” as Kenneth Burke would say, critics utilize the “medium of ordinary people” in order to challenge whether Drummond’s representation of an extraordinary lifestyle is evidence of “real” country living. In questioning Drummond’s authenticity, critics’ comments suggest an inaccurate perception that the blogging genre is capable of revealing unfiltered reality, as well as an ambivalence about Drummond’s worthiness of the label “Pioneer Woman” due to historical perceptions of 19th century pioneer women as hardworking, manual laborers.

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However, it is unfair to compare Drummond to her frontier ancestors, as in this process critics dismiss her intellectual labor as a professional blogger. Therefore, ultimately, this works calls for a re-conceptualization of the definition of a pioneer, to acknowledge Drummond’s successful utilization of modern-day technological tools that resulted in a lucrative brand based off her lived experiences as a wife and mother living on a cattle ranch.
PART I:
INTRODUCTION

Ann Marie, “Ree,” Drummond is the creator of the wildly successful blog, thepioneerwoman.com. Created in 2006, within 10 years’ time, the blog has grown from a small “photo diary” on the free blogging platform Typepad to an “extremely polished lifestyle portal” hosted by WordPress that generates a solid $1,000,000 dollars in advertising revenue per year (Casserly; Fortini; Haupt 41). A “lifestyle portal,” or lifestyle blogging, refers to websites that center around the domestic, i.e., they serve as a resource center for recipes, child rearing tips, and/or crafting, entertaining, and shopping ideas. As a conglomeration of personal stories about ranch life, family and friends (“Confessions”), recipes (“PW Cooks”), product recommendations (“Life and Style”), and information about her own cookware line and cookbooks (“Products”), Drummond’s blog serves as an example of a lifestyle blog.

Drummond’s food photography, for example, that is exhibited on her “extremely polished” blog is shot with an expensive, high-grade Nikon camera, in a studio kitchen with special lighting, and that is then amplified by Photoshop techniques. In effect, as Anne McBride, a PhD candidate in Food Studies at NYU, would say: these “portrayals of food have been so transformed by food styling, lighting, and the actions of comely media stars that food does seem increasingly out of reach to the average cook or consumer” (Gastronomica). In other words, even if a fellow Oklahoman mother cooks one of Drummond’s recipes, it will never look as perfectly presentable as it does when Drummond prepares and photographs the meal herself.
While Drummond has attracted many fans with what writer Emily Matchar would call “domestic porn”—e.g., mouthwatering close-up shots of recipes like decadent Bartlesville Chocolate Pie—Drummond has also angered a lot of people who resent that she purports to be “an everyday rancher’s wife” because they see her highly polished blog suggesting an extraordinary, privileged lifestyle that is perceived as antithetical to country livin’ (Homeward Bound 3). Fueling the fire is the fact that as her blog has exploded in popularity, Drummond has also acquired more hats, i.e., she is the star of a Food Network show aptly titled “The Pioneer Woman,” the author of several NY Times bestselling books, and most recently, the designer of a “pretty and practical” cookware line sold at Wal-Mart stores nationwide (“Walmart”). In essence, while Drummond’s claim to fame may have originated with blogging, the growth of “The Pioneer Woman” into a brand has complicated the idea that blogging is the “official medium of ordinary people” because as Drummond’s critics claim her life is now anything but ordinary. Lisa, creator of the farm blog Crazy Cow Country Farm as well as a former fan of Drummond’s, provides an illustrative quote that captures critics’ unsettling reaction to Drummond’s growing celebrity: “And I find her sweet down-home ‘just a little housewife with a blog’ manner a little off-putting considering she’s not that at all but is, rather, a multi-millionaire sharp businesswoman…” (“I call Bullshit!”).

However, what I find to be anything but ordinary is the response to Drummond’s growing celebrity. With Drummond’s brand invoking such a polarized spectrum of reactions ranging from devoted, adoring fans to vehement, disgusted critics, I think it is too simplistic to explain the backlash surrounding Drummond’s celebrity as people either
love her or hate her. Such fierce condemnation of Ree Drummond arguably points to larger issues that American society is wrestling with, such as how to navigate our increasingly intermingled offline and online identities. Consequently, Drummond becomes the vessel through which this ambivalence is expressed.

I initially came to this research topic after stumbling across one of Drummond’s cookbooks—*The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Recipes from an Accidental Country Girl*—in Target in the fall of 2014. At the time of this kairotic discovery, I was enrolled in a graduate-level class called “Perspectives of Digital Culture” that explored issues raised by virtue of being citizens living in a Digital Age, i.e., how the lines between private vs. public are becoming increasingly blurred, and consequently, how this blurring affects how people perceive their identities, and think and act in online and offline spaces. As the course progressed, I began digging into Drummond’s background and her path to fame. Through this journey into the blogosphere, I became utterly fascinated not only by how many critics Drummond had accrued but also by the impassioned, vitriolic tone of many of these same critics. It prompted me to wonder why some people seemed revved up enough to start a revolution, in response to a seemingly, innocent homemaker with “two dough-poked dimples on her cheeks”? (St. Clair).

As Claudia Corrigan D’Arcy—the former Director of Social Media for @Dragon Search, an Internet marketing firm—astutely observed in a BlogHer editorial, “How to Make a Blog in the Genre of Niche Bloggers: Haters”:

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1 For example, comments like “And by the way, [Drummond] must give FANTASTIC head because I don’t know a rancher around who’d want a woman THAT clueless about ranching for a wife” (The Pioneer Woman Sux, “I never planned any of this”).
The mark of a great blog might not necessarily be a gaggle of likes and followers, or the celebrity blogger status you receive, or even the motorcade of blog traffic because you are oh-so-popular. Nope. A clear signal that you could be a top blogger is the number of spin-off hate blogs that you cause. *Case and point: Pioneer Woman* (“Top Blogger Spin Offs”; my emphasis).

D’Arcy is referring to the fact that after the premiere of Drummond’s television show in 2011, the growing Pioneer Woman brand appeared to inspire the creation of three such spin-off hate blogs on the Web—The Marlboro Woman, Pie Near Woman, and The Pioneer Woman Sux. While there are a number of people who have written lone articles or posted critiques about Drummond all over the Internet, like D’Arcy, I find it significant when a handful of people feel so impassioned that they decide to devote time out of their busy lives to not just post a comment on someone else’s blog but to create

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2 I must note, however, that people like the Marlboro Woman would most likely disagree that her site functions as a “hate blog” because she seems to view herself as performing a valuable, ethical service in response to what she perceives as Drummond’s unethical blogging practices. As the Marlboro Woman has said, “[My site] is not a hate site.” Rather “The Marlboro Woman quite simply reveals the cold, hard truth about a narcissistic woman whose [sic] spent multi-millions to retain Madison Avenue publicists and the services of web giants, Voce Communications” (The Marlboro Woman 1:41 a.m.; 5:59 p.m.).

3 It is worth noting, however, that The Pioneer Woman Sux has not appeared to have updated the content of her site since 2012. Nevertheless, *thepioneerwomansux.com* still appears within the first two pages of results, if one were to Google information about “Ree Drummond” or “The Pioneer Woman.” The site is also one of the first two results if one were to search for “Critics of the Pioneer Woman.” Consequently, The Pioneer Woman Sux’s content may be dated, but it is still accessible today for anyone to read. In some cases, people seem to actually prefer going to Pioneer Woman spin-off sites than they do Drummond’s original blog. D’Arcy herself admitted that “I spent more time on the mock blog today than I ever have on the real one and I laughed” (D’Arcy).

4 When the Marlboro Woman, for instance, was called out by a defender of Drummond’s for wasting her time on a “hate site,” the Marlboro Woman retorted that “We have extremely busy lives involving family, jobs, and other activities far more important than a self-absorbed, greedy Internet caricature. This is a
their own, entirely new blogs centered around missions like “We’ll poke fun and we’ll expose just how fucking stupid all her sheeple followers are” (The Pioneer Woman Sux, “About”) and “Join us as we reveal what’s really behind the Guru of grease, cow patties, and fairy tales” (St. Clair).

Initially, I was tempted to agree that “an entire blog devoted to criticizing one person is weird and obsessive” (Anonymous, reply 65). However, inspired and informed by the questions raised in my fall 2014 digital course, I felt that Drummond’s celebrity demonstrates a more complex case study regarding how one should or should not act online. More specifically, as a blogger who has endured a wave of backlash in response to her particular blogging practices, Drummond serves as a perfect case study for rhetorical criticism. More pointedly, I feel that the backlash surrounding Drummond’s celebrity is no doubt related to ideals about what is the appropriate way for a woman to engage in online practices, especially as it relates to economic pursuits. Consequently, I see my work adding to both the fields of rhetoric, and feminist rhetoric.

hobby for us, one we find extremely rewarding” (Marlboro Woman, 5:59 p.m.). Even if the Marlboro Woman sees her blogging as a “hobby,” this viewpoint is nevertheless significant because others would disagree and perceive people like her to be trolls. Even if Drummond is a so-called fraud and is not transparent about the realities of her daily life, there are those that would argue that the practices of critics like The Marlboro Woman are more unethical because she admits that saying mean things about a person has become “a hobby.”

However, even if they wanted to, these critics most likely could not respond directly to Drummond on her forum because they would most likely be censored, e.g., “She deletes any negative comment and blocks individuals from commenting” (Skattebol); And, “…I’ve also taken screenshots of the entire post because as we’ve seen in the past, Ree may delete the entire thing soon” (The Pioneer Woman Sux, “Ladd and Ree are Idiots,” my emphasis). Nevertheless, it is again significant that in response to this censorship, certain people still felt compelled enough to create entire blogs rather than finding an existing alternate forum to comment on.

For example, Drummond blogs about her family life, which has raised ethical concerns about profiting from stories about one’s children in addition to being part of a larger ongoing cultural debate about what is
In this work, I acknowledge that “The Pioneer Woman” is a mediated image, and it is not my intention in this project to dispute that well-known fact. However, I also believe that critics’ cries that Drummond has morphed into a mediated image overlooks the fact that their criticism is problematic in itself because it attempts to dictate Drummond’s mediated image, as well as, mistakenly simplifies the conditions surrounding her celebrity. What I see at the root of all criticism of Ree Drummond is a rejection of her particular representation of a “pioneer woman” because her audience does not identify and recognize that performance as being constitutive of a “real” pioneer woman. In this rejection, critics are insinuating that they are the experts, even when it comes to the marketing of Drummond’s own life, i.e., they know who a pioneer woman is, they know what she should be doing, and they know what words and images would best reflect her lifestyle. Consequently, critics assert that Drummond’s particular representation of a “Pioneer Woman” vis à vis her blog, and her television show, is wrong—both factually, and ethically. However, in this work, I will be arguing that in trying to project a narrow definition of who a “real” pioneer woman is and what she should be doing onto Ree Drummond, critics are in fact negating her agency in being able to construct a profitable, marketable identity that is based on her real-life experiences. This finding contributes to scholarship on rhetoric and digital writing because it examines how producers and consumers of blogs are utilizing rhetorical tools in order to construct and challenge representations of femininity and domesticity.

Furthermore, it points to a question which arguably still lingers in society about what is the appropriate use of a woman’s time, i.e., do children suffer if working moms cannot devote their attention to their children 24/7?
Of course, when critics lament that Drummond’s blog (and TV show) is obscuring or improperly representing the reality of life on a contemporary working cattle ranch, they are in fact ignoring the reality that Drummond’s practices have appealed to legions of women, who are happy and more than willing to buy into the hyper-reality that she offers them as “The Pioneer Woman.” As Heather Havrilesky supports in a 2012 article published in *New Yorker* magazine, “Even though readers are well aware that The Pioneer Woman may not be a portal into a simpler, better life so much as a carefully art-directed, commercially sponsored fantasy, they are happy to suspend their disbelief.”

Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification will prove useful in analyzing the rhetorical practices of Ree Drummond as “The Pioneer Woman,” and the response of her critics, as Burke believed that it is through rhetoric that people form connections through associating and/or disassociating with one other. In sum, Burke argues that people fundamentally desire to feel a sense of belonging; people make a concentrated effort to find others who are like-minded, so as to avoid feeling “estranged.” It is because of a fear of estrangement that “people yearn to belong to one another and to institutions” (Sloane 376). “Belonging” in this sense is rhetorical because “people ‘belong’ to one another through identification” (Sloane 376). In other terms, individual people come to feel a sense of belonging in a group by identifying with each other through words; words become the bridge. As Burke puts it, “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” (*The Range of Rhetoric* 20). When examining the rhetorical practices of Ree
Drummond, and the response of her critics (and fans), I am thus analyzing how this process of identification occurs online.

Blogging forums provide a space in which people can find community and a sense of belonging, either through associating or disassociating with the rhetorical narrative that Drummond has constructed. Furthermore, Burke’s definition of identification applies to both interior and exterior identification. In other words, people either can identify with others based on a relation to the self (i.e., this person is like me in some way), or they can identify a relation that is other than the self (i.e., this person lives on a ranch like pioneer women do, and so I identify her as being a part of that group). The key idea is that in order for identification to occur in either case, a person has to be persuaded to see commonality. In the case of Pioneer Woman critics, they find themselves unable to be persuaded by Drummond’s representation of a “Pioneer Woman,” and so they feel estranged from the community that Drummond has built. They do not see Drummond’s lifestyle reflecting their own, or reflecting the life of what they believe would be constitutive of a “real” pioneer woman’s. In order to appease these feelings of estrangement, critics turn to alternate forums—most times, outside of the sanctioned space of thepioneerwoman.com—in order to express their opinions and identify with others who feel similarly.

However, in reading through these comments and posts on alternative blogging forums, I also believe that critics tend to grossly overlook the context surrounding Drummond’s celebrity. Thus, in addition to Burke’s theory of identification, my work will also be guided by Carl Herndl’s and Adela Licona’s redefinition of agency, as a
complex intersection of social and semiotic conditions that call an agent into being. When critics adopt a pigeon-hole view and refuse to label Drummond’s actions as anything but “inauthentic,” they negate the particular rhetorical conditions that have surrounded, and allowed for, the flourishing of “The Pioneer Woman” brand. In simplistic terms, Drummond could just as easily have started her blog in 2006 and it could have been a huge flop. There are reasons bigger than Drummond as to why her particular blog, at this particular time and through this particular medium, has been so well-received at this point in history.

In addition, I will also apply cultural studies’ traditional definition of agency—as something that an individual can possess—to frame my work because the criticism directed at Drummond is arguably gendered. The backlash against Drummond’s rhetorical practices has attempted to minimize Drummond’s skill and role as a female entrepreneur who recognized a kairotic “potential for action,” and consequently made smart rhetorical choices resulting in a million dollar brand. In sum, my work will attempt to position the success of the Pioneer Woman brand as a result of a set of external conditions, as well as Ree Drummond’s recognition of, and adjustment in behavior to, those conditions. And, it is through Drummond’s adaptation to her circumstances that audiences can interpret “The Pioneer Woman” brand to be truly representative of a modern-day pioneer.

Informed by these frameworks, overall, I will argue that Ree Drummond’s rhetorical practices as “The Pioneer Woman” call for a reconceptualization of what it can mean to be a pioneer woman living and working in the 21st century Midwest. Critics find
Drummond’s blog, cookware line, and TV show to symbolize a life of excess. Excess is seen as conflating with the modest life of an everyday person, let alone a “real” pioneer woman. However, my work will challenge this criticism surrounding Drummond’s rhetorical and economic practices and attempt to reframe excess in a positive way, by acknowledging Drummond’s skillful utilization of modern day technological tools that led to the construction of her new identities as an expert lifestyle blogger and successful entrepreneur.

To conduct my analysis, I will be analyzing a variety of artifacts from Drummond’s public persona including her blog, cookbooks, novel, as well as YouTube videos of Drummond’s public appearances and speaking engagements. I will also be analyzing the forums in which people respond to The Pioneer Woman; this includes op-eds found on the Internet, blogs such as The Pioneer Woman Sux, and independent academic pieces such as a dissertation. All of these artifacts must be considered because Drummond’s presence is not limited to one domain on the Internet—e.g., thepioneerwoman.com—and her brand extends beyond her blog, e.g., her cookware line and cookbooks. Likewise, the ways in which people are engaging online and expressing their opinion about The Pioneer Woman are located across different forums across the Web.

Following this introduction, I have found it pertinent to include a chapter on background information that will give a more in-depth history of the journey of The Pioneer Woman brand from its inception in 2006 to today. Readers can keep this foundational context in mind, as they proceed to reading Part II. In Part II, I felt that the backlash in response to the Pioneer Woman brand could be broken down into four
different themes. While the four chapters all contain overlapping elements, the following is how I chose to divide my main chapters.

In Chapter 1, “Blogging,” I will discuss the medium where it all began. Blogging has been hailed as being “the medium of everyday people” due to the accessibility of the forum to average people, but also because it is idealistically perceived as a space in which people can be their true selves. When critics navigate to thepioneerwoman.com and deem that the text and images do not represent a “real” pioneer woman’s lifestyle, they cry foul as they believe that the monetized blog is now too polished to represent the simple, modest lifestyle of a rancher’s wife living on the frontier. Thus, Drummond is perceived to be fraudulently embodying the “Pioneer Woman” label, misrepresenting the identity of a rancher’s wife, and perhaps worst of all, abusing the medium of everyday people in order to perpetuate this lie.

However, I will also discuss how Drummond’s work as a professional blogger has also been problematically dismissed as not being exemplary of “real” pioneering work in the first place. In this situation, Drummond’s intellectual work (constructing blog posts, networking and monetizing her blog) is seen as failing to meet the standards of work, as defined by traditional, historical conceptions of pioneering life as hard, demanding physical labor. When critics refuse to see the monetization of Drummond’s blog as anything other than inauthentic, they also harmfully label Drummond’s economic goals and creative visions as inauthentic, unfeminine desires. Moreover, when critics refuse to recognize the blog as worthy of the “Pioneer Woman” label, they dismiss how this virtual space is representative of the skillsets of a 21st century entrepreneur.
In Chapter 2, “Domesticity,” I will discuss how critics attack Drummond for not doing domesticity in the right way. One shape this criticism takes form is through judgment of Drummond’s cooking for being too simple. In its simplicity to prepare, “Pioneer Woman” recipes are perceived by critics as offensive to historical pioneer woman, for whom preparing and cooking food was an all-day affair. A second way Drummond’s performance of domesticity is judged is through the polished nature of her blog, as it is deemed to be too perfect and romanticized to properly represent the busy life of a rancher’s wife. Consequently, critics believe that Drummond is unethically setting up an unfair comparison for her readers, who will never be able to recreate these images of domestic bliss in their own lives. However, I will argue that in actuality, it is critics who are creating the unfair comparison. When critics use historical definitions of domesticity as backbreaking toil to judge Drummond and to hold her to narrow expectations about what qualifies as the proper representation of domesticity, critics overlook Drummond’s own ingenuity in crafting a version of domesticity that works best for her in the 21st century. Moreover, critics negate Drummond’s skill in recognizing the wants of her audience for escapist entertainment from their own domestic lives, and her hard, intellectual work in delivering a romanticized portrait of life on the frontier that proved lucratively successful.

In Chapter 3, “Ambition and Agency,” I will examine how Drummond’s agency is threatened when critics suggest that the growing Pioneer Woman brand symbolizes nothing but greed, and is an anathema to a “real” pioneer woman’s socioeconomic status. In particular, I will be discussing how with the latest launch of her cookware line,
Drummond was attacked by critics and accused of being a selfish, irresponsible, and even, un-American, businesswoman. On the contrary, Drummond’s foray into the cookware market, and her partnership with a company that was perfect for her fan demographic, represented a logical next step in the expansion of her brand. Thus, when critics chastise Drummond’s ambition—defined as both her creative vision and economic desire—they are problematically viewing her actions as unfeminine, rather than as legitimate moves towards achieving internal and external validation.

Finally, in Chapter 4, “Performance,” I will discuss Drummond’s on-screen performance on her Food Network show, “The Pioneer Woman.” In particular, I will discuss how critics swiftly took to the blogosphere following the premiere of the show in 2011, to reject the persona that they saw Drummond projecting. While Drummond’s actions on the show appeared to align with the persona that she constructs as an everyday home cook and an accidental country girl, nevertheless, critics rejected this performance due to seemingly conflicting reasons. On one hand, Drummond was perceived as inadequately performing the role of a celebrity chef on camera. While ordinary folk are not filming cable television shows, nevertheless, audiences seemed to be disappointed that Drummond was not more at ease cooking, and entertaining an audience, in front of a camera.

On the other hand, critics lamented that Drummond’s performance was not correctly exhibiting the “right” country lifestyle, as her cooking was perceived as too fattening, her kitchen was seen as too swanky, and even her personality was viewed as too bland and incompetent to truly reflect a “real” pioneer woman. Of course, these criticisms reveal a
desire for Drummond to seamlessly embody multiple even conflicting subjectivities, yet this imposes an impossible dictate upon Drummond that her performance must add up to one particular representation of a “Pioneer Woman”—otherwise, it is “wrong.” This dictation of Drummond’s mediated image negates her agency in not only deciding to film a television show, but also under what circumstances and in what way.

Overall, I hope to exemplify through these chapters that Drummond’s crafting of a blog that is based on her real-life experiences is representative of a smart and savvy businesswoman who has used the tools at her disposal to capitalize on a kairotic opportunity. Critics’ responses to Ree Drummond’s blogging practices suggest that there is a right and wrong way to blog, that authenticity is black and white, and that it is easy to point out when a blogger is being “inauthentic.” However, with the increasing overlap between offline and online identities, and as more women seek to participate in entrepreneurial endeavors like monetizing their lived experiences, I would suggest that critics’ reactions simplify the phenomenon of blogging. As a rhetorical medium, the blog is incapable of presenting unfiltered reality. Even still, blogs can challenge us to examine our current understandings of identity by illuminating rhetors’ behaviors. As a female blogger, Ree Drummond as “The Pioneer Woman” encourages us to reconceptualize what it can mean to be a pioneer woman, and a technological innovator, in the 21st century.
BACKGROUND

"I'm Ree Drummond. I'm a writer, blogger, photographer, mother, and I'm an accidental country girl. I live on a ranch in the middle of nowhere, and all of my recipes have to be approved by cowboys, hungry kids, and me" (Imper).

–Drummond’s opening spiel for “The Pioneer Woman” cooking show on the Food Network


Perhaps better known by the moniker “The Pioneer Woman,” Ann Marie, “Ree,” Drummond’s initial claim to fame began when she started a blog that chronicled her life as a wife and mother living on a working cattle ranch in Osage County, Oklahoma. As Drummond tells the story, in May 2006, she found herself alone at home for several quiet, uninterrupted hours (“Ask Pioneer Woman”; “O Pioneer Woman”). This was a rare occurrence for Drummond because as the wife of a cattle rancher and as a stay-at-home mother and homeschooler of four children, she normally did not have much time to herself outside of the demands of homemaking and childrearing (“O Pioneer Woman”). On this particular day though, Drummond says that her husband, Ladd, took all four kids to work cattle with him. Taking advantage of the quiet, Drummond decided to try her hand at blogging and created the blog “Confessions of a Pioneer Woman” at pioneerwoman.blogspot.com (BlogHer). As Drummond described that day, “I had read one blog in my life. I wanted to have a place to park my photos and it never occurred to me that anyone would ever see it but me and my mother and my Orkin man” (“Ask Pioneer Woman”; BlogHer).
To this day, Drummond maintains that she had no branding vision when she started her blog, and that she really only created the blog in order to have a place to store and share photos of her young family with her mom, who had moved to another state after divorcing Ree’s father (BlogHer). According to Drummond, blogging turned out to be the easiest medium in which to share the photos because “…our email was slow and mean” (“Ask Pioneer Woman”). The blog name, “Pioneer Woman,” reportedly was inspired by a nickname that Drummond’s friends bestowed on her, when in the late nineties she announced that she was marrying a cowboy and moving to the country (BlogHer). However, it is worth pointing out that not all of Drummond’s followers have bought this claim. Responding to a blog post called “I never planned any of this” on thepioneerwomansux.com, a person by the name “ionasky3” commented and agreed with one of Drummond’s most outspoken critics that Drummond’s words do not seem to match up with her actions:

She always claims that she started her blog to share photos of the kids with her mom. But her earliest entries were always geared toward other readers. Otherwise, they [sic] would have been lots of pics of her kids and posts like we did this today and that today. But nope, she tested out traffic with $50 gift card giveaways, had explanations about how ranching works,

7 According to Drummond, no one predicted that she would ultimately end up living in the country, let alone becoming the wife of a rancher: “I’d always given off the air—sometimes obnoxiously so—of someone who thought she belonged in a larger, more cosmopolitan locale. The fact that I would now be hanging up my L.A.-acquired black pumps to move to an isolated ranch in the middle of nowhere was enough to raise a few eyebrows. I could almost hear the whispers through the grapevine” (Black Heels to Tractor Wheels 139).
cowboy quotes, etc. Definitely not a simple family blog to show off pics of the kids (ionasky3. Re: “I never planned any of this”).

Ionasky3 is correct in her observation that, from the beginning, Drummond’s photos and posts about life on the ranch did not “simply” revolve around her children. However, Ionasky3’s criticism also raises the question as to why Drummond has to justify and separate her proposed intent to document her kids’ lives from how her content ended up expanding and taking various forms? This criticism of Drummond’s earliest intentions in starting her blog illustrates how criticism of Drummond as a whole has manifested itself. In other words, when critics like Ionasky3 suggest that Drummond’s blog is more than a “simple family blog,” they problematically suggest that Drummond’s blog cannot function as more than one thing, or that Drummond cannot occupy more than one role lest she be deemed as inauthentic.

In any case, from its earliest days, Drummond’s blog featured photos of her four children, Alex, Paige, Todd, and Bryce. Drummond captured her offspring’s childish shenanigans as they jumped on trampolines (“A Trampoline Shot”), pouted about waking up to work early mornings on the ranch (“My Favorite Photo, Part 3”), or slept buck-naked on the sidewalk (“Dirty Naked”). As Ionasky3 observed, Drummond also posted photographs featuring subjects other than her children, such as still photos of water pumps (“I like close-ups”), weathered barns (“One Barn, Ten Ways”), and Oklahoman sunsets (“My Favorite Photo, Part 4”). Mrs. Drummond also posted photographs of her cowboy husband, Ladd, or as she more often refers to him on her blog, “Marlboro Man”.

Just as “The Pioneer Woman” was reportedly a tongue-in-cheek moniker bestowed on her by friends, according to Drummond, Ladd’s nickname “Marlboro Man” was the result of a friend’s off-hand comment.
(“Tough Love”). And, after his addition to the family in 2007, Charlie, the family basset hound, admittedly became Drummond’s “#1 photo subject” (News Channel 5).

Beyond the visual, Drummond shared self-deprecating stories about her most humiliating moments,9 posted witty “Cowboy Colloquialisms,10 and composed volumes of poems entitled “Poetry of a Madwoman.” In these seemingly raw, unfiltered poems, Drummond lamented on a range of topics that seemed to be inspired by her personal experiences as a stay-at-home mother—from frustrations over endlessly picking up after her messy children to exasperations like the time when all four of her children got sick and permeated the house with the smell of puke (“Volume 3”; “Volume 13”).

Seven months after she started blogging, Drummond posted her first recipe entitled: “How to Cook a Steak”; the recipe was posted as a step-by-step process accompanied by seventeen photos to illustrate each step. (BlogHer). Drummond has said that she had no idea how her audience would respond to the addition of recipes to her site: “I had no idea whether anyone would be the least bit interested, but I was willing to give it a go” (“Ree Drummond”). It is possible that after a year of blogging (and out of boredom and/or creative curiosity), Drummond felt that she could afford to experiment and expand the types of content on her blog. At this point in time, Drummond also would

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9 E.g., Drummond shared “Gross-Out Stories” such as “The Fruit Stripe Ordeal.” In this story, Drummond’s mother discovered that her three-year old daughter, Ree, had stuffed fruit stripe wrappers up her nose and it caused a foul sinus infection.

10 E.g., It’s rainin’ like a cow peein’ on a flat rock. Translation: It’s raining hard (“Cowboy Colloquialism”).
have been experimenting with digital photography for a year. It could be surmised that after a year of taking photos around the ranch, Drummond wanted to pioneer into new territory, try her hand at food photography and marry her two professed passions: cooking and photography.

However, from a rhetorical and economic standpoint, writing about food also gave Drummond a new arena in which to expand the variety of blog content offered, and in effect, to pipe current readers’ curiosity and attract new traffic to her website. Even if readers were not interested in cooking, Drummond’s devoted followers may have eaten up the chance at the prospect of seeing another window into her everyday life—especially because Drummond framed her foray into food blogging as the result of deciding to record and share experiences that were already occurring in her everyday life.

According to Drummond, her first published recipe was the result of capturing the process of “getting ready to cook a steak for my husband, who has just returned from weaning calves” (“Ree Drummond”). This narrative helped to establish Drummond’s ethos as a relatable personality; in other words, Drummond’s cooking and lifestyle seemed attainable to her readers because she was cooking with ingredients that average families would already possess in their pantries at home, rather than making obscure, gourmet meals.

And, Drummond’s show is evident of a larger paradigm shift at Food Network, from shows featuring professional chefs to shows starring home cooks (many of whom were already celebrities). As Allen Salkin notes in his biopic of the Food Network: “The world of food no longer needed or wanted the network to make new stars or spread the
basic gospel. In a country now familiar with arugula, Food Network’s job was to harvest what had sprouted and display it in as fun and entertaining a way as possible” (From Scratch 392). Watching Drummond make recipes that have to be approved by “cowboys, hungry kids, and [her],” readers could similarly see themselves making meals for their own hungry families and become more enticed to engage with The Pioneer Woman brand (Imper). Readers did in fact respond positively to the addition of recipes to the blog, and subsequently, Drummond began regularly posting recipes and eventually progressing to blogging seven days a week (BlogHer; “Ree Drummond”). While Drummond says her traffic growth was “extremely gradual,” by the 2007 Bloggies Awards—the equivalent of the People’s Choice Awards of the Internet—Drummond’s blog received the “Best Kept Secret” award (BlogHer; “O Pioneer Woman”).

