Seeking a Democratic Self

Michelle Iten
Virginia Military Institute

Abstract

This essay argues that faculty and administrators of student affairs should generate practical concepts of the democratic self in order to provide students with alternatives to influential neoliberal models of the self. Aimed at stimulating further inquiry into the democratic self as a lived experience, this essay emerges from the need to foreground democracy more strongly in higher education as well as the call to improve critiques of neoliberalism with specific focuses and constructive ideas. A critique of the *optimized*, *branded*, and *quantified* self summarizes the restrictive messages these models send to students about the aims and techniques of selfhood. Contemporary theories of democracy and rhetoric furnish conceptual bases for countering those messages with constructs of the democratically *expansive* and *agential* self. These versions urge that concepts of the democratic self remain open to variety and based in nuanced understandings of personal power. Throughout, examples of topics to take up with students and colleagues emphasize the importance of conversation as an initial method of inquiry.

Keywords: self, students, democracy, higher education

Michelle Iten is an associate professor in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia. Email address: itenmb@vmi.edu

Today, we are particularly aware that we cannot afford to leave any stone unturned in our fight to make democracy real in the places we live and work. In higher education, we advance democracy through research, civic initiatives, and coursework bringing together students' epistemic and experiential knowledge. Yet, we have another significant site of democracy to explore more fully: the self as a lived, embodied experience. The opportunity to better understand the self as a site of democratic meaning and action is on our doorstep. As faculty and as administrators of student life and affairs, we act from our selves while our work brings us into intensive contact with a continually renewing stream of students acting from their selves, each one a unique, embodied, and named presence. In this essay, I argue we should take the opportunity this contact affords us to provide students with robust democratic visions of the self as a counterbalance to the market-based models that permeate our culture. There are two reasons for doing so, one critical and one constructive. In what follows, I build on insights from critics of neoliberalism to highlight corrosive messages that inhere in the models of the *optimized*, *branded*, and *quantified self*. Many of our students are deeply familiar with these models, which dominate popular advice for lifestyle and career success. I then draw on ideas from contemporary theories of democracy and rhetoric to describe conceptual bases for countering neoliberal models with democratic ideas of the *expansive self* and the *agential self*. Throughout, I incorporate my experience as an instructor and academic advisor to provide examples of specific conversations we might have with students and colleagues. I do not aim in this essay to provide a comprehensive account of the neoliberal or democratic self; rather, the goals are to bring those concepts together, essay initial ideas for grounding further inquiry into the democratic self, and overall to encourage us to provide our students with thoughtful, practical alternatives to the self as a market actor.

Primarily, this essay is grounded in our current, urgent need to expand democracy in all possible directions. At the same time, it also responds to what several writers have called academics' "neoliberal fatigue" (Robbins, 2019, p. 840). While the fatigue is warranted, disdain for an overused, under-defined word isn't a reason to stop tackling the dehumanizing effects of neoliberal values on bodies and spirits. By focusing on the self as one site wherein a dominant economic model can be fruitfully contested with democratic alternatives that emphasize human flourishing, this essay responds to the call to specify our critiques of neoliberalism and enrich them with constructive ideas. In his systematic review of English-language literature on the topic, Tight (2019) concludes that "the criticism of neoliberalism in relation

to Higher Education is often so broad-brush and ritualistic as to both lack utility and add support to neoliberalism" by drawing our attention away from addressing its specific instantiations and consequences (p. 278). The word itself functions as "a kind of universal scapegoat" (Tight, 2019, p. 279) and "the linguistic omnivore of our times" (Rodgers, 2018, p. 78), which may "make it harder to identify points of resistance, strategies of action, and the creation of alternative possibilities" (p. 86). Both Tight and Rodgers call attention to language as an important ground for action. While the fundamental stakes of the contest between neoliberal and democratic paradigms are material and physical, "market rationalities [are] diffused throughout everyday life, via language through corporate media and educational institutions, occupying semantic resources for making sense of the world" (Amsler, 2015, p. 41). Implicitly, this calls on us to shrink the lines of that occupation by expanding the available semantic resources for democracy. Similarly, Winslow (2015) reminds us that "[n]eoliberalism is not merely an economic philosophy but rather a rhetorical project" that exerts influence through specific discursive strategies (p. 208). He calls for more critical exploration of "the rhetorical and symbolic formations by which our understandings of neoliberalism and higher education have coalesced" (p. 204) and implies there is much constructive work yet to be done, averring that we have "failed to provide cogent alternative language to market-conducive versions of higher education" (p. 228). By offering alternative, democratic adjectives for describing the self, this essay aims to spotlight, not only a particular practice of countering neoliberal attitudes in higher education, but also the importance of language in advancing democratic attitudes and actions.

