

Democratising Moves: Power, Agency and the Body

Stacey Prickett

Abstract

Recently, the word 'democracy' has 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. The roots of today's political democracies are often located in the 18th century revolutions of the USA and France and continue to reinforce Euro-American values and ideas of nation. The transfer of power remains a defining principle, shifting control from an elite to a multitude. How do the principles that inspired democratic revolutions relate to the ballot box versions of democracy today? The 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 to political agency.

Biography

Dr Stacey Prickett is a Reader in Dance Studies at the University of Roehampton. Her primary research uses a sociological lens to focus on identity issues, dance and politics, examining contemporary and historical practices in the USA, Britain and South Asian dance. She authored the book *Embodied Politics: Dance, Protest and Identities* (2013) and has written chapters in *Dance and Politics* (2011), *Dance in the City* (1997), and entries in *Fifty Contemporary Choreographers* (1999 and 2011). Her articles have appeared in publications such as *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance Research*, *Dance Chronicle* and *South Asia Research*.

Introduction

The following article is developed from my keynote lecture at the NOFOD Dance and Democracy Conference.¹ My conceptualisations of the term democracy are shaped in part by experiences in two nations – the USA and Britain – and recent periods of political instability that can be traced back to an iconic freedom, the ballot box. Initial

ideas for my lecture included celebrating the election of the first female president as validation of the democratic system in the USA. These plans changed on November 9, 2016, the morning after Hilary Clinton lost the electoral vote despite gaining the most popular votes. Since then, headlines have warned of the demise of democracy in the USA as well as Britain when a snap election deprived the Tory government of its majority in the British Parliament although it remains in power as I write. Both situations complicate definitions of democracy that emphasise the power of the ballot box and values shaped by American 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 interrogated as examples of group agency, individual gestures of defiance, and choreographic examples that convey messages of social injustice.

Defining Democracy

Surveys of 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 emerged across the centuries in various moves towards representative rule. In Britain, for example, the Magna Carta in 1215 was one step on a long process of chipping away at authoritarian rule, helping to set into place a Parliament that has existed in one form or the other since the 13th century.

A formal definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary* prioritises 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, organization, 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 the inauguration of the 45th president of the USA, the *Washington Post* added a subtitle to its online masthead. Underneath its main title, a new motto reads 'Democracy Dies in Darkness'. It is the first time in the 140-year history of the newspaper that a subtitle has been used. Although assumptions were made about whether the subtitle was a response to the attacks on the press by the new American president, plans to adopt the phrase were in progress at least a year before its appearance (Fahri, 2017). Pleas to defend democracy appear daily in the press, seen in stoic responses to terrorist attacks in 2017 which reassured the world that democracy would win over those who would turn a vehicle into a machine of terror. The word democracy has also been evoked to justify acts of death and destruction, regime change and oppression as well as to reinforce autocratic rule, as I explore later. But it has also served to inspire and motivate.

Faced with such ambiguities, I want to question how democracy is 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?

Democratic Principles

I return to the official definition below, but the most widely recognised associations today reference the struggle for democracy undertaken in the 1776 American and the 1789 French revolutions. Raymond Williams (1983) identifies 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 where 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 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, where 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 organizations 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 feature in iconography of 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 USA, has held a torch aloft to light a way to freedom since 1886. In 1903 Emma Lazarous's poem was added to the base of the statue, reinforcing the link between 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 ten-metre high Goddess of Democracy statue created out of *papier maché* in the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in 1989. The image of 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 which included 'open argument', encompassing freedom of expression and 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 which combine with belief in the possibility of change, of individual and collective agency. The second part of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition sets out 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, organization, etc.' (*OED Online* 2017).

Claims of universal democratic concepts underpin projects which 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 one hundred ninety-five nations and territories as free (45%), partly free (30%) or not free (25%). The USA received a score of 85, while Sweden, Norway and Finland sit at the top of the scale with full marks of 100. The Democratic Republic of Congo was assessed at a dismal 19 points, 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 in 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, there has been a downward trend in its place on the democratic scale due to attacks upon the press and restrictions to voting rights (Puddington & Roylanc, 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 mantle of President 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' (1986, 195). A mass can have derogatory connotations or can be perceived as 'the people' in an empowering way. In Marxist terminology, the masses were comprised of proletarians, on the edge of power as consciousness of their collective power needed awakening. In response to the horrors of Nazi totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt distinguishes 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 feel outside the political discourse and rise up in what is labelled as populism, which is behind movements that resulted in the 18th Amendment to the US Constitution prohibiting the sale of alcohol in 1918. 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 “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 USA, the populist conflicts were based on rural versus city interests. Populism was tied to the land – who owned it or worked on it -- and used to be linked to voting rights. With the Industrial Revolution in Britain, populist interests evolved where economic prosperity was not linked to the land, people could earn money and improve their existence by working in factories with industry, ‘raising standards of living that had something to do with an effective democracy’ (Crick 2002, 79).

Other symbolic examples can be seen in the early modern dance and ideas around economics and social justice in the USA. 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 relations of power. In the upheaval of the world-wide depression of the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, a left-wing dance movement gained momentum in New York, challenging the established power balance and highlighting increasingly desperate conditions of workers. Organisations such as the Workers Dance League were populated by recreational groups like 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 USA 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 manifest in the diverse approaches and themes at the NOFOD conference. Lena Hamnergren gave voice to Swedish female dancers and writers in recovering the history of their 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 Övreås Svendal explored notions of democracy through access to historical archives in Norway and which helps 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 a disconnected person who passes by with just a glance at the action. Guðrún Þórsdóttir and Jóhanna Vala Höskuldsdóttir documented how The Citizen Stage Project in Iceland helped refugees from Syria and other immigrants to establish connections with local communities (abstracts are available at <http://nofodgot2017.akademia.is>).

