Oil Fictions

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Petrofeminism
Love in the Age of Oil

Helen Kapstein

Don’t we all in the end write about love? All literature is about love. When men do it, it’s a political comment on human relations. When women do it, it’s just a love story. So, although I wanted to do much more than a love story, a part of me wants to push back against the idea that love stories are not important. I wanted to use a love story to talk about other things. But really in the end, it’s just a love story.
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to Emma Brockes, interview in The Guardian

When writing Americanah, Chimamanda Adichie self-consciously “wanted to use a love story to talk about other things,” but love stories are always about other things.¹ In Nigerian love stories—whether mainstream romance novels from the South or the “love literature” of the Islamic North—one of those other things is oil. When Peter Hitchcock refers to “oil’s generative law,” he means that it is “everywhere and obvious[,] it must be opaque or otherwise fantastic.”² To expand, oil not only generates but regenerates and is gendered. Here, I read Nigerian romance fiction for what it says about gendered relations to oil, showing that oil is indeed everywhere and making that ubiquity obvious.³ In the course of writing about how Nigerian short stories sabotage Big Oil’s narrative, I discovered that romance is the most widely read genre in Nigeria and that 91 percent of romance book buyers are female.⁴ My hypothesis for this study was that, given the total saturation of everyday Nigerian life with oil politics, its tensions and debates must inevitably arise in the country’s fiction. As it turns out, while the short stories explicitly call out the dangerous, exploitative nature of the oil industry, in the romance fiction by and for women the intersections between gender, oil, and the text appear to be far more taken for granted. Romance as a genre deliberately showcases the
pleasures of the text, including the private female pleasure of reading alone, the promise of love and marriage, and the staging of erotic fantasies. Time and again, these fantasies feature elements of petromodernity, from sex scenes in the back seats of cars to flirtations on the side of the road. In what follows, as I move through a series of romantic motifs that emphasize the pleasures of and in the texts, those points of intersection become visible when the text puts them on display or when we’re attentive to them in ways the text might not anticipate. This approach, in revealing the petroculture that intimately structures our daily lives and loves, lets us see romance as one refinement of our petro-imaginary and see petrofeminism as a necessary development in theories of petrofiction that drastically underrepresent women as consumers, producers, and reproducers of oil and petroculture.

What Women Want

When Janice Radway’s now-classic *Reading the Romance* was first published in 1984, it gave theoretical form and expression to a genre and its readership that had been ignored by academia. Radway was interested in “what women want from romance fiction” and how they are able to “circumvent the industry’s still inexact understanding” of that. In the course of conducting interviews with her informants, Radway came to realize that the “act of romance reading” mattered more to them than the content they were reading; what they wanted was escape from the day-to-day (a temporal condition characterized by a lack of privacy, sparse free time, and frequent interruptions). Radway describes the books as “eagerly read . . . by women who find quiet moments to read in days devoted almost wholly to the care of others.” Her women read for the same compensatory reasons—and to escape similar circumstantial limitations—that the Victorian woman read *Pride and Prejudice* or *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre*, in fact, opens with a scene in which the private female pleasure of reading alone is violently interrupted by a male character. While we certainly don’t want to collapse the experiences of white nineteenth-century Englishwomen, white twentieth-century Midwesterners, and Black twenty-first-century Nigerians, their reading practices are nevertheless on a continuum, even allowing for radical differences in location, literacy, and leisure.

Studies in petroculture have enjoyed an academic vogue in recent years partly because the topic allows for connections across and between genres and
disciplines. But gendered relations to oil have only just begun to be studied—Heather Turcotte’s work on petrosexual politics argues that gender violence is a necessary precondition for petro-violence, and Sheena Wilson looks at how images and concepts of women are “systemically co-opted to serve national and international petro-politics.” What I’m calling petrofeminism may be more immediately visible in the solidarities and alliances forged through and modeled by more explicitly political fictions about oil, but romance fiction, despite its many retrograde qualities, may also be a site of feminist solidarity, whether through its readers who share an interpretive community or through its writers, as in the case of the Kano group in Northern Nigeria, who write in the shared space of the cooperative and find self-determination in adult literacy and professional success. This particular strand of feminism—shaped by, reactive to, and corrective of a petroarchy—suggests that romance and pleasure are as much oil relations as are dirt, violence, and degradation. Petrofeminism highlights the constructive potentials of writing, love, and care in the service of various kinds of liberation ranging from the individual (pertaining to selfhood and sexual identity) to the epochal (pertaining to anthropocenic concerns like mobility and energy independence). Because petrofeminist theory and fiction are both site-specific, we must inevitably speak of petrofeminisms, plural. In Nigeria, concerns about the importation and imposition of white Western feminism have most recently surfaced regarding Adichie and her work, and the African Islamic feminism of Northern Nigeria, as Shirin Edwin calls it, will be different again from feminist expressions in the South. Nevertheless, petrofeminism, while being a retort to globalized corporate self-interest, might also turn out to be a homegrown feminism appearing in homegrown writing.

