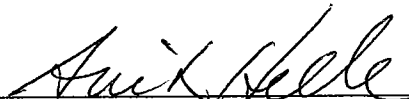


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sarah B. Burghauser for the degree of
Master of Arts in
English presented
on June 19, 2007.

Title: "A Dissonant Element": The Difficulty of Anaïs Nin

Abstract approved:



Anita Helle

This thesis is arranged in three main chapters, each of which focuses on a particular type of Anaïs Nin text, and each of which is intended to enlarge Nin's complexities through distinct but overlapping perspectives. The idea connecting these three chapters is that Nin, who has been radically misrepresented by her critics, is a multi-vocal, experimental writer who has not received fair critical attention: a critical attention which seeks to explore her complexities rather than diminishing her writing. Using the writing of Nin critics as well as theorists such as Roland Barthes and Judith Butler, this thesis seeks to offer a different kind of critical approach to Nin's work which allows Nin, as an experimental artist, to guide us on her own terms.

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**“A Dissonant Element”:
The Difficulty of Anaïs Nin**

by
Sarah B. Burghauser

A THESIS
submitted to
Oregon State University

**in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of**

Master of Arts

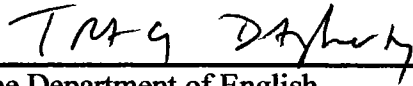
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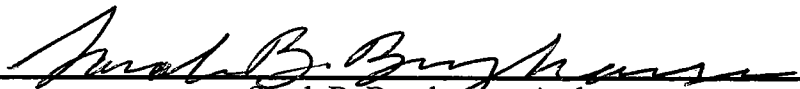
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Sarah B. Burghauser, Author

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
First Interlude.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Second Interlude.....	9
Chapter 1: “A Clanging Cymbal”: The Story of Anaïs Nin’s Reception	10
Third Interlude	38
Chapter 2: “A Beautiful Spectacle”: Anaïs Observed and the Visual Representation of a Woman as Artist.....	39
Fourth Interlude.....	67
Chapter 3: Turning the Mirror: House of Incest and Anaïs Nin’s Experimental Identity.....	69
Fifth Interlude.....	88
Conclusion.....	89
Sixth Interlude.....	92
Works Cited and Otherwise Referenced.....	93
Endnotes.....	97

First Interlude:

So far I am hardly even reading the words in the diary or letters contained within those pages. . . I am just flipping, feeling, looking, smelling all there is to smell, see, feel. . . This particular diary is so small. Smaller than I imagined it would be. It is about the size of my hand when my fingers are pressed close to each other. Even then, my middle finger hangs off the top edge of the page. The small book seems to be vibrating under my touch but at the same time, it bares a haunting stillness: like when you can feel someone standing behind you but you can't hear or see them yet.

In the back of this diary, Nin kept an address book by snipping the edges off the pages, leaving small tabs behind to mark the letters of the alphabet. Some of them had been turned under, and as I sit here, smelling, looking. . . I adjust the tiny flaps by unfolding the tabs with my stub nails making sure not to puncture the pages. The tabs stop at "W." There are also "to do" lists scrawled in beautiful letters in the back of the tiny book. Some have check-mark companions next to the writing while some have a single, graceful line squiggled through the word or phrase. They told me her diaries were beautifully written – not just the meaning of the words, but the way they look on the page: perfectly formed, each line flowing like a small river. But then there are these to-do lists, and recordings of her engagements throughout the text – well-worn, well-worked, well-used.

Introduction:

As I began writing this thesis, I had the privilege of visiting the Anaïs Nin archives at UCLA. Before I left for the archive, I worried that upon my return, I would be infused, as a result, with a kind of undue pomposity that would lead me to making poor, unsupportable arguments about Nin and her writing. Instead of going in order to “know Nin,” I decided to go for no other reason than to be closer to her for a few days; I thought of my trip as a visit based on experiencing aesthetic and historical beauty.