Many ideas about democracy continue to resonate across 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 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' which 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 which 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 is comprised of ordinary people. Some people are educated, informed about issues, vote and become involved in their communities, while others do not vote, or may not be allowed to. '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 that 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, membership of political parties, and an increasing income disparity between those who don't vote and those who do.

Democratic freedoms can also pose complexities where 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 on the decline in part 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).

The Freedom House Report highlights how the Brexit vote (which was not a majority of the voting population) authorised the withdrawal of Britain from the European Union. A referendum in Columbia offers a positive example of how checks and balances can work. A proposed peace agreement with the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Rebels of Columbia) rebels initially lost, but passed after some changes were

implemented (Puddington and Roylance 2017). In contrast, a referendum in Turkey on April 15, 2017 approved measures that increased President Erdogan's control, resulting in the extension of a state of emergency that is undemocratic. *The New York Times* described the new rules as 'indefinite rule by decree' which subverts parliamentary and constitutional court oversight. Thousands of people have been jailed, lost their jobs and many media outlets have been closed (Kinglsey 2017).

Embodied Democracy:

With this litany of problems, I want to turn around the possibilities and highlight how moral codes are deeply embedded with the concept of democracy. There is potential for action, or agency, where '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 people in Burma, the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring protests, by setting out how political defiance offers chances of standing up to dictatorial rule that guns do not have. He talks through how to organise and challenge dictators who have superior strength, identify their weaknesses and significantly to avoid armed struggle. The appendix lists 198 methods for nonviolent action, ranging from formal statements of opposition, processions, marches, honouring the dead, to non-cooperation through boycotts, walk-outs, strikes, 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 series of 'economic boycotts, demonstrations, tax refusals, 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 'democratization than countries experiencing armed struggle' (Chenoweth, 2014, 354). It is through bodily action that campaigns for democracy are enacted.

Some significant articles have analysed the power of the body in protest, people trained in how to maintain discipline in civil disobedience actions, in contrast to the idea of an unrestrained mob. The concept of 'passive resistance', non-violent protest, or civil disobedience has shaped multiple struggles but came to greater awareness under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, starting with protests in South Africa and gaining strength in India in the drive to independence from the British which was achieved in 1947. As Warren Cohen (2009, 26-28) summarises, in 1930 Gandhi led a 250 mile/400 kilometre walk from Amhedabad to the Arabian Sea to protest 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 and the protest succeeded in reversing the taxes.

Actions such as the Salt March inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., who helped the American civil rights movement gain 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 -- was turned into a moral imperative, prompting a wider bus boycott that had severe financial repercussions. Courts had already legislated against segregation, however, separation of races remained 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 the safety of the marchers. Intensive media coverage broadcast footage of violent responses to the peaceful marchers which helped 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, restrictions which continue to be opposed 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 counterintuitive 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 all analysed the agency of the body in protest actions. Foster's (2003) account of the Greensboro Lunch Counter sit-in articulates the notion of choreographing protest. In 1960 four young African American college students challenged segregation policies at the 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.

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 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 where two African American runners each held one black-gloved hand 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 who advocated for violent struggle, the Black Panthers also sponsored social programmes such as the Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren which helped ease conditions of poverty in the local Oakland, California neighbourhoods (Hilliard, 2008). While met with negative reactions at the time, a statue commemorating protests by Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos was erected in the city of San Jose, California.

A 'hands up' gesture became widely seen in response to 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 can also 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 as a choreopolitics of freedom, the hands up action offers the ability to move 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 teenager Trayvon Martin was shot in Florida, his killer acquitted on a self-defense claim. For Abraham and many other black males, the hands up gesture turns automatic, an action undertaken when 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 another person in the dance. The dancers began to place themselves into a passive pose, transitioning from being controlled externally to the action evolving into part of their habitus.

Other photographs have circulated of race-related protest actions, either gestures or standing one's ground at Black Lives Matter protest marches. A photograph was widely circulated of nurse Ilesha Evans standing alone as two police wearing full body protection approached her. The *BBC News* online printed a Facebook post that offered a rich analysis of Evans' 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 vision of the calm, unarmed young woman, wearing a long sundress 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 a 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 him, often their bodies are in full contact and they step 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) *Sharing the American Dance*. The form evolved along democratic creative processes, challenging hierarchies of traditional choreographic practices. Co-founder of the style, Steve Paxton 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 that evolved out of the workshops was labelled an 'anarchistic democratic theatre collective' (Paxton 1972, 128). It was anarchistic because of the opposition

to structure in their creations (Novack 1990, 59-60) and democratic in terms of advocating 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, trained in non-violent direct action. Goldman argues that the early protesters' reactions involved improvisations, paying close attention to their bodies that expands an emphasis on contact improvisation as democratic (2010, 96-97). One reaction was to fall, -- using 'slack musculature and stillness', not as 'motionless' inferring 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 Theater.

Writing in 2003, Ann Cooper Albright (2013) further reflected on democratic principles and sense of inclusivity within contact improvisation that resonates in other dance practices such as community dance. Albright recognises that the democratic aesthetic is under tension at times, because of 'two kinds of dancing: one that emphasizes virtuosic dancing and one that emphasizes 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 considering unstable socio-political situations confronting people in 2017. It has been used to initiate regime change, humanitarian rescue missions, while the potential for liberty and freedom continue to inspire hope. As democracy is perceived as under threat 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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ⁱ I would like to thank Astrid Von Rosen and the Board of Directors of NOFOD for the invitation to present a keynote address at the Dance and Democracy conference at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, June 2017.