

2023

Navigating Trauma and Disadvantage in Irish Society and the Arts

J. Javier Torres-Fernández
University of Almería, jtorferna@ual.es

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Torres-Fernández, J. Javier (2023) "Navigating Trauma and Disadvantage in Irish Society and the Arts,"
Journal of Franco-Irish Studies: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/3ZWH-9Z75>
Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/jofis/vol7/iss1/3>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](#).

FOREWORD

Navigating Trauma and Disadvantage in Irish Society and the Arts

In the kaleidoscope of contemporary Irish society, the exploration of trauma and disadvantage emerges as a fundamental lens through which to recognize and understand the intricate nuances of human experience. This special edition ventures to unravel the complex interplay between societal challenges and artistic expressions, weaving together historical insights, literary analysis, educational perspectives, and autoethnography. At the heart of this endeavour lies the recognition of the multifaceted nature of trauma and disadvantage.

Trauma, from the Ancient Greek word *τραῦμα*, initially meant “physical wound,” and it would not be until the end of the nineteenth century that the term expanded from its medical dimension to its psychological implications. From a more contemporary approach, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) defined the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980, introducing the term “trauma” in both psychology and psychiatry and addressing it as an unpleasant experience that disturbs the subject and results in causing effects in the person’s aspects of functioning, attitudes and behaviour. Disadvantage, from Old French *desavantage*, “loss, injury, prejudice to interest,” means something that prevents success, or renders it difficult, for the subject. The APA defines “disadvantaged” as an adjective denoting communities or individuals deprived of equal access to resources and, more precisely, to education and employment. This special edition, comprised of six essays and four book reviews, relying on its multidisciplinary approach to these two terms, explores trauma and disadvantage as two sides of the same coin.

The different contributions successfully provide a nuanced understanding of trauma and disadvantage within the realm of Irish society, with a particular focus on its representation in literature, graphic design, photography, and the educational context. The authors delve into the tangled ways in which literary narratives and art serve as media for expressing and articulating traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth’s seminal work, *Unclaimed Experience*, builds the foundational basis for the exploration and understanding of trauma as wounds on both body and mind.¹ As a multifaceted phenomenon, trauma has

¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

garnered increasing attention within the field of literary studies and beyond,² and this special edition seeks to tackle the intertwined experiences of trauma and disadvantage in narrative and real educational and personal experiences. Caruth further claims that trauma disrupts the linear progression of time and narrative, creating a compelling need for its constant reiteration in order to be integrated into consciousness.³ In the same vein, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's exploration of trauma and testimony informs these studies. Felman and Laub contend that the act of bearing witness through narrative is a crucial aspect of the healing process.⁴ In this context, not only do literary and artistic representations of trauma serve as forms of testimony, providing a platform for individuals to convey their lived experiences, but also the study of contemporary discourse surrounding disadvantage builds a stronger claim to deconstruct the barriers surrounding dyslexia and opening a window to challenge how society looks at educational disadvantages.

In the context of Irish society, works of authors like Edna O'Brien and Sebastian Barry have helped to uncover how the legacy of historical traumas, such as the Troubles, resonate in contemporary narratives. The intersections of personal and political trauma shed light on the unique contributions of Irish literature to the discourse on trauma. This can be related to the comprehensive examination of disadvantage from both educational and social perspectives that different authors carry out in this special edition with the goal of providing a nuanced understanding of the interconnected challenges faced by individuals and communities. Drawing from education and sociology, disadvantage and its implications for learning and teaching will be explored aiming to contribute to a holistic comprehension of the complex dynamics surrounding disadvantage in contemporary society. The concept of disadvantage has far-reaching implications for both educational and social structures; Pierre Bourdieu contends that social inequalities are perpetuated through the transmission of cultural capital within educational and societal

² Madalina Armie and Verónica Membrive, *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature* (London: Routledge, 2023); Melania Terrazas Gallego, *Trauma and Identity in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020); Janice Carello, Lisa D. Butler and Filomena M. Critelli, *Trauma and Human Rights: Integrating Approaches to Address Human Suffering* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First-Century Irish Novel* (Irish Studies) (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018); Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Jill Bennet, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

³ Caruth, 4.

