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To - Everyday - Stand Up

(Gwen Rakotovoao)

**Que veut dire se lever tous les jours ?
Que se cache-t-il derrière un mouvement qui fait
partie du quotidien ?**

Dans un contexte social inégalitaire et bouillant, comprendre les enjeux de ces questions me semblait important. « *To stand up* », en anglais, est un un verbe accompagné d'une particule qui informe d'un mouvement vers le haut. C'est aussi un mouvement et une station qui a plusieurs fonctions et caractéristiques. En effet, son sens est multiple : il peut signifier « se lever » - se mettre debout, c'est aussi l'effort ou l'action de « se tenir debout » ou encore « être debout ».

C'est un mouvement qui porte à la fois des valeurs sociales et est propre à chacun. Il ne s'arrête jamais et il est en perpétuelle transformation. Enthousiaste, je me suis intéressée à la complexité de ce geste. J'ai réfléchi en m'appuyant sur mon expérience de danseuse, de chorégraphe et de femme racisée ayant grandi en France.

Il me fallait prendre de la distance et écrire en anglais est devenue une évidence. C'est dans cette langue que j'ai trouvé les mots pour témoigner et prendre le temps et l'espace nécessaires afin de ne pas être submergée par les émotions. Avec ce texte, j'argumente que se tenir debout pourrait bien être un mouvement quotidien de résistance. J'ai commencé mon raisonnement en m'appuyant sur une citation de l'explorateur océanographique Jacques Yves Cousteau : « Dès la naissance, l'homme porte le poids de la gravité sur ses épaules. Il est rivé à terre. Mais l'homme n'a qu'à descendre sous la surface et il est alors libre ». Je souhaitais investiguer et comprendre pourquoi Cousteau

pensait que l'homme « porte le poids de la gravité sur ses épaules » et qu'il se trouve libre dès lors qu'il plonge dans l'eau. En partant de cette citation et en étudiant les enjeux sociaux et émotionnels qu'implique la posture de se tenir debout, ce texte tente de répondre à ces questions en m'appuyant à la fois sur mon expérience et en entrant en dialogue avec le travail d'Hubert Godard, William Pope.L et André Lepecki.

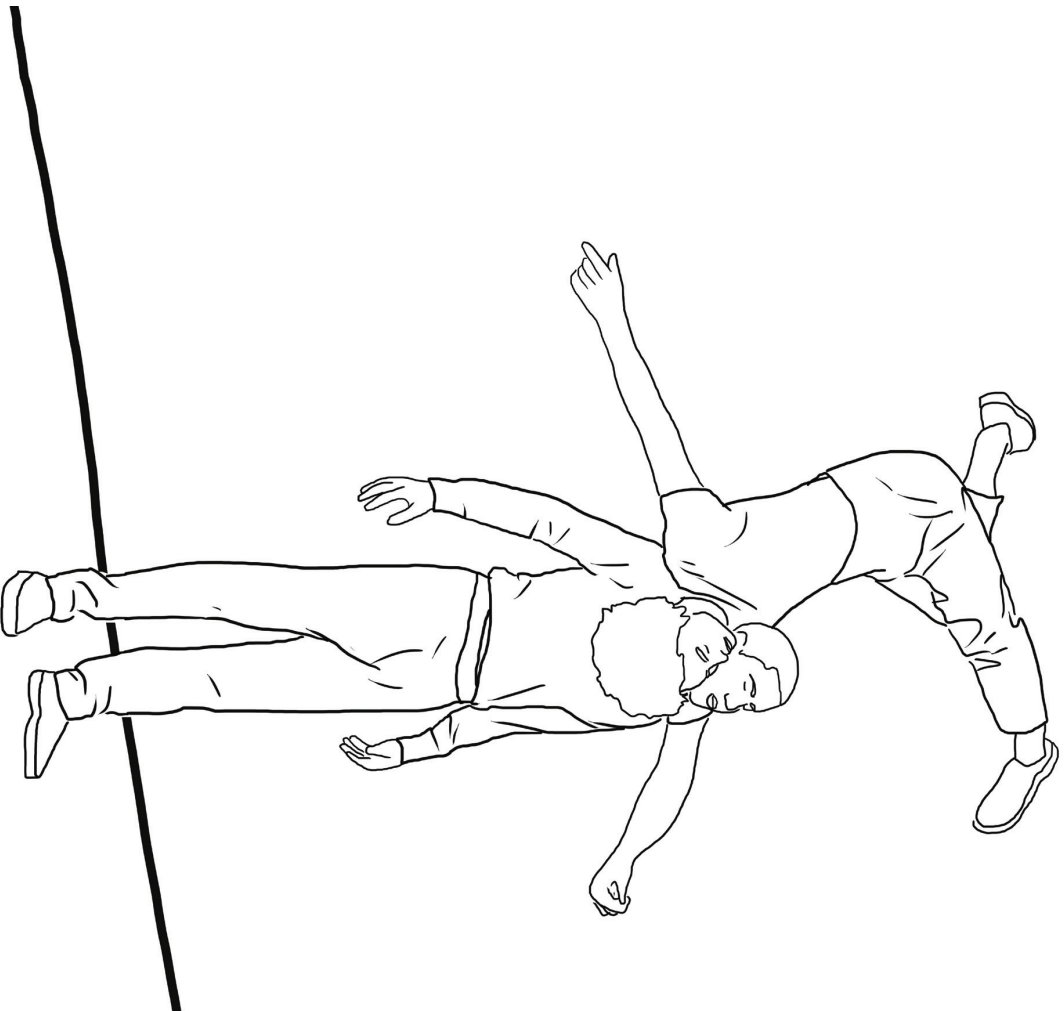
Ce texte est une première ébauche, il est peut-être incomplet. Mais c'est ainsi que je vous laisse avec un prémice qui l'espère vous donnera une idée de ce que le mouvement de *stand up* peut nous apprendre.

