

Studies in American Indian Literatures

NEWSLETTER
of the
Association For Study
of
AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURES

602 Philosophy Hall
Columbia University
New York, New York
10027

STUDIES IN AMERICAN INDIAN
LITERATURE The Newsletter
for the Association for
the Study of American Indian
Literature

Volume 7, no. 3, Fall, 1983

Editor: Karl Kroeber, Columbia University
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Bibliographer: Lavonne Brown Ruoff,
University of Illinois, Chicago

SAIL BIBLIOGRAPHY #5

Paula Gunn Allen, B.A., M.F.A., Ph.D.
Poetry

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Studies in American Indian Literature.
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Allen's poems have appeared in over
twenty-five journals and have been included
in half-a-dozen major anthologies. She has

written numerous critical essays and several pieces of fiction, as well as introductions to books by Brian Swann and Maurice Kenny.

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CANTAS ENCANTADAS: Paula Gunn Allen's
Shadow Country

Herman Melville in his gripping short novel, Benito Cereno, uses the subject of mutiny aboard a slave ship as a metaphor for the difficulty of distinguishing truth from illusion, good from evil. A mood of enchantment hovers over the foreground, where three worlds, those of black slaves, Spanish imperialists, and American merchant-sailors intersect. Melville's images accordingly are surrounded by a mute and mysterious natural world, and are from the first cast in shades of gray: "Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come."

Paula Gunn Allen, a very different writer in a very different time, has undertaken a similar task. Her new volume of poetry, Shadow Country, seeks to piece together a private cosmos from the tri-partite world of the Native American past, the tangled contemporary life of what Allen calls "breeds" (Americans of mixed origin, including Native American heritage) and the deadening consumer society of white America. Her title finds expression in an infinite number of ways as she rearranges the pieces of this tri-partite puzzle over and over again, against a sensual and sun-struck natural background.

The book is divided into four parts (the sacred number of Southwestern tribes, as

Allen has reminded us elsewhere): "Que Cante Quetzal," "Shadow Country," "Requardo," and "Medicine Song." These are also the titles of the poems which conclude their sections.

The poems, read as a unit, are quite explicit about Allen's procedures. In "Creation Story," the first poem in the collection, she signals the shaping of her own mythical terrain, populated with spirits wrought from nature, Indian culture, urban centers (the living dead), and from Western history (the dead living).

Recreating the traditional creation story, Allen focuses on the sign of four, decreed by the Goddess of the Corn. Allen's creations emerge from the earth, "where those who have gone/wait, work, and come four days at a time/ bringing the rain, coming home."

Accordingly, these two motifs appear again and again in the ensuing poems, the rain multiplying its mystical meaning exponentially, but most importantly as a sign of poetry, generation, spirituality. Coming home represents a return to nature, tradition, and native poetic consciousness, the true self. Many of these inspirations come to the persona as she walks the land. They are modern "walking songs." Extracting key words from the second piece, "Mountain Song," (the poems are often in complementary pairs) one could fashion the poet's message to her culture and her readers:

"Let me tell the tales; I will walk nobly."

Telling the tales means more than reconstructing legends. It also entails facing the terrifying realities of the past

and the present together, creating new poetic vessels out of the shards of the old, vessels capable of holding the sacred waters of life and creativity. These images appear many times, usually as pots in the hands of women.

Sadly, the men of the tribes lie defeated on the periphery, or drinking in silent kivas, refusing to perform the sacred dances. As the title "Deep Deep City Blues: Elegy for the Man Who Owned the Rain" suggests, men have forfeited their heritage: "the dead from broken jars remain, unrebored."

It is "Womanswork" to create new jars from old shards, a process underlined by the isolation of words in short lines.

What of water? It is found primarily in memory, souvenirs, relics, remembrances ("Recuerdo"), and of course, in nature, but also in love and in tears. Memory, however, is the key. Memory alone now keeps "...the eternal pueblos of our lives..." and "restores the ruined and faded kivas of our dreams."

