

Domesticity and the Death of the “American Dream” in Post-Recession Fiction

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I certify that this document fulfills the requirements for the critical paper in the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program, Antioch University Los Angeles.

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### *1. Domesticity and Feminism: Oxymorons?*

I am fascinated by the concepts of domesticity and feminism, and the paradoxical, ironic ability of those two concepts to exist simultaneously, in the same household, in a “fourth-wave feminist” era. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to fourth-wave feminism as the technology-bolstered era after the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s to early 1980s—second-wave feminism, and after third-wave feminism of the 1980s and 1990s. I consciously choose not to use the terms “postfeminist” and “postfeminism,” so as not to suggest the controversial yet widely held patriarchal view that feminism and working toward gender equality are no longer necessary. I also reference the concept of “neofeminism” throughout, with the adherence to the idea that female protagonists in modern fiction may fulfill conventional domestic roles, but they do so with the intention of achieving generally equal treatment and respect from their male partners.

Throughout my studies during this project period and last, Winter/Spring 2019 and Summer/Fall 2018, I returned repeatedly to the concept of the changed economy, and how domesticity and feminism became metaphorical bedfellows in partnered couples’ households. Namely, I studied several female protagonists’: a) reactions to and executions of domestic work in conventional maternal and marital roles; b) life-workplace balance; and c) approaches to motherhood and parenting, both mental and actual. Through my studies of female protagonists in modern fiction, I determined that changed domestic and workplace roles in post-Great Recession literature—fiction published after 2009—symbolize the demise of the prototypical American Dream.

While other feminist scholars, including Kristin J. Jacobson, author of *Neodomestic American Fiction*, and Kalene Westmoreland, whose Louisiana State University dissertation I

pored over as part of my research for this paper, have performed critical research and published writing on this same topic, I was delighted to find that few, if any, scholars delved deeply into post-recession fiction in a fourth-wave feminist era. Westmoreland's studies followed "a trajectory which corresponds to the feminist movement from the beginnings of second wave into the development of third wave, revealing domesticity's complex interaction with feminisms (21). Similarly, Jacobson focused on how domestic fiction may have experienced a cultural comeback in the early 2000s, but "we are far from a domestic revolution. Neodomestic fiction and American lived experience suggest that feminist politics still have much to do with home" (Jacobson 198). I'm honored to continue Westmoreland's and Jacobson's work by examining post-recession, poststructuralist, "neodomestic" fiction. That way, I can examine and challenge contemporary gender hierarchies (Jacobson 24); emphasize that the home is, as Mary Romero called it in *Maid in the U.S.A.*, one of the main sites of "class struggle" (Jacobson 44); and delineate, as Westmoreland quotes Sally Helgesen, the "confluence of 'wrenching [and] gradual' economic and social changes occurring in the post-Feminine Mystique era" (Westmoreland 11-12).

## 2. *The Great Recession, the "Cult of Domesticity," and the Farcical American Dream*

After the United States experienced a major recession in the late 2000s, the economy struggled to rebound. Homeowners lent subprime mortgage loans lost their houses to the same banks that gave them money to buy dwellings in the first place. "Households are trying to free themselves of debt they have accumulated in recent years, and they are saving more, even as the recession ravages incomes," stated an April 2009 *BusinessWeek* article, "The Great Adjustment is Underway" (Cooper). "Meanwhile, companies are working to align their capital spending,

inventories, and payrolls with the realities of weaker demand, both at home and abroad, with no real sense of when business will improve.” All these reactions to the plummeting economy contributed to the longest and steepest recession in the United States since the 1930s (Cooper). A September 2012 U.S. Census Bureau report cited by a White House spokeswoman in a statement indicated the U.S. was “digging our way out of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” (Dougherty and Anna) The spokeswoman said in the statement, “Congress must act on the policies President Obama has put forward to strengthen the middle class and those trying to get into it” (Dougherty and Anna). The transformed job market has since forced many career-aged Americans to pursue part-time or freelance work with many working from home. Meanwhile, Americans continue to work minimum wage jobs in the food service or retail industries and struggle to get by (Medina and Peters).

