Of Time and Trauma: The Possibilities for Narrative in Paula Gunn Allen’s The Woman Who Owned the Shadows

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Abstract

In the introduction to her 1998 essay, “Contemporary Two-Spirit Identity in the Fiction of Paula Gunn Allen and Beth Brant,” Tara Prince-Hughes observes that for Native American writers the “struggle for identity has required writers to engage actively and dispute dominant Western fictions of ‘Indianness’ and to express the fragmentation experienced by people of mixed ancestry” (9). In this essay, I want to address the way in which Paula Gunn Allen, in The Woman Who Owned the Shadows (1983), actively engages and disputes dominant Western fictions of “trauma” in a Native American context. In a central sequence of episodes in the novel, Allen depicts her protagonist, Ephanie, undergoing western-style therapy in the attempt to heal her alienated condition. Eventually, Ephanie comes to reject psycho-therapy because at the point when she leaves her therapist she finds herself in a more alienated and fragile state than ever. Western approaches to the healing of trauma are powerless to help Ephanie; however, Paula Gunn Allen offers us in this novel not only an alternative vision of healing but also a different [...]
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The Woman Who Owned the Shadows

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This essay considers the contested thematics of trauma, in Paula Gunn Allen's novel, in terms of the treatment of time. The connection between time and trauma is crucial to the Western understanding of trauma presented by influential theorists such as Ruth Leys and Cathy Caruth. I want to use trauma theory to approach the question of the representational capacities of language within the context of a trauma that is both racial and gendered, historical and personal. In particular, I want to question the issue of trauma as characterized by Caruth’s concept of “belated temporality” in relation to the ways in which Allen represents the destruction of subjectivity within trauma and the implications of this for the construction of a temporal narrative of self. I want to introduce in this context Allen’s insight into an alternative approach to trauma: the idea that in fact trauma is unrepresentable in narrative terms because the destruction of the traumatized “I” renders the linear history of trauma unrecuperable.

Let me begin by acknowledging that trauma may seem to be an inappropriate approach to Allen’s work (especially given the negative representation of psycho-therapy in the novel) and, indeed, to Native American literature in general. As Hartwig Isernhagen observes in his essay in this present volume, Native American literature can be distinguished from African American writing (to take one fairly arbitrary example of American “minority” literature) in that Native writers have avoided “trauma narrative” as a designation for their work and critics of Native American literature have tended to follow this lead (“They Have Stories”). Writers like Paula Gunn Allen emphasise the status of their texts as healing narratives, and it is in these terms that Allen describes her project in The Woman Who Owned the Shadows, in the essay “Whose Dream Is This Anyway? Remythologization and Self-definition in Contemporary American Indian Fiction,” in The Sacred Hoop (98-100). However, at the same time that Allen approaches the issue of Native experience from the perspective of a woman-centered Keres-Pueblo cultural tradition she offers a revisionary perspective upon the whole contemporary discourse of trauma. A monolithic view of trauma, such as seems to be emerging from the contemporary orthodoxy surrounding trauma studies, cannot offer this revisionary approach. But a sensitive, tribally-informed approach, such as Allen’s novel represents, can uncover for us a larger truth about identity de/formation under conditions of trauma.
I. Of Time and Trauma

In most dominant theoretical accounts of trauma, there are two moments in the chronology of psychic trauma: the original traumatic event and its belated emergence as a symptom. Ruth Leys explains:

The idea is that, owing to the emotions of terror and surprise caused by certain events, the mind is split or dissociated: it is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed. As a result, the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present (2).

In these terms, trauma is defined by a belated temporality; trauma resides in the repetition of an earlier event that is forgotten or repressed and so is neither recalled nor known as traumatic, except in the repetition of symptoms or traumatic memories. But these repetitions are not identical and because each repetition is not self-identical there opens the potential for analysis. Through the analysis of difference within a pattern of repetition the original traumatic event can be isolated, revealed and treated.

This description of the chronology of trauma offers the field of trauma literature as a rich ground for literary analysis, representing as it does the symptoms of trauma in an essentially narrative form. Indeed, the prominent trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth, argues in the essay “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History” that trauma offers literary criticism a resolution of the problem of referentiality and consequent “political and ethical paralysis” posed by some critics of poststructuralist or “deconstructive” approaches. Caruth argues that trauma describes “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic, events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). She identifies the figure of the shell-shocked soldier, whose traumatic experience of violent and massive death is received in a benumbed state but is relived in years of nightmares, as the iconic representation of modern trauma. Such an example as this offers Caruth the opportunity to argue that the representation of trauma is not strictly referential, that it is necessarily indirect, symbolic and so subject to interpretation. More importantly for my approach to the issue of time and trauma is her construction of trauma as a linear narrative process: trauma as belated repetition is trauma as an unfolding linear history. Caruth claims:

Through the notion of trauma . . . we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not (182; emphasis in the original).

