In a series of essays, Webb Keane (2007) has greatly contributed to our understanding of modernity’s ways of imagining itself and the modern subject. Keane argues that the idea of the modern subject has been embedded within a specific semiotic ideology that requires the materiality of semiotic forms to be subordinate to immaterial meanings. The modern subject has been defined as an interiority that must be kept autonomous vis-à-vis any form of materiality, broadly defined, such as the body, ritual, received tradition, other people, and words, in order to maintain its freedom and moral integrity. Drawing on his ethnographic fieldwork in the island of Sumba, Papua New Guinea, Keane has traced the Protestant roots of this semiotic ideology. He has discussed the efforts of missionaries to abolish local practices that involved fetishism, ritual exchange, and ceremonial speech because these practices blur the distinction between the subject and external materiality and thus threaten the moral autonomy of the modern subject as it is defined within this specific semiotic ideology.

Keane argues that here lie the intellectual roots of modernity as theorized by Bruno Latour (1993); that is, as a “constitution” that attempts to guarantee the separation of nature and culture. According to Latour, modernity disavows the role played by nature in the formation of culture, while in practice it allows the two to intermingle in various hybrids. Indeed, scholars have traced various forms of this strand of modernity that demands a separation of nature and culture. For example, the language ideology prevalent in modern Euro-American contexts,
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which stipulates that language should be a transparent medium for referencing the subject’s interiority (Carr 2006; Hill and Gal 2000; Silverstein 1979), has often been understood to be one manifestation of a broader semiotic ideology that requires the materiality of semiotic forms to be reflective, rather than constitutive, of the modern subject’s interiority. Similarly, scholars have noted that the idea of modern bourgeois public subjectivity has been predicated on the demand that the modern subject abstract itself from the particularities of culture, race, gender, and class and identify with a disembodied public subject (Warner 1993). Keane’s intervention, therefore, can be seen as the culmination of a long tradition of anthropological study of modernity, which has argued that any role played by materiality in the constitution of the modern subject exists despite modernity’s ideology of dematerialization and remains unacknowledged by it.

In this article, I highlight the distinguishing features of a different semiotic ideology, one that has remained relatively unexplored by anthropologists, although it has been and continues to be crucial to contemporary notions of modern subjectivity. Within the scope of this semiotic ideology, the materiality of semiotic forms is fully incorporated into the architecture of the self and is seen as a condition of possibility for the self’s articulation. It is epitomized in the normative ideal of self-expression that has emerged from Sentimentalism and Romanticism. This normative ideal has dominated modern contexts concerned with the creativity of the subject, that is, situations characterized by open-endedness, in which the subject lacks knowledge about his or her future actions, preferences, and wants. Although this semiotic ideology has emphasized the radical uniqueness of each individual, it has also allowed the mobilization of the materiality of semiotic forms as a means for realizing and articulating this uniqueness. The modern ideal of self-expression has ideological determinants and practical manifestations that are different from the determinants and manifestations explored by anthropologists in the context of the ideal of the dematerialized modern subject. The difference hinges on the ideological distinction between situations in which the subject conveys an already fully formed interiority (best epitomized in the notion of sincerity [Keane 2002]) and situations in which the subject articulates an inchoate interiority in the process of becoming (best epitomized in the notion of self-expression). The materiality of semiotic forms in the first case is supposed to be reflective of the subject’s interiority; in the second it is supposed to be constitutive of this interiority.

To discuss this undertheorized dimension of modernity and to illustrate its ubiquity, I turn to various ethnographic settings. To begin, I build on fieldwork I conducted in two sites of artistic training: creative writing workshops in Israel,
which take their pedagogical lead from the field of U.S. creative writing programs, and U.S. postsecondary jazz education. Contemporary Western artistic production is an appropriate context in which to explore some of the distinguishing features of the semiotic ideology that is constitutive of the modern ideal of self-expression that I explore in this article because art was the context in which Romanticism, as a more or less unified ideology, originally emerged and received its fullest form prior to informing notions of the modern subject in general (Berlin 2001; Taylor 1989; Trilling 1972). Furthermore, because institutionalized artistic training relies on codified and explicit instruction, it provides a fruitful point from which to explore some of this ideology’s principles.

Although there have been numerous ethnographies of various forms of modern practices and institutions such as science (Latour and Woolgar 1986), law (Mertz 2007), health care (Carr 2006), and bureaucracy (Herzfeld 1993), in which the normative ideal of the dematerialized modern subject seems to be dominant, there have been fewer ethnographies dedicated to modern Western art, for various reasons. To begin, because anthropologists have understood modernity primarily as an ideology of disembodied reason and instrumental rationality, they have tended to explore modern contexts that epitomize this rationality. Additionally, the legacy of Romantic ideology seems to have dissuaded anthropologists from exploring Western artistic practice for methodological reasons. For example, when he discussed the art of North Pacific Coast Native Americans, Franz Boas described the artist in terms of “creative genius” that poses methodological problems because it does not “take place in the full light of consciousness” (Boas 1955:155). By endorsing an ideology of artistic production in terms of creative genius, Boas relegated the artist to a realm that is presumably off-limits to anthropology.

