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Marianne Kongerslev
Aalborg University: Aalborg East
0000-0002-6494-7258

She Bloomed in the Dark: Shadow Feminism and Queer Failure in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*

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Abstract: This article analyzes Paula Gunn Allen's 1983 novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* deploying Jack Halberstam's notion of queer failure, a subversive phenomenon that involves embracing negative affects, refusing success narratives, and negating selfhood. Refusing stereotypical feminine positionality in a masculinist universe in favor of a shadowy, female-centered spirit community, the main character, Ephanie, rejects disciplinary gender norms and fails to perform a cis-hetero feminine identity. Recasting Allen's conception of the medicine-dyke as a Halberstamian shadow feminist, the article analyzes how the novel employs queer failure as a critique of settler colonial oppression and violence, from the main character as failed ciswoman to the novel's narrative as a failure of form and convention. Through a fragmented narrative style that never truly resolves, the novel lacks stability and familiar structure, challenging the telos of stabile identity formation and the logic of success. Like its main character, the novel is subversive, a queer unstory that fails to adhere to literary conventions, emphasizing unbeing, undoing, and murky kinds of feminist resistance.

Key words:
Queer failure;
Shadow Feminism;
Paula Gunn Allen;
Trauma; Two-Spirit.

Laguna Pueblo[1] scholar and poet Paula Gunn Allen's only novel, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), is a celebration of feminist refusal and an invitation to consider the power of shadows and darkness as creative forces. Set in an unspecified time in the latter part of the twentieth century, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* is a poetic-experimental work that does not lend itself easily to a concise summary. Vignettes, letters, psychologist's notes, poetry, and other snippets of text weave together Laguna Pueblo myths and legends with the story of Ephanie Atencio, a "crossblood" woman, to borrow Gerald Vizenor's term (*Crossbloods*). In the opening scenes of the novel, Ephanie seems to be emerging from a mental break, unable to speak or escape from the suffocating paternalistic behavior of her "Indian cousin" (8), Stephen. Aided by memories of her first love, Elena, and the legends of the creatrix Thought Woman (sometimes referred to as Spider Woman), Ephanie seeks a way out of abusive and toxic relationships that hold her captive in feminine and powerless gender roles. This pursuit takes her from her ancestral homelands in New Mexico to San Francisco, where she establishes a new life for herself and her children, and becomes involved in the city's Indian Center in an attempt to find friends and connections. She briefly marries a Japanese American man, Thomas, but this marriage fails after the couple loses one of their twin sons to sudden infant death syndrome, after which Ephanie returns to Albuquerque, where she attempts to hang herself. Realizing she does not want to die "in such a stupidstupid [sic] way" (163), she frees herself at the last moment. In the aftermath of this final violent and traumatic experience, she becomes obsessed with reading and knowledge (168), and with "re membering [sic]" herself as a medicine-dyke through stories of the mythical Thought Woman (212).

The first novel written by a native woman to feature a (queer) woman as main character in roughly half a century (Tatonetti), this novel provides a seminal point of entry into Native women's fiction and an opportunity to explore the intersection between indigenous studies and queer studies. The novel contains several autobiographical traits and aligns well thematically with Allen's scholarly, poetic, and political projects, which she in large part outlines and explains in her 1986 book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions.* As Lisa Tatonetti states in *The Queerness of Native American Literature* (2014), *The Sacred Hoop* started a conversation about the relationship between Native American studies and queer studies. The book is in many ways foundational for scholarship on queer native literatures, cultures, and traditions, despite its myriad generalizations about ancestral "gynocracies" and "matrifocality" in Indigenous cultures (3), as well as essentialist ideas of "American Indians" (2), and gender constructs. However, Allen's mission with the book—a recovery of traditions and a feminist call to arms—spurred on further research, especially as scholars engaged critically with her writing.

[1] Although Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008) referred to herself as a "multicultural event" (Van Dyke 70), as a mixed Lebanese-Pueblo-Scottish-Sioux woman, she often aligned herself with her maternal Laguna Pueblo heritage (see e.g., *The Sacred Hoop*).

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Ancestral Indigenous sexualities and genders have been studied extensively, since Europeans invaded the continents, especially from historical or anthropological perspectives (see for instance Williams; Lang; and Roscoe). In the last quarter of the twentieth century, new scholarship and activist movements intersected in increasingly complex ways. Running parallel to, but never quite intersecting with, the post-Stonewall gay and lesbian movement of the 1970s, the Native Two-Spirit, LGBT+, and queer movement in many ways originated in the San Francisco Bay Area with the organization Gay American Indians (GAI), with whom Allen was associated. This group's collaborative *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988) was the first collection of stories, poems, and historical and anthropological writings thematizing the gayness of Native America.

Moreover, within the last three decades, scholars have increasingly focused on the ways in which settler colonialism continues to influence Native societies, especially in terms of gender discourses and constructs (See for instance Rifkin; Morgensen; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill), although studies in queer indigenous issues received relatively scant mainstream attention, until the resurgence of scholarly work in the early twenty-first century. The debate about the split between queer studies and Indigenous studies continues today and it raises questions of how to square the two, evidenced by Choctaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd's 2020 article, "What's Normative Go to Do with it? Toward Indigenous Queer Relationality," in which she details the "strange and disjointed intimacy" between indigenous studies and queer studies (105). Describing an impasse, Byrd succinctly claims that "Indigenous studies has a queer problem" (109). As the two fields have not yet found common ground, she suggests shifting the focus from identarian constructs and othering processes to a grounded relationality, centering "the materiality of Indigenous bodies [as] relationally collective" (111).