A search for “Nigeria” on the website for the romance imprint Mills & Boon returns two hits, both for books starring Mack Bolan, a heavily serialized character who fights terrorism the world over. In *Insurrection*, Bolan must “smash al Qaeda’s hopes of building yet another major African power base,” and the blurb for *Conflict Zone* tells readers that “Nigeria is rich in oil, drugs and blood rivals—on both the domestic and international fronts. Mack Bolan’s ticket into the chaos is a rescue operation involving the kidnapped daughter of an American petroleum executive.” We know that Nigerian women are reading Mills & Boon books: Adichie reports that “every girl who grew up in Nsukka when I was growing up read Mills & Boon. I think maybe I read 200.” But they are not finding themselves represented in them;

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even the Mack Bolan series is not strictly romance but action-adventure published by another division of Harlequin Books. There appear to be no Mills & Boon romance novels set in Nigeria. Thus in this essay I read a spectrum of Nigerian romances, from the self-published *A Heart to Mend* (2009) by Myne Whitman to *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—a book that, through acclaim, has risen above the stigma of romance novel into the stratum of literature—to *Sin Is a Puppy That Follows You Home* (1990) by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, the first Hausa novel of any sort translated into English.

In *Americanah*, oil fills in background details—a given—constituting part of the market economy in the sections of the book that take place in Nigeria and expressed in the hope that an oil company would rent a block of flats (“Don’t worry. . . God will bring Shell”) and in dialogue overheard at a party (“But you know that as we speak, oil is flowing through illegal pipes and they sell it in bottles in Cotonou! Yes! Yes!”). In her essay on the novel, Katherine Hallemeier remarks on how it marginalizes global economic history in favor of the central love story: “By treating the political economy as a minor plot point in the romance between Ifemelu and Obinze, Adichie’s novel belies expectations that African literature ought to do otherwise.” The book, while not marketed as a romance, has many of the classic hallmarks of one and has been called one in numerous reviews. Adichie herself has both claimed and rejected that label, saying, “This is in the grand tradition of Mills & Boon but also it’s the anti–Mills & Boon.” When Ifemelu and Obinze meet at a dance party, Adichie makes a similar linguistic move, putting the idea of romance under erasure by writing, “Ifemelu thought Mills and Boon romances were silly, she and her friends sometimes enacted their stories.” Despite Ifemelu and her friends thinking romance novels are silly, they reenact them anyway. The run-on sentence in the preceding quotation strikes me as purposeful; these things coexist in the same breath without contradicting each other. By making direct, if ironic, reference to the genre, the author flirts with it:

Ifemelu thought Mills and Boon romances were silly, she and her friends sometimes enacted their stories. Ifemelu or Ranyinudo would play the man and Ginika and Priye would play the woman—the man would grab the woman, the woman would fight weakly, then collapse against him with shrill moans—and they would all burst out laughing. But in the filling-up dance floors of Kayode’s party, she was jolted by a small truth in those romances. It was indeed true that because of a

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male, your stomach could tighten up and refuse to unknot itself, your body’s joints could unhinge, your limbs fail to move to music, and all effortless things suddenly become leaden.24

Both character and author appropriate the romance novel. For the character, romance novels permit safe experimentation with gender identity and budding sexuality; for the author, they allow a self-aware co-optation of the genre’s discourse: “This is really corny but I am so full of you, it’s like I’m breathing you, you know?” he had said, and she thought that the romance novelists were wrong and it was men, not women, who were the true romantics.25 We see a similar moment in Whitman’s book, suggesting self-conscious romance as a postmodern genre, registering itself and reflecting on the act of reading.26 The postmodern romance nudges the pleasure of the text from the readerly toward the writerly. After dancing, Ifemelu next tells Obinze that what he said sounds like “the kind of thing you read in a book,”27 and Yogita Goyal notes that “questions about reading and reception are themselves staged in Americanah, which embeds an ongoing critique about books, how they’re read, and what they do or fail to do in the world.”28 She goes on to say of Ifemelu: “Each of her romances . . . is mediated by a set of reading protocols.”29 With its interspersed blog posts (extended beyond the bounds of the traditional novel form as an actual blog embedded in Adichie’s website), the book upends any usual protocols, in keeping with what—and how—women really want to read now.

Being Moved

Perhaps Nigerian women are reading Ifemelu’s blog on their phones. In 2014, UNESCO published a report called Reading in the Mobile Era: A Study of Mobile Reading in Developing Countries that describes how the globally ubiquitous mobile phone gets used as a reading device and could be further leveraged as a delivery system for books. The report quotes another report by the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA), “a trade body that represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide”:

The study shows that mobile reading represents a promising, if still underutilized, pathway to text. It is not hyperbole to suggest that if every person on the planet
understood that his or her mobile phone could be transformed—easily and cheaply—into a library brimming with books, access to text would cease to be such a daunting hurdle to literacy. An estimated 6.9 billion mobile subscriptions would provide a direct pipeline to digital books.\textsuperscript{30}

