



CIVICS LESSON

Nella Larsen/Paula Gunn Allen

Cultural Expressions of Mixed-Race Heritage

Like Nella Larsen, Paula Gunn Allen was of mixed-race heritage but of a different cultural blend: Larsen's parents were of African American and European descent; Allen's father was Lebanese American; her mother was part Laguna-Sioux.

Growing up in the mid-twentieth century, Allen embraced her mother's heritage, learning about the the Laguna Pueblo culture through its oral traditions. She received her bachelors and masters degrees in English literature, eventually earning her PhD, concentrating in Native American studies. Allen taught at several universities with her longest stint in the UCLA English department while also serving in the American Indian Studies Center there.

Allen made her greatest impact through her anthropological writings. In 1986, based on her own experiences and her extensive study of Native American cultures, she published the groundbreaking "The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions", which was followed by several anthologies.

Similar to Larsen, Allen explored her identity through her writings. Instead of fictional works, Allen did extensive research and created well-regarded academic assessments. The following excerpts from her lectures and writings reveal some keys to embracing and expressing cultural heritage, whatever background you come from.

HERITAGE KNOWN

My mother told me stories all the time . . . And in all of those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me . . . That's what she said and what she showed me in the things she did and the way she lived.

HEALING EMBRACED

Healing the self means committing ourselves to a wholehearted willingness to be what and how we are - beings frail and fragile, strong and passionate, neurotic and balanced, diseased and whole, partial and complete, stingy and generous, twisted and straight, storm-tossed and quiescent, bound and free.

HOPE AFFIRMED

We are the women of daylight; of clocks and steel foundries, of drugstores and streetlights, of superhighways that slice our days in two. Our dreams are pale memories of themselves, and nagging doubt is the false measure of our days.

HUMANITY EXALTED

In the Native American tradition . . . a man, if he's a mature adult, nurtures life. He does rituals that will help things grow, he helps raise the kids, and he protects the people. His entire life is toward balance and cooperativeness. The ideal of manhood is the same as the ideal of womanhood. You are autonomous, self-directing, and responsible for the spiritual, social and material life of all those with whom you live.

Like Larsen and Allen, what steps can you take to explore, embrace and express your cultural heritage?