I was scared because I had been reading a wide variety of Nin criticism, all of which claimed to know the “Truth” about Nin. Beginning my paper, I did not know much about where my research would take me, but I *did* know that I did not wish to fall into generalizations or presumptuousness as I observed so many other critics had. My goal was to treat Nin as fairly as I could, and to take into consideration as much information as I could find within the time and space constraints we face as writers. What has resulted is a study, in fragments, of some of the ways various readers read Anaïs Nin.

I have found the archive particularly useful as model for thinking about Nin herself. The archive is, in a traditional sense, considered *the* site of authenticity to the extent that we fetishize its originality (Helle 631). In other words, the archive might symbolize the place where the Truth of a body of work is found in its purest form. The archive too is a place designed to prevent the decomposition of that work: a place of preservation both of a physical body of work and the memory of it. I would like to add,

though, that the archive is a site of dialogue, of conversation. In an archival encounter, we add to the archive through our interpretation of it. As a result, the archive is not a fixed body of work by one author, but rather a body of work with mutable borders, ready to engage in a conversation with all those who encounter it. This brings the authenticity of the archive into question; if the artifacts in the archive somehow *represent* Nin in her purest form, we too can *re-present* her through interpretation of its contents. It is through this approach that we might include any criticism of Nin in her archive because each bit is a representation of Nin, although no bit represents a perfect whole.

The Truth-seeking type of criticism many Nin critics perform prevents full and fair readings of Nin's work and is indeed damaging to our understanding of her place in more experimental and feminist literary traditions. In other words, many critics' representations and readings of Nin reduce the possibilities of interpretation rather than opening new ones. This thesis seeks to approach Nin in much the same way that I approached the archive: in a dialogic way that releases possible meanings in her work.

Because I am interested in more open forms of investigating Nin's writing and life, and because I extend the definition of the archive to the critical work on Nin, I view the critical reception of Nin's writing as an important part of the ways various readers (academic scholars, male fans, female fans, and close friends) understand her and perpetuate those understandings (and in some cases, *misunderstandings*). Through studying her reception in its various manifestations, we can begin to make a space for interpretation that reads Nin differently. Nin has been misrepresented in her critical

reception; in our further study of her work, we should let her own clarity as an experimental artist guide us on her own terms.

* * *

Working through various reactions to and reviews of Anaïs Nin, I noticed three distinct categories in her critical reception emerge:

1. We love her! She's an excellent, feminist-friendly, sex-positive, woman writer. She's our hero! She's gorgeous and sensual!!!! Her work represents the female experience! Her writing style is poetic and fluid, and we love that!

2. She's a lying, manipulative, bitch. Her writing is chaotic and makes no sense. She couldn't write a good, coherent story if her life depended on it – especially not an erotic story. Her writing is unfriendly to women and reflects her total narcissism. She makes us sick and we'd all be better off without her.

3. Nin is a complex and controversial figure. Her writing and her life are complicated because they have the capacity to say many things at once. Let's figure out what we might take from her. What were her goals in writing and living her life the way she did? We like Nin: she did new and important things for fiction, erotica, and women's writing. We also know, and understand why some folks have a problem with her: but they oftentimes can't see beyond their own ideas of what a woman writer should be and what sort of work she should produce.

Of course, as we might find in any set of categories, there is overlap between groupings and indeed, bits of criticism that may fit into none of these at all. In identifying these categories, however, I hope to uncover some of the patterns in Nin's reception.

As mentioned above, it is my goal to treat Nin as fairly as possible by allowing her work to speak to us and by noticing others' observations. I set out to write a paper according to the third approach because I believe it is the most fruitful approach to Nin's work we have. To recklessly praise Nin's work is to dismiss all the wonderful contradictions and complexities within it just the same as if we were to recklessly reject it.

The inner-life Nin depicts in her writing is exceedingly complicated, but why not try to understand it anyhow? What I ask of my peers in Nin scholarship, in the process of responding critically, is to be as true to the work as possible as they analyze; by "be true to" I mean not that there is *one* truth to Nin's work that we all must strive to discover, but that we remain true to the *complexity* of her work, for that is the only truth of her work that I can indeed observe.