*Every morning,
I wake up in a comfortable bed. I
sometimes lay there and wait. When
my body is ready to move,
I sit down or roll,
I find the edge of the mattress and
I finally stand up. With two feet on
the ground,
I am ready to make the first step
into another day on Earth.¹*

I vaguely remember his face, but I do remember his smile, his big smile, and happy eyes. Every time I saw him on television, he had a great sense of content of what he was doing at sea. His enthusiasm was contagious even on the other side of the screen. Jacques-Yves Cousteau - an undersea explorer - is one of the many personalities that marked my childhood. I identify him as the happy man traveling and living, both, at and under sea. In an obituary article written for the famous oceanographer, the *New York Times* gave him a tribute by citing one of his famous lines "from birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his

¹ Personal notes.

Transposition



*shoulders. He is bolted to the Earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free.*² His words made me wonder what did Cousteau meant by asserting that “*man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders*” while they are still tightly attached to the Earth? Why his experience at sea and undersea made him believe that man had to sink underwater to be free? Lastly, how does this weight on our shoulder may affect an everyday movement such as standing-up? In an attempt to answer these questions, I first study the concept of posture - that the movement of standing-up infers - and its process of learning.

By focusing on the latter in relationship with the ground - from horizontality to verticality - I found that the social components of the standing-up movement are of great importance to approach its relationship with weight and gravity. I then bring Michel Foucault and André Lepecki in the conversation to determine the relationship between the standing-up movement and the notion of “moving freely” as a means of resistance.

To – every day - carry the weight of our own histories

As I found very complex to write about the movement of standing up as a universal standardized movement, I approach here the movement of standing up as a means of teaching vertically. I chose to approach it not as a final fixed position but rather as a process of finding a vertical position. In other words, I chose here to talk about standing up as a continuous movement.

² “Jacques Cousteau, Océans Impresario, Dies”, *New York Times*, June 26, 1997, page A00001 of the National edition.

Transposition



At an early stage of human development, babies learn to get a grip of the gravity and to balance their weight by sitting down. They stabilize their own weight and attempt to keep their backs straight to stay in a vertical position. The baby crawls on the ground - from point A to point B, moving horizontally, building up muscles, constantly adapting to gravity and finding support by pushing and sliding on the floor. Some children stand up clumsily and start walking, step by step. The learning process of standing-up is the accumulation of several phases that culminates by the development of a posture.

For many years, with the discipline of dance, I learned to stand up straight and to change my "everyday posture". I used to believe that I could control and fix it. My encounter with texts on Hubert Godard's concepts and research about the pre-movement (*pré-mouvement*) transformed the way I perceive the body posture. This led me to rethink the beliefs I learned through dance practices and to realize that much more is at play when it comes to understanding what makes a posture. For Godard, to stand up is a specific attitude towards weight and gravity³. In *Le geste et sa perception*, he demonstrates that the pre-movement is shaped by psychological elements which ultimately affect the expressiveness of the movement. In fact, the muscles responsible for keeping us in balance - and allowing us to stand up without thinking about it - are also the muscles that receive the information of any change in our affective and emotional states.