Since Boas made these statements, anthropologists have provided significant ethnographies of artistic production that include an interrogation of the artist. These ethnographies, however, have focused mainly on non-Western contexts (Coote and Shelton 1994; Gell 1998; Lavie et al. 1993; Liep 2001; Myers 2002; but see Hallam and Ingold 2007). Scholars who have focused on Western art, meanwhile, have tended to avoid artistic creation in situ. In part, this has been the result of the impetus to deconstruct altogether the notion of the individual creative artist (Barthes 1978; Foucault 1999) and instead to interrogate the broader sociological contexts within which the artist operates and that are responsible for the social construction of the very idea of the single creative artist (Becker 2008; Woodmansee 1994). Ethnographies that are specifically dedicated to the interrogation of Western artistic training have been even less common (but see Duranti and Burrell 2004;
Sawyer 2003). Either they have been concerned with understanding the structure of the institution within which training takes place, rather than with unpacking artistic production itself (Kingsbury 1998), or they have been undertheorized, consisting mainly of descriptive material (Berliner 1994). Finally, attempts to provide a theory of modern creative or expressive social action (rather than a theory of creativity in a much broader sense—see McLean 2009) have tended to be uncorroborated by ethnographic data and thus remained highly abstract (Habermas 1984; Joas 1997).

In addition to these two sites of artistic training, I turn to U.S. self-help literature to discuss the explicit incorporation of the materiality of semiotic forms in the constitution of the modern subject. Indeed, if stories of conversion to Protestantism are one privileged site in which to explore how modern subjects are constituted (Keane 2002:65), contemporary self-help literature is another. It allows us to explore not only the kind of obstacles to self-formation that subjects face in the present historical moment but also how subjects negotiate these obstacles. Because the artist has become one of the key models for modern subjectivity (Taylor 1989:376), the odd juxtaposition of the study of contemporary artistic training with that of contemporary self-help literature actually makes methodological sense—both sites are concerned with the constitution of the modern subject.

It should be clear from the outset that in discussing this specific aspect of modernity, which accepts the role played by the material infrastructure of semiotic forms in the constitution of subjectivity, I do not focus on the practical impossibility of the normative ideal of the dematerialized subject. Anthropologists have already successfully demonstrated that this notion neglects the interactive and processual construction of subjectivity (Silverstein 1998), the material intractability of any form of mediation (Miller 1987), and the open-endedness and material infrastructure of action in general (Hallam and Ingold 2007). My goal is to complement, rather than replace, existing anthropological narratives of modernity by accounting for one of modernity’s semiotic ideologies, which explicitly embraces the materiality of semiotic forms as a structure of the self in moments of open-endedness and potential creativity. This ideology is not an unacknowledged dimension of the modern subject. As I argue in the conclusion, it structures the ways in which modern subjects attempt to cope with the contemporary historical moment that requires them to negotiate multiple choices, conflicting norms, and open-endedness. As I will show, subjects interact with the material infrastructure of semiotic forms in order to “find themselves” within this disorienting contemporary moment. This strategy goes back to a specifically Romantic semiotic ideology.
Ideals of modern subjectivity may still be different from ideals of subjectivity in cultural contexts in which, for example, ethics is explicitly intertwined with and achieved via the materiality of the body, ritual, speech, sound, and so forth (Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005), or in which the distinction between persons and objects is blurred (Strathern 1990; Weiner 1992). However, I find that this difference lies in modernity’s emphasis on the radical uniqueness and capacity for self-determination of each individual, rather than in a specific relation between materiality and the subject espoused by modernity, as scholars have often assumed. I thus argue that modernity’s Romantic legacy represents an explicit conflation of nature and culture that, while not as ostentatious as the intertwining of nature and culture explored today within the so-called “species turn” (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010:546), is no less significant in its implications for long-held anthropological narratives of modernity.

I begin by reiterating Keane’s description of the modern semiotic ideology that constitutes the ideal of the dematerialized subject, focusing on sincerity in speech. I then analyze a vignette from self-help literature to tease out the distinguishing features of a different modern semiotic ideology, one that underlies the ideal of self-expression and modern creative agency, as well as the ways in which it differs from the semiotic ideology that underlies the ideal of the subject that must be kept autonomous vis-à-vis the materiality of semiotic forms. I then proceed to explore a specific context of artistic training in which the Romantic norm of self-expression and the creative aspects of modernity find full expression. I conclude by returning to self-help literature to show the ubiquity and manifestations of this dimension of the modern subject in the contemporary historical moment.

