

# Postcolonial Mythologies

Carmen McCain

## WHAT IT MEANS WHEN A MAN FALLS FROM THE SKY

Lesley Nneka Arimah

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While writing this review, I read the news of a Nigerian-American graduate student at Yale who fell asleep in a common room while writing a paper and awoke to a white student calling the police on her. When she protested this assault on her freedom of movement, the police told her, “You’re not being harassed.” This incident and its normalization by authorities resonates with Lesley Nneka Arimah’s presentation of Nigerian-American lives in her stunning 2017 debut collection of short stories *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*. These characters navigate between familial expectations of success and the scrutiny that comes with being a minority in America. In Arimah’s story “Second Chances,” the consequences of something so harmless as falling asleep have reverberating consequences. When Uche oversleeps and forgets to pick up her little sister at the airport, the airport police call, thinking her sister has been abandoned. Her mother is furious. “I had violated her cardinal immigrant rule. Live quietly and above the law.” Uche’s sleep and her mother’s anxiety result in devastating consequences on the entire family. In this story like many others in the collection Arimah points to the personal suffering that comes out of a larger climate of injustice.

Arimah herself was born in the UK and grew up between Nigeria and the United States, and this experience of living between two places, two norms, is an integral part of her story telling. Arimah’s stories, which have garnered honours such as the African Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and an O. Henry Award, not only move physically between two continents but also range from kitchen-sink realism to the wildly speculative. In this she joins a cohort of recent Nigerian diaspora authors like Nnedi Okorafor, Helen Oyeyemi, or Chikodili Emelumadu (also shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Literature in 2017) who build on a tradition of literature that pushes beyond conventional realism to mythologize about the postcolonial world. Arimah borrows vampires from the African literary canon and the popular imagination, where consumption becomes a metaphor for exploitation. In pioneering Nigerian author Amos Tutuola’s novel *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), for example, a “half-bodied” baby born of his mother’s thumb eats everything in its path, even resurrecting after his parents burn him to ashes, and in Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o surreal novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982), a contestant in a competition for “Modern Thieves and Robbers” proposes to build a pipeline of blood from Kenya to Europe and America. In Arimah’s collection, she focuses on family relationships and individual choices, but, like Ngugi, she also links personal harassment to wider structural forms of exploitation and consumption.

The title story of the collection imagines a future world where mathematics explains everything. Mathematicians map out the body and human emotions in code, theorizing a formula they believe to be infinite “like the universe.” They use this formula for flight, “a man levitating like a monk...before shooting into the air,” as well as for healing. Mathematicians like Nneoma and her lover Kioni see grief in human beings, and, like

good vampires drawing out venom, they “eat” the pain, draw it into themselves “like poison from a wound.” Arimah’s use of mathematics to plot out the universe reminds me of Nnedi Okorafor’s science fiction novel *Binti* (2015) where the plucky heroine Binti “trees,” using equations to create technology and make peace between warring peoples. But, in Arimah’s story, there is something of the hubris of Icarus in the mathematicians’ assumption that the formula is infallible, the belief that the “Formula was God, misunderstood for so long. They believed that it was only a matter of time before someone discovered the formula to create life, rather than to just manipulate it.” It turns out, however, that the formula might be finite, “beginning to unravel around the edges,” and that human attempts to make themselves into gods are doomed to failure. A man falls from the sky, and healers begin to consume themselves.