The so-called, consumer capitalism-driven American Dream, defined at midcentury by James Truslow Adams as a quest for upward social mobility and home ownership (Adams), is dead, and so is the concept of a conventional housewife and her role in protecting and bolstering their children’s economic futures (Samuel 7).

As early as 100 years ago, the “cult of domesticity” reigned, forcing women into non-professional societal roles, only allowing them to work from home. The cult of domesticity, also referred to as the “cult of true womanhood,” a term spawned by Barbara Welter in a 1966 article in the *American Quarterly*, is the notion that women in the Victorian era, roughly the years 1820-’60, could be industrious only in their homes. Welter suggests that society required these women to rigorously uphold four cardinal virtues: “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (152).

I wanted to examine how those domestic and workplace roles changed after the 2008 global economic recession, and how those changed roles affect female protagonists in modern fiction. As Wendy Martin and Sharon Becker write in “Writing as a Woman in the Twentieth Century,” women writers in the Progressive Era, approximately 1890 to 1920, finally began writing modernist fiction that “freed the female character from operating only in this domestic sphere. No longer bound by its constraints, modernist women authors used the newly emerging literary forms to directly critique domesticity, traditional love relationships, and the trap capitalism set for the women who decided that being modern meant being a consumer” (Martin and Becker 7).

However, despite the increased vigor and complexity of fictional female characters, much contemporary fiction still depicts female protagonists completing domestic tasks, being in traditional hetero-normative partnerships, and engaging in capitalist behaviors in pursuit of a revived “cult of domesticity”—the so-called “American Dream”—a partner, a stable and ample income, an owned home, and children (Samuel 8).

### *3. Research Questions and Sources*

As I embarked on this research, I kept these questions in mind: What is the real function—apart from tidying and cleaning—of domestic tasks executed by female protagonists who inhabit conventional maternal and partner roles in post-recession fiction? Simultaneously, what are the effects of the Great Recession on female protagonists in modern fiction?

For the purposes of this critical paper, I examine two pre-recession novels and two post-recession novels. All four novels feature strong and unconventional female characters: Ruth in *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, published in 1977; Sylvie in *Housekeeping* by Marilynne

Robinson, published in 1980; Ifemelu in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, published in 2013; and the unnamed female protagonist in *Dept. of Speculation* by Jenny Offill, published in 2014.

As Jacobson states in *Neodomestic Fiction*, “The dual explosion in attention to domesticity in the nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries helps explain domestic fiction’s twin renaissances. It also provides opportunities to compare what constitutes the model home and to what extent homeownership, a key symbol of the American dream’s achievement, has changed” (Jacobson 35).

In each novel, I closely examine references to domesticity and domestic topics, and supplement this examination with secondary research into the concepts of the cult of domesticity and domesticity in modern literature, and tertiary research into the concept of the American Dream and accompanying socioeconomic theory. In all four novels, the protagonists’ completions of domestic tasks merely allow them and their families to survive, rather than thrive as the picture-perfect, financially comfortable, and overly capable housewives of Adams’s 1950s American Dream. These strong but flawed anti-heroines of modern fiction reject the “cult of domesticity.”

In both *Housekeeping* and *Song of Solomon*, the concept of the American Dream lives large. Published in the late 1970s and 1980 respectively, these two novels were born into a post-Sexual Revolution United States that was flush with a rebounded economy after the recession of the early 1980s and a decade of excess culture. Both Sylvie in *Housekeeping* and Ruth in *Song of Solomon* live in the midcentury era, with a post-World War II booming economy, and reap the benefits of an increasingly consumerist economy, cyclical as it may be.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's grandmother Sylvie, more so than her norm-rejecting aunt, projects an air of self-sufficiency that passes down, seemingly through genetics but more likely through financial security, to her daughters and granddaughters. Since Sylvie and her deceased husband, who owned their house outright, built it on a hill, the house remains relatively undamaged by a catastrophic flood. Their neighbors visit and exhibit "polite envy at the relative comfort and order of our household ('I would ask you to sit down,' Sylvie explained, 'but the couch is full of water'), and slogged home again...Two weeks after the water was gone people began to believe that our house had not been touched by the flood at all" (Robinson 74-75). The financial advantage of owning a home on a hill is clear in this post-disaster scene.