Surely part of the reason Allen yearns to be back among the remembered mesas is that through communion with this truly living nature, she can overcome the pain of what she has termed elsewhere "the ancient thrust toward unification," an urge that is "beset by isolation, powerlessness, denial, pain and loss of self...often worked out violently."

Because Allen thought this problem out in writing "A Stranger in My Own Life: Alienation in American Indian Prose and Poetry," her own work largely avoids the cover-up of superficial anger or sentimental

nostalgia. That is not to say that her voice is always serene.

In "The Return," by contrast, memory is intoxicating. She remembers the smooth rock she used to carve, and her yearnings for persons unknown. In these childhood mesas she "made runes," which she now rereads and understands for the first time, a late blossoming of early fruit. Eager to catch both this personal trace as well as the communal, before it fades, she identifies with the memory of "how the trees at dusk wrapped/their branches around the light."

The personal archaeological probing of "Easter Sunday: Recollection," and "Paternity," (a poem that unearths dreams of a kind father but nightmares of a cruel grandfather who took potshots at his wife as she fetched water home) comes at a cost, however, illustrating the key principles set out in the major statement of "Approaches," the first poem of Section III. Sweeping across the sand's artifacts, she finds visual and sometimes painful stimuli for poetic thought, which is suggested by "wings knifing the edges of memory/blowing clouds like blood/on the hills/....bewildered hands of morning/ laid like bone upon the glass." Here as elsewhere, memory is the reopened wound, but miraculously, as the stanzas progress, the wings of memory "beat light into gold." an astonishing image that magically transforms a cruel instrument into an artist's forge --all without a sound.

Conversely, the forge produces the sharp instrument of poetry. This enchanted sword must be used carefully; in "Off Reservation Blues," the speaker dreams of being locked

in a tower, high above "a white-skinned figure...far below"; desperate to send down her message, she can only groan; later awakening, close up to the audience, "your eyes" become impenetrable "glass." Yet, language is "oblique/misunderstandable" --"this narrow pass,/this sharpness of tongue,/this blade to cut your heart out/ and offer it to the sun/must stay quiet awhile./Open words, openly said/are not heard..."

Of the several poems about the creation of poetry, "Coming Out" presents perhaps the best set of poetic transformations. In a patient time of waiting, the poet hovers "like a hawk/starving/on the edge of thought/ I ride unseen currents"; swooping downward, she is the arroyo, waiting for the rain, waiting to enclose, shape, and channel the water of inspiration.

The ancient ingredients are there, only the water of inspiration is lacking. This poem may be usefully paired with "Recuerdo," the title poem of the third section. Here the poet is climbing into the pure peaks where the gods live in search of lost power: "Lately I write, trying to combine sound and memory/ searching for that significance once heard and nearly lost"; the search is in the "tall pines," with the "voice under the wind" that brings her to "terror and to tears." Fingering peyote buttons, dreaming obsessive memories, the poet awaits the meaning with hope and dread: "Maybe this time I will not turn away/...Maybe I will find that exact hollow/where terror and comfort meet."

The title, Shadow Country, means many things but salient here is the sense of time

running out. One must take advantage of the dying light to retrieve the usable detritus of the past. Poems like "Impression: A Photograph of Lee and Ethel Francis, Christmas, 1978," operate by a kind of notation, and encapsulate the archivist's despair. The elderly couple are evoked as they disappear under a gray avalanche of years; they have forgotten what they are and what they wanted as their cares fall away. Similar are the faces of the old people in "Reveries," who remember the terrible year of 1851, "whose faces stretch over the bone/like priceless drums" have had all "guilt and memory/swept away/in cleansing breezes/of senility..."

Allen's references to the past frequently take on a double meaning. Many poems ("The Warrior," "Riding the Thunder," "Another Long Walk,") commemorate the cruel history of the forced relocations of the nineteenth century, yet Allen sees that tribal strength and song itself comes from this walking.

