Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education
June 2021. Vol 20 (2): 1–11. doi:10.22176/act20.2.1

Democracy and Discursive Agency: Taking a Stand

Deborah Bradley, Co-Editor

In this article, I explore the concept of democracy as unstable and exclusionary. Drawing upon both the historical emergence of the concept and an overview of recent events in the US alongside concerns for the decline of democracy globally, I question the stability of the concept and the lack of definition within educational application. These concerns provide the background for the four articles in this issue of ACT, which interrogate various assumptions related to democratic practices in music education.

Keywords: *democracy, democratic participation, justice, social justice, perlocutionary effects*

In *Excitable Speech,* Judith Butler (1997) explored issues of performativity related to injurious speech acts, arguing that because human beings "require language in order to be" (2–3), we are vulnerable to it. This vulnerability to language comes as the consequence "of our being constituted within its terms" (3). Throughout the book, she interrogates vulnerabilities to "free speech," commonly assumed to be a characteristic of democratic governments. Near the end of the book, she reflects upon the performative power of those who claim entitlement to terms such as *justice* and *democracy*, particularly since these concepts have been articulated historically to *exclude* individuals and groups who may attempt to voice their claims to that same entitlement (158): racially and ethnically disenfranchised groups, LGBTQIA+[1] persons, women, religious groups, and others, including those who may either self-identify or be categorized as poor and working class.[2]

Butler's reflection serves as the point of departure for my musings in this editorial introduction. The claims to entitlement to justice and democracy from disenfranchised groups may be heard by some as a clamoring chorus of vocality that interrupts the calm and presumed stability of those who had previously believed

their entitlement (and hence understanding of democracy) was complete, secure, and beyond question: they feel threatened. These insistent clamors bring into relief the difficulty of defining terms like justice and democracy, as well as humanity's collective vulnerability to definitions operationalized by those who do the defining or, as Butler might say, the articulating. In this issue of ACT, four authors articulate new perspectives about how democracy is conceived and enacted within music education, questioning whether democracy can truly fulfil the promise it appears to hold and whether so-called democratic forms of music education can sustain that promise.

Democracy as Concept

The concept of democracy has been much on my mind over these past five years, especially since March 2020 when COVID-19 prompted stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions across North America and elsewhere. I watched events in the United States (my original homeland) unfold from the perceived greater "security" of my home in Canada. These events included—to name just two—government misinformation and mishandling of the pandemic response and the 2020 US election, whose outcome remains contested by many Republicans largely because of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Spurred by Trump's claims that the election had been "stolen," his supporters refused to accept that Biden had won. After speeches from Trump and others at a rally on January 6, 2021, whose intent was to incite the crowd, hundreds of the supporters stormed the US Capitol to disrupt Congress's certification of the Electoral College votes. As a result of the insurrection, five people died.

How distance has influenced my perspective, I cannot know, especially since my time in the United States periodically during these five years has had an undeniable impact on a frame of reference about US democracy formed many years ago in public school. As I recall, we were uncritically taught that the US had developed the ultimate form of democratic government while criticisms simultaneously flowed about other forms, most notably communism; however, even constitutional democracies such as Great Britain's were presented as inferior to US democracy. It was only after I moved to Canada in my late 20s and experienced life under Canada's parliamentary democracy that I began to see the fallacies of my public-school indoctrination and to understand that other forms of democracy have merit. However, I make no claims that Canada has "gotten it right." The amount of time it took

to acknowledge the need for a national investigation of violence against Indigenous women and girls, including the disappearance and murders of over 1200 Indigenous women and girls (see https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/), provides but one example among many indicating that Canada, too, applies concepts of democracy and justice differentially. However, it seems clear that no matter one's perspective on democracy as a system of government, the Trump administration made significant (terrifying) strides articulating who was entitled to justice in the US and to whom "democracy" applied. The Biden administration's recent attempts to re-articulate the concepts of justice and democracy are being met with considerable resistance; a majority of Republican party members continue to uphold the myth of the stolen election as they seek to change voting eligibility legislation under the rationale of "election security" (Wines 2021). On May 12, 2021, Republicans in Congress voted to oust Rep. Liz Cheney (daughter of former Vice-President Dick Cheney) from her leadership role because Cheney has not only accepted the results of the election but also spoken out against Trumpism (Cheney 2021).