The girls' Aunt Sylvie also displays consumerist tendencies, somewhat odd for an antiestablishment wanderer, by purchasing her nieces cheap but fanciful clothes and accessories:

Sylvie never bought things of the best quality, not because she was close with money (although, since the money was ours, she spent it timidly, even stealthily), but because only the five-and-dime catered to her taste for the fanciful...However a day's or a week's use might have maimed the velvet bows and plastic belts, the atomizers and gilt dresser sets, the scalloped nylon gloves and angora-trimmed anklets, Sylvie always brought us treasures (Robinson 93-94).

These purchases display how aunt Sylvie is a female character with consumerist tendencies in a culture with a healthy economy, fitting for the time in which *Housekeeping* was published, 1980, and for the stable economy of the mid-1950s setting of the novel.

Ruth, Macon Dead's wife and Milkman's mother in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, also rejects traditional norms of domesticity but reaps the benefits of a flush midcentury

economy. As her late father's daughter, Ruth is the child of an affluent medical doctor. As her husband's wife, Ruth is the spouse of an entrepreneurial, ambitious, and well-to-do man.

In contrast, in both *Americanah* and *Dept. of Speculation*, the concept of the Great Recession looms large. Both Ifemelu in *Americanah* and the unnamed female wife and mother in *Dept. of Speculation* react to the effects of the Great Recession in various ways, altering their domestic and workplace realities, habits, and future intentions. Ifemelu ultimately opts out of life in the United States post-recession, choosing to return home to her native Nigeria, where her skills are in higher demand, despite the popular and profitable blog she started in the U. S. In *Dept. of Speculation*, the unnamed female protagonist chooses to move to a rural area with her husband and daughter to opt out of the endless loop of freelance work and adjunct teaching gigs she subjects herself to due to the current state of the U.S. economy in the late 2000s, the time setting of the novel.

In order to discover how each female protagonist in each pre-recession and post-recession novel handles the effects of the respective American Dream or Great Recession, I narrowed my focus to three distinct plot and craft elements in each novel: domestic work, life-work balance, and approaches to parenting, both mental and actual.

#### 4. Domestic Work

Both Robinson's *Housekeeping* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* feature powerful, willful female characters who refuse to adhere to the standard conventions of mid-century United States society, and yet choose to operate in relatively conventional roles within that society. Both Sylvie and Ruth attempt to complete domestic work, such as Sylvie's strange and half-hearted attempts at keeping her mother's house intact while she and her nieces live there, and Ruth's lack

of cooking skills despite her affinity for her beautiful dining room table. Neither protagonist claims to be the perfect portrait of midcentury domestic life, but both strive to achieve some semblance of domesticity—Sylvie to keep her nieces alive, the bare minimum of childrearing, and Ruth to keep the relative peace in her household. Both *Housekeeping* and *Song of Solomon*, by way of their coyly rebellious protagonists, serve as complete inversions of generic domestic fiction, much of which was written and published in the mid-twentieth century and which often portrayed married women in subservient gender and domestic roles (Jacobson 20-22).

In contrast to her mother Sylvia's routine, rhythmic domesticity—"breakfast time, suppertime, lilac time, apple time" (Robinson 13), Sylvie floats above conventionality, preferring instability, transience, lack of employment, and comical domestic forgetfulness—washing half the kitchen ceiling and a door, and foregoing other household cleaning to instead open doors and windows "for the sake of air" as a cleaning solvent (Robinson 85).

Morrison notes in the foreword to the novel that "the challenge of *Song of Solomon* was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one. To get out of the house, to de-domesticate the landscape that had so far been the site of my work" (Morrison xii). Indeed, Morrison succeeds at de-domesticating the novel; Ruth Dead, wife of Macon Dead and daughter of a renowned doctor, has dreamy and unconventional housekeeping priorities, which she performs with a curious and humorous sort of unwitting rebellion, that the novel mentions only in brief, in the first twenty pages:

When she closed the door behind her afternoon guests, and let the quiet smile die from her lips, she began the preparation of food her husband found impossible to eat. She did not try to make her meals nauseating; she simply didn't know how not to. She would notice that the sunshine cake was too haggled to put before him and decide on a rennet

dessert. But the grinding of the veal and beef for a meat loaf took so long she not only forgot the pork, settling for bacon drippings poured over the meat, she had no time to make a dessert at all. (Morrison 11)