Erica Jong, in her essay "A Story Never Told Before — Reading the New, Unexpurgated Diaries of Anaïs Nin," discusses the complexity of Nin's work and the ways that complexity has been interpreted by critics. She questions,

Why are there so few positions in between adoration and detestation [when it comes to Nin's work]? Because Nin is seen as a representative of woman's psychological and sexual freedom. The response to her depends on the reader's degree of liberation. For women who seek freedom – artistically and sexually – she is the pioneer, validating our quest. For women who fear freedom, she becomes the target, evoking a furious response which may be only anger at oneself for being unfree. (205)

Jong argues that women who are able to perceive the complexities of Nin's work are more "liberated" than those who cannot. In other words, readers who are "liberated" will appreciate Nin's writing more than those who are "unfree" because "Nin is seen as representative of woman's psychological and sexual freedom" (Jong 205). Similar to Roland Barthes' understanding of sound criticism, Jong also implies that critics who treat Nin as a "target" are "blind and dumb."¹ While Barthes might argue a critical viewpoint that says, "you either get Nin or you don't, and whether or not you get her depends on how smart you are" is blind and dumb, Jong might retort that there is some truth to this; Jong might say not that most Nin critics are stupid, but that most of the critics really don't get Nin because they do not see her complexity.

*

*

*

This thesis is arranged in three main chapters, each of which focuses on a particular type of Nin text, and each of which is intended to enlarge Nin's complexities through distinct but overlapping perspectives. In the first chapter I look closely at selected pieces of critical reception of Anaïs Nin's writing and life and the polarized reactions to her representation of femininity and creative life. Especially in chapter one, feminist reactions to Nin become integral to the ways Nin's work has been received. While some argue that Nin's feminism stems from her sex-positive writing and credit her with the embodiment of *écriture féminine* ("Anaïs Nin"), others maintain that her ideas about women are largely essentialist and that her adherence to a traditional, stereotypical, and even exaggerated femininity is damaging to the feminist movement. Even though Nin's popularity peaked during Second-Wave feminism, her reception is

still important in the Third-Wave since many feminists continue to debate the place of feminine identities and representations in the movement. Further, because of Nin's apparent (yet arguable) adherence to these traditional representations of femininity (Nin as "whore," "child," "goddess"), her place in any possible canon of feminist literature also continues to be debated. The importance placed on Nin's femininity by both academic and non-academic readers is symptomatic of the difficult relationship feminism has with expressions of femininity.

The second chapter examines the perceived importance of visual images of Nin in the reception of her writing. Specifically, the chapter looks at the film *Anaïs Nin Observed: Portrait of a Woman as Artist* [1973] as an example of one of the ways her physical appearance has been scrutinized in order to either diminish or praise her writing.

The third chapter is a close reading of Nin's famous prose poem, *House of Incest*. This reading serves as one possible example of a fair representation of Nin's writing. In this chapter I use Helen Tookey's essay, "I Am the Other Face of You: Anaïs Nin, Fantasies, and Femininity" in order to show the ways Nin, from within her poem, asks her readers to examine their own journeys to self-discovery. Further, I argue that *House of Incest*, Nin's first published work of fiction, also represents Nin's declaration of herself as an experimental artist through her use of collage and metaliterary communication with her readers.

Throughout this paper I have included interludes nestled between the chapters. These are fragmented and consciously reflective descriptions of my encounters with

artifacts I came across in the archive and short readings of visual images of Nin. These interludes can be read as moments that reflect on the various representations of Nin. They also represent the dialogic characteristic of the archive as a site that encourages multiple interpretations of, and encounters with a supposed “original”; the interludes serve as momentary reflections on the complexity of Nin’s life and writing especially through the view from the archive.

Second Interlude:

From box #10, "Red Star Diary"²

On the bottom of page 335 there is a stamp which reads:

"A REMINDER: -- Have you ordered your diary for next year? For Duplicate of this book order by number in front."

This reminder struck me as so strange as the hand of Nin is piled on top of it, burying it in all its strangeness. This is the diary of Anaïs Nin – she can write on whatever she wants – she will not order by number. There are her words, piled on top of this printed message, buried underneath the weight of her calligraphy gliding slanted across the page – it barely looks like language, but rather like visual art – some strange conglomerate of visual poetry, literary poetry, confession, fiction, all topping this public service announcement-like warning: Must buy new diary. Running out of time. The year is almost over. The dangling letter "y" descends between the words "your" and "diary," severing them from each other. She did not order a new diary, for every book I have seen and touched so far has been so very different – always mixing in loose papers with the bound pages with the photos and drawings.

