

## Continuity of the "Womb Writing" in Anaïs Nin's *House of Incest*

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### □ ABSTRACT □

This article explores the possibility of establishing a unique feminine aesthetics within the larger domain of female body politics in the French writer Anaïs Nin's controversial work, *House Of Incest* (1936). The article questions the apparent submerging of the female body in the literary representations of the canon. This research also attempts to study how Nin's formulation of the "womb writing" extends and, actually, precedes the tradition of *l'écriture féminine* by way of analyzing the female body's engagement with and commitment to a continuous existence through the body's most basic organic function; i.e. (re)productivity.

**Key Words:** Anaïs Nin, "womb writing", female body, continuity.

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## استمرارية "كتابة الرحم" في رواية "بيت غشاء المحارم" لأنابيس نين

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### □ ملخص □

تستكشف هذه المقالة إمكانية تأسيس شعريّة أنثوية فريدة ضمن المجال الأوسع لسياسات الجسد الأنثوية في عمل الكاتبة الفرنسية أنابيس نين الإشكالي "بيت غشاء المحارم" (1936)، كما تناقش عملية إقحام الجسد الأنثوي في التمثيلات الأدبية التي تشكّل الإرث الكتابي. ويسعى هذا البحث إلى دراسة الطريقة التي يمتد فيها تشكيل نين ل "كتابة الرّحم" و يستبق تقليد "الكتابة الأنثوية" عبر تحليل تناول الجسد الأنثوي للوجود المتواصل والتزامه به من خلال الوظيفة العضوية الأساسية للجسد ألا وهي (إعادة) الإنتاج.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أنابيس نين، "كتابة الرّحم"، الجسد الأنثوي، الاستمرارية.

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## Introduction:

"Life is a process of becoming" (Nin, *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* 20).

The art of woman must be torn in the womb-cells of the mind . . . woman's creations far from being like man's, must be exactly like her creation of children, that is it must come out like her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished with her own milk. (qtd. in Pulis 30)

This essay offers an exoneration from a torrent of negative critical feedback on Anaïs Nin's literary output especially her (in)famous *House of Incest* (originally published in 1936). It aims at refuting and undermining Nin's attackers who claim that she is only "a nymphomaniac, a slut, a fabulist, deluded and, often a bad writer" (Andersen 64). Surely, such a harsh attack could not only rest on the grounds of Nin's personal life that is elaborately detailed in her life-long diary. A critical response that is prejudiced is bound to reflect a sexist and gendered bias based only on an anatomical difference which plays a vital role in the dynamics of power-sexual relations. I argue that *House of incest* is an attempt at destabilizing gender norms and roles in the biologically differentiated bodies under a phallogocentric discourse. I make use of Lacan's myth of an "Ideal-I" and the incongruity that goes into its configuration (Lacan 503). Nin's work treads the path toward a salvational destination that relieves the female-writing subject from a discontinuity of being and eventually leads to continuity of existence by means of revising the notions of eroticism and death. Moreover, *House of Incest* stands as an irrefutable testimony to Nin's intuitive philosophy of the female aesthetics that she has heartily championed, known as "womb writing" (Friedman 85; Tookey 121).

## Importance and Objectives:

This research studies one prominent aspect of a very important movement in feminist theory; namely, feminine writing, or what came later to be known as *l'écriture féminine*. Its importance lies in its attempt to analyze the work of a relatively submerged female author who has actively championed what she has named "womb writing," a concept that encourages woman to write her own body. The objectives of this study are: first, to question the writability of the female body in the literary scene. The second objective is to suggest that Nin's *House of Incest* is a manifestation of how the female body is a mediator of continuity for the existence of woman. Thirdly, this research aims at problematizing canonical concepts of "eroticism," "life," and "death" within the narrative of *House of Incest* in order to validate a unique feminine aesthetics.