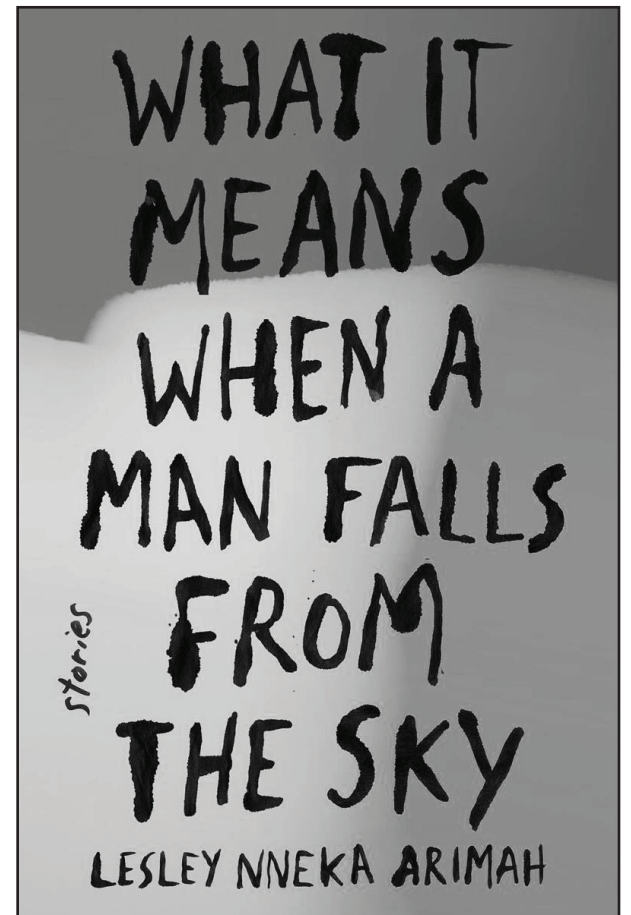
In naming the entire collection *What It Means When a Man Falls From the Sky*, Arimah invokes a war between humanity and their gods, as well as the fallibility of colonial and patriarchal systems. There is tension between a nurturing consumption of the sort practiced by the grief workers who absorb other people’s pain, and an exploitive consumption that takes and gives nothing, practiced by the settlers in

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Nneoma’s land. Some African speculative fiction, like Djiboutian novelist Abdourahman Waberi’s *In the United States of Africa* (2006/2009) or the Kenyan TV series *Usoni*, reverses the power dynamic of the contemporary world: after Europe and America are destroyed by natural disasters, refugees from former colonial powers clamour to get in to Africa. The world system Arimah imagines, however, does not reverse but instead continues colonialism. Although the mathematicians believe they have found the secret to the universe, this secret does not yield a utopia. History repeats itself in new locations. Pre-existing structures of abuse are exacerbated in the extremes of the future. When most of America and Europe is lost to the ocean, powerful northern nations move south with their war machines. The French commit genocide in Senegal so that they can settle their land, the Americans decimate Mexico, while the British create an apartheid state in the territory of Biafra-Britannia.

Arimah takes the unsuccessful bid for Igbo independence from Nigeria remembered by the traumatized father in “War Stories” and imagines here that Biafra finally succeeds in gaining independence in 2030, only for the British re-colonize the space. Biafrans are once again “third class” citizens who cannot live alongside the new white “refugees” or other privileged first-class citizens like Nneoma, who uses her healing power only for those who can pay. Like Ngugi’s imagined pipeline of blood, the privileged suck away the life and land of those they once despised to resurrect themselves. Although one of the bright parts of the story is the power that women wield and their seeming freedom to love each other, the stories set closer to our own time point to systems not only of political and racial but also gendered dominance, where patriarchy is inextricably linked to other forms of injustice.

Arimah imagines the mythic beginning of male entitlement in her creation story “What is a Volcano,” when the powerful but careless goddess



River thinks of her small antagonist Ant as a “fun diversion” but does not realize that “you do not take small things from small men.” Ant takes revenge on her for flooding his ant colonies by kidnapping her children and engaging in a larger pattern of abuse against women he marries and then abandons, killing their children to cover his trail. Ant realizes that “one could ask almost anything of a girl,” and he asks a girl to carry his secret, with a “certainty that she must never, ever tell.” Girls pass secrets of abuse down through the generations: “when she is no longer a girl, she will give it to another girl, and this sorrow stone will be stolen away in uniform pockets and hidden under the pillows of marriage beds, secreted in diaries, guarded closely by the types of girls who, above all else, obey.” This story becomes a mythic explanation for what girls suffer in the rest of the stories as well.

In the ironically titled story “The Future Looks Good,” which begins the collection, a wealthy man seduces his lover with cars and spending money, but he views these gifts as payment for ownership. “Godwin, so unused to hearing no it hits him like a wave of acid, dissolving the superficial decency of a person who always gets his way.” In “Buchi’s Girls,” Dickson, Buchi’s brother-in-law is “the sort of man people pretended to like because they couldn’t afford not to.” He and his wife exploit their recently widowed sister-in-law expecting her to “cook, clean, manage the house help,” while refusing to pay for her children’s education. Buchi discovers that “the consequences of disrespecting a man like Dickson are always disproportionate to the sin. A grenade in retaliation for a slap. A world undone for a girl’s mistake.” In the final story of the collection, “Redemption,” a church youth leader preys on young girls and, like Ant in “What is a Volcano?” tells them to keep his secret. No one believes the narrator’s story about him, until the rebellious housegirl next door violently exposes the man. In each of these stories, women revolt, quietly or otherwise, against men who assume god-like authority and find redemption in their love for each other.