Because this is an argument about language, some prefatory attention to the word self is required. It is beyond this essay's scope and aim to engage the long history of ideas in which the natures of self, individual, and citizen are debated. As vital as that epistemic debate is, one of my aims here is simply to propose an everyday, bottom-up tactic by which we might bring more democracy into higher education: a series of conversations to inquire into the models of self that we want for our students (and, by extension, our society). In conversations, the function of words is no less important than their denotations. Some words open conversation, others shut them down; some words exclude who can contribute, while other words invite. I use the word self in this essay because I have experienced its positive functionality in three types of conversations. First, in spontaneous conversations both in and out of the university, I have found that using "self" offers better chances for connecting across differences than "individual." Using this term seems

often to send conversations down undemocratic tracks: positioning individual liberty as necessarily opposed to shared goods; focusing on individual rights to the exclusion of civic responsibilities; or conflating individual freedom with consumer preference. A precondition of a good conversation is that the people in it feel less fear and more curiosity, and talking about one's own self, rather than "the individual," can feel safer at a time when potential explosions of political invective hang on the hair trigger of a word. Yet, paradoxically, although the word self seems less political and more personal, it can open us up to more meaningful and genuine places in a conversation, places where it's easier to engage in the democratic activity of building bridges across differences.

In a second type of conversation—discussions of democracy in the rhetoric classes from which this essay emerges—I have found that using the word self allows students and me to test the idea that democracy is enacted not only by citizens, but by any people attempting to assert democratic values and conditions in the places they live. In these conversations, "self" accommodates a wider range of accounts of democratic experience than the legal narratives of "person" and "citizen," allowing us expand what counts as democracy. Finally, "self" is the terminology our students use in the one-on-one conversations they have with us in the contexts of teaching, advising, mentoring, career planning, coaching, and counseling. These conversations often reveal the many experiences that lead students directly to wrestling with existential and consequential questions about "my self." Such experiences are as diverse as assessing and comparing themselves, encountering different ideas and people, navigating political discussions, reflecting on their past and future, making decisions about majors and credit hours, talking with parents or partners, preparing application materials, and more. In these conversations, echoing students' terminology of "self" can help us better support them.

Below, I critique three neoliberal models of the self, concluding each with an activity I have found useful for inviting students to test abstract ideas about the democratic self with their concrete experiences. In criticizing market-based notions of the self, I am not diminishing the need to make a living, but rather pointing out specific implications in these models that we should counter with democratic ideas. Underlying this critique is the fact that, in actuality, none of these models wholly permeates higher education and our own and our students' lives. The claim that an "ideological apparatus [captures] the thoughts (or determines the subjectivity) of all the subjects of the modern state," preventing any sort of apprehension outside of it, is "simply hyperbolic" (Appiah, 1991, p. 73). Remembering this, though, has become

increasingly difficult in the years since Appiah wrote. The perception that certain conditions—such as neoliberalism, hyper-partisanship, acceleration, and the death of democracy—are inescapable is only heightened by technologies and algorithms designed to keep us immersed in certain ways of seeing the world. However, neoliberal models of the self, while dominant, are not ubiquitous. Gaps exist, and it is in them that we can broach democratic alternatives for conceiving the self.