## Methodology:

Nin's counteractive female discourse marks a beginning in a long line of a language seeped in female sensitivity that had yet to crystallize with writers like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Obviously, my argument will rest on the body of what came to be known as "*l'écriture féminine*" (Jones 360) with essays like Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Irigaray's "This Sex which is not One." George Bataille's *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* and Paul Zweig's *The Heresy of Self-Love* will serve as a critical background in support of a female aesthetics that evades demise and holds strong regardless of a masculine interference. Nin's own *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* will also be employed to further advance her case. Of course, other critical responses will come in handy throughout this article as a review of the feedback on Nin's literary creation.

## I

The critical acclaim to Nin's work has been mostly directed at her autobiographical epic which spans over almost her entire life. This focus on the

autobiography is a conclusive evidence to a deeply-rooted, highly gendered response to women's writing. Arguably, woman's only route to the logic of the word is through the diary, a genre that requires no challenge to the higher facilities of creation reserved only to the male. This generic partiality does not negate the fact that Nin's autobiographical pursuit is a direct reflection of her social milieu. Elyse Lamm Pineau argues that Nin employs performance as an expression of the self especially in the "performance narratives of her fictional women" (97). Nin's diaries are seen by many as her greatest achievement due to an affiliation with the concerns of the modern woman. Deirdre Bair argues that Nin stands as an important female figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for exploring such "concepts that brought sweeping change" and caused controversial anxieties. These concepts were "sex, the self, and psychoanalysis" (qtd. in Bawer). Whether Nin uses her diaries as a "practice ground for the stories that would go into her published fiction" or not, is not the concern of this research (Charnock 59). However, I wish to see how the autobiographical venture might have gone in the making of Anaïs, the fiction writer. Nin's fictionalization of the self is accompanied by a publicization of the self-text so that boundaries between the public and the private become blurred. This is part of a wider project which Nin propagates in order to create a module for a shared feminine experience that integrates and invites the other to partake in its "autobiographical intimacy" (Pineau 97).

Although Nin stands out as an idiosyncratic writer who refuses to be aligned with "any warfare or mass movement," her "womb writing" aims at initiating a female-only language that would unite women in their infinite struggle against phallic constrictions. However, this is not to lay a claim on a universal experience for women that eludes their cultural and situational variety which would entail an infinitive theoretical framework. In addition, it would be beyond the boundaries of this article to go into the polymorphous experiences of women at large. However, Nin seems to call for a tentative starting point that is incubated within the female body itself. Margret Andersen wonders whether reading Nin's work would yield "a definition of women's writing" (255). In this sense, the text of a woman becomes synonymous with her body, which reflects and is reflected by the written work itself. It is with Evelyn Hunz, though, that one can start drawing connections between the female body and writing since she states that Nin's work attempts to "reflect the interaction of art and ideology, literature and ideas" (qtd. in Andersen 255).

This moderate, and I think it is fair to say applauding, response to Nin's output is counteracted by a severely negative and chauvinistic feedback. Bruce Bawer directs at Nin an onslaught of a materialistic nature accusing her of being an immature attention-seeker and a spoiled brat. Bawer views Nin's diary as no more than an inventory of lovers and an "intellectual vacuity". He goes on to demonstrate that Nin's only accomplishment lies in proving herself as someone with an obsessive compulsion for "fame; a zeal for self advertisement; a tendency to confuse art and self expression; a rejection of intellect in favor of feeling; a romantic glorification of neurosis, selfishness and irresponsibility". Andersen also cites Michiko Kakutani's response to Nin's relation of "The Father Story" that appeared in her posthumous diary entitled *Incest* (1993) as an example of blinded masculine censure of female writer-ship. Kakutani's reading upholds that Nin's writing does not go beyond the parameters of "annotation" that fails to capture what he sees as the essence of a true incest narrative (Andersen 65). Kakutani goes on to express his dissatisfaction with Nin's failure to "maintain any kind of spontaneity" in her account of her relationships with her father or any male figure in her life" (qtd. in Andersen 65).

