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Authors

Hogan, Linda
Allen, Suleiman
Churchill, Mary
[et al.](#)

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A SPECIAL LITERARY TRIBUTE TO PAULA GUNN ALLEN

Paula Gunn Allen and Grandmother Spider

It would be easy to write about Paula Gunn Allen as a scholar, but that information is everywhere, from books and interviews to student graduate dissertations. Even with her many accomplishments, such as her defining book *The Sacred Hoop* and her often humorous and dead-serious book *Pocahontas*, I love Paula's poem about Grandmother Spider the most. That's what Paula was, a weaver of connections between the world, between people, between word and word. From the work that follows, it seems more important to write about her as a human being. Poet, scholar, teacher, writer, her warm heart seems to be, finally, what people love this strong story-woman for the most, at least until her words reach future readers and scholars.

I first met Paula when I had written my first book and knew nothing about the world of writing, books, or educated Indian women. Paula took me into her web. Before I knew it I was on a talk show and in over my head. Fortunately, Paula was articulate enough to cover for me. Then I gave a reading at a salon she took me to in New York, a first reading for me, a young writer. First, she took me to her home and fed me eggs and salsa. Hot salsa! How could I not adore her? We shared our growing worlds, relationships, poetry, then also our losses: children, loves, work.

She was a real human being, a kind and beloved woman. She, in many ways, represented the meaning of her book, which will be out in January from West End Press, *American the Beautiful*. I will always think of her as a spider woman, weaving, reweaving, leaving filaments of silk for us to follow.

One friend of hers, Charlotte Gullick, was with her before she changed worlds and describes Paula, "I come back to find her eyes closed, but her left hand is in the air, and she's shaking it as if she holds a rattle. Her lips dance out silent words and I watch for a few minutes before she opens her eyes. . . . I wish I had enough knowledge of her tribal connections to know what kind

of rattle would be the right one. There's incredible power in her stance, her motions, and the air tightens with clarity. I silently thank her for the faith she has shown in my writing, teaching, and parenting. I wonder what words dance inside her brains as she weaves worlds together."

Weaving, always weaving. That was our Paula. She never faltered in those lifelines of words and care, the magic caught in her web, still there.

Linda Hogan

The following poems begin with a poem by Paula's son.

“Puff”

My mother's name was Shimanna
Which means “raincloud” in our language.
It was a name bestowed upon her
By a wise old elder
Steeped in secret lore.
It was a ceremonial token
Of her entrance to his sacred lodge
The secret gathering place of the tribe.
But it was not an indian name.
The tradition was not Laguna.
The tradition was not Sioux.
The one who named her was gay
And the token he gave bespoke,
Years ahead of its time,
Her admittance to that tribe.

Suleiman Allen

Long-Distance Gifts

For Paula Gunn Allen

Look into the palms of these hands
 my hands were so young and inexperienced,
 she took them gently, my teacher, my auntie
 professor, my grandmother
 the whole way from California
 she took my hands into her hands
 so she could look into the lines and
 marks of my birth, my dreams, my
 failures and joys. Into the depths of
 what I brought with me through my
 mother, what my ancestors, Natives
 of the East and Jews from the Mediterranean
 wrote on my hands, she read their messages.

All the way from California, Professor Auntie Paula
 looked into my hands that she had taken
 into her hands the month before, and declared
 "Ah, you're a traditional."
 "You better shake them up, girlfriend!"
 "Jewish Indian women are dangerous, you know!"
 Across the phone lines our voices travelled, from
 sea to shining sea: half laughter and half Indian talk.
 Across purple mountains' majesty: Laughing and culture
 women's mixed blood laughter together with
 women's mixed blood culture together with
 women's mixed blood education together with
 women's love. Mother and daughter. Teacher and student.
 Grandmother of Ancient Wit and Tricks, and Granddaughter
 learning the Women's Traditions written in eternity, caught among
 college culture, blood politics, phone wires, and the last time we hugged.