While “pipeline” may be simply a metaphor, it may also not be, especially considering that the report quotes the GSMA frequently throughout. It is undeniably in the GSMA’s best interest that more phones are used and that more uses are found for phones. The cell phone is not only a commodity but also a petroleum product, and a report like this inadvertently (or not) promotes the exploitation of an emerging African marketplace for a number of commodities in conjunction—the book, the mobile phone, and oil.\textsuperscript{31}

What Radway calls the “event of reading”\textsuperscript{32} is always contextual, and in the case of Nigerian romance readers, oil literally greases the engine of the text’s conveyance, since Nigerians read while mobile in more than one sense. They read on their mobile phones, and they read on the move, while commuting. Mobile phone penetration in Nigeria in 2019 is estimated at 87 percent of the population, according to Jumia, a Nigerian e-commerce website, and the country has one of the highest mobile and online readerships in the world, with those numbers only increasing (by 32 percent from 2017 to 2018 alone).\textsuperscript{33}

Although the UNESCO report has therefore been outpaced statistically, anecdotally it is still germane. The report invites us to “Meet Nancy,”

a mobile reader in Abia State, Nigeria. Nancy is 20 years old and loves to read. Nancy’s favourite book is \textit{A Heart to Mend} by Nigerian romance author Myne Whitman. Nancy began reading on Worldreader Mobile in May 2013, and that month she spent 10 hours reading. In June, Nancy read on Worldreader Mobile for over 40 hours.

When asked “Do you think that you read more now that you can read on your mobile?” Nancy replied, “I do not think that I read more—I know that I read more.”\textsuperscript{34}

The dual technologies of the mobile phone and the car conspire to associate reading and petromodernity in new and possibly unforeseen ways that register in the literature both blatantly and latently, and in event and content. Wendy Griswold, author of \textit{Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria}, for instance, informs us that the single most common scene in the Nigerian novel is the traffic jam. Indeed, in Whitman’s book (freely available to download or read online) much of the connective tissue of the plot involves

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anticipating traffic, negotiating traffic, or sitting in traffic. Our protagonist, Gladys, arrives in Lagos on a “rickety yellow bus” that takes an hour to cross the bridge into the city, affording a view from its “smudged windows” of a polluted petroscape that will form the backdrop to the story.

Nigerian traffic has taken on mythic proportions, described as an “apocalyptic scene” in media accounts such as the *The Atlantic*’s “World’s Worst Traffic Jam” article. Such language is in keeping with a trend to depict African realities as dystopian sci-fi futures that have already arrived. In what is not just a car culture but a culture of “chronic gridlock,” the portability of the mobile phone fits. As though to illustrate this, in *Americanah*’s frame story, when Ifemulu tells Obinze she is moving back to Nigeria from America (thus becoming an Americanah), he reads her email while stuck in Lagos traffic. As an Americanah, one who “look[s] at things with American eyes,” Ifemelu feels “assaulted” by the city upon her return, including by “the yellow buses full of squished limbs” and the pervasiveness of mobile phones: “When she left home, only the wealthy had cell phones, all the numbers started with 090, and girls wanted to date 090 men. Now, her hair braider had a cell phone, the plantain seller tending a blackened grill had a cell phone.” This is proof that cell phones are everywhere and, more pertinently, that they facilitate romance.

The UNESCO report is particularly interesting in its description of who reads what on their phones. Clearly, readers want to be emotionally moved while physically moving, since romance tops the list, with phrases relating to romance (e.g., “sex,” “love,” and “Romeo and Juliet”) among the most popular search terms and romance novels composing nineteen of the top forty books read. If genre is a set of rules for the production of meaning, then the rules of romance novels show up across the genre, no matter whether they are from the Harlequin “fantasy factory” or homegrown Nigerian ones (Ifedigbo).

Pamela Regis, in *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, outlines eight essential elements all romance or courtship novels share. But although the conventions are persistent, they are not static, so that, for instance, even *Jane Eyre* “demonstrates the flexibility of the form.” Ann Rosalind Jones has studied how Mills & Boon novels absorb and accommodate feminism. Jones surmises that the romance format is particularly rigid when it comes to the conventions through which the hero is constructed: he is still older, richer, wiser in the ways of the world, and more sexually experienced than the heroine. In Nigerian fiction, these rules hold, but the “urban petroscape” modifies them. Scenes that associate the eligible, desirable hero with his car drive the...
narrative, and while the narrative perspective still privileges the male gaze, he now habitually looks at the woman on the side of the road from inside his luxury vehicle.

In *A Heart to Mend*, our heroine Gladys first notices her hero when his car pulls out of a garage:

A black Mercedes S class model with tinted windows purred out. She stared at it in appreciation as it turned towards her, distracted from her quandary for the moment. She took a step back, startled, when the car stopped beside her. Her mouth almost gaped when the back passenger window rolled down. She couldn’t help but note the looks of the man who stared back at her. He was very attractive, probably in his mid-thirties, with a certain stamp of authority all over him. His hair was bushier than she usually saw on men his age, but it was full and well-combed. The line between his deep set golden-brown eyes looked ingrained over the strong nose and pink lips accentuated by his dark skin.

