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From Historical Unresolved Grief to Healing
through Storytelling: An Analysis of Paula Gunn
Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses the novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), by Laguna Pueblo writer Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008), centered on the breakdown and healing of its protagonist, Ephanie Atencio. At the beginning of the text, Ephanie is totally fragmented, and this is explained as the result of both gender and racial discrimination. However, as articulated in the novel, she goes through a process of transformation where female companionship and Native traditional stories are essential for her healing. A necessary approach to this text will take into consideration gender issues from a Native tribal-centred perspective that expands Indigenous women's visibility. On the other hand, I have found the complementarity between Sandra Bloom's conceptualization of traumatic dissociation and the concept of Native historical unresolved grief particularly useful, for both perfectly describe Ephanie's situation as well as the solution to her problem. Drawing from these ideas, I postulate that Paula Gunn Allen counters the effects of colonization—which included dominating and erasing Native American stories—by making these narratives key to survival and the coming to terms with one's indigenous identity, a necessary step towards healing. In this sense, this fictional work by Allen builds a bridge between trauma and feminist studies but also confirms the urgent necessity of reading critical studies of Native American literature through the lens of the specific Native context in order for these theoretical frames to be applicable.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), una novela de Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008), de ascendencia Laguna Pueblo, que narra los desajustes emocionales y la consiguiente curación de su protagonista, Ephanie Atencio. Al principio, Ephanie está totalmente fragmentada debido a la discriminación tanto racial como sexual que sufre. No obstante, tal y como se articula en la novela, Ephanie experimenta un proceso de transformación, en el cual la compañía femenina y las historias de la tradición indígena son esenciales para su curación. Un enfoque adecuado a este texto tendrá en cuenta las cuestiones de género desde una perspectiva centrada en las tribus nativas que expanda la visibilidad de las mujeres nativas. Por otro lado, la complementariedad entre el concepto traumático de disociación propuesto por Sandra Bloom y el concepto de dolor histórico no resuelto también son fundamentales, ya que ambos arrojan luz sobre la evolución de Ephanie y la solución a su problema. Por ello, a partir de estas teorías postulo que Paula Gunn Allen contrarresta los efectos de la colonización—incluyendo la dominación y eliminación de las historias nativas americanas—reivindicando estas narrativas como la clave para sobrevivir y recuperar la identidad Nativa, un paso necesario para la curación del trauma. Así pues, esta obra ficcional de Allen construye un puente entre los estudios de trauma y los estudios feministas, si bien también confirma la necesidad de una lectura de los estudios críticos de la literatura Americana Nativa que tenga en cuenta su contexto nativo con el fin de que estos marcos teóricos resulten efectivos.

Introduction:
Paula Gunn Allen and *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*

In her 1983 novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Laguna Pueblo poet, essayist and fiction writer Paula Gunn Allen presents the story of Ephanie Atencio, a Native American woman. This text can best be approached from the perspective of both western trauma and feminist theories, while simultaneously reinforcing the relevance of Native American studies to critical studies and the necessity to adapt all these theories to the specific Native American context. On the one hand, Allen exemplifies the concept of historical unresolved grief through the postcolonial traumatic experiences of this Native American woman and, on the other, she questions the ethnocentrism prevalent in white feminism through Ephanie's alternative version of official Native American history, thus acknowledging contextual differences and specificity.

Consequently, Allen's work may be placed within Indigenous feminist movements, which emerged as a part of the third wave of feminism in the 1990s and continue in the present. These movements envision a liberation, for the world in general, from heteronormative and patriarchal nation-states and try to show the diversity of perspectives about the relevance and implications of feminism. Such diversity reflects how Indigenous women understand their responsibility and relationships to the disidentification with feminism (Barker 3). In other words, western forms of feminism are perceived as unethical and ineffective in the way they appropriate historical struggles of Indigenous women for self-determination. It can be then said that Indigenous feminism seeks to incorporate specifically Indigenous perspectives into the mainstream feminist framework as lack of diversity neglects other female identities.

The definitive text to understand Indigenous feminism is *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Studies Traditions* (1986) by Allen. It is

considered the first American Indian feminist study that analyses Indigenous notions of gender and sexuality, especially through the crucial role of Spider Woman and Sky Woman in Indigenous creation stories. In many Native American cultures, Native women had the power to transfer their stories to the next generations as a way to perpetuate women's history. In this sense, the oral tradition is the means of survival for Native women and men, whose identity is the result of their unity and also the unity of their weaving webs of life with stories. These stories are accompanied by symbols which in Native American culture are not considered as different from reality. As David Bidney states, "mythical thinking uses symbolic representations but without differentiating the symbols from their objects" (379). In this way, all Names are considered to have a story behind them and as a consequence, language is believed to be able to create reality. Accordingly, the language of Native American women's stories is used differently in order to produce specific "realities" that represent these women.