The *optimized self* is one's best physical, psychological, social, and professional self. Self-optimization is a continual process of production and updates. It involves scrutinizing the self, deploying tools and techniques provided by "experts," and measuring progress and performance. "The self is reconceived as a tool for success," Reichardt (2018) writes, "measured in terms of socially and culturally pre-given parameters" (p. 114). Many students enter college with the understanding that self-optimization is necessary for career and economic success. The "obligation of self-optimization" (Reichardt, 2018, p. 104) is to manufacture the self as the optimal product for the employer and economy. Such manufacture requires management: optimization requires "a reflexive relationship in which every self is meant to contain a distance that enables a person to be literally their own business" (Gershon, 2011, p. 539). Thus, knowing the self must include knowing the market's current and near-future needs. Self-optimization for the labor market also sets up a particular way of knowing others. It primes students to see their economic futures playing out in an arena of zero-sum competition, which establishes the field of relations as winners/losers, one-up/one-down. It is this connection to future economic survival that can make college students regard the development and improvement of one's self, not as open-ended opportunities, but fraught imperatives from a demanding market that determines whether one will be rich or poor. Under this demand, time becomes critical in that time not spent on producing the optimal product is wasted. In this managerial approach to time, "[o]ne is never 'in the moment'; rather, one is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles" (Gershon, 2011, p. 539). Developing the self is central in the college experience, but optimizing redefines development as management and the self as project and product.

For engaging students with notions of the self beyond the economic, the aforementioned attitude toward time can provide an entry point. Many students can speak fluently about their own ideas of what defines "good" and "bad" uses of time and can reflect on the connections among time, priorities, and values. From there, I have found students not only

willing, but deeply thoughtful in taking up the questions, "What do you see as 'good' uses of time to support democracy, and why are they good? What do you know about yourself that suggests good ways to use your time for democracy?" Writing down the students' contributions during this discussion provides a pool of ideas we can refer to in discussing how ideas of democracy and interpretations of democratic virtues can differ. At the same time, we get to see in front of us the diversity of ways to "be democratic" and the diverse things we bring to democracy from our selves.

To produce the *branded self* involves assembling and marketing a coherent package of one's skills and traits. Even more overtly than optimization, branding establishes the self as a source of profit. The injunction to market the self as a unique, attractive (as determined by consumer or audience demand), and consistently recognizable brand is inescapable in the expert advice given to job applicants. But it is also common advice to college, grant, and award applicants and anyone else seeking profit, visibility, or influence, from authors and professors to religious figures and lifestyle mavens. Self-branding involves "taking an inventory of one's assets, establishing the 'value proposition' one brings to one's customers, and deploying the branding tactics that have been utilized by large corporations and celebrities" (Vallas & Hill, 2018, p. 294). In this model, understanding the self is replaced by strategizing the self, and presence to one's self is replaced by presenting the brand. For college students, self-branding imposes an additional curriculum in which the objects of knowledge are market or audience research, and learning is centered on mastering the techniques of building and selling a brand. As with self-optimization, the messages driving this curriculum are marked by notes of dire urgency and stark scenarios of survival: you must brand yourself, or you won't be noticed, selected, hired, or otherwise valued; you must be a brand, or you don't exist to the outside world. In fact, branding can even make you real to yourself. A fundamental adage of selling is that the best salespeople believe what they are saying. So, rather than a being a performance to take up and put down at will, the most successful personal brand must become a personal truth. Through branding, the felt experience of "being one's true self" becomes wholly identified with profitability: "the market is defined as fully conducive to—and, in fact, an indispensable support for—the creation of a free, authentic, and successful self" (Vallas & Hill, 2018, p. 294). Because "genuineness" and "authenticity" command increasingly higher market and social value (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020, p. 1288), crafting a successful branded self requires not only technique, but an existential commitment.

In the same manner as discussions about time, discussions about being able to talk to strangers can help illuminate contrasts between the branded self and the democratic self. My students are familiar with the networking advice to be able to talk about personal interests and experiences as a way of standing out to potentially useful people. Drafting and practicing these talking points are part of crafting a saleable personal brand. But, when prompted, students can also easily describe times when sharing their interests, concerns, and anecdotes face-to-face with strangers didn't get them anything "useful" but did provide a pleasurable social connection. From there, they are able to debate the democratic facets of sharing from the self, for example, can we connect the practice to democratic virtues? How does it compare or contrast with other types of political conversations? I also ask students to chart the differences between self-marketing talk and talking with strangers in temporary social connection: which aspects of themselves do they highlight in each case, and what's the style of language they use? This discussion can pave a way into understanding that developing and communicating about oneself are more than marketing projects, that they are, in fact, essential to advancing democratic conditions and building strong democratic relationships.