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Keane explains that above and beyond any heterogeneity, “a vision of the self, abstracted from material and social entanglement,” is key to the notion of the modern subject. “One component of this vision of the self is the normative ideal of sincerity in speech” (Keane 2002:68), defined as follows:

[Sincere speech] is therefore also associated with the understanding of “religion” that centers on truthful propositions rather than, for example, ritual activities or bodily disciplines (Asad, 1993). The idea of sincerity also seems to propose a hierarchical relation between these two (words and thoughts), since the thought seems to come first and thereby determines and imposes a limit on the words. The concept of sincerity thus seems to assure a clear distinction between words and thought, as parallel discourses (interior and
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This ideology thus requires dematerialization of words—that is, it requires that words function as a medium that does not affect the message it conveys, where such a message is the modern subject’s interiority. The subject’s interiority is assumed to exist prior to the words that express it. As Alessandro Duranti puts it in a different context, such a notion of communication assumes that “meanings as intentions coincide with certain psychological states and it is implied that the meaning of an utterance is fully defined in the speaker’s mind before the act of speaking” (Duranti 1993:25).

To begin illustrating the contours of the radically different semiotic ideology with which I am concerned here, I turn to an item from the business section of the New York Times (Weinstein 2010). Middle-aged Lee Weinstein was suddenly hit with a “momentous life question” while standing in front of the bathroom mirror:

My bathroom-mirror moment came one morning more than three years ago. I was 47, and it dawned on me that my 15th anniversary of working in public relations at Nike was fast approaching. “Do I want to stay at Nike for five more years?” The unequivocal answer from the man in the mirror was, “No!” I knew then that I had accomplished everything I wanted to do at Nike, and that it was time for me to get out and do something new. Thus began a two-year process of introspection and redirecting my career.

This vignette epitomizes two features that are often attributed to the modern subject: “the privilege accorded to the individual’s agency, inwardness, and freedom” and “the expanded vision of the possibilities for individual self-creation” (Keane 2002:68). Indeed, it is possible to say that the vignette is about “sincerity”: In a moment of introspection, Weinstein is forced to acknowledge (to be sincere with himself) that he does not want to continue working for Nike.

What happens next, however, does not align with normative ideals of dematerialized modern subjectivity and modern sincerity, especially regarding the relation between words and thoughts. After this life-changing moment, Weinstein works with a number of career counselors and consults a dozen career-change books to find out what he should do next. One such book, Do What You Are, engages the reader in personality tests to reveal what type of work is best suited for him or her.
Despite these efforts, Weinstein acknowledges, “I still didn’t know what I wanted to do next.”

The turning point came when I sequestered myself for a series of free writes. I simply created an imaginary workday and wrote without stopping: “It’s 6 a.m. . . . I’m waking up in Portland and I’m getting up and going to work for a P.R. agency downtown. . . . I’m going to work teaching U.S. history at a high school. . . . I’m going to work for a large company doing communications. . . . I’m waking up in the Columbia Gorge and going to Hood River, where I have a P.R. agency.” As each possibility came to me, I paid closer attention to the feelings that emerged. Working at a P.R. agency in downtown Portland felt good but not terribly exciting. Being a high school teacher seemed lonely. But waking up in a small town and starting my own business or P.R. consulting firm would be exhilarating. I had my answer: I was going to leverage all that I had learned in P.R. for 20-plus years and start my own consultancy. No one else had given me my answer—it was inside. My wilderness journey was ending. [Weinstein 2010; emphasis added]

At the article’s end, Weinstein is successfully running a public relations agency in The Dalles, Oregon, with his wife and has “a life more connected to nature.”

Three points stand out. First, the story is concerned with a lack of knowledge whose topic is the modern subject—Weinstein—and the line of work that would make him happy. Second, as a way of addressing his predicament, the subject comes up with imaginary scenarios that he writes down. Third, the subject gains knowledge by paying close attention to his feelings as he objectifies these scenarios.

These points suggest a different vision of self-creation and a semiotic ideology that stipulates a different relation between thoughts and words than what would occur regarding the normative ideal of sincerity in speech. To begin, where sincerity assumes thoughts that precede words, the crux of Weinstein’s predicament is that he does not have any thoughts about his future plans that he can be sincere about. At this point he can only be sincere about the fact that he does not want to continue doing what he has been doing. His inability to come up with any productive thoughts about his future plans is the prime mover of this modern plot.

Following his acknowledgment of this impasse, Weinstein imagines scenarios, which he writes down. Here, too, there is no sincerity in any clear way—Weinstein is not expressing his thoughts through words. He does not convey some truth that is located in his interiority or that mirrors some kind of inner authenticity. The scenarios are fictive. Indeed, at one point, Weinstein seeks out imaginary scenarios
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in the books he consults. As we shall see, these scenarios are valuable precisely because they may or may not correspond to his interiority.

Third, and most important, Weinstein exercises his imagination and objectifies it by writing it down as a means to an end, to reveal to himself his interiority. In this moment of revelation, the words in which the imaginary scenarios are objectified—the words that Weinstein now encounters as external stimuli—precede the articulation of his interiority. As Weinstein reads what he has written down, he is looking for a signal to indicate which of the imaginary scenarios matches up with his interiority. This sign is a pleasurable “feeling,” a sensation that indicates to the subject that a specific imaginary scenario aligns with “who he really is.” This ideal of self-creation turns the ideal of sincerity in speech on its head by making the materiality of words a condition of possibility for the articulation of the modern subject’s interiority. In this ideal, words precede thoughts and the subject’s interiority. To be sure, one can argue that Weinstein is still motivated by a desire to be sincere to who he really is. The crux of the matter, though, is that in situations in which the subject does not know who he or she really is, the subject does not hesitate to embrace the materiality of semiotic forms in order to “discover,” and in the process also create, his or her interiority. This strategy cannot be dismissed as yet another of modernity’s unacknowledged dimensions in the vein of Latour’s hybrids. Rather, such a story of self-creation, or as we shall see, self-expression, draws from a semiotic ideology that is part and parcel of the structure of modernity and that has coexisted with the normative ideal of the dematerialized modern subject.

