

# Aestheticizing Pain. (Re-)Claiming Identity through Music, Literature, and Landscape

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## Abstract

On July 12, 1947, the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs (1899–1968) was shattered by the news that his 17-year-old daughter, Líf, had perished in the freezing cold waters off the coast of Sweden. Leifs turned to composing as a means of processing his pain. In a matter of weeks, he completed several monumental works that he dedicated to her memory. A little more than sixty years later, the glaciologist M. Jackson was devastated by the loss of her parents, who died within a two-year period due to terminal cancer. Amid her grief, she turned to writing and eventually published two books in a single year (2019): *The Secret Lives of Glaciers* and *While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change*. While these accounts may seem disparate on the surface, on closer inspection, they share several similarities. Both figures not only witnessed the pain of their family members, but also experienced intense levels of pain after their deaths. In their attempts to cope with the devastation, they both turned to aestheticizing their pain. In doing so, they found solace in nature, particularly the icy mantles of Iceland's glaciers. Most significantly, both suffered in ways that transcended mere physical sensation: they struggled to find meaning for their pain and recover from a loss of identity. Consequently, these case studies reveal challenges to biomedical approaches to measuring and managing pain. Despite many groundbreaking achievements in these areas, the shift in authority to biomedicine over the past century has not been accompanied by an equally extensive gain in our understanding of pain's many meanings and their relevance to one's quality of life. Moreover, the use of personal narrative and aesthetics to gain access to this knowledge remains underutilized.

Therefore, in this article, I argue that some of the most deleterious effects of pain result not just from physical sensations alone, but from

the experience of *pain without meaning*. In doing so, I demonstrate how the process of aestheticizing pain is helpful to granting meaning and ultimately sharing forms of suffering in cases ranging from the mid-twentieth century to the recent past. By exploring Jackson's use of metaphor to scaffold my analysis of Leifs' use of juxtaposition in his *Requiem*, Op. 33b, I reveal the ways Leifs and Jackson utilized the natural environment to help mediate their pain and thus fill the knowledge gap left by biomedical science. Collectively, by framing my analysis with recent studies by Sara Ahmed, Joel Michael Reynolds, and others, I illustrate that their techniques convey the lasting importance of shared spaces of dwelling for the unending cultural co-construction of pain – a process that enabled them to reclaim identity using music, literature, and landscape.

**Keywords** Pain, suffering, music, landscape, Iceland, ecology

On July 12, 1947, the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs (1899–1968) was shattered by the news that his 17-year-old daughter, Líf, had perished in the freezing cold waters off the coast of Sweden.<sup>1</sup> This devastating event occurred after a series of defeats for Leifs, including the financial and psychological challenges hastened by war, the separation from his wife, and his failed attempts to gain collective support as a national composer. Leifs thus turned to composing as a means of processing his pain. In a matter of weeks, he completed several monumental works that he dedicated to her memory: the choral works *Torrek*, Op. 33a, and *Requiem*, Op. 33b, which were soon followed by *Elegies* for male chorus (1947) and *Vita et mors* for string quartet (1948–1951).<sup>2</sup> A little more than sixty years later, the glaciologist M. Jackson was devastated by the loss of her parents, who died within a two-year period due to terminal cancer. Amid her grief, she turned to writing and eventually published two books in a single year (2019): *The Secret Lives of Glaciers* and *While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change*.<sup>3</sup> In the former volume, she recounted a trip on the anniversary of her mother’s death and observed, “I have always fled back to Alaska after experiencing breakable pain. This landscape protects me”<sup>4</sup>

While these accounts may seem disparate on the surface, on closer inspection, they share several similarities. Both figures not only witnessed the pain of their family members, but also experienced intense levels of pain after their deaths. In their attempts to cope with the devastation, they turned to aestheticizing their pain. In doing so, they found solace in nature, particularly the icy mantles of Iceland’s glaciers. They also similarly took to sharing their pain by weaving their personal narratives with collective stories using techniques that conflated geographical and emotional landscapes. Most significantly, both suffered in ways that transcended physical sensation.

During the several decades that spanned the gap between their careers, biomedical science marked achievements in managing and even curing some forms of pain. For instance, although first identified by Charles Sherrington at the dawn of the twentieth century, vast numbers of nociceptors were identified in the 1960s helping to inaugurate

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1 See Árni Heimir Ingólfsson: *Jón Leifs and the Musical Invention of Iceland*. Bloomington 2019, 258-269.

2 See Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 266.

3 M. Jackson: *The Secret Lives of Glaciers*. Brattleboro 2019; M. Jackson: *While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change*. Brattleboro 2019.

4 Jackson, *While Glaciers Slept*, 27.

pain as a field of medicine.<sup>5</sup> In 1973, the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) was formed, bringing together scientists and clinicians from around the world to help redefine and develop new forms of treatment.<sup>6</sup> Two years later, the McGill Pain Questionnaire was first published, which offered new ways of measuring pain.<sup>7</sup> The 1980s were home to additional advancements and setbacks, including the increased prevalence of prescription opioids.<sup>8</sup> By the 1990s, with abuse of these pharmacological interventions becoming widespread, new regulations were unleashed and pain was designated the “fifth vital sign.”<sup>9</sup> And thus far, the twenty-first century has been home to more forms of screening, detecting, and treating conditions that lead to chronic pain, including the use of non-opioid analgesics and multi-modal interventions. Yet, despite all these developments, one of the biggest challenges to the methods of biomedical science has been dealing with not just the sensation of pain, but also with the perception of it. Fernando Cervero, past president of the IASP, acknowledged this in his 2012 study *Understanding Pain*, writing:

Although nociception is easily approached with the scientific method, understanding human pain is, at present, beyond that method’s capabilities. [...] No matter how much we know about the details of a certain nociceptive mechanism, we can’t understand how that mechanism influences an individual’s overall, and subjective, pain perception. How nociception leads to pain perception remains inaccessible to scientific inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, these limitations have frequently been exacerbated by a “lack of concordance between the experience of the illness and its objective classification and treatment”, leaving many to struggle to recover from a loss of identity.<sup>11</sup> In short, the shift in authority to

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5 See Fernando Cervero: *Understanding Pain*. Cambridge 2012, 43. See also his discussion of Sherrington’s discovery on pp. 1-4.

6 See <https://www.iasp-pain.org/>.

7 See Srisuda Ngamkham et al.: The McGill Pain Questionnaire as a multidimensional measure in people with cancer: an integrative review. In: *Pain Manag Nurs* 13.1 (2012), 27-51. doi.org/10.1016/j.pmn.2010.12.003.

8 See Roger Collier: A short history of pain management. In: *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* 190.1 (2018), E26-E27. doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.109-5523.

9 Clara Scher et al.: Moving Beyond Pain as the Fifth Vital Sign and Patient Satisfaction Scores to Improve Pain Care in the 21st Century. In: *Pain Manag Nurs* 19.2 (2018), 125-129. doi.org/10.1016/j.pmn.2017.10.010.