Subscribing to David Bidney's words, *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* recovers a woman-centered narrative tradition in an attempt to override the patriarchal discourse through the transgression of psychic and cultural limits. Two complementary images developed by Allen are crucial to open the door into what lies beyond those suffocating limits: the shadows and the Spider. The shadows are the adverse space the protagonist Ephanie Atencio lives in, for she has been sunk in deepest darkness by the patriarchal colonizer, and the Spider is the original female creator of Laguna Pueblo tradition. Paradoxically, the power of the Spider seemingly contradicts Ephanie as she is unable to arrive at "a convincing reinterpretation of the ever going (re)creation and of her own place for it" (Schoeler 144), yet the resulting tension of these two stories serves to hold the novel together (Cook 22).

At the beginning of the text, Ephanie is relegated to a secondary position for being a Native American and a woman, which results in the loss of her identity. She feels that her traditions were stolen from her and instead of Guadalupe she speaks “a stranger’s tongue” (Allen, *Woman* 70). Further, Ephanie is alienated from the western world and the Christian education she receives, which makes her think her body is sinful. Her ability to connect with women is then neglected as Christian ideology punishes “natural curiosity and love of exploration and discovery” (Allen, *Sacred Hoop* 57-58). However, she cannot find companionship from men either, as they see her as essentially inferior by placing her in an empty space to be ascribed whatever meanings these men choose. For these reasons, Ephanie’s relationships are either failed or damaging, which results in her social marginalisation. In her attempt to find an effective means of adaptation, Ephanie eventually enters a traumatic spiral of fear.

This fear traps Ephanie in a process of displacement due to her ethnic and gender identity, which prevents her from sharing her suffering in the western society she is living in. In fact, this society disenfranchises the legitimacy of her grief since, as a Native American, she is considered a savage and therefore incapable of having feelings, so no right to grieve is believed to be needed (Yellow and LeBruyn 56). Within the clashing demands of these two different cultures, Ephanie finds her healing in Spider’s storytelling that disrupts the flow of dominance in both space and time (Madsen 67) and propels her to connect with her ancient feminine roots. Thus, the deconstruction of the very opposition between past and present assumed by western theories of trauma—like that of Freud’s theory of acting out and Caruth’s theory of trauma’s “belated temporality” (136) that presume a linear relationship between past and present—allows Ephanie to fulfil her own individual creative potential and transform her story into

history. In this way, Allen transforms the traditional trauma theory and approaches it to the Native American context in order to present Ephanie's healing journey.

Chapter 1: Coming to Terms with Dissociation and Historical Unresolved Grief

In this first chapter, I examine the origin of Ephanie's trauma and its different phases that begin with her fragmentation and end up with her healing through the restoration of her ability to cope with the past and make sense of it in the light of the present. For this analysis, I apply Sandra Bloom's conception of dissociation as offered in her 2010 article "Bridging the Black Hole of Trauma: The Evolutionary Significance of the Arts," and the Native American historical unresolved grief phenomenon conceptualized by Maria Yellow and Lemyra M. DeBruyn.

Native Americans experienced massive losses of lives, land and culture from European contact and colonization (Yellow and DeBruyn 56), so it is reasonable to state that the Native American history is a traumatic one, which has required that the Native Americans develop adaptive coping skills. In her article on trauma, Bloom deeply examines the consequences of applying such adaptation skills and their effects on the human brain. In the same way that she confirms the importance of these skills, since everybody needs to try to feel accepted in society, she also admits that these adaptation skills are not always successful, which keeps the individual trapped in a dissociated reality that blends elements and vital relations from different scenarios (202).

