

Walking in Jamaica:

Exploring the Boundaries and Bridges of Rhetorical Agency

Brent Lucia,

University of Connecticut

Communities are in constant flux, shifting within a network of people, things and spaces; yet it is not uncommon to see a universal narrative emerge within the local commonplace of our towns and cities. These narratives are often too simplistic, avoiding the dynamic array of rhetorical flows that are circling through the social, material and historical realities within a communities' actual network. During my time working in Jamaica Queens, New York, I witnessed the strong dissonance between the common narrative told in Jamaica's local news outlets and the experience I had in its actual spaces. My manuscript explores this dichotomy by describing a recent walk I had through Jamaica's streets, traversing its unique landscape while reflecting on my own subjectivity in the process. In doing so, I argue that rhetorical agents have the ability to support or subvert these universal narratives. However, one must also consider how our spatial encounters reinscribe the fluid and often precarious positionalities we find ourselves in as we move through different spaces over time.

As you walk through the streets of Jamaica, every house seems either a store or a tavern. There are two newspapers, one by Mr. Brenton,

otherwise "Dr. Franklin," a good soul; and the Long Island Farmer. Jamaica has a large, old established Academy for Boys, "Union Hall," and also an Academy for Girls... The infinitude of Jamaica stores and public houses allows an inference which is the truth, viz: that farmers, travelers, marketmen, and other passengers on the turnpike through the village give it all its trade and retail business. It has no manufactories, and has not been what is called a "growing place" for many years, and probably will not be.

—Walt Whitman's *New York, New Amsterdam* 1863

Whitman settled in Jamaica Queens in the 1830's, working as a teacher and a writer for a local newspaper. The section of the turnpike Whitman is referring to is now known as Jamaica Avenue: a busy street that runs from East New York Brooklyn over to Bellerose Queens. The avenue is one of the oldest streets in Jamaica, dating back to the seventeenth century when native tribes used it as a trail that lead out to the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. For Whitman, however, the changes to this road in his time were not substantial enough for him to consider Jamaica a "growing place;" farmland stretched across this area, and its roads sent "passengers" to other, more populated parts of the city.

Today's Jamaica tells a different story. Whitman's account of Jamaica as a transportation hub for "farmers, travelers and marketmen" is still fairly accurate, yet its desire to become a "growing place" has certainly increased in recent years. While economic development was stymied through most of the early twentieth century, developers and businesses have recently grown interested in this area of New York, particularly as crime rates continue to dwindle. In 2014 I started working as an instructor at York College CUNY, a small community college on Jamaica Avenue, and began reading more about Jamaica's transformation in city newspapers more more, local organization and real estate developers' websites, social media outlets, and community blogs. I quickly noticed that a single, long-standing narrative had been forming about Jamaica since the early 2000's, one that stressed "development" and "expansion" as a way to respond to Jamaica's urban decay and crime. At York College I noticed that the pace of human activity right outside the campus seemed never ending—a rapid stream of passengers, straphangers, shoppers, workers and

students—suggesting a dynamic and fluid array of storylines, stories that seemed to be missing from local and national media outlets.

Walking through the streets of Jamaica Queens unfolds an experience not told by the local newspapers, websites, or community blogs, and the experience is certainly different than that of those who lived there before, like Walt Whitman. The patterns of this area of the city are being inscribed on a constant basis, supporting, subverting or questioning Jamaica's totalizing narratives. Subverting these universal narratives requires awareness to the networks one is a part of within his or her community. "Networks," Latour has argued, "does not designate a thing out there...it qualifies its objectivity, that is the ability of each actor to make other actors do unexpected things" (Latour 2005, 129). What defines a network then is the constant interaction of its actors, not a stable relationship of elements within a fixed structure that one is removed from. Considering our locations as networked is useful when thinking about our position within these locations, reminding us that we have the power to affect change within our towns or cities through developing new spatial interpretations. When working within these networked systems that create a place, it is important to understand the topoi, but it is also important to produce new threads of information that people do not necessarily find in the popular discourse (Latour 2005). Jamaica is certainly a region that continues to suffer from crime while also becoming a talking point for real estate developers, but these are not the only characteristics that define this area of the world. Other narratives about this community have the potential to emerge when one spends time engaging with Jamaica as a networked space, raising one's awareness to their material, social, and cultural realities as they move through space.