The pressure on US democracy brought to life by Trumpism "has some parallel echoes in other parts of the world (e.g., Brexit, growing potency of far- right parties in other European countries), there are worrisome signs of erosion in the ties needed to keep a diverse democratic society healthy and whole" (Bobo 2018, 385). Indeed, this erosion of democracy exists far beyond the UK and Europe; one example among many is India's 2020 crackdown on the right to protest and the legal treatment of protesters. According to the report sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy, the Merrill Family Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment, a discernible decline in democracy has become a global phenomenon, broad enough to be "felt by citizens of long-standing democracies. Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced deterioration last year. The ongoing decline has given rise to claims of democracy's inherent inferiority" (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021, 1).

Observing the flip-flop of governmental policies in the United States that has occurred since Barack Obama's presidency, Donald Trump's presidency, and now Joe Biden's has led me to appreciate that the concept itself, dependent upon the definitions articulated by those in power, can never be stable. The current struggle over voting rights in the United States, emerging after a presidential election in which more people voted than ever had previously, reiterates the vulnerability of targeted groups to the perlocutionary[3] effects of laws governing voting. The

struggle prompted both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to run full, two-page spreads on April 14, 2021, under the banner "We Stand for Democracy."[4] In this iteration, democracy is conceptualized primarily as the right to vote. The two-page spread portrays the names of hundreds of companies and corporate leaders who voiced their opposition to the new voting rights law in the state of Georgia (which serves little purpose other than to limit the opportunities for certain citizens to vote) and proposed similar laws in many states under Republican leadership across the US (Corasaniti and Epstein 2021). As Gould (2007) has argued, democracy as concept often is viewed as participation but reduced to voting rights, asserting instead that "democracy … is not so much about voting, as it is about politics" (236). In accord with this statement, I posit that limiting perspectives on democracy solely to a focus on participation impedes our understanding of democracy constituted by other aspects such as freedom and justice; voting rights are but one component of the vaguely defined, much broader concept. The lack of a consensus definition suggests that democracy is inherently unstable. Niknafs (in press) argues that the concept of democracy is imperiled; although many authors have critiqued the concept, the vast body of scholarship[5] in music education seems preoccupied with the creation of democratic pedagogies, spaces, and citizens as an unequivocal good, without sufficient attention to the potential harm inflicted to those vulnerable to its linguistic machinations, thus rendering the very concept of democratic education ineffective. She reminds readers that at its heart, democracy as concept always-already invokes the question: "democracy at the expense of which—or whose—ideologies, collectives, humanities, or existence?" (4). At whose expense, indeed?

In application, democracy relies on notions of exclusion. The earliest, "officially recognized" governmental form of democracy in ancient Athens was exclusionary with respect to who could participate—what made Greek democracy seem "new" was the notion that "regular citizens" *could* participate in decision-making under *some* conditions—but Athenian democracy excluded women, enslaved persons, and resident non-Greeks (Gould 2007, 230). I use "officially recognized" in scare quotes because the possibility exists that Indigenous societies also may have utilized forms of governance that one might today call democracies, but western historians' penchant for locating Greece as the locus of civilization obscures this possibility. We know, for example, that Indigenous forms of egalitarian democracy were in place when colonizers arrived in North America in

the fifteenth century; Benjamin Franklin drew upon examples from the Iroquois League and other Indigenous societies to draft the first version of the US Articles of Confederation (Gould 2007, 230; Johansen 1990) in July 1775, although that draft never received formal consideration. Unclear in historical accounts, however, is for how long Indigenous groups may have been self-governing with egalitarian principles prior to European contact.

> While the Iroquois and other Native American societies did not provide *the* model for the Constitution by and of themselves, American Indian societies did provide our founders with examples of societies that were substantially freer than Europe's of that time. (Johansen 1990, 288, italics in original)

Although it is beyond the scope of this short essay to explore core ideas of democracy within Indigenous societies (in North America and beyond; for example, the Celts) (see Johansen 1990), perhaps the important take-away is that democracy is not an "invention" of the ancient Greeks, the British Magna Carta, or the United States Constitution; as a concept, it has operated in different configurations across history and around the world. While dictionary definitions of democracy describe it as a system of government whose officials, as representatives of the people, are elected by those eligible to vote, voting eligibility laws vary widely from one system to another.

