

Preface

This thesis explores the ways in which Anaïs Nin demonstrates the creation of individual gender identity in her *Erotica* series, *Delta of Venus*, and *Little Birds*. In it, I use Judith Butler's queer theory to deconstruct the self-gendering messages which Nin includes in her writing. Before I do that, however, I need to address a few issues.

The first is the issue of originality. Nin is not the first female author to explore the creation of self in writing, nor is she necessarily the first female author to explore alternate genderings through fiction. France has a long literary tradition of self-construction in erotic literature. While Nin was writing the *Diary* and her erotic short stories, her French contemporaries Marguerite Duras and Sydonie-Gabrielle Collette were addressing similar issues in their work. Nin was aware of these authors and admired them greatly, as repeated entries in her diaries attest. Moreover, many of the same themes that intrigue students of Nin are also studied by students of Colette and Duras.

Despite its similarities to French female-authored erotica, Nin's *Erotica* is unique and deserves study for a variety of reasons. The first reason that Nin's *Erotica* merits individual study is based in the circumstances under which she wrote it. In the 1940's, while living in New York, Nin supported herself by writing erotic short stories for an unknown collector. She took over this job from Henry Miller, who found writing pornography exhausting and wanted to spend more time on his own writing. Although the collector was initially resistant to Nin's replacing Miller, he grew to enjoy her work after she submitted a few stories. His only real problem lay with her style. In her diary, Nin had created a lyrical, almost poetic writing style. The collector, on the other hand, wanted Nin to write in a more realistic and sexually explicit style.

Nin found it difficult to adjust her writing to suit her patron. As she recounts in the introduction to *Delta of Venus*, whenever she sought to inject emotion, feeling, and lyricism into her writing, she was reminded to "Concentrate on sex. Leave out the poetry" (xii). Nin felt that the collector's preoccupation with the sensations of the body and his exclusion of emotion effectively destroyed any eroticism. As she wrote to her patron,

You do not know what you are missing by your microscopic examinations of sexual activity to the exclusion of aspects which are the fuel that ignites it. Intellectual, imaginative, romantic, emotional. This is what gives sex its surprising textures, its subtle transformations, its aphrodisiac elements. You are shrinking your world of sensations. You are withering it, starving it, draining its blood. . . Only the united beat of sex and heart can create ecstasy (xv-xvi).

Upset with the way she was coerced to change her style, Nin refused to publish the *Erotica* for decades. Upon rereading it in the 1970's, however, she discovered that, her capitulation to the collector notwithstanding, she had effectively created something unique:

I believed that my style [in the erotica] was derived from a reading of men's works. For this reason, I long felt that I had compromised my feminine self. . . Rereading it these many years later, I see that my own voice was not completely suppressed. In numerous passages I was intuitively using a woman's language, seeing sexual experience from a woman's point of view. I finally decided to release the erotica for publication because it shows the beginning efforts of a woman in a world that had been the domain of men (xvi-xvii).

Thus, Nin felt that she had offered a feminine sexual voice, something that had been lacking in the erotic genre in America.

This brings us to the second major issue, a consideration of Nin's relationship to French erotica. In some ways, Nin translated the French art of erotica writing into English, and repackaged it for an American audience. As she states:

France has had a tradition of literary erotic writing, in fine, elegant style. When I first began to write for the collector I thought there was a similar tradition here, but found none at all. All I had seen was shoddy, written by second rate writers. No fine writer seemed ever to have tried his hand at erotica (xiii).

So Nin set out to write "fine, elegant" erotica in English. She surrounded herself with a coterie of writers, and they all wrote for the collector:

I gathered poets around me and we all wrote beautiful erotica. As we were condemned to focus only on sensuality, we had violent explosions of poetry. Writing erotica became a road to sainthood rather than to debauchery (xiv).

Essentially Nin, who was widely read in French literature but wrote in English, attempted to reproduce the customs and methods of a French literary style in America. In this, she was somewhat successful. When Nin's *Erotica* collections were published in the mid-1970's, they became her only bestsellers, and among the first female-authored erotic collections to be written in English. They were widely read, and lauded for their uniquely *feminine* approach to sexuality.

The time has come to laud Nin's *Erotica* for more than the fact that it was written by a woman. As American society begins to explore the idea of gender identity construction in

literature and film, it should consider one of the first English-language writers to explore this topic in fiction. Nin's time has arrived.

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Chapter One

Claiming Ownership: Issues in Nin Criticism

Throughout her life, Anaïs Nin was never at a loss for critics, literary and otherwise. Shortly after her father deserted her, Nin's mother, Rosa, bought her a notebook in the hopes that it would distract her from her feelings of abandonment and provide an outlet for her creative energies. While she originally intended to use the notebook as a sketch-pad for the drawings she hoped would be her vocation, Nin soon began using it to write stories about her life. She initially conceived her diary as a letter to her father, but it quickly became the lens through which she viewed and re-viewed the world. The diary soon progressed beyond the distraction Rosa had hoped it would be and became an obsession for Nin. Her relatives became worried at her constant jotting and her mother eventually had to nag Nin to stop writing and concentrate on the "real" world.