However, such a process is not innocent, and our subjectivities are also established and reworked within these networks. In an attempt to articulate these bodily interactions with space, we must not only understand its support or subversion to universal narratives but also consider how such encounters reinscribe our subjectivity. In doing so, we acknowledge the fluid and often precarious positionalities we find ourselves in as we move through different spaces over time. Indeed, new kinds of subjects are forming through this reciprocal process,

subjects who can potentially imagine themselves as different public beings. The promising stories of construction and revitalization through new development overshadow the emerging rhetorical flows that our own social, material, and historical realities help create. Improving our rhetorical awareness then means being sensitive to this fundamental dissonance between what we see and feel in our material worlds and what lives in our prevailing discourse.

A BRIEF HISTORY ON JAMAICA

Once a small town in Long Island, Jamaica eventually dissolved its township and joined the jurisdiction of New York City in 1898, becoming a popular location for European immigrants. Eventually, developers recognized its ideal location for local business and transportation centers for the city. By the late 1920's, Jamaica was one of the busiest shopping centers in Queens, housing the first self-service supermarket in the country, King Kullen, which opened on Jamaica Avenue in 1930 (Cultural Collaborative, n.d). This development also included the famous Valencia Theatre (now the Tabernacle of Prayer), the impressive Kurtz furniture store and the Roxanne building, both now historical landmarks. It was during the early twentieth century when Jamaica grew as a transit-oriented hub, inspiring the region to become the center for commerce, entertainment and government for most of Queens and parts of Brooklyn (Cultural Collaborative, n.d).

By the 1960's, new neighboring shopping centers were constructed in Nassau County, helping to reduce the retail activity in Jamaica. This led to the closing of Jamaica's department stores and the relocation of two headquarter banks, suffocating its economic activity (Cultural Collaborative, n.d). The economic hardship continued through most of the 1980's due to the crack epidemic and Jamaica's inadequate infrastructure, which stiffened future development. By the time the great recession hit in the early 2000's, Jamaican residents were migrating to the south as part of the Second Great Migration (Bilefsky 2011).

Thanks to a recent decrease in the crime rate, Jamaica is slowly seeing a resurgence, and developers are beginning to pay attention, particularly to its unique location to transportation centers. The

mixed-use commercial center of One Jamaica Center as well as the creation of Jamaica Station—a transportation hub that connects the New York Subway, the Long Island Railroad and the AirTrain to JFK—were the highlights of many new development projects in the early 2000's. Jamaica also resides just north of the cities' largest airport, John F Kennedy International Airport, and is a central transfer point for the Long Island Railroad, which is the busiest commuter railroad in North America (Dickens 2014). One of its most bustling transportation hubs is Jamaica Center where two subway lines, the E and F trains, meet, as well as three major avenues: Jamaica Avenue, Archer Avenue and Sutphin Boulevard. It is here where various government agencies and businesses congregate. One building in particular, One Jamaica Center, houses a federal office building, a theatre complex and a shopping mall. The junction sits right outside the walls of York College CUNY. It is at this intersection where one is immediately swept into the surging energy of Jamaica's street-life, overflowing with citizens from all different regions of the world.



Hotel and condo developers are also becoming much more interested in Jamaica. One such project, entitled *The Crossing at Jamaica Station*, will become a 26-story tower built near JFK airport and will have 539 mixed-income apartments, incorporating retail and community spaces within the building's design (Walker 2017). This project will create what the development firm is calling a “super block,” rising thirty stories high between the busy intersection of Archer Avenue and Stuphin Boulevard (“Construction of Mixed-Use” 2018).

As recently as July 2017, the Governor of New York City, Andrew Cuomo, earmarked ten million dollars to improve Jamaica's downtown, focusing on business, education, technology and job training. In a press release from Cuomo, he stated that "the critical investment in Jamaica's downtown will help it grow into a major economic hub that boosts small businesses, expands economic opportunity for residents, and draws new residents and visitors into the community" (Gannon 2017). New construction projects are on the horizon, looking to "enhance the neighborhood as a central business district" (Construction of Mixed-Use 2018) and jump-start a "development boom" (Walker 2017). Jamaica is now becoming the next space developers are pointing to for a word many locals in New York City hate: gentrification. A community blog entitled *Queens Crap* has this very issue in mind, declaring itself a website that's "focused on the overdevelopment and 'tweeding' of the borough of Queens in the City of New York" (n.d).