As such, democracy as an idea for self-governance is imbued in practice with notions of whose voice may be heard on issues related to how that governance operates. Even so, many of us currently living in so-called democratic societies probably do not want to see major changes to the general concept but may desire a greater sense of urgency to include voices presently marginalized within those societies—to expand rather than contract participation. As Niknafs (in press) has suggested, some of us may feel "protected and comfortable" living in democratic societies; at the same time, we recognize that these feelings of protection and comfort are not experienced by all those in our midst or elsewhere in the world. As discussed earlier, a great many politicians around the world seem invested in shrinking democratic participation through restrictive voting laws, changes to free speech legislation, and crackdowns on critics (see Repucci and Slipowitz 2021 for an overview of countries where democracy is in decline or under threat). The sense of protection and comfort to protest government action or inaction guaranteed in the US, Canada (see Malek 2020), and other democratic nations is under siege. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) argues that Florida's new "Combating Public Disorder" bill criminalizes peaceful protests and "was

purposefully designed to embolden the disparate police treatment we have seen over and over again directed towards Black and brown people who are exercising their constitutional right to protest" (Levenson 2021, para. 7). Under this legislation, a gathering of as few as three people may constitute a "riot" if "disorderly conduct" results, yet disorderly conduct is not defined within the legislation, thus leaving it open to interpretation by law enforcement officials. The perlocutionary effects of this legislation are yet to be experienced.

Subject to the caprices of the party in power, democracy's effects on human experience continuously morph: Giorgio Agamben (2005) argues that a state of exception comprises the content of democracy, constituted by "a no man's land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life" (Agamben 2005, 1). Agamben's concern resonates with Butler's on perlocutionary effects; he posits that the transformation of provisional and exceptional measures (for example, the US Patriot Act in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001) as a technique of government has altered the structure and meaning of constitutional forms. The state of exception, then, "appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism" (3). Thus, one can understand what may have prompted Gould's (2007) declaration that "democracy has come to mean almost anything and everything, depending on one's priorities, values, and interpretation" (230). A concept that in practice appears to mean almost anything and everything and is dependent upon the priorities and values of those in power, is inherently unstable.

Democracy in Music Education

Despite the fluidity of operationalized concepts of democracy—which the educational disciplines in general have not addressed—music educators devote much effort toward enacting "democratic education" in music classrooms, often as the means to achieve another vague concept for pedagogy, *social justice* (see Bowman 2007). DeLorenzo (2016) confirms that the two terms appear interchangeable in some corners of music education and attempts to separate them: "social justice distinguishes itself as the endeavor to take action for the purpose of building a more just democracy" (DeLorenzo 2016, 5). Schools at all levels, including higher education, can be instrumental in helping students become aware of both the values and flaws of democracy as enacted (including the stratification of society that creates disadvantage to some groups), yet in this acknowledgement,

DeLorenzo and other authors in *Giving Voice to Democracy in Music Education: Diversity and Social Justice* (2016) rely upon the ideal of "informed citizenship" as one of the goals of democratic music education: "what and how we teach has a great deal to do with developing *citizens* who advocate for social justice" (5, italics added). Antiracist scholars argue that "no group has an automatic right to privilege, supremacy, and a disproportionate share of the valued goods and services of society" (Dei and Calliste 2000, 29); the statement suggests that a just and democratic society need not depend upon citizenship as a criterion for participation. As I have argued elsewhere (Bradley 2018), the fixation on citizenship may indeed do discursive violence to vulnerable members of a society (see also Brandzel 2016).

Much of the discourse about democratic music education, particularly that tied to broad issues of social justice,[6] take foundational concepts from John Dewey's (2004/1916) *Democracy and Education*. Niknafs (in press) wonders if the scholarship on democracy and music education may at times represent forms of argument "safe from any threat of the very real crises that exist just around the corner" (2); much of this scholarship interrogates the reality of inequality in education only up to a point.