The *quantified self* is constituted by a collection of numerical measurements, generated by technologies that users engage voluntarily. (I distinguish here between lifesaving medical quantification and quantification as a lifestyle industry.) As with optimizing and branding, self-quantification attracts by promising individual agency to build a better self, in this case through data: "[t]he defining feature of a quantifying approach to the self is the explicit aim of self-improvement and -optimization, be it fitness, wellness, or having better chances in one's profession or personal relationships" (Reichardt, 2018, p. 103). Again, there is no apparent conflict between personal wellbeing and market wellbeing. A good self becomes goods for the market on both ends: users consume the technologies of tracking and produce data for the information industry. Much of the appeal of self-quantification is that it "promises objective results, as data can be stored, compared, and infinitely recalled" (Reichardt, 2018, p. 103). The underlying premise is that objective self-knowledge—culled from "my" logs, informatics, and analytics—is unquestionably more reliable than subjective self-knowledge as the basis for producing a better self. Numbers also become a seemingly more reliable way of knowing others: "[w]hen merit and success are the key values of social comparison, then numbers become the best way to judge someone; numbers are anonymous and can be easily compared, even out of context" (Reichardt, 2018, p. 111). Using

numbers to measure the self and others is likely as old as humanity, and students have compared test scores as long as there have been students. But self-quantification takes on a more dangerous character to the extent that it crowds out other ways of knowing the self and to the extent that un-quantifiable parts of the self are seen as less worthy of examination.

Behind self-quantification is the basic human impulse to better understand the self by logging activities and experiences. Because living with others in democratic ways is full of tensions and challenges, the democratic self can only benefit from understanding itself more fully in any way. Logging, observation, and recording activities can help us cultivate the attitudes and habits by which we embody such democratic values as equality and equity, freedom from and freedom to, transparency and critique. Yet because democratic selfhood is complex, it requires multiple methods of seeing the self, not excluding quantification but also including ways that help capture ephemera, tensions, and contingency. This means recovering the very activities that self-quantification posits as unreliable: "introspection and memory, self-observation and narration" (Reichardt, 2018, p. 103). When I assign students to practice observing themselves as democratic actors, they choose their own methods from a set that comprises writing (any genre), photography, videography, and any other studio or digital art they enjoy. I don't grade these activities, requiring only that students give me a brief written reflection on the activity, and it is wholly optional for them to share insights in class or online discussion. Ideally, the democratic self should not lend itself to the evaluation and compulsory public sharing that give existence to the optimized, branded, and quantified self.

These models conflict with democratic principles at several points, but of particular concern are their inherent bases in restriction and subjection. Collectively, they restrict the aims and means of selfhood, and they subject the self to marketplace measures of worth and efficacy. In contrast, developing democratic concepts of the self should involve asking, how can the fields and activities of the democratic self be enlarged? What means of personal power can we realistically ascribe to the democratic self? In the next section, I describe some foundational ideas and conversations for conceiving the *expansive self* and the *agential self*.

As a set of commitments and a way of life, democracy is distinguished by an energy of expansion. It is a proliferation of the means—actions, structures, angles of approach, ways of knowing, and so on—for making democratic aims, such as equality and human flourishing, vis-