SENTIMENTALISM AND ROMANTICISM

In The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, Colin Campbell (1989) has argued that in tandem with a specific Protestant ethic responsible for propelling capitalist production, there existed another Protestant ethic responsible for promoting the spirit of modern consumerism. This “other” Protestant ethic emerged from pietism and later evolved into Sentimentalism and Romanticism. Campbell argues that while the Protestant ethic with which Max Weber was concerned had to do with utilitarian-based and rational social action, the Protestant ethic that was responsible for promoting the spirit of modern consumerism involved autonomous, self-illusory, and hedonistic social action. Key to this type of social action was the legitimacy and the drive to imagine scenes that were remote from everyday experience and to find pleasure in the feelings provoked by these scenes. To summarize Campbell’s argument rather crudely, this provided the characterological foundation for the consumption of commodities that are not
concerned with the satisfaction of bare needs. The subject’s capacity to imagine appropriating potential goods and to engage in fantasies of potential futurities and self-creativity was crucial for the development of the spirit of consumerism. The ability to exercise the imagination in this way enabled the subject to vicariously “assume” or “try on” different potential goods. The subject’s sensations vis-à-vis such imaginary scenarios provided an impetus to purchase or avoid purchasing.

This type of social action emerged from what Campbell calls the “ethic of feeling.” He locates its origins in Sentimentalism, a movement that developed from Protestant pietism in mid-18th-century Europe. During this period, sensibility was held in great esteem because it indexed the idea of humanity’s advancement. It was a modern quality that connoted an ideal character type based on the subject’s susceptibility to his or her tender feelings and to those of others. The person of feeling could not help but express his or her emotions and often found pleasure in such acute sensibility. Key to this character type was the “modern ability to use the imagination to create an illusional environment which, in turn, [prompted] a sought-after emotion” (Campbell 1989:143).

Another key dimension of this ethic evolved in tandem with the emergence of a middle-class aesthetics that provided an alternative to the aristocracy’s neoclassicist aesthetics. Whereas the latter relied on the application of formal rules, the cult of sensibility, as articulated by thinkers such as Lord Shaftesbury, held that it was through feelings rather than reason that ... insights [about proper action] were to be obtained. This has the consequence of making formal rules appear irrelevant, both to the identification of beauty and the formulation of the good, as these could now be ascertained merely by “trusting to one’s feelings.” [Campbell 1989:151]

The revolutionary factor in this development, however, was the introduction of pleasure as an indicator of proper action: “the fact that a course of action not only ‘felt right’ but also gave pleasure could now be advanced as a forceful argument in favor of its propriety” (Campbell 1989:152).

At the end of the 18th century, Sentimentalism evolved into full-blown Romanticism. Romanticism criticized Sentimentalism for promoting public displays of emotions that were conducive to insincerity and resolved the problem by advancing a normative ideal of radical interiority and self-creativity, while retaining Sentimentalism’s emphasis on the role of the imagination, feelings, and pleasure. Drawing on organic metaphors, Romanticism argued that each individual has his or her own nature or voice with which he or she must be in touch and to which he
or she must remain faithful. However, crucially, such organic metaphors also stipulated that this nature cannot be known prior to its articulation. As Charles Taylor explains (1989), this was based on a fundamental distinction between the mimetic and creative types of imagination. Whereas mimetic imagination is concerned with an accurate articulation of a reality that exists prior to such articulation, creative imagination is about making something manifest. Taylor further notes:

But to talk about “making manifest” doesn’t imply that what is so revealed was already fully formulated beforehand. Sometimes that can be the case, as when I finally reveal my feelings that I had already put in words for myself long ago. But in the case of the novel or play, the expression will also involve a formulation of what I have to say. I am taking something, a vision, a sense of things, which was inchoate and only partly formed, and giving it a specific shape. In this kind of case, we have difficulty in distinguishing sharply between medium and message. ... Fulfilling my nature means espousing the inner élan, the voice or impulse. And this makes what was hidden manifest for both myself and others. ... What the voice of nature calls us to cannot be fully known outside of and prior to our articulation/definition of it. [Taylor 1989:374, 375]

As Taylor argues, although such a notion of the subject emerged in the sphere of art in the late 18th century, it has subsequently come to define notions of the modern subject in general, especially ideals of self-expression and radical interiority: “[Expressivism] has been a tremendously influential idea. Expressive individuation has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture. So much so that we barely notice it” (Taylor 1989:376).