This history that arises does so as a result of cumulative understanding derived from the repetition of the traumatic event. This is a convenient way of opening the field of historical understanding to literary analysis by insisting upon the narrative and referentially indeterminate nature of historical understanding. However, this theory weakens in the presence of texts like Paula Gunn Allen’s novel which, whilst obviously documenting the consequences of trauma in the life history of the protagonist, Ephanie, does not disclose any single sudden or catastrophic event. Caruth’s paradigmatic case of trauma, the soldier haunted by his wartime experience, or indeed the other examples of traumatic event that she cites “rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents, and so on” (1991, 182), finds no counterpart in Allen’s trauma narrative. While, it is true, Ephanie’s story does describe the pattern of forgetting and return that Caruth sees as the essential pattern of trauma, the trauma itself cannot be located in any single event. What are we to make of this? At this point we, as readers, must read the novel against the theoretical grain and question the universal
applicability of the theoretical concept of “belated repetition” as always characteristic of trauma in every case.

It seems to me that we must exercise some scepticism towards theoretical models, especially in relation to such contentious issues as post-traumatic stress disorder and recovered memory (and false memory syndrome). Particularly, we should explore alternative accounts of the relations between time, trauma and memory. One such alternative theory is presented in the essay “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma.” Here, Ernst Van Alphen argues persuasively against the assumption made by Caruth that experience somehow precedes trauma. If we return briefly to Caruth’s definition of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events” we find her arguing that experience precedes response, a response that may come years after the event or experience. Van Alphen, in contrast, argues not that trauma is an experience of particular kinds of events but that trauma in fact destroys experience. His view of experience is based on the understanding that, in order to come into existence, experience must be discursively constructed:

Experience depends on discourse to come about; forms of experience do not just depend on the event or history that is being experienced, but also on the discourse in which the event is expressed/thought/conceptualized (Van Alphen 24).

Experience and, by extension, the subjectivity constituted by that experience are then discursive constructions: “subjects are the effect of the discursive processing of their experiences” (25). There is no contradiction between Van Alphen and Caruth in terms of the understanding of subjectivity and experience as discursive constructions. Where the two theorists part company is in relation to when experience can be said to have taken place and how this experience is retrospectively constructed as memory. Caruth presents experience as the foundation of trauma and that to which traumatic memories return the victim. This “foundational” view of experience is criticized by Van Alphen from the outset when he observes of the status of experience in historical analysis that “[e]xperience is put forward as true or self-evident, as uncontestable [sic], and as an originary point of explanation” (24). For Van Alphen, in contrast, the foundation or “originary point of explanation” for trauma lies in some sensation to which we cannot have access because it cannot be transformed discursively into experience and so cannot be articulated, even to the victim of the trauma. This is the trauma, for Van Alphen, but not for theorists like Caruth and Leys who, following Freud, posit the knowledge of trauma at some subsequent moment and the trauma itself in the repetition of the traumatic event.

Van Alphen’s account of the relations between experience and subjectivity is important for his understanding of traumatic memory, where memory is seen as the retrieval not of the past itself but of the discursive experience of the past. Memory is a special category of experience and, in the terms Van Alphen presents, traumatic memory is impossible. Trauma is a case of what he calls “failed experience” and so of “failed memorialization” of that experience, which eludes discursive representation. Incidentally, we might note here that Freud, in Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria, observes that a characteristic of hysteria is the inability to tell coherent stories as a consequence of what has been repressed (30-31). In Van Alphen’s argument, trauma itself lies in the impossibility of experiencing, and so remembering, an event that resists all discursive formulation.

The concept of the unrepresentability of trauma takes on a new significance in this perspective. When Van Alphen refers to the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, for example, he does not mean the impropriety of representing the Holocaust under certain circumstances; rather, he means that survivors of this historical trauma find it impossible to narrate their traumatic memories because the trauma itself has destroyed the discursive basis for the construction of experience and the memory of that experience. Van Alphen explains:

The difficulty of telling the past of the Holocaust should not be located in the extremity of the events itself, but rather in the process and mechanisms of experience and its representation. ... I presume ... that in principle representation
does offer the possibility of giving expression to extreme experiences. The issue, however, is that representation itself is historically variable. Sometimes there are situations or events – and the Holocaust is prototypical for such situations – that are the occasion of “experiences” that cannot be expressed in the terms that language (or, more broadly, the symbolic order) offers at that moment (26; emphasis in the original).

