How to Begin is also Where: Placemaking Pedagogy and June Jordan’s *His Own Where*

The Harlem Riots of 1964 marked a turning point in June Jordan’s thinking about the possibilities for black flourishing in white America. In the wake of this uprising, Jordan embarked on an urban redesign project with architect and planner R. Buckminster Fuller titled “Skyrise for Harlem”: “a proposal to rescue a quarter million lives by completely transforming their environment...which may actually determine the pace, pattern and quality of living experience,” a veritable blueprint for reparations.¹

Harlem, at the time, was the focus of much pathologizing media attention, which Jordan counters through statistics that point to the state’s neglect of the neighborhood: inadequate housing, dangerous traffic, and underfunded schools that effectively lowered children’s IQs. The article outlines a carefully researched plan for an environmental solution to these problems, including how to fund the project. What stands out are the conical skyscrapers — cornerless, concrete towers that would house families, direct traffic, and serve as centers of commercial and recreational life.

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In a deceptive turn of events, the editors of *Esquire* published the article, attributing the design wholly to Fuller, and renaming it “Instant Slum Clearance,” thus bolstering a white supremacist geography of Harlem as a dirty, worthless neighborhood in need of erasure, rather than a neighborhood *that is owed* clean air and water, safety, quiet, parks: deliberately designed spaces that would make love a reasonable response.

We see a similar attentiveness to the particularities of place in the teaching and writing Jordan undertook in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including teaching at the City College of New York and in the extracurricular Teachers and Writers Collaborative, and her 1971 young adult novel, *His Own Where*. During these years, Jordan was involved with the fight for Black English, Black Studies, and bilingual education, crucial aspects of larger struggles for racial justice and what Lisa Duggan calls the “downwardly redistributive” social movements of the late
twentieth century. While Jordan would continue to address those in positions of power, like the readers of *Esquire*, for the remainder of her career, these teaching experiences and novel are some of her earliest efforts to involve those rendered most vulnerable by the social order in the process of addressing structural inequality.

I place all of these on the table to highlight the multiple modalities through which Jordan materialized a placemaking pedagogy, grounded in the art of structural critique and using language in the service of social change. My thinking about placemaking emerges directly from Jordan’s own work. In a 1964 letter to Fuller, she shares her theory of place:

> I would wish us to indicate the determining relationship between architectonic reality and physical well-being. I hope that we may implicitly instruct the reader in the comprehensive impact of every Where, of any *place*. 

In this paper, I show how Jordan “implicitly instructs” her students and young readers in cultivating a structural imaginary that locates one’s seemingly idiosyncratic experiences in relation to physical space and the power relations they materialize. This notion of placemaking also draws on Katherine McKittrick’s work, which demonstrates how black feminist texts present landscapes not as neutral backgrounds, but as sites of contested power struggle that illuminate oppositional and subaltern geographies. For Jordan, placemaking is intertwined with a literary pedagogy that emerges from women of color feminist aesthetics. By considering Jordan’s early teaching experiences alongside “Skyrise for Harlem” and *His Own Where*, we can better apprehend how cultivating a structural imaginary is a central component of social justice pedagogy, and how literature can facilitate this learning.

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5 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
Jordan’s praxis was grounded in a notion that poetry and pedagogy “should be where the people are”: that creativity and desires to learn are widely distributed; that dominant capitalist, white supremacist, and patriarchal institutions often stifle this potential; that transformative education can occur in those spaces most neglected by the status quo; and that the question of “how” to teach and learn is also “where.” This pedagogy emerged, in part, from her work with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, a group of authors and educators who believed that writers could help working class children in New York City by sharing the skills possessed by artists: problem solving, comfort in open-endedness, an empowering relationship to language, and creativity, among others. In contrast to the pathologizing journalism of the time, Jordan’s published diary entries depict these students not as unintelligent, but as arriving with a “history of no education” already battered by years of “shit treatment” and “despisal pedagogy” at the hands of underfunded public schools. As these reflections indicate, Jordan’s work belongs amidst a body of late 1960s writings that sought to explain the underperformance of black and Puerto Rican students in New York City’s public schools as the product of racist institutions and not individual deficiencies. The question then became, “How can you correct completely illiterate work without entering that hideous history they have had to survive as still another person who says: You can’t do it. You don’t know. You are unable. You are ignorant.”

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7 Lopate, *Journal of a Living Experiment*.

8 June Jordan, “The Voice of the Children” in *Civil Wars*, 32.


Determined not to be part of this stifling history, Jordan set about exploring other ways of being together and doing things with language that taught these young people that they are capable of action.

