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"Protective Watersheds Will Enclose the Sky of Harlem": Reading "Skyrise for Harlem" in a Time of Sea Level Rise

I would like to use my brief comments today to think about the stakes of reading June Jordan's "Skyrise for Harlem" in the context of sea level rise, which is one of the most urgent climate justice concerns in the New York City of the present. Jordan composed "Skyrise for Harlem" to center architectural method as a primary means of addressing the relationship between environmental and racial inequality. In "Skyrise," Jordan writes that "it is architecture, conceived of in its fullest meaning as the creation of environment, which may actually determine the pace, pattern and quality of living experience" (111). To read "Skyrise for Harlem" in the present is to be reminded that architecture and planning are essential tools for addressing racial justice in the context of climate emergency. Integral to the utility of architecture and planning for Jordan is a relationship to "environment" that is significantly concerned with water systems. Water systems, Jordan argues, offer an aesthetic relation, a recreational context, an integral component of the more-than-human environment of cities, and a resource essential for human survival. Jordan focuses in "Skyrise for Harlem" on redesigning Harlem's engagement with its waterfronts and water systems. In doing so, she anticipates present conversations about climate justice in New York that also center water systems and their management. In my comments today, I

will consider this question: How can Jordan's multifaceted approach to water justice help nuance present conversations about architecture and planning for the climate futures of New York and other coastal cities?

Many of the elements of "Skyrise for Harlem" center a reimagined relationship to water. Early in the essay, Jordan describes the project by noting that "Harlem will widen from river to river across the island" (109). Throughout her description of "Skyrise," Jordan returns again and again to residents' connection to the Harlem and Hudson Rivers, between which Harlem is located. Jordan thinks about the rivers as part of the aesthetics of the city and as a space for recreation and transportation. As she describes the residential towers that are part of the design intervention of "Skyrise," she notes "Every room has a view. From these hanging gardens, both rivers will be visible" (111). Jordan also considers the recreational and transportation affordances of the rivers by noting, "With Skyrise for Harlem, two marinas will provide recreation and supplement transportation via the river" (111). Designing infrastructure that offers direct access to the water is crucial to the work of "Skyrise." Water access, as Jordan describes it, is at once affective and logistical.

Jordan additionally thinks about water as a question of resource management. She explains how the design of "Skyrise" will address flooding and the contamination risks of runoff. She notes that "Protective watersheds will

enclose the sky of Harlem like overlapping umbrellas. Rain may cascade visibly from these watersheds to be piped into New York reservoirs" (111). In many ways, the design of "Skyrise for Harlem" repeats the large-scale idiom of contemporaneous renewal projects, such that the drawings of the project (as displayed on the title slide of my comments) can be read as being at odds with Jordan's articulation of the goals of "Skyrise." But the residential towers do also introduce the benefit of elevation. Even as the large scale of the towers in the drawings repeats the aesthetics of mid-century high-rise public housing projects, the elevation of housing to higher floors of buildings preempts contemporary debates about how to address sea level rise in coastal areas of New York City. As Jordan explains "No one will move anywhere but up … Skyrise for Harlem means literal elevation of Harlem to the level of Morningside Heights" (111). In "Skyrise," Jordan addresses water systems out of a concern for the more equitable distribution of residents' life chances in ways that anticipate design as an environmental strategy in the New York of the present.

Jordan's engagement with water systems as a key component of "Skyrise for Harlem" is relevant not only to present conversations about New York's hydropolitics, but also to the many other coastal cities for which New York is viewed as a model. As Rebecca Elliott argues of coastal damage in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, "New York City was in some ways a bellwether for

issues that many Americans would soon be confronting" (11). Similarly, Ashley Dawson argues, "New York City is not alone in its vulnerability to flooding: almost all of the world's great cities are sited on or near bodies of water. This should come as no surprise, since rivers, lakes, and the ocean have always been key to the economic and ecological health of cities" (17). Jordan's focus on water systems as integral to equitable design provides an essential contribution to conversations about water justice in coastal cities.

Even so, Jordan's approach to engaging with water systems both resonates with and departs from recent scholarship on environmental justice and design in the context of sea level rise. Jordan writes that "A comprehensive designer must conserve natural resources and yet control their effects" (111). But as Nikhil Anand reminds us, designing water systems is a process of negotiation between built and more-than-human environments. Anand writes, "as water infrastructures leak into the ground in ways that challenge modernist stories of control and dominion over nature, these uncontrolled, often unknown flows reveal how humans don't rule over the environment with technologies and infrastructures" (150). In "Skyrise for Harlem," Jordan uses the language of control, but she describes a process that is in many ways more like the adaptive and provisional negotiation that Anand articulates. There is a tension in "Skyrise" between Jordan's engagement with the idea of control and her orientation toward

architecture as a tool for environmental and racial justice. This tension makes evident how Jordan uses “Skyrise” to negotiate a modernist architectural idiom to arrive at her own practice as an architectural thinker and designer.

As Jordan considers an equitable proposal for the design future of Harlem, she makes a case for how we might confront our relationship to the more-than-human elements of cities as always already a question of racial justice. Thinking about how Jordan engages with the management of water systems invites us to read “Skyrise for Harlem” as it links the value of Black life not just to care for the city’s ecology, but specifically to the management of the city’s relationship with its surrounding bodies of water. Jordan’s emphasis on architecture and environmental planning as primary means of advocating for racial justice underscores Rebecca Elliott’s argument that “climate change is not a narrowly ‘environmental’ problem, nor should it be studied as such” (27). Jordan, of course, is not explicitly writing about climate change, but she is writing about environment and infrastructure and about using design to value residents who have been devalued and dispossessed by interlocking social, economic, and infrastructural systems.

Jordan’s work has been vital to scholars in a broad range of fields, and to readers and thinkers within and outside of academic spaces. The interdisciplinary conversations and methods of this conference are indicative of the distinct and

overlapping contexts in which Jordan's work has been important. Jordan's writing in "Skyrise for Harlem," for instance, focuses design interventions on community knowledge and systemic inequality in ways that are exactly in line with current interdisciplinary conversations about justice in architecture and planning. For example, the planning scholar Fayola Jacobs models in a 2019 article how Black feminism and radical planning can help reframe disaster planning scholarship. More effective research would, Jacobs argues "understand what vulnerability looks like to the people who experience it" through a focus on community knowledge and structural histories of devaluation (32). Jordan offers a model for an interdisciplinary urbanism focused on environmental and racial justice that provides essential guidance for the present and future of urbanist scholarship, as well as for architecture, planning, and policy.

Jordan's work provides not only a transformative urbanism, but also a reminder to think about water justice and racial justice as one inextricable system. As a 2019 article in the journal *Nature Communications* reports, there are at least 1165 community water systems in the U.S. that are Safe Drinking Water Act Serious Violators, and the inequitable distribution of the harm caused by these inadequate water systems falls along classed and racialized lines (2). The water politics of "Skyrise for Harlem" ask us to link the right to safe drinking water to conversations about sea level rise as integral components of

architecture and planning projects concerned with racial and environmental justice. In “Skyrise,” Jordan centers water systems as a vital focus for the networks of interpersonal, environmental, and infrastructural care in which we engage when we make and design space for one another.

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