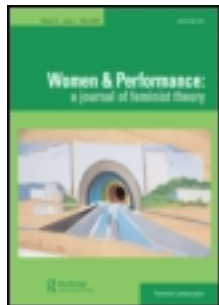


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WHICH WAY IS DOWN? IMPROVISATIONS ON BLACK MOBILITY

Jason King

Falling down is random, improvisational. Breathtaking.

One summer, on the heels of my twelfth birthday, my mother called my brother, father and I into the living room to announce that the family was going to travel across Canada on a vacation. Three days later, I was staring out the window of a Greyhound bus, mesmerized by the rolling stretches of Albertan prairies, all wheat fields and yellow daisies, as they morphed into the rockier, adventurous terrain of Ontario and the East. My parents—Trinidadians who made the momentous journey to Canada in the late 1960s to carve out a better life for themselves and their future sons—had already taken my brother and me on trips to the United States. But neither of us had seen much of Canada, save for the Edmonton suburbs where we had been born and raised.

The trek out East counted three days in total. In Winnipeg, halfway there, we sat for hours in the terminal while the bus refueled and changed passengers. Bored of our portable video games, and frustrated by the soda machines that required change we did not have, my brother and I sat on the floor of the bus station, heads cupped in our hands. Some distance away, our parents had taken the

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high road and opted for the terminal's black bucket seating. We sat on the floor for no other reason than sheer boredom and because the bucket seats did not allow us to stretch our growing legs.

All the while I had been eyeing a Greyhound porter—decked out in uniform, dark-skinned, greying at the sides of his small Afro—assisting passengers with their luggage. Winnipeg, like much of Western Canada, is not famous for its black population. Having mostly white and Asian friends as a child, and lacking any localized racial movement to ratify my identity, I had grown up in the 1980s feeling neither overwhelming pride nor shame for being black. My father, on the other hand, often claimed that racism was an American invention. He would from time to time nod his head silently at a black person shopping in the Edmonton mall or crossing as a pedestrian in front of our car. “Do you know him?” I would ask inquisitively. “No,” my father would say. “Just saying hello.”

That same elemental, unspoken recognition gleamed in the porter's eyes as he approached us. From my status on the ground, he appeared eight or nine feet tall. He swished his cheeks as if he held an angry secret in his jaws, and slowly leaned over. “Get up from the ground,” the porter exclaimed, authoritatively. “Black man needs to get out of the gutter.” As soon as he came he was gone, pushing an overstuffed luggage cart out of the glass front doors of the Greyhound terminal.

With measured reluctance, my brother and I stood up and dusted off our pants that, by now, carried scuffs from the floor we had been sitting on. I recall feeling somehow criminalized, as if the porter had charged me with a violation of some unwritten code of behavior. I never discussed the incident with my brother, nor did I ever mention it to my parents. I have wondered ever since, though, why merely sitting on the ground constituted such a violation. How did the floor of a bus terminal so quickly become a “gutter”? Why did we need to get up from the ground if whites sitting on the floor in the terminal did not? The answers to these questions were not unthinkable. The porter was likely miffed that any “right-thinking” black person, given the colossal gains of the various civil rights and anticolonial movements of the 20th century, would choose the floor over the seat. Not only had we parked ourselves on the ground, we had done so in a public venue, at the risk of confirming for white people our predisposition toward subservience. “Black man needs to get out of the gutter.” It was as if we had been unconsciously bandying about the word “nigger” in front of Greyhound's whitest passengers, or had

been suited up in minstrel outfits tap dancing for change. We had erred by airing our dirty laundry; we had neglected to keep up appearances for the advancement of the race. And because he had rushed so quickly to judgment about my guttural status, the porter's words suggested to me, if only subconsciously, that it was primarily race that would determine my mobility in the world—how and where I would walk, talk, sit and stand. Of course, it took some time to learn this. Only five years later, still in my teens, I packed up and moved to New York City, intensely racially polarized at the time under the Dinkins administration.

Falling is downward mobility, descent. Unless one subscribes to the fiction of the bottomless pit, at the end of the fall is inevitably a bottom, a floor, basement, earth, ground. To fall suddenly is to lose direction, footing. Slipping, stumbling and tripping are all performances of disorientation, de-anchoring, rootlessness; they precursor the fall or the slide (the gliding fall) or the tumble (the rolling fall) or the flop (the thudding fall). By any standard measurement of time, one does not fall slowly, unless the fall has been deliberately choreographed, executed according to a plan.

To soften the violence of elitism, the terror of inalienable difference, we cling to the sociological metaphor of the "ladder" to account for the promise of mobility. Each ascending rung suggests a higher level of socioeconomic prosperity.¹ Different communities, organized by class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability and other variables, struggle to maintain footing on different rungs. None wants the pain, the indignity, of slipping to a lower rung or, worse, falling off altogether. Tumbling down the ladder means losing access to material resources, political disenfranchisement. Ascension, moving up the ladder (every move up the ladder seems to be a climb toward glory, like Jacob), or just struggling to maintain a lateral position, become the only desirable options in a democratic society organized by hierarchies of power, regulated by the myth of meritocracy. Communities striving to maintain footing on the lowest rungs of the ladder have the least access to resources. And because they have the least far to fall, these communities also have the least to lose by shaking the ladder vigorously until it topples.