By the 2009 Bloggies, thepioneerwoman.com won for “Best Photography” and “Best-Designed Weblog,” beating out the favored PerezHilton.com and the esteemed Huffington Post (“O Pioneer Woman”). As of 2014 statistics, thepioneerwoman.com receives approximately 24 million page views/month (News Channel 5). Today, “The Pioneer Woman” blog is hosted by WordPress and is a conglomeration of several different sections including, “Confessions,” “PW Cooks,” “Food and Friends,” “Cookbook!,” “Life and Style,” “Fun and Learning,” “Products,” and “Giveaways.” In these various sections, Drummond covers topics ranging from recipes, stories about family and friends, and the latest cattle operation on the ranch or trip she has taken in association with the Pioneer Woman brand. She also posts quizzes for readers to take, giveaways for readers to enter, and photographs of the various products available in her
cookware line. Two of the sections—“Food and Friends” and “Life and Style”—are not produced by Drummond herself but are spaces in which Drummond allows other female food bloggers, and a “PW Lifestyle Team,” to contribute content.

As thepioneerwoman.com has evolved into a polished lifestyle portal that is maintained by a team of help, critics feel that due to her celebrity lifestyle, Drummond is no longer relatable to everyday Midwesterners—let alone other ranchers’ wives—and thus, she cannot claim to be a “real” pioneer woman. Criticism has taken multiple forms from blog posts and comments on blog posts, to conspiracy theories and entire websites created by people like The Marlboro Woman, The Pioneer Woman Sux, or Pie Near Woman. What all critics seem to have in common is their derision of Drummond for suggesting that she is just an ordinary housewife from Oklahoma married to a cattle rancher, and that her blog and TV show are simply capturing and broadcasting these experiences without manipulation. In reality, critics are puzzled over how Drummond manages to travel for book tours, film a cable television show (days Drummond has described as “as full as they could possibly be”), write witty blog posts, take pictures then upload, sort and Photoshop them, as well spend quality time with her husband and homeschool and raise her kids. (“Food Network Show FAQ”). All in all, it seems that critics find Drummond to not only be unworthy of the label “Pioneer Woman” because of the nature of her work, but also, deceitful in this claim because it would take more than one pioneer woman to accomplish all of the responsibilities that she currently has as a blogger, celebrity chef, author, businesswoman, mother, and rancher’s wife.

In regards to how she manages to juggle all of her roles and responsibilities, Drummond replied in a 2014 interview at the Power of the Purse luncheon, an annual fundraising event by the nonprofit Women for Women:

That’s probably the main question I get asked everywhere I go! First of all, I have a great husband… my other answer is I just do the things that I enjoy. And I really enjoy blogging, and doing the cookbook and the show, and so I seem to be more efficient at those things, but you should see my laundry room sometimes…I have periods of time when I’m really, really too busy—usually when I’m travelling on a book tour or something—but other than that, life on the ranch… it’s busy. Even if I wasn’t doing what I’m doing, it would still be crazy (TTUHSCtv).

Drummond’s first answer in response to this question was that she has “a great husband.” This comment is an interesting one because it suggests that perhaps Drummond’s marriage is more egalitarian and modern than most people assert. It has been suggested that part of the reason Drummond’s brand has been so popular amongst female consumers, in particular, is because it appeals to traditional masculine and feminine roles, i.e., Ree is the homemaker and Ladd is the handsome, hardworking cowboy who takes care of her. However, Drummond’s success and the demands that that success has placed on her—e.g., national book tours—not only complicates these traditional roles but also suggests that her husband would have to be more equally involved with the management of their household, especially in Ree’s absence. It could be argued that cooking, cleaning, childrearing are still seen as responsibilities that are primarily Ree’s, and Ladd is simply
filling in as necessary. Nevertheless, while critics may claim that Drummond is portraying a cookie cutter marriage that regurgitates antiquated masculine and feminine roles, Drummond’s comment seems to insinuate that the gendered roles within her marriage may be shades of gray rather than black and white.

In the second part of Drummond’s answer, she seems to try and assuage her followers that her life is not as picture-perfect as she depicts it on her blog. Drummond appears to try and diffuse any tension by joking, “you should see my laundry room sometimes!” However, this is the sort of comment that seems to upset critics. Drummond may claim that her laundry room is in disarray, but readers of thepioneerwoman.com never see said pictures of a messy laundry room. In fact, when I searched for the phrase “laundry room” on Drummond’s site, the first results that came up regarded the remodeling of the laundry room in the Lodge. Firstly, “the Lodge” is the guest house on the Drummond’s property, where she films episodes of her Food Network television show. In the Performance chapter, I will discuss further how the existence of the Lodge has unsettled many critics, as they insist that Drummond’s ability to renovate a second property and film a cable TV show there exemplifies an extraordinary lifestyle unlike that of ordinary ranching families. Of course, this criticism also negates Drummond’s agency in being able to share ordinary experiences in extraordinary ways vis à vis her blog and television show.

However, while these pictures may be messy in that they show a laundry room under construction, they certainly do not show the mess that Drummond so often alludes to with piles and piles of dirty clothes cluttering the floor. Rather, today’s readers are
only invited to see and consume Photoshopped images, filtered Instagram photos, edited blog posts, and a scripted TV show; they are not invited to see the house that Drummond actually resides in on a daily basis and to see the state of a house where “everyone’s always home, the house is always lived in” (“Waiting for Superwoman”). Furthermore, it could be argued that considering that Drummond is repeatedly asked this question suggests that most of the time, Drummond’s posts must make it appear like she is in fact managing her many roles seamlessly.

**The evolution of thepioneerwoman.com, and the subsequent backlash**

In August 2015, Drummond unveiled a newly redesigned version of thepioneerwoman.com, in which several former sections of the site were retired\(^\text{12}\) and the interface was replaced by a more visually-emphatic template. While these changes showcase Drummond’s prowess in evolving professionally as a blogger, photographer, and businesswoman, critics feel that because the blog looks (and sounds) much different than it did in 2006 that it is evidence of Drummond’s inauthentic embodiment of “The Pioneer Woman” persona.

Upon navigating to thepioneerwoman.com today, the most notable change to the blog is featured across the top of the home page: a large slider that cycles through and features several photographs of the latest posts from each of the seven sections. Scrolling through

\(^{12}\) “Entertainment,” “Home and Garden,” “Homeschooling,” and “Photography” are all sections that were retired in summer 2015. Back during her BlogHer ’13 speech, Drummond says that at one point, she was blogging quite frequently about photography. As a professed self-taught photographer, Drummond would share with her readers various techniques she had learned, either in taking or editing photos. However, Drummond says that she made the decision to retire that section of her blog because she felt that had not learned anything new to share, and she did not want to keep a “stagnant” section of her blog (BlogHer). I would argue that this was part of the same motivation in Drummond’s decision to retire the “Homeschooling” section, which I was discuss more in depth in the Performance chapter.
from top to bottom of the home page, readers are met with rows and rows of high-quality images that pop against the white background of the WordPress template. Also in the blog makeover, each of the sections were paired up with a decorative icon. For example, recipes are associated with a pot, while stories of ranch life are associated with a butterfly. More than just decorative, this decision further instilled branding consistency across the site. With a handful of different sections, icons help readers to quickly associate and identify what section of the site they are on.

In regards to authors of the content itself, Drummond’s admission of contributing bloggers via sections like Life & Style was quite significant, as prior to the website redesign, Drummond seemed to maintain that she was primarily responsible for adding content: “But day in and day out, I’m the one getting the content out there” (Casserly). Thus, while not surprising, with the blog’s makeover, it was made public information that Drummond is not the sole contributor to her site. The changes highlight that thepioneerwoman.com is no longer a one-woman show; Drummond needs a “PW team” to be able to maintain and operate a lifestyle blog of such magnitude, if only to be able to continually post fresh content. For critics, the growth of the blog has marked a shift in Drummond’s ethos from confessional and intimate to more filtered and polished; there is a now an entire team who contribute to Photoshopping images, editing blog posts, moderating comments, etc. In effect, critics feel that there is now a team of people helping Drummond to problematically blur the line between reality and fantasy.
Fig. 1: An Example of Drummond’s Amateur Early Food Photography

(“The Marlboro Man Sandwich”)

Fig.2: An Example of Drummond’s Professional Food Photography Skills

Today (“The MM Sandwich, PW Style”)

Of course, it is not surprising that the aesthetic of Drummond’s blog has changed, as blog traffic grew and even as Drummond discovered her design preferences and gained new skills. And perhaps if thepioneerwoman.com simply showed visual differences between the blog’s look from 2006 to today, critics would not be so offended. However because critics perceive that Drummond’s ethos also sounds much different compared to
her early blog postings, they accuse her of increasingly occupying a fraudulent identity that is only perpetuated for the sake of growing her brand. Indeed because readers can still access posts from 2006, this dated blogging material is used as ammunition by Drummond’s critics to accuse her of being inauthentic. I do not dispute the fact that Drummond’s ethos has evolved since the inception of her blog from more raw and uncensored to more filtered and polished. For example, while Drummond published audio clips of herself burping in 2006 (“Adolescent Humor: Burp #1”), this type of post would never occur on thepioneerwoman.com today. However, it has also been ten years since Drummond created her blog, and it is arguably more unrealistic for critics to expect that Drummond’s ethos would also not evolve over the course of time due to human nature.

Melanie Haupt, a scholar at the University of Austin who studies the intersections between feminism and the food industry, seems to agree that “…because the archives of [Drummond’s blog’s] early days are still relatively intact, readers can piece together a very different portrait of Ree Drummond, separate from the highly polished, mediated image of the Pioneer Woman of today” (“Guest Post”). Basically, Drummond is accused of increasingly sanitizing the truth about the realities of her daily life, in order to appease marketers and to sell a utopian version of her daily life living on a remote ranch. As one of Drummond’s most notable critics, The Pioneer Woman Sux, expresses:

More disturbing to me than the lies-by-omission, the sucking of the government tit, and the downright deceit of portraying a normal ‘just like everyone else’ rancher’s wife is the morphing like Brundie-Fly into
something other than human. *Ree Drummond no longer exists. Readers are now presented with the sanitized and trademarked Pioneer Woman* (my emphasis). A brand. Nothing more, nothing less” (“Mike is no longer retarded”).

The Pioneer Woman Sux is referring to the fact that today one would be extremely hard pressed to find relatable, diary-like posts ala “Poetry of a Madwoman” style on the aspirational “extremely polished lifestyle portal” that has become “The Pioneer Woman” brand (Haupt 39).

A vivid example of this contrast in Drummond’s ethos—from more personal in 2006 to less intimate and more corporatized in 2016—would be how she has approached writing about weight loss. In a May 22, 2006 post entitled “Volume 9: “Poetry of a Madwoman,”13 Drummond dramatically wrote about the baby weight that she hadn’t been able to lose since the birth of her fourth child, Bryce. As Drummond lamented:

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13 I find it imperative to note here that I have been unable to locate the original “Volume 9” post on thepioneerwoman.com. I first read this poem as a part of Melanie Haupt’s 2012 dissertation entitled, “Starting from Scratch: Community, Connection, and Women’s Culinary Culture,” but to date, I have been unsuccessful in combing Drummond’s archives. Considering that Drummond’s original blog posts from 2006 are still accessible on her website, I find it very strange that I have been unable to locate this particular poem. In total, it seems that Drummond published at least eighteen volumes worth of “Poetry of a Madwoman” because the last poem I have found is titled “Poetry of a Madwoman, Vol. 18” published in September 2006. However, volumes 4-10 and 16 appear to be missing from the site. This leads me to wonder whether Drummond has since gone back and deleted some of the poems. Volume 9, for example, contained the word “bastard,” which might have been deemed offensive and was not considered acceptable language to Drummond’s advertising partners. It could also be surmised that Drummond was embarrassed about how much she shared with her readers at the time, and she deleted the entries she decided were too personal. For example, when Drummond was asked in a 2009 Q&A panel of food bloggers, “How do you reconcile living your life in public versus keeping your own space?,” she responded: “I feel like I’m very, very open on my blog, and my blog is personal. But there’s a lot I don’t post about. Just, you know, hormonal moments, explosive hormones and things.”(ginavon). If we are to take this comment at face value, it could be hypothesized that Drummond might have decided that her Madwoman poetry was too “hormonal.” Perhaps as Drummond grew more famous, she became mortified at the thought of such a large audience reading her most intimate thoughts, albeit published in such a public forum. However, in a 2011 interview with Oklahoma News on 6, Drummond insisted that “I’ve never had a moment where I’ve felt uncomfortable [about how much I’ve shared on my blog]. I’ve never had a moment where it felt unnatural
I’m fat
So very fat.
These thirteen bastard pounds
Cling to my gut
Like a marsupial suckling.
My thin, shapely legs
Are mankind’s greatest deception.
Just travel north a foot or two
And a blubbery hell awaits
Bring me cheese.
Fresh mozzarella cheese.
And chocolate by the load.
I’m nothing but a toad.
I’m fat (Haupt 45-6).

As for more recently, the closest example I could find on Drummond’s blog where she talks about feeling fat or wanting to lose weight was this August 7, 2015 post: “I’ve been walking somewhat religiously, paying careful attention to meet my daily FitBit goal of 10,000 steps, since May of 2014, with the exception of a several-week wagon fall-off earlier this summer” (“Hiya!”). Here, Drummond does not explicitly say, as she does in the 2006 poem, that she feels fat and yearns to lose weight. Rather, this statement can simply be interpreted as Drummond wanting to get into better physical shape, thus why or strange.” Thus, while Drummond’s motivations may indeed be a combination of embarrassment and pressure from advertisers, I am tempted to conclude that it was more so an act to please her sponsors.
she has been “walking somewhat religiously” and using her FitBit to help track whether she has been meeting her goal of “10,000 steps” per day.

However, Drummond’s additional statement that she fell off the FitBit wagon suggests that she has not solely been walking to stay in shape or improve her physical fitness, but also in order to stave off weight gain. The ethos of this post is arguably less intimate and personal than the 2006 poem. The first half of the sentence, before the “several-week wagon fall-off” admission, could have been written by anyone who owns a FitBit. In this post, Drummond does not detail her personal body shape, reveal her feelings about being overweight or curse falling off the FitBit wagon. The second more recent blog posting thus reads as more of a statement of fact rather than a diary-like confession. It reads more like an endorsement of a FitBit by your fellow virtual neighbor, Ree.

According to U.S. law, paid reviews must be clearly marked (Homeward Bound 61). According to a November 2013 post where Drummond shared a picture of her new FitBit Flex with readers, she was not being paid to advertise the product (“A Friday List”). Nevertheless, Drummond’s continual mentioning of her FitBit use, screenshots of her exercise progress in several consequent blog posts,¹⁴ in addition to her holding of FitBit giveaways,¹⁵ all suggest that in some shape or form, Drummond has an economic

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¹⁴ “I’ve been walking/running/walking/running/but mostly walking in the evenings, because I’ve become reacquainted with my FitBit after a long, jiggly break and I’ll be dearned if the little contraption isn’t motivating me” (“My Walking Companion”).

relationship with the company. Today, Drummond can profit from writing about her efforts to lose weight by the mentioning of a product in her prose, whereas in 2007, Drummond had not yet forged relationships with corporate sponsors. From a business standpoint, Drummond is smart to weave product use into her blogging, as she can profit either by receiving free new gadgets and/or monetary compensation. Companies like FitBit also love relationships with people like Drummond because their products can be more subtly endorsed. As Emily Matchar writes in *Homeward Bound*, “Paying bloggers to write reviews is a way for a company to connect with an audience suspicious of corporate ad campaigns...” (61). Moreover, “a 2011 BlogHer report on women and blogs [found that] 81 percent of U.S. women trust what they read on blogs” (*Homeward Bound* 61).

In effect, it is differences in the visual aesthetic (staged and Photoshopped photos) and the ethos (a more corporatized-sounding tone) which have led critics to say that Drummond is not being real or completely honest with her readers, because everything thing is polished and stripped of imperfection. Moreover, money is arguably now seen by critics as tainting Drummond’s motives. That is, rather than blogging for the sake of personal fulfillment and engaging with fellow readers for the sake of community, Drummond’s relationship with her audience is perceived as one-way. In other words, Drummond is seen by her critics as selfishly only caring about her audience now in terms of their economic value as readers, viewers, and customers. Thus, rather than being concerned with representing the truth of ranching life vis à vis a documentary-like expose
about the joys *and* hardships, or sharing how she juggles her growing career with her busy home life and how her income positions her as a privileged rancher’s wife, Drummond is seen as obscuring and romanticizing the truth in order to sell a utopian narrative of pioneer life. While Drummond may have started out as a more relatable, “authentic” blogger, Drummond is perceived to have morphed into the aspirational and mediated image known as “The Pioneer Woman.”

Nevertheless, and as evidenced by her financial success, Drummond does have a large fan base who very much enjoy her depiction of life on the ranch. This fan base is estimated by Drummond to be 95% female (“O Pioneer Woman”). These women appear to be fascinated by the narrative that Drummond constructs through her photographs and stories; a narrative that romanticizes Drummond’s (ongoing) “transition from city life to ranch wife” (News Channel 5). Anna Fortini, a reporter for *New Yorker* magazine, pointed in out in her 2011 feature article on Drummond that because she hails from Oklahoma, Drummond’s locale seems exotic to many readers: “Because the Pioneer Woman’s housewifery is distinctly rural, it is exotic to her readers, many of whom log on from suburban or urban locales” (“O Pioneer Woman”). Moreover, Fortini added that while “the Internet is now overrun with ‘farm blogs’ when Drummond began to write an online diary, they were still a fairly novel idea. In this sense, at least, she was a pioneer” (“O Pioneer Woman”). In fact, because Drummond can track where her readers are coming from using analytic tools that pinpoint IP addresses, she has ascertained in actuality that traffic to her site is pretty evenly split between country and city dwellers. As Drummond said in a 2010 interview with Forbes magazine,
I was actually surprised to find out the distribution of people reading The Pioneer Woman is evenly distributed between city folks and country people. I would have thought that there were more rural-minded people, but it turns out all people can find something to relate to on the site, whether it’s the food or the ranch life or the photography (Casserly).

That “something to relate to” could be the fact that no matter how many makeovers thepioneerwoman.com has undergone over the years, Drummond has adhered to a consistent formula that readers find attractive. Like the early days, Drummond is still relatively sharing the same stories, e.g., pictures of her kids and scenes from around the ranch. However, what has changed is that the quality of these photos has grown increasingly attractive over time. As Fortini would support, “Drummond uses still photography and then heavily Photoshops [her pictures] so that every subject, from her kids to the cows grazing in her pastures, looks alluring, lush, sherbet-hued” (“Pioneer Woman Gets Lost”). As a result, everything Drummond publishes on her site looks appealing—from a casserole dish full of hearty Midwestern fare like Chicken Spaghetti to a picture of her SUV slathered in coats of mud. It is the showing of ordinary things in an extraordinary way that seems to capture fans’ attentions. Of course it is also this enhancement and exaggeration that has enraged critics, who claim that in the process of branding her life, Drummond has distorted the reality of what life is like for the average ranching family—let alone for working moms—and thus, she has misrepresented and is undeserving of the label, “Pioneer Woman.”
Moreover, when Drummond says that “all people” can find something to relate to on her site, this is not necessarily accurate, either. It does not seem to be that all people are attracted to Drummond’s blog, and/or the overarching Pioneer Woman brand. Rather, Drummond’s blog seems to overwhelmingly attract female readers. While part of Drummond’s appeal is that viewers can watch her cook meals for her family and can envision themselves doing likewise, the Pioneer Woman brand is also appealing because audiences can watch and listen about Drummond’s life and fantasize about a life that is different from their own—a life that is often presented to them as idyllic, where the bills are paid, the house is clean, the kids are polite to mom and cordial to their siblings, and the husband is handsome. As Drummond remarked in an interview describing why she thinks her brand appeals to women, “I think all of us women yearn for a simpler life, particularly when we have kids and schedules all around us. The country seems simpler to a lot of people” (Garcia).

Melanie Haupt would agree that The Pioneer Woman brand appeals to a yearning for a less chaotic, simpler life, or as she puts it: “a nostalgic image of a pastoral Midwestern existence” that “regurgitates hegemonic tropes of femininity and masculinity” (Starting from Scratch 52). As Haupt theorized in her dissertation, a work that examined the cultural significance of recipes, cooking, and eating in women’s popular genres such as film, novels, and cookbooks,

…the matrix of feminized domesticity [Drummond] constructs through her posts about cooking, her children, homeschooling, and home-related product recommendations such as quilts and jewelry-storage systems
reinforces the image of Drummond as the angel in the (ranch) house, attending to all things domestic while her rugged, virile, Dr. Pepper-swilling husband attends to manly things outdoors, like working cows and castrating calves (*Starting from Scratch* 52).

It is this particular portrayal of rural living as fantasized domestic bliss that appears to have resonated well with Drummond’s fans. As Haupt has further added, “She’s making money off women who buy this narrative hook, line, and sinker” (*Homeward Bound* 63). This appears to be true simply by the women who show up by the hundreds, and wait for hours in line, just for a chance to meet Drummond and have her sign a cookbook or pair of cowboy boots, e.g., “At her first reading, people waited in line *five hours* just to see her” (Ahern; Tracy).

It is indeed highly likely that Drummond’s audience is overwhelmingly female because there are more females than males engaging with blogs in general. Today—and perhaps contrary to popular belief—studies show that “the typical blogger is more likely to be a thirty-two year old stay-at-home mom than an eighteen-year old male video gamer” (*Homeward Bound* 50). Furthermore, American women are spending significantly more time online in general than American men are (*Homeward Bound* 50). BlogHer, one of the largest online publishing networks for women as well as the company that connects Drummond with advertisers, puts the number of women engaging with blogs at 60 million (Bowman). This is a significantly high number; it is a large enough demographic, that in a 2010 State of the Blogosphere Report, Technorati declared...
that “the influence of women and mom bloggers on the blogosphere, mainstream media, and especially brands has never been higher” (Matchar, *Homeward Bound*, 51).

This notion of instrumental influence is perhaps why Drummond’s critics are so infuriated. In other words, Drummond could be offering a different portrayal than the one she is now, even if it was more so like she did in the early days of her blogging with posts like “Poetry of a Madwoman.” Indeed, Drummond is in a rare club today as a blogger who now makes a solid $1,000,000 dollars a year from advertising revenue on her blog (“O Pioneer Woman”). In reality, as Matchar reports in her book *Homeward Bound*, “…only 18 percent of bloggers make any nonsalary money off their blogs. And of those, the average yearly earnings are less than $10,000…But if [women] are hoping for financial self-sufficiency, they’ll probably do better looking for a nine-to-five” (62). The average woman who partners with BlogHer, for example, earns a couple hundred dollars a month (CBS This Morning). Conversely, Drummond could support her family from the money she makes from her blog alone. Even so, the blog is not Drummond’s only source of revenue. In addition to the blog, Drummond also rakes in revenue from several other business ventures including her cooking show on the Food Network, four cookbooks, children’s books, as well as a best-selling book called “Black Heels to Tractor Wheels” based on the story of how she met her husband. Most recently, in September 14, 2015, Drummond released a line of cookware available at Wal-Mart stores nationwide (“Walmart”).

In response to the backlash, Drummond’s responses have taken multiple forms. In my research thus far, I have not seen Drummond directly respond to criticism per se, e.g., a
press conference. However, Drummond has done many speaking engagements and participated in numerous interviews, thus arguably, I have pieced together answers across various platforms of how Drummond has responded to certain questions or claims, e.g., through YouTube videos, published interviews online, and quotes in articles. In regards to dealing with critics on the Internet in general, in a Q&A session after her BlogHer ’13 keynote speech, Drummond was asked by BlogHer co-founder Lisa Stone how she handles dealing with “trolling, and frankly, hate.”

Drummond replied:

My number one piece of advice is don’t let them do that to you. Don’t let them zap your creativity. *Don’t let them take what you have created.*

Don’t let them fill you with fear. Having friends that are fellow bloggers has been essential to me over the years… Surround yourself with people you trust (BlogHer).

Here, Drummond gives a very politically correct answer, which affirms her savviness as a businesswoman and giving answers that align with the persona that she has constructed.

The narrative driving The Pioneer Woman blog is that it has been a space to document and share Drummond’s transition over the years from city life to ranch wife. This transition is often talked about by Drummond as a conscious decision to trade in the frivolities and hustle and bustle of city life, like getting weekly pedicures and buying expensive sushi dinners, for a more grounded life in the country, e.g., “It sounds so crazy but I had really sort of found myself in the country” (Hood). Arguably, in light of

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16 An example of hate would be a comment like this one, “Never seen the show or read her blog, but from the pics I’ve just Googled, she looks like a smug bitch” (“Frau blogger”). Here, this anonymous commenter admits that s/he has never even engaged with The Pioneer Woman brand, but yet, s/he still hates Drummond simply because she appear to look like “a smug bitch.”
Drummond’s current celebrity, “hustle and bustle” could be seen as an accurate description of the politics and drama that can come as a result of having a high-profile career. However, Drummond’s answer seems to situate herself outside of the drama, to emphasize that her priorities lie elsewhere. If Drummond is perceived to be focused on her job (“Don’t let them take what you have created”) and her family and friends (“Surround yourself with people you trust”), in comparison, critics, who spend their time trolling commenting forums and saying harsh, unkind words, seem like petty, pathetic people who have nothing better to do all day than to prey on a seemingly innocent blogger with “two dough-poked dimples on her cheeks” (St. Clair).

Fig. 3: Instagram photo of Drummond wearing a bracelet inscribed with the prayer of St. Francis, 11 Feb. 2016
In addition to the comment above, Drummond also added that while she does not like to give the following as advice to other bloggers, her approach has been based on the prayer of St. Francis, i.e., “make me an instrument of your peace.” As Drummond says, “I don’t want to put it back out there. For me, it has always stopped on my doorstep. For me, it would be a disproportionate response considering the good I have experienced” (BlogHer). Therefore, in regards to critics like The Pioneer Woman Sux or The Marlboro Woman, Drummond’s approach seems to be to ignore, and to not respond to, the criticism. Drummond’s mentioning of the prayer of St. Francis implies that she sees her actions as wholesome and good, unlike how critics portray her to be as a deceitful, manipulative woman. Of course, it could also be argued that Drummond’s reference of a quote by St. Francis paints her as a woman with good religious values, which whether Drummond intentionally means to or not plays into the construction of her as the ideal domestic woman.

It is no question that with her growing celebrity and the opportunities that affords, Drummond is not representing the “average rancher’s wife.” Because thepioneerwoman.com has intact archives, I have been able to look back and see how Drummond’s online persona has changed over time and that she has in fact evolved into profitable, mediated image. Within the course of my short graduate career, I have been able to see how thepioneerwoman.com has aesthetically changed. Even within the time span of starting this thesis, the home page of thepioneerwoman.com changed again.
When it comes to online performance, there are always choices involved, e.g., choose to post this and not that; choose this word over that word. Critics struggle to support Drummond because with her celebrity platform, she could choose to present a much different portrayal of life on the ranch than the one she does now. She could be more transparent about her daily life, and how there is no way that she alone homeschools her children, cleans her house and cooks for her family, all the while producing fresh content for her blog and maintaining a blog that receives such high traffic, filming a cooking show, running her Wal-Mart kitchenware business, writing a cookbook, and travelling for public commitments. There is no arguing against the fact...
that Drummond occupies a position of privilege, and while she may be married to a cattle rancher, her life certainly is not representative of the average ranching family.

Nevertheless, critics’ questioning of whether Drummond fits the label she has chosen for her brand problematically attempts to belittle Drummond’s success because she occupies a privileged, socioeconomic position, and to inscribe one, particular definition of who a pioneer woman is and what she does. In this process, critics attempt to control Drummond’s agency in being able to craft, assert, and market her identity—a market which can be extremely lucrative. After all, Drummond is far from the only person today who is taking part in self-branding. In a NY Times online editorial, a working mother acknowledged that while she may be envious that her 8 year old daughter loves watching “The Pioneer Woman” because she is “all that I am not,” she also recognizes Drummond’s prowess in establishing her brand. As the woman writes, “Her blog shows that not only is she a cook, but also what all things post-2010 must be: a brand” (“My Daughter Loves”).

In his essay “Phantasmagoric Capital,” economist Ernest Steinberg seems to support this idea as he maps the discourses surrounding three, distinct classes of labor since the Industrial Age. He categorizes the status of the current marketplace as “phantasmagoric,” in which we essentially all brand ourselves just as products have been branded in the past. As Steinberg describes:

We load ourselves up with meaningfulness; we work hard at issues of self-image in an effort to constitute ourselves as ‘significant’ iconic workers. It is just as important to be seen as a good nurse, executive, flight attendant,
as it is to actually do the tasks that make up the job; the ‘capacity for calculated posing’ has become a routine job requirement (qtd. in Hearn 621).