This is the reason why a change in our affective state will change our posture even in a very subtle way (Godard, 1998). According to this concept of pre-movement, human beings - on a daily basis - carry emotional states that shape their bodies from the moment they were born. Moreover, since the muscles responsible for our balance are those who negotiate simultaneously with gravity and register any emotional reactions we go through, the weight on our shoulder - as Cousteau mentioned - must be related to the emotional events oneself faced and participated in the

3 "Nous nommons 'pré-mouvement' cette attitude envers le poids, la gravité, qui existe déjà avant que nous bougeons, dans le seul fait d'être debout, et qui va produire la charge expressive du mouvement que nous allons exécuter". Hubert Godard, *Le geste et sa perception*, in Isabelle Gino & Marcelle Michel, *La danse au XXe siècle*, Bords éditions, 1995, p. 224-229

Transposition

Standing-up is not only a movement that individuals are trained to accomplish to reach a certain vertically, but it also reflects the emotional weight we carry throughout our life. Now, one might ask oneself how to measure the effort that must be made to reach for vertically. Are we all equal when it comes to working towards vertically? Do we all feel the same weight on our shoulders when we stand up?

Let's come back for a moment to the sea level - the ground floor - and bring the self-proclaimed "friendliest black artist in America" William Popel in the conversation. With the piece *Decarie on the mountain*, William Popel crawled with other hundred people from the Decarie Highway to the mountains, an inarguable demanding physical effort. In the statement written for this piece, the artist reminds us that "... we all begin on the same level with the same luck. Crawling brings us back to basics. We crawl, as small children, not because we are humiliated but because we are learning to be human. Crawling is a way to remind ourselves of our common struggle to be human" (Chase, 2006, p. 20).

First, Popel indicates us that there is a means of equality between human beings as we evolve horizontally by crawling on the floor. He suggests then that becoming human is not given, it is something that first, one has to fight for and second, one has to accomplish with others. It is a common struggle. As he continues, *"the rich look down on the poor. The beautiful look down on the plain"*, Popel invites us to pay attention to the fact that once everyone has reached their "stand-up position", they find themselves at a different level in the social hierarchy. Since *"the rich look down on the poor"*, the first is at a superior position than the latter. To reach vertically is not only a matter of caring all the events that moved us, it is also a position that allows us to gain a certain rank in society⁴. In sum, to stand up is, on one side, a disciplined effort to reach vertically to place ourselves in the social hierarchy of modern society, on the other side, it is a movement that reflects the emotional weight we carry on a daily basis. I now wonder what the repetition of this movement of standing-up has to teach us.

4 On this subject, Christine Roquet with "Être debout" in *Histoires de gestes*, Actes Sud, 2012, p. 23-37 and Georges Vigarello with its introduction to *Le corps redressé. Histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique* led, Jean Pierre Delorge, 1978, p. 9-13, offer a great insight of "the stand-up posture" within the discipline of dance. Their studies confirm that the search of vertically is tightly link to social elements.



Transposition

Is standing-up a first step to Freedom?

In his essay "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer", André Lepecki introduces the readers to the potential of thinking of choreography as a political act⁵ or, in other words, as a set of motions for resistance. He opens the discussion by putting into play Hannah Arendt's assertion "*we have arrived in a situation where we do not know - at least not yet - how to move freely*"⁶ (Lepecki, 2013, p. 14). Although, I agree with Lepecki that it is necessary to constantly move politically in order to not let "*the political vanishes completely from the world*"⁷, I was immediately interested in this sentence as it seemed incomplete to me. I first wondered if it was true that "we do not know how (...) to move freely" and then who was the "we" referred to in the quote?

First, with the concept of criminalization, Michel Foucault developed the idea that, in Western society, the creation of mechanisms for studying people's behaviors allowed institutions of power to determine particular habits, actions, attitudes, movements... as *non-normal behavior* and therefore punishable.

5 Here, "political act" is to be understood in a Rancierian way which is to say any action opposing itself against a prevailing model of social order.

6 "[...] *we have arrived in a situation where we do not know - at least not yet - how to move politically*" is

the original quote by Arendt. By analyzing Arendt's work, Lepecki concludes that, in this sentence, the word "politically" refers "freely".