For Nin, the diary became her "real" world. Over the next sixty years, Nin would continue to write in it, filling thousands of pages in over a hundred volumes. It would become her other identity, her confidant, her constant companion, the repository of all her experience, and the foundation of her literary reputation. Nin would re-write her life in the diary, and then re-write the diary as stories. In the diary, Nin created herself; out of the diary, she created fiction.

Given the impact of the diary on her life, it is no surprise that it has become the basis of much of the literary criticism which has been applied to Nin. The primary dividing line in Nin criticism has traditionally been disagreement over the relative merits of her diary versus her fiction. This question has led to the evolution of two rather amorphous camps: those who feel her fiction was a purer distillation of her diary, and those who feel Nin's diary is her greatest achievement, compared to which her fiction is a pale copy. It is difficult, however, to accurately portray these two camps as equals. The majority of Nin criticism has been based on the *Diary*, mainly because it is the largest and most deeply personal portion of her *oeuvre*. By comparison, Nin criticism has generally given her

fiction short shrift, and has almost completely avoided mention of her *Erotica* series. Consequently, the Nin criticism represented below is drastically skewed in favor of her *Diary*.

Ultimately, however, this division seems unrealistic. Combatants on both sides agree that Nin's fiction was the product of her diary. Furthermore, even the supporters of her diary are largely willing to admit that her constant rewriting of it, and the considerable editing that went into its publication, make the diary a spurious historical source at best, and a fictionalized narrative at worst.

Moreover, just as Nin's diary and fiction bled into each other, so the two lines of criticism have, to a great extent, combined. Because of the degree to which they influenced each other, and the critical perspectives they give on each other, it is difficult to discuss Nin's fiction without discussing her diary, and vice-versa. Discussing Nin's fiction without considering her diary is comparable to ignoring almost her entire source material. Conversely, discussing Nin's diary without considering her fiction is tantamount to ignoring a primary example of her creative process while trying to unravel what is essentially a work of self-creation.

Recognizing that traditional dividing lines in Nin scholarship are flawed, it is perhaps better to consider her critics thematically, rather than through the cracked lens of a theoretical division that seems increasingly irrelevant. With this in mind, I have chosen to review those aspects of Nin criticism that are relevant to a consideration of her *Erotica* from a queer theory perspective. First among these is Nin's act of self-creation.

"Self-creation" may seem an odd term to apply to someone who relentlessly recorded her every thought, her every deed, and every significant event in her life. However, that is exactly what Nin's diary is. It does not purport to be an "accurate" depiction of either its author or the times in which she lived, and the version of Nin that peeks out from her diary is part literary creation, part fantasy, and part complement to her personal identity. The "Diary Nin" is as much a literary creation as a living being.

Consideration of Nin's Diary as an act of self-creation is often intertwined with consideration of her as an artist. This is because the diary, as Nin interpreted it, was intimately tied to her creation of self. As she wrote in the diary, she created her artistic style and defined her individuality. The first proponent of Nin's diary as an art form, and the first person to recognize its role in her artistic self-creation, was Henry Miller.¹ In 1937, he published "Un Être Étoilique," in which he argues that Nin's diary is destined to become a classic:²

As I write these lines Anaïs Nin has begun the fiftieth volume of her diary, the record of a twenty-year struggle towards self-realization. Still a young woman she has produced...a monumental confession which when given to the world will take its place beside the revelations of St. Augustine, Petronius, Abélard, Rousseau, Proust, and others (*The Henry Miller Reader*, 287).

Miller's justification for this rather grandiose comparison is based less on his appreciation of Nin's writing than on his belief that diaries and autobiographies, as art forms, will ultimately eclipse other forms of literary art. He suggests that they are as artistic an endeavor as any other literary form and that, moreover, the diary's central quest for self-realization not only encompasses, but overwhelms the more traditional literary goals of truth and beauty:

The chief concern of the diarist is not with truth, though it may seem to be, any more than the chief concern of the conscious artist is with beauty. Beauty and truth are the by-products in a quest for something beyond either of these. But just as we are impressed by the beauty of a work of art, so we are impressed by the truth

¹ This seems odd because Miller's repeatedly exhorted Nin to limit her devotion to the diary in favor of more traditional media.

² Nin coined the word "étoilique." She based it on the words "étoile," or stars, and "lunatique," or lunatic, literally "one who is fascinated with the moon." "Étoilique," therefore, would be "one who is fascinated by the stars." "Un Être Étoilique" would therefore mean "to be one who is fascinated by the stars."

and sincerity of a diary (289).

Miller believes that the search for self-knowledge which a diary entails inevitably leads to a discovery of the truth and beauty which exist in the individual and, by extension, in the human condition. He admires the diary form for its ability to uncover transcendent truths about humanity even as it records the individual's course toward self-creation.

Having established what he believes to be the value of the diary as an art form, Miller goes on to argue that Nin's diary is a fine exemplar of this process. He feels that her work is a fresh, feminine examination of the human condition, with a consciousness that transcends pedestrian issues of ego and identity. Finally, he states that her "human document":

Rivals the work of art, or in times such as ours, *replaces* the work of art. For, in a profound sense, this is the work of art which never gets written-because the artist whose task it is to create it never gets born. We have here, instead of the consciously or technically finished work,...the unfinished symphony which achieves consummation because each line is pregnant with a soul struggle (295).

