The Politico-Aesthetics of Groundlessness and Philippe Petit's High-Wire Walk

Gwyneth Shanks

When I see two oranges, I juggle; when I see two towers, I walk.
> —Philippe Petit, *To Reach the Clouds*

A figure stands in open air. Centred in the photo, the body seems suspended in the expanse of hazy, blue sky that opens up around their small form. On the right-hand side of the image, one tower of the newly built World Trade Center (WTC) looms. The figure is small in comparison, a smudge of black made insubstantial next to the clean, geometric grid of the tower's detailed façade. And yet it is the figure that arrests the viewer's gaze. The ground upon which this person stands is nothing but a thin cable, barely visible in the photograph. The photo, taken the morning of August 7, 1974, is of French high-wire walker Philippe Petit. Captured by Petit's friend and co-conspirator, Jean-Louis Blondeau, the image reveals a figure caught between ground and sky, between the two towers of the WTC, and between life and death. Suspended between the Twin Towers, balanced on his wire, Petit's walk celebrates the precarity of groundlessness.

Philippe Petit on a cable suspended between the two towers of the newly completed World Trade Center in New York City, August 7, 1974. Film still from the 2008 documentary, *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh. Photo: Jean-Louis Blondeau, 1974.

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Petit's feat was to capture the imagination of New Yorkers and, indeed, all of the United States (and beyond) in the days that followed. When the towers were first proposed in the 1960s, they were maligned in the local press, and by the public. Petit's walk humanized the towers for New Yorkers, transforming the alienating steel columns into a key icon of the city (Asbury 1962; Clark 1962; Huxtable 1964; Stewart 2016). Prior to his feat, New Yorkers, as reflected by community protests and news articles in the *New York Times*, disliked the WTC. The two towers were large and imposing, blocking sunlight from surrounding blocks and displacing numerous small business owners who had long worked in Lower Manhattan. His walk, which so captivated the city and the nation, worked to endear the WTC to New Yorkers. Some forty years after his feat, the death-defying act has entered the national imaginary thanks to a series of commercially and critically successful books and films. Recent works—like James Marsh's Oscar-winning 2008 documentary, Colum McCann's 2009 novel, and Robert Zemeckis's 2015 feature film—frame Petit's feat as an act of extreme imagination, dwelling on its affective dimensions. This essay, however, analyzes his walk to different ends. An analysis of Petit's performance fits within a growing body of performance studies scholarship that focuses on the shifting economic landscape of the US in the 1970s, and in what follows I wish to theorize the ways in which we might link his virtuosic performance to the economic instability of a rapidly changing nation.[1] I turn to Petit's high-wire walk as a means to examine how one negotiates the precarious space between, not only, ground and air, but also between revitalization and marginalization, a city's master plan and artists' strategic practices of infrastructural disavowal. This essay draws upon Petit's walk to theorize a politico-aesthetics of groundlessness, arguing that the groundlessness of Petit's high-wire walk serves as a critical metaphor for the city's larger economic landscape in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s.

Much work on Petit retroactively frames his walk as an example of individual will, gumption, and tenacity. His feat, thus, fits neatly into the triumphant narrative of the WTC itself (prior, at least, to 9/11): an architectural marvel that defied previous understandings of how one could build a skyscraper and came to represent, more than any other landmark in the city, its position as a hub for high finance. By focusing on groundlessness, I aim to preserve some of the virtuosic abandon of Petit's act, but I also wish to place his walk within a larger urban landscape in which groundlessness serves as a more dire metaphor for crumbling infrastructure, slashed federal funding, and impending municipal bankruptcy. Groundless, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, includes such meanings as having no ground or foundation, unsubstantiated; destitute of authority or support; having no real cause or reason; and unfounded. Groundlessness, a noun, indicates the quality of being without: without ground below, without support, or without reason. A politico-aesthetics of groundlessness aims to bring together the aesthetics and *mise en scène* of Petit's performance with the concurrent political and economic conditions of the city. The term, then, like Petit's walk, teeters between the majesty of the Icarian funambulist reaching ever skyward and the material city, struggling to attract tenants to the largely empty office spaces of the WTC and to stave off citywide bankruptcy.

Petit's walk sketches the relation between performance and groundlessness, his high-wire act materially dependent upon the lack of solid ground. If the tension between ground and groundlessness frames the material conditions of his feat, the term aims to articulate more broadly the performative quality of urban infrastructures and planning. Petit's walk was intimately linked to the WTC, and this essay expands outwards from his performance to examine the broader landscape of urban renewal and planning from which the Twin Towers emerged. Certainly much has been written about the history—performance and otherwise—of New York City in the 1970s. My aim here is not to re-tread such historical scholarship, but rather to assert that a different understanding

of the connections among the city's municipal policies, its revitalization of Lower Manhattan, and its economic downturn emerges when one looks at this period through the lens of groundlessness.[2] Petit's walk, in other words, serves as a critical metaphor for New York's economic and urban landscape in the 1970s, offering a means of charting a critical historiography of the city predicated upon groundlessness.

In recent years, a series of articles and monographs in performance studies have focused on Petit, addressed the WTC and the space's cultural resonances post-9/11, or theorized terms like ground or falling. This essay is indebted to such scholarship, which includes work by Chloe Johnston, T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko, Randy Martin, and Laura Levin.[3] Johnston focuses her article on Petit's walk, articulating how the aerial feat resonates some forty years later for the event's "secondary audience"—artists and a public fascinated by his walk (Johnston 2013, 30). Schotzko and Levin's recent monographs address a post-9/11 moment focused on, respectively, what it means to fall and the politics of the ground and how attention to the term entangles subjectivity and landscape. While this body of scholarship is historically and critically useful, I expand on their work, noting how Petit's walk and the WTC inform our understanding of New York City in the 1970s. In this respect, Martin's essay, which, in part, analyzes Trisha Brown's early equipment pieces, like *Man Walking Down a Side of Building* (1970) and *Roof Piece* (1971), through the economic landscape of the city in the 1970s, is particularly pertinent. As Martin describes, in the context of a longer essay focused on the relationship between finance and movement, the downtown art scene emerged in relationship to the city's economic downturn and the ready availability of empty real estate in which to create and show work. This alignment of performance practice and urban milieu parallels my aims in this essay. I begin by discussing Petit's walk and the relationship between his body so many thousand feet in the air and the spectators who gathered on the ground far below to watch his performance. From there, I shift to analyzing the urban policies and decisions that led to the development of the WTC and the revitalization of Lower Manhattan. Using Petit's walk as a nexus point for discussing the city's attempts at urban planning, I deploy groundlessness as a critical framework for historicizing this period in the city's development. I end by focusing on Zemeckis's recent feature film, *The Walk*, which dramatizes Petit's high-wire feat. The film, released in 2015, is the most recent artistic project to chronicle his walk, and it frames his performance as a eulogy of sorts for the fallen Twin Towers. Groundlessness, in this final section, underscores the poignancy of his feat of will, now rendered impossible as the towers are gone: an architectural void in the skyline of the city.