Jamaica's history depicts a constant shift between decline and revitalization, mirroring many of the headlines about Jamaica one sees today. Stories regarding real estate development run parallel to the depictions of decay and crime that continue to circulate within its popular discourse, even as the community is rapidly changing. Recent narratives in both local blogs and popular news sources range from complaints regarding Methadone clinics in the neighborhood, (Ker-Jedrychowska 2017) to a recent body of a man found in an abandoned food truck on Liberty Avenue in Jamaica (Boyer and Rayman 2019). The once popular WordPress website, *Cleanup Jamaica Queens*, was a testament to this sense of helplessness in the community. Its creator ended the blog's run in 2015, stating his time was wasted in a community "where way too many people don't give a shit...and some of the worst, corrupt and lazy elected officials ever are in office" (Moretti 2015). Of course, it isn't all bad. The hashtag #jamiacaqueens, for example, showcases a nice blend of entertainment, real estate development and community outreach tweets that present a thriving community. However, the overall narratives I found in this search seemed limiting, moving Jamaica towards a story that seemed negative and all too simplistic.

As I read through these local stories, I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between Jamaica's written depiction in popular discourse and the experience of Jamaica as one embodies its spaces. The construction of space and our sense of embodiment are inevitably linked, as Lefebvre has argued "Each living body is space and has space: it produces itself in space and it also produces space" (Lefebvre 1991, 107). Moreover, it is the subtle, interconnected ways that "accidentally" develop through bodies and spaces that assist in the emergence of our everyday spaces (Dickinson 2002, 6). Naturally then, it is no wonder that walking around Jamaica can create a potential for various narratives that could depict this space—narratives that are deeply felt as one moves through its city streets. Other stories regarding Jamaica must speak to something outside of "growth," "expansion," and "crime, yet these stories seem flattened under a constant, totalizing narrative.

SUBVERTING THE TOTALIZING NARRATIVE

Recent rhetorical scholars have advocated for a material turn within rhetorical theory, attempting to center the material elements of our rhetorical context as we seek to be more rhetorically sensitive in our everyday spaces. This rhetorical force, emerging through the interaction between bodies and their material spaces, has been defined within rhetorical studies in various ways. For example, Thomas Rickert has argued that rhetoric "must be grounded in the material relations from which it springs," stating that rhetoric is ambient, and it "impacts the senses, circulates in waves of affect, and communes to join and disjoin people" (Rickert 2013, x). Rickert focuses on how our bodies and our minds come into play when constructing the rhetorical situation and utilizing rhetoric as a tool for discovery. In Scott Barnett and Casey Boyle's recent book, *Rhetoric Through Everyday Things*, they introduce and define the term "rhetorical ontology" which is a framework used in rhetorical scholarship that focuses on both human and non-human elements in our material world in order to show how objects "interact suasively and agentially in rhetorical situations and ecologies" (Barnett and Boyle 2016, 2). Working off Rickert's notion of the ambient conditions rhetorical situations exist in, Barnett and Boyle highlight the ways in which objects act as rhetorical forces within our spaces. Such claims have helped develop fresh insight into the material elements of our rhetorical contexts. For example, Rivers

and Weber revisit the rhetorical circulation of potentially mundane objects in their article, “Ecological Pedagogical and Public Rhetorics” (2011). Both authors show how unnoticed, non-human agents such as meeting minutes helped propel the Montgomery bus boycotts (Rivers and Weber 2011, 200). The authors advocate that such movements do not emerge solely from a single speech but through a larger, systemic interaction between humans and non-human elements.

Much of what is being conceptualized in these claims is an attempt to attune our rhetorical sensitivities to the material, raising awareness to the potentialities that can emerge outside of our bodies through the interactions within everyday spaces. Thus, recent scholarship is attempting to reverse the often common approach rhetorical scholars have to consistently emphasize the linguistic/textual over the spatial, devaluing the historical and material attributes of everyday life in the portrayal of a rhetorical situation (Barnett 2017, 17). Indeed, the rhetorical constructions of a given space can therefore be revisited and potentially critiqued through a more sensitive approach to the “material attributes of everyday life.”

In this vein, scholars such as Jeff Rice have highlighted the reductive qualities of our spatial representations that heavily rely on language representation, noticing the overbearing rhetorical narratives, or “totalizing narratives,” of a community which can flatten its local articulations. These totalizing narratives ignore the subtle interactions that help make up humans’ spatial production. In his text, *Digital Detroit*, Rice argues that his mapping project can be a model for replacing narrative constructions of a given region through its ability to arrange and invent on the rhetor’s terms. He sees his project as a way to subvert grand narratives, which are universal stories of a given place, a project that “evokes a totalizing space that does not allow for rhetorical turns, memory associations, spatial searches, or travel metaphors” (Rice 2012, 39). The grand narrative Rice notes in particular is Detroit’s depiction as a city of ruins—one that is constantly in the throngs of struggle and depravity. While some of these rhetorical claims may be true, repeating this universal narrative has done little to improve Detroit’s condition, and the typical response to this grand narrative has been to repeat the same *topos*, forgetting that a “given space holds multiple approaches towards one or more meanings” (Rice 2012, 66).

