I’D RATHER BE A SAGE THAN A CYBORG: RE-THEORIZING POSTHUMANISM THROUGH RELIGIOUS WISDOM LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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The topics of identity and subjectivity are well-trodden paths in posthuman thought, and the trend has been to reduce the self to its material, social, and techno-scientific components. Yet the posthuman model of subjectivity—influenced by the tenets of postmodernism—tends to be disabling because it does not focus on the subject’s agency or the possibility of liberation from social tyranny. In this thesis, I use a sampling of what I call “religious wisdom literature”—specifically, the wisdom books of the Old Testament and contemporary Buddhist writings—to challenge the assumption that the self is indistinguishable from the ideologies that produce it. I provide models from religious texts that instead, emphasize critical agency, flexibility, and resistive power. I also suggest that focusing on these qualities may ultimately be useful in the composition classroom, where we can use “self-centered” expressivist techniques (reflective assignments, emotional awareness) to meet the social-epistemic goal of ideological critique. Ultimately, posthumanism, with its emphasis on the construction of subjectivity, is better suited to question strict materialism and inquire into the inspiring possibilities of ancient wisdom.
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Introduction..............................................................................................................1

Chapter I: "I Am Not What I Am Thought to Be": Biblical Wisdom Literature and Posthuman Hermeneutics ..........................................................................................11

Chapter II: The Posthuman Warrior: Re-Theorizing Posthuman Subjectivity Through Buddhist Wisdom Literature ..............................................................27

Chapter III: Conclusion and Posthuman Wisdom Pedagogy.................................43

Works Cited............................................................................................................52
INTRODUCTION

Although I am not religious, I have always been struck by the opening of the Book of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God” (John 1.1). The verse is so elusive, almost playful in its tenuous contradictions. How can “the Word” be God, and be “with God,” at the same time? If God supposedly created time, how could he be “in the beginning?” Further, why is this metaphysical God described as a “Word,” if words are human constructs? Finally, what does it mean that this “Word” gained material status and “became flesh and dwelt among us?” (John 1.14). Yet, even as the verse produces these illogical twists-and-turns—the kind of inconsistencies that might infuriate some—to me, it always felt perfectly complete. John 1 acknowledges the sacredness in everything. The God of this text is unfettered by logic; he (pronoun issues notwithstanding) transcends a dualistic system of language that demands things either be this or that.

I think there is something we can learn from the non-dualistic God imagined by the writer of the Book of John. In our increasingly complex techno-capitalistic society, identities are shifting and changing as much as the surrounding environment. Perhaps John 1 teaches us not to hold too tightly to any aspect of identity and to acknowledge the inherent goodness in all parts of ourselves, even the most deeply illogical and confounding. The topics of identity and subjectivity are well-trodden paths in critical theory, yet the trend—it barely needs mentioning—has been to move away from religion and to turn instead to the comfortable certainties of humanism with its material, social, and techno-scientific explanations. However, I think that religious texts still have something to offer in this arena. In this thesis, I use a sampling of what I call “religious wisdom texts” to challenge some of the assumptions that shape current understandings of identity and
subjectivity. For example, the postmodern rendering of subjects as socially constructed, as purely “ideological”—a view first popularized by French Marxist Louis Althusser—has become commonplace in critical theory. In this introduction, it is my first task to discuss some of the problems with the Althusserian model of subjectivity. However, I want to orient my discussion not in postmodernism, but in posthumanism, a more contemporary field of critical theory that many claim has supplanted the former. I see various ways that Althusserian subjectivity influences posthumanism, and the next part of this introduction is devoted to showing some of those similarities and why this view is problematic for posthumanism and the premises that its theorists set up. Finally, in the chapters that follow, I move to the wisdom literature to reveal new possibilities for imagining selfhood. These religious ways of constructing the self, I argue, ultimately allow for more agency, flexibility, and resistive power for posthuman subjects.

In the postmodern imagination, subjectivity follows a deterministic logic that is structured around social relations. Lamenting the loss of human distinctness and individuality, Frederic Jameson famously refers to the “death of the subject” in his book *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (16). Jameson asserts that “subjects,” no longer the prized possessions of Enlightenment ontology, are “dead” in that they would not exist at all if not for the social relations that formed them. Althusser similarly emphasizes the influence of the social over the individual in his germinal essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in which he argues that selfhood is a construct produced by these “ideological apparatuses.” According to Althusser, ideological state apparatuses, or ISAs, include various social institutions: religion, the family, the education system, the legal system, political parties, and so on (1341). There is no “you” or “I” prior to the ISAs, in Althusser’s thinking: “you and I are *always already*” their “subjects” (1357). These idea-making institutions “interpellate” individuals into their ways of seeing, thinking about, and being in the world (1355). To be interpellated by ideology means to relinquish ownership over oneself and relocate the center of selfhood in these
larger institutions. Michel Foucault, another postmodernist, puts forth a similar argument in *Discipline and Punish*. He wagers that selfhood is, in so many words, imaginary: “the individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society” (194). In various inflections, the postmodern view seems to suggest that individuals no longer speak; rather, ideologies speak through them.

In recent years, as posthumanism has come to take postmodernism’s place as the most current and cutting edge “post” of our time, it strikes me that this same view remains largely unrevised. In her book *How We Became Posthuman*, foremost posthuman theorist N. Katherine Hayles describes the posthuman subject as an “amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components,” whose identity is “owned . . . because [it was] purchased” (3). Not only is posthuman identity caught up in a Marxist web of “market relations” (3), the posthuman individual lacks any agentive or resistive power to break from her socially, materially-inflected existence. Quoting C.B. Macpherson, Hayles defines human essence as “‘freedom from the wills of others’” (4). In posthumanism, “human essence” is a fiction, and since “there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will” (4), the posthuman individual cannot disentangle herself from these ensnaring ideologies because there is no individual outside of them to do that work of deconstruction. Ideology, for Hayles as well as for Althusser, becomes the proverbial fishbowl through which the colors and shapes of “reality” will forever be distorted for subjects.

The way these theorists imagine selfhood can be, I think, somewhat disabling and disempowering. It is as if there is a dangerous minefield of ISAs—or in posthuman terms “other-wills”—that constantly threaten to decide for us who we are, and that essentially, escape is futile. “You have no choice,” this view says, “you have only the illusion of choice.” Omnipresent and influential as social forces may be, I maintain in this thesis that we need to reclaim ownership over selfhood and challenge these models, questioning the primacy of social relations and ideology as the basis of identity. Instead of theorizing
away our inherent agency, we need to find ways to strengthen it; instead of assuming we are powerless against social forces, we need to find ways to sharpen our critical faculties. However, mine is not a nostalgic yearning for more self-definition; it is a feminist plea for freedom from definition. When we accept without question the postmodern injunction that the self does not exist, we perpetuate a patriarchal imperative that interpellates women into a system of signification where their identities are always-already decided for them, well before enough of us had the chance to speak them for ourselves. As bell hooks famously quoted in “Postmodern Blackness,” “it’s easy to give up identity—if ya got one” (9). Just as black intellectuals struggled with the death of subjectivity in postmodernism, women still face the same problem of self-effacement in the posthuman era. I believe that alternative, more empowering and positive qualities need to be asserted into the way we conceive of subjectivity, and the religious subjects I analyze in my thesis can offer a few avenues for exploration in this area.

When the postmodern view deflects subjectivity to ideology, not only does it deemphasize the agentive power of subjects, but it also overlooks the varied, intricate textures of conscious experience that may not be ideological in nature. In other words, it assumes that identity is found in one’s thinking—in one’s ideas—which elides the presence of other dimensions of conscious experience such as emotion, physical sensation, and the many nebulous states in between. While posthumanism has already begun to parcel out the multiple dimensions of conscious experience, these discussions have drawn mostly from scientific explanations of identity. Hayles, for instance, focuses on the role of biological phenomena. Experiences can be “culturally constructed,” according to Hayles, but not “entirely so,” for they emerge “from the complex interactions between conscious mind and the physiological structures that are the result of millennia of biological evolution” (“Flesh and Metal” 297). Hayles’s inclusion of biological and evolutionary forces helps to broaden the strictly ideological/ Marxist model; however, “biology” and “evolution” are themselves products of humanism. Further, when one posits the concept of “physiological structures,”
one has moved into the realm of abstraction, which is already a step away from immediate subjective experience. While bodies are made intelligible through “biology and culture, evolution and technology,” such understandings, while valuable within their proper limits, still in the end produce a reductive view of subjectivity. I think that understanding identity means looking closely and deeply within ourselves, but reducing subjectivity to the discursive regimes of ideology, biology, or evolution reduces the intricacy and uniqueness of experience to totalizing metanarratives.

Posthumanism risks staying entrenched in an outdated paradigm when it endorses ideological subjectivity because underlying this view is a hard materialist philosophy that contradicts its goals. In Althusser’s case, for instance, although he describes ideology as linked in a dialectical relationship with materiality (1353), this dialectic eventually ends in a materialist telos. Ideology is simply materiality that appears in a different “modality,” but all are “rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter” (1353). Hayles appears to also rely on materialist philosophy to make her claims about posthuman subjectivity; however, her subject is not “material-ideological,” but “a material-informational entity” (3). Hayles’s posthuman subject is both material and “informational,” which refers to the genetic as well as the computational aspects of consciousness. Hayles intends to contest the “conceptualization that sees information and materiality as distinct entities” (12). Yet in a rhetorical fashion similar to Althusser’s, Hayles in the end reduces her claims about subjectivity to the material: “information must always be instantiated in a medium” (13). By describing information as always “instantiated in” material phenomena, Hayles implicitly suggests a separation between the two. However, I think it is in posthuman critical inquiry’s best interest that we continue to interrogate materialism.

One reason materialist premises are problematic because they conflict with posthumanism’s goal to move beyond Enlightenment humanism, the worldview that produced materialist philosophy. In “Theorizing Posthumanism,” Neil Badmington argues that posthumanism is to “take the form of a critical practice” that consists of “the working-
through of humanist discourse” (22). Materialist philosophy should not be exempted from such a critical practice. To illustrate, the existence of physical matter must be demonstrated on a human scale; what counts as “matter” for humans occurs differently for other species. Various nonhuman animal species perceive and navigate what humans see as “physical matter” very differently. Echolocation, for instance, presents a wholly other form of subjectivity that, for bats, probably does not have the same texture of experience at all compared with a human’s. A bat’s “material reality” consists of sound waves, which occur for humans in a completely distinct way. Such comparisons between human and nonhuman animals are becoming popular in the emerging field of animal studies, often itself aligned with posthumanism. As such, critiques of anthropocentric materialism are already happening.

