

## Moore: A woman of great words

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They are speaking - who is listening?

Truth is piercing - who is bleeding?

Honor is rising - who is lifting?

Great Women of Words

I sing for you.

I sing a song of woven lightning.

I sing a song of storm.

I wrote this poem, "Women of Words," in 1997 for various American Indian women writers, including Paula Gunn Allen, who passed to spirit in May. Known as the founder of American Indian literary studies, Gunn Allen was a formidable woman in the world of literature and will be missed in many arenas. She was the gracious recipient of various awards including the Hubbell Medal for Lifetime Achievement (2000) and Native Writer's Circle Lifetime Achievement Award (2001).

Gunn Allen authored many books in various genres, including "Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat" (for which she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2004); "The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions"; and "Grandmother of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Source Book." From these, I gleaned the following confirmations: Menstrual taboos are about power, not sin or filth, in some American Indian tribes; "that women who are at the peak of their fecundity are believed to possess power" that totally throws male power out of kilter. Therefore any "male-owned or -dominated ritual or sacred object" cannot perform its usual task and that is why women are kept from them during their cycles.

Europeans, when first observing the Cherokees, believed them to have a "petticoat government" due to the importance of women's opinions and status in tribal decisions, and thus set out to change this. And to my delight and substantiation, certain women of medicine can make "brooms dance." "Stories connect us to the universe of medicine - of paranormal or sacred power," she wrote.

Gunn Allen was always generous when asked to contribute to anthologies I was editing, such as "Genocide of the Mind" ("God, what a title!" she wrote in her e-mail), "Eating Fire, Tasting Blood," and the latest, "Birthed From Scorched Hearts: Women Respond to War," which Fulcrum Publishing will release in December.

She contributed a new poem, "Apache Warrior - Apache Troop," introduced with the following: "Watching TV coverage of the invasion of Iraq, March 2003, and I am thinking how strange they use our [Native] names for their wars yet don't notice that more American Indians than any other group, demographically speaking, serve and have served in the armed forces." She was always drawing attention to things like this; making others look beyond names, phrases and of course, words.

Of mixed ancestry (Laguna/Sioux/Lebanese/Scottish), Gunn Allen understood and experienced similar attacks from jealous individuals that I have had to endure while writing and promoting American Indian literature. An inspiration for many years, I will miss her wonderful sense of humor and her delightful encouragement. But, great woman of words that she was, her writings will no doubt endure forever.

## **Kopis'taya, a Gathering of Spirits**

Because we live in the browning season  
the heavy air blocking our breath,  
and in this time when living  
is only survival, we doubt the voices  
that come shadowed on the air,  
that weave within our brains  
certain thoughts, a motion that is soft,  
imperceptible, a twilight rain,  
soft feather's fall, a small body dropping  
into its nest, rustling, murmuring, settling  
in for the night.

Because we live in the hardedged season  
where plastic brittle and gleaming shine,  
and in this space that is cornered and angled,  
we do not notice wet, moist, the significant  
drops falling in perfect spheres that are certain measures of our minds;  
almost invisible, those tears,  
soft as dew, fragile, that cling to leaves,  
petals, roots, gentle and sure,  
every morning.

We are the women of the daylight, of clocks  
and steel foundries, of drugstores  
and streetlights, of superhighways  
that slice our days in two. Wrapped around  
in plastic and steel we ride our lives;  
behind dark glasses we hide our eyes;

our thoughts, shaded, seem obscure.

Smoke fills our minds, whiskey husks our songs,

polyester cuts our bodies from our breath,

our feet from the welcoming stones of earth.

Our dreams are pale memories of themselves

and nagging doubt is the false measure

of our days.

Even so, the spirit voices are singing,

their thoughts are dancing in the dirty air.

Their feet touch the cement, the asphalt

delighting, still they weave dreams upon our

shadowed skulls, if we could listen.

If we could hear.

Let's go then. Let's find them.

Let's listen for the water, the careful

gleaming drops that glisten on the leaves,

the flowers. Let's ride

the midnight, the early dawn.

Feel the wind striding through our hair.

Let's dance the dance of feathers,

the dance of birds.

From "Life is a Fatal Disease: Collected Poems 1962 - 1995"

(c) 1997, Paula Gunn Allen

*MariJo Moore, Cherokee/Irish/Dutch, is the author of more than a dozen books, including the forthcoming "The Boy With A Tree Growing From His Ear and Other Stories." She resides in the mountains of western North Carolina.*