This summary of Allen's poetry cannot include a full analysis of the other tender love poems, the sketches of eccentrics and portraits of friends and lovers, or the interesting bits of historical revisionism, such as "Riding the Thunder," a savage blow at Andrew Jackson. An initial appraisal of Shadow Country would not be complete without mentioning two groups of poems that provide much of the collection's considerable power. The first deals with the plight of the alienated urban Indian and with similarly oppressed figures across the globe. The second set focuses on Indian women, both as victims and as agents of change and salvation.

"Los Angeles, 80" is perhaps the most powerful indictment of urban America in Shadow Country. Our contemporary lives are there, unmistakable, indefensible. Since recent statistics indicate virtually half of all United States Indians live in cities (more in Los Angeles than in any other place) this poem has much to say about the alienation of all urban Indians. The speaker, surrounded by a consumer "death culture" that has decked itself in organic trappings, sees herself in the tasteful smoked glass front of a Weight and Smoking Control Center: "short, fat, a black cigarette in my hand/my self-cut hair graying, my worn clothes mocking/ the expensive, seductive sign./ I could see how I am/neither healthy nor wealthy./But I am wise/enough to know/ that death comes in pretty packages too"; and yet, the narrator here sees the relation between herself and the beautiful "sun children" around her --a "smoky tomorrow" is to be shared, and all walk into it, still believing death "need not be."

In her concern over the brutalization of ethnic peoples, especially ethnic women, Allen is brave enough to face current problems directly. Much of the history and current plight of Southwestern Indians is here, in broken shards, but Allen speaks for her brothers and sisters elsewhere as well; she reminds us in "Que Cante Quetzal!" with scathing irony, of the claim that "the revolution is over;/ but they're napalming Indians in Brazil...In Bolivia the Peace Corps sterilize women forcibly..."

Beirut, Vietnam, Cambodia, all the recent epidemics of killing are conjured up, to

explain why now, finally, "The clans are coming in." "The Buffalo Dance" against injustice is taking place in underground kivas again, figuratively speaking, across the world. The repeated use of this image suggests that the exploitation of Indians in America, which has never ceased, has spread like a contagion to other parts of the world.

"Laguna Ladies Luncheon" and "Suiciding(ed) Indian Women" are horrifying variants of these themes, but the most apocalyptic poem in the collection is ironically named "The Garden." It begins peacefully enough, with the speaker and her companion weeding. The ominous discovery of insect skeletons and the admission that something is "out there" creates the momentary frisson of Thing-In-The-Desert genre horror movies.

Later, a woman who dreams of Pentecostal beatitudes has her vagina mutilated by a crazed man with a knife and a hatchet. In a never-ending sequence of horrifying images of death, the speaker sees a Brazilian Indian woman hung next to a white hunter: "she is naked/she is dead," conjuring up the unbearable memory of the notorious "snuff" movies and worse. In this chilling sequence Allen takes her anger to the outer limits.

The poem is appalling, but it has an undeniable power; in terms of the total vision of the book, however, it is atypical, but it provides a foil for the resolution of "Indian Mother Poem," a qualified declaration of independence: "no you can't use me/I am not a con/sumable item...but you can share/ me with me as though/I were a two-necked wedding jar/they make, over in

Santa Clara --some for each of us/enough." Here the respected woman can share herself, pouring out the waters of life and creativity that are destroyed in the nightmare activities of modern political life.

These contrasting themes are majestically given a summary in "He No Tye Woman." After an extensive inventory of the mighty waters of the world, the speaker considers the cleansing rain, sign of the lovely earth mother, "Pouring. Making everything new." If man would only respect woman, and this land, this spirit of the mother might emerge from her cave to bless the earth once again.