Materialism is formed from the vestiges of an outdated, classical view of physics that scientists themselves already consider problematic. This essentially reductionist view upheld that “any complex phenomenon could be understood by reducing it to its individual components and eventually down to elementary material particles” (Greyson 37). Twentieth-century quantum physics reveals how shaky the materialist understanding of the universe is. The Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum physics, pioneered by Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, holds that subatomic phenomena behave either as particles or waves, depending upon the presence of an observer. As Karen Harad explains, “Bohr rejects the atomistic metaphysics that takes ‘things’ as ontologically basic entities” (813). What this adds up to is that in order for “physical matter” to exist, one must willfully ignore the wave properties of subatomic particles, a basic empirical truth of physics. If we are to engage questions of human existence, which, if followed long enough, lead to ontological questions, it seems reductive to disregard these findings. Quantum physics may seem removed from a discussion of identity and subjectivity, but if the posthuman model relies on materialism, it is worthwhile to consider the scientific basis for it.

Our conceptions of consciousness in the posthuman moment must continue to
evolve with contemporary science; such an interdisciplinary approach to posthumanist inquiry is ultimately in its favor. However, as I have suggested, these are bright and promising areas of research that are well attended-to. What has been given less attention is how the interdisciplinary study of ancient, religious texts might work to advance this field of theory. Pairing religion with theory is not a new phenomenon. The so-called “postmodern theologians” of the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s such as John D. Caputo, Victor E. Taylor, and Charles Winquist have all brought postmodernism and religious ideas together. Jacques Derrida also wrote about religion and Judaism late in his career. My thesis is written in the spirit of these writers; however, I hope to generate a discussion that is distinctly posthuman in register. By nudging posthumanism away from materialism and instead toward metaphysics (and in turn, pushing religion towards posthumanism), I aim to empower readers by liberating them from the tyranny of their calcified assumptions about subjectivity. Subjects may be “material-informational,” but in my conception, they also share a deep connection to the metaphysical. When we begin to develop this blasphemous faith in something larger than ourselves, we see that “ideology”—once hegemonic—may be exchanged for “ideological consciousness,” which becomes simply one among many possible states of subjective experience. When ideology is regarded as a mode of consciousness instead of a totalizing narrative of identity, individuals have more power to critically engage with their ideas. Finally, the ground of identity—human essence, if you will—is defined not as “freedom from the wills of others,” but as awareness. I will discuss each of these further below.

Perhaps this occurs as a brash statement, but I think that in order to talk about subjectivity at all, it is necessary to talk about metaphysics. Analyzing Descartes’ Meditations, Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion argues that the construction of the ego—Descartes’s cogito—depends on an “otherness” within subjectivity. He writes, “the ego does not attain itself except by the interlocution whereby an other than itself establishes it prior to every self-positing” (26). What is this “other than itself?” I cannot
speak its name. It can be witnessed in the liminal space before thinking, before ideas, or as postmodern theologian Charles Winquist puts it, “in the middle of experience” (7). This otherness, this metaphysical, non-substantive space, might be thought of as an aporia or opening in subjectivity, one that gestures towards perhaps a theological thesis. While the otherness that allows for “self-positing” can be found within subjective experience, there is something unknowable, unspeakable, and indefinite that makes all of it possible—an emptiness that makes articulation possible. For Winquist, “the conceiving of God enfranchises the consideration of that which is other than subjectivity from within subjectivity” (35). This other, this God, as Winquist suggests, is paradoxically immaterial—“other than subjectivity”—yet retains an intimate subjective connection with individuals. Again I am reminded of John 1 and the befuddling omnipresence of God, that coy figure is both present and absent, spirit and flesh.

In addition to this “otherness within subjectivity,” another link we might find to a metaphysical connection in ourselves is in the experience of awareness. We can look without perceiving; we can observe without judging. While perception and judgment lie in the realm of ideology, awareness of these mental phenomena appears to lie—and the Derridean overtones are intentional—elsewhere. Even scientists cannot locate where consciousness “is” in the brain. Using awareness as the ground of selfhood, we might speak of an “ideological consciousness” that represents merely one possibility in the colorful field of our experience. There is a part of us that possesses the ability to witness our inner experience, and through this witnessing we can observe ideological consciousness without buying into it. Marion highlights the parts of us that can “hear,” “experience” and “notice the world” (1). Marion’s “I” is a powerful way of conceptualizing subjectivity because it allows for the possibility of observing ideological consciousness without letting it become our master. There may be no observer, but there is an observing. This does not mean that identity is not deeply imbricated in ideology, but it does mean that we are capable of noticing our identification—our allegiances,
likes, dislikes, preferences—without being our identification. The so-called “death of the subject” in postmodernism (and in posthumanism, when Hayles rejects an atomistic understanding of self) is not fatal if we can bear witness to its death.

Opening subjectivity to include this metaphysical otherness—this force that is both there and not there, that is both inside and outside—and the witnessing aspect of consciousness both work to awaken the posthuman subject’s critical faculties. The “I” who notices her thoughts without attaching her identity to those thoughts is the individual who can liberate herself from oppressive ideologies. When a subject learns to become more aware of ideological consciousness and, with a certain amount of detachment and curiosity, observes interpretive constructions without necessarily acting on them, she is beginning the work of critical thinking. In the eyes of many, however, religion is seen as antithetical to critical thinking. In his article “True Believers, Real Scholars, and True Believing Scholars: Discourses of Inquiry and Affirmation in the Composition Classroom,” Douglas Downs suggests that religion is guided by what he terms a “discourse of affirmation” (41); in other words, individuals are taught to accept and find ways to prove answers rather than to ask questions. Downs contrasts this discourse of affirmation against the discourse of the inquiry promoted by the university (41). Certainly, in many cases this is true, but I see fecund, uncharted territory in the potential for religious texts to spur critical inquiry in the same way that secular, academic theory does. While religious texts are usually used for moral direction and personal development, these purposes, as well, are not far removed from the goals of theory.

In Chapter One, I examine two books of biblical “wisdom literature”: Ecclesiastes and Job. These readings are intended to bring posthumanism and the Old Testament together; I evidence the nascent posthumanism of the Bible and, in turn, reveal the implicit metaphysical thinking within N. Katherine Hayles’s work. First, I argue that the Bible advances a prescient critique of humanist epistemology. Humanism has been confounded by the problem of establishing “objective truths” that are ultimately self-reflexive in
nature. I read the Book of Ecclesiastes as an example of such searching for truth, which for the narrator becomes a futile exercise in self-identification. In my discussion of the Book of Job, I argue that God is a force similar to Marion’s “otherness” within subjectivity. God in this book manifests as silence, absence, and mystery. Through his connection to God—distant and mysterious as it may be—Job is able to utilize a type of critical thinking that allows him to transcend the outdated, orthodox explanations of his friends to reach a higher understanding about the meaning of his suffering.

In Chapter Two, I move into Eastern religion, examining the writings of a few prominent Tibetan Buddhist thinkers. Buddhism has often been referred to as a “wisdom tradition” and even “philosophy,” and its emphasis on knowledge and the mind makes it an appropriate choice for posthumanist inquiry. I choose to focus on contemporary Tibetan Buddhist writers who write in English; while no less authoritative than other possible sources, they make the ideas accessible and relevant to Western society. In the chapter, I develop the concept of the “posthuman warrior” which I use to emphasize the various qualities of subjectivity I advocate: agency, flexibility, and sharp critical faculties. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s concept of “warrior,” from which I draw my inspiration, challenges the dominant model of ideological subjectivity by showing that ideology itself is not monolithic but fragmented and thus, more workable than is assumed. Buddhist writings also add many nuanced distinctions and specialized terms to refer to the self: ego, interdependence, and anatman, to name a few, which help to parcel out the discursive, ideological dimension of subjectivity from other aspects that comprise subjective experience. Impermanent, contingent, and socially constructed as the self may be, these writings call our attention to the preciousness of life and confer greater personal responsibility on the individual.

In my conclusion, I begin to consider how the models of subjectivity generated by these religious texts might translate into a pedagogical setting. In developing this posthuman wisdom pedagogy, I advocate for a critical consciousness produced through
self-reflection in the composition classroom. While the ideological model of subjectivity can cause teachers to over-focus on students’ ideas and less on their humanity, a posthuman wisdom pedagogy honors the student’s voice and autonomy, which ultimately works to strengthen their critical faculties. In addition, by acknowledging and respecting a student’s autonomy, teachers are more likely to develop a respectful, harmonious bond with students. I also argue for the value of self-reflection in the classroom, which helps to awaken a critical self-awareness in students. Ultimately, however, my thesis is built on the premise that how we relate to ourselves governs our relationships with others; therefore, posthuman wisdom pedagogy also focuses on the personal development of the teacher rather than devising a model for who we want our students to be, ideologically speaking.
CHAPTER I: “I AM NOT WHAT I AM THOUGHT TO BE”: BIBLICAL WISDOM LITERATURE AND POSTHUMAN HERMENEUTICS

“Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him. He snatches away, who can stop him? Who will say to him, ‘What are You doing?’” (Job 9.11-12)

What do cyborgs and ancient biblical narrators have in common? In this chapter, I marry posthuman theory with Old Testament wisdom literature. The cyborg, while at first may seem an unlikely image for an Old Testament discussion, helps one to visualize posthumanism’s theoretical project. Connected to technology with little distinction between herself and her technological other, the posthuman subject’s consciousness expands beyond itself, revealing its hybrid, technologically-distributed form. The posthumanist conceptualizes subjectivity as “distributed cognition located in disparate parts” (Hayles How We Became 3). These “disparate parts” are usually technological devices: prostheses, the internet, gaming devices, and so on.

Yet technology need not be present to construct the posthuman. Hayles writes, “the construction of the posthuman does not require the presence of a literal cyborg . . . the defining characteristics involve the construction of subjectivity” (How We Became 4). According to Hayles, then, the posthuman is not limited to the clichéd images of robots
and nanochips usually associated with the field. The essence of the posthuman subject, as I suggest above, seems rather to lie in its “distributed cognition” (3) and connection to an entity more expansive than itself. In various registers, posthumanism launches a critique against “the possessive individualism” associated with the liberal human subjectivity of the Enlightenment (3). The liberal human subject was defined by his rationality, his psychic coherence, and his self-containment. Taking its cue from Hayles’s emphasis on the construction of subjectivity, this chapter focuses on how biblical subjectivity similarly constructs an individual against a larger, more powerful Other that, in an anachronistic though distinctly posthuman fashion, reveals the epistemological limits of humanism and the deleterious effects of anthropocentrism. I suggest that two books of the Old Testament, Job and Ecclesiastes, are proto-posthuman texts that critique this “possessive individualism”—the model of subjectivity in which humans are constructed as autonomous individuals—and exchange it for a dynamic relation with a divine Other. The divine Other in biblical wisdom literature is an essential component of the construction of self; individuals are said to be created in God’s image (Gen 1.26). The biblical literature discussed here reveals a God who is connected with individuals through their subjectivity, yet he employs absence, silence, and mystery to continually humble readers, reminding them thousands of years earlier of the same epistemological limits that posthumanism has revealed.

