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*Declan Kavanagh*

### **Rosaleen McDonagh and the fractured heart**

These essays are not by an inspirational person. These essays are not by a supercrip. These essays don't pathologise my Traveller ethnicity or my gender. There was no triumphant moment of overcoming the violence inflicted on me. Instead, these pieces embody a diverse experience of what it is to be Irish. There is no room for wanting to deny or overcome my impairment. There is no hiding my Traveller ethnicity. The opposite. This book finally allows me to take ownership of my fractured heart.<sup>1</sup>

In the penultimate paragraph of the introduction to her essay collection, *Unsettled* (2021), Rosaleen McDonagh writes about how composing the collection allowed her to take ownership of a 'fractured heart'. Her deployment of the metaphor of a fractured heart here is indicative of the emotionally rich and gently arresting nature of the testimony that follows across the sixteen chapters of varying length that comprise the book. This is an essay-collection-cum-memoir that should serve to make us, as readers, wholly *unsettled*. For McDonagh's claiming of her fractured heart involves the telling of stark and uncomfortable truths about the treatment of those with disabilities and impairments in the Irish Republic. It involves, too, the careful centring of Traveller ethnicity, and of cis femininity, as intersectional nodes of personhood that for McDonagh are always mutually informing. The fractures that emerge speak to intersections between and across identities, which overlap in McDonagh's narration of her own life experience as a Traveller, a woman, and as a disabled person who uses a wheelchair and an adapted car for her mobility. As readers, we come to

know these overlapping identities as fractures, or as points of Othering, points of violence, and often as points of shame. McDonagh is skilled in demonstrating how distasteful prejudices that are ambient in Irish culture can be quietly and devastatingly internalised over time. Her claiming of such fractures amounts, in part, to an un-claiming of certain toxic internalisations about gender, ethnicity, class and impairment. This transformative journey is one of careful plotting for both author and reader. From the very outset, McDonagh is keen to stress how her narrative resists dominant modes of disability representation in Western-anglophone culture. She is not ‘an inspirational person’, nor is she a ‘supercrip’. She refutes her story as being one of exception or triumph; her legibility is not to be *settled* on the image of a disabled person who *manages* to achieve in spite of their disability or impairment. Similarly, McDonagh stresses that her story of being a Traveller in Ireland is but one story among many: ‘This book is not the Traveller story. It’s just one of many to come’ (p.xiii). Importantly, *Unsettled* is not a story in which impairment is overcome (whatever that might signify). In his influential study *Disability Theory* (2008), Tobin Siebers argues that: ‘Disabled bodies provide a particularly strong example of embodiment as mimesis because they resist standard ideas about the body and push back when confronted by language that would misrepresent their realism’.<sup>2</sup> Matching the mimetic intensities of disabled narratives as outlined by Siebers, in *Unsettled*, the lived experience of a person with cerebral palsy is fully probed but always as part of a connective tissue of life writing that enfolds McDonagh’s co-lived experiences of both cis womanhood and Traveller ethnicity. No one part can be separated from another. No one fracture can reveal the full heart of the matter. It is this intersectional approach – this unflinching view of the fractured heart – that makes *Unsettled* so powerful. It is all the more powerful still for the honesty with which McDonagh tells her reader that the claiming of these fractures is no protection from future breakages:

My public persona, my politics, give expression to a notional self-love and pride. These tools of survival and empowerment are elusive. You offer them to others but rarely take time to use them yourself. In my everyday reality, that self-love doesn't protect me from racial harassment, sexism and ableism. You don't forgive yourself when you are called a Knacker, a cunt, a useless cripple. That self-love is ever-evolving. It's not always at the ready when needed (p.xii).

Owning the fractures of a heart is not the same as mending a heart nor is it a one-time act of claiming trauma. There is no easy story here; no straightforward lesson; no narrative closure. There is instead a real sense in *Unsettled* of the sheer and unrelenting emotional and intellectual labour that must be expended simply *being* when one is perceived as wholly Other along interrelated axes of gender, class, race, and ability in Ireland. Of course, the very title of '*Unsettled*' evokes this marginalisation and stigmatisation: to be *unsettled* is to not be *settled*. It is to be debarred from the privileges enjoyed by the majority in Irish settled society. And, yet, to be unsettled might also mean to be at odds with, or to be at a slant from, the dominant hegemony – to be, in other words, couched in a position of questioning that is painful but somehow also generative and enriching. There is much in McDonagh's careful de-coding of her positionality that aligns with Irish queer experience but even then, and directly in the chapter entitled 'Queer Connections', she deftly avoids any easy conflation of her own multi-layered experience with the modes of queerness that she has encountered thus far in her life and in her activism.