Ruth's role as the wife of a relatively affluent man and the daughter of a presumably well-off doctor release her from the need to learn how to cook to appease her husband's bad temper. Her role as a midcentury housewife—Morrison implies *Song of Solomon* takes place in the 1930s through the '60s—is dissatisfactory to her husband, but she is able to avoid fulfilling the conventional role of domesticity because she has more independent wealth than many other black women who fulfilled maternal and wifely conventional roles during this time. As a black female homeowner in the midcentury U.S., Ruth is a rarity indeed; "...black homeownership consistently registers well below the national average" (Jacobson citing U.S. Census Bureau statistics 93). Ruth does not need to work at all, much less work in a white woman's home in the oppressive, commonplace "servant-served" dynamic (hooks 94).

Both Adichie's *Americanah* and Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* feature modern, feminist female protagonists, and the Great Recession shapes these female protagonists' lifestyles in various ways. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's Auntie Uju's experiences difficulty finding a well-appointed apartment for Ifemelu to stay in when she first arrives in the U.S. Ifemelu faces hardships finding steady work in the U.S., and her relationship with her younger cousin, Dike, is a stronger bond than that of a typical cousin relationship—Ifemelu essentially becomes his surrogate mother of sorts. In *Dept. of Speculation*, the protagonist grudgingly completes domestic work as part of efforts to save her marriage, threatened by her husband's infatuation with a younger woman. The *Dept. of Speculation* protagonist throws herself into work, researching punishing amounts of factoids for a book she will ghostwrite and teaching numerous

classes as an adjunct lecturer—work that is necessary to sustain her family financially and ensure that she can still, one day, get back to creative work again. She seems to have a positive but limited relationship with her daughter, who is possibly young enough to not remember her parents almost divorce during this part of her life. However, that relationship is fraught with the protagonist and husband's marital strife and the clear resentment the protagonist feels at completing invisible domestic labor.

As an immigrant to the U.S. on her student visa, Ifemelu in *Americanah* endures some of the most complex cultural changes and challenges one can face when embarking on citizenship in a new country. Her domestic life in America is defined first by her Aunty Uju and her son, then by a multiple-roommate situation to save money, and then, at last, Ifemelu secures her own apartment (Adichie 127-212). Through her housing search trials, Ifemelu begins to understand how class and race differences dictate domesticity in the U.S.:

When Aunty Uju spoke about her friends who had come to America earlier and passed their exams—Nkechi in Maryland had sent her the dining set, Kemi in Indiana bought her the bed, Ozavisa had sent crockery and clothes from Hartford...And she thought, watching her, how the old Aunty Uju would never have worn her hair in such scruffy braids...America had subdued her. (Adichie 135)

Ifemelu sees the overworked and underpaid lifestyle of her formerly vibrant and flirtatious aunt and realizes how the early and mid-2000s economy affects everyone trying to make a life in America, immigrants or otherwise. Aunty Uju's need for donated furniture and monetary assistance mirrors the needs of thousands of immigrants, many of whom lived financially comfortable lives in their home countries before arriving in the U.S., with its

immense wealth disparities. Indeed, the protagonist witnesses her Aunty Uju performing domestic work for a husband who would have been thoroughly out of her league in Nigeria:

All he wants is for me to hand over my salary to him and cook peppered gizzard... Why should I give him my salary? Did he pay my fees in medical school? He wants to start a business... and he found out a man who goes to our church got a loan with much worse credit... Did he not know we would be the only black people here?... I just want to be comfortable. I just want to be able to pay for my child's college. I don't need to work longer hours just to accumulate money. It's not as if I am planning to buy a boat like Americans. (Adichie 270-271)

Ifemelu understands her aunt's need to fulfill a conventional domestic role despite Uju's resistance to succumbing to her husband's materialism; the American economy and the Great Recession demand that Uju does it all—achieve success as a medical doctor, cook her family regular meals, and serve as the sole breadwinner for her relocated “American” family.