Both car and man are made objects of desire by Gladys’s appreciative gaze, a gaze reciprocated by him staring back at her. But although they exchange looks, it’s not an even trade, since he then scrutinizes her before offering her a lift, retaining his patriarchal powers of selection and control. She can find him attractive, but it’s his scrutiny of her that decides their fate. Later, when he drives by and she wonders if he’d seen her, we’re told that “Edward had seen Gladys alright. How couldn’t he have done so when he’d deliberately altered his route to pass through this street again?”

When she gets into his car, having necessarily demurred first, she subordinates herself by making herself look away from him: “Gladys forced her gaze away and glanced around. The large sports car was spacious and lavishly appointed. She admired the shiny fixtures and automatic controls between the front bucket seats. The whole interior was fitted with smooth tan leather. She could imagine her car-loving brother’s envy when she told him about it later.” When she turns her attention to the car’s luxurious interior, her description lingers over the vehicle in the same way it lingered over the male body. A prosthetic extension of the self, the car signals class, status, and success, all necessary matchmaking qualifiers. It’s noteworthy how often cars crop up when Jan Cohn lists the property inventories of romance fiction’s desirable bachelors in her study *Romance and the Erotics of Property*. When Alhaji Abdu gets his comeuppance and loses everything in *Sin Is a Puppy That*
Follows You Home, foremost on his list of losses is his automobile: “He had no car; no stall; no merchandise; no money.” And, in keeping with Americanah’s deconstructionist approach to romance, the elusive love interest in that novel confesses early on that his acquisitions have begun to make him “feel bloated . . . , the family, houses, the cars, the bank accounts.” We see both Obinze in Americanah and Edward in A Heart to Mend being driven by hired drivers, and for Edward his ability to afford this is part of what makes him desirable. A hero straight out of the Victorian mold, his name says it all—Edward Bestman is the best man for Gladys. He shares a first name with Jane Eyre’s Edward Rochester and a history as an orphaned child who makes good in the world with Wuthering Heights’ Heathcliff. He holds out the promise of elevating Gladys’s position through marriage in that same tradition—something the novel winks at in a moment of metanarrative: “Dreamer, her inner voice mocked, you’ve read too many romance novels. This guy drives the latest car models and lives in the posh part of town. He’s not going to notice you.”

The automobile accelerates the erotics of the text, including a latent homoerotics that the mainstream romance can’t otherwise come to terms with, through the triangulation of desire as Gladys imagines her “car-loving brother’s envy.” In imagining this, she calibrates her own lust, as we learn that “her brother had gone crazy when she described that car. But she didn’t tell him about the handsome owner who was more remarkable than his car.” When the hero recalls their encounter, part of her appeal is that she admired his car; it’s completely wrapped up with how she looks (both in the sense of her physical appearance and in the sense of her gaze): “The way her nose turned up at the tip; her delicate eyelids over large dark eyes; the wonder in her gaze as she had admired the car; the way her skirt had ridden up just so to reveal smooth, round knees, and give a hint of other shapely curves too. His heart rate hiked up in a pulsing beat of urgency—a marker of his physical attraction.” Lending new meaning to the term autoerotic, the book stages love scenes in the car:

She met him halfway as he bent his head to kiss her again. Her lips parted in welcome, even as he moved his hand around her ears to her collarbone and then lower. He caressed the top of her heaving breasts for a while and then slid his fingers beneath the bodice of the top to touch her breast. Her chest rose and fell as her breath came faster and when she gripped his biceps, his lower body came fully to life. He just had to feel those breasts against him and as he pressed her back into the bucket seat, she moaned against his lips.
The car’s intimate space provides a literal vehicle in which the clichés of the genre can unfold.

Love

A world away from Lagos but still in Nigeria, the Northern city of Kano is epicenter to the phenomenon of littattafan soyayya, or “love literature.” Although these novels function within the constraints of a strict Islamic culture and therefore diverge in all sorts of ways from Mills & Boon–style romance novels, they nevertheless still share a conventional preoccupation with love and marriage. In Privately Empowered, her discussion of Islamic feminism in Northern Nigerian fiction, Shirin Edwin takes Novian Whitsitt’s point that the novels mark a confrontation with dramatic social change while emphasizing that “the personal and private empoweringly serve as the motor for an entire socio-literary apparatus,” rather than the public and the political.58

Whitsitt calling the books “vehicles” for the writers’ social concerns, and Edwin talking about the “motor” for them being “quotidian private preoccupations”59 remind us that these books also occupy a petroscap in which cars and the men who drive them feature prominently. This is amply illustrated in Diagram of the Heart, Glenna Gordon’s photo-essay about the Kano authors, by an image of the cover of the love book Mardiyya that features the author’s name twice: “Zuwaira Dauda Kolo (Mrs Bashir Ishaq Zugaci),” presumably for decorum. Above this image is a picture of a silver sedan alone against a green backdrop.60 Gordon’s photograph simply shows two side-by-side copies of the book on a lace tablecloth, and the doubling of the image doubles the import of the featured cars. Littattafan soyayya, a subgenre of Kano market literature (named for the marketplace where it is sold), has garnered some critical attention, but not much, if anything, has yet been said about the role oil plays in it. This is almost certainly because Nigeria’s oil industry has to date operated solely in the South, although it’s been reported recently that new Northern wells show prospects of crude.61 The case for petrofeminism in the oil-rich (or oil-dependent, depending on your perspective) South of the country is more self-evident than in the oil-poor and impoverished North, but the literature makes the case for itself—it is preoccupied with the automobile despite not being set in a place saturated by oil rather than because of it.