In line with Bloom's ideas, Ephanie, as a Native American, is forced to develop coping methods to survive in Western society, which in return discriminates her and hinders her adaptation by perpetuating Western societal patterns and thus, deauthorizing traditional Native healing ceremonies. Consequently, Ephanie's attempt at adaptation results in a traumatic experience that diminishes her social capacity of integration. In Bloom's terms, the only solution to maintain Ephanie separate from conflicting epistemologies, associated with her western and her Native identities—given by her

mixed-blood ethnicity—is dissociation which, indeed, can be said to have survival value (Bloom 200). Dissociation, then, allows Ephanie to enter different states of consciousness with contradictory information that blocks her mental functions:

“Yes, I get confused. Sometimes I forget which language I’m supposed to be talking in. Or even listening in. Sometimes I forget the right way to walk. Or how to sit. Or how to eat. Or where to look with my eyes. So many things are different between the way my parents do things and the way Americans do. Sometimes I just want to cry I get so mad because I can’t remember who’s who.” She shrugged. “But I get over it. In a way it’s exciting, interesting. Because who in this country really knows how to be an American?” (Allen, *Woman* 93)

In dissociation, Ephanie finds a way to perceive her environment, to process information and to store memories selectively. As a result of this, she is able to deceive herself, which allows her to create a personal reality “determined by how much it lines up and is consistent with how her culture defines reality” (Bloom 202). The problem is that the western and the Native American cultures, which are supposed to define Ephanie’s reality due to her mixed-blood nature, are conceived as opposed and therefore, preclude her from adapting.

This feeling of not belonging is directly related to the idea of disenfranchised grief, which is defined as “grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publically mourned” (Doka 15). The traditional Native American culture could admit Ephanie’s reality and therefore facilitate the mourning process as Native American grief ceremonies would bring the recovery of her identity. However, the dominant Western context does not recognise the healing value of these ceremonies, firstly because the basis of American identity is intrinsically related to individualism, so they cannot understand Native American’s preservation of identity through the community, which, besides, is defined as “a place for feminity” (Allen, *Off the Reservation* 32), something unacceptable in the western patriarchal society. Secondly,

American identity is usually associated with rationalism so Native ceremonies are not considered to promote a healthy spirituality able to regain personal identity. Thus, the only culture that could heal Ephanie's fragmentation, that is, the Native American culture, is denied by the Western dominant culture, which does not accept Ephanie, and this limits the resolution of her grief.

In this situation, Ephanie has no other option but separate—or dissociate—herself from emotions entirely. Because she “[is] too tired to fight” (Allen, *Woman* 91), she accepts complete dissociation as the only means to survive, while she admits that “resisting [is] not her way, antagonism [is] not possible” (91). Bloom explains that in such a state of total dissociation, memory functions shift, so that verbal memory is shut down entirely while an alternative visual and sensory-physical memory function is utilized (204). Applying the words of Elaine Scarry, who tackles the fact of pain's inexpressibility, Ephanie enters into “the prelanguage of cries and groans” (4) that makes her unable to share her experience with others:

She knew that everything moved and everything balanced, always, in her language, her alien crippled tongue, the English that was ever unbalanced, ever in pieces, she groped with her words and her thought to make whole what she could not say. She was obsessed by language, by words. She used the words she had lavishly, oblivious to their given meanings. She did not give them what was theirs, but took from them what was hers. Ever she moved her tongue, searching for a way to mean in words what she meant in thought. (Allen, *Woman* 70)

Bloom provides us with a scientific explanation of this loss of language that problematizes Ephanie's possibility of narrative. She argues that during a traumatic experience, the so-called dominant hemisphere of the brain, which controls language and allows us to order reality, is inhibited, while the nondominant one, which controls sensory-perceptual experience, is stimulated (204). In this way, Bloom's explanation helps us to understand how Ephanie's traumatic impossibility to adapt does not become unspeakable but instead is articulated by the language of the nonverbal (205),

characterised by nonlinear association, timelessness perception and lack of cause-and-effect logic:

But she wasn't deranged just now. Only distracted. It seemed so late, so early, so indeterminate when she got up. But there are people coming today, or did they come and now they are gone. Why they went so early. She began to dig, habitually. Trying to find a point that would give her the time. Clocks evaded her. When she looked at one she forgot to register what it said. Resistance. Digging, brown hand clasped, she went carefully over what had happened that day. When the people had come. What they had done. What said, how gone. She knew that much of what had gone before was missing. (Allen, *Woman* 3-4)

In the light of Bloom's deductive reasoning, it can be suggested that Ephanie's two hemispheres experience two different realities, one at the level of conscious awareness, where the part of her trauma did not occur, and another one at another level of reality, in which these traumatic fragments are still remembered (Bloom 206). That is, Ephanie's brain experiences a kind of 'split-brain' phenomenon as a result of her traumatic maladjustment. However, the 'cognitive imperative,' the forces of adult development, obligate Ephanie to bring order to disrupted and incomplete cognitive-emotional schemas (206) through the integration of both hemispheres. In this way, the nondominant hemisphere attempts to communicate with its other side, which in turn blocks these interferences since they are perceived as strange, chaotic and dark—what Carl Jung called 'the Shadow.' This perfectly explains Ephanie's conflict with the shadows and the light, which have to be reconnected in order to integrate her traumatic memories:

Perhaps it had been the shadows that betrayed her. The certain angle of light that somehow disoriented her. Perhaps so accustomed to being safe, she did not know the danger, any danger that might tear the web of their being. Shredding. Shattering. Splintering. Or maybe it was the sun. The bright, the pitiless, the unwavering sun. But whatever had disturbed her knowing, her keeping in time with the turns and twists of their sharing, their lives, in that splitting second everyone had abandoned Ephanie. Everything had gone away. (Allen, *Woman* 23)

The cognitive imperative demands a resolution of the conflict and a restabilization of the sense of personal reality (Bloom 207). However, this integration, must also be understood in the light of memory and narrative in social theory or what is the same, in the light of communication with the individual's social group. In Bloom's words, this occurs because human beings are a social species (208) and as such we were designed "to resonate with the emotions of others" (Nathanson 59). Bloom adds that emotional contagion is so powerful that we can begin to alter our identity, and therefore our reality, in fundamental ways without even knowing we are doing so (209). In the case of Ephanie, this emotional contagion comes from the community of women who not only accept her but also make her recuperate her storytelling skills, through which she learns to put into words her trauma, thus proving that "affect is the engine that drives us" (Nathanson 59).

To sum up, trauma produces dissociation and leaves Ephanie vulnerable and trapped in "a cycle of continuing deterioration" (Bloom 210). Ephanie then has to deal with the impossibility of her social adaptation, which makes her encounter her own 'black hole' that absorbs her wholeness. This character cannot manage this situation individually so it is women community's mimetic response that promotes her healing and identity recovery, which confirms that "the healing mechanism resides within the confines of social evolution" (Bloom 210). In this way, only when Ephanie understands the interrelationship with her past and how it shapes her present world can she start her healing process, which rests on the integration of American storytelling that supports identity formation through survival of the community.

Chapter 2: Repressed Memories Coming to the Surface

In this chapter I will analyse three traumatic experiences repressed by Ephanie's memory that eventually come to the surface. In the light of Native tribal oral tradition, these memories emerge into consciousness so that Ephanie discovers the reasons for her fragmentation, which lets her relieve racial and sexual tensions.

One of Ephanie's traumatic experiences is a violation committed by Stephen, a lifelong friend whom she calls "brother" and who is apparently supporting her after the breakup with her husband. If a rape is disturbing by itself, so that victims usually repress this kind of episode, the fact that it is perpetrated by a close person one considers a brother brings to the fore the concept of incest and makes this experience even more distressing. In fact, this terrible act not only becomes repressed but also unspeakable. According to American psychologist Elizabeth F. Loftus, and in line with trauma theory, when something shocking happens, the mind pushes it into some inaccessible corner of the unconscious, only to haunt the victim repeatedly and inevitably in the form of nightmares or flashbacks, which precludes the victim to give shape and temporal order to those events (1). Precisely, the rape scene is only mentioned through Ephanie's hallucinatory experiences that bring her to the encounter with that overwhelming event that has not been assimilated:

She remembered something. That had no words. That had no pictures. 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 that 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 would not breathe. (Allen, *Woman* 14)

After the rape, Ephanie and Stephen start a silent war in which Stephen gains power in Ephanie's life and Ephanie loses hers. Thus, Stephen may be read as a masculine representative of oppressive patriarchal society who restrains Ephanie's vision of herself. Through this encounter, Allen attacks white feminism and its belief that as Indigenous women have always been valued within their own culture there is no need to be a feminist. On the contrary, Allen clamours for the necessity to be a feminist within Indigenous communities, which also suffer gender violence and discrimination that reinforces relations of power between men and women as articulated within the social formation of US imperialism (Barker 17).

Accordingly, Ephanie becomes the Other, which allows Stephen to construct a positive self-identity as masculine. By seeing Ephanie as not-man, Stephen can read into his understanding of femininity whatever qualities are needed to contrast his positive sense of identity, transforming Ephanie into the imaginary location of his dreams, idealizations and fears. Thus, although Ephanie tries to overcome her husband's abandonment, Stephen prevents her from doing that, victimising and making her believe she needs him: "'You are,' he said. 'You are new Ephanie. I have remade you.' He smiled, calm and certain. She saw how her hands shook" (Allen, *Woman* 17).