Aside from the urgency required for the documentation of vanishing people and artifacts, Allen's pace and rhythm are measured, patient, sure. The force of the poems is both repetitive and ceremonial. This is countered at times by the fact that some poems remain mysteries to the reader. In the organic scheme of the book, these too have their place, however, adding to the sense of the great mystery that exists, even in the heart of what is comprehensible about nature and man. The language is pure and concentrated, the sort that we associate with writers like Elizabeth Bishop, who also concerned herself with folktales, legend, natural notation, and ritual.

Yet in Shadow Country Paula Allen has produced a cosmos all her own, a world created through incantation and enchantment. Her poems are truly cantas encantadas. Like Melville, she prophesies darkly of "shadows present...shadows to come," while her poetry also does what she claimed the best of Native American literature has always

done: It verbalizes "the sense of the majesty and reverent mystery of all things," and actualizes, in language, "those truths of being and experience that give to humanity its greatest significance and dignity." She has, indeed, "retold the tales." With Shadow Country Paula Allen "walks nobly" into the ranks of the major American poets of our day.

John Lowe
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Paula Gunn Allen The Woman Who Owned the Shadows: The Autobiography of Ephanie Atencio (Spinster's Ink: Argyle N.Y., 1983)

In her first novel, Paula Gunn Allen focuses on the journey toward spiritual rebirth of the central character, Ephanie Atencio. As Allen points out in her author's notes, the novel describes Ephanie's quest for spiritual powers, during which she first learns about these powers, is prevented from understanding and using them, and "comes to terms with them in a contemporary American/Indian world." Allen emphasizes Ephanie's thought processes rather than her actions.

In the course of her psychological and spiritual journey toward emergence as a shaman, Ephanie searches her memory to recall both childhood experiences that reveal the sources of her adult fears, and the stories of Keres mythology that are at the base of her Indian heritage.

This journey is symbolized by her circular migrations between Albuquerque and San Francisco. In her progress toward the

visionary state, she is aided by her brother Stephen and the psychic Teresa, who act as shamans to initiate her into healing rituals and to transmit to her messages from Keres deities until she can communicate directly.

Another shaman-like character is the therapist who enables Ephanie to express both her own unconscious thoughts and those of her family that are necessary to her psychological progress. Ephanie must, however, separate herself from each of these intermediaries in order to proceed to the next stage of spiritual power.

The novel contains skillful portraits of feminine relationships. One of the best describes the loving childhood friendship between Ephanie and Elena, inseparable companions until forced apart by Elena's mother and a school nun who fear the girls' physical affection for one another.

In adulthood, Ephanie finds another friend in the psychic Teresa, who helps her find her way back to Keres deities. The complex relationships between grandmother, mother, and daughter are imaginatively presented through having Ephanie take their roles in therapy sessions.

Ephanie's identification with the female characters and deities is much stronger than with the male. Although she feels a close bond to her brother, Ephanie recognizes that he smothers her, does not allow her to be real. Abandoned by her first husband, she moves with her two children to San Francisco, where, out of loneliness, she drifts into sexual liaison and later marriage with Judah, a Japanese-American filled with hatred over the mistreatment of his people during World War II. Judah,

whose symbol is his Rising-Sun flag, impregnates her, but does not give her the affection she craves. When one of their twin sons dies, a victim of crib-death, Judah leaves. Like Naotsete of Keres mythology, Ephanie isolated herself and as a consequence was impregnated by the sun, which abandoned her. Like Naotsete, she must give up one of the twin sons she bears.

Throughout the novel Allen interweaves Keres myths to demonstrate the parallelism between the mythic experiences of Keres deities and those of Ephanie. Like these deities, Ephanie is a spiritual descendent of Ts'its'tsi'nako, called Thought, Dream, or Spider Woman. Possessing both male and female characteristics, Ts'its'tsi'nako is the origin of all creation. Whatever she thinks, is. She creates two sisters, Uretsete and Naotsete, to assist her in making the world. Ephanie is particularly identified with Iyatiku, Corn Woman, one of the most sacred Keres deities. She is also identified with Kochinninaku, Yellow Woman, heroine of Keres abduction tales in which she is carried off by a stranger, becomes pregnant, and returns to her village with twin sons who become a rejuvenating force in her society.