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Sin Is a Puppy That Follows You Home by Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, originally published in 1990, was the first Hausa novel translated into English, in 2012. Concerned primarily with the female characters’ matrimonial statuses, it gives us a number of related story lines, including that of a young woman, Saudatu, who aspires to be married before she finishes school. “I don’t trust men who like to give girls lifts in their cars,” she says, and she is told, “You’re right—you should be wary of the ones that want to give you a ride—they’re all bastards. They just enjoy corrupting girls. Take a taxi, or walk, but never get into someone’s car alone.” Soon thereafter, in a scene reminiscent of A Heart to Mend, “an Alhaji drove by in a flashy gold-coloured car. They locked eyes for a moment, but she looked away, he passed her without slowing down. She saw him looking back at her, though, as he drove away.” Their exchange of glances preserves her modesty—which is reinforced when they meet again and he adjusts his rearview mirror to steal looks at her without her knowledge or reciprocation—but suggests the start of sexual tension between them. In keeping with a context in which everything is commodified, including the women in the story who are constantly called “worthless,” her interest in him is based entirely on his car, which “looked expensive and well-maintained.” This exaggerates Cohn’s idea that the “heroine must not only be aware of the hero’s display of consumer goods, she must see the hero in part through that display.” Luckily for her, he is both rich and kind (unlike some of the other men in the book, who really are bastards), and she gets to marry up out of poverty as his second wife.

In Edwin’s discussion of The Virtuous Woman by Zaynab Alkali, she describes a similar caution given to Nana, the protagonist of that book, who is told, “‘Remember all the things I have been telling you about long journeys.’ . . . ‘What did I say about accepting favours from strangers?’ . . . ‘That includes free car rides, monetary gifts and clothes.’” Edwin reads the book, a deliberately moralistic novel intended for adolescents, for its African Islamic feminism that comes to the fore especially when Nana declines a lift from a stranger. Edwin enumerates the qualities that “comprise strong feminism,” including Nana’s courage, strength of character, decisiveness, and dignity, all of which happen to be made visible by “her steadfast refusal of a free ride.” She makes this choice on day one of an empowering journey toward school and a scholarship, a journey not just feminist but petrofeminist in its enabling mobility.
When Charlotte Brontë and her siblings were young, they wrote stories of imagined worlds in miniscule hand in tiny books. The spatial constraints they imposed on their juvenilia reflected their limitations as children and as girls in a society that literally made no room for women writers. The circumstances of their literary production seem not unlike that of the women writers of Kano, who, according to Gordon’s introduction to *Diagram of the Heart*, are not supposed to leave their houses. If the comparison to cloistered Englishwomen sounds like overreach, it’s worth pointing out that one of the authors Gordon features says she “loves Jane Austen novels” and that another has been profiled by *Time* magazine as “Kano’s Jane Austen.” Spatially constrained, all these women let their imaginations loose.

Despite laments that the book in Nigeria is an “endangered artifact,” the technology of the book holds its own against the digital technology of the mobile phone, which we can see in the final image in Gordon’s book of a Hausa woman reading a romance novel on the train from Lagos to Kano. In transit, she reads a hard copy of the book by the light of her mobile phone, harnessing the newer technology in service to the old. Like the Brontës, the Kano writers capitalize on the book form as a scalable, portable object, often handwriting their texts in small composition books, transcribing them via computer, and self-publishing them. In her essay “Reading Romance Novels in Postcolonial India,” Jyoti Puri affords us a cross-cultural comparison when she describes young Indian women’s negotiated reading habits, which include ignoring remonstrations from parents, delaying reading the material, and concealing their consumption. One such young woman, “Reshma, who loves ‘intense, meaningful, hot, sexy stories,’ says of her parents, ‘They don’t know.’ She reads the novels in the bathroom, in the train, and in college.” Puri contemplates whether the act of reading romance novels can be considered cultural resistance or a challenge to the hegemonic order but concludes that “the act of reading is limited as a political strategy” since it “remains an isolated, individualized activity” and “may contain and neutralize women’s discomfort with their realities.” The event of reading matters here, however. To read in liminal spaces, like on the train, is to practice and perhaps even to model behaviors not sanctioned by mainstream authorities, who, in the case of the Northern Nigerian authors, include the morality police and the Ministry of Education as well as parents and spouses. In addition, the Kano women’s writers’ cooperative confounds the assumption that reading and writing are isolated activities.
In Jones’s essay on Mills & Boon, she argues that although the demands and debates associated with feminism produce striking ambivalence in these novels, she does see real innovation over time, even if those changes ultimately contain feminism’s radical potential and don’t negate the basic premise of the genre, that is, that the greatest goal and pleasure in a woman’s life is the love of a good man. One of these changes is a heroine’s commitment to her work, and Jones gives the example of a Harlequin romance called *Maelstrom*, in which both hero and heroine are petroleum engineers who risk life and limb to cap an exploding well. Novian Whitsitt’s study of love literature lets us trace in it a parallel trend “within a working paradigm of African feminism,” specifically an Islamic Hausa breed of feminism that promotes the working woman who can “fall in love and lead a blessed life of motherhood, career, and opulence beyond her expectations.”