Thus, in Miller's eyes, Nin's diary, although unfinished, achieves "consummation," or completion, because it records the "soul struggle" of an individual attempting to create herself. He suggests that Nin, in creating and re-creating herself, repeatedly achieves completion, followed by re-creation. Miller suggests that the "artist whose task it is" to produce the tale of self-creation never does so because s/he "never gets born." The artist is too busy birthing fiction to ever concern him or herself with the task of birthing his or her own identity. Thus, in Miller's eyes, by allowing readers to view her repeated self-creation, Nin educates them on the art of achieving identity.

Miller's essay, and his tireless support of Nin's diary, raised the work to near legendary status. That was, in fact, Miller's intention, as he hoped to use the publication of

the diary to bolster his own career. However, despite considerable public and critical interest, Nin's diary was not published until 1966, when *Diary I*, a section which focused on Nin's late twenties and early thirties, was released to considerable public interest.

In her 1968 article, "Anaïs Nin: Myth and Reality," one of the first post-publication proponents of the diary as an art form, Marianne Hauser, considered the mythic status of Nin's diary in the literary world.³ Hauser first addresses the reality of Nin's diary in relation to its myth:

Now that the first two volumes of *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* have appeared in print, the nimbus of a literary myth has lifted and from it emerges a solid work of art, painstaking in its accuracy, profound as well as witty, and illuminated by poetic vision (45).

By placing the myth of the diary in opposition to its reality, Hauser effectively recenters Nin's fame in her work itself; not in what has been said about it. This "nimbus," this cloud imagery, is central to Hauser's consideration of the diary, for she honors both its clarity and its intense hold on reality. Nin, she feels, solidly and realistically explores the birth and growth of an artist.

In order to explore Nin's diary beyond the myth which surrounds it, however, Hauser must fully explicate the myth itself. This she does, initially employing a personal reminiscence of a conversation about the diary before its publication:

The myth included...the diary she had supposedly been keeping since childhood. I say supposedly, because I remember how at a literary party...more than twenty years ago, one of the guests earnestly questioned if there was such a diary. Mightn't it be...an imaginary opus...talked about here and abroad though no one had seen them? (45)

³ Hauser, Marianne. "Anaïs Nin: Myth and Reality." *Studies in the Twentieth Century* 2 (Fall 1968): 45-50.

Hauser demonstrates the dangers of having one's work publicly discussed when it is not available for consideration. Prior to the publication of the diaries, some suspected that they did not exist, but had been imagined by Miller, who used them as a fictional example to prove a point about the art of literary creation.

As part of the process of demystifying the diaries, Hauser criticizes Miller's excessive support of Nin's work:

As early as 1937, Henry Miller had...equated the *Diary* with "the revelations of St. Augustine, Petronius, Abelard..." Miller's statement...has a hollow ring. Like that earlier myth which tended to cloud the vitality of Anaïs Nin's art, it seems to remove her from us again, entomb her in a hall of fame among the ancient, or worse add her name to those distant immortals engraved into the walls of our public libraries (46).

In attacking "Un Être Étoilique," Hauser accomplishes two goals. First, she effectively dispels the cloudy "nimbus" which has shrouded Nin's work. In so doing, she makes Nin useful and immediate, both as an exemplar of writing, and as a subject for study. No longer an "ancient" literary "immortal," old before her time; in Hauser's construction, Nin becomes a living voice, capable of useful commentary and instruction for the contemporary author and reader. Second, Hauser metaphorically takes Nin out of the hands of Miller, her literary benefactor, and forces her to stand on her own merits. While this means that Nin no longer benefits from Miller's reputation, it also means that she can no longer be obscured by it.

Having freed Nin's work from the shadow of Miller, Hauser is able to comment on Nin's writing style:

[Nin's] style is flexible, lucid. The imagery is succinct...With a few pen strokes she alerts us to the tenor of the moment, its charm or horror, its duplicity. There is no verbal clutter. She has the

discipline of the artist-writer who, as Nietzsche demands, must proceed with grace on a narrow road, flexibly, like a dancer (46).

Hauser praises Nin for her spare, clean style of writing. There is no “verbal clutter,” no excess words. In Hauser’s estimation, Nin is “disciplined” and precise in her recollections. She gives neither more nor less than is needed and, in so doing, demonstrates a masterful method of writing that is “of invaluable help to students of writing” (48).

Hauser again returned to Nin’s diary in 1970 with “Thoughts on *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*.”⁴ In this essay, she considers the means by which Nin’s diary became a sort of “writers workshop” for her:

[The Diary is] the story of Nin’s growth as an artist and a woman. The journey is still in progress...Nin draws from her source, the diary, and through added dimensions creates an intensified reality, i.e., fiction. Again and again, we are through the diary led into the secret corridors of artistic creation. She calls the diary her hashish, her best solace and worst enemy. However, it is above all a writers workshop. Ideas, fragments are set down to be abstracted later, and made into some of her best stories (65).

