

cosmopolitan in brooklyn

patricia spears jones, columnist

Inside a poet's life

I am not a native of New York, so the past 3 decades living here I have had to reconcile cultural New York (how its depicted in film, television and literature) with real New York (what it means to get up five days a week and get on the A Train to go to work). Does the city still energize me, I am not so sure. That could be middle-age. Or it could be the relentless pace that has gripped this city, post-September 11. It is as if we are all running towards some idealized material gain that blanks out the huge wound that will always be in this city, no matter how high the "Freedom Tower."

What I have always been impressed by is the intimacy of so many people having to live very private lives in public places (tears on the subway-we have all been there; young people boasting and bragging on the street, post school, about who will or will not get jumped; lovers in mid-thrall-you really do wait for someone to shout "get a room!") and the commitment of ambitious people to actually make the city livable-the loveliness of green grocers-where tulips and roses and exotically named flowers shiver in January; the flirtatious mise en scenes of countless boutiques; the congregation of skateboarders, boys and girls, all races just getting their gear on and up and over ramps here and there; the neighborhood restaurant, often immigrant owned where a part of the world you may never see is there to taste. These are just some of the ways in which the streetscape allows we perambulators to catch our breath, catch a glimpse, and spark a new thought. Of course *Calabar*, the little store/artists hangout in Prospect Heights is one such place.

Commerce is culture in New York City and storefronts create community; expand ways in which culture thrives. I know that many would like to divorce culture and commerce; creativity and mammon except the hip hop folk WHO ALWAYS WANT TO BE PAID, but I don't know of any place where such a separation truly exists. The artisans who created the cathedrals of Europe may well have done their work for the glory of God, but the Church paid them. *Calabar* started as a storefront that offers contemporary art and crafts from Africa, Asia, Central and South America, but now encompasses a web site; new networks of artists, activists and entrepreneurs and this magazine that has brought my work as a poet and writer to a different audience. Like galleries in Williamsburg or theater spaces in the East Village, *Calabar* and other commercial spaces make it possible to bring artists and audiences together, but with a twist.

I am an African American poet and writer who grew up in the latter part of the last century. I've been writing since I was 12. I love to read. I am fascinated but what humans make and destroy. I think about a lot of stuff. I care about people and the planet and I find New York

City, particularly Brooklyn fascinating. That's about all the definition you will get out of me. Read my books, poems and reviews, they do the talking.

With regard to challenges of an artist, I make everything up as I go along.

I think Brooklyn is in great danger of losing sight of what makes the city so special-the modesty of buildings; the openness of air. As the density increases without improvements in service (remember the A Train; try driving anywhere), who knows if all the new condo owners will stick around or will they leave the borough with

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well-appointed proto-slums? Okay, that may be way too pessimistic, but when I moved to Brooklyn 16 years after trying to find anything affordable in Manhattan, I got a great apartment, but also a great neighborhood-church on one corner; diner on the other; there was a Cub Scout troop; and a drag queen--that kind of mix only comes when a broad range of people live in proximity to each other.

The condos and luxury apartments are not made for families; not even for couples, and there's little effort to engage the new owners into the life of the community since their buildings are the community. So wither the storefronts, the cafes that do not cater to these all the same looking/thinking/people? I don't know. Maybe boredom will send some out onto the streets of the borough or into volunteer spaces where they can meet children and grandparents and drag queens who are just walking to the grocery store, not on stage. I guess I want us to be mindful of just how fragile the ecology of the city is and how exuberant capitalism may well bring great comfort to some, but often causes greater misery for many others. I want more comfort for all. Will that happen in 2008? Not likely. ■