

Trucker Rhapsody & Other Plays is a sweeping and incisive exploration of what it means to be human in an American landscape of conflict, unrest, and inequality during the past 50+ years. Press-Coffman calls to mind Kushner and Deaver Smith, providing no easy healing but offering the balm of empathy. When she holds a mirror up to nature in these plays, we may not like what we see, but perhaps we won't be so quick to look away.

—**Dr. Judith Sebasta**, Austin Community College

These plays, set in recent historical moments of heightened pressures and conflicting interests, are nonetheless driven by the characters in all their flesh-and-blood humanity, their impulses both grand and trivial. Toni Press-Coffman has a natural instinct for authentic dialogue. Her fully dimensional characters materialize before you, emerging from the page effortlessly. Her skill at weaving divergent threads and points-of-view into one complex, irresolvable but co-arising American experience is unique.

—**Susan Marsden**, Resident Director, Eureka Theatre (Retired)

Toni Press-Coffman is a humane creator of characters struggling to navigate their interwoven lives. Times and spaces overlap as we witness their struggles to form community in a world of disunity.

—**James Reel**, Arts Critic and Journalist

Perhaps Toni Press-Coffman's greatest gift as a writer is to break open her characters (widely diverse, spanning centuries, races, genders, class and politics) to reveal to us their beating hearts. Often meticulously researched, her plays are never burdened by historical detail, but enriched by a context that helps us, her audience, to glimpse the full humanity of her characters. Given voice by a theatrical language that is both heightened and deceptively natural, Press-Coffman's plays pulse with a driving rhythm and flashes of searing imagery.

—**Brad Erickson**, Playwright and Executive Director, Theatre Bay Area

TRUCKER RHAPSODY
&
OTHER PLAYS



TONI PRESS-COFFMAN

Wising Up Press

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Catalogue-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.
LCCN: 2021944193

ISBN: 978-1-7376940-9-0

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	1
UNCONDITIONAL WAR	3
TRUCKER RHAPSODY	61
ARMOR	107
STAND	161
UNITED	221
	
AFTERWORD	284
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	286
PLAYS BY TONI PRESS-COFFMAN	288
AUTHOR	289

FOREWORD

How do we aptly sum up the turbulence and devastation wrought during the first quarter of the twenty-first century? Should we start with the world pandemic that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, shut down economies and separated us from our loved ones, or in some cases, our homelands? Or the civil unrest that happens when the former leader of the United States of America makes it clear that not all states and all people are deserving of concern and funding? Maybe the fear that a simple slogan, Black Lives Matter, creates in those who cannot grasp the concept of privilege? Or do we begin with a riotous crowd, so besotted with a fabrication that they storm the nation's Capitol, looking for, and drawing, blood? We are braced for disaster; our social structures ruptured by a year of masks and fear, we live through our computers and nurture a deep distrust of what we perceive as other. Such times, we think, are unprecedented.

The five plays written by Toni Press-Coffman and presented in this collection, which take place in the US from 1967 to the present, are a blazing reminder that today's struggles, while new to us, are themes that have surfaced before. Civil unrest, racial inequality, integrity in one's work, the law of unintended consequences, a terrorist attack—in these pieces, Press-Coffman recreates real moments in history, yet these are not merely historical plays. Historical plays, or documentary plays, tend to emphasize events, and the facts that surround those events. Press-Coffman's plays humanize the players so that they are not merely action figures, but thoughtful, engaged agents of their deeds. Somehow, she manages to penetrate the motivations of her characters much like a Method actor would prepare for a role—artfully uncovering their inner thoughts and provocations. We understand why one character would want to hurt another, even if the act is criminal. We understand what would make a character turn to drugs. We understand why a character would want to help another character, even though that character might be perceived as having a competing, even dangerous, agenda.

Press-Coffman is a fearless writer who is able to identify with and portray people in the mainstream, people in the margins, people of different races,

sexes, ages, and classes. My husband and I read "Trucker Rhapsody" aloud. When we finished we sat in contemplative silence. "She is able to understand, to feel, every character's point of view," said my husband finally. This is no easy feat. Press-Coffman is not judging. She is merely presenting us with human beings who make decisions, take action, all with consequences, some good, some bad.

Reader, in these times of isolation, I urge you to have a play reading with your friends—on Zoom, in a backyard, at an outdoor cafe. Reading these pieces aloud will give you a deeper understanding of events and how they occur, as well as some comfort in the fact that, indeed, we humans have always struggled with our place in the world, with ourselves, and with each other. When you are done reading, you too will feel a little less afraid, a little more uplifted, as she has created a space that includes all of us, with empathy and compassion.