Here Hauser picks up the thread of self-creation which Miller introduced in 1937 and takes it further. According to Hauser, Nin is not only creating herself as “an artist and a woman,” but ultimately also generating the grist that will ultimately be milled into “some of her best stories.” This connection between the creation of individuality and the creation of fiction becomes one of the most controversial aspects of Nin study, as many later critics feel that, for Nin, there was no differentiation between the two. Hauser, however, does not address this issue. For her, it suffices to consider the position of Nin’s diary in her creation of both personal identity and fiction.

Daniel Stern further explores Nin's careful balancing of reality and fantasy in her diary in his 1968 article, "The Diary of Anaïs Nin."⁵ Stern begins with establishing what he considers to be the major problem facing the modern writer:

The main problems of modern art have not changed since the nineteenth century. Realism or some form of anti-realism--this is still the question at the center of the artist's choice of method...The conflict is always between reality and dream--between the ice-clear day and the mists of night (39-40).

For Nin, this must have been an especially difficult dilemma. Paris of the 1930's, the time and place in which she began her writing career, was at the heart of the burgeoning Surrealist movement, an artistic movement that embraced anti-realism. On the other hand, Nin's medium of choice, the diary format, traditionally relies on adherence to reality.

In Stern's estimation, Nin effectively negotiates the problem of marrying her medium to the preeminent artistic philosophy of her time by, first, maintaining a realistic consideration of the world:

While adoring night and its special magics she has created the clarity of time...the lyrical, but utterly specific poetics of place...and most of all she has created one of the most magnificent sets of characters to appear in any contemporary work of art. None of these is presented with the distortions, the derangements of sense that characterize the "night works" of the surreal (41).

Thus, Stern argues that, while Nin's view of the world, as it emerges in her writing, is "lyrical" and magical, it is also, nonetheless, "specific" and clear. Her "characters," the people in her life and diary, are not "distorted" or viewed through a "derangement of sense," as they would be in many surrealistic works, but are rather depicted realistically.

⁴ Hauser, Marianne. "Thoughts on *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*." *Journal of the Otto Rank Association* 5.1 (June 1970): 61-67.

⁵ Stern, Daniel. "The Diary of Anaïs Nin." *Studies in the Twentieth Century* 2 (Fall 1968): 39-43.

Stern does not suggest, however, that Nin completely eschews the surrealistic style and themes of her contemporaries, but merely that she considers them secondary to the reality that her work recounts. According to him, Nin uses surrealistic themes and imagery, but applies them to a purpose: obtaining a greater understanding of the human condition in both its beauty and its ugliness. As he lauds her:

The artist has tampered with reality; and reality has been the beneficiary.....The inner and the outer, the day and the nighttime style of living and of feeling are, at Miss Nin's best, merged...She has solved some of the most pressing problems of the modern artist. How real must reality be-how does one deal with the dark side, the surreal side of living (which is present as much in Homer as it is in Norman Mailer)? (42).

Thus, Nin not only effectively addresses both realism and surrealism, she also uses the conflicting techniques to consider the dark underbelly of human life as well as the bright side.

In a final note, Stern is less forgiving of Nin's style than Hauser. While Hauser praises Nin's avoidance of excess verbiage, Stern gives a qualified criticism of Nin's technique:

There are numerous entries that are loose and lyrical in the pejorative sense in which the word "feminine" is sometimes used.

But these are always balanced by a taut sense of reality (42).

Thus, Stern turns even this a criticism into a compliment. Like Hauser, he honors Nin's "taut sense of reality," even while he argues that it is offset by an at times excessively "feminine" lyricism. By this, we may assume that he means that Nin's work occasionally becomes unclear, but always maintains a strict relationship with reality.

Stern returned to the diary in his 1971 article “The Novel of Her Life: *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume IV, 1944-1947*.”⁶ In this work, he reviews the themes and flow of Nin’s diary, and argues that the multiple volumes together form a “novel”:

Along with Proust and Gidé, Anaïs Nin has taken the materials of individual lives and their settings, and portrayed them in conflict, filtering the results of the conflict through her own sensibility. In short, she has been creating a novel in the form of a continuous diary. It is one of the most ambitious undertakings in modern writing (571).

In other words, Nin uses the raw materials of her life and those of her colleagues to create a work which contains plot, story, and conflict. The idea of becoming the author in one’s own life, of sorting out intention and meaning in the confusing flow of day-to-day life is overwhelming. Yet, this is exactly what Stern is suggesting. In his estimation, Nin not only creates herself and her fiction, as Miller and Hauser suggest, but she actually finds reason, intent, and meaning in the chaotic reality of her life.

Tristine Rainer considers the role of the diary in explaining Nin’s growing consciousness as an artist in her 1974 article “Anaïs Nin’s *Diary I: The Birth of the Young Woman as an Artist*.”⁷ Although this article is primarily a retelling of the diary, Rainer effectively argues that Nin categorizes her decisions by polarizing characters and making them represent opposed choices:

Once the reader understands the diary as the working out of an inner liberation, a story of growth, which is movement away from death and toward new life, the nature of the characterization and imagery become clear. New people appear in Anaïs’ life as a new side of her begins to grow, while others seem to her to be dying,

⁶ Stern, Daniel. “The Novel of Her Life: *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume IV, 1944-1946*.” *The Nation* 29 Nov. 1971: 570-572. Rpt. in Zaller 153-156.