The pairing of metaphysical literature such as the Bible with posthumanism may seem odd for some readers. For instance, by aligning itself alongside various scientific disciplines, posthumanism may seem entrenched in a materialist, positivistic paradigm that is incompatible with Judaic philosophy. Hayles writes that the posthuman subject is a “material-informational entity,” and that information must always be instantiated within a medium (How We Became 3). In such a thoroughly materialist paradigm, the metaphysical God of the Judaic tradition would seem to have no place. This is the assumption I wish to challenge, however. The God of the literature analyzed here is not
at all moments a strictly metaphysical God. Likewise, one need not take a leap of faith to appreciate the rich, sagacious teachings found in the Bible. It may also seem that the Bible would be an unlikely place to locate, as previously mentioned, moments of absence and silence. While it is true that biblical literature often sanctifies what Jacques Derrida has called the “metaphysics of presence,” placing emphasis on “the primacy of logos—historically, the word of God” (Mason 39), the sacred spaces of absence and silence in biblical wisdom literature represent an often overlooked and unrepresented dimension of Judeo-Christianity. These apophatic qualities of God permeate many layers of my discussion, ranging from God’s status as unrepresentable to the strategic and instructive silence of Job’s friends in the Book of Job. I choose to focus on the apophatic because of its inherently feminist underpinnings; feminist posthumanists “interested in challenging the masculinist, logocentric tradition of privileging the presence of the word” (Mason 39) may find themselves pleasantly surprised to find venues for that challenge in the Bible. Posthumanism needs to continuously address the pressing need to pursue alternative models to the metaphysics of presence, especially when constructing and reconstructing a more inclusive subjectivity more sympathetic to feminist goals.

The first tenet of posthumanism that I trace in biblical literature is how it makes visible the anthropocentric contingency of knowledge. As both posthumanism and the Bible make apparent, the pursuit of objective truth—which is the pursuit of God, the ultimate Object, in the Bible’s case—is a quest haunted by an insidious anthropocentrism. The Bible manifests this critique through the idolatry prohibition. We might think of anthropocentric ideas that claim to be objective truth as “false idols.” Next, In the Book of Ecclesiastes, I suggest that the text’s repeated refrain, “all is vanity and a chasing after wind,” corresponds with Hayles’s idea of “dynamic flux,” both of which gesture toward a common source, an unnamable Other. Then, in the Book of Job, I examine how silence and absence function as mediums of healing that ultimately lead Job to a higher understanding
of God. This apophatic, “negative” conception of God in Job serves as a rupturing force that enables Job to break from the ideology of his friends. This is a deconstructive God whose teachings do not end in nihilism, but in a negative theology that at once maintains faith in the divine and restores difficulty to (post)human existence.

In “Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments,” Hayles introduces the idea of “dynamic flux” (298). Although she writes about posthuman embodiment, the concept has a quasi-religious dimension, as well: the “dynamic flux” serves as “the source of everything that populates my perceived world, including the body and experiences of embodiment” (298). This flux, as Hayles states, includes both the physical body as well as bodily experience. She describes the flux as having a primal, almost pre-verbal quality; though to apply any additional signifier would be to distance oneself further from this source. The flux is that which we “try to understand analytically by parsing it into such concepts as biology and culture, evolution and technology” (298). In contrast to these ideological regimes—biology, culture, and so on—the flux “precedes these evaluations” (298). Furthermore, its name shows that this is not a fixed, static concept but one that experienced as a living “relation” (298). These “attempts to understand analytically” the nature of the flux, by contrast, result in arresting the flux. At this point, the observer has lost sight of what we might call the Kantian thing-in-itself—the irreducible, the numinous—and in its place arises static, self-reflexive interpretive constructions. Hayles’s goals do not seem far from the Bible’s, in this regard: she wants readers to appreciate “the joy that comes” when they realize “we are not isolated from” this world of dynamic relationships (297). She asserts, using overtly religious language, that posthuman individuals “enact [their] mindbodies through [their] deep and continuous communion with [the flux]” (309). It seems that Hayles, after pursuing these multiple avenues of understanding identity—biology, culture, and so on—arrives at the same conclusion, which is no conclusion at all: that identity is at all moments in flux, and therefore, in a sense, unheroizable. When identity is thought of in this way, as a dynamic
process, it becomes apparent that hegemonic systems of knowledge ultimately seem unequipped to clearly define what or who we are. Our science is anthropocentric; our knowledge is replete with abstraction.

I find it interesting that in the Bible, God—giver of knowledge—also refused to be represented in human-made idols. The prohibition on idolatry discouraged ancient Jews from reducing a complex, dynamic God into a frozen image imbued with human, rather than divine, qualities. In other words, the Hebrew God was an anti-anthropocentric figure. In the second commandment, God dictates to Moses: “you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible* Ex 20.4). God’s description of the idol as a “form” signifies that these representations would only amount to a “likeness” (how “form” is translated in some versions) of God, and therefore could not capture a complete, objective rendering. God regularly punished the Jews for breaking this commandment, such as in his judgments on Israel during the Babylonian captivity of Isaiah (44.9-11) and Ezekiel (6.4-7). The idol-worshipping ancient cultures that surrounded Israel were depicted as a constant threat to the nascent Jewish religion, and I interpret God’s incessant punishments for succumbing to idolatry as a metaphorical means to reinforce its philosophical teachings rather than literally threaten its readers with violence (which is how these difficult texts are often interpreted by those who seek to discredit religion). Therefore, an essential characteristic of the Judeo-Christian God—one that was so vital as to be set up in the Ten Commandments and continuously referred to throughout the text—was his refusal to be frozen into static representation. The God of the Old Testament is, rather, a “dynamic” force. Manmade objects would essentially reduce the expansive, omnipotent, omnipresent nature of God and thus convey a false image.

The “dynamic flux” similarly resists representation. Hayles writes that the flux “cannot be grasped as a thing-in-itself” but that such attempts to “grasp” might be found in systems of human knowledge such as “biology and culture, evolution and technology”
All of these fields of thinking aim to grasp, in one way or another, the nature of consciousness, human biology, and existence itself. However, like the divine idols, they produce an incomplete image that is something other than the immediacy of subjective experience. This is not to invalidate these systems of knowledge by any means; each one provides a unique and of course useful perspective. However, as Harold Morowitz recognizes, “though we understand the histology of the nervous system and the physiology of action potentials and synaptic activity, we are far from dealing with the nature of consciousness” (12). Put another way, phenomena are intelligible within the hermeneutic systems that they themselves construct, but still have yet to approach what we would call an objective understanding. Even Hayles, a former scientist herself, concedes that “these categories” will “always come after the fact, emerging from a flux” that is too “complex, interactive, and holistic” to grasp in a single interpretive construction (299).

Like the Biblical idols, these systems of knowledge are characteristically one or more steps removed from the flux: as representations, they “always come after the fact” (299); they create an additional level of signification that takes one further away from “the thing in itself,” or, in the ancient Judaic literature, knowledge of God. Any system that claims to be objective truth, in other words, constitutes a false idol.

The Bible’s indictment of idolatry did not only point to God’s complex, multidimensional existence, but also the tendency extending in our own time towards anthropocentrism. Not only were ancient Jews forbidden to represent God as an idol, but they were also prohibited from making “wrongful use of the name” of God (Ex 20.7), or in the King James Version, not taking “the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Ex 20.7). Taking God’s name “in vain” could apply to “the misuse of the Lord’s name in magic, divination, or false swearing (Metzger and Murphey 95), but this idea of “vanity” (which will be discussed later in Ecclesiastes) suggests that any image made of God would ultimately evoke a human-made rather than divine likeness. “Vanity” suggests a self-reflection, as if one were gazing into a mirror.
This anthropocentrism, which the Bible implicitly critiques when it prohibits idol worship or wrongful use of the name of God, is what posthumanists contest, as well. Bruno Latour, writing on the history of scientific epistemology, points out that our knowledge “deal[s] only with the world-for-a-human-consciousness” (9). He elaborates, “this knowledge will be of no use in accounting for how things really are, since we will never be able to escape from the narrow focus of human intentionality” (9). This ouroboric thinking—where knowledge is made and then unmade by the circular claim to human relativity—is of limited use within the domains of biology or culture, as long as those fields of knowledge acknowledge their limits. Therefore, posthumanists influenced by the scientific imperative for objective truth should keep in mind that “science is that discipline that replaces the hard questions that we are unable to answer by simpler questions to which we are competent to seek solutions” (Metzger 1). Posthumanism and the Bible both seek answers to those “hard questions,” but they also remind us of the importance of humility before the unknown. They teach us to resist knee-jerk assumptions and calcified understandings about the answers to these “hard questions.”

Despite the biblical prohibition against idolatry, the writers of the bible must of course continuously make recourse to symbolism and metaphor in order to convey God to its readers. One way the Bible makes this unknowable God known is through images of wind, breath, and spirit. There is a certain fitness to this because wind, breath, and spirit, rather than “things in themselves,” are perceived instead by what they are not: we see not wind, but ripples upon water or the trembling of tree branches. Furthermore, these phenomena are appropriate for imagining the dynamic flux because they work together to convey “a wide range of dynamic relationships between God, humanity and creation” (Ryken 119). These “dynamic relationships,” uncannily echoing Hayles’s same language, are encapsulated in the Book of Ecclesiastes through the metaphor of wind.

The Book of Ecclesiastes reflects on an ancient preacher’s pursuit of wisdom and understanding, a pursuit that the writer repeatedly calls “vanity” and “a chasing after
wind.” In its first chapter, the preacher Qoholeth recounts his effort to “seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (1.13). Qoholeth seeks this wisdom in order to reflect on a number of human activities and pursuits in the chapters following: pleasure, riches, food and drink, work, justice, envy, speech. Through these contemplations, he seeks to understand “what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (2.3). Qoholeth’s mission attempts to ascertain divinely given wisdom. This divine wisdom contrasts with what I will call “spiritual materialism,” which amounts to an intellectual antique shop full of human-centered interpretive constructions. In contrast to spiritual materialism’s epistemological fullness, divine wisdom empties through a dynamic sequence of negations.

This tension between divine wisdom and spiritual materialism is reflected in the preacher’s conflicted, elusive attempts to grasp wisdom in Ecclesiastes. On the one hand, “wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness” (2.13), yet on the other, “in much wisdom is much vexation” (1.18). Wisdom is divinely given, yet also “a vanity.” How can this be so? I offer the suggestion that readers differentiate between two types of wisdom in the text, divine wisdom and “spiritual materialism,” a term I borrow from Tibetan Buddhist philosopher Chogyam Trungpa. Trungpa, a preeminent teacher of Tibetan Buddhism in the West whose works I explore more closely in Chapter Two. Spiritual materialism, according to Trungpa, self-reflexively amasses a collection of intellectual truths concerning spiritual matters. Cutting through this spiritual materialism would therefore ironically mean stepping out of our “constant desire for a higher, more spiritual, more transcendental version of knowledge, religion, virtue, judgment, comfort, or whatever it is that the particular ego is seeking” (15). Biblical literature teaches readers not to conflate the wisdom of God with the egoistic—and eventually, anthropocentric—collection of knowledge. In the same way that the Bible frequently criticizes materialistic culture, it also indict spiritual materialism. Qoholeth cautions that “of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12.12). While spiritual materialism, as
a product of humanity and the material world, eventually perishes, divine wisdom has no beginning and no end.