10 Cervero, *Understanding Pain*, 4.

11 Javier Moscoso: *Pain: A Cultural History*. New York 2012, 170.

biomedicine has not been accompanied by an equally extensive gain in our understanding of pain's many meanings and their relevance to one's quality of life. Perhaps for this reason, the subject of pain perception has attracted the attention of growing numbers of scholars across the humanities and social sciences. Even so, the use of personal narrative and aesthetics to gain access to this knowledge remains underutilized.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, in this paper, I argue that some of the most deleterious effects of pain result not just from physical sensations alone, but also from the experience of *pain without meaning*. In doing so, I demonstrate how the process of aestheticizing pain is helpful to understanding the ways in which pain is granted meaning and ultimately shared. My scope extends from the mid-twentieth century to the recent past, or roughly from the period when Leifs was suffering from the loss of his daughter and pain was first recognized as a psychological and physiological problem, to the time when Jackson was coping with the death of her parents and multi-modal treatments reached new levels of acceptance.<sup>13</sup> By exploring Jackson's use of metaphor to scaffold my analysis of Leifs' use of juxtaposition in his *Requiem*, Op. 33b, I reveal the ways they utilized the natural environment to help mediate their pain and thus fill the knowledge gap left by biomedical science. Collectively, by framing my analysis with recent studies by Sara Ahmed, Joel Michael Reynolds, and others, I illustrate that their techniques convey the lasting importance of "shared spaces of dwelling" for the unending cultural co-construction of pain.<sup>14</sup>

## 1. Defining Pain, Losing Meaning: The Search for Clarity Amid Confusion

For centuries, scholars have attempted to articulate what pain is. Its elusive nature has, at times, been described as a mark, a miracle, or a mechanism. At other times it has been labeled a warning, a sin, or a sensation – a list which could be extended in numerous ways. Beginning in the latter twentieth century, attempts to bring greater precision to these competing explanations have often hinged upon the frequently cited definition by

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12 For some of the recent interdisciplinary approaches to this problem, see <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/10155/disembodied-perception-of-the-self-and-other---interdisciplinary-perspectives-from-science-arts#overview> and Philip Gerrans: Pain Asymbolia as Depersonalization for Pain Experience. An Interoceptive Active Inference Account. In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020). doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.523710.

13 See also <https://painmanagementcollaboratory.org/pain-management-history-timeline/>.

14 I borrow this term from Sara Ahmed: *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham 2010, 14.

the IASP: “an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage”.<sup>15</sup> Since the release of this statement in 1979, numerous studies have brought both clarity and controversy to this debate, especially by authors who reside outside the fields of biomedical science. Elaine Scarry’s seminal study *The Body in Pain* (1985) focuses on the challenges following from both the inherent inexpressibility of pain and the power that results from leveraging pain, particularly when it comes to methods of torture and abuse.<sup>16</sup> In his book *The Culture of Pain* (1991), David B. Morris argues that we need to complement biomedical approaches with a corresponding level of investigation into the “personal and cultural meanings that we carve out of pain”.<sup>17</sup> According to Morris, even if such research eventually discovered a hidden switch that turns pain off, that switch “will not somehow stop the cultural process by which we construct meanings and uses for pain”.<sup>18</sup> Pain, he contends, “is always personal and always cultural”.<sup>19</sup> More recently, in his study *Pain: A Cultural History* (2012), Javier Moscoso expands our understanding by introducing a new metaphor: pain as drama. According to Moscoso, “pain mobilizes all the elements of theatrical presentation. The experience of harm has its actors, plot, stage, costumes, props, scenography, and, of course, its audience”.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the latter component, he notes that whether “pain is conscious or unconscious is not as important as whether its presence is socially recognized”.<sup>21</sup> Joanna Bourke has similarly emphasized the importance of narrative in her study *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers* (2014) wherein she explains that, because pain is “constructed by a host of discourses, including theological, clinical, and psychological ones”, we need to avoid falling in the trap of treating pain as an “independent entity” within a person.<sup>22</sup> As a corrective, she conceives of pain as a “type of event” that is “chronologically flexible and historically complex”.<sup>23</sup> And like many of her predecessors,

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15 Cervero, *Understanding Pain*, 16.

16 Elaine Scarry: *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford 1985.

17 David B. Morris: *The Culture of Pain*. Berkely 1991, 5.

18 *Ibid.*, 25.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History*, 6.

21 *Ibid.*, 8.

22 Joanna Bourke: *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers*. Oxford 2014, 3-4.

23 *Ibid.*, 17.

she argues that “[t]he body is never pure soma; it is configured in social, cognitive, and metaphorical worlds”.<sup>24</sup>

In some cases, efforts to define pain have taken the route of explaining what it is not. Most recently, in his book *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* (2022), Joel Michael Reynolds decouples pain from its damaging relationship with disability. This so-called “ableist conflation” equates experiences of disability with pain and suffering. Doing so, Reynolds argues, results from uncritically underdefining concepts such as disability, harm, pain, and suffering as well as the relations between them.<sup>25</sup> In his efforts to untangle these associations, he compares theories of pain and differentiates the concept of pain from the concept of suffering using three categories: component pain (feeling pain), constitutive pain (suffering), and consuming pain (extreme suffering).<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, other scholars have elected to dispense with the distinction between pain and suffering altogether. Bourke, for instance, explains that she uses these terms interchangeably because “[i]t used to be radical to question the distinction between the mind and the body. Not any more”.<sup>27</sup> She later concludes, “[f]or researchers in the arts and humanities as well as in the sciences [...] mind/body dichotomies have been an impediment to scholarship. [...] The body is mind-ful and the mind is embodied”.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in their introduction to their edited volume *Knowledge and Pain*, Leona Toker and Esther Cohen note how the IASP definition fails to consider “emotional suffering that is not triggered by a sensory component [...] as if it were a separate category”.<sup>29</sup> “By contrast”, they argue, “in our attempt to map paths to the understanding of what is involved in the experience of pain, we suspend the distinction between the physical and the emotional pain or at least register the porousness of the dividing line between them”.<sup>30</sup>

Collectively, these studies reveal an important paradox: Our gaze must extend out beyond the body if we are to more fully understand how pain is embodied. Thus, my goal in this article is not to relitigate the overlapping and sometimes competing definitions of

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24 Ibid.

25 Joel Michael Reynolds: *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality*. Minneapolis 2022, 4.

26 See *ibid.*, Chapter 2: A Phenomenology of Chronic Pain, 50-57.

27 Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 24.

28 *Ibid.*, 25.

29 Esther Cohen et al.: *Knowledge and Pain: Probing the Boundaries*. New York 2012, viii.

30 *Ibid.*

pain. Nor will I attempt to separate concepts such as pain/suffering and physical/emotional pain when the artists conflate them. Rather, in what follows, I want to explore the dimensions of this paradox more deeply. For this reason, I will shift the focus of the debate from the question of what pain *is* to what pain *does*. My inspiration is drawn largely from the methodology of Sara Ahmed, who argues that “[t]he question ‘what does happiness do?’ is inseparable from the question of how happiness and unhappiness are distributed over time and in space.”<sup>31</sup> Her study of happiness bears many resemblances to the study of pain, including challenges in observing, measuring, and interpreting humanity’s most confounding absent presences. Pain, like happiness, is seemingly everywhere and nowhere. It resides within us and beyond us. It defies definition yet defines us. It provides directionality to our lives and disorients us. At times we crave its presence and at other times we celebrate its absence. But achieving a better understanding of how pain affects the body requires that we first transcend it.