Three features in this intellectual history are worth retaining for our discussion: the idea that the interiority of the subject does not precede its manifestation and material objectification in whatever medium but, rather, is constituted by this material manifestation; the emphasis on the subject’s capacity to imagine fictive scenarios; and the emphasis on feeling as an indicator of the “good.” These features explain why Weinstein’s story does not align with the normative ideal of the dematerialized modern subject. First, the Sentimentalist-Romantic ideal is concerned with open-ended situations that are characterized by a lack of knowledge, multiple possibilities, and potential creativity. It is concerned with the future fulfillment of a potential that is not yet known to the subject. As Taylor argues, this ideal stipulates that the subject can find himself or herself only through articulation and expression. Interiority is revealed only as it is articulated because it is a
potentiality—a concept that owes much to Herder’s organic metaphors; it is always in the process of becoming. The idea that “in articulating my [originality], I am also defining myself” and “realizing a potentiality that is properly my own” underlies modern notions of multiculturalism as well (Taylor 1994:31, 42). The demand that individuals and cultures be given the freedom to realize a presently unknown potentiality, which can only be discovered through its articulation, is a legacy of Romanticism that is based on a semiotic ideology that embraces the materiality of semiotic forms as constitutive rather than reflective of meaning, the self, and culture.

Second, the Sentimentalist-Romantic ideal is characterized by the exercise of the imagination, frequently followed by its objectification. The subject imagines fictive scenarios whose value is precisely in the fact that they represent future possibilities, not existing states. These fictive scenarios may or may not align with the subject’s interiority. Third, it is the subject’s reaction to the objectified products of his or her imagination in the form of “feeling” and “pleasure” that alerts the subject to his or her true nature and interiority and decides whether a specific course of future action is “right” and should be pursued. At stake here is authenticity, rather than sincerity, that is, the demand that I remain “true to myself” in the sense that I follow what the voice of my nature calls me to do (Taylor 1992:29). “Feeling” is precisely this call. It is not a reflection of a fully formed interiority but, rather, an indication of the direction in which the subject must develop the self. The value of the imagination, therefore, is in its capacity to produce fictive scenarios under conditions of uncertainty with the hope that one of these scenarios will match up with the subject’s inchoate interiority.

Remember again Weinstein’s reaction to one particular imaginary scenario. He had feelings about all the imaginary scenarios he wrote down. The first scenario felt “good but not terribly exciting”; the second felt “lonely.” It was only the third scenario that proved “exhilarating.” This pleasurable feeling served as an indication for Weinstein that he needed to pursue this specific scenario. In this normative ideal of modern creative agency, materiality is part of the architecture of the self. Thoughts do not precede words, nor do they precede any other form of materiality. This semiotic ideology stipulates explicitly that the self is realized in and through the materiality of semiotic forms, especially in moments of creativity, open-endedness, and multiple possibilities.

This is not a story of either—or. As Campbell argues, “In theory, individuals cannot conform to two ethics; in practice, it may not be so difficult” (1989:221). Indeed, notice that Weinstein’s predicament begins to be resolved only when he
subjects himself to a methodical exercise of his imagination through a rationalized practice of writing—a device he learns from well-developed self-help literature. He exercises his imagination through rule-governed social action to produce fictive scenarios. These are then subjected to the Romantic ideal of creative or spontaneous social action that requires the subject to be in touch with his or her feelings and inner voice. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilf 2010), this intertwining of rule-governed social action and spontaneous social action is a prevalent phenomenon in the present historical moment. It is evident both in the growing tendency of modern organizational settings to mobilize metaphors from the sphere of art in order to come up with organizational models that foster organizational flexibility under conditions of economic uncertainty and in the socialization into increasing numbers of art forms that takes place within modern organizational settings. I next discuss the second aspect of this intertwining—organizational artistic training—and the ways in which it demonstrates the incorporation of materiality into the architecture of the self as part of an explicit semiotic ideology and a normative ideal of modern creative agency.

**THE PROFESSIONAL MUSE**

Between November 2001 and June 2003, I conducted fieldwork in creative writing workshops for neophyte poets in Israel. The workshops were organized by a nonprofit organization for the advancement of poetry that I call Orpheus. Orpheus was established in 1990 and is considered one of the major organizations in the small field of Israeli poetry. In addition to holding workshops and master classes, Orpheus publishes a poetry journal and organizes poetry readings and festivals. At the time of my fieldwork, the organization was headed by a number of people, two of whom have apprenticed in the prestigious creative writing program at the University of Iowa.² The methods of poetry writing that were mobilized during the workshop are thus in large part indicative of the global dissemination of expert knowledge. In what follows, I bracket any processes of localization of these methods.

When analyzed in detail, Orpheus’s agenda of poetry writing seems to focus on an effort to reconfigure poetry writing in such a way that it can be achieved under controlled conditions. In various publications, Orpheus’s managers emphasize repeatedly the necessity of mastering rationalized and standardized techniques of poetry writing. Their agenda finds the clearest expression in the following vignette that appears in the introductory notes to the anthology of poems that summarized the second annual workshop, held in 1994:³

One of the aims of the workshop is . . . to give the participants tools that would allow them to work even when they “do not feel like” working. Different
instructors suggested different tools and techniques that enable the poet to work when the muse takes a nap or is in a vacation: ... automatic writing, structured exercises, learning classical forms. And to the surprise and amazement of everybody—all these techniques changed the craft of writing from an allegedly spontaneous thing, which is done under very well defined conditions, to a professional work. Discipline replaced caprice.