Dewey argued that learning takes place not only in schools, but in the environment within which the learner lives and with which they interact. Separating educational conditions from the messy, contradictory, and complex "out-of-school environment" substitutes a

> pseudo-intellectual spirit for a social spirit.... It has yet to be proved that learning occurs most adequately when it is made a separate conscious business ... as a business of this sort tends to preclude the social sense which comes from sharing in an activity of common concern and value. (Dewey 2004/1916, 29)

The desire for a more complete social sense developed in and through music education—including an understanding of the effects of neoliberal capitalism on our concepts of democracy—runs throughout Paul Woodford's (2005) *Democracy and Music Education: Liberalism, Ethics, and the Politics of Practice,* in which Woodford similarly looked to Dewey for inspiration. The book provided the impetus for several essay reviews published in a previous issue of ACT (2008, Volume 7, Issue 1: http://act.maydaygroup.org/volume-7-issue-1/). I encourage readers to review those essays, which remain timely for today's concerns about democratic education in and through music. As Niknafs (in press) asserts, "a music education based solely on the ideals of democratic participation and engagement risks becoming half of what it purports to do and be" (4). When education functions as

a separate entity, dislocated from the everyday lives of students, participation and engagement may be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. If, as Dewey (2004/1916) posited, democracy is "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (83), then a democratic education should intentionally make room for elements of students' lives beyond the school in order to widen "the area of shared concerns" (83).

Closing Thoughts and This Issue of ACT

The authors in this issue of *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* similarly seek to move beyond the superficial notions of participation that plague much of music education's current thinking—to push the dialogue related to democratic education into new territory. Dewey's particular vision for inclusion of concerns beyond the classroom provides a further backdrop to the four essays. As he argued,

> the isolation of a gang or clique brings its antisocial spirit into relief. But this same spirit is found wherever one group has interests "of its own" which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got, instead of reorganization and progress through wider relationships. It marks ... schools when separated from the interest of home and community. (Dewey 2004/1916, 81–2)

Isolation of classroom learning from the world beyond has long been a concern for progressive educators and for those advocating for social justice in education. Indeed, "matters of social justice and democracy have moral implications that go beyond the school and the classroom" (DeLorenzo 2016, 6). This frame of reference opens the door to some of the issues explored in the four articles found in the current issue of ACT, including Lauri Väkevä's discussion of epistocracy and music education philosophy as it relates to Finnish extra-curricular music education, and Cathy Benedict's argument that today's "religion-blind policies" in North American education represent a failure of democratic education. Following Benedict's article, Patrick Schmidt draws upon Chantel Mouffe to explore both the paradoxes and possibilities inherent in the concept of vocality in democracy; his argument moves far beyond facile notions of participation to query how current trends to indigenize curricula complicate the "multiple ways in which managerial democratic practices emerge and take hold" in educational policies. Panos Kanellopoulis' essay forms the final argument of the issue, in which he presents a political-philosophical perspective drawing from Jacques Rancière's writings, including

Hatred of Democracy (2006), and the work of Giorgio Agamben on "studious play" to re-imagine the "difficult encounter between democracy and music education."

The essays in this issue of ACT emerged from a panel presented by the four authors in 2019 at the *International Symposium for the Philosophy of Music Education*. The original short presentations have been expanded considerably to explore the issues raised in that panel and the subsequent discussion. Readers concerned with democracy and music education scholarship will, I believe, find these essays interesting and perhaps provocative. In acknowledging the essays' potential for provocation, I return to Butler's (1997) thoughts on the performativity of speech acts and discursive agency. The possibility for the speech act to "take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged, is precisely the political promise of the performative … one that offers an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking" (161). The four essays in this issue of ACT represent such deconstructive thinking and serve as acts of discursive agency; their arguments encourage readers to look beyond commonplace beliefs about democratic education, to seek out its non-ordinary meanings, to rethink both the paradoxes and possibilities of democratic education, and to take a stand.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 2005. *State of exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bobo, Lawrence D. 2018. Democracy under siege. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 14 (2): 381–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X18000005X.

Bowman, Wayne. 2007. Who's asking? (Who's answering?) Theorizing social justice in music education. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 6 (4): 1–20.

Bradley, Deborah. 2018. Artistic citizenship: Escaping the violence of the normative (?). *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 17 (2): 71–91. https://doi.org/10.22176/act17.2.71

Brandzel, Amy L. 2016. *Against citizenship: The violence of the normative*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press,

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. New York: Routledge.

