

## As Fragile as Tissue and as Strong: Toward a Lacanian Somaesthetic Literary Theory

*Diane Richard-Allerdyce*

**Abstract:** *For many writers, self-care is closely linked to social justice issues and involves either telling the story of bodily violation and wounding or exposing it—often both. Drawing upon Alice Walker’s metaphor of physical scars as “warrior marks”—the site and source of strength, this paper employs a Lacanian Somaesthetic lens to explore examples of feminist literature that thematize bodily vulnerability as a condition of human existence at the same time they also suggest a way of approaching this vulnerability as an opportunity for transformation. The first half of the paper investigates how Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, when conversant with a feminist Somaesthetic pragmatism, can help readers employ what Richard Shusterman has called “thinking through the body” to move beyond binary systems of oppression. The Lacanian idea that all human subjectivity is constructed on the brink of a loss is useful for re-imagining a way of working through one’s own states of exile to achieve greater creativity, compassion, and community while avoiding the totalizing move of speaking for and about others as if culture were universal or homogeneously constructed. The second half of the paper provides a brief Lacanian Somaesthetic reading of a passage from Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* and a longer reading of Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series to suggest that a body-based linguistic/literary approach to vulnerability may be potentially liberating for individual writers and readers as well as potentially transformative on a larger scale.*

**Keywords:** *Jouissance – joy that can easily tip over into pain; excess of feeling. Magnetism – the force literature has upon the human psyche. Primary narcissism – bodily sensations that evolve “into the meanings Lacan called ‘letters’ that connect the body to the outside world via the drives” (Ragland, EPD 34). Trieb – Freud’s word for the psychic drives that make physical demands upon mental life.*

At the end of her essay “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self,” Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker describes the moment when her small daughter stood up in her crib, took Walker’s face in both hands and tipped it to the light, exclaiming, “Mommy, there’s a *world* in your eye!” That “world” in Walker’s eye was the scar tissue left by the childhood injury that permanently blinded her on that side when one of her brothers “accidentally” shot her with a BB gun. Walker dedicated the book in which this essay appeared to her daughter, Rebecca: “Who saw in me / what I considered / a scar / And redefined it / as / a world.”<sup>1</sup>

Walker objects to the accidentality of the incident that blinded her, though. She employs a feminist perspective to call into question the different ethics of care that boys and girls were (and to some degree still are) taught by patriarchal systems founded on duality. Why did her brothers get BB guns and the girls other types of playthings? Why was she put in danger and her brother empowered to wound with a weapon? For me, her confronting the gendered binary of social

---

<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self,” in *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004).

constructs resonates with Richard Shusterman's claim that cultivating somatic awareness can advance feminist goals by confronting dualities that perpetuate gender injustice. The ability for thoughts to produce physical changes in thinkers' bodies, Shusterman has argued, is evidence that the dualities between binary poles such as male and female, body and mind are misleading.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when Walker calls into question the so-called "accidental" nature of her injury at the hand of her weapon-bearing male sibling, she draws upon the experience of vulnerability to confront binary systems of oppression from the personal and familial levels outward. Walker's subsequent activism against domestic abuse, war, and female genital mutilation speak to the potential transformation of one's own bodily vulnerability into an ethics of care beyond duality.

For many writers including Walker, self-care is closely linked to social justice issues and involves either telling the story of bodily violation and wounding or exposing it—often both. Drawing upon Walker's metaphor of physical scars as "warrior marks"—sites and sources of strength—in this paper I employ a Lacanian Somaesthetic lens to explore examples of feminist literature that thematize bodily vulnerability as a condition of human existence at the same time they also suggest a way of approaching this vulnerability as an opportunity for self-care and transformation.

To explore the relationship between Somaesthetic vulnerability as it appears in literature and the potential for greater awareness on both writers' and readers' parts as they confront their own vulnerabilities, the first section of this paper, "Toward a Lacanian Somaesthetic Literary Theory," uses the example of Walker's "warrior marks" as a jumping-off place. From there, I investigate how Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, when conversant with a feminist Somaesthetic pragmatism that includes reading and/or writing stories about healing places of woundedness into sites of strength, can help readers move beyond binary systems of oppression. The Lacanian idea that all human subjectivity is constructed on the brink of a loss is useful for re-imagining a way of working through one's own states of exile—a form of self-care—to achieve greater creativity, compassion, and community while avoiding the totalizing move of speaking for and about others as if culture were universal or homogeneously constructed. The second half of the paper, "Our Vulnerability is our Gift and our Hope: Two Literary Examples," provides two Lacanian Somaesthetic readings of feminist literature. The first examines a brief scene from Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* to illustrate a character's realization of her complicity in a colonizing project that wounds her and her family as much as it oppresses members of another culture. The second is a longer reading of Octavia Butler's *Parable* series. Drawing on the Lacanian metaphor of human subjectivity as a Möbius strip, my analysis of *Parable* suggests that a body-based linguistic/literary approach to vulnerability may be potentially liberating for individual writers and readers as well as potentially transformative on a larger scale.