In this context of ongoing conversations on the state of the field and its theoretical innovations, it is important to revisit both canonical and noncanonical texts to bring their themes and messages into new conversations. Thus, my errand in the present article is to explore how *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* expresses 'queer failure' in Ephanie's repudiation of normative gender and her alignment with Jack Halberstam's concept "shadow feminism," as well as in the narrative's refusal to comply with conventions. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Halberstam defines queer failure as "a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and [...] a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent" (88). Furthermore, he explores shadow feminism as "an antisocial, anti-Oedipal, antihumanist, and counterintuitive feminism that arises out of queer, postcolonial, and black feminisms and that thinks in terms of the negation of the subject rather than her formation, the disruption of lineage rather than its continuation, the undoing of self rather than its activation" (125-26). These concepts resonate with Byrd's discussion of the antinormativity of "entities

that defy and refuse expectations" (Byrd 119), and with *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, as Ephanie as a failed cis-woman, is a disruption of settler discourses and narratives. At the end of the novel, Ephanie unravels and refuses to cohere, not to refuse futurity, but to highlight queer relationality, collectivity, and a different kind of kinship beyond the human. Although it is unclear whether the novel embraces magic realism and Ephanie transforms into a spirit, or if she simply loses her mind, she is portrayed as transcending human form by joining spiders and dancing women emerging out of the shadows in her room, singing herself into corporeal unbeing, as one among a collective of Spider Women.

Structured as a nonlinear series of falls and failures, the novel refuses easy categorization and analysis by eschewing linear narrative and traditional novelistic conventions. Through this disintegrated narrative style that never truly resolves, the narrative challenges the notion of stable identity formation and the logic of success. Like its main character, the novel is a subversive, queer failure to adhere to literary conventions, emphasizing Allen's mobilization of Yellow Woman-turned-medicine-dyke, a shadowy figure of feminist refusal, negation, and dissent.

Queering Yellow Woman

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Allen argues that Pueblo cultures center lives around a feminine principle that guides and determines peoples' social and familial roles. As she recounts:

> *In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman. The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into the present among those peoples of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her, being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Spider Woman who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection.* (Sacred Hoop 11)

Allen furthermore calls Native culture(s) "gynocratic" and matrifocal (2-3). In many tribes, including Allen's own Keres/Laguna Pueblo culture, women maintained an essential role in tribal government and families, as well as ceremonially and mythologically. Tribal gender roles fell into somewhat narrow categories, but Allen comments that the Pueblos and other tribes "encouraged variety of personal expression" and that many women-centered social systems valued "free and easy sexuality" (2), allowing for a measure of personal freedom despite valuing "conformity and propriety above almost anything" (227). Similarly, illustrating this female-centered and egalitarian life, in the essay "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit" (1991), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), discusses the relevance and centrality of the Kochininako (Yellow Woman) stories to Pueblo life, society, and ceremonies. She recounts:

> *In one story, the people are suffering during a great drought and accompanying famine. Each day, Kochininako has to walk farther and farther from the village to find fresh water for her husband and children. One day she travels far, far to the east, to the plains, and she finally locates a freshwater spring. But when she reaches the pool, the water is churning violently as if something large had just gotten out of the pool. Kochininako does not want to see what huge creature had been at the pool, but just as she fills her water jar and turns to hurry away, a strong, sexy man in buffalo skin leggings appears by the pool. Little drops of water glisten on his chest. She cannot help but look at him because he is so strong and so good to look at. Able to transform himself from human to buffalo in the wink of an eye, Buffalo Man gallops away with her on his back. Kochininako falls in love with Buffalo Man, and because of this liaison, the Buffalo People agree to give their bodies to the hunters to feed the starving Pueblo. Thus Kochininako's fearless sensuality results in the salvation of the people of her village, who are saved by the meat the Buffalo people "give" to them.* (Silko 70-71)

Other stories tell of similar feats by Yellow Woman, who acts as the culture hero, uniting, aiding, saving the people. At the same time, her role in the stories is paradoxical, like the trickster in many other tribal legends and tales (Hynes). Yellow Woman does not always obey tribal laws or social rules, and sometimes she dies tragically. However, as Allen states, "the stories do not necessarily imply that difference is punishable; on the contrary, it is often her very difference that makes her special adventures possible" (*Sacred Hoop* 227). Yellow Woman takes on an oppositional social role, often described as precarious or positioned marginally in respect to the tribe. In many stories she lives on the outskirts of the village, by a river, or in other liminal spaces (*Sacred Hoop* 227; Cox 19-20), and she often shows the community how to live by way of example and as warning.

