

AN INTERVIEW WITH

**TONI
ANN
JOHNSON**

BY SCOTT LAMASCUS

Toni Ann Johnson describes her writing career as an exploration of the most contentious and urgent topics about race in American life and culture, whether the stories have appeared on screen, stage, or in print. In her debut as playwright of *Gramercy Park Is Closed to the Public* (1994), as screenwriter for

Disney's *Ruby Bridges* (1998), and her linked short stories in *Light Skin Gone to Waste* (Georgia 2022), Johnson's writing is courageous, insightful, and meaningful. She gives her audiences deep and prizewinning explorations of race, polarization, and racism. *Light Skin Gone to Waste*, selected by Roxane Gay for the 2021 Flannery O'Connor award, is a haunting story that shows not only how racism persists in a post-Civil Rights era, but also because it is a collection awarded in the name of a writer from the Deep South.

Scott LaMascus: What is it like to write so honestly about family and friends? If any ghosts are given their rest in these stories, whose are they? How are they given peace?

Toni Ann Johnson: I'd love to say *mine*. The stories are inspired by my family's experience and my own, and it would be nice if the stories gave the characters (based on us) rest, but I'm not sure that's the case. The stories might actually keep those ghosts alive. There may be some characters that I've left in peace, however, their "peace" comes in *Homegoing*, I think, not in the collection. If any are given peace, it's because they're given a chance to answer Maddie when she confronts them. My father is deceased, but my mother may be troubled by the stories. She's always been concerned about what people think of her and so the version of herself she presented to me and to the world, was inauthentic. As an artist, authenticity is important. I try to peel

back the layers and uncover vulnerable places. As I see it, vulnerability is where the emotional connection is made between reader and writer.

LaMascus: Did the story or characters of *Light Skin Gone to Waste* change in a significant way over the many years between when they took life in your first drafting and their final forms in publication? Why or why not?

Johnson: The *characters* did *not* change significantly because they were based on my lived experience and then created from a combination of memory and imagination. What changed was the writing itself—the language, voice, in some cases point of view changed (mostly from first-person to close third). Dialogue changed and evolved over time but not the characters' fundamental natures or biographical information. The characters did become more detailed and more vulnerable, but not significantly so.

LaMascus: Your career so far has been full of many types of artistic accomplishment. Has any accomplishment, publication, or writing contract been more rewarding than the others? Has any been easier than the others?

Johnson: Publishing fiction has been more *artistically* rewarding than any of my produced screenwriting because I've had more control over the finished product and my books reflect what I intended to say. My scripts have been far more *financially* rewarding, however, my voice has been diluted and in some cases the result is a reflection of the input of multiple artists, not mine alone. Each accomplishment, publication, and writing contract has been difficult in its way. The launch of my screenwriting career might be considered easy from a limited point of view because it happened after a play I wrote and acted in landed in the hands of an entertainment attorney. He subsequently shared it with a big agent (Dave Wirtshafter) who read it, liked it, and signed me. From that point on, studio executives and producers

were willing to work with me because of Wirtshafter's reputation. And because I had a specialty: writing about race and race relations.

It was a confluence of good fortune, but I was truly struggling by the time my break into the entertainment industry came when I was thirty. I'd been studying acting from the time I was twelve, and I began writing plays at nineteen. I'd written many things that went nowhere. What might have appeared to be a lucky break was the result of *years* of preparation, dues paying, and financial difficulty as well as a lot of mental determination and grit.

LaMascus: Besides your students' work, what are you reading now? What books need more attention?

Johnson: I just finished listening to Ruth Ozeki's *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. I'm re-reading Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. I'm listening to Antioch University, Los Angeles, alumna Cassandra Lane's memoir *We Are Bridges*. And I'm reading Dan Chaon's *Stay Awake*. I hope readers will seek out books by friends who, like me, have published with small presses. Small press books often get overlooked because there's little money for publicity campaigns.

LaMascus: How do the other genres you write impact how you write fiction? How has this experience impacted your craft? What specific techniques did you learn in the other genres that you draw on for fiction?

