

Democratising Moves: Power, Agency and the Body

Stacey Prickett

ABSTRACT

Recently, the word 'democracy' has been featured prominently in the press, with calls to restore it, save it from ominous threats and expose challenges to its principles, all predicated on an assumed understanding of the concept. Many of the roots of today's democracies reach back to the 18th century revolutions in the pre-U.S. American colonies and France, which continue to reinforce Euro-American values and ideologies of nation. The transfer of power remains a defining principle, shifting control from elites to the masses. How do the principles that inspired democratic revolutions relate to the ballot-box versions of democracy today? This article considers contemporary complexities of democracy as a concept, offering examples of how it is embodied through iconography, gestures of defiance and civil disobedience. Democratic values are explored in more formal choreography and in creative processes that establish associations with political agency.

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Introduction

The following article was developed from my keynote lecture at the Nordic Forum for Dance Research (NOFOD) Dance and Democracy Conference. My conceptualisations of the term *democracy* are shaped in part by experiences in two nations – the US and Britain – and recent periods of political instability that can be traced back to an iconic symbol of freedom: the ballot box. Initial ideas for my lecture included celebrating the election of the first female U.S. president as validation of the nation's democratic system. However, that plan changed in November 2016, when Hillary Clinton lost the electoral vote despite winning the popular vote. Since then, headlines have warned of the demise of democracy in the US, as well as Britain, when a snap election in June 2017 deprived the Tory government of its majority in the British Parliament, although it remains in power as I write this. Both events have complicated the definitions of *democracy*, which emphasises the power of the ballot box and values shaped by the US and French revolutions. As explored below, such principles of democracy are endowed with multiple contradictions and universalised assumptions. Dance and body movement offer rich modes of engaging, embodying or reinforcing democratic ideals or responses to perceived threats. Actions perceived as democratising moves are presented as examples of group agency, individual gestures of defiance and choreographic examples that convey messages of social injustice.

Defining Democracy

Surveys on theories of democracy by Raymond Williams (1983) and Bernard Crick (2002) trace the political concept back to Athens. The Greek word combines '*demos* (the mob, the many) and *kratos*, meaning rule' (Crick, 2002, 11). The Athenian concept encompassed 'legal and political' equality, rather than economic parity (Crick 2002, 16). The Roman definition included the notion of citizenship, reinforcing a sense of belonging associated with an expectation of certain rights that became central to democratic principles. Challenges to autocratic rule globally emerged across the centuries in various moves toward representative rule. In Britain, for example, the Magna Carta in 1215 was one step during a long process of chipping away at authoritarian rule, helping to institutionalise a parliamentary system that has existed in one form or another since the 13th century.

A formal definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes *democracy* as a type of rule:

1. A Government by the people; *esp.* a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity (or, *esp.* formerly, a subset of them meeting particular conditions) are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly; (more generally) a system of decision-making within an institution, organisation, etc., in which all members have the right to take part or vote (*OED Online* 2017).

Keeping in mind these fundamentals, dramatic instances of how the term *democracy* circulates in everyday communication came to my attention. For



example, in late February 2017, about a month after Donald Trump was inaugurated the 45th president of the US, the *Washington Post* added a subtitle under its online masthead: 'Democracy Dies in Darkness'. It was the first time in the 140-year history of the newspaper that a subtitle was added. Although assumptions were made about whether the subtitle was a response to Trump's attacks on the press, plans to adopt the phrase were in progress at least a year before its appearance (Farhi 2017). Pleas to defend democracy appear daily in the press and were seen this year in stoic responses to terrorist attacks, reassuring the world that democracy would win over those who would turn a vehicle into a machine of terror. The word *democracy* also has been invoked to justify acts of death and destruction via regime change and oppression, as well as to reinforce autocratic rule, as I explore later. However, the word also has served to inspire and motivate.

Faced with such ambiguities, I want to question how democracy has been instilled in government and civil institutions. What are fundamental democratic values and how are they reinforced? To what extent are they changeable, depending on who uses the term? The evocation of democracy has taken multiple forms – how is it embodied and its principles acted upon?