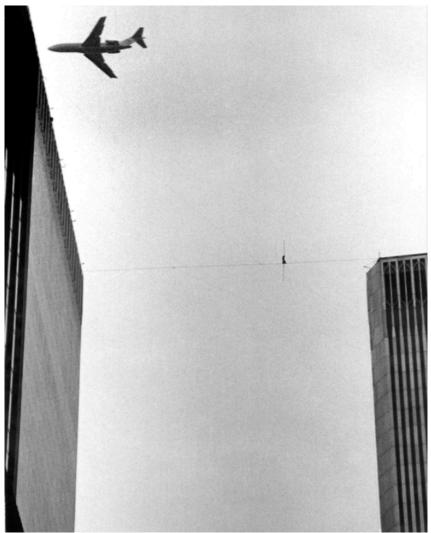## The Day Of: Walking Between Sky and Ground

Those who saw him hushed. On Church Street. Liberty. Cortlandt. West Street. Fulton. Vesey. It was a silence that heard itself, awful and beautiful.
       —Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin*

Petit is centred in an anonymous photographer's image from the day, taken from the street. The angle is such that his balance pole seems not to bisect but rather continue the vertical line of his body. The cable and guy lines create a delicate pattern of horizontal stripes interrupting the soft gray of the sky around him. Only the edges of the Two Towers are visible in the frame. The photo was taken from the ground, the angle inviting a viewer to imagine the anonymous photographer standing among a crowd of onlookers some 1,350 feet below.[4] The mise en scène of his walk, whether analyzed through photographs from the day or news accounts in papers like the *New York Times* and

the *Los Angeles Times*, entangles ground and groundlessness; to seek the groundlessness of open air is to simultaneously evoke the ground far below.

In other words, Petit's feat exemplifies a certain triumphant individualism, in which the WTC also participated. The Twin Towers, even on their opening in 1974, stood as architectural representations of a US-centric notion of global finance, a notion increasingly dependent upon neoliberalism, free trade, and the disenfranchisement of an underclass within the city (e.g., the city's near default in 1975), nationally, and internationally. To entangle Petit's feat of groundlessness with the ground far below aims to read the connotations of individual will, exceptionalism, and audacity that marked his walk and its close association with the WTC through discourses that challenge narratives of capital accumulation and, instead, reveal the precarity of such financial practices. The dynamic relationship, thus, between ground and groundlessness is both literal—pedestrians on the sidewalks of Lower Manhattan stared up at Petit far above them—and metaphoric, seeking to critically engage the economic and political connotations that undergird the towering edifices of the two towers and buttress Petit's slim body, so many feet in the air.

Philippe Petit on a cable suspended between the two towers of the newly completed World Trade Center in New York City, August 7, 1974. Film still from the 2008 documentary *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh.

Petit accomplished his walk with the help of a cohort of accomplices. He spent six years planning for his feat, collecting a group of friends (Jim Moore, Francis Brunn, Jean-Louis Blondeau, and Jean-François Heckel) willing to support, financially and otherwise, his plan. In the months leading up to August of 1974, he and his co-conspirators organized numerous clandestine missions into the newly opened WTC. They posed as builders or foreign journalists to case the towers and gain information about the building's construction (Johnston 2013, 31). The day before Petit's walk, the group, divided into two smaller cohorts, rode the freight elevators up to the roof of each tower. Petit and Jean-François spent the night hiding from the night watch crew under tarps, before slipping, early in the morning, onto the roof of the north tower. The second group, ensconced on the south tower, used a crossbow to shoot a thin hemp rope to Petit and Jean-François. The two groups then passed ever-thicker ropes, wires, and finally the galvanized steel cable across the space (Lichtenstein 1974). Petit began his walk at 7:15 a.m. and spent forty-five minutes on the cable, making a total of eight passes (Lichtenstein 1974).

His walk ended on the roof of the south tower. Alerted to Petit's presence, officers with the Port Authority Police Department arrested him as soon as he stepped off the wire. As the police led him through the crowd gathered on the street, spectators booed the officers, and WTC constructions workers, still finishing much of the interior spaces of the towers, attempted to shake his hand as he was led past them in handcuffs. Charged with disorderly conduct and criminal trespass, District Attorney Richard Kun agreed to dismiss the charges if Petit performed for free in Central Park for "the children of the city," as Kun phrased it (Lichtenstein 1974). While Petit described his punishment as "the most beautiful" he could have received, the agreement was not without its benefits for the Port Authority or the city of New York. Plagued by poor press and protests, the WTC was largely reviled by New Yorkers. Petit's walk humanized the towers, the excited fervour his walk caused effectively masking an economic critique of the towers and displacing coverage of the community protests that dogged the WTC throughout its development and construction. Reflecting on his walk some forty years later, Petit explained that, "before my walk [the towers] were not liked, generally speaking, by New York. They thought it was two, I don't know, like, file cabinets. It was unhuman [sic], inhuman" (Loinaz 2015). While Petit is correct in his characterization, the assumption, shared by *New York Times* architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, that New Yorkers' disliked the towers because of their design obscures more pointed critiques of the WTC vis-à-vis municipal planning and economic development that circulated through the 1960s and '70s. After his walk, Petit continues, the city embraced them because he had "rendered them human," by placing his body—a small, vertical figure—in parallel with the towering edifices (Loinaz 2015). Following his stunt, the 110th and 107th floors of the south tower were converted into public observation decks so that all New Yorkers could experience the view Petit saw (Glanz and Lipton 2003, 220). Ironically, his walk, which seemed to so epitomize nonconformity, was repackaged as the ultimate publicity stunt for the WTC.