This is precisely the problematic situation in which Allen’s traumatized protagonist finds herself. For Ephanie, her suffering is focused upon the impossibility and continual frustration of failing to make herself understood to others and, often, even to herself. She does not possess a vocabulary sufficient to the construction of her experience and, consequently, she loses the sense of her own self, her own subjectivity, as a construction of experience that would be prerequisite for the articulation of that experience. The absence of a coherent and self-consistent subject of/in the narrative accounts for the radical fragmentation that characterizes the language of the text. For example, in the section entitled “Shaking, She Makes It Matter,” the narrator attempts to represent the nameless fear that haunts and periodically paralyses Ephanie:


The language of this passage stresses not only discontinuity but also the primacy of sensation. The fragmentation of sentences emphasizes a lack of causal connections in favour of sensations like color (red, dark brown), light (the sun, the lamps), and the body (breastbone, guts, temples). These sensations do not cohere into experience, which makes sensations explicable and communicable. Ephanie does not have at her disposal forms of representation that enable her to “have” experiences in a way that can be understood and communicated. The events of her life cannot become experience in the forms of articulation available to her. Instead she has sensation that is without meaning, or experience that is sensation constructed according to an inauthentic discourse that she perceives to be inauthentic.

It is this failure of discourse that itself constitutes trauma rather than functioning as a symptom of traumatic experience. In Van Alphen’s words and in his example of Holocaust survivors:

The problem of Holocaust survivors is precisely that the lived events could not be experienced because language did not provide the terms and positions in which to experience them; thus they are defined as traumatic. The Holocaust has been so traumatic for many, precisely because it could not be experienced, because a distance from it in language or representation was not possible. In this view, experience is the result or product of a discursive process. Thus, the problem of Holocaust experiences can be formulated as the stalling of this discursive process. Because of this stalling the experience cannot come about (27).

This gives rise to a further revision of assumptions about traumatic memory and the chronology of trauma. The problem of unrepresentability is not an issue subsequent to the traumatic event but is constitutive of the trauma itself: “the later representational problems are a continuation of the impossibility during the event itself of experiencing the Holocaust in the terms of the symbolic order then available” (Van Alphen 27). This description of trauma as constituted by the denial of subjectivity that occurs at the same moment that the traumatic event refuses to be articulated as experience contradicts the view of theorists such as Cathy Caruth that trauma is characterized by a “belated temporality” that is subsequent to the traumatic event which reappears in the form of hysterical symptoms and the pathological repetition of the trauma. It is, however, an accurate
II. On Trauma Narrative and Narrative Symbolism

As I remarked earlier, Allen’s narrative is uniquely marked by the absence of any single traumatic event in the depiction of Ephanie’s suffering. Rather than seek to articulate and bring to meaning some specific “failed experience,” to use Van Alphen’s term, the narrative emphasizes time, recollection, and memory and the idea of circling or repetition. These repetitions are not the hysterical symptoms of trauma in the sense that Cathy Caruth describes the insistent repetition of the singular traumatic moment. These repeated motifs appear in the narrative, as it is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, and these motifs tell a story of Ephanie that is distinct from the story Ephanie would tell about herself. At times, this narrator reports Ephanie’s own first-person voice but this occurs only in moments of intense introspection, when meaning dissolves back into raw uninterpretable sensation. The narrative remains insistently focalized through Ephanie but there remains a disjunction between the narrator’s voice and that of Ephanie, who is alienated from everything and everyone: including herself. In this way, the narrative structure seeks to represent Ephanie’s trauma as something that resists conceptualization, that remains stubbornly in a condition of sensation rather than experience, in the absence of sufficient discursive forms to transform these sensations into experience. Allen’s narrative style presses language to convey trauma in its full unspeakable horror by resisting any normalizing literary style that would reduce the alien and terrifying nature of trauma.

