

# AT THE 1999 PUSHKIN BICENTENNIAL SYMPOSIUM

## “The Significance of Aleksandr Pushkin in the African Diaspora”

by

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### ABSTRACT

**Aleksandr Pushkin’s** importance to Russian culture and to the Russian People cannot be overstated. Neither should his significance to the African Diaspora be underestimated. In a world neither fractured nor fragmented by “race” or class, Aleksandr Pushkin would be avowed a great writer. However, in a world splintered and skewed by both “race” and class prejudices, Aleksandr Pushkin takes on additional meaning far beyond that of a cultural icon and the acknowledged “*Father of Russian Literature*”. In a “race” conscious context, Pushkin’s African ancestry symbolically transforms him into a historical “marker”, and political “signifier” for today’s People of African Descent scattered the world over. The *material reality* of his life experience resonates with rich meaning for us as a collectivity across frontiers that are temporal, geographical, linguistic, cultural, and political. On a global level, with increasing frequency, we are all witnessing longstanding barriers give way and fall to reveal the African Diaspora in its true magnitude. Their collapse exposes to light the obfuscated contributions of Africa to Humanity, and World Civilizations’ unacknowledged, on-going and outstanding debt to Africa. For the African Diaspora, it is this critical backdrop that colours, textures, gives dimension and lends shades of meaning to the image of Aleksandr Pushkin. As a result he becomes, simultaneously, linchpin and key between Past and Present, as well as beacon, vector, or Muse of inspiration to carry us forward into the New Millennium. In the African Diaspora, Aleksandr Pushkin is a rallying point of reference that can help us better understand the legacy of History and the “*material reality*” which we People of African Descent mediate, globally, each day.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

A lawyer, linguist, lecturer, educator, writer and seasoned Human Rights advocate, Esmeralda M.A. Thornhill is a tenured Full Professor of Law at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, where, in July 1996, she was appointed the first holder of the distinguished **James Robinson Johnston Endowed Chair in Black Canadian Studies**.

Her academic training includes Post Graduate Studies in Spanish, French, and Pedagogical Sciences at the Université de Montréal, McGill, and Denver Universities. She holds a Law degree from the Université du Québec à Montréal and a Diploma in International Law from the University of San Diego (Paris, France). Fluently trilingual in English, French and Spanish, and a member called to the Bars of both Quebec and Nova Scotia, Professor Thornhill has researched and written extensively and has lectured widely to legal, academic, government, public, and grassroots audiences at local, national and international levels on the “*material reality*” of Racism in Law, Education, and Public Services. Published in legal, educational and feminist journals, she conceptualized, developed and taught the first university-accredited course in Black Women’s Studies offered in Canada, *Black Women: The Missing Pages from Canadian Women’s Studies* (Concordia University, 1983 and 1988).

Professor Thornhill is the recipient of honorary Doctorates of Law, from both the City University of New York (1996), and Concordia University (1997). Widely travelled, Esmeralda Thornhill is also a published poet in English, French and Spanish who has entertained audiences both at home and abroad.