Chapter 1:

A “Clanging Cymbal”: The Story of Anaïs Nin’s Reception

In one encyclopedic overview of Anaïs Nin’s life, work, and reception, an anonymous author states, on one hand, that because “Nin wrote in a poetic style using repetition, omission, and pastiche as organizing principles” she “is credited by some feminist critics with embodying *écriture féminine*” (“Anais Nin”). On the other hand, the overview continues, Nin “became a controversial figure in the feminist movement. She was at once praised for her unflinching examination of the female psyche and vilified as someone who upheld archaic feminine stereotypes” (“Anaïs Nin”). This contradiction is at the heart of much of the criticism we have on Nin, feminist or not.

This chapter tells the story of the problem of Nin’s critical reception by chronologically moving through the waves of criticism on Nin’s writing from the early criticism of the 1950’s and 60’s to the present. I have identified a kind of representative spokesperson for each critical wave, who epitomizes the response of the time. In the 1950’s and 60’s, Frank Baldanza represents the criticism *ad feminam* of his time, which almost always links her to her literary “partner in crime,” Henry Miller, and in the 1970’s and 80’s, Estelle C. Jelinek represents some voices of Second Wave feminist criticism. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I explore the reasons why criticism on Nin drops off after the early 1990’s. It is important to note here that in each of these critical waves there exists some divergence or variation in ideological focus. In other words, the waves often overlap in approach, and some themes even persist across time because in every historical moment there exists both a residual and emergent culture. For

example, Jelinek's and Edmund Miller's arguments in the 1980's and 1990's respectively contain aspects of Frank Baldanza's masculinist and misogynistic criticism *ad feminam*, while during the Second Wave feminist movement of the 1970's there are critics, such as Julia Casterson, who interpret Nin's writing with a more contemporary eye.

I am telling this story of Nin's critical reception because understanding the ways she has been interpreted can open up the possibilities of new interpretations of her work, which, in the last ten years, have been nearly absent. When we re-examine Nin's critical reception, we notice that Nin sparked (and still does) great controversy amongst many critics.

Nin Criticism *ad feminam* in the 1950's and 60's:

Among those critics who accuse Nin of a variety of literary and artistic infractions is Frank Baldanza. His review of Nin's work³, written in 1962, is titled, "Anaïs Nin." The title of this piece itself reflects the way Baldanza regards Anaïs Nin's writing; by using Nin's name as the title of *his* criticism, he attempts to redefine her, maybe even confine who she is – so that this piece becomes not his *reading* of Nin, but the *Truth* about Nin, defining her identity according to him. This sentiment is reflected and elaborated within the review. Baldanza attacks not only Nin's writing, but her femaleness and femininity. He writes that "the self perpetuating activity [of writing in the diary] obviously reveals. . . a female fussiness over detail [which] can easily pass for the rigor of discipline" (Baldanza 10). He continues that "such incessant daily writing –

without editing – would also necessarily congeal stylistic traits into a rigid mold of habit” (Baldanza 10). In other words, Baldanza attributes Nin’s prolific writing not to her artistic rigor, discipline, and skill, but to a “female fussiness” constituted by obsessive and habitual behavior. Additionally, her stylistic choices, like an addiction, he writes, are “self-perpetuating” like a kind of masturbation: self-centered.

Words which frequently appear in Baldanza’s review regarding Nin’s writing are “neurotic,” “jumble,” “rambling,” “erratic,” “random,” “pointless,” and “inaccurate.” He writes, “The handling of characters and incidents is so erratic and baffling that one must assume the writer simply means to spill random impressions onto the page. But where elements of traditional plot adhere to the impressions, the result is an incoherent jumble” (Baldanza 10). Embedded in this statement, and the aforementioned one, are many assumptions about, and distinctions between, women’s and men’s writing. To properly explain these connections, I would like to revisit some possible characteristics of “feminine writing” that many feminist critics have identified and that serve as a trap for Baldanza and for other critics who attribute Nin’s “poor” writing skills to her womanhood. It is important to note here that the identification of these characteristics does not mean to say that all women’s writing is a particular way or that all women *should* write this way. It is only to notice some similarities in women’s writing and certain theories about their characteristics without letting those things we notice lead us to essentialist conclusions about women.