Coupling the notion of the feminine deity, Thought Woman, and the legendary Yellow Woman, Allen invents a queer indigenous concept to avoid anachronistically using 'lesbian.' Suggesting lesbian separatist or political lesbianist ideas, this "medicine-dyke" (*Sacred Hoop* 259) is a sexual and gender categorization for women who bond "with women to further some Spirit and supernatural directive" (257), rather than what she posits as a loosely defined Western concept of 'lesbian' as simply "a woman who is emotionally and physically intimate with other women" (257). The spiritual features of this identity ordain it as closely connected with the female deity. For this reason, Allen claims, heteropatriarchal settler colonial discourses and strategies, internalized by "a number of Indian men" (259), construct the figure as dangerous, which has led to it being met with dismissal, fear, and suppression in contemporary tribal societies. As a counter to historical and ideological erasure, Allen seeks to recover the centrality of women generally, and medicine-dykes in

particular. In “Hwame, Koshkalaka, and the Rest: Lesbians in American Indian Cultures,” a chapter outlining historical and ancestral stories and legends about homosexual people, Allen lambasts the historical and anthropological erasure of Native lesbian existence. Foreshadowing Byrd’s critique above, she introduces the chapter by stating that, “The lesbian is to the American Indian what the Indian is to the American—invisible” (245). Therefore, Allen’s feminist project becomes focused on ancestral gender forms and recovering the gynocentric and matriarchal power of women: “Under the reign of patriarchy, the medicine-dyke has become anathema; her presence has been hidden under the power-destroying blanket of complete silence. We must not allow this silence to prevent us from discovering and reclaiming who we have been and who we are” (259). Critiquing native men as complicit in this heteropatriarchal settler colonial erasure, she asks her native lesbian sisters to “reject all beliefs that work against ourselves [sic],” to unapologetically embrace “womanculture” (259), and the “singular power” inherent in the medicine-dyke to “override” the patriarchy (260). The medicine-dyke is transformative, queer, and shadowy; but she is also de(con)structive. Borrowing Keres ancestral stories, Allen frames her novel using Thought Woman, creator of the world: “In the beginning was the spider. She divided the world. She made it. Thinking thus she made the world. She drew lines that crossed each other. Thus were the directions. Thus the powers [...] In the center of the universe she sang” (1). Privileging this feminine creatrix, Allen shapes the story circularly, ending it where she began, with the heroine entering the song of Spider Woman:

> *And in the silence and the quieting shadows of her room, in her bed surrounded by books and notebooks and silence and dust, she thought. And the spiders in the walls, on the ceiling, in the corners, beneath the bed and under the chair began to gather. Their humming, quiet at first, grew louder, filling all of the spaces of the room. Their presence grew around her. She did not move. And around her the room filled with shadow. And the shadows became shapes. And the shapes became women singing. Singing and dancing in the ancient steps of the women.* (the Spider. 212-13)

This narrative circularity has led many scholars to conclude that Ephanie reaches a state of female empowerment and healing—by joining her ancestors in a dance, Ephanie builds “womanculture” (see for instance Holford; Bredin; Shi; Prince-Hughes). Some of the earliest critical explorations of the novel, such as A. LaVonne Brown-Ruoff (1983) and Elizabeth I. Hanson (1989), focus on the narrative as a quintessential identity quest. Whereas Brown-Ruoff reviews the novel’s autobiographical aspects, the usage of Keres/Laguna mythology, and the mixed-blood theme, Hanson, touching upon these topics as well, adds a critique of the novel’s shortcomings and failures, especially its formal failures and what she describes as its tendency to slip “into a personal narrative of melodramatic victimization” (Hanson 69).
Later scholars, such as Renae Bredin (1994)

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and Barbara Cook (1998), continue to focus on identity, but read the novel through various feminist lenses, including "U.S. Third World Feminism" (Bredin 36), Allen's Native American essentialist ideas about identity in relation to more constructivist paradigms (Bredin), and "Indian feminism" (Cook 21). Echoing key points in the development of the field of native feminist studies, these texts explicitly couple feminism and lesbianism thematically and theoretically, and although they largely support Allen's own scholarly and feminist writings, such as *The Sacred Hoop*, they fail to take into account "the prevalence of two-spirit[2] people among Pueblo peoples, including Laguna" (Prince-Hughes 11).

Jian Shi (1995) and Tara Prince-Hughes (1998), among others, include theoretical innovations by feminist and queer indigenous thinkers, recentering the identity-quest as a specifically queer, or two-spirit, tale. For instance, In "Contemporary Two-Spirit Identity in the Fiction of Paula Gunn Allen and Beth Brant" (1998), Tara Prince-Hughes argues that, "Native American writers seek to recover an underlying sense of stability based on spiritual and cultural continuity and interconnection with the wider natural world" (9). Through the trope of the two-spirit figure, she analyses the novel as a *Bildungsroman* (i.e. novel of development), where the protagonist ultimately ends up recovering a stable Self and position in the world, central to the community. Unlike previous scholars who focused on the Western idea of lesbianism in the novel, Prince-Hughes analyzes the cultural specificity of Ephanie's two-spiritedness, arguing that especially the Pueblos accorded their alternative gender people high social positions as, for instance, medicine people. Ephanie's identity as both mixed-blood and two-spirit, according to Prince-Hughes, is fundamentally that of a healer and mediator, someone whose role in the community is to bring people together (11). However, Allen's novel as well as much of her poetry and scholarly works were written before the term 'two-spirit' became commonly used both academically and popularly, and before queer indigenous studies coalesced as a field. Furthermore, although Ephanie attempts to act as a mediator, healer, and mixed-blood go-between, the text does not seem to support this reading. Other than two references to her friend, Teresa, visiting her (169; 179), in the final section, Part IV, of the novel, Ephanie has sequestered herself and only interacts with other characters in flashbacks or in retellings of myths. Ephanie never returns to her community, nor does she offer healing *per se*. Like her grandmother, Nightshade, who "bloomed in the dark" (148), and Yellow Woman, Ephanie ends up living alone outside of the village of her family,

