

reflections

LIAN BELL - THEATER IS OVER

RACHEL BONDS - THE OCEAN FLOOR

LAUREN GUNDERSON - GOD IS IN THE STAGE DIRECTIONS

GUADALIS DEL CARMEN - BLACK AND LATINA IN THE TIME OF CORONA

JORDANA DE LA CRUZ - A NON ESSENTIAL CAREER

CHRISTINE JONES - THEATRE FOR ONE, THEN, SOON, SOMETIME

DANIEL ALEXANDER JONES - EVIDENCE OF LOVE

CELIA KEENAN-BOLGER - BROADWAY FEEDS BELLEVUE

KIRK LYNN - PRAYER FOR INSPIRATION & BAD PERFORMANCE

KIRK LYNN - SIMPLE PRAYER & PRAYER FOR FAIR TRADE

MARY-LOUISE PARKER - POEMS

NANCY RODRIGUEZ - I USED TO BE AN ACTRESS

JESSICA THEBUS - THE STORY CIRCLE AS WITNESS

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON - HOPE IN THE TIME OF HYPHENATION

SEE LIGHTING FOUNDATION

YEE EUN NAM - 10 YEARS IN US

DARREL ALEJANDRO HOLNES - BLACK FEMINIST VIDEO GAME

DAVID ZINN - 2020 COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

THE KILROYS - THE 2020 LIST

MONET HURST-MENDOZA - IT'S OK

DONJA R LOVE - SOFT

JEFF AUGUSTIN - CRY OLD KINGDOM

JIREH BREON HOLDER - JUNETENTH PRAYER

DURETE MAGUIRE - WITH THIS HAND I NOW RAISE

NGOZI ANYANWU - GOOD GRIEF

JACKIE SIBBLIES DRURY - FAIRVIEW

DESIREE BURCH - TAR BABY

TORI SAMPSON - IF PRETTY HURTS

JIREH BREON HOLDER - IN THE SOUTHERN BREEZE

CHERYL L WEST - I ASK

JONATHAN PAYNE - THE REVOLVING CYCLES

CHARLY EVON SIMPSON - FORM OF A GIRL UNKNOWN

JILLIAN WALKER - SKINFOLK

OCTAVIO SOLIS - NOT MY PRAYER

CHRISTINA ANDERSON - KITCHEN THOUGHTS

JULIA CHO - PRAYER

LARISSA FASTHORSE-PRAYER FOR THEATER

DONNETTA LAVINIA GRAYS - IMAGINE A LIGHT

MIRANDA ROSE HALL - THESE DAYS

JESSICA HECHT - AN ELEGY NOT WRITTEN BY US

C.A. JOHNSON - SUSTAINABLE FACTS: PROVABLE AND OTHERWISE

JOHN LAHR - OUR PLAGUE YEAR: DISPATCH FROM LONDON

SARAH B. MANTELL - ON THE LOSS OF A PLAY AND THINGS WORTH LOSING

ELLEN MCLAUGHLIN - ON QUARANTINES AND ANGELS

REN DARA SANTIAGO - LETTER TO VERSIONS OF:

JOSE SOLÍS - REWATCHING SEX AND THE CITY DURING A PANDEMIC

PAULA VOGEL - AGING IN THE TIME OF COVID

Hope in the Time of Hyphenation

CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON

Social distancing is nothing new if you've ever traveled while Asian to places where you are greeted with the kind of silent stares that shout "GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM." Not only do I already have experience keeping a healthy 6 or more feet away from this kind of radical reverse hospitality (especially these days), I also find myself when I'm in these situations – a sixth generation-Asian American-college educated-Ann Taylor Loft wearing woman of a certain age – suddenly compelled to start up long non-essential conversations with my husband. This way there's no mistaking that I speak English and indeed "speak it well" (as I, along with every person of Asian descent I've ever met, have been told on more than one occasion) and that if I were to go back to where I came from, it would be to an upper middle class suburb of New York City.