### **Toward a Lacanian Somaesthetic Literary Theory**

Somaesthetic philosophy recognizes the centrality of the body in human culture and consciousness. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is useful in seeing how language derives from awareness of the body and how language is used to situate the body in a world where it is vulnerable. Literature, particularly that which evokes a sense of bodily nostalgia, offers an experience of physicality as well as emotional solutions for the perplexing paradox that all of us are negotiating life from within and through bodies that die. Humans' vulnerability is not merely physical, of course, but the physical body mitigates the losses that make consciousness

---

2 Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2012), p. 1.

possible, even more so when viewed through the lens of a Lacanian Somaesthetic literary theory such as that proposed in this paper.

One way of understanding the relationship between writing and the body is to look at literary form as analogous to bodily form. In addition, the psychological effect writing has on readers and writers may stem from an analogous relation between literary creation and the processes of the psyche's development in infancy and beyond. Most of us, I imagine, have noticed when one's heart starts racing faster when reading a particularly moving passage. I remember hearing that Emily Dickinson once described good writing's effect on her as causing the top of her scalp to go cold. Similarly, Lacan pointed to the uncanny sway that James Joyce's writing had on him and theorized how that happens.

Ellie Ragland calls this pull a kind of "magnetism" that from a Lacanian perspective is based upon literature's function as "an allegory of the psyche's fundamental structure."<sup>3</sup> Lacanian theory provides a framework for viewing how such networks form our identities through a process that is similar to the way formal aspects of narrative serve as construct for identification in the places in the texts that resonate with past trauma--the formal literary structures of literature provides a container for writer and reader to confront a psychic fragmentation born of a paradox. This paradox is that human consciousness comes into being in the wake of a loss. Lacan's reformulation of Freud's unconscious as structured as a language sheds light on the role between body and mind. What Lacanian theory adds to Somaesthetics is a way of seeing how language operates somatically in the body.

What Somaesthetic philosophy adds to the Lacanian account is a pragmatist application of theory to a real-life ethics of care. For example, Shusterman writes in response to a passage of Beauvoir's where she celebrates "a new aesthetics" in working women's dress that: "Clearly the message here is that a change of Somaesthetic representations cannot only help change the bodies of women but also improve their overall self-image and empower them toward greater transcendence."<sup>4</sup> From a Lacanian perspective, transcendence would not be the goal even if it were achievable; nevertheless, it is clear the practice of a Somaesthetics can be potentially liberating in much the same way that a Lacanian perspective of vulnerability moves beyond binary rigidities to increased empathy for those whose bodies are as mortally vulnerable as one's own. A Lacanian view would not support a belief in a "true transcendence of consciousness and action in the world that real freedom requires" (Shusterman 120); it posits, instead, a relative affective freedom that is possible through bringing into awareness one's own and others' vulnerability. Knowing that all human beings are "the same boat" in the sense of having bodies whose social meaning is linked up with formation of identities through awareness of loss and awareness of the fictional role of the self as analogous to the ego/psyche and aligned to the ultimate vulnerability of both ego and body (which are inextricably linked, for Lacan, in language) is what is liberating. Reworded to include the Lacanian component, Shusterman's response to Beauvoir that "Imagined mysteries are usually much more feared than the familiar realities one has explored for oneself" (125) might read as follows: Denied unconscious attachments are more dangerous than consciously acknowledged alignments about real, imaginary and symbolic elements of the psyche. That is, rather than walking around in a body-ego designed to project an image of invulnerability, it is by engaging in the world from a conscious awareness that we are

3 Ellie Ragland, "The Magnetism between Reader and Text: Prolegomena to a Lacanian Poetics," *Poetics* 13 (1984): 381-406.