On the surface, these words suggest a cultural context in which modernity, understood as increased instrumental rationalization, is taken to its logical extreme. As if ventriloquating Max Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), Orpheus seems to be determined to harness the muse, as it were, and dress her in a suit. It wants to eradicate spontaneous social action and its capricious character and replace it with rule-governed social action that can guarantee the predictability of poetry writing.

Orpheus’s motivations stem in part from the specificities of creative production in the arts. One crucial preparatory stage in the creative process in every field is that in which the person is “immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity” (Csikszentmihalyi 1996:79). In contrast to other fields such as physics, in which the state of the domain usually defines the problems that need to be solved, in poetry it is difficult to find the initial problem:

In certain conditions, the creative process begins with the goal of solving a problem that is given to the person by someone else or is suggested by the state of the art in the domain. ... For artists the goal of the activity is not so easily found. In fact, the more creative the problem, the less clear it is what needs to be done. Discovered problems, the ones that generate the greatest changes in the domain, are also the most difficult to enjoy working on because of their elusiveness. In such cases, the creative person somehow must develop an unconscious mechanism that tells him or her what to do. The poet Gyorgy Faludy usually does not start writing until a “voice” tells him, often in the middle of the night, “Gyorgy, it’s time to start writing.” ... The ancients called this voice the Muse. Or it can be a vision. [Csikszentmihalyi 1996:114–115]

These considerations alert us to a fact that we encountered before: the plot’s prime mover in this specific context is a lack of knowledge, open-endedness, and creative potentiality that is not yet identified. Such moments of potential self-creativity and self-realization are characterized by the fact that the subject cannot be sincere about anything save for the fact that it is not clear what to do next. The subject is not
concerned with already existing, fully formulated thoughts that can be expressed in some medium. This is a very “modern” moment of self-determination.

Significantly, the core of Orpheus’s poetry workshop was a class, whose purpose, as the instructor told me in an interview, is to help the poet come up with “the beginning of a new poetic creation.” The class consisted of exercises that are supposed to enable poets to write regardless of mood and inspiration. These exercises are the condition of possibility for professional poetry writing. At the end of the workshop, the instructor distributed a booklet containing nearly 160 of these exercises, many of which the participants had performed during the year. What follows is the instructor’s division of the exercises into ten types as they appear in the booklet. Under each type I have listed one exercise that is exemplary of that type, also quoted from the booklet:

**Exercises of automatic writing:** Write uninterruptedly for an established period of time. Do not insist on significant writing. Do not resist repetitions...or stupidities if they arise.

**Feedback exercises:** Try group and cooperative writing. Each of the group members will write a creative response to the work of another member. Thus a piece will be collectively written.

**Exercises that incorporate the senses:** Write while feeling different textures. Feel interchangeably with the finger, with the palm of your hand, with other organs (cheeks, toes, bottom, tongue, chin, elbows).

**Exercises that explore the possibilities entailed in the use of nonpoetic texts:** Collect different items from the newspapers. Cut words and small pieces of texts, and try to recombine them.

**Exercises of poetic explorations that include writing in fixed poetic forms:** Try to write in fixed poetic forms such as sonnet, haiku, villanelle, and so on.

**Exercises of variations:** Write a “negative” to a well-known poem. After finishing, write another negative.

**Exercises that relate to works of art in other media:** Write while observing a painting, a photograph, or a sculpture.

**Exercises that are based on technical work according to established rules:** Work with words whose relation to one another is accidental, taken from a well-known poetic piece. For example, write with all the words that have more than four letters in the story of “The Selling of Joseph.”
Exercises that encourage writing in different states of consciousness: Write while constantly changing the position of your body: while walking, sitting, lying, kneeling. . . . Don’t stop writing while moving.

Exercises that focus on the self: Write while observing yourself in the mirror without using the word I.

Notice, to begin, the various forms in which the materiality of semiotic forms—understood in the broadest sense to include other people, the body, social conventions, objects, and words—is methodically incorporated into the realization of the poetic self as a means of overcoming the problem of radical open-endedness that characterizes the stage of problem finding in the field of poetry. These exercises reveal no ideological objection to the creation of “hybrids” of various kinds or to full-blown heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1996). Participants are instructed to integrate into their craft the writing of other participants and famous poets, as well as poetic conventions, strict rules of letter omission, nonpoetic texts, objects, and their own bodies.