[2] Cherokee scholar and poet Qwo-Li Driskill calls the term *two-spirit* "a sovereign term in the invaders' language" (Stolen 62). The term originated in the late 1980s Native lesbian and gay movements—and was adopted at the annual International Two-Spirit Gathering—when Indigenous LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and others) scholars came up with the term as an umbrella term to replace the more problematic term berdache (Tatonetti 8-9), which carries with it a history of genocide and colonization. Although not an uncontested term, *two-spirit* more closely mirrors the social, economic, and spiritual roles third and fourth gender persons played in ancestral tribal communities (see also GAI; Roscoe).

mostly withdrawing from her friendships and relationships, and ultimately, opting for the community of spirit women. She embraces negation and refuses bodily reality as a literal shadow feminist.

Failing and Falling

Through Ephanie, Allen constructs a critique of settler colonial gender constructions, gendered violence, and compulsory positivity. Initially, Ephanie is a stranger to herself. She is distracted and disarranged and has "disorderly black hair" (3). Furthermore, time collapses in on her, as "Clocks evaded her" (3), and initially she is desperately "trying to find a point that would give her the time" (3). Her memories likewise interrupt time, moving her back and forth between the present and the past, intruding constantly on her ruminations. The result is a scattered, disjointed, and distressed impression of her state of mind, reflected in her thoughts about her own name: "too strange a name, deranging her from the time she first understood its strangeness" (3). Both Ephanie's body and name, mirroring each other, are split: "Her body, choppy and short, sturdy, was at odds with her name. Ephanie was for someone tall and serene. Someone filled with grace. But like her it was a spilt name, a name half of this and half of that: epiphany. Effie. An almost name. An almost event. Proper at that for her, a halfblood. A halfbreed" (3). The adult Ephanie is her own shadow, her own racialized double embodied and rejected.

The motif of doubles runs parallel to the shadow motif throughout the narrative, and Ephanie aligns herself with shadows and constantly seeks out new doubles. She remembers her childhood friend, Elena, describing as her a twin: "There were photographs of them from that time. Because Elena's gold-tinged hair looked dark in the photograph's light, no one could say which was Elena, which Ephanie. With each other they were each doubled. They were thus complete" (22). Both of them, moreover, "loved the shadows" (22), and after Elena's mother forbids their friendship, suspecting they are becoming lovers, Ephanie wonders: "Perhaps it had been the shadows that betrayed her" (23). Throughout the rest of the novel, she struggles to make sense of her relationship with the shadows, sometimes seeking out darkness for comfort and strength, sometimes fleeing it. Ephanie aches "for the cave, for the Grandmother hand, voice, to guide her. For the low sweet singing that would call her into deep, into darkness, home" (175). Ultimately, she assumes the identity of Yellow Woman (173), linking her to her grandmother, Shimanna (Nightshade), to "beloved darkness" (209), and to Thought Woman.

In addition to the shadow motif, Allen uses the symbolism of falling to describe Ephanie's awakening as shadow feminist and gradual transformation into a medicine-dyke. That is, her failure as a woman lies in her attempts at conforming to society's standards, to perform "emphasized femininity" in Raewyn W. Connell's words (*Gender and Power* 183), a failure resulting from a series of traumatic events in her early adolescence. The most significant of these events is a violent fall from an apple tree, revealed in bits at a time through

flashbacks. This fall has both Christian and indigenous connotations, possibly evoking the biblical fall from the Garden of Eden, or emphasizing Ephanie as the otherworldly, unnamed heroine of the Iroquois creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," which Allen also recounts in several forms throughout the novel. Ephanie wakes up symbolically reborn after the fall which both injures her physically and, most importantly, breaks her confidence with her own body. Trying to get up, but unable, she recalls later: "she'd broken two ribs and punctured a lung and it had collapsed. They drained the fluid that had collected there with a longlong [sic] needle and a terrifyinghuge [sic] syringe. They said soothing things to her. They said she was lucky she didn't break her neck" (202). The experience functions as a disciplinary event for her, and she heeds its warning. "She didn't say much except that she was sorry. That she shouldn't have done that. That Elena had said for her not to. That she should have listened to her, to all of them, to their warnings, to their fear, to their complaints" (202).

In the aftermath of the fall, Ephanie starts internalizing her surroundings' perceptions and fears. "'I guess I am not so tough after all,' she had said. Or thought. 'I guess I shouldn't do things like that again'" (202). And so she does not. "After she fell everything changed. How she dressed. How she walked. What she thought. Where she went. How she spoke. The old ease with her body was gone. The careless spinning of cowboy dreams" (202). The fall teaches her how to regulate and tame her body, and teaches her to perform femininity properly:

> *Instead highheels and lipstick. That she suddenly craved, intently. Instead full skirted dresses that she'd scorned only weeks before. Instead sitting demure on a chair, voice quiet, head down. Instead gazing in the mirror, mooning over lacey slips and petticoats. Curling endlessly her stubborn hair. To train it. To tame it. Her. Voice, hands, hair, trained and tamed and safe.* (203)