Notably, both reviewers exhibit a male fanaticism toward an alleged female "superficial writing" that lacks literary value (65). Typically, a patriarchal society holds

prejudiced and cherished binary oppositions that consolidate gender difference such as "proper/improper, norm/deviation" (Eagleton 189). A simple systematic alignment of other antithetical dichotomies of man/woman and collected/spontaneous would result in attributing collectedness to man while woman remains a spontaneous being at the negative end of the spectrum. I would like to suggest that Kakutani's upbraiding of Nin's lack of spontaneity goes against the very structure of binarized hierarchy of difference. If man is mind, logic and by extension, a master of the writing act, then why would Nin's male reviewers ask for spontaneity in her narrative? Does not this very trait demean the written word? I cannot help but see this as a shortcoming in phallic logic that has deep-rooted anxiety toward the (m)other. Indeed, such a demand may be taken as a clear indicator of the gap existing between male and female expressive signifying practices and, perhaps, languages.

## II

I would like to suggest that *House of Incest* constitutes a part of Nin's agenda to explore what Freud once referred to as the "dark continent" of female sexuality (qtd. in Eagleton 155). The darkness surrounding female sexuality is a result of the silencing of the female body through various discursive practices like psychoanalysis. Woman's relegation to a dark, marginalized non-space has ultimately led her to adhere to the dictations of a male-only oriented logic, thus, masquerading her female identity and putting on a phallic guise. She has been denied her social and sexual rights. Therefore, women were told how "they *should* feel sexually" instead of "what they *do* feel sexually" (qtd. in Suleiman 44). In a much cited Nin quote, one can see how Nin seeks to establish the metaphor of the womb as a synonym for that untrodden dark place which contains all the untold secrets of woman's sexuality. Nin states that "I had a feeling that Pandora's box contained the mysteries of woman's sensuality, so different from man's and for which man's language was inadequate. The language of sex had yet to be invented" (qtd. in Suleiman 43). I think that Nin has managed within the space of a few lines to capture the essence of the female dilemma. Pandora's box, which has set evil into the world, is appropriated by Nin's work in order to re-discover the body that has been denied the right to speak; that is, to verbalize its secrets and desires. I argue, then, that *House of Incest* is a literary womb that encompasses woman's ability to (re)produce, both physically and verbally.

Written in a "surrealist way" as an imaginative "lyrical outburst" (qtd. in Stuhlmann, forward xv), *House of Incest* pushes against the linear succession of time in the dream-like atmosphere of the book in which an unnamed female narrator journeys into her "own book, seeking peace" by virtue of her creative powers (Nin 43). Furthermore, it interpellates the exclusion of the female from the "logic of oral speech and the logic of the text" by the systematic and gradual appropriation and undermining of phallic concentricity (Cixous 339). It also configures a conflation between "the pregnant imagination" and the "pregnant body" (Pulis 29-30). Consequently, the old-age dichotomy of mind/body is deconstructed. Anaïs Nin's work seeks to uncover the generative powers of the female body through the fragmentational nature of its narrator who has experienced an awakening that pushed her to "write this book" (Nin 1). Hence, woman's initiation into language must be seen as inherent and programmed into her body since it comes to being by merely acting out on instinct. The bodily proliferation of the narrator simulates reproduction on so many levels and opens up a possibility of female bodily continuity that is generative in nature. Nin manages to conquer any "passive objectivity" that has been long enforced on woman through her textual creation wherein flesh becomes a word, and blood ink. (Pulis 65).