In the Book of Proverbs, an earlier wisdom book, this dual nature of wisdom is explained further. On the one hand, wisdom comes from God: “for the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov 2.6). In another proverb, however, even God himself appears subordinate to this valorized wisdom: “the Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens” (Prov 3.19). God’s subordination to wisdom suggests that, although human beings are created in his likeness, God cannot be conceptualized as an entity—as a “thing in itself”—since wisdom, an unconditioned abstraction, precedes him. This paradoxical language further suggests a multidimensional God who is unable to be contained within an anthropocentric paradigm. Not only does Qoholeth use wisdom as a means by which he comes to understand “what was good,” but he also seeks to understand the nature of wisdom itself: “I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly” (1.17). However, it is as if the more Qoholeth tries to apply his “mind,” or “to understand analytically” (Hayles, “Flesh and Metal” 298) the nature of wisdom, the less he knows.

At the heart of Qoholeth’s disappointments lies this tension between worldly wisdom and spiritual materialism. With exasperation, he discovers after many of these meditations on “the deeds that are done under the sun” that “all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccl 1:14). The wind cannot be “grasped as a thing in itself” (Hayles 299); it can only be futilely pursued. Furthermore, Qoholeth’s declaration that “all is vanity” shows how human attempts to seek truth will always be imbued with a self-reflexive quality. Our attempts to grasp knowledge are bound to reflect, in Latour’s words, a “world-for-a-human-consciousness” (9). However, objective, non-anthropocentric truth is as elusive as knowledge of God: “just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything” (11.5). One may observe the life of a child in a mother’s womb but not fully comprehend the nature
of that life. Qoholeth is repeatedly eluded by trying grasp the thing in itself in this way: “then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun” (8.17). This mysterious, apophatic quality of the divine, however, does not simply end in nihilism and total unknowing.

Although the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom delivers devastating blows to Qoholeth—he refers to an “unhappy business” (1.13), laments that “in much wisdom is much vexation” (1.8), and gives “his heart up to despair” (2.20)—this desperate experience functions cathartically and brings Qoholeth to a higher realm of understanding about God. Qoholeth, in other words, “enact[s] a “deep and continuous communion” (Hayles 309) with God in the midst of his emotional flux. Qoholeth’s “chasing after wind,” despite its futility (a futility that ultimately results from the inevitability of death, and the uncertainty of what will occur after death), is literally and ultimately his “communion” with God. Nothing more and nothing less than his emotion itself is the sacred teaching. Similar to how the flux and God cannot be arrested, Qoholeth’s search for wisdom and his subsequent disappointments are themselves not static, unchanging truths but simply a part of human experience, for “there is a time for every matter under heaven” (3.1). It is a difficult truth that God has “put a sense of past and future into their minds” and has made humans conscious of their own mortality (3.11), but the text suggests that conceiving of mortality is, too, a transient experience. Qoholeth’s toiling for wisdom is at moments abandoned for life’s pleasures; he instructs his readers to enjoy life and “drink your wine with a merry heart” (9.7). Not only does the text suggest “the pleasures of life” (Murphey and Metzger 841) as an alternative to the contemplation of uncertainties and endings, its literary structure creates a comforting, sustained coherence. The pattern of repetition and redoubling in the text—the phrases “all is vanity,” “toiling,” and “under the sun,” for example, all appear in Qoholeth’s opening discourse and continue throughout the rest of the book—create a sense of continuity and coherence despite its dissatisfied, restless pathos. Even as the text proposes truths and then “unwrites” them by calling them
vanities, readers are invited to appreciate a sense of continuity in the repeated refrains. The phenomenological experience of reading and sharing Qoholeth’s crisis is a type of wisdom in and of itself. It encourages readers to “banish anxiety from [their] mind[s]” (11.10) and not resist the knowledge of transience or inevitability of death, but to acknowledge these truths and move on.

While Ecclesiastes provides a rubric by which we may be taught the difference between the collection of knowledge-as-spiritual materialism and knowledge-as-wisdom, the question of how one might go about pursuing divine wisdom or communion with God to receive this divine wisdom remains. The Judeo-Christian tradition has plenty to say on communing with God, of course—following the Commandments, obeisance, and prayer—but at this point I would like to highlight another practice the Bible sanctions that also intersects with posthumanism, and that is the place of silence and absence in the attainment of wisdom.

The Bible frequently references the practice of silence as a means to commune with the divine. While it is undeniable that biblical literature at times sanctifies the metaphysics of presence, the Bible also carves out a sacred space of absence, of silence. Though posthumanism rejects the presence/absence binary and exchanges it instead for pattern/randomness (Hayles, *How We Became* 33), I am suggesting that posthumanism return to absence—specifically silence—as site where wisdom is produced. However, this wisdom is, as my previous analysis indicates, a kind of refusal of knowledge. This hermeneutic, furthermore, allows me to read the Bible in such a way that recovers—even sanctifies—a feminized absence and absented femininity. Hayles’s pattern/randomness dialectic still privileges positivism, in a sense. Randomness is simply the absence of the presence of structure, and pattern is structural. Focusing on silence, however, does not amount to “simply inverting the hierarchical relationship” (Mason 43) between presence/absence, or male/female, but it does attempt to restore balance to the patriarchal tradition of privileging the word.
In the Book of Job, silence serves as an important medium of sacred teaching. The book opens with a deal made between God and Satan to test Job, a “blameless and upright” follower of God (1.1). In the following chapters, God and Satan inflict a series of devastations upon Job: he loses his animals, his property, his children, and all of his possessions. He is afflicted with “loathsome sores” and in a fit of self-pity begins to scrape himself with a potsherd (2.7). Job’s external riches are snatched away, leaving him internally fractured and bereft. When his three friends Eliphaz, Blidad, and Zophar arrive, they are so bewildered by Job’s bereavement that “they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word” (2.13). David Pleins remarks that this silence gives Job a space in which he is “able to express his grief freely once he has encountered the reality of God’s ominous silent presence” (229). The text constructs this silence—this absence—as a means of healing.

However, when Eliphaz breaks the silence after seven days—for “who can keep from speaking?” (4.2)—interpretive constructions pour into the previously empty, silent space and a lengthy Socratic dialogue ensues. His friends pursue various rationalizations to try and explain Job’s calamities. They proceed to offer “the traditional orthodox teaching on retribution,” claiming that Job must have sinned or displeased God and that he is being punished for his transgressions (Murphey and Metzger 628). Their traditional ideological explanations, however, become nothing more than empty words for Job—who has committed no sin—as he probes the depths of his suffering in these conversations. Job’s experience of pain is incomprehensible; it cannot and will not be contained within the explanations of his friends, nor will it be contained within religious ideology. After their speeches, Job rebukes his friends for their verbose diatribes: “if you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom!” (13.5). Not only are his friends accused of speaking too much on the behalf of God, they are criticized for speaking “falsely” and “deceitfully” for him, which hearkens back to the Second Commandment prohibition on misuse of the name (13.7). Job’s injunction to his friends to be silent before God recalls the prohibition
on idolatry, as well: words *about* God can become like idols, arresting God’s dynamic nature into an incomplete and contingent human language. Job tells his friends, “your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay” (13.12). Their reasoning is portrayed as deteriorated and lifeless. Therefore in this theological discourse, “only the ‘topic’ of God finds expression” (Pleins 230), and Job is left with these unsatisfactory meanderings on that topic rather than a personal connection with God himself.

Job’s hymn on wisdom in 28.2 best illustrates the contrast between the dead knowledge of his friends—the old items in the spiritual materialist antique shop—and the living quality of his experience. The poem begins with “people’s ability to find virtually everything that the earth contains” (Ryken 955). Readers are bombarded with natural imagery in this opening section, which demonstrates the material aspect of his friends’ rationalizations: “surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold to be refined. / Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from ore” (28.2). This transmutation of earthly minerals into precious metals expresses metaphorically the process by which the raw material of earth becomes knowable and “collectable.” Yet, as in Ecclesiastes, the text differentiates between the vain hoarding of knowledge and the apprehension of wisdom: “but where shall wisdom be found? / And where is the place of understanding? / Mortals do not know the way to it” (28.12-13). Wisdom is in the unknowing. Wisdom in its most divine inflection is ungraspable and immaterial: “gold and glass cannot equal” it, nor can it be “gotten for gold, and silver cannot be weighed out as its price” (28.15-17). The Bible therefore indicts spiritual materialism: “to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping” (2.26). The meaning of Adam and Eve’s original sin, eating from the Tree of Knowledge, is perhaps brought to full “fruition” here. To eat from the tree is to separate oneself from God and enter into dualism. Adam and Eve’s transgression is, as well, liberal humanism’s flaw. The liberal human view thinks that separateness and dualism constitute human nature, but this separateness is only one possibility, one interpretive construction. Thus the goal of the posthumanist, similarly to the Biblical literature’s, is anti-dualistic: “to
realize that we are not separate from” the flux, just as the goal of Judeo-Christian religions is to enter into communion with God.

At the end of Job’s story, the silence is penetrated once again when God speaks and finally answers Job. The familiar God of the Old Testament returns, the God who reveals himself in theophanies, delivers a moral code to his people, and strikes down the wicked. He appears to Job and answers him “out of the whirlwind” (38.1). His emergence from “the whirlwind” represents yet another comparison of God to the wind, both part of that wind yet separate from it as well. He asks Job, “who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (38.2). He rebukes Job and his friends for attempting to understand him through orthodox ideologies and calls for Job to humble himself. In a moment of ironic reversal, he commands Job, “I will question you, and you shall declare to me” (38.3). While Job’s questioning is entirely focused on himself, God asks a series of questions that widen Job’s perspective beyond his own subjectivity. He invokes grandiose natural imagery (“foundation of the earth” [38.4]; “springs of the sea . . . recesses of the deep” [38.16]; “expanse of the earth . . .” [38.18]), all of which allude to the vast dominion of God and Job’s inability to “comprehend” (38.18) his nature. Even as God is present, he invokes his own irreducibility; according to the text, only God, giver of life and wisdom, can “know when the mountain goats give birth,” (39.1), “give the horse its might” (39.19), and “put wisdom in the inward parts” (38.36). Job admits with chagrin, “I have uttered what I did not understand” (42.3). This is a God of irreducible complexity, and even after God appears and speaks to Job, he does not reveal his dealings with Satan, nor do readers know God’s reasons for agreeing to test Job in the first place. Although God returns at the end of the text, it is a cryptic, befuddling Presence.

