Extending the Postmodern: Finding Agency Amidst the Death of the Self

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EXTENDING THE POSTMODERN: FINDING AGENCY AMIDST THE DEATH OF THE SELF

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Heather Norwood
March 2020
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern theory, specifically the death of the agent, naturally troubles concepts of agency, and has drawn the attention of scholars within English Composition. These scholars have worked their way around the need for an agent in various ways however, I would argue that underneath the surface, postmodern theory is making an argument for the death of the self and that these scholars are likewise attempting to come to terms with this. To explore the death of the self, I have delved into postmodern theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, revealing the areas in their work that most clearly make the argument. To test the argument, and the theory that arises from it, I believe a cross-disciplinary approach that takes into consideration contemporary thoughts about the self offered by evolutionary and experimental psychology is the most effective way to work towards a theory of agency that is both valid and allows for things like meaningful writing projects and social change. As a result of this approach, it appears that the seat of the self is in the unconscious mind, and the death of the self is valid conceptually as we come to realize that the humanist version of the self which is centered in the conscious I, is not congruent with how we know the mind works. With this new knowledge of the self, it is possible to reconceptualize agency in a way that recognizes the agency we all already have and empowers students all at once.
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I wish to express my gratitude for both of my readers. Dr. Mary Boland, who has made me a better writer through the thesis process- the value of which cannot possibly be overstated. Her questions have become a part of my internal monologue and continue to help me as I continue to write. Dr. Boland’s support and encouragement throughout my time at CSUSB was like a beacon of light in the darkness, and this project would not have been possible without her willingness to take it on even as her life was changing. I am forever grateful for the positive impact she has had on my life and my work. And Dr. Jessica Luck, whose guidance through the thesis process was invaluable, both inside and outside of the classroom. She taught me how to ground a text and gave me the freedom to write like I had never experienced. I’d also like to add a quick thank you to my friends who listened to me talk about this project; explaining it to people who had no idea what I was talking about helped me to get a firmer grasp on what I was trying to say.
DEDICATION

This is for my Mom, who I hope is watching me from somewhere, and is proud. Her life made my life possible in more ways than one and there remains a debt which I can never repay.
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CHAPTER ONE
EXTENDING THE POSTMODERN: FINDING AGENCY AMIDST THE DEATH
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Postmodern theory problematizes everything we know, even knowledge. In some ways, this push against the modern, against the notion of absolute truth, against the idea that there is a world that is objectively real, reflects our experience of the world both intuitively and scientifically. However, the ideas offered by postmodernism can also be deeply problematic, especially as they relate to the author, the subject, the agent, the self, and consciousness. In writing and rhetoric studies, the struggle can be seen in our anxiety about concepts of agency and authorship given that traditional notions of agency have included agents who are rational actors with free will, a coherent consciousness, and an autonomous self. These concepts are nestled together like Russian Matryoshka dolls, where the consciousness is the seat of the self, and the self is the seat of agency, and to trouble one is to trouble them all. Postmodernism does this by offering a view of the individual as written on by cultural codes, with selves embedded in performance, and choices delimited by discourses. This puts pressure on the traditional humanist version of the self, whose coherence and autonomy provides a logical and intuitive foundation for agency. Scholars wrestling with new views of agency in light of the postmodern, find there is real value in postmodern theory as a whole, in that it illuminates how discourses
construct subject positions, performances construct identities, and readers construct meaning. However, their reconceptualizations have led to notions of agency without an agent, as attribution, as a property of questioning, or as a result of embodied processes—all of which bring agency closer to the lived experiences of individuals while maintaining the social construction aspects of the self that are found both so valuable and so troubling within postmodern theory, but ultimately leave the Matryoshka empty.

James Berlin, in his article *Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies*, presents “some of the central features of postmodern theory that workers in rhetoric have found especially relevant to their efforts” (17), and while it is not meant to be an exhaustive treatise on postmodern theory, it does cover what I would agree are “the significant postmodern developments”: “the status of the subject; the characteristics of signifying practices; the role of master theories in explaining human affairs” (18). I am mostly concerned with the first—the status of the subject, especially because of its relationship to rhetorical agency. Berlin offers that the postmodern subject is a push back against “the unified, coherent, autonomous, self-present subject of the Enlightenment”, which maintains a “transcendent consciousness that functions unencumbered by social and material conditions of experience, acting as a free and rational agent who adjudicates competing claims for action” (18), and in many ways, postmodern theory places the subject in cultural and discursive contexts that traditional theories ignored. The subject does not operate with complete independence
from the culture in which it is immersed and postmodern theory offers an insightful view of how the subject is written on by cultural codes and constructed socially by discourses, which points to the absolutely constructive power of language beyond the creation of stories (literature) and arguments (rhetoric). This has been a boon to composition studies as it has allowed us to ask more questions about what we can write.

In this shift from the self-present subject to subject positions however, we have lost the traditional, humanist view of the self. Part of my purpose here is to account for the self amidst the postmodern wreckage--to explore what is left in the place of the coherent autonomous self-present subject—ultimately arguing that the postmodern deaths ought to be extended past the traditional humanist self, the author, and the agent, to notions of the self as a whole. The foundation for the death of the self can be seen in postmodern theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Butler, and it can be argued that when all of the layers of the postmodern self that are left are stripped away—constructed subject positions created by discourses, performance, and illusion—nothing remains of “self” in any way that we are accustomed to thinking about it. However, a cross-disciplinary dive may yet offer us not only a seat for the post Postmodern self, but also for agency, which is the most troubled by the myriad postmodern deaths.

Aside from serving as a logical seat for choice and thus agency, the self provides the foundation for certain discursive practices within rhetoric and composition and the veneration of the individual self has served to support the
social project of the discipline. Tod Sloan noted two reasons in the article

*Beyond the Postmodern Self*: “concepts of the self matter because they can serve ideological and, occasionally, emancipatory interests” (110). We see this at play when we consider authorship as a point of genesis where credit for ideas and responsibility for words once spoken (or written) ultimately resides, requiring a subject, or a self, that is capable of generating unique thought and being accountable for personal action. Without a self that can shoulder authorship, strict citation practices seem ridiculous. The second reason Sloan offers is that “analyses of actual forms of selfhood are among the best sources of information we have about collective and individual efforts to improve the quality of social life” (110), which to me relates to one of the goals of Rhetoric and Composition as a whole: giving a voice to the voiceless. The history of western rhetoric includes the ways that the marginalized and oppressed have been publicly silenced, and as a result, part of the project of the discipline is to rectify this situation— to value all voices, and create conditions for each voice to be heard; it is for this reason that I think composition scholars especially have given the topic of agency a renewed reconsideration with the death of the author/agent/subject/self in postmodernism. The role and function of the self is too important to relegate to simply construction, performance, or illusion—we need a self to be the seat of agency and authorship to maintain a vested interest in the voice of the individual.
Emptying the Matryoshka

It makes the most sense to consider the postmodern theory around which new theories of agency are being constructed to see how they empty the Matryoshka of the traditional, humanist self and lay the foundation for the death of the self as we know it.