⁷ Rainer, Tristine. “Anaïs Nin’s *Diary I: The Birth of the Young Woman as an Artist*.” Zaller 161-168.

as the part of her that needs them dies (163).

Thus, in Rainer's conception of the diary, Nin's "characters" are metaphors for what Rainer considers a constant process of death and birth. Moreover, Rainer asserts that the movement of people in and out of Nin's life is a technique she uses to demonstrate change in her own interests and personality. Rainer's argument frames Nin's diary as an almost purely symbolic work, rejecting Stern and Hauser's suggestion that it carefully navigates between realism and symbolism.

Rainer's consideration of how Nin addresses Antonin Artaud is a prime example of how she frames Nin's creative process:

At first Antonin Artaud represents birth to Anaïs. She writes, "He began to talk flowingly....It gives a strange feeling, as if one were witnessing the very process of a birth of a thought, a feeling. One can see the nebula, the unformed mass moving, struggling for shape...." But later she sees he is dying. She writes, "To be touched by Artaud is to be poisoned by the poison which is destroying him" (163).

Rainer's argument that Nin uses her characters as metaphors for changes in her life minimizes the degree to which one can take Nin's diaries as historical recollection. She is certainly aware of this, as she claims that "the Diary is not intended to be read as an objective record of notable people living in Paris in the thirties, but as a subjective account of Nin's personal growth in relation to them (163)." However, viewing Nin's diaries this way foregrounds them as works of artistic creation, for Nin seems to create reality as a novel, complete with all the artistic flourishes one might expect of that form.

Lynne Sukenick's 1976 essay "The *Diaries* of Anaïs Nin"⁸ considers the question of authenticity in the diary, but ultimately argues that it is irrelevant: "Nin's power...is not in direct proportion to the quantity of information in the diaries, not a direct function of

⁸ Sukenick, Lynn. "The *Diaries* of Anaïs Nin." *Shenandoah* 17.3 (Spring 1976):96-103.

how much she tells us” (97). Thus, Nin’s diaries should not be considered as historical documents, for that is not where their strengths lie. In Sukenick’s view, they should be valued for their artistic and human accomplishment.

Moreover, Sukenick argues, Nin’s tendency to rewrite the past is a central part of her personality. As she states,

For Nin, realism is a form of defeat. She craves the idyllic...and her drive toward the perfect...and her impulse to make things as beautiful as possible is a central feature of the diaries.

Transforming her optimism into an esthetic, she believes that the role of the artist is to transform ugliness into beauty, in life as well as in writing...Nin’s occasional neglect of sincerity...in the diaries--the lies she tells to others...to maintain harmony...is directly related to her desire for perfection (98-99).

Thus, Sukenick suggests that it is irrelevant to argue over honesty and authenticity in Nin’s diaries, as the same “esthetic” that drove her make her diaries beautiful compelled her to do the same in her life. That this process of “beautification” occasionally occurs at the expense of truth is, in Sukenick’s eyes, ultimately irrelevant. Furthermore, Sukenick argues that Nin not only accepted her tendency to “transform” her world, at least in the diaries, but that she felt that doing so was her job as an artist.

Finally, Sukenick suggests that Nin’s practice of remaking herself through creative editing of the diary is a blueprint for how individual readers might create and recreate themselves:

Nin relates how she sometimes conceals things from others in order not to hurt them...She writes in the diary to compose herself, literally, to offset her empathic merging with others. Yet even this private act, now made public, offers comfort, now to her readers, who receive insights into and a blueprint for the opening of the

heart, solicitude, and creative energy...Many of her readers have saved and changed themselves through the inspiration of her work (102).

In light of the eternal question of whether it is better to be dishonest, but kind, or to be honest, but cruel, it is not hard to see where Sukenick places Nin. The surprising thing about this positioning, however, is that Sukenick does not consider Nin's dishonesty to be problematic. In fact, she apparently revels in it. Sukenick seems to argue that Nin's creative relationship to the truth is necessary to enable her to relate to others without losing her identity. In Sukenick's interpretation, Nin *needs* to lie in order to maintain her individual identity.

As far as utilizing Nin for a lifestyle exemplar is concerned, Sukenick must be approached skeptically. While the idea that Nin's writing has powers of salvation is interesting, Sukenick's total failure to provide grounds to support this claim positions it in the world of late-night infomercials, not literary criticism.

Sharon Spencer furthered Sukenick's train of thought in her 1977 book *Collage of Dreams*. She argues that issues of honesty and authenticity are irrelevant, because Nin's diary, as she edited it, is a purer expression of self than the real life which she lived. To demonstrate the value of Nin's careful editing of her life, Spencer uses the metaphor of "ragpicking":

Anaïs Nin is often imagined to have been a wealthy, expensively dressed woman, yet the truth is that many times she remade her clothes or wore dresses purchased from thrift shops. In the diary she tells of transforming an inexpensive suit or dress into elegance...Seemingly irrelevant, these examples of Nin's thrift actually point to one of her most characteristic attributes: the desire to...restore meaning to what has been neglected and to give meaning to what has been ignored or derided. In short, Nin is a

ragpicker of experience (1).