Bradley, Deborah. Democracy and discursive agency: Taking a stand. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 20 (2): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.22176/act20.2.1

Cheney, Liz. 2021. Liz Cheney: The GOP is at a turning point. History is watching us. *The Washington Post*, May 5, Opinions. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/05/liz-cheney-republican-party-turning-point/.

Corasaniti, Nick, and Reid J. Epstein. 2021. With Florida bill, Republicans continue unrelenting push to restrict voting. *New York Times*, April 30, Politics. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/us/politics/florida-voting-rights-bill-republicans.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20210501&instance_id=30095&nl=todaysheadlines&regi_id=48543449&segment_id=57008&user_id=0ed2a2d24bf73f2dfa7bd84d5eecafa0

Dei, George J. Sefa, and Agnes Calliste, eds. 2000. *Power, knowledge, and anti-racism education*, edited by George Sefa Dei and Agnes Calliste. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

DeLorenzo, Lisa C. 2016. *Giving voice to democracy in music education: Diversity and social justice*. Routledge studies in music education. New York, NY: Routledge.

Dewey, John. 2004/1916. *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Unabridged replication ed. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

Gould, Elizabeth. 2007. Social justice in music education: The problematic of democracy. *Music Education Research* 9 (2): 229–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613800701384359.

Johansen, Bruce E. 1990. Native American societies and the evolution of democracy in America, 1600-1800. *Ethnohistory* 37 (3): 279. https://doi.org/10.2307/482447

Levenson, Michael. 2021. As protests against police violence surge, Florida passes a bill to combat 'public disorder.' *New York Times*, April 15. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/15/us/politics/florida-public-disorder-bill-police.html?searchResultPosition=1.

Malek, Jan. 2020. *Is our right to peaceful protest disappearing?* Council of Canadians. https://canadians.org/analysis/our-right-peaceful-protest-disappearing#:~:text=The%20right%20to%20protest%20is,the%20freedom%20of%20peaceful%20assembly.%20https://www.utoronto.ca.

Niknafs, Nasim. in press. Necropolitical effigy of music education: Democracy's double. *Philosophy of Music Education Review* (special issue: Philosophy Meets Sociology).

Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *Hatred of democracy*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London New York: Verso.

Repucci, Sarah, and Amy Slipowitz. 2021. *Freedom in the world 2021*. Freedom House. www.freedomhouse.org

Wines, Michael. 2021. "In statehouses, stolen-election myth fuels a G.O.P. drive to rewrite rules." *The New York Times*, Feb. 27; updated Mar. 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/27/us/republican-voter-suppression.html.

Woodford, Paul G. 2005. *Democracy and music education: Liberalism, ethics, and the politics of practice*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Notes

[1] See https://outrightinternational.org/content/acronyms-explained

[2] The US constitution initially disenfranchised those who did not own property, for example, as well as codifying racism through its acceptance of slavery as an economic system and the enactment of the 3/5 Compromise, which relegated Blacks as only 3/5 of a human being for purposes of representation in government. Recently, a new argument has been adopted by some Republican legislators to "legitimize" the 3/5 Compromise; see https://apnews.com/article/nh-state-wire-business-slavery-race-and-ethnicity-government-and-politics-0dffc6a8ef1fdb351f60516ec18ec16a

[3] Butler (1997) cites J. L. Austin's distinction between "illocutionary" and "perlocutionary" speech acts. "The former are speech acts that, in saying do what they say," while "the latter are speech acts that produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something, a certain effect follows" (3).

[4] See https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/17/us/politics/republican-foreign-policy.html and https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/statement-signed-by-major-corporations-opposing-laws-that-restrict-voting-rights/dd5c9bdf-b441-47ea-98c5-07d6a2b8a223/

[5] It is not the purpose of this editorial introduction to include a full review of the literature on democracy and music education; rather, articles cited herein bear discernible relationship to the four essays of this ACT issue. However, notable scholars who have written on the topic include Randall Allsup, Scott Goble, Sidsel Karlsen, Heidi Westerlund, and Paul Woodford.

[6] I refer here to "broad issues" of social justice because the more focused discourses (feminism, critical race theory, antiracism education, and others), typically do not draw upon Dewey as a foundational text for the arguments presented.