## 2. From Pain Scales to Scaling Glaciers: Finding Meaning Beyond the Limits of Biomedical Approaches

At first glance, the answer to “What does pain do?” seems straightforward. It hurts. And when presenting with pain, two questions patients are commonly asked are “Where does it hurt?” and “How bad does it hurt?” Yet, in attempting to answer them, one is immediately faced with three false premises of biomedical approaches that obfuscate the reporting and diagnosing of pain. The first assumption is that measuring is objective. Here also, Ahmed’s observations of happiness are relevant. She explains, “happiness research does not simply measure feelings; it also interprets what it measures.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the act of measuring pain is an interpretive one for both patient and practitioner. In her discussion of metaphorical language, Nicole Piemonte speaks to this polemic when she notes, “within medicine, the ‘knowable’ is believed to be the observable and measurable [...] and how one comes to know those facts is through observations or via measurements.”<sup>33</sup> However, Piemonte discerns a tension that arises between the “language about the biological

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31 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 19.

32 *Ibid.*, 6.

33 Nicole M. Piemonte: *Medical Slang: Symptom or Solution?* In: Alan Bleakley (ed.): *Routledge Handbook of the Medical Humanities*. London 2020, 155-162, 156.



happenings of the body as object” and the language one uses to make sense of their subjective illness experience.<sup>34</sup> She summarizes this problem by quoting sociologist Arthur Frank, who declared: “The body I experience cannot be reduced to the body someone else measures”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the veneer of scientific language and classification systems is not thick enough to blot out the fact that pain, like happiness, can only be measured by communication between the sufferer and the observer.

Classifying pain is further complicated by a second assumption, which is that the body can be standardized. Yet, because bodies are constructed through intersectional biological and social processes, there can be no reliable way of universalizing one’s experiences. Nevertheless, pain scales have been employed with the spirit of flattening out difference. This is because, according to Bourke, over the course of the nineteenth century, a noted shift occurred in the way in which pain was labeled, defined, and evaluated. What once began as long, descriptive narratives soon became a list of adjectives.<sup>36</sup> A century later, these descriptors ultimately dissolved into a Visual Analog Scale that encompassed a mere handful of categories. According to Bourke, this “thinning of pain language” can be attributed to the perceived “rising complexity of the body, the untrustworthiness of patients, and the inherent difficulties of language”.<sup>37</sup> Lost in the goal of universalizing pain were the multiple factors that shape one’s response to pain, the varied meanings of these events, and the reflexive relationship between individual and collective experiences.

This point raises the third false premise, which is born out of a combination of the previous two assumptions. It is the idea that scales accurately reflect experiences. In her critique of “the search for objective symptoms or signs”, Bourke cites the work of author Eula Biss, whose eponymous article “The Pain Scale” sheds light on the problems that stem from trying to quantify it. According to Biss,

pain presents a unique problem in terms of measurement, and a unique cruelty in terms of suffering – it is entirely subjective. Assigning a value to my own pain has never ceased to feel like a political act. I am a citizen of a country that ranks our comfort above any other concern. People suffer, I know, so that I may eat bananas in February. And then there is history [...] I struggle to

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34 Ibid., 158.

35 Ibid.

36 See Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, 9-30.

37 Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 137.

consider my pain in proportion to the pain of a napalmed Vietnamese girl whose skin is slowly melting off as she walks naked in the sun. This exercise itself is painful.<sup>38</sup>

Her situation, like others whose lives have been shaped by chronic pain, is further complicated by the fact that there is no evidence of pain on her body. The proof, which has been required by “minds in thrall to the evidence-based regimes”, evaporates the moment the person-in-pain attempts to measure and quantify it leaving them in a state of bewilderment.<sup>39</sup> Biss testifies to this process, noting, “[t]he sensations of my own body may be the only subject on which I am qualified to claim expertise. Sad and terrible, then, how little I know”.<sup>40</sup>

I do not wish to overstate the significance of pain scales in diagnosis – a process that is more complex than space here allows me to unpack. Nevertheless, I also do not wish to minimize the experiences of those who have been marginalized by their application, nor the suffering of those like Biss that has only increased in the attempts to quantify pain. Rather, I use these three assumptions to bring into focus the first thing that pain does: it causes displacement of identity.<sup>41</sup> On one end of the spectrum, it can completely consume people, leaving them to become their pain. In those cases, pain assumes a totalizing role as many people have affirmed on blog posts and discussion forums.<sup>42</sup> On the other end, it can deprive people of meaning, leaving them feeling empty. This is the very problem Morris called attention to nearly two generations ago when he observed, “[i]t may be the most damaging change of all that the new world of chronic pain [...] is a world in which pain has become almost utterly without meaning”.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of Ivan Illich’s critique of the medicalization of western society, Seamus O’Mahony, quotes Illich when he notes:

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38 Eula Biss: The Pain Scale. In: *Harper’s Magazine* (2005), 25-30, 28.

39 See Shane Neilson: The Practice of Metaphor. In: Bleakley, *Routledge Handbook*, 144-154, 145.

40 Biss, The Pain Scale, 26.

41 To compare an earlier approach in the humanities with a more recent one, see Kristin Boudreau: Pain and the Unmaking of Self in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved.’ In: *Contemporary Literature* 36.3 (1995), 447-465. doi.org/10.2307/1208829; Elisa Aatola: Confronting suffering with narrative theory, constructed selfhood, and control: Critical perspectives by Simone Weil and Buddhist metaphysics. In: *Journal of Disability and Religion* 23.3 (2019), 227-250. doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2019.1567296.

42 See, for instance, Isobel Whitcomb: When Chronic Pain Becomes Who You Are. In: <https://slate.com/technology/2022/06/chronic-pain-identity-spoonies-support-recovery.html>.

43 Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, 56.

Pain, in the absence of cultural and spiritual context, is unendurable. Such cultural iatrogenesis had robbed people in modern industrialised societies of the ability to *suffer*, thus rendering pain meaningless: “Culture makes pain tolerable by integrating it into a meaningful setting [...] Culture makes pain tolerable by interpreting its necessity [...]”<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, the poet, critic, and physician Shane Neilson has noted, “a common problem my patients face when accepting their illnesses and coming to terms with them is determining what their illnesses means [sic] for them”<sup>45</sup> Thus, across all ends of the continuum, people-in-pain have often been alienated from society and themselves, which lends evidence to the notion that it is not just “unpleasant sensation” but unpleasant sensation without meaning that is most damaging.