In *Dept. of Speculation*, Jenny Offill's protagonist listens to her husband describe the household repairs he made, noting his handiness “is another way in which he is an admirable person. If he notices something is broken, he will try to fix it. He won't just think about how unbearable it is that things keep breaking, that you can never fucking outrun entropy” (Offill 37). She admires her husband's commitment to domestic tasks even though they do not own the house they rent in Brooklyn—a vital component of the American Dream. Her husband is willing to attempt to prevent the inevitable decay of the apartment, a fact proving the impermanence of life, but Offill's protagonist and the other two protagonists in the examined novels recognize the futility of domesticity and, thus, their inability to achieve the American Dream. Offill's couple

can never afford to purchase their Brooklyn rental home, so why even try to maintain it?

### 5. *Life/Work Balance*

Throughout the 1960s, the percentage of married women who worked outside the home rose from 21 to 33 percent. By 1980, 42 percent of married women were employed outside the home. By 1996, more than 74 percent of women over the age of eighteen were in the workforce (Westmoreland paraphrasing Helgesen 11-12).

Neither Sylvie in *Housekeeping* nor Ruth in *Song of Solomon* hold jobs, preferring instead to raise children—Sylvie looks after her nieces while Ruth raises her two daughters and the novel’s protagonist, Milkman.

Ruth Dead’s relative wealth in *Song of Solomon* affords her the opportunity to dwell more heavily and pensively on her father’s death than she perhaps would otherwise, if distracted by the running of a busy and needy household. She obsesses over a watermark on the “fine mahogany” (Morrison 11) dining table left where a bowl “filled every day during the doctor’s life with fresh flowers” stood, “always something to grace the dinner table in the evening” (Morrison 12). The centerpieces represented the family’s comparable wealth in this fairly strong post-World War I economy, “a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived” (Morrison 12).

In both *Americanah* and *Dept. of Speculation*, the female protagonists make their livings by intellectual work—Ifemelu’s race and lifestyle blog earns her a financially comfortable existence, and the *Dept. of Speculation* protagonist writes for a living, in addition to research, ghostwriting, and college-level teaching. Each protagonist works to balance her home life with her now extremely necessary, money-earning work in an early-2000s American economy.

Even as Ifemelu's blog becomes solvent, earning her more money than she ever anticipated, she still engages in cozily domestic work with her boyfriend Blaine, albeit a presumably enlightened, healthful, and progressive domesticity:

He told her which grains had protein, which vegetables had carotene, which fruits were too sugary... Little domesticities with him, in his apartment on the twentieth floor of a high-rise near campus, became gravid with meaning... He ran every morning and flossed every night. It seemed so American to her, flossing, that mechanical sliding of a string between teeth, inelegant and functional. 'You should floss every day,' Blaine told her. And she began to floss, as she began to do other things that he did—going to the gym, eating more protein than carbohydrates—and she did them with a kind of grateful contentment, because they improved her. He was like a salutary tonic; with him, she could only inhabit a higher level of goodness. (Adichie 384)

These domestic acts, with their eye toward liberal U.S. politics and mid-2000s wellness trends, are how Ifemelu spends her free time when not working on her blog, which offers cultural critiques on blackness in America from her perspective—that of the “Non-American Black.” Despite her native home of Nigeria, her upbringing in which makes her a self-declared Non-American Black, Ifemelu relies on the American economy to fund her lifestyle and her blog, which ironically critiques many aspects of American culture, from the concept of race and blackness to fashion in the U.S. to the realities of socioeconomic divides. Ifemelu's unique vantage point from her role as a profitable non-American blogger operating within the U.S. economy allows her to miraculously benefit during the Great Recession, while maintaining a fair amount of free time for domesticities like teeth-flossing and smoothie-making. However, as the protagonist herself points out, these domestic acts are so innately “American” that her leisure

time once again becomes co-opted by the same culture she criticizes in her blog. However, Ifemelu transcends the black-white domestic servant-served dynamic hooks condemns when she leaves domestic employment, as a white woman's housekeeper, to pursue the unexpectedly more profitable career of freelance writing and academia.

