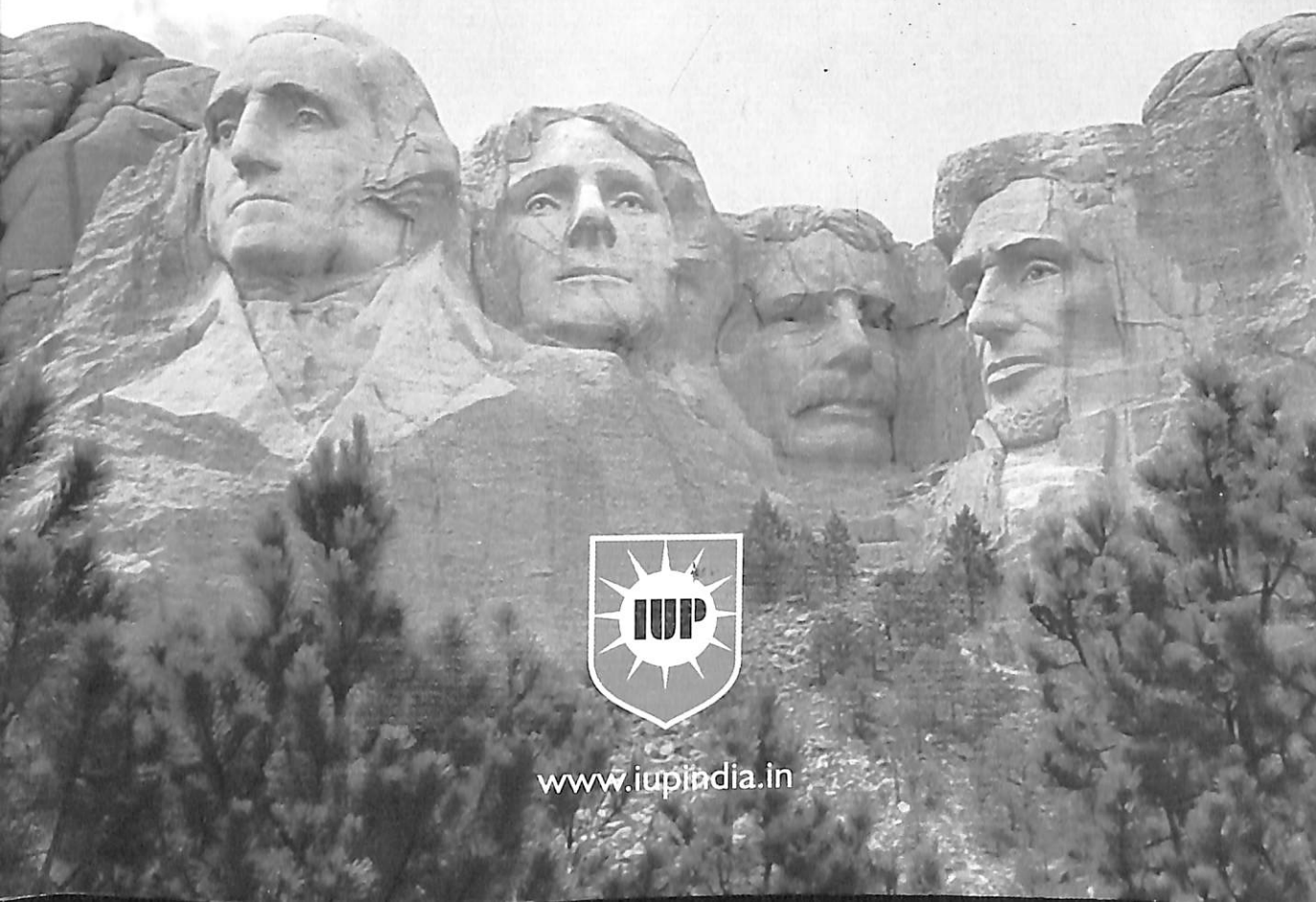


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Remapping Boundaries: A Study of Paula Gunn Allen's Ecophilosophy

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Paula Gunn Allen, a bicultural Laguna Native American writer and brought up in the white mainstream patriarchy, makes known to the world her ecophilosophy through her works. She creates, in her works, an awareness about the rich Laguna culture that foregrounds Mother Earth in all her vitality and vigor. Allen's Native Indian mother and grandmother instilled in her Indian traditions and cultural values which are deep-rooted in her. She found the push and pull of the two cultures that upheld two different value systems tearing her apart. Logical reasoning makes her fall on the right side of the fence and show her loyalty to her tribe. She reorders and renegotiates a new relationship of man with land and environment from a gendered and geopolitical view. She, as an enlightened reformist, remaps the boundaries for altering the mainstream's perspective. This paper presents Allen as an enlightened posthumanist.