In what is a major and historic contribution to Irish memoir and life writing, McDonagh's uncompromising commitment to the narration of her experience through an inter-sectional lens demonstrates how Irish-disability identity itself can often operate as a privileged identarian position; one which entirely falls beyond the scope of participation for

Irish Travellers. The claiming of disability as an affirming identity position, which confers access to rights and privileges has long been theorised in the academic field of disability studies. In thinking through the question of disability identity as affirming, Siebers argues that:

It is equally vital to understand that claiming disability, while a significant political act, is not only political but also a practice that improves the quality of life for disabled people. As documented in the cases of minority identities, individuals who identify positively rather than negatively with their disability status lead more productive and happier lives. Feminism, the black and red power movements, as well as gay and disability pride – to name only a few positive identity formations – win tangible benefits for their members, freeing them not only from the violence, hatred, and prejudice directed toward them but also providing them with both shared experiences to guide life choices and a community in which to prosper.<sup>3</sup>

Claiming a disability status, according to Siebers, can ‘lead [to] more productive and happier lives’ for those who identify as disabled.<sup>4</sup> Disability pride, as with gay pride, denotes here the protections and rights afforded to those who seek to be identified as being a part of a minority that has won, after years of political struggle, ‘tangible benefits for their members’.<sup>5</sup> One of the singular contributions that *Unsettled* makes to Irish Studies is to demonstrate how Irish disability status is firmly drawn along racial and class lines. Those who identify as disabled in Ireland and are granted access to the rights and permissions that attend that identity position are most often white, settled, and middle-class citizens. Disability status, in McDonagh’s narrative is elusive; it is not automatically shown to be achievable or to yield the kind of tangible benefits that Siebers outlines. Crucially, it is not connected to a shared history of

struggle that is wholly inclusive of Irish Travellers. Much of this reality is shown in the opening chapters of *Unsettled*. For example, in recounting her childhood as a disabled Traveller, McDonagh stresses how “‘Access’” was a word that belonged somewhere else’ (p.4). In many ways, *Unsettled* exposes how disability identity in Ireland, along with access to the benefits of hard-won struggles that are ongoing, is wholly predicated on whether or not one is the right kind of Irish citizen. To be *unsettled* is to be, according to McDonagh’s testimony, not settled enough to be afforded access to disability status. This truth, in and of itself, should do much to unravel the neat and tidy narrative of Irish modernity and progressive ‘equality’ that has been too often celebrated in neo-liberal Irish political discourse of the last decade.

In reading McDonagh’s memoir, we are faced with narrative turns that show the calculated ways in which the Irish State worked to debilitate minority populations like the Traveller community, whilst debarring individual Travellers with impairments from full access to the privileges of disability status. As McDonagh clearly and painfully articulates:

The relationship between me and my family remained strong in these difficult circumstances. As the State, via social workers, did its best to have me fostered by settled families, I was infinitely determined to ensure that these foster family arrangements failed. While the families were kind to me, my relationships with them were never easy. The cultural difference was too enormous. On the other hand, during this period, help and support was generously and lovingly given to me by all the members of my family. Indeed, I found my family’s gift of love and their bravery so incredibly compelling that today I consider sustaining these relationships as my biggest and greatest achievement (p.6).