Johnson: I read a lot of playwrights when I was starting out. I began as an actor. Acting led to playwrighting. Actors understand subtext, which impacted the way I approach scenes in fiction as well. Acting also gave me an understanding of how to connect with character and what's there psychologically and emotionally. I also developed an ear for the musicality of language by reading plays and listening to them being performed. Having been a screenwriter also impacts the way I write scenes in fiction, but the dialogue in my fiction is closer to

playwriting, I think. As a screenwriter, I use less dialogue. The visual image, the way the character is behaving, and what they're doing physically and emotionally in a scene, which is what the viewer sees on screen, is as important as the words. Often, it's *more* important. Usually, far fewer words are needed to tell the story. Screenwriting helped me develop the craft of visual and dramatic writing. The emphasis is on what the viewer will see and hear—as opposed to fiction where you can leave a scene to write narration and you can go deeply into a character's interiority. At first, I didn't understand how to write visually enough in fiction—it's a different approach than writing screen directions. One of my fiction mentors explained that the reader needs to know what to visualize while reading. That clicked for me. I found a way to translate what I knew about telling a story visually and applying it to prose.

LaMascus: You've found a way to be extremely productive in storytelling—on stage, on screens large and small, and in print—across changes in how audiences, publishing, and media are operating today. How are these changes shaping the work just emerging in your notebooks and on your keyboard today? What story are you hoping to tell next?

Johnson: I've been focused on fiction and out of the film and TV world for a while. Because I'm not writing for hire, the changes in audiences, publishing, and media don't affect what I'm writing. I write about the characters, themes, ideas, and circumstances that interest me. I don't chase trends. I'm still working on a novel that is an expanded and deepened version of one of my early plays.

LaMascus: How do you plan to adapt that story to the particularities of the twenty-first century, if any?

Johnson: Beyond writing it from a twenty-first century lens, I don't plan to adapt it to the particularities of this century. I don't think that's necessary because the subject matter remains entirely relevant. If the particularities

you refer to are the revelation of how racist, polarized, and violent this country is then I'm good.

I'm also interested in education about history and sharing information that helps people understand why there are disparities at all and that they're there by design. I haven't educated others on a wide scale, but I share (with friends) the work of those who have. I frequently read books by scholars and historians who are making this information available and accessible.

LaMascus: How does your writing figure into this emphasis on "advancing social, economic and environmental justice," to borrow the words from Antioch University, where you're an MFA faculty member?

Johnson: I often write about race relations. I've done so in movies such as *Ruby Bridges* (about integration) and *Crown Heights* (about tensions between disparate communities) and I also examine race relations in my stories and novels. I try to express the full humanity of characters of all races. The goal is to foster understanding of one another's perspective, to increase empathy, and to move toward harmony and social justice.

LaMascus: Your mentors and teachers include a who's-who in several fields, from the acting coaches of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, to Antioch University, Los Angeles where you earned your MFA. From Sundance Screenwriters Lab to fellowships at Callaloo and in Prague, you've worked with amazing actors, directors, and writers. Which mentors do you think have had the most influence on your work?

Johnson: I've encountered many great *teachers*. Arthur Kopit, Leslie Lee, Charles Fuller, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Chinua Achebe, Hannah Tinti, Stuart Dybek, Ravi Howard, Jacinda Townsend, Crystal Wilkinson, and Jamie Gordon, to name several.

A *mentor* is more than a teacher as I see it. A mentor is someone who's in a student's life over a period of time. OR someone whose work the student

interview

has access to and continues to refer to over the years. I have had only a few real mentors. They are: Emory Taylor (a voice teacher who also taught me about history and art), Leslie Lee, a playwriting mentor, Adam Skelter, a screenwriting mentor who's generously spoken with my own students, Alma Luz Villanueva, a mentor at Antioch University who remains a friend, and Leonard Chang, a former mentor at Antioch University who's been my partner for thirteen years.

LaMascus: Which teacher or mentor gave advice that you didn't understand or believe at the time, but which later proved to be particularly helpful?

Johnson: Probably Leonard, who explained that any day you've written, even if you aren't pleased with the writing, has been a good day. Getting the bad writing over with gets you closer to better writing. He told me this years ago when I was frustrated about not making progress on a story. I felt the day had been wasted. Now, I do understand why it *wasn't* a waste and that I had to go through that ineffective writing day to experience the better days that followed.

LaMascus: Do you channel any mentor, mimic a practice, or pass along any advice in particular as you teach screenwriters and fiction writers?

Johnson: I do. I use a couple of lessons I learned from Hannah Tinti. I also use Adam Skelter's materials—books and videos. And I use a number of John Truby's lessons from his book, *The Anatomy of Story*.

LaMascus: Does any widely accepted writerly advice seem particularly untrue or, perhaps, even potentially harmful? Maybe this is your chance to set the record straight!

Johnson: Not really. I think I've misinterpreted some writerly advice and taken it far too seriously. For example, Leonard Chang criticized my use of paired adjectives in a draft of a book. Early on, I took that to mean one must *never* use them. I became the paired



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adjective police. Of course you can use paired adjectives. I was *over* using them to the point where it became a repetitive pattern. The *reliance* on them was the problem. I did later notice this reliance in colleagues' and students' work and I gave the same note.