For Rice, our spaces should be seen as “networked,” which is not a generalized concept that one can point to, but is defined by its process of connecting. The network encompasses friends making connections, people dealing with music, food or academic life; a network is any given space put into relationship with other spaces (Rice 2012, 44). We are always in the process of building these networks as we move through locations, becoming active producers in the construction of these spaces. A place is not static, and our arrangements of space cannot be described in fixed orderings, but instead through interactions which help generate rhetorical invention (Rice 2012, 36). A network then is not simply built from our perception of a space, but through the memories, emotions, and feelings we encompass as we move through our locations—through the interactions we have with both human and non-human elements. These encounters seem to be an embodied practice that is inevitably tied to the social construction of our spaces. Bodies and places impact upon each other, and a body becomes marked with a residue of a place; however, places are also changed by the presence of our bodies (Reynolds 2004, 143). While totalizing narratives circulate through the discourse of a community, our embodied practices within these communities are important to consider when thinking about how one can become a rhetorical agent of change.

Change, however, is not only enacted by the rhetorical agent but also performed on him or her as one moves through space. One’s subjectivity is implicated in the process of connecting, where spaces help reconstitute our subjectivities as we experience, and circulate through, locations. As Dickinson suggests, it is in these minute, often subtle interactions within the everyday where we most thoroughly materialize ourselves and our bodies, and if we think of the subjective as more than just a mental operation, we need to pay attention to the frequent interactions one has with their material spaces (Dickinson 2002, 6).

The reciprocal relationship one has with space suggests that our subjectivity is unstable, operating somewhere between the body and its ecological landscape. Acknowledging this can potentially be empowering for a rhetorical agent as they create spatial representations, developing a deeper awareness to their own

subjectivity as it transforms within locations. From this position the static, totalizing narratives that circulate within our discourse and help position cities within American culture seem limiting, working as “circulated, yet fixed topoi” that create a monolithic version of our city spaces (Rice 2012, 21). The stories Rice came across regarding Detroit would “often fluctuate between demolishment of some sort and rejuvenation as a response” (Rice 2012, 21). Such narratives remain constant and unchallenged, defining locations without considering the dynamic process between people and their spaces.

I was quickly bombarded with similar commonplaces about Jamaica, describing its potential for economic opportunity and the most recent acquisitions in the area by real estate developers, as well as the various assaults and murders that have happened in the neighborhood. These articles help paint the story that you read about not just in Jamaica but also in many “expanding” neighborhoods in New York City like Harlem or Brooklyn. Like Rice’s depiction of Detroit, the story of Jamaica was the same: once a community riddled by crime and drugs, it is now slowly building its way back thanks to the help of outsiders seeking real estate opportunity within the area. However, this was not the lived-in experience I had on the streets outside of York College; the encounters I felt seemed to pull me outside this rhetorical construction of Jamaica on occasion, traveling into new narrative potentials that helped shape and inform me.

I decided to walk through Jamaica after class one day with Rice’s *Digital Detroit* in mind, taking notes and pictures along the way to see what sort of narratives developed as I embodied its spaces. As I came in contact with objects that sparked my imagination, I’d quickly attempt a Google search on my phone in order to find more threads of information. I saw this practice not just as a way to examine Jamaica via the digital, but as a central component to my cognitive processes, something Andy Clark and David Chalmers call, “the extended mind.” The theory notes that thinking can happen outside the skull, noting that when we are linked with an external entity such as a cell phone, we are creating a cognitive system in its own right (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 8).

Walking with this process in mind, I tried to see what sort of questions would develop as I attuned my own rhetorical practices to the sensations, thoughts, memories and ideas that emerged through different locations. My goal was not simply to question the universal narratives regarding Jamaica Queens, but to try and raise my awareness to the subtle changes these spaces may have on my own subjectivity, attempting to reveal an honest depiction of how these locations affected my conscious experience. Indeed, while I believe such a process can help one potentially become a rhetorical agent of change inside their community, I also felt the need to describe the moments when one's sense of agency might seem limited, challenged or even lost through spatial interactions. Therefore, I remained open to the limitations of space as well as its freeing capacities, attempting to present myself as both empowered and humbled as I walked through Jamaica's spaces.