In other words, according to these dictates, ideal workers in today’s marketplace are those that have a persona that is always on and ready to be profitable. In application to Ree Drummond, this means that regardless of whether she is engaging in hard manual labor like pioneers of the 1800s, it is more important that the public buys into her marketed image as “The Pioneer Woman.” (see figures below)

![Fig. 5: 19th century pioneer woman vs. Drummond as “The Pioneer Woman” in the 21st century](image)

In this case, Drummond has created a dynamic, online presence, and her “calculated posing” has been extremely successful. With the amount of blogs cluttering the blogosphere market today, it is no small feat to create a profitable blog that is worth seven figures, so Drummond’s continued success after ten years is laudable.
PART II

CHAPTER ONE: BLOGGING

Critics use the Tool of Ordinary People to Challenge Drummond’s Extraordinary Representation of a Pioneer Woman

Introduction

Blogging is where Drummond first began sharing her identity with a public audience, as a “ridiculous city girl stuck in the country, trying desperately to act the part” (“The Real Cowgirl”). Blogs are also the popular medium in which mostly female critics turn to, in order to reject this particular representation of a rancher’s wife. People like The Marlboro Woman, Pie Near Woman, and The Pioneer Woman Sux are all individuals who have created entire blogs devoted to exposing The Pioneer Woman for the fraud they believe her to be. Other critics have chosen to devote an individual post on their blogs—blogs ranging in genres from general/personal blogs, to farm blogs, to food blogs—to express their disapproval of Drummond’s blogging practices. Others like Emily Matchar—author of Homeward Bound, a book that critically examines the resurgence of domesticity in America—have written posts that encourage conversation and engagement and that have spawned hundreds of comments, e.g., “What do you think? Any Pioneer Woman fans/haters out there?”

What all these critics seem to have in common—whether they are writing a blog post, commenting on a post, and/or both—is their rejection of Drummond’s particular

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17 One could argue that all Pioneer Woman critics are looking for conversation and engagement when they post about their dislike of Ree Drummond. They seek identification through others’ validation; they are looking to talk with others who also cannot stand The Pioneer Woman. However, this points to one type of identification, i.e., Pioneer Woman haters. Conversely, Emily Matchar was open to hearing from both fans and critics when she wrote her piece.
representation of a rancher’s wife because she has failed to meet their expectations about what that identity should entail. In fact, critics like The Pioneer Woman Sux, Marlboro Woman, and Pie Near Woman all seem to share a perverse bond over their rejection of Drummond’s brand, and their enjoyment in identifying Drummond as a common scapegoat. Pioneer Woman Sux, for example, calls her fellow Ree-bashers, “Awesome Bitches” (“Home”) thus suggesting that she condones their criticism and finds their respective approaches to be acceptable ways of critiquing Drummond’s blogging practices. Blogging has given these critics a vehicle through which to virtually band together to express their dissatisfaction over the expansion of The Pioneer Woman brand. As Burke would say, bloggers come together through their shared purpose of separating themselves from another, e.g., “Thus rhetoric is a contest of identities and loyalties, the courtship of coming together and separating (Sloane 375).

In fact, blogging has been lauded as a medium that brings women, in particular, together. As Emily Matchar notes, “In an era of near-universal Web access, even the most traditionally isolated of women—homebound mothers of newborns, farm dwellers, work-at-home-rs living far from family—can be connected” (Homeward Bound 52). When she started her blog, Ree Drummond was a stay-at-home mother of four young children living on an isolated cattle ranch. thepioneerwoman.com thus arguably gave Drummond a vehicle through which to establish connections outside of her small community in Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

Some critics believe that Drummond’s blog in its original form was more authentic as they feel it represented a small photo diary compiled by a mommy blogger.
Today, critics increasingly feel that Drummond is being dishonest on her blog not only because she offers a highly polished portrait of life on the ranch, but also, because they claim that the work she does to craft that portrait is largely hidden. Understanding the life of a nineteenth century pioneer woman to be demanding and difficult, critics struggle to understand why (and how) Drummond’s representation of pioneer life seems so picture perfect and free of hardship.

In American history, the word “pioneer” refers to the people who migrated west during the 1700s-1800s in search of owning their own land (“Pioneers”). Embarking on long journeys, traversing across uncharted, wild terrain, and settling in unfamiliar territories, pioneer men and women lived challenging lives and had to be extremely self-sufficient in order to survive. Women, especially, worked extremely hard as they not only worked alongside their husbands outdoors farming, planting, and harvesting, but they also were the ones largely responsible for the domestic chores and running of a household. Women cared for their children, canned fruits and vegetables, cooked, cleaned, sewed and made clothes, tended to animals, and more (McAndrew). Essentially, life in pioneer times was very demanding, especially for women who were charged with all domestic duties. Necessities had to be made from scratch, and pioneer women adopted multiple roles as farmers, mothers, seamstresses, cooks, and/or doctors in order to meet the needs of their families.

The image of a pioneer is deeply rooted in America’s identity and is symbolic of its values. Pioneers are seen as the epitome of the American Dream: self-reliant individuals who worked hard in pursuit of their aspirations, e.g., owning land. Even when
they faced struggles and hardships, pioneers are perceived as having endured, pushed forward, and survived. Thus today, it seems that in order to appropriately label someone as a “pioneer,” or for someone to be seen as appropriately embodying this label, this person must not only be perceived as being a hard worker, but also someone who overcame obstacles or difficult circumstances and persevered. It is as Joanne Stratton says in her historical novel, *Pioneer Women: Voices of the Frontier*, “In its isolation, the pioneer family existed as a self-sufficient unit that took pride in its ability to provide for itself and persevere in the face of hardship” (57).

Married to a rancher who makes at least $100K a year,¹⁸ Drummond is perceived by her critics to be a woman of means who is not familiar with what it is like to endure real hardships. Hardships are perceived by Pioneer Woman critics as being well understood by the average ranching families today, as well as the pioneering families of yesterday. Conversely, Drummond’s family was already financially secure when she decided to start her blog, and to pursue her professional blogging career; her family was not dependent on income from thepioneerwoman.com in order to pay their bills. While carving out a unique domain in the blogosphere and accruing a large fan base has by no means been a simple process, Drummond’s critics reminisce about 19th century pioneers

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¹⁸ Ree’s husband, Ladd (along with Ladd’s brother, Tim, and his dad, Charlie) are partners in the ranching business Drummond Land and Cattle (Coffey). According to a 2013 special edition of *The Land Report*, the Drummonds are the 17th largest landowners in the U.S., owning 433,000 acres (“100 Largest Landowners”). As a part of their business, the Drummonds uphold a contract from the Bureau of Land Management to raise wild horses on their property. According to a report by Oklahoma news channel 6, Ree and Ladd Drummond house 2,200 horses on their property and are paid $1.30 per horse/per day, which comes out to $1.04 million/year (Lester). However, Ladd claims that less than ten percent of this is profit, which would bring his annual income to approximately $100,000 a year (Lester). Of course, 20,000 out of the 430,000 acres are also used to raise cattle (Garcia). Unlike the wild horses, however, the 2,500 cattle are raised and then sold for slaughter which would bring in additional income (DiGregorio).
trekking the Oregon Trail and consequently conclude that Drummond’s path to success has been nothing but luxurious. Here, success is seen as well-deserved when individuals start from nothing and build a fortune; yet, if individuals like Ree Drummond already possess a small fortune and then enter into more success, the American Dream does not appear as romantic. As one of Drummond’s critics complained, “I do know though that when someone is already rich and then has had this much success, it’s sometimes hard to root for them” (Bitch Eating Crackers, Re: “Pioneer Woman is Selling Stuff at Wal Mart”).

Drummond may work hard as “The Pioneer Woman,” but it seems that critics struggle to equate professional blogging with “hard” work. Blogging is considered to be a leisurely hobby, rather than a legitimate, respectable career. Plus, with her growing celebrity and wealth, Drummond is seen as occupying a socioeconomic status that disqualifies her from identifying with the lives of either 19th century pioneers or 21st century ranchers’ wives. Rather, Drummond is seen as living a glamorous, privileged lifestyle, in which she can blog inside a renovated guest house without ever having to work long days outside in the blistering sun as a ranch hand.

Overall, critics’ discomfort about Drummond’s ownership of the “Pioneer Woman” label points to an interesting overarching metaphor between the Midwest

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19 “Ladd is married to ‘The Pioneer Woman,’ Ree Drummond, a Food Network cooking show host/blogger/photographer/cookbook author who writes folksy blogs about her life on their ranch in Oklahoma. Kind of like she’s a pioneer woman. Except in real life, Ree is wealthy and has both a house and a nice lodge on her ranch. (Nothing like the real pioneers, who had to trod across the plains in a covered wagon.)” (Coffey; my emphasis).
frontier of the 1800s and the landscape of the Internet today. Just as the frontier in the 1800s was referred to as the “Wild West” because it was undefined land, the Internet today is representative of unsettled territory as citizens still debate how it should be mediated and what is the proper way to act within its forums. Criticism of Ree Drummond, “The Pioneer Woman,” exemplifies tensions surrounding expectations about the blogging genre itself, but also expectations about who a pioneer woman is.

Believing the blog to be a more democratic form of media because of its accessibility to all demographics and everyday citizens’ ability to publish their thoughts directly, lifestyle blogs are expected to be spaces that reflect people’s ordinary, messy, complex lives and in which they can express their “true” selves. Moreover, I claim that because blogging can be done extra-institutionally and because traditional women’s work in the private sphere has been historically undervalued, female bloggers who create lifestyle blogs to write about their lived experiences as wives and mothers are often not taken seriously as professionals. Drummond’s critics challenge that her seemingly perfect representation of a rancher’s wife is in fact an unfiltered depiction of her life. Critics’ objections strongly suggest that Drummond had the potential, through a platform hailed today as being “the medium of everyday people,” to give readers an unfiltered peek at life on an Oklahoman cattle ranch in the 21st century. Yet, especially because her blog is monetized, critics interpret Drummond’s content to be corrupted.

Furthermore, determining that she must spend the majority of her days blogging inside rather than ranching outside, critics deem that Drummond is not a “real” pioneer woman in the first place. Blogging all day about food, sunsets, and her dog, Drummond’s
actions are read as leisure rather than work, and consequently, her identity as a professional blogger is not taken seriously. Moreover, Drummond’s brand and blog connote pioneering by name, yet Drummond’s work as a professional blogger troubles critics because it is not seen as exemplary of historic, traditional pioneering work. While Drummond’s success points to her intellectual labor in the building of a widely read virtual blog supported by advertisements, nevertheless, because she is not perceived as engaging in strenuous, physical labor, Drummond’s work is not respected but rather dismissed as unfit to qualify as a “real” pioneer woman’s work. Furthermore, Drummond’s monetization of her blog, and exponential growth of her brand, is seen as conflating with a down-home, simplistic life on the pioneer.

However, in this process, critics problematically attempt to claim authority over one particular definition of a pioneer woman, and in real ways, they attempt to dismantle Drummond’s agency in being able to market her construction of a rancher’s wife. Furthermore by clutching onto a romanticized historical image of a pioneer woman and obsessing over the differences between Drummond and this image, critics fail to see a commonality between Ree Drummond and her pioneering ancestors. As Attila Nagy astutely observed in a blog post entitled, “15 Tools That Helped Pioneers Survive on the American Frontier”: “American culture unapologetically romanticizes the lives of the first pioneers…In reality, the frontier was a terrifying, dangerous wilderness. And you were only as good as the tools you carried” (my emphasis). This last line is what I see as the uniting thread between the historical definition of pioneer, and the possibilities of a new modern definition that expands the work of a pioneer to include more than physical
labor. While the tools that Drummond uses in the 21st century in order to build her Pioneer Woman brand may be different than the tools her 19th century ancestors used on the frontier to accomplish their work, nevertheless, both can be considered pioneers in that they sought out the most effective tools in order to achieve the task before them.

Blogs as the Official Medium of Ordinary People

Before I discuss criticism of Drummond’s blog in more depth, I find it helpful here to give a brief summation of the history of the blog. Blogs first emerged in the late nineties as a way for tech-savvy individuals—generally web designers or programmers—to be able to log and track their activity across the Web (Miller and Shepherd 6). Writer Jorn Barger is credited with coining the term “web-log” in 1997 (Miller and Shepherd 6); this term was eventually shortened to the term “blog,” which is now used as both a verb and a noun (Higgins). By 1999, a number of blog platforms launched that did not require coding experience to operate, thus increasing blogging popularity amongst lay people outside of the tech industry (Miller and Shepherd 6).

At its most basic, digital literacy scholar Aimeé Morrison would describe a blog as “a webpage comprised of individual posts” (“Blogs and Blogging”). While blogs may differ in content from site to site, there is strong agreement amongst scholars that there are formatting features that all blogs share. Individual posts contain a date (and posts are ordered by reverse chronology, with the most recent appearing first), a time stamp, a permalink, and usually the author’s name as well as a space for commentary (Miller and Shepherd 8). This space for commentary is a defining feature of the blogging genre;
unlike ancestral print genres like diaries or novels, the blog allows for interactive
dialogue between author and reader in real-time.

Moreover, a majority of blog posts contain external links or contain embedded or
linked media components like photographs, videos, or audio files (Miller and Shepherd 8;
“Blogs and Blogging”). Laurie McNeill, a scholar at the University of British Columbia
who studies genre theory and social networks, would say these aforementioned features
allow bloggers to utilize the tools of the Internet to turn “textual self-portraits into three-
dimensional virtual experiences that allow the reader to take a guided tour of the
[blogger’s] ‘life’” (30). In other words, a blog post filled with photos, videos, and/or
audio constructs a virtual world for readers; readers are not left to imagine and paint their
own picture of a blogger’s life based on text alone, but rather a blogger already provides
the images for the reader. Scrolling through photographs, readers are invited to share in
the blogger’s experiences and see her world through her eyes. Since a blogger can upload
and share photographs almost immediately after the events depicted occur, “the
immediacy heightens the reader’s sense of identification with the writer, since the reader
can experience vicariously the events in the diarist’s life almost in ‘real time’” (McNeill
30). One of BlogHer’s cofounders, Elisa Camahort Page, supports that research has
shown that “Once you have read someone’s personal blog for awhile you no longer
consider them someone you ‘don’t know’” (Homeward Bound 54).

Media scholars Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin would agree that blogs are not simply
digitized diaries, photo albums, scrapbooks, and/or cookbooks, but rather, they represent
a refashioning of older mediums before them. While blogs contain elements of older print
and analog media such as diaries, they also have new elements which are distinct to the
Web platform such as the immediacy of publishing on the Web and the ability to interact
in real-time with others. While with analog print media there was a delay between writing
and publishing, with digital media forums bloggers can publish their writing
immediately. In turn, readers can also instantly comment, which heightens the genre’s
immediacy, as well as readers’ feelings that they truly “know” the blogger.

Thus, since the emergence of the blog as an easily accessible platform, the blog
has been hailed as the “official medium of ordinary people” (“The Pioneer Woman:
Selling a Fake Image”). Anyone with an Internet connection can quickly set up a blog
within minutes on a free blogging platform like Blogger, WordPress, Drupal, Tumblr, or
SharePoint. Indeed, the reality that anyone with an Internet connection can immediately
publish his/her thoughts to the Web, without it first being filtered or censored has also led
to blogging being conceptualized as the ideal democratic platform.

In other words, it is the prospect that with the advent of the Internet, doors were
opened that allowed everyday citizens to become not only consumers of media but also
producers. Henry Jenkins has described the culture of new media as a “participatory
culture.” As Jenkins writes, “Rather than talking about media producers and consumers
as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with
each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (3). In
essence, Jenkins is saying that prior to the Internet, mass media was a closed community
whereby professionals were gatekeepers of information. Producers and consumers
occupied separate roles, i.e., professionals produced media, while citizens consumed. In
order for the average Joe’s voice to be heard in analog media, a person had to go through certain channels and formalities.

For example, in order to have an opinion heard in a local newspaper, a person would have to write a letter to the editor. This letter could ultimately be rejected for publication. Conversely, today anyone with access to an Internet connection can produce and publish a story, article, or video, as well as make their opinion heard by commenting in a forum, by starting a blog or website, or by posting a video to YouTube. While it can be argued that there are still constraints within these media forums and thus perhaps why Jenkins writes that the relationship between consumers and media producers is not yet fully understood—e.g., bloggers like Drummond have the power to censor comments from their sites—nevertheless, the barriers to publication for the average person are lower than they were in the print era.

WordPress, the site that hosts Ree Drummond’s blog, is by and large the most popular free blogging platform in the world and appears to significantly outrank its competitors by several million users because it is a user-friendly platform with a professional-looking interface. WordPress itself boasts that “WordPress.com is a great choice for bloggers, photographers, artists, plumbers, doctors, restaurateurs — almost anyone” (“Support”). Indeed, with a large selection of free themes, the opportunity for complete customization, as well as being an SEO-friendly platform, WordPress has appealed to both individual bloggers and professional businesses. In effect, with easy

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20 They say “almost anyone” because for tech savvy users who would prefer to maintain their own code, WordPress recommends going with a WordPress.org domain instead of WordPress.com. With WordPress.com, WordPress staff take care of the behind-the-scenes work that goes into managing and hosting a site which allows users to focus on content rather than code.
access to blogs and because blogs have accessible features, blogs have been envisioned as a utopian tool for everyday, ordinary people.

Laurie McNeill would say that since blogs no longer require a particular skill to create, “anyone with access to and some familiarity with computers can create a Web diary, [and consequently,] readers will not be expecting texts or lives that are literary, exceptional, gifted, or even particularly thoughtful” (29). While McNeill talks about online diaries as a metagenre of blogs, nevertheless, this comment is arguably applicable to the blogging genre overall. In other words, McNeill’s comment speaks to the idea that if society considers the blog to be the medium of everyday people, then it follows that readers expect a blog’s content to give an “honest” look at a blogger’s everyday life experiences.

Here, with the expectation of blogs to portray life realistically, is where critics emerge to protest Drummond’s blogging practices. Critics appear angry because they see Drummond posing as an individual blogger, when in fact she has become a business. Individual blogger meaning an “ordinary” person, i.e., Drummond is a rancher’s wife and mother who has simply taken to the web to share her everyday experiences as they unfold. Conversely, critics find Drummond’s identity as a businesswoman to be incongruent with the narrative of an everyday rancher’s wife. Moreover, they see the idealized way that she is sharing this narrative—polished photos and carefully constructed posts—to be antithetical to the utopian vision of the blogging medium as a place where people can share their uninhibited, uncensored feelings and be their messy
selves. Thus, tensions emerge in the blogosphere when critics perceive Drummond to be performing an identity, rather than simply being her “true” self.

Similarly, Emily Matchar summarizes her issue with Drummond’s actions:

> Blogs give us a historically unprecedented peek into strangers’ domestic lives. And, even though we know better, we expect blogs to portray life realistically. We all know that Martha is a pro, but bloggers are supposed to be our friends, our sisters, our neighbors. So when we see what looks like an organized, stylish pictures of domestic bliss portrayed on their blogs, there’s a natural tendency to hold ourselves up against that; if our lives don’t measure up, well, we feel like crap. This is one of the more insidious effects of lifestyle blog culture (*Homeward Bound* 63).

In other words, Martha Stewart’s actions are seen as acceptable because she is perceived as always have explicitly marketed herself as a professional, as a brand. When women see a picture of a perfectly set table on *thecmarthablog.com*, Matchar suggests that these readers do not feel bad because they understand Martha Stewart to design stylish settings for a living. Conversely, Drummond’s actions are seen as detestable by critics because they perceive her to be fraudulently claiming to be an ordinary, everyday person who is simply documenting her experiences on her blog, and has happened to become famous in the process. Drummond is a brand, yet critics lament that she continues to write as if she were not. Thus, if all readers see are Martha-esque style pictures on *thepioneerwoman.com*, yet Drummond does not admit to be a professional like Martha, critics like Matchar say readers are unnecessarily set up to feel bad because their own
lives do not compare to Drummond’s, who is supposed to be just like all of us, albeit living on a cattle ranch. Of course, critics are also invoking a historical definition of a pioneer woman when they judge Drummond’s blogging practices. When the images and text on the blog suggest that Drummond’s life seems too picture-perfect, critics deem her life to be too glamorous to adequately represent the gritty, simple life of a real pioneer woman.

However, I would argue that as a lifestyle blog, thepioneerwoman.com is not meant to be a representation of reality, but rather, it is a representation of Drummond’s private life as she chooses to share it with a public audience. Consequently, the blog reflects a series of choices made by Drummond—choices that no doubt are affected by the scale of her fan base. With four million people reading her blog every month, Drummond embellishes stories or photos, in order to entertain her audience. And this formula has proven successful. Fans do not sulk that their home lives do not look like Drummond’s. Rather, fans are excited to feel as if they are sharing in Drummond’s experiences—experiences that are doubly exciting because they are in fact different from their own. As Kido Lopez has observed about fans of blogs in general, “fans of blogs check for updates on a weekly or even daily basis, hoping to hear more from their favorite commentators” (734).

Furthermore, Matchar’s suggestion that readers still tend to “expect blogs to portray life realistically,” and that is why blogs like Drummond’s are problematic, is a troubling framework because one could argue that the polished state of Drummond’s blog now does reflect reality. In regards to her photography for example, the evolution of
"thepioneerwoman.com" from 2006 to 2016 highlights the fact that Drummond refined her photography skills and self-taught herself Photoshop. Rather than these “organized, stylish pictures of domestic bliss” being interpreted as fake, Drummond’s photos could also be interpreted as reflective of acquiring a professional eye. The fact that her photography has gotten better over the years, and that she is no longer an “amateur,” should not automatically disqualify Drummond from being able to identify as an everyday person, or even necessarily as a pioneer woman.

Critics assert that “real” pioneer women engage in physical labor and get dirty, or historically that they only utilized tools in order to survive. Real pioneer women do not have time to take pictures, if they are too busy wrangling cattle, mending fences, or hunting for food. However, again, this criticism is based on historical perceptions of pioneering work. If we consider what a camera has allowed Drummond to do, it has afforded her the opportunity to forge new economic opportunities through her depiction of life on the Oklahoma frontier. The tools and scenario may have changed since the 1800s, but Drummond’s blogging practices also arguably suggest the widening of the definition of pioneer. Just as pioneers trekking West in the 1800s forged new paths, Drummond also has forged new territory on the blogosphere through her photography skills, rhetorical prowess, and business savvy.

Nevertheless, Drummond’s monetized representation of “The Pioneer Woman” conflicts with critics’ expectations of blogging as an everyday medium and pioneering life as simplistic and physically grueling. Because the blogging platform allows for anyone to express their opinion, when critics disagree with Drummond’s pioneer identity,
they flock to blogging forums to call her out for abusing the medium of everyday people to inappropriately market an inauthentic brand.

**A Democratic Forum? Questioning Authenticity and Defining Drummond’s Domain**

Created in 2006, within ten years’ time, most critics seem to agree that Drummond’s blog has evolved over the years from a small “photo diary” on the free blogging platform Typepad to an “extremely polished lifestyle portal” hosted by WordPress (Forbes; Fortini; Haupt 41). A “lifestyle portal,” or lifestyle blogging, refers to websites that center around the domestic, i.e., they serve as a resource center for recipes, child rearing tips, and/or crafting, entertaining, and shopping ideas. Today’s studies show that women are the ones not only driving blogging activity (as producers and consumers), but activity as it relates to family, homemaking, and domesticity (*Homeward Bound* 50). As a conglomeration of personal stories about ranch life, family and friends (“Confessions”), recipes (“PW Cooks”), product recommendations (“Life and Style”), and information about her own cookware line and cookbooks (“Products”), Drummond’s blog serves as an example of a lifestyle blog.

It seems that when critics ridicule Drummond’s blog for evolving into an “extremely polished lifestyle portal,” these criticisms are intricately tied to expectations about the blogging genre. In regards to the genre, it seems that critics are perceiving the blog to be a space where Drummond should be 100% transparent with her readers, comparable to a confessional diary or even documentary-style expose, e.g., why don’t you share how rich you and your husband are; why don’t you share pictures of your messy laundry room rather than just talking about it; why don’t you share how you
manage to juggle all of your responsibilities? It seems that critics are expecting \textit{thepioneerwoman.com} to reveal everything about Ree Drummond’s life, to be one big “behind-the-scenes” narrative, and then they are disappointed when they find evidence to the contrary where Drummond edits or retouches. However, these expectations about how Drummond’s blog should function actually negate the reality of what \textit{thepioneerwoman.com} is. Drummond’s lifestyle blog is a form of entertainment that draws people in through a narrative that is \textit{based} on her life.

In other terms, \textit{thepioneerwoman.com} is not a neutral space that is capable of depicting reality because it is a representation of Drummond’s life. By definition, representation is “the production of meaning through language” (Hall 16). Therefore, the language, and images, that make up \textit{thepionneerwoman.com} are never neutral.

Drummond constructs meaning when she chooses which words and images she wants to convey a particular representation of her life. These blogging practices are therefore not necessarily inauthentic, but more accurately, they represent Drummond behaving as a rhetor as she constructs a narrative about an uprooted city girl trying to comically adjust to life in the country. By writing about a life centered around family, food, and beautiful landscapes, Drummond appeals to Midwestern family values, while sharing seemingly ordinary everyday experiences in an extraordinary way. Drummond draws on her real-life experiences in order to construct her blog posts, however, these blog posts can never fully mirror reality. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall would say, “The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language. Language does not work like a mirror.
Meaning is produced within language….Meaning is produced by the practice, the ‘work’ of representation” (28).

As an example of this “work of representation,” when Drummond takes pictures of children, they may be her actual children, but these pictures do not represent reality per say, but rather, a series of decisions through the posing and framing, and Photoshopping of the subjects. Alongside the photos, Drummond further constructs a story by writing text that will elicit a particular reaction from her audience, e.g., does she want to make them laugh? However despite the embellishment (or omission) of details in the narrative she constructs, what makes Drummond’s tactics so successful is the fact that they are based on her life in Oklahoma. As Laurie McNeill would comment, Drummond’s narrative smartly “…is anchored in ‘actual’ places and people that members of the audience may also recognize, making them feel part of the narrative, as ‘insiders’ who are part of the community the diarist addresses” (33).

Critics insinuate that Drummond’s editing, retouching, and leaving out of information is implicitly wrong because they expect her blog to represent unfiltered truth; they assert that reality-based entertainment is also ethically wrong. I would beg to differ and argue that critics’ insistence that Drummond’s portrayal of her narrative is wrong is a more troublesome form of editing, in that they are trying to claim her voice and insist that thepioneerwoman.com function in one particular way in order to exemplify a “real” pioneer woman’s lifestyle. thepioneerwoman.com is a reflection of Drummond’s narrative; it is a space in which Ree Drummond can navigate her multi-faceted identity as a wife, mother, cook, writer, photographer, and businesswoman through her performance
of “The Pioneer Woman.” Blogs are a digital platform which have allowed for self-expression and community; by extension, when Drummond’s shares the fruits of her labor with her readers, thepioneerwoman.com, it represents this self-expression.

Monetizing is Inauthentic. Is Financial Reward Wrong?

Criticism of Drummond also implies that she has abused the blogging platform because she has monetized her blog. In other words, blogging was a space imagined to be free of corporate hands; a space for ordinary, everyday people to share their experiences without ulterior motives. However, bloggers like Drummond who have monetized their blogs have faced harsh criticism; their motives for blogging are now seen as tainted and their words cannot be trusted.

When I speak about “professional” bloggers, I am talking about people for whom blogging is either their main source of income, e.g., Heather Armstrong of dooce.com, or one of their major streams of revenue, e.g., Ree Drummond of thepioneerwoman.com. Professional bloggers attract enough traffic to their websites that they have captured the interest of marketers, and in turn, they are able to sell advertisements on their websites. Therefore, Ree Drummond is an example of a blogger who monetized her blog, and now meets the label of “professional blogger.”

Mommy bloggers are a particular niche of bloggers who seemed to have faced the brunt of criticism surrounding the appearance of advertisements in formerly ad-free spaces.21 In her piece, “The radical act of mommy blogging,” media and cultural studies

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21 A 2011 study by Scarborough Research, a marketing research firm, defined mommy bloggers as “women who have at least one child in their household and have read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days” (Hermanson). According to the study, mommy bloggers make up 14 percent of American mothers.
scholar Lori Kido Lopez cites Heather Armstrong, the creator of the blog dooce.com, as one of the most famous bloggers on the Internet who is both loved and hated (much like Drummond). Interestingly, Armstrong is not only frequently chastised for her use of ads, but also, her content is not seen as being worthy of monetization in the first place. As one female blogger (whose site is ad-free) complained:

If I wanna see that many ads, I’ll go yahoo or whatever…I’m sure writing little posts about what your daughter, husband, family does is HARD work, but pardon me if I don’t do that everyday and don’t get paid for it and sell cute pictures, etc. Stop the madness, get jobs’ (Lopez 741).

Even though this comment was made by a fellow female blogger, this woman distinguishes herself as different from Armstrong because she does not view her personal blogging as a legitimate career. Rather, this woman implies that blogging is a hobby, and it is mind-boggling to her as to why Armstrong is paid to blog everyday when she does not perceive blogging to be “HARD” work. Here, the fact that Armstrong has been able to support her family full-time by blogging “cute pictures” has been entirely negated. Drummond is criticized in similar ways.