Let’s begin with the author. The author is notably taken up in work by Roland Barthes, technically a post-structuralist, who claimed that the author is dead. This proclamation was a strong push back against notions that the meaning of the text was determined and closed by the author of the text. Barthes notes in “The Death of the Author” that “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us” (1322). However, Barthes un hinges the connection between the author and the meaning of a text, suggesting that “it is language which speaks, not the author” (1323). This idea that “only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (1323) is as romantic a notion as the solitary writer in the attic, composing great works out of his pain and sadness, as it hints at the capacity of language to perform, imbuing language with the kind of life that characterizes the massively constructive power of human language. However, this troubles the notion of the author, not for the reader, but for the writer who identifies as the author, and for the writer whose work includes the works of other writers.
Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault can help us to make sense of the death of the author and see further how it troubles traditional notions of the self. Derrida, in his work “Of Grammatology”, offers us the idea that “there is nothing outside of the text” (1692), that is, when a person sits down to read, the interaction is between the reader, and the text. The author is not along for the ride, the author may be truly dead, and in either case, the author is metaphorically dead, and the meaning that arises from the text is specifically born of the interchange between the language and the reader “for we have read…that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence” (1692). Foucault, in “What is an Author?”, both recognizes and sets aside the idea that an author can close the meaning of their own text and “that status we have given the author, for instance, when we began our research into authenticity and attribution; the systems of valorization in which he was included; or the moment when the stories of heroes gave way to an author’s biography” (1476). This move allows for a theoretical conceptualization of what is left in that space which the death of the author has left unoccupied: the author function. Foucault offers that “function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (1481), and “does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy” (1485); it serves as a way to denote intellectual property, to lend the weight of truth, and as a subject
position in discourse. The author has been moved from self-present to a subject position, and is no longer producing works of self-expression, but rather is a “particular source of expression” and the self has disappeared.

This handling of the author is tenable, and even a relief, as we become readers able to pull meaning from a text based on simply the words themselves, without having to delve hopelessly into a world we can’t know in order to understand what the text is saying. However, the self continues to be troubled as Barthes confronts the I: “linguistically, the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing more than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject’, not a ‘person’, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language ‘hold together’” (1323). The I that says I is has traditionally been an individual with a self and a consciousness, but here Barthes points out that language is blind to individual human beings and is only connected to the subject, which it constructs and is constructed by. This continues to support the death of the author and leaves the writer in the constructed subject position of the author function, thus emptying the Matryoshka of the author and the self-present subject that is the writer.

The removal of the self-present subject can also be seen in the work of Judith Butler in text “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”. In this article, Butler’s statements relate to sexuality and sexual and gender identity, however in working with the I that pertains to self and identity, the I that is conscious, she asks a very interesting question: “is sexuality of any kind even possible without
the opacity designated by the unconscious, which means simply that the unconscious 'I' who would reveal its sexuality is perhaps the last to know the meaning of what it says?” (309). Butler notes that the unconscious mind is opaque, to the point that the conscious mind cannot know it, thus suggesting its primacy over the conscious mind, as the conscious 'I' is possibly the last to know the meaning of its own revelation. Additionally, in raising this question, Butler connects that ‘I’ that is intuitively connected to the self to the conscious mind (which is the traditional connection between the “I”, the self, and the conscious mind). This becomes particularly interesting when she discusses the way that the ‘I’ is “a site of repetition… the ‘I’ only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself” (311), which proposes that the identity of the ‘I’ or of the conscious is something that is constructed through performance. Further, “if the ‘I’ is the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of continuity or coherence, then there is no ‘I’ that precedes the gender it is said to perform; the repetition, and the failure to repeat, produce a string of performances that constitute and contest the coherence of that ‘I’”. (311)

In other words, Butler offers the possibility that it is repeated performance that creates the illusion of the static ‘I’ of the conscious mind, an illusion so powerful that not only does it convince others that someone is for example, a lesbian, but also convinces the conscious mind in a constitutive loop, because “how and
where I play at being [a lesbian] is the way in which that being gets established, instituted, circulated and confirmed” (311), not for others or just in public, but in reality whatsoever. That is to say that being a lesbian is not constituted in the opaque unconscious, whereby some mysterious connection, the conscious ‘I’ becomes aware of it, and then seeks to reveal it and therefore performs being a lesbian. Rather it is the performance of being a lesbian that is constructive of being a lesbian. Additionally, if the performance constructs identity, then this identity is unstable because of the variations, however slight, in the repetitions of the performance. It is due to this idea that we do not repeat identity performances exactly that the ‘I’ is destabilized- there is the possibility of inconsistency and therefore a lack of coherence- which ultimately results in the “permanently non-self-identical status of that ‘I”’ (311). How we understand this line is up for interpretation. It could be taken that the ‘I’ cannot identify the self because the ‘I’ is separate from the self it appears to represent, or it could be taken that the ‘I’ identifies non-self. Either way, Butler, making an argument about the nature of gender and sexuality, also points to a postmodern perspective of the self as constructed, not only through language as others have suggested, but through performance as well, and suggests that the “I” is an illusion created by this performance. Thus, the self is no longer present (decentered), performed, and illusory, and the traditional view of the self is troubled significantly.
In the place of the self-present subject is the self-absent subject of discourse. John Clifford discusses this at length in the article “The Subject in Discourse”, where the subject is the writing subject and Clifford reminds us that “for the traditional humanist, the writer has always been seen as a creative individual, the locus of significance, the originator of meaning, an autonomous being, aware of ends and means, of authorial intentions and motivations” (39); in this view the subject and the self are the synonymous, unified, and possessing the same qualities. As Clifford walks the reader through structuralist, poststructuralist, and materialist views of the subject, where the humanist subject is that which has died, we see that in its place is a subject that is “the site of contradiction”, “written on by social or psychological forces that might diminish the clarity of consciousness or the singularity of individual intentions” (39). If we accept that the traditional self is dead, and the subject is constructed through discourse, then we end up with subjects inhabiting “positions that have already been constructed to create just this seductive illusion of choice” (43), and a self that is no longer unified, autonomous, or aware. The self that has choice is dead, decentered, constructed, written on, and conflicted; it is the product of competing discourses, and no longer knows its own mind. This is not a self that can shoulder the weight of authorship or agency, but unlike the author function, there does not seem to be a convenient agent function within the scholarship of rhetoric and composition to fill the void.
Struggling with the Empty Doll

To work around the void left by the move from the self-present subjects to subject positions, scholars have reconceptualized agency in several ways. One of the main sticking points seems to revolve around choice, or the illusion of choice, as Clifford mentions in his article. Self-present subjects have autonomy and therefore the ability to make their own choices, but postmodernism removes the self and autonomy, not always together, or at the same time, but with the same result- the death of the agent as a rational actor capable of independent choice.

Nick Turnbull, in his article “Rhetorical Agency as a Property of Questioning”, opens with the statement that “where there is choice there is agency” (207). However, he quickly addresses issues that have risen out of postmodernism and asserts that “the attention to agency has increased with the ongoing crisis of thought arising from the critique of metaphysics” (207), by which I assume he is referring to how “simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” (Baudrillard 219) and nothing is Real. Turnbull suggests that without the foundation of the Real to support reason, for knowledge to exist, we must depend on rhetorical constructions. That is to say, we can no longer depend on our senses to gain knowledge of the world, because postmodern theory contends with the notion that experience can lead us to truth, and instead, we depend on the persuasion of the rhetorical to explain reality. Turnbull calls this the “rhetorical turn”, and offers that “even identity itself has
been ‘rhetorically’ with the death of the subject” and there is “an increased capacity of agency in the use of language to construct identity”, which echoes Butler’s notion that identity is constructed through performance.