Ami Skånberg's artistic keynote; Suriashi – marche féminine Photo: Mikko Orpana

Democratic Principles

I return to the official definition below, but the most widely recognised associations today refer to the struggles for democracy undertaken during the 1776 American Revolution and the 1789 French Revolution. Raymond Williams (1983) has identified significant changes that accompanied these events: the type of engagement between a government and its constituency, which shifted to a proportional representation, and the interpretation of «the people». Significantly, however, 'the mode of choosing representatives was more important than the proportion of «the people» who have any part in this' (Williams 1983, 95). A key issue that continues to shape power struggles was evident in the early years of the American nation: the need to «balance the imperatives of popular sovereignty against the fear of excessive democracy». (Wilentz 2005, 40). Although distinctions exist between the American and French contexts, both revolutions were uprisings of the people in which the power shifts generated fear, as well as celebration.

French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville's two-volume treatise *Democracy in America* and later

letters offer a vision of democracy in progress that resonates today, documenting a new nation's process of institution building that he observed in the 1830s. 'No taxation without representation' was the rallying cry that stirred the colonists into battle with the British, culminating in the American Revolution. Tocqueville noted how the American situation was linked to an expanding equality of social conditions, in which there were more literate people, more landowners and a growing population living with similar values (Delgou 2016). As historian Eric Foner (2005) summarised, however, Tocqueville recognised that 'Democracy... was more than simply the right to vote; it was a habit of the heart, a deeply rooted set of beliefs that encouraged both individual initiative and an active public sphere populated by numerous voluntary organisations that sought to better society'. Significantly, Foner (2005) argues that most prominent patriots were not democrats, 'but ... the struggle for independence emboldened ordinary men and women to demand a greater voice in public affairs'. Economic autonomy was a core feature of the American version of democracy, as explored further below.

Ideals of liberty and freedom are often conflated with democratic concepts. Both appear in iconography as female figures celebrating the power of the people and the search for democracy. In Eugène Delacroix's 1830 painting, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (*Liberty Leading the People*), Liberty takes the form of a woman, captured mid-stride climbing over barricades and fallen bodies. She holds the French tricolour flag aloft, inspiring another group of fighters to continue in the battle against King Charles X. The Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the US, has held a torch aloft to light a way to freedom in New York City Harbour since 1886. In 1903, Emma Lazarus' poem was added to the base of the statue, reinforcing the link between the nation and immigration: 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning

to breathe free...' (quoted in Bragg 2008). Another gendered image is seen in the 10-metre-high Goddess of Democracy statue, created out of *papier-maché* during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing. The statue, depicting a woman holding a torch, was demolished by troops when the protesters were cleared out. Replicas of the statue have been created in numerous cities, including Vancouver, Hong Kong and San Francisco (anon. n.d.).

The three images symbolise actions of the people in democratic processes that included 'open argument', encompassing freedom of expression and the right to gather -- moving beyond standard notions of power and associations of class. Whether or not there is real equality, Williams explains that there is a drive to 'act as if *all* people are equal, and deserved equal respect' (Williams 1983, 97). Significant moral values are invoked that combine with belief in the possibility of change, of individual and collective agency. The second part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition describes democracy as: 'a form of society in which all citizens have equal rights, ignoring hereditary distinctions of class or rank, and the views of all are tolerated and respected; the principle of fair and equal treatment of everyone in a state, institution, organisation, etc.' (*OED Online* 2017).

Claims of universal democratic concepts underpin projects that rank democratic values on a global scale. The non-profit organisation Freedom House evaluates democracy-utilising principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'A truly democratic system includes a variety of other checks and balances that ensure freedom and resilience over time, such as a free press, independent courts, legal protections for minorities, a robust opposition and unfettered civil society groups' (Puddington & Roylance 2017, 3). The 2017 Freedom House Report classifies 195 nations and territories as free (45%), partly free (30%) or not free (25%). The US received a score of 85, while Sweden, Norway and



*Dr. Stacey Pricketts keynote presentation.
Photo: Astrid von Rosen*

Finland sit at the top of the scale, with perfect scores of 100. The Democratic Republic of Congo received a dismal score of 19, highlighting a contradiction between the notion of 'democracy' in the nation's name and the reality of its implementation.