Jordan had firsthand knowledge of the inadequacies of New York City’s public schools:

When I was going to school, too much of the time I found myself an alien body force-fed stories and facts about people entirely unrelated to me, or my family. And the regular demands upon me only required my acquiescence to a program of instruction pre-determined without regard for my particular history, or future. I was made to learn about ‘the powerful’: Those who won wars or who conquered territory or whose odd ideas about poetry and love prevailed inside some distant country where neither my parents nor myself would find welcome.11

Here, Jordan uses the passive voice to connect an alienating curriculum dominated by the victors of history to a disciplining pedagogy that punishes those who don’t conform to pre-established ways of being and knowing.

By contrast, Jordan challenged students in her weekend workshops to write about what they knew: New York City, riots, love, American history, blackness, fragility, Nina Simone, and schools that taught children that they “are slaves to teachers.”12 Through poetry, prose, and song-writing assignments, various field trips to inspire writing, and the publication of their poetry in anthologies, Jordan exposed students to the power of language: writing that might have an impact in the world beyond the classroom.

Anthologies of student writing from the Teachers and Writers Collaborative

Together they worked to unlearn the disempowering pedagogies they were taught by dominant institutions, learning instead to trust the authority of their experiences, to trust each other, and to use the power of the written word.

In 1967, Jordan also began teaching in the English Department at the City College of New York, where she inveighed against the “insanities” of standard syllabi and curriculum, such as timed writing exercises, which placed students in unrealistic situations of duress: “Only as some kind of bad joke would Freud’s composition, on any subject, be interesting if he were coerced into a 40 minute deadline, in uncomfortable classroom chairs.”

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13 Editor’s introduction to *Tomorrow in English*, box 76, folder 14, June Jordan Papers, 1936-2002, MC 513, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
furniture and physical space demonstrates an environmental approach to thinking about the material conditions that enable (or foreclose) thinking, writing, and learning.

Jordan taught students to analyze the institutions in which their lives were unfolding by having them develop criteria and evaluate their own educations. In response to this assignment, one student reflects on the shortcomings of his education: “I was given no concept of life, much less an appreciation of it, with which I could go out into the world on my own and become somebody important and useful to the community.”\(^{14}\) Rather than treating education as something given and inherited, Jordan’s assignments encourage students to see their education as mutable, something they have an active stake in and are capable of changing.

As demonstrated by “Skyrise for Harlem,” Jordan’s journalism explored how writing about the physical conditions of a neighborhood might impact the quality of life of the neighborhood’s residents. In Jordan’s classes, students wrote about their needs, desires, and experiences and used these to interrogate the environment that produced these responses. At City College, Jordan borrowed Mina Shaughnessy’s “problem paper” assignment, in which students researched local place-based social problems that were important to them, analyzed the material conditions of their neighborhoods, and evaluated ways of addressing these inequalities: their essays are titled “Inferior Education in the Williamsburg Community,” “Drug Addiction in the South Bronx,” and “Inadequacy of Acceptable Food and Inadequate Systems of Food Supply in Harlem.” This assignment exemplifies Jordan’s commitment to inventing “routes to power” where none seemed to exist.

Jordan’s pedagogy connects questions of how to teach, share, and use language in an empowering way to the location of those involved: both their subject positioning and their relation to the physical classrooms, institutions, and neighborhoods in which this work occurs.

\(^{14}\) Student, *Tomorrow in English.*
Years before Paulo Freire’s writings would be translated into English, and at least a year before he would famously theorize a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” Jordan was connecting learning to its material conditions of possibility, drawing our attention to the hypocrisies of liberal education amidst the radical inequalities of New York City.\(^{15}\)

The idea that poetry and pedagogy “should be where the people are,” refuted the dominant discourse of educational equality in the 1950s and 60s: integration through busing. Anticipating our contemporary era’s enthusiasm for “school choice,” proponents of busing advocated moving students to the most successful schools, while geographies of racial capitalism and unequal distributions of wealth remain intact. Both busing and school choice belie a tacit recognition that there will be no investment in public schools located in neighborhoods that serve working class students of color. Jordan’s work helps us see irrelevant education, school integration, and school choice as part of the same neoliberal logic. Her teaching, writing, and activism helped reveal to people their collective capacity to change these conditions.

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At the same time that Jordan was immersed in these experimental educational initiatives and movements for Black English, Black Studies, and bilingual education, she simultaneously authored a young adult novel, *His Own Where*, which follows the blossoming romance of 16 year old Buddy Rivers and 14 year old Angela amidst conditions that make love the unlikeliest of responses.\(^{16}\)

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Similar to her teaching, *His Own Where* evinces an unconditional faith in the wisdom of young people, despite teachers and institutions that tell them otherwise. The novel is remarkable not only for its dazzling use of Black English to bring the late 1960s Brooklyn world of its youthful protagonists to life, but also for its pedagogy: the way it makes modes of structural critique and pleasure available to its young readers. Jordan herself described the novel as a “means of familiarizing kids with activist principles of urban redesign or, in other words, activist habits of response to environment.”\(^\text{17}\) The novel maps the paths and possibilities available to poor black children in New York City in the late 1960s. It condemns the institutions structured to drain their desires, and affirms the pleasures that exist despite, or outside of, these: the pleasure of reading,

drawing, dancing, designing, having sex, listening to music, and building the world you want to live in with the people you want to share it with. In doing so, it thematizes the pitfalls of working to change a system structured for their demise and celebrates their capacities for collaborative worldmaking.