The article plunges into the nature of rhetorical agency specifically, and Turnbull argues that in order to do this sufficiently, he must explore the division between logic and rhetoric, as well as the conflict between necessity and freedom. In his view, logical arguments lead to necessary conclusions which remove agency from the audience; through demonstrative reasoning “we have no choice but to accept the conclusion that is presented to us” (209). Turnbull therefore is in favor of rhetoric because of the agency that it provides both to the rhetor and the audience, and uses the rhetorical turn to talk about the problematicity present in the postmodern (the postmodern makes a problem out of everything; it troubles everything we think we know). The article draws heavily on the philosophy of Michel Meyer, and in some ways, necessarily reconstructs the connection between rhetoric and philosophy through a discussion of the nature of the problematic, placing the issues that postmodernism raises in the wheel house of philosophy since “philosophical systems are problematological in that they resolve a question and express a problematization at the same time”, therefore “the problematization of the subject and the historical crisis of reason are thus entirely normal for philosophy since its nature is to express the problematic” (216). My appreciation of this approach cannot be understated, not only because of my natural leaning towards the philosophical, but because this
cross-disciplinary method produces an elegant argument for the nature of rhetorical agency to reside within the problematic as a property of questioning, rather than as a property of an agent.

In this way, the argument does not seem to require a handling of the postmodern agent or self, even though he seems to accept several tenets of postmodernism. The article concludes that “the nature of rhetorical agency is the power to explicitly or implicitly treat a question” (219). However, this begs the question: if he allows for the death of the subject, then where is the power to treat a question? The conclusion seems to require an agent, or a subject, a self, or some place for that power to reside. Turnbull does offer that “the death of the subject means the attention is directed towards discourse” (210) and posits in his conclusion that “the rhetorical agency of discourse is a necessary consequence of the principle of questioning” (219) which he has shown to be at the heart of philosophy, logic, and rhetoric, however, he does not say that the power to treat a question lies within the discursively constructed identity, or make mention of how it is possible for discourse to have agency, instead we get a picture of the subject as an agent:

“In discourse, one way to treat a problem is by declaring its solution. The hearer then proceeds to interpret the adequacy of the conclusion. She has a choice.” (218)

A problem arises if we accept the postmodern notion of the death of the subject, which Turnbull seems to do in the opening of the article. This subject,
while being rhetorically constructed, is not freely constructed by an agent. The subject is dead specifically because it is no longer an autonomous agent in control over its construction, not even over the construction of its own identity. If the subject doesn’t have the freedom of rhetorical construction, then she does not really have an autonomous choice. Her choice is limited by the construction of her identity, or the subject position that she occupies, which is likewise out of her control. While this article does a good job of articulating problematicity, it does not really resolve the issue of how a non-autonomous actor can retain choice because it is just as likely that the choice to treat a question is a part of the discursive subject position that an individual occupies, and is therefore not an independent choice. It appears that it is not enough of a solution to place questioning inside the Matryoshka doll because questioning on its own cannot be a seat for agency without an autonomous agent capable of choice.

In the article, *What Can Automation Tell us About Agency?*, Carolyn Miller also tries to rework a theory of agency without an agent, and begins with pointing out the prevalence of automated writing assessments that are already in place and the prospect of computer based assessment of the essay portions of the SATs, and discusses a theoretical product: an automated oral presentation assessment system called AutoSpeech-Easy™. Miller suggests that the widespread use of such a system troubles rhetorical agency “by positing a machine as audience” which serves to “denaturalize rhetorical action, challenging and uncovering our intuitions about its necessary conditions” (140). In order to
research what kind of intuitions or ideas are held about rhetorical action, Miller conducted a survey at her university of professors in composition and communications. The strongest responses had to do with the computer’s inability to judge things like, “creativity, appropriateness to context, the expression of emotion, and individual and cultural differences” (140) and the second major theme (after incredulity) “concerned the damage that automated assessment does to rhetoric’s audience” (141). From the responses that she received, Miller suggests that the resistance to automation “is rooted in a commitment to agency” (141), and confronts the problem that arises “from the struggle of rhetoric to come to terms with the postmodern condition… since agency has traditionally been understood as a property of an agent, the decentering of the subject- the death of the author//agent- signals a crisis for agency” (143).

Considering this conundrum, and with the assumption that there is no agency without an agent, Miller offers three components of agency: performance, audience, and interaction. Here, Miller has removed the agent and replaced it with an implicit performer (although it could be argued that the agent is the one doing the performance, the performer does not necessarily have to have the status of agent as one with autonomous power). This allows the performer to inhabit a subject position, without having autonomy, choice, or the conditions for choice, and possess agency through attribution. Thus, agency is defined as “the
kinetic energy of a rhetorical performance” (147), and “requires a relationship between two entities, who will attribute agency to each other” (149).

Therefore, in Miller’s argument the agent is resurrected, as “it is through this process of mutual attribution that agency does, indeed, produce an agent” (150). With this line of reasoning, the performance precedes the agent and the performance itself is what constructs the agent. From this perspective, we can see that performance has a constructive power; performance constructs the identity of the agent; an entity, outside of performance, is not an agent, which is similar to Butler’s suggestion that performance constructs an identity. Miller uses the term “entity”, I think exactly to avoid using a term like person, or performer, because these terms can suggest that there is autonomy, or a self, or a consciousness present when the postmodern condition of the death of the agent has already been accepted as foundational for the purposes of the article to begin with. This suggests to me that Miller, like other scholars, is trying to create a foundation for agency in an agent and in the process comes across another sticking point of how to talk about an individual without suggesting that there is as self, or an autonomous consciousness present, even though I think Miller is truly trying to forward the idea presented by Herndl and Licona that “it is the social phenomenon of agency that brings the agent into being” (150). This again says to me that we need, both conceptually and linguistically, to have a hook on which to hang the self so that we can meaningfully tie agency to it.
We need to fill the Matryoshka doll so that we have a satisfying way to talk about the self; part of the reason that the traditional humanist version of the self worked for so long is because it served to both allow us to talk about ourselves in a way that made intuitive sense, and answered the question about what is in control of the body. If we don’t have a self that is in control, then what is the source of our choices? I don’t think it is enough to say that it is the layers of subject positions we inhabit- it seems to make sense that there is some internal impetus for choice and discourses set the parameters for the choices we are capable of making.

