

Patton examines Leslie Jamison's book *The Empathy Exams* and notes the difficulty of defining "empathy" conclusively. Centering this essay on the investigation of that key term, she compiles evidence from critics and scientists in outlining Jamison's efforts to use writing as a means of connecting her own pain with that of others. (Instructor: Gerard O'Donoghue)

BLOOD, INK, AND PAIN: AN EXCAVATION

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Leslie Jamison's ex-boyfriend called her a "wound dweller" ("Grand" 186). The young essayist was offended. She wrote to a friend, "I've got this double-edged indignation about my bodily ills and ailments . . . On the one hand, I'm like, Why does this shit happen to me? And on the other hand, I'm like, Why the fuck am I talking about this so much?" (187). Jamison goes on to explore her physical and emotional ills, as well as the pain of others, through eleven essays compiled in her 2014 book *The Empathy Exams*. She dwells on wounds and, in the process, thoroughly reckons with the concepts of pain and empathy, seeking out pain to compile varying levels of visibility and intimacy. Her essays range from the personal confession of a journal entry to the cold analysis of a medical file. Jamison's attempt to tackle pain and empathy becomes an exploration of her own relationship with anguish.

Why did Jamison devote 218 pages of text to exploring empathy? Empathy eludes definition. According to Karen E. Gerdes, a professor of social work, "between 1957 and 1967 there were twenty-one different definitions of empathy offered in the social work literature" (2328). Researchers struggled to even categorize empathy, labeling it an "ambient interpersonal process," a "specific skill," or a purely physiological response, among other titles (2328). This lack of complete definition or categorization stems from its abstract nature. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, empathy is "the ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings" ("empathy, *n.*"). However, it is immensely difficult to measure a person's feelings.

Though this definition sounds succinct, it fails to give full shape to the concept of empathy. In 2007, neuroscientists Jean Decety and Yoshiya Moriguchi made significant progress in defining empathy, or at least its broad characteristics. They identified four major components of empathy: “affective sharing,” “self-awareness,” “mental flexibility and perspective taking,” and “emotion regulation” (Gerdes 2331-32). Their study found that all four components must be present for a person to have a “complete experience of empathy” (2331-32). Based on these criteria, Jamison is a deeply empathetic person. However, while all four components act in Jamison’s work, her propensity for each varies greatly.

Jamison effectively shares in other people’s emotions, often mirroring their perceived feelings: crying when they cry, flinching when they flinch. This sharing is largely due to her adeptness in the field of “mental flexibility and perspective taking” (Gerdes 2332). She frequently imagines what it would be like to be in another person’s position. While visiting a friend in prison in her essay “Fog Count,” she ponders the families of the other prisoners, thinking of their weekly visitation routines. She writes, “There’s a certain heartbreak to knowing the minutia so well: the inmate number, the plastic bag of quarters, the jeans and the hard chairs and the faces of the guards” (“Fog” 144). However, this ability to dive into other people’s worlds often makes it difficult for Jamison to draw boundaries between herself and the person or persons she observes; she “erases the perceived boundary between self and other,” struggling with the “self-awareness” detailed by Decety and Moriguchi (Gerdes 2332). This tension often leads to a lack of “emotion regulation” (2332)—Jamison tends to become overwhelmed by the emotions that arise in reaction to others’ feelings.

However, Jamison detaches herself in order to combat her tendency to mirror the emotions and pain of others and submerge herself in their minutiae. It is difficult to call this disassociation “emotion regulation,” because Jamison oscillates between extremes. When she allows herself to feel pain, it is an intense, vivid experience. When she analyzes that pain, her analysis is cold and unyielding. Jamison frequently applies both approaches to the same experience. Mark O’Connell, a critic for *The Slate Book Review*, observes this uncanny

ability: “she flinches, and then she explores that flinch with a steady gaze.” Jamison herself once wrote that she “looked back at [her] own life like text” (qtd. in McAlpin). This type of analysis is evident when Jamison applies the methodology of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp to examine the time she was attacked in Nicaragua. In the essay “The Morphology of the Hit,” she classifies each part of her experience getting mugged according to Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*: “a map for storytelling” consisting of thirty-one functions, or plot points, that can be rearranged and applied to any story (“Morphology” 70). Though she breaks down each part of the experience according to one of Propp’s functions, the content under each function contains the raw language of a woman reliving a painful experience—it’s full of blood, pain, and vulnerability.

