

The Colossus of New York

Colson Whitehead

Colson Whitehead was born in 1969, and was raised in Manhattan. After graduating from Harvard University, he started working at *The Village Voice*, where he wrote reviews of television, books, and music. He is the author of *The Intuitionist* (2000), *John Henry Days* (2001), *The Colossus of New York* (2003), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009), and *Zone One* (2011). He lives in Brooklyn.

Pre-Reading

What was your first memory of New York City?

I'm here because I was born here and thus ruined for anywhere else, but I don't know about you. Maybe you're from here, too, and sooner or later it will come out that we used to live a block away from each other and didn't even know it. Or maybe you moved here a couple years ago for a job. Maybe you came here for school. 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. The city also puts a lot of effort into making your hometown look really drab and tiny, just in case you were wondering why it's such a drag to go back sometimes.

No matter how long you have been here, you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey's, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge. That before the internet café plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled in the mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now.

You start building your private New York the first time you lay eyes on it. Maybe you were in a cab leaving the airport when the skyline first roused itself into view. All your worldly possessions were in the trunk, and in your hand you held an address on a piece of paper. Look: there's the Empire State Building, over there are the Twin Towers. Somewhere in that fantastic, glorious mess was the address on the piece of paper, your first home here. Maybe your parents dragged you here for a vacation when

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you were a kid and towed you up and down the gigantic avenues to shop for Christmas gifts. The only skyscrapers visible from your stroller were the legs of adults, but you got to know the ground pretty well and started to wonder why some sidewalks sparkle at certain angles, and others don't. Maybe you came to visit your old buddy, the one who moved here last summer, and there was some mix-up as to where you were supposed to meet. You stepped out of Penn Station into the dizzying hustle of Eighth Avenue and fainted. Freeze it there: that instant is the first brick in your city.

I started building my New York on the uptown No. 1 train. My first city memory is of looking out a subway window as the train erupted from the tunnel on the way to 125th Street and palsied up onto the elevated tracks. It's the early seventies, so everything is filthy. Which means everything is still filthy, because that is my city and I'm sticking to it. I still call it the Pan Am Building, not out of affectation, but because that's what it is. For that new transplant from Des Moines, who is starting her first week of work at a Park Avenue South insurance firm, that titan squatting over Grand Central is the Met Life Building, and for her it always will be. She is wrong, of course—when I look up there, I clearly see the gigantic letters spelling out Pan Am, don't I? And of course I am wrong, in the eyes of the old-timers who maintain the myth that there was a time before Pan Am.

History books and public television documentaries are always trying to tell you all sorts of "facts" about New York. That Canal Street used to be a canal. That Bryant Park used to be a reservoir. It's all hokum. I've been to Canal Street, and the only time I ever saw a river flow through it was during the last water-main explosion. 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. Except for that bit about the Dutch buying Manhattan for twenty-four bucks—there are and always will be braggarts who "got in at the right time."

There are eight million naked cities in this naked city—they dispute and disagree. The New York City you live in is not my New York City; how could it be? This place multiplies when you're not looking. We move over here, we move over there. Over a lifetime, that adds up to a lot of neighborhoods, the motley construction material of your jerry-built metropolis. Your favorite newsstands, restaurants, movie theaters, subway stations and barbershops are replaced by your next neighborhood's favorites. It gets to be quite a sum. Before you know it, you have your own personal skyline.

Go back to your old haunts in your old neighborhoods and what do you find: they remain and have disappeared. The greasy spoon, the deli, the dry cleaner you scouted out when you first arrived and tried to make those new streets yours: they are gone. But look past the windows of the travel agency that replaced your pizza parlor. Beyond the desks and computers

and promo posters for tropical adventures, you can still see Neapolitan slices cooling, the pizza cutter lying next to half a pie, the map of Sicily on the wall. It is all still there, I assure you. The man who just paid for a trip to Jamaica sees none of that, sees his romantic getaway, his family vacation, what this little shop on this little street has granted him. The disappeared pizza parlor is still here because you are here, and when the beauty parlor replaces the travel agency, the gentleman will still have his vacation. And that lady will have her manicure.

You swallow hard when you discover that the old coffee shop is now a chain pharmacy, that the place where you first kissed So-and-so is now a discount electronics retailer, that where you bought this very jacket is now rubble behind a blue plywood fence and a future office building. Damage has been done to your city. You say, It happened overnight. But of course it didn't. Your pizza parlor, his shoeshine stand, her hat store: when they were here, we neglected them. For all you know, the place closed down moments after the last time you walked out the door. (Ten months ago? Six years? Fifteen? You can't remember, can you?) And there have been five stores in that spot before the travel agency. Five different neighborhoods coming and going between then and now, other people's other cities. Or fifteen, twenty-five, a hundred neighborhoods. Thousands of people pass that storefront every day, each one haunting the streets of his or her own New York, not one of them seeing the same thing.