Michele Markarian

Playwright, *Unborn Children of America*

 **UNCONDITIONAL WAR** 

CHARACTERS:

LYNDON JOHNSON, President of the United States

LADYBIRD JOHNSON, his wife

AIDE, White, aide to the President, late 20s-30s at the start of the play

MR. YOUNGBLOOD, Black, a Porter, 50s-60s

TONY MOSES, Black, Harlem resident, 16-17 at the start of the play

BUTCH JOHNSON, Black, Harlem resident, 16-17 at the start of the play

LEROY TOWERS, Black, Harlem resident, 17 at the start of the play

WAYNE PEARSON, Black, SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) Worker, Lexington Mississippi, 21 at the start of the play

VIRGINIA (GINNY) HAWTHORNE, Black, SNCC Worker, Lexington Mississippi, 20 at the start of the play

HARTMAN TURNBOW, Black, resident of Lexington Mississippi, 30s

JASPER PEDERS, White, Berkeley student, 20-21 at the start of the play

DAVID DOUBIAGO, White, former Berkeley student, 21 at the start of the play

HARMONY, White, Jasper's girlfriend after the war, 17

Scene 1: Christmas Eve 1963 in the following locations: Johnson's study in his Texas home; a street in Harlem; a living room in Berkeley; a freedom house in Lexington, Mississippi; a porch in front of an Akron, Ohio home.

Scene 2: March 1965 in the following locations: Johnson's study in his Texas home; a street in Harlem; a freedom house in Lexington, Mississippi; a street in Lexington, Mississippi.

Scene 3: January 1968-May 4, 1970 in the following locations: Johnson's study in his Texas home; a street in Harlem; a living room in Berkeley.

Scene 4: December 1971-January 1972 in the following locations: Johnson's study in his Texas home; a meeting room in Austin, Texas; a living room in Berkeley.

SCENE 1

(Christmas Eve 1963. In the dark, we hear several gunshots. As the lights come up on PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON's study, we hear his recorded voice.)

JOHNSON: My fellow Americans. All I have I would have given gladly not to be standing here today. The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives in the immortal words and works that he left behind. No words are sad enough to express our sense of loss. No words are strong enough to express our determination to continue the forward thrust of America that he began. The dream of conquering the vastness of space—the dream of education for all of our children—the dream of an all-out attack on mental illness—and above all, the dream of equal rights for all Americans, whatever their race or color. On the 20th of January 1961, John F. Kennedy told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished in the first thousand days, nor in the life, of his administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But, he said, "Let us begin." Today, in this moment of new resolve, I say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.

(Sometime during the recording's playing, on the stage, JOHNSON pours himself a glass of orange soda. AIDE sits and watches him. JOHNSON lifts his glass.)

JOHNSON: Let me get you a drink—hard, soft—we got everything.
(standing, calling) Bird!!

AIDE: No thank you.

JOHNSON: How about some of this? You want to join me in a glass of orange crush? Come on now, it's no trouble, it's my pleasure.

AIDE: I'm really not thirsty.

JOHNSON: *(overlap)* I appreciate you coming, I'll tell you that. I'm always happy to have you down here and I promise you, you are going to love a Johnson Christmas. Tonight, you will not be able to believe what you're tasting. Bird sets a fine holiday table.

AIDE: Yes, I remember. Last year—I ate so much, I could hardly stand up.

JOHNSON: *(overlap)* That's right, you were here last Christmas Eve, weren't you? Am I right?

AIDE: Last two, Mr. Johnson.

(JOHNSON gets up and goes to him, sits on the arm of AIDE's chair, and puts

 **TRUCKER RHAPSODY** 

CHARACTERS:

REGINALD DENNY, a long-haired, White truck driver, 36 at the time of the riot.

DAMIAN WILLIAMS, a young, Black man, trying to decide what direction his life should take, well-built—he's not nicknamed "Football" for nothing, 17 at the time of the riot.

RIOT 208, a young Black graffiti artist who paints in Queens, New York, 17 at the time of the riot.

TITUS MURPHY, a Black unemployed aeronautical engineer, who—despite his own formidable problems—saves the life of a truck driver he doesn't know, 28 at the time of the riot.

TERRI BARNETT, a Black interior designer, mother of a young daughter, TITUS' partner, rescuer of a truck driver, 28 at the time of the riot.

GEORGIANA WILLIAMS, DAMIAN's mother, a Black, Christian nurse from the deep South, trying to raise four children in South Central Los Angeles, mid-40s at the time of the riot.

ACT I: 17 scenes, some without text

ACT II: 25 scenes

Scenes take place in Los Angeles during the 1992 Los Angeles riot; in the jail cell in which DAMIAN WILLIAMS is incarcerated; in DAMIAN's childhood home; in the home of two of REGINALD DENNY's rescuers; during the trial of the four men arrested for attacking DENNY; and in a stage space where a New York City graffiti artist engages one of DENNY's attackers in confrontations of various kinds, and where DENNY teaches that graffiti artist how to country swing.