The Woman Who Owned The Shadows is an example of the way in which literature can preserve the authenticity of trauma as an experience that takes place in a liminal space outside the normal contexts of experience and meaning. The significance of trauma as unspeakable horror is, in the view of theorists like Cathy Caruth and Walter Benn Michaels, articulated as pure horror when the referential function of language is pressed beyond its limits. Then, in the words of Benn Michaels, we have access to “not the normalizing knowledge of the horror but the horror itself” (Benn Michaels 8). In a literary context, trauma can be witnessed without being fully comprehended because “language is capable of bearing witness only by a failure of witnessing or representation” (Leys 268). The peculiar epistemology of trauma resides in the special authority attributed to the survivor who, alone, is qualified to articulate the trauma they have experienced. But, when the victim cannot clearly articulate that trauma as experience then the very attempt to articulate this “failed experience” pushes the representational limits of literary language. This is precisely what Allen achieves in this narrative: the depiction not of a story of trauma but the trauma in all its unintelligibility. What some critics have condemned as the unnecessary repetition of mundane events and activities (see Hanson, 1990) is in fact the recording of sensation that cannot be transformed into a state of meaning. Similarly, the radical fragmentation of the narrative, into four major parts and more than seventy sections of unequal length, underscores the absence of any coherent paradigm or logical structure into which this story could fit. The fragments that constitute the narrative stress the impropriety of linear narrative as a form that could contain and “tell” this story. Ephanie’s trauma does not conform to a neat repetition of a singular, originary event and the narrative does not lead in any simple way towards the idea of healing the trauma.

What does unite these fragments is the pattern of symbolic repetition through which key images accumulate significance that finally becomes a language capable of transforming Ephanie’s life into a condition of meaning and “experience.” The narrative charts this progress from a state of “failed experience” to experience that can be articulated and so offers the prospect of healing. We should recall that Ernst Van Alphen stresses the historical variability of representation when he points out that “there are situations or events ... that are the occasion of ‘experiences’ that cannot be expressed in the terms that language (or, more broadly, the symbolic order) offers at that moment” (26; Van Alphen’s emphasis). What Paula Gunn Allen depicts is the gradual historical shift from a moment when no appropriate language is available to a later moment when the structure of the symbolic order is such that these situations and events can be articulated as traumatic experiences.
This shift, which is a chronological shift, takes place through the symbolic subtext of the narrative. In memories, dreams, and visions a series of key symbols is established and developed throughout the narrative: flying or jumping, the imagery of shadows, and the image of Grandmother Spider. But memory also brings recollections of loss, abandonment, and violation. These images come together in the conclusion of the narrative, converging in a vision that provides Ephanie with the explanatory paradigm she needs to transform her life into meaningful experience. Images of flying or jumping are associated with betrayal and abandonment in the early part of the narrative; but in the section “She Remembers Something” what Ephanie recalls is the tribal story of Sky Woman, who is betrayed by her husband as he pushes her through a hole in the sky so that she falls through the void. However, this is a creation story in which birds break the woman’s fall and place her gently on the back of Grandmother Turtle, upon whose back they have spread the mud from which the earth grows. At this point in her development, Ephanie names the tree that is uprooted to reveal the hole through which Sky Woman falls a death tree (38). When the same story is repeated later, in the section “In The Shadows She Sang, Remembering,” Ephanie sees this as a fortunate and creative fall, and the woman as one “[w]ho entered a new world and upon it planted her seed. Who gave the sun and moon their light. Who from death made life” (191). This is the knowledge that Ephanie has resisted, the vision attached to this story and the symbolism of falling: “She understood at last that everything was connected. Everything was related. Nothing came in that did not go out. Nothing was that did not live nestled within everything else. And this was how the stories went, what they had been for. To fit a life into. To make sense” (191; my emphasis).

This knowledge is unpalatable for Ephanie because in order to remember the stories that communicate this understanding she must remember her own fall, her literal fall from the apple tree in her mother’s garden. This tree opens not a hole in the sky but a hole in Ephanie’s life as she learns from this experience fear and self-doubt. After this fall, which breaks her ribs and punctures her lung, Ephanie no longer trusts her own body and so she learns a passive femininity and she forgets how she once trusted her own judgement and vision. “‘I abandoned myself,’ she said. ‘I left me’” (204). Ephanie falls into a world symbolized by shadows, signifying this fear, confusion, abandonment and betrayal. The imagery of shadows, which of course lends the narrative its title, signifies the loss of control that characterizes Ephanie’s life. She calls herself “Shadow Woman” (36) and the city where she seeks refuge the “Shadow Place” (58). Gradually, the accretion of significance around the image of shadows becomes the focus of Ephanie’s growing need for knowledge. It is the “shadow sister,” Grandmother Spider, who assists Ephanie in the pursuit of this knowledge, which is the recollection of knowledge she had and forgot. Early in the narrative, the image of the spider is associated with memory and assumes the status of a guardian of historical memory. Indeed, Ephanie is hostile towards spiders during the long period when she does not want to remember. But the figure of the spider acquires additional meaning as a witness to the death-dealing brought by white people; the spider even witnesses Ephanie’s attempt at suicide. It is as a figure waiting for the people finally to come to peace that the spider takes on its most powerful significance. In Ephanie’s vision of the convergence of all creation, past and present, it is the Spider Grandmother who tells her, “‘Little sister, you have jumped. You have fallen. You have been brave, but you have misunderstood. So you have learned. How to jump. How to fall. How to learn. How to understand’” (211). In this way, necessarily through complex strategies of symbolic indirection, the narrative describes its transformation of Ephanie’s “failed” traumatic experience into meaningful experience.