Part of Ephanie's sense of loneliness stems from her status as a half-blood, neither totally Indian nor white. Ephanie is at home neither in the Southwest nor in San Francisco. Although she briefly turns to the San Francisco Indian Center to assuage her loneliness, she does not fit the Indian image expected by those she meets there. Nor does she fit the Indian image expected by whites. Allen graphically

describes Ephanie's desperate efforts to fit into the Indian social life that revolves around the Indian Center, she experiments with San Francisco cults, and attempts pottery-making to express her creativity. Although her sense of identity with the mythic world of Keres stories strengthens, Ephanie is acutely aware of the violence that haunts Indians in San Francisco and on the reservation. Her world becomes that of the Spider-Woman, a world of vision and of words that give power to the vision.

Although the novel is not Allen's autobiography, it contains many autobiographical elements. The description of Ephanie, as short and stocky with almond eyes and dark hair, dressed in moccasins, jeans, and comfortable shirt is an accurate description of Allen herself. The emphasis on the half-blood heritage and the Keres mythology mirrors Allen's background. Readers of Allen's poetry will recognize details from her life, such as rearing two children alone, the later birth of twin sons and crib death of one, and the migrations between Albuquerque and San Francisco. Readers of her poetry will also recognize her poetic voice in her prose style.

The novel is a very complex blend of myth, oral history, and personal memory which retells in modern circumstances the ancient quest for ritual and supernatural understanding in order to achieve harmony with the gods, one's tribal home, and oneself. The reader senses that with the completion of this personal and literary journey, Allen has found creative peace within herself.

Note: This discussion is based on the manuscript version of the novel.

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Paula Gunn Allen's "The One Who Skins Cats":
An Inquiry into Spiritedness.

It is true that the native women of America have a unique quality of mystery. It is true that a native woman is able to intuit the spirit lives of her blood sisters more deeply than are others. Paula Gunn Allen has done it notably. "This Wilderness In My Blood" clearly synthesizes the kinship of a spiritual catalyst working with the poetry of each of five Native American women poets. She reveals the source of this catalyst thus:

"The sense of connectedness of all things, of the intelligent consciousness of all things, is the single most identifying characteristic of American Indian tribal poetry..."

and goes on to connect it with tribally inspired poetry of the world.

Such intuition is this poet's apprehension of a new, partially unpublished series encasing a triad of poems which explicate the roles and obligations of three famous native women: Pocahontas, La Malinche, and Sacagawea.

The series is designed to call attention to the spiritedness which guided these and other native women of American history, the

true motives of women who comprehended and aided destiny and were misunderstood, even by their own people. In the alchemy of the latest and only long poem of the triad, she distills from the crucible of Sacagawea's life an elixir no less heady because of its spiritual thrust (though subtle and heretofore unsung) than any other we have found. Here is a dram of that elixir: Tom Rivington, a boy whom Sacawega had influenced said:

"She never liked to stay or live where she could not see the mountains, for home she called them. For the unseen spirit dwelt in the hills, and a swift-running creek could preach a better sermon for her than any mortal could have done. Every morning she thanked the spirits for a new day."

Earth was her strength:

"I am Chief Woman, Porvivo...
I am a grandmother of the Sun...
I am the woman who knows the pass and where
the wild food waits to be drawn from the
mother's breast.
I am Slave Woman, Lost Woman, Grass
Woman, Bird Woman--
and I come and go as I please..

"There's more than one way
to skin a cat. That's what they say,
and it makes me laugh. Imagine me,
Bird Woman, skinning a cat."