McCann opens his 2009 novel *Let the Great World Spin* with Petit's walk, imagining what it would have been like to view, so many feet above, the small figure of the unknown funambulist. If Petit's walk is often discussed—in news reports from the time and contemporary works of art—as an act of individual virtuosity, McCann reminds us of the countless individuals who witnessed his feat. His prose describes not the virtuosity of the singular performer but the spectacle of stasis that gripped hundreds of New Yorkers travelling to work early on the morning of August 7 as they stared upward at his small body. The crowds, standing in large and small groups, stared upward, transfixed by the audacity of the high wire walker. He writes:

> They found themselves in small groups together beside the traffic lights on the corner of Church and Dey; gathered under the awning of Sam's barbershop; in the doorway of Charlie's Audio . . . elbowing for space at the windows of the Woolworth Building. . . . From the Staten Island Ferry they glimpsed him. From the meatpacking warehouses on the West Side. . . . From the breakfast carts down on Broadway. (McCann 2009, 4)

McCann's opening collapses geographic space within the city, creating a viewing collective from the disparate throngs of people gathered on the Staten Island Ferry or walking down the sidewalk in Lower Manhattan. His novel reminds us that Petit's performance extended beyond the expanse of his 131-foot-long cable to the ground below. Grace Lichtenstein of the *New York Times* reported that "hundreds of spectators created a traffic jam" in the streets below the WTC, while John Goldman of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that, "Traffic halted on the Brooklyn Bridge; cars stopped near the Trade Center" (Lichtenstein 1974; Goldman 1974). McCann's prose imagines the people on the sidewalks below Petit as engaged in a kind of all-encompassing viewership, predicated not on the singular figure looking down and seeing all, but rather a reverse panopticism born of hundreds of viewers looking up.

Crowds gathered on the sidewalk below the Twin Towers, watching Philippe Petit. New York City, August 7, 1974. Film still from the 2008 documentary *Man on Wire*, directed by James Marsh.

McCann's grounded crowd challenges the ground/sky dialectic, which privileges the aerial view. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French theorist Michel de Certeau articulates the relationship between knowledge and sight, describing the viewer perched on the 110th floor of the WTC as akin to a god, able to see the whole city laid out before her. He writes:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. (De Certeau 1984, 91)

De Certeau's description—written some ten years after Petit's walk and made possible because of the public observation deck his feat helped create—is not dissimilar from McCann's. Each evokes the various neighbourhoods of the city, their prose moving a reader from Wall Street to Greenwich, or from the corner of Church and Dey to Sam's Barbershop. If both imagine the geographic sprawl of the city, they invite the reader to experience that space from distinctly different vantage points. While de Certeau looks down, pulled out of the city's grid, McCann drops his reader onto the street, passing beneath the awning of a local business, feeling the sharp jab of an elbow as one is jostled in a crowd of onlookers. Between the two authors, ground and groundlessness become entangled in the confluence of the city's geographic spaces and one's ability to see the city laid out before or below one. De Certeau's panoptic viewer is often evoked as a figure of control or authority over and above the pedestrians crowding the streets below. McCann's description of Petit's walk asks a reader instead to imagine the affective pull between ground and air: one is predicated on the other. It is a description not dissimilar from phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's contention that bodies can "catch" movement from other bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1964). Theatre scholar Peta Tait writes, describing a viewer of a circus or aerial performer, "Merleau-Ponty's idea of catching is not a literal touching but perceptual attunement and engagement of the whole body that is oriented to others through its pre-existing history of movement . . . and this catching is underpinned by . . . sight in particular" (Tait 2005, 149). If McCann focuses on the affective awe Petit inspired, Merleau-Ponty and Tait encourage a reading of the pedestrian spectator that links affect to embodied empathy and, further, links that spectator's body to Petit's far above.

McCann describes the crowds watching Petit as hushed and still, descriptions borrowed from contemporary news accounts.[5] While descriptions of Petit's walk highlight his movement—eight passes across the wire!—they also note his stillness: poised for what seemed like minutes at the edge of the WTC's roof. To stand still, to *stage stillness*, as performance studies scholar Harvey Young reminds us, renders the embodied and phenomenological experience of being stilled legible as a site of control and authority (2010). Groundlessness, however, articulates a *lack* of authority or structural control. We might imagine these moments of stillness, then, which circulated between Petit and his audience, as articulating not the stasis of capture which Young discusses, but rather the disruption of authority, which dance scholar André Lepecki discusses (Lepecki 2006, 1). In standing still and staring upward, the crowds gathered to watch Petit disrupted the early morning commutes of thousands of New Yorkers, slowing business in the financial district for much of the day. There was a traffic jam on the Brooklyn Bridge; the NYPD struggled to figure out just what charges to bring against Petit. The stillness, then, of Petit and, even more so, of the crowds gathered to watch him rendered legible—if only momentarily—the potential for authorial disruption contained within groundlessness.

Scholars like Johnston describe the affective potency our cultural imaginary holds in keeping Petit aloft, as she describes it. Johnson argues that by imagining our own experiences walking, standing atop a tall building, or using Petit's walk to eulogize the fallen towers and those who died, a contemporary audience "reclaim[s] a space whose meaning changed irrevocably in the years since," 1974 (Johnston 2013, 34). She argues that we project ourselves, phenomenologically and affectively,

into Petit's performance; groundlessness offers a means to expand upon Johnston's contention, revealing the ways in which such projection is not only about a kind of retroactive remembrance, but is also tied to the historical context of the day of his performance. Petit's walk, in other words, was never only *his* walk. Rather, the politico-aesthetics of groundlessness his feat articulates was contingent on the space between ground and open air, between viewers looking up and his body poised in the hazy morning sky above.

