

Finding New York

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The Port Authority, Central Park, subway stations, Broadway, Coney Island, Brooklyn Bridge, Downtown, Times Square, JFK: Colson Whitehead's essays tunnel into the heart of New York City, revealing it to be both a bastion of cruelty and an alluring symbol of hope, both an executioner of dreams and a mother of new beginnings. Whitehead writes about the city as if it were human, and about its people as if they were buildings. Yet these personifications constantly interchange. Whitehead never represents living beings as wholly mechanical, or the city as wholly human. The key to this interchange lies in the way Whitehead projects his own reality upon the city, and his own multifaceted identity upon the legions of anonymous selves that populate the city's streets. Whitehead's constant creation and re-creation of characters and metaphors reveal a fear of being held to one identity, to one existence. And behind this urge to escape a solidified selfhood lies a desire to evade the confines of time, the inevitability of death. This yearning marks where our version of reality and Whitehead's version overlap. It is the one immutable monument in a city of constantly shifting perceptions.

From the very beginning, Whitehead dismantles the vision of New York as a glittering, perfect metropolis. He writes about New York as a complex force rather than a commercialized idea, as a being capable of doling out both salvation and destruction. In "City Limits," Whitehead notes the "You Can Make It There" mythology of New York with a wry smile and a jaded observation: "the city has spent a considerable amount of time and money putting the brochure together," he writes (3). Before he can successfully create his own vision of New York, Whitehead must dismantle the naïve romanticisms instilled in readers' minds through countless popular movies, television shows, and songs. He promises his own realistic brochure, "a guidebook, with handy color-coded maps and miniscule fine print you should read very closely so you won't be surprised" (11). That brochure makes no effort to shine the city's filthy shoes: Whitehead describes the streets as if they could rise up, the buildings as prisons, the apartments as cells. In his view, the first snow of the

year is a shroud rather than a blessing, transforming the city into a morgue (“Morning” 26). In five minutes, the snow becomes soiled and grimed; five minutes, according to Whitehead, is “all it takes for the city to break you” (28). Hell-fires burn beneath deceptively smooth asphalt; there is “no snow on street grates” because of “such abominable heat from below” (30). This brutal city gives no comfort, no opportunity, no dream for free. It gives only “the right to disappear” among countless hordes, to become anonymous, to escape the confines of identity (“Brooklyn” 109). The inhabitants of the city must meet the brutality head on and fight for success—or be conquered and submerged in the unceasing pounding of their metropolis.

After destroying our glamorized cardboard vision of the city, Whitehead forges his own New York, giving the metropolis flesh and blood in metaphor and human will in personified descriptions. In “Rain,” the city seems to be waging war on its own inhabitants. Whitehead describes people running from water drops like soldiers from gunfire: “pressed up against buildings as if on the lam,” people sprint and dash “between horizontal cover” (61). Rain, the “enemy,” strikes from above and below; as a young girl seeks cover from shots overhead, she becomes embroiled in a battle with a puddle beneath her feet. After the storm, the facades of the buildings become faces, every visage sooty, “a face powdered by industry.” According to Whitehead, “this so-called cleansing leaves behind more than it washes away. But then few things are as advertised” (66). The acid rain of toiling industry grimes and wrinkles the city’s body, its buildings; the tedious work of the city’s inhabitants etches its toll in crow’s eyes and frown lines. In “Morning,” after Whitehead describes snow as a shroud on a dead city, he orders the reader to “notice your first wrinkle, it made you late in front of the bathroom sink. No time to buy the advertised creams. First it snows and now this personal frost to consider” (32). As winter in the city becomes representative of death, the city itself becomes a being capable of dying. Then again, a being capable of dying must also be capable of living. Whitehead gives the city a breath of life in “Subway,” in the underground trains and thoroughfares that roar into existence. As the train reaches the station, “the herd trembles, the lion approaches, instincts awaken”; “the jaws slide apart and the people step inside” (50). In “Broadway,” the iconic New York street takes on flesh as well, becoming “a Great Beating Heart” congested with faceless people (144). Eventually, Whitehead gives the city all the essential organs of humanity: the wrinkles of the skin, the roar of the spirit, the beat of the heart, and, perhaps most significant of all, the inevitable wintering of death.