But if pain steals both meaning and identity, can it also restore them? This is what Joel Michael Reynolds argues when he writes:

The effect of pain is to allostatically regulate life: *pain is a command to reorient oneself*. To be sure, the ends toward which one will reorient oneself in the face of pain will be diverse. Those ends will always be relative to the domain or domains in which and by which one interprets one’s pain as well as the salient interpretative differences operative within that domain.<sup>46</sup>

According to Reynolds, “pain – like gravity – is a force. We can measure it, feel it, alter it, study it, and even exploit it, but we still don’t really know how it works, nor do we know how to hold together its many disparate meanings”<sup>47</sup> In support of this thesis, he offers “a phenomenology of multiple sclerosis” in which he turns to the work of S. Kay Toombs to illustrate how “attentional reconfiguration can be disorienting”<sup>48</sup> Reynolds explains that this process “can occur when, for example, the salience of an action, desire, or possibility shifts from one’s body to the environment, in other words, when that to which one must

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44 Seamus O’Mahony: *Medical Nemesis 40 Years On: The Enduring Legacy of Ivan Illich*. In: Bleakley, *Routledge Handbook*, 114-122, 117. Emphasis in the original.

45 Neilson, *The Practice of Metaphor*, 150.

46 Reynolds, *The Life Worth Living*, 35. Emphasis in the original.

47 *Ibid.*, 12.

48 *Ibid.*, 101.

explicitly attend to do X or Y becomes a question of the body's *relationship to its environment*".<sup>49</sup>

Thus, by concentrating on pain's paradoxical ability to disorient and reorient, I want to extend Reynolds' analysis to case studies in which the natural environment becomes a medium for reclaiming identity. Here, too, Ahmed speaks to the central role of the relationship between humans and their surroundings, noting: "Feelings do not [...] simply reside within subjects and then move outward towards objects. Feelings are how objects create impressions in shared spaces of dwelling".<sup>50</sup> Because of this, she characterizes her methodology as one that describes "what kind of world takes shape when happiness provides a horizon".<sup>51</sup> My approach differs slightly in that I aim to describe what kind of world takes shape when the horizon created by pain merges with the horizon of the physical landscape. It is similar to the configuration that Piemonte explores when she quotes from Heidegger to describe her experience of caring for her dying mother, stating, "physical space is always more than just space; it is not simply the measurable area containing material objects, but the '*wherein* [that] I live,' the space where we dwell".<sup>52</sup> By concentrating on the convergence of the space of pain and glaciers, my goal is to shed light on how these dwelling places can become an orienting force for those faced with the disorienting pain of loss, transforming their union into a lot "more than just space".

### 3. Of Landscapes and Lifescapes: Reclaiming Identity through Metaphor

In her 2019 book *While Glaciers Slept: Being Human in a Time of Climate Change*, geographer and glaciologist M. Jackson provides a vivid account of the pain she encountered during the period of her parents' prolonged illness and untimely passing. She also tells a tale of another type of death: the death of glaciers, which she observed on numerous trips to Alaska. Her approach to these narratives is typical in that she, like many others, resorts to simile and metaphor to describe the palpable effects of pain. What is less common is the number of ways that Jackson assigns meaning to glaciers. In some passages, they

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 100. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Piemonte, *Medical Slang*, 159. Emphasis in the original.

become symbols of humanity, as when she notes, “each glacier is extraordinary, unique, just like people. Glaciers continually change, like people. On some glaciers, the changes occur in a day or a single moment; on others, the changes only happen within a glacial lifetime. Glaciers are changelings.”<sup>53</sup> Other instances take on more personal significance, as when she refers to her father as a “glacial shepherd.”<sup>54</sup> They also become shields, as in the passage I cited in the introduction wherein she credits the landscape with protecting her on the anniversary of her mother’s death.<sup>55</sup> At times, they even serve as a metaphor for her own physical and emotional pain, as when she recounts falling into the icy waters: “Several years before my mother died, and years before cancer wrapped itself coldly around my father’s lungs, I became an iceberg.”<sup>56</sup> She further explains: “I was glad not to be physically present in a place that was painful [...] I could feel my body slowly morphing, transitioning, becoming glacial. My mind fled to the ice world.”<sup>57</sup>

The various environmental metaphors she uses of which glaciers form one important category, point to the fact that her methodology is not additive. She does not simply augment her story with allusions to nature in the hope that the audience might find satisfaction in recognizing similarities between the two. On the contrary, her approach is thoroughly transformative. She explicitly acknowledges this in the introduction, stating that her book is not solely about the death of her parents, “nor is it about sadness, or irretrievable loss. Rather, this is a story that contains such multitudes. Here is the story of two people facing unknown futures and their daughter’s trying to recognize again a landscape and lifescape transformed.”<sup>58</sup> By juxtaposing the categories of landscape and lifescape, she suggests the emergence of a third space of identification that emerges through their imbrication. This third space becomes the domain in which she undergoes a conversion resulting from her pain.<sup>59</sup> As such, I argue that Jackson’s experiences are akin to the type of reorientation that Reynolds describes when he observes, “in each domain that proffers a meaning for pain, pain functions as a command to reorient oneself. Pain orders one to

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53 Jackson, *While Glaciers Slept*, 42.

54 *Ibid.*, 198.

55 See *ibid.*, 27.

56 *Ibid.*, 42.

57 *Ibid.*, 49.

58 *Ibid.*, 7.

59 For a similar framework, see Homi K. Bhabha’s discussion of Frederic Jameson’s notion of “third space” in *The Location of Culture*. New York 1994, 306-319.

regain a certain balance. It functions with the aim of reestablishing oneself and one's abilities relative to the domain in question and the function it serves."<sup>60</sup>

Not only does Jackson's narrative of pain function in accordance with his analysis, but it also encourages us to add a sixth domain to the five he outlines: the natural environment. She speaks to this domain on numerous occasions, as when she writes:

I was a whole person who disintegrated when my mother died. My grief splintered into rain and ran down the gutters and into the rivers and oceans and seeded clouds that raced back to shed on a dreary day. I assumed a fluid form, with no direction, that floated along, passive, until enough was enough and I was reminded to re-imagine, rebuild, re-coup. Somehow, I midwived seeds of instinct and hope and direction that grew into a new person.<sup>61</sup>

In this and many other passages, Jackson reveals the agency she is granted through nature, allowing her to come to acceptance with her pain. The natural environment domain then, like the religious, neurobiological, humanist, existential, and medical models, serves as a force to reorient oneself "toward not-being-in-pain" as it transforms pain into an ecosystem ripe with possibilities of identification.<sup>62</sup>

But while Jackson's use of metaphor shares similarities to the regulative models Reynolds describes, at various points in her book, she offers evidence that this third space overlaps with the deregulative force that Reynolds analyzes in his phenomenology of chronic pain. Reynolds ascribes four general structures to this type of lived experience: forebodingness, beholdenness, bioreckoning, and disruption.<sup>63</sup> To give but three examples, Jackson's discussion of "glacier time" quoted above "assists in accounting for the unique temporality of chronic pain" that is characteristic of foreboding.<sup>64</sup> The "capriciousness, ambiguity, and weariness" of her self-described "fluid form" corresponds to beholdenness.<sup>65</sup> Jackson also speaks to the power of disruption that "evicts one from being at home in one's own body."<sup>66</sup> Reynolds explains: "Pain is always in a dynamic

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60 Reynolds, *The Life Worth Living*, 35-36.

61 Jackson, *While Glaciers Slept*, 66.

62 Reynolds, *The Life Worth Living*, 34.

63 See *ibid.*, 37.

64 *Ibid.*, 45.

65 *Ibid.*, 47.

