

Shadows in Paula Gunn Allen's "Shadow Country"

ELIZABETH HANSON

we shall go home again,
back to our own time and earth,
and know again the changelessness,
the silence, the
strong
sure steps of home.

PAULA GUNN ALLEN, "Two"

PAULA GUNN ALLEN explores the nature of "I" in her volume of poetry *Shadow Country* (1982), in an attempt to contain and reconcile the complexities of the white/Native American experience. The poems of *Shadow Country* are marked by precisely the control and certainty that Allen calls for in her essay "Answering the Deer." There she writes: "Divergent realities must meet and form comprehensible patterns" for the Native American artist, and therefore that artist "must develop metaphors that not only will reflect the dual perceptions" of whites and Native Americans, but "also will reconcile them" (161). The self, conceived in the poem, may work as the ideal metaphor that "will harmonize the contradictions and balance them so that internal equilibrium can be achieved" (161) as an external vital chaos is revealed. Again and again, Allen locates an aesthetic of equilibrium in the poems of *Shadow Country* as she paces with "strong, sure steps" towards her own country, her own time, and her own earth.

For Allen, the self as mixed Native and white gives a sense of self divided and demands that both aspects of her experience be comprehended and retrieved within the larger unity of her poetic vision. The poem "Hoop Dancer" may be read as an

examination of the forces that beset the "breed" (viii), a dancing, prancing "I" in search of some reconciling meaning to the disparate elements of time, race, and sorrow inside the alienated self:

It's hard to enter
 circling clockwise and counter
 clockwise moving no
 regard for time, metrics
 irrelevant to the dance
 where pain is the prime number
 and soft stepping feet
 praise water from the skies:
 I have seen the face of triumph
 the winding line stare down all moves
 to desecration: guts not cut from arms,
 finger joined to minds,
 together Sky and Water
 one dancing one
 circle of a thousand turning lines
 beyond the march of gears—
 out of time, out of
 time, out
 of time. (8)

If it is difficult "to enter" the interface that is the mixed-blood's particular terrain, none the less that space must be sought, for it contains the "one dancing one / circle" of wholeness within. The dance toward reconciliation requires pain as its "prime number," but its "soft" steps lead toward celebratory, life-giving water flowing "from the skies." A "winding line," like a flowing rain, restores those it touches by destroying "all moves / to desecration" and joining dancing fingers "to minds" now consecrated. "[T]ogether Sky and Water" coalesce; their fusion reflects the merging space within which the poet's voice dances and discovers transcendence.

In this important poem, Allen displays her "sure strong steps home" to poetic control. The mixed-blood person, a self divided against itself, is here shown a way "beyond the march of gears" of mechanized, materialistic white society. Now the alienated self is enabled to join the "one circle" of "one dancing" in which there are "a thousand turning lines" representing the myriad possi-

bilities of individuality within the singleness of purpose in Allen's vision. For the Hoop Dancer is the figure of a poet in search of a life transfigured, a life "out of time, out of / time, out / of time" in an aesthetic realm remote from transitory experience and attached to the qualities of consciousness.

Other poems in *Shadow Country* reiterate the problems posed and the solutions tendered in "Hoop Dancer." "Peace Is a Stratified Concept" reveals Allen seeking herself in relation to others. Here the poet immerses herself in the stratigraphy of self-discovery:

At this late date
I have come
to understand
the outcropping
from which you strike:
it is the same
ancient bed
from which I dip—
the angle of vision
determines
both prominence
and the direction
of the stream's flow. (74)

On the "ancient bed[rock]" ebb and flow the streams of consciousness—calm, changeable, constant, wild, powerful. The poet has come "to understand" that the "ancient bed" sustains us all. The versions of peace the poet defines are stratified but form "the same" foundation of insight. What matters is "the angle of vision," for it is that which "determines" the "prominence" and the "direction" of consciousness itself.

Shadow Country contains additional poems that centre on the poet's quest for versions of peace. Allen's creation of self as mediator, as peacemaker, becomes a means by which she may transform herself from a conflicted individual into a being of universal meaning. Allen looks back to Native American myth and to her own memories for examples of common feeling between men and women, between whites and Native Americans, between the included and the excluded, in order to discover a fully shared and valued experience. Her poem "Requero" (memories) is a record of her quest:

I have climbed into silence trying for clear air
 and saw the peaks rising above me like the gods.
 This is where they live, the old people say.
 I used to hear them speak when I was a child. (105-06)

Allen's ascent "into silence" is a movement to the space where the old people's voices are heard and their gods are seen as far above the needy alienated self. The vision, however remotely held by the past, is still with the poet:

Lately I write, trying to combine sound and memory,
 searching for that significance once heard and nearly lost.
 It was within the tall pines, speaking. (105-06)

"Once heard," the significance of being within the Native American experience must be searched for; it may even be "nearly lost." Even though it appears as a form of silence to those estranged from its voice, "it [is] within the tall pines, speaking" to the poet (105-06).