The bigger issue seems to be that critics associate the monetization of a blog with greed; this is an issue I will discuss more in Chapter 3, in regards to Drummond’s ambition. However by assuming that monetizing is inauthentic, critics are also

(Hermanson). The term “mommy blogger,” while limited to a female demographic, is not limited to a female blogger’s status as a mother however. The term mommy blogger is also used to describe the content that mommy bloggers write about, i.e., they are often writing about the domestic and their lived experiences. Here, domestic can be understood as activities related to what has historically been seen as traditional women’s work, e.g., cooking and childrearing. According to these definitions, Ree Drummond could be considered to be a mommy blogger.
problematically implying that the entrepreneurial desire to profit from one’s creation is wrong. In fact, Drummond would have been foolish not to capitalize on the opportunity to sell ad space, especially because she was sitting on a multi-million dollar site. Moreover, critics also negate that with a growing audience, blog expenses can rapidly grow as bloggers must accommodate more traffic to their website. Selling ad space is one way to incur those costs. As Drummond said when interviewed by Forbes in 2010, “…as with any business, if you’re growing then your expenses are going to grow. I have people like Web designers to pay, and I keep getting bigger servers, so someone’s got to pay for those things, too” (Casserly).

In other words, even if Drummond had not strategically focused on expanding her blog and it organically grew, her blog became big enough that it became necessary to monetize it, simply in order to cover the costs of maintaining the site. It seems, however, that many people who criticize advertisements on websites do not understand, in general, the work that goes into the back-end of a website, in order to keep the front-end looking so polished and consumable. This misunderstanding seems so prevalent that many critics have trouble grasping how blogging could even constitute a full-time profession.

**Blogging: Not a “Real” Job for an “Authentic” Pioneer Woman**

In a 2014 interview at the Power of the Purse luncheon, an annual fundraising event by the nonprofit Women for Women, one of the questions that Drummond was asked included: “How does a USC graduate and somebody who wanted to go to law school in Chicago end up being the person who represented the Pioneer Woman?” (TTUHSCtv). This particular question flagged my attention, as I found the undertone implies that
Drummond chose the less prestigious path, i.e., you are a college graduate who could have become a lawyer, but instead, you wound up living on a ranch and blogged about it. It is the same type of criticism as mentioned above, e.g., “I’m sure writing little posts about what your daughter, husband, family does is HARD work, but pardon me if I don’t do that everyday and don’t get paid for it” (Lopez 741). Furthermore, I would also argue that the phrase “end up” implies that Drummond fell into her current career in the limelight by chance; the contrary assertion is that Drummond would have remained a largely unknown homemaker in a small town of 3,412 people (Fortini, “O Pioneer Woman”). While critics have chastised Drummond for calculating her path to fame, conversely, the rhetorical phrasing of this question from Power of the Purse seems to condescend Drummond’s success in an opposite way. In other words, it downplays Drummond’s skill in building the Pioneer Woman brand by implying that her path to “being the person who represented the Pioneer Woman” was a result of chance or luck, rather than the result of smart rhetorical and economical decisions as Drummond recognized opportunities to expand and evolve.

I find this question to reveal a judgment towards Drummond; judgment for not only following a man and giving up her supposed original plan to attend law school, but also, for the career she did “end up” having: a blogging career. In other words, there seems to be a pervasive idea in popular culture that blogging—let alone “mommy blogging” where women write posts based on their lived experiences as mothers, like Drummond does—is not a serious profession. That is, not only do people have difficulty conceptualizing how blogging could constitute a full-time office job, but also, they cannot imagine how people
could earn enough money from blogging in order to provide for their families. And, not only can Drummond support her family from her blogging alone, but her blogging has been so successful that it has led to other opportunities, e.g., book deals and a TV show.

Heather Armstrong—the creator of dooce.com and a blogger who has received similar criticism to Drummond—wryly describes in the “About” section of her blog what it means to do what she does: “I am what is known as a professional blogger…What do I do? Why, I just sit in my pajamas all day long writing about my feelings! At least that’s why my lawyer thinks I do…” (“About”). One, I found this to be interesting because Heather’s lawyer felt this way, which I felt connected to, and confirmed, the Power of the Purse comment which implied law was a more esteemed profession. Secondly, Heather’s statement reiterates that while professional bloggers may be taken seriously by advertisers, their work is certainly not taken seriously by the general public. It is true that if a professional blogger can make an office anywhere and not be confined by the walls and rules of a corporate office, he or she could wear pajamas all day long while constructing posts like Heather.

Moreover, it seems that because Drummond’s blog and brand connote pioneering by virtue of the name, yet Drummond does not seem to engage in hard, strenuous, physical labor herself around the ranch, blogging seems to be pretty light work in comparison. Thus, while typing all-day may lead to a case of carpal tunnel syndrome, it does not lead to visible effects of hard work such as calloused hands and dirt under the fingernails. Here, critics see Drummond as failing to meet the standards of traditional pioneer work, they imply that her success is less admirable because it is seen as having
come more “easily,” i.e., constructing a blog does not make you sweat like building a sod home from the ground up would. This is problematic, however, because Drummond’s success has come at the expense of her intellectual labor.

In her work “Redefining the Workplace: The Professionalization of Motherhood through Blogging,” Emily January Petersen, a Ph.D. candidate studying the theory and practice of professional communication at Utah State University, explored how mommy bloggers are actively working to combat the perception that their work is not legitimate. Petersen noted that these women had full schedules, as they labored to maintain their blogs: “Mom bloggers spend each day gathering content, writing and editing articles, creating tutorials, conducting usability tests, and responding to user comments and concerns” (278). Indeed, also in her “About” section, Heather Armstrong elaborates that while her office may be in her home and sometimes she does wear PJs all day, nevertheless, she still maintains a busy schedule:

Much of my day is spent taking photos, processing photos, writing notes, writing posts, editing posts, reading and answering email, opening mail, processing mail, and pretty much everything else one does when working in an office (Armstrong, "About").

Even back in 2007, Drummond alluded that her full-time job could solely be responding to fans’ emails, e.g.,

And since I’ve proven myself physically, practically, psychologically, obstetrically, gynecologically, intellectually, and urinarily incapable of
keeping up with my inbox and answering individual emails, I’d like to provide that information here… (“One Barn, Ten Ways”).

While Drummond worded this admission in an interesting way, nevertheless, Drummond suggested a busy schedule similar to Armstrong’s, i.e., “reading and answering mail, opening mail, processing mail…” (“About”). And, the amount of mail Drummond has gotten would have only increased in the years since 2007. Tasks like answering emails or writing posts should not be dismissed by critics as trivial work. Professional bloggers engage in intellectual work when they construct blog posts and/or respond to fans’ comments and emails, in order to build relationships with their readers. Building a blogging community attracts traffic; traffic attracts advertisers. Advertisements equates to income for a blogger.

Yet, even though women like Armstrong and Drummond have financial success and busy schedules to suggest that their work constitutes legitimate, full-time employment, Petersen observes that "the women have been given the charming title of 'mommy blogger' and their work is often considered to be a hobby, rather than a profession” because of their extra-institutional locations (278). It is as the Power of the Purse question insinuated: a lawyer is a profession; “the woman who represents the Pioneer Woman” sounds like an extracurricular hobby.

It is true in terms of financial reality that the pool of bloggers who are able to be financially self-sufficient from their blogging alone is relatively small. As Emily Matchar reports in *Homeward Bound*, only 18 percent of bloggers make any non-salary off of their blogs (62). Of these 18 percent, the average yearly earnings are less than $10,000.
As a blogger making $1,000,000 (and that is just her cut, not the total worth) in advertising from her blog per year, Drummond is indeed a member of a rare club. Thus, as Matchar advises to female bloggers with dreams of ending up like the Pioneer Woman, most would honestly be better off “looking for a nine-to-five [job]” (*Homeward Bound* 62).

For Drummond, *thepioneerwoman.com* has afforded her the opportunity of a nine-to-five job, in that the blog has garnered enough popularity to constitute blogging as a full-time profession. However, rather than being praised across the board for her ability to become one of the rare few who can live off of her earnings, critics judge Drummond for being a professional blogger because she is seen as inauthentically embodying the “Pioneer Woman” label. Moreover, in imposing a fraudulent identity upon her readers, Drummond is also seen as perverting the genre of blogging and infringing on a space where people can supposedly be their authentic, true selves. However, in romanticizing the purpose of blogs in this way, critics also overlook the notion that authenticity is not necessarily absent as Drummond constructs a narrative that blends reality and fantasy. It is through blogging that Drummond expresses creativity, and navigates her identity as a rhetorician and businesswoman.

**Conclusion**

On one hand, the assertion is that real pioneer women do not blog; critics expect that ranching work should monopolize all of a rancher’s wife time, and so there is no way that Drummond could maintain a lifestyle blog of its current magnitude by herself. However, this criticism also negates Drummond’s agency in not only being able to build
her own lucrative career (apart from the ranching business that she married into), but also to define what that career entails. The fact that Drummond constructed a blog that is based off her life experiences on a ranch—a notion that was novel in 2006—was a smart rhetorical move; it became an even smarter economic move as Drummond realized that audiences enjoyed consuming her particular portrayal of ranching life, and so she began to sell ad space in order to support the growing blog.

On the other hand, the assertion is that blogging itself is not a legitimate career. While law is regarded as an esteemed profession, blogging is regarded as a hobby—something that anyone can pick up and that requires no skill. It is true, as I laid out in the beginning of this chapter that due to the accessibility of the medium today, pretty much anyone today can start a blog. However, as I have also pointed out, what anyone cannot easily do is to start a blog that earns enough advertising revenue to finance a living wage let alone a small fortune. In this regard, Drummond deserves credit for her entrepreneurial success. Moreover, I would urge critics to reconsider their expectations that a small fortune is antithetical to pioneering life, and instead, to consider Ree Drummond’s egg money to be the result of her skillful embodiment of a modern-day pioneer woman who was able to skillfully navigate the 21st century blogosphere.
CHAPTER 2: DOMESTICITY IN THE BLOGOSPHERE

“The Pioneer Woman”: Constructing a Hyper-real Contemporary Homestead

Introduction

An article in Southern Living romantically describes Drummond’s life as a wife and mother living in isolated Oklahoma:

Miles from the nearest grocery store, gas station, or strip mall, this place feels wild and free, with space to breathe and time to watch slow sunsets. Ree, her husband (“The Marlboro Man”), and their four children run this working cattle ranch. It’s a nonstop job of hard, dirty work from sunrise to sunset, but they love it and do it together, as a family (“At Home with the Pioneer Woman”).

As this excerpt illustrates, Ree Drummond’s pastoral narrative appeals to the nostalgia of a simpler time, when families worked together on homesteads and were not distracted by the frivolities of modern life. For fans disillusioned by the hardships and woes of modern city life, thepioneerwoman.com offers them a place where Ree Drummond’s domestic work is appreciated by her loved ones and held up on a pedestal.

Critics, on the other hand, are not captivated by Drummond’s representation of domesticity. Conversely, they do not find Drummond to be doing the domesticity of a rancher’s wife in the “right” way. Even if critics deem that a particular role (e.g., chef) falls under the scope of what a real pioneer woman would be doing, they declare that Drummond is not performing the role “right.” When it comes to her cooking, for
example, critics judge Drummond for utilizing store-bought, packaged ingredients rather than making more recipes from scratch or using ingredients grown on her property. For pioneer women in the 1800s, cooking was a labor-intensive process (Riley 57-8). In comparison, critics perceive the simplicity of Drummond’s cooking to be laughable.

Moreover, because domesticity in pioneering times has historically been associated with hard work under harsh conditions, critics do not perceive Drummond to be engaging in hard work when she blogs, even as she blogs about her home life. In viewing the images and reading the stories on her blog, critics seem to think that Drummond’s life does not mirror that of a “real” pioneer woman—one who would be too busy raising her children, homeschooling her children, and running the household to have enough time to blog everyday, let alone to also film a television show, write cookbooks, and launch cookware lines. After all, American history has taught us that pioneer women were the backbone of their families; while men hunted for food, built cabins and farmed, women not only assisted their husbands in outdoor chores like harvesting fields, but they also were considered responsible for all of the indoor domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, and childrearing (McAndrew). In sum, “To the pioneer woman, home and hearth meant workloads that were heavier than ever” (Stratton 57).

However, on the other hand, it seems that critics are not so much troubled by Drummond’s blogging, which they read as leisurely activity rather than work, but rather that Drummond’s blogging content romanticizes domesticity, which in effect also reads as leisurely rather than the hard work it can often be. In other words, critics find Drummond’s masking of the hardships she must face—as she juggles her personal life
off-screen and offline with her professional life as “The Pioneer Woman”—to be harmful to modern mothers. Critics find it troublesome that Drummond is not more transparent because she is seen as setting an unfair standard for the women who visit her site, who will be unable to replicate this illusion of perfection in their own home lives no matter whether they live in the city, suburbs, or countryside.

And similar to my argument in Chapter 1, Drummond is seen as inappropriately using the blogging platform to promote an unrealistic and unattainable representation of domesticity, rather than using her celebrity to offer a refreshing, alternative view of what working motherhood looks like in rural America. Consequently, not only is Drummond seen as dishonoring the memory of pioneer women of the past, but also hurting the self-esteem of fellow ranchers’ wives of the present. Of course, critics’ accusations place an impossible expectation on Drummond considering that the blogging medium could never completely represent what working motherhood looks like in practice. Blogging is partial; it never represents the whole picture.

Because blogs are considered to be the medium of everyday people, however, they are expected to showcase the good, bad, and ugly aspects of people’s lives. Moreover, critics’ comments on lifestyle blogs suggest that there is still a “right” and “wrong” way to “do” domesticity. Ree Drummond’s critics deem that she is performing domesticity “wrong” because the text and images on her blog suggest a romanticized version of her home life; critics look at Drummond and think “this life looks nothing like mine.” Critics believe that Drummond’s blogging is problematically masking how difficult running a household can be and suggesting that being a wife and mother is
always fulfilling. Conversely, fans disagree and find Drummond’s construction of a hyper-real homestead to be enjoyable precisely because it is a lifestyle that is unlike their own.

What is problematic about critics’ rejection of Drummond’s representation of domesticity is that there is the implication that in order to worthily claim the label of “Pioneer Woman,” Drummond must conform to a narrow definition that fits critics’ understanding of what domesticity for a rancher’s wife looks like. In this process, if the labor of being a professional blogger is not seen as constituting the legitimate work of a pioneer, then the brand that Drummond has managed to build as a direct result of her blogging is problematically dismissed. Moreover, in attempting to define Drummond’s life experiences for her, critics are ultimately the ones who are creating a problematic comparison asserting that Drummond’s life should look differently. In effect, this criticism negates the notion that Pioneer Woman fans have enjoyed visiting thepioneerwoman.com to consume a life that is presented differently from their own, and undermines Drummond’s agency in being able to present her version of domesticity in the 21st century.
Fig. 6: The work of “The Pioneer Woman”:

Drummond taking photos, speaking, and blogging

“Dump and Pour” Cakes as an Inauthentic Representation of “Real” Pioneer Cooking?

In a particular lengthy comment that I found on the blog, thepioneerwomansux.com, a woman named Karen vented that Drummond was an embarrassment to the memory of her great-grandmothers. Karen’s great-grandmothers were supposedly farmers’ wives, just like Drummond is a rancher’s wife. However, Karen felt that her great-grandmothers were hard-working, self-sufficient women, while she finds Drummond to be a spoiled woman who lives a life more reminiscent of suburban than rural living. As Karen commented:

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22 Photo Sources from top left to bottom right: (“Pioneer Woman on Food Network”; “Twenty Four”; “Still Life”; “Dear Pioneer Woman, Part One”).
My great-grandmothers were both farmers’ wives. They canned their own food, washed laundry by hand (until they got their beloved washers, of course!), made everything from scratch. My grandmother was gifted at making meals out of practically nothing; there were times my grandfather had to go out and hunt small game so they had meat. Sometimes all he brought back were squirrels…There were weeks on end when they didn’t see a neighbor due to weather or the harvesttime [sic] cutting into their socializing…If they wanted vegetables for dinner, they didn’t whine about their teeny tiny grocery store didn’t carry cilantro. They grew tomatoes, cabbages and potatoes in the kitchen garden…She should just call herself Suburban Housewife of Oklahoma, because that’s what she is (Re: “I never planned any of this”).

There is no refuting that Ree Drummond’s life on the pioneer looks much different than the life that Karen describes. Historic sources support that the provisioning of food for a household in frontier times was an onerous task. Pioneer women relied on ingenuity to produce basic food staples, and the preparation of family meals took up the majority of a woman’s day (Stratton 63).

Comparatively, just a glance through the “Cooking” section on the Pioneer Woman blog proves that the Drummonds do not want for much in their diets, especially when it comes to meat. According to Ree, on any given day, her freezer is stock full of ingredients like grilled chicken breasts, browned hamburger, and cooked, crumbled breakfast sausage (“Freezer Cooking”). Ladd Drummond does not need to go out and
hunt squirrels for Ree to cook up, like Karen’s great-grandfather was forced to do in lean times. However, what I find problematic about Karen’s criticism is that she is comparing Drummond’s life to her great-grandparents’ lives, yet she does not seem to account for how their lives would have evolved had they still been living today. Drummond’s life on the pioneer reflects the time that she is living in; she utilizes modern conveniences such as packaged foods.

Of course Karen’s great-grandmother engaged in extremely hands-on domestic activities, but this is because living on an isolated homestead in the 1800s, families had to be self-sufficient in order to survive, e.g., “With the most limited of supplies and without mechanical conveniences, she required diligence and ingenuity for even the simplest chores” (Stratton 62). In the years since, great-grandma would have gained access to conveniences, which would have lightened her load. In fact, Karen’s great-grandmother did eventually own a “beloved washer” that literally helped her wash loads of laundry faster. However, here, Karen does not seem to think that her grandmother was any less of a “farmer’s wife” because she utilized a modern appliance that made her daily life easier. Thus, why is Ree Drummond seen as less of a pioneer/less of rancher’s wife when she makes use of similar labor and time saving tricks in the 21st century?

When Drummond blogs about her cooking, for example, she has never pretended that she makes all of her meals from scratch like her pioneer ancestors might have. And, this is in fact part of Drummond’s appeal to her fans. The Cooking section of Drummond’s blog appeals to everyday people because Drummond readily admits that she uses packaged, pantry-friendly ingredients as time savers, like canned fruit pie
fillings or boxed cake mix ("Fried Fruit Pies"). In a Jan. 4, 2011 post, for example, Ree shared a recipe for Pistachio Cake; a recipe which included a box of pistachio-flavored instant pudding mix and a box of vanilla cake mix (Jenn). Fans loved the recipe; many of them loved the cake recipe not only because it is easy to prepare, but because it brought up nostalgic memories of their own mothers making that very same cake recipe when they were little. As some of the fans commented:

“Dump and pour!! Now, that’s my kind of cake baking!” (Marisa).

“I love recipes that have different ingredients! And come to think of it, I have a package of pistachio pudding in the pantry right now! (Lord knows how it got there, but it’s there! : ))” (Heather).

“My mom used to make this all the time when I was a kid…It is super easy to make, turns out very moist, and is very yummy…” (Kristin).

23 It is interesting to recall that when packaged ingredients like boxed cake mix first hit supermarkets, marketers had to convince mothers that it was okay to not bake a cake entirely from scratch. Advertisers challenged the idea that using a boxed cake mix would make a woman a bad mother, by selling the notion that what ultimately mattered was that the cake was made by mom (Parkin). Food = love. In other words, it became acceptable to use ingredients like boxed pistachio pudding mix because the pudding was still prepared by mom, even though the pudding itself was not made from scratch.

However, it is interesting to think about how conceptions have changed, and in 2016, how food made from scratch is seen as the choice made by the best mothers. Mothers who make dairy-free, organic pudding from scratch are seen as better mothers than those who feed their children boxed pudding or canned foods. It is as Emily Matchar writes, “In the 1950s, serving frozen and canned foods meant you were a cutting edge homemaker indulging in the very best the Space Age had to offer. Today canned green beans symbolize cheapness, laziness, bad taste, a lack of giving a damn about your health” (245). Thus, Drummond appeals to women who still incorporate packaged, convenience foods into their busy lifestyles; as a celebrity chef, Drummond makes it “okay” and appeases their guilt. Conversely, critics argue that Drummond is promoting unhealthy recipes reminiscent of an era where mothers served everything out of a can.
As these fans allude, they like that Drummond’s Pistachio Cake recipe is easy to make and that it includes ingredients they might already have on hand. They do not lament that Drummond is not a “real” pioneer woman because she does not bake a cake from scratch. Rather, these fans adore The Pioneer Woman because she seems relatable; she makes “dump and pour” cakes when she is in the mood for dessert, but also when she does not feel like spending hours slaving away in the kitchen just to indulge her craving. Moreover, this recipe appeals to women who may desire to cook and bake more like their own mothers did; however, their contemporary lifestyles may not allot time to bake a cake from scratch. Thus, Drummond sells her audience a simulation of “homeyness” through this particular vintage cake recipe.

In a 2014 article “Paradox, performance, and food: managing difference in the construction of femininity,” James M. Cronin, Mary B. McCarthy, Mark A. Newcombe, and Sinéad N. McCarthy examined how women in the postmodern age negotiate their identities in relationship to food and what paradoxical juxtapositions arise as a result of preparing it, eating it, and sharing it. The authors discovered four themes exhibited in their study; one of which was the women’s hybrid creation of a hyper-real “homeyness,” whereby the romanticization of family unity and homemade cooking was juxtaposed with contemporary concerns about nutrition and diet. Many of the women expressed fond memories of their moms in the kitchen, e.g., “…mum was at home: she was a wonderful cook and baker and she did a full dinner for us every day with puddings and everything” (Cronin et. al 374). In contemporary households, however, cooking from scratch is not always plausible. Thus, while the women in the study expressed a desire to cook and
bake more, simultaneously, they expressed an appreciation for time-saving shortcuts and store-bought products that evoke desired qualities associated with tradition and “homeyness.” In other terms, “Women want a reality namely to make their own—but are happy to buy the hyper-reality offered by the creative marketer” (Cronin et al 377). Ree Drummond as “The Pioneer Woman” is a creative marketer; she offers her audience a similar hyper-reality that is described in the Cronin et al study. She endorses recipes like “Pistachio Cake,” which while it utilizes packaged ingredients, is a cake that exudes the quality of “homeyness” as it is prepared by hand for loved ones.

Conversely, critics have found cake recipes like this to be insulting because not only does Drummond admit that she did not invent the recipe, but because the recipe is perceived to be so simple to make that it is insulting. Critics believe that the fame and fortune that Drummond has accrued from marketing such recipes is undeserved. As Melanie Haupt would support, “[The Pistachio Cake] recipe underscores the absolute flattening of home cooking, divesting it of any required skill, intuition, creativity, or even ingredients” (62). However, Haupt also acknowledges and adds that the cake recipe hits “all the right notes of identification, tonally, for readers” (62). In other words, Haupt acknowledges critics’ complaints about Drummond’s lack of culinary inventiveness as legitimate, but she also agrees that Drummond appeals to fans who identify with her unapologetic use of convenience items, in order to prepare meals for her family.

Moreover, while critics like Karen suggest that Drummond’s cooking is not indicative of a real pioneer woman, conversely, Drummond often actually cites her busy life on the ranch as rationale for utilizing time-saving ingredients. In her latest cookbook,
Dinnertime, for example, Drummond writes that “there is no such thing as a typical week in our house” (Dinnertime). As she elaborates,

On any given day, there might be a grass fire to put out, fence to fix, a flat tire to tend to, or a calf to bottle-feed, not to mention all of the normal things that happen to a family of six: football practice, soccer practice, cattle working, homeschooling co-op, cows in the yard, dogs on the porch, and a five-mile stretch of gravel road before we even get to the highway. And once we get to the highway, the journey has just barely begun (Dinnertime x).

Of course, this is the narrative that Drummond tells, in order to appeal to readers who also have busy work and home lives and who do not necessarily have an hour every weekday to prepare dinner for their families. It is clear that this introduction was meant to set the tone for the type of recipes that readers would find in the rest of the cookbook: easy to prepare, quick dinner recipes. However and more pointedly, this excerpt suggests that Drummond’s life, as a member of a family of six, is just as busy as the life of Karen’s great-grandparents, albeit different circumstances. In her comment, “She should just call herself Suburban Housewife of Oklahoma, because that’s what she is,” Karen implies that Drummond is lazy in comparison to her great-grandparents (Re: “I never planned this”). On the contrary, Drummond appears to maintain a very busy schedule. In fact, Drummond’s life is even busier than she mentions, as excluded from the above list
is obviously Drummond’s own work-related responsibilities, e.g., compiling the cookbook that this particular introduction appeared in.

Also, Karen’s criticism completely overlooks (or ignores) the narrative that Drummond has been constructing. Drummond’s narrative has been built on the notion that she did not expect to live in the country; rather, she married a cattle rancher and unexpectedly found herself living on an isolated cattle ranch. According to Drummond, after moving to the ranch,

I spent a month mourning my old life [in Los Angeles]. And then I decided if I couldn’t beat ‘em, I’d join ‘em. And I set out to create delicious food—food that would allow me to tickle my cooking fancy, but still make the cowboys’ hearts go pitter pat (The Pioneer Woman Cooks 2).

Of course, it is impossible to extricate what element of truth this narrative may or may not contain, but that it is not really my point to make here. Rather than dismissing Drummond as a “real” pioneer woman like Karen does because her cooking is seen as deviating from cooking like her great-grandmother did, one could choose to view Drummond’s narrative above as descriptive of a pioneer who had moved from urban California to rural Oklahoma and worked hard to adapt to her circumstances. Just as Karen proudly reminisced about her great-grandmother’s ability to adapt and make the best of her environment—e.g., “My grandmother was gifted at making meals out of practically nothing” (Re: “I never planned any of this”) — Ree Drummond’s actions can
also be interpreted as innovative. thepioneerwoman.com started as “practically nothing,” but it grew to its current magnitude because of Drummond’s hard work and perseverance.

While we are of course taking Drummond’s word for it that “More than a decade and four kids later, I’m still adapting to life as a ranch wife,” nevertheless in this process, Drummond has managed to build a very successful brand by chronicling her domestic experiences (*The Pioneer Woman Cooks 2*). She has utilized the tools at her disposal—a camera and the reach of the Internet—to build a loyal group of followers. Moreover, these followers appreciate that Drummond embodies the persona of an everyday person who adopts tactics that help to make her daily domestic chores easier. Conversely, critics like Karen problematically claim that if Drummond is to truly embody the label of Pioneer Woman that she should restrict herself to cooking and preparing food exactly as her ancestors did; they problematically suggest that rural living is paradoxical to conveniences like those living in suburbia enjoy, e.g., store-bought canned goods.

In fact, in the next section, I will discuss how critics have been unhappy with Drummond’s presentation of rural living because they complain that it is too polished. What I find more troublesome, however, is critics’ insinuation that they know what Drummond’s life should look like as resident of Osage County, and what the “right” way to present her lived experiences is. In effect, this criticism condescendingly negates Drummond’s expertise in why she has made particular choices on what to include, and what not to include, in the building of her highly profitable blog, thepioneerwoman.com.
Claiming Drummond’s Representation of Domesticity is Out of Touch with Reality and Failing to Understand the Reality of the Blogging Medium

In her first cookbook, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*, published in 2009, Drummond wrote in the introduction:

> And I love country life. It isn’t worry free or cushy. It isn’t seamless, easy, or without challenges. But it’s perfect for me. As someone who grew up smack dab in the middle of modern society, it’s a daily reminder of a simpler time—a time when folks worked the land, when take-out food was the exception, not the rule; and when decency, kindness, and hard work were the measure of a person’s success…and when Starbucks didn’t exist on every corner (Not that I’d a mind a Starbucks in our north pasture) (*The Pioneer Woman Cooks* 3).

This excerpt is exemplary of the narrative that Drummond constructs as “The Pioneer Woman.” She draws on a nostalgia of “simpler” times, of pioneering families of the past who labored together on the land to provide for themselves. Of course, it is ironic that Drummond says “when Starbucks didn’t exist on every corner,” because her Pioneer Woman brand is just as much a part of contemporary American consumer culture as Starbucks is. Drummond’s dishware is sold in Walmart stores, which do practically exist “on every corner.” However, when it comes to branding in the 21st century, what is most important is perception. Thus, what is most important is that fans perceive the Pioneer Woman brand, and Pioneer Woman products, to exemplify admirable characteristics like “decency, kindness, and hard work” because then they are more apt to engage with the brand via clicks and/or dollars. In chapter 3, I will discuss further how Drummond’s
cookware line has actually spurred controversy because its production is seen as an anathema to American values.

In any case, critics complain that thepioneerwoman.com does in fact present a worry free, seamless picture of domesticity, and this is perceived as an unethical blogging practice. Drummond says that country life is not worry free or cushy, that it is not seamless or without it challenges. Yet, this is not the impression that readers would gather after a visit to thepioneerwoman.com. Typical posts show Drummond’s kids, for example, wearing matching pajamas, smiling and getting along with each other. The house is shown as orderly and put-together—usually because Drummond is not posting pictures from the actual house that she lives in but rather photos from the family’s office in a renovated historic building downtown or from the guest house on their property. Even a low-fuss family meal like pancakes always looks appetizing and delicious because Drummond photographs it with a professional-grade Digital SLR camera and artfully arranges it on beautiful dishware. All in all, critics claim that these polished photographs not only suggest that Drummond is trying to pass off her experiences as ordinary when she is clearly living an extraordinary life, but also that she is problematically implying that family life is always rosy.
In effect, critics lament that Drummond is unfairly making female readers feel bad, if they too cannot replicate these domestic images of bliss in their own lives. As discussed in Chapter 1, as the medium of ordinary people, blogs are largely perceived to be created by everyday people, not professionals: “bloggers are supposed to be our friends, our sisters, our neighbors” (Matchar 63). Therefore, the images shared by everyday people should reflect an honest look inside imperfect homes. Plus, especially because she lives in the heartland of America and is the wife of a cowboy, critics expect Drummond to be the quintessential American who is representing the lives of everyday wives and mothers. Thus, if a mother views thepioneerwoman.com and does not recognize herself in the domestic picture that Drummond paints, then she is left feeling like a lazy mother for not putting forth more effort. As Heather Havrilesky explained in an editorial in New Yorker Magazine,
It takes only a few minutes of voyeuristically perusing Drummond’s pastoral pleasuredome, with its gorgeous photographs of Drummond cooking dinner for her rugged cowboy husband or home-schooling her four towheaded children, before you realize that you are a failure. Gazing at photos of Drummond’s kids riding their horses under a cloud-dappled Maxfield Parrish sky, you can see that, in comparison, you fail your brood every day. Because as you grumble and boil mac and cheese from a box and your kids beg to watch the latest Katy Perry video on your laptop, this woman fries chicken and teaches her children algebra and shakes her luscious mane of red hair in the Oklahoma sunshine.