As the city becomes human, the city's inhabitants lose themselves within it, trading their identities for anonymity, their organs for steel, their individuality for mechanized collectivity. In "Port Authority," Whitehead describes the crowds that surge into the metropolis, hoping to lose themselves in the city's glamour. Before they even enter the city limits, he renders them in mechanical language, calling them "broken somehow, sagging down the stairs of the bus" (15). He refuses to give them names. Every person remains "he," "she," or "you," an anonymous figure awaiting Whitehead's narration, awaiting submersion in the city's steel. The metamorphosis from human to machine occurs rapidly: after the anonymous characters step off the bus at the end of "Port Authority," they immediately enter Whitehead's next essay, "Morning," which describes everyday life in the city as an endless repetition of industrialized motions. The characters now live by a robotic mantra: "Keep this machine up and running. Deliver and pick up. Every day a down-payment" (34). Even though the citizens eventually become aware of the city's brutality and of the false promise of unlimited opportunity, they cannot bring themselves to leave: "We've been ripped off," writes Whitehead, "but breaking the lease at this point is impossible" ("Broadway" 76). The citizens never do seem to "break the lease" of their inhumanity: even near the end of the essay collection, in "Rush Hour," Whitehead describes them as "halfway to sheet-rock. Steel-boned, mortar-blooded. Granite without end" (114).

Yet just when we think Whitehead writes only of the mechanization of humanity and the humanization of the city, just when we start to think that "The Colossus of New York" can be pigeonholed as a work of tidy chiasmic metaphor and forgotten, Whitehead reverses his own representational logic, describing the city as a city, the humans as human beings. Immediately after "Morning," the essay that most vividly describes the city as grimly cyclical, we enter "Central Park," a place where people seek the green enclave by "biological imperative" (37). In "Rain," as water besieges the citizens, they unleash their primal urges, seeking physical contact. The couples "forced into doorways" by fear of the rain pelting their skin instead pursue each other, searching for kisses and the warmth of another body (64). Two people in a car, safe from the icy actuality of the storm, still feel compelled to pull over to the side of the road, to make out awkwardly, to tilt the seats to "uncomfortable angles" (68). And the city, too, reveals itself at times to be just a city—not alive by and in itself, but full of the blood of humanity. Whitehead describes Broadway as a "beating heart," but he also describes it as a "black hole," something "unnatural" ("Times Square" 148). In fact, Whitehead insists that *we* keep

Broadway's heart beating. Broadway needs us, and "if the secret ever got out, [Broadway] would be empty" (85).

Whitehead creates identities and destroys them, never forging any character worthy of a name beyond a pronoun. Yet in all thirteen of his essays describing the city, with the exception of the first prologue-like essay, "City Limits," he refuses to use the pronoun "I." Perhaps Whitehead refuses to do so because "I" would be redundant: he examines his own identity, his own reality, in every invented character, in every depiction of the city, in every dramatized scene. But the refusal seems derived from reluctance. Whitehead often describes the city as a set, and the citizens as actors: "A motley crew waits for transportation. Leave the house fifteen minutes later or earlier and join a different cast of characters" ("Morning" 29); "few of them profess to be actors, and yet they are naturals for these curbside improvs, the whole clumsy theater of Which way are you going" ("Downtown" 137); and, "On New Years Eve citizens gather and shiver for one last curtain call before it's on to the next production" ("Times Square" 148). We do indeed project our reality onto the city, treating its buildings as set pieces for personal plays, as mere background to Acts 1, 2, and 3. Yet Whitehead is not content to act out a single play, or to make New York a singular projection. He must create new actors and new scripts, innumerable nameless characters, multiplicities of selfhood that he can bring out and examine at will.