Perhaps no group has more to offer the phenomenon of falling than black people, easily one of the most fragile socioeconomic com-

munities in the United States. Denied formal channels of political representation in a systemically racist society, black people have historically mobilized music and performance to comment on the “problem” of social mobility. Black people under white supremacy are expected to bear the burden of ambivalent direction, perpetual meandering, purposeless loitering, sloping destiny. To be black is to have already fallen, to witness trouble, to cry in the wilderness, to meet every dead end. We’re not supposed to live until the end of the movie script, not supposed to ride the train to the last stop on the line. *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, Melvin Van Peebles’ searing 1971 Broadway play about the vagaries of street life, makes reference in its title to the popular conception of black potential—or lack thereof. Due to historical circumstances, black people have a special and even intimate perspective on suffering and death. Langston Hughes once wrote: “Death is a drum, A signal drum/ Calling life/ To come!/ Come!/ Come!” (1990, 87). In the 1994 Whitney Museum exhibit catalog *Black Male*, Greg Tate writes about the ungainly number of black male creative “geniuses” who’ve suffered due to accidental or improvisational circumstances. There’s Sam Cooke, mysteriously shot to death in 1964; Marvin Gaye, shot by his father over a money dispute in 1983; and Curtis Mayfield, struck by a lighting tower during a freak windstorm at a Brooklyn concert in 1990. “To live is to defy the logic that all we’re supposed to do is stay black and die,” Tate writes. “To leave in your wake artistic legacies, documents, abstract bodies of work and knowledge, conceptual paradigms, aesthetic philosophies and methodologies, signature styles, mythic identities, is to increase confusion exponentially” (2). It is no coincidence that we use the phrases “slipping into darkness” or “slipping into blackness” to connote the onset of despair, pain, fever, unconsciousness and even death.²

Black folk in the New World have been wanderers, anchorless, Diasporic. The essential melancholy of blackness is an interminable longing for a sense of rootedness that was historically denied. But the disorientation that is rootlessness also promises the freedom to move. And so black freedom, ironic though it may be, is coveted by communities more stationary on the ladder of mobility. Blackness has always been more of (a) movement, both literal and abstract, than a stable racial category. Blackness performs the direction of indirection, the mobility that is immobility, the re-orientation that is disorientation.

The “ironic tenacity” of black people, as James Baldwin called it in his 1963 *The Fire Next Time*, is the ability to turn the debilitating fall into stylized, kinetic movement. Historically, black folk have survived (in) a hostile environment by internalizing, and even at times satirizing, the deeper meaning of trouble. Every opportunity to fall becomes an opportunity to rise. “You may write me down in history/With your bitter, twisted lies,/You may trod me in the very dirt/But still, like dust, I’ll rise,” Maya Angelou chimed in her wildly popular 1978 poem “And Still I Rise.” Blackness codes itself by invincibility, a stoic “fierceness” that is simultaneously heroic and tragic. That fierceness, embodied by blues singers, homegirls and voguing queens alike, stems from the spiritual belief that trouble is always around the corner, but don’t last always. Struggle becomes the precondition for change; ascension, the path to glory, comes earmarked by the fall, bad news, unshakable misery. Falling down reminds us, confirms for us, that we are essentially vulnerable: a simple stumble or trip can quickly transform even the most casual stroll into an embarrassing disaster. But on the lowest rungs of the ladder, there is no need to fear the fall, only to make it work for you. “I been down so low that getting up ain’t even crossed my mind!” the disco duo Two Tons o’ Fun chuckled in “I Been Down” from their 1980 album *Backatcha*. For those always already expected to fall, vulnerability becomes something else altogether.

The choreography of black invulnerability; disorientation, frenzy, as the highest form of orientation. The first rock star I remembering seeing live in concert is Tina Turner. Though it seems impossible to imagine now, she was hired as the opening act in 1983 for Lionel Richie on his 48-city debut solo world tour. I recall being not only blown away by her tremendous energy on stage, which seems as visceral today as it did then, but also by her ability to dance feverishly around the stage in high heels to songs like “Show Some Respect” and “Better Be Good to Me” and not take a tumble. “Amazing,” my mother said at the time. “She never falls in those things.”