4 Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*: A Pragmatist Reading of a Feminist Classic," *Hypatia* 18.4 (2003): 106-136.

all temporary (rather than engaging in denial of unconscious “truth”) that can allow an affective freedom and appreciation of the strength and health that are achievable. This is not exactly the true liberation Shusterman discusses *vis-à-vis* Beauvoir. But it is an affective awareness based on acceptance of the paradox that only by acknowledging one’s own and others’ vulnerability can one be strong. It is also an awareness that might be harnessed within networks of social power.

The impossibility of reconciling self and other, body and mind, male and female is served by the Somaesthetic enterprise of transcending dualities. And the impossibility of it can be liberating in that even gender categories do not have to be social prisons when the constructedness of gender identifications are seen through the lens, for example, of queer theory, such as in Judith Butler’s challenge to a gender as binary and through the lens of Lacan’s account of everyone’s ascension to the social order through a non-biologically determined gender.<sup>5</sup> The account of that ascension, or at least entry, would not fit within the limits of this paper. But important to note is that for Lacan, categories of women and men exist only in their naming as such while emphasis is put on each subject’s individuality. This is not to erase the usefulness of gender categories for forming bonds of solidarity on whose basis to exert political power. It is, though, to draw attention to the human psyche as linked to bodies through language that determines identity and, from that perspective, to make examining the physical responses to literature that individual readers feel a worthwhile subject of philosophical consideration.

More importantly, Lacan’s work sheds a light on the psychological mechanisms that cause readers to experience somatic effects at the level of identity and desire. That is, the structural foundation of language (metaphor and metonymy) mimics the ways that humans develop consciousness in the first place. Delving into these in literature can aid a reader in identifying how she or he is organized as an individual within a social organization. In Lacan’s teaching, “the body resides within the metaphorical field of *jouissance*, while representation elaborates the metaphorical field of substitutive meanings (the Other).”<sup>6</sup> Lacan used the word *jouissance*—a pleasure that can easily tip into its opposite—to refer to “the supposed consistency of being, body, or meaning that individuals seeks to attain and maintain” (Ragland, *Essays* 13).

Further connections between Somaesthetic philosophy and Lacan’s ideas bear noticing. For instance, Lacan admired the work of Melanie Klein for drawing attention to the body in psychic life, and he reworked the theory Freud developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). There Freud defined *Trieb* or drives as “somatic demands upon mental life” (Ragland, *Essays* 33). The term “death drive” appeared here to account for human’s tendency toward constancy, aggression, and destructiveness. These are important to an exploration of how fear of dissolution can lead some to oppress others in order to compensate. This passage from Ragland’s *Essay on the Pleasures of Death* shows the connection between this fear, which in Lacan’s thought is fundamental to all human consciousness, and the drives. It also points to the link between language and self-image as rooted in bodily sensations from the earliest stages of human development:

In 1936 Lacan had proposed the ego as a strategy of defense for blocking the apprehension which comes from *situating* the infant body in the world. In the 1950s Lacan described the beyond in the pleasure principle as the principle of repetition whose modes are a few ego signifieds by which individuals try to guarantee their being at the level of their position in

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

6 Ellie Ragland, *Essays on the Pleasures of Death: From Freud to Lacan* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994).

a social signifying chain. (33)

“In Lacan’s reformulation of Freud’s concepts,” Ragland continues, “primary narcissism becomes corporal sensations that involve into the meanings Lacan called ‘letters’ that connect the body to the outside world via the drives” (*Essays* 34). She explains the connection between the soma and language in this passage: “By the time most children begin to use language (the symbolic) coherently, language *functions* to tie the biological organism (the real) to images of the body (the imaginary) and to objects in the natural world by *naming* or evoking the *form* of an image that replaces and absence ... language enables most individuals to be ‘human’ by talking or writing about the world at one remove from it” (*Essays* 117-118).

Their use of language is steeped in images of the body that indicate how language is not just a medium for the telling of a story but also material out of which a writer constructs psychological boundaries to withstand and process the world’s cruelties. That is, the narrative structure of these works of fiction mirrors that of the ego configurations of the human psyche, providing both writer and reader a place to confront and reorganize myriad elements of the world into a coherent form. Meaning-making is what humans do in order to live in the world. Literature represents and mirrors the process by which they do it, and a Lacanian Somaesthetic theory can help illuminate those processes toward the possibility of increased compassion for oneself and for others, that is, toward the possibility of transforming bodily sites of vulnerability into warrior marks—signs and sources of strength.

## **Our Vulnerability is our Gift and our Hope: Two Literary Examples**

### **Complicity and Awareness in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible***

Literature such as that presented in this paper often points beyond the words to something that lay outside of conscious memory, inviting readers into a realm from which they may have been excluded before. These “rupture moments” operate in the body as well as the imagination.