The tension between ground and groundlessness offers a way to imagine the collective ideology contained within Petit's performance. No longer an act of single-minded individualism, groundlessness gestures toward the community of onlookers, accomplices, arresting officers, and construction workers who constituted the scope of his performance. Groundlessness frames not only the material conditions of Petit's walk, but likewise articulates what ground was absent from his performance. It was, of course, the material ground of the city's sidewalks. If the stability of the viewer standing on Church and Dey seems categorically different from Petit's body balanced so precariously on the cable, the politico-aesthetics of groundlessness becomes a lens through which it is possible to articulate the ability of both figures—the funambulist and the spectator—to disrupt space. Both, whether by breaking into the WTC or blocking traffic, disrupted the city's municipal laws and policies. But only momentarily. Traffic resumed, and the District Attorney's decision to *not* press charges could be read as merely re-instantiating the city's final authorial control.

The World Trade Center Rises: Urban Renewal and the Master Plan

This is a Plan for Lower Manhattan: for its business core, its transportation facilities, its waterfront and its land, for its place in the Manhattan Central Business District and in the metropolitan region as a whole. It is thus not merely a project…but a system of development…in which every phase of downtown life is related in an overall process of planning and change.
    —Carol Willis, *The Lower Manhattan Plan*

When Petit walked across his wire, the two towers had only recently been completed. Indeed, most of the interior of the north tower was still unfinished, allowing Petit and his co-conspirators to pose so convincingly as builders simply surveying the work yet to be done. However, the planning for the WTC reaches back to the late 1940s and renders legible the shifting dynamics of the city's desire to revitalize Lower Manhattan (Willis 2002). The WTC serves as a through line from which to trace the city's attempts to reimagine certain neighbourhoods, gesturing outwards to discourses of urban renewal, community protests against the proposed building projects, and infighting between the leading industrialists of the day. By 1974, as the city neared bankruptcy, its master plan to reimagine Lower Manhattan, quoted in the epigraph to this section, was in disarray. The WTC was behind schedule; the majority of its office spaces were not leased; the landfill, created from dirt excavated from the WTC construction site, and meant to hold an upscale housing development for businessmen who would work in the WTC, was still a stretch of undeveloped dirt. The imagined city of the future that was to rise on the island's tip was not the urban utopia developers had promised. Instead, Lower Manhattan was affected by the city and the nation's financial woes. Groundlessness thus foregrounds the financial *instability* that was to grip the city, articulating how the abstraction of the city's political economy was made manifest in the concrete construction taking place in Lower Manhattan.

As a historiographic frame, groundlessness is an effective metaphor for discussing urban development in the city in the 1970s. The term, however, is also a critical analytic for parsing out the material and precarious relationships that circulate among and across aesthetic production, municipal development, financial speculation, and urban communities. Dance studies scholar Randy Martin theorizes the notion of the derivative, which in finance "came to stand for vast aggregates of wealth unmoored from any particular purpose," through the progressive ethos he assigns to contemporary dance practice. In this shifted milieu, the derivative is harnessed as a logic which allows dance practices "to shuttle between the ground they inhabit and the world that they ripple through," effectively navigating the precarity of dance production (Martin 2012, 75). Groundlessness aims for a similar flexibility—a descriptor I use not unaware of the neoliberal connotations of labour it can evoke—reminding us of Petit's ephemeral gesture as much as it returns us to the financial instability of urban development and speculation.

Responding in the late 1950s to the economic depression of sections of the city, New York, in partnership with a variety of development associations, orchestrated numerous large-scale building projects. Throughout the '40s and '50s the city had attempted to revitalize Midtown Manhattan, and by the later '50s, the city shifted its redevelopment plans downtown. In the late '50s, Lower Manhattan and the Financial District were no longer the financial centre the area had been at the turn of the previous century. Nine- and ten-story skyscrapers, built in the 1880s, dominated the area, which was primarily populated by small, individually owned businesses (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1050). David Rockefeller, the grandson of John Rockefeller, saw potential in the neighbourhood and spearheaded efforts to revitalize it. He formed the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association (DLMA), and it was through their efforts that a proposal, the Lower Manhattan Plan, was drafted in 1966. The centrepiece of the DLMA's plan was the development of the WTC, a global nexus of high finance that was projected to secure NYC's position as a city of global economic import (Buttenwieser 2002, 21–27).

The Lower Manhattan Plan was eventually funded by the Port Authority based upon the sheer number of office spaces the proposal would add to Lower Manhattan. Eschewing more established New York architectural firms like Harrison & Abramovitz or Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, the Port Authority commissioned Minoru Yamasaki to design the centre (Robins 2011, 26). Known for his ornamental design and pastiche of modern techniques and historical motifs, Yamasaki was considered an iconoclastic choice. His initial design for the WTC included dense, detailed grids of overlapping arches. Over the course of the design process, though, the complex façade was stripped down to the barest pattern of arches. Briefly, before the Chicago Tower was built, the WTC was the tallest building in the US, a feat achieved due to the skyscraper's innovative engineering, which included a lattice-like exoskeleton of steel columns and the addition of express and local elevators, thus maximizing rentable office space. "The World Trade Center should, because of its importance," Yamasaki wrote of his design, "become a representation of man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity, his beliefs in the cooperation of men, and through cooperation, his ability to find greatness" (Olson 2012). The two tall towers, then, were never only framed as office space; rather, from their inception they were championed as representing American exceptionalism. Refusing the ground, the architectural logic of the twin skyscrapers instead equated exceptionalism with reaching ever higher, with a kind of groundlessness.

While the WTC's grand vertical scale was meant to inaugurate the city as a key financial centre, the notion—even on the part of the architect, who was himself afraid of heights—of actually being in the space seemed unnatural, uncanny. Being able to look down and see the city laid out far below

one was an exhilarating rush, and yet being elevated so far above the grounded flow of the city's streets could also produce destabilizing vertigo. The WTC's campaign slogan read, "It's hard to be down when you're up." The pun attempted to elide the attendant embodied anxiety around skyscrapers, framing the dozens of skyscrapers that were built during the early '60s and into the '70s as symbols of progress and futurity. The slogan, however, was to resonate quite differently by the mid '70s, with the city firmly caught in the throes of an economic recession (Glanz and Lipton 2003, 220).