⁴ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Cries of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9.

contexts.⁵ This special edition delves into the ways in which this concept manifests in educational settings, influencing access to resources and opportunities for individuals from different social backgrounds. Turning to Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach, emphasizing critical education and liberation informs our exploration of disadvantage in educational contexts, providing a lens through which to examine the potential for transformative teaching practices to mitigate the effects of disadvantage and empower learners.⁶

The six papers within this collection collectively illuminate the diverse threads that constitute the contemporary Irish narrative, extending beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries. By intertwining educational insights, psychological perspectives, and literary analysis, the contributors engage with trauma and disadvantage enriching the discourse and deepening our understanding of the Irish experience.

This special edition begins with Geraldine Mitchell's transversion of temporal and cultural boundaries connecting biblical narratives with historical events and crime fiction in "Treating Traum(a): Examples in the *Tanakh* that Mirror Events during the Life of Bonhoeffer and Crimes of the Ian Rankin Novel *Knots and Crosses* (1987)." The theoretical underpinning draws from religious analysis and literary theory, creating a tapestry that spans centuries. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, the paper positions trauma as a common thread linking disparate contexts, shedding light on the timeless resonance of human suffering and concluding that it is impossible to eliminate trauma from humanity.

Shifting from historical and literary realms to the personal, Aisling Dolan's "Dealing with the Trauma of Undiagnosed Dyslexia" engages with dyslexia in the contemporary educational landscape. Informed by psychological and educational theories, this research unpacks the emotional and cognitive dimensions of living with undiagnosed dyslexia. Here, the multidisciplinary approach underscores the interconnectedness of psychological well-being, education and societal structures that shape individual experiences. Reflecting on her own story, Dolan's use of autoethnographic research reveals how the arts can function as a tool for self-expression and healing.

Extending the scope of this special edition, Vicki O'Reilly's "Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder: Reframing the Possible Employment Outcomes of Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Students from Disadvantaged

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Education, Globalisation and Social Change*, ed. H. Lauder, P. Brown, J. A. Dillabough and A. H. Halsey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 107.

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 67.

Communities” explores the educational realm, employing Active Research methodology and drawing on sociological and educational theories. By reframing the discourse surrounding Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students, the paper aims to challenge prevailing negative narratives through a participatory approach. The multidisciplinary lens brings forth insights from sociology, education, and linguistics, fostering a comprehensive understanding of educational disadvantage. O’Reilly claims that the way to change the narrative around disadvantage is through reframing society’s, and our own, understanding of it.

Continuing the discourse on dyslexia, Keith Murphy’s “The [DIS] Advantage of Studying Higher Education (HE) with Dyslexia” critically examines societal perceptions within the context of higher education. The theoretical framework draws from disability studies, psychology and sociology, challenging prevailing notions of deficit. This multidisciplinary exploration encourages a holistic understanding of dyslexia, emphasizing its integral role in shaping academic and social identities. Murphy’s research not only accounts for how small details might have a significant effect on the learning experiences of students within neurodiversity, but also argues that even though people might have impairments, it is society what is disabling.

Shifting gears back to the realm of literature, my own contribution “Trauma and Stigma in AIDS Literature: Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1995) and Colm Tóibín’s *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999)” engages with the HIV/AIDS crisis in Irish and American narratives. Informed by queer theory, cultural studies, and literary analysis, the paper delves into the socio-political and biomedical dimensions of trauma and stigma. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the author illuminates the complex interplay between art, politics, and societal perceptions. I argue that both works offer valuable insights into the impact of the AIDS epidemic on individuals and society as an intergenerational trauma that still permeates contemporary society.

Eugene O’Brien closes the article section of this special edition by navigating the contemporary landscape of social media in “‘That’s because of the trauma’: Repetition, Reflection and Refraction in Social Media in Louise O’Neill’s *Asking for It* (2015).” O’Brien deploys Lacanian theory and draws on psychological and feminist frameworks. By scrutinizing the impact of social media on trauma representation, the paper explores the intersection of virtual and lived experiences. This multidisciplinary lens invites readers to contemplate the intricate relationship between trauma, identity, and the digital realm.