By comparing questions of honesty and authenticity to tailoring and fashion, Spencer does what Stern, Sukenick, and Hauser failed to do: she makes Nin's potential dishonesty seem virtuous. In Spencer's construction, the liberties Nin takes with the truth essentially make silk frocks out of *schmattes*. This reconsideration of Nin's honesty enables Spencer to move beyond her colleagues' suggestions that Nin's dishonesty is irrelevant, to her own argument that dishonesty is Nin's greatest strength.

Spencer avers that Nin's diary expresses a fullness and depth of existence which was richer than her actual life; it is a "complement," a fantasy, and a testament to the reality of individual identity:

As a woman, with responsibilities and obligations to others that often seems more important than her personal concerns, Nin has used her Diary to fill out her life; it is a complement; it is the expression of the dimensions of her self that her life has not always had room for. Nin's Diary is a more authentic, certainly a more complete, deeper, and fuller expression of her self than the actual life she has lived (118-119).

Spencer suggests that Nin was able to live a fuller life by creating herself in the pages of her diary. Thus, as a reflection of her personality and individuality, the Diary is actually "more authentic" than the reality of Nin's life.

One telling aspect of Spencer's formulation of Nin's Diary is her emphasis on Nin's femininity. Spencer directly connects Nin's "responsibilities and obligations to others" to her being a "woman." Spencer's emphasis upon Nin's womanhood, and her supposed willingness to ignore her own needs for those around her are indicative of Nin feminism, a trend in Nin criticism that first reared its head almost as soon as the first volume of her diary was published, and which was still in its earliest stages when Spencer wrote her book.

Much of contemporary feminist discourse seems to feel the need to position itself in relation to Nin. Feminist theorists seem eager either to honor or to demonize her, praise her or bury her. Perhaps this is because Nin's writings cut to the heart of the act of self-creation with which the feminist movement in America has had to come to terms. Perhaps it is because, when Nin was faced with self-creation, her choices were not always the ones that contemporary feminists would have preferred.

In constructing herself as an independent woman, Nin was forced to negotiate her conflicting need for self-expression and desire to support the men in her life. Admittedly, this was not always an easy path. Nin's financial and emotional support of her husbands and lovers pushed her to the edge of total collapse and/or abject poverty on numerous occasions. Conversely, at other times she abandoned her lovers and husbands, leaving them to their own devices while she pursued her own self-identity. Eager to construct herself as an independent entity, she nonetheless occasionally found herself defining her identity in relation to the men around her.

Beginning with the publication of Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* in 1968, critics started to consider how Nin related to later feminist movements, and consequently compared her ideological framework with that of modern feminism. Ellmann considers Nin's *Diary* a prime example of how some female authors reproduce antiquated female stereotypes, from which they consider themselves exceptions. To demonstrate Nin's adherence to this process, Ellmann first establishes what the process is:

In some writers, it seems...a self-deceptive vanity. It is possible for the vain to establish themselves with the best that has been said, and to associate *other* women with the worst: to court the authorities, like state's witnesses, by admitting the guilt of their associates(188).

In Ellmann's estimation, certain female authors adopt those stereotypes of women that seem to honor them, and apply the ones that do not honor them to other women. She considers this a betrayal of womanhood, and believes that Nin is a prominent perpetrator:

When Anaïs Nin writes, "Man attacks the vital center. Woman fills out the circumference," and then, "Feminine vision is usually myopic. I do not think mine is..." we know that she herself does not intend to subsist circumferentially (188).

In other words, Nin suggests that men get to the heart of the matter, and women embrace the entire situation. This, in itself, is not a criticism, but when it is paired with Nin's suggestion that women tend to be unable to see the heart of the problem, it indicates disability, and thus becomes a criticism of women. This is further highlighted when Nin excludes herself from this process.

Ellmann's primary goal is to vanquish misogynistic stereotypes. Consequently, she cannot entirely attack Nin. Nin, Ellmann suggests, also demonstrated a willingness to apply traditionally negative "female" stereotypes to men:

Another effective, though less predictable, observation [of Nin's]: "Women are so much more honest than men..." In less rarefied circles than Miss Nin's, the question is "Which sex is the more dishonest?" and women are generally supposed to be the answer (189-190).

It seems odd that Ellmann cannot quite bring herself to acknowledge Nin's reversal of traditional stereotypes. In the passage above, Nin conceivably argues that traditional sexual stereotypes are inadequate. Her apparent insight into this matter might have been the product of the psychoanalysis she and her husband, Hugo Guiler, received in the early-1930's. At that time, they were both seeing Dr. Rene Allendy, and one of Allendy's diagnoses was that Guiler marriage and business dealings were largely successful through Guiler's use of subtlety, indirection, and evasion. This galled Guiler, who viewed these

techniques as “women’s methods.”⁹ Guiler, as always, shared these observations with Nin, who may well have integrated them into her diary. Ellmann is either ignorant of this historical backing, or chooses to ignore it, as she seems inclined to ignore Nin’s apparently non-traditional gender stereotyping, and instead proceeds to focus her attention on *justifying* female dishonesty.