In his book, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, George Bataille explains how human beings are solitary creatures in that their life cycles run in separate orbs. They are born alone, they live alone, grow old and die alone. An ever-widening and yawning chasm exists between individuals. In other words, human beings are, to this effect, "discontinuous beings" (12). The subject's unconscious life-driving forces are oriented towards a bridging of that gap in an attempt to forego his/her "discontinuity" (12) and reach that tranquil, yet intricate state of "continuity" (13). This existential dilemma is not the corollary of a smooth transition from one state to another but a capricious and violent transformation that shakes the very foundations of the individual. Bataille goes on to suggest the solution(s) to this troublesome state of discontinuity. He sees in death and eroticism an answer to human beings' suffering and anguish. How is that even remotely related to Nin's *House of Incest*? I argue that *House of Incest* comes to embody the very answer that Bataille suggests to humanity's discontinuous existence, and especially in the female's appropriation of the concept of death as the disintegration of restricted bodily confines and that same body's refraction, projection and reflection in the person of the other. In addition, *House of Incest* exhibits an extreme modification of the taboo on incest by re-reading it as an erotic survival strategy that is undertaken by the female and that shapes and enforces a feminine aesthetics and language. Indeed, Bataille even goes further to suggest that death and sexuality are inseparable in that they have the power to disrupt any standing social order through the "abrupt wrench" from discontinuity (16). He cites the Marquis de Sade who declares that "[t]here is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image" to clarify his point of view (qtd. in Bataille 11, emphasis in original).

In accordance with Bataille's approximation of death and erotic desire, Nin's narrative shows how the female works toward a continuous existence by way of reproduction. This biological-cum-artistic process takes place inside the female body by virtue of her womb in which a cellular division and coalescence occur for humanity to come into being. It is through this purely biological function that Bataille draws lines parallel with the sexual act in that both actions entail the "partial dissolution" of their practitioners (17). Bataille explains how

In the process of dissolution, the male partner has generally an active role, while the female partner is passive. The passive, female side is essentially the one that is dissolved as a separate entity. But for the male partner the dissolution of the passive partner means one thing only: it is paving the way for a fusion where both are mingled, attaining at length the same degree of dissolution. (17)

However, any assumed passivity on the part of the female is questioned in Nin's *House of incest* as it seeks to work out a balance "between the maternal and the libidinal" (Pulis 33). The text of *House of Incest*, a womb-in-action, incubates its narrator who refuses to abide by phallogocentric definitions of female sexuality and who becomes an active agent of disruption since she "wrote with pollen and honey" in a gesture of sexual-textual independence (Nin 9). Thus, a process of intra-pollination becomes equal to the sexual act in which the "fecundity of [the] destruction" of established normative heterosexual orders prevails (13). The female narrator of *House of Incest* rises above roles of (re)production that necessitate man's unexpendable contribution by assuming an all-encompassing generative sexual identity. The destruction stems from a desire to break rules and conventions, especially those that belong to procreation; the pillar of the social structure and the need for a re-conceptualization of female sexuality and pleasure. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Anna Powell invokes their concept of "part-objects" in order to

explain how Nin manages to re-invent an unbiased gender-less and sex-less aesthetics through which woman can extricate herself from a phallogocentric structure of sexual-power relations (57). Part-objects, according to Powell, are not to be fixed or associated with distinct body parts of differentiated human beings, but rather, they are to be "found in the dispersion of the nonhuman sex" (qtd. in Powell, 57). Therefore, Nin's "pollen and honey" come to represent the very non-gendered aspect of an anti-phallic sexuality. Furthermore, Nin pushes such an anti-phallic sexuality in the direction of a "post-gendered becoming" that is epitomized in the figure of the modern Christ who, although a male, "was born without skin" and "once stood naked" in a pre-gendered Edenic state (Nin 47). In this instant, flesh becomes like clothes; that is, a wrapping up of the subjective identity into the social, sexual and political constructs of the given ordered structure of living. This means that there is no such thing as an essential male or female, but a covering up of both identities by the assumed teachings of the existent order-in-power. Mary Jacobus states that "there is no unequivocal gender identity . . . but only the masquerade of masculine and the feminine" and that it is only by virtue of "clothes" that the individual is constituted into language (944). The modern Christ, then, serves as a canvas for the restitution of a left-behind imaginary anti-essentialist identity not only superficially formed on "the surface of [his] body, but all through it"; that is, through the foregoing of outside, shallow surfaces and probing deeper within (Nin 74).