WALKING WITHIN THE NETWORK OF JAMAICA QUEENS

I left York College and wandered down 168th street, walking towards the sounds of Jamaica Avenue. Various English and Spanish words colored the streets as I made my way north, quickly being reminded of Jamaica's eclectic community. Along with Jamaica's recent surge in development and its reputation as a transportation hub, the area has become one of New York Cities' most diverse neighborhoods. As recently as 2014, Queens County itself was noted as the third most diverse county in the country, housing a variation of African American, Latino, Caucasian, Native American and Asian American ethnicities (Narula 2014). You could say Jamaica is a large reason why. Various Hispanic and West Indian ethnic groups have flocked to this location since the 1990's, compiling a vibrant mixture of cultures within the region that is instantly felt when one moves through its streets.

I decided to walk past Jamaica Avenue and continue north towards Jamaica Hills on 168th street. As I neared Hillside Avenue, I noticed a few men and women wearing hijabs, moving briskly past the townhouses that squeeze against each other on the hillside. Jamaica has also seen a large growth in its Bangladeshi-American population, thanks in part to the Jamaica Muslim Center, an establishment that was coming up on my right down 168th street. The center houses

a Mosque, a school and a function area for religious gatherings. It is one of the largest Muslim institutions in Jamaica, dedicated to “promoting Islamic awareness and facilitating socio-economic welfare for the common people in Jamaica” (Jamaica Muslim Center, n.d). The center’s blue and white domes tower over the small houses in Jamaica Hills, presenting a compelling piece of both American and Islamic architecture. Looking up at this magnificent building, one can’t help but acknowledge the strange arrangement of both architectural styles unfolding on this quiet street in Queens.



I noticed that the Muslim Center is only a short distance from the Saint Stephen Episcopal Church on 168th and 90th avenue, and a five-minute walk from the famous Valencia Theatre House on Jamaica Avenue. Now a home for the Tabernacle of Prayer for All People, the Valencia Theatre’s stunning interior design serves as a backdrop

for Catholic services. Standing outside this theatre evoked a feeling of nostalgia, remembering a time when Catholicism once serviced the bulk of worshippers in the community. However, along with churches and mosques, the influx of Bangladeshi’s to Jamaica has helped increase the presence of Hindu temples in the neighborhood, creating a variety of religious communities. Multiple Hindu temples have been built on or off Jamaica Avenue, including two on the block of 173rd street alone. This rapidly growing East Indian community is a far cry from the European population that lived in Jamaica in the late nineteenth century and has therefore helped form this spiritual hybridity within the neighborhood, where various sects of Hindus’, Muslims and Christians co-exist. Walking past these holy spaces, I wondered how these religious communities have constructed or broken down barriers of faith and community within Jamaica? How have these separate faiths intersected in material ways, whether in commercial or public spaces in and around Jamaica?



Thinking through these questions reminded me that such inquiry begins the narrative process, or as De Certeau would call it, “the treatment of space.” Such treatments lead to stories about a location, and stories reveal not only the constraints of a place—its imposed order of things—but how one mingles its elements, revealing what one can do in it and make out of it (De Certeau 1980, 122). De Certeau reminds us that such inquiry may reframe the narrative, yet does so within the same boundaries that determine the totalizing narrative. While my questions are an attempt to think through the intersections of faith-based practices within Jamaica, I quickly found other stories within Jamaica’s popular discourse that were loosely related. For example, there was recently an announcement of a “Religious Garb Bill” in Northeast Queens in early 2019, which will prevent workplace discrimination against religious attire and appearances. The article, published on the QNS.com website that celebrates Northern regions of Queens, noted the importance of combating religious discrimination in this area of the city, but avoided highlighting the unique, religious pluralism that currently exists in Queens. Like my questions, the article points towards the faith-based practices in Jamaica, but only as it applies to political change. My inquiry seeks a different route for discussion, attempting to mingle the elements of space towards a narrative of spiritual and cultural hybridity. Yet both treatments of this space are never fully divorced

from each other, revealing similar operations that help people think through and organize such spatial structures.

I turned south on Hillside Avenue arbitrarily and immediately noticed the many Bangladeshi stores and restaurants along 167th and 168th street, not too far from a thriving Sri Lankan community. One immediately notices that the cultural complexities of Jamaica are witnessed not only through a variety of religious structures but also



in the storefronts that line Hillside and Jamaica Avenue. This unique mixture of Latino, African, and Bangladeshi populations is exemplified on the store's signs themselves, particularly at the intersection of 168th and 169th street. It was there I noticed Richie's Coffee Shop on 169th street, which was promoting its dishes in both Spanish and English, residing directly across from a pharmacy that displayed its title in English, while situated next to signs written in Bengali.