Dirt, like work, is traditionally gendered, so that if women’s dirt is household dust, the dirt of oil is masculinized. Thinking of petroleum through feminism, however, lets us see the dirty work of oil as being as much women’s as men’s. This is true not only at the level at which Nigerian women siphon oil from the pipeline to sell by the side of the road but also in the highest ranks of the industry. Although the Nigerian oil industry is still a “boys’ club,” the number of female oil executives in Nigeria continues to grow, part of an indigenization plan for the industry. Figures such as Folorunsho Alakija tend to make the news. According to *Forbes*,

> Alakija is worth a staggering $1.73 billion . . .[,] making her the fourth richest person in Nigeria and second richest woman in Africa. She is the Vice Chair of Nigerian oil exploration company, Famfa Oil, which shares a joint partnership agreement with international giants Chevron and Petrobras. With a 60 per cent stake of block OML 127 of the Agbami field, one of Nigeria’s largest deepwater discoveries, Famfa Oil produces approximately 250,000 barrels of crude per day.

It’s no coincidence that in *A Heart to Mend*, Gladys works hard to qualify for a position with Zenon Oil, a choice reflecting the country’s total immersion in the oil industry, a bigger profile for women in it, and the romance novel’s increasing interest in women’s work.

Corruption and scandal run rampant in Nigerian society, with some of the newly high-profile women in oil ensnared in this other sort of dirty
work, such as former petroleum minister Diezani Allison-Madueke. She was charged with money laundering in a case involving the misappropriation of funds from the Nigerian national oil company NNPC in a bribery scandal to keep Goodluck Jonathan in office. In Slow Violence, Rob Nixon talks about “the ongoing romance between unanswerable corporations and unspeakable regimes,” which this corruption amply illustrates. Nixon’s choice of the word “romance” implies an unsavory relationship but also speaks to a secondary sense of the word—that is, “an extravagant fabrication; a wild falsehood, a fantasy.” Any work of romance fiction is a fantasy, remote from everyday life, but this meaning rings especially true when the promise of sentimental love is premised on a romantic scam.

Slickness

The subject of two Forbes Africa profiles, Alakija is described as a “slick oil baroness” on one of the magazine’s covers, with the punny modifier “slick” introducing a query the accompanying article does not ask—to what extent is she slick because she’s a smooth operator and to what extent is she slick because she’s a swindler, having greased palms along the way and benefited from corruption at the highest levels? Regardless, slickness, with all its connotations, works. The latest iteration of Nigeria’s infamous scamming economy is the romance scam, the new 419 (so called after Article 419 of the country’s criminal code, to do with fraud), in which scammers frequently pose as oil rig workers, since it’s a profession that covers a multitude of sins, including absenteeism, lack of communication, and the need for funds. Wired magazine calls it a “macho cover story that allows them to fade in and out of victims’ lives at will.” A microcosm of the global scam that is Big Oil, these smaller scams represent the latest installment in the story of leveraging oil for profit at the expense of the vulnerable—in this case, those most susceptible to romance. Cyberpsychologists say that women who fall for online romance scams “tend to score highly on tests that measure how much they idealize romantic love.” A set of guidelines available on Facebook on how to avoid being scammed uses the extended metaphor of the “road to romance,” which might be “slippery” or “hazardous.” But the scammer’s slipperiness or slickness is also his appeal.

Accounts of romance scams read like mass-market paperbacks. “Mike Benson” was “a dashing oil worker to whom she’d sent around $14,000 over the
preceding months,” the Wired article gushes in pink prose. Another scammer, posing as someone named Duke McGregor, claimed to be a mechanical engineer with Transocean offshore drilling contractors: “When he wasn’t working on North Sea oil rigs, he enjoyed reading classic novels, playing with his tiger-striped tabby cat, and strumming a heart-shaped guitar.” Duke’s handsome profile photo allegedly showed a middle-aged man with a ruddy face, strong black eyebrows, and a welcoming gaze. The victims of these scams, we are told, often share a particular psychological trait: an exceptional faith in the existence and importance of romantic destiny, which is of course also the reason why women read romances.