What is celebrated as objective classification criteria glosses over a Euro-American emphasis on defining democratic principles. Dominant discourses emphasise a Western perspective of democracy that tends to reinforce a sense of superiority over non-Western socio-economic and political systems. David Slater (2003) assesses an ethno-centric universalism that disregards power relations and representations of the post-colonial or non-Western 'other'. Drawing on the work of political theorist Birku Parekh, 'Western liberal democracy has often imposed on other countries' systems of government that were not relevant to the skills and talents of non-Western countries...' (Slater 2003, 425). In the process, democratic interventions can undermine existing cultural values and institutional structures.

Threats to Democracy

The US elections offer a prime example of the complexities of democratic processes, and according to Freedom House, the nation has moved down on the democratic scale due to attacks on the press and restrictions to voting rights (Puddington & Roylance 2017). The electoral college system reveals another complexity. It was created to help balance out representative power between states of varying populations, starting with the first elections in 1789. On five occasions, the presidency was awarded to the person with the fewest popular votes. As the nation grew, American policies offered a new type of politics that moved away from what Crick calls 'reasoned debate... [that was] appropriate to a smaller political class, often bound by social acquaintance and common codes of behaviour' (Crick 2002, 77). A notion of community, of shared interests, is also seen in the imagined community Benedict Anderson (1991) articulates. Shifting demographics turn what would have been personal connections into imagined ones, with awareness of events in an area shared beyond the immediate locale with the advent of the printing press and national newspapers. Until the 19th century, the

term *democracy* held negative connotations among those in power, as it had the potential to empower the masses. Williams traces the shifting perceptions of how a majority group is perceived during a process of revolution: '*Masses* is the modern word for *many-headed multitude or mob*; low, ignorant, unstable.' An alternative meaning endows the majority with agency, as 'a description of the same people, but now seen as a potentially positive social force' (1983, 195). A mass can have derogatory connotations, or it can be perceived as 'the people' in an empowering way. In Marxist terminology, the masses comprise proletarians, on the edge of power as consciousness of their collective power before awakening. In response to the horrors of Nazi totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt distinguished between 'the people' and 'the mob' – the people want political representation while the mob embodies hatred of society, and its members function individually unless a charismatic leader unifies them (Crick 2002, 86).

At various times, parts of the population that feel as if they are outside the political discourse rise up in what is labelled *populism*, which is behind movements that resulted in the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution, prohibiting the sale of alcohol in 1918 (later reversed). Populism is defined as 'a style of politics and rhetoric that seeks to arouse a majority, or at least what their leaders passionately believe is a majority (like the «Moral Majority» today, who are plainly a minority), who are, have been or think themselves to be outside the polity, scorned and despised by an educated establishment' (Crick 2002, 77). Populist organisers borrow their presentation style from revivalist meetings and evangelical pulpits – or propaganda, as some would argue. Churches were important places for circulating political ideas in Britain, while in the US, populist conflicts were based on rural vs. city interests. Populism was tied to the land – who owned it or worked on it – and once was linked to voting rights. With the Industrial Revolution in Britain,

populist interests evolved so that economic prosperity was not linked to the land. People could earn money and improve their existence by working in factories, 'raising standards of living that had something to do with an effective democracy' (Crick 2002, 79).