It is not men that Ephanie really needs but female companionship which, as she will gradually realise, makes her feel complete and whole. However, she cannot find female company due to another traumatic experience, even more deeply repressed, that takes us back to her childhood. Ephanie discovers completeness with her childhood Chicana friend Elena while "running in frantic circles, around her grandmother's house" (Allen, *Woman* 6), which is near the apple tree that becomes the symbol where both girls spend time together:

It had been the apple tree. The long spring days there. With the girl. They had watched the village going. They had watched the clouds. When they thirsted

they climbed down from the branches and walked to the nearby spring. Took a long sweet drink. (21)

As these spring days are blossoming, Elena and Ephanie's love also begins to blossom. Innocently, they play, "pretending to be ranchers, chasing the village cattle around the town, they suffered scolding for it" (21). Their childhood exploring relationship represents a break with conventional roles because it is usually boys and not girls who are expected to play like they do, and the community constantly reminds Ephanie that "a twelve year old girl shouldn't be acting that way" (197). Despite the fact that their games go against the gender roles of their Christianized community, the more the girls grow, the more their relationship is strengthened. Ephanie finds companionship and feels complete with Elena, who allows her to have a twofold vision of herself:

In their seasons they grew. Walking the road between their houses, lying languorous and innocent in the blooming boughs of the apple tree. Amid the fruiting limbs. And had known themselves and their surroundings in terms of each other's eyes. Though their lives were very different, their identity was such that the differences were never strange. They had secret names for each other, half-joking, half descriptive, Snow White and Rose Red... In recognition also of the closeness they shared, those friends. In spite of distance, in spite of difference, in spite of change, they understood the exact measure of their relationship, the twining, the twinning. [...] With each other they were each one doubled. They were thus complete. (22)

However, one day Elena tells Ephanie that they cannot see each other again because the nun says "that evil made Ephanie and Elena play dirty things. That the sister had said they must stop playing with each other like that. They should be ashamed. They should be afraid" (Allen, *Woman* 13). The nun also states that to redeem their sin "they would have to go to confession about it if they kept on playing like that, between each other's legs when they were one or two years and could sin" (13). As a consequence of this pressure, it is in Picacho Mountain that Elena breaks her relationship with Ephanie, who reacts putting her hand on Elena's arm, looking "over the side of the peak" and thinking about flying: "Dropping off. She thought of going to

sleep” (29). Ephanie only thinks of escaping by flying, which we can connect to Cixous’s statement that “Flying is woman’s gesture.” As the French critic says, “What woman hasn’t flown/stolen? Who hasn’t felt, dreamt, performed the gesture that jams sociality? [...] Who hasn’t inscribed with her body the differential, punctured the system of couples and oppositions” (252). This character’s desire to fly echoes Cixous’s escape from constrictions and constructs an image that signifies a transcendence of opposites through dislocation. These two girls’ relationship has become a threat to heteropatriarchal society in such a way that Elena is taught to believe that what they are doing, which makes her whole and happy, is sinful and unacceptable, a good enough reason to put an end to it.

This metaphorical fall mirrors the traumatic falls of the women who jumped from Picacho because of an impossible love, just like that of Ephanie and Elena. Chicano people tell the legend about Picacho and a pregnant woman who climbed to the top and jumped after her lover’s death at war, and Guadalupe’s people tell that a woman fell in love with a stranger but she was not allowed to marry him so “she climbed to the peak of the mountain and jumped to death” (Allen, *Woman* 27). The landscape of Picacho is, then, feminised in such a way that it symbolizes the fate of forbidden lovers: women. So now, Ephanie and Elena have their own story set on Picacho, where they separate forever.

These two traumatic experiences are decisive to Ephanie’s future and will remain buried for years. However, the fall from the apple tree, the most crucial and deeply buried event, takes place before Ephanie and Elena’s paths divide. The story is like this: Ephanie and her friend Elena were searching for a snake to bother Stephen, who does not like this animal at all. Stephen calls both girls to go to the apple tree and challenges them to jump. Ephanie, unlike Elena, accepts the challenge but accidentally

falls as the bough on which she is standing breaks, and she ends up with a broken rib. This fall does not only imply physical pain but also psychological suffering, since accepting the challenge of Stephen, who encapsulates the westernized patriarchal society, and not listening to her Chicana friend's advice not to jump, makes Ephanie reconsider the values she held up to this moment. As a result of her fall, Ephanie loses a part of her self which is connected to her Native identity and she will from this moment onwards cling to her western one. Needless to say, this will only become a source of acute suffering for Ephanie which determines her pain as an adult. Coming to terms with this change in her life is something that she will need to do in order to heal. Because she blames her carefree, independent self for her fall, from this moment Ephanie becomes a westernized American teenager, who adopts the Christian doctrine of behaviour that feminises her according to the western hierarchical worldview that Allen describes thus in *The Sacred Hoop*:

God commands first; within the limits of those commands, man rules; woman is subject to man, as are all the creatures, for God has brought them to Adam for him to name (Gen. 2:18-24, 3:16). In this scheme, the one who is higher has the power to impose penalties or even to deny life to those who are lower. (58)

Western society is based on a patriarchal kind of domination which assumes that “men and women behave, think, and aspire differently because they have been taught to think of masculinity and femininity in ways which condition difference” (Sultana 10). In other words, the belief that women's and men's differences are a result of biology was translated into different patterns of thought and behaviour specific to each gender that transform essentialist ideas into rules of conduct for the woman as wife, mother and daughter and restrict women's participation in society. Instead, many Native societies are matriarchal so in the tribal tradition, women's role is often very different from that in western societies. Women's bodies are thought to be connected to the land, the reason why they are seen as responsible for the continuance of the community that

brings the family and the tribe together through tales, legends, and myths (Özcan 12). Accordingly, the fall means Ephanie's internalization of the institutionalised western system of male domination, which implies the loss of her alternative gender identity that subordinates her to a secondary position so that she is not allowed to create her own life since her Native identity is definitely taken:

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. She no longer cavorted along the roads, over the mesas, among the branches of the sheltering trees. No flying leaps from rooftops to horse's back. No wild handsprings, or flipping head over heels from one spot to the next, diving headfirst into space, through the air to land and on her feet, running shouting, free. (Allen, *Woman* 203)

Converted into a westernized woman, Ephanie meets Thomas Yosuri, called Judah, a Japanese-American. Thomas does not show any affection for Ephanie, but she accepts this lack, perhaps thinking that she deserves it. Submitted to male subjugation, Ephanie continues with the relationship, gets pregnant and gives birth to twins. However, when one of the twins dies Thomas abandons her, leaving her "tormented into isolation" (Allen, *Woman* 108) and she attempts to commit suicide:

Ephanie knew she could react to Thomas by hating men. He was like the other, she supposed. She could hate men, turn to her work, her friends, her children. Bury herself that way. Cut herself off from her rage that way. Like before she had cut herself off through Stephen. She could learn another way, the one the other women, secure in their politics and parties did. But rage took hope: a sense of meaning beyond herself, and she was bereft of meaning, of hope. (92)

It is not until later on in her life that Ephanie understands the significance of all these traumatic experiences. On the one hand, Ephanie understands Elena and the futility of their love within their patriarchal and religious communities: "[Ephanie] understood, wordlessly, exactly what Elena was saying. That they were becoming lovers. That they were in love. That their loving had to stop. To end" (Allen, *Woman* 30). In retrospect, Ephanie realizes that she was not prepared to face the ending of any

of her relationships, and she admits “that she was falling. Had fallen. Would not recover from the fall, smashing, the rocks. That they were in her, not on the ground” (30). On the other hand, it is the important reinterpretation of the meaning of the fall from the apple tree that drives Ephanie to make sense of her life. She admits that “[she] should have been smarter than listen to Stephen’s dare” (205), thus reflecting as an adult in the process of self-affirmation and healing. As she “had misunderstood thoroughly the significance of the event” (204), only when she re-evaluates the nature on her fall does she understand that she was “trapped in a dissociated reality, feeling like a tinker-toy. Falling to pieces on the floor” (5). For a long time, Ephanie was not ready to confront these memories and her survivor instinct made her deny important aspects of reality that were too disorganizing for her. Eventually, Ephanie—we might even consider calling her “Epiphanie”—lets the Shadows enter into her so she can acknowledge this key memory that will give way to a proper understanding of the loss of her Native identity.

Chapter 3: Healing through Native American Storytelling

This chapter explores how the recovery of female friendship and the Native American storytelling tradition allows Ephanie to gain control over the traces left by trauma. In this way, her uncontrollable traumatic memories become meaningful as her identification with the women of the traditional Native American stories makes her become aware of her role of creator, healer and helper.