Alongside this Foucauldian's concept and within his concept of choreopolice, Lepecki reminds us that the function of the police is "to form conformity, to ensure conformity" (Lepecki, 2013, p. 19). Then, this apparatus of criminalization not only contributes to the creation of normal behavior and conformity, but it also serves different systems of discipline, punishment, and surveillance that control and repress the freedom of the human being in our modern society. In this context, we may ask ourselves: who constitutes the "we" who does not know how to move freely?

It is with Angela Davis - who in the chapter "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition" built on the notion of criminalization by confronting it with the concept of race - that we may understand how complex it is to speak about a "we". She first contextualizes slavery as a starting point for introducing the forms of punishment that were addressed to black bodies, then she retraces the history of the system of punishments towards those bodies in relation with imprisonment and labor. Davis argues that "*labor was punishment attached not to crime, but to race*" (Davis, 2008, p. 99). For Davis, "race" was created and then assimilated as a crime itself. In other words, crime is not only a set of behaviors defined as non-normal, it could also be a condition related to one's "race".

As a young French girl of color growing up in the metropolitan France, my mother taught me to always carry my Identity Document when going outside. For her, it is an illegal act to be in the streets without it, as the police must be able to identify anyone who walks there. While it's not exactly a law⁸ I later understood why it was so important for my mother that her children could prove their identity at any time. She knew from experience that I could be seen and potentially treated differently by the police. At an early age, I not only learned that I must circulate in the streets⁹ I also incorporated that I had to be a diligent citizen who must constantly be careful and behave well so as not to attract the slightest possible encounter with the police. I grew up with the built-in fear that a policeman could come

7 Here, Lepecki quotes Hannah Arendt: "Die Gedächtnis, das das Politische betrieht, ist der Welt verschwindet" (Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, Munich, Piper, 1993).

8 The official website of the French administration indicates that it is not mandatory to carry an ID at all time: <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F1601>.

9 In "Choreopolices and choreopolitics", Lepecki reminds us of Rancière's answer: "Move along! There's nothing to see here!" to Louis Althusser's "They you there!" to express that the individuals are expected to circulate in the streets and not to gather as the police would intervene otherwise. (Lepecki, 2013, p. 19)

Transposition

Criminal born. Born to resist. Born to constantly - attempt to - move freely

In this condition, what does it mean to be on the streets when you comprehended that you are not welcome there or that you are not allowed to move as freely as you wish? In other words, how to stand in the streets with constant feelings of insecurity and fear? Not so long ago, in 2017, a young French man was hanging out with his friends in his neighborhood. A few minutes later, this man was brutally beaten by police officers. He was severely injured. His body was destroyed from the inside and we now know that he will be disabled for life. We can follow Davis's argument here and acknowledge that his crime was to be black¹⁰. What I found striking in this situation is the fact that the man kept standing up until his body was destroyed.

He kept moving up towards freedom until he was stopped. By keeping standing up while he was educated by society to either stay home, not to move freely in the streets and to stay on the floor as the police officers kept beating him each time he stood up, the man made a critic of the forces that attempted to put him down and control his freedom. He tried to take space and attempted to move freely in the streets. His act of multiplying the movement of standing up is not a revolution, rather it is a strong refusal to be what society and its power have decided him to be. It is a political act. With this - paradoxically disciplined - movement of standing up there is a reach out to freedom. The man showed that he knew how to keep moving freely but he was stopped. One can then wonder what would have happened if, under such circumstances, the police officer - not the figure of the state power, but the human being behind the uniform - had surrendered his policed habits and decided to act politically by ceasing to beat the young man. What if he had found ways not to do "his job" - the job for

which he was disciplined and trained to do? To conclude, I argue here that in order to keep moving and to merely live, some of us have no choice but to stand up every day and keep moving politically as they constantly have to face strong police¹¹ forces. In our modern western society, I imagine that in order to one day see every human being having the chance to practice what André Lepecki defined as choreopolitic - the practice of moving freely - it may be the task of all to continue simultaneously practicing to move and act freely **and** to work towards letting go of our policed movements and actions..

¹¹ Police here is to be understood in the Rancierian way.

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10 In 2017, Theo Luhaka was walking in his neighborhood and went to say hello to his friends who were standing still in the streets. A police officer arrived, followed by more colleagues. The latter guided the group out of the surveillance camera sight for no apparent reason and started to beat the group of young people. Theo Luhaka was taken apart and raped.

