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Christine Metzo
Book Review


In *Shattering Silence*, Begoña Aretxaga discusses the experience of Northern Irish republican women as it defies the binary accounts provided by colonial and post-colonial discourse. She highlights the complicated and conflicted locus of national identity for these Irish women in a "country that is literally betwixt and between these categories" (15). Her attention to the political, geographical, religious, and social context of women in West Belfast results in a beautifully textured analysis of the situation of republican women and the shaping of their political subjectivities in the modern manifestation of the "troubles." Through a highly accessible writing style, she presents her argument for the importance of women's involvement in the struggle for independence while demonstrating how that role is both possible and made invisible by the gendered discourse of the family, religion and the revolution.

Aretxaga claims that without the possibilities for political subjectivity that existed for women, as paradoxical as they sometimes were, there could not have been many of the successful moments of resistance by nationalists. The ideology which placed motherhood in a sacred position through the Cult of the Virgin, for example, made mothers visiting their sons in prison just women, when in reality they were the communication channel between boys inside the prisons and the IRA leaders on the outside. Yet women get written out of the republican histories with the very same discourse of motherhood which allowed them to play such crucial roles in the movement against the British Women were just women after all.

Her discussion of the 1981 hunger strikes is particularly illuminating regarding this double-edged significance of women's experience. The modern use of hunger strikes as political tactic was started by suffragist women, to great effect, and was adopted by men in the republican movement in light of that (83). But the mythologized history surrounding the use of hunger strikes in the modern Irish republican movement is that it is a link to the moral and political actions of Gaelic heroes from long ago. By maintaining the mythologized construction of the history, women are written out of the history and "republicans construct a political identity as direct descendants of their preconquest ancestors" (82). So the role of women in the evolution of tactics of resistance becomes invisible in light of a political memory and history which asserts the unity of Ireland—a male Ireland.

Aretxaga asserts the importance of naming and of these rewritings of history and mythology in the shaping of political subjectivity, both male and female. She convincingly lays out the evidence behind her claim that women have been made invisible in the political process. But at the same time, she shows that the actions of women in that very process, constitute "irruptions in political discourse, disturbing presences that break the order of authorized historical narratives and in so doing raise questions about the nature of such order" (6). Organizations like Clár na mBan (Women's Agenda, a branch of the IRA), she claims, stand as "an affirmation of historical agency by nationalist women" (6). Though she does not spend extensive pages discussing this organization, the work she does to establish the historical and political agency of nationalist women does the work she wants it to regarding the symbolic meaning of the establishment of women's organizations in the late 70s and early 80s.

The experience of republican women mirrors the experience of members of the republican movement in general. It is an experience of "a demand for existential-political recognition, a desperate claim to presence" (85). It is a claim to this nationalist political agency. Republi-
can prisoners wanted to be recognized as political prisoners, prisoners of war; women wanted to be recognized as equal to their male counterparts in the struggle for an independent Irish state. But, as Aretxaga shows through the various examples of literal and symbolic readings of women’s actions, nationalist women’s political subjectivity is marked and kept hidden by the ideologies surrounding womanhood.

*Shattering Silence* is a work of carefully examined experience and beautifully articulated analysis. Aretxaga does well to limit the scope of her book to the present situation and the impact of the past on this present as a historical narrative which shapes the subjectivities of nationalist. Her attention to the role of women is a timely contribution to the scholarship on the struggles in Northern Ireland.