That said, if we can associate men’s writing with “traditional” (to use Baldanza’s word) writing that is plot-driven and linearly organized, we can associate

women's writing, or "non-traditional" writing with cyclical plots, movements of thought rather than action, fragmentation, and emotional motivation. (The "traditional" forms to which Baldanza refers are akin to the perceived masculine form of writing that has been identified by French feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray). From Baldanza's words, we might assume that he criticizes Nin for, on one hand, not adopting a "traditional," plot-driven narrative (associated with masculinity), and on the other hand, that where she *does* attempt this masculine form of writing and thought, she absolutely fails (Baldanza 10). In other words, both Baldanza's praise and criticism depend on the same axis which polarizes women's writing against men's writing.⁴

Oliver Evans, however, in his essay "Anaïs Nin and the Discovery of Inner Space" [1962] addresses the kind of presumptuous response offered by Baldanza. He refers to the beginning of his literary experiences with Anaïs Nin's work, saying that he had never heard the ideas of Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and others, in words "with such directness and clarity" (Evans 18). He continues to write about Nin's intentions in her *Diary* and fiction: "in light of the author's intention – an opportunity for which any reader should be grateful, particularly in the case of a writer as unconventional as Miss Nin, whom it would obviously be unjust to judge by standards she neither respects or acknowledges" (Evans 18). Here, Evans encourages readers of Nin not to judge her writing with old methods of criticism we use to uphold a masculinist literature; rather, he asks us to join Nin in her exploration of "unconventional" writing by judging her according to the standards and goals which she herself assigns to her own projects.

(Evans uses the word “unconventional” while Baldanza would call this unconventionality, “erratic,” and “jumbled”). This is not to say, though, that Nin is not as ambitious a writer as her traditional or male counterparts. According to Evans, we should, however, regard her writing as the embodiment of liberation from traditional models of texts with literary merit. He writes:

I was struck, more than anything else, by their [Nin’s books] extraordinary airiness; by the impression they gave of being somehow dimensionless, and thus illimitable, unconfined, and unrestrained; and by their serene independence of the conventions of ordinary fiction. . . . Anaïs Nin has constituted for me a symbol of freedom, excitement, and discovery. (Evans 17-18)

From these words, readers might infer that Nin’s writing epitomizes femininity, but must also be faulted for it; Evans describes Nin’s work as “light” reading, unsubstantial, and also uncontrollable, unable to be restrained (even other-worldly!), for he uses words such as “airiness,” “dimensionless,” “illimitable,” “unconfined,” and “unrestrained.” Evans’ words are also in direct contradiction to those of Baldanza’s because while Baldanza understands Nin’s writing as a clumsy and failing attempt at literature of any kind, but particularly conventional, plot-driven fiction, Evans understands Nin’s work as entirely unconventional in a liberating, empowering, and exciting way. Even though Evans’ and Baldanza’s readings appear to be radically different, they both show a similar problem: that the same characteristics of Nin’s work (“unconfined” and “unrestrained”) are used to both praise and fault Nin as a woman artist.

It seems apparent, given the remainder of Baldanza’s criticism of Nin, that much of his problem with Nin’s work is tied to her femaleness which, because its traits are essentialized in formal terms, obscures her writing. The following are examples of

Baldanza's criticism *ad feminam* in which identity and traits are identified as female or feminine (in the writing of women) and are then placed in comparison with the writing of men (often presented as "lacking" something that men's writing has) in order to implicitly or explicitly disparage those traits.