Even after Whitehead has created this immense canvas for projections of what he considers reality and the self, he is not satisfied. He must continually remake, re-imagine, and re-name the city and its citizens. A fear of being found out, of submitting himself to singularity, leads him to take pleasure in the destruction of the city, the erasure of monuments from his past. Of the nameless characters, he writes, "They secretly relish the violence done to their neighborhoods and old haunts" ("Times Square" 151). Once the buildings of the past are destroyed, Whitehead has complete freedom to re-imagine them—and, by extension, himself. And yet he holds a profound reverence for, and attachment to, the city that allows him to remake himself in that way. He tells the reader to "pay tribute" to old apartments, for "they are the caretakers of your reinventions" ("City Limits" 9). He takes solace in the fact that "there are always other apartments waiting for him. There is always more city"—takes solace in the ability to spread himself out ("Downtown" 137).

But why does Whitehead feel the need to spread himself out? Why does he feel the need to constantly revise his imaginings? Perhaps he realizes that committing to a single identity, a single existence, means committing to a certain trajectory, a birth, a death. Through constant reinvention and renaming,

Whitehead tries to evade mortality. He pretends that he can regenerate existence itself, pretends that he has an endless supply of life's most vital force: time. "Broadway" is the only essay in which he follows a single character rather than a crowd of people, the only essay in which he clearly defines at least one incarnation of himself. This momentary commitment to a single identity leads to the most explicit discussion of the fear of death—what Whitehead calls "the big fear"—in the entire collection (77). The essay follows a nameless man who spends a day walking without purpose on Broadway, discovering his perception of reality and of the self. "Let it happen," Whitehead writes, "these are the terms of the truce he has made with Broadway" (76). The man feels aimless, without a destiny: "Around him they all have payment plans, arrangements to pay for what they want. And what is he after. He walks" (74). The passage echoes the fear of a man Whitehead addresses in "Port Authority": "Everyone reached their destination and got off except for you, and it might be the case that all these new people will reach their destinations before you and only you will remain, in this seat, the lone fool sticking for the terminus" (21).

At times, Whitehead imagines that those around him have found their destiny, have found some higher purpose, have embraced a single identity and accepted time and death. In "Rain," he describes a group of slow walkers who have "let go": "Walking slowly and naturally in this downpour, they are avoided by the more sensible, who walk swiftly around them, unsettled by these strange creatures. Citizens of a better city" (68). In "Broadway," he extends the resignation to the city itself: "There's an armor the city makes you wear and look at him defenseless, breastplate and helmet dropped back blocks ago . . . rendering [us] all cowards" (84). Yet even as Whitehead admires these armorless beings, these people capable of "letting go" and embracing vulnerability and mortality, he cannot quite bring himself to give up his own disguises. Perhaps he realizes that such an existence is impossible; even his descriptions of these defenseless, miraculous characters seem overly fictionalized—accounts of prophets or angels, rather than real people. As Whitehead reveals in "Broadway," "life is an argument with the world over time"—and just as it is impossible to forget time, it is impossible to fully accept it (82). Even as Whitehead reinvents his identity, as he strives to "fix exteriors and repave, spackle down and gussy up," he realizes that some things "cannot be demolished. Some things reach down and become bedrock" ("Times Square" 153). But not individual human beings.

Nevertheless, while our New York and Whitehead's New York may be different, we all share in that bedrock, in that urge to sidestep the relentless

stream of time and evade the inevitability of death. After all, “We’re neighbors,” writes Whitehead in “City Limits,” “we walk past each other every day” (11). New York serves as a blank slate for Whitehead’s multiple identities, but it serves as a blank slate for ours as well, so much so that it becomes crowded. “You’d try to flee too, if everyone heaped their dreams upon you,” writes Whitehead of the metropolis, calling it a “pack mule and palimpsest” (“Brooklyn” 100). But although our writings on the palimpsest differ, the paper remains the same: “The city is one substance, every inch of it from one end to the other” (“Downtown” 139). Even as we join in the collective creation of New York, we recognize that it will surpass us, outlive us, exist separately from our individual perceptions of it. “Like the best art, it will outlast you,” writes Whitehead (“Broadway” 79). In one man’s view, it can take on the wintering of death and seem capable of destruction, but the city itself never dies. It is the unceasing compendium of human lives, the site of continuous births and continuous deaths, a chain of countless existences that merge into a single stream of infinite time. As we strive to fight death through the construction of monuments, the creation of masterpieces, and the multiplication of new identities, we build the bedrock of New York City as it really is—a world that will outlast the self, a great colossus of immortality.

WORKS CITED

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