In her *exposé* on woman's right to language, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous maintains that the female body is the receptacle of various seemingly opposing forces. For Cixous, being a woman does not necessitate a break from the written word, for she states that woman "physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body" (338). Similar to Nin's call for the female to write in her blood, Cixous also asks woman to write "in white ink" (339). It is from this angle that one can follow Bataille's line of rationalization. Even though he argues that eroticism is independent of reproduction, he still maintains that the latter forms an unconscious desire by which the former is initiated (12). I would like to add that this separation does not take place in Nin's *House of incest*. The desire to mother, to (re)produce, and to (re)create is indivisible from the desire for erotic intimacy. According to Cixous, the mother is a symbol of balance and giving as she "makes everything all right . . . [by] nourish[ing], and . . . stand[ing] up to separation" (339). Therefore, *House of Incest* can be seen as an extension of woman's body whereby "one no longer detects the fissure" (Nin 12). The transition from one state of discontinuous being into a continuous one and the proliferation of one woman into libidinalized multiple others echo Nin's earliest experimental "feminist" philosophy that she laid down in her mock-modesty-entitled text, *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, in which she states that "life is a process of becoming"; a process of sexual-textual decolonization (20). Nin also reviews the concept of death as an ultimate demise and later thematizes it in *House of Incest*. She demonstrates that death is not so much the decay of the living being, but the stasis that results from remaining in one position and not moving toward another, more dynamic state. In other words, it is "death in life [that] is more terrible than physical death" (46).

Henceforth, I present a textual analysis of Nin's *House of incest* in the light of the discussed notions and assumptions. Right from the very beginning, the work assumes an epistemological quest into female creative impulses. The first line shows an unidentified voice- indeed, one cannot tell whether it is that of Nin or some yet unknown narrator- that professes that "[a]ll that I *Know* is contained in this book" (preface, my emphasis). Knowing, which has been associated with the active male creator, is taken up by the

female in order to break up gender distinctions in which the woman is only to be seen as a passive figure whose only role is to propagate male hegemony by reproducing that male into her body. However, the decision to write-as-female is not met with enthusiasm. The narrator seems to be aware of the hostility she is to encounter; a hostility that takes the form of a threat that all women have internalized throughout history. The narrator is wary of the fact that

[t]here is an instrument called the quena made of human bones. It owes its origin to the worship of an Indian for his mistress. When she died he made a flute out of her bones. The quena has more penetrating, more haunting sound than the ordinary flute. (Nin 1)

According to Chris Michael, the female's only route to presence is death and her voice is only heard through an "act of ventriloquism"; that is, she is played to the tune of the male creator (137). I argue that not only is woman played to the tune of the male, but she is also threatened to become mere "bones" if she ever tries to step beyond the boundaries of her designated role. Michael proceeds to elaborate that these "penetrating" and "haunting" qualities of woman's voice are only the result of "being heard from the lips of men" (ibid). However, I think that those phantasmal qualities are not something that only man can display on behalf of woman; rather, they are signs of resistance that are already inherent in woman's body. The threat of death and violence is absorbed and faced out by the narrator who brazenly challenges and launches her counter-threat of continuity to phallogocentric law by stating that "I do not wait for my love to die"; that is, she does not wait to be claimed by death in order for her absence to become presence (Nin 1).

As such, the narrator embarks on a journey of self sexual-textual discovery and makes her duty to correct any lack that she might have been made to suffer in her "uncompleted self" (Nin 3). She takes strength from the fact that "her first birth [was] in water"(ibid). The fluidity and deceptively passive surface of water makes it the perfect atmosphere for the female to initiate her literary aesthetics. This attempt is first a hesitant one as she stands reluctantly "on the threshold" waiting in limbo that is forever in upheaval (ibid). I argue that water, the prenatal state, corresponds with Bataille's continuous state of being. There exists no separation or differentiation and most importantly no gendering of the human being into pre-ordained and pre-shaped moulds of binarized oppositions. This continuous state is characterized by an "ecstasy of dissolution" of a discontinuous being into the all-embracing and sought after state of unbiased acceptance of idiosyncratic difference (Nin 5).

