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Susan Cannon Harris
University of Notre Dame

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Geofeminism and the “Parable of the Plums”

CHRISTIN M. MULLIGAN, *Geofeminism in Irish and Diasporic Culture: Intimate Cartographies*.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
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Susan Cannon Harris

Published by Palgrave Macmillan as part of their new Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies series, Christin M. Mulligan’s *Geofeminism in Irish and Diasporic Culture* brings feminist and postcolonial theory to bear on the “spatial turn” in literary and cultural studies. The series, according to its editors, promotes scholarship that will “disclose, analyze, and explore the significance of space, place, and mapping in literature and the world” (ii). Such explorations have long been a primary feature of Irish studies—partly because maps, boundaries, and borders unavoidably became central preoccupations for a generation of Irish writers who came into their own during the Troubles. Famously, some of these writers were unwilling or unable to examine the gendered conventions governing their visions of the Irish landscape or to recognize writing by Irish women as essential to the Irish literary tradition. For some Irish studies scholars, however, the interactions between gender, place, and politics have proved an irresistible target for analysis. Since the 1990s, a corpus of feminist scholarship dedicated to probing those conventions, expanding the contemporary Irish canon, and rethinking those interactions has been steadily accumulating. Mulligan’s monograph is part of that corpus and makes an important and welcome contribution to those projects.

Defining “geofeminism” as “a particular blend of consciously intersectional feminist theoretical paradigms and postcolonial geocriticism” (4-5), Mulligan promises to show “that contemporary Irish and diasporic women artists deliberately and repeatedly cross borders, literally (in terms of topography), ideologically (in terms of politics and faith), figuratively (in terms of conventions and canonicity), and linguistically” (4). Bringing “feminism and spatial theory” together, Mulligan argues, “should not simply inform debates about literal space and place, but also psychoanalytic territory and the positionality of women’s bodies and persons in the public, private, and religious spheres” (6-7). The analysis that follows navigates these different conceptions of “space,” from the ambiguously embodied “Traumatic/Erotic Map[s]” of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s poetry (5) to the fractured psychic spaces of Tana French’s neo-changelings. Along the way, Mulligan offers intriguing re-readings of some of Ireland’s most canonical modernists. Mulligan’s second chapter, for instance, incorporates a fascinating analysis of the “Parable of the Plums” from the “Aeolus” episode of *Ulysses*. Mulligan prepares the ground for this examination by working with both the Irish lyrics and English translations/adaptations of “Róisín Dubh,” opening up the pre-Revival history of the *cailleach/tseanbean bhocht*/hag and her counterpart, the *spéirbbean* or “sky woman” of the *aisling*. Connecting the plum-eaters of the parable with the *cailleach* (hag), Mulligan argues that Joyce deploys the hag’s transgressive sexuality—her combination of an exhausted reproductive capacity with an apparently limitless libido—to endow the protagonists of this parable with a kind of “(sinful) creativity” whose “genius ... lies in refusing to create any offspring” (38). Joyce thereby “invoke[s] both barrenness and its counterpart over-ripeness as subtle parabolic metaphors to engender doubt and cast aspersions on Britain’s systematic domination of the Irish people” (39). In her final chapter, Mulligan’s critique of Yeats’s consumption and re-production of places, place names, toponymic

legends, and the female body anchors her analysis of Tana French's novel *The Likeness*. Mulligan argues that, like Yeats's deliberately anti-realist plays and poetry, French's ostensibly realistic murder mystery invokes the fairy Otherworld as a space which is geographical, embodied, and also immaterial/internalized. In French's novel, Mulligan argues, "changeling figures [are] queer bodies and the *lios*/ringfort [is] a space of queer geography and transgression" (6); but this transgressive potential is circumscribed by literary, historical, and folk traditions that define the Otherworld as a "locus of death for women who dare to violate the borders enforced by patriarchal culture" (6).

