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On the Line

Eva Johnson

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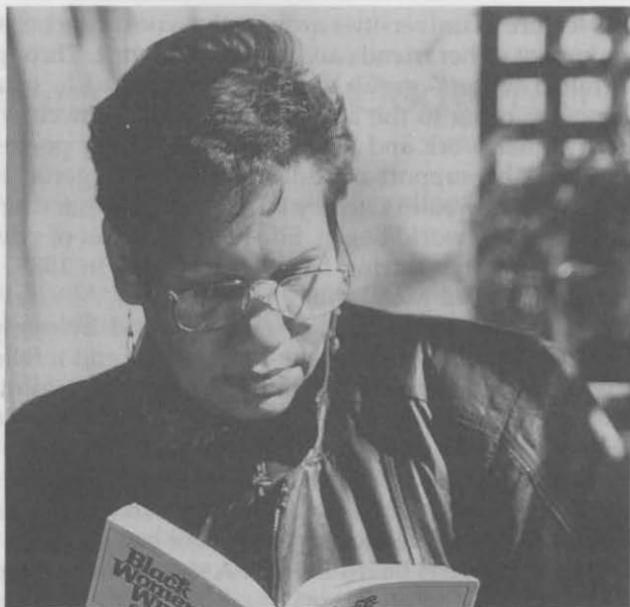
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Abstract

The biggest question that lies important in my life at the moment is, what is my role in this country, as a writer, a woman, a mother and most importantly, as an Aborigine? My sense of responsibility comes from a place where, as a writer, the knowledge that I have acquired is the tool that connects both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal concepts. Aboriginal writing includes society as the focus of our Art.



Eva Johnson was born at Daly River in the Northern Territory. She moved to Adelaide in the 50's and in 1979 wrote her first play. Her third play *Voices* was performed as part of the Hiroshimo Arts Festival in Japan in 1990. Eva's writing has taken her to many parts of the world. In 1988 she was invited to the first International Women's Playwrights Conference in Buffalo, New York, was writer in residence at the Native American Community School in Minnesota, and has spoken at several universities throughout America including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Rollins College Florida, and the University of Minnesota. In 1991, Eva was a speaker at the 3rd International Feminist Book Fair in Barcelona, Spain. Her most recent play *Heartbeat of the Earth* had its world premier performance as part of the 1993 2nd World Indigenous Youth Conference in Darwin. In 1993 Eva was awarded the Australia Council inaugural Red Ochre Award in recognition of her outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts culture. Her published works include – plays ('Murras' – in *Plays from Black Australia*; and 'What do they Call Med' in *Heroines*) and poetry (*Inside Black Australia* and *Spirit Song*).

EVA JOHNSON

On the Line

The biggest question that lies important in my life at the moment is, what is my role in this country, as a writer, a woman, a mother and most importantly, as an Aborigine?

My sense of responsibility comes from a place where, as a writer, the knowledge that I have acquired is the tool that connects both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal concepts. Aboriginal writing includes society as the focus of our Art.

My writing is specifically Aboriginal because it deals with my life experiences as an Aborigine and those of other Aborigines. Writing for me, as an Indigenous Australian, is about the will to survive. I try to work towards the accomplishment of the ideal of freedom through writing plays which seek to eliminate the many confusions that hinder Aboriginal people and I deal with questions that are crucial to Aboriginal people and our experiences.

Aboriginality is a major part of the texture and meaning of all important works by Aboriginal writers. Writings of protest, resistance and cultural revolution have typified Aboriginal literature.

My writing allows me to speak. The characters in my plays are real; they are living a life on stage, perhaps their lives, perhaps that of another Aborigine and their experiences. I write about people who have been under prescribed treatment for over two hundred years, who have endured the harshness, the traumas, of a hostile racial history in their own country. These historical events are different configurations of racism but these are lived experiences. My writing exemplifies these experiences. My writing is often triggered by childhood memories...

