

In her poetry and in such works as her well-known collection of essays *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), Allen emphasizes the crucial role of women in Native American tribal traditions and storytelling rituals. While the historical and anthropological evidence for some of her contentions has caused controversy in scholarly circles, her work has been very influential in attracting attention to feminine mythical figures and rituals in Native American culture. Allen's feminist viewpoint emphasizes the conditions of lesbians especially, a perspective that grew out of her own experience of coming out after three marriages and divorces: Her novel *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983) features a mixed-blood, lesbian protagonist who gradually comes to accept her own racial and sexual identity.

Allen has edited collections of Native American literature, both traditional and contemporary. One of these, *Spider Woman's Granddaughter: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (1989), won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1990. Throughout her career, she has published volumes of poetry such as *Shadow Country* (1982), *Wyrds* (1987), and *Skin and Bones* (1988). As the poems presented here show, Allen not only highlights how women become victims of racial and sexual discrimination but also celebrates the resourcefulness and resilience they have developed in facing their difficult existential condition.

PAULA GUNN ALLEN

Pocahontas to Her English Husband, John Rolfe¹

In a way, then, Pocahontas was a kind of traitor to her people. . . . Perhaps I am being a little too hard on her. The crucial point, it seems to me, is to remember that Pocahontas was a hostage. Would she have converted freely to Christianity if she had not been in captivity? There is no easy answer to this question other than to note that once she was free to do what she wanted, she avoided her own people like the plague. . . .

Pocahontas was a white dream—a dream of cultural superiority.

—Charles Larson
American Indian Fiction

Had I not cradled you in my arms,
oh beloved perfidious² one,
you would have died.
And how many times did I pluck you
from certain death in the wilderness—
my world through which you stumbled
as though blind?

Had I not set you tasks,
your masters far across the sea
would have abandoned you—
did abandon you, as many times
they left you

1. Pocahontas (c. 1595–1617) was the daughter of Powhatan, a Native American chief, in Virginia at the time of the British colonization. She allegedly saved the life of English Captain John Smith and became an intermediary between Powhatan and the struggling colony at Jamestown. She converted to Christianity and, in 1614, married the successful tobacco planter John Rolfe

(1585–1622); their son, Thomas, was born in 1615. In 1616 the family traveled to England, where Pocahontas became very popular in distinguished society and was received at the royal palace in Whitehall. She died in 1617 while preparing to return to America.

2. Treacherous, faithless.

to reap the harvest of their lies.
Still you survived, oh my fair husband,
and brought them gold
wring from a harvest I taught you
to plant. Tobacco.

It is not without irony that by this crop
your descendants die, for other
powers than you know
take part in this as in all things.

And indeed I did rescue you—
not once but a thousand thousand times
and in my arms you slept, a foolish child,
and under my protecting gaze you played,
chattering nonsense about a God
you had not wit to name. I'm sure

you wondered at my silence, saying I was
a simple wanton, a savage maid,
dusky daughter of heathen sires
who cartwheeled naked through the muddy towns
learning the ways of grace only
by your firm guidance, through
your husbandly rule:

no doubt, no doubt.
I spoke little, you said.
And you listened less,
but played with your gaudy dreams

and sent ponderous missives to the throne
striving thereby to curry favor
with your king.
I saw you well. I

understood your ploys and still
protected you, going so far as to die
in your keeping—a wasting,
purifying Christian death—and you,
deceiver, whiteman, father of my son,
survived, reaping wealth greater
than any you had ever dreamed
from what I taught you and
from the wasting of my bones.

Taking a Visitor to See the Ruins

FOR JOE BRUCHAC

He's still telling about the time he came west
and was visiting me. I knew he
wanted to see some of the things

everybody sees when they're in the wilds of New Mexico.
So when we'd had our morning coffee
after he'd arrived, I said,