

Paula Gunn Allen, ed. *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983) xiv, 384 pp., \$27.50, \$13.50 paper.

Studies in American Indian Literature edited by Paula Gunn Allen is an excellent literary survey and resource book for instructors interested in developing college level courses on American Indians. Allen develops the format by including "critical studies in American Indian literature that explain and/or use basic themes, motifs, structures, and symbols found in traditional and modern American Indian literature." These critical essays lead into course outlines for developing American Indian classes.

Each chapter includes articles discussing specific genres applicable to diverse American Indian courses of study. In-depth analyses of American Indian literary material by culturally sensitive authors provide background and methods for understanding American Indian culture through literature. By using numerous authors and specialists in the field, Allen demonstrates the complexities existing in American Indian literature.

Although Allen focuses primarily on various genres existing in American Indian literature, the scope of the book is far-reaching as she examines a multidisciplinary approach for understanding American Indian culture. Allen's work includes a broad range of materials focusing on American Indian oral traditions, history, biography, personal narratives, American Indian women's literature, and contemporary American Indian literature. By broadening the instructors' foundations, Allen forces them to teach from a holistic background rather than a disciplinary perspective. Instructors who teach courses on American Indians must be well read in American Indian studies and must be aware and sensitive towards American Indian cultural perceptions. American Indian cosmology, belief, and cultural constructs are alien to Euroamerican culture. Instructors, therefore, must take care in their use and teaching of such diverse materials. A new world is opened up. The eyes, ears, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of the American Indian take on new meaning for narrowly focused Euroamericanists. Allen clearly illustrates the complex nature existing within American Indian cultures and among American Indian groups which are not easily understood by non-Indians or the untrained researcher.

The following are ideas one must comprehend before attempting to instruct students in American Indian studies:

- 1) Make sure the teaching of American Indian literature is from the point of view of its people.

- 2) Understand the concepts of balance and harmony existing among the people with respect to nature. The physical, ontological and cultural worlds as perceived through oral and written narratives are inseparable

Explorations in Sights and Sounds. No. 4 (Summer 1984)

from reality.

3) Understand that the oral tradition and American Indian languages continue their vitality in contemporary society.

4) Be aware of the importance of women in American Indian cultures. This is a significant topic of study because within Euroamerican literature, the authors who have written about American Indian women have promoted stereotypes or ignored the existence of women. Misinformation is prolific. Although American Indian women have historically held a complementary role within their culture, their existence has only recently emerged and been recognized outside of the American Indian sphere. Women form part of the continuity, balance, harmony, and completeness found in American Indian cultures.

5) Understand the use of language and symbolism, e.g., the flexibility and continuity of the coyote symbol illustrates the cultural process of spiritual retention, but changes occur in character and dimension of the coyote depending on the American Indian writer. The changes in language and symbolic motifs fall within the recognized boundaries of cultural maintenance, transition and change.

6) Understand that oral and written genres such as songs, poetry, and narratives should be viewed as a cultural process rather than static forms. These genres form an integral part of historical and contemporary American Indian culture.

Studies in American Indian Literature is necessary reading for all scholars of ethnic literature. This book is especially important for people developing courses. Allen not only presents course designs and reading materials but also points out the importance of American Indian literature as an area for research. Allen emphasizes that developing courses requires critical sensitivity and understanding of American Indian cultures. Myths, beliefs, oral and written expression in poetry, song, and narrative are the means by which American Indians express who they are, their relationship to nature, the world and belief systems.

Studies in American Literature provides excellent material concerning a coloured ethnic group which has historically been misunderstood, stereotyped, politically ravaged, and ignored. Authors like Paula Gunn Allen have risen to the challenge of the 1980s by producing timely and relevant methods for understanding ethnicity from a people's perspective. She moves beyond white history and literature in "coloured face" and into the complex and diverse arena of cultural continuity and change. People interested in teaching about cultural dynamics will find *Studies in American Indian Literature* a necessary addition to their resource library.

— Barbara Hiura
Sacramento City Unified
School District