Rather than turn this into a discussion of free will versus determinism, I will take a cue from David Hume who asserts that “man is a reasonable being; and as such, receives from science his proper food and nutrition” (3) With this in mind, I turn to the social sciences to further reconceptualize the self, picking up in some respects where postmodernism left off, in an attempt to relocate the self in a way that is congruent with lived experience and allows us to be self-referential without always needing to put the self under erasure. Tod Sloan marks the need for this in part when he says in *Beyond the Postmodern Self* that “scholars can easily trace the ebbs and tides of concepts of selfhood through the centuries, but the degree of correlation between these concepts and the lived experience of individuals is probably slight” (110). For this reason, it doesn’t seem like enough to simply say that the self of the Enlightenment is dead and retrain the focus to the subject; there is still a need conceptually and linguistically for the self, or the /
that says I, to have some kind of locus, and it's seems that through the lens of experimental psychology, we can locate the self beyond construction or illusion in a way that allows us to talk about ourselves without absurdity.

Postmodernism has been influenced by psychology in its assessment of consciousness and the self. Sloan suggests that “as the observations of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists became more widely available, this view of the self as coherent could no longer be affirmed…we became all too aware of the fissures, contradictions, fragments, and splits within the psyche” (111), which suggests the connection between the self and consciousness. It seems to be a common connection, and it would be profitable to talk about the self and consciousness separately, but it is difficult linguistically to do so, exactly as Sloan has exhibited, because the self and consciousness appear to be connected; that is, we tend so say we know one based on knowledge of the other: we came to see the psyche as split and therefore the self as incoherent. This is probably due to the way we see the self as originative- I chose to study English Composition because a love of reading and writing is part of who I am- the concept of the self provides a framework for us to understand the choices that we make, the things that we do, or as Sloan elegantly says “the self is often conceived as that aspect of the personality that gives coherence to various acts, feelings, moods, ideas, and images that a person is aware of and creates this coherence through a complex process of sense-making: narrative construction, story-telling, self-interpretation, rationalization, inner dialogue” (114). From this perspective, the
self is the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves. Has this story ceased to be coherent? And thus, the self? And thus, the mind?

Psychology has offered a lot of information about the mind, but if we are going to take the observations of psychiatrists, whose main source of data is what clients have said, as proof that the consciousness is fragmented and incoherent, then I think we’re stopping short of a full exploration. Granted, there are many people, who when they speak, sound incoherent, they may make choices that seem random, they may have experiences that they cannot consciously make sense of, but that does not mean that the self, or the mind, is absolutely characterized by fragmentation or incoherence; it is that they are expressing it in response to some experience that the conscious mind is trying to make sense of, and at some level failing, or is simply in the middle of a process of narrativizing, story-telling, and self-interpretation.

If we come from Butler’s perspective, it is possible 1) that the unconscious mind has already assimilated the experience and the conscious I is trying to catch up or 2) the fragmentation being expressed is not the I because there is no I that precedes the fragmentation. I’d also like to offer 3) what psychiatrists have observed are performances of fragmentation and incoherence that are distinct events or phenomena separate from the overall working of the mind and 4) that the performance of fragmentation and incoherence may be in part due to the kinds of conditioning we have received for the expression of emotions. The way that we express emotions is culturally transmitted; we are taught from a young
age how we ought to interpret and respond to external stimuli, and this includes expressions of emotional responses through facial expressions, body language, tears, laughter, etc. (For more information on this see *How Emotions are Made* by Lisa Feldman Barret) I am not saying that people who come back from Iraq with PTSD are somehow faking, but I *am* saying that part of the expression of trauma and the interpretation of another’s performance of a trauma response are conditioned, framed, and constructed by our culture. These four points, I think are enough to cast reasonable doubt on psychiatric sessions providing the data for a definitive answer on whether the self or the consciousness is incoherent.

People may *feel* as though they are fragmented or incoherent, they may even have a heightened sense of the discourses that compete depending on their subject positions or even an awareness of their cognitive dissonance. For example, I’m aware that I believe in reincarnation because I want to, rather than because I have any reason to, and if I am perfectly honest, I am fairly certain that there is nothing after death. However, I am so dissatisfied with this nothing that I choose to believe in something irrationally to feel more at peace with my own eventual death. Does this awareness mean that there is conscious fragmentation or incoherence? I don’t think so. I think it points to one of the mind’s most interesting qualities: the ability to entertain opposing viewpoints. Yuval Harari writes about this in his book *Sapiens*, saying that “just as when two clashing musical notes played together force a piece of music forward, so discord in our thoughts, ideas and values compel us to think, re-evaluate and criticize”
This suggests that it is from the overdetermined positions we are called to inhabit, the multiple and shifting codes by which we are written, the competing discourses that duke it out over control of our ideologies, are exactly what make us creative individuals— they are what give us access to what is outside the subject positions we are called to inhabit (without this access, I would suggest that we couldn't have any kind of meta-knowledge).

Further, just because these positions are constructed by “conflicting, partial, interesting codes, not by the coherent and stable consciousness posited by traditional humanists” (Clifford 50) does not mean that because we for a moment step into the subject position that we are therefore constructed the same way that the position has been constructed. Think of the intense friction that would arise from a coherent consciousness, or self, stepping into a subject position that is rife with internal contradictions— the experience of occupying that subject position may be characterized by the fragmentations of the subject positions, but the narrativizing self can still make sense of it, can still tell a story about it, in exactly the same way I told you a story about my cognitive dissonance.

Leonard Mlodinow, in his book How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior talks about this narrativizing as a “struggle to fashion a coherent, convincing view of ourselves and the rest of the world” and notes that the unconscious mind “is a master at using limited data to construct a vision of the world that appears realistic and complete to its partner, the conscious mind”
This is easily understandable just considering vision. We have a blind spot in our vision, but as we experience reality, we do not experience this blind spot- that is because the unconscious mind automatically fills in the blind spot with data it already has in its memory. We never perceive a blind spot at all because of how good the unconscious mind is at filling in missing data with other data, such that we never even realize there was any data missing to begin with. For this reason, “visual perception, memory, and emotions are all constructs, made of a mix of raw, incomplete, and sometimes conflicting data” (201), which sounds a lot like the construction of subject positions by competing discourses. Mlodinow suggests that “we use the same kind of creative process to generate our self-image,” (201) and that that process happens in the unconscious mind. This suggests that the narrativizing self isn’t the conscious I either, but the opaque unconscious.

I like the view of the mind that Daniel Kahneman offers in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*. This book speaks at length about these two processes of the mind: fast thinking and slow thinking, or terms that are “widely used in psychology” (21) System 1 and System 2 respectively, where System 1 “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control” (20) and System 2 “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations” (21). Kahneman describes System 2 as the system that we associate with the self; it has desires and preferences, beliefs and convictions, it is rational and makes choices. The
two systems can operate independently of each other and Kahneman suggests
that we "think of the two systems as agents with their individual abilities,
limitations, and functions" (21).

These systems seem to correlate to the subconscious and the conscious
minds, even though in the brief introductory description of what each system
does, there is no mention of the conscious, or of the self. This makes me wonder
if my perception or desire to connect the systems to consciousness is because I
have been linguistically conditioned to think of consciousness and myself in this
way, and perhaps the reason that we identify ourselves with system 2 is because
it is the slow system that allows for the kind of plodding through connections slow
enough that it reaches what we perceive as our conscious awareness, whereas
System 1 works so quickly that it is done before the slow mind has gained
knowledge of its actions and thus has the opacity that Butler suggests, and is
therefore impossible to identify with (identifying being a slow process rather than
a fast one).