Other symbolic examples can be seen in early modern dance and ideas around economics and social justice in the US. The notion of rugged individualism as a defining national characteristic is tied to the capitalist system and the democratic opportunity to become rich. Different types of democracies are linked to particular economic systems and associated power dynamics. In the upheaval of the world-wide depression from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, a left-wing dance movement gained momentum in New York City, challenging the established power structure and highlighting workers' increasingly desperate conditions. Organisations such as the Workers Dance League were populated by recreational groups such as the Red Dancers. They performed Edith Segal's dance, *The Belt Goes Red* (1928), which represented the workers taking ownership of the means of production. Young modern dancers argued that there was a responsibility to create socially conscious art for the people. The people envisioned were often manual labourers, exemplified by the proletariat celebrated in communist images and Marxist texts. Their ideal of a workers' dance was a democratic one – a dance of, for and by the people (Prickett 1989, 1991, 2013).

Although global powers such as Britain and the US may make grand claims about democratic processes, other nations have long and varied histories of individual freedom and social liberties associated with democracy as a concept. These are similarly manifested in the diverse approaches and themes at the NOFOD conference. Lena Hambergren gave voice to Swedish female dancers and writers in recovering the history of the nation's early 20th century movement practices. Hanna Järvinen's account of democratic bodies in Finland and postmodern dance

reflect on power relations, political history and art institutions in relation to definitions set out in canonic dance-history texts. Sigrid Övresås Svendal explored notions of democracy through access to historical archives in Norway that help counteract the marginal place of dance in the education system. The Swedish group ReAct creates site work that disrupts notions of public space and ownership by challenging viewers to respond to what is going on around them, rather than remaining disconnected bystanders who pass by with just a glance at the action. Guðrún Þórsdóttir and Jóhanna Vala Höskuldsdóttir documented how the Citizen Stage Project in Iceland helped Syrian refugees and other immigrants establish connections with local communities (abstracts are available at <http://nofodgot2017.akademia.is>).

Many ideas about democracy continue to resonate, spanning decades, despite changing contexts. Writing in 1966 as the free speech movement and student protests were gaining strength, cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (2017) asserted that what was at issue was 'political commitment'. He identified major shifts in the post-war period that impacted on democracy and its implementation. World War II brought substantial changes to social and economic structures, and there was a 'transformation of the great ideologies of the past and the conditions with which they flourished' (2017, 86). Hall argued that 'ideology had followed trade, and trade followed the flag'. but that in the 'New World, it could be said that political ideas have clustered around weapons systems' (2017, 86). Changes in the 'maturation' or decline of mass political parties corresponded with a rise of 'new issues' that might not have been recognised as political in the past. Hall mentions how race and youth became political, while today, one could add issues of gender, sexuality and power over women's bodies.

For Hall, the final shift is the 'ideology at the end of ideologies', 'that modern technology renders ideology obsolete' (2017, 87). Technology poses new challenges

that some argue move away from democratic principles. Jon Delogu (2016) highlights how among the different groups that engage with democracy as a process or institution, the largest group consists of ordinary people. Some are educated, informed about issues, vote and become involved in their communities, while others do not vote or may not be allowed to vote. 'Each of these groups has a different amount of power – imprecisely measurable and ever changing in the Internet age – when it comes to controlling the meanings of democracy, and therefore, its fate' (Delogu 2016, 168). Theoretically, ordinary people have the most power, but the reality is often quite different. The circulation and control of data moved away from the academic, elite institutions: 'In the Internet age, the humble fact gatherer and organizer has the potential to become much more powerful, as the information can be relayed more, and in more ways, than when those roles for shaping and transmitting were solely in the hands of professors, university presses and librarians' (Delogu 2016, 169). Despite population growth, there has been a decline in the number of people voting and the membership rolls of political parties, juxtaposed with an increasing income disparity between those who don't vote and those who do.

Democratic freedoms also can pose complexities in which the chance to vote, to express one's opinion, can have negative repercussions, which is seen in some established democracies that are deemed to be in decline partly through the use of referendums:

Referendums represent a radical reduction of democracy to its most skeletal form; majority rule. Too often, they are called in order to circumvent some obstacle thrown up by political or legal institutions – a failure by elected officials to reach consensus, for example, or a constitutional barrier that powerful actors find inconvenient. Whatever the intent, referendums are an end run around the structures and safeguards of democracy (Puddington and Roylance 2017, 3).