God’s initial silence is integral to the Book of Job’s teaching. After his friends’ first two speeches, Job retorts: “I know I am not what I am thought to be” (9.35). By refusing their explanations—what Job’s friends “think him to be”—he is able to break free from an ideology that lacks the power to signify his experience. He does this by locating his
subjectivity not within human constructs but, as biblical narrators are wont to do, by connecting to the divine that lies within himself. This transvaluation of subjectivity makes possible Job’s liberation from the ensnaring rationalizations of his friends, which worsen Job’s suffering and fracture his sense of self: “how long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?” (19.2). The signifying system of language that exacerbates Job’s misery is conveyed as a violent force, one that reduces the fullness of experience into a contingent structure. Yet Job’s faith persists: “my foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips” (23.11-12). The humanization of God in these lines—his steps, his lips—portrays a God in close personal relation with human beings. This is a God, however absent and silent he may appear, that is present in moments of confusion and pain, as those moments of confusion and pain. Communion with God means deep communion with oneself. Conceiving God as this present silence, as the empty space that interpretive constructions fill, consoles Job and helps him to eventually transcend his suffering.

Ultimately, the literature sampled here agrees with posthumanism’s understanding of consciousness “as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is a minor sideshow” (Hayles, How We Became 3). Both gesture toward an unknown “other”—God, the “thing-in-itself,” the “whole show”—and acknowledge the insidious anthropocentrism present in human pursuits of both secular and spiritual knowledge. As posthumanism and the fascinating scientific disciplines with which it aligns itself move forward, it should leave open as much as possible the old, difficult questions about subjectivity, consciousness, and metaphysics, since there is much that lies beyond our current horizons of understanding. Posthumanists should not dismiss religious experience but embrace it as the oldest form of their theoretical project.
CHAPTER II: THE POSTHUMAN WARRIOR: RE-THEORIZING POSTHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH BUDDHIST WISDOM LITERATURE

The biblical wisdom literature of the previous chapter offered a prescient critique of humanism and anthropocentrism, which showed how these ancient texts worked in the service of posthuman critical practice. In this chapter, I turn to the writings of contemporary (1960s and onward) Tibetan Buddhists in order to excavate what I believe to be more empowering ways of rendering subjectivity than what posthumanism has offered so far. Simply labeling (post)human individuals as ideologically, informationally, or materially-constituted reduces the complex textures of subjective experience down to mechanistic, even deterministic concepts. Ultimately, the current theorization of posthuman subjectivity seems more interested in what subjects are—an ontology that in many ways, reproduces postmodern ideology—rather than what subjects are capable of in terms of their agency, choice, and power. Hayles urges that “serious consideration needs to be given to how certain characteristics associated with the liberal subject, especially agency and choice, can be articulated within a posthuman context” (How We Became 5). In this chapter, I hope to give these aspects of experience the attention they have lacked using a selection of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist concepts and practices.

Admittedly, the goals of Buddhism and the goals of an academic, posthumanist inquiry are different. The primary goal of Buddhism across its many diverse practices is to liberate sentient beings from suffering, and this objective may appear to fall more in the realm of personal development than academic inquiry. However, both Buddhism and posthumanist inquiry share a deep interest in subjectivity: understanding the self, our relation to the world, how identities are constructed, how to live ethically. A highly techno-scientific posthumanist inquiry could stand to gain from a more “human-centered”
ethos that Buddhism offers. Both are highly philosophical, critical, and skeptical of appearances, but Buddhism retains a very down-to-earth ethics of compassion and personal power that are all too easy to lose sight of in a posthuman cyberscape. Above all, I think both posthumanism and Buddhist philosophy are interested in contributing to “the greater good.” I think that if we are to suspend for a moment claims to ethical relativity, we will find in ourselves as scholars and teachers a similar commitment.

The first step toward changing the discourse of posthuman subjectivity is changing its vocabulary. While “subject”—the chosen name for postmodernism as well as posthumanism—implies a secondary position, one who is always at-the-effect-of some Object, I have chosen the term “posthuman warrior” to signify a more empowering possibility for posthuman identity. Whereas subjects are mastered by their rulers, posthuman warriors fight back. The term “warrior” comes from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tibetan Buddhist founder of Naropa University and prolific writer, philosopher, teacher, and artist of the 1960s. In his book *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*, Trungpa outlines a philosophy of personal development he calls “warriorship” that, in essence, reminds individuals of their own worth. Warriorship, according to Trungpa, is “founded on the premise that there is basic human wisdom that can help to solve the world’s problems” (1). This “basic human wisdom” exists in all of us, according to Trungpa, and it leads us to discover that “there is something basically good about our existence as human beings” (11). While some may balk at the use of that vague, arbitrary word—“good”—Trungpa, I think, wants to push us beyond our opinions about what “good” is and instead indicate to readers how this “goodness” already occurs in their experience. He writes, “it is not just an arbitrary idea that the world is good, but it is good because we can experience its goodness” (13). By experiencing goodness, Trungpa means seeing the extraordinary in ordinary, everyday experiences: for instance, noticing “the brilliance of the bright blue sky” (13) or the “sudden whiff of fresh air” when we “walk out of a stuffy room” (12). By becoming present to the goodness of our
experience—the goodness of ourselves—posthuman warriors are inspired to conduct themselves in an uplifted, dignified manner. Instead of being “afraid of the seeming threat the world presents” (10), warriors take the world head-on with confidence; more than that, they want to be a light in the world. They begin to develop a faith in and commitment to serving a greater good, however “good” may occur for us in particular. Rather than “converting the world to another theory,” warriorship is about discovering “what inherently we have to offer the world” (11).

The principles that underlie warriorship—faith in oneself, belief in one’s agentive power, a commitment to the greater good that begins with the recognition of goodness within oneself—are often forsaken in academic discussions of subjectivity for more “objective” or “analytical” discourse (Althusser calls his a “scientific discourse” [1356]). “Touchy-feely” is not “in”; the “waning of affect” that Jameson observed in postmodernity is still operative today. However, I aim to generate a more hopeful—perhaps idealistic, if only that word were free of its pejorative connotations—way of thinking about ourselves and our places in the world as teachers, writers, and critical agents. In doing so, I aim to show how an ethos of peaceful warriorship can complement posthuman critical practice, even work in the service of it. My first task in this chapter is to delineate the ontology of posthuman warriorship. I discuss her capabilities as well as her limitations, re-theorizing subjectivity using Tibetan Buddhist terms and concepts. Then, I discuss how the posthuman warrior can relate to herself differently under this model; by acknowledging the multidimensionality of her subjective experience, she learns to work with ideological consciousness instead of allowing it to rule over her. However, posthuman warriorship, while a theoretical model, is ultimately founded on a practice. Woven throughout my discussion, therefore, is the Tibetan Buddhist practice of shamatha meditation. Shamatha meditation—a practice in which individuals sit silently to become more keenly aware of the inner workings of their minds and bodies—is ultimately useful for critical inquiry because it trains practitioners to have more self-
awareness of their personal ideologies and belief systems. Perhaps that awareness offers individuals a bit more choice in their lives; through the practice of simply witnessing thoughts, it offers the opportunity to observe and question automated responses to events rather than acting them out.

Posthuman warriors do not gain their ontological status from the discursive feint of Enlightenment humanism. In other words, they are not the “liberal subject[s]” that “possess” bodies (Hayles, *How We Became*) 4. Nor are they, in the words of the Dalai Lama, “the ruler[s] or master[s] of the body and the mind” (66) because they have been all too acquainted with the body and the mind’s unruliness. Ontologically speaking, while the self is not exactly separate from the body and the mind as it is in humanism, I want to raise the possibility that posthuman warriors can create this separateness—a fissure in subjective experience—to clear a space for witnessing their discursive thinking. In other words, meditation, as an active practice, allows individuals to gain some critical distance from ideology and interpretive constructions. In this creative act, posthuman warriors are far from “dead”; through the practice of witnessing, they activate an inner agentive power that allows them to become deeply self-aware of identity. Unlike rulers, masters, or possessors—beings separate from and in complete control of their domains—posthuman warriors acknowledge the deeply ideological nature of identity and the power of social influence. However, unlike in postmodernism (and its posthuman vestiges), the posthuman warrior’s consciousness is not completely defined by this realm of abstract concepts and ideas. Posthuman warriors are able to, in a way, distance themselves from ideology because they are able to focus their attention elsewhere in the middle of experiencing discursive thought. In doing so, they develop more freedom and mobility in their ability to move between perspectives.

How do posthuman warriors go about this witnessing? Warriorship as a philosophy is meaningless without a practice, and the Shambhala tradition offers a useful practice for posthuman warriorship in Shamatha meditation. It is rather difficult
to talk about Buddhist philosophy at all without first discussing meditation, with which it is deeply, perhaps inseparably, intertwined. Meditation across Buddhist traditions is often referred to both as a “path” and a “goal,” which suggests that it is simultaneously a philosophy and a method. While I encourage readers to consult some of my sources for more specific instructions—and, if they are so inclined, to try it themselves—my goal is to provide only a basic description of the practice and to explain how it ultimately works for posthuman critical practice. In the Shambhala tradition, meditation involves sitting in silence with the eyes open as one focuses attention to the breath. The meditator concentrates on the sensation of the breath in the body, and soon finds their awareness inevitably drifting into the sticky territory of discursive thought: we start thinking about what we would like to eat for dinner, remembering a conversation, fantasizing about that new smartphone. Our attention may dwell in these thoughts for quite some time. However, when we become aware of ourselves absorbed in a thought, Trungpa instructs, “you experience your thoughts, you label them ‘thinking,’ and you come back to your breath” (Shambhala 62). Meditation is thus a practice of both “letting be” and focusing attention; it oscillates between passivity and activity.

Meditation opens a space for us to experience our minds—all the delirium of our interpretive constructions—fully and directly. There are few better ways to understand the self than this direct experience. We usually use logic and reason to “figure out” or, as Hayles would say, “try to understand analytically” (“Flesh and Metal” 298) the nature of identity, but I think that “analyzing” ourselves can only take us so far. Analysis carries with undertones of a cognitivism that, perhaps in our posthuman era, amounts to no more than self-reflexive constructions, like the biblical idols that can bear a limited and static “likeness” to what they represent. Thus, the direct experience and knowledge of self that meditation brings can lead to fresh, immediate insights about who we are. For instance, if we examine the process of meditation as described above—and even moreso if we do it ourselves—we begin to notice with more clarity the vivid contours
of our inner experience and the idiosyncrasies of our unique consciousness as it unfolds through time. We find that identity is neither continuous—our thinking is riddled with gaps, interruptions, and detours—nor solid. Thoughts come and go. Subconscious murmurings may be brought to conscious awareness, or repressed emotions may surface in the light of our observing minds. In the meditative space, we are confronted with our neuroses, desires, conflicts, and fantasies, sometimes all at once. We might find ourselves completely self-absorbed, producing construction after construction: “the action of our mind is so overlapping, an ingrown toenail, introverted,” Trungpa writes, “if I do this, then that is going to happen; if I do that, then this is going to happen” (Spiritual Materialism 93). In short, meditation offers an encounter with the chaos of identity, an up-close-and-personal look at ourselves that can speak directly to the nature of consciousness.