We can never make proper good-byes. It was your last ride in a Checker cab and you had no warning. It was the last time you were going to have Lake Tung Ting shrimp in that kinda shady Chinese restaurant and you had no idea. If you had known, perhaps you would have stepped behind the counter and shaken everyone's hand, pulled out the camera and issued posing instructions. But you had no idea. There are unheralded tipping points, a certain number of times that we will unlock the front door of an apartment. At some point you were closer to the last time than you were to the first time, and you didn't even know it. You didn't know that each time you passed the threshold you were saying good-bye.

I never got a chance to say good-bye to some of my old buildings. Some 10
I lived in, others were part of a skyline I thought would always be there. And they never got a chance to say good-bye to me. I think they would have liked to—I refuse to believe in their indifference. You say you know these streets pretty well? The city knows you better than any living person because it has seen you when you are alone. It saw you steeling yourself for the job interview, slowly walking home after the late date, tripping over nonexistent impediments on the sidewalk. It saw you wince when the single frigid drop fell from the air conditioner twelve stories up and zapped you. It saw the bewilderment on your face as you stepped out of the stolen

matinee, incredulous that there was still daylight after such a long movie. It saw you half-running up the street after you got the keys to your first apartment. The city saw all that. Remembers, too.

Consider what all your old apartments would say if they got together to swap stories. They could piece together the starts and finishes of your relationships, complain about your wardrobe and musical tastes, gossip about who you are after midnight. 7J says, So that's what happened to Lucy—I knew it would never work out. You picked up yoga, you put down yoga, you tried various cures. You tried on selves and got rid of them, and this makes your old rooms wistful: why must things change? 3R goes, Saxophone, you say—I knew him when he played guitar. Cherish your old apartments and pause for a moment when you pass them. Pay tribute, for they are the caretakers of your reinventions.

Our streets are calendars containing who we were and who we will be next. We see ourselves in this city every day when we walk down the sidewalk and catch our reflections in store windows, seek ourselves in this city each time we reminisce about what was there fifteen, ten, forty years ago, because all our old places are proof that we were here. One day the city we built will be gone, and when it goes, we go. When the buildings fall, we topple, too.

Maybe we become New Yorkers the day we realize that New York will go on without us. To put off the inevitable, we try to fix the city in place, remember it as it was, doing to the city what we would never allow to be done to ourselves. The kid on the uptown No. 1 train, the new arrival stepping out of Grand Central, the jerk at the intersection who doesn't know east from west: those people don't exist anymore, ceased to be a couple of apartments ago, and we wouldn't have it any other way. New York City does not hold our former selves against us. Perhaps we can extend the same courtesy.

Our old buildings still stand because we saw them, moved in and out of their long shadows, were lucky enough to know them for a time. They are a part of the city we carry around. It is hard to imagine that something will take their place, but at this very moment the people with the right credentials are considering how to fill the craters. The cement trucks will roll up and spin their bellies, the jackhammers will rattle, and after a while the postcards of the new skyline will be available for purchase. Naturally we will cast a wary eye toward those new kids on the block, but let's be patient and not judge too quickly. We were new here, too, once.

What follows is my city. Making this a guidebook, with handy color-coded maps and minuscule fine print you should read very closely so you won't be surprised. It contains your neighborhoods. Or doesn't. We overlap. Or don't. Maybe you've walked these avenues, maybe it's all Jersey to

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you. I'm not sure what to say. Except that probably we're neighbors. That we walk past each other every day, and never knew it until now.

Discussion Questions

1. Colson Whitehead writes that everyone's New York is different. What is his "private" New York like? What was the "first brick" in his city?
2. According to Whitehead, when does someone become a New Yorker?
3. What is the significance of the title?
4. According to the author, why are there no "proper good-byes" in New York?
5. How does the author establish the tone of the essay?
6. In paragraph 3 what are skyscrapers compared to? Can you find any other metaphors in the essay?
7. Whitehead uses many expressive verbs such as "roused" (para. 3), "erupted," and "palsied" (para. 4). What are the effects of these words?
8. In paragraph 10 the author writes, "The city knows you better than any living person because it has seen you when you are alone." Find other examples of personification in the essay and comment on them.
9. In the original version of this essay—which was a response to 9–11—Whitehead began paragraph 14 in a different way. Instead of "Our old buildings still stand . . .," he originally wrote "Our towers still stand . . ." What is the effect of this change?

Writing Tasks

- Recount your first memory of being in New York. Focus on a particular image, sensation, event, or encounter.
- What changes have you noticed in your neighborhood? How do you feel about them?
- In New York, many neighborhoods have been undergoing economic development in which run-down buildings and vacant lots have been turned into upscale residential apartments and chain stores (such as Starbucks). What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of this change—known as gentrification?