We meet Buddy and Angela lying entwined in each other’s arms in the cemetery.

*New York Times Book Review, November 7, 1971*

However, their story actually begins in a hospital, where Buddy’s father lies dying in a coma and Angela’s mom is the private nurse hired for the patient in the adjacent room. Their love is entangled with the landscape of late 1960s Brooklyn and flourishes *despite* the institutions that ostensibly exist to usher them into adulthood: Angela’s abusive family, Buddy’s oppressive school, a child services system designed to do more harm than good. Unable to find happiness in
this world created by adults, they steal away to a cemetery sanctuary and build their own. The novel concludes with the joyous anticipation of their pregnancy.

Buddy and Angela’s relationship unfolds in a world of structural ironies. Both legally children, they are the primary sources of care in their families. Buddy visits his dying father in the hospital everyday. The doctors and nurses seem to think his father stands a chance, running tests and experimental procedures, but Buddy knows better; his father will not be leaving the hospital. Every evening Angela comes to the hospital to get “orders from headquarters,” from her tyrannical mother who blames her eldest daughter for everything that has gone wrong in life. Angela never had much time to be a child; she raises her siblings, putting her baby sister to sleep in a crib that should have been for a baby doll, while enduring the verbal and physical abuse of her father. Brooklyn is described as a loud and dirty “emergency room,” full of danger at every corner, assaulting its inhabitants. Buddy wishes this world would be more like his father’s wing of the hospital, where people greet each other kindly and care for one another. And yet, when he brings his beloved Angela to the hospital, beaten to the edge of death by her father, he is the one accused of the violence.

Buddy is a vivid dreamer, agile carpenter, and charismatic student organizer, with a keen gift for seeing through the lies of adults: for seeing their insecurities as products of environments deliberately designed to facilitate the flourishing of the few at the expense of the many. The doctors refer to the “accident” that landed Buddy’s father in the hospital, but Buddy understands this as a failure of urban planning to protect pedestrians: “The street set up...so cars can clip the people easy kill them even. Easy” (3). Enraged at their daughter’s romance and convinced that she is a harlot, Angela’s father beats her into a near coma, while her mother barely bats an eyelash. When the doctors finally identify Angela’s injuries as “child abuse,” Buddy sees
through this diagnosis to the structural conditions that contribute to these violences: “they call it child abuse...But why Angela parents have to work so hard and long and why they have to live so crowded up they say nothing. Point no finger. Take no action. Still the consequences standing pretty terrible and clear” (35). In order to “protect” Angela, she is imprisoned in what the adults call a religious “shelter,” but what Buddy recognizes as a “cross up between a penitentiary and school,” where boys are forbidden. The irony is not lost on Buddy: “Dictionary tell him shelter keep you safe from danger. He be worrying about old people when they think that love be dangerous” (35-6).

Buddy learned this way of seeing the world from his father, who taught him how physical spaces shape people’s emotions, sense of self, and modes of relationality. Their house is a kind of classroom in which Buddy learns how to build spaces to produce the kind of life he wants: “House be like a workshop where men live creating how they live” (12-13). The novel repeatedly connects physical space to the narratives, paths, and possibilities that are available to Buddy and Angela. In describing their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and New York City itself, Jordan depicts these spaces not simply as there and given, but as socially constructed, and thus alterable. In these descriptions, Jordan’s language becomes most poetic and inventive: she creates terms like “peoplespace,” “openspace,” and “cityspace” to map these spaces as they are experienced by Buddy and Angela. Buddy is depressed by the clutter and lack of “peoplespace” in Angela’s home: “he hate the room she have...Rooms crush small by stuffed-up piece of furniture huge sofa and huge matching lamps huge things that squeeze the family mix into a quarrel just to move around a little” (20-21). Inspired by his newfound love, Buddy transforms his apartment to facilitate their pleasure. The whimsical house borders on the unimaginable; with the hallways removed it is three floors of pure living room, drenched in kaleidoscopic hues of
blue, red, and purple shining through a stained glass skylight. Buddy convinces his neighbors to tear down the fences that separate their yards, creating a giant “openspace” where they come together for barbecues. Changing the space changes the neighborhood: now “people on the block say hello and talk awhile” (52). Indeed, the novel dramatizes young people’s abilities to dream up and build a world far more caring and beautiful than anything adults have yet to produce. Thinking alongside McKittrick, Jordan celebrates the cartographic imaginaries of two young, working class, black children, those who are least often consulted in decisions about resource distribution and the social construction of place.