Allen examines the relationship between culture and health through Ephanie, who moves from a state of mental disease towards wellness through reconnection with her cultural traditions. As mentioned in chapter two, the Native tradition is built on the creative power of women and, because Ephanie has lost her ability to create and make sense of her life, only the communication with her tribal community of women will heal her. Thus, in the pattern of medicine women, Allen takes us on a journey that demonstrates that female companionship, within the context of Laguna Pueblo tradition, is a cultural imperative to find “significant female deities and female rituals that are necessary to the on-going life of the tribe” (Allen, “Interview” 101).

Ephanie’s healing begins in San Francisco, where she meets Teresa, the woman who helps her to enter the Native American ceremonial time and space. Through Teresa, Ephanie manages to bring order to her disruptive emotional schema as she gets to communicate with the Spider, who enables Ephanie to remember her grandmother and the stories told by a community of creator women of which she is part. In order to realize that she is also a member of this community and that she has the opportunity to re-create her life, her subconscious has to enact with her grandmother and the Spider, who assigns Ephanie the job of weaving the strands of her pain into creation:

There’s someone coming toward me. The light is very bright, so I can’t make out who it is. Now he’s right next to me, and he’s saying something. I can’t

understand what he's saying, but I feel very happy... oh. He's saying that he's glad to see me. I wonder who he is. He seems really familiar. Now I'm looking at a woman. It's Grandma Campbell. Oh, boy. Now... she's holding me. (Allen, *Woman* 79)

Ephanie's fragmentation and her inability to pass on knowledge of her culture and ways of healing reflect the devastation of indigenous communities and lives. Thus, the revitalization of Native American history begins the moment Ephanie understands the meaning of the stories of the Spider, centered on Yellow Woman and Sky Falling Woman.

The traditional story of Yellow Woman narrates how this woman suffers from the domination of Evil Kachina, a masculine authority that oppresses her. Ephanie is dominated by both Stephen and Thomas who abuse her and refuse "to make her real" (Allen, *Woman* 82), just like Yellow Woman is forced to stay at home and accept "women's rules of conduct":

One day Yellow Woman goes out of the town to fetch water from the river. At the river bank she sees and picks up a kicking stick. Evil Kachina comes up to her to ask about the kicking stick, which he uses as a trick to kidnap the woman. He carries Yellow Woman to his house and forces her to grind corn and make wafers for him while he goes out hunting. Meanwhile Yellow Woman's husband comes home to find that his wife is gone. He searches around and comes up to old Spider Woman, who is also called Spider Grandmother. With Spider Grandmother as a guide, he finds his wife Yellow woman at Evil Kachina's house. They escape from there before Evil Kachina comes home from hunting. (Shi 164)

Yellow Woman's flight becomes a proleptic warning of Ephanie's possibility to escape from patriarchal dominance after the reinterpretation of this story through the Spider. In both women's stories, male characters are identified with the Sun, which is seen as the destroyer of the snow. Indeed, Stephen compares Ephanie to snow and wants "to make love to the snow" (Allen, *Woman* 43). Spider, however, makes Ephanie aware of her power telling her that "snow moves around so much when it's falling. And it melts

when it gets warm” (43) thus, inspiring her to fall, just like snow does, in order to start over.

This necessity to fall is also connected with the mythical story of Sky Falling Woman, who was going down until water birds put her on the turtle grandmother’s back that became Turtle Island. There, Sky Falling Woman got pregnant making this myth a creation one: “She gave birth to a daughter there on Turtle’s back, far away from the lodge of her mother and far, far away from the devastated tree of light. It was a death tree, or so Ephanie always believed” (Allen, *Woman* 39). Allen masterfully subverts the Christian myth of creation through Ephanie, who “illuminate[s] the unhealthy limitations that belief in Eve’s fall has inflected on Western women” (Holford 11), and celebrates female survival and fertility by means of the Native American Creation stories. When Ephanie understands not only the meaning but also the necessity to fall, she realizes that she fell down from the apple tree to bring to light the submerged tradition of women’s creative power and that she will create her own life, just like Sky Woman and Yellow Woman:

Jump. Fall. 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. We are asking you to jump again. To fall into this world like the old one, the one you call Anciena, Sky Woman, jumped, fell and began in a world that was new. (Allen, *Woman* 211)

It is now that a journey back to the female centre begins: “I know who I am. I am Ephanie Atencio. Ephanie Kawieme Atencio. No one else can possess me. No one else can control me. No one else can speak for me. I don’t live in the apple tree spring anymore” (Allen, *Woman* 135). Ephanie acknowledges her memories, she discovers her lost past and realizes she is part of a spiritual community of women that support each other. The feminine force is rescued when Ephanie finds Teresa, which makes Ephanie re-discover her potential and transforms woman’s self-love into “some necessary

counterpart of home and daylight” (153). At this point, feminine libidinal energy becomes Ephanie’s healing; like Sky Woman and her daughter, Teresa and Ephanie create a new world in which they stop dreaming through the dreams of men (Beauvoir 161) and drive their story into history.

