

“The Way We Live Now: 11-11-01; Lost and Found”

Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead was born and raised in Manhattan, New York, the place which he still calls home. He is a prolific writer of fiction and nonfiction, that is largely place-based. He has won numerous awards for his work, including the MacArthur “Genius Grant.” Here, he writes in the wake of September 11th, looking back on his own version of New York City.

Vocabulary...

drab (adj)	indifference (n)	topple (v)
colossus (n)	impediments (n)	credentials (n)
motley (adj)	wince (v)	crater (n)
rubble (n)	incredulous (adj)	wary (adj)
unheralded (adj)	reminisce (v)	

Reading Questions...

1. What is a “tipping point”? What does Whitehead mean when he says, “There are unheralded tipping points”?
2. What does Whitehead mean when he says that all New Yorkers have their own version of the city? Don’t we all live in the same city?

Discussion Questions...

1. According to Whitehead, when does someone become a New Yorker? Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. According to Whitehead, why do we want to hang on to parts of the city that no longer exist? Is it just about a coffee shop, travel agency, or pizza place?

Activities and Assignments...

1. Whitehead suggests that “You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now.” Can you relate to this? Write a short story that describes *your* New York--both how it is and how it was. Be sure to include your feelings about the places and the changes, alongside actual descriptions of places. Look back to Whitehead’s essay to see how he blends the two elements.
2. This piece was written partially in response to 9/11 and the destruction of New York’s iconic twin towers. Because of the tragedy, Whitehead talks about saying goodbye to things that are already gone--things that he never got a chance to say goodbye to. Write a letter to something or someone that is no longer a part of your life that you wish had a chance to say goodbye to. What do you wish you could say? How would you like to say goodbye?