When Buddy visits Angela at the religious shelter, they both realize that the school is draining her desires, narrowing Angela’s imagination and sense of possibility, to the point that life seems only to offer two paths: becoming “my mother” or “a nun” (58). Well aware that it is the physical space, governed by repressive, punitive, narrowly-defined ways of being and knowing, that is suffocating Angela, Buddy resolves to liberate her. The reader then witnesses a cinematic escape, as the sisters chase them through the cafeteria “like overheated penguins” culminating in a victorious getaway in Buddy’s car, the lift their liberation. But immediately thereafter, we learn that this was all a flight of fancy in Buddy’s imagination; instead, he and Angela plan a slow and careful escape from the tyrannical and stifling institution.

Alone together in their cemetery sanctuary, they learn each other’s rhythms, giving shape to the tentative relationship they are constructing in this space: “His voice her voice shape him and her familiar (shapes) inside the unfamiliar house. They talk but standing still talk trying to imagine how they can stay and move and sleep and change where they are standing now, inside” (76). Through the language they create together, Buddy and Angela position themselves as subjects, building their own grammar, rhythm of life, and ways of organizing/making sense of
the world. The language dances, unsettling any notion of a stable subject or referent, allowing the reader to join in the improvisatory nature of their relationship. Having broken with inherited infrastructures, now they choreograph their lives.

One night, Buddy drifts off into a dream about the skyscrapers in Manhattan: those offices inhabited during the day by well-employed businessmen, but left vacant during the evenings, when the Brooklynnites he knows are stuffed into “the crowded, cold, the peeling painted rickety and rusted the unlit shamble Brooklyn housing” (84). Buddy wonders what would happen if instead they shared the skyscrapers as a workspace by day and living room by night. He imagines the Hudson River swallowing the housing projects while “all the Brooklyn people reach the evening empty towers and fill them up with cribs and toys and parties on the intercom and blankets on the leather couch and turnip greens cook steaming in the cafeteria” (84). Just as Jordan did in “Skyrise for Harlem,” Buddy insists to his young readers that there are better ways of sharing social spaces. For me, this is an exhilarating moment of structural imagination, a way of thinking that starts with material conditions — actually existing structures and people’s needs for shelter — and figures out a way of rearranging space to promote human flourishing.

In the penultimate scene, Angela has a dream in which she maps the city through the heuristic of desire, through everyone’s desires, not just the desires of a select few:

All the people be like Angela who hold a radio. Use it like a compass on a music map. Tune the dial to what you want. Some hard rock coming very soft. You go the right direction then the sound grow louder on the radio...When the sound reach very loud you be along with all those other folk who want to hear the same sound at the same time. In a park. A office building. A ocean liner. You never know where you will end up or who you maybe meet there where you going. (90)

In this sonic city, you don’t just interact with those in the same tax bracket who live next door; instead, the city guides you to others who enjoy the same music, allowing people to bump up
against one another and be together for however long feels good. Then you turn the dial, and move somewhere else. In this city, you know you are going the “right” way and following the “right” path if it sounds like “what you want.”

Angela and Buddy are protagonists who are directed by desire. Despite her efforts to be a good daughter, Angela is verbally and physically abused. Despite his efforts to peacefully organize his classmates to demand that their education help them enjoy their lives, Buddy is expelled. When Buddy and Angela are unhappy, in pain, when they can’t be together, they recognize these as the effects of inadequate institutions. They teach young readers to see the world as structured by the environment: to see how institutions affirm the language, lives, and love of some at the expense of the many, and to be skeptical of adults and other authority figures. They do not accept the rules simply as given; instead, they insist that structures should shift to accommodate the desires of those they allegedly serve. In a moment when New York City was experiencing a top-down neoliberal realignment orchestrated by the financial elite, these protagonists refuse to adjust their desires to accommodate inadequate structures.

Jordan’s women of color feminist aesthetics and pedagogy insist that creativity, beauty, and power are widely distributed despite the stifling institutions of a patriarchal, white supremacist society. Her work encourages us to ask, what kinds of worlds might we build if we start with the needs and desires of those most abused by the status quo — if we worked together to create structures that facilitate the pleasure of the many? To want pleasure, not just for oneself, but to want to structure society so that love and human flourishing are the easiest, most instinctive reactions to our built environment, and to convince us that we have at our disposal the tools for doing so — that, I see as Jordan’s praxis, as Jordan’s gift, to her students, to her readers, and to educators everywhere.