The following should be included in the program of any production of this play. "The inciting incident of this play is the beating of truck driver REGINALD DENNY during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. These riots were touched off by the acquittal of four police officers who beat Rodney King, a Black man whom they were trying to arrest for a traffic violation. Their trial was moved from Los Angeles to Simi Valley, a mostly White, middle class suburban community where the largest concentration of law enforcement

officers in California resides. The beating of Rodney King was caught on video, as was the beating of REGINALD DENNY. Both videos were aired on television repeatedly."

Incorporation of these videos or other images relating to those incidents would be a welcome addition to a production of this play if a director so chooses.

I'm grateful to DAMIAN WILLIAMS and BEN VELAZQUEZ (RIOT 208) for their willingness to communicate with me. Without their stories and their generosity, there would be no play.

ACT I

SCENE 1

(NWA music plays as a photo of the corner of Florence and Normandie Streets in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992 comes into focus slowly with its famous picture of REGINALD DENNY lying in the street near his truck, DAMIAN WILLIAMS standing over him with a concrete block raised above Denny's head. Sudden silence. DAMIAN steps through the photo, concrete block in hand.)

DAMIAN: Can't take it back. Can't do it. *(He approaches the photo, speaks to it.)* Get up. Everybody knows you're not dead, man, so stand up.

(DENNY stands up, walks through the photo. Country music starts to play. DENNY walks to a corner of the stage and takes a seat in a couple of chairs painted red that stand in for his truck. On the chairs is painted "208." He drives. He turns up the music. Lights out on both of them as—)

SCENE 2

(RIOT 208 enters—and the lights come up bright and we see his work brightly lit on a wall. RIOT is a graffiti artist; the work we see should contain his tag—"RIOT 208.")

RIOT 208: I'm interested in learning things, I mean in learning all things, I am interested in learning every single thing under the sun. There is no subject that does not interest me, there is nothing I cannot learn, there is nothing I reject before I let it flow through me and see it for what it is and understand what good it does me to know this thing. So each day I paint with more knowledge and each time I throw my name up there I throw up a name that stands for a little more perception, a little more worldliness, more and more of the great and good human person that is me.

(police siren)

(DAMIAN animates, looks around him for the police.)

RIOT 208: *(turning to DAMIAN)* That's for me, not for you. I'm in New York City, you're in Los Angeles, this is a New York City police siren.

(DAMIAN steps back several steps, still looking around.)

RIOT 208: Believe me. *(a sigh)* They are going to chase me around a little while and try to confiscate my art supplies, then they are going to cover up my work. These particular police are not after you. Believe me. *(beat)* You got to trust somebody sometime.

DAMIAN: I trust my mama.

RIOT 208: That's a start. And by the way, put that down, did that weapon not get you in enough trouble?

(DAMIAN looks at the concrete block, surprised that it is still in his hand.)

RIOT 208: What now? You gonna tell me you have some special feeling for that brick? Put it down.

(DAMIAN puts it down.)

RIOT 208: Idiot.

SCENE 3

(DENNY gets out of his truck. He walks to the center of the stage, then realizes the country music is very loud and returns to his truck to turn it down. Then he returns to the center of the stage.)

DENNY: *(covering his eyes with his hand as though there's a light shining on them)* Reginald Oliver Denny. But you can just call me Hey You. Most people just call me Hey or call me Hey You. *(a small chuckle)* I'm kidding. That's a joke. So. *(he puts his hand down)* I was driving from—I was working. I picked up a load in Azusa and I was driving it to the plant in Inglewood. I saw, you know, a lot of commotion. I didn't know about the verdict at all, I hardly knew who Rodney King was. I knew, but only a little bit. There was a medical truck of some kind stopped in the road in front of me, so I had to stop too. *(He turns around and points to DAMIAN.)* He was there, I guess. I don't remember him being there because I had 92 skull fractures. I had more cracks in my head than Humpty Dumpty.

 **UNITED** 

United takes place throughout the lifetimes of the 40 passengers who were killed on United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. Their story is told in 18 scenes, some of which occur on the plane and some of which do not.

When the piece was being developed in Tucson (through five public readings) and when it premiered at Winding Road Theater Ensemble in February 2015, the music noted in the text was played live by a violist. This worked beautifully.

In the world premiere, 20 actors played all the characters, with a lot of doubling. The only character not doubled is Mariah Mills, who also acts as the narrator, if you will.