Ifemelu could be described as a postcolonial (Scarsini 6) neofeminist in this relatively conventional role as a heterosexual, heteronormative, female-identifying girlfriend. Ifemelu's feminism is unique, in that capitalism, both in Nigeria and the United States, allows her to be a postcolonial neofeminist, in contrast to Ifemelu's first love Obinze's agreeable, domestic, sexually subservient, conventionally beautiful wife Kosi (Scarsini 112), as Valentina Scarsini, a former Università Ca'Foscari Venezia European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures master's degree student, points out in her 2016-'17 graduating thesis.

Additionally, Offill's protagonist identifies undoubtedly as a feminist. Throughout the novel, Offill's first-person protagonist completes domestic tasks in an effort to stave off the decay of her marriage after her husband develops feelings for a younger woman. Offill's protagonist tries to preserve the marriage, despite the couple's lack of resources to achieve the prototypical financial security of the American Dream:

Her sister is the one who comes up with the winning plan. They should move to her ramshackle house in Pennsylvania and live there for next to nothing. The wife checks the schools. She checks the car insurance. She checks the cost of firewood. She orders bee-keeping and chicken-tending books for him and starts filling out forms so they can adopt a puppy when they get there. She fact-checks an eight-hundred-page book about space aviation, then finishes all her grading for school in one fourteen-hour session.

*Any flight of ideas?*

*Any pressured speech?*

*Any grandiose plans?*

Nope. (Offill 159)

Offill's protagonist engages in a flurry of domestic tasks to save her marriage. Their financial situation plays a starring role in this effort; the part of Pennsylvania to which they move has a much lower cost of living than Brooklyn, allowing them to pursue the elusive American Dream more easily. To the wife's relief, this "grandiose plan" works at saving their marriage. This is the protagonist's repeated effort to achieve the nonexistent American Dream—her attempts to maintain the marriage is one component of that unattainable dream.

#### *6. Approach to Childrearing*

Both protagonists in *Housekeeping* and *Song of Solomon* raise their children in unconventional ways, Sylvie by allowing her nieces to repeatedly skip school in favor of adventuring (Robinson 106) and Ruth by suckling her son until he is well into childhood.

A stark contrast to her daughter Sylvie's spotty childrearing of Lucille and Ruth and Sylvie's lack of maternal sentiment, after the death of her husband, Sylvia Foster, Ruth's grandmother in *Housekeeping*, noticed her daughters' mournfulness and support: "Never since they were small children had they clustered about her so, and never since then had she been so aware of the smell of their hair, their softness, breathiness, abruptness. It filled her with a strange elation..." (Robinson 11).

Sylvia teaches her daughters kindness and empathy, whereas Ruth and Lucille learn little from their depressive mother. Either way, each generation of mothers in *Housekeeping* experiences the ease of a midcentury economy, as opposed to one that is mid-recession or

immediately post-recession. Ruth and Lucille's aunt Sylvie takes advantage of the flush economy by allowing Ruth and Lucille to enroll in—and frequently miss—school rather than put them to work on a family farm business or as youthful labor in any number of local small-town businesses. Each mother in the book wishes to give her children the chance at a true childhood.

In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth also determines to give Milkman, her youngest child and only son, a true childhood, a period of his life that extends even longer than necessary. Macon, Milkman's father and Ruth's husband in *Song of Solomon*, does not admire the beautiful bowl that belonged to Ruth's father or Ruth's centerpieces in it, nor does he acknowledge or even seem to notice the watermark on the treasured dining table. His indifference to Ruth and her emotional needs, as well as her parenting efforts, causes her to seek out “a balm, a gentle touch or nuzzling of some sort:” the long overdue breastfeeding of her preschool-aged son (Morrison 13-15). Due to her somewhat-affluent status as the wife of a real estate businessman and daughter of a physician, Ruth simply has more time to breastfeed and pamper Milkman than the average black mother in her neighborhood in similar familial circumstances might, albeit in an emotionally violent place, a “margin,” as bell hooks called it in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Jacobson 30).