66 *Ibid.*, 50.

relationship pulled taut between past conditions that led to its emergence and a future state without it toward which it orients one. [...] Without a cause, pain loses its regulative significance because it no longer has a basis, a reason, with respect to which it can *orient* one's action".<sup>67</sup> Jackson attests to this structure when she writes: "Both radical realities [of climate change and my parents' deaths] were long in the making before I could ever imagine such a future. After they died, I was numb. Immobilized. Lost. I had no guidance and no direction".<sup>68</sup>

She was lost, that is, until she discovered the ability "to conceptualize what happened to [...] [her] parents through the scientific lens of climate change and our planet".<sup>69</sup> In this respect, her emphasis on ecology is helpful to expanding the many roles that Reynolds assigns to one's environment when it comes to regulating and deregulating identity.<sup>70</sup> Shifting back and forth between different perspectives, she proclaims, "individual actions in the face of climate change are only meaningful when they occur in concert with the action of the rest of humanity".<sup>71</sup> According to Jackson, lasting meaning can be forged when our individual experiences of pain form a composite with the shared narratives that serve as the sinew for communities on a local, national, and/or global scale, which also permit the presence of pain, in the words of Moscoso, to be "socially recognized".<sup>72</sup>

Jackson offers a closer examination of this principle in her second book, *The Secret Lives of Glaciers*, where she shifts the setting from Alaska to Iceland. In it, she offers numerous accounts of how glaciers bind people together. She begins by noting,

context is *always* crucial. While it is important to have the best physical data, statistics, and models chronicling glacier change, if such information is not grounded within the human stories of glaciers [...] then that information is powerless. If people do not see themselves in the story, then they are not part of the story.<sup>73</sup>

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67 Ibid., 49-50. Emphasis in the original.

68 Jackson, *While Glaciers Slept*, 20.

69 Ibid., 155.

70 Here, the use of the term 'environment' is used broadly to denote one's physical surroundings.

71 Jackson, *While Glaciers Slept*, 178.

72 Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History*, 8.

73 Jackson, *The Secret Lives of Glaciers*, 14. Emphasis in the original.

In her exploration of these diverse stories, Jackson evokes assemblage theory based on the earlier writing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who maintain “parts within a whole are not fixed nor stable [...] all parts are fluid based on how they continually relate and re-relate to each other within a greater constellation of the whole”.<sup>74</sup> And, just as these “power arrangements are not static” for people nor their environment, she demonstrates that assemblage theory can be also be applied to glaciers: “Glacier power does not come from a single point within a glacier. It is assembled in context of geography, scale, time, people. It is assembled within continually shifting constellations”.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout this volume, Jackson reveals how metaphors drawn from landscape generally and glaciers specifically are important to shedding light on what pain does. Like glaciers, it can change and protect us. It can modify our experiences of time. And by adopting the natural environment as a “meaning-making device”, pain enables the fusion of landscapes and lifescapes.<sup>76</sup> This composite can create a third space that regulates and orients while becoming a dwelling place in which one can undergo a personal transformation. But it can also deregulate and disorient by fostering what Reynolds has elsewhere described as forebodingness, beholdenness, bioreckoning, and disruption.<sup>77</sup> In sum, pain is not only “infinitely shareable”, to borrow Bourke’s phrase, but also a source of infinite meaning.<sup>78</sup>

I have thus illustrated how the vectors of Jackson’s personal narrative can be extended to the studies I outlined in the previous sections. Accordingly, I have offered examples of how literary devices like metaphor can complement and, in some cases, compensate for the shortcomings of biomedical attempts to measure, classify, and standardize pain. In many ways, Jackson’s books, like many studies on pain extending back to Scarry’s seminal work, benefit from decades of research into both glaciers and pain respectively. Yet, for many living prior to the second half of the twentieth century, such reference points, even if flawed, were often absent. Even more, for those living in Iceland among the glaciers, finding refuge in the “shifting constellations” of self, society, and the environment in the wake of pain was complicated by struggles for political independence, national unity, and modernization.<sup>79</sup> The intersection of these issues made it challenging to connect one’s

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74 Ibid., 99.

75 Ibid., 100.

76 Reynolds, *A Life Worth Living*, 34.

77 See *ibid.*, 37.

78 Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 234.

79 See Karen Oslund: Chapter 1: *Icelandic Landscapes: Natural Histories and National Histories*. In:



personal narrative of pain to shared stories due to the splintering of identities that transpired for generations.<sup>80</sup> Faced with these and other difficulties, the natural environment took on a varied yet equally significant role when it came to sharing pain in the mid twentieth century. And for one artist in particular, the medium of music helped to transform the personal experience of loss into a shared ecology of suffering.

#### 4. Ecology of Place, Ecology of Suffering: Jón Leifs' *Requiem* and the Co-construction of Meaning

David Morris observed, “the failure of interpretation in cases of unthinkable suffering and massive disaster helps indirectly to emphasize how important it is that we ordinarily [...] understand a meaning for our pain. The importance grows in times of unusual conflict and rapid change”.<sup>81</sup> His remarks can be applied to the situation many Icelanders faced in the wake of World War II. According to Karen Oslund, a postwar national Icelandic identity was born out of several juxtapositions, including modern/premodern, inorganic/organic, and unnatural/natural.<sup>82</sup> Citing the work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth, she explains, “identities are constructed at borders, at the points where differences can be seen most clearly”.<sup>83</sup> Yet despite the widespread efforts to differentiate between “peripheral” cultures and continental Europe, “the Icelandic nationalist movement placed an emphasis on social equality, cooperation, and consensus” in order to “minimize difference among themselves”.<sup>84</sup> In addition to projects like standardizing their language, many Icelanders turned to their natural landscape as a common ground for procuring a homogenous identity. Thus, just as Jackson believed landscapes and lifescapes could form a composite identity, Oslund confirms that the marriage of these two domains dates back for centuries in Iceland. Because “human and natural histories composed a unified story”, she writes, their convergence provided for “an accessible story, readable on the surface of things, like the features of the landscape”.<sup>85</sup>

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*Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*. Seattle 2011, 30-60.

80 Oslund, *Iceland Imagined*, 29.

81 Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, 51.

82 See Oslund, *Iceland Imagined*, XI.

83 *Ibid.*, 7.

84 *Ibid.*, 148.

85 *Ibid.*, 48.

But even this commitment to unification could not fully undo the damages incurred by centuries of colonization by Britain and Denmark.<sup>86</sup> When combined with the strain of war, these factors raise questions over the role that trauma plays in unleashing various forms of pain. According to Gilad Hirschberger,

the term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society [...] It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it.<sup>87</sup>

In the search for meaning, he notes, “a transgenerational collective self is pieced together [...] This transgenerational collective self promotes group cohesion, a sense of group importance and common destiny, and a strong commitment to group identity”.<sup>88</sup> Applied to Iceland, cultural memory and cultural trauma have gone hand-in-hand for centuries as evidenced in the reception history of their medieval sagas. For instance, Miriam Mayburd has uncovered the ways in which forms of trauma contained in these texts have contributed to group cohesion due to critics’ subjective encounter with them.<sup>89</sup> Her analysis of the vivid depictions of violence and death in the *Strulunga Saga* is but one example of the way Icelanders have attempted to formulate a transgenerational collective self.