Thus, internalizing hegemonic, Anglo/Western attitudes towards femininity, Ephanie attempts to rebuild her mangled body, thereby alienating her from what the novel portrays as more holistic—or even queer-inclusive[3]—Guadalupe traditions. Metaphorically, Ephanie shapeshifts by playing the role of the proper girl who does not cause trouble, and she adapts stricter Catholic beliefs:

> *After she fell she had begun rising early to attend morning Mass. Had given up grandiose daydreams for Lent. Had forgotten how to spin dreams, imaginings about her life, her future self, her present delights. Had cut herself off from the sweet spring of her own being. Bless me father for I have sinned. But I won't sin anymore, she vowed.* (203)

[3] I use the phrase "queer-inclusive" despite its anachronistic implications, and the term queer here both connotes sexuality and gender. The novel constructs the Guadalupe as matriarchal, matricentric, and as gender non-binary as well as relatively open to multiple forms of sexual identities.

Importantly, Ephanie stops allowing herself to dream and imagine, like she did with Elena, that she could be anything, perceiving her childish manners as sinful. By denying herself imaginings, she denies herself survivance and engages in a form of erasure, a lack of futurity that plays into the settler colonial conception of heteropatriarchal compulsory heterosexuality (Rifkin) as well as expendable "Indians" (Wolfe). Because the settler colonial logic rests on the presumption of eventual elimination (Wolfe; Morgensen), by ignoring what Allen would call her "spirit-directed" identity as medicine-dyke, Ephanie temporarily becomes complicit in her own symbolic elimination.

Like her submission to patriarchal discourses and attempts at performing cis-hetero femininity, Ephanie's dysfunctional and abusive relationships with men function as a metaphor for colonial violence. Like Yellow Woman's seduction by the beautiful spirit, Ephanie is ensnared by the (false) promises and possibilities in relationships with men, believing that she will find a sense of belonging and worth. However, these relationships only lead to trauma and erasure of her desires and agency. Thus, throughout the novel, Ephanie vacillates between constant movement and stunned inaction, precariously at the mercy of her surroundings, especially the men in her life.

This is apparent from the beginning of the novel, when her husband has recently left her to take care of their two children alone. Her childhood friend Stephen takes it upon himself to take care of her and the two enter into a form of relationship that at first is not clearly defined as either platonic or romantic. Ephanie experiences the world in a haze as if drugged. After "the cruel marriage" (8) ends, Stephen attempts to fill a space in her life, but Ephanie does not want him. At first, before she can put her feelings into words, she experiences him as "Starlight. Candlelight. Flame. Against her shadows, sharp. Pointed he was. Keen. Slicing through the fogs that shuddered her. Through her. Through her. A flicker of light. Of fire" (8). Trying to describe him, Ephanie's words circle around images of light, contrasted with her own shadows. The language Allen uses to describe Ephanie's perception of Stephen is coded as destructive. He is "sharp" and slices through her like a knife. The section is teeming with violent imagery, and eventually Ephanie's recognition of Stephen's manipulation ends up nudging her out of her doped stupor.

Ephanie slowly becomes aware of her oppression, "Why did she incessantly long for him, his presence when he was not there? Wish with all her shadowed heavy burdened being that he be gone when he was there? And why did she not get stronger?" (9-10). Slowly realizing that she yearns for something else than Stephen's company, Ephanie attempts express her concerns. But she has become voiceless and smothered by Stephen's dominating behavior. "And low, so low, she had finally managed to say. 'Stephen. I want.' Pausing then. For a beat. One beat the length of one single word. Then finishing. 'To go away.' She did not say that one, that crucial word. 'You. I want you to go away.' Nor did he hear. What the tiny pause, that silence was intended, inarticulate, to say" (11). Stephen has taken away her will and agency, slowly, by taking advantage of her

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traumatized state after her marriage ended. "'You be still now, Ephanie" he tells her, "Now you rest. Now you let me take care of you. I'll take care of you.' Saying, 'You know you need me to. You are so weak, now. I'll take care of you, little one, sister. I will take care of you" (9). Stephen's treatment of her is a form of erasure that renders her infantilized and confused. She "did not realize it was he who told her often, every day, more, that she would surely die without him to secure her, to make her safe. She was helpless, he said" (10). Ephanie internalizes his oppressive treatment to the extent that he almost convinces her she is unreal. "That orange doesn't see you. Do you exist?" he asks (47).

When Ephanie moves to San Francisco, she meets another man, who, like Stephen, crushes her. Thomas is Nisei, or a second generation Japanese American, whose experiences with racism and disenfranchisement in American society has rendered him impotent and vengeful, and he takes this rage and impotence out on Ephanie, whose own impotent struggling against him proves futile. Although in certain ways, he is also a member of an oppressed community in the US, Thomas is a second-generation immigrant, a symbol of the permanence of settler colonialism. His various violences towards Ephanie, as well as his refusal to acknowledge himself as the oppressor, echo the process of settler eradication through real and symbolic violence (Wolfe; Veracini). "Like Stephen he refuse[s] to make her real" (82), his desire for her is superficial and formulaic, and he leaves her feeling empty, even though "his lovemaking was good," and she ponders, "when she was near him, why did she cry" (81).