Given the discursive nature of history, Ephanie’s story only becomes history when she “give[s] it to [her] sister, Teresa. The one who waits. She is ready to know” (Allen, *Woman* 210). Through telling her story, Ephanie understands that her cultural responsibility and power is to assert transformation as the only means to survive. She has gained a critical distance on the fall(s) in such a way that her personal reality is now congruent with her cultural reality so she can transform the traumatic memory into narrative memory (Van der Kolk 429). The spider, characterized by her infinite-like shape symbolizing infinitive possibilities of creation, teaches Ephanie to weave the pattern of her life as well as the pattern of her story:

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. (Allen, *Woman* 191)

Like the Spider weaves its lines in her web, Ephanie will try to spin her own lines in her own story that will be transformed into history, thus granting generations of Native American women knowledge of their own heritage and their role within the fabric of Native American societies.

Conclusions

In *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, Allen presents the story of Ephanie, who after several null attempts to adapt to western society, is plunged into a dissociated reality, which results in the deformation of her identity and thus, a traumatic experience. The fact that this woman is non-western, non-heterosexual, non-white and non-Christian allows Allen to give voice to what is considered a subordinated perspective, usually silenced or, at least, relegated to the margins. Meanwhile, Allen also examines identity (de)formation issues under traumatic conditions through a cultural-specific approach: Native American women's stories. By providing a specific Native and feminine vision, Allen challenges the monolithic contemporary discourse of trauma and its curability.

The traditional theoretical concept of trauma relies on traumatic memories that in this novel, however, take on a new significance. Ephanie's attempts to accommodate to the western society become traumatic memories not only because the events are traumatic in themselves, but because the way in which Ephanie could overcome western society's refusal, that is, through Native American women's storytelling, is denied by this patriarchal society, thus perpetuating historical unresolved grief. In Native American cultures, the oral tradition is the way to write the past, live the present and preserve the future, which allows for the re-shaping of Native American identity. Therefore, as Ephanie's identity is directly defined by Native American women's storytelling, western society's avulsion of her storytelling tradition is directly proportional to Ephanie's identity's avulsion.

Ephanie's suffering is then focused on her impossibility to make herself understood. The loss of a link to the storytelling tradition is what constitutes the trauma, which makes Ephanie lose her own subjectivity as accounted for the fragmentation in

the novel. In this way, Allen resists normal language to convey the unspeakable horror of trauma and “preserves [its] authenticity as an experience that takes place in liminal space outside the normal contexts of experience and meaning” (Madsen 119). The four chapters of the novel are also perceived as fragmented, incoherent and illogical because they seem not to move towards the idea of healing Ephanie’s trauma. What does connect these fragments, however, is the repetition of a pattern of symbolic images that eventually becomes the language that gives meaning to Ephanie’s experiences. Allen then presents Ephanie’s shift from the absence of language to the acquisition of symbolic order:

It was another arrangement of the four corners that composed the Universe, the four days of sacredness that women remembered in their bodies’ blood every month. [...] Ephanie saw the corners lying flat, like on paper, then taking on dimensions, forming the four-armed cross [...] that was the door to place of the Spider. [...] her seven sisters had sprung at the bidding of the Grandmothers, long ago so far, before time like a clock entered and took hold. (Allen, *Woman* 206-207).

Ephanie’s transformation is eventually possible through the recovery of female friendship and memories, dreams and visions related to the imagery of shadows and the figure of Grandmother Spider, the guardian of historical memory. Ephanie can finally reconcile her personal trauma with the stories of Native American women, which become the healing force that restores her Native American identity. The recovery of Native American identity also serves Allen to criticise US patriarchal colonization and its attempt to destroy women-centred Native American societies, which Allen calls “gynocratic” societies, and to question western trauma theory due to the way it ignores a plethora of responses to traumatic events like Native American women’s storytelling, which have a natural and cathartic effect to regain personal wellness and the power of community self-determination.

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