Together, isolation, colonization, collective trauma (stemming from both recent events and transmitted through the sagas), and the reliance on landscape to foster unity all shaped Leifs’ career. Ingólfsson has demonstrated that Leifs resented the “cultural and physical marginalization of his native land” and “developed a hatred of Danes and all that reminded him of the old colonial power”.<sup>90</sup> Just as he lamented the status of his fellow Icelanders, Leifs also complained about his own lack of recognition. For instance, in a

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86 Ibid., 20.

87 Gilad Hirschberger: Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning. In: *Frontiers in Psychology* 9(2018), 1-14, 1. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441.

88 Ibid., 4.

89 See Miriam Mayburd: Worlds Emerge, Worlds Collapse: Traumatic Affect in Medieval Historiography and the Reception of *Sturlunga Saga* in the Twentieth Century. In: Rafał Borysławski, Alicja Benben (eds.): *Emotions as Engines of History*. London 2022, 132-152. doi.org/10.4324/9781003019015-11. Torfi H. Tulinius has also written extensively on this topic. See, for instance: Trauma. In: Jürg Glauser et al. (eds): *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Berlin 2019, 495-501. doi.org/10.1515/9783110431360.

90 Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 33.

letter to his cousin in 1931, he declared: “What I find most regrettable in all my artistic endeavor is that I have no empathy and no support among my own people”.<sup>91</sup> But he also credited his isolation and suffering as being a stimulus for artistic expression by identifying with Beethoven, stating, “a mark of true artists is that they are like vessels made to carry out the command of higher powers [...] even though their life and work only brings sufferings [...] even though no one comprehends them or their work”.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Leifs often combined references to landscape with the theme of heroic suffering. As Ingólfsson has shown, Leifs “sought to associate his music with nature, seeing in the country’s glaciers, waterfalls, and volcanoes not only a valuable *natural* resource but a *cultural* one. When given sound through music or other artistic expression, it could sustain claims for Iceland’s nationhood”.<sup>93</sup> Many of his works thus venerate specific geographical locations, such as Geysir (geyser), Hekla (volcano), and Hafis (drift ice).<sup>94</sup> Others draw inspiration directly from the saga literature and Iceland’s ‘heroic’ past, including *Three Songs from Icelandic Sagas*, Op. 24, *Songs of the Saga Symphony*, Op. 25, and *Old Skaldic Verses from Iceland*, Op. 31.<sup>95</sup> Above all, Leifs believed that music, literature, and nature could function symbiotically in the shared dwelling place of suffering thereby enhancing not only his own notoriety but also the significance of his country on the global stage.

This viewpoint influenced his aesthetic approach to pain in the immediate aftermath of his daughter’s death. Indeed, while the search for significance can be challenging in any circumstance, finding meaning for pain that results from the loss of a child can be nearly impossible. Yet this is precisely the daunting task with which Leifs was faced in 1947. Like Jackson, even though the cause of his pain was clear, his path forward was not. But also like her, he found a new form of agency by turning to art. Thus, it is not the sensation of pain that would reorient him, but *pain in a particular context*. For this reason, a parallel can be drawn between Reynolds’ depiction of pain as a force to reorient oneself and Ahmed’s discussion of suffering as “a kind of activity, a way of doing something”.<sup>96</sup> She further explains: “Suffering is a receptivity that can heighten the capacity to act”.<sup>97</sup> And

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91 Quoted in *ibid.*, 155.

92 *Ibid.*, 112.

93 *Ibid.*, 118. Emphasis in the original.

94 See *ibid.*, 117.

95 See *ibid.*, 105-109.

96 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 210.

97 *Ibid.*

because of this, “we must challenge the very separation of active and passive, and how that separation works to secure different classes of being”<sup>98</sup>

Likewise, because both Leif and Jackson found meaning in the decisive conflation of personal pain, communal suffering, and collective trauma, they challenge us to rethink the borders between these categories by channeling their “heightened capacity to act” into the aestheticization of pain. This does not mean that, as Reynolds has rightly pointed out, we should apply these terms uncritically. Rather, I am suggesting that in some cases, as in the loss of a parent or a child, pain becomes a type of absent presence. It is felt in the body as much as the mind. These sensations are acutely detected and chronically endured. To focus on their distinction in such instances is to misconstrue the aims of those who have assigned value to their convergence. Correspondingly, Maria Cizmici has shown how music is uniquely suited for blurring these boundaries. She notes:

At the same time that aesthetic works can respond to and represent some of trauma’s mental and emotional effects, they also function as public forums, contributing to and shaping social perceptions and conversations. Many cultural critics concerned with aesthetic representations of suffering tend to blend the psychological definitions of trauma with an eye toward the way in which art circulates in society and shapes people’s ideas. Art, literature, film, and music can construct an event as a “cultural trauma,” identifying the nature of suffering, describing the significance of the painful event, and addressing issues of responsibility and social change. And because the memory of trauma – both personal and historical – frequently creates a site of contention in which differing groups battle over social meaning, aesthetic works that deal with suffering frequently speak to discourses of power.<sup>99</sup>

Since I have already alluded to Leif’s responses to the discourses of power surrounding his life and work, the question remains: what procedures did he employ to contribute to the “social perception and conversations” of pain while articulating the significance of his daughter’s death?

In his *Requiem*, Leif contributes to these processes by reimagining the function of the musical score and employing a specific technique to highlight the intersection of pain, suffering, and trauma. His vision was based upon connecting his individual experiences with the collective identity of his nation using an aesthetic style that conflates geograph-

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98 Ibid.

99 Maria Cizmici: *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe*. Oxford 2012, 16.

ical and emotional landscapes in what can be termed an “ecology of suffering”. In their eponymous study, Jadhav, et al. employ this label to refer to the framework that links “what happens in the ‘clinic’ to wider ecological forces, both material and social”.<sup>100</sup> Their research elucidates how “suffering is profoundly affected by ecological relations that are contingent on local particularities”.<sup>101</sup> Given the numbers of variables that act on the individual, which they conceptualize as “vectors, pathways or forces”,<sup>102</sup> they conclude:

The concept of ecology of suffering opens up the dynamic between the local, national and international. This approach requires decentring from the person and their body to the ecology or series of interacting forces which interconnect with the person and their body. The aim is to maintain the agency of the person, and ensure they are an active participant in their fate, whilst naming and addressing the forces acting upon them.<sup>103</sup>

By replacing “the clinic” with the discursive space of the musical score, this paradigm can be useful for tracing meaning in aesthetic spheres. In the *Requiem*, Leifs similarly integrates his personal pain with the material and social forces described above. He thereby converts the score into a binding force between sufferer and society by shifting the focus out beyond his own mind and body while inviting listeners to co-construct a narrative of suffering. As with many sagas, the *Requiem* facilitates the social transfer of pain thus enabling not only the transformation of identity, but also the possibility of analgesia by modulating pain through renewed context.<sup>104</sup>

A key technique to illuminating this ecology of suffering is the use of juxtaposition, which occurs in two domains: the text and the musical setting. Beginning with the former category, Leifs eschews the traditional Latin version and instead stitches together different sources of folk poetry. Some sections are borrowed from Jónas Hallgrímsson’s (1807–1845) *The Lay of Magnús*, which is part of a folk tale that depicts a widow dying

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100 Jadhav Sushrut et al. Ecologies of Suffering: Mental Health in India. In: *Economic & Political Weekly* 29 (2015), 12-15, 12.