Along with revealing the multiple, overlapping dimensions of identity—all the self-absorbed thoughts that arise in this space—with continued practice, meditation also shows that consciousness has many potential states that are not ideas, that are not abstract thought. We discover that it is possible to perceive without interpretation. As Trungpa puts it, “sometimes, when we perceive the world, we perceive without language. We perceive spontaneously, with a prelanguage system” (Shambhala 42). He locates an example of such direct perception in “intense emotion—passion and aggression and jealousy” (42). These emotions, according to Trungpa, are “too intense in the first flash,” and therefore “don’t have a language” (42). Most of us have experienced the difficulty of “putting our feelings into words” at one point or another, and this is because although emotions arise from various stimuli, they have a texture all their own. Emotion, then, is one dimension of consciousness not taken into account by the ideological model of subjectivity. However, experiencing the world through the filter of ideology is much more common: “but sometimes when we view the world,” Trungpa continues, “first we think a word and then we perceive” (42). In this second way of experiencing the
world, individuals “see the world through the filter of [their] thoughts” (42). Despite the incessant pull of ideology and the near-ubiquitous presence of such filters, posthuman warriors strive to tap into this neutral, disinterested awareness as much as possible through the witnessing space they carve out during meditation. Awareness, while I must necessarily speak within ideology to explain it, is perhaps the closest we can come to “neutral” position from which ideological consciousness can be observed. Awareness is an inherent capacity that, generally speaking, we all possess; yet it is devoid of qualities on its own, without a human to experience it.

There is a specialized term in Buddhism that is useful for parceling out the multidimensionality of subjective experience, both identity and our capacity for awareness: ego. Although it shares some of the psychoanalytic and popular connotations of this word, Trungpa defines ego specifically as “the effort to secure our happiness, to maintain ourselves in relation to something else” (Myth of Freedom 12). Ego in Trungpa’s view is not a fixed concept as it is in liberal humanism but an active process, an “effort,” not a static entity, but an event (12). Furthermore, rather than fixing the formation of the ego to a specific relation—technology, ideology, the Lacanian mirror, or whatever else—Buddhists explain the ego as a recurring sequence of mental events taking place within subjective consciousness as it unfolds temporally. The birth of ego, like the cycles of reincarnation in Buddhist doctrine, happens continually: it occurs every time we arrest the dynamic flux of our thoughts into falsely solid constructions of who we are. Egoic consciousness becomes the medium through which we relate to the world. We try to hold onto experiences, instead of being in the experience. We make the experience mean something. Yet, underneath it all, it seems fundamentally impossible to fully grasp what the self is, in all of its flux and transience, accurately in this way. Accordingly, the Buddhist belief is that this process of identification with the emotional flux of the moment, the error of believing that there is a “true self” that resides somewhere within this morass of judgments, perceptions, and the discursive mind in general—which is a rather humanist rendering of subjectivity—
constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding about who we are. This “grasping at self-existence” within egoic consciousness “distorts our view of reality and causes us to relate only to our confused appearances” (Dalai Lama 18). Ego is ruled by these “confused appearances,” subjective perceptions that are both embedded in and distorted by ideology, our worldview and attitudes.

Ideology is not limited to politics and market relations; it is also the seat of identity in the liberal humanist view. The domain of ego in Buddhism is quite like the ideological consciousness of Althusser. For postmodernists and posthumanists, there is no way outside the ego; there is nothing outside of ideology. However, ideology is not something that exists “out there” in the world but organically, in our experiences of egoic consciousness. Consciousness has many potential states of being; thinking in “ideas” is only one possibility. When Descartes embarked on his own “meditations,” his famous declaration cogito ergo sum formed the basis of identity and self-existence. However, in meditative practice, this same declaration is the witness’s encounter with the ego. Unlike Althusser’s constrictive model of selfhood in which “you and I are always already subjects” of oppressive ISAs (1355), Trungpa focuses on a more expansive model that emphasizes “the open, fluid, intelligent quality of space” (20). Our mental space can be open because, like Walt Whitman mused, it “contains multitudes”: the distant hum of traffic, the smell of dinner cooking, or a memory from childhood. We move through this realm of perception, as Trungpa suggests, “fluidly,” our awareness able to move from one thing to another at will, flitting from last night’s basketball game, to the sound of a lawnmower, to remembering an argument we had that morning. Finally, the “intelligent” aspect of consciousness refers to its potential for precision and deliberateness, it can produce razor-sharp clarity, even in the midst of confusion. Even confusion has an intelligent quality if one slows down one’s thoughts enough to observe, piece by piece, what is happening. The individual who invites this openness, fluidity, and intelligence into her subjectivity allows discursive thought to unravel slowly, so that consciousness becomes less restricted and
more open for multiple perspectives to unfold.

While witnessing the fullness as well as the emptiness of personal experience—the discursive mind and the gaps in thinking—teaches us about the multidimensionality of our subjective lives, ideological consciousness is not something to necessarily be “transcended” or “overcome” in posthuman warriorship. It is important to learn how to engage critically with ideology and the content of the discursive mind. By simply being there with ourselves, we become more aware of the automated thought processes that arise. As meditators go deeper into this self-awareness, they start to notice habitual attachments to patterns of thought and emotions: “we start to notice set patterns of thoughts; we start to see the scaffolding of our assumptions” (Nichtern 70). Witnessing this “scaffolding of assumptions” has profound implications for critical practice: during a sitting, a practitioner may find herself sorting through multiple perspectives on a given problem, checking in with herself to see which feels right to her. It can provide an open, contemplative space for interpretive constructions to freely play out, unencumbered by the distractions and numbing devices of everyday life. Because these insights “lead to those tiny shifts in action” (71), meditation practice can make us better critical decision-makers and more conscious creators of our lives. By providing a material and mental space for self-reflection, we may arrive at insights with more clarity and perspective.

Although the practice can open a space for critical insights and self-reflection to arise spontaneously in the practitioner, I think an even more consequential result of the practice is that it sharpens our ability to focus attention. In this way, meditation becomes a “discipline.” When I was learning meditation, my teacher gave us a riddle: two students are told to meditate and make a mark on a sheet of paper each time they had a thought. The first student had very few marks on his paper; the second had many. She asked us which represented a more disciplined mind, the student with few marks or the student with many? While we might say the first student, because he had fewer thoughts (often we think of meditation as a process of “emptying the mind”), she said that in fact, the
second meditator is more trained because he noticed himself thinking at a much higher rate than the first. By coming back to the breath as much as possible, meditators sharpen the conscious aspect of the mind, the part of themselves that is able to focus on one thing or another. Recalling the Hebrew emphasis on wind/breath, perhaps meditation is a kind of stasis to counteract our incessant “chasing after wind.” By returning to the breath, meditators train their ability to focus where their conscious attention lies. In this regard, I think that it is possible to—if not “break from” ideology—at least gain some critical distance from the inner narrative of discursive thought that gives ideological consciousness its form. Likewise, when confronted with the ensnaring rhetoric of others—the media, politicians, and advertising—we may find ourselves becoming more skeptical, regarding the rhetoric from a distance rather than becoming helplessly interpellated by it.

Thus, meditation leads posthuman warriors to recognize that they have choice in the matter of what they give their attention to. As attention is pulled away from discursive thinking—the realm of abstract concepts and ideas, judgments and insights—and towards physical sensation in the body, these multiple possibilities for where we focus our attention become apparent. We start to see that consciousness need not always dwell on its ideological fixations, that we can train ourselves to, in a sense, “detach” from ideological consciousness by refocusing attention on the breath. Of course, an Althusserian may say that I am developing an ideology of meditation here, and in that way the practice does not promise a total break. However, at the very least, meditation recalls our agentive power. The practitioner begins to “develop a sense of balance” between these two mental activities, automatic thought processes and focused attention (Trungpa, Shambhala 72). As we realize our power to detach from the objects that occupy our attention, this represents “a step towards taking command” of the warrior’s world (72). Because they are deeply in touch with this inner strength of mind, warriors begin to feel more that they are consciously authoring their lives: “you feel that you are riding in
the saddle, riding the fickle horse of mind [sic]. Even though the horse underneath you
can move, you can still maintain your seat” (Trungpa, *Shambhala* 72-73). Whether it is
“riding” the ups and downs of one’s personal experience or maintaining critical distance
from ensnaring discourse, meditative practice cultivates equanimity. It is about realizing
our potential to become—if not the “masters” of our domains—their careful attendants.

As the posthuman warrior’s agentive power is awakened, she learns to wield
more power over not only ideological consciousness but also over emotional states.
Such control—which is not an aggressive, but a tempering force built on friendliness
towards oneself—is important to the posthuman warrior because she desires to be a light
in the world, and her emotional temperance is gained through letting herself freely and
willingly unravel. Trungpa explains that working with emotions in meditation means
dropping the dualistic barrier that there is a self who experiences phenomena; he writes,
“we are speaking here of becoming one with the emotions” (*Myth of Freedom* 66). As
individuals allowing themselves to relax into their own disintegration, they learn to
develop a welcoming attitude towards themselves, he explains, “which is different from
and in contrast to the usual approach of suppressing [emotions] or acting them out” (*Myth
of Freedom* 66). As meditators “become one with” their emotions, allowing themselves
to rise and fall in the flux of their experience, they begin to notice an inner equanimity
that arises because they have learned how to relate with themselves properly; indeed,
have learned to relate to themselves at all. Emotions no longer threaten to overwhelm or
control critical decision-making—the tail wagging the dog—instead, they become fruitful
territory for self-exploration and even self-love.

The agency that one awakens in meditative practice can thus produce resistive
power and emotional temperance, and along with these, as one’s practice develops, a
natural sense of confidence also begins to arise. Trungpa writes, “the key to warriorship
. . . is not being afraid of who you are” (*Shambhala* 76). This fearlessness of oneself—
essentially, confidence—leads to self-appreciation. Posthuman warriors see themselves
as beings with inherent dignity, and this self-confidence is important for both posthuman teachers and scholars. However, the purpose of confidence in this context is not self-aggrandizement. In contrast, because warriors acknowledge how much of their identities they owe to the world, self-confidence heightens the posthuman warrior’s appreciation of and obligation to the world around her. Trungpa writes, “because we appreciate the world, we don’t make a mess in it. We take care of our bodies, we take care of our minds, and we take care of our world... the world around us is regarded as very sacred, so we have to constantly serve our world and clean it up” (Shambhala 46). Therefore, posthuman warriors do not own themselves and their agentive power to satisfy a narcissistic desire; they do so for the benefit of others and the world.