Connected to the DLMA's plans to redevelop the existing neighbourhoods in Lower Manhattan, the association likewise drafted plans to develop a landfill site along the southwestern side of the island. The landfill, Battery Park City, was to be created from the tons of dirt excavated to construct the WTC's vast basements. Draft plans for the proposed development included residential housing developments and a high-end hotel. Newly elected New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller (and brother of DLMA's head, David Rockefeller) proposed plans for the landfill site, which, unlike his brother's proposal, included middle- and low-income housing (Gordon 1997, 12). Infighting between the competing developers continued throughout the late 1960s, as each group jockeyed over the amount of middle- and low-income housing Battery Park City was to have (Gordon 1997, 23–26). These fights ensured that, while the excavated debris and dirt from the rapidly progressing WTC construction site slowly formed a stretch of land along the island's waterfront, any long-term development goals for the landfill would remain stalled. Governor Rockefeller had the money to finance any development on the site, and the city of New York, now represented by newly elected Mayor John Lindsay, had the rights to the land (Gordon 1997, 21). Eventually, however, a compromise plan was reached in 1969. In its final version, it largely jettisoned the proposed housing units, clearly articulating for whom the DLMA "city of the future" was meant.

Architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote in a *New York Times* article that, "Battery Park City is progressive, sophisticated and promising development" (Huxtable 1969). In a review from 1969 in *Architectural Record*, she goes further, describing the development as, "a proposal for new housing, new jobs, and new land . . . perhaps a new kind of urban life" (Gordon 1997, 27). That new kind of urban life, though, was one that projected an urban future seemingly devoid of poverty—or at least not concerned with it. The designs featured a complex and futuristic pod layout, structurally linked by what came to be known as the spine. A shopping mall, as opposed to Governor Rockefeller's low-income housing, acted as a main thoroughfare for the development, linking office spaces to housing (Gordon 1997, 25, 27). Battery Park City, still only piles of dirt and building debris in '69, was hailed as a new model in urban planning. Like the rhetoric surrounding the WTC—a feat of engineering that was to vastly shift the composition of the city for the better—the landfill was imagined as the city of the future, one able to instantly create itself from the cast-off dirt of the ever-rising WTC. When Petit walked between the two towers, Battery Park City was still a stretch of sand and dirt, the abandoned lot indicative of the lack of financial support undergirding the Lower Manhattan Plan, the newly erected WTC, New York City, and, indeed, the nation.

If the WTC was meant to bolster the city's finances, initially it did exactly the opposite. Its completion in '73 "glutted the downtown economy" with office space (Gordon 1997, 51). Just as demand for office space declined due to rising unemployment, the market was inundated with thousands of units of available office space in the newly completed WTC. The excess space sent rents across Manhattan spiralling downward (Gordon 1997, 51). Residential rents, which were tied to office rates, also plummeted, and Battery Park City seemed less and less likely to be profitable, if indeed even feasible. The bond revenue that the Urban Development Corporation had promised to

fund the construction of the housing units on the landfill was rescinded (Harvey 2005, 73). Likewise, the Nixon administration ended federal support for low-income housing initiatives in 1973, so even the small number of low-income housing units the final Battery Park City proposal included became the financial obligation of New York State and the city (Gordon 1997, 52). Floundering under rising interest rents, increasing unemployment, and ballooning debt, neither could fund construction at the landfill. The vacant site revealed the impossible myth of ever-triumphant urban development and renewal and showed that ghosting every urban plan is the possibility of perpetual deferral.

As Manhattan was experiencing rising unemployment, falling rent, and stalled construction, the country also entered a period of prolonged stagflation (Bailey and Farber 2004, 2). The term, coined by pop-economists, was meant to explain the state of the national economy, which was simultaneously experiencing both inflation and stagnation (Bailey and Farber 2004, 2). Throughout the Midwest and Northeast, manufacturing jobs disappeared as more and more factories moved overseas, where labour was cheap and regulations lax. Only a few months after Gerald Ford took office in 1974 the poetically named "misery index" (which aimed to determine how the average citizen was doing by combining unemployment data with inflation) reached a high of 19.9%.[6] The decade's stagnation decimated the city's financial sector, throwing New York into its infamous 1975 debt crisis. The city avoided collapse because the Teacher's Union handed over $150 million dollars to the city from the union's pension fund, a move that bolstered the finances of the city on the backs of its citizen-workers.[7] Two years later, the citywide looting, violence, and mass arrests linked to the infamous twenty-five-hour blackout were blamed on a city discontent with and disenfranchised by the economic downturn.[8] The pervasive racism and corruption on the part of the NYPD led to the targeted arrest of nearly three thousand people during the blackout, primarily people of colour and those living close to poverty. By the end of the decade, a million people had left the city, a population decline that was not to be regained until the '90s, when the success of the city's numerous large-scale gentrification projects began to take effect. The optimistic language of self-renewal and revitalization of the Lower Manhattan Plan seemed, by the mid-1970s, an ironic and cruel jab at the city's economic recession.[9]

For scholars like David Harvey and historians of New York, the city's 1975 debt crisis functions as the culmination and clearest representation of the city's financial woes—a means of framing the city's lack of funding for social services or its rising poverty and police violence (Harvey 2005; Tabb, 1982; Moody, 2007). Rather than replicating this albeit useful history, I instead want to linger on the relationship between the WTC and the Battery Park landfill, proposing the image of the abandoned landfill as one way in which to frame the city's economy. For most of the 1970s, Battery Park landfill defined the visual composition of Lower Manhattan. Aerial photographs from the decade show a strip of undeveloped, vacant land hugging the Lower Manhattan waterfront: they symbolize a city in decline. The placement of the landfill, adjacent to the Financial District, was meant to create a lucrative circuit between it and the immaterial exchange of money, futures, and interests upon which much of the economy of Lower Manhattan was predicated. The landfill does not represent the triumphant groundlessness of Petit's walk; rather, it articulates—through its literal ground, the cast off dirt of the WTC—the financial groundlessness of the city as a whole.

