

Elizabeth Treadwell

## **On Working with Paula Gunn Allen**

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It was life-changing to cross paths with Paula Gunn Allen at Berkeley, and extremely fortunate, as we were both there so briefly. It's a bit daunting to express the effect she had on me: she made me feel intellectually at ease, comfortable, right with the world; she made me feel that intellectual venturing can be purposeful, even inspired, not always cracked, fake, and oppressive. In other words, here was teaching that made sense on this continent, in my context. Gunn Allen is extremely present as a teacher, poet, and scholar: she brings everything to bear. She lets everything be. She made me feel there's a sacred continuum between the talk of grandmothers, the play of children, and the concerns of the academy. Or, she showed me there could be. And this is the only way any transmission of knowledge or culture makes good sense to me.

When I mention grandmothers, I'm talking about my own, her own, your own. And I'm talking about scholars like Dale Spender and Janet Todd, whose research disinterred works of English literary history by women and led me so happily later on to, say, a newly minted paperback copy of Eliza Haywood's fabulous 1751 novel *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*. Gunn Allen's work is, among other things, part of a new wave of feminist scholarship that hit not a minute too soon as far as I was concerned.

Once while at Cal I complained (to my sister Carol probably) of a writing workshop, "they race-class-and-gendered my story!" By which I meant that the students who spoke reduced my writing to less than the sum of the categories into which they had placed me on sight. And indeed there was a lot of simplistic analysis going on. But such half-thought-through or even spiteful gestures were simply the laziest, cheapest, dumbest outcropping of a profound and necessary change that was occurring—a long and tidal change, expressed partly as the very existence of the Ethnic Studies programs at Cal that allowed me to focus on Native American history and literature in the Native American Studies department rather than on mainstream and otherwise canonical literature in the English department. Gunn Allen's work as a scholar and teacher has been profoundly valuable to me. For it validates, complicates, and extends ways of thought and story and living and dreaming that make my brain and heart and senses feel recognized and, by such recognition, propelled.