101 Ibid., 12-13.

102 Ibid., 12.

103 Ibid., 14.

104 For further discussion, see Marianne Horsdal: The body and the environment in autobiographical narratives and in autobiographical narrative research. In: *Embodied Narratives: Connecting Stories, Bodies, Cultures and Ecologies*. Odense 2014, 47-60.

and leaving behind a young daughter.<sup>105</sup> Other texts are representative of *ljúflingslög*, or texts sung by Iceland's *huldufólk* ("hidden people") to human children "often in times of need or distress."<sup>106</sup> The supernatural origins of these selections provide contrast to the depictions of natural landscapes. They also convey a sense of collective trauma to which Leifs can tether his own story of loss, which he does in part by shifting between passages that emphasize external facing portrayals of nature and internal accounts of grief.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Leifs distributes these texts in three parts (ABA) beginning with the opening stanzas in tonic A major/minor. After concluding with the line "Sleep now, content and victorious. / Sleep, I love you",<sup>108</sup> the A-section yields to a series of contrasts in the middle section, which coincide with gloomier imagery in the text: "Over the weary / workman's cottage / night has drawn a veil / of dark dreams from the sea".<sup>109</sup> He thereby assigns nature the role of both comforter and a harbinger of sorrow. All told, Leifs infuses juxtapositions into multiple layers, including the choice of text, tone, imagery, and structure.

He also complements these contrasts with a series of corresponding musical juxtapositions, which, I argue, function analogously to metaphor in literature by bringing two or more elements into closer proximity for the purpose of creating a new relationship. Accordingly, Leifs creates conflict between the diatonicism suggested by the lengthy bass pedal point on the tonic "A" and the tenor and alto voices, which take on increasing levels of chromaticism. The piece resists settling in either major or minor (marked by the C#/C conflict) thereby providing a sense of unease that undermines the otherwise grounding nature of the bassline. This technique also creates tension when it comes to the phrase rhythm. While the bass pedal conveys a sense of stasis by resisting harmonic progression, the short two- and three-note phrases attempt to propel the piece forward. These local juxtapositions also unfold at a structural level. To distinguish the outer A-sections from the short, inner B-section, Leifs provides a change in texture by pairing the bass and

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105 Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 264-265. Hallgrímsson was a folk poet who was also deeply inspired by the landscape of Iceland and a staunch supporter of their independence. See <https://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/Jonas/About.html>.

106 Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 265.

107 For a closer examination of how the transmission of folktales and epic poetry shaped conceptions of collective trauma and narratives of ability/disability, see Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, James G. Rice (eds.): *Understanding Disability Throughout History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Iceland from Settlement to 1936*. London 2022.

108 Excerpted from Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 262-263.

109 Excerpted from *ibid.*, 263.

tenor voices, which alternate with the alto and soprano lines. In sum, contrasts occur across many levels of the musical fabric, including harmony, phrasing, and texture. For this reason, we may add juxtaposition to the list of techniques such as fragmentation, repetition, stasis, and disruption that Cizmic identifies in postmodern composers who embody trauma.<sup>110</sup>

But what I have framed as conflicts can also be read as complements. By weaving these seemingly incompatible forces together, Leifs incorporates procedures Gilad Hirschberger has identified as methods by which victims of trauma create meaning, including passing down culturally derived teachings; embedding the trauma into a symbolic system of meaning; fostering a sense of collective self that promotes new meaning; using the sense of an historical collective self to increase group cohesion and group identification; and employing collective trauma as a lens through which group members may understand their social environment.<sup>111</sup> Each of these practices unfold in the *Requiem*. First, by associating his personal pain with the texts of *huldufólk*, Leifs permits the music and text to work synergistically to create a novel third space in which to express his grief. Second, the people of the landscape (represented by the *huldufólk* texts) and the people living within the landscape (represented by the contemporaneous allusion to his daughter) become central to forging a common Icelandic identity. Third, this fusion is made possible by tapping into the broader sociopolitical movement of creating a self-image in which “nature claimed a prominent part in the discourse”.<sup>112</sup> And fourth, Leifs often relied on a bidirectional perspective that looked back to sources of collective trauma to forge a path forward. As a result, it is never just his pain that is expressed in the *Requiem*, but the shared pain of his fellow Islanders.<sup>113</sup> They become one and the same in the rocking of a lullaby – an elegy to that which can never be recovered.

Therefore, it is through the intra- and extramusical layers of juxtapositions that Leifs bares his own ecology of suffering. This network of associations reveals his capacity to, as Jackson put it, “relate and re-relate” to the environment during a traumatic pain event. It is one that also granted him the agency needed to reorient himself. According to

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110 See Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 11.

111 See Hirschberger, *Collective Trauma*, 2.

112 Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 114-118.

113 While it is beyond the scope of this study, I suggest this process is also exemplary of Alexa Weik von Mossner’s concept of “strategic empathy”, which she explores in *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. Columbus 2017. See especially Chapter 3: “Imagining Pain”, 77-104.

Ingólfsson, “[b]y composing his daughter’s death, he rejected his status as a helpless bystander, attempting to regain the control he so desperately sought”.<sup>114</sup> In doing so, Leifs, much like Jackson, teaches us to embrace what Alan Bleakley has described as “the paradoxical value of sickness and suffering”.<sup>115</sup> In other words, he transformed his state of liminality into a site of identification by merging acute pain with past traumas and projecting the intersection of these vectors onto the Icelandic landscape, making it paradoxically a source of repose and a dynamic catalyst of change. It is one more enduring reminder of Jackson’s thesis that “Transformation unites us all. How we respond to transformation defines who we are and what our future can be [...] Seeing glacier vulnerability means not only seeing a glacier flood coming, but also seeing one’s self within the causal loop of the transforming flood”.<sup>116</sup>

## 5. Visible Spaces, Hidden Agendas: The Advantages and Hazards of Aestheticizing Pain

In the preceding sections, I have illustrated that, despite the years that separated the lives of M. Jackson and Jón Leifs, Iceland’s landscape was a common impetus for assigning meaning in the wake of disorienting pain events. I have also demonstrated that, amid ecologies of suffering, metaphor and juxtaposition functioned to shift our gaze out beyond the body-in-pain and reveal a deeper understanding of the transformative forces that act on it. Yet, despite these and other similarities in their approaches, there are several key differences, which serve as important reminders of the potential hazards of aestheticizing pain. To conclude, I offer a summary of these advantages and corresponding dangers.

One of the key advantages to aestheticizing pain is that it helps to alleviate a form of suffering that emerges from experiencing pain without significance. It provides value and a chance to reclaim one’s identity – often one that is, as Jackson has illustrated, radically transformed. But sometimes, assigning significance can be dangerous, especially when narratives of suffering are tied to so-called genius narratives. Leifs’ identification and near obsession with Beethoven is a powerful example of this union. By combining his love

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114 Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 269.