So. Here we are in the Summer of 2020 in the middle of both a global pandemic and a national reckoning on systemic racism in America. Added to the mix, anti-Asian sentiment ranging from the micro-aggressions of yesteryear to the hate crimes of today are being fueled anew by various government leaders' insistence on renaming COVID-19 "the Chinese virus" or the "Kung flu." And Asian Americans are reminded that the roots of xenophobia and prejudice against people who look like us are deep and storied in this country. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (active until 1943), the Japanese internment camps of World War II and the metaphorical and literal hyphenation of Asian Americans in the 21st century remind us that there is a legacy of discrimination from which no mask can protect us.

To hyphenate or not to hyphenate the words "Asian" and "American" as a descriptor has been an ongoing discussion amongst style guides since the term "Asian American" was coined in the 1960s. Hyphenating it (to many of us) implies being considered "less than" a full American, underlining the perpetual foreigner status we continuously battle. In simpler grammatical terms, if you see "Asian" as an adjective and "American" as a noun, you are describing an American who traces their heritage to Asia, similar to a person who is "French Canadian" (only they're Canadian. And French). But if you hyphenate the description to be "Asian-American", joining two nouns together, this implies that said person is not quite whole of either. (Interesting fact: though journalists have been requesting this for decades, the AP Style Guide was not convinced to stop hyphenating until March of 2019.)

But as I was saying, here we are in the Summer of 2020. Now on extended hiatus from my long running job as an actor in the first national tour of *Come From Away* and sheltering in place in my beloved New York City in the midst of a new kind of national truth telling, I find that I'm writing like crazy. I'm doing rewrites and/or working on new musicals, plays, screenplays, television pilots, monologues, pitches, and essays with a mystifying kind of quarantine-influenced clarity and vigor. I'm compelled to create art, consciously or sub-consciously I realize, partially as a response to this new wave of prejudice gnawing at my psyche, to this relentless fictionalization of our responsibility for the pandemic; one that is attempting to render our true selves invisible, less than, otherized, hyphenated. I realize that I'm fighting back by trying to literally write us into the narrative of the American landscape – but on my terms. Not everything I'm writing is specifically about Asian or Asian American people, or even set in this specific time period. And I'm aware that there is often an expectation about what a person who looks like me "should" be writing, and more presumptively (in an unspoken way) that the sixth generation Asian American college educated Ann Taylor Loft wearing woman of a certain age lens through which I see things is not exactly in line with those expectations. Even so, through all of these words, I'm writing, these stories I'm dreaming, these worlds I'm imagining – through all of them emerges an unlikely guide: hope.

If you're just getting to know me through this reflection, you'd probably never guess that in spite of all I've talked about so far, I'm a self-described "pathological optimist." And don't get me wrong, that optimism is being challenged to its very core every day. But not while I'm writing. While I'm writing, I dream up stories where our better angels get a chance to be born out of chaos, where lifelong dreams defiantly come true, where against all odds love triumphs over hate, and equality and justice triumph over fear and prejudice. I write the world as I hope to see it someday. And though cynicism and irony may have influenced hopefulness to fall out of style, I also dream of the day when a story seen through the unapologetic eyes of a sixth generation Asian American college educated Ann Taylor Loft wearing woman of a certain age with a wounded yet optimistic heart can be embraced as an *American* story. And where we, the storytellers, can help change history with the truths we tell and the dreams we fiercely fight for. This hope is what keeps me breathing deeply (inside my own house, where I don't have to wear a mask), eyes on the horizon, looking ever forward towards the day when we will gather again and tell stories together of humanity, unity, and compassion, in a place as wide open with possibility as the ocean: the theater.



CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON

Christine Toy Johnson is an award-winning writer, actor and advocate for inclusion. She serves on the Council of the Dramatist Guild and hosts the Guild's podcast "Talkback" on the Broadway Podcast Network. More at www.christinetoyjohnson.com

All media courtesy of the writer.