Confidence is important to the posthuman warrior because she is aware of how her own state of wellbeing is intimately linked to the lives of those she encounters. It is true that Buddhism provides a rubric of personal development, but ultimately, it does so in the service of helping others: “in order to establish an enlightened society for others, we need to discover what we inherently have to offer the world” (Trungpa, Shambhala 11). Buddhism takes this view of an interconnected relationship between self and other because of a principle called interdependence (also known as “dependent origination”), which states that phenomena in the world gain their existence only in relation to other phenomena. Interdependence is not far removed from Jacques Derrida’s linguistic system of difference, in which signifiers have no absolute existence outside their relation to other signifiers. I think the Buddhist concept of interdependence, while similar to the postmodern vision of a socially inflected subjectivity, is preferable because it reminds us of this interconnected nature of our being and “the cradled support of countless predecessors” (Nichtern 36). It generates gratitude towards these predecessors, instead of a feeling that we are being threatened by their oppression. This gratitude we cultivate in ourselves radiates outward, touching others in the interdependent web of our social relations. Yet the ultimate usefulness of interdependence is not, as Nichtern quips, to fall into a New
Age-y, “we are all ONE” philosophy (38). It is not as if, he continues, “our collective consciousness were some amorphous cosmic borscht, and the point of spiritual practice is to melt back into the luminous goo from which we all came, sighing in a vague and final ecstasy” (38). Rather, by reminding us of how much we owe to our fellow sentient beings who have contributed to who we are, interdependence ironically confers the ultimate personal responsibility onto individuals because it reminds us that we, too, are affecting the lives of those around us. Every action taken by posthuman warriors, no matter how minute, has the potential to affect their immediate surroundings, which can ultimately cause negative or possible ripples throughout an interdependent society. Therefore we make decisions slowly, deliberately, and as much as we can, consciously consider our responses to the world.

In this interdependent web of social relations, ideology becomes just as fragmented and decentered as subjects themselves. The effort to establish ideology as a solid, cohesive entity, as the “master” of subjectivity, suffers from the same error as trying to anchor selfhood in the *cogito*. Just as our lived experience is caught up in this messy web of social relations, so too are ideologies. I think posthumanists get it right when they wager that the reified, static self is a myth. However, it seems like the ideological subjectivity of Althusser also assumes that ideology itself is solid. The Dalai Lama explains that the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism theorizes subjectivity as a collection of “aggregates” and “psycho-physical components,” similarly to the postmodern and posthuman views, which are fragmentary and socially-determined. He points out, however, that “grasping at the existence of the aggregates is also grasping at self-existence” (67). If it is true that there is no ideology except by and for subjects and that subjects are inherently unstable and decentered, then ideology itself, which is produced by subjects, must share those same features. For example, there is no singular, unified “Christian ideology,” there are only individuals, practices, and rituals, each one a little different than the next. The many sects of Christian religion itself, furthermore, are enough to demonstrate the incohesiveness of
its putative ideology. While ideologies may share some of the same features, they are far too diverse in the individuals that comprise them to assume a monolithic presence. The conversation on subjectivity and selfhood, therefore, cannot end in such a metanarrative. To do so would be to arrest the flux of ideologies themselves, which look less and less like solid objects the closer one approaches.

In these Buddhist views, then, we find that the self is not solid, but neither are its constitutive social components; both are similarly interdependent phenomena. Perhaps I find Buddhist philosophy so relevant to posthuman practice because it breaches the boundary between “I” and “other” in this way, collapsing the familiar binary in our conversations about subjectivity. Hayles attempts a similar task in her own work by pursuing a posthuman subjectivity that eschews “dualistic thinking” (“Flesh and Metal” 297). In this work, she returns to when she “made a distinction between the body and embodiment” in How We Became Posthuman (297). In How We Became Posthuman, she explains that she had separated the body from the mind, wagering that “the body . . . is an abstract concept that is always culturally constructed,” while embodiment “is experienced from the inside” (297). In other words, she mistakenly viewed “the body” as culturally constructed and saw the experience of embodiment as separate from culture. In “Flesh and Metal,” Hayles claims that both are ultimately culturally determined. This model, however, seems to suggest that we can only experience by way of interpretation and that all embodied experience is “filtered.” Hayles’s pursuit still seems mired in the postmodern model that, in the end, produces the same argument: that there is nothing outside of culture.

While ultimately founded on the same premise, the Buddhist search for non-duality has a different function: to bring us closer to others. This takes the form of what Trungpa calls renunciation: “what the warrior renounces is anything in his experience that is a barrier between himself and others” (Shambhala 60). Thus, as we learn to let go of our anger, our intimidation, our condescension—or any emotion that divides us from others—by focusing attention on the breath in meditation, we become “more available, more
gentle and open” (60). I believe that cultivating these capacities in ourselves as teachers is especially important. We experience all sorts of emotions in response to our students, yet we strive to treat them all equally and without bias. Ultimately the foundation of much Buddhist thought is simply the practice of developing compassion, and while we certainly should not bend to the desires of every student nor accept every excuse, I think that genuine compassion is sometimes hard to access, especially for students with ideological views very different from our own. As such, posthuman warriors seek to transcend the dualities that create false, destructive divisions between self and other. In the Buddhist view, the ego is a dualistic mechanism, constantly caught up trying to prove its own existence as it labels and categorizes phenomena, “me” and “not me.”

In conclusion, much more than a web of “information” and “material”—which is an abstract distillation of a dynamic process—the unfolding of consciousness in meditative practice is unruly, organic. Our minds are wild creatures; we live by indecipherable logic. The more we commune with the flux of our experience in meditation, the more conscious we become of its disorderliness. The practice produces an insatiable curiosity about ourselves, and I think curiosity is one of the healthiest qualities a critical practitioner can have. We may begin to wonder, for instance, why one thought crops up in our consciousness and not another. We may ask ourselves, by what mechanism do we suddenly decide to abandon an idea or take on an idea as truth, and why at that moment in particular? Why do certain individuals seem more resistant to ideological brainwashing than others? I think that if we pursue the answers in the “analytical” mode, we may find ourselves in an infinite regression, origins receding further into the distance. One answer becomes part of a larger answer until we reach the limits of our knowledge and explanations fail. Even Althusser claims that “ideology has no history” (1348). While I find little hope in a model of identity that leads nowhere, the idea of beginning from nowhere is a more inspiring possibility. If we have no history, we create our stories as we go, each moment providing a new possibility—once we realize we have the choice. It may be true
to some degree that, in the words of composition theorist James Berlin, ideology provides “the structure of our desire, indicating what we will long for and pursue” (470). But what, then, provides the structure of how ideology occurs for us in the first place? Why do our perceptive filters assemble in one particular way and not another?

These questions, I hope, restore some difficulty to posthuman existence. Like Job, we are left bereft of explanations to the hard questions, and I think we need a way of thinking about ourselves and our relationship to the world that does not omit these messy experiences of uncertainty. I have offered here a sketch of the posthuman warrior, a figure who is open-minded yet resistive, powerful yet not coercive, and self-oriented yet concerned for others. My argument may be idealistic in concept, but posthuman warriorship is more a set of practices than a philosophy. By heightening our awareness, we become more cognizant of our everyday decisions, the consequences of which, in an ever-more interdependent society, can never be underestimated. By opening our minds enough to sort through various perspectives, we sharpen our critical intelligence. And by training our minds to be more flexible—less mired in the sticky mud of ideological consciousness, able to move about freely at will—we ensure that we don’t, as Nichtern puts it, look at a problem “from the colonization of our own biases, through the hazy filter of habit” (167). Such “habit-breaking,” which begins in our own minds, is the beginning of radical spiritual and intellectual growth.
CONCLUSION: POSTHUMAN WISDOM PEDAGOGY

In the previous chapters, I demonstrated how religious texts restored dignity and worth to the individual and explored how this revised posthuman subjectivity could spur critical consciousness. In this conclusive chapter, I begin to consider how to implement the biblical and Buddhist models of subjectivity into composition pedagogy. How we see ourselves directly impacts how we see our students, and likewise, how our students see us. Although the previous chapters focused on religious texts, this conclusion concerns itself with how the new models of subjectivity those texts generated might be put to use within the composition classroom. The classroom in which students are thought of merely as “material-informational entities” or “ideological subjects”—the posthuman and postmodern renderings—may cause a similarly clinical, robotic demeanor to emerge in an instructor, whereby his students become simply webs of information who need logical or ideological “correction,” whose assumptions inherently need to be “challenged” (say nothing of our own assumptions), who, like the ready-made model that precedes them, are “dead.”

In Chapters One and Two, I argued that the posthuman subject is larger than the sum of their ideas. Whether it is Job’s connection to a silent God that allowed him to resist the oppressive ideologies of his friends, or the power of meditation to create critical “gaps” in subjective experience, the model of subjectivity I advance is one that allows for self-reflection and detachment made possible through the subject’s metaphysical connection. I think it is valuable on a practical level to treat our students with the same understanding: that they, too, are more than the sum of their ideas. We need a pedagogy that is thoroughly humane (though not humanist), in that it recognizes the dignity, perhaps even the sacredness, of our students as autonomous individuals. Such a pedagogy, which I tentatively call “posthuman wisdom pedagogy,” focuses on the vulnerability of individuals in order to use self-reflection to effect
both personal and social transformation. Because it draws on the self as text, such a pedagogy seeks to move away from an approach that centralizes ideology critique at the expense of the personal. Furthermore, this is a posthuman pedagogy that embraces embodied experience and does not limit critical thinking to the abstract, ideological dimension of subjective experience; posthuman wisdom pedagogy also invites emotions into the classroom and uses them as instructive material. The “wisdom” aspect of this pedagogy suggests that we are doing something more personal and experiential—even spiritual—in the classroom than simply collecting and sharing information and ideas. Recalling the spiritual materialism/wisdom dichotomy from the Book of Job and the wisdom apprehended through direct experience in meditation, the posthuman wisdom model in first-year composition (FYC) encourages the same self-distancing and self-reflection in students.

When discussing the goals of FYC, a common tendency is to think in binaries: either expressivist or social-epistemic; either student-centered or teacher-centered. Self-reflection is associated with navel-gazing and solipsism (“all is vanity”); ideological critique is associated with overt political agendas. However, it is in our interest to mediate between the extremes of binary thinking; at certain times, a student may need to self-reflect, and at other times, he or she may need to consider dominant social narratives in order to move their writing and their ideas forward. Posthuman wisdom pedagogy borrows from both the expressivist and the social-epistemic approaches to composition pedagogy; both self-reflection and ideology critique are central to this practice, one often working in service of the other. Furthermore, because identities and needs are always in flux, perhaps the instructor needs to call on the wisdom of the moment to determine what would be most effective for students, rather than approaching their classroom with a pre-made agenda. No matter what kind of abstract goals we have in mind, our students will always be people first, and their humanity demands, first and foremost, regardless of what is being discussed, humanity from their instructors.

Posthuman wisdom pedagogy, built on the idea that the real exists within the individual and emphasizing personal growth and development, owes much to expressivism. In his
canonical article “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom,” James Berlin explains that for expressivists, “the existent is located within the individual subject” (484). When we choose to see our students not as passive recipients of ideology, but as autonomous agents—a view of subjectivity I advocated for throughout the thesis—we develop more respect for them. This may seem trivial, but we genuinely do need to have a profound respect for students regardless of their political views if we hope to teach them anything. When we centralize ideology critique in the FYC classroom, inviting dissenting, potentially unpopular and confronting views, we risk marginalizing the vulnerable people expressing those opinions. For example, I have often heard teachers—myself included—participate in so-called “student shaming,” which involves trading stories with colleagues over “offensive,” “unintelligent,” or “uncritical” remarks students may make in the classroom or in their papers. While there is nothing wrong with venting frustrations, too often do we make assumptions about what kind of people students are based on their ideological positions. Perhaps we even treat these students differently in unconscious ways. The point is to not dismiss students as “racist bigots” or “materialist scumbags” in our minds, reducing the complexity of their experience to convenient noun phrases that only create further bias and prejudice against others. However, allowing students the freedom—in practice, but more importantly, in our minds—to “voice” their opinions and to take them seriously has a humanizing effect on the student. Perhaps only when a person is treated humanely themselves—especially by someone they perceive to be “in power”—is when they begin to treat others humanely.