Like her inability to speak her will with Stephen, Ephanie has no language or power to act against Thomas. When he invades her apartment late one night before they are married, he rapes her and thus further robs her of agency and voice. "She protested [...] She couldn't say she was having her period. Shyness, inarticulate fear rose in her at the thought" (88), but he begs her, "and with his hand he pushed his half flaccid penis into her, almost sobbing, 'Damn thing,' he cursed, moaning, 'Damn thing.'" When her new friend, Teresa, tries to convince Ephanie not to marry Thomas, Ephanie thinks, "she wondered herself why she would think of marrying him, knowing that it was because she was too tired to fight. That resisting was not her way, antagonism was not possible" (91). Through his constant "denying [of] all she knew and based her life upon" (98), Thomas wears Ephanie down and "sucked her courage and denied her its sustenance" (97). Thinking she can heal him, she is seduced into another brutal marriage to a man.

Ephanie's lack of agency is further symbolized by the death of one of the couple's twin boys, and later a near-drowning experience. Ephanie fails to fully control her life like she fails to control her body. She cannot protect her children and she cannot save herself. However, after nearly drowning, only to be saved by her potential lover, Teresa, Ephanie seems to make the conscious effort to embrace her failure to conform to cis-hetero womanhood. Thus, to undo her violent erasure, Ephanie moves towards deliberately unbecoming hegemonically gendered. She slowly discovers that

there is freedom to explore other avenues of being, which in Halberstam's terms entails how, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Thus, a purposeful undoing of identity becomes a performance of a failure that reclaims meaning and agency. Ephanie's undoing of her femininely gendered self leads her to a sense of being that predates her fall from the apple tree.

Furthermore, at the end of the novel, her union with the Spider and Spirit Women, whose community she has longed for, functions as a failure to remain in the realm of the living. Thus, like Yellow Woman, she chooses to live separately, in a liminal space, among the spirits, partaking in a spiritual "womanculture," rather than committing to any social or cultural community in the real world. Embracing this other position constitutes a form of protest against limiting binary gender systems, while simultaneously resisting oppression. Resistance and modes of undoing are key shadow feminist strategies, relying on anti-establishment and separatist ideals and in their extreme forms become violent counterattacks on heteropatriarchy. As Halberstam states, these "Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating" (4).

Similarly, Ephanie engages in a process of unbecoming and violation, degenerating into shadow(s) formed by "the spiders in the walls, on the ceiling, in the corners, beneath the bed and under the chair…" (212). Ephanie embraces the shadows that undo: "They stepped and they sang. And she began to sing with them. With her shawl wrapped around her in the way of the women since time immemorial, she wrapped her shawl and she joined the dance. She heard the singing. She entered the song" (213). Entering the song becomes a way to remove herself from a world dominated by demands she cannot and will not meet. This mirrors the beginning of the novel, the prologue in which Spider creates the world: "In the beginning was the Spider. She divided the world. She made it. Thinking thus she made the world […] There were no others then but the Spider who sang" (1). Coming full circle, the narrative emphasizes Ephanie's surrender to "a form of unbeing for which beginnings and ends have no meaning" (Halberstam 131). Although describing another novel, Halberstam's comments aptly describe Ephanie: "her refusal to be is also a refusal to perform the role of other within a system that demands her subjugation" (132). Instead of learning to tell time, Ephanie transcends it, and instead of performing a role as ciswoman, she refuses to be a woman at all.

Trauma and Narrative Failure

Trauma and narrative failures produce the novel as "the unstory of a woman who cannot be anything but the antithesis of the self that is demanded by colonialism" (Halberstam 131). As well as thematically disunited, the narrative consists of fragmented sentences and a myriad of gaps, ellipses, and silences, "moving back and forth between present, past, and mythical time" (Cook 21). In her stunned and depressed

state, Ephanie suffers from aphasia, a severe inability to understand or express language, reflected stylistically as near-gibberish:

> *She walked through the tiny quiet house. Turning on lights, turning out lights, picking things up, carrying them awhile, putting them down. Among the litter of my own things, she kept thinking. Grew angry at herself for thinking it over and over. As though it was a prayer, a ritual, a rite. Among. Pick up the robe. The litter. Walk with it. Of My. Put it down. Own things. Turn out the bedroom light. (Among.) Turn on the hall light. (The litter.) Go downstairs. (Of my.) And begin again. (Own things.). (6)*

Gradually and unevenly, Ephanie's aphasia abates, mirroring her chaotic and somewhat unsuccessful healing process, in which she attempts—and often fails—to make sense of and to herself. Thus, through this narration of her past, attempting to reorder it as if it were a corporeal entity, or "re-membering" it, Ephanie undoes her own false origin story. In "Of Time and Trauma: The Possibilities for Narrative in Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*" (2007), Deborah Madsen elegantly links notions of trauma, gender, and healing with storytelling and argues that trauma as portrayed in the novel is un-expressible. She argues, "trauma is unrepresentable in narrative terms because the destruction of the traumatized 'I' renders the linear history of trauma unrecuperable" (112). In this way, Madsen states,

> *Allen approaches the issue of Native experience from the perspective of woman-centered Keres-Pueblo cultural tradition, however, she offers a revisionary perspective on the whole contemporary discourse on trauma. […] 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. (112)*

Instead of viewing trauma as an experience with a belated reaction, which also seems traumatic, Madsen sees trauma as lying "in the impossibility of experiencing, and so remembering, an event that resists all discursive formulation" (116). As an example of narrative failure, trauma is traumatic exactly because it is unspeakable and unrepresentable in language. As Ephanie herself thinks early in the novel, "I wonder if I can speak at all. To anyone." (5). Thus, for Madsen, "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" (Madsen 117). The narrative itself fails to express trauma, but stylistically, Allen conveys this unspeakability through fractured, incoherent, disjointed language.