She does not need to work for money to support her family, and thus, she has time to work with Pilate and a voodoo doll to protect Milkman's life against Macon's attempts on it. However, due to Ruth's voiceless and unhappy role in her and Macon's emotionally abusive marriage, the Dead house is not “matrifocal and nurturing” (Clark 19), in contrast to Pilate's, a liberated woman's (Tyson 390), home. This lack of nurturing spirit—despite the prolonged breastfeeding and physical closeness Ruth establishes with her son—causes Milkman to seek

refuge at his aunt Pilate's home throughout this childhood. Ruth's failure at her domestic role serves to isolate her further from her family, in particular her son.

In both *Americanah* and *Dept. of Speculation*, each protagonist views motherhood and parenting from a modernist viewpoint, preferring to build a career and pursue higher education, beyond undergraduate, before having children. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu, though a postcolonial feminist, approaches most romantic relationships with the idea of marriage and children subconsciously in mind (Scarsini 81) and maternally craves the companionship of her nephew Dike, though in a more socially accepted way than Ruth's prolonged nursing:

The highlight of her days was talking to Dike. His voice, higher-pitched on the phone, warmed her as he told her what had happened on his TV show, how he had just beat a new level on Game Boy...She missed him. Sometimes she told him things she knew he would not understand, but she told him anyway. She told him about her professor who sat on the grass at lunch to eat a sandwich, the one who asked her to call him by his first name, Al, the one who wore a studded leather jacket and had a motorcycle. On the day she got her first piece of junk mail, she told him, 'Guess what? I got a letter today.' That credit card preapproval, with her name correctly spelled and elegantly italicized, had roused her spirits, made her a little less invisible, a little more present. Somebody knew her. (Adichie 162)

Ifemelu clearly feels social pressure to get married, "settle down," and start a family from her Nigerian peers (Adichie 490), but she must take a winding and problematic path to find the correct partner, first eschewing serious commitments (Scarsini 81) and dating American men and then returning home to Nigeria, where she reunites with Obinze, her first love. Ifemelu's wiggly journey toward true love is also a symptom of the economy—Nigeria's economic upheaval was

the cause of Ifemelu's original departure to the United States. Ifemelu's single status into her early thirties is merely the effect of her sojourn in the U.S., according to her friends and family in Nigeria.

In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist in *Dept. of Speculation* declares that she never wanted to get married; she wanted to be an "Art Monster" (Offill 8), a writer who pursues artistic ambition in lieu of family life. But she falls in love with her husband, has a daughter with him, and must, at times, fulfill the domestic roles necessitated by that love. During their husband's brief separation, the protagonist continues to write, edit, and teach, juggling several freelance and adjunct positions while caring for her young daughter, unequivocal proof that one can be both a successful, if overworked, artist and mother. The two partners in Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* grow close again at the end of the novel, united by their love for their growing daughter and a new puppy. The novel ends with the couple reflecting on their daughter's youth and naiveté:

The yellow bus pulls up. The doors open and she is there, holding something made of paper and string. It is art, she thinks. Science maybe...Our daughter hands us her crumpled papers, takes off running. You stop and wait for me. We watch as she gets smaller. No one young knows the name of anything. (Offill 177)

The couple, acknowledging their daughter's lack of knowledge of names and of school projects, simultaneously and subconsciously acknowledges their inability to lead her into a stronger financial future, despite their parental optimism at her budding academic abilities.

### 7. Other Possibilities

Throughout the course of this paper, I encountered numerous research sources that suggest that the “Cult of Domesticity” still exists (Turner), that the rebounded, post-Great Recession economy allows women to enter workplaces more than ever (Greenstone and Looney), and that “homemaking, not homeownership and the formal domestic economy, takes precedence and more frequently symbolizes a female character’s ability to produce a loving, safe, and comfortable environment” (Jacobson 21). In their essence, these sources suggest a post-feminist society, a society in which women can be the ministers of the cult of domesticity—engaging fully in homemaking—while working full-time, regardless of homeownership or the state of the economy. While elements of this argument are true—that upwardly mobile, middle-class women can have and do it all—these sweeping statements are problematic in that they do not analyze the state of domestic fiction from a bird’s eye view via historical and socioeconomic perspectives:

...even early feminist work privileged ideology and image over economic and social realities..much second-wave work privileged a white, middle-class perspective, which has contributed to the misperception that virtually all women in pre-women’s liberation America were relegated to the suburbs and did not perform labor for wages.