ible in people's lived experiences. Democratic expansion is transgressive, characterized by a continual overflowing of boundaries (Wolin, 1994, p. 47) and an ongoing displacement of "the limits of the public and the private, of the political and the social" (Ranciere, 2005, p. 62). Bensaïd (2009) asserts that "to survive, [democracy] must keep pushing further, permanently transgress its instituted forms, unsettle the horizon of the universal, test equality against liberty. . . . It must ultimately attempt to extend, permanently and in every domain, access to equality and citizenship" (43). As Wolin (1994) delineates, from Plato forward, democracy's detractors have seen this energy of expansion as dangerous; the remedy is institutional and constitutional ways to contain the people's excesses of appetites and interests, including their direct access to political power (p. 34-38). For democracy's friends, though, its promises of expansion and exuberance make it preferable to other ways of living in political association. Indeed, expanding its ways and forms is democracy's "very condition of existence" (Mouffe, 2009, p. 74); a specifically democratic politics "must ceaselessly renew the possibility of the unfurling of forms or registers of meaning" (Nancy, 2009, p. 73-74). Put another way, democracy isn't really itself unless it is expanding. Supporting democracy, then, involves keeping an ongoing lookout for more actions, agents, sites, and practices by which to bring about more democratic conditions for more people. Seen from this angle, the self, and the ways we conceive it, represents additional sites of democratic meaning and action.

To contest the principle of restriction inherent in neoliberal concepts of the self, we should embrace an ethic of expansion in pursuing democratic notions, in particular exploring the many instances of democratic selfhood. In this, a metaphor of democracy as a tapestry can be helpful. Constituted by the same thread and taking shape on the same ground, both sides of a tapestry show a different version of the same image. The two sides of the democratic tapestry represent different locations and ways of being that in actuality work in concert. On the front side, typically more discernible, democracy is a form of governance accompanied by other forms—constitutions, institutions, legal codes, discussion protocols, and so on—by which we codify democratic political virtues and attempt to establish democratic conditions. Here, the democratic self evinces legally and constitutionally, as a person, an individual, and a citizen (or not). On the back side of the tapestry, democracy comprises the things that selves do, often quotidian and ephemeral, to make democratic virtues and relations visible in everyday life. Here, democracy as a way of existence "lives in the ebb-and-flow of everyday activities, responsibilities, and relationships" (Wolin,

2004, p. 604). On the front side, the self acts within the institutions of democracy in government offices and law courts; on the back side, the self engages what Asen (2004) calls "democracy's heart," which "does not beat in the halls of Congress or in the voting booth but in everyday enactments of citizenship" (p. 197). On both sides, the democratic self "[emerges] again and again in new ways from engagement with the experiment of democratic politics" (Biesta, 2011, p. 152). The whole tapestry provides an abundance of places where the democratic self can be found.

The concept of an expansive democratic self can help us push back at restrictive neoliberal models in two sites: the conversations we have with students in the contexts of teaching and student affairs, and the discussions we have among ourselves about assessing civic capacities. With students, the model of the expansive self can provide grounds for both critique and construction. For example, we might explore with them such questions as, what other important activities or experiences of the self are missing in the compulsion to optimize? What can quantification not tell us about ourselves, and what can we do to round out the picture? The restrictions of the branded self emerge with particular clarity in the many conversations we have across campus in which we carry out one of higher education's central responsibilities, supporting students to fully experience, rather than ignore, inner conflict. This contrasts directly with the reductive techniques of self-branding. Crafting a successful brand requires eliminating conflicts in order to project one consistent, encompassing message about the self; a brand is monovocal. In contrast, an expansive, democratic approach to inner conflict draws on the values of parliamentary discourse. From the disciplinary standpoint of rhetoric, the discussion we have within ourselves "falls under a general theory of argumentation" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, p. 6). Seen from this angle, inner conflict among the self's parts, however we choose to label them, is not a battle for one voice to prevail but a deliberative exchange, often heated, in which parts argue, furnish reasons, and listen to one another in order to find a better answer to the issue at hand. More than just a way of solving problems, though, the interaction of the self's multiple parts is a good in and of itself. Nienkamp (2001) suggests cultivating an internal rhetoric "so that the broadest possible range of interests and consequences are represented" in a method "characterized by the openness with which alternative voices [of the self] are allowed into the conversation. In this ethic of relationship, the good is defined by what keeps our voices interacting and open to one another" (p. 135). In the self as brand, complexity of any kind dilutes the punch of the one

voice, resulting in poor sales. In an expansive, democratic self, staying present to the self's multiple parts, including their conflict, is a sign of vitality and durability.