The most impressive showing of this cultural hybridity was further down 168th street where a small hair stylist crossed multiple cultures in a single awning. The name of the business, Caribbean Barber Shop, was etched in small English letters above the more prominent display of its name in Bengali. Below, and also in English, was the phrase: "service with a smile for all hair types and nationalities." This unique display of cultural diversity unraveled a series of questions I had for the shop owner: how did you come to a decision to enhance the lettering in Bengali and not in English? What practices allow you to still identify as a Caribbean Barber Shop while also welcoming all "hair types and nationalities?" The rhetorical choices these shop owners displayed on their store fronts presented both the unique

mixture of cultures within the neighborhood as well as the savvy business practices of the shop keepers who looked to survive within a location that crossed cultural borders.

What is also noticed here is the adherence of the shopkeeper to follow policies established within certain systems of control (i.e the signage requirements indicated by New York City's Department of Buildings; the desired font, color and overall aesthetic for the sign to attract customers in a free-market system) while also graying the boundaries between various cultures in the neighborhood. The story that can be told is once again both a bending and constructing of various limitations. Indeed, stories have distributive power to authorize the establishment or displacement of limits, serving as both a frontier and a bridge of possibilities (De Certeau 1980, 123). Within the boundaries of legal and ethical constraints followed by the shopkeeper, they still seek to push the limits of how multiculturalism can present itself, crossing into various cultural articulations presented in their signage.

This “bridge of possibilities” seems to transcend my own defined boundaries of what it means to be a consumer in a culturally complex region of the world. I was originally born in the suburbs of Massachusetts, and the battle for customers between small businesses in my town never extended outside the English language. While not all of their marketing materials were targeting my demographic, their message reached me, and I was a possible—if not intended—member of their audience. Staring at the Caribbean Barber Shop sign was almost a complete subversion of the homogeneity found in my home town; a signal that was purposively not intended for a monolingual,

English speaker such as myself. As a consumer I felt out of place in its presence—as if the sign was purposively talking over or around me. Yet, as a New Yorker, I was somehow comforted by this feeling of distance between me and the sign's rhetorical message, reminding me that such a diverse city helps one learn to surrender



to the material and linguistic realities that purposively avoid you. I was humbled in its presence and the feelings that it gave me, even while my position as a consumer seemed to be completely ignored.

The variety of restaurants in Jamaica is a world tour of exceptional



cuisine. As I walked down Hillside Avenue, I noticed Guatemalan, Bengali, Chinese, Thai, and Latin restaurants all situated in the Jamaica Hills region of Queens. When I reached 160th street on Jamaica Avenue I found Muy Luck Kitchen, a Chinese restaurant, directly across the street from Rincon Savadoreno, which serves Latin specialties from Central America. Puerto Rican, Dominican, Sri Lankan, Jamaican and Italian restaurants also lined this stretch of Jamaica Avenue, providing an enormous range of food from around the world.

Jamaica then is not simply a story about transportation or economic expansion, but a story about cultural and theological complexities that all found a home within a small area of Queens. Coming to this conclusion as I walked further down Hillside Avenue, a few more questions came to my mind: how does this story come in contact with the narratives regarding gentrification? Is the cultural diversity of the neighborhood informing the various economic opportunities happening in Jamaica or is it being ignored? In pushing myself to think about these questions, I'm reminded that such "frontiers and bridges" formed through spatial imaginaries are also a push for survival, where intersections of social behavior and material space lie and where locations find flexibility. This flexibility can lead to promoting spaces of vibrant, cultural diversity or threatened,

diminished spaces. As Lefebvre argues, “social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others (Lefebvre 1995, 73).

The vehicle for how these metaphors are constructed then must not be forgotten, noticing that such a boundary-forming practice can implicate what’s included or excluded from the narrative. Indeed, these are the very processes that help develop and permit universal narratives to occur, yet it also reminds us of the malleable nature of such narratives. Our human desire sustains or breaks through the boundaries of a universal narrative, not some fixed system beyond our control. One must walk through, not read about, the spaces that construct Jamaica Queens to notice how the unique social, cultural and material realities help create its networked landscape, and how we can be agents of change within the network.