The landfill was built atop (and structurally supported by) the city's derelict piers and abandoned ferry docks, relics of the city's port that thrived a century earlier. In a sense, then, the landfill was materially book-ended by two iterations of capitalist production in the city: the nineteenth-century piers and the twentieth-century WTC. In Zemeckis's 2015 film *The Walk*, the landfill appears in a shot of Petit (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) lying on his back on the cable between the two towers. The

camera is positioned "above" Petit's body and looks down toward what is presumably a computer-generated image of the ground far below, where just visible in the lower right corner of the frame is the expanse of Battery Park landfill. The space is mostly empty piles of dirt, although a few beat-up cars are parked on a section of the landfill that had been paved. While the shot is brief, the juxtaposition of Petit, the WTC, and the abandoned landfill far below is extreme: the freedom of the skyscraper and the squalor of the abandoned lot.

Film still from *The Walk*, directed by Robert Zemeckis. Petit (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) lies down on his cable strung between the Twin Towers. Below him is the undeveloped expanse of the Battery Park landfill.

It is this very juxtaposition that, I argue, shifts the poetic groundlessness of Petit's walk back to the material conditions of NYC in the summer of '74. Linked to the tower's construction, the landfill articulates a notion of groundlessness that indicates a lack of support or foundation. Performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson argues that performance and aesthetic production is contingent upon networks of support, or support systems, whether they be institutional, affective, or community-based (Jackson 2011, 30–33). To assert the landfill as articulating groundlessness, then, is to note the failure of municipal governance, its mandate predicated upon the continued function of social support systems. To evoke Jackson is also to frame municipal planning as a type of performative, or perhaps choreographic, practice, in which smaller elements are interconnected and the entire endeavour is mobilized for particular ends. The landfill, which lingered for over a decade as an expanse of undeveloped land, pointedly reveals the lack of federal, state, or municipal support for the project. The juxtaposition between the WTC and the landfill renders legible the tension embedded within a politico-aesthetics of groundlessness; it is a tension that plays on the literalness of Petit's groundless walk and the underdeveloped, abandoned ground of the landfill. Groundlessness frames the lack of financial support that left the landfill abandoned and, more broadly, left so many of the city's citizens neglected and funding for social services gutted. The vacant landfill and the towering WTC each rendered legible an earlier, brighter moment in the city's planning, one backed by big money and sleek midcentury designs. If the empty landfill, devoid of

development, more clearly telegraphed the city's financial instability, the WTC remained no less an image of the city's instability: a large-scale building project conceived over and above (literally) the welfare of the city's residents.

Groundlessness links the WTC to the abandoned Battery Park City landfill, helps us think across the DLMA's master plans for Lower Manhattan to the city's recession and debt crisis, and frames the slashing of social services through Yamasaki's triumphant rhetoric about the architectural legacy of the WTC. In other words, groundlessness proposes a conceptual analytic for linking urban planning and the effects the city's recession and debt crisis had upon its citizens to the visual depictions of the city itself, namely the abandoned Battery Park City landfill. If the abandoned landfill serves as a visual motif for framing the larger economic downturn in the city, it did not stay empty. By the mid-1980s, building had finally begun. While the city of the future Huxtable praised never did materialize, David Rockefeller's desire for an upscale housing development that would cater to the wealthy and affluent eventually did. The successful implementation of much of what was initially proposed in the 1950s for Lower Manhattan, then, serves as a harbinger of sorts for New York's current situation: a city increasingly pricing out middle- and lower-income families and communities. Groundlessness articulates a kind of promiscuous historiography, framing temporally and spatially disparate links between the New York of the 1970s and today.

A Eulogy to the City: The Walk Now

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame/ With conquering limbs astride from land to land; Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand/ A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame/ Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name/ Mother of Exiles.
      —Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," 1883

Film still from *The Walk*, directed by Robert Zemeckis. Petit (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) stands on the small balcony surrounding the torch carried by the Statue of Liberty, narrating his high-wire caper to the film's viewer. Behind him is Lower Manhattan, including the Twin Towers.

The Walk opens with a closely framed shot of Petit's face. Looking directly out at the viewer, he begins to describe his most daring and dramatic feat: walking between the Twin Towers. As he

continues to speak, the image shifts. We are now looking at an aerial view of Lower Manhattan; the Twin Towers are barely visible, encased in a wreath of clouds. The shot pulls out so that the face of the Statue of Liberty fills the foreground of the frame. Slowly, the shot pans upward to her crown, then up her arm, to finally rest on the observation deck surrounding her torch, where we see Petit poised upon the deck. Dressed in his signature black turtleneck and pants, he resumes his monologue to the viewer, before inviting us to journey backward in time and across the Atlantic to Paris to witness the inception of his plan to walk between the towers. This framing device recurs throughout the film, disrupting a linear narrative in which Petit and his co-conspirators' plan might unfold as some grand, high-wire heist. Instead, the continual return to the top of the Statue of Liberty positions Petit as a kind of empyrean narrator, not confined in his life or its fictional portrayal by considerations of space or height, safety or legality.[10]

The framing device, however, does more than simply assert Petit's exceptionalism. His walk, as Zemeckis's film articulates, carries a far different meaning in 2015 than it did in 1974; Petit's performance has come to serve as a eulogy for the fallen towers. Standing atop the Statue of Liberty, his act is repurposed to represent freedom, tenacity, and an unbreakable American spirit. Lady Liberty is the nineteenth-century embodiment of the city, and the WTC was symbolic in the 1970s of the city's transnational, financial aspirations. Such aspirations and the urban policies and plans that aimed to ensure they came to built fruition were to leave many New Yorkers—the poor, communities of colour, immigrant communities—out of luck. If Petit's walk has been marked as the moment in which New York embraced the towers, they stood throughout the 1980s and '90s as global symbols of American transnational capitalism and neoliberalism. Groundlessness in this final section thus serves as a means to reflect on the role Petit's walk occupies within the national imaginary. While the appearance of the Statue of Liberty in Zemeckis's film frames an ideological link among Petit, American exceptionalism, freedom, and the fallen towers, here I question the ways in which Petit's walk has been re-cast as a feat of nationalistic will.