In our conversations about assessing students' democratic capacities, the concept of an expansive self can fruitfully complicate what Biesta (2011) criticizes in education as the "domestication of the citizen—a 'pinning down' of citizen to a particular civic identity" (p. 142). One place to start is by scrutinizing institutional or course outcomes that invoke "citizenship" and "civic life" for language that narrowly restricts students' ways of enacting democracy. In writing better outcomes, we should be guided by the injunction to "acknowledge and valorize the diversity of ways in which the 'democratic game' can be played, instead of trying to reduce this diversity to a uniform model of citizenship. This would mean fostering a plurality of forms of being a democratic citizen" (Mouffe, 2009, p.73). Doing this should turn our attention to our particular students—what are *their* opportunities to engage democracy?— and to writing institutionally specific civic assessment materials. To the extent that we can hold conversations of inquiry about the democratic self with students and colleagues within our respective institutions, we are in a better place to resist de-contextualized, pre-defined measures of the good civic being. By drawing on knowledge of our own places, we have the opportunity to develop more creative, sensitive outcomes that liberate rather than restrict the many ways our particular students can develop a democratic self.

In addition to following a principle of expansion, democratic ideas of the self must necessarily address the issue of power, in particular agency, that is, the personal power to create visible change in one's environment and conditions. Winslow (2015) reveals that the discourse of neoliberalism functions in large part by "constructing new symbolic representations strategically aligned with public vocabularies and socially shared orientations already resonating in the public's imagination" (p. 208). Neoliberal models of the self appeal to the existing language and values of individual rights to freedom. In the optimized, branded, and quantified self, agency is aimed at meeting the market's demands in culture and the workplace, variously represented as happiness, success, or the rewards of one's best self. The relentless labor to optimize and market oneself is in actuality not so much agency as busy work, but it is often couched in the terms that make implicit appeals to individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Conceiving democratic alternatives to neoliberal models of the self involves shifting the object of agency to the broad end of making democratic virtues concrete in the life we share with others. Democratic agency involves attending to,

among other things, material conditions, the effects of policies on bodies, and the everyday ways of interacting by which political relations are forged. In addition, in keeping with the principle of expansion, concepts of the democratic self will prioritize variety in the types and means of agency. As I have written about elsewhere (Iten, 2017, 2021), democratic agencies often assumed to be universal, such as activism, calling authorities to account, public expression, and even argument, are culturally and sometimes socioeconomically situated. This doesn't mean not teaching these important agencies, but rather supporting students to discuss their attitudes toward forms of democratic agency instead of presenting certain ones as self-evidently applicable to everyone. Discerning a wide range of ways to exert democratic agency is another benefit of exploring the democratic self with the specific student populations in our respective institutions.

Additional activities for better understanding the agential democratic self are specifying the type of democracy we invoke in our work and examining the terms for self we use in our disciplines. The word democracy is what we might call a load-bearing beam in higher education. It is both an object of disciplinary study and a term used to give public and institutional value to research, teaching, and student affairs. It can be used as shorthand to signal commitments as diverse as the free market and economic redistribution, individual sovereignty and communitarianism, private philanthropy and governmental responsibility for equity. The word gets around but is often insufficiently specified. Uncovering our assumptions about the term and explaining more precisely what we mean by it in the various contexts of our work are good overall ways to foreground democracy in higher education. But those activities can also provide a wealth of ways to conceive the agency of the democratic self. What objects and means of agency are available to the self in the models of, for example, constitutional, institutional, deliberative, social, radical, American, liberal, pragmatic, digital, and aggregative democracy? Each model differs in its treatment of democratic virtues and its view of associated life. This means, in turn, different implications for which selves have democratic agency and what kinds.

In addition, more expansive understanding of the agential democratic self can be derived from focusing on the words we use for "the individual" in our disciplines. The primary work of these terms is epistemological; they don't need to align with a democratic project, just as theories of the self don't need to bear out in lived experience. However, there may be times, such as developing curricula or outcomes for degree programs, when we want to bring into closer congruence the no-

tions of "individual" we teach with possibilities for democracy. In these cases, we might ask, what implications for democratic agency can be drawn from our discipline's way of labeling the self, whether the term is subject, being, performance, human, client, assemblage, body, identity, user, patient, person, civilian, citizen, provider, or other? Does a particular term position actually existing selves to act in democratic ways? As implied by a certain term, who are agents, and who are objects of agency? Below, I sketch some examples of this discipline-based analysis in the field of rhetoric.