The initiation of the female into the world of writing entails a "return to her self. . . [a] return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (Cixous 337). It is a process of de-alienation and repossession of an estranged body. The connection between the body and writing is explained by Cixous:

To write. An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; *it will give her back her goods, her pleasure, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal*; it will hear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty. (338, my emphasis)

This means that any attempt to write, to inscribe the body, is already inherent within woman; in her womb, the generator of life. Therefore, writing as well as enjoying physical pleasure become analogous in the deterritorialization of the female body from a phallogocentric discourse of confinement and sexual absenteeism. I am inclined to read this prenatal state in water as a womb in which the transition from discontinuity to continuity

takes place and the text of *House of Incest* as a narrative womb that situates the female in the realm of the word and "the logic of the text" (Cixous 339). This is why the narrator "broke the thread" that kept her as an outsider to speech in the process of composing- giving birth- to this text (Nin 1). The continuity of the womb is disturbed again as the narrator wakes up in that opaque area of "dawn, thrown up on a rock" indicating a wrench from that continuity that only woman can experience by virtue of merely being a woman (5).

Hence, the struggle to return to the womb, to continuity, begins. The narrator seems to be "troubled with memories" that haunt her. Those memories, I argue, are reminiscent of that complete state where unity with the other is paramount. According to Jacques Lacan, the trial of psychosexual development through which the human subject goes is responsible for the alignment and production of gendered identities that dictate the designated positions of both male and female. Most conveniently, Lacan's theory links the human psyche to society, and most importantly, the psyche's manifestations in language. To start with, Lacan argues that in the early stages of the development of the infant, it lacks any awareness of its body boundaries and exists in relation to the other. It subsists in a "ceaseless closed exchange" between a perception of a perfect body image and its reflections in other objects (Eagleton 164). This is the "mirror stage" in which a partial identification or pseudo-identification takes place in relation to the subject's awareness of self which is given validity through the presence of the (m)other (Lacan 502). The mirror in this stage serves as an object of identity authentication since it is reflective of one's mental image of the self and the reciprocal exchange that goes into identity formation between self and image, between origin and reflection. Furthermore, the child sees in the body of the mother a reflection of its own image and this is where an everlasting connection is forged with that nurturing body. Lacan demonstrates that

[t]he *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation- and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from fragmented body-image to a form of its totality. . . to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (505-6)

This "insufficiency" is the corollary of a misrecognition- "meconnaissances"- between the self and the specular image (507). Lacan's claim is extended to suggest that this gap in perception will constitute the ego in the future becomings of the human psyche since the object of perception is fundamentally different from the subject that perceives. It is important to note that this stage is pre-linguistic and pre-gendered. This denotes a break from the pre-arranged designations of social and sexual identities governed by the discourse of a language that "always pre-exist us" in the *symbolic order* (Eagleton 174). The symbolic order is that "pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society" and is characterized by the plunge of the unsuspecting subject into the orders dictated by language (167). It is marked by a wrench from the body of the mother and an identification with that of the figure of the father. I see this movement as representative of the movement from continuity to discontinuity, especially that now the subject has been gendered and thrust into opposing sexually-differentiated camps. Any future subjectivities will be based on lack or a non-lack; that is, on the "transcendental signifier" - as Freud would have it- of the phallus which has been conflated with the penis as a symbol of sexual and creative power (qtd. in Eagleton 168). According to this logic, man is seen as endowed with sexual and creative potency while the phallus-less female is to be seen as creatively impotent. I argue that *House of Incest* utilizes the imaginary stage in order to erase the lines of separation that mute the female from her

right of expression in language as it suffers "no lacks or exclusions of any kind" (166). The misrecognition one experiences as a result of the joyous unity of the self in the reflected image continues in the work as it forms a bridge that connects woman to her body and consequently to production, be it sexual or textual. Characteristically, the imaginary order, just like the world of *House of Incest*, is one of multiplicity, proliferation and "plenitude" (166).