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, provides several such moments of rupture as readers enter the world of the Price family whose patriarch, Nathan, takes his wife Orleanna and four daughters in 1959 to the Belgian Congo where he has decided to serve as a Christian missionary.<sup>7</sup> Nathan is resolutely unconscious that he is replicating colonialism in dangerous and abusive ways. The narrative alternates in point of view among the female Prices; Orleanna learns through the materiality of grief over their youngest daughter’s death by snake bite to see her husband as the ineffective dominator that he is, but only years later as she processes her experiences in retrospect. The novel’s plentitude of somatic imagery provides a site for readers’ identification, as when the Price women prepare Ruth May’s small body for burial (454). Another is when one of the Price sisters says that exhilaration and fear feel the same in the body; only the naming of these emotions, she says, differentiates them (431), an observation reminiscent of-- and that problematizes--how language in Lacan’s account is “always already” embedded in the flesh as traces that trigger certain emotions or sensations.

A full Somaesthetic reading of *Poisonwood*, although certainly worthwhile and fascinating, is beyond the scope of this paper; however, I want to turn now to one more passaging from Kingsolver’s masterpiece as of the most compelling instances I have encountered of a somaesthetically haunting literary passage that highlights a character’s realization of vulnerability on several levels, including the rawness that accompanies becoming suddenly aware of one’s own

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel* (New York, NY: HarperTorch, 1998).

unforeseen culpability. The scene in question illustrates what I wrote in the introduction above:

The Lacanian idea that all human subjectivity is constructed on the brink of a loss is useful for re-imagining a way of working through one's own states of exile to achieve greater creativity, compassion, and community while avoiding the totalizing move of speaking for and about others as if culture were universal or homogeneously constructed.

In the following scene from *Poisonwood*, Orleana Price, the mother of the four daughters, writing from the US years after she has left her husband and returned from the Congo, revisits a memory that disrupts her idea of a universal womanhood and provokes instead—and over time—her realization that others' culture may not be so easily appropriated as she'd been taught to believe:

From everyone within walking distance, every fifth day, people with hands full or empty appeared in our village to saunter and haggle their way up and down the long rows where women laid out produce on mats on the ground. The vendor ladies squatted, scowling, resting their chins on their crossed arms behind fortresses of stacked kola nuts, bundles of fragrant sticks, piles of charcoal, salvaged bottled and cans or display of dried animal parts. They grumbled continually as they built and rebuilt with leathery, deliberate hands their pyramids of mottled greenish oranges and mangoes and curved embankments of hard green bananas. I took a deep breath and told myself that a woman anywhere on earth can understand another woman on a market day. (106)

The scene oscillates between the sensory textures, colorful imagery, and movement in Orleana's description and her increasing awareness of an acute separation that is based in part, but only superficially, on her different color: "However I might pretend I was their neighbor, they knew better."

The next part of her narrated memory is palpably cringe-worthy as Orleana tells the story of a cultural gaff she and one of her daughters made in a particularly striking way when twelve-year-old Leah made a seemingly innocent but culturally ignorant move and was aided by her mother in doing so. Finding themselves separated on either side of a display of goods without a visible path to rejoin each other in the same aisle, Leah reaches for her mother's hand for assistance in stepping over the mat of a vendor's wares between them. It seems a natural shortcut, but as soon as Leah has propped the large basket she is carrying on one hip and has started to step over the display, the young girl becomes stuck, unable somehow to complete the move she has initiated. Orleana and Leah are mortified as Leah finds herself suspended over the piles of vegetables and fruit. Immediately there is a cessation of movement all around as the men on the sidelines cluck in disapproval and the women vendors rise in protest and indignation at the audacity of the white women to have violated the vendor's territory. Leah is wearing a pinafore-style dress; it occurs to Orleana that the vendors are all imagining her daughter's genitals, "bare—for all anyone knew--," suspended over what Orleana calls--in her recounting of the incident--the vendor woman's "market day wealth." The passage consolidates her and her daughters' vulnerability to being duped into complicity with her husband's colonizing project, which she later recognizes as the result of tremendous cultural conceit on all their parts. The passage is also memorable in its marking the daughter's genital-sexual vulnerability, pointing to the paradoxical absence of solidarity between the colonized and colonizers of the same physical gender:

Until that moment I'd thought I could have it both ways: to be one of them, and also my husband's wife. What conceit! I was his instrument, his animal. Nothing more. How we wives and mothers do perish at the hands of our own righteousness. I was just one more of those women who clamp their mouths shut and wave the flag as their nation rolls off to conquer another in war... A wife is the earth itself, changing hands, bearing scars. (107-08)

The fictional Orleanna's scarring by her husband's colonization of her own family in addition to his shortsighted and failed attempts to convert the villagers to his worldview may serve as impetus for Kingsolver's readers to identify. Orleanna's willingness to change and to become aware may be an indication that she, like the real-life Walker, is using her scars as warrior marks, to tell a potentially liberatory story.

