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Indian Writer Led Groundbreaking Work in Native Literature

[By Lloyd Jojola](#)

Journal Staff Writer

Paula Gunn Allen, an American Indian scholar and poet whose works included "The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions" and the anthology she edited, "Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs," recently died in California. She was 68.

Allen, a Fort Bragg, Calif., resident, had battled lung cancer, those who knew her said. She died May 29. A funeral service took place June 2. A memorial was being planned for the summer in California.

Allen was from Laguna Pueblo and earned a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico in 1976. She served as a professor of English, creative writing and American Indian studies at the University of California-Los Angeles when she retired in 1999.

"Inventive" and "groundbreaking" were words friend Patricia Clark Smith used to describe Allen and her work.

Smith was Allen's dissertation director at UNM, and she said "The Sacred Hoop," published in 1986, grew out of that dissertation.

"It became just an amazingly important book in native studies," said Smith, a UNM professor emerita.

"She began to draw very heavily on her own childhood and backgrounds in order to write that book, and to talk about the importance of women in many native societies, not just Keresan ones and puebloan ones— but a lot of people did not know that.

" ... It talks to some degree about the importance of whatever word you want to call it— gay, lesbian— presence in native tradition. Because she was lesbian."

Allen was born Paula Marie Francis and grew up on the Cubero land grant in New Mexico, reads an online memorial written by Mary Churchill, a faculty member at Sonoma State University in California.

"Both her father's Lebanese and her mother's Laguna Pueblo-Métis-Scot heritages shaped her critical and creative vision," the memorial states. "For the last 30 years Allen was a foremost voice in Native American literature and the study of American literature. She was also a founding mother of the contemporary women's spirituality movement."

Allen won the prestigious Lannan Writing Fellowship for 2007. Her 2003 book, "Pocahontas— Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Allen edited the 1983 anthology "Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs," which was done for the Modern Language Association.

"They kind of authorized her to organize a course that brought together a lot of young scholars who were in the field of native literature, which was very, very new in the '70s," Smith said. "It's really '69, '70 where this field as we now think of it starts to happen, and boy, a lot of it started to happen in New Mexico.

"And people still use that," Smith said of the text. "It's kind of a benchmark book for Native American studies, especially in terms of literature."

While much of her work consists of essays, literary criticism and some memoirs, Allen principally conceived of herself as a poet, Smith said.

Allen produced six published volumes of poetry and about two-and-a-half weeks ago submitted her final manuscript, her last book of verse titled "America the Beautiful."

Allen earned a bachelor's degree in English and master's degree in creative writing from the University of Oregon, before earning her doctorate in American Studies from UNM.

Allen was a professor of Native American and ethnic studies at the University of California-Berkeley, before teaching at UCLA.

Earlier, she taught at Fort Lewis College in Colorado, the College of San Mateo, San Diego State University, San Francisco State and UNM.

Allen's numerous awards included postdoctoral fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ford Foundation-National Research Council, the Hubbell Medal for Lifetime Achievement in American Literary Studies from the Modern Language Association, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, the Susan Koppelman Award from the Popular and American Culture Associations, the Native American Prize for Literature.

Her survivors include a daughter, Lauralee Brown; a son, Suleiman Allen; two granddaughters; two sisters; and a brother. She was preceded in death by sons, Fuad Ali Allen and Eugene John Brown, according to her online memorial.

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