

## MEMORIAL TO PAULA GUNN ALLEN

December 6, 2008

It is with sadness that I learned of the death of Native American poet and scholar Paula Gunn Allen. I first met Paula in the early 1980s when I was teaching at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center, and she was at the University of California, Berkeley. Judy Grahm introduced us. I interviewed both of them for my book *The Spirit and the Flesh*, and Paula was a major source for a chapter of that book.

But beyond the information that Paula told me, what was even more important was her incredibly strong support. She encouraged me to publish my research even though the criticism at the time was severe. She was the person who convinced me to include a chapter on female Two-Spirit persons.

When my university tried to fire me from my job over that book, she was among a number of prominent scholars across the country who wrote to the Dean in protest. After the book won three book awards, the provost ordered tenure. Paula and I celebrated. She also wrote a heartfelt and trenchant analysis of the book in *American Indian Quarterly*, which helped many native people to open their eyes and evaluate the issue of Two Spirit people without the prejudice that a century of Christian missionizing had laid over their eyes.

It was Paula who also helped to inspire me to write a novel, which I did (along with novelist Toby Johnson) and it was published under the title *Two Spirits*. As far as I know, it is the first novel with a Two Spirit person as the main character.

Most importantly, Paula's book *The Sacred Hoop* was so influential to me and many other scholars, that it rightly qualifies as one of the formative books in American Indian Studies of the 20th century.

As I look back on my life, I feel so blessed to have met and known so many giants and great pioneers in the LGBT community. Paula is one of those relationships that I most treasure in my memory. Not only for her many scholarly and intellectual contributions, not only for the beauty of her poetry, and not only for teaching me not to be fearful of spiders because Grandmother Spider Woman is truly our friend.

What I will remember most is her kind and supportive manner, her deep regard for the truth, her strong commitment to justice, and her abiding friendship.

I am honored to have known her.

She walked in the Beauty Way, and she leaves a sparkling trail by which many can follow.

Walter L. Williams