As Havrilesky insinuates, Drummond makes domesticity look always fulfilling and effortless, when in reality domestic chores can be monotonous and exasperating, e.g., cooking dinner every night for the family. Essentially, Havrilesky implies that because Drummond only appears to post images of her best self, the blog naturally induces guilt. However, I would argue that Havrilesky is forgetting that thepioneerwoman.com will never reveal a complete picture of reality. Drummond also probably grumbles from time to time in having to prepare yet another meal for her hungry brood. As discussed in the first subsection, Drummond is also a fan of utilizing packaged ingredients, so it is probably a safe bet that she feeds her children boxed macaroni and cheese on occasion. But as a visual rhetor, Drummond has the privilege of selecting which stories and images to share, and she can choose to omit the pictures of boxed mac and cheese. However, this
presentation of domesticity does not have to induce guilt, if readers remember that a blog never conveys the full picture.

Emily Matchar would side with Havrilesky though and say that lifestyle blogs like Drummond’s problematically encourage women to compare themselves to one another. According to Matchar, “Negative self comparison is enough of a widespread problem in the blogosphere that some lifestyle bloggers have lately taken to doing special weekly ‘reality posts’” (*Homeward Bound* 64). “Reality posts” appear to be an attempt by lifestyle bloggers to address backlash that their blogs problematically obscure reality and fantasy, so periodically they will post less-flattering shots than normal. The photos act as “proof” that while their blogs present a perfect façade most of the time, they too face ordinary struggles in their daily lives, e.g., “a blogger who generally posts lovely backlit shots of fresh-made pies will post a picture of a kitchen disaster—a fallen cake, a sink full of scummy dishes…” (*Homeward Bound* 64).

Fig. 8: pp.284-285 from *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* cookbook
The pictures above, for example, are found in the back of Drummond’s cookbook, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks* and could be said to be an example of a “reality post.” These “Keepin’ It Real” posts function to reaffirm Drummond’s relatability to her readers; she may be a NY Times Bestselling cookbook author, but she too appears to make giant messes in the kitchen when she cooks. These pictures are meant to close the gap between Drummond and her audience. Of course, critics would argue that these pictures are located in the back of the cookbook. They do not accurately represent the most common images that readers see when they navigate to *thepioneerwoman.com*.

Nevertheless, I would question where is Drummond’s agency in being able to determine what types of posts she wants to fill her cookbooks or to populate her blog? I would argue that Drummond is in fact “keepin’ it real” whether she posts “reality shots” like the ones in her cookbook above, or images like Fig. 7: Country Living, because she is appropriately performing the role of a rhetor and making choices through her photographs. In part, Drummond’s decision to share pictures of messy dishes with her readers affirms her relatability to them, i.e., I, too, make a mess in the kitchen when I am cooking. However, on the other hand, the photographs also work to represent and distinguish Drummond’s status from everyday people because they showcase her ability to make messes look good. This latter reason prompts readers a reason to keep engaging with the Pioneer Woman brand. The professional quality of the photographs makes even a sink full of dirty dishes look aesthetically pleasing.

However, critics expect Drummond to share images, like the messy kitchen, more often on her blog in order to be authentic. With the expectation of the blogging genre to
exemplify honest, revealing images, critics become disappointed when they only see revealing images covertly hidden in the back of a cookbook. However, in this disappointment, critics fail to understand that photography is a rhetorical practice. In other words, it is impossible for any lifestyle blogger to ever post a true “reality” shot because photography is rhetorical, and moreover, the genre of lifestyle blogs is not equivalent to a documentary. Photographs are the result of a series of choices on behalf of the photographer; photography both reveals and conceals. As Richard Howells states in *Visual Culture*, “The attitude, creative choices, and technical skill of the photographer suggest that photography cannot be considered an objective reproduction of reality at all” (151). Furthermore, critics’ expectation that all of the photography exhibited on her blog be self-disclosing, honest, and raw infringes on Drummond’s agency in proudly presenting her finished accomplishments (culinary dishes) rather than dwelling on the messes behind-the-scenes (messy dishes).

Critics like Matchar suggest that Drummond is problematically creating an unfair comparison between herself and her readers; however, many of Drummond’s fans are going to thepioneerwoman.com to in fact engage in escapist entertainment. They also have sinks full of dirty dishes at home; why navigate online to see a mirror of their own private lives? Many women profess loving Drummond’s blog, precisely because it is free of real-life worries and politics. Erin, a commenter on Matchar’s blog post “The Pioneer Woman: Selling a Fake Image of Domestic Bliss” wrote that she thinks that critics are actually reading Drummond’s blog through the wrong lens:
I’ve been reading her blog for years and I love her! As a 24-year-old living in a city it’s fun to read about Ree and her ‘country life.’ I think anyone who reads her blog has to take what she writes with a grain of salt—of course her life isn’t perfect!—but her blog isn’t meant to be serious. It’s funny, light and has lots of pretty pictures (Re: “The Pioneer Woman: Selling a Fake Image”).

Thus, according to Erin, she enjoys Drummond’s blog because of its pretty aesthetic; she does not see it as a space that is meant to be interpreted as unfiltered reality (and as argued, it cannot fully represent reality, anyway). Drummond’s life is certainly not perfect, but thepioneerwoman.com affords Drummond the opportunity to have a place where her life can be perfectly organized and presentable.

Nevertheless, when critics try to dictate what Drummond should and should not be sharing on her blog, they are reacting to a tension between the allure of the blogging genre as a transparent medium, and Drummond’s blog that is populated by professional photographs. Because the blog is seen as a place where women can offer and share glimpses of their real selves, and their messy, complex lives, Drummond’s actions are seen as counterproductive to what the blogosphere could idealistically be like. In other words, it is the idea that women have long been bombarded with images of perfect domesticity in the media; with the advent of the blog, women had a chance to offer a fresh, more realistic perspective of their lived experiences and bypass the filter of corporate media. As one woman commented, in response to a blog post by Emily Matchar called “Pioneer Woman and farm life fantasies”: “What I find wonderful about
blogging is that it provides a glimpse into other people’s lives. If that life is essentially a fabrication, what’s the glimpse genuinely worth? I might as well just pick up an issue of Country Living Magazine” (ConsciouslyFrugal). As this frustrated woman explains, she expects magazines to be chalk full of perfectly staged living rooms and images of women as domestic goddesses. Conversely, she believes blogs should be an alternate forum in which women can present their imperfect lives as they are, flaws and all.

To be fair, Drummond has not necessarily claimed to be perfect. In a February 21, 2011 blog post entitled, “Waiting for Superwoman,” Drummond admitted that her audience only sees the things that she does accomplish on thepioneerwoman.com. In the lengthiest, most telling response that I have seen to date in response to how she appears so unruffled and composed even though she is so busy, Drummond said:

You only see the things I do accomplish. You see the photos I take (and edit), the recipes I cook (and photograph)...What you do not see are the stacks of books and loose papers on the kitchen counter. My messy, unforgivable closet…The emails I can’t answer…And you don’t see the laundry. A few months ago, when I was deeply mired in approximately forty different things, I hired someone to come to the ranch three mornings a week to help me dig out from under the tragic laundry situation…I also have a cleaning crew that comes one morning a week to give the house a deep cleaning, which means we have one day a week where the house sparkles…instead of zero. Basically, our household is like any other homeschooling household: everyone’s always home, the house is always
lived in, and everything is always chaotic. Throw in all the meals, the cooking, the cleanup, and the ranching/mud/manure element, and it makes for a grody, untenable domestic scene, man (“Waiting for Superwoman”).

While Drummond gives quite a lengthy list of all of things that do not get crossed off of her daily to-do list, essentially, this explanation is exactly what critics take issue with. Drummond may complain about her messy, unforgivable closet, but readers hardly ever see evidence of that supposed “grody, untenable domestic scene.” Instead, the Pioneer Woman audience only sees what Drummond accomplishes; they see the cleaned up, meticulously arranged domestic scene. Writer Emily Matcha has, in fact, seen and commented about the inside of Drummond’s closet. In her book, *Homeward Bound*, Matchar says, “I’ve seen the inside of the Pioneer Woman’s [bedroom closet], complete with jealousy-inducing sliding barn door and built-in hardwood shelves” (64).

Thus, here lies the tension between fans and critics. Fans of Drummond love when she posts images of her drool worthy, Pinterest-inspired closet. They love seeing insight into Drummond’s life, even if it is literally by looking inside her closet. Critics, on the other hand, feel that only seeing pictures of a “jealousy inducing closet” sets up an unfair depiction of Drummond’s life as picture-perfect. Even more troublesome to critics is that the designer closet highlights Drummond’s socioeconomic status. In other terms, if the shtick behind the Pioneer Woman brand is that Drummond left behind her high-maintenance city lifestyle for a simpler, no-fuss lifestyle in the country, the closet suggests otherwise by implying that Drummond still lives a life of luxury, albeit in the
country. Nevertheless, this criticism also negates Drummond’s agency in wanting, and choosing, to only share what she accomplishes with her readers, regardless of her income.

Photographs of Drummond’s closet represent a tension for critics, as the images Drummond posts do not match what they expect to see based on the genre. In other words, if blogs give ordinary people the chance to give others a glimpse into their lives, critics expect to see a closet that might look a lot like their own. However, when Drummond shares pictures of a glamorous closet that looks like it was professionally organized and decorated, critics feel that the photographs fail to reveal an authentic glimpse and that Drummond is inappropriately abusing the blogging genre. Of course, Drummond’s life offline and off-camera may indeed be more complicated and sophisticated than her onscreen persona presents. Most of the time, Drummond’s closet may be a shabby mess. However, the blog and TV show are particular spaces in which Drummond can feel like her life is perfectly organized and put-together. The pictures of her closet, therefore, exemplify Drummond’s agency as a visual rhetor in showcasing the images of her choice. And especially when many, many fans love consuming Drummond’s accomplishments, why would Drummond reject this external validation if it is not only professionally profitable but personally rewarding?

**Conclusion**

Life for pioneer women in the 1800s revolved around the cabin. While Drummond’s lifestyle blog may revolve around domesticity, critics claim that the images of domesticity are not accurately conveying the lifestyle of a woman living on a cattle ranch and that the blogging itself is a leisurely activity not plausible for a busy rancher’s
wife. Critics assert that Drummond’s blogging practices are unfairly encouraging women to compare their domestic lives to hers because she is utilizing the medium of everyday people, which inaccurately situates her as a relatable, everyday person. Because Drummond is accused of not portraying reality vis à vis thepioneerwoman.com, it is implied that readers’ lives will inevitably not match up to what they see online, and women will leave their encounter with the Pioneer Woman brand feeling bad about themselves because they cannot meet Drummond’s standard of perfect domesticity.

Critics perceive domesticity to be hard work, especially historically for a pioneer woman. So when judging her cooking, critics lament that Drummond’s recipes are too simple for her to be worthy of a label that also describes 19th century hardworking women. Moreover, Drummond’s blogging about said cooking is also not perceived to be hard work. A woman who is busy running her homestead is seen as working too hard to have the time to regularly blog. Overall, what is most offensive to critics is that Drummond’s blogging content presents domesticity as leisurely and eternally fulfilling, in effect masking how hard domestic work can be. And historically, since the home meant a life of leisure for wealthy women, yet for poor and middle class women it entailed “endless drudgery of housework and homemaking,” Drummond is seen as fraudulently claiming an ordinary, middle-class identity while her blog represents a privileged, upper-class lifestyle (Stratton 57).

However, critics actually sets up an unfair comparison in the first place because they are relying on historical models of domesticity, and inapplicable expectations of genre, when they judge Drummond’s current rhetorical practices. In this process, critics
have significantly undermined Drummond’s own expertise in building “The Pioneer Woman” brand; a brand that is based on ranch life and that has brought her great success. Critics attack Drummond for claiming to represent reality, but in this process, they are problematically trying to shape her reality for her.

Critics reject Drummond’s presentation of domesticity because they claim that it is not representative of ordinary lives, which is undeniably correct. However, just because Drummond’s life does not mirror that of other ranchers’ wives or working mothers does not mean that she should be disqualified from the agency in being able to label her experiences and name her brand as constitutive of a “Pioneer Woman.” “The Pioneer Woman” brand does in fact represent country living, but as it applies to, and has been expertly constructed by, Drummond. From the inception of the blog, Drummond posted particular portraits of her life on the ranch, and it was through this process that Drummond discovered what her fans enjoyed consuming. Thus, Drummond has proceeded to continue to post high-quality, professional images of certain subjects in a particular way (e.g., smiling kids, grazing cattle, amazing landscapes), and to write in a light-hearted tone, because it is a formula which has proved very lucrative and successful for her. Therefore, it is problematic for critics to refuse to acknowledge a broadened definition of what a “pioneer woman” can look, and act like, in the 21st century, especially when there are people who are so ready and willing to buy into a hyper-real version of domestic life—a version that has granted Drummond tangible internal (creative fulfillment) and external (economic) validation. Pioneer women since the 18th and 19th centuries have labored to adapt to their circumstances, and that, in reality, is a
timeless trait that Ree Drummond shares with her female, Oklahoman pioneering ancestors.
CHAPTER 3: AMBITION & AGENCY

Why it is More Kosher for Ree Drummond to Claim that She is an “Accidental Country Girl” than to Boast that She is an “Internet and Publishing Sensation”

Introduction

In doing research related to online performance and identity, I have seen the notion of “authenticity” repeated over and over again. Particularly, the idea that authenticity is a virtue that is being lost in the Digital Age because online, people are “always on” and always performing. In an age where people can create social media profiles, hide behind screens, and literally create Second Lives, a nostalgia for authenticity seems to have emerged and is deemed to be a crucial attribute of engagement online, i.e., you will gain more readers and people will like (and trust) you more, if they perceive you to be real and authentic. In this case, “real and authentic” means that the content is perceived to be coming straight from the blogger him or herself versus their motives being tainted by the filter of corporate media, e.g., “A personal voice humanizes your brand. Readers often connect better with an individual human being, with a name and a face, than with a brand or organization” (Tidwell 403).

Even if a blogger is a brand (read: Ree Drummond), the idea is that Drummond must come across as authentic, as unaffected by her affiliations. Moreover, this quest for authenticity—for catching people in raw, unguarded, unfiltered moments rather than planned, scripted, staged content opportunities—seems to have become an obsession. Finding and calling out people who appear to unauthentic seems to have become equally
as thrilling, as evidenced by sites like The Marlboro Woman who seems to enjoy exposing the fraud she perceives the Pioneer Woman to be.

However, I find this framing to be problematic in that while we may not all be businesswomen like Ree Drummond, we are all likely engaging in some level of performance all the time whether that means posting a selfie to social media accounts, giving a presentation to colleagues at work, or even chatting at home amongst friends and family, e.g., “No, honey! You don’t look fat in that dress!” Moreover, I think that developing and obsessing over a socially constructed spectrum of what is “the most authentic” experience or situation also risks negating and diminishing a person’s accomplishments.

In this particular case study, for example, it seems that according to this organic viewpoint of “true authenticity,” Drummond would have had to stumble upon each new layer of success without any outside counsel, team of help, or any sort of strategic marketing plan. Or, it is the idea that Drummond lost her authenticity the moment she decided to monetize her blog because her motives and views are now seen as tainted by economic incentive and a demand to please her sponsors. And here, I think we risk viewing ambition as an unhealthy and/or unauthentic desire, which I would argue is a detriment to women who desire to provide for themselves and/or act on their entrepreneurial, economic and creative visions, such as the creation and monetization of thepioneerwoman.com. Therefore, I think the more productive question for conducting this analysis is through an agentive framework and asking in what ways should Drummond be “allowed” to share experiences that are based on her life, and to expand
her brand according to her economic and creative goals, without being reprimanded and labeled as an unauthentic fraud? In other words, it is as scholar Jean Burgess wrote, “The question that we ask about ‘democratic’ media participation can no longer be limited to ‘who gets to speak?’ We must also ask ‘who is heard, and to what end?’” (Burgess 203; my emphasis).

The framework that I will be using is guided by how agency has been traditionally defined in cultural studies, but also, by how Carl Herndl and Adela Licona redefined agency in rhetorical studies in their 2007 piece, “Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action.” In cultural studies, agency is usually talked about as something a person has or can possess. As Herndl and Licona point out, “Despite the postmodern theory of subject, agency continues to be thought of in terms of individual” (139). Therefore, if agency is something tangible that can be possessed, it follows that agency can also be obscured or taken away. Even within rhetorical studies, agency has been discussed in similar ways. In summarizing Kenneth Burke’s pentad in *Rhetorical Theory*, Timothy Borchers explains one of the elements, the agent, as “the person who performed the act. Rhetors who feature the agent, see people as rational and capable of making choices” (Borchers 153). Thence, from this standpoint, if certain groups are silenced or marginalized, a cultural or rhetorical scholar might say it is because this group has been deemed “not capable of making choices” and/or that their ideas, etc. are not valuable or legitimate. In other terms, their agency can be taken away.

However, Herndl and Licona hail us to reconceptualize agency in a new way. In their eyes, they agree with feminist scholar Susan Bordo that “Agency cannot be seized,
assumed, claimed, had, possessed, or any of the many synonyms for those transitive verbs” (137). Rather, agency is

the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute

the possibility of action. The rhetorical performance that enacts agency is

a form of kairos, that is, social subjects realizing the possibilities for action

presented by the conjuncture of a network of social relations (Herndl and
Licona 135).

In other words, here, agency refers to when an agent recognizes an opportune moment or

opportunity in time for action. Agency does not originate from individuals, but rather, it

is “the social phenomenon of agency that brings the agent into being” (Herndl and Licona

140). Rhetors become agents when they move into an agentive space. Agents do not

“have” agency; “agency cannot be seized, assumed, claimed, had, or possessed” (Herndl

and Licona 137). Rather, agency is a “social location and opportunity”; it is a space in

which a rhetor—such as Ree Drummond—can move in and out of (Herndl and Licona

138).

Ultimately, I find it important to think about agency in both senses. Through

studying the backlash in response to Drummond’s rhetorical and economic practices, I

see critics attempting to downplay and diminish Drummond’s accomplishments because

they disagree with her portrayal of her life vis à vis her brand. Critics perceive

Drummond to be harmfully blurring and romanticizing the reality of what daily life is

like for families on a working cattle ranch, and in the process, they see Drummond as

fraudulently embodying the label of “Pioneer Woman.” When critics ridicule
Drummond’s naming of her experiences via her brand, “The Pioneer Woman,” it seems that it is because they are perceiving a dissonance between their historical connotations of who a pioneer woman is and what she does, compared to the popular image that Ree Drummond projects as a professional blogger and celebrity chef.

A 19th century female pioneer living in the Midwest would have engaged in hard physical labor all-day long: doing everything from making soap, to picking and spinning cotton into clothes, to farming, harvesting, and cooking meals for her family. Comparatively, if Drummond is spending her days mostly indoors protected from the notorious Oklahoma wind “sweepin’ down the plain,” cooking in a $100K kitchen and utilizing time-saving ingredients like canned goods, as well as spending hours composing blog posts, then she fails to be seen by critics as a worthy, legitimate example of a “Pioneer Woman” (TTUHSCtv). However, this comparison is unfair because Drummond is not a 19th century pioneer woman, she is a woman living in the 21st century who has access to technologies that her ancestors did not. Certainly, Drummond is drawing on some connotations of pioneer life to market her brand (like family-oriented values); however, she arguably is not claiming to live a life that is exactly reminiscent of a 19th century pioneer woman. Moreover, the claim that Drummond is not a “real” pioneer woman problematically asserts that the work Drummond is doing is not valuable because it is not physical enough. This assertion negates the notion that self-branding in the 21st century is a form of pioneering in the marketplace, in which a modern-day woman can fulfill her entrepreneurial and creative visions as well as financially provide for her family. Living on a remote cattle ranch and caring for four young children, blogging
arguably gave Drummond the opportunity to pursue a flexible career from home. In this case, it becomes worthwhile to view agency as “a thing, something agents have, possess, or gain” because it is important to reassert Drummond’s right to not only name and share her experiences in the way she wants vis à vis a constructed persona like “The Pioneer Woman,” but also to applaud her skillful ability to construct and build a lucrative brand (Herndl and Licona 140).

This notion that critics are forgetting the broader context in which Drummond is operating her business today points to the need to also think of agency as the result of a larger context. While it is important to think of agency in terms of Drummond as an individual, and as something she can possess, it is just as critical to think about agency as the result of social conditions which only offer a potential for action, not a guarantee. In other words, when critics get swept up in conspiracy-like theories about Drummond’s scheming to become famous and rich or obsess over Drummond’s inaccurate embodiment of the name “Pioneer Woman,” they obscure why Drummond’s brand has become so successful at this point in time. Therefore, we must view the Pioneer Woman within a larger set of circumstances, and Drummond only coming to occupy agency through recognizing opportunities for action that resulted in lucrative profits.

One business opportunity that Drummond has capitalized on is her most recent decision to launch a cookware line; this decision was announced to Pioneer Woman readers in an October 6, 2014 blog post entitled “Fun Announcement.” In this chapter, I claim that ambition is still not culturally regarded as a feminine trait. There is still ambivalence about a woman engaging in economic practices in the public sphere—
especially women who profit from selling stories about their families. Rather than seeing
the launch of her cookware line as a logical next step in the expansion of her brand, Ree
Drummond is viewed by critics as greedy for foraying into the cookware market.
Moreover, especially because her products are labeled as “pioneer,” critics expect that the
brand reflect the lifestyle of a modest country woman.
Indeed, since the release of the line at Walmart stores nationwide, Drummond has
been majorly criticized for launching a cookware line with products that are made in
China and sold in Walmart stores. Yet by labelling her ambition as selfish, this criticism
has also negated Drummond’s desire to expand into the cookware market regardless of
whether she “needed” the income or not. Moreover, by zeroing in on Drummond’s
individual actions, critics seem to conveniently forget the larger realities about production
today. While Drummond’s products are not the only things manufactured overseas, it
seems that her specific choices about the production of her cookware line caused some
fans to join the ranks of critics in their belief that Drummond’s ambition has gotten the
best of her. In the pursuit of a profitable manufactured image, Drummond is perceived to
be neglecting ethical business practices. In reality, Drummond’s decision represents a
smart business move, and a logical next step in the expansion of her brand.

Ambition

"What awful thing has Ree Drummond done that has all these other bloggers so
upset? Well. It's very simple really. She succeeded" ("The Pioneer Woman and Too
Much Salt.").

“Women don't become successful in our culture without being hated” (Anonymous,
reply 15).
Keynote speaker at the 2013 BlogHer Conference in Chicago. Millionaire professional blogger with a website that attracts several million readers a month. Celebrity chef on the Food Network TV Show, “The Pioneer Woman.” New York Times bestselling author of four cookbooks, a series of children’s books, and a romance novel. Number 22 on Forbes’ 2010 Web Celeb 25 List. From the growing list of accolades on her CV to her bulging bank account, Ree Drummond appears to be doing pretty well for herself professionally. And considering that Drummond started out with one focus on her plate—her blog, Confessions of a Pioneer Woman, created in 2006 – it seems safe to say that Drummond has shown great ambition. Today, the Pioneer Woman blog is just one aspect of Drummond’s growing, profitable brand; her brand has most recently grown to include “a line of ‘wares: glass, bake, cook, and eat” (Stone). The growth of her blog, and of her business, is by no means a small feat. According to Mitra Parineh, a research fellow at King’s College London who studies women and blogging, women all too often mistakenly believe that they will be able to start a blog and instantly earn viable income. However, Parineh points out that “a lot of these big, impressive blogs [like Drummond’s] take ten years to get off the ground” (qtd. in Homeward Bound 62). Thus, considering that Drummond was offered a TV deal in 2011 due to the popularity of her blog, she could be praised for being able to build a “big impressive blog” within half the time.

However, Drummond’s ambition is not praised by everyone. Rather, Drummond has been ridiculed by people ranging from Pioneer Woman- specific critics like The Marlboro Woman, to other female bloggers, to random people commenting in blogging forums (both on thepioneerwoman.com and alternative blogging forums). Emily Matchar
might say that in the case of Ree Drummond, “ambition” does indeed seem to be a dirty word. In fact, when reporter Anna Fortini was interviewing Drummond’s family, friends, and associates for her 2011 feature article about The Pioneer Woman in the *New Yorker*, she observed that interviewees were hesitant when it came to talking about Ree’s work ethic. As Fortini said,

> Several bloggers who know Drummond told me, in the furtive tone one might use to convey gossip about a friend, that she is a ‘very savvy businesswoman.’ But no one would offer specifics. ‘She’s quietly, insanely ambitious,’ Ed Levine, a friend and the founder of the Web website Serious Eats, said. ‘Drummond reminds me of a duck: underneath the water, it’s paddling like mad, but above the surface it’s placid.’ (“O Pioneer Woman”).

While these answers are of course perceptions, they nevertheless prompt the question as to why the interviewees *appeared* to be so hesitant to offer specifics about Drummond’s work ethic? Why would Drummond hypothetically feel as though she had to be “quietly” ambitious versus confidently vocal about her past accomplishments, and future goals, as related to the Pioneer Woman brand?

I would argue that Drummond shies up when she is prompted to reveal how much she makes because highlighting her ambition may conflate with the persona that she has worked so hard to construct. In other words, part of Drummond’s schtick is that she traded in her more high-maintenance lifestyle in the city for a simpler lifestyle in the country. Drummond’s admittance of her economic goals might risk offending fans, as her
ambition might be interpreted as greedy and in opposition to a brand that perpetuates values of family and faith. Another way of putting it is that The Pioneer Woman brand sells the idea that out in the quiet countryside, underneath the big open skies, Drummond gained perspective.\textsuperscript{24} It is as one pioneer woman from Kansas observed, in the 1800s, in her memoir: “Pioneering is really a wilderness experience. We all need the wisdom of the wilderness—Moses did, Jesus did, Paul did. The wilderness is the place to find God…” (Stratton 33). Thus, The Pioneer Woman brand establishes that through her transition to life in the country, Drummond has realized that there are more important things in life than money. The idea that Drummond has humbly stumbled upon her success serves as a more endearing narrative to tell fans than to admit she always aimed to be a millionaire.

Susan Brownmiller would support that Drummond must publicly stay mum about her accomplishments because traditionally in American society, ambition has not been regarded as a feminine trait. However, she also adds that this is because, historically, motherhood was supposed to be woman’s ultimate goal. As Brownmiller says in her 1984 work \textit{Femininity},

\begin{quote}
But there is no getting around the fact that ambition is not a feminine trait. More strongly expressed, a lack of ambition—or a professed lack of ambition, or a sacrificial willingness to set personal ambition aside—is virtuous proof of the nurturant feminine nature… (221).
\end{quote}

Here, Brownmiller adds an interesting observation that professional ambition can be interpreted as conflicting with a woman’s role as mother. In Ree Drummond’s case, she

\textsuperscript{24}As Drummond professed her love for living in the country, in a 2013 interview: “There are no skyscrapers; there’s no traffic. That isn’t all life is, hustle-bustle. For some people it would drive them crazy, having the silence and the clear view. But for me, it’s what my soul needed” (DiGregorio).
might fear being perceived as prioritizing work over her family; this is of course complicated by the fact that Drummond’s family life has become labor for her brand. In any case, Brownmiller’s observation is interesting to consider in light of Drummond’s conscious work to include her identity as a mother not only in the opening spiel for her television show, but also in her comments that attempt to downplay that her professional, money-making endeavors take her away from her family life on the ranch for too long.

Thus, when I talk about ambition, I will be talking about it in terms of Drummond’s entrepreneurial desire to grow her brand, both in terms of the economic revenue she brings in, and by the creative opportunities and media platforms that she is involved in, e.g., celebrity chef, blogger, author, business woman. In turn, when Drummond’s ambition is criticized, it seems that it is because her actions are perceived to be greedy and incongruent with the connotation of a modest, simple country existence, and/or selfish and incongruent with family life. This theory seems to be especially true when Ree Drummond’s public comments seem to attempt and downplay the work that she is doing rather than to highlight her fame and financial success, e.g., “I don’t think anything I’m doing is necessarily remarkable. I’m just writing about things I love and that I’m passionate about: my family, food...And I think passion shows through when you pour yourself into it” (TTUHSCtv).

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25 E.g., "I'm Ree Drummond. I'm a writer, blogger, photographer, mother, and I'm an accidental country girl..." (Imper; my emphasis).

26 E.g., “I travel a bit in conjunction with the book, and then I go right back home” (DeLorenzo).
This explanation, however, does not tangibly explain how Drummond has become so successful to the point where people are calling her actions, “remarkable.” Determination or drive would better explain Drummond’s success, because those words would more accurately illustrate intentional rhetorical and economic decisions being made. Passion suggests that Drummond has simply been doing activities she enjoys, and by coincidence, people started to notice and pay her for it. Drummond’s explanation works to diminish criticism that she is inappropriately lusting for “power, status, money, or immortal fame,” by shifting attention away from her role as clever businesswoman to her role as a nurturing wife and mother who prepares meals for her family and then writes about it (Brownmiller 228-29).

