

WRITING THROUGH THE RHETORICAL MODES

SECTION I: A RHETORICAL MODES READER

Chapter One: The Narrative Mode

Narration and Reflection: Reading 3

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

Colson Whitehead is an American novelist and a 2002 recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, or “Genius Grant.” His most recent novel, The Underground Railroad (2016), reimagines the underground railroad that brought escaped slaves to freedom in the 19th century as a subway rather than a network of secret routes and safe houses. It won the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Here, Whitehead’s imagination is just as fiercely at work in the wake of 9/11 as he imagines the city as a character in the life stories of all New Yorkers.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/11/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-11-11-01-lost-and-found.html?pagewanted=all>

Questions for Reading and Discussion

- 1) Whitehead asserts, “Never listen to what people tell you about old New York, because if you didn’t witness it, it is not a part of your New York and might as well be Jersey.” Do you agree with this statement? Disagree? What is Whitehead trying to emphasize about what it means to live here?
- 2) What does Whitehead mean by “the brochure” when he states, “Maybe you saw the brochure. The city has spent a considerable amount of time and money putting the brochure together, what with all the movies, TV shows and songs—the whole ‘if you can make it there’ business”? To what extent do you experience your own life in this city in relation to “the brochure”? What might be the opposite of “the brochure”?
- 3) As you can tell by the date in the title, Whitehead wrote this article two months after the twin towers collapsed in the 9/11 terrorist attack. How does his portrayal of New York as ever-changing, and as a witness to our lives as New Yorkers, address the event that the article commemorates? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of his approach to the topic of life in New York in the wake of 9/11.

Questions for Writing and Research

1) Write against “the brochure”: describe the New York you know and inhabit. How does your New York pose a challenge to “the brochure”? Which New York do you prefer? Before you write, decide who your audience will be—will you write to people who have *only* seen the brochure, or will you write to your fellows who know a New York similar to your own?

2) Write a reflective essay in which you explain how your New York has shaped you as a person. Focus your reflection on two or three specific things or experiences—you might include anecdotes and/or descriptions of the people, places, or things that are most familiar to you. As you write, keep in mind that the most interesting writing is often writing that gives your reader a sense of “being there.”



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