

VII

187th Street *In the Heights (More Ways Than One)*

“USNAVI:

Lights up on Washington
Heights, up at the break of day
I wake up and I got this little
Punk I gotta chase away
Pop the grate at the crack
Of dawn, sing
While I wipe down the awning.
Hey y'all, good morning.

PIRAGUA GUY:

Ice cold piragua! China.
Cherry. Strawberry.
Just for today, I got mamey!

USNAVI:

Yo, piraguero, como estas?

PIRAGUA GUY:

Como siempre, Señor Usnavi.”

Lin-Manuel Miranda, *In The Heights*.

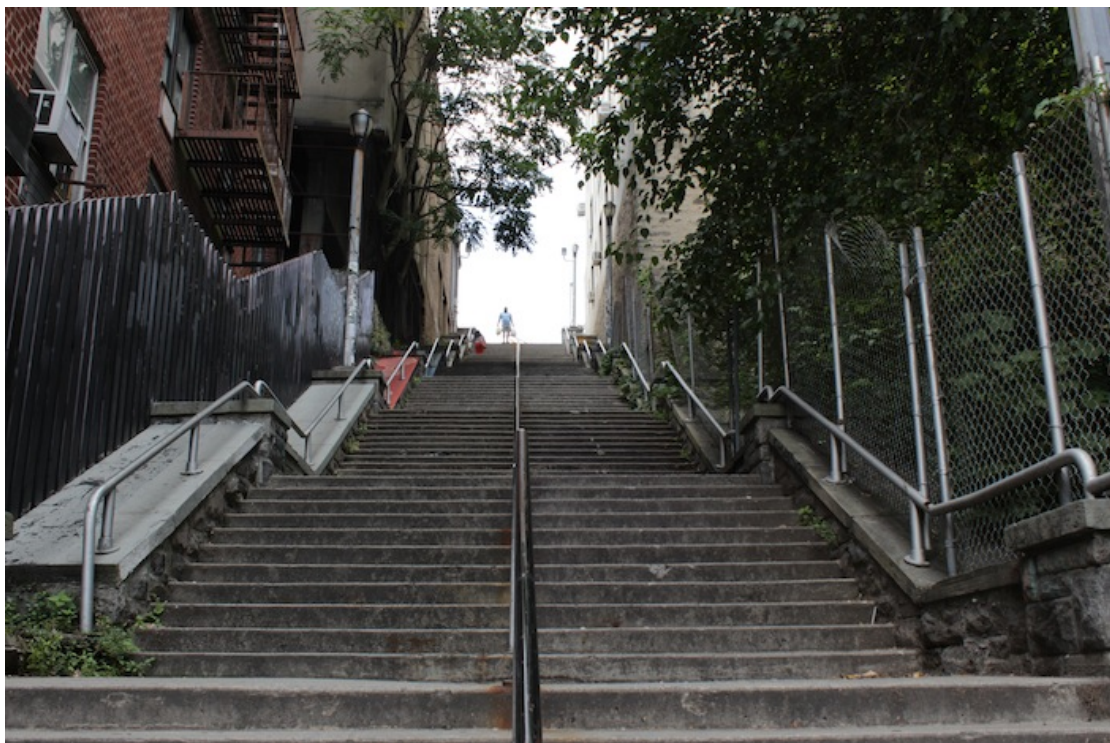
From Ground Zero, we make a superhuman leap across the length of the small island to northern-most Manhattan, where streets once again break free from the tyranny of the grid system, in more ways than one: here also, Manhattan appears in its original form as a series of steep hills and slopes. Here, we're in the heights, quite literally.



187th Street is one of the last streets that cuts across Manhattan from shore to shore. It sits in Washington Heights – simply known as “The Heights” in local vernacular. Here, the vibe has traditionally been staunchly working-class Hispanic, which is to say, rich in spirit, culture and aspiration, but poor in material terms.

The zeitgeist is ebulliently, albeit somewhat romantically, captured in the 2008 Tony-award winning Broadway musical, *In The Heights*, which tells the tale of a community of Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican and Jewish residents schlepping in the vicinity of 181st Street. The story revolves around the lead character Usnavi and his coming into an inheritance of sorts. He faces the choice of either leaving his community to build a new life elsewhere, or remaining to build a new life where he is, together with his community. No prizes for guessing which option he chooses.

Up here, there is also a very significant Jewish presence. The street is home to the main campus of Yeshiva University – New York City’s foremost Jewish educational institution, with six campuses in the city alone, and one in Israel. Established in 1886, it is the oldest university in New York that integrates Jewish scholarship with traditional fields like science, business, arts, law and medicine. The campus occupies a forbidding fortress-like castle in the Moorish revival style, at the top of one of the three main hills 187th Street snakes over. Around the university, the vibe is more Golan Heights, as young men with yarmulkes are observed scurrying with much determination towards whatever it is that they are (always) late for.



Finally, at the Western end of the street, up a steep flight of stairs, occupying the Hudson waterfront, is the quiet residential estate of Riverside, set in verdant environs overlooking woodlands along the Hudson River. The feel here is idyllic, and village-ey, channeling quaint provincial towns in New England. Here, in the same place they started out in, is the end of the journey (for Usnavi and his chums): a staunchly middle-class community, living out their lives in relative contentment; the American Dream made real.