Drilling Down

Hitchcock’s law of oil states that “it must be opaque or otherwise fantastic,” but in romance novels these things are simultaneously true: the fictions depend on an enabling, mobilizing, largely invisible petroculture, and when oil is visible, it is fantastically so, as in the rush to cap the gusher in Maelstrom.

In “Petrofiction,” his 1992 trailblazing essay, Amitav Ghosh observes that “the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic.” The pornographic qualities of oil extend to an interest in the money shot. Textual representations of oil gushers such as scenes in Upton Sinclair’s 1927 novel Oil! or its 2007 cinematic version There Will Be Blood have been read as adolescent ejaculation fantasies, wherein the spectacle of the blowout occludes the slow violence of the oil ordinary. Of a similar moment in the romance canon, Jones writes that Maelstrom’s “crisis is genuinely exciting: the couple risks life and limb to cap an exploding well, a spectacular accomplishment.” The relationship, however, between romance and porn (and therefore, by extension, between romance and oil) is highly contested. In 1979, Ann Barr Snitow famously equated romance novels with porn for women, arguing that because they are formulaic, “the novels have no plot in the usual sense.” A study in the Review of General Psychology makes virtually the opposite argument:

Unlike romance novels, pornography does not really have a “plot.” Instead, they typically contain a loosely connected series of sex scenes, each of which usually ends with a visible ejaculation, the “money shot.” As a result, pornography has as many Petrofeminism
Another study, entitled “‘She Exploded into a Million Pieces’: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Orgasms in Contemporary Romance Novels,” published in the journal *Sexuality and Culture*, has it that “female characters were significantly more likely to be depicted experiencing an orgasm during a sexual encounter than male characters.”

Perhaps the difference lies in degrees of visibility—the money shot and the geyser are visibly spectacular, while the female orgasm and the everyday backdrop of a petroculture usually are not. Maybe the difference is one of degrees of economic conventionality—the romance novel is, fundamentally, a fetishistic capitalist fantasy that must play out within the monetary mainstream to be fulfilling. Anne Cranny-Francis puts it this way: “Romantic fiction is the most difficult genre to subvert because it encodes the most coherent inflection of the discourses of gender, class and race constitutive of the contemporary social order; it encodes the bourgeois fairy-tale.”

That bourgeois fairy tale pertains regardless of setting; every study of romance fiction alludes at some point to its formulaic quality (e.g., “The Eight Essential Elements of the Romance Novel”), which is why the romance novel as genre will never entirely spill over from readerly pleasure to writerly jouissance. The single constant is not the attraction, the barrier, or the declaration but the highly conventional pursuit of financial bliss. Everything else—the launching of a career, the happy ending, the heterosexual marriage, the promise of offspring—sublates itself when an economic reading is foregrounded. Thus, Katherine Hallemeier reads *Americanah* as about the “pursuit of capital and love alike”: “*Americanah* presents an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism.” In this dream of Nigerian capitalism, oil would presumably be part of the success story, but Hallemeier gets through her entire essay about capital in the novel without any mention of it. Oil as generative backdrop is so assumed that neither critics nor characters see it. It does not perform itself; it is not pornographically visible. There is a moment late in the novel when Obinze warns that oil companies aren’t doing Nigerians any favors, but his success in real estate is predicated on renting to oil men. Everyone in the room has made a fortune from some aspect of the
petro-state: Eze, “the wealthiest man in the room,” is “an owner of oil wells,” and “Ahmed had leased strategic rooftops in Lagos just as the mobile phone companies were coming in, and now he sublet the rooftops for their base stations and made what he wryly referred to as the only clean easy money in the country.” Obinze’s fictional warning about “big oils” planning to move offshore and leave onshore operations to the Chinese is framed by the financial press in real life as an indigenous opportunity. “Homegrown” may seem an inapt descriptor for oil (better suited to, say, agriculture), but it is used with some frequency to describe a new phase in Nigerian oil production, one in which local entrepreneurs take over operations. In the dream economy that Adichie’s characters aspire to live in, domestic oil control is the material correlate of the textual development that is the homegrown Nigerian romance novel.

Love in *Americanah* does cross boundaries, breach borders, and challenge norms, but it does so within a conventional economic system and is fundamentally conservative in its interest in “manifesting capitalism.” This is even more true of the other romance novels read here, although they may actually have more radical potential, even though they are more traditional. *Sin Is a Puppy That Follows You Home* and other love books, for instance, promote female education and have been credited with a rise in literacy among Hausa women. They are also much more likely to meet with censorship and public criticism, according to Whitsitt. Romance as a genre tends to play it safe, and these feminist fantasies imagine oil futures that create a safety net for women’s welfare, well-being, and being well-off. Petrofeminism operates within, not outside of, an oil economy, making space inside it for women to claim what is rightfully theirs without having to siphon it off riskily, a space in which the romance of women’s work is a job at the oil company and in which a romantic relationship is not possible until the love interest returns to Nigeria to make his fortune renting properties to Shell. The romance stories of Northern and Southern Nigeria offer glimpses into competing modernities, quite different in some essential ways and yet both products of a petroculture shaped and scribed by women. We can read for romance elsewhere too: in short stories by writers such as Sefi Atta and Nnedi Okorafor that demonstrate love and care for nation, community, and environment. Those short stories sabotage the status quo, but the romance novels deliberately do not, playing within received forms of genre and capital. However we understand the petro-imaginary, it
must ultimately make all of these iterations visible. Petrofeminism lets us see the inseparable nature of women’s politics from oil.