A movement is always a reaction against the preceding one. Posthumanism is a major European continental philosophy that started around the late twentieth century. Posthumanism is different from classical humanism in that it decentralizes the role of man. The focus is on man not destroying nature, or on his realizing that he cannot set himself above nature. Man's knowledge is reduced to a less controlling position. The limitation and fallibility of human intelligence are accepted, and many scientists and techno-savvy people have publicly declared their return to a socially committed and spiritual life. Techno-scientific knowledge cannot be accepted as foolproof. The posthumanist is an enlightened one who takes full responsibility for his deeds. It is only when one takes full responsibility for the consequences of one's action that one can be called enlightened. Paula Gunn Allen relies on her matrilineal lineage because she finds the white mainstream belief systems unacceptable and unenlightened. So, Allen's move from humanism to posthumanism is a new definition where new boundaries are being remapped.

Native Indians in the past practiced a kind of animism, as per the white man's observations. So they were labeled primitive and savage. But much to her chagrin, Allen found the white think culture more uncivilized and heathen. Anglo-Americans were erasing cultures through conquest, coerced acculturation, and misrepresentations through texts. Allen is a bicultural Laguna Native American writer, brought up in the white mainstream patriarchy. Her Native Indian mother and grandmother instilled in her Indian traditions

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and cultural values which are deep-rooted in her. Like Indians who regard the earth as *Bhoomidevi* (Earth goddess), for Native Indians the earth is something very sacred and is another link in the sacred wheel of life. Native Indians do not have a ladder sense of space. For them all space is cyclic, and man, god (all spirits), and nature have equal significance.

Anglo-Americans have despoiled the earth setting up nuclear parks and ravaging the earth for various other reasons. Man is the canker that is eating up this globe. He does not realize the consequences of his actions and neither does he feel accountable for them. One has to develop a secular perspective or what Edward W Said calls 'worldness.'

The earth for Native Indians is another being like man and from time to time undergoes transformation. Cultural encounters make Allen generate her ideas based on her beliefs. These thoughts are new, and for Allen, it is an assertion with confidence of Laguna gynosophies. Lagunas believe that Planet Earth is a physical being and is emotional, spiritual, and cerebral. She is our mother and grandmother. The reason for the planet being in a crisis is not just the deeds of men, but because, as Allen says:

... she is entering upon a great initiation—she is becoming someone else. Our planet, my darling, is gone coyote, *heyoka*, and it is our great honor to attend her passage rites. She is giving birth to her new consciousness of herself and her relationship to the other vast intelligences, other holy beings, in her universe. Her travail is not easy ..." (*Off the Reservation*, 1998, p. 120)

All of mankind, Allen believes, is a part of the Earth, so we are her relatives. Even the Earth does not want to change; like humans, she prefers to remain the same. But like a woman changes from the status of a mother to a grandmother, she has to transform herself. Allen (1998) says: "We are not her, but we take our being from her, and in her being we have being, as in her life we have life. As she is, so are we" (p. 120). This is, however, not because of industrialization, war, or exploitation of the earth. She does not wish to be caught in a flux of transition but longs to reach the completed stage. The transitory stage is marked by volcanic passions and storms and earthquakes. Only on complete transformation, the experience of a congruent self, with the spirit and with the earth, is felt. This essential balance is a part of the Laguna belief system. And all this one sees is a great honor to us, for one is attending her passage rites. Allen explains how by doing this she is giving birth to a new consciousness of herself and her relationship to other things in the universe. Allen describes the earth as a planet and a woman she loves, and also the woman she loves as a tree. Man is moving with great rapidity towards transformation and change. Like man, the Earth too is afraid of change and

becoming new and wonders whether she would become unrecognizable to herself and all that is related to her.

For white Americans, Indian beliefs are uncommon, eerie, and are from their states of unconsciousness. Mainstream Christianity depicted God as intimidating and punishing and man as His puny creation. According to Native Indians, gods and spirits are just another link like man in the great sacred wheel of life. Allen looks at the natural world to learn lessons of life. She finds a link between the natural world and women. She cannot visualize femininity to mean helpless and cute, as in mainstream patriarchy. She tells Eysturoy (1995) in an interview: "But to me femininity means these great craggy mountains and these deep arroyos and tremendous storms, because Mother Nature is after all feminine, right?" (p. 16). And one cannot dream of controlling Nature because she is stormy. Allen, in her works, metamorphoses stormy nature in terms of feminine strength and power, instilling in women a lot of self-confidence and self-awareness.