III. On the Possibility of Representing Collective Trauma

Jeffrey K. Olick, in his essay “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures” (1999), addresses the issue of the collectivity of remembering, which takes place in and through language, narrative, and dialogue: “it is not merely that individuals remember in language, coding their experiences as language and recalling them in it. Language itself can be viewed as a memory system” (343), he argues. This is not a new argument; as Olick points out, Mikhail Bakhtin, in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (1963), claims that each speech act contains a “memory trace” linking it to the
utterances that have preceded it. Linguistic events make sense through a complex interplay of recollection and innovation. The historical development of linguistic usage takes place through genres. Each genre “lives in the present, but always remembers its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development” (Bakhtin quoted by Olick, 343). If collective memory is contained in some way in literary forms or genres, we must ask then whether the collective recollection of traumatic memory can be contained also in literary form? If personal trauma can be articulated in symbolic form, as opposed to the form of conventional linear narrative, what form is required, or indeed possible, for the articulation of collective trauma? Can the trauma of an entire community be brought into the condition of meaning that would create a collective experience of trauma?

Olick describes trauma as the disruption of “the legitimating narrative[s] that we as individuals produce for us as a collectivity” (345). Trauma lies in the inability of the victim to make sense of the traumatic event because no existing language, system of moral values, or explanatory paradigm is sufficient. This creates complications for any view of the inheritance of trauma or for the construction of collective traumatic memories. Olick continues:

While we may speak of the residue of individual traumas, insofar as parents or grandparents imparted to their offspring stories of their experiences, psychological traumas cannot be passed down through the generations like bad genes. In the first place, the fact that the memory of such personally traumatic experiences is externalized and objectified as narrative means it is no longer a purely individual psychological matter. And in the second place, discussing the ongoing nature of the trauma in terms of such transmitted personal narratives does not capture what we really mean – that is, an unassimilable breach in the collective narrative. ... In this way, for instance, the trauma of Auschwitz will not disappear with the death of the last survivor; nor is it carried only through those ... who suffered its personal ripple effects: Auschwitz remains a trauma for the narratives of modernity and morality, among others ... (345).

The externalization and objectification of personal memories of trauma as narrative (and we must recall here Van Alphen’s warning that these memories are necessarily the construction of experience through later discursive forms and are not constitutive of the trauma event itself) transforms personal trauma into something that is no longer personal and psychological or emotional. We are talking here about collective historical trauma, a problematic concept that generalizes theories developed in the treatment of traumatized individuals to encompass communities that have been subject to historical trauma. Olick does emphasize, however, the necessity that we think of trauma not only in personal but also in collective terms, as the disruption of collective narratives like “progress,” “civilization,” “modernity,” and the like. As Olick suggests, the assimilation of personal trauma accounts into explanatory paradigms that remove the horror of inexplicable pre-experience or raw sensation disrupts those collective narratives and the collective values of “modernity and morality” that underlie and support them.

In Allen’s narrative, this disruption of collective narratives by Ephanie’s personal trauma serves to underline the distinction between the destructive white narratives that have destroyed Ephanie’s self-esteem to the point of destroying her subjectivity and the tribal narratives that offer the possibility of self-reconciliation and healing. This is an uneasy distinction to sustain, however, as Ephanie reveals the ostracism of her family through three generations by a tribal community that will not tolerate inter-marriage with whites and the mixed-blood offspring that result from these marriages. Ephanie’s alienation is equally from tribal and white communities. The opening section, “Her Name Was A Stranger,” explains this double estrangement: “like her it was a split name, a name half of this and half of that: Ephiphany. Effie. An almost name. An almost event. Proper at that for her, a halfblood. A halfbreed. Which was the source of her derangement. Ranging despair. Disarrangement” (3). Her trauma is located partially in the negative narratives of Native Americans that surround her: the Vanishing American, the Indian as Victim, the romanticized view of Native peoples by certain liberal whites. After spending time with Teresa’s New Age friends in Colorado,
for example, Ephanie is consumed with rage because these people insist upon a view of Native Americans as the passive victims of the colonial history of the US who continue in a passive role as victims of modernity. Ephanie is aware that her self-destructive rage confirms the negative stereotype to which she is subjected, even as her anger exposes this traumatizing collective narrative.