However, in trying to display humility about her accomplishments, Drummond also may unintentionally make other women feel bad. In other terms, women who may be trying to foray into the lifestyle blogging market may wonder why while they also have passion, their blogging efforts are not resulting in the same sorts of lucrative endorsement deals as Drummond. Drummond could very well contribute a valuable service to the feminist movement by complimenting herself on her success, in effect working to dismantle the stigma that ambition is not feminine. Right now, it seems that it is better for Drummond to feign the modesty card and act as if she is an “accidental country girl” who stumbled upon a life in the country and into her role as a celebrity (whether this is “true” or not), rather than to acknowledge and flaunt that she indeed has become an “Internet and publishing sensation” (Lynch). However, Drummond should not have to hide her success, nor her pride in having built a brand based off of her life experiences. Thus, my
work aims to expose how ridicule of Drummond’s Pioneer Woman brand—a brand which critics claim is a harmful, manipulated construction of reality and fantasy—is arguably more problematic than critics’ assertions because it attempts to demean the concrete reality of Drummond’s entrepreneurial success and discredit her agency in owning the label, “Pioneer Woman.”

**The Pioneer Woman Collection**

One of the most recent examples where Drummond has been ridiculed for her ambition, and questioned about the “need” to expand her brand, is the launch of her cookware line, “The Pioneer Woman Collection.” By “need,” I am talking about the fact that by the time she launched her cookware line, Drummond was already very wealthy because of the revenue she generates from her blog, her TV show, and her cookbooks and children’s books. Thus, when critics condemn any new business endeavor that Drummond pursues, they often cite her wealth as evidence that she is not a “real” pioneer woman. In other words, it seems that critics associate a real pioneer woman with living a more frugal lifestyle and scrapping together what she has to make ends meet; conversely, Drummond’s wealth and expansion of her brand suggest a life of excess, where she wants for nothing. Of course, this narrow perception negates how Drummond has scrappily utilized her skillsets and existing business connections to expand her Pioneer Woman brand. Nevertheless, critics reject Drummond’s brand because they perceive her marketed appeal—as an everyday person just cooking for her family—to conflate with the now multi-million dollar Pioneer Woman brand.
After giving her keynote speech at BlogHer ’13, Drummond gave the impression that expanding into merchandising was not an imminent project on her radar. BlogHer co-founder, Lisa Stone asked Drummond in a Q&A after her speech: "I've asked you many times [over the years] why it is and how you have turned down so many of the offers you have had to do every little thing…and every time you've said no. Can you talk about why you've said no? (BlogHer). Drummond replied:

I've had a sense from the beginning that I don't want to do something that I'm not equipped to do. And I feel like I know blogging...I'm still learning...but I feel comfortable. I can write cookbooks.... But when it comes to launching product lines or merchandising, it's honestly just isn't in my wheelhouse. I don't have the proverbial team around me and I say ‘Do this!’ and it happens. I have very limited time to get the things done that I do and still raise my kids and make sure that I'm tuckin' them in at night. It's really on a practical level that I haven't done that (BlogHer).

Drummond’s response suggested that she had not yet forayed into merchandising not because of a lack of desire to do so, but because of a lack of time and know-how. By October 2014, however, Drummond announced to her fans—first, via an October 6th blog post entitled “Fun Announcement,” and second, via a Facebook post—that she would launching a line of “kitchen, cooking, and dinnerware products” the following fall (“Fun Announcement”; The Pioneer Woman—Ree Drummond).

In her October 6, 2014 blog post, Drummond commented that she would be working with a “great company” that would allow her to be very involved in designing products that
would be “pretty, practical, and functional” (“Fun Announcement”). The company responsible for producing The Pioneer Woman collection is Gibson Overseas, Inc., a company that advertises itself as “the nation’s leading producer of tabletop and housewares products” (Gibson Overseas, Inc.). Gibson is also responsible for manufacturing brands like Sunbeam, Oster, and Crock Pot (Gibson Overseas, Inc.). Thus, as a company that produces other kitchenware products like Crock Pots—appliances useful for cooking some of Drummond’s famous comfort-food recipes like Spicy Dr. Pepper Pulled Pork—Gibson seems to have been a natural choice for Drummond to partner with.

In response to the company’s announcement that she would be partnering with them, Drummond replied: “I couldn’t be more thrilled to be working with Gibson to create The Pioneer Woman product line. I’m beyond excited to unveil the line next year, and to start using the products in my own kitchen” (“Gibson Partners with The Pioneer Woman”; my emphasis). In her public comments to fans, Drummond cleverly emphasized that her line would not only be full of products that they would enjoy using, but also, that she herself would be utilizing in her own home kitchen. Drummond was drawing on her constructed persona as a home cook; her cooking is marketed as accessible because viewers can also easily make Drummond’s recipes at home for their own families. Now, fans can also purchase the same cookware that Drummond uses to prepare meals, and at affordable prices to boot. In addition, the cookware line was a logical next step in the expansion of her brand because Drummond already had platforms in place in order to advertise her products. Even before the launch of the line, Drummond
posted sneak peeks of products on her blog. Since the launch of the line, new episodes of the Food Network show feature Drummond using products from the line to prepare, cook, and serve the dishes that she makes.

The Pioneer Woman Collection made its debut at the New York Tabletop Market, and at the International Home + Housewares Show, in March 2015. Typically, these trade shows are used to gauge the interest of prospective sellers (“Gibson Partners”). The seller Drummond ended up partnering with is Walmart. As briefly alluded to above, Drummond chose a company whose brand echoes her own in terms of accessibility, i.e., affordability. In other terms, Walmart is notoriously known for being a store that sells products at “great, low prices.” Indeed, Drummond’s line retails from $1.99 - $99.00 (“Ree Drummond Collaborates”). Most anyone can afford to shop at Walmart, and therefore, kitchen products sold there can be used by everyone from amateur home cooks to professional chefs. Shelley Huff, the Vice President of cook, dine and kitchen electronics for Walmart U.S, echoes that The Pioneer Woman Collection is accessible to all cooks, both in terms of their cooking skills and what they can financially afford: “This collection is an exciting, fresh line of kitchen and tableware that has something for everyone – the charm for small family dinners, the style for entertaining friends and the great quality for serious cooks” (“Ree Drummond Collaborates”).

By the time the line launched—first, exclusively online at Walmart.com on September 1st, and then, nationwide in Walmart stores on September 14th (“Ree Drummond Collaborates”)—Drummond went from being someone who once professed
not being comfortable with launching a merchandising line to being advertised as an expert, e.g.,

The Pioneer Woman is an award-winning food blogger and TV personality, and now she shares her expertise on whisks, pots, pans, wooden spoons, plates, knives, measuring cups, pitchers and more with Walmart. She has been involved with each and every piece to make sure they’re all pretty, practical, functional and in line with her personal style (WalMart).

The expertise here is Drummond’s input into the design of the whisks, pots, pans, etc. to match the perception that fans have of who the Pioneer Woman is and what life in the country is all about. In the collection, there are hearty iron skillets perfect for making hearty Midwestern fare; there are items named after Drummond’s brood that give homage to family ties, like Paige Red plates or Alex Marie flatware; and there are porcelain coffee creamer containers in the shape of cows, which of course give a nod to the creatures who dot the Oklahoma prairie and that contribute to the Drummond’s livelihood (“It’s Here”). All in all, The Pioneer Woman Collection represents quintessential American values: a family working hard to earn an honest living, on the prairie, in the heartland of America.
Plenty of fans adored the new collection, e.g.,

“Yay! So excited to shop your line and restock my kitchen! Every piece is absolutely lovely <3” (Amber Kirby Carson).

“I can’t wait to go shopping! I love your designs, just my ‘cup of tea.’ I love pretty dishes and cookware” (Gaile Ausmus Boudreau).

Moreover, initial stocks appeared to sell out pretty quickly, e.g., “Everything is sold out at all the Walmart stores in our town and there are 5 or 6 of them very close by…” (Carroll).

However, the addition of a “Products” section to thepioneerwoman.com also invited a floodgate of criticism, notably that Drummond’s cookware line is manufactured in China.
and sold in corporate Wal-Mart stores. Not only did Drummond further upset her existing critics like The Marlboro Woman, but it seems that she also disappointed fans.

To date, Drummond’s post “It’s Here” on thepioneerwoman.com, which announced the official launch of the cookware line, has accrued close to 1,700 comments. Below is just a few of the selected comments on the still growing thread:

“I am VERY disappointed that these are only for sale at Walmart. Like the pieces but will not be purchasing any” (Kim).

“(She should be setting an example. She has the power & ability to change things, yet strolled along with the rest of the sheep & expect [sic] us to follow too! Who knows what kind of glaze those Chinese used on those dishes?! I’m extremely disappointed, I expected better from her!” (Nusbaum).

“(I would have purchased some of the line, but no one in the U.S. made a single item. And to top that, billionaire Walton family will get the proceeds, not low wage employees. So sad” (Westfield).

It seems that Drummond was perceived as crossing ethical lines with her business ambitions because not only were her products not going to be manufactured by American laborers in the United States, but then, the products were going to be sold at Wal-Mart stores—a corporation which has received a lot of flak for its treatment of minimum-wage
employees, as well as their MO of swooping into towns and knocking out competition from local small business owners who cannot compete. It seems that the people above do not fault Drummond for wanting to launch a cookware line in general, e.g., “I would have purchased some of the line…” or “Like the pieces but….” However, since Drummond decided to partner with Gibson Overseas and Walmart, disgruntled fans interpreted Drummond’s ambitions as greedy rather than as a creative project and smart business decision.

Critics seem to take offense that while Drummond’s cookware line symbolizes quintessential American values, the ironic reality is that the products are manufactured in China. And while the situation may be ironic, the fact is that most products nowadays are produced overseas and Drummond’s line is no exception. Nevertheless, criticism has dismissed the circumstances surrounding American production today, and critics have even gone as far as to indirectly accuse Drummond of neglecting her fans’ health with her decision to work with Gibson, e.g., “Who knows what kind of glaze those Chinese used on those dishes?!?” As Nusbaum laments, “I expected more from her!”

In one particularly interesting exchange on the commenting forum, a person by the name “kittenbiscuit” and a woman by the name “emd04” debate whether Drummond’s business decision was right or wrong. Essentially, kittenbiscuit believes that if Drummond were a true red-blooded American who cared about giving back to her community, then she would have tried harder to ensure that the production of her cookware line happened in the States. (And by extension, if that could not occur, it is implied that Drummond should have dropped the pursuit of a cookware line altogether).
Suddenly, it seems that Drummond, because of her celebrity, is charged with taking on responsibility for bringing new jobs to invigorate the local Osage County economy. As kittenbiscuit argues: “Look, I love Ree too. But she could have opened up a small distribution facility here in the states, employing folks who need and want to work here, and sold direct [sic] through her website instead of launching these products at Walmart” (kittenbiscuit). The idea that Drummond should have been concerned about creating job opportunities for others, rather than selfishly focusing on her individual career aspirations is what Nusbaum also seemed to be alluding to in her comment above, “She should be setting an example. She has the power & ability to change things.”

The inference here is that while not all people may be fans of The Pioneer Woman, they also recognize that Drummond is in a unique position as a highly popular blogger and TV personality. In turn, Drummond is seen as having the power vis à vis her public platforms to advocate for change. In regards to a cookware line, “the power to change things” suggests Drummond should have worked harder to find a way to produce products at home in the U.S., or else, she should have abandoned the project in favor of writing editorial-like blog posts decrying the lack of American-made products and pushing for reform. Of course, this criticism also overlooks that Drummond is setting an example—an example of a smart businesswoman making sound economic decisions by choosing to work with companies that already have production and distribution centers in place.

At this point in the commenting forum, emd04 chimed in to challenge the practicality of kittenbiscuit’s idealistic plan: “...And many, many stores move
manufacturing out of the U.S. because it’s expensive to produce here. Do you have any ideas how much money it would cost to open a ‘small distribution factory?’” (emd04). Kittenbiscuit responded that she is in fact aware of how expensive a small distribution facility would cost, but in her eyes, she believes that Drummond has the financial resources to make an operation like that a reality. Even if Drummond does not possess the funds herself, kittenbiscuit believes that Drummond could have easily secured investors to help cover the costs: “I really do think [the Drummonds] could have gone that route if they wanted to, kind of like how they chose to renovate that building in their downtown area. It’s just a matter of priorities” (Re: emd04, “It’s Here”). Thus, considering that Drummond did not pursue opening a small distribution center, kittenbiscuit concludes that it was because Drummond did not view production in the United States as a priority. The not-so subtle jab is that Drummond chose her individual, selfish ambitions over more patriotic, ethical business practices that would have benefitted the collective Oklahoman, and American, population.

While certainly Drummond is rich by most American standards, at the same time, kittenbiscuit is assuming that she understands Drummond’s complete financial portfolio and that she could afford to invest in such a large undertaking like opening a “small” distribution center. Moreover, critics like kittenbiscuit or Nusbaum (the woman who commented on the glaze) act as if Drummond hastily went forward with her decision to offer a cookware line without any sort of ethical, or practical, considerations. The reality is that Drummond’s decision reflects smart business decisions not only for herself and
her family in terms of what would be the most profitable, but also for her fans in terms of what would be the most affordable.

It is true that Drummed has invested in a building in her local town of Pawhuska; “That building” kittenbiscuit refers to is an old mercantile building in downtown Pawhuska that Ladd and Ree Drummond purchased in 2012 and have been in the stages of renovating ever since.

Fig. 10: The Osage Mercantile Building circa Early 1900s (“Fun Day”)

Fig. 11: The Mercantile Building Renovation as of April 3, 2014 (“Fun Day”)

While critics like kittenbiscuit insinuate that Drummond’s growing brand is an anathema to small hometown values, the Drummonds purchasing of this dilapidated old building to restore it to its former glory works to suggest otherwise. In other words, when critics suggest that Drummond has gotten too greedy (such as the case with her cookware line), fans conversely can point out how Drummond has invested some of her wealth back into her local community. But of course, the renovation of the old mercantile building doubly benefits Drummond because future plans for the space also benefit the expansion of her brand. The ongoing renovation has provided Drummond with a storyline and photographs for her blog, as well as a setting to film special Food Network episodes.²⁷ Fans have loved watching the renovation process, making comments on the Pioneer Woman blog like, “I LOVE LOVE LOVE old buildings like that!!! I live in a very small town and there are a few buildings on Main St. that have been around since the 1800’s…It’s wonderful you’re able to maintain the building and not tear it down!” (Leslie G.)

Moreover, the finished building will not only include offices for Drummond Land and Cattle business operations, but also space for a deli, mercantile store, and event space (“New Marbles”). The deli, for example, reportedly will have ready-made sandwiches…and there will be hot food ready to go. In addition to that they’ll have several daily specials that you can call down and pick up on your way home—a lasagna for eight people, it will already be cooked or it will be prepared, and all you’ll have to do is take it home and pop it in the oven (McKee).

²⁷ E.g., The building was featured in the following episodes: “The Building” (Season 5, Episode 4), “Big Day at the Building” (Season 7, Episode 13), and the 2014 Christmas special, “Cowboy Christmas.”
While the deli and shop have not officially been named, it seems safe to assume that the recipes, such as “a lasagna for eight people,” will be Pioneer Woman creations and function as another way to promote Drummond’s brand. Moreover, in the inevitable event that Drummond’s blog and brand decline in popularity, the investment in this building provides Drummond with a sustainable form of income that can function long after her celebrity wains, e.g., a deli.

Some, like emd04, have attempted to come to Drummond’s defense regarding the cookware line, even while simultaneously making a point to emphasize that they are not fans. For example, a reader by the name of “ohjodi” wrote in to respond to all of comments chastising Drummond for working with a Chinese manufacturer and for selling at Walmart:

> I’m going to defend Ree, here, and I’ve barely heard of her, never seen her show, or read her books and blog, so I’m not starry-eyed. Her collection is awesome, though…The dinnerware is made by Gibson Overseas, not a no-name Chinese dump. It is designed in the US. They are probably the #1 maker of affordable dinnerware (aside form Corelle USA) and you probably own something made by this company and you don’t even realize it. Yes, it is made in China or other Asian countries, but the only brands made in the U.S. anymore are Corelle, Fiesta, and Picard. Half of Lenox is gone, and Pfaltzgraff is totally gone (Re: Erica L. Nusbaum, “It’s Here”).
ohjodi is correct that the dinnerware is made by Gibson Overseas, “not a no-name Chinese dump.” In other words, Gibson is a well-known company, which challenges the fears of people like Erica Nusbaum who imagine that toxic glazes are haphazardly being slapped on The Pioneer Woman collection. Moreover, ohjodi is right to point out that most likely, many of the people criticizing Drummond probably (and hypocritically) already own a product that is produced by Gibson and/or that is made overseas. As mentioned, Gibson is also responsible for manufacturing brands like Sunbeam, Oster, and Crock Pot, which includes common kitchen items like blenders and slow cookers (Gibson Overseas, Inc.).

Perhaps more significantly, ohjodi also points out in her comment that while she also is not the biggest fan of Walmart, in regards to what people are professing to be upset over, this is a larger issue with the American economy that goes beyond Drummond. As ohjodi says, “I know that [labor issues are] Walmart’s fault. But it’s our fault, too” (Re: Erica L. Nusbaum, “It’s Here”). In other words, ohjodi attempts to say that while it is not ideal that Drummond’s line is manufactured in China and sold in WalMart stores, rather than made in Oklahoma and sold by a local mom and pop store, it is pretty rare these days to find a “Made in the USA” sticker on anything let alone on a stack of dishes. Yet, criticism of Drummond seems to negate the larger context of the American economy and blame her individually for not trying harder to produce the line here in the States. As one commenter surmised about the discussion happening in the commenting forum, “It is interesting how something like pretty dishes can become an example of serious social and economic issues” (Nylene13).
Conclusion

Indeed, critics’ fixation on where Drummond’s cookware is manufactured and produced exemplifies another serious issue, in that the criticism negates how Drummond skillfully maneuvered into the merchandising market. The cookware line was launched a month before the release of her latest cookbook, “Dinnertime,” and also, before major holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas. Fans could buy the cookbook, and then use Pioneer Woman products to prepare recipes for their loved ones. Economically speaking, Drummond’s decision represents a smart recognition of more ways to stay relevant as a brand in the 21st century. But, just as the backlash around the cookware line exemplifies a larger dissatisfaction about the state of production today, the backlash also points to a larger ambivalence about powerful female executives. In other terms, if a man were to make the exact same business decisions as Drummond, I wonder whether he also would have been accused of being selfish, neglectful of the health of his customers, and apathetic towards the state of the nation’s economy.

I would wager no, as historically, women are the ones who were expected to self-sacrifice for their families and/or for the greater good of their communities. Thus, when Drummond’s ambitions are seen as selfish, it seems that she is being judged based on gendered expectations that women should be selfless. Rather than making business decisions that would spur domestic production and working hard to make that a reality, Drummond is seen by her critics as selling out by only thinking about how she could further her own personal career and deepen her own pockets. Arguably, historical
conceptions about pioneer women as selfless also influence critics’ opinions of Drummond’s actions.

Pioneer women in the 1800s worked hard, but society taught them that their work should always be oriented towards others, not themselves, e.g., “In the nineteenth century, the home was regarded as the proper ‘place’ for women in society, a sphere where women were expected to serve diligently as wives, mothers, and housekeepers” (Stratton 57). Additionally, these expectations of femininity became amplified on the pioneer, as living on an isolated prairie and with a shortage of labor, women attended not only to traditionally female tasks but also male ones. Consequently,

For [pioneer women in the 1800s], life was far from easy. The endless hours of back-breaking toil left little time for rest and leisure. Day in and day out, [pioneer women] worked in the house and in the fields to produce the basic necessities of life and to build a future for their children (Stratton 75).

Drummond’s work could be viewed in a similar vein, as the profits from her brand can help her “establish a future for [her children].” Emd04 in fact tried to defend Drummond by making this exact point in the commenting forum, e.g., “…[Drummond] also has four kids to put through college” (emd04). Nevertheless, the criticism surrounding Drummond’s economic practices not only suggests an ambivalence about whether the marketplace (public sphere) is a suitable place for a woman, but also whether conducting business is the proper behavior of a woman. Especially if historical pioneer women were
expected to be selfless and humble, in contrast, Ree Drummond as the modern Pioneer Woman is perceived to be selfish and greedy.

Lori Kido Lopez pointed out in an article on the radical act of mommy bloggers that criticism of women who monetize their blogs is unfair because it assumes that “women do not participate in impersonal entrepreneurial endeavors, or that mothers somehow operate in a world separate from the need for cold, hard cash” (Lopez 741). While this comment speaks specifically to the monetization of blogs (something Drummond is also criticized for, as discussed in Chapter 1), Lopez’s point is also arguably applicable to the criticism surrounding Drummond’s entrepreneurial endeavors as related to her cookware line. Even if Drummond does not “need” the extra cash from her brand, Drummond should be free to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors regardless of her gender. Moreover, whether the profits Drummond’s makes are going towards her children’s educations or not is arguably irrelevant.

In reading narratives about women’s lives on the frontier in the 1800s, what seems to be missing is their ability to make choices about how they wanted to earn money. Circumstances dictated what work a woman did, i.e., if her husband was busy all day plowing the fields and planting crops, then she was busy cooking so as to ensure that her family had meals to eat that day. We should be cautious not to romanticize this work, lest we relegate and restrict women’s work in the 21st century to the private sphere. Today, Drummond is able, and has chosen, to earn money through the creation of a lifestyle blog, which led to the possibility of the production of a cookware line. Feeding her desire to create and to expand her brand, the cookware line does not represent a
selfish act, but rather, it represents the act of a practical and passionate entrepreneur. And ultimately, the creation of The Pioneer Woman Collection could be seen as the opposite of selfish. By utilizing her talents, Drummond shares her creativity with others, who enjoy consuming the products that she has designed.
CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE

An Accidental Country Girl Tries her Hand at Television

Introduction

Today in 2016, Ree Drummond represents both an individual and a brand. Every blog post she writes, cooking episode that she films, book that she composes, or Instagram photo that she posts, all contribute to constructing her identity as “The Pioneer Woman” and building her brand.

In this chapter, I will discuss how Drummond has used rhetoric on her television show, “The Pioneer Woman,” in order to prompt her audience to identify with her as an everyday home cook and relatable personality. As Kenneth Burke would say, Ree Drummond has used rhetoric to “foster courtship through identification” (375).

However, after the premiere of her television show on the Food Network, many disappointed viewers took to the blogosphere to reject Drummond’s on-camera performance. Rather than identifying with the everyday home cook they saw on-screen, critics rejected Drummond’s performance because she did not match their expectations about how a pioneer woman should look and act. Thus, Burke would say that critics took to blogging forums to express their discontent as a symbolic form of disassociation, i.e. …people use rhetoric to think of themselves as similar to or dissimilar from one another as they live in cooperative competition. They act in concert and associate with those with whom they identify and dissociate themselves from others. They may act against, scapegoat, even symbolically kill those with whom they do not identify (Sloane 375).
However, in their claims that Drummond’s performance was not representative of a real pioneer woman, critics have problematically attempted to claim authority over one particular definition of who “The Pioneer Woman” should be.

On the blog, people are not “supposed” to perform; rather, my study of lifestyle blogs suggests that blogs are supposed to be spaces that reflect people simply being their “true” selves. On television, however, audiences expect individuals to perform in particular ways in order to entertain. Thus, this presents a difficult tension for people like Ree Drummond, who is both a blogger and a celebrity cook. Drummond must appear as if she is acting “natural” both on television and on the blog. Thus, when viewers’ expectations about genre are not met, criticisms both emerge and merge.

Because television viewers express a desire for Drummond to perform, and to perform in a particular way, this desire positions Drummond as more than an everyday person who is simply giving viewers insight into an average day cooking in her home kitchen. In effect, viewers’ expectations suggest an interesting tension between desiring Drummond’s TV performance to equal that of a professional chef who is at ease preparing food in front of a camera, while at the same time expecting Drummond to perform as a sassy-mouthed, accidental country girl who is whipping up a batch of her famous cinnamon rolls as if there were not cameras around. In this process, critics threaten Drummond’s agency in being the ultimate authority on how she looks and acts as “The Pioneer Woman.”
The Backlash Erupts: The Premiere of the Food Network Show, “The Pioneer Woman”

“In this era of multimedia ‘branding,’ when tweets are turned into books and amusement parks become movies, executives, publishers, and other purveyors of pseudoculture might want to remember that success in one medium is no guarantee of success in another. A case in point is the Food Network show ‘The Pioneer Woman’....”

–Amanda Fortini, “The Pioneer Woman Gets Lost on the Range”

In late August 2011, a cooking show aptly called, “The Pioneer Woman” premiered on the Food Network, consequently promoting Drummond’s celebrity via another platform.²⁸ When asked about how her show was going to be different from other shows on the Food Network, Drummond replied that the show would offer “an authentic representation of my life.” As Drummond described:

…the show will offer glimpses into my life in the country. I've always known that I wouldn't be happy doing a cooking show where I'd just stand behind the counter and cook; I want to share the recipes that work for me, yes — but I also want to share the fact that sometimes when I'm making my favorite pasta dish, a couple of bulls will walk by the window and give me a dirty look. And sometimes I'll mutter things under my breath, like, ‘You'd better stop eyeballin' me, boy,’ and I'll punch my fist like I'm going to beat them up. And those are the things I won't necessarily censor myself

²⁸ This was not Drummond’s first appearance on television, however. The Food Network may have been doing a test-run, when Bobby Flay challenged Drummond to a Thanksgiving cooking challenge on his show, “Throwdown! With Bobby Flay.” The episode aired on November 17, 2010 on the Food Network (The Serious Eats Team). Drummond ended up winning the challenge, of course (“Bobby Flay loses”).
from doing, because again: I want this to be an authentic peek into my life in the kitchen (Godar).

By authentic, Drummond seemed to refer to both her cooking style, and her surrounding environment. In other words, Drummond reiterated to audiences that she is not a professional chef; rather, she markets herself as a self-taught home cook who is simply cooking meals that she would be making for her family anyway, except now this process is conveniently being captured on-camera for the benefit of others. Here, it does not matter so much whether Drummond is cooking recipes on-camera that she actually cooks for her family and friends in her everyday life, but rather, it matters that audiences buy into this performance and perceive Drummond’s recipes to be a symbol of stress-free, simple yet delicious home cooking.

That way, when they are in a pinch for an easy, delicious holiday recipe, for example, fans can identify with Drummond and envision her being in a similar situation. Thus, fans are more likely to engage with The Pioneer Woman brand because they find Drummond’s recipes to be accessible. The hook of The Pioneer Woman is that audiences can choose to consume by only watching Drummond make the recipes, but the Pioneer Woman recipes are also purportedly easy enough for them to replicate at home for their own families, e.g., “I’ll be cooking delicious things that anyone can make” (DiGregorio).
Fig. 12: The First Supper: Chicken Fried Steak, Mashed Potatoes, and a Tomato Salad (Zimmer)

The premiere episode, “Home on the Ranch,” aired on the Food Network on Saturday, August 27, 2011. The show opened with Drummond wearing a crochet cowboy hat and watering her garden. Drummond then conveniently picked some fresh herbs from the garden to use for dinner that night and headed up to “The Lodge” to cook what she called “The Ultimate Ranch Dinner”: chicken fried steak with gravy, creamy mashed potatoes, and a marinated tomato salad (“Home on the Ranch”). True to claims written in her cookbooks that her cooking is decidedly “not noncaloric,” Drummond chose to make her family a meal that would “stick to their ribs” (“Home on the Ranch”); the mashed potatoes alone were made with a stick and a half of butter, eight ounces of cream cheese, and a cup of heavy cream (“Home on the Ranch”). Overall, the hearty meal seemed to fit with the identity that Drummond has constructed for herself through her blog and cookbooks: a country girl relying on pantry-ready, unfussy and simple
ingredients  to feed a horde of picky kids and hardworking cowboys. There is no doubt that in this construction, Drummond draws on the image of a historical pioneer woman, who often times had to get creative cooking with limited basic staples. In Kansas, for example, where corn harvests were particularly abundant, women cooked corn as “bread, grits, mush, pudding or pancakes” (Stratton 63).

Moreover, the commentary Drummond made while preparing the meal also worked to establish her ethos as a simple, home cook. For example, while describing how she was chopping her herbs to add to the tomato salad, Drummond commented that she just had to say “chiffonade” because it made her feel “sophisticated” (“Home on the Ranch”). This comment worked to affirm Drummond’s representation as an amateur chef because she alluded that most of her dishes would not be considered “sophisticated” by professional culinary standards. Drummond added that she knew the tomatoes would not be the most popular dish she made that night because vegetables could not compete with fried cubed steak, but nevertheless, she wanted to add some color to the meal. It could also be argued that this was Drummond’s attempt to ward off potential criticism that her cooking is unhealthy, by showing the inclusion of a fresh salad; in addition, considering that most of the dish she made was visually monochromatic (i.e., white mashed potatoes,

29 “I live in a rural area, so complicated ingredients aren’t an option for me” (Drummond, Where Women Cook).

“In addition to accessible recipes, Drummond uses readily available pantry ingredients – due to the fact that the nearest major grocery store is about a 90-minute round-trip drive away and that includes a five-mile stretch of gravel road” (Lynch).