### **Her Greatest Weakness as her Greatest strength:**

#### **Hyper-empathy in Octavia Butler's Parable series**

In Octavia Butler's dystopian novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) protagonist Lauren Olamina, a hyper-empath who feels others' pain literally as her own, is the epitome of bodily vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> She is also, paradoxically, the epitome of strength in the sense of Walker's transformation of sites of physical woundedness into warrior marks—signifiers of strength and compassion. My reading of Lauren's thin-skinnedness (as a child she literally bleeds through the skin when she sees someone else hurt) links a Somaesthetic lens to the Lacanian idea of selfhood as having the shape of a Mobius strip to suggest that the dystopian message of Butler's *Parable* series may have an inner lining of hope that is continuous with and emergent from despair.

"The Mobius strip," write Ragland and Dragan Milovanovic in *Topologically Speaking*, "enabled Lacan to demonstrate how 'that which is interpersonal (conscious and unspoken) is connected to that which is intrapsychic (unconscious and pre-spoken). Indeed this topological device was Lacan's way of indicating how an "inside" (the unconscious) has continuity with an "outside" (the conscious)."<sup>9</sup> In this section of this paper, I investigate how the Somaesthetic and Lacanian psychoanalytic goals of moving beyond oppressive binary systems-- inside/ outside, male/female, physical/spiritual, Black/white, vulnerable/strong, for instance--play out on the surface of human bodies. The novel's message of hope for a sustainable existence reads gender and race beyond individual bodies while also suggesting that it is through the living, breathing, conscious, individual somatic body from which intentional community may emerge.

In the *Parable* series, the body repeatedly appears as the site of suffering and oppression as well as potential instrument of connection to soften lines between self and other. The story opens in July of 2024 (less than a decade from now of course but over three decades from the time of publication). It is the eve of Lauren Olamina's 15<sup>th</sup> birthday and her father's 55<sup>th</sup>. They live with Lauren's step-mother, Corey, and Lauren's four younger half-brothers in a gated cul-de-sac neighborhood in suburban Los Angeles. Life outside the gate is dangerous and violent. Politics are extremist and leaning toward fascist. The newly elected P resident Donner has successfully campaigned on a platform very similar to that represented in the slogan "Make American Great again" and intends to do that by targeting minorities, the poor, the lower middle classes, and anyone else who threatens the social order his party envisions, including LGTB persons and

8 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Recorded Books, LLC, 2000); *Parable of the Talents* (Recorded Books, LLC, 2007).

9 Ellie Raglan and Dragan Milovanovic, eds., *Lacan: Topologically Speaking* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2004).

those with religious beliefs that run counter to the status quo. Food, water and jobs are scarce. Troops of renegades called “Paints” rove the land, addicted to a new street drug called “Flash” or “Pyro” that makes watching fire better than having sex and thus causes those who use it to become murderous arsonists. Corporate employers are reinstating slavery by luring desperate families with abusive compensation packages that include housing and food sources for which employees are trapped into paying exorbitant amounts of their meager pay, often becoming indebted beyond remedy. There are rumors of new laws being passed that prevent employees from leaving the compounds where their jobs are based until their debts are paid. (An interesting twist is that Black and Latino families are not as sought-after by the corporations creating such systems, so that Whites are the most likely group to be enslaved—perhaps a projected kind of karmic pay-back). Patriarchal backlash against any possible progress made before the novel’s opening is rampant and systemic.

Beyond the walls of the neighborhood, rape, murder, decapitation, and other forms of bodily dismemberment are the norm. When community organizers venture beyond the walls for gun practice—the kids are allowed to start accompanying the adults from the age of fifteen—they are met regularly with the site of sick, desperate beggars, hungry dogs, and decapitated human heads and other body parts, and corpses. It would be difficult to describe the extent of the horrific conditions the novel presents as a projected reality for the Western US in 2024, when robbers and arsonists have already begun making it over the walls despite the broken glass bottles and razor wire that have been installed on top of the wall.