It is one of our primary jobs as teachers to model for students how to respectfully, civilly disagree with others. The experience of dissent that occurs in the FYC classroom is instructive for everyone in this way; perhaps our objective should not be to change minds, but to open our minds to the inevitable, unsettling differences that arise between individuals and how to, at the very least, create a civil exchange where mutual learning occurs. Therefore, anytime a student uses his or her “voice”—whether in classroom dialogue or in writing—we should allow them the expression of their autonomy, even if it results in the reproduction of
dominant narratives. Such repetition is bound to occur, and it occurs in all of us. While it may seem that being generous listeners may, as Amy Winans points out, “encourage us to support rather than question the dominant social narratives and habits of mind that reinforce social inequalities” (8), the instructor and other students, both critical agents themselves, are also free to challenge students’ responses. In the dialogic exchange that occurs in the classroom, we have the opportunity to ameliorate social inequalities right now by modeling civility and fostering the same respectful way of treating others amongst students. So long as students are not producing hate speech or outright disrespecting another student—in which case they should be made aware of the deleterious effects of their expressions—I see no harm in allowing students the space to freely play out their interpretive constructions in the classroom, difficult as it may be at times. The recognition of agency and respectful dialogue go hand in hand in the posthuman wisdom approach; if we imagine that it is not students speaking but ideologies speaking through them, again, we risk engaging with our students as texts rather than as people. Although ideology critique is a perfectly valid way to approach teaching FYC, it is imperative that we remember the humanity of our students in the process. The difference can be something as subtle as buffering our responses to students with affirmative statements such as “I see where you’re coming from, but…” or “You raise a valid point; however…” Validating a student’s voice is no less important than challenging a student’s voice.

However, even though we need to validate students more, this pedagogy’s end goal, unlike the expressivists’, is not solely “locating the individual’s authentic nature” (Berlin 484). Although self-knowledge may be produced through writing, its purpose is not specifically or necessarily “the self discovered and expressed,” (484) even though self-discovery may occur at many points throughout a semester. Rather than making the discovery of the self an end, in this pedagogy, the self becomes the means, a dynamic text to “read” and critique. The self is not somehow pure and true once it is discovered; the discovery is only the beginning. In practice, this means that we should not only encourage our students to express their views on a topic, but offer reflective assignments on why they hold those views in the first place. For example, I have
often asked students to complete short, reflective assignments in which they connect something from their personal lives to our readings; when we read an excerpt of Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, I asked my students to reflect on their own eating habits and where their tastes and proclivities came from. I find that such assignments produce less stilted, more honest prose and helps students to feel a personal connection with the topic. How often have we heard the complaint that students find their readings boring, disconnected from their personal lives, or “irrelevant?” I think it is essential that we ask students to personally engage with texts; if we do not make the material relevant to students, who will?

Using reflective assignments to connect students to the material conditions of society begins with self-inquiry—valuable on its own—yet it leads to an “explicit critique of economic, political, and social arrangements” (Berlin 490) more characteristic of social-epistemicism. The self thus becomes the medium through which we understand the world; in turn, thinking about the world and our place in it may lead to shifts in perspective and action at the personal level. Yet posthuman wisdom pedagogy also moves beyond social-epistemicism in distinct ways. For example, in the social epistemic view, the existence of the individual can only be found in a dialectical relationship between himself, “the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence” (488). Berlin makes primary the dialectic relationship between the individual and society, yet seems to cheapen the living quality of that relationship by reducing its members to “verbal constructs” (488). A “construct” is artificial, deliberately assembled, an orderly arrangement; people, on the other hand, are anything but.

Social-epistemic pedagogy, by emphasizing the linguistic and constructed nature of social relations, is a thoroughly poststructuralist pedagogy, which strikes me as a potentially dehumanizing way of seeing our students, putting forth an overly technical view of human beings that dismisses the emotive and sensory components of our lives. Furthermore, because of their implication in historically and linguistically specific systems, it becomes impossible to generate knowledge about individuals and societies “apart from language” (488). While
it may be impossible to generate knowledge for others without language—in the materialist conception of knowledge, where truth is ascertained from the material world and data amassed, collected, and shared—as I explained in Chapter Two, I do think it is possible for individuals to observe themselves with some amount of neutrality and detachment. Perhaps knowledge without language is impossible, but in this pedagogical approach, the goal is not just knowledge but also wisdom. Thus Berlin’s materialist epistemology is exchanged for an “embodied wisdom”: we teach our students not only with the words we speak, but with our body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, whether we are standing or sitting as we engage with them, and so on.

Also integral to embodied wisdom is emotion, which is often outright ignored in composition pedagogy. However, we can encourage students to observe their own emotional states and use those emotions as instructive material. Sometimes before showing intellectually challenging material on YouTube or documentaries, I tell students to observe how they feel in response to it, which seems to work since emotions toward reading material are in abundance: they jump at the opportunity to express that the material is “boring” or that they “didn’t like it.” From there I ask why they found it boring or disliked it, and while some students are unable to respond, occasionally this has led to rich discussions that tapped deep into their interaction with the text. I will never forget the day my inner Marxist was put to shame when some of the students in my ENC1102 classes responded negatively to Peter Singer’s lecture in the film Examined Life. During the film, Singer strolls down 5th Avenue as he bemoans wealth disparities and criticizes America’s rampant consumerism. Surely, I was convinced, my students would agree with Singer (and with me), and we would all engage in a “critical” conversation together. To my chagrin, when the segment ended, my students were mostly expressionless. I could sense a tense atmosphere in the classroom, and decided to let go of my expectations and instead tune into the emotional climate of the room. I asked my students what they thought about the film and mumbled something about them not liking it. Silence. I tried to open things up more. “It’s okay if you hated it,” I said, “boredom or dislike is a perfectly
valid response.” A few more moments of painful silence, and then one student hesitantly raised her hand and said that she felt as though Singer was “looking down on rich people.” This, she explained, alienated her because her family, she told the class, gave a good portion of their wealth away to philanthropy. Students with rich, philanthropic families (a combination that I had not really considered) in my other section had the same reaction. This resulted in a radical shift of my own perspective as I released some of the unfair presuppositions I, myself, had harbored about the wealthy. When students are guided towards self-awareness, instructors become more aware of their own habits of mind, as well. In turn, I believe that I helped a shy student feel it was safe to contribute to class discussion. The material we ask our students to engage with can be confronting in a variety of ways; too often do we think of our students’ silence as apathy when perhaps, in many cases, it is more a feeling of alienation.

Although advocating for self-expression and advocating for critical thinking are nothing new, the conversation on how to achieve these goals in the classroom could always use expansion. Guiding students towards awareness of their own discursive thought, emotions, and how their attitudes might relate to larger social narratives are practices not limited to engaging them in dialogue, which critical pedagogues, expressionists, and social-epistemicists alike have long championed. Another way that students may be led to both self-discovery and social critique is ironically through silence. In Chapter One, I discussed how silence functioned as a medium of sacred teaching in the Book of Job, and I see potential in silence to also generate “teachings” in the composition classroom. Currently, the dialogical model popularized by Paulo Freire is one in which students and teachers actively participate in conversation about oppressive social structures, and through their transformative conversations, students become agents of social change. However, such a model fails to account for those students who do not speak, who do not weigh in on the “dialogue.” Are such students less critically conscious for not participating in the conversation?

In his article “Rethinking Critical Pedagogy: Implications on Silence and Silent Bodies,” Richie Neil Hao frames silence as a strategic decision on the student's part, a
“performative act . . . which helps us break the binary between speech as a dialogic act while silence is not” (280). Hao encourages teachers to reconsider their assumptions about silent students, challenging the belief that such students are passive or unengaged in the material. Such an approach, according to Hao, humanizes students and recognizes their status as agents: “understanding and allowing silence as a legitimate classroom ritual is not only about appreciating each other’s differences, but more importantly providing silent students a voice that they otherwise would not have in the classroom” (282). Silence provides students with a “voice” because silence is a deliberate choice. While it may be our tendency to see active, loquacious dialogue as the ideal sign of engagement, critical consciousness can also be achieved through silence. In silence, we may choose to listen consciously, we may question utterances in our heads, and we decide where to put our attention. Silence may create for a student the opportunity to process information, sort through multiple perspectives, and create an inner dialogue that is an interpretive practice all its own. Conversely, the silence into which students make utterances when they do speak can also be instructive. Often, saying something out loud is enough for a student to take a more critical perspective on themselves or their own attitudes. In class discussions, I often observe students begin to make a point, and then backpedal to change their point once they have “heard how it sounds.”

When students tune into their own subjective states, whether through silence or through reflective questioning and assignments, they are generating critical consciousness, reading the world as they read themselves. It is instructive for students to gain knowledge of themselves and knowledge of their society, and choosing one in favor of the other is not a choice that needs to be made. In this way, posthuman wisdom pedagogy moves beyond the social-epistemic goal of placing “the question of ideology . . . at the center of the writing classroom” (Berlin 490). Ideological critique is still important, but it is neither realistic nor possible to achieve this goal without recognizing that students are agents with their own agendas, expectations, and needs of their own. At the same time, we should not move too far to the opposite end of the spectrum and unflinchingly support the expressivist injunction to “serve the needs of the individual” in
spite of everything else (484). As Berlin alludes to, plenty of college students really are there to get a degree and “play . . . the game of material acquisition” (490) after graduating, and we should not be afraid to challenge these “ambitions.” Berlin is right that we should have dialogue about “more self-fulfilling behavior” (490), but if we are going to do that, we have to find out what “self-fulfilling” actually means to our students. In other words, we have to let them talk and write about themselves. Perhaps pointing students toward the dominant narratives means starting with their local, micro-narratives.

In the posthuman moment, as we continue to discuss theories of subjectivity and how they affect classroom practice, we know better than to return to Enlightenment delusions of self-containment and isolation. However, the new narratives of “dead” or purely ideological-informational-material subjects currently in vogue fail to account for human vulnerability and for how strongly the drive toward self-concept drives us, in spite of our “knowing better.” Perhaps we “know more” about ourselves now than ever, but we must constantly raise the larger, epistemological questions about the nature of such knowledge. The ideological view of subjectivity that began with Althusser and found its way into rhetoric and composition via social epistemic pedagogy seems driven by materialist philosophy. When we base our epistemology in hard materialism, we remain stuck in an older paradigm while posthumanism moves forward, collapsing the binary between information and material and implicitly reviving questions of the metaphysical. Turning our focus back inward may prove to be our last salvation from an increasingly networked world colonized by the forces of techno-capitalism. The inner space of the individual was never “pure” but always sacred.
WORKS CITED