Former and present chairs and vice chairs of NOFOD
 Lena Hammergren, Egil Bakka, Inger Damsbolt, Ingrid
 Redbark-Wallander, Leena Roubiainen, Susanne Ravn,
 Camilla Damkjær, Astrid von Rosen, Hilde Rustad.
 Photo: Mikko Orpana

The Freedom House Report highlights how the Brexit vote (which did not involve a majority of the voting population) authorised the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union. A referendum in Colombia offers a positive example of how checks and balances can work. A proposed peace agreement with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Rebels of Colombia) rebels initially lost at the ballot box, but was passed after some changes were implemented (Puddington and Roylance 2017). In contrast, a referendum in Turkey, in April 2017, approved measures that increased President Erdogan's control, resulting in the extension of an undemocratic state of emergency. The *New York Times* described the new rules as 'indefinite rule by decree' that subverts parliamentary and constitutional court oversight. Thousands of people have been jailed and have lost their jobs, and many media outlets have been closed (Kingsley 2017).

Embodied Democracy

With this litany of problems, I want to turn around the possibilities and highlight how moral codes are deeply embedded within the concept of democracy. There is the potential for action, or agency, in which 'the people' can change the world. Returning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the second definition of *democracy* reads: 'Those people who possess no hereditary or special rank or privileged status, collectively; the common or ordinary people; (in later use) *spec.* the whole body of citizens of a country, regarded as the source of political power; the people'.

The power of the people is demonstrated in the extended essay *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation*, by Gene Sharpe (2010). Available for free on the Internet, Sharpe's guidebook offers advice on how to conduct peaceful resistance. Written in 1993 and initially published in Bangkok, it has inspired many protesters in Burma, the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring by explaining how political defiance offers chances to stand up to dictatorial rule in ways that guns can't.

He details how to organise against and challenge dictators who have superior military strength by identifying their weaknesses while avoiding armed conflicts. The appendix lists 198 methods for non-violent action, ranging from formal statements of opposition, processions, marches and honouring the dead, to non-cooperation through boycotts, walk-outs, strikes, and social, political and economic interventions (Sharpe 2010). International studies scholar Erica Chenoweth's research into non-violent protests reminded readers of how the American armed revolution that began in 1776 was preceded by a series of 'economic boycotts, demonstrations, tax revolts, the building of alternative-governance institutions and economic systems and, finally, the Declaration of Independence' (Chenoweth 2014, 352). Statistical analysis supports the conclusion that civil-resistance campaigns since 1946 have been more successful in achieving 'democratisation than countries experiencing armed struggle' (Chenoweth 2014, 354). It is through bodily movement that campaigns for democracy are initiated.

Some significant articles have analysed the power of the body in protests to maintain discipline in civil-disobedience actions instead of using an unrestrained mob. The concept of 'passive resistance', non-violent protest, or civil disobedience has shaped multiple struggles, but came to prominence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, starting with protests in South Africa and gaining strength in India in the drive toward India's independence from the British, which was achieved in 1947. As Warren Cohen (2009, 26-28) summarised, in 1930 Gandhi led a 250-mile/400-kilometre walk from Amhedabad to the Arabian Sea to protest a British tax on salt. The 24-day walk to the coastal village of Dandi highlighted how the British had made the recovery of salt an illegal activity. The Dandi Salt Marchers challenged taxes on a commodity that is vital to the survival of people and animals, while asserting the rights of Indians to

extract their own salt without paying taxes or fees. The protest succeeded, as the taxes were nullified.

Actions such as the Salt March inspired Martin Luther King Jr., who helped lead the American civil rights movement as it gained strength in the 1960s (Nojeim 2005). Earlier individual acts of non-violent resistance resonated far beyond the local communities in which they occurred. Women such as Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks were arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 for refusing to move to the back of the bus and give up their seats to white people. A physical action – taking a stand by remaining seated – transformed into a moral imperative, prompting a wider bus boycott that had severe financial repercussions. Courts already had ruled against segregation, but the separation of races remained public policy in Southern states such as Alabama. Group marches from Selma to Montgomery were met with violence by state police until federal troops intervened to ensure marchers' safety. News media broadcast footage of violent responses to the peaceful marchers nationwide, helping to spur passage of the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act had legislated equal rights, further action was required to abolish literacy tests and other prohibitive procedures that had suppressed minority participation at the polls, with some voting restrictions still being fought today.