30 “Once married and living in the country, it was a rude awakening to find out that cowboys don’t eat Ahi tuna. They don’t eat ginger-sesame noodles. They wouldn’t touch sushi with a ten-foot pole. Cowboys eat meat—lots of meat—with an occasional potato thrown in for balanced nutrition” (Drummond, The Pioneer Woman Cooks).
brown fried steak and gravy), the addition of a red and green marinated salad added a pop of color to the dish which made it more visually appealing not only for her blog, but for television.

In any case, the cooking itself took place in “The Lodge,” a remodeled guest home and studio that is approximately two miles from the Drummonds’ family home (DiGregorio). Scenes of Drummond cooking inside were juxtaposed with images from outside on the ranch: kids playing soccer, cowboys wrangling cattle, and Drummond herself trying to wrangle cattle and round the horses up. While the show appeared to do what Drummond said it would—it showed more than her just standing behind a counter and cooking—for the most part, her performance behind the counter is exactly what critics fixated on. Since the premiere of the show, audiences have flocked to the blogosphere in hordes to express their disappointment over “The Pioneer Woman” (Godar). Drummond’s cooking was seen as unhealthy, her performance while cooking was seen as bland and unentertaining, and the kitchen that she cooked in was seen as too glamorous and upscale for the average country girl. Perhaps most unsettling to critics was the fact that while Drummond’s performance in the kitchen was deemed awkward and boring, nevertheless, she seemed to be more comfortable cooking in the kitchen and uploading photos to her blog than she was outside assisting with ranching duties. All-together, “The Pioneer Woman” TV show painted a portrait that was not congruent with what viewers thought Drummond as a country girl should be like, and critics rejected the show for failing to live up to their expectations.
Criticizing Drummond’s Performance of Country Cooking: The Meal

It seems that the dish Drummond chose to make for the premiere episode played a major role in the backlash because critics interpreted it as a meal that Drummond makes quite frequently for her family. In other terms, each star on the Food Network has a hook that distinguishes themselves from other stars on the Network. For example, Giada DeLaurentis represents “Everyday Italian,” e.g., “From their conversations came the idea that Giada could be the personality who represented ‘everyday Italian’ cooking. She would make dishes regular people could make, not just admire as part of the sport of ‘armchair cooking’” (Salkin 303). Likewise, Drummond is also a cook that represents everyday cooking, albeit for Midwestern fare. Thus, in their understanding of Drummond’s shtick to be an everyday cook, critics saw the recipes she was making to symbolize not just the simplicity of ingredients and the effort involved in preparation and cooking, but also, numerically, in how often Drummond makes them in her everyday life. Therefore, the fact that Drummond made a high-caloric dish like chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes seemed to truly horrify many critics who felt that Drummond was harmfully encouraging her viewers to eat unhealthy in their own daily lives. Drummond did make a point in the episode to say that this was not a dish that her family eats every day, but it seems that this comment was largely ignored because of the fact that the Food Network show was showcasing her making it, i.e., you may purport to not eat this dish everyday because you recognize that it is not the most healthy, but yet, this is still the dish that you are choosing to advertise to fans.
Critics like Evan (also a food blogger like Drummond) felt that Drummond’s cooking was promoting unhealthy habits. Evan wrote a negative review of the show on his food blog, *The Wannabe Chef*, and commented: “She made this meal for her husbands [sic] and kids because they worked hard on the ranch all day and she wanted a meal that would ‘stick to their ribs.’ Uhh, are you sure you didn’t mean to kill them?” (“The Pioneer Woman—Really?”). Evan’s post accumulated 163 comments, most of whom agreed with Evan’s opinion of the show. Of course, in this criticism, many viewers also negated the fact that Drummond’s family spends long hours engaging in physical labor around the ranch; they do not live sedentary lifestyles, which coupled with a diet high in saturated fat, would up their risk for cardiovascular disease. Thus, while some completely discounted the fact that Drummond’s family is out on the ranch working all day burning calories, others said that unless they also were doing similar physical labor all day, there was no way that they could justify eating dishes like country fried steak on a regular basis, e.g.,

…but unless you are a cowboy working on a hard core ranch, how in the world can you justify eating that way? You can’t. I have been living and watching some of the most unhealthy lifestyles lately and I’m so over it (The Non-Dairy Queen).

Sarena appeared to be disgruntled because she perceived Drummond’s show was going to continually present recipes like country fried steak, and Drummond’s endorsement of the recipe implied that viewers at home should cook her fattening dishes regularly for their families. However, just as Drummond said to her viewers that her family did not eat this
meal every night, viewers at home could also “justify eating that way” by not making country fried steak every night of the week. Sarena, however, interpreted country fried steak as equating with an entire unhealthy lifestyle.

Indeed, other viewers seemed to be upset not just that Drummond made a fattening meal, but that country fried steak was pitched as “The Ultimate Ranch Dinner.” In other terms, some critics were offended because they saw Drummond unfairly contributing to stereotypes that country cooking automatically means unhealthy. As one viewer complained, “Perhaps the FN really wanted to dumb this up, but let me tell you, country is neither dumb nor all butter and oil or fried food. Shame she couldn’t showcase her herb garden more and go with a recipe that really stood out” (Stacy@ Four Points Foodies). This viewer actually wanted to see Drummond cook more dishes like marinated tomato salad. However, this desire also seems unfair because if Drummond is supposed to be the cook who is representing food that she makes in her real life, chicken fried steak is presented as being one of those recipes. Plus, as an aside, if the Drummonds are out working on the ranch for long stretches of time between meals, there is no way that a marinated tomato salad as a main course would keep them full and satisfied.

Thus, here, it seems that viewers want Drummond to cook particular recipes that they deem acceptable as healthy, fresh country fare—however, this desire also conflates with Drummond’s agency and representation as a cook who is sharing “food from [her] frontier” (The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Food From My Frontier). In other terms, if viewers were calling the shots about what Drummond made, it would change the premise of the show as Drummond sharing recipes that “rotate through my kitchen on a regular
basis” (The Pioneer Woman Cooks: Food From My Frontier). The desire to “showcase her garden more” suggests a scripted TV show where recipes are particularly concocted for viewers at home; Drummond’s performance is supposed to be about her showcasing the type of cooking she already does at home, albeit with cameras capturing the process.

Criticizing Drummond’s Performance of Country Cooking: Lack of Vocational Language

While Drummond markets herself as a home cook, who has never gone to culinary school and received formal training, nevertheless, it seems that disappointed viewers expected Drummond to act like a professional chef on camera. Particularly, some viewers zeroed in on Drummond’s lacking vocabulary, in being able to describe the dishes she was preparing, as evidence that she was unfit to be appearing on a cooking channel. As this person complained:

> Despite selling herself as a writer, her vocabulary for describing the food is pretty impoverished and seems mainly limited to ‘amazing,’ ‘beautiful,’ and ‘rich and flavorful’… (Anonymous, reply 74).

However, while Drummond did secure her Food Network gig because of the popularity of her blog writing, nevertheless, this particular viewer seems to assume that a good writer also effortlessly possesses the flair to talk about food. However, Drummond’s vocabulary usage makes sense, if it is thought about through the lens of the persona that she performs on her blog. In other words, an amateur cook who never went to culinary school may not ever have acquired the vocabulary to talk about food beyond describing it

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31 “…it was never a dream of mine or even a notion in my head that cooking would even turn into an actual vocation or anything other than a source of enjoyment. I never went to culinary school in a quest to be a chef, nor did I ever have plans to write a cookbook” (Where Women Cook).
as “amazing” or “rich and flavorful.” Drummond may (or may not) be able to describe why an ingredient adds to the flavor profile of a dish, but the persona she presents sends the message that all she knows is that the addition of it makes the recipe taste better and that is the extent of her rationale.32

Considering that Drummond markets her cooking as simple, she probably would have been perceived by her audience as obnoxiously pretentious if she had gotten on-camera and repeatedly talked in a way that was not accessible to the average viewer, e.g., if she sounded like she was reading straight from a French cooking glossary. After all, as Drummond said before the premiere of her show, “Somewhere along the way cooking became something that was fancy, and it just left behind all these people who aren’t comfortable in the kitchen” (Lynch). Through posting step-by-step photos of the cooking process on her blog, Drummond has worked to establish her recipes as easy to imitate, and to appeal to people with a range of cooking skills. Arguably, this is why when Drummond did drop a fancier culinary term, “chiffonade,” she tried to lighten up the moment with humor, e.g., this word makes me feel “sophisticated.” In other terms, it is implied that as a country girl, Drummond does not usually say words like this. In reality, if the average cook was performing the same action, she would most likely say that she was cutting herbs into thin strips, rather than using the fancier French term, “chiffonade”

Nevertheless, viewers like the anonymous critic above seemed to expect that Drummond possess a wider vocabulary in regards to food, and in effect, the appeal of

32 Take the inscription on a pastry brush in The Pioneer Woman Collection, for example, “Butter makes everything better!” (Stone).
Drummond’s persona as accessible to ordinary, amateur cooks is discounted. Rather, on TV, it seems that viewers expect Drummond to perform as an articulate and entertaining professional chef, who simultaneously seems ordinary and relatable. This is a tall order for someone to juggle; someone who is supposed to just be an everyday person trying to “plow through life in the country” (*The Pioneer Woman Cooks*).

**Criticizing Drummond’s Performance of Country Cooking: Lack of Comedic Delivery**

In addition, a common complaint amongst critics was that they did not find Drummond to be very entertaining in her television performance. In this case, it seems that viewers expected Drummond to act like a professional *celebrity* chef—not only at ease preparing food on-camera, but preparing it in an *entertaining* way. In particular, those that had been readers of Drummond’s blog—long before tuning in to watch the show—expressed disappointment that she was not as funny as they had envisioned her to be. While on her blog, readers found Drummond to possess skillful comedic timing, on TV, viewers found Drummond’s comedic chops to fall flat. Below are some of the comments made:

“I was really crestfallen. She’s such a badass and wit on her blog, and that didn’t translate at all on the show” (ally@girlVfood).

“While I love her blog, I felt like her comedic timing was lost in the show. And not even remotely funny” (Amanda).
“I watched the show yesterday…y-i-k-e-s! She tried to say witty things she would normally say in the blog, like that ‘I like to shake the mason jar to get my aggressions out’ and ‘kings and presidents’ thing, but it TOTALLY didn’t work for her on-screen! Man, was she awkward/fake” (Nourhan@Miss Anthropist’s Kitchen).

Here, viewers seem to be upset with Drummond’s delivery; her delivery on-screen is perceived to be stiff and scripted. Rather than jokes coming across as off-the-cuff and witty as they do on her blog, on TV, Drummond’s jokes appeared to be out of place, thus fake. Viewers seemed to desire Drummond to act more informally like a home cook casually preparing food and joking around as if she was not on camera. Viewers who felt that Drummond came across as funnier on the blogging medium were utterly perplexed as to why her humor did not carry over to television, leading some to wonder as to whether Drummond in fact had a ghost writer on her blog all along:

I don't know who this person is, but it is the most boring cooking show BAR NONE on TV. I can't stand watching it. I keep waiting for her to say something funny, goofy, self deprecating like she does on her blog, but it is all extremely dry and too sweet for TV. It's bizarre. It makes me wonder if she had a ghost writer for her blog all along? (Lisa, Re: “Food Network Musings”).

Of course, this criticism negates that fact that when constructing blog posts, Drummond does not have a camera crew physically hovering over her and making her self-conscious.
Thus, Drummond’s performance is not really that bizarre (as people like Lisa assert), if viewers were to critically weigh the differences between the medium of television and the medium of blogging. When she is blogging, Drummond may have a virtual audience that numbers in the millions, but those people are not physically standing right next to her and pointing multiple cameras in her face. Moreover, Drummond’s comedic timing can across as ingenious on her blog, because she can conveniently take as much time as wants to construct posts and perfect the appearance as if she is making jokes off-the-cuff. While television crews can also do multiple takes to capture the perfect scene, this does not matter if the person being filmed is not particularly comfortable in front of the camera.

Drummond has repeatedly said that filming a TV show is not where she feels the most comfortable, e.g., “As I’ve said, I’m not quite the TV expert. I prefer to be behind the scenes” (BlogHer). In fact, Drummond would probably agree with many critics after watching herself back on the show later. As Drummond has shared, “When I watched the episodes, I cringed. Recoiled. It’s hard because there’s so many things to think about when you’re being filmed” (Zimmer). Drummond shared how nerve-wracking the whole process of filming can be:

I’d talk, and the camera wouldn’t talk back. I’d say something I thought was mildly amusing, and no one would react. Then I’d think, ‘Wait. Was that not funny? Or are they all just being quiet because we’re on set?’ Then I’d start nervously sweating. Then things would go downhill from there (“Food Network Show FAQ”).
In other terms, Drummond acknowledges that filming a television show indeed requires a different performance than writing on her blog does. She admits as critics pointed out that when she would make jokes and/or say things that she might say on her blog, the audience (aka the crew) did not react in the way that she thought they would, which made her question whether the commentary was funny. On her blog, Drummond can always appear confident; on-camera, it is harder for Drummond to hide any nervousness, as viewers scrutinize her body language, facial expressions, and commentary.

Thus, just like her lack of vocabulary in preparing food disappointed viewers and pointed to a desire for a more professional quality performance, Drummond’s lack of comedic timing also highlighted a desire for a more entertaining television personality. However, the idea that Drummond did not live up to people’s expectations could suggest that she is performing appropriately as an everyday person because she has not mastered cooking on television like other Food Network stars have. While some accuse her lack of comedic timing as evidence that Drummond is fake or that producers were writing her jokes for her (thus the jokes were not originating from her and seemed forced), it could be argued that her perceived awkwardness aligns with her performance as an everyday person and thus could be perceived as more, not less, authentic. However, in this case, it seems that viewers demanded that if Drummond were to be on television that she perform in a particular way. Even though most country girls are not filming cable television shows, viewers of The Pioneer Woman show expected Drummond, the accidental country girl, to be naturally funny on camera. As this unsatisfied viewer actually said, “I
don’t care about authenticity as long as you bring something interesting to the table” (Renae).

Failing to Deliver an Authentic Peek: The Kitchen

“One look at her kitchen is all anyone should need to see she’s not ‘down home country folk,’ she’s a high maintenance chick playing at being folksy” (Fly on the wall).

Not only were viewers disappointed by Drummond’s performance in the kitchen, but the kitchen itself caused much controversy. While most stars on the Food Network are not cooking in their home kitchens, either, it seems that Drummond is held to a different expectation because she markets herself as cooking everyday fare. Dressed in her nice clothes and cooking in the Lodge, it seems that Drummond did not match the perception that many viewers had of her—a perception formed either from reading her blog directly, or through connotations from hearing the name of her brand. By their complaints, it seems that viewers expected to see Drummond cooking her “favorite pasta dish” on modest appliances in a wood-paneled kitchen located in her actual home (Godar), but instead, she was shown cooking in a high-end kitchen “with its gleaming Wolf stove, vaulted ceilings, gigantic farm table and collection of Le Creuset Dutch ovens” (Byron). One has to wonder in this criticism whether Drummond is also being compared to historical pioneer women, who notoriously made meals with rudimentary kitchen equipment and utensils. Moreover, early sod homes on the frontier usually lacked kitchens entirely; women cooked in a corner in the main room of the house or out in the yard (Riley 56).
In effect, rather than coming across as a unique, sassy personality that says things like “I like to shake the mason jar to get my aggressions out” and cooks in a chaotic household as she often alludes to on her blog, on the TV show viewers saw a woman blandly delivering jokes, repeating words like “deliciousness,” all the while standing in a top-of-the-line kitchen located in a renovated guest house. Consequently, critics felt that Drummond’s television performance projected an image incongruent with the kitchen a pioneer woman apparently should be cooking in. While in the previous section, critics seemed to insist that Drummond be more natural in her persona as an accidental country girl on camera, in this section’s critique, critics maintained that everyday country girls do not cook in kitchens like the Lodge whether they are on-camera or not. In effect, as Anna Fortini later wrote in a follow-up editorial to her feature article on Drummond, “Because Drummond seems like any upper-middle-class wife, anywhere, cooking in her well-appointed kitchen, her folksiness often feels put-on, a costume she’s donned for the occasion” (Fortini, “Lost on the Range”).

However, in this process, critics also negate Drummond’s agency not only in her decision to film a cooking show, but also the circumstances under which she films.

33 A tweet complaint from The Marlboro Woman on April 25, 2015: “There you have it: 5 shirtain changes, ‘glorious,’ ‘deliciousness’ and ‘I love it’ overused ad nauseum. Today’s @thepioneerwoman show” (The Marlboro Woman).
Fig. 13: Ree Drummond sitting in her kitchen studio, in “The Lodge” ("Star Kitchen")

Fig. 14: A rare glimpse of Drummond’s actual kitchen in her family home; a find I stumbled across in the archives of thepioneerwoman.com ("Hackers")

Drummond insists that filming at the Lodge is more practical because it is always clean and ready to be filmed in, while the family home is usually a mess (see fig. 15).
Fig. 15: Drummond shows a pile of “Stuff. Gear. Garb” that clutters her family home on a daily basis (“Solution”)

As Drummond explained in a BlogHer interview before the premiere of her show: “With four kids, all of our homeschooling gear, all of the laundry and normal, everyday clutter, it makes much more sense for the bulk of the show to be filmed at the Lodge, which is probably the only quiet place on the ranch” (Godar). While it is doubtful that the Lodge is the most (or only) quiet place on the ranch especially when there is a full production crew occupying the space, since one thing that fans and critics seem to agree on is how busy Drummond is, it would make sense for the television show to be filmed in a studio rather than Drummond’s personal living space. When Drummond is questioned about how she manages to do it all—which includes how she manages to keep her home clean when she is so busy—filming in the Lodge is one way in which Drummond can avoid stress. In other words, it is okay if the Drummond’s family home is not spic and span because the show is not filmed there; it does not “need” to be clean at all times. At the Lodge, Drummond never has to worry about having to clean up at the last minute to welcome
guests. Rather, the studio is already, always presentable for viewers at home. By keeping her home private, Drummond maintains a space in which she does not have to perform, as her Pioneer Woman brand expands.

In fact, Drummond has said that she does not know whether she would have committed to filming the show if it was at her family home, e.g., “If it had to be at our house, I don’t think we could do any of it, because our house is definitely the real world. You need a place to close the door and just be in your yoga pants” (DiGregorio). Interestingly, here, Drummond acknowledges that there is a level of performance involved in her cooking show because the Lodge is not described as reflecting the “real world.” At the Lodge, Drummond looks coiffed and polished for television, rather than dressed in her everyday attire lest she were she not being filmed, e.g., yoga pants. Thus, critics have deemed the Lodge problematic because it reflects a privileged situation, rather than a kitchen that everyday families—let alone female ranchers—cook in:

I do ranch for a living, and I don’t get to blog and take photos and cook all day and I certainly don’t get to do it in a 100K kitchen (or with a 10k camera) that isn’t even in my house—it’s the Lodge” (the south dakota cowgirl, 8:25 p.m.; my emphasis).

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that fans love Drummond’s performance, which includes insight into the beautifully decorated Lodge. Fans revel in the fact that on

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34 How “coiffed” Drummond is made up for her appearance on TV is debatable. At least in season one, Drummond claimed to do her own hair and makeup, e.g., “I’m glad I did my [makeup]. I don’t wear a lot of makeup around the house on a daily basis, and I didn’t want to have an overly made up, polished, glitzy look because I thought it would be out of place. On the other hand, sometimes I have had spasms when I put on eyeliner. Makeup artists come in handy at times like that. On one hand, I didn’t want to look powdered and perfectly matte and studio-ready” (“Food Network Show FAQ”).
her blog, and on her TV show, Drummond has “shared more than just the sugar and the flour” (Ginavon). In other words, fans not only want to tune in to “The Pioneer Woman” to see Drummond prepare a delicious dish; they also expect and want to soak up the surrounding environment. In a 2013 article on the WSJ online, Ellen Byron noted

That Ms. Drummond has become a star shows how far cooking shows have come from the classic cooking show format, or what network producers call the ‘dump and stir.’ On ‘The Pioneer Woman’ and other shows that fill the Food Network and increasingly dot the schedules on other channels, episodes often feature delicious meals and gorgeous kitchens. To stand out and keep viewers returning for more, producers need to keep coming up with fresh settings and lifestyles—be it Nigella Lawson’s posh London kitchen, Ina Garten’s chic Hamptons retreat or Ms. Drummond’s ranch (“Pioneer Woman Serves Up”).

So while critics complain that “The Pioneer Woman” show is not representing the life of an everyday person let alone the average rancher’s wife, fans enjoy the show precisely because it shows a lifestyle that is unlike their own. In this case, Drummond seems to actually be feeding most viewers who tune in to the Food Network what they want: a romanticized glimpse into life in a rural locale.

Moreover, in her comments about preferring to film at the Lodge, Drummond implies wanting to maintain a certain level of privacy between her professional and personal life, in being able to not always have to be “on”—hence, again, the comment, “You need a place to close the door and just be in your yoga pants” (DiGregorio). Now as
a star on the Food Network, Drummond is in fact not an average, everyday person, and she should be granted agency in determining how much of her life she would like to share with the public, e.g., the choice to film the television show in the Lodge. By fixating on the fact that Drummond owns a “multi-jillion dollar” place like the Lodge, critics negate the realities of filming a television show (Dugan). If the show were to be filmed in Drummond’s family home rather than in the guest house, a production crew would completely invade the space and further impede on the family’s privacy off-camera.35

**Failing to Deliver an Authentic Peek: “I’m an accidental country girl”**

“I’m a ridiculous city girl stuck in the country, trying desperately to act the part. Then I look at Missy, the real cowgirl around here, and realize I’m not fooling anyone.”  
–Ree Drummond, “The Real Cowgirl Around Here” (8 June 2007).

Lastly, besides her perceived awkward performance inside the Lodge, critics seemed to be disappointed by Ree Drummond’s performance outside the Lodge in regards to ranching activities. In other terms, as a “Pioneer Woman,” it seems viewers expected Ree to be just as wieldy outside on the ranch, as she is inside in the kitchen.

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35 When Ina Garten aka “The Barefoot Contessa” for example, another star on the Food Network, agreed to shoot a pilot, she did not fully realize what shooting a cooking show in one’s home meant. As Allen Salkin records in his book about the stars of the Food Network: “A production team showed up at [Ina Garten’s] house in East Hampton in early 2000. A prep kitchen was set up in her yard under a tent. [Ina] thought she could protect her rugs and floors from the muddy comings and goings of the crew by putting out a bin of socks and insisting everyone wear a pair when they were inside. But there were more than a dozen people in the crew, and they found it too cumbersome to keep taking off and putting on their shoes every time they ran into the house. The carpets started to fill with dirt, and the lawn under the tent was damaged from all the traffic. Worse, most houses in East Hampton had their own septic systems, and few were suited for heavy use. Within a few days, Ina’s system backed up and the toilets gurgled with brown water. The would–be-star of *In the Kitchen with Ina* was frantically unhappy, and it showed in her performance” (297).

Likewise in the shooting of “The Pioneer Woman,” production crews completely take over the Lodge. In a post entitled, “The Past Fourteen Days, Drummond shared “behind-the-scenes” pictures of all of the production equipment which appeared to be everywhere. Drummond herself described the scene as “a maze of equipment.”
After all, in the 1800s, pioneer women regularly assisted their husbands and sons with ranching work:

Faced with a chronic shortage of labor on the frontier, the working family needed all the help it could muster…the mother and the daughters assisted with the traditionally male tasks of planting, harvesting, tending livestock, hauling water, gathering fuel, and even hunting (Stratton 61).

Conversely, the Pioneer Woman show depicted the female Drummond as clumsy, inefficient, and clueless when it came to working with animals. When Ree announced, for example, that she would help round up the horses for the night, her husband and kids laughed at the thought. Later in the episode, when Drummond dropped off breakfast sandwiches for the crew and her husband prompted her to help wrangle cattle “because she was still too clean,” squealing Ree struggled to get a handle on the calf’s legs (“Home on the Ranch”). While Drummond calls herself an “accidental country girl” on her blog and in the opening credits of the show, nevertheless, it seems viewers expected Drummond to be a confident, capable cowgirl as if she had been ranching all of her life. And because her on-screen performance did not match this perception, viewers, especially those who identified as female ranchers, were upset that Drummond was depicted as so helpless because she made people like them look bad:

No, I’m an actual ranch wife who works on the ranch, and doesn’t have time to cook all day or take photos. Yes, I take photos when time permits but unlike the PW I actually ride, start colts, pull calves, have my arm
shoulder deep in a heifer, feed bottle babies, horses and such. I’m not confined to the space of the house (the south dakota cowgirl, 2:19 p.m.). While Drummond was not shown as “confined” to the house in the episode—hence, her scenes outdoors attempting to do ranch work—nevertheless, the show did depict Drummond as more adept in the house, than outside it. However, even before the premiere of her show, Drummond has always presented herself as an “accidental country girl” who never expected to find herself married to a cattle rancher and living in the remote countryside. Thus, Drummond’s awkward attempt to wrangle a calf actually aligns with the type of self-deprecating stories that she has shared since the beginning of her blog and as a self-professed accidental country girl. On camera, however, viewers could not seem to wrangle their thoughts around how a rancher’s wife could be so inept at ranching.

“Watered down” Reality or Family-friendly Fantasy?

In her decision to bring “The Pioneer Woman” to television, while she could control where filming took place, Drummond could not necessarily close the door to the wave of backlash that arose as viewers were invited to see “here’s what’s happening on the ranch” (Imper). Viewers complained that they were not satisfied with Drummond’s performance, however in this criticism, critics also seemed to contradict themselves. In desiring Drummond to act a certain way as The Pioneer Woman on television, critics admitted a yearning to watch an entertaining performance, but yet, this desire for performance conflates with a larger, overall criticism of Drummond as her brand has expanded that she is performing at all.
In other words, when it comes to her blog, Drummond has been accused of being too “polished” and becoming less relatable over time as her life now appears picture-perfect. No longer does Drummond share stories like “Frontier Follies,” she shares Photoshopped images of the frontier. Yet after her television premiere, critics complained that Drummond was not polished enough, i.e., she did not act enough like a professional celebrity chef, she did not act enough like a capable country girl. Most significantly, longtime readers of the blog felt that Drummond’s TV persona did not match her blog persona, especially when it came to her sense of humor. In this case, viewers wanted Drummond to act exactly as she does on her blog because she is perceived as being more natural and funny; yet the blog is also a space where Drummond is criticized the most for performing.

While some people seemed to realize that Drummond’s personality may not be suited for the medium of television, and empathized with her, nevertheless critics who seem puzzled by the dissonance between the blog persona and the character on TV seemed to suggest that if it is because the Food Network has dampened her creativity, Drummond should have said no to a network that would not let her be her “true” self. Of course, just as critics mistakenly believe that the blog is a medium which can reveal truth in entirety, this expectation also suggests that critics believe that Drummond’s rhetorical performance on television should, and can, depict unfiltered reality. Or, critics also seem to suggest that Drummond should have been content with blogging, if she realized that she is not the best on camera AND has confessed that she prefers to be behind the scenes, anyway. As these viewers commented:
I happen to love PW’s blog—she really does write well, and while some of her life may be ‘fake’ or overhyped, I think she is a genuine person, and her blog generally reflects this. From what I’ve read about the show, she just didn’t translate well to TV. I guess maybe she should appreciate the incredible blog talent that she has rather than spreading into new mediums? People are very rarely incredible at more than one thing…” (caronae; my emphasis).

I wish she would just stick to writing. Or maybe weekly appearances on the Today show. Too much PW is a bad thing. (Michelle @ Crazy *Running* Legs)

However, because Ree Drummond has forged ahead with thirteen seasons of her show, Drummond’s ambition—like in the case of her new cookware line—is questioned by people as being greedy because her motives for doing the show are only seen as economically driven, i.e., she does not like being on-camera, so why else would she subject herself to the torture of all-day film schedules? Moreover, Drummond’s commitment to film a show that critics believe flattens her personality (as established on her blog) seems to convince critics that she has indeed sold out because she has agreed to such a portrayal. However, both criticisms negate the fact that even if television is not Drummond’s favorite medium, the show has still allowed her to expand her brand and bring in additional revenue.
Food Network’s general manager and senior vice president, Bob Tuschman, says fans of shows like “The Pioneer Woman” become hooked because “…they want to appreciate a beautiful lifestyle that they don't have. There's fantasy and romance that appeals to all of us” (Byron). Indeed, as one fan responded in response to a negative review of the television show,

I think the show is entertaining because I wonder what it would be like to live on a cattle ranch. I’m a legitimate, professional city girl, and Ree’s lifestyle is so different from my own that I’m fascinated. My kids like the show too because they are interested in the animals, the ranching, the scenery…My daughter has never seen little kids ride horses like that. At least it’s something we can all watch together (BAM).

After reading this fan’s comment, it does not seem like Tuschman’s comment that fantasy and romance appeals to “all of us” is completely accurate in describing who is actually watching “The Pioneer Woman.” Rather, it seems like Drummond’s portrayal of domestic bliss is appealing to women, in particular. According to 2013 statistics, “The Pioneer Woman” attracts approximately eight million viewers a month. This puts “The Pioneer Woman” as the most-watched show for 25-to-54 year old women, a coveted demographic by advertisers (Byron). Moreover, Drummond’s show seems to appeal to moms and their families. While some viewers like Evan (the Wannabe Chef food blogger) may interpret this as “watered down,” there are mothers who seem to appreciate that they do not have to worry about Drummond saying something profane or inappropriate. For example, a BlogHer reader, by the name of redbarnlacecurtains,
responded with positive praise to the editorial in which Drummond was interviewed before the premiere of her show:

Three words for Ree, ‘You go girl!’ In a world that can be harsh and raw your show is a breath of fresh air. From the awesome recipes, faith based living, home-schooling, to the children playing outdoors. Our whole family enjoys the show and we can watch without fear of inappropriate conversation taking place. Observing values that we work to instill in our family and seeing Ree’s family work, play, and eat together is exactly what I want my family to see when the [sic] watch TV. Sincerely, Suburban [sic] country girl (Re: “Exclusive: Drummond on Her Pioneer Woman Food Network Show”).