Tina Turner’s life story, on the other hand, as mythologized in her 1987 book with Kurt Loder, *I, Tina* and Bryan Singer’s lurid 1993 bio-pic *What’s Love Got to Do with It?*, recounts her fall from grace and her remarkable recalcitrance. It’s the classic rags-to-riches narrative. After years of drug abuse and a painful divorce from her abusive husband Ike that left her penniless, the Tennessee-born rock ‘n roll star finds solo success through her fateful discovery of Bud-

dhism and new music management. Self-improvement, the foundational narrative of American life, assumes that personal will determines social mobility. Self-improvement is, above all else, redirection, re-orientation. Staying up on your feet becomes a dance ("I'm dancing as fast as I can," the saying goes). "I've been thinking about a new direction," Turner confessed in her 1984 comeback single "What's Love Got to Do With It." Ostensibly about romantic relationships, the lyric also alluded to Turner's newly upwardly mobile career direction, signaled by her mainstream 1980s movie career and a slew of Grammy awards, as well as her burgeoning Europhilia (she would later move permanently to the French Riviera, and shack up with Erwin Bach, a German-born record company executive.) In a twist of fate, in 2000, Tina Turner hired Lionel Richie (who, after years of chartlessness, seemed like he had fallen "off the face of the earth," as one reviewer put it) as *her* opening act for her *Twenty Four Seven* Tour.

The dream of black invincibility, never far from the promise of uplift and the dissolution of white racism, was popularized in the late 19th century by the bootstraps rhetoric of Booker T. Washington, and later, in different ways, expounded upon by leaders from Marcus Garvey to Elijah Muhammad. In 1896, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson penned "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (later to become institutionalized as the "Negro National Anthem") as a tribute to Washington. "Out from the gloomy past," the song goes, "till now we stand at last." By the 1920s and 1930s, the political dream of standing proud in the face of a checkered past became infused by the discourses on "recovery" and "conversion" that accompanied the burgeoning American self-help industry. These discourses were the influence of Frank Buchman's Christian based Oxford Group as well as the mainstreaming of the Alcoholics Anonymous' twelve-step programs originally founded by Dr. Bob Smith and Bill Wilson in 1935. At least since the turn of the 20th century, the idiom "falling off the wagon" (altered from "going on the water wagon" which was originally used to describe the attempt to stay sober in the Prohibition era) has referred to an alcoholic relapse. Besides, learning to walk upright has always meant first crawling and stumbling.

The notion that falling is a precondition to self-improvement is also based in Western ideals of romance and love. To be in love, that distracted state of migration toward the other, is disorientation, or as sociologist Dorothy Tennov calls it, limerence (1979 [1999]). Love

will improve you, even heal you, the story goes, but first you must fall. Lovesickness is seasickness, nausea, disorientation. The idea that falling in love is spirit possession, getting swept off your feet, is reinforced ideologically in popular songs from “Fallin’” by Alicia Keys (2001) to “Weak” by SWV (1993) to “Weak in the Knees” by Steve Arrington (1983). Patsy Cline’s eternally haunting 1961 “I Fall to Pieces” or Tramaine Hawkins’ stirring 1990 gospel chestnut “The Potter’s House” (“In case you have fallen by the wayside of life.../The potter wants to put you back together again”) are worth mentioning here. But Aretha Franklin’s dizzyingly dramatic 1971 reading of “All the King’s Horses” surpasses them all. “We sat on the wall of security so high above...All the king’s horses, all the king’s men/Couldn’t put our two hearts together again,” Franklin laments. With its obvious allusion to the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme, the lyric (penned by Franklin herself) envisions love as eternal brokenness, beyond repair. Getting togetherness becomes the same difference as falling apart.

Since the 1960s, the black pride movement, spearheaded by pundits like Maulana Ron Karenga and Lerone Bennett, has functioned on the implicit assumption that black power and autonomy are inseparable from visibility and uprightness. Racial progress demands this visibility, progressive uplift: it demands secure footing, resistance against the pull of gravity, downward mobility. Karenga discusses Malcolm X’s influence on his uplift philosophy in the following manner:

...three things [Malcolm] said that were most important: Wake up, clean up and stand up. The first speaks to intellectual development rooted in self-knowledge; what Malcolm wants us to do is to shake off our diminished conception of ourselves as ghetto dwellers and see ourselves as world-historical people. He believed that kind of consciousness would call us to a different kind of action...

The final thing he argues is “stand up.” That means engaging in the practice of social change to increase the good in the world. We have to struggle for that, for human freedom and human equality and human justice...

As in every situation, there's a dialectic going on, with people rising and falling at the same time. Good things are coming into being while old things are going out. It's not a clear course, there are twists and turns in the road (quoted in Kaplan, 2002).

"Stand up"—the long, arduous journey out of the terror of slavery and the darkness of colonialism is necessarily vertical in direction; one moves up and out of these things into the light. "Move on up towards your destination," Curtis Mayfield sang on "Move on Up" from his 1970 self-titled debut album. And yet, as confirmed by decades of black political turbulence in the post-slavery era, the most confusing thing about re-orienting one's self after a fall can be trying to figure which way is up. This, perhaps, is the ambivalence Karenga suggests when he describes the contemporary plight of black people "rising and falling at the same time" in the manner of an Hegelian "dialectic."