Here, McDonagh narrates how Traveller identity and culture is deemed somehow incompatible with access to disability status. The Irish State, through the actions of state-appointed social workers and liaison officers, actively worked to remove McDonagh as a child from her Traveller family and extended community through fostering to settled families. The implication being that Traveller identity and cultural life is incompatible with the affording of disabled status. To be legible as disabled, and to have access to disability rights and permissions, one must be a settled, not unsettled, citizen. McDonagh's memoir powerfully and persuasively exposes the exclusivity of disability status in an Irish context at a time when disability studies itself is coming under pressure to assess its own criticality. For example, scholars in disability studies have recently begun to theorise the politics of debility with decisive consequences for readings in the field. In *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017), Jasbir K. Puar mobilises 'the term "debility" as a needed disruption ... of the category of disability and as a triangulation of the ability/disability binary ...'.<sup>6</sup> Puar argues that 'while some bodies may not be recognized as disabled, they may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled'.<sup>7</sup> Puar writes about disability and debility within the frame of biopolitics arguing that 'biopolitics can thus be read as a theory of debility and capacity... [with] debilitation and the production of disability [being] in fact biopolitical ends in themselves, with neither moving toward life nor death as the aim'.<sup>8</sup> Puar reads Palestine and the treatment of the Palestinian people in Gaza, as a controlled society in which an entire population is kept debilitated and in a process of slow death by the Israeli State. In reading *Unsettled*, in particular, the account that McDonagh offers of her childhood as a young girl and teenager with an impairment, Puar's account of debility as a biopolitical tool of state-control proves especially instructive. It is instructive precisely for the ways in which disability as an identity is always bound up in *Unsettled* with McDonagh's integration into a fostered-settled identity; her experience is such

that remaining within Traveller society as a child with an impairment is to remain under the pressures of a relationship to the Irish State that is bound up with debility and exclusion, not disability and inclusion. Reading *Unsettled* under the lens of debility as a needed disruption of disability as a privileged, white, and, in this case, settled category, serves to bring into sharp relief the unique importance of McDonagh's life writing to Irish Studies and to all those who remain concerned with histories of oppression, trauma, and exclusion in the Irish State.

McDonagh's claiming of a fractured heart reveals a diverse experience of being Irish. Such narrative fractures illuminate for us readers the ways in which some Irish citizens are debilitated by the state-sanctioned foreclosure of disability status with Traveller ethnicity. This painful history of a relationship to disability rights is one that persists into the present, as at times, McDonagh seems to fully enter into the discursive fray of mainstream and global disability politics; for example, when it comes to the environmental controversy over the use of plastic straws:

A straw is now considered an enemy of the environment. A request for one is met with a shrug of the shoulders, a gesture of the hands. The carnivore with the steak at the next table is a valued customer. The nuisance is the one who asks for a ramp, a toilet, for a straw. The one who keeps asking (p.20).

A complaint about the failure to include the material access needs of disabled and impaired people in environmental policy changes around plastic usage is extended here into an historic register of requests for 'a ramp, a toilet'. We might be tempted to read this as a broad complaint about the constant pressure that disabled people are under to ensure that accommodations are met, however, the material object of a ramp and an adapted toilet are



precisely the kinds of accommodations that were refused to McDonagh as a debilitated Traveller child but not as a disabled fostered one. Here the more popular and mainstream accommodation of the plastic straw is only arrived at last in a list of other domestic accommodations that have historically been denied to McDonagh in a Traveller setting. When later reflecting upon her friendship with Mary Elizabeth, a Traveller woman with CP who grew up in a settled environment, McDonagh admits how:

[their] involvement with disability politics was always on the fringes. Being involved in campaigns often felt like too much hard work. We just wanted to live our lives. Participating in activism and politics didn't always involve a choice. We had to support our friends. Activism, we both agreed, was not fun (p.93).

Disability politics might well feel like even more 'hard work' for a person with an impairment who also belongs to an ethnic group that is kept debilitated in economic, social, political and material ways. As McDonagh stresses, 'want[ing] to live our lives' had to be balanced with 'support' for 'our friends'. What is most moving about *Unsettled* is how McDonagh renders vulnerability as a source of connection and of community. The ambivalence that is registered here and elsewhere to disability activism (and with reason) is over-powered, at times, by the necessity of activism and engagement to sustain others across intersections of identity: gender, class, sexuality, race, and ability. The claiming of a fractured heart is a deeply personal experience for McDonagh, yet in writing *Unsettled* she also masterfully sutures her reader to the same endeavour.

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## NOTES

1. Rosaleen McDonagh, *Unsettled* (Skein Press, 2021), p.xv. Further quotations from this work are in parenthesis in the text.
2. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), p.2.
3. Siebers, p.11.
4. Siebers, p. 11.
5. Siebers, p.11.
6. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p.xv.
7. Puar, p.xv.
8. Puar, p.xviii.