Here the poet's *donnée* is that of a strained relationship between the self that possesses meaning and the self that does not possess meaning. Meaning exists—"it was within"—and yet where is it? By combining "sound and memory" the poet writes and searches and listens to the past. No longer warmed by family campfires, the poet tells us that "now I climb the mesas in my dreams" because she is "obsessed with a memory / that will not die" (105). This narrative of inner divisions is remembered from a perspective that suggests an ironic glint: "I stir wild honey into my carefully prepared cedar tea and wait for meaning to greet and comfort me" (105). Amid revelations of self-estrangement, there is meaning even in a cup of tea. Yet, longing for solace, the poet's voice is exposed—to Allen and to her readers—within such gestures:

Maybe this time I will not turn away.
 Maybe I will ask instead what that sounding means
 Maybe I will find that exact hollow
 where terror and comfort meet.
 Tomorrow I will go back and climb the endless mesas
 of my home. I will seek thistles drying in the wind,
 pocket bright bits of obsidian and fragments
 old potters left behind. (106)

So little remains among the possibilities and the "maybes"—only "bits" and "fragments" of her Native American being. The narrator, who is identified explicitly with the act of writing, may be able to face the reality of a divided self without turning away. Yet the aspirations of the divided heart, a heart that demands an "exact" space of wholeness within, may never be met fully. The climb toward this aspiration is to "endless mesas" of a home that is itself bereft of vitality. What the poet will seek there are "thistles drying in the wind" and other pathetic remains "left behind" by an "old" lost culture of the past.

Memories of a version of a Native American peace within the self are an obsession "that will not die" for Allen. She uses demotic diction, shifts in sequential organization, rejection of received structures and strict meters, and personal subject-matters (often with only the barest mediation via personae) to signify the fractured meanings within the self. Hers is a voice that will not die; nor will it speak solely of aloneness. Requiring that someone listen and comprehend, she writes one of her most important poems, "Two," dedicating it to Vine Deloria, Jr., the distinguished critic of the Native American experience in contemporary America. "Two" is a poem of affirmation, of triumph over the exigencies common to the person of mixed blood—loneliness, distorted identities, depression, alienation. The poem begins subtly:

in the winter everything disappears,
leaving a lonely bird or two
and some dry stalks of last year's grass. (22)

The words "lonely bird or two" repeat and deepen the significance of the poem's title, "Two," and convey the alienated atmosphere of the contemporary Native who witnesses Native American cultural genocide as the "winter [when] everything disappears." Only loneliness is left behind for the one or two who remain. Yet "two" are enough, if those "two" are "lords who could still display themselves to fire" as an old sachem might. Allen's dedication of the poem suggests that she is thinking of Deloria's passionate fire for justice and his long legal struggles on behalf of all Native Americans. The poem records Deloria's public triumph of memory and compassion:

Remembering somehow in that celebration the
 Law, the
 Winter, the
 long flight of moon in the dry sky. (22)

This is a poem of celebratory intent; Allen seeks to reconcile the opposites of life and death, of loneliness and mutuality, of disappearance and changeless restoration. "In tribal dreams / image and sound together make complicated song" (22): that song, which traces "our spiralling path," the narrator reminds her listeners, is not lost. For Allen, there is always a transformative vision lurking within the "winter" self of alienation.

This subtle, healing moment may be in conflict with women's lived experience, but Allen's whole body of feminist verse discovers new symbolologies and new forms of celebration. The feminist literary artist hopes that other women, and men as well, will recognize themselves and their relations with one another in the story/poem and will join the artist in seeking to transform their shared culture. For Allen, that shared culture is itself ambiguous; feminism and racial heritage interpenetrate in her vision of self. The two commingle—feminist and "breed"—as Allen creates art that reveals, criticizes, and examines the borders between race and gender.

In "Medicine Song," Allen transmutes her image of woman as "wingless fish" whose "blank utterance" is unheard in a world of androcentric literary and cultural traditions and patriarchal social and personal circumstance (148-49). Allen re-explores the inner being of her "child of water / . . . webbed and broken / on the surface of the lake" (149), dead, but not dead, because the image or shadow of its being does not die. That image is transfigured from being "too blind to dream" (149) in its lament to being a shadow source of meaning for the imagining voice of the poet. In the final section of "Medicine Song," entitled "The Dead Spider (the judgment)," the poet intervenes to adjudicate the possibilities as well as the losses women sustain. Like an old medicine woman, Allen concludes the poem with a healing blessing: "dream in your silent shadow / celebrate" (149). Allen opens the space of women's writing by moving beyond a patriarchal system as an enemy or as a symptom of a malignant condition; in the process, she seeks to articulate not a battle-

ground, but a sacred terrain, a centre of being where silent shadows celebrate:

We
 simply follow disappearance over
 each next rise, but
 this winter, or that, we shall go home again,
 back to our own time and earth,
 and know again the changelessness,
 the silence, the
 strong
 sure steps of home. (23)

Here the persona called "I"—the voice of so much of Allen's poetry—is remade as a shared voice, "We," affirming a transfiguring poetic unity: "we shall go home again, / back to our own time." For Allen, this "changeless" time of "sure" strength signifies a vision of wholeness, of "homeness," where heretofore no home was more than imagined.

Singing, shadows, silence: these are the figures of Allen's vision. The tribal ties within the self form the centre of consciousness and shape the range of meaning in her poems. The voice that Allen articulates may be obsessed with the alienation it so resolutely explores in her poetry. But in singing her songs of experience, Allen discovers a palpable presence of "home" that assuages isolation and leavens despair both for herself and for her reader.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Paula Gunn. "Answering the Deer: Genocide and Continuance in the Poetry of American Indian Women." *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. 155-64.
- . *Shadow Country*. Los Angeles: Native American Series, University of Los Angeles, 1982.