For instance, Baldanza, in talking about her use of madness in her characters, compares Nin's work to Virginia Woolf's writing: "But [in Nin's *Under a Glass Bell*] the interior sense of madness is not counterbalanced by the elegant discipline of Mrs. Woolf's prose, nor is there any steadying agent like the motherly Clarissa Dalloway" (Baldanza 14). Here, Baldanza criticizes the absence of a stabilizing, "motherly" figure in Nin's work as opposed to Woolf's. Previously, Baldanza has referred to Nin as "Miss Nin," whereas he refers to Woolf as "Mrs. Woolf" even though Nin too is married. The "Miss" over the "Mrs." implies a diminutive quality to Nin in contrast to the more "mature" (read, "motherly" or "wifely") quality to Woolf. Referring to Nin as "Miss Nin," I have found, is not unusual for critics of this period (and in some cases, critics writing during the 1970's and 80's as well). Additionally, these same critics often use the author's last name alone for other writers, particularly for Henry Miller; Baldanza refers to Henry Miller simply as "Miller," while assigning his female subjects a suitably feminine title, which signals their ties to men and their lesser status. By using "Miss" rather than "Mrs." for Nin, Baldanza argues that Nin is farther away from any kind of male figure, literarily or personally, while Woolf apparently, adheres somewhat to traditionally masculine or disciplined standards of fiction. Further, the way Woolf handles of themes of madness (with "elegant discipline") are, according to Baldanza,

representative of a controlled femininity, while Nin's femininity is undomesticated and unbridled.

He goes on to say that

the most effective piece in this book – indeed, the single most controlled and compelling of all Miss Nin's writings – is the story "Birth," a short, first-person account of bearing a dead six-month child. The story succeeds largely because of the stark directness and economy with which this excruciating experience is related. It must be a minor classic for those who follow Miller's dicta about facing the facts of life in all their bloody detail. It is the one work in all of Miss Nin's production that rises genuinely above vulgarity. (Baldanza 14-15)

Firstly, in this passage, it is unclear to which piece of Nin's writing Baldanza assigns the term "vulgar" and indeed what qualifies as "vulgarity" in his estimation (though, just before this passage we read Baldanza's concern for "the quality of sympathy evoked" by the "mad" characters in Nin's *Under a Glass Bell* as well as the character Jeanne kissing "her brother's shadow" in *House of Incest*). Further, Baldanza repeats the word "vulgarity" as he discusses Nin's *Diary* and Henry Miller's response to them:

Henry Miller speaks of the devastating honesty and the complete lack of malice in her journal. . . Without the discipline and control that is synonymous with art, such honesty becomes vulgarity, the lack of malice seems a lack of standards, the inclusiveness looks flabby, and the self-absorption leaves the reader puzzled and uncertain, since he – by what must be one of the most elementary laws of epistemology – does not share the same self. (15)

Still, even after this deeper explanation of what Baldanza finds problematic in Nin's *Diary*, readers are left wondering what "vulgarity" is and where we see it in the *Diary*. It seems obvious that Baldanza's use of the term "vulgarity," which has different meanings, signals his moralizing and traditional definition of the word.

Secondly, in the above passage, we find it no surprise that Baldanza assigns the lofty title of “most effective piece in this book” to Nin’s story about birth and motherhood. Even though the story “Birth,” in a way, is about failed motherhood (for the child was stillborn), it still represents a woman’s attempt at traditional femininity and “womanly” behavior. Additionally, using such words as “controlled,” “stark,” “directness,” and “economy” indicated further what Baldanza values in fiction.

Previously too, as in the above passage, in his diatribe on the lot of Nin’s published work, Baldanza compares Nin’s work to Miller’s. He writes about *House of Incest* saying, “it was the subject of a ten-minute avant-garde movie by Ian Hugo, and it suggested many of the images for Henry Miller’s *Scenario*, which is inherently a much finer work than the one that inspired it” (Baldanza 13). So here, Baldanza argues that a man’s representation of the woman’s (Nin’s) art is far more valuable than the woman’s art itself: according to this view, male artists know “women’s art” better than women themselves. We learn that a male artist is capable of producing women’s art, only better. In other words, Baldanza implies that Miller is able to revise Nin’s work to suit masculine standards of art and is thus “inherently” more successful: masculine tampering makes women’s work better. This argument is also, by implication, a further attack on Nin’s inability to not only produce good, masculine art, but her inability to produce good feminine art as well. Further still, Baldanza uses the word “inherently,” indicating that there is a set of rules art needs to follow in order to be considered art, and that Nin, “by nature,” does not follow them. The word “inherently,” can be read as

another attack on Nin's femaleness because of the traditionally essentialist view of women as naturally emotional, illogical, and manipulative.