Uprightness, like uplift, suggests verticality. Uprightness surpasses upward mobility—which takes a directional metaphor to index class or status aspiration—in that it calls forth ideals of moral virtue. The dream of black invincibility, which is rooted in the concept that every fall is an opportunity to rise, and that every rise is earmarked by the potential to fall, cannot be extricated from religious belief. In Christianity, the Lord is the "rock of our salvation;" one learns to lean on Him so as not to fall. Falling is a motif in the Bible, linked to virtue: "They stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they are also appointed," says Peter (1 Peter 2:8).

To become like a rock, invincible, is to imagine every fall as an opportunity to get back up again. "We fall down," Donnie McClurkin sang in his hit 2001 gospel song. "But we get up/For a saint is just a sinner who fell down/But he didn't stay down/And got up." For McClurkin, falling down is natural, accidental. Being on the ground is acceptable. But he reiterates a moral code that makes getting up, self-improvement, mandatory. A transitive fall, or a fall that turns into an opportunity to rise, has purpose. Permanent or willful downward mobility, falling that does not result in rebound, is unspeakable. John Redmon, a gospel artist on the independent Christian label Reaching Records, claims that McClurkin's inspiration for the lyric came from *Proverbs 24:16*: "For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mis-

chief." Redmon challenges McClurkin's lyric, taking issue with the song's naturalization of falling and sinfulness. Redmon argues that rather than simply rebound from every fall one should never fall in the first place. Presumably, one should suppress the fall altogether through the performance of "virtue." He says:

I have a real issue with this song simply because it indirectly gives an excuse for sin. I like songs that proclaim that God is able to keep you from falling (Jude 24). And songs that relay the message from 1 Ptr 1, that giving all diligence, adding to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; (vs. 10)...for if ye do these things ye shall never fall (2001).

Others are less sanguine about the confluence of downward mobility, moral virtue and spiritual belief. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes about how the "gimmick" of religion saved him from the almost certain horrors of homophobic racism and poverty as a teenager:

...[O]ne night, when this woman had finished preaching, everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strangest sensation I have ever had in my life—up to that time, or since. I had not known that it was going to happen, or that it could happen. One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping and at the same time, working out in my head the plot of a play I was working on then; the next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. I did not know what I was doing down so low, or how I had got there. (29)

The spirit that comes down through gospel music, in all its monstrous beauty, possesses Baldwin without warning, literally sweeping him off his feet. Sudden disorientation becomes progressive re-orientation. Lying on his back in the aisle of the church, Baldwin is "saved," reborn as a prodigious preacher. He discovers a new direc-

tion for himself, a temporary way out of the ghetto, although he has no memory of the sensation of the physical act of falling that produced his spiritual renewal.

Uprightness in black communities has always found moral resonance in popular songs that make you want to move and take decisive action. In the prophetic 1964 bridge of "A Change is Gonna Come," Sam Cooke cries out for help from his 'brother' but is mercilessly knocked down to his knees. (The windfall, suckerpunch.) The covenant of racial kinship is met with betrayal, but the inspirational lyric supposes that betrayal is the stepping stone that leads to change: "There've been times that I thought I wouldn't last for long/But now I know I think I'm able to carry on/It's been a long time coming/But I know a change is gonna come." In 1969, Sly and the Family Stone urged their audiences to stand upright: "Stand/For the things you know are right/It's the truth that the truth makes them so uptight;" and "You've been sitting much too long/There's a permanent crease in your right and wrong." Standing up for one's rights becomes, above all else, a moral necessity. In the same year, the Bay Area trickster and his band released the classic "I Want to Take you Higher," a raucous anthem for spiritual uplift, brazenly couched in the metaphor of a different sort of tripping, mind-expanding drug use. (These days, "tripping" is urban slang for acting crazy, disoriented, bugged out. i.e. You must be trippin'.) On Sly's bizarre, drug-hazed classic 1971 *There's a Riot Goin' On*, he continued to trip, to fall upward (to get high), as did Marvin Gaye in the same year on his most agitprop record, *What's Goin' On*, when he sang of "flying high in the friendly sky/without ever leaving the ground." Political insurgency takes you up and away, makes you high, brings you euphoria.

By 1973, Bob Marley's exhortation to "Get up, stand up/stand up for your rights" had helped foment this relationship between verticality and activism. If ascension is required for insurgency, horizontalism becomes inertia, apathy, couch potato-ism, stasis, sittin' on the dock of the bay. Being up, getting up, however, registers as potency. James Brown's funky 1970 exhortation to "get up" in "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine" was as much a call to political action as much as it was a sexual prescription. The noble promise of the erection. Uplift, virility. The erotic pull of upward mobility. Black power, the ascension of the race, at some point becomes inseparable from masculinity, as Michele Wallace argued in her 1979 *Black*

Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. The activist has to supposedly stay up, hard; cannot get limp, flaccid, weak.