Gestures of Defiance

Many instances of civil disobedience involve acts of stillness, embodying a power that Randy Martin reflected on:

Consider the duality between motion and stillness. Holding stillness is a point of power. This is implicit in the relationship between being obliged to move and holding the capacity to move...the counter-intuitive part of dance is stillness. The political can be posed around the refusal to be moved by people (Martin in Kowal, Siegmund and Martin 2017, 7).

Susan Leigh Foster (2003), Martin (2006) and André Lepecki (2013) have analysed the agency of the body in protest actions. Foster's (2003) account of the Greensboro lunch-counter sit-ins articulates the notion of choreographing protest. In 1960, four young African-American college students challenged segregation policies at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Decisions about what to wear and how to act centred on how they presented themselves and how their images would be read by the world outside. They simply sat on the stools while the counter was open, waiting to be served. Their stillness required great discipline as their opponents became increasingly aggressive and violent. Their protest led to others using the same method.

Like the marches, the lone individual who held up a procession of tanks around Tiananmen Square in 1989 became a strong symbol. Images of 'Tank Man' resonated around the world, although the protesters' immediate demands for democratic policies were suppressed. Here, one man's stillness confronted the might of the military. Other iconic gestures of defiance include the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, when two African-American runners each held one black-gloved fist aloft during their medal-award ceremony. The clenched fist symbolised the struggle for racial equality and was associated with the radical Black Panthers group. Although there were some black activists in the group who advocated for violent protests, the Black Panthers also sponsored social programmes such as the Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren program, which helped ease poverty in Oakland, California, neighbourhoods in the late 1960s (Hilliard, 2008). While it was met with negative reactions at the time, U.S. Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos' protest was immortalised when a statue of them was erected in San Jose, California.

A 'hands up' gesture became a popular protest message after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Anusha Kedhar (2014a, 2014b)

offers multiple readings of the action, noting that it can be interpreted through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. It also can be read as 'a failed sign (not seen, ignored, did not generate the response hoped for – [which is] submission).' As a 'gesture of innocence', it offers bodily proof that the person is not holding a weapon. As a choreographic tactic, it can be perceived as performing non-cooperation. And in the choreopolitics of freedom, the hands-up gesture provides the ability to use movement as a political act. Kedhar's analysis resonates in the choreography of Kyle Abraham, whose work *Pavement* premiered in 2012. Abraham and his dancers were creating the piece when the young black teen Trayvon Martin was shot in Florida, his killer acquitted on a self-defence claim. For Abraham and many other black males, the hands-up gesture became automatic, an action undertaken when one is constantly challenged by authorities. In *Pavement*, gestures of friendship and encoded greetings among members of a local community shift suddenly into gestures of submission. As I analyse elsewhere (Prickett 2016), the repeated action of moving hands behind one's back into a simulated handcuffed position was first initiated by Abraham who was performing in *Pavement*, an action taken up by others in the group. The other dancers eventually put themselves into a passive pose, transitioning from being controlled externally to an action that is part of their habitus.

Other photos of race-related protest actions have been published, either gestures or standing one's ground at Black Lives Matter protest marches. A photo was widely circulated of nurse Iesha Evans standing alone as two police officers wearing full body armour approached her. *BBC News* online printed a Facebook post that offered a rich analysis of Evans' powerful corporeality:

[Jami West wrote] Look at her posture. She is balanced, powerful, upright and well-grounded

from the crown of her head to the heels of her feet. She is only protected by the force of her own personal power. By contrast, the officers have the transitory, temporary protection of their equipment that will be removed at the end of their shift. They are rocked back on their heels, knocked off balance and appear about to fall over backwards just from the power of her (cited in Anon, 'Baton Rouge Killing', 2016).