115 Alan Bleakley: *Don’t Breathe a Word: A Psychoanalysis of Medicine’s Inflation*. In: Bleakley, *Routledge Handbook*, 129-135, 134.

116 Jackson, *Secret Life of Glaciers*, 236.



of the heroic theme in the sagas with the romantic paradigm of the suffering genius, he assumed an identity sometimes referred to as “The Nordic Beethoven”.<sup>117</sup> The only path to greatness, the story goes, is through suffering. It is a story that many artists, including the contemporary composer Percy Grainger (1882–1961), flaunted.<sup>118</sup> At times, the trope of the suffering artist was even weaponized by combining it with racialized notions of superiority, especially during the rise of eugenics and subsequent exploitation by Nazi Germany.<sup>119</sup> Under such regimes, the “Nordic” were labeled superior in part because they were deemed more capable of enduring suffering than others. Moreover, history is full of instances in which entire groups of people have been forced to suffer under the guise of narratives which asserted that their pain does not “count”, cannot be felt, or, in those cases where it was recognized, they were denied relief.<sup>120</sup> In addition, the concept of heroism has long been tied to the role of the doctor. This emphasis on individualism, in addition to contradicting celebrated notions of collectivism, “runs counter to the team-based problem-solving approach to health care delivery that leads to better quality”.<sup>121</sup> Though not directly tied to the creation of the *Requiem*, Leifs’ tactical reliance on this trope for his own benefit exposes his hidden agenda and brings music and medicine into closer proximity under troubling circumstances.

Another key advantage to aestheticizing pain is that it can help to counteract the “thinning of pain-languages”, which transpired alongside the increased use of pain scales.<sup>122</sup> The examples in this study demonstrate that while pain descriptions contracted in some disciplines, they expanded in others. Instead of creating a façade of objectivity – guises which, as Biss has called attention to, often serve the practitioner more than the patient – both Leifs and Jackson provided opportunities for bridging the distance between the

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117 See discussion in Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 109-113.

118 Sarah Collins, Simon Perry: “The Beauty of Bravery”: Alternative Modernism, De-Historicizing Grainger. In: Suzanne Robinson, Kay Dreyfus (eds.): *Grainger the Modernist*. Surrey 2015, 17-32. They note: “The trope of self-transformation through suffering [...] is vital to understanding how the themes discussed in the pages above underpinned Grainger’s thinking about himself and his music” (ibid., 32).

119 See Ingólfsson, Jón Leifs, 159-194.

120 See Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 192-230, wherein she covers topics ranging from race and women to the fetus and mental health about which she concludes: “The belief that not every person-in-pain suffers to the same degree is intrinsic to hierarchical systems generally” (ibid., 230). Further aloft from musical spheres, one of the main focuses of Scarry’s seminal text is the strategic use of pain in torture, interrogation, and war.

121 Urmimala Sarkar, Christine Cassel: Humanism Before Heroism in Medicine. In: *JAMA* 326 (2021), 127-128. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.9569.

122 Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 137.

experiences of pain events and their “objective classification and treatment”.<sup>123</sup> In short, by conferring a pivotal role upon experience, these figures helped to close the gap between art and science created by physiologists at the start of the nineteenth century, wrestling it back from its exclusive status as an “object of science”.<sup>124</sup> But subjectivity has its limits. During the same decade Leifs was composing his *Requiem*, neurologist Thomas Lewis noted, “pain is known to us by experience and described by illustration”.<sup>125</sup> According to Cervero, this observation is problematic because “defining pain in terms of subjective personal experiences is as useful as telling a blind man that everyone knows what the color red is”.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, he admits, “the only way we have to assess pain is through communication with other human beings”. Cervero’s critique is a reminder that the study of pain cannot be completely unmoored from objectivity. After all, measuring pain – no matter how imperfectly – can be an important way of recognizing it. At the same time, I have argued that shifting the focus from defining and measuring pain to analyzing what it does can be useful to transcending the limits of the scientific method. As in Ahmed’s study of happiness, this approach can help when our efforts to measure and classify pain fail, or when one uses it as ‘a shield’ against possibility, thus resisting its reorienting force.<sup>127</sup> Finally, by enhancing shareability, the act of aestheticizing pain can serve as a catalyst for co-constructing meaning. It can form communities by strengthening bonds of sociability, connecting people to each other and, in some cases, to their “higher, spiritual family”.<sup>128</sup> This goal is achieved by mapping personal narratives onto works of art, which contribute to ecologies of suffering that encourage others to see themselves in the same stories.<sup>129</sup> At the same time, this process can harness the natural environment to grant agency to

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123 Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History*, 170.

124 For a history of the rise of scientism, see Otniel E. Dror: *Visceral Pleasures and Pains*. In: Esther Cohen et al. (eds.): *Knowledge and Pain: Probing the Boundaries*. New York 2012, 147-168; Moscoso, *Pain: A Cultural History*, 210-211.

125 Cervero, *Understanding Pain*, 2.

126 *Ibid.*

127 See Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 217-218.

128 Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 48. The positive outcomes of community formation have also been noted in clinical research. See, for instance, Orla T. Muldoon et al.: *The social psychology of responses to trauma: social identity pathways associated with divergent traumatic responses*. In: *European Review of Social Psychology* 30 (2019), 311-348. doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2020.1711628; Catherine Haslam et al.: *The group mechanism in treatment: group identification and cohesion contributes to reducing chronic lower back pain by increasing personal control*. In: *Disability and Rehabilitation* 45 (2023), 1332-1342. doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2022.2057602.

129 See Holly Watkins’ related discussion of “Schopenhauer’s Musical Ecology” in: *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music*. Chicago 2018, 66-84.

individuals and link the span of space and time that otherwise divide societies. Yet, while it is undeniable that both Jackson and Leifs intended their autobiographical stories to be read out of their aesthetic works, this process always carries the dangers of ascribing false assumptions.<sup>130</sup> Music – like language – can be as deceptive as any pain scale. Art therefore contains the potential to further exacerbate the false premises of biomedical approaches I outlined above by similarly claiming authority over an enigma that is as complex as it is ambiguous.

Notwithstanding these potential hazards, while neuroscience and other fields will continue to offer hope through new treatments and cures for pain, “the body is never pure soma” and, as Morris correctly forecasted, no switch could ever “stop the cultural process by which we construct meanings and uses for pain.”<sup>131</sup> For these reasons, we should not forget that narrative can sometimes be our best technology. It is by aestheticizing pain that it becomes more than a problem to be solved or a feat to be endured. It becomes a catalyst for creating new relations through a collective experience that questions the boundaries of the body and serves as a sinew of society.

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<sup>130</sup> Ingólfsson notes, “Leifs had always been (and would remain) an autobiographical composer, but this impulse is nowhere stronger than in these four works [composed after Lífs’ death]” (ibid., 261). See Mark Evan Bonds’ extensive discussion and historicization of this topic in *The Beethoven Syndrome: Hearing Music as Autobiography*. Oxford 2020.

<sup>131</sup> Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, 25. Here I also refer to Bourke’s statement in *The Story of Pain*, 17.