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Shadow Country. By Paula Gunn Allen. Los Angeles: UCLA Indian Studies Center, 1982. 149 pp. \$7.50 Paper

Throughout the ages, women have served as an articulate and often primary voice of Indian people. In many instances they have acted as a sort of sociocultural glue, giving essential form and substance to political, economic, religious, historical and other critical factors of American Indian life. To a significant degree, the value structures that created these circumstances are retained among tribal traditionals and—it should come as no surprise—are reflected within the verse of modern Indian poets. Poetry is, after all, the closest literate equivalent to the oral lyricism of indigenous tradition, and it is the continuation of this tradition which is perhaps most often posited as the conscious objective of the writers at issue.

Hence, to put it simply, a considerable measure of Indian poetics is decidedly female in flavor and orientation. Perhaps it is the sense of cultural continuity, of things thus being as they should, which allows a clearly unpretentious flowering of femininity within the poetry of these women, a condition unfortunately absent in much of the writing offered by "feminism" in other contexts. This strength of the female within the totality of American Indian poetry does much to forge and temper the whole, and in a quite positive fashion.

Any identifiable group of writers, regardless of how amorphous the designation "group" may be and despite the overall excellence of the writing produced therein, all but inevitably generates certain individuals who may be deemed preeminent. Such is the case with Paula Gunn Allen who, along with a handful of others, including Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose and Roberta Hill, stands out as one of the very best of an exceptionally strong group of practicing poets.

Allen's latest book of verse, *Shadow Country* (UCLA Indian Studies Center, 1982) follows hard on the heels of her *Star Child* (Blue Cloud Quarterly) and *A Cannon Between My Knees* (Strawberry Press), both released in 1981. It extends the work contained in these books as well as her earlier *Coyote's Daylight Trip* (La Confluencia, 1978) and *The Blind Lion* (Thorpe Springs Press, 1975) in interesting and important directions.

Shadow Country is divided into four related sections: "I: Que Cante Quetzal" ("Let Quetzal Sing"), "II: Shadow Country," "III:

Recuerdo ("Memory" or "I Remember"), and "IV: Medicine Song." The structure of the book thus duplicates four of the basic thematic streams evidenced in the body of Allen's work over the years. These may be roughly described as homage to a pre-contact native reality (evidenced in Section I), preoccupation with the negative development of European culture in this hemisphere (Section II), figurative insertion of the author's persona into a visionary native past present continuum or alternative to the dominant European reality (Section III) and homage to the living continuity of native culture and tradition as well as its projection into the future (Section IV). For the first time, they are presented together, with equal weight.

Shadow Country then, is ideally suited to a broad and coherent exposition of Allen's overall recent effort, particularly when compared with the somewhat fragmentary conception evidenced in past volumes. Such an approach simultaneously renders her vision more accessible, her method more comprehensible, her stature as a writer more readily available for critical evaluation and her intrinsic "Indian-ness" fully exposed along its entire scope and depth.

The poems themselves are a study in contrasting sentiment, not only from one to another, but especially from section to section. Allen ranges from the tenderness of her handling of the integral femininity of the traditional worldview in "*Que Cante Quetzal*" (That dawn she came/riding the sun/humpback flute player heralding Her dawn/the Corn, sweet maiden, riding/the new day), to a painful harshness in her "*Shadow Country*" assessments (The death culture swarms/over the land bringing/honeysuckle eucalyptus palm/ivy brick and unfinished wood/torn from forests to satisfy organic/craving. The death society walks/hypnotized by its silent knowledge/nor does it hear the drum quiet/to the core).

She turns from pensive in "*Recuerdo*" (I made runes/singing/I remember/childhood an echo on the hollows/of the hills. Blossoms of yesterday/fall from our eyes/I remember the eternal drought/(How the trees at dusk wrapped/their branches around the light)/still) to the jubilant in "*Medicine Song*" (We went up the pass, she and I/to see the mountain turning/watched it discover/its goldenlight/rejoicing/we followed a rutted road/center blooming and filled with rocks/yellow, magenta and pale

brown/that kept us twisting, unable to see/what was ahead, climbing/until the valley opened wide below/fading into simple blue as the sky/revealing distance to our astounded eyes).

The seventy-six well crafted and surprisingly even poems which comprise *Shadow Country* present a firm contentable overview both of Allen's sense of "Indian" and of her sense of her own Indian-ness. As Kenneth Lincoln observes in the book's foreword:

Paula Allen ventures on personal quests through experimental forms and subjects. A mood or technique carries her an uncharted direction in open forms, as she sets her own standards of honesty and passion along the way: body the receptor, mind the tool, a caring "I" filtering impressions, spirit of courage....The grief language of her mute body registers speechless acts. She braves see-through barriers of sex, race, class, education, language, "civilization," consciousness itself in its many definitions—out of that breed no (wo)man's land of pained articulation, potentially revolutionary on the poet's tongue.

With this we must agree. It seems an astute judgment of the woman and her work. But Lincoln then ventures to concur with one of Allen's self-assessments ("The breed is an Indian who is not an Indian.") when he continues, "Existing wholly as neither Indian nor non-Indian, Allen assimilates both as best she can." With this, we must gently disagree. Allen's often raw introspection is hers alone, shred perhaps as a guide to others, but not redeemed as a means of understanding who/what she *is* so much as what she has *become*, a record of her passage.

In attempting to sum up the Paula Gunn Allen evidence in this latest book, many things could (and probably should) be said: mature, gifted poet; warrior woman in the truest sense; exquisitely sensitive analyst of the Indian experience in contemporary America; visionary and much more. But the most closely accurate attribute which occurs to me is to turn Allen's own testament to Joy Harjo back upon her: "The woman is an Indian."

Ward Churchill

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