Notes

3. Research in this chapter was supported by a PSC-CUNY Research Award.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Ibid., 46.
9. To the best of my knowledge, this term is my coinage. Since I first used it in an early version of this essay, presented at the Cultural Studies Association Conference at Georgetown University in May 2017, it has started to enter the discourse, although not always with my meanings.
10. For instance, Sefi Atta’s short story “A Union on Independence Day” uses elements like realistic news headlines (“Nigerian Delta Women in Oil Company Stand Off”) to deliberate effect.
15. In second place on the list of top ten books read by Worldreader Mobile users in UNESCO’s Reading in the Mobile Era report is Mills & Boon’s The Price of Royal Duty, read by 18,364 people from seven countries (including Nigeria) in three months.
17. Nkem Okotcha’s pen name.
19. Ibid., 37.
21. It is what Writing a Romance Novel for Dummies calls a “reunion romance,” also known as a second-chance romance, and closely follows Shoshanna Ever’s “Secret Formula of Most Romance Novels.”
22. Additionally, critics have pointed out the “(surprisingly spare) critical commentaries” on Americanah (Jennifer Leetsch, “Love, Limb-Loosener: Encounters in Chimamanda Adichie’s Americanah,” Journal of...
of Popular Romance Studies [April 2017]: 3, http://www.jpirstudies.org), with one attributing this directly to its romance form: “The reasons of the lack of academic interest in Americanah may lie in the very nature of the novel, the plot being quite linear and ‘pop’ and based on a romantic love story; this aspect, however, may be considered on the contrary positive, since it makes complex gender and ‘racial’ issues more accessible and visible to common readers.”


23. Smith and Adichie, “Between the Lines.”


25. Ibid., 239.

26. For connections between postmodernism, feminism, and romance, see Diane Elam’s Romancing the Postmodern, although Elam does not discuss romance novels per se. For Elam, the romance is postmodern because it marks and is marked by excess—“its capacity to appear where least expected”—but this theory works only when one is looking for romance outside of romance novels (London: Routledge, 1993), 12.

27. Adichie, Americanah, 70.


29. Ibid.


32. Radway, Reading the Romance, 7.


34. West and Chew, Reading in the Mobile Era, 47.

35. Myne Whitman, A Heart to Mend (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009).


37. Ibid.

38. Adichie, 475–76.

39. Ibid.

40. West and Chew, Reading in the Mobile Era, 52.

41. Morley, quoted in Radway, Reading the Romance, 10.


43. Ifedigbo calls Whitman’s novels homegrown, although the Nigerian-born Whitman now lives in diaspora in Seattle.


47. Whitman, Heart to Mend, 6.

48. Ibid., 7.

49. Ibid., 30.

50. Ibid., 7.


54. Whitman, 29.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., 18.

57. Ibid., 72.


59. Ibid., 165.

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63. Ibid., 30.

64. Ibid., 53.

65. Ibid., 31.


71. Ibid., 20.


74. Ibid., 130–31.

75. The degrees of cultural separation here may be even fewer than one would imagine: Shirin Edwin pointed out in conversation that it’s no coincidence that *Sin Is a Puppy That Follows You Home* was published by an Indian house—it’s the kind of conventional narrative that appeals to a mainstream Indian audience, she says. Moreover, as she explains in *Privately Empowered*, the books themselves are heavily influenced by Bollywood films (26).


77. Ibid., 441–42.


80. Ibid., 147.


85. Ibid.


87. Andrew Apter traces a direct lineage from crises in the oil economy to the “rise of the era of the ‘419’”: “As inflation soared, arbitrary exchange values destabilized the very phenomenology of exchange itself.” *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 277.


89. Ibid.


92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.


96. Ibid, 76, 77.
97. Oil as ejaculate is only one version of the persistent metaphoricity of oil. The commodity’s transitive properties (it becomes everything from fuel to plastic to money) and its ubiquity mean that oil is a slippery term, transmuting into “black gold” and even transubstantiating into “the very blood of the nation and its citizens.” Apter, *Pan-African Nation*, 277.
101. Christine Cabrera and Dana A. Menard, “‘She Exploded into a Million Pieces’: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Orgasms in Contemporary Romance Novels,” *Sexuality and Culture* 17 (2012): 193–212.
103. Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.
105. Ibid., 232.
106. Ibid., 237.
107. Adichie, 580.
108. Ibid., 577.
109. Ibid., 576.
110. See, for example, Jeff Grey, “Meet the New Face of Nigeria’s Oil Industry” *Globe and Mail*, August 10, 2014.