As a body of knowledge, Western rhetoric has engaged philosophies and theories of the self throughout its history. At the same time, rhetoric as a practice, an object of criticism, and a basis for classes in speaking and writing continually chastens those ideas. Most rhetoricians will agree that, historically, rhetoric as a necessary art of democracy was based on the assumption that people can act with language to intervene in their surroundings through a combination of decision, will, and deliberate strategy. No less than in other disciplines, deconstructions of the essential, autonomous self challenged this view of agency and directed rhetoricians' attention to the self as a socially determined subject. Interestingly, the theoretical debates about agency and structure that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century have renewed, practical relevance for the project of conceiving the democratic self. For example, when it comes to teaching rhetoric as a means of democratic action, we must avoid fictions of self-agency that assume level playing fields, including equal access to an education in rhetoric. At the same time, in responsibility to students' (and our society's) needs, we cannot afford to leave the self in shadow as a democratic actor. In searching for ideas of the agential democratic self that can push back at neoliberal models, the challenge is to take up larger concepts that allow for the possibility of individual agency without ignoring the realities of oppressive structures that rob the self of agency. Alcorn (1994) provides an instructive example of thinking through the implications of different concepts of the self. In seeking to develop a productive theory of ethos (broadly, a concept that focuses on the person and perception of the rhetor), he contrasts Classical notions of the self as a "freely chosen social role" and "creative agent" of rhetoric with poststructuralist notions of the self as "the *effects* of rhetoric, a sort of epiphenomena constituted by interplay among social, political, and linguistic forces. . . . that determine [the self's] nature and movement" (p. 32). Alcorn concludes that the two ideas of the self "are useful for some purposes, but they are not particularly useful for a theory of ethos" (p. 32). Here, Alcorn clearly illustrates the fact that we use ideas to build

other ideas; he also underscores that, in doing so, it is important to look for congruence between the implications of one idea and the purposes of another. He probes ideas of the self to ask, in effect, are these the ideas we want to work with? Do they serve our purposes?

In another example of considering the implications of notions of the self, Nienkamp (2001) in her nuanced theory of internal rhetoric asserts that it is "unproductive" to create a binary between traditional rhetorics, which emphasize the rhetor's intentions, and expansive rhetorics, which position "societal discourses or rhetoricality as determining our very beings" (p. 126). Instead, "each human being is a site of both rhetorical dissension and concerted rhetorical action" (p.127). Similarly, in Crick's (2010) "naturalistic ontology of becoming" (p. 65), the self and its attitudes are formed in part by others' rhetorical discourse, but the self is not "simply [a vessel] for texts . . . passively absorbing and regurgitating rhetorical narratives." Rather, the self is an "organic being who uses the resources of language and communication to adapt to a changing natural environment" (p. 66). These instances of thinking through the rhetorical self exemplify the kinds of questions that can emerge when we examine our disciplinary terms for their implications for agency. They also show a nuanced understanding of the flow of influence between self and surroundings that should inform the democratic models of the self that we provide to students. Neoliberal models offer a spurious promise of liberated self-agency: individuals have every opportunity to achieve success if they just focus assiduously enough on the work of self-optimization. In reality, by positing the self as simultaneous consumer and product for consumption, neoliberal models place the self in subjection to market demands. In contrast, concepts of the agential democratic self must face up honestly to the complexities of lived experience, acknowledging the realities of how systems and surroundings act on us and how we act on them. At the same time, the principle of expansion suggests that another form the democratic self might overflow is that "classic antimony of social theory—the agon of structure and agency" (Appiah, 1991, p. 68). Not to supplant it, for it seems in some ways that we have only just now as a nation started to foreground the true extent and consequences of structural inequality, but to posit the binary as only one among many ways to see the agency of the democratic self.