The dream of uplift infuses pride as a political movement. Downward mobility becomes exclusively associated with shame. One feels shame immediately following an accidental slip on the street, down the stairs or on a sheet of ice. Indeed, sinners fall. Newly empowered with knowledge, Adam and Eve were supposed to have felt shame, naked and banished from the Garden of Eden. The Grigori (gigantic angels who once protected mankind but became corrupted by their lust for mortal women, according to the sacred text *The Book of Enoch*) fall downward into degradation. Every fall from the ladder becomes a fall from grace. Far too many Hollywood films finish predictably with the once powerful villain falling into a vat of some scalding or toxic substance. What is worse for the villain— death itself, or the tremendous indignity of having to fall, usually looking face up at the gloating heroes, locking eyes with the moralizing audience? (Falling into a vat of toxic substance also goes hand in hand with the possibility for self-transformation in cartoons and science fiction. Think of the *Batman* comic series: Jack Napier falls into a vat of toxic waste during a botched robbery at the Ace Chemical Factory and reemerges as the surreal, hideous Joker.) Uplift requires vigilance, a continual push against gravity: one must work hard to keep a certain distance from the ground, to keep from slipping into the filthy gutter. Basic physics tells us that pushing up a hill requires more labor than simply surrendering and tumbling downward. Uplift requires labor, but in time, exhaustion sets in. Following the display of too much pride, one supposedly falls. But must the fall, downward mobility, inevitably result in shame?

First, it should be noted that one is less likely to feel shame in the act of falling than in the indignity of having *been seen* falling. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres, of all people, has something to offer here. She performs a hilarious bit about the embarrassment of accidentally tripping or stumbling in the street. (It's a bit she's recycled over the years in her comedy routines about human foibles, and it showed up again as recently as her 2003 HBO comedy special "Here and Now: Modern Life and Other Inconveniences.") One immediately looks around to acknowledge to onlookers who may have seen the trip that one has not been hurt. One also tries to look back at the

sidewalk, to search for a crack that might have caused the trip, if only to suggest to onlookers (regardless of whether they seem concerned or apathetic) that one is anything but a klutz, that there is something wrong with the street itself. In other cases, one wants to demonstrate to the worried onlooker that the fall was actually a part of the walk—the “I meant to do that” syndrome. One then casually repeats the stumble or the dip to the ground so as to prove to the onlooker that the accident wasn’t an accident at all, but a staged action to look cool. To overcome the shame of having fallen in the street one has to perform as if the fall was always already intentional. Although my academic paraphrasing of the joke can’t account for DeGeneres’ tremendous physical comedy, there is a philosophical resonance to her treatment of the fall. One makes the accidental fall, or the disorientation that is the fall, a part of the act, or the performance, which then becomes improvised to look intentionally unintended.

Falling randomly and without cause is, in a good number of cases, shameful and embarrassing, the stuff of physical comedy, the banana peel routine. Choreographed falling is cool and hip, breathtaking. If you choose to dip, then you have not so much fallen as you’ve made a decisive action to go down. But, as DeGeneres suggests, even an unintended fall, a fall that happens suddenly without any premeditation, can still be worked back into a modality of intention, through the improvised performance of making it look premeditated. And in making the trip or dip look as if it was rehearsed for an audience of onlookers, one automatically becomes a choreographer of sorts.

The walk that incorporates falling takes us immediately to the concept of the “cool walk.” Writers on black masculinity and manhood have frequently written about walking in the city as an expression of black cool. In Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson’s 1992 *Cool Pose*, the “black walk” — often referred to as the “pimp walk” and performed by street hustlers, pimps, b-boys and a host of others—becomes decontextualized from its sociopolitical context:

The conspicuous and expressive nature of the African-American male’s walk has become a way to announce his presence, to accentuate his self, and to broadcast his prideful power... The mainstay of the walk is rhythm and style. In contrast to the white male’s robotlike and mechanical walk, the black walk is slower—more like a stroll. The head is slightly ele-

vated and tipped to one side. One arm swings at the side with the hand slightly cupped. The other hand hangs straight to the side or is slipped into the pocket ... The walk can serve as a threatening and confirming means of power in the face of hostile representatives of the mainstream: teachers, police, and store owners. (73-4)