One of the most vulnerable points in this essay occurs when Jamison reflects on the visibility of her wounds to the local townspeople. She writes: “Everything was visible to them—swollen face, bloody arms, bloody legs, bloody clothes. These were the only things I was composed of, and everyone saw them—everyone understood them—as well as I could” (“Morphology” 73-74). The visibility of pain is an ongoing concern for Jamison. In this particular instance, her pain has a distinct physical manifestation—after being punched, her face is swollen and she is covered in blood. The Nicaraguan townspeople can tell that a trauma has just taken place. However, pain does not always elicit such gruesome wounds. In “The Empathy Exams,” Jamison reflects on the emotional toil of an abortion she underwent some years before writing the essay. Much of the pain of the abortion was invisible to the outside eye. Jamison’s “sadness about the abortion was never a convulsion” (“Empathy” 12). Had the same Nicaraguan citizens seen her leaving the abortion clinic, they wouldn’t have paused their daily activities and registered the trauma. She admits, “Part of me has always craved a pain so visible—so irrefutable and physically inescapable—that everyone would have to notice” (12). To Jamison, tangible pain legitimizes her internal strife. When she began experiencing severe cramps three days after her abortion, she was relieved because “at least [she] knew what [she] felt” (12). Because of the pain, she could explain her distress easily to an outsider and, perhaps most importantly, to herself.

Jamison's concern over visible and tangible pain makes it difficult for her to reckon with both emotional and physical pain, as emotional pain rarely has a physical manifestation. The official definition of pain, according to the International Association for the Study of Pain, is "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage" (Wrigley and Siddall 31). However, the term "pain" is often applied to purely emotional struggles, removed from the fear of damaged tissue. For instance, the pain of loneliness is real, or at least commonly accepted as real, yet it does not necessarily have a physical component; Jamison's anguish in the aftermath of her abortion was certainly real before she experienced cramps. This may be due to the fact that emotional pain activates the same region of the brain, the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, as physical pain (Eisenberger 190). Despite similarities in neural activity, physical pain, which is chiefly exterior, is still visible, or at least easily understandable, to the outside viewer, while emotional pain is not.

Jamison craves visible pain because she wants identifiable verification of suffering. She is not alone. In "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," Jamison briefly examines the concept of 'cutters,' people who purposefully cut their own skin as an expression of inner pain. Jamison herself confesses to cutting because she wanted to give physical shape to her own unhappiness. She understands that "bleeding is . . . excavation, interior turned out—and the scar remains as residue, pain turned proof" ("Grand" 192). People who cut don't wish for blood; they, like Jamison, wish for evidence.

In her essay "Devil's Bait," the group of people Jamison encounters at a Morgellons convention in Austin, Texas, is different: they are hunting for visibility. These individuals firmly believe in the physicality of their pain, believing fibers grow out of their skin, causing irritation and discomfort. Their self-diagnosis of Morgellons disease is not, however, recognized in the scientific community; their fibers are barely visible to those who aren't "Morgies" ("Devil's" 28). Jamison interviews several Morgies at the convention. Her interviews are deeply personal—she hears from Dawn, a nurse who fears that Morgellons will affect her future relationships, and Paul, a Texan who has been battling with Morgellons for eight years. He called his dis-

ease “the devil’s fishing bait” before he had heard of Morgellons (43). The name sprung partially from the fateful fishing trip, during which he believes he contracted the disease, and partially from being “lured into response” (43). Paul’s battle with the disease is apparent: his skin is pockmarked and his ear mangled. Jamison observes these are likely self-inflicted wounds, made in attempts to purge the disease. His motivation was different than that of ‘traditional’ cutters, but the excavated results are the same.

Paul’s scars echo the lines Jamison carved into her own skin in the sense that both are visible manifestations of an otherwise indiscernible pain. *The Empathy Exams* achieves a similar effect: pain is made visible to readers via ink on a page. Jamison expresses internal and external pain through the countless experiences she shares in the eleven essays that make up the collection. These accounts, personal and otherwise, effectively make the book a compilation of anguish. This compilation is reminiscent of the poetry constructed by a friend Jamison met at a writers’ retreat in Mexico, an experience she details in the essay “La Frontera.” Her colleague, Marco, compiles fragments of others’ writing, often found on the Internet, to form his poems. In a recent project, he scoured blogs, message boards, and Twitter feeds for posts from the residents of Comales, Mexico, about their daily struggles, especially those caused by the rampant drug trafficking and gang activity in the area. He then spliced the disparate phrases together into a poem. However, Jamison clarifies, “The language isn’t ‘poetic’ because it didn’t start as poetry. It started as a cry” (“La Frontera” 65). The tormented posts of the townspeople, when taken together, became a powerful work of art seen by the public. Likewise, Jamison’s composition of pain is one wave of pain after another, layered on top of each other to create a desperate chorus, demanding visibility and response. Like Marco, she has composed a collage of pain—cries turned prose.