The Statue of Liberty stands on Liberty Island in the New York Harbor. It served as the most monumental expression of the relationship between the United States and France in the nineteenth century. Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, a French sculptor who later in life became fascinated by colossal sculptural works, designed the copper statue, and Gustave Eiffel, the engineer primarily responsible for the Eiffel Tower, built it. Some ten years after Bartholdi proposed the idea in 1875, the Statue of Liberty was dedicated on October 28, 1886, the centennial anniversary of American independence. For a film about a Frenchman inspired by American architecture, the statue serves as a temporal bookend of sorts. Some one hundred years after Bartholdi expressed his admiration for American democracy by conceiving of the colossal Statue of Liberty, Petit expressed his reverence for American architecture by walking between the Twin Towers.

Less obviously, however, the Statue of Liberty invites an investigation between the New York City of the 1870s, when the statue was constructed, and the moment, almost a century later, when Petit undertook his walk. In both periods, the city was experiencing a particularly devastating recession, the effects of which were primarily borne on the backs of its most impoverished or marginalized workers. This analysis, then, resists the direction of Zemeckis's lens, which directs a viewer always to look outwards at the beautifully lit skyline of New York City. Instead, groundlessness offers a way to linger in the abstracted language of defaulted loans, crashing markets, and the lack of municipal support for social services, all of which were to grip the city in fall of 1873.

The panic of 1873 and the subsequent nation-wide depression began in New York City. One of the city's leading businessmen, Jay Cooke, who had invested heavily in the railroads, was unable to fund

the proposed westward extension of the Northern Pacific Railway. Instead, Jay Cooke and Co. filed for bankruptcy. The effects of his company's bankruptcy rippled outward, closing the New York Stock Exchange for ten days and throwing much of the nation into a depression.[11] Life insurance companies in New York City collapsed; real estate values, as in the 1970s, burst, and thousands of property owners in the city found their equity wiped away "as with a sponge" (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1022). Construction projects, a clear indicator of financial boom times, largely halted; lots that had been purchased years before to construct middle-income homes lay abandoned.

As would be the case with the city's recession in the 1970s, those who bore the brunt of the city's decimated economy were its most precariously situated communities: the working poor, recent immigrants, communities of colour, and the homeless. Unemployment was over 25%; homelessness and hunger grew, and the floors of the city's police stations and almshouses were blanketed with those who had nowhere else to sleep (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1023). The response to the city's growing impoverishment was discontent on the part of the disenfranchised (the Tompkins Square riot of 1874 was the most famous, and many in power in the city feared the clash was the precursor to a Paris Commune-like takeover) and ridicule on the part of the press and the city's elite.[12] The *New York Graphic*, a popular publication at the time, wrote, "Whining and whimpering are as useless as they are disgusting," while the *New York Times* stated that the "natural laws of trade" were simply "working themselves out" (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1023). One of the biggest impacts the depression had upon the city's workers was the decimation of the unions; by 1880, the city's unionized rank and file had shrunk from 45,000 members to 5,000 (Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1027). Groundlessness offers a metaphoric framework for thinking between the vaulted heights— literal and symbolic—of the Statue of Liberty's torch and the grounded effects of the city's concurrent recession. By analyzing Zemeckis's framing device not only through the symbolism of the Statue of Liberty—freedom, enlightenment—but also through the city's political and economic history, the Statue, like the abandoned Battery Park City landfill, returns us back to the ground and to the effects of the city's economy upon its citizens. Groundlessness links the symbolic and discursive potency of towering edifices like the WTC or the Statue of Liberty, the former representing twentieth-century globalization and the emergence of neoliberalism and the latter a nineteenth-century understanding of *liberté*, with the city's economic landscape, and to the material effects the city's economy has upon its citizens.

The Statue of Liberty has long stood as a visual icon of freedom—or its demise—in the US cultural imaginary. Think of the fallen Lady Liberty, buried in sand and eroded by the tides, in the final scene of the 1968 version of the *Planet of the Apes*, or the image of the drowned statue in the 2001 film, *A.I.* Likewise, protest groups have used it to highlight the discontent about the United States purportedly valuing "freedom" yet continually disenfranchising certain minoritarian communities through governmental policies. In August of 1970, protestors affiliated with the upcoming nationwide Women's Strike, organized by the National Organization for Women, unfurled a banner reading "Women of the World Unite" from the statue's pedestal. In 1977, and again in 2000, Puerto Rican activists illegally gained access to the statue's crown and unfurled the flag of the unincorporated US territory. Petit's position atop the Statue of Liberty in Zemeckis's film thus places him—supreme cypher of anarchist joy and liberty in the film—atop a symbol most often linked to nationalist (and capitalist) notions of freedom. The film's repeated framing device certainly underscores the illegality of his performance; yet it also, I would argue, more clearly alludes to the tempered promise of the nation's symbolic gatekeeper, welcoming yet always regulating the huddled masses who might seek shelter at the nation's shores.

The Statue of Liberty functions as a potent visual eulogy for the fallen Twin Towers and a reclamation of the notions of freedom for which the WTC came to stand in the days, weeks, and years following 9/11. By placing Petit atop the statue, Zemeckis positions his film as a monument or a eulogy to the fallen towers, narrating Petit's walk through American ideologies of freedom. The Statue of Liberty's survival in the face of the devastation of Ground Zero across the harbour came to symbolize the city's resilience, a resilience extended in *The Walk* to retroactively paint Petit's feat as representative of resilience and ingenuity "unique" to the American national imaginary. Schotzko opens *Learning How to Fall* with photojournalist Richard Drew's photo *Falling Man*, which depicted a man falling from a window of the WTC on September 11, 2001. The photo, in her book, serves as a starting point for articulating the entanglement of reality, representation, and cultural production in a post-9/11 world. Falling through, in her argument, becomes a way to theorize the shift from real event with material consequences to aesthetic practice, the consequences of which might be no less material. The phrase, though, like Merleau-Ponty's idea of catching movement, imagines a type of collectivity in which the affect of the fall is never singular but multiplicitous (Schotzko 2015, 57). If Zemeckis's film seems shadowed by the fall, groundlessness, as it emerges through Petit's walk, is not only about movement (the fall of the towers that now renders his feat impossible or the suspense of if he would fall) but also about a certain stillness. Spectators stare upward, arrested in their morning commute by the spectacle of Petit's figure or the funambulist lying still on his back on the wire. Groundlessness, thus, reminds us of stillness's affective dimensions: of awe of Petit's groundless feat. It also, however, engages the way the mediatization of his walk (the still images that document his feat or Zemeckis's film) affirms, perhaps overdetermines, the way in which his feat has become archived, remembered, and reproduced.