I remember my mother running through the bushes
with me on her back,
her screams deafened my ears.
Other women were running too.
She placed me in the bushes on the ground,
covered me with leaves.
The sound of hooves galloping
pounded my heart
my screams of fear burst my lungs
exposed my camouflage.
Strange hands brushed away the leaves

picked me up, placed something sweet in my mouth
 I spat it out
 put me on the back of a horse.
 The bush became deadly silent.
 That was the last time I saw my mother.

from the play *Tjindarella*, 1984

I began writing in the late 1970's when Aboriginal people were no longer content to remain invisible. From 1967 when Aborigines were honoured with citizenship rights in their own country, when we were no longer seen as part of the flora and fauna, the first moves began towards constituting a black consciousness, a black social force in this country.

Writing became one of the most powerful tools of protest. Thus began the resurrection of a new kind of writer, beginning with such well-respected Aboriginal writers as Kevin Gilbert, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Hyllus Maris. These writers are part of Aboriginal history and indeed the history of establishing Aboriginal Literature within the context of Australian literature.

My whole focus as a writer is to deal with history. The Land Rights struggle brought to light a particular political concept for me. I began to write poetry about the land, the people and the living spirits that are part of Aboriginal culture. Through the genre of land, black consciousness, I sieved through the events of history, especially the treatment of Aborigines, and drew a clear conclusion of how immense the future struggle for Aborigines would be. My initial response was that of anger.

The realisation for me was that while struggling for acceptance in this country, the enemy seen by those in power was in fact my own Aboriginality, my own blackness. It was used against me by a manipulative structure that would inevitably use as its tool restrictive policies, with a view to destroying any sense of self-worth and most importantly, cultural identity.

So initially, anger became a catalyst for my writing. Anger became a valuable political tool for analysis, confrontation, redress, and in fact acted as a neon repellent against any notion of serving the government in the very institutions that moulds Aboriginality into useless captive tokens.

Writing became my partner in the war against injustice. Writing became a therapeutic balm, using works of creative expression to expel negative thought, writing words of self-affirmation, love and wisdom. Writing became a part of my spirit, the very core of my being. Writing brought me to understanding the true concepts of Aboriginality, Identity and most importantly, a sense of humour. Writing about our oppression through humour is for me one of the most poignant interactions with reality.

Weavilly porridge I'm going insane
 weavilly porridge gonna wreck my brain
 H,mmm, mission food

send'm from heaben
must be good
bless'em little weavill
bless'em little me
I been lungga trick'em
just you see
catch'em little weavill
put'em in the tea
only fulla drink'em up
MISSIONARY!!!!

I am often asked if my work is autobiographical. For the most part it is. So many things have happened to me in my lifetime that it is important for me to retrace, to record some of the events. My children grew up in an era that had no relation to any of the childhood experiences that I had. They want to learn of my past, our past, Australia's history in the past.

I also have an inherent interest in all that is Aboriginal. Thus anything that hinders or threatens the progress of Aboriginal survival forces me to respond. Every day I deal with the notion of superiority/inferiority and that is unsettling to me as it brings with it the sense of imbalance in this society. Does my writing sabotage the notion of white racial superiority and bring to reality the power of my existence?

Writing has the power to unveil almost any conscious or unconscious thought. I write to that consciousness, the conscious demon that arrived in this country two hundred years ago.

I'm not sure whether I take my writing seriously enough. The process of my writing is erratic and at most times steered by time deadlines. Procrastination is my greatest enemy. I detest being 'organised' and much prefer to do things in my own time. But I am no longer afraid of what I write, nor do I allow any room for self-censoring. MY writing has to be attuned to my philosophical and spiritual beliefs, in that whenever I write, the contents must come from that part of me which is the conscious source of my being.

Writing is the most daring thing I have ever done and the most rewarding. The rewards of my writing are reflected by those who acknowledge my work, particularly Aboriginal people. For me this acknowledgement is an affirmation that the audience for whom I specifically write endorses the worth of my work.

There are other Aboriginal writers who have forged the way for writers such as I, writers whom I acknowledge as our heroes of the pen. To them I dedicate this poem. As someone once said... Speak loud, speak unsettling things and be dangerous.