Gunn Allen enters the secret life and thought of the fabled Shoshone "guide" of the Lewis & Clark Expedition with greater insight than have the historians who bestowed upon that life not only improbable motives but their typical suicidal concept of Western-Cowboy bravado. She contradicts the historians:

"I didn't lead the whitemen, you know. I just went along for the ride. And along the way I learned what a chief should know and because I did, my own Snake people survived.

"And what I learned I used. Every bit of the whiteman's pride to make sure my Shoshone people would survive in the great survival sweepstakes of the day. Maybe there was a better way to skin that cat, but I used the blade that was put in my hand-- or my claw, I should say."

The fundamental quality of Sacagawea's existence was this: she was a woman of the people, who were the essence of the land called America: a woman of Earth. It was alive. It breathed into her. It spoke to her in infinite whispers and cries. It directed her destiny. The poet intuitively that Sacagawea's spiritedness gave life to actions more probable than those ascribed by purported authorities. The quality of spiritedness underlies Allen's inquiry and speculations.

Such speculations concern attitudes of

white women and the reactions of the tribal people, (then and now). As she almost certainly did say at some point about white women, Sacagawea says here:

"...those white women, suffragettes, made me the most famous squaw in all creation. You know why?...

"...they was tired of being nothing themselves. They wanted to show how nothing was really something of worth. And that was me. Indian squaw, pointing the way they wanted to go..."

And about her people:

"...so many of my own kind call me names. Say I betrayed the Indians into the whiteman's hand. They have a point, but only one. There's more than one way to skin a cat, is what I always say.

"...the things my Indian people call me now they got from the white man, or, I should say, the white women. Because it's them who said I led the whitemen into the wilderness and back, and they survived the journey with my care. It's true they came like barbarian hordes after that, and that the Indian lost our place. We was losing it anyway.

"Do you know my people laughed when I told 'em about the whale? Said I lied a lot,

said I put on airs.

Well, what else should a Bird Woman wear?"

If her 'own kind' called her liar then, if they rebuffed her, what would they say after a hundred years? No matter. Though she had been a slave child to the Hidatsa, had been taken from them by the gross and lusty backwoodsman Charboneau, had in turn been enslaved and buffeted by him, and had no obvious reason to do a favor for the Lewis and Clark expedition, we see that her soaring vision grasped the immensity of past and future.

Akin was the motive of Malinal, by her people derogatorily dubbed La Malinche, in guiding Cortes:

"...you, paltry in your barbaric splendor, alone could ride across the jungles and the hills to the heart of Atzatlán. Did you never wonder who it was that led you, let you in? Did you never wonder why?

"The hour is late, Cortes. And as I stood and watched you strip my lovely king great Montezuma of his gold, as I stood, guiding your words and your soldiers with my eyes as I had guided them with my many-flavored tongue, I stand now silent, still, and watch with great Ciacahuatl as your time runs out."

The drive of Pocahontas was subtle, yet served the greater design:

"Had I not cradled you in my arms oh beloved perfidious one,

you would have died.
And how many times did I pluck you
from certain death in the wilderness--
my world through which you stumbled
as though blind?

"...Tobacco.
It is not without irony that by this crop
your descendants die, for other
powers than you know
take part in this and in all things.

It is easy to surmise that, when she was
freed, she avoided her people because they
ridiculed and rejected her for cohabiting
with Rolfe.

Similarly beaten down, Sacagawea insisted
on rising. This is the path of the truly
heroic. They forge past petty disbelievers
toward the obligation, the commitment. It
is as though they are possessed. As surely
they are. This is the nature of those
possessed by spiritedness.