*Parable of the Sower* opens with two scenes, written as a series of Lauren’s journal entries, that are remarkable for their somatic themes. In the first, Lauren reports in her journal entry of July 2014 that she had a recurring dream the night before, the eve of the birthday she shares with her father. The dream, she writes, comes when she struggles to “be [her] father’s daughter,” signifying her grappling with traditional familial roles in a patriarchal system that has spiraled out of all control in the dismal and violent world that is the book’s setting. We soon learn her rebellion is waged most overtly against his religion, which she says is “all a lie” although she loves the man her father is to her, “the best person [she] know[s].”

In the dream, she is learning to fly, which involves manipulating her body through the air. She is not able to completely control the direction she moves in as she projects herself, and sees that she will inevitably hit the jam of the door through which she is attempting to fly.

It seems to be a long way from me, but I lean toward it, holding my body stiff and tense. I let go of whatever I’m grasping, whatever has kept me from rising or falling so far, and I lean into the air, straining upward, not moving upward but not quite falling down either. Then I do begin to move as though to slide on the air drifting a few feet above the floor, caught between terror and joy.

As in the other renditions of the dream, the walls begin to burn and she flies through the flames as if swimming, grabbing at handfuls of air in a futile attempt to escape. Then the scene goes dark and she awakes. The fire is reminiscent of the violent world outside as well as symbol of transformation. The dream also highlights the role of the body as an instrument as Lauren imagines traversing normative limits and defying rules of physics that may seem as inconvertible as social attitudes toward gender and race.

The second Somaesthetic theme appears shortly after that of the fire dream, as Lauren reflects on a childhood memory: at the age of seven she used to go outside just after dark with her stepmother, Corey, to take the laundry down off the line. In the relative coolness and safety from

the heat of the day they would marvel the star-filled sky as Corey handed Lauren armfuls of her little brothers' diapers. Speaking in her native Spanish, Corey told Lauren that they hadn't been able to see too many stars when Corey was small because the lights of the now-destroyed cities would block their being seen. Stars, she tells Lauren, were windows through which God could keep an eye on the people below—a story Lauren believed for about a year, already precociously developing her own theory of humans' relation to a larger order. While Corey preferred the city lights, ostensibly wishing for a return to normalcy to the time when cities' infrastructure provided convenience, comfort and structure, Lauren, who had never lived in a “functional” society, prefers the stars, even at her young age longing to be released from captivity on the small stamp of earth where her family lives behind a wall in what is left of their gated community.

This sky in the remembered scene appears as a kind of membrane, the skin of the universe's face. Here and throughout the narrative the universe itself is not a separate entity but more of a living body, a theme that is central to the novel's impulse toward an expanding sense of relationship between self and other, between individual and community, between inside and outside. Once again, I find the metaphor of the Möbius strip for representing the psyche an image applicable to Lauren's worldview as well as of the semi-permeable membrane-like quality characteristic of her perceptions. Even as a child her hyper-empathy puts her in the company those whose *jouissance*—Lacan's term for a capacity for overflowing of both pleasure and pain, or enjoyment that can easily tip over into its opposite—is characteristic of people whose ego boundaries are more fluid than normative. Lauren's is the *jouissance* of poets, mystics, and hysterics for their flexible sense of selfhood (as opposed to the more rigid egos of those who buy into patriarchal structures). I see Lauren as a mystic in this sense, someone who sees and feels beyond the surface of things, beyond the surface of her own skin. She is someone able to “think through the body” in ways that not everyone can do, at least without practice or a leap of faith (although others affected by the same condition appear as the story continues).

Hysteria manifests in bodily effect. In the *Parable* series, the body repeatedly appears as the site of suffering and oppression becomes an instrument of hope and connection that leans away from binaries between self and other. Lauren's dream about teaching herself how to fly signifies that thinking through the body, while easier perhaps for some who are predisposed to fluidity through hyper-empathy, is a learned skill. It is a skill Butler's novels suggest could become an antidote to oppressive colonization (later Lauren suggests that colonizing other planets, however, underlining the narrative's resistance to binaries including “good/bad” may be a key to a different kind of existence).