The heart of the monograph is Mulligan's extensive exploration of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, the main subject of the third chapter. It is here that Mulligan's "geofeminism" achieves its greatest explanatory/revelatory power; and indeed, this combination of ideas taken from Kristeva, Butler, Irigaray, Deleuze and Guattari, Spivak, and others could have been assembled for the specific purpose of illuminating Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry. Mulligan's third chapter focuses on a group of poems in which the body becomes (as Mulligan puts it) a "Traumatic/Erotic Map" (99) in which geography is inseparable from incarnation. Arguing that Ní Dhomhnaill is engaged in creating a "feminist postcolonial alternative geography of Ireland," Mulligan offers fascinating readings of individual poems ("Féar Suaithinseach/Miraculous Grass," "An Prionsa Dubh/The Ebony Adonis," "Cailleach/Hag," "Oileán/Island"). While informed by a wide range of theorists—including theorists of the lyric, of social geography, and of minor languages—these chapters also stand out for the agility and sensitivity of Mulligan's interpretations of Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish (Ní Dhomhnaill composes in Irish; her poems are often published alongside English-language translations done by other Irish poets.). As someone with almost no Irish, I found Mulligan's discussion of the linguistic nuances and translation questions that arose during her analysis interesting and edifying. It is gratifying to see Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry receiving this kind of careful and informed attention. In addition to making the case for Ní Dhomhnaill as a major contemporary Irish poet, the book's third chapter successfully makes the case for Mulligan's larger assertion that "the intersection of feminism and spatial theory should not simply inform debates about literal space and place, but also psychoanalytic territory and the positionality of women's bodies and persons in the public, private, and religious spheres" (6-7).

In the book's final chapter on "Magic Realism and Queer Geography in the *Oeuvres* of Yeats and French," the geocritical strand of the analysis becomes somewhat more attenuated. I am sympathetic to, and persuaded by, Mulligan's critique of Yeats's simultaneous effacement of both the bodies of actual women and the topography of actual places; as she puts it, "the physical, material, and environmental state of places themselves becomes secondary to their role as emotionally laden, imaginative repository for the emotional states that are of central concern" to Yeats (190). The connection that Mulligan makes between Yeats's "The Mask" and Tana French's mystery novel *The Likeness* seems more based on inner space than on topography, however. In its attempt to keep these two conceptions of space superimposed, Mulligan's analysis sometimes becomes strained. Nevertheless, this chapter remains an interesting comparative reading.

Mulligan's style is not transparent. The theoretical concepts that make up Mulligan's "geofeminism" paradigm sometimes cluster so densely that they obscure what they should be making clear. Further, Mulligan sometimes engages scholarly predecessors with unwarranted antagonism in what seems to be an effort to distinguish *Geofeminism* from earlier investigations of the space/gender/nation nexus. It is true that our profession rewards novelty, more richly perhaps than it does more important qualities. However, from my point of view, *Geofeminism's* continued engagement with theorists and literary critics who shaped the conversations about space, gender, the body, and the nation that have taken place over the past thirty years is a feature, not a bug, and therefore not something to be disavowed or protested against too much. As Mulligan's own analysis strongly suggests, breaking new ground is not necessarily more important than revisiting a landscape that continues to resist excavation and explication.

The book's brief coda demonstrates the implications of *Geofeminism* for the larger field of ecocritical studies focused on grappling with the Anthropocene. "Our beholdness to the environment," Mulligan asserts, "is exhibited not only externally in terms of the natural landscape and others around us, but through self-awareness of mind and body ... which continue to be essential concerns for contemporary authors in Ireland and of the diaspora" (238-39). In seeking to reveal to us the ever-shifting and ambiguous relationship between external environments and the "climates inside oneself," Mulligan's monograph makes a real contribution to a number of important critical investigations, opening up one avenue toward understanding the increasingly pressing problems that complicate the relationship between space and the self (239). Ultimately, *Geofeminism* confirms that the tradition of feminist scholarship upon which this book draws (and occasionally writes against)—in drawing attention to the mysteries of embodiment and to the gendering of conceptions of the earth and our place in it—has an important role to play in our attempt to understand the Anthropocene, and to imagine alternatives to it.

—*University of Notre Dame*