The film ends with an image of the Twin Towers; it is night and they are illuminated. The surrounding skyline fades away and the viewer is left with only the outline of the WTC. If *Falling Man* and the fallen towers indicate the impossibility of ever re-performing Petit's walk, stillness, groundlessness, freezes it in amber. The film fades to black as the towers, seemingly transformed into glowing embers, pulsate before themselves fading to black.

Ground Zero and a Space of Zero Ground

The essential thing is to etch movements in the sky, movements so still they leave no trace.
    —Philippe Petit, "On the High Wire."

August 2014 was the fortieth anniversary of Petit's walk between the towers; September of this year marked the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11. The WTC has been rebuilt, now One World Trade Center. Its glittering tower rises, as did the Twin Towers, above the surrounding skyscrapers. Coincidently, when I began this project, I lived in New York City. I had lived in the city for nearly a year but had only ventured to Ground Zero once before. Exiting from the wrong subway stop, I found myself confronted by a tall chain link fence and a vast emptiness in the city's skyline. As I began research on Petit, I returned to the site; the emptiness I recalled from my previous experience was gone. Instead, there were dozens of cranes and three half-built skyscrapers. Sunglasses on, I stood amidst a crowd of people. It was surprisingly quiet. The usual din of the city's streets was muted. The slow-moving groups of people crowding the sidewalk mirrored—echoed—the slow, almost languid dips and lifts of the cranes. It was a delicate dance of metal and steel, of cranes and dump trucks, a choreography that slowly inched its dancers upward, recreating, rebuilding the scar of an emptied skyline. My gaze drifted upward, away from the reality of the scene before me, attempting to imagine

the spectre of Petit's small figure poised at the edge of the absent north tower of the WTC. I stared into empty sky. My mind's gaze shifted from Ground Zero to the space of zero ground, over a thousand feet in the air. My gaze shifted from the construction site before me, shifted from the need to remember and somehow bear witness to the national wound—a city's, a nation's trauma—to a decades-old memory of transgression.

I stood in the lengthening shadows of the Ground Zero construction site. Above me, towering on all sides, was a whole world of seemingly "empty" air, compressed between the skyscrapers of the financial district. This open air is the world of Petit's groundlessness; his walk existed "at the threshold of the visible in the sky, [when] movement and stillness are held as one," and where ground and groundlessness entangle (Heathfield 2009, 43). Yamasaki sought, with his narrow windows, to foreclose that threshold of the visible, sought to eliminate the ability to trace the open air with each careful step of the funambulist. Petit's walk placed his body and those of his audience members many feet below in relationship to that threshold, which twines between air and ground. His diary from the early 1970s lays out his philosophy of high wire walking; he writes, "the essential thing is to etch movements in the sky, movements so still they leave no trace" (Heathfield 2009, 43).

Notes

1. See, among other works, Jackson 2011, 2012; Martin 2012; Rosenberg 2012. See also, in critical thought, Hardt 2006; Hardt and Negri 2004; Hardt and Virno 1996.

2. A small selection of such scholarship, across urban studies, history, and performance studies includes such works as Brecher and Horton 1993; Delany 1999; Gandy 2002; Miller 2016.

3. See Johnston 2013; Martin 2012; Schotzko 2015; Levin 2014.

4. See Lichtenstein 1974.

5. John Goldman (Goldman 1974), writing for the Los Angeles Times in 1974, describes spectators as "gap[ing] in amazing," and left "breathless" by Petit's feat. "All eyes," Goldman continues, "were riveted upwards."

6. In an odd historical coincidence, a mere two days after Petit's walk between the two towers, President Richard Nixon became the first president to resign from office. Mr. Nixon met the press for one last meeting on the White House lawn and remarked, "I wish I had the publicity that Frenchman had." Performance studies scholar Chloe Johnston writes that "Petit's successful walk was not only a 'diversion' from the drama of this country's first presidential resignation, but could also be understood as a powerful rebuke, a symbol of triumph and bravery amidst a time of cowardice and cover-ups." Bailey and Farber 2004, 4; Johnston 2013, 31.

7. As David Harvey explains, the answer to the city's debt was an important step in inaugurating neoliberal policies on a national and international stage, laying a blueprint for the way in which US was to deal with debtor countries. Harvey 2005, 73.

8. Mayor Beame, lampooned as a beggar on the cover of Time magazine during the debt crisis of two years earlier, accused Consolidated Edison, Inc. of "gross negligence," an accusation that was to stand up in court.

9. As noted on page five, Randy Martin's essay contextualizes the emergence of the downtown art scene, particularly dance, in New York City with the decimation of the manufacturing sector that had dominated business in Lower Manhattan and SoHo. As businesses increasingly closed, those spaces were left empty, and artists—like Trisha Brown—either purchased spaces or squatted in them. Martin 2012, 71.

10. The observation deck surrounding the torch was only ever open to visiting dignitaries on special request, but it was permanently closed in 1916 following infrastructural damage to the statue's arm.

Shanks

11. The effects of the US-led depression were felt across the Atlantic in Europe, leading, in part, to a two-decade-long depression in the UK. Burrows and Wallace 1999, 1022.

12. The Tompkins Square riot of 1988 likewise focalized clashes between the city's elite, backed by the authority of the NYPD, and its most marginalized communities.

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