The cool walk, while internally differentiated by region, nationality, gender and sexual orientation among other variables, is choreographed falling, informed by the politics of racial marginalization. It's the rhythmic, almost percussive, casual stride that incorporates a bobbing or falling motion, followed by a quick, stylish pull upward. Perfected during the apex of jazz hipster culture and bebop style in the 1940s and 1950s, the cool walk has been since immortalized in the comedy routines of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and in the visual work of rap stars, among others. The walk becomes a winning way to move in the world not so much because it announces black male power, but because it incorporates the fall, and its concomitant shame, as an intentional act. When comedians grossly exaggerate the movement of white people and middle class uppity blacks, as Richard Pryor does in his 1979 film *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, they often do so by tightening their ass cheeks, stiffening their bodies and walking formally with no fall or downward motion. Black people, on the other hand, appear to walk with funk, erotic life, in stylized motion. Like in George Clinton's 1976 classic "Mothership Connection (Starchild)": "Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip." The hipster walk is the only sexy, hip way of walking that holds currency in the American imagination, and so it is black shame, the freedom that is disorientation, that is continually referenced, sought after, desired, eroticized in the movement. Coolness is presence, being in the moment, pure sensuality. Mastering the cool walk becomes part of the way one practices being (a) black (man), on the margins, an outsider. Ellen DeGeneres' improvised stroll, where she incorporates the dip so as to look cool in front of discriminating onlookers, can't help but conjure up blackness by default, since race is not explicitly mentioned in her routine.

Into its third decade, Hip Hop routinely transforms the shame associated with downward mobility into an ethics of pride. The controversial manipulation of the verbal epithet "nigger" as "nigga" to signify camaraderie and the mobilization of epithets like "bitch" and

“faggot” to supposedly refer to behavior rather than gender or sexual orientation are often held up as the most obvious examples. But Hip Hop reminds us that the gutter, that site of downward mobility, has a life in political struggle too. Spilling his guts in 1996 to the media after a series of exhausting legal tribulations, slain rap legend Tupac Shakur expressed pride, not shame, for his ghetto roots. “I wanna be the only way I’ve been practicing my whole life, to live my life,” he admitted, “to be responsible for what I do. I don’t know how to be responsible for what every black male did. I don’t know. Yes, I am going to say that I’m a thug, that’s cause I’m from the gutter and I’m still here.” DMX carried the torch of Tupac’s thug persona into the late 1990s. In “Slippin’,” the gravelly-voiced rapper rhymes about the pitfalls of ghetto living: “I’m slippin’, I’m fallin’, I can’t get up.” His lyric, rooted in blues melancholy, is actually sampled from the wildly satirized 1990s TV ads for Medic Alert personal security system in which an elderly woman lying prostrate on the ground, stricken by an anonymous ailment, cries out “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.” Despite their queer source, DMX’s lyrics would later fuse into reality: he was arrested in 2000 for drug related crimes.

Hip Hop’s transformation of uplift is decidedly far-reaching in its influence. By 2004, black punk style—spanning the bizarre music of R&B singer Kelis to flamboyant Hip Hop experimentalist Andre 3000 of Outkast to James Spooner’s roughhewn indie documentary *Afropunk: Diary of a Rock ‘n Roll Nigger*—has begun to recirculate publicly to a degree not seen since the 1980s. Hip Hop and punk were always symbiotic musical movements, both emerged in the late 1970s as respective reflections of alienated, disaffected young people. Ironically drawing on white punk, a movement initially based on a rejection of black musical priorities, black punk, with its ghostly vision of otherworldly blackness, has little interest in traditional narratives of upward mobility and social ascension. It calls forth alternative ways of imagining how to act, look and be black, unabashedly incorporating socially unacceptable behavior.

The Down Low phenomenon that emerged in the late 1990s also recovers the shame associated with downward mobility into an ethics of pride. Down Low (or DL) refers to the behavior of Hip Hop identified men who have undercover sex with men, neglecting to disclose their homosexual activities to the female partners they are also sleeping with. By retreating into the closet, men who live on the down low have been criticized for promoting a lifestyle that regresses same-sex desire to pre-Stonewall times. If the closet has historically been linked

with shame, confusion and disorientation, coming out continues to suggest holding one's head up high and standing up for what one believes in. The various interlocking pride movements of the 1960s and 1970s—black pride, gay pride, Chicano pride and so on—all promoted the idea that the best, or only, way to express one's pride was to be out and visible. Shame could be eradicated in time through therapy and the intimacy of community. Each of these pride-based identity movements ultimately reproduced a tribal identity that equated functionality with uprightness and visibility. In the rhetoric of these movements, downward mobility became a non-option.