Notice, furthermore, that this incorporation of materiality is supposed to produce different “scenarios” that are removed from the here and now. They are a quasi-automatic way—indeed, a professional one because it is controlled and codified—of creating “fictive” and imaginary situations, in the sense that they do not necessarily align with the poet’s internal states. The products of these exercises were not considered to be reflective of the participants’ interiority in any meaningful way. Participants were instructed to examine in detail the written products that emerged from these exercises, to circle those parts or word combinations that they thought were poetically dense and that they experienced as “surprising” and “exciting,” and then to work with these combinations and try to develop them into complete poems. The number of “exciting” word combinations consisted of a negligible amount of the entire written text that emerged from the exercises. Participants discarded and never explored again anything other than those pregnant word combinations. This was the case even in exercises that might be interpreted, at first glance, to be reflective of the participant’s interiority, like “automatic” writing. Automatic writing is valuable because of its potential to result occasionally in various unusual word combinations, rather than as a medium that is specifically conducive to revealing something substantial about the participants. Furthermore, this type of writing is characterized by a lack of focused intentionality, an element that is captured by automatic. Sincerity, however, implies intentionality, in that it is “a product of one’s desire to make one’s expressions aligned” with one’s interior state (Keane 2002:75).
Notice, finally, that the indication of whether a specific word combination might lead to a potential poem consisted of a certain pleasurable feeling. Such a feeling was an index that a specific word combination matches up with the interiority of the poet and should be pursued as a way of realizing and articulating this interiority via the creation of a poem. During the workshop, participants were never asked to justify their choices in any elaborate way, precisely because the justification at this specific moment was a subjective feeling.

These exercises are embedded within the same semiotic ideology and normative ideal of self-expression discussed above with respect to Weinstein’s story. Words and external materiality are not reflective but, rather, constitutive of meaning and the poet’s self, explicitly so. The subject examines different potential lines of action that are externally objectified and is attuned to his or her feelings in order to ascertain which possibility matches up with his or her interiority and should thus be pursued.

This semiotic ideology and normative ideal of self-expression are not limited to spheres in which words are central. Between July 2006 and June 2008, I conducted fieldwork in two U.S. collegiate jazz music programs. Elsewhere (Wilf 2010), I have explored a problem that the jazz educators I worked with tried to solve in their everyday practice in the classroom. As they argued, because postsecondary jazz education relies on mass-produced pedagogical material taught in classes that are often attended by dozens of students, jazz students often sound just like one another. By incorporating the same musical patterns in their playing, they sound the same as other students, both at their school and at other schools. Here, too, the issue is not a lack of sincerity. Currently, students do not, and indeed cannot, imagine ways of playing that would be different from their habitual and embodied modes of playing. They do not know how to play differently.

As I showed, jazz educators attempt to solve this problem by manipulating the playing bodies of their students. For example, they instruct pianists and guitar players to play with only three fingers, or they assign to students instruments other than their habitual ones. The rationale is to reconfigure students’ body schemata. Jazz educators have a nuanced phenomenological understanding that subjects experience the world, including future possibilities, via their bodies, and any change in subjects’ bodies also changes their habitual ways of perceiving the world; it brings to their attention new possibilities and potentialities. This context, too, is characterized by a problem of creativity and a lack of knowledge about the self’s potentiality, as it were. It is solved by the methodical and rule-governed incorporation of materiality. The manipulation of the body’s materiality (and that of the musical
instrument) is a professional way of drawing out new potentialities, which are then assessed through “feeling” as to whether they align with the subject’s interiority and are thus worth pursuing. Materiality precedes the realization of the modern subject in these moments of potential creativity and open-endedness because it is a condition of possibility for such realization and articulation within this specifically modern semiotic ideology and normative ideal of modern creative agency.

CONCLUSION: MODERN OPEN-ENDNESS AND MODERN CREATIVE AGENCY

The ideal of the dematerialized subject has been modernity’s way of imagining the autonomy, objectivity, and indeed sincerity of this subject. Yet modernity has also been concerned with situations of potential creativity, in which the subject cannot be sincere about his or her interiority, thoughts, needs, and future actions because these are elusive. The Romantic ideology of self-expression and self-creativity has been modernity’s way of imagining and, indeed, promoting these open-ended situations of potential creativity.

The ethic of feeling, Sentimentalism, and Romanticism had limited influence at first, yet today we can detect their impact in many contexts of modern life where the subject is faced with multiple choices, fuzzy normative guidelines, and thus potential creativity. Weinstein’s story is indicative of modernity’s predicament at the present historical moment, which is characterized by the demand that subjects devise for themselves norms and rules of action and that they take the risk involved in such a project of self-fashioning (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:50). As Ulrich Beck puts it, the labor market, the housing market, education, and even the traditions of marriage and family are all “becoming dependent on decision making, and with all their contradictions must be experienced as personal risks” (Beck 1994:14). The vast industry of self-help counselors and literature often mobilizes Romantic normative ideals of self-expression. It is one manifestation of what Beck calls “reflexive modernization” (Beck 1994:14). In conditions of neoliberal uncertainty, in which the modern subject needs to chart his or her own way, the ethic of feeling reemerges as the promise of orientation, the suggestion that there is some kind of inner compass available. Yet such “feeling” requires the material objectification of future possibilities with which the subject can resonate.