My walk through Jamaica was experienced by both old and new stories of the community thanks to the cultural artifacts that have withstood recent development. The rich history of Jamaica Queens is not completely buried under the waves of new construction and diversifying communities, and it can still be spotted in various landmarks around the region. Getting off Hillside Avenue and walking back east towards Jamaica Avenue, I eventually stumbled upon King Manor, a historical home that resides within Rufus King Park. A sign near the home described King Manor as a historically landmarked estate and once the home to Rufus King, an original signer of the U.S Constitution. A quick Google search revealed his name, and I learned a few more interesting elements of King’s history: while also being the U.S ambassador to Great Britain in the late eighteenth century, as well as a senate member and a presidential nominee in the early nineteenth century, Rufus King was an out spoken critic of slavery forty-three years before the Emancipation Proclamation. King even created provisions to the 1785 Northwest Ordinance that stopped the growth of slavery into the Northwest Territory (Purvis 1987, 21).

I walked up to the old colonial home from the park and stared at the tall, wooden door that faced out onto Jamaica Avenue. I was immediately reminded that Jamaica was once covered in farmland and dirt roads, where houses like King Manor stood alone and distant

from its neighbors. I tried to imagine what Jamaica Avenue must have looked like to Rufus as he stood outside that same door, watching the wagons and horses ride by his estate. What did he witness here and how did it develop his worldview? I've walked by his mansion a few times on the way to work and assumed King held the typical values of your standard American colonialist of the time, maybe because the mansion seemed like your typical colonial farmstead, with its boxed-shaped wooden façade and multiple chimneys, adorned with a symmetrical pattern of multipaned windows. Its symbols reminded me of the historical homes one finds in the reimaginations of America well before the Civil War, conjuring up a time when so many American's sense of moral responsibility somehow eluded the plight of African-Americans. Spaces resonate with symbolism that is not lost on the spectator, and can almost feel intentional. The oppressive steel structures in Manhattan's financial district, for example, are meant to showcase the power the market can have over the individual. Indeed, space has this heuristic power to change both the inhabitant's behavior, and potentially, also their view of themselves.

Acknowledging this power of material space reminds me that I should be cautious about the immediate conclusions I make about the spaces I traverse, particularly in light of totalizing narratives. In its presence, King Manor represented the typical moralities of eighteenth century America, one that I regularly encounter around the historical landmarks of my hometown in Massachusetts. However, his homestead equally fails at symbolically representing the progressive intentions of Rufus King himself. Staring at King's house reminded me that even the larger narratives I've bought into regarding colonial times in America are not as simplistic as I would tend to believe. It's interesting to think about his legacy as an early abolitionist in relation to the types of people who currently walk by King's door—many of which come from Africa or African descent. Jamaica's history may be unique in this way, and yet King's story seems lost in the shadows of more recent discussions regarding real estate expansion and development. What would Rufus think about the world outside his door now?

The visit to King's house was also a reminder of the impact rhetorical spaces can have on our own subjectivity. These spaces provide the

material and rhetorical resources in which we create our bodies and ourselves, implicating our subjectivities in the process (Dickinson 2002, 6). Investigating my encounter with King Manor more closely allowed me to revise my incomplete understanding of Colonial America and to reconsider not only the symbolic references to this time in history, but also the ability for one man to challenge the moral



paradigm of his or her generation. Such a story can be a kernel of inspiration for those who encounter King's home. For me, the house now symbolized the arduous process of building a moral crusade and forced me to think about the ongoing injustices of my own time. What are my responsibilities as a citizen in this period of American history, and how must I face them? I had entered King Manor with a sense of nostalgia for Jamaica's past, preparing myself to learn about yet another New York aristocrat, but I left with a new sense of urgency to be impactful in my community and to follow in King's footsteps.

There are more historical locations and objects scattered around Jamaica that share the same sidewalks as its citizens, serving as potential trajectories that could redirect the totalizing narratives within the community. Along with King Manor, there is the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce Building, Jamaica Savings Bank, and J Kurtz and Sons Store listed as three historically landmarked commercial buildings in Jamaica, further justifying the notion that Jamaica has been a center of commerce for decades. Walking by these buildings, I quickly noticed that these historical locations are clustered near the Sri Lankan shops, African-American hairdressers and Spanish-

American restaurants, seamlessly integrating the old with the new and making for a very vibrant and unique space.

It is not uncommon to see these old pieces of architecture being put to more recent use. As I walked by an old brick structure at 150-10 Hillside Avenue, I was curious about its origins since the building seemed outdated among the newer commercial buildings between which it was situated. The building had the words “Venture House” carved above its front door, which I would later learn was a housing project for people suffering from mental illness. The building was once the site for Walter B. Cooke’s Funeral home for over seventy years. One can trace obituaries to this site as far back as 1935. In the 1940’s the funeral home proclaimed itself the largest funeral director in New York City and continued servicing the area up until the 1970’s. The façade of 150-10 Hillside Avenue looked as if it had not changed since its early years as a funeral home, surviving decades of real estate development while continuing to service its local citizens.