There is a powerful juxtaposition between a vision of a calm, unarmed young woman wearing a long sun-dress that is blowing in the wind, and the highly militarised and armed police who approach her.

Tenets of democratic freedom are embodied by Baktash Noori, a young Muslim man who stood blindfolded on a Manchester city street in the days after the May 22, 2017, terrorist bombing at a music concert. Without being able to see who was approaching him, he stood with open arms next to a sign that reads: 'I am Muslim & I trust you. Do you trust me enough for a hug?' (Revesz 2017). As documented in the YouTube video *Life of Bako*, people are filmed walking past him on the city street, some slowing down to read his sign and reflect on his stillness. Eventually, one man turns and initiates a gesture of trust, reaching out and hugging the blindfolded Noori. More and more people pause and step up to hug him, often with their bodies in full contact, then they move away, smiling broadly. A queue of people grows as they wait their turn to participate in Noori's act of openness and trust in hugs that range from brief to hearty and long, helping to turn around negativity and shatter stereotypes in the process.

Democracy is often associated with contact improvisation, as documented in Sally Banes' (1983) book *Democracy's Body* and Cynthia Novack's (1990) book *Sharing the American Dance*. The form evolved through democratic creative processes, challenging hierarchies of traditional choreographic practices. Steve Paxton, co-founder of the style, spoke

of being influenced by Merce Cunningham's assertion that any movement could be dance and that any *body* could be viewed in some way as an 'aesthetic conveyor' (Novack 1990, 53). From these early principles, the Judson Church workshops drew in people who studied choreography with Robert Dunn. They adapted improvisational processes, in part due to practical necessity because of the difficulty in arranging rehearsals when everyone was available. Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969) began to ask: 'Where do social hierarchical roles originate and how can they be changed; how to make artistic decisions; how not to depend on anyone unless it is mutually agreed; what mutuality means, and how to detect it' (Paxton 1972, 129). The Grand Union performance group, which evolved out of workshops, was labelled an 'anarchistic democratic theatre collective' (Paxton 1972, 128). The 'anarchistic' part refers to the group's opposition to structure in its creations (Novack 1990, 59-60), and the 'democratic' part refers to how it advocates equality.

Danielle Goldman's (2010) research into improvisational practices explores the relationship between contact improvisation and protest. In 1961, the Freedom Riders were a group of activists challenging segregation on busses, who were trained in non-violent direct action. Goldman argues that the early protesters' reactions involved improvisation, paying close attention to their bodies, expanding the emphasis on contact improvisation as democratic (2010, 96-97). One reaction was to fall, using 'slack musculature and stillness' – not as 'motionless', implying passivity (2010, 98), but demonstrating how 'wilful mobility can exist within stillness' (2010, 100-101). A racial imbalance exists, however, as different responses are generated if the person is black or white. Goldman engages with the imbalances of power that Ramsay Burt (2006) notes in his account of the Judson Dance Theatre.

Writing in 2003, Ann Cooper Albright (2013) further reflected on democratic principles and a

sense of inclusivity within contact improvisation that resonates in other dance practices such as community dance. Albright recognises that the democratic aesthetic is full of tension at times because of 'two kinds of dancing: one that emphasises virtuosic dancing and one that emphasises movement communication that is accessible to anybody' (Albright 2013, 262). These examples demonstrate how one can think of democracy in relation to diverse definitions of politics and consider moral issues raised by democratic processes. They also demonstrate empowered body movement across a range of situations and how democracy is shaped by the people.

Conclusion

The word *democracy* is constantly evoked in the press, particularly in terms of unstable socio-political situations confronting people in 2017. It has been used to initiate regime change and humanitarian rescue missions, while the potential for liberty and freedom continues to inspire hope. As democracy is threatened across the globe, historical and contemporary examples demonstrate agency, power and the body in action. From standing one's ground to ceding power to moving in cooperative action, the values of democracy are embodied in multiple ways.

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