Not all feminists hate Nin. Some, in fact, recognize Nin’s proto-feminism, and have attempted to relate it to modern feminism. This issue was first considered by Ann Snitow, whose 1971 article “Women’s Private Writings: Anaïs Nin” opens with Snitow advocating diaries as a form of record and self-discovery:¹⁰

When you have written something in a diary, it becomes permanent, like any form of art, while your life begins instantly to diverge from what it was at the moment of writing. Having a record of an earlier state of mind is both a satisfaction in itself, and a gesture toward the future. The desire to make such a record is at the source of *all* writing (414).

This opening immediately positions Snitow within Nin discourse. For Snitow, Nin’s diary is a path to self-discovery that all women can follow. Moreover, as the basis of all other writing, it can potentially empower women to take control of their own self-creation.

When Snitow considers the pressure on Nin to become “masculine,” she places the diary in opposition to the men in Nin’s life:

Anaïs was the androgynous go-between who wanted to play the man to June [Miller], and play the male companion, the fellow artist, to Henry [Miller]. The diary explores this painful kind of bisexuality--so unlike the kind feminists dream of--in which, to create, you must in some way become a man, but to live in a

⁹ Bair, Deidre. *Anaïs Nin: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995) 153.

¹⁰ Snitow, Ann. “Women’s Private Writings: Anaïs Nin” *Notes from the Third Year* (New York: n. p., 1971). Rpt in *Radical Feminism*.

human way, you must support men...and sacrifice those things in you the world calls masculine (415).

Snitow suggests that, in trying to become a writer, Nin feels pressured to metaphorically “become” a man, and accept all the self-centered baggage that goes along with that. However, by doing so, Nin also must give up a basic part of her identity. She must abolish her position as helpmeet, she must deny the very femininity which she believes defines her.

Reviewing Nin’s life in Paris, Snitow admits that “it’s fairly plain Anaïs Nin isn’t a conscious feminist as we understand the term now” (414). Nin expended tremendous amounts of energy taking care of the men in her life, and accepted comments and advice from her analysts “that would be intolerable to a feminist today” (414). However, in spite of this apparent lack of feminist consciousness, Snitow recognizes Nin’s value to modern women:

In the diary she ceases to be a mirror for other people like [Henry] Miller and [Otto] Rank, and tries to become herself. But this is a terrible struggle. “...No one has ever loved an adventurous woman as they have loved adventurous men.” So annihilating is this difference that the very images by which she expresses it are, of necessity, male (418).

In questioning Nin’s relevance to modern feminism, Snitow recognizes her position as an exemplar of sorts. She admits that Nin was not a feminist as such, but her struggle for personal identity in the face of unified male opposition is not dissimilar from what contemporary feminists have had to face. Moreover, the self-expression and creation of identity which Nin underwent mirrors the struggle of women today.

The critical scholarship on Nin’s *Erotica* has, unfortunately, been marred by a lack of serious consideration. There seem to be three basic schools of *Erotica* scholarship. The first is the “sincere scholar” perspective. These authors attempt to review Nin’s work

sincerely and with a great deal of honesty. Foremost among these is Smaro Kamboureli, whose 1984 article, "Discourse and Intercourse, Design and Desire in the Erotica of Anaïs Nin" attempts to reposition Nin's work in a scholarly context.¹¹ Kamboureli argues that Nin is "innovative within the realm of pornography" (144) Her first justification for this assertion is the fact that Nin's "naturalistic vocabulary" (143) separates her work from more hackneyed, male-oriented prurient works. In short, Nin's avoidance of clichéd, scatological terms for body parts raises her above other artists in the genre.

Second, Kamboureli argues that Nin's inclusion of biographical data on her characters creates a frame which extends beyond the sexual acts in which they engage. This separates them from characters in more traditional pornographic literature, who are not given any characterization beyond the bare minimum required to contextualize the sexual acts that they perform.

Dennis R. Miller is another author who writes from the "sincere" perspective. His 1982 article, "*Delta of Venus: Sex from Female Perspectives*," compares several of Nin's stories from *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*.¹² Miller justifies this approach because:

Nin and [Henry] Miller were working closely together at this time. She read and criticized the *Tropics* manuscripts and her stories at times seem to be a woman's response to this male view of sex and lust (7).

By comparing the unromantic and often cruel prose with which Henry Miller describes the sex act with Nin's work, Dennis Miller is able demonstrate much of the revolutionary nature of Nin's work. Moreover, considering the close working relationship between Miller and Nin, the author's connection of these two bodies of work seems valid.

¹¹ Kamboureli, Smaro. "Discourse and Intercourse, Design and Desire in the Erotica of Anaïs Nin." *Journal of Modern Literature* 11.1 (1984): 143-158.

¹² Miller, Dennis R. "*Delta of Venus: Sex from Female Perspectives*." *Seahorse: The Anaïs Nin/Henry Miller Journal* 1.4 (1982): 6-11.