The voice of Sacagawea sounds faintly out
of the time of "great survival." But it
carries a warning tone. An ironic tone. A
humorous tone. Again we observe that the
prophet's voice is not truly heard in her
own country, nor in her own time, nor by her
own people. Yet the prophet stands between
the ages. It is necessary to reiterate
truth in each succeeding generation. One
truth is that for peoples of the world to
come to harmony, we should hear attentively
the cautionary words of poets and prophets.
We need to hear the far, threadlike voice of
a Sacagawea, and the more timely catalytic
tones of a Gunn Allen, even through the dark
needle's of eye of time.

Sacagawea marched ahead of her people,
behind the explorers. Wise enough to see
that the way would be found in any event,
she saw too that someone must point the way.
Her eyes ranged beyond moonwalks, the space
race, beyond nuclear fission.

She was a key to the wilderness. She
kept faith with both peoples. Primarily she
kept faith with herself and her obligation
to the task that was hers. At that moment
in history, she saw her obligation to point
the way without losing her private mystique:
the mystery of mountain, creek, and spirits.

As Gunn Allen says about the five native
women poets and their blood sisters, "There
is a permanent wilderness in the blood of an
Indian, a wilderness that will endure as
long as the grass grows and the wind blows,
as long as the rivers flow and one Indian
remains alive."

This permanent wilderness is a unique
freedom and spiritedness. Such spiritedness
pervaded the lives of these powerful women
who showed us the way.

(This discussion focuses on "This
Wilderness in my Blood: Spiritual
Foundations of the Poetry of Five Indian
Women" in Coyote Was Here, ed. Bo Scholer,
University of Aarhus, Denmark, 1983, with
reference also to work in Frontiers: A
Journal of Women's Studies, 6 (No.3, Fall,
1981), and the special Native American Issue
"A Gathering of Spirit" (Summer, 1983)
treating of Sacawegawea, Pocahontas, and
Malinal.)

* * *

Mary Tall Mountain

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Climbing a Sacred Ladder: Technique in the poetry of Paula Gunn Allen

Paula Gunn Allen's most recent books, A Cannon Between My Knees (1981), Starchild, (1981), and Shadow Country, (1982) all affirm extraordinary diversity of rhythm, language, and subject as the outstanding characteristic of a progressively more impressive artistic accomplishment. As she advances in her poetic journey, Allen is remaining true to the fundamental insights that were the initial impulse, but she is honing her techniques and widening their application to encompass more and more facets of contemporary life.

In an early poem entitled "Coda" (The Blind Lion, 1974) we find one of the first expressions of her poetic credo, couched appropriately as a question. "Should I fashion futile words to clear/ the cinders from your eyes and give you sight?" With alert foreknowledge of how futile language can be, Allen has sought words that provoke clear-sightedness. Like all good poets, she has had to find ways around the problems of language bound to historical conditions that rapidly create clichés. One way to avoid futility is to go to the wellspring of thoughts and expression strong enough to avoid erosion of their value. For Allen, that wellspring is myth, a realization she shares with others. But while her awareness of linguistic dangers and enduring inspirations may be held in common with others, her ability to use her resources is unique, original, and forceful.

During the last decade, Allen has

gradually assimilated her traditional sources to the point where her own poetic idiom can accommodate and adapt to an entire chorus of contemporary voices, and her modern transformations of mythic energies fracture closed world-views to give us glimpses of the "undreamed centuries" that "lurk in every darkened alley, around every corner" ("Locus"). In the last poem of Shadow Country, the artist tells us she has made mythic seeing "familiar to my eyes," and we realize that an apprenticeship has been well served; the poet has long "told the songs and tales of Kawaiicomu" and is now skilled enough to translate into action her wonder at "how I might make of wandering a reason/ an image of a sacred ladder I might climb/ as earth and water climb to help/ the wingless flesh upstream."

In this poem entitled "Medicine Song" the imagery is active. Myth may help overcome the futility of language, but not easily or comfortably. It is a ladder, an intricate, involved image that Allen has often used. One frequently anthologized example is the poem "Grandmother," about Grandmother Spider and creation.