Especially interesting in Kahneman's book is the idea of associative
coherece, which it handles at length. The idea of the mind being an associative
machine with its main feature being associative coherence seems to refute the
notion of an inchoerent consciousness suggested by postmodern theorists.
Traits of this associative machine include interpretations of causality (75-76), the
construction of stories (114), and prediction (194). Kahneman illustrates this
automatic associative process by asking readers to participate in a tacit experiment, putting these two words on the page for consideration:

Bananas

Vomit

He predicts, “A lot happened to you in the last second or two. You experienced some unpleasant images and memories. Your face twisted in an expression of disgust… your heart rate increased, the hair on your arms rose a little, and your sweat glands activated… your mind automatically assumed a temporal connection and a causal connection between the words, forming a sketchy scenario in which bananas caused the sickness” (50), or perhaps you groaned or said yuck- my response to the word vomit was verbal- or you pictured vomited bananas. Kahneman offers that the “essential feature of this complex set of mental events is its coherence… each element is connected, and each supports and strengthens the others… yielding a self-reinforcing pattern of cognitive, emotional and physical responses that is both diverse and integrated” (51). With this definition of coherence, even the soldier with PTSD can still be viewed as associatively coherent, if not perhaps functionally coherent, or verbally coherent. This becomes easier to see if we take more out of Kahneman: “that your System 1 treated the mere conjunction of the two words as representations of reality…your body reacted in an attenuated replica of the reaction to the real thing” which illustrated what “cognitive scientists have emphasized in recent years, cognition is embodied” (51).
It appears that consciousness is coherent, and while the self points to consciousness, I don’t think that consciousness points to the self in the same way. It is for this reason that here I separate the two and suggest that there can be a coherent consciousness without the traditional humanist version of the self, whereas that version of the self seems to require a coherent consciousness. This is an unhinging of the traditional connection between the self and the conscious mind, where the coherent conscious mind gives rise to the self, and the self is evidence of a coherent conscious mind. In the place of a self that has the same properties of the consciousness that gives rise to its existence (autonomy, coherence, choice, agency, etc.), I would posit a self that is performed, constructed, and illusory. Not only does this seem to be theoretically accurate (as in it relates to and reflects reality in a way that assumes a close approximation to lived experience), but it also serves to reconcile the postmodern self with what experimental psychology offers as a way to understand the human mind.

With the uncoupling of the self and the conscious mind, comes the uncoupling of the agent and the conscious mind. Marilyn Cooper, in her article “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted”, notes at the beginning that, “we have for a long time understood an agent as one who through conscious intention or free will causes changes in the world” (421) which again echoes that coupling between an autonomous, coherent consciousness and an agent. Cooper seeks to unhinge this coupling by suggesting that “neither conscious
intention nor free will—at least as we commonly think of them—is involved in acting or bringing about change” (421). Cooper’s argument is that “agency is an emergent property of embodied individuals” (421), and I would extend this thought by suggesting that the reason this is the case is because of the nature of the subconscious mind. If the subconscious mind is what calls the shots, making our decisions for us, as experimental psychology offers, then it is possible that agency is not only a property that arises from embodiment, but specifically, something that arises out of the subconscious mind. Indeed, Cooper’s work also can be seem to support this idea as she points out from her research in neurophenomenology that “emergent properties (such as agency) are not epiphenomena, nor ‘possessions’ in any sense, but function as a part of the systems in which they originate” (421), where an epiphenomenon is a secondary effect or byproduct that arises from but does not causally influence a process. This idea, when embraced, allows us to see agency as originating in the subconscious mind, especially when we consider that the subconscious mind appears to be the actual source of human choice, and as the center of the Matryoshka doll. From here, we move towards a concept of unconscious intention, a topic which seems as opaque as the unconscious mind itself, and one that I will return to.

Agency therefore arises out of the cognitive system of the human mind as it functions embodied in and through the world. Agency, originating in the
subconscious mind, is a property not just of embodied individuals, but of cognition.

I’m also going to suggest, perhaps counterintuitively, that consciousness is coherent regardless of any experiential evidence to the contrary because “most of the work of associative thinking is silent, hidden from our conscious selves” (Kahneman 52). Butler, Clifford, and Kahneman all converge at this point, that a large part of our mental apparatus is unable to be known to us. Butler calls the unconscious opaque and Clifford suggests that it is “beyond our ability to know accurately why we write and think as we do” (40). For this reason, I would take what experimental psychology has to offer about the mind, which is the data from which Kahneman pulls his information when theorizing about the self and consciousness.

“System 1 provides the impressions that often turn into your beliefs and is the source of the impulses that often become your choices and your actions. It offers a tacit interpretation of what happens to you and around you, linking the present with the recent past and with expectations about the near future. It contains a model of the world that instantly evaluates events as normal or surprising. It is the source of your rapid and often precise intuitive judgements. And it does most of this without your conscious awareness of its activities.” (Kahneman 58)

Interestingly, this description of System 1 correlates very closely to what we think of as the self, which supports the idea that the unconscious mind, or fast mind, is
the seat of the self, rather than System 2, or conscious mind, or conscious I. It is perhaps simply because we can know System 2, the slow mind, that we have come to identify ourselves with it. To know one’s self then, is to pay attention to the ways that System 1 works; this may be the kind of self-consciousness that Clifford refers to at the end of his article when he says “we should do the intellectual work that we know best: helping students to read and write and think in ways that both resist domination and exploitation and encourage self-consciousness about who they are and can be in the social world” (51).

That our unconscious minds are the ones running the show seems to be a trend in contemporary psychology, both experimental and evolutionary, and this effect is not only being felt in its own field, but also in the fields of finance and economics. Leonard Mlodinow’s book, which I mentioned earlier, asserts in the first chapter that “the truth is that our unconscious minds are active, purposeful, and independent… hidden they may be, but their effects are anything but, for they play a critical role in shaping the way our conscious minds experience and respond to the world” (29). The bulk of the book is concerned with how the unconscious mind perceives the world and responds accordingly; Mlodinow provides many examples and studies to illustrate just how much the unconscious mind is responsible for our perceptions, behaviors, memories, and social judgment. What is interesting is that both Kahneman and Mlodinow attribute the power of choice to the unconscious mind, and Kahneman specifically calls the unconscious mind an agent.
Underlying all of this, there appears to be order—the subconscious is not necessarily making arbitrary decisions. It is here that we could consider the cognitive impact of discourses and cultural codes as providing the framework in which the mind functions. The outer layer of the Matryoshka doll may very well be discourse. However, it may be more interesting to consider a modular view of the mind as proposed in Robert Wright’s book *Why Buddhism is True*. Interestingly, Wright mentions that “Buddhist thought and modern psychology converge on this point: in human life as it’s ordinarily lived, there is no one self, no conscious CEO, that runs the show; rather there seem to be a series of selves that take turns running the show” (103, 104), and asserts that a “fair number of psychologists have come to agree… that the dynamics of the mind are well captured by a modular model” (95).