In conclusion, we in higher education have a compelling opportunity to generate concepts of the democratic self. We, our students, and our society need more democracy, period, amid today's rising impulses toward authoritarianism and the awareness of our nation's failures to create conditions for equal human flourishing. In this drive for more

democracy, the self—imbricated in, but not synonymous to, the community—can be seen as another site in which democratic attitudes and actions can fail or thrive. This is not the self as an abstraction but the self as experienced in a single body with a unique consciousness. As faculty and administrators of student life and affairs, our work brings us into frequent contact with many such selves every day, often in a state of active development. This proximity should make us attentive to the ways students (and we) discuss their selves. The neoliberal models that furnish many of our students' existing guidelines for selfhood are narrow and often inhumane in restricting the scope of selfhood and subjecting it to market considerations. We have the opportunity to provide students with the language and aims of alternative, democratic notions. The sketches of the expansive and agential self provided in this essay call out to be deepened, complicated, and tested against experience. The conversations I have described here are starting points for us, along with our students, to undertake further inquiry into the democratic self.

References

Alcorn, M. W. (1994). *Narcissism and the literary libido: Rhetoric, text, and subjectivity*. New York University Press.

Amsler, S. (2015). *The education of radical democracy*. Routledge.

Anteby, M., & Occhiuto, N. (2020). Stand-in labor and the rising economy of self. *Social Forces, 98*(3), 1287-1310.

Appiah, A. (1991). Tolerable falsehoods: Agency and the interests of theory. In J. Arac & B. Johnson (eds.), *Consequences of theory* (pp. 63-90). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Asen, R. (2004). A discourse theory of citizenship. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *90*(2), 189-211.

Bensaïd, D. (2009). Permanent scandal. In G. Agamben (ed.), *Democracy: In what state?* (pp. 16-43). Trans. W. McCuaig. Columbia University Press.

Biesta, G. (2011). The ignorant citizen: Mouffe, Ranciere, and the subject of democratic education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, *30* (2), 141-153.

Crick, N. (2010). *Democracy and rhetoric: John Dewey on the arts of becoming*. University of South Carolina Press.

Gershon, I. (2011). Neoliberal agency. *Current Anthropology*, *52*(4), 537-555.

Iten, M. (2017). The first discipline is class: Aiming at inclusion in argument across the curriculum. *WAC Journal*, (28), 34-51.

Iten, M. (2021). Contemplative practices as rhetorical action for democracy. *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, (7), 125-151.

Mouffe, C. (2009). *The democratic paradox*. Verso.

Nancy, J. (2009). Finite and infinite democracy. In G. Agamben (ed.), *Democracy: In what state?* (pp. 68-75). Trans. W. McCuaig. Columbia University Press.

Nienkamp, J. (2001). *Internal rhetorics: Toward a history and theory of self-per-*

suasion. Southern Illinois University Press.

Perelman, C., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1958). *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*. Notre Dame University Press.

Ranciere, J. (2005). *Hatred of democracy*. Trans. S. Corcoran. Verso.

Reichardt, U. (2018). Self-observation in the digital age: The quantified self, neoliberalism, and the paradoxes of contemporary individualism. *American Studies*, *63*(1), 99-117.

Robbins, B. (2019). Everything is not neoliberalism. *American Literary History*, *31*(4), 840–849.

Rodgers, D. (2018). The uses and abuses of "neoliberalism." *Dissent*, *65*(1), 78-87.

Tight, M. (2019). The neoliberal turn in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *73*, 273-284.

Vallas, S., & Hill, A. (2018). Reconfiguring worker subjectivity: Career advice literature and the "branding" of the worker's self. *Sociological Forum*, *33*(2), 287-309.

Winslow, L. (2015). The undeserving professor: Neoliberalism and the reinvention of higher education. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *18*(2), 201-246.

Wolin, S. (1994). Norm and form: The constitutionalizing of democracy. In J. Euben, J. Wallach, & J. Ober (eds.), *Athenian political thought and the reconstruction of American democracy* (pp. 29-58). Cornell University Press.

Wolin, S. (2004). *Politics and vision: Continuity and innovation in western political thought*. Expanded ed. Princeton University Press.