Dennis Miller's best insight is that, in Nin's *Erotica*, she effectively reverses power from its traditional positioning. While "woman" is "repressed...we also see her take control of the sexual game...We see men as mindless brutes, impotent children, narcissists and exhibitionists" (6). Thus, Nin effectively re-situates sexual power in the hands of her female characters. They control their sexual interactions with men and effectively control the reader.

The second group of *Erotica* scholars are those who seem inclined to write on *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* because it gives them an excuse to print explicit sexual descriptions in scholarly journals. The two primary practitioners of this school are Dennis R. Miller and Daniel R. Barnes. Miller can be forgiven because his topic of consideration, Henry Miller's *Tropics*, seem to require a certain level of lingual freedom. For Barnes, however, there is no excuse.

"Nin and Traditional Erotica,"¹³ Barnes' 1982 consideration of Nin's *Erotica*, is not as concerned with Nin's *Erotica* as it is with the "genre and traditional character of [pornography]" (1). In this article, Barnes explores the relationship between two of Nin's erotic stories, "The Woman on the Dunes" and "The Veiled Woman," and preexisting prurient tales. Barnes suggests that the final scene in "The Woman on the Dunes," wherein the female narrator tells how she had sexual intercourse while watching a public hanging, is a retelling of Casanova's description of a similar event with a courtesan.

Similarly, Barnes argues that the "young adventurer who learns his lesson" motif in "The Veiled Woman" has its origins in traditional "dirty jokes." Unfortunately, Barnes' consideration of Nin's *Erotica* largely seems to be an excuse for including quotations from her stories in a scholarly journal. He claims that he does not wish to "draw attention to...Nin's shortcomings as a practitioner [of pornography]," but rather to "the weaknesses...endemic to the genre" (1). However, this again seems like an excuse to drag

¹³ Barnes, Daniel. "Nin and Traditional Erotica." *Seahorse: The Anaïs Nin/Henry Miller Journal* 1.1 (1982): 1-5.

out the hackneyed “man from Khartoum” limericks so popular in elementary school playing fields. Barnes does so with barely-concealed glee.

The final school in *Erotica* scholarship is the traditional academic perspective. These authors seem inclined to consider Nin’s *Erotica* not out of any interest in the material, but rather as a claim to comprehensiveness in their considerations of her *oeuvre*. Philip Jason is foremost among these critics. In his review of Nin criticism, *Anais Nin and Her Critics*, Jason gives the *Erotica* a scant page of attention, prefaced by the dunning statement that:

Delta of Venus (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979) add little to Nin’s stature, even though they sold amazingly well. Much of this work was composed “to order” during the early 1940’s...Perhaps because of this circumstance, Nin seems to have been able to keep an audience in mind in ways that often escape her in the main body of her work (51).

Jason’s tart commentary on Nin’s *Erotica* seems the stock critique of the seasoned academic when faced with popular literature; he seems to distrust it for the very fact that it is popular. Nin’s attention to audience in the *Erotica* series seems to disquiet him, as does its status as Nin’s sole bestseller. It is as if he mistrusts any product of Nin’s typewriter that is not too esoteric for *hoi polloi*.

Unfortunately, Nin scholarship has failed to adequately consider her *Erotica* from a critical perspective. While the few positions covered here are interesting, they only scratch the surface of this issue.

In a broader cultural perspective, Nin’s *Erotica* is the work for which she is best known. Despite the fact that she published over 35 books in her life, *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* are Nin’s only bestsellers. Consequently, although Nin did not wish to be known for her *Erotica*, it is the basis of most of her fame beyond the diary.

Toward the end of her life, Nin realized that, although erotica is a predominantly male genre, and although she wrote her *Erotica* for a male collector, she succeeded in making the form her own. She effectively wrote erotica *as a woman*, and with a distinctively female sensibility.

Perhaps that female sensibility is the basis of the popularity of Nin's *Erotica*. As American society has changed to allow women more freedom to express their desire and individuality, many women have been drawn to Nin's unique depiction of that desire. Moreover, as American society has slowly changed to accept a wider array of individual gender constructions, perhaps Nin's early exploration of that theme has finally found its audience.

Nin criticism has long courted the edges of queer theory, but has never seemed willing to take the plunge. Numerous authors, as we have seen, have lauded Nin for her perspective on female creation of self, both as an artist and as a woman. However, this consideration of Nin's self-creation has never expanded its perspective to consider how she integrated gender construction into her relentless rewriting of her identity. As Nin's diaries tell us, a great portion of her self-construction was based on constructing her gender. Often, this gender identity construction was in defiance of her religious upbringing and the societal stereotypes of her day, stereotypes that enforced virginity and female chastity.

As we have seen, Nin's self-creation was a major influence on her fiction. Considering the extent to which this self-construction leached into her fiction, particularly her erotica, it seems odd that critics have ignored this issue.

Female self construction is not the end of Nin's consideration of gender identity. As Ellmann's book, *Thinking About Women*, seems to suggest, Nin also reconsidered those personality traits that were stereotypically applied to men. Once again, she found the stereotypes lacking.