(Westmoreland 11)

While these sources make fascinating points, they illustrate the still-existing dominance of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal viewpoint, as bell hooks points out in *Teaching to Transgress*.

#### *8. Erosion of the Middle Class and Widening Income Disparities*

While Jacobson argues that homemaking and not homeownership take precedence in neodomestic fiction, the critic also makes the incisive and apt observation that the “nineteenth century’s ‘cult of true womanhood’ requires helping others successfully produce white middle-class domesticity” (Jacobson 55). “This certainly rings true for the formation of domestic literature, which tends to privilege white women’s experiences as ‘universal,’” Jacobson writes (113). The cult of domesticity or cult of “true womanhood” is an inherently racist notion (Tyson 106); many women of color could never afford to not work outside the home, thanks to systemic oppression and socioeconomic barriers (hooks 60). More often, women of colors serve as the hired household help in nineteenth and twentieth century domestic fiction, the invisible labor (Crenshaw 23) creating the image of their white, female employers’ homemaking deftness.

Thus, the notion that women can “have it all” is an inherently classist and privileged statement, applicable only to those with high salaries, job-provided health insurance, and stable, heteronormative partnerships (Wamsley on Obama statements). The prototypical American Dream is dead, and workplaces changed fundamentally after the Great Recession, not necessarily for the better. Even “homeownership does not result in the achievement of the American dream” (Jacobson 33).

Many modern novels portray the effects of the subprime mortgage crisis, with some characters losing their homes or declaring bankruptcy. “Not surprisingly, when the model American home undergoes scrutiny, Americans bristle,” Jacobson (76) posits. “Critiquing the American home brings the American dream—in essence the very ideology that is America—under question.”

Decreased collective bargaining rights (Kalleberg and Von Wachter), the still-existent gender wage gap that favors lower- and middle-class men even as women secure more education

and higher-paid jobs (Paquette), and the prevalence of the gig economy's reliance on desperate laborers, most of whom already have full-time day jobs and families (Medina and Peters) all contribute to the increased disparity between the poor and wealthy in the United States. These factors ensure that the socioeconomic gap grows, every year, and the middle class in the U.S. continue to erode and disappear (Dougherty and Anna). The transformed economy and workforce result in a dissipating American Dream, a fact reflected in modern fiction. Not only do Adichie and Offill depict this socioeconomic wealth gap, so do Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Halle Butler's *The New Me*, and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*—all novels with female protagonists published in the last three years.

### 9. Conclusion and Areas for Further Research

For years, popular culture, mass media, and literature perpetuated the mistaken, troubled, and blithely optimistic notion that the “American Dream”—an enduring and loving partnership and family, home ownership with ease, eternal wealth—was attainable and real. Throughout these four novels, the individual protagonists are still subject to aspirational consumerism (Currid-Halkett), due to the pressures of American society. These protagonists still want to attain the American Dream, despite its unattainable nature. In trying to achieve the nonexistent American Dream, they suffer at the hands of the cosmically inevitable. Both female protagonists in the post-recession novels experience human suffering, debt, and the instability of their financial futures, despite their best efforts to mend or build their homes in protection of these mundane and expected dangers. Thus, I must conclude that the completion of domestic tasks in an attempt to achieve the American Dream, performed by flawed, financially constrained, female

protagonists, symbolizes the post-recession demise of the fictional American Dream—in modern fiction.

However, the simple statements and truths that the American Dream is dead and that feminist protagonists mirror its demise in neodomestic fiction are obvious. As fiction writers embark on the next post-recession decade, and “as the housing crisis and foreign investment in American real estate continues to develop, writers will also continue to craft art that reflects and attempts to shape the shifting geography of the American dream” (Jacobson 198). Perhaps, as the previous quote from Jacobson suggests, the American Dream is not extinct but merely dormant, undergoing changes during its hibernation from mass popular appeal.

It is my hope that modern feminist fiction, domestic or not, will represent intersectionality, a range of characters experiencing different socioeconomic possibilities, and the realities of the 2020s job market. I’ll continue reading and researching fiction featuring female protagonists engaged with the everyday domesticity of life in the U.S. and, and I’ll remember that the American Dream as society and fiction depict it is a farce (Jacobson 165).

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