Now I am standing under the white pine who has
 cradled twenty-foot canes of pink rose blossoms
 in my front yard. December's tornado pushed over
 every oak in its path, but she still rises. My hands
 are turned to the sky. It is June and
 I am weeping at the loss of my treasured teacher
 covered in fallen petals and honeysuckle perfume
 in the dark I pray for her.

On Friday, with my hands still open I light
Sabbath candles and set a place for Auntie Paula
at our dinner meal. In a vase there are peony blossoms.
To the empty chair, to her spirit,
I tell jokes, then sit on the porch with my drum and sing.

Stephanie A. Sellers

First Language*for PGA*

Tectonic plates crush words together,
syllables pulse in Earth's crust, pressure
rises in rifts of memory and dream
held in Earth's mind, smoothed by wind, rain
Burst of language, Her torn skin
rock-fired words, micaceous glisten
clay hardening around sound and sense
but hollowed, porous like Earth Herself
An urn of stardust we emerge,
our voice—Her mind, Her breath, Her image

Mary Churchill

Deer Woman

For Paula, who knew to beware

1.

I see her in the gathers
of autumn's grey veil
the timid stare, ear twitch
then stillness

She bows her satin head
to nibble near the stalks
now rows of stubble
after the harvest

Her soft flanks press
against the cold

Startled, she darts
through brittle grasses
haunches pushing, hooves reaching
her breath a trailing
cloud

2.

Air catches
in the trap
of my throat,
palms cup sweat
unwicked
by my gloves,
gut twists
and chews
itself
raw

3.

I had pursued her through
four seasons, led on
by the soft undercoat
of her voice, lost track

of everything longitude
and latitude
birthdays, due dates, appointments
with the dentist

What about us, I asked
Where are we?

Where I'm going, I'm going
alone was all she said

but she does not know
it's too late
I can't go back

4.

There are stories
told in loud bars
from Oakland to Tulsa
in hushed voices
on dark porches
lit by fireflies and cigarettes,
from mother to daughter
and daughter to cousin
stories of our sisters
and brothers
and their encounters
with doe-eyed girls
how entranced by deer
they follow her into
mountains of solid mist
they never return
quite
the same

5.

How is it that the dream
that is deer that is woman
calls you by your own secret names
seduces you breath by breath
to that place where
you feel her in the tender flesh
of softened cattails
you know her

in the soft brown turn
of river's bend
you open to her aching
as an old red barn
agape on all floors, doors
unhinged and fallen
windows long gone
How is it that she takes you
out there leaves you out there
wanting it all and all
that is left to you
is the way
of all
breath
home

Mary Churchill

shawl poem

for paula

you wove yourself a shawl of words
wrapped it tight about you
lifted your chin
and high-stepped in
to kick off the grand entry

you wove yourself a shawl of names
tsechenako kochinnenako hwame
porivo koskhalaka pocahontas

you wove yourself a shawl of thoughts
gynocratic theosophic cosmic
profane sacred fearsome funny

you pierced the edges with your awl,
your sharp eyesight, your anger,
your fierce love for the thoughtworlds
destroyers could not claim

you leapt right in, a riot of fringe,
a fractal trail of pollen,
a spiral of stars,
your laugh a revolt against drought and boredom

we all fell in behind you

some of us looked both ways first
some of us kept an ancient rhythm
some of us tripped along in shiny black heels
and some sulked backwards in muddy boots
too proud to call you auntie

we are cree sioux cherokee osage breed pinoy
dykes and white girls who just love a drum
we are women who wear the shawl of words
you wove against oblivion

joanna brooks

May 18, 2008

My friend is dying
not my friend
just
my mother
teacher
guide
inspiration
unlocked
the unknown
undiscovered
unlit
passages
that carried me
here
so many worlds
open.