Baldanza is not the only critic to use this word to describe Nin or her work; the words "inherent" and "inherently" appear over and over again in much of the criticism and reviews of Nin's work. What about Nin and her work make us use that word in our analyses? *Should* there be something "inherent" about her work? Why must we justify a reading of her work with the word "inherently"? We see here that with Nin, we are especially nervous about being wrong or right, or being misinterpreted because she is, in many ways, an easy target for many critics.

Nin's Questioned Feminism:

Criticism during Second Wave Feminism of the 1970's and 80's:

"Anais Nin: A Critical Evaluation" [1978] by Estelle C. Jelinek was the first essay I read that made me thoroughly question my own feelings of adoration for and exaltation of Nin. Jelinek's essay represents, in many ways, the brand of Second Wave feminist criticism that rejects Nin and her writing as feminist. She cites evidence of Nin's sexism, essentialism and love of theater, performance, and "insincerity" (Jelinek 48) from material ranging from Nin's novels, *Diary*, essays (specifically her "Notes on Feminism"), films, magazine articles, interviews, and even an encounter with Nin herself at a lecture in Berkeley in 1971.

Jelinek recounts a moment during Nin's presentation, followed by her thesis:

The women [at the lecture] are talented and deserve recognition; Nin herself deserves credit for encouraging them. But when Nin introduces

one woman as ‘a critic, unusual in women – she has her own point of view, she is sensitive, and she is feminine and still objective,’ I must then question Nin’s feminism. From reading her diaries and novels and now having heard her in person, I can see, despite what I have been told, that she holds views that are anathema to me and the women’s liberation movement. (Jelinek 46)

Certainly from this passage and Nin’s words one can see why Jelinek finds Nin’s ideas so damaging to feminism. She continues by arguing that “Nin’s concept of woman is really an alternate form of sexism” (Jelinek 47) because she essentializes the characteristics of women and men. Further, and perhaps most interestingly, Jelinek chastises Nin’s passionate readers for admiring her life and work: “Nonetheless, women who call themselves feminists or Marxists swoon at her words and applaud her ‘feminine’ virtues” (50). She continues that she notices “the blindness. . . in Nin’s readers and audiences. . .” (Jelinek 51) and refers to “the wrath of the Nin cult” (Jelinek 52). The word “cult” here, as a super-charged term serves to negatively mythologize Nin as a threat (see the word “wrath”) to feminism and to women everywhere in addition to negatively mythologizing Nin’s *readers* as a kind of blinded, even brainwashed group of people.

Finally, Jelinek accuses Nin of exploiting the women’s movement for her own egotistical and financial gain:

I am not impressed with her appearances at fund-raising events for women’s centers or her promotion of women’s journals because I see these, just as I view those ‘celebrations,’ as opportunistic efforts to spread her name and sell her books. . . I believe Nin’s involvement in the women’s movement is *insincere* because *she is not a feminist*. She holds views that are *contrary* to those held by *true feminists*: the glorification of male heroes, the belief in the special nature of women that makes them superior to men, her repulsion to the ordinary, everyday struggles

of oppressed peoples, her reliance on the individual solution, and her own self-glorification. (Jelinek 53-54, emphasis added)

My point in emphasizing Jelinek's words is not to show how awful and wrong Jelinek is, for she does indeed make some excellent and important points about Nin's feminism (or lack thereof). Neither is it my point to showcase Nin's non-adherence to the feminism of her time. Rather, I am trying to expose the damaging horizontal hostility⁵ between Nin and her feminist critics, and to open up possible new ways of approaching Nin's work by studying these critics' responses. This is a valuable project for feminist literature too, for even though we might not conclude that Nin's work is feminist, this exploration makes us question the wide-ranging characteristics of feminism and feminist literature.