Allen does not feel that being a mother is easy. The typical expectation is that mothers are nice, tolerant, and accommodative. It means giving up many things one likes. Allen feels that a mother need not always be nice, have to smell nice, or always cook good things, and sometimes look shabby. Allen takes all her examples from nature. She says in her interview to Eysturoy (1995):

It is like that in nature, and you have to think about the larger picture, the whole, and what's going on around you. It has allowed me to notice parts of Mother Earth that I didn't understand before because I could have said that mothers are terrible people, which people in America love to say '... Have you ever seen birds function with babies? They are not nice. (p. 22)

Allen shatters the stereotyped image of mothers being always nice and serviceable just because they are mothers. She looks at Nature and learns sometimes how mothers need not always be nice. Sometimes, one has to be not nice to convey a certain message. So, she says being a mother leads her to Mother Nature and the mothering cycle, finally reclaiming herself. Allen's works attempt to bridge the gap between both the Native and the Anglo worlds of common experience, and by extension, between the feminist and other worlds.

The surviving Native Indians are 'half-breeds' who have been robbed of land and forced to acculturate. The land as well as the environment is regarded as a woman. The mainstream looks upon both as something to be possessed. This identification is there in the mainstream discourse too. But the Native Indian understanding of land as feminine is placed within a different power equation. Allen says in *Off the Reservation* (1998): "Western civilization was erected on twin pillars, so to speak: possessiveness and literacy" (p. 20). Man in his

subjugation has exhausted the environment and woman, and both tend to retaliate. The ethnic woman expresses boldly the injustice she suffers, likening it to the environment which man is depleting.

Euro-Americans have violated the environment and land by their deeds and have caused an imbalance. Allen says:

The planet, our mother, Grandmother Earth is physical, and therefore a spiritual, mental, and emotional being. Planets are alive, as are all their byproducts or expressions, such as animals, vegetables, minerals, climatic, and meteorological phenomena. (*Off the Reservation*, 1998, p. 118)

She remaps and renegotiates a new relationship of man with land and environment from a gendered and geopolitical view for altering the mainstream's perspective. Allen calls mainstream a 'rape culture,' attacking land, 'woman-hating' (*Off the Reservation*, 1998, p. 66), giving women a secondary role. When lands and waters are polluted through experiments and wastes, the environment or Mother Earth is being defiled, and she will strike back with retribution through diseases, drought, and other natural phenomena.

For Allen, the natural world shows something of the human world. For her, the landscape is a place where the great dramas are enacted. All things are related to the universe and are one family. Man is a part of a living whole. But according to western thinking, the world is divided into natural and supernatural. Speaking about *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Van Dyke (1995), in her essay "The Journey Back to the Female Roots: A Laguna Pueblo model," says:

The pueblo worldview, like that of the other tribal cultures, is based on the concept that all things inanimate and animate are related and are part of the whole. Plants, animals, rocks, and people are in reciprocal relationship, and people must carry on rituals, prayers, and offerings to keep things in balance in that reciprocal relationship. To the pueblo, who have kept their world view essentially intact, life is sacred and everything, including the arts, contributes to "light, life, wellbeing." (p. 28)

In the Native Indian belief system, relationship is central. Everything is a brother. All are brothers and relatives of one part of an orderly and balanced whole. Afraid of the American corrupting influence, Allen's mother taught her to respect all that is in nature, the flora and the fauna. Since everything is a brother, one does not treat people and nature differently, and this is a very Laguna thing. She says a bull snake lived under her house, and Lagunas do not kill bull snakes. Bruchac (1987) quotes Allen as saying, "You take care of people and you take care of creatures because that's what you do and you don't do anything else" (p. 7). But the Euro-American worldview is one that separates

the animate from the inanimate, man from animals, and shows lack of respect to other creations. In this system, man occupies a higher rung on the hierarchical ladder much above nature and trees, while animals occupy the lowermost rung of the ladder. They do not see an interrelatedness of all things in a web of being. The western world's view of man above plants and animals and mind over the physical leads ultimately to a lack of balance. Trees and mesas are important. Conversations are with animals. As she loves her tribe, all relationships are important. Allen says in *The Sacred Hoop* (1992): "All are seen to be brothers or relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central), all are offspring of the Great Mystery, children of our mother, and necessary parts of an ordered, balanced, and living whole. The Indian feels being away from his tribe he cannot progress" (p. 116). Allen reiterates this point in *Off the Reservation* (1998) as well: "I have a strong sense of family, of property, of place" (p. 210).

Allen belongs to the local Laguna culture. But when she speaks about the Native Indian life, she takes into consideration the totality of the experiences of all the tribal groups coming under the umbrella concept of Pan-Indian civilization. She is a reformist who feels radically about the environment and wants to change the society and the white think culture. ✱

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