By 2004, the exhaustion that uplift produces may have set in. As more and more poor and working class black and Latino men come out as DL, and express their desire to be in-visible rather than out and highly visible, DL remobilizes the closet as a site for pride and re-orientation. As I previously noted in a 2003 *Village Voice* article "Remixing the Closet: The Down-Low Way of Knowledge," DL offers a "remix" of the political agenda of black gay men. One can now admit to be proud to be shameful: "pride on the DL." The return of shame and secrecy seems to be, in the eyes of many, a regressive dead-end for black and gay pride movements. Indeed, the media has latched onto the term "down low"—urban slang to euphemize sexual infidelity cribbed from R&B and hip hop—to revivify public fears from the late 1980s about the shadowy, sinister "stealth bisexual." A popular stereotype in some of E. Lynn Harris' best-selling novels, the stealth bisexual desires "the best of both worlds," and in so doing, he's imagined to lay down the "bridge" that bring AIDS from the "gay world" to the "straight world." In the recent DL crisis, the media needed to rationalize why black women who identified as heterosexual were testing positive in record numbers. So it wagged a collective finger at the so-called Homothug, a hip-hop identified MSM.³ By "posing" as a thugged-out ruffneck, a homothug could lure unsuspecting women into his lair to have unprotected sex. Few have taken the media to task for circulating the spurious—and implicitly homophobic—notion that DL is causally linked to HIV transmission. The issue of sexual duplicity has to be separated from HIV transmission. If it were axiomatic that acts of infidelity led to HIV, high-profile naughty folks like Jesse Jackson and Bill Clinton would be popping cocktails. We can moralize about the rectitude of duplicity until the cows come home, but the most immediate way to curb the spread of AIDS is by educating men and women to use male and female condoms during high-risk sexual activities.

The onus on public health organizations is to find creative, pro-sex, race-specific ways to reach MSMs of color who choose to be undercover. For instance, US Helping Us, a non-profit AIDS service organization in D.C., stages safe-sex workshops in spaces where young black and Latino men are often socialized about sex and gender roles, like barbershops. The organization also provides services for the discharged prison population, of whom 10% may be HIV positive. It's entirely possible to educate men of color about prevention methods without demonizing the ways in which some MSMs choose to express—or in this case, not express—their sexuality. What is fascinating, and even worthwhile, about DL is that it literally suggests a new direction for black identity, and it does so in the most unique way—through the metaphor of directionality and mobility. No dead-end is really an end. One can find pride crouching low to the ground, moving under the radar, not just up high, in the air. While standing up tall and proud may be inseparable in the popular imagination from (political) virility and potency, the popularity of DL confirms that there is also an erotics of shame and downward mobility. Everyday, more and more people are choosing to fall off the ladder, opting out of its treacherous game of balance and negotiation. There is an erotic appeal to the practice of falling, a stylized sexiness at its core.

Black people are often idealized as the most rhythmically and choreographically sound people on the planet, and yet the most groundless and politically disoriented as well. Dance tells us everything about the political complexity of black folk, who improvisationally transform the fall, the slip, the dip, into intended movement. The acrobatic drops and flops to the ground in breakdancing are cousin to the dazzling stunts of the Nicholas Brothers, particularly in 1943's *Stormy Weather* where they were filmed leaping over each other from stair to stair, falling in graceful, awe inspiring splits, only to rebound again. Twyla Tharp, Lila Yorke, and many others have deliberately incorporated falling into their choreography, but there is a terrible beauty in witnessing black people fall in death-defying ways but not kill themselves, contrary to everything society has to say about the value of black life. This is another way to consider the mobility of black genius. Few things in life are more breathtaking than watching basketball players, from Dr. J to Jordan to Shaq, slam dunking.

The slam dunk or the “skywalk” (extreme presence) is black men’s gift to what might be an otherwise formulaic game. The slam dunk is denouement, the arc of the fall, cascading glissando, smashing backboards, shattered glass falling everywhere. (NBA superstar Daryl Dawkins always claimed he would improvise what he would do in the air only once he had left the ground).

In the “New Way” voguing style that has emerged since Madonna exploited the form in the early 1990s, young black gay men perform a spectacular movement often called “the drop” or the “dip.” On a percussive accent, sometimes at the energetic climax of the dance, competing dancers suddenly fall to the ground, one leg stretched taut and other bent at the knee, while the back straddles the floor. In the explosive performances of New Way voguing, there is no denouement, just as the thrill of fireworks exploding is not in the ascent of the shell, but in the fall, the descending shower of light. The daredevil drop in voguing, which instantly suggests the spectacular danger and terror of being black and gay, also suggests that improvisation is nothing if not bungee jumping, free-falling, the exhilaration of parachuting, leaping suicidally into the abyss. In black performance, disorientation, unintended or accidental, is the highest form of orientation, uncanny balance and rhythm. The drop down is the inversion of uplift. To witness the “danger” of spectacular black performance is breathtaking, unsettling—disorientation becomes reorientation. The Impressions’ “Finally Got Myself Together,” (new)found direction. Repetition, improv-ing on improvisation.