To collect this compilation, Jamison avidly sought out pain. *The New York Times* critic Olivia Laing commented on the “ethical tightrope between voyeurism and narcissism, between an unnatural interest in the woes of others and an unattractive obsession with the wounds of the self” that Jamison had to walk while exploring empathy and pain. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Jamison remarks on

her relationship with the different types of pain presented in the essays “The Morphology of the Hit” and “Devil’s Bait,” saying, “Going to the Morgellons conference is a choice in a way that getting hit in the street isn’t. But the collection chooses to bring all of those experiences together in a certain way” (qtd. in Emre). The complex exploration of empathy Jamison has embarked on in *The Empathy Exams* requires both personal and solicited pain. She worries about this solicitation when she interviews her imprisoned friend in “Fog Count,” confessing, “I’m afraid . . . that my curiosity will prove little more than useless voyeurism, a girl lifting her sunglasses to peer between the bars, stuttering *What’s it like here? What part hurts the most?*” (“Count” 141).

The mentality that Jamison fears is aptly called “poverty tourism” in Heller McAlpin’s NPR review of *The Empathy Exams* (McAlpin). The concept of ‘poverty tourism,’ alternatively called ‘reality tourism,’ first became prevalent in the mid-1990s in India, South Africa, and Brazil (Rolfes 421-422). International tourists would pay for guided tours of local, poverty stricken areas as part of a “*negative sightseeing*” excursion (422). The tour guides, often residents of the areas, promised the tourists an “*authentic or realistic*” excursion (Rolfes 422). Leslie Jamison embarks on an LA ‘gang tour’ in “Pain Tours (I): Indigenous to the Hood.” The tour closely mirrors the popular poverty tours of the mid-1990s in form: Jamison and a large church group from Missouri roll through the streets of an LA neighborhood in an air-conditioned bus. They peer out the windows as two former gang members regale them with tales of their past, filling in the surrounding terrain with former girlfriends in the projects, gunfights at their junior high school, and felony statistics of the area. While this account directly parallels a ‘poverty tour,’ Jamison’s other accounts do too—indirectly (421). Time and time again Jamison seeks out windows into others’ pain. Her experience at the Morgellons conference in Texas is an example of her hunt for pain. She extracted personal stories of loss and struggle from attendees like Dawn and Paul. She listened to speakers, perused photos of the supposed symptoms of the disease, and asked probing questions of attendees about the emotional impact of Morgellons. After the conference, she went home, free of the disease. Commenting on this experience, she writes, “I

spend a day in their kingdom and then leave when I please. It feels like a betrayal to come up for air” (“Devil’s” 46). Though she is aware, even ashamed, of her foray into ‘pain tourism,’ the awareness does not change her actions. It serves only to complicate Jamison’s internal struggle regarding her relationship with pain.

Jamison’s entire essay collection is a ‘reality tour.’ Though she details her experiences as a ‘tourist’ and as a sufferer, her narrative voice throughout acts as a guide. She leads the reader through trauma after trauma, drawing their attention to certain details and eliciting empathy. She, just like the poverty tour guides of LA, uses her past experiences to show her connection to the suffering that she displays. She writes that her gang affiliated tour guides were “curators and exhibits at once” (84). The same could be said of Jamison.

Leslie Jamison’s ex-boyfriend called her a “wound-dweller” (“Grand” 187). He was mistaken. She is a wound-hunter. She does not passively “dwell” on past wounds; she seeks them out and interrogates them. She holds them up to the light and examines them side-by-side with other wounds.

The epigraph at the beginning of *The Empathy Exams* reads: “*Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto*; I am human: nothing human is alien to me.” The quote first appeared in the Roman playwright Terence’s play *The Tormentor*. The epigraph seems to be Jamison’s declaration to the reader that no pain is foreign to her. Her very humanity grants her the right, and the ability, to relate to other people’s emotions. Around the time *The Empathy Exams* was published, Jamison got this phrase, in its original Latin, tattooed on her forearm. Bold cursive letters stretch from the soft skin of her inner elbow to her wrist. Again, it appears to proclaim her natural capacity for empathy. However, Jamison confessed in an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, “my tattoo wasn’t true for me, not yet. But it was what I most needed to hear, an asymptote, a horizon” (“Mark”). The tattoo serves as a reminder: a personal note that pain, a human condition, is not foreign to her. Yet this prompt, given its size and placement on her inner forearm, is visible to everyone around her. It is no wonder that the same woman who would publish *The Empathy Exams*, a raw collection of essays that is equal parts public discourse and personal discovery, would have an ink-laden needle repeatedly

puncture her skin to convey such an intimate, yet public, message.

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