The modular model of the mind may seem abstract and Wright admits that it can be easily misunderstood and offers several ways of thinking of these modules. First, “modules aren’t like a bunch of physical compartments” (87), they do not correlate to specific parts of the brain in a one to one correlation where one a scientist can look at an individual’s brain scan and know definitively they are using the module that helps people makes inferences from body language. They are not like individual tools that we employ singly “like the blades on a Swiss Army knife or the apps on a smartphone” (87) where each app has discreet information packets that apply only to that app and are not used in the functioning of other apps. Rather, the modules borrow from each other and
overlap. Wright offers the idea of the cheater detection module and suggests the “cheater detection machinery” can be employed by different modules of the mind with different motivations depending on the situation, which can vary from buying a car to finding a mate. The point of this is that “the division of labor among, and delineation among, the modules in our mind is much less clear-cut than the word modules suggests, and the extent of the interaction among them is greater than the words suggests” (88).

Interestingly, Wright’s research of the modular view of the mind, which draws heavily on the work of split-brain researcher Michael Gazzaniga, and Robert Kurzban who wrote *Evolution and the Modular View of the Mind*, and the work of Marilyn Cooper which draws upon Walter Freeman’s work “How Brains Make Up Their Minds” all “develop understandings of cognitive processes and brain dynamics as embodied non-linear self-organizing systems interacting with the surround” (Cooper 421). This is especially important because postmodern theory has conceptualized the mind as so non-coherent and fragmented as to destabilize the whole notion of the self/subject/agent/author. In this area, as far as the research shows, postmodern theory is slightly off the mark. That being said, there might be a way in which thinking of ourselves as incoherent can lend itself to considerations about how we are written on by conflicting cultural codes and discourses, however, this is a philosophical move and not one that is actually rooted in the science that allows us to understand the way the mind actually works, which I think it a very important distinction to make. In postmodernism’s
defense however, it has offered us quite a bit of information to consider and has been particularly generative as a theory, which underlies the value of a theory, even when it fails to provide a close approximation to reality. That being said, it appears as though the postmodern view of the mind rested on a certain subjective feature of consciousness—that “sometimes the mind feels like a free-for-all, and sometimes it feels more organized, as if the free-for-all has been resolved” (Wright 89)—and the idea that we are fragmented has resonated with so many who have had this subjective experience of their own minds.

Through the lens of postmodernism then, we can see the complex situatedness of individuals in subject positions with competing and conflicting codes, however, when we encounter the notions of the incoherent consciousness and the non-autonomous self, it should be clarified that the consciousness is characterized by quite a bit of coherence, and the self is non-autonomous but it is not the discourse or the subject position that is removing the autonomy of the agent, but the nature of the unconscious mind, in that it does what it does without the conscious awareness of the I. The conscious I therefore can be seen as non-autonomous, and by extension, the self and the consciousness, only when the self and consciousness are seen as the same thing and agency and the power of choice rests in one or both, but autonomy still resides within the individual in the unconscious mind and in that way, an individual retains autonomy, even as it admits of the postmodern condition. It is a subtle nuance, but one that ultimately empowers the individual when postmodernism appears to
remove even the power to choose from a subject assumed to be not only incoherent and non-autonomous, but also written on by cultures and codes and determined by discourses. So yes, the conscious mind and the conscious I are non-autonomous however, from the stable autonomy of the unconscious emerges both a seat for speaking about the self (if we must) and an agency which can be enacted rhetorically.

Thus far, I have discussed that the self, consciousness, and agency have traditionally been seen as interdependent-- the self being born of consciousness and agency being born of the self’s ability to make rational choices—and that postmodern theory’s handling of the author/subject/agent/self/consciousness destabilizes the foundation upon which agency has been understood. Scholars in the field of composition have tried to reconceptualize agency around postmodernism with some success, but without the ability to avoid certain sticking points, thus directing us towards a need to reconceptualize the self, not only to anchor agency, but also to provide a way for us to linguistically talk about the self in a rational way. Experimental psychology offers us a view of the mind as associatively coherent and suggests that the unconscious mind is in control.

This perspective opens the door for the idea that we all always already have agency and removes the need to find our way back to agency around postmodernism. Without this need, we can ask more questions of agency than perhaps we were able to do before.
Evolutionary Agency

If we accept that the postmodern death of the traditional humanist self is actually the death of the self, then we no longer need to work out a theory of agency that is compatible with a self or a consciousness that is incoherent, fragmented, non-autonomous, unable to know itself, with possibly only the illusion of choice. Postmodernism seems to ask scholars to rethink agency without agents, without choice, but to extend the Postmodern is to let a concept of self die. With this, the notions of the agent and the subject apply to our Postmodern condition, but do not determine the nature of the consciousness or of the self, because the seat of the self, the individual embodiment of information, is in the unconscious mind, which is associatively coherent, and possesses its own agency. Agency, from this perspective, becomes something we always already have by virtue of being individually embodied, and this individual embodiment of a subconscious mind is forever the self to which we refer.

This allows us to move into new theoretical territory and to think about agency in a new way.

What if we applied evolutionary theory to agency? We could ask questions out of “Darwin’s Toolkit”- the questions that were proposed by Niko Tinbergen, (1907-1988), “a Dutch biologist who shared the Nobel Prize in medicine with Konrad Lorenz and Karl von Frisch in 1973 for pioneering the field of ethology, or the study of animal behavior” (Wilson 36).
Tinbergen “called attention to four questions that must be addressed to fully understand any product of evolution. If we think of agents/agency as a product of evolution, the adaptation of Tinbergen’s questions become: what is the function of agency? How did agency evolve in our species? How does agency evolve over a person’s lifetime, and what kinds of environmental factors influence this evolution? What is the physical mechanism of agency? Approaching agency from a Darwinian perspective gives us new theoretical ground to cover, and ultimately asks us to be visionary.

We do live in a Postmodern world, and in this world, many people have been given a voice. There are still pressures and oppression, still people who want to silence, people who feel they cannot speak, however with the internet and global communication, more people have a voice now than ever before. There are platforms for the oppressed, there are opportunities for the marginalized. As a species, we are growing ever more conscious of the injustices that people have been and are still subjected to, and in response, we are activists, we are allies.

I’d like to propose a thought experiment where we assume that we all already have agency, and ask ourselves this question: What do we want to do with our agency? It may seem like an idealistic question to ask, but there is a very real way that the answer to this question can affect both ourselves and future generations, with biological and evolutionary consequences, through conscious evolution. Wilson asks the question in the final chapter of his book
This View of Life—does conscious evolution have a leg to stand on? The answer is yes, and epigenetics is the mechanism. Epigenetics is responsible for mutations over a single generation as genes respond to the environment by turning on and off and thus changing the way that they are expressed, not simply with physical adaptations, but with behavior, and in this way, “learning and cultural transmission can radically alter the course of genetic evolution” (219). Our behavior as a species evolves and adapts to culture, to discourse, and this awareness, combined with a vision, can allow us to consciously evolve in a direction of our choosing, in a real tangible way. Biologically. Genetically.

Lee Ann Carroll offers the idea that “questioning of belief in an autonomous self can be liberating, like surviving a disastrous love affair or improvising new versions of old songs…yet without this belief, a house just isn't a home,” and asks: “what do we tell the kids?” (917). We tell the kids that even though they may not have a self in the way that we have traditionally thought, we do have a subconscious mind that is in control and responding to the environment we live in with characteristics that have evolved and adapted over hundreds of generations. We tell them that even though the subconscious mind is largely in control of our choices in ways of which we are unaware, that the conscious mind “gets to do a little nudging” and if we are paying attention (by practicing mindfulness or meditation, or otherwise cultivating our own self-awareness, say through meaningful writing projects), we can turn it “into
something that can do a lot of nudging” (Wright 90), and the result of this is self-control. This self-control lays the groundwork for conscious evolution.