It is Earthseed, Lauren's own kind of religious philosophy that counters the norms upheld by her father's seemingly benign form of patriarchy and its dangerous inner surface that is continuous with its outer expression. Here the image of the Möbius strip, where there is only the illusion of inside and outside, is helpful in visualizing the relationship between the inner and outer surfaces of patriarchy as Lauren Olamina experiences and resists it. The Möbius strip may be an ideal metaphor for unveiling the insidious dangers of rigid binaries—as well as the danger in wholesale condemnation of either pole. In this regard, *Parable of the Sower's* call for a nuanced reading of conventions and suggests that even in efforts to resist totalizing effects of polarity in psychic and social life, it may be advantageous to avoid wholesale rejection of the systems from which they stem. That “the baby shouldn't be thrown out with the bathwater is thematized when Lauren, having stopped believing in her community's God three years beforehand, allows herself to be baptized to keep the peace. In her journal, which is the book being read—there's no aesthetic distance between the two—Lauren sardonically remarks on the absurdity of “seven kids [getting] dunked in a big tub of expensive water.” Yet she respects her father's sacrifice in

purchasing that water and decides to choose her battles carefully as she matures from the fifteen-year-old who opens the novel to the eighteen-year-old who, several chapters later, will present herself as a man when she takes to the road after her entire family is murdered and most of the community decimated in series of raids by rapist-thieves.

On their journey northward, the tendency to constantly weigh what is worth risking proves useful as she and a growing band of travelers make their way toward a hoped-for better life in the Pacific northwest and later, in the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, as some members of their group seek that better future “among the stars,” that is, in space.

Lauren’s hyper-empathy, we learn, is an inherited condition caused by a drug called Paracetco that her mother took when she was pregnant. Labelled by doctors as a delusion, Lauren’s hyper-empathy, is both a blessing and a curse, a form of “biological compassion” she calls it at one point in the narrative. Having to experience others’ pain as her own leads her, several years later, to found an intentional community based on cooperation over competition for resources.

As a child, Lauren bleeds when others’ skins are broken. Interestingly, after she begins menstruating, the bleeding through the skin stops although the pain she feels when she sees anyone else injured remains intense. The displacement of Lauren’s bleeding from the surface of her skin to her menstrual flow seems significant, though I’ve struggled to make sense of it completely. For me, the shift from surface bleeding to uterine--external and visible to others to internal and concealed--draws attention to the novel’s grappling with the relation between gendered biological reproductive functionality and the Somaesthetic--aspects of Lauren’s condition. Also significant is that it is about the same time as she begins menstruating that Lauren also begins to develop her antireligious philosophy of “Earthseed,” signaling a turn from the conventional expectations that her destiny is to marry young and bear children as several of the teens in her neighborhood have already begun to do.

The name of the new religion Lauren envisions, “Earthseed,” comes to her as she works in the garden, pushing seeds below the crust of earth and dreaming of how the destiny she envisions for humankind is to “take root among the stars.” We can see a parallel between this crust and the protective membrane around the body that is the skin, like the novel’s playing with the idea of the sky as a living membrane. For at least three years, she says, her father’s god has not been her own. Her journal becomes home to her own set of scripture-like messages, subtitled “The Books of the Living,” which will become the basis for the intentional community she’ll start a few years later after her family and most of her neighbors are killed during an invasion by the “Paints.” Her father has been missing for weeks when this happens, disappeared while bicycling home from the college where he teaches outside the neighborhood (no one of modest means can afford to drive a car any longer; only arsonists and the very rich can afford to buy gasoline). He is suspected dead, considering the numerous corpses and charred body parts found when the community searches for him. In the immediate aftermath of the raid when their families, including children and elderly, are burned, raped and murdered, Lauren teams up with two other survivors: 1) Zahra Moss, a young African-American who has just had her baby ripped from her arms and thrown into the fire during the invasion, the third wife of a man scorned by his neighbors for bigamy but, it turns out much loved by the formerly homeless girl who found in the marriage the first home she ever had, and 2) Harry Balter, a member of one of the neighborhood’s several white families who has barely survived after being attacked when he pulled a rapist off of Zahra. The three survivors find each other after Lauren ventures back to the neighborhood she has fled the night before to look for her stepmother and brothers and to retrieve supplies, money and guns from their hiding places at the house, which is being ransacked by scavenger-looters.