Where to place my foot
is clear
now
she gave me keys
to locks
unseen
or the car
I often can't remember
which,
but her voice
words
remind
from a book
deep in a stack
office floor strewn
numbers
figures
results
those words
carry me
forward now
to where I
wanted to be
before.

Leslie Kay

Home Calling

(for Paula Gunn Allen)

Lately New Mexico calls to me.
 Maybe it's the friends, maybe mesas or
 some purity of light that never left
 my heart when I waved Vaya con Dios
 to Taos. I still see that young woman
 blaze like dawn along canyon walls,
 believing warmth will soften any
 hardness. She comes as a stranger now,
 her face in mirrors rock, no sun
 touching the shadow places
 with holy fire.

Here in the East I've grown too sad,
 eyes clouded with falling towers
 on a stolen island –

here, after you died in the night, Paula,
 I recalled winter's conversation,
 you lilting *Lately New Mexico calls to me*
 in 1940's gin & cigarette voice, lung cancer
 and chemo further roughening the mix.
 Certainly we spoke about mixings,
 two mixed bloods, breeds, yearning
 for home, some steady earth balancing
 our feet. And I'll carry forever

understandings you gifted to me
 from north California beach –
*Many mixed bloods, especially
 women, feel chronic fatigue.
 The "bloods" war against each other
 inside our bodies. My Scots-Laguna
 mother taught me that. We half-
 laughed about others failing to notice
 our terrible tiredness. You joked Yeah,
 they think we're normal, never suspect
 we're about to faint, or worse, we're poets.*

Lately friends urge me to write happy poems
 and odes of joy call to me as New Mexico calls –

New Mexico called you all the way, Paula.
In my grief I dance with you, your beloved
trumpet vines in bloom, hummingbirds whirring
deep into orange flowerings of happiness, you
a pain-free girl blossomed with bird energy.
Sparkly eyed daughter of dawn, I hear you –
laughter of last stars, dreams of turquoise,
sage-fragrant limbs flying, shining.

Paula, it's over, the split life, the wars inside
and out, the human cruelties, stupidities.
Sister to so many of us, welcome home.

Susan Deer Cloud

Spider Woman

Here
in your house
amongst the
pretty laced
china cup,
silk scarves
and books lining the shelves,
I take comfort
in you having
slept here,
thought new worlds
here,
breathed fire here,
made your enemies
drink their own blood,
watched the sun rise,
the sound of water
slowly spreading
its fingers in loving
prayer.
Your beautiful
linens, wallpapered
borders hand-drawn,
woven in color and content,
all in one.

I'm not long for
this world,
you said in
a dream
of another time,
space, life, lace,
feathered light and air,
yet there you sat, telling
me it was time.
Then you were gone.

Five hundred miles later,
through old haze,
children crying,
gnarled trunks
and congested airways,
I lay here, looking for you.

A last song of days
looms sweetly
amongst the tangled web
you so carefully spun from
your body,
fingers dancing, spinning,
until time stood still.
I lay here, dreaming your voice,
watching light and air
fall from spinarets and
thousand faceted eyes
of sky blown clouds.

Last night,
frogs sang, calling rain home.
The sky opened up,
dreaming the dark rimmed
edge of night along
a rain basted sky,
clouds seamless,
the only thing missing
was you.

Carolyn Dunn

Last Supper in Fort Bragg, California

The last supper I shared with my mother:
A Tamale from Harvest Market
Chicken & cheese, maybe even organic
The sauce; a tad spicy

She rallied just for me, I like to imagine.
We broke bread together, one last time:
Tuesday night May 27th 2008 around 9:30.

Smelling the food and hearing me eat, she opened her eyes in a moment of
lucidity, raising her head insisting on two bites;
So eager to continue that part of everyday life,
to remain among the living—
She managed one small morsel, savoring the taste for at least half a second...
we were in Familial eternity

How precious that meal!!
The most nourishing one I can ever remember eating with her
Sitting on the edge of her bed
The edge of our physical time together on earth—

I love Tamales.

Lauralee Brown