When we consider what this means for the future of our species, the notion of conscious evolution becomes more poignant than romantic, and “once we become comfortable with the concept of conscious evolution, then the need to design our personal and cultural evolutionary processes becomes clear, similar to designing an evolutionary algorithm on a computer” (Wilson 220). If we fail to conceive of a vision for ourselves and map out a path to get us there, “then evolution will still take place but will lead to outcomes that are not aligned with our normative goals” (220). The urgency underneath these words cannot be denied—we need a clear vision of what we are moving towards.

A final note: it may be the most profitable for scholars and professors in English composition to consider the question of how agency develops over the lifetime of an individual. If it is true, as Wilson states, that “we are always manipulating each other in one way or another… that’s what it means for a person to be a product of social interactions,” (159) then individual agency is something that people are taught by members of varying social groups throughout a lifetime, beginning with their families. How does a concept of agency change when we think of it as something that is learned or acquired over the course of a person’s life through group interaction? Does that contradict what we already think we know about agency?
The generative potential of looking at agency through the lens of evolutionary theory may be particularly useful in the continual working towards that is at the heart of theoretical work. Theories themselves evolve, as “theories that do the best job of explaining observations are accepted, only to be challenged by another round of theories, and so on, bringing our knowledge of the world closer to reality” (Wilson 3).
CHAPTER TWO:
CONFERENCE PAPER PROPOSAL

In our current social climate, we want agency to be a tool that we can wield in the present the way it appears to have been wielded in the past: to create social change. We also want to give a voice to the voiceless in a world which has silenced so many. However lofty this goal may be, without a proper understanding of the nature of agency, it is misguided. With a better understanding of the nature of agency as a property of the subconscious mind, and something we all therefore already have, we can take the pressure off students, teachers, and ourselves in this area.

The subconscious mind, according to several branches of psychology, is actually the CEO and the seat of the self, contrary to our common conceptions that it is the conscious mind. Additionally, these same branches reveal that contrary to postmodernist theory, consciousness is both unified and coherent, and the agent might not be dead after all.

Agency, as defined by Marilyn Cooper is “the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions” (426). By this definition, agency is something we all already do. Agency, rather than being like an object, or a tool that can be passed back and forth, is a property of consciousness and inherent in embodied individuals moving through the world.
Thinking about agency in this way frees us to think about what we will do with the agency we always already have.
Rhetorical agency is important, especially if you have ever taken a class on the history of western rhetoric, or if you know any history of any marginalized people. When I sit in the classroom, I hear students, colleagues, and scholars asking for a way to use rhetorical agency to make the voices of the marginalized heard. We recognize the need in our department perhaps more than others to give voices to the voiceless, to create space for more to be heard, for more knowledges to count as knowledge, for more Englishes to count as English, for more people to matter. This is part of our particular brand of social justice in the English department. We are assuming however, that rhetorical agency is the answer to some social wrongs, and if we could just give agency to people, or teach them how to harness it, we could right some of those wrongs. Make voices heard.

Unfortunately, that is not how rhetorical agency seems to work.

Eodice et al. describe student agency in their article *Agency and the Meaningful Writing* project as “having students gain control of their writing and actively constructing their learning” (33). This sounds good at first. As a student, I like the idea of being in control of what I write and being an active participant in my own education. However, I dislike the underlying assumption that students
are not in control of their writing or active participants in their education. This bothers me on a fundamental level because I think students are sold short at times, and I am inclined to think that this is one of those times. Then I reflect on the time I have spent in high school classrooms as a substitute teacher and remember the ways that the students are expected to obey, repeat, and regurgitate and I understand where Eodice et al. are coming from.

I spent a semester in a middle school English classroom with the teacher standing at the back of the room behind an overhead monitor while she read a handout and after giving students a moment to attempt to answer the questions (reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar), she told them what to write. Several students were failing her class even with her telling them what to write and her habit of never assigning homework. I doubt these kids were given a meaningful writing project that year or had any sense of student agency. It’s these same kids five years later that English teachers are trying to give meaningful writing projects and rhetorical agency to, and I can see the difficulties that arise in this endeavor simply as a result of the education system.

Of course, not all teachers are like the one who was supposed to be my mentor teacher through the credential program, but there is enough of this going on that when I was sitting in my internship class last quarter, I could see the students struggle with not being told exactly what to do. Many students did not know what to do with all of the freedom they were given with their assignments. They seemed nervous and confused, rather than liberated and excited.
In their article, Eodice et al. note that when they surveyed students about their meaningful writing projects, 56 percent of the courses students identified as the ones in which they had experienced their meaningful writing project was in a required class (35). So, we know that it is possible to have a meaningful writing project in a class that is required; I have had that experience myself. However, my most meaningful writing projects happened in graduate school. I wasn’t a good student in my late teens, early twenties. I was given opportunities to make my projects meaningful, but I didn’t do the work to accomplish that end because I was on my own, trying to work and go to school without any family help, or a car, and I ended up having to sell my blood, or drop classes to work more hours in order to make ends meet, so I understand why the authors say that student agency is important, “but an elusive goal amidst the challenges of the social and material conditions [students] face” (33).

The correlation between freedom and agency is confirmed throughout the rest of the article with the conclusion resting on a concept of agency that involves control. Where there is freedom to control one’s “academic, intellectual, and professional present lives and ever-expanding futures” (54), there can be agency.

But also, there can be agency where there is less freedom- when the professor puts pressure on the student to write in Standard American English, or to place the thesis sentence in the first paragraph, or to leave out instances of the “I”, and the student chooses to write their paper the way that they want to,
instead of the way they feel pressured to. There can be agency with less opportunities to control one’s life, there can be agency without an agent, there can be agency without a self.

Several scholars have written in response to the postmodern concepts of the subject, the self, consciousness, and the author. In postmodernism, the subject is a placeholder that merely grounds experience in a specific subjectivity, the self is constructed through performance, consciousness is fragmented, incoherent and non-autonomous, and the author is dead.

As a note here, I find it very interesting that scholars accept the truth of the postmodern condition without testing it for scientific accuracy. In my project, of which this conference paper is presenting only a portion of my research, I take the postmodern condition to task, comparing what the postmodernists say about the self and consciousness and comparing it to what sociology, psychology, and eastern philosophy say on the matter. It is from the conclusions of this research that I have retheorized agency. I will touch on that in a moment.

Carolyn Miller, in her attempt to work out a theory of agency, identifies “three related sets of concerns- theoretical, ideological, and practical” (143) that are of current concern to scholars in the area. This theoretical concern is the one that I am going to touch on briefly because this concern is the one that is raised with the acceptance of the postmodern condition.