Lauren, Zahra and Harry hole up in a burned-out garage for a few days while Harry recovers and decide to start traveling together. Prevailing attitudes toward mixed-race groups lead Lauren, who is tall enough to pull it off, to travel as a man and thus to present as Zahra's partner—a Black couple traveling with Harry, whom they hope will tan enough to be believable as a cousin of theirs. Thus Lauren, the youngest of the group and perhaps the most headstrong, becomes, at 18, the leader of a growing troop of travelers trying to make their way north to a better life in Oregon. Neither of her companions knows about her “sharing”—another word for her hyper-empathy; she feels too vulnerable having anyone outside of her family realize that she can be disabled by pain at the mere sight of another's injury because if the knowledge spread to the wrong people it would give them power over her. Nor do they know that Lauren is writing the verses that will become the scriptures for her new religion, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Earthseed is a philosophy based on the idea of an impersonal God that is essentially a law of physics. Lauren's god does not love or protect anyone personally nor require of them any form of obedience. Rather, “god is change” we are told multiple times, and “everything you touch changes you.” What Lauren's philosophy is getting at, it seems to me, is the interconnectedness of all things and all life. Her words hint at a pliability and permeability of the membrane that separates God from people and/or the spirit from the body and where the skin separates the outside from the inside.

At times the point seems overwrought; the philosophy presented as controversial and potentially revolutionary is based on a theory that is as metaphorically as old as the stars themselves. Still, the story and especially its relational themes are compelling as the narrative follows Lauren and her fellow travelers many hundreds of miles on foot through a landscape ravaged by environmental destruction and undeclared civil war. Gradually Zahra, Harry and Lauren allow others, including a young family with a baby, to join their group. Bonds between some become romantic and sexual, and new families are forged from survivors of multiple forms of violence; Lauren finds love in the unlikely person of a much-older retired physician named Bankole whose destination is an expanse of land his family owns in Humboldt County, California. Over the ensuing chapters as their relationship develops, the plan evolves to settle on that land and create the intentional community Lauren has long envisioned, which Butler portrays as far from Utopian. Named Acorn, the community is based on the teachings of Lauren's Earthseed philosophy of change and cooperation. It is built on the ashes of Bankole's whole family whose charred remains they find upon arrival at the property.

Throughout the *Parable* series, the body repeatedly appears as the site of suffering and oppression. Yet the body also becomes an instrument of hope and connection that leans away from binaries between self and other. Lauren's dream about teaching herself how to fly—the scene with which *Parable of the Sower* opens--signifies that thinking through the body, while easier perhaps for some who are predisposed to fluidity through hyper-empathy, is a learned skill. It is a skill Butler's novels suggest could become an antidote to oppressive colonization.

While some critics have remarked on the lack of hope that Butler's dystopian novels portray—the utter sense of disillusion and despair brought on by human excess--I read them somewhat differently, seeing in the *Parable* series the possibility that what is good and noble might be retained and/or regained. For Lauren Olamina and her followers, hope of a better world may lie in outer space. But the story's embracing of a continuum rather than binary opposition between “inner” and “outer” realities, between “self” and “other,” and between culturally prescribed gender identities (among other binary constructions that are oppressive) coincides with Walker's metaphor of scars as symbols of strength and resilience.

In conclusion, stories about the body's fragility can signify the possibility of compassion and

community beyond the surface of individuals' skins. As Kingsolver's character Orleanna Price embraces a wounding that leads to awareness and self-forgiveness, the Lacanian Somaesthetic approach to the feminist literature presented here indicates that the body's vulnerability may be seen as opportunity for furthering both psychoanalytic criticism's and Somaesthetic philosophy's meliorative aims. Through their lenses, stories of wounding transformed become components within an ethics of care that can lead to healing on both individual levels (for writers and readers) and, potentially, on a larger social scale as individuals take that healing into the world.

## References

- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, Octavia. 2000. *Parable of the Sower*. Recorded Books, LLC.
- . 2007. *Parable of the Talents*. Recorded Books, LLC.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. 1998. *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel*. New York, NY: HarperTorch.
- Ragland, Ellie. 1994. *Essays on the Pleasures of Death: From Freud to Lacan*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . 1984. "The Magnetism between Reader and Text: Prolegomena to a Lacanian Poetics," *Poetics* 13: 381-406.
- Ragland, Ellie and Dragan Milovanovic, eds. 2004. *Lacan: Topologically Speaking*. New York, NY: Other Press.
- Shusterman, Richard. 2003. "Somaesthetics and *The Second Sex*: A Pragmatist Reading of a Feminist Classic," *Hypatia* 18.4: 106-136.
- . 2012. *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.
- Walker, Alice. 2004. "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self," in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. By Alice Walker. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, pp. 361-70.