Blackness offers an alternative way to consider the funky choreography of politics, as well as the political contexts that inform choreography. Getting down is getting funky, falling into the groove. (The ultra-repetitive, trance-inducing 1995 classic “Get Get Down” by Chicago House DJ Paul Johnson—now a popular cell phone ringtone—is designed to sweep you off your feet, to get you on the dance floor.) The refusal to get up has been a key part of black political insurgency, from the bus protests symbolized by folks like Rosa Parks, to the radical 1960s mobilizations of sit-ins. Refusing to move is how one stands up tall in the face of the enemy. But if black music has always provided the soundtrack to political struggle, much of the music also demands that you get down, which of course implies getting up out of your seat. (This is the tremendous paradox of Brainstorm’s 1977 disco classic “Lovin’ is Really My Game.” The lyric is about a rhythmless narrator who can’t win her man on the dance floor, but tries to make her case anyway. “I believe in the

boogie/But the boogie don't believe in me /...I get soul satisfaction without jumping up and down in my seat." The relentlessly propulsive rhythm track, in contradistinction to the lyric, wants you to move. Never before or since has there been a funkier song about having no funk.) If the first lesson of political activism is to fall and to stiffen the body during a physical scuffle with authority so as not to break any bones in the event of a fall, dance always already implies movement, rather than immobility, as political possibility. Black activism has always challenged traditionalist approaches to politics, by confirming that one can get up and get down at the same time. Black performance moves toward the co-presence of mobility and immobility, control and freedom. Disorientation, falling, is always already ambivalence. Blackness is ambivalent direction, finding the fall in the ascent, and the ascent in the fall. This is survival. "To live is to suffer," DMX muses in the introduction to "Slippin'." "But to survive, well, that's to find meaning in the suffering."

And still, nobody ever asks which way is down, only which way is up. In the late 1970s, Motown R&B producer-songwriter Norman Whitfield, who had scored big with the social realism and bluesy funk of songs like "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" and "Smiling Faces Sometimes" launched a short-lived female R&B vocal trio called Stargard on MCA. A low rent version of LaBelle, the funky trio of female singers became best known for "(The Theme from) 'Which Way is Up?'," the title track to the uninspired 1977 Michael Schultz film that starred Richard Pryor in three roles. The song features a blues-inspired lyric: "Had a little trouble in the homefront/Things got funky so I had to leave right away/So I went to the city on a bus next to me/Trouble had a way of finding me." Hoping to leave her personal problems behind, the narrator hops a bus, that perpetual symbol of the protest era, and finds a new way to move—disorientation as reorientation, indirection as redirection. The refrain goes: "Which way is up?/I finally got my direction together/Which way is up?/I know now which way I'm going/Which way is Up?/Don't have to think about it twice/Which way is up?/I've got a new lease on life." Because of positivist lyrics like "finally got my direction together" and "I know now which way I'm going" "(The Theme from) 'Which Way is Up?'" could easily function as an uplift tune. However, the lyric keeps returning to the chorus: "Which way is up?" The narrator's new direction ("got myself together") seems to be undercut by indirection. "Which way is up?" is not phrased as a

statement but as a rhetorical question. Better yet, the song admits that the only realizable direction is indirection.

With its kinetic bassline, singsong motifs, reverberating organs and gutsy vocal performances, "(The Theme from) 'Which Way is Up?'" demands that the body become active, dance. (As George Clinton says, funk can not only move you, it can re-move.) The frenzy inspires the body to fall into the groove. The music performs the message of the lyric, the re-orientation that is disorientation. To make the song work, one has to move, to re-direct the body into motion. Norman Whitfield's production essentially opens up a space in which one can perform freedom to move. The body is meant to become possessed. But the lyrical content of the song is about nothing if not the mobility that is immobility, the uncertainty of certainty, the loss of directional clarity: the nearer we get to our destination, to the light, the more we slip away into darkness, confusion, ambivalence. (Paul Simon knew this intimately in the lyric to his 1977 song "Slip Slidin' Away.") Disorientation, the fall, is reorientation; the rise is the fall; climax is denouement. Your rags are your riches, your riches are your rags.

The setting of the bus station in "(The Theme from) 'Which Way is Up?'" returns me to the Greyhound terminal where my brother and I were once chastised by the porter for being down on the ground so many years ago. The bus station is an ironic place: it's a terminal for some, the end of the line, but also a place of transition where people embark on different journeys. Terminal ambivalence is the performance of disorientation. And performing ambivalence around terminality is another way to consider how people survive in the midst of suffering, negative circumstance and death. No dead-end is really an end, no fall is really a fall, just an opportunity to (re-)move. In the midst of constant worries about the political (in)direction of black people, we might pay more attention to the way blackness already remobilizes the concept of directionality. Black music, in particular, suggests new ways to move, (as) new ways to think, to live, to be.

Like rapper Talib Kweli says in the song, "move somethin'."

Notes

1. Christopher Lasch's 1996 *The Revolt of the Elites* offers a critique of the concept of the ladder in American society, and Adam Bellow also references the ladder in his preposterously false 2003 take on social mobility and family enterprise *In Praise of Nepotism*.

2. Martha Adams Sullivan's 1995 essay "May the Circle Be Unbroken: The African-American Experience of Death, Dying and Spirituality" and Sharon Holland's book *Raising the Dead* are also useful here.

3. MSM—"men who have sex with men"—is a term that allows health professionals and outreach workers to discuss men's sexual practices and behaviors without tying them to a conventional identity.

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