Although Madsen argues that there is no single originary traumatic event for Ephanie in the novel, an argument that seems to fit well with the analysis of trauma as inexpressible, there are multiple originary traumatic events in Ephanie's life. Madsen links trauma and sensation narratively and argues that instead of expression in words, Ephanie's trauma

manifests as wordless felt sensations and internal images. In this way, the single event becomes doubly repeated, first as memories or sensations, representing an event and later re-lived as new events that re-traumatize her. Thus, her first "cruel marriage" (8) leads to two other abusive relationships, and the almost-but-not-quite remembered sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of her doctor as a child, transcends generations and re-traumatizes her, as she realizes the doctor may also be abusing her children (12-13). Similarly, the rape-scene featuring Thomas has an antecedent with Stephen cast as the perpetrator:

> *She remembered something. That had no words. That had no picture. About Stephen, the light. The heat of that July day. The sun blazing, hurting her head, stupefying her brain. The numbing sun. The fire. A shadow coming down over her. A hand. A mouth. A feeling of suffocation. On her chest heavy. Knowing she would surely die. Wanted to. But that she could not remember. Could only in her body know, its humming, its buzzing, the sound of static like on their radio, that sound within her now, that sound she could not abide, would on hearing it become senseless, enraged, a buzzing angry like bees, like wasps, like hornets, in her brain just behind her eyes, near the top of her head, in her skull, in her eyes, in her throat shutting off words, in her chest, tight in her chest, a buzzing like static so that she could not breathe. (14)*

Ephanie's body remembers something she cannot, a violent, possibly sexual, assault, although the scene might also refer to the fall from the apple tree that punctured her lung. Because it is fragmented and full of gaps and silences, Madsen argues that, "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" (119). Trauma is not an experience *per se*, and as such it cannot be expressed in language, a point which the novel exemplifies in eschewing these stylistic and novelistic conventions.

Throughout the novel, the narrator remains unreliable, and the narrative has no consistent focalization or perspective. The representation of speech, thoughts, and impressions remains ambiguous. Mostly, the narrative is heterodiegetic with focalization through Ephanie. However, the narrative slips from third person narration to first person narration in ways that do not fit with neither standard free indirect discourse nor direct discourse, which makes it seem like the narrator is Ephanie herself, at times talking about herself in the third person. "She looked around her and saw dust lying. Thick on everything. Nobody was ever here. I didn't have that conversation with Stephen" (5). Slipping from the narrator describing the surroundings to focalizing through Ephanie is a common linguistic cue leading the reader to see through Ephanie's eyes, but the slippage from "Nobody was ever here"—an example of free indirect discourse—to "I didn't have that conversation…" offers no cues or punctuation to denote that this is direct speech, although stylistically it seems to be just that. This type of confused narrator voice occurs mostly in

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the beginning of the novel, when Ephanie is alone, as in this example, where the narration abruptly switches from "her" to "I":

> *She knew one thing. She was alone. There was no one in the house with her, to see the last sun go, to see the darkness crawl into the room, the see the fire brighten in front of her eyes. There is something else I know. It is dark. But is it night? Dark comes early now. I wonder if it is really night. I wonder how long I have to wait until I can expect someone to come (6).*

Crucially, except for these slippages, the novel consistently uses quotation marks to denote direct speech, which indicates that this is different. Even when she speaks to herself, the text notes this: "And he left her there to ponder the pain of him, of her. 'I don't want to live,' she whispered" (88). This narrative failure not only adds to the sense that Ephanie is a woman on the verge of a breakdown, a woman whose self is so fractured she needs to represent herself from two perspectives, but also adds a sense of refusal of identity as singular and fixed. Madsen also comments on this narrative inconsistency, remarking that "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. [...] 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" (117). This fragmentation, Madsen further notes, alienates Ephanie from herself and the "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" (119).

However, towards the end of the novel when Ephanie starts to realize "the lie she had learned, had lived" and to remember how she "forgot who she had meant to be, what she had meant to do" (204), this slippage recurs as she comes to understand how she had misunderstood earlier events in her life. In this fashion, the novel stylistically underscores Ephanie's Halberstamian unravelling:

> *But I had already left myself before Elena abandoned me, she thought now. Because I thought I should have been smarter than to listen to Stephen's dare. Because I was hurt. Because I was in the hospital for a few days, alone and scared and feeling so guilty. So guilty I never trusted my own judgment, my own vision again. 'Yes, my dear,' she said out loud to herself, 'you took quite a fall.' (205).*

Thus, at the end of the novel, the return to muddled narrative voices signals Ephanie's decision to opt out of a system "built around a dialectic between colonizer and colonized" (Halberstam 131), instead refusing individuality and embracing plurality and a form of kinship that transcends human relationality.