LaMascus: *Light Skin Gone to Waste* brings readers stories of characters whose past, identities, and memories are shaped powerfully by trauma. Natasha Deón, author of *The Perishing* and *GRACE*, has called these the “menacing violences—words spoken and unspoken, actions and expectations” which simmer and boil over for the characters of these stories. How have our cultural responses to trauma changed since the 1960s?

Johnson: If you're speaking specifically in terms of *racial* trauma, I don't think the cultural response has changed much for Black people. We've always known what existed and we have always grieved. That said, Black people may be receiving more therapy now than in the '60s. Through social media we have greater access to sharing injustices and being seen and heard, so that's different. But there have always been Black people who did what they could to expose injustice. Emmet Till's mother who kept her mutilated son's casket open in the '50s is an example of that. We have long had the impulse and the fearlessness to make our pain seen and heard.

For non-Black people, I think video evidence shared on social media has broadened, diversified, and changed the collective cultural response. The blissfully ignorant among the dominant culture are more aware of racism and its problems. A wider array of people protested in 2020 than protested in the 1960s. There were protests all around the world. That's different.

I don't know about the change in responses to the many other types of trauma including domestic and sexual abuse. I can only guess that therapy is more common. And, hopefully, manifestations of traumatic responses are better understood. They seem to be more widely medicated.

Mental health is of greater concern in

our culture than it was in the '60s and '70s. At USC professors were trained to look out for mental health issues. I understand that these days mental health is of concern in elementary and high school students as well. When I was in school I got called the N-word regularly. There were teachers who knew this. They heard the verbal assault. I don't recall anyone asking me if I was okay or sending me to the school psychologist to process what happened. There was no interest in my mental health or in the mental health of *any* of the kids (I was not the only one bullied), unless a child was wildly disruptive.

LaMascus: Can you discuss the varieties of ways your characters respond to their traumas—some seem to push it underground, some lash out in anger and so on? Your characters seem to depict the number of ways humans react to cruelty, violence, sexual abuse and suffering. What were your motivations there as you created these characters and their voices, habits and decisions?

Johnson: I wasn't initially motivated by a conscious desire to depict the characters' responses to trauma. I was simply remembering behavior. As the drafts progressed, I realized that the terrible behaviors, absent the knowledge of the trauma that led to

those behaviors, created despicable people. In fairness to them, I tried to layer the source of the traumas in to help the reader understand that these people behaved badly because they were broken and not put back together properly. That said my father was a psychologist and psychoanalyst. He talked about trauma. He once came to my high school when I was in tenth grade and taking a psychology class and he gave a lecture that discussed trauma. I really don't remember what he said, but I believe that I had an understanding of trauma from a fairly young age because of my father's work.

LaMascus: How are these changes shaping your emerging work?

Johnson: I'm not sure at the moment, but of course anything I'm writing *now* is through the lens of the present, so the work is absolutely shaped by that lens and what I know now that I didn't when I was a younger writer.

LaMascus: Any hints on what is to come for your readers? What themes, stories or historical moments are occupying your creative energies and interests?

Johnson: Right now book promotion is taking all my energy. I do plan to write more about the complexities of

race relations going forward. I'm also drawn to family dramas and narcissism, and I'm fascinated with the idea of going "no contact," which is when a family member chooses to entirely cut off another family member in order to protect their mental health. The experience leading up to that choice and the response to it is interesting to me.

LaMascus: What do you see in today's publishing and literary community that gives you reason for the most optimism about your work or about the future?

Johnson: My literary community in Los Angeles is the best artistic community I've ever been a part of. This may be due to age—I'm more mature and many members of the L.A. lit community are mature as well. I'm not sure what it is, exactly, but it's the most welcoming, diverse, supportive, affirming community I've known. We enjoy each other's company, we respect each other's work and careers, and we constantly celebrate one another. I'm inspired by this and feel immensely fortunate to have found myself there.



Scott LaMascus is an educator, writer, and public humanities advocate in Oklahoma City. He is founder of The McBride Center for Public Humanities, which received a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to host lectures by writers who have included novelist Marilynne Robinson, poet Robert Pinsky, playwright David Henry Hwang, and activist Bryan Stevenson. He is an MFA candidate at Antioch University, Los Angeles, whose recent work has appeared in *Red Ogre Review*, *Bracken*, *Half and One*, and *Altadena Poetry Review*.