That said, finding myself in agreement with much of what Jelinek argued, I was horrified at myself; how had I gone so long studying Nin and not seen her sexism? Why had I ignored her classism? How could I have missed her essentialism?

So I began a search for an exception in Second-Wave feminist criticism that was friendly toward Nin not because I needed my own previous convictions reaffirmed, but because I was so thoroughly convinced by Jelinek's essay; I wanted to hear a retort. What I found was stunning: Julia Casterson's and Maxine Molyneux's 1970 interview with and commentary on Nin titled, "Looking Again at Anaïs Nin." Casterson acknowledges that Nin is an anomaly for feminist critics. Casterson does what few critics in her time were doing: "looking again"⁶ at Anaïs Nin to reexamine where Nin fits and where she does not fit into a line of women writers. The paradoxical nature of Nin's feminism is perplexing and, as Julia Casterson writes, "problematic" (216).

The feminist criticism on Nin's work in the 1970's and 80's is spotty at best: it is inconsistent and radically contradictory. Some feminist critics praise Nin for her sex-positive writing, which, it is often claimed, is written from an inherently female perspective, and conveys her sexually liberated lifestyle, and her artistic and literary accomplishments as a woman writer. Other feminist critics vehemently charge Nin with crimes of narcissism, dishonesty, artistic sloppiness, hyper-femininity, essentialism, and even sexism. Julia Casterson, in her introduction to Maxine Molyneux's transcribed 1970 interview with Anaïs Nin, comments, "We [Casterson and Molyneux] remarked on how uneasily her work sits in the history of women's writing in this century, and the problems she presents to feminist analysis because of this" (Casterson 215). Casterson goes on to say,

We did not want to reject or ignore her work because it doesn't fit into any predictable pattern, because it cannot be cited in the same breath as that of contemporaries as diverse as Jean Rhys, Simone de Beauvoir, and Virginia Woolf, who can be far more unproblematically 'claimed' as the literary grandmothers of present day feminist writers. On the contrary, her writing presented itself to us as perhaps more engaging and challenging because of the questions it raises about writing and femininity. (215)

Casterson's words echo those of Erica Jong (which we will hear later) regarding Nin's usefulness for the future of women's writing whether we "love her or hate her" (Jong 213). Just the fact of the polarity of opinion on her work should be enough to want to keep her work circulating in our contemporary circles of women writers and scholars.

Casterson continues that Nin

stands as *another* voice, making different meanings and representations of women. She is a dissonant element that asks to be heard in a long line of women writers who can sometimes, perhaps mistakenly, be registered

as a fully-constituted orchestra playing in harmony. She seems to be one of those stereotypes (mother/witch/child/whore) we thought we had cast off and as such, she is a clanging cymbal to us. (216)

Casterson's use of the word "cymbal" which is an obvious homophone for "symbol," helps her readers draw connections between the sound of Nin's "dissonant" voice in the body of literature by women and her weighty symbolic status. The message, cloaked in a particularly resonant metaphor, is that Nin's dissonance is not a disadvantage for, or harmful to the feminist movement. Casterson, in framing Nin as a complex and contradictory symbol for "those stereotypes," allows us to study Nin and all her complexities together because they are "playing in harmony." Casterson ends her introduction:

She was a problem in her lifetime, and accepted herself as such; and now, when the importance of surrealist writing is fully recognized in America, she presents problems of a different nature for feminists. We wanted to examine her *as* a problem, not dismissively or condemningly, but in a way which would perhaps reveal to us the inefficacy and unhelpfulness, of blanket statements that feminists often make about women writers. [Nin's example affords us] a possible exercise, a possible interrogation that can be made of a "difficult" woman writer. (216)

Embracing Nin's "difficulty" allows us to include her in our studies of women writers and also enables us to see her doubly-marginalized status not only as a woman writer but as an *experimental* writer; the "difficulty" of Nin as a woman writer is exactly her appeal, according to Casterson. If studying Nin makes us question what it means to be feminine, a woman, a feminist, makes us question what literature is and what we want women writers to address in their work, then this is a good reason to return to Nin; her difficulty is her appeal.⁷

