

Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting Border-Crossing Loose Canons

Paula Gunn Allen

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This broad and effective collection by Gunn Allen includes political, literary and personal essays. Originally the term off-reservation referred to a renegade, outlaw, a non-conformist. Often the offender met with harsh punishment. Risk still accompanies the author of *Off the Reservation*, here she crosses boundaries, leaves “safe” ground and creates new territories. “Each essay is, in its own way, an assertion that Indians are everywhere.” Oral tradition is apparent and strong in Gunn Allen’s voice as she directs our attention to tales and events long kept quiet.

The first section is centered in the idea of women’s wisdom, the word “haggles” indicates the accrued wisdom of our elder aunties and grandmothers. We listen to how one woman finds and identifies herself in the midst of family and global histories, her story largely includes us in its different points. She is relentless in her drive to uncover untruth and injustice.

The second section of the book addresses works of words, includes literary criticism, much attention paid to Native literature, through a lens that is decidedly Indian and female.

Finally we are allowed a glimpse into the personal “myth and memory” of the author. It is her re-invention of herself and her particular ancestral patrimony in a text that denies no one’s existence, hides no ancestor. She speaks clearly and precisely to what we are all recipients of, a mescal of different bloods, cooking pots and stories. A long-standing mix, to be certain, but one whose blended voices are re-speaking our American identity. Gunn Allen is participating in the writing of the new America, the stories and myths of our “new” people. The legends and life of a Laguna Lebanese woman, joining the Thai Navajos and the African Vikings with Chinese grandmothers in our retelling of the Nation. She tells us we have many Coyotes and Lokis waiting to teach us, millions of grandmother’s bedtime tales, history the way it is, not the way it has been documented. Gunn Allen does not discount the past, in fact she revels in it, submerges deep in the waters of history and returns bearing words and legends of the past, both hers and ours. What she does is adeptly present the past as it exists for her, a mixed-blood woman, instead of accepting the Cloroxed version so long fed to us without option.

Gunn Allen is a professor of English at University of California, and is the author of numerous works of fiction and essays, chapbooks and volumes of poetry.

GABRIELLE SHAW (January / February 1999)

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