Let me conclude by suggesting that the recent popularity of “instinct” and “intuition” as magic bullets that can orient the subject in the context of economic uncertainty is a late modern instantiation of “feeling” within the normative ideal of self-expression and the semiotic ideology I have outlined here.
Self-help literature is inundated with books with titles such as *The Power of Intuition: How to Use Your Gut Feelings to Make Better Decisions at Work* (Klein 2004) that attempt to harness intuition and instinct to decision making in business. Such books assume that the modern subject has a built-in mechanism for guidance in making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. As the subject hesitates between numerous and conflicting possibilities and potential future actions that are often objectified externally in one form or another, he or she can presumably learn to be tuned to his or her “instinct” vis-à-vis these options, in order to find the right course of action. Although instinct, in its biological sense, denotes a trait that is shared among members of a species, its Romantic reconfiguration has transformed its meaning into each subject’s personal and unique compass. This finds expression in the notion of “gut instinct,” for example, encountered in the title above and in other self-help books, such as *Trust Your Gut: How the Power of Intuition Can Grow Your Business* (Robinson 2006). Gut instinct is commonly associated with a personal, unique, and indeed embodied reaction to external stimuli.

In a more current version of this reconfiguration of the Romantic call to the modern subject to be in touch with his or her unique voice or nature, the internal compass is located in the subject’s DNA, as is evident in a title such as *Instinct: Tapping Your Entrepreneurial DNA to Achieve Your Business Goals* (Harrison 2005). The DNA, the code that presumably holds the key to our unique future potentialities and limitations, might be a new version of the Romantic idea of nature as a source. I would argue that when individuals pay money to gain information about their DNA, they participate in a late modern form of the Romantic ideal of “being in touch” with one’s unique self, as it were. One’s DNA, too, can presumably display its value as a locus of orientation in an uncertain world by virtue of the ways in which it is in or out of tune with the external world.

These examples point to the ubiquity of a semiotic ideology that underlies the normative ideal of modern creative agency. This ideology stipulates a coconstitutive relation between the materiality of semiotic forms and modern subjectivity. Its recent resurgence is part of our contemporary historical moment. Scholars have much to gain from providing ethnographically based explorations of this normative ideal of the modern creative subject and its various contemporary manifestations.

**ABSTRACT**

Existing anthropological accounts have tended to portray the normative ideal of the modern subject as predicated on the demand that the materiality of semiotic forms such as the body and words be subordinate to the subject’s interiority as a condition
of possibility for his or her freedom and moral autonomy. In this article, I seek to contribute to the ongoing and fruitful conversation in anthropology over the idea of the modern subject by highlighting the distinguishing features of a specifically modern normative ideal of creative agency in which the materiality of semiotic forms is fully incorporated into the architecture of the self and is seen as a condition of possibility for its articulation. This norm is epitomized in the notion of self-expression that has emerged from Sentimentalism and Romanticism. In doing so, I draw on fieldwork I conducted in creative writing workshops in Israel and U.S. postsecondary jazz education, as well as on U.S. self-help literature. I argue that this normative ideal of modern creative agency qualifies the assumption that modernity has been predicated mostly on the desire to keep nature and culture ontologically distinct. I conclude the article by exploring this normative ideal as it resurfaces in the present historical moment in modern subjects’ attempts to orient themselves under conditions of neoliberal uncertainty, open-endedness, and potential creativity. [modernity, subjectivity, agency, creativity, Romanticism]

NOTES
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1. Indeed, even Karl Marx, who more than any other founding figure in anthropology acknowledged the role of materiality in the constitution of the subject, argued that “what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Marx 1978:344).

2. Although creative writing at the University of Iowa emerged as part of an attempt to further the critical understanding of literature “from the inside” by practicing poetry writing, the field as a whole eventually became oriented to the production of professional writers from the 1940s. For a historical survey, see Myers 1993.

3. All quotations from Orpheus’ publications and from the poetry workshop are translated from Hebrew.


5. The situation was different in the subsequent stages in which participants developed initial word combinations into complete poems. Participants met with instructors for “editing sessions,” which consisted of attempts to come up with rationalized justifications for poetic choices. At the same time, such justifications remained highly abstract and noncodified. They were often black-boxed (Latour and Woolgar 1986) in the instructor’s authority or the authority of canonized poets and poems.

Editors’ Note: Cultural Anthropology has published a number of articles on subjectivity and self-hood. See, for example, Ahmed Kanna’s “Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging ‘City-Corporation’” (2010), Tomas Matza’s “Moscow’s Echo: Technologies of the Self, Publics, and Politics on the Russian Talk Show” (2009), Debra Curtis’ “Commodities and Sexual Subjectivities: A Look at Capitalism and Its Desires” (2004), and Ernestine McHugh’s “Contingent Selves: Love and Death in a Buddhist Society in Nepal” (2002).
Cultural Anthropology has also published a number of articles on modernity, including Eric Gable’s “The Funeral and Modernity in Manjaco” (2006), Webb Keane’s “Sincerity, ‘Modernity,’ and the Protestants” (2002), and Louisa Schein’s “Performing Modernity” (1999).

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