Dominick LaCapra offers a useful term to describe such collective trauma: a “founding trauma” is an historical event that plays a formative role in the creation of a community’s collective identity and becomes a basis for the individual identity of members of the community (LaCapra 724). Traumatic historical events include the Holocaust, American slavery, and Native American genocide. Paula Gunn Allen’s protagonist is shaped in negative ways by the legacy of genocide: she is haunted by voices that chant to her the historical message that “a good Indian is a dead Indian” and she knows that she cannot be “good” because she is alive (147); she and her community have somehow survived that which they were not intended to survive.

Personal trauma is reconciled in the narrative by the pattern of tribal symbols and the tribal mythology, the stories, which enable Ephanie to situate her trauma, to transform it into experience. The collective and historical or “founding” trauma she suffers is, however, reconciled only through the thematics of death and the exposure of the negative collective narratives to which Ephanie, as a mixedblood person, has been subjected.

Ephanie comes to understand the tribal account of the bringing of death to the world and in this way she is able to situate her own experience of vision, her understanding of the symbolic parallel between the Woman Who Fell From the Sky and her own fall into falsehood and self-loathing. The collective narrative of death describes not only the disruption of tribal narratives by the invasion of Anglos with their contrary narratives of life and death; the disruption of collective tribal narratives such as these is in itself the trauma suffered by tribal peoples. At the same time that Ephanie situates her own personal trauma in a logical paradigm offered by the tribal mythology so she also locates her own trauma within the larger historical trauma, the “founding trauma,” to use Dominick LaCapra’s term, of her people. This is a trauma which she is best placed to appreciate, in all her suffering but also in the wisdom of her knowledge, as a person of mixedblood who has been alienated from her white and tribal affiliations but who finally comes to see a way forward for herself and, potentially, for all her people.

Conclusion

The movement from lack of appropriate symbolic forms and “failed” experience to a condition of knowledge and communicable experience is achieved in this novel not by any of the conventional strategies of linear novelistic narrative. Indeed, the narrative resists that which is linear, including the linear construction of trauma posited by influential theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys. It is rather by a process of circling, recording sensation and fragmented thought in such a way as to permit the gradual accumulation of meaning by key symbols, that the narrative is able finally to bring Ephanie’s trauma into a condition of meaning. The image of circles and circling, closely associated with the activity of weaving, runs throughout the text: from the early image of Elena, the friend who will betray Ephanie, running in circles to the late image of thinking in circles:

She talked, her thoughts ran in circles. Which couldn’t be helped. Indians lived in circles, did not care for lines that broken went nowhere. For her the sun was a clock, a calendar, like her body, like her eyes that were the meeting place of light and flesh, were circular. Like the winds. Like the sky. Like the entire galaxy that wheeled, holding the earth in her outflung arm. She thought in accretions, concretions. Like pearls grow. Like crystals. Like the earth. She gave up talking. (185)

No talking cure then for Ephanie. This passage succinctly describes the novelistic strategy of Allen’s text. It is an achronological strategy, such as she describes as typical of the tribal novel in
the MELUS interview, published in the same year as *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows* (1983):

... what you’re going to have, when an Indian writes a chronological tale, is a tale of colonization and death. That’s what’s going to happen. Nothing else can happen to an Indian in a chronological time frame. ... But in this other structure [“achronicity”], what’s happening is we’re beginning to develop a structural mode that will enable us to affirm life and to talk about who we really are, as well as who we imagine ourselves to be (19-20).

Paula Gunn Allen’s novel challenges the assumptions underlying the chronological structure of literary narrative. This text also challenges us to review our assumptions about the narrative nature of trauma and is representation. The construction of trauma as a pattern of linear repetitions, structured as chronological narrative, may well open the field of trauma in a convenient manner for embattled literary critics, as Cathy Caruth suggests. But trauma texts such as Allen’s requires that we assess carefully the interests served by the explanatory paradigms that bring all our knowledge into a condition of meaningful “experience.”

**Works Cited**