CHARACTERS

MARIAH MILLS

PASSENGERS (age on 9/11/2001)

CHRISTIAN ADAMS (37)
 TODD BEAMER (32)
 ALAN BEAVEN (48)
 MARK BINGHAM (31)
 DEORA BODLEY (20)
 MARION BRITTON (53)
 TOM BURNETT (38)
 WILLIAM CASHMAN (60)
 GEORGINE CORRIGAN (55)
 PATRICIA CUSHING (69)
 JOE DELUCA (52)
 JOE DRISCOLL (70)
 ED FELT (41)
 JANE FOLGER (73)
 COLLEEN FRASER (51)
 ANDREW GARCIA (62)
 JEREMY GLICK (31)
 KRISTIN GOULD (65)
 LAUREN GRANDCOLAS (38)
 DONALD GREENE (52)
 LINDA GRONLAND (46)

RICHARD GUADAGNO (38)
 TOSHIYA KUGE (20)
 HILDA MARCIN (79)
 WALESKA MARTINEZ (37)
 NICOLE MILLER (21)
 LOUIS NACKE (42)
 DON PETERSON (66)
 JEAN PETERSON (55)
 MARK ROTHENBERG (52)
 CHRISTINE SNYDER (32)
 JOHN TALIGNANI (74)
 HONOR WAINIO (27)

CREW (age on 9/11/2001)

LORRAINE BAY (Flight Attendant, 58)
 SANDY BRADSHAW (Flight Attendant, 38)
 JASON DAHL (Pilot, 43)
 WANDA GREEN (Flight Attendant, 49)
 LEROY HOMER (First Officer, 36)
 CEE CEE LYLES (Slight Attendant, 33)
 DEBORAH WELSH (Flight Attendant, 49)

CHORUS

All 43 characters who are not passengers or crew members on the plane (except MARIAH) are part of the CHORUS and are played by five actors. Whether they move in and out of scenes or stand together as a chorus traditionally does, I leave up to the director. Scene breaks are indicated by the CHORUS announcing the name of a new scene.

(CHORUS and MARIAH MILLS stand on the stage.)

A musician plays the viola—Telemann's Viola Concerto in G Major, third movement, starting with the 8th measure.

(When MARIAH steps forward, the music stops.)

CHORUS: OBSESSION

MARIAH: I don't know how I knew. I just knew. We were sent home from school that morning, September 11, 2001. That morning. I threw myself on my bed and couldn't stop crying. My mom kept telling me the things you're supposed to tell your kids in the face of that kind of tragedy. It's all right to be scared. It's good to get all that sadness out. I kept sobbing and having a hard time breathing. When I could finally speak, I said, "I think one of my birth parents is dead." My mom became really alarmed.

CHORUS MEMBER: How could you know that?

MARIAH: I just knew. The next day I pored over the newspaper and saw the crash site in a Pennsylvania field—a two-page photo spread with firefighters and the coroner and random onlookers. I stared and stared and stared at that photo. I was mesmerized. United Flight 93 was traveling at 563 miles an hour when it hit the ground. Causing the 44 people on board to vaporize. My adoptive parents had agreed to raise me as a Catholic and make sure I got a good education. When I reached 19, I would be allowed to see the adoption records and, if I consented, the birth parents would be allowed to meet me. I was 16 in 2001. I had two and a half years to see what I could discover about the people on that flight. I was fairly sure none of the terrorists was my birth parent. I have a recurring waking nightmare in which I hear those men praising their God while in the act of murdering 40 people. I believe Allah had a few choice words for those killers. Paradise? I don't think so. Besides those four? 40 other people. Very small number of people for a cross-country flight. Much larger number of people to gather information about. I became obsessed. How old were they? What were their families like? Where did they grow up? Did they have pets? What gave them joy? Where did they sit on the plane? Did they have faith?

CHORUS MEMBER: Faith in what?

MARIAH: What happened was this: soon after they realized their plane was being hijacked, they discovered that two planes had been flown into the



Toni Press-Coffman has written twenty-seven plays that have been produced in cities throughout the United States. She frequently writes about real people or events such as the people who died when Flight 93 crashed in a Pennsylvania field (*United*); the 1992 L.A. Riots (*Trucker Rhapsody*); Lyndon Johnson's presidency (*Unconditional War*); Dean Martin (*Dean the Sublime*); and Richard III (*Two Days of Grace at Middleham*); and dramatizes social issues impacting the lives of women and children (*Psycho Sarah*, *That Slut!*, *Stand*, *Holy Spirit*) or the consequences of the rampant racism that continues to plague American society (*Stand*, *Trucker Rhapsody*). The recipient of several playwrighting awards, she is also an actress, dramaturg, and co-founder of Winding Road Theater Ensemble in Tucson, where she served as company manager for ten years. She now lives in Connecticut with her husband Glen, dog Mareeba, and cats Augie and JJ.