Turning to the last section of this especial edition, Noelia Carmona Rivero opens the book reviews with her review of *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the*

Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature: Wounds of the Body and the Soul (2023), an edited volume edited by Madalina Armie and Verónica Membrive published in the Routledge Studies in Irish Literature series. Carmona Rivero delves into the volume, comprised of twelve academic articles and three pieces of creative writing, exploring how it constitutes an enriching and timely publication that sheds light on the complex traumas around women's issues and female experiences as presented in contemporary literature.

Shifting the lens to visual culture, Melania Terrazas delves into *Ireland and the British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality* (2023), an edited collection of seven articles edited by Fintan Cullen and published in the Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland series that tackles the traditionally controversial relationship between Ireland and the British Empire. Terrazas observes how Cullen's collection not only ensures a deep and wide coverage of the artistic and visual arts that contributes significantly to the understanding of the connections between Ireland and British imperialism, but also the way in which the thought-provoking essays invite readers to expand Irish visual historiography.

Merging visual arts with literature, Barry Houlihan reviews *A Deep Well of Want: Visualising the World of John McGahern* (2023), a monograph by Paul Butler published in the Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland series. The monograph represents a unique reinterpretation of the world of Irish writer John McGahern through his writings and Butler's own imagery as an artist. The thread weaving both together is trauma in the lives of both McGahern and Butler. Houlihan defines Butler's monograph as a brave and honest dual photo-memoir delving into the complex nature of a troubled childhood. Intertwining literature with photography, Houlihan highlights how Butler's understanding of images as a form of storytelling that resonates as a dialogue with McGahern's writing.

Brian A. Murphy closes the special edition with his review of *"Honest Claret": The Social Meaning of Georgian Ireland's Favourite Wine* (2022), a monograph by Tara McConnell published in the Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland series. McConnell explores the social life of claret, the wine that flowed in the social world of Ireland's privileged classes, in Georgian Ireland carefully observing the social meanings attached to the wine and expanding reader's knowledge of Irish Food Studies. Murphy argues that McConnell's book not only skillfully unravels the tapestry of Georgian Ireland's social customs immersing readers in the eighteenth century, but also offers profound insight into Ireland's cultural heritage.

Collectively, these papers and book reviews contribute to a multifaceted understanding of trauma and disadvantage in contemporary Irish society and

the arts. By weaving together historical, psychological, educational, and literary perspectives, this special edition invites readers to embrace the richness of Irish Studies. The theoretical apparatus employed serves not only as analytical tools for specific inquiries but as bridges connecting disparate fields, fostering a holistic understanding of trauma and disadvantage. Following Judith Butler, change emerges from “a space of appearance.”⁷ In other words, through the representation and study of trauma and disadvantage, from being seen and acknowledged, these traditionally hidden or silenced experiences rise and argue for social advancement. The portrayal of these narratives plays a crucial role in making people’s voices heard, and their identities and experiences visible. As we embark on this multidisciplinary journey, we unravel the complexities inherent in the intersection of society, literature, and the arts, ultimately enriching our appreciation for the diverse narratives that constitute the contemporary Irish experience.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the editors of JOFIS, Elaine Mahon and Anke Klitzing, for their constant support and guidance through the process of relaunching the journal with this special edition. I am deeply indebted to all the contributors, for their trust, work, and patience; and to the external reviewers for taking the responsibility of ensuring that the content published here today is of great quality and interest to the academic community and wider society. I wish to thank the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies for allowing me to conduct a research stay at Technological University Dublin last year. I am deeply grateful to Eamon Maher for his motivation and encouragement, and for trusting us with the relaunch of JOFIS. Last, but not least, I also extend my gratitude to María Elena Jaime de Pablos and everyone who took part in the interdisciplinary postgraduate research seminar “Contextualising Trauma and Disadvantage” held on November 23, 2022, in TU Dublin Grangegorman. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

This research has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (FPU21/01232).

J. Javier Torres-Fernández

University of Almería/ National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies

⁷ Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. J. Butler, Z. Gambetty and L. Sabsay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 16.