After her, the women and the men weave blankets into tales of life memories of light and ladders, infinity-eyes and rain.
"After I sit on my laddered rain-bearing rug and mend the tear with string."

Much threatens the web of life, and as she confronts various of these dangers, Allen changes her style and diction to be true to each encounter, to find exactly the right string for mending the "laddered rain-bearing rug." While myth may provide the pattern of meaning that absolves the

poet of useless self-indulgence, it is not the only way to fight the problems of language. Another is direct action, giving rise to words that report such action and possess some of the clarity and purity of it. Allen is no stranger to public and political action, and on rare occasions, we find in her poems the unencumbered language that fits such action.

She describes the long march "through relocation centers,/ through drunk midnight streets,/ through broken resolutions,/ through rehabilitation centers/ through mindless unreflected stone drunk afternoons." ("The Warrior")

The language of the reporter takes on the significance of witnessing. In one of her essays, called "Answering the Deer" Allen asked, "how does one survive in the face of collective death?" Her answer points to several poetic techniques. "Bearing witness is one of the solutions, but it is a solution that is singularly tearing, for witnessing to genocide --as to conversion-- that requires that there be those who listen and comprehend."

Survival involves more than just reporting. It demands teaching and shaping a vision of enough hope to make the effort itself an affirmation. So the language of the witness gets incorporated into that of myth; historical reality and mythic seeing are bound in poetic interpenetration:

...in legend
the dead bring healing to rotted flesh
see how my hand lies heavy on the air
where living breath moves unseen clouds
where heaving history falls far behind

where those who met the thunder and the tide
forever ride. ("Riding the Thunder")

Where there is affirmation, there can be love and sanity, goals Allen always seeks even in the midst of the chaotic madness she expresses, sometimes with tortured syntax. Love comes into Allen's poems with its blessed partner, humor. "Durango Suite," written for her father, is a fine example of poetic rhythms imitating and parodying country music in order to reveal how people play with images of the American West and create a region of mind quite different from what exists outside of the imaginative realm.

Humor in Allen's poems is always gently affectionate, never cynical. To miss the role of humor would be to lose awareness of how her poetry works. All the effort to see and understand, to forge appropriate techniques, leads the artist beyond despair to a special kind of humor. In an unpublished essay entitled "Answering the deer" Allen describes humor in American Indian Poetry in a way applicable to herself. "It makes tolerable what is otherwise unthinkable; it allows a sort of 'breathing space' in which an entire 'race' can take stock of itself and its future. Humor is a primary means of reconciling the tradition of continuance, bonding and celebration with the stark facts of racial destruction."

For Allen, all technical efforts are part of a struggle that goes beyond poetry, the struggle for techniques of survival. But she realizes that the formal discipline and experimentation required of any artist is an

integral part of learning and teaching other techniques of survival. Perhaps nowhere is this sensitivity to ongoing development more important than in her poems about women. Her astonishingly lucid grasp of her own and other women's experiences leads to poems that project the meaning of womanhood in metaphors whose appropriateness must resonate through remembered feelings, for they cannot be grasped through a purely rational response.

Just as there is diversity in rhythm and subject in the body of Allen's work, there is a whole range of uses for metaphors. Sometimes images act like the surgically sharp knives she once called her metaphors, and they cut to the quick in order to heal. Other metaphors effect transformations that thrust us into strange ways of seeing. As I meditate my way in, through and around Allen's poems, I am always impressed anew by the skill with which they are wrought and the genuine substance they possess. The echoing, interpenetrating forms are bound to each other in ways I never suspected at first readings. That kind of continuing challenge is the most I can ask of any poet.

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Studies In American Indian Literature the newsletter for the Association for the Study of Native American Literatures, is issued four times a year. Annual subscriptions are by the calendar year only and are \$4.00. For back issues and special publications by SAIL contact the editor, 602 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, New York. 10027, to whom contributions and

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STUDIES IN AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE
1983 @SAIL