Miller aptly points out what many people have no doubt thought about when encountering postmodern theory- this tension that is raised between the
concept of agency requiring an agent and the swift death that has befallen the postmodern agent. Scholars including Miller are trying now to get around the necessity of an agent in their theories of agency. Miller does this by identifying three elements of agency – “performance, audience, and interaction” (142)- and suggests that the agent arises out of the confluence of these three elements. Nick Turnbull does this by resituating agency. Instead of agency being the property of the agent, rhetorical agency is instead a property of questioning. According to Turnbull, agency arises through treatments of questions (or non-treatments as the case may be). In both cases, agency is not something that an agent has, which is the tacit assumption in the first article I mentioned: Agency and the Meaningful Writing Project.

It is understandable however, this desire to see agency as the property of an agent, because then it appears to be something that can be granted through the freedom to choose one’s projects, taught, harnessed, or taken up. I WANT to see agency as something people always already have, but the issue is the discrepancy between the agency that students are assumed to already have and the agency that the students harness, use, or express. This is problematic for a couple of reasons however- the first is the assumption that teachers can somehow be the bridge between the agency students have and the agency students use, which turns agency into something that we as teachers, students, and scholars have control over, and that at times there is a deficit, and there are actions that can “fix” this deficit. This kind of language, the language of need, is
something scholars are pushing back against in our field, but with other topics, like whether first year composition ought to be required, and the issues relating to grammar instruction in the writing center. We recognize the unfairness and the injustice of assuming that students are arriving with deficiencies and habits that need to be “fixed”, but it appears to be the case with agency that it is assumed that students aren’t using it and that meaningful writing projects, and the like, can force students to take up their agency.

The second problem that arises with the concept of agency as a property of an agent and the give and take model of agency is that it sets up a false hierarchy where teachers can grant agency, like it is something that can be given, and taken away (i.e.. given when teachers give their students more choices over what they will research and write about as opposed to giving students details prompts for writing assignments that accommodate little variation). This gives too much power to the teacher, too much credit, and too much blame. Also, I believe that it is patently false that students arrive without rhetorical agency, and while many teachers would likely agree, there still remains an impetus to be that bridge between having and using agency, so that it looks like and sounds like teachers are trying to give agency to their students rather than create a space for students to realize the agency they already have. Perhaps this is a pedagogical issue, but I think that if we consider the nature of agency first that we will be able to resolve at least, the problematic way
that agency is talked about, which could lead to pedagogical transformations in an organic way.

Through my research on consciousness and the self, it appears to me that our subconscious minds possess agency; that is, agency is a property of the subconscious. It is the means through which the subconscious mind takes in information, processes it, and guides our actions as a result. It has generally been assumed that the conscious mind is both the CEO and the seat of the self; however, there are new theories on the horizon, backed by solid evidence in experimental and evolutionary psychology that reveal that neither of these assumptions appear to be the case.

From the very beginning, experimental psychology has offered a view of the mind as divided between the conscious and the subconscious. In his book *Subliminal* Mlodinow cites William Carpenter, a psychologist in the 1800’s, who wrote that “two distinct trains of Mental action are carried on simultaneously” (32) and comments that these two trains “are actually more like two entire railway systems” (33). However, the fact that “the conscious and unconscious railways each comprise a myriad of densely interconnected lines, and that the two systems are also connected to each other at various points” (33) provides the base point for understanding the connectedness of consciousness. Though postmodern theorists may experience the consciousness as fragmented and incoherent, that does not make it so. We always experience the earth as flat, but that does not mean that it is not round; we know enough about science to know
that what we experience may not be the way things are. So even though each individual is written on by culture, signs, and varied and competing discourses, the mind remains both unified and coherent.

The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance is one that may appear to offer another counter to a unified, coherent consciousness. In his book *Sapiens*, historian Yuval Noah Harari suggests that this is actually a common feature of culture, rather than a feature of consciousness as Berlin suggests, and in fact, “had people been unable to hold contradictory beliefs and values, it would probably have been impossible to establish and maintain any human culture” (165). Harari takes it a step further and suggests that not only are cultures connected by contradictions but are also changed by them as the struggle to reconcile their inherent differences results in “the creativity and dynamism of our species” (165) and he concludes that “a human being who belongs to any particular culture must hold contradictory beliefs and be riven by incompatible values” (165). This makes perfect postmodern sense because scholars like Berlin and Clifford recognize that individuals are written on and are products of their culture; if the culture one belongs to is characterized by contradictions, then how can any individual escape being written on by contradictory beliefs and values? It makes much more sense that our internal contradictions are a characteristic of culture rather than a characteristic of consciousness and are the result of cultural transmission rather than a consciousness that is not unified.
The modular view of consciousness offers a new way to see the flexibility and adaptability of the human mind that may allow for a greater degree of internal opposition, contradiction, and competition. “In this view, your mind is composed of specialized modules—modules for sizing up situations and reacting to them—and it’s the interplay between these modules that shapes your behavior,” (86), so the mind can hold modules that are incompatible with each other, but at any given moment, the modules that come together are compatible with both each other and the situation. If they are not, they can be swapped out for other modules that produce more appropriate behavior for the situation, and in this way, we are incredibly adaptable to our social environments all the time from birth. Agency, in terms of this model, is exercised in the subconscious process of bringing together the various modules to perform actions in the world.

Though this view of the mind might be accurate, or at least more accurate than the view that postmodernism offers, it still may not satisfy.

One of the main struggles with agency I think stems from this desire for it to be used in a way, as I mentioned at the beginning, to further some of our social justice goals. We want agency to right wrongs, or least if it can’t right them, to work against the pressures that minorities and marginalized people come across in their daily lives. We see what happens when people use their agency at certain times, like during the suffrage movement, or the civil rights movement. However, I would like to suggest that there are more factors at work in these times when people speak and write to effect change. It is not just that...
there is rhetorical agency being exercised; it is being exercised in addition to Kairos. The time was ripe for Susan B. Anthony, and her voice was heard above the din of daily life, and her voice made a difference in the lives of countless women. I’m not saying that she did not need rhetorical agency - I am saying that she already had it, and what she needed that was external to her, was Kairos. The right time.

Marilyn Cooper expresses something similar in her article *Agency as Emergent and Enacted*. First, she mentions that agency is “the process through which organisms create meanings through acting into the world and changing their structure in response to the perceived consequences of their actions” (426). This definition suggests that everyone has agency all the time as a function of being an embodied individual interacting with the environment, which coincides with the research that I did on the mind as well. Further, Cooper quotes theorists Maturana and Varela who posit that “the changes that result from the interaction between living being and its environment are brought about by the disturbing agent but determined by the structure of the disturbed system” (426; emphasis in the original).

This suggests that for rhetorical agency to have the power to influence the surrounding world, the surrounding world must respond to it. The concept of rhetoric has long been tied to persuasion and influence, and the onus has generally been placed on the rhetor to enact this persuasion - that is, a good rhetor is one who can persuade others, change minds, and influence people.
To a certain extent, we must accept what it is that we cannot control—the world—and try to control what we can—ourselves. We can become amazing rhetoricians, and we can keep speaking, and we should, and the moment of Kairos will come and go, and we might not even know it. All we can do is continue, and not be disheartened when students don’t take a stand, or find their voice, or agree with our views of the world. Their moment will come. So, will ours.
REFERENCES