This reader does not necessarily seem to tune in to watch a lifestyle that is different from her own. It seems she is drawn to the show, and the Pioneer Woman, because she perceives that Drummond and her share similar values. Nevertheless, at the same time, it seems that this suburban family woman also appreciates the element of romanticism that Drummond’s show offers, as it is perceived as being a respite from the “harsh and raw” world outside. Moreover, even if this woman considers herself a fellow country girl, she also reveals that she lives in suburbia which still makes the setting of Drummond’s show a different landscape to consume.

Conclusion

Overall, critics’ comments in response to The Pioneer Woman television show suggest that Drummond’s performance on television did not match their perceptions of
how a pioneer woman should look and behave. Critics were unhappy with Drummond’s cooking, dialogue, kitchen, and lack of ranching skills. However these criticisms also highlight an interesting tension between critics’ usual claim that Drummond is fake because she is performing, and their desire post-Pioneer Woman premiere that Drummond act differently on television, thus acknowledging that a level of performativity is involved. As a star on a cable television show, Drummond is not representative of an everyday person, yet critics still seemed to desire that Drummond perform in a natural, effortless way as if she were not being filmed. They expected her to sound exactly like she does on her blog sans cameras.

However, many of these criticisms actually conflate with the actual persona that Drummond has constructed as a relatable personality, i.e., her decision to make comfort food, as well as her awkwardness in the kitchen preparing food and outside on the ranch wrangling cattle, were most likely meant to portray Drummond as relatable and endearing. However, critics watched the show and consequently deemed Drummond to not only be unfit to star on television, but also to be an inappropriate representative of the average rancher’s wife. Even filming in the Lodge—a kitchen which appeases many viewers’ desire to see a beautiful lifestyle unlike their own—upset critics because they deemed that it did not resemble the average kitchen of most ranchers’ wives. While Drummond has not hid the fact that the Lodge is not her home kitchen, this has not appeased critics who find the existence of the Lodge to be an anathema to Drummond’s performance as an everyday rancher’s wife.
In ridiculing her actions, critics attempt to inscribe one, particular reality on Drummond about who she is and what she should be doing if she is to rightfully claim the label “Pioneer Woman.” In this process, Drummond’s agency in being able to craft her identity as a modern day pioneer woman on television is problematically dismissed. While Ree Drummond may not be doing hands-on ranch work and branding cattle, the narrative she has crafted based on ranch work highlights the innovative branding of herself. This is perhaps the timeless definition of a Pioneer Woman: a person who has proven herself adept at adapting to her circumstances, taking on multiple roles, and working hard to achieve her goals—whether that be by building a cow pen or by building a brand.
CONCLUSION

“The Pioneer Woman” blog, TV show, cookbooks and social media accounts all contain “images, graphics and texts [that] are constructed to give off impressions about [Drummond] and foster a particular narrative about [Drummond’s] life and identity for a particular audience” (Dobson 9). While all individuals engage in a performance of the self—often unconsciously—what makes Drummond’s actions different is that they exemplify a “conscious, mediated representation of the self,” in order to portray a particular narrative about life as “an accidental country girl” living on a cattle ranch in Oklahoma (Dobson 9). Thus because her performance is strategic, Nancy Thumin, author of the book *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*, would say “When a self-representation is produced it becomes a text that has the potential for subsequent engagement” (Thumin qtd. in Dobson 9).

The Pioneer Woman brand encourages engagement. The blog encourages readers to click through recipes and links on the site; the more page views she gets, the more Drummond is paid as advertisers pay for exposure to their respective brands. Even the blog redesign in 2015 was influenced by fans’ feedback, as Drummond encouraged comments that would guide her how to better tailor her content to readers’ interests. The TV show invites viewers to tune in to the latest episode. The cookbooks and cookware line spur customers to purchase the latest products. As of March 2016, this particular venture continues to grow, as Drummond released a line of “pretty and friendly” kitchen and table linens (“Pioneer Woman kitchen”)
In my thesis, I examined in what ways Drummond uses rhetoric to craft her self-representation for her audience. The field of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication benefits from this analysis because it examines in what ways people are using rhetoric to express themselves, and to “think of themselves as similar to or dissimilar from one another,” within particular rhetorical, digital spaces (Sloane 375). This thesis has uncovered that blogging is a medium that people seek for self-expression and connection with others.

While Ree Drummond has many fans who buy in to The Pioneer Woman persona that she constructs and sells, she also has many critics who do not identify with this particular identity, and reject and condemn it. These critics make their opinions known on the blogosphere, either by creating entire blogs with the singular purpose of ridiculing Drummond, by writing individual posts on their blogs of varying genres, and/or by commenting in forums on their own and other blogs. Moreover, many of these critics seem to continue to engage with the Pioneer Woman brand—either by visiting the website, watching the show, and/or following Drummond on social media—because they find a perverse enjoyment in mocking Drummond and identifying with others based off of their distaste for her persona, e.g., Pie Near Woman.

However, for many critics, their disapproval of Drummond goes way beyond distaste, as they find her blogging practices to be morally repugnant. For bloggers like the Marlboro Woman, her criticism becomes a moral crusade, as she campaigns for transparency on the Web. However, it must be pointed out here that critics are insisting on a reality that will never occur through the blogging medium. Framing photographs and
making rhetorical choices, Drummond is appropriately acting as a rhetor. Nevertheless, it seems that critics perceive Drummond to be acting inappropriately, even though the Pioneer Woman blog can never completely represent the reality that they call for.

Moreover, my work also adds to feminist rhetorical scholarship because it examines how women primarily are the ones who are engaging with, and reacting to, the Pioneer Woman brand. My work, however, is not feminist simply because it is women who are the ones primarily engaging with lifestyle blogs and who are critics of Ree Drummond, but because it challenges the criticism itself which reflects gendered cultural scripts about what actions are acceptable for a working woman. As discussed in Chapter 1, Drummond’s work as a professional blogger has been criticized not only because monetizing her blog has been perceived as too ambitious and thus inappropriately feminine, but also because blogging itself tends to be dismissed as a feminine hobby rather than lauded as a legitimate career. As rhetorical scholar Jordynn Jack noted in an article about reciprocity and resistance within a particular feminist blog community, “Women’s writing about and with technologies is discredited, especially when that writing takes place in the home. The border between public and private has historically been drawn in ways that exclude women and devalue their activities” (332). Blogging from home (and about domesticity), it then becomes easier to see why critics devalue Drummond’s work if women’s work in the private sphere has historically been seen as insignificant.

As discussed in Chapter 1, blogging has been dismissed as not constituting as a legitimate full-time job because the writing and composing process can take place extra-
institutionally, i.e., in the home. As Emily January Petersen puts it, “The home has always been a workplace, but because of limited definitions of workplace, it has not traditionally been considered a site of professionalism” (289). Certainly, American society is currently re-conceptualizing this idea as wireless Internet connections and mobile devices are changing workplace dynamics by allowing more women (and men) to work outside the confines of the office. Nevertheless, criticism of Drummond’s position seems to problematically be directed at the specific type of work (blogging) because not only has the home has tended to be associated with the private, not public sphere, but also, because blogs are seen as deriving from feminized ancestors like diaries and thus not seen as having economical value. Of course, this dismissal is problematic when blogging from home can give women like Drummond the work-home flexibility that she needs, especially as the wife of a rancher living on a remote ranch in Oklahoma. Even more problematic is the insinuation that a genre like blogging is seen as being less valuable and/or political because it’s considered to be “too feminine.”

A woman blogging about traditional women’s work, like making food or caring for her kids, tends to be dismissed by critics as doing nothing but egotistically writing about herself, posting pretty pictures, and unfairly getting compensated for it—hence the aforementioned comment in Chapter 1, “I’m sure writing little posts about what your daughter, husband, family does is HARD work, but pardon me if I don’t do that everyday and don’t get paid for it and sell cute pictures, etc.” (Lopez 741). Comments like these are condescending because building a brand like Drummond’s has in fact been hard work. The pictures that Drummond posts of her own “daughter, husband, family” are more than “cute.” Anyone can post a “cute” picture on the Internet, but few can turn that
cuteness into a multi-million dollar profit. Secondly, I feel compelled to add that these pictures represent images taken from Drummond’s home life. Thus, some forty years after the second wave feminist movement, I find it problematic when a woman like Drummond must justify the fact that she is handsomely paid for narrativizing her personal experiences. As Emily Matchar noted in *Homeward Bound*, critics may complain about lifestyle blogs like Drummond’s, but there is no denying the tantalizing possibility of the genre: “Feminists have long said that women should be paid for domestic work. Now, at least sometimes, they can be” (60).

This is why in my work, I have aimed to question the criticism surrounding Drummond’s celebrity because at its core, it is attacking Drummond’s skill in constructing a highly successful lifestyle blog that is based off of her presentation of her lived experiences as a wife and mother living on a cattle ranch. Drummond has been able to capture seemingly ordinary moments like preparing a meal for her family or watching her kids play outside in the yard, and to monetize these images of domesticity into a multi-million dollar brand. When critics complain that these moments are too polished or manipulated to represent that of a “real” pioneer woman, they are not only denying Drummond’s agency in being able to express herself, but also refusing to recognize a modern-day manifestation of a pioneer because they are stubbornly fixated on traditional, historical views of pioneering. While critics may continue to debate whether Drummond is a “real” pioneer woman let alone a pioneer of the blogosphere, what cannot be denied is that the blogosphere has afforded diverse audiences the opportunity voice their opinions and to publish a wide range of topics.
Whitney Morrill, a local mommy blogger in Charlottesville, VA, believes that while mommy bloggers have been widely scrutinized, nevertheless she sees blogging as an invaluable tool:

If you are a blogger, that may mean putting up your photos and writing about the muffins you made, or the dinner you made. Whatever it is, it’s helping that person and giving her a sense of accomplishment, a sense of connectivity...That person is expressing herself and that is a success (Hermanson).

Thus, statements like these suggest that whether or not the photographs of the muffins Drummond has made have been Photoshopped, and every crumb made to look like perfection, is a moot criticism. Rather than labelling Drummond as an inauthentic pioneer woman, the muffins and the pictures of the muffins represent Drummond’s creativity as a photographer, writer, and cook, and her prowess as a businesswoman in being able to sell that creativity to consumers.

If I were to continue my scholarship studying The Pioneer Woman, I would examine Drummond’s performance on her television show, “The Pioneer Woman” using a critical media studies approach. It truly seems that the premiere of the show in 2011 spurred a new wave of backlash, and I would be interested in analyzing more in-depth how Drummond’s persona is represented on the Food Network. Of all the chapters in this work, the Performance chapter could have been twice as long. Speaking of length and while not necessarily a limitation, my main difficulty in writing this thesis was keeping my analysis concise.
After devoting nearly two years of my Master’s education to studying The Pioneer Woman, I had so much that I wanted to include, and to say, but that length constraints did not allow for. I often worried that everything was “necessary” and that my readers would lose valuable context, if I were to omit a particularly vivid quote. Of course, this thinking reveals my subjectivity as a graduate student in the humanities, who has spent the past semester living, and studying, a particular text. I think my struggle to accept that there are folders full of omitted, excerpted material reflects the attitude of a writer who is never completely satisfied that her work is perfect or complete, but more so, I also think this ambivalence strongly supports the existence of my scholarship as it points to evidence that there is definitely more to be said and written about in the case of The Pioneer Woman.

I think this work would have greatly benefited if I had been able to insert Ree Drummond’s voice and perspective. After all, considering that my work has tried to emphasize Drummond’s agency in the building of her brand, it would have been valuable to give Drummond the opportunity to speak for herself and to offer her perspective as to the motives and ethics of her blogging and entrepreneurial practices. While I still would have to read these responses with a critical eye, nevertheless, it would have given Drummond the opportunity to directly address particular criticisms about her, especially when many of these criticisms appear in anonymous form and the authors do not show any interest in having a dialogue with Drummond even if she were to respond.

With that being said, I believe the strength of my project is the fact that I have devoted two years of study to The Pioneer Woman, and have capitalized on every opportunity I could to pursue my research both inside and outside of the classroom.
While at times I felt like I was stalking Drummond, at others, I felt complimented when told that “you know way too much about her” because it represented that I knew my subject well. Of course, I am not impervious to the fact that I, like the vast majority of PW readers, do not “know” Drummond personally. I know “The Pioneer Woman” in the sense that her readership does; I know Drummond based on her self-representation. But even so, what I see in Drummond is a pretty savvy rhetorician, and I hope my work vis à vis my own presentation of the self—this Master’s thesis project—reads the same.
INTRODUCTION

1 For example, comments like “And by the way, [Drummond] must give FANTASTIC head because I don’t know a rancher around who’d want a woman THAT clueless about ranching for a wife” (The Pioneer Woman Sux, “I never planned any of this”).

2 I must note, however, that people like the Marlboro Woman would most likely disagree that her site functions as a “hate blog” because she seems to view herself as performing a valuable, ethical service in response to what she perceives as Drummond’s unethical blogging practices. As the Marlboro Woman has said, “[My site] is not a hate site.” Rather “The Marlboro Woman quite simply reveals the cold, hard truth about a narcissistic woman whose [sic] spent multi-millions to retain Madison Avenue publicists and the services of web giants, Voce Communications” (The Marlboro Woman 1:41 a.m.; 5:59 p.m.).

3 It is worth noting, however, that The Pioneer Woman Sux has not appeared to have updated the content of her site since 2012. Nevertheless, thepioneerwomansux.com still appears within the first two pages of results, if one were to Google information about “Ree Drummond” or “The Pioneer Woman.” The site is also one of the first two results if one were to search for “Critics of the Pioneer Woman.” Consequently, The Pioneer Woman Sux’s content may be dated, but it is still accessible today for anyone to read. In some cases, people seem to actually prefer going to Pioneer Woman spin-off sites than they do Drummond’s original blog. D’Arcy herself admitted that “I spent more time on the mock blog today than I ever have on the real one and I laughed” (D’Arcy).

4 When the Marlboro Woman, for instance, was called out by a defender of Drummond’s for wasting her time on a “hate site,” the Marlboro Woman retorted that “We have extremely busy lives involving family, jobs, and other activities far more important than a self-absorbed, greedy Internet caricature. This is a hobby for us, one we find extremely rewarding” (Marlboro Woman, 5:59 p.m.). Even if the Marlboro Woman sees her blogging as a “hobby,” this viewpoint is nevertheless significant because others would disagree and perceive people like her to be trolls. Even if Drummond is a so-called fraud and is not transparent about the realities of her daily life, there are those that would argue that the practices of critics like The Marlboro Woman are more unethical because she admits that saying mean things about a person has become “a hobby.”

5 However, even if they wanted to, these critics most likely could not respond directly to Drummond on her forum because they would most likely be censored, e.g., “She deletes any negative comment and blocks individuals from commenting” (Skattebol); And, “…I’ve also taken screenshots of the entire post because as we’ve seen in the past, Ree may delete the entire thing soon” (The Pioneer Woman Sux, “Ladd and Ree are Idiots,” my emphasis). Nevertheless, it is again significant that in response to this censorship, certain people still felt compelled enough to create entire blogs rather than finding an existing alternate forum to comment on.

6 For example, Drummond blogs about her family life, which has raised ethical concerns about profiting from stories about one’s children in addition to being part of a larger ongoing cultural debate about what is appropriate to make public and post online (e.g., “Is Mommy Ethical?”). Moreover, it points to a question which arguably still lingers in society about what is the appropriate use of a woman’s time, i.e., do children suffer if working moms cannot devote their attention to their children 24/7?
BACKGROUND

1 According to Drummond, no one predicted that she would ultimately end up living in the country, let alone becoming the wife of a rancher: “I’d always given off the air—sometimes obnoxiously so—of someone who thought she belonged in a larger, more cosmopolitan locale. The fact that I would now be hanging up my L.A.-acquired black pumps to move to an isolated ranch in the middle of nowhere was enough to raise a few eyebrows. I could almost hear the whispers through the grapevine” (Black Heels to Tractor Wheels 139).

2 Just as “The Pioneer Woman” was reportedly a tongue-in-cheek moniker bestowed on her by friends, according to Drummond, Ladd’s nickname “Marlboro Man” was the result of a friend’s off-hand comment. As Ree tells the story, “…that came about years earlier. I was having a baby shower for my friend, and a bunch of ladies came over. And my husband was sitting on the porch with his feet up, and I heard someone say, ‘Who’s that Marlboro Man on the porch?’ And I teased him about it. The cowboys tease him about it sometimes. It’s really just a fun nickname” (TTUHSCtv).

3 E.g., Drummond shared “Gross-Out Stories” such as “The Fruit Stripe Ordeal.” In this story, Drummond’s mother discovered that her three-year old daughter, Ree, had stuffed fruit stripe wrappers up her nose and it caused a foul sinus infection.

4 E.g., It’s rainin’ like a cow peein’ on a flat rock. Translation: It’s raining hard” (“Cowboy Colloquialism”).


6 “Entertainment,” “Home and Garden,” “Homeschooling,” and “Photography” are all sections that were retired in summer 2015. Back during her BlogHer ’13 speech, Drummond says that at one point, she was blogging quite frequently about photography. As a professed self-taught photographer, Drummond would share with her readers various techniques she had learned, either in taking or editing photos. However, Drummond says that she made the decision to retire that section of her blog because she felt that had not learned anything new to share, and she did not want to keep a “stagnant” section of her blog (BlogHer). I would argue that this was part of the same motivation in Drummond’s decision to retire the “Homeschooling” section, which I was discuss more in depth in the Performance chapter.

7 I find it imperative to note here that I have been unable to locate the original “Volume 9” post on thepioneerwoman.com. I first read this poem as a part of Melanie Haupt’s 2012 dissertation entitled, “Starting from Scratch: Community, Connection, and Women’s Culinary Culture,” but to date, I have been unsuccessful in combing Drummond’s archives. Considering that Drummond’s original blog posts from 2006 are still accessible on her website, I find it very strange that I have been unable to locate this particular poem. In total, it seems that Drummond published at least eighteen volumes worth of “Poetry of a Madwoman” because the last poem I have found is titled “Poetry of a Madwoman, Vol. 18” published in September 2006. However, volumes 4-10 and 16 appear to be missing from the site. This leads me to wonder whether Drummond has since gone back and deleted some of the poems. Volume 9, for example, contained the word “bastard,” which might have been deemed offensive and was not considered acceptable language to Drummond’s advertising partners. It could also be surmised that Drummond was embarrassed about how much she shared with her readers at the time, and she deleted the entries she decided were too personal. For example, when Drummond was asked in a 2009 Q&A panel of food bloggers, “How do you reconcile living your life in public versus keeping your own space,” she responded: “I feel like I’m very, very open on my blog, and my blog is personal. But there’s a lot I don’t post about. Just, you know, hormonal moments, explosive hormones and things.” (ginavon). If we are to take this comment at face value, it could be hypothesized that Drummond might have decided that her Madwoman poetry was too “hormonal.” Perhaps as Drummond grew more famous, she became mortified at the thought of such a large
audience reading her most intimate thoughts, albeit published in such a public forum. However, in a 2011 interview with Oklahoma News on 6, Drummond insisted that “I’ve never had a moment where I’ve felt uncomfortable [about how much I’ve shared on my blog]. I’ve never had a moment where it felt unnatural or strange.” Thus, while Drummond’s motivations may indeed be a combination of embarrassment and pressure from advertisers, I am tempted to conclude that it was more so an act to please her sponsors.

8 “I’ve been walking/running/walking/running/but mostly walking in the evenings, because I’ve become reacquainted with my FitBit after a long, jiggly break and I’ll be dearned if the little contraption isn’t motivating me” (“My Walking Companion”).

“I also have a lot of answering to do in regards to my FitBit, which has been angry at me for the past month” (“April 23: A Retrospective”).


10 An example of hate would be a comment like this one, “Never seen the show or read her blog, but from the pics I’ve just Googled, she looks like a smug bitch” (“Frau blogger”). Here, this anonymous commenter admits that s/he has never even engaged with The Pioneer Woman brand, but yet, s/he still hates Drummond simply because she appear to look like “a smug bitch.”

CHAPTER 1: BLOGGING

1 One could argue that all Pioneer Woman critics are looking for conversation and engagement when they post about their dislike of Ree Drummond. They seek identification through others’ validation; they are looking to talk with others who also cannot stand the Pioneer Woman. However, this points to one type of identification, i.e., Pioneer Woman haters. Conversely, Emily Matchar was open to hearing from both fans and critics when she wrote her piece.

2 Ree’s husband, Ladd (along with Ladd’s brother, Tim, and his dad, Charlie) are partners in the ranching business Drummond Land and Cattle (Coffey). According to a 2013 special edition of The Land Report, the Drummonds are the 17th largest landowners in the U.S., owning 433,000 acres (“100 Largest Landowners”). As a part of their business, the Drummonds uphold a contract from the Bureau of Land Management to raise wild horses on their property. According to a report by Oklahoma news channel 6, Ree and Ladd Drummond house 2,200 horses on their property and are paid $1.30 per horse/per day, which comes out to $1.04 million/year (Lester). However, Ladd claims that less than ten percent of this is profit, which would bring his annual income to approximately $100,000 a year (Lester). Of course, 20,000 out of the 430,000 acres are also used to raise cattle (Garcia). Unlike the wild horses, however, the 2,500 cattle are raised and then sold for slaughter which would bring in additional income (DiGregorio).

3 “Ladd is married to ‘The Pioneer Woman,’ Ree Drummond, a Food Network cooking show host/blogger/photographer/cookbook author who writes folksy blogs about her life on their ranch in Oklahoma. Kind of like she’s a pioneer woman. Except in real life, Ree is wealthy and has both a house and a nice lodge on her ranch. (Nothing like the real pioneers, who had to trod across the plains in a covered wagon.)” (Coffey; my emphasis).

4 They say “almost anyone” because for tech savvy users who would prefer to maintain their own code, WordPress recommends going with a WordPress.org domain instead of WordPress.com. With
WordPress.com, WordPress staff take care of the behind-the-scenes work that goes into managing and hosting a site which allows users to focus on content rather than code.

CHAPTER 2: DOMESTICITY

1 Photo Sources: (“Pioneer Woman on Food Network”; “Twenty Four”; “Still Life”; “Dear Pioneer Woman, Part One”).

2 It is interesting to recall that when packaged ingredients like boxed cake mix first hit supermarkets, marketers had to convince mothers that it was okay to not bake a cake entirely from scratch. Advertisers challenged the idea that using a boxed cake mix would make a woman a bad mother, by selling the notion that what ultimately mattered was that the cake was made by mom (Parkin). Food = love. In other words, it became acceptable to use ingredients like boxed pistachio pudding mix because the pudding was still prepared by mom, even though the pudding itself was not made from scratch. However, it is interesting to think about how conceptions have changed, and in 2016, how food made from scratch is seen as the choice made by the best mothers. Mothers who make dairy-free, organic pudding from scratch are seen as better mothers than those who feed their children boxed pudding or canned foods. It is as Emily Matchar writes, “In the 1950s, serving frozen and canned foods meant you were a cutting edge homemaker indulging in the very best the Space Age had to offer. Today canned green beans symbolize cheapness, laziness, bad taste, a lack of giving a damn about your health” (245). Thus, Drummond appeals to women who still incorporate packaged, convenience foods into their busy lifestyles; as a celebrity chef, Drummond makes it “okay” and appeases their guilt. Conversely, critics argue that Drummond is promoting unhealthy recipes reminiscent of an era where mothers served everything out of a can.

CHAPTER 3: AMBITION & AGENCY

1 As Drummond professed her love for living in the country, in a 2013 interview: “There are no skyscrapers; there’s no traffic. That isn’t all life is, hustle-bustle. For some people it would drive them crazy, having the silence and the clear view. But for me, it’s what my soul needed” (DiGregorio)

2 E.g., ”I'm Ree Drummond. I'm a writer, blogger, photographer, mother, and I'm an accidental country girl…” (Imper; my emphasis).

3 E.g., “I travel a bit in conjunction with the book, and then I go right back home” (DeLorenzo).

4 E.g., The building was featured in the following episodes: “The Building” (Season 5, Episode 4), “Big Day at the Building” (Season 7, Episode 13), and the 2014 Christmas special, “Cowboy Christmas.”

CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE

1 This was not Drummond’s first appearance on television, however. The Food Network may have been doing a test-run, when Bobby Flay challenged Drummond to a Thanksgiving cooking challenge on his show, “Throwdown! With Bobby Flay.” The episode aired on November 17, 2010 on the Food Network (The Serious Eats Team). Drummond ended up winning the challenge, of course (“Bobby Flay loses”).
“I live in a rural area, so complicated ingredients aren’t an option for me” (Drummond, Where Women Cook).

“In addition to accessible recipes, Drummond uses readily available pantry ingredients -- due to the fact that the nearest major grocery store is about a 90-minute round-trip drive away and that includes a five-mile stretch of gravel road” (Lynch).

Once married and living in the country, it was a rude awakening to find out that cowboys don’t eat Ahi tuna. They don’t eat ginger-sesame noodles. They wouldn’t touch sushi with a ten-foot pole. Cowboys eat meat—lots of meat—with an occasional potato thrown in for balanced nutrition” (Drummond, The Pioneer Woman Cooks).

“...it was never a dream of mine or even a notion in my head that cooking would even turn into an actual vocation or anything other than a source of enjoyment. I never went to culinary school in a quest to be a chef, nor did I ever have plans to write a cookbook” (Where Women Cook).

A tweet complaint from The Marlboro Woman on April 25, 2015: “There you have it: 5 shirtain changes, ‘glorious,’ ‘deliciousness’ and ‘I love it’ overused ad nauseum. Today’s @thepioneerwoman show” (The Marlboro Woman).

How “coiffed” Drummond is made up for her appearance on TV is debatable. At least in Season One, Drummond claimed to do her own hair and makeup, e.g., “I’m glad I did my [makeup]. I don’t wear a lot of makeup around the house on a daily basis, and I didn’t want to have an overly made up, polished, glitzy look because I thought it would be out of place. On the other hand, sometimes I have hand spasms when I put on eyeliner. Makeup artists come in handy at times like that. On one hand, I didn’t want to look powdered and perfectly matte and studio-ready” (“Food Network Show FAQ”).

When Ina Garten aka “The Barefoot Contessa” for example, another star on the Food Network, agreed to shoot a pilot, she did not fully realize what shooting a cooking show in one’s home meant. As Allen Salkin records in his book about the stars of the Food Network: “A production team showed up at [Ina Garten’s] house in East Hampton in early 2000. A prep kitchen was set up in her yard under a tent. [Ina] thought she could protect her rugs and floors from the muddy comings and goings of the crew by putting out a bin of socks and insisting everyone wear a pair when they were inside. But there were more than a dozen people in the crew, and they found it too cumbersome to keep taking off and putting on their shoes every time they ran into the house. The carpets started to fill with dirt, and the lawn under the tent was damaged from all the traffic. Worse, most houses in East Hampton had their own septic systems, and few were suited for heavy use. Within a few days, Ina’s system backed up and the toilets gurgled with brown water. The would-be star of In the Kitchen with Ina was frantically unhappy, and it showed in her performance” (Salkin 297).

Likewise in the shooting of “The Pioneer Woman,” production crews completely take over the Lodge. In a post entitled, “The Past Fourteen Days, Drummond shared “behind-the-scenes” pictures of all of the production equipment which appeared to be everywhere. Drummond herself described the scene as “a maze of equipment.”
Appendix

This screenshot was taken in April 2015; the image used to be located in the right-hand column of thepioneerwoman.com. While this image was removed with the blog’s latest redesign, nevertheless, readers still can access posts dating back to 2006 as the caption says (“Dinnertime”).
Ann Marie, “Ree,” Drummond
(“Pioneer Woman on Food Network”)
The Family

Ladd and Ree Drummond at their home

(“Pioneer Woman on Food Network”)

The Drummond family in the Lodge: Ree, Ladd, Bryce, Alex, Todd, and Paige

(“Pioneer Woman on Food Network”)
Ladd Drummond, “The Marlboro Man”

(“Chapsody in Blue”)

**Scenes from around the Ranch**

Cows in the Pasture

(“Marlboro Man and Pioneer Woman Go to the Farm”)
Canoe on the Lake

(“My Five Favorite Photos”)

Products

Iron Skillets from The Pioneer Woman Collection

(“It’s Here”)
Images Referred to in Background Information

Drummond’s daughters, Paige and Alex

(“A Trampoline Shot, A Close-up, and A Poem. Amen.”)

Drummond’s daughter, Paige

(“My Favorite Photo, Part 3”)
Drummond’s son, Bryce

(“Dirty Naked Three-Year-Old Asleep on the Sidewalk”)

The infamous water pump

(“I like close-ups”)

Drummond’s son, Bryce

(“Dirty Naked Three-Year-Old Asleep on the Sidewalk”)

The infamous water pump

(“I like close-ups”)

Drummond’s son, Bryce

(“Dirty Naked Three-Year-Old Asleep on the Sidewalk”)

The infamous water pump

(“I like close-ups”)
A Barn on the Drummond Property

(“One Barn, Ten Ways”)

An Oklahoman Sunset

(“My Favorite Photo, Part 4”)
Ladd Drummond, “The Marlboro Man”

(“Tough Love”)
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