The building’s legacy could reveal a new thread within Jamaica’s history, potentially reimagining its location. The ability to reimage space reinforces the ephemeral nature of spatial representations. The spaces we love are unwilling to remain permanently enclosed; they appear to move elsewhere without difficulty, into “other times, and on different planes of dream and memory” (Bachelard 1964, 53). Totalizing narratives may feel flattening in their privileged display within popular discourse; however, their existence relies on the fleeting projections of human “dream and memory.” What memories

of 150-10 Hillside do we want resurfacing and defining its location? A space’s history may help recast the current, universal narrative within a location, reminding its viewers that something other than “rejuvenation” or “urban decay” help define elements of Jamaica. As I stared up at the Venture House’s worn, brick façade, I thought about how a new spatial



representation may be buried in its rich past, waiting to be unlocked by its surveyors.

The cultures and histories you will come across in Jamaica change from block to block, where one can travel from the West Indies to Bangladesh in under a mile, or be transported to the eighteenth century among its historical parks and city landmarks. The transformation happens rapidly, yet who gets to decide what stays and what disappears? Walking away from the Venture House back to the subway, I stumbled on the famous Sidewalk Clock in Jamaica Center



built in the late nineteenth century. Designated a New York City landmark in 1981, the double-faced copper clock towers over its cast iron base, surveying the busy intersection of Jamaica Avenue and Union Hall Street. The meaning of this clock must have changed within this ever-expanding community, a community that has left its previous demographic landscape behind, yet has kept this specific relic. The face of the clock seemed like a constant reminder that, at some point in Jamaica, keeping time was a luxury for only a few, and such objects were meant to be both aesthetically pleasing and useful to its onlookers.

I could see an array of other signs in the immediate area of the historical clock referencing modern services such as Medicare or travel assistance. The intersection where it stood was busy with people rushing to cross the street. The clock's presence in this particular location quickly reinscribed for me the constant fluidity of an urban setting; the objects of the past stand still and witness our endless march towards modernity. This image reminded me of how my own subjectivity gets caught up in this constant push towards progress where one must always be ready to reinvent themselves in a fast-paced, capitalistic society or become a relic of the past. This

was the reality for me for ten years as an adjunct in New York City, where I had to navigate the precarious hierarchy of the higher education system in order to maintain a livable wage. I felt secure as an adjunct when I entered the classroom and twenty faces looked up at me awaiting direction, but I felt unstable leaving campus the last week of the spring semester, questioning how I'll pay rent during the summer months. The space captured this feeling of instability for me, suggesting that I could somehow symbolize both the stoic presence of the clock and the chaotic, Queen's intersection. I starred at the object one last time and allowed this unsettling emotion to wash over me, as the crowds of people quickly moved past my body.

CONCLUSION

These locations are living and acting in Jamaica, affecting our embodied practices as our bodies affect the social construction of these spaces. In providing this walking journal, I hope to turn our eyes towards the non-discursive elements that create our rhetorical agencies, empowering us to shift the narratives of our towns and cities. These objects of cultural and historical relevance help define Jamaica and make this region vibrant and active as one walks between the city blocks. In the overpowering emergence of our universal narratives we can easily overlook the agentive elements in our spaces that contribute to the rhetorical flows of a region. That said, these rhetorical flows both empower and challenge our commonplace understandings of the spaces that we move through and the sense of agency that we feel. We have the ability to inherit these trajectories, "which allows for institution, or trees, or ourselves or your computer, to last" (Walsh 2017 403). While becoming sensitive to these rhetorical flows as I walked through Jamaica, I couldn't help but feel both empowered and limited by the spaces I wandered in, emphasizing the fluid nature of my own subjectivity. I believe this sense of rhetorical awareness can become an entry point to other, more localized narratives that exist in Jamaica, potentially subverting or redirecting its totalizing narrative, but one's own sense of self cannot be ignored in the process.

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Brent Lucia is an Assistant Professor In-Residence at the University of Connecticut School of Business where he teaches technical writing for their business communication department. He has a Ph.D in Composition and Applied Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In the past he taught both literature and composition courses for The City University of New York and William Paterson University. His current research explores the rhetorics of technology and its relationship to the production of space. His past scholarship on comparative rhetorics can be found in *Enculturation* and *China Media Research*. Originally from Massachusetts, Brent now lives in East Harlem.