Yet if there is a critique here of the patriarchal system, Arimah does not excuse women from participating in and sometimes even creating abusive systems. Indeed, in the one story that does away with men all together, “Who Will Greet You at

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Home,” first published by *The New Yorker* and later shortlisted for the 2017 Caine Prize, the character “Mama,” landlady, employer and exploiter of the young mother Ogechi, sucks away at her joy and empathy. Here women need no man to procreate but instead make their babies out of materials they can find around them and then seek the blessing of their mother to bring their babies to life. If the mathematicians of the title story nurture people by taking in their pain, Mama does the opposite, performing the blessing in exchange for preying on their emotions. Ogechi reflects on “all that empathy and joy and who knows what else Mama took from her and the other desperate girls who visited her back room” in exchange for animating their children. Indeed, a child born of this kind of blessing, Ogechi discovers, will only continue the vampirism of her godmother. Like the half-bodied baby of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, her baby is never satiated. The story “Windfalls” is the prosaic but no less horrifying parallel to Ogechi’s story. A mother pimps out her teenage daughter to help fund their peripatetic lifestyle, staging injuries as precedent for lawsuits. When the teenage Amara becomes pregnant, she begins to resist her mother’s abusive lifestyle. Like Ogechi, she dreams of giving her child the nurture and home she never had.

And while abuse and harassment is rampant in these stories, the sort of tenderness Amara feels for her unborn child lingers in other tales of families as well. If the stories deal with vampires, symbolic and real, who consume the “sorrow, tears, and blood” of those dependent on them, they also deal with the nurture of parents, the love between sisters, cousins, and friends, and the fire in the bellies of girls who refuse to let their souls be crushed. In the midst of suffering, there is also fierce love. In “Wild” the narrator holds close her humiliated and abandoned cousin and her illegitimate child. In “War Stories,” the narrator recounts how her mother fights her father’s traumatic stories of war with happy stories of her own childhood: “I listened with every atom and she animated the story with everything she had.” In “Light,” which won Arimah the 2015 regional short story Commonwealth Prize, a father raises his daughter alone while her mother travels to America to earn a degree. He nurtures her noisy laughter and spares her all the proprieties her mother tries to teach her over Skype. In his daughter, he sees a “streak of fire. He only knows that it keeps the wolves of the world at bay and he must never let it die out.”

“Light” and other stories show how difficult it is to keep that fire alive. In the final story, “Redemption,” the narrator realizes that “Girls with

fire in their bellies will be forced to drink from a well of correction till the flames die out.” Yet while the stories in Arimah’s collection are rarely optimistic, they are not without hope. Stubborn mud girls born of ash and sorrow re-emerge in story after story. Individually, these women have only their own fire to keep them going, but together they take inspiration from each other, even if it is only to spit on the path of their oppressor. In the mythic story “What is a Volcano,” the wandering Bereaver eternally seeks the lost children of her sister River. Finally, when the “god-child cries” and her mother’s body responds, a volcano forms. In the midst of despair, the fire still rumbles beneath the ground.