In response to some critics' claim that the novel is "seemingly unedited" (Hanson 68) and fragmented unintentionally, Vanessa Holford points out, employing Helene Cixious' concept of *ecriture feminine*, that

these narrative slippages and unconventional narrative features are purposefully constructed (100). The effect is a fragmentary and unusual text, a feature that might be construed as failure-as-resistance. Utilized as a critique of phallogocentrism, this textual unevenness is an example of what theorist James C. Scott has labeled "weapons of the weak" (qtd in Halberstam 88). These are oppositional strategies that may appear to be failures—for instance, Halberstam discusses the notions of inaction, passivity, and non-reproduction—that offer a form of emancipation. Moreover, resistance can take "the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing" (11-12, *italics in original*). Therefore, to "*Resist mastery,*" embracing the failure or inability to accomplish something, is to defy the rules entirely (11, *italics in original*). Narratively speaking, Allen's novel, in eschewing order and recognizable structure and progression, challenges fixed logics of identity construction and the capitalist logics of success and mastery. Allen flouts the rules of narrative progression, especially in connection with healing, which in western psychological terms is presented as requiring a linear progression through stages of grief and self-discovery (Madsen).

Furthermore, in addressing the ways in which failure in colonial situations can be mobilized as strategy of resistance, Halberstam argues that,

> *There are several responses possible to colonial knowledge formations: a violent response, on the order of Frantz Fanon's claim that violent impositions of colonial rule must be met with violent resistance; a homeopathic response, within which the knower learns the dominant system better than its advocates and undermines it from within; or a negative response, in which the subject refuses the knowledge offered and refuses to be a knowing subject in the form mandated by Enlightenment philosophies of self and other.* (Halberstam 14)

Thus, the negative response corresponds to a wholesale refusal to acquiesce to Western modes of identity construction and narrative progression, and this is what *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* does. By rejecting, firstly, the dominant society's ideals of true cis-hetero-womanhood, and, secondly, normative existence in the dominant society at all, both Ephanie and the novel embrace queer failure.

Conclusion

There is always a risk in reading past literatures from a different historical perspective, however, Allen's complicated and open-ended narrative lends itself to, or rather invites, renewed interest and potentially pleasurable misreadings. Reading *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* with Allen's own ideas about gender and patriarchy—but also alongside those who have sought to highlight a two-spirit aesthetic—does not preclude reading with

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Halberstam as well. Allen's own conceptions of gender and feminism were sometimes adversarial, often combative and provocative—and importantly, not wholly utopian or even happy. Folding in Halberstamian negativity and shadow feminism expands on and enriches previous readings, rather than disproves them in a kind of positivistic fashion. One may read Ephanie as two-spirit or a medicine-dyke, or both, but neither of these readings necessitate happy endings or neatly resolved happy endpoints of empowerment. Ephanie can be simultaneously a medicine-dyke, two-spirit, and a shadow feminist who embraces separatism, negativity, and antinormativity; these are not mutually exclusive.

Most scholars analyzing Ephanie's queerness conclude that she ultimately finds a place central to community, in accordance with the social role traditionally attributed to two-spirit people in many indigenous communities. However, the ending of the novel never truly fulfills this promise of centrality and inclusion; instead, its ambiguity points toward Ephanie embracing the position of the medicine-dyke as failure, as marginal and subversive. In this way, the novel suggests that women, especially queer and lesbian ones, must deconstruct notions of belonging, centrality, femininity, and motherhood. Unlike the figuration and social position of two-spirits, the novel situates the medicine-dyke as permanently peripheral to mainstream society, and although Allen herself argued for the centrality of Native lesbians and queer people *to native societies*, her own novel deconstructs this female centrality—at least within a settler social context. The medicine-dyke's indigenous centrality does not translate to centrality in settler society, and only through subversion and separatism can she achieve survivance.

Through a series of (attempts at) acts of self-love, bodily sovereignty, and self-harm, Ephanie struggles to gain agency and empowerment, ultimately finding power and freedom in embracing herself as a failed *cis-woman*, and in the process, she redefines the role and significance of Yellow Woman. Failing to acquiesce to settler colonial norms of proper feminine behavior therefore becomes a way for Allen to "explicitly challenge colonialism and heteropatriarchy as intertwined *and* interdependent systems of oppression" (Burford 176).

The Woman Who Owned the Shadows is a novel about trauma and learning to bloom in darkness. Ephanie Atencio, the main character, whose mixed-blood status alienates her from mainstream society, struggles to overcome silencing, violence, and the oppressive pressure of the discourse of success. And in a Halberstamian way she does. Ephanie fails spectacularly at being a ciswoman, a mother, and a productive member of society. However, as Halberstam would argue, there is resistance in queer failure. Refusing her role as mother and wife in a masculinist universe in favor of a (possibly imagined) female-centered spirit community, embodying the mythical Yellow Woman-turned-medicine-dyke, Ephanie rejects the disciplinary gender norms and abandons cis-hetero femininity by immersing herself in shadowy fashion in the spiritual culture of the women who sing the world into being.

Finally, the novel's episodic and chaotic

narrative style can be seen as a deliberate rejection of mastery. Through a fragmented narrative that never truly resolves, the novel breaks with conventions of novelistic writing, structure, and thematic resolution. Lacking stability and familiar structure, the narrative challenges stabile identity formation and the logic of success. In short, it is a subversive, queer failure to adhere to literary conventions, narratively emphasizing Ephanie's emergence as a shadow-feminist medicine-dyke.

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