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## Seek to Trouble

Sarah Deer

### VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIGENOUS WOMEN: LITERATURE, ACTIVISM, RESISTANCE

Allison Hargreaves

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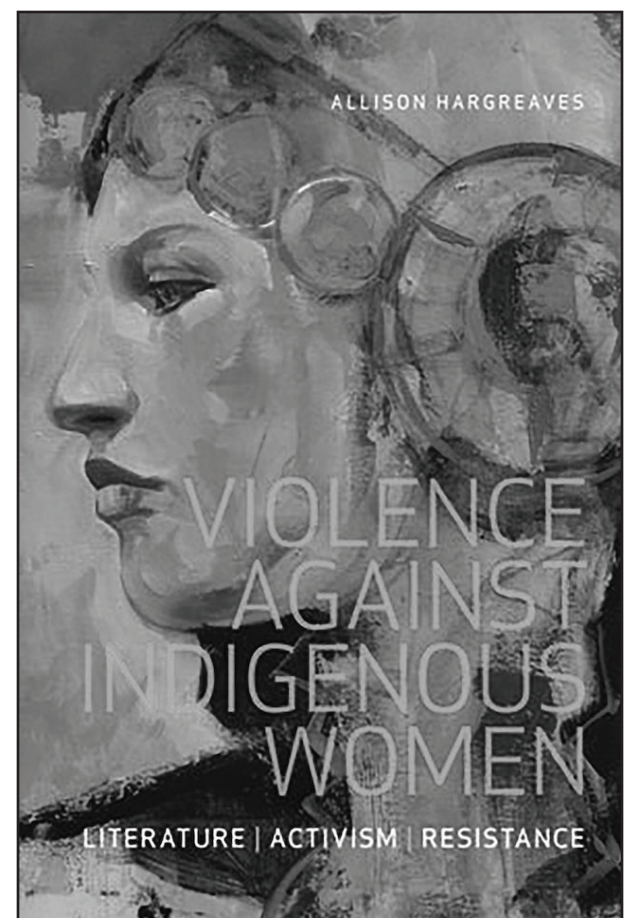
“I seek to trouble” is a common refrain in Allison Hargreaves’s monograph about violence against Indigenous women in Canada. And “trouble” she does—providing hard hitting but thoughtful critiques of several common, contemporary activist efforts to address the tragedy of widespread violence in the lives of Indigenous women. A self-described “settler-scholar,” Hargreaves analyzes how some mainstream efforts to address the disproportionate rates of violence experienced by Indigenous women can actually be detrimental to the cause. She repeatedly problematizes many well-known activist efforts by consulting and analyzing the perspectives of Indigenous women as expressed in film, art, and literature. As such, this volume is highly recommended for Indigenous studies and gender studies scholars. Moreover, it offers significant insight for activist communities of any stripe, who will benefit from Hargreaves’ interrogation of common activist tactics.

In the Introduction, Hargreaves establishes a bold proposition—that the most widely-recognized strategies for addressing violence against Indigenous women in Canada are deeply problematic and potentially counter-productive. Seeking to understand how activism “can bring about the social and political transformation required to end violence,” she begins by questioning the mainstream “awareness” campaigns that have come to be the hallmarks of anti-violence activism in Canada. As a literature scholar, Hargreaves proposes that the creative works of Indigenous women offer insights into the limitations of these

mainstream projects. Thus, the book is structured by juxtaposing a strategy of anti-violence activism with a corresponding perspective as voiced through film, poetry, or fiction produced by Indigenous women. Hargreaves uses Indigenous film and literature as the window to critique and question the value of the liberal nation-state’s most well-known efforts to acknowledge and resolve the historical oppression and colonial violence experienced by Indigenous women today.

In Chapter One, Hargreaves critiques the British Columbia Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (MWCI), a 2010-2012 government effort to solicit testimonies from families, activists, service providers, and law enforcement agencies about missing and murdered Indigenous women, with a narrow focus on Vancouver’s notorious Downtown Eastside, a common site of disappearance. Hargreaves critiques the MWCI efforts through the lens of Metis filmmaker Christine Welch’s 2006 documentary *Finding Dawn*. Because the official MWCI activities were artificially conscribed and constrained as to scope and depth, many observers, including Hargreaves, saw the efforts as being a “missed opportunity to link the specific circumstances...to broader colonial patterns of systemic displacement and violence.” *Finding Dawn*, on the other hand, offers an expansive perspective on the nature of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The film tells the story of three missing indigenous women by exploring themes of “hope, resilience, and transformation.” By critiquing MWCI through the lens of an Indigenous filmmaker, Hargreaves is able to see a much larger and expansive project, one that focuses on the interrelationships between Indigenous women and the violent history of settler colonialism.

One of the most important aspects of *Violence Against Indigenous Women* is that Hargreaves’s critiques transcend the Canadian experience and become applicable in other settler nation-states. Several subjects explored by Hargreaves have striking parallels in the American context. Beginning in Chapter Two, she describes and critiques the



Canadian *Stolen Sisters* report from Amnesty International issued in 2004. Amnesty International released a similar report in the United States (*Maze of Injustice*) in 2007, which explored the failure of the United States to adequately respond to sexual violence in Indian country. (In the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that this reviewer collaborated with Amnesty International to research and write *Maze of Injustice*.) Hargreaves’s criticism of the *Stolen Sisters* human rights report is cogent and much of her insight can be applied to *Maze*. For example, both reports assume “the legitimacy of the colonial nation-state to protect Indigenous women’s rights” and utilize the stories of individual Indigenous women in a “certain narrative mould” that requires the primacy of victimhood to achieve reform. While not categorically condemning

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