This plurivocality is meticulously invoked by the narrator's split into her two (m)others; Sabina and Jeanne who seem to *haunt* and *penetrate* the discourse of phallic dominance. This can be seen as a fragmentation of the female body locked in the phallic chain of signification into resisting others that attempt to thwart the "religion of the father" (Cixous 341). It is not a surprise that man, in his thirst for power, has turned his appropriation of language into a divine status that demands adherence and conformity of the "otherized" female. However, Nin manages to create her own cult; the cult of the womb through this process of self-fragmentation. It is within a spirit of self-induced renewal and transformitivity that this work can be best understood. The narrator's self proliferation is to be seen as a desire to remain connected to that image of wholeness experienced in the mirror stage. Moreover, it transcends that experience to reach a level of female divine self-love. This self-love results in a desire for the self to multiply, which sets a chain-reaction in the body of the female to (re)produce. It should be noted that the narrator's division is the incarnation of the fulfillment of desire since "it is an original lost object- *the mother's body*- which drives forward the narrative of our lives" (Eagleton 185, my emphasis). It is because of its giving, nurturing and unconditional loving that the mother's body is invoked since it is an incontestable truth that woman generates and extends herself by virtue of the biological functions of her womb.

The theme of "divine self-multiplication", which Paul Zweig has tackled in his book, *The Heresy of Self-Love*, can illuminate the narrator's self-fragmentation and desire for the other that is translated into language and the logic of the written word (11). Sabina and Jeanne, who seem to be social misfits, are the apotheosis of a female narrator that transcends any threat of demise and destruction in the shape of becoming mere bones that are to be played by the male. Both phantasmal women become flesh and blood throughout the work and no traits of the male hubris are present; rather, there exists a female sense of achievement of creation. In this sense, Zweig argues in his discussion of the Gnostic tradition that creation is an act of simulation; the simulation of divinity's narcissistic indulgences. This narcissism is not of negative connotations. Rather, it has a generating and benevolent nature that veers away from the traditional and phallic associations that are normally aligned with it. Zweig explains: (I am aware of his use of a masculine pronoun with reference to a higher deity but I use it as a neutral pronoun that is gender-non-specific)

God, they said, is love. But love cannot exist without an object; therefore, it is in God's nature to create something separate from Himself, so that He may exist fully by loving it. What he creates, however, must be worthy of His love . . . . God remains both the object and subject of His love. (11)

In this sense, the narrator takes on the role and rule of the He and reverses to write the female story of creation by re-creation or multiplication that starts in her body; in her womb. Therefore, the narrator is an iconoclastic, idiosyncratic female creator that works towards subverting a hegemonic discourse that denies the female the right to (re)produce and (re)create and, consequently, the right to her own body.

Sabina, whom "no man could satisfy," is introduced in the second part of *House of Incest* (qtd. in Stuhlamann xv). She is the beginning of a process of collapsing the mock-unity that prevails the symbolic and that assigns gender and sexual roles for the male and female whereby man dominates while woman is dominated. Sabina's "luminous mask" is indicative of her performativity of a designated role ,for she plays her part as an object of desire rather than being the subject that decides her fate (Nin 9). The mask Sabina dons goes with the traditional image man has allotted woman, which accords her a mythical status that allows no variety. Cixous has argued that men placed women "between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" and ,consequently, relegated them to an either-or state of being (341). It is either the horror of a castrating and man-eating Medusa or the hysteric *darkness* of the female body. Hence, Sabina is appointed the position of an object of male desire which is the result of the stagnant "indissoluble poison of [the] legends" that the male has woven around the body of the female (Nin 9). *House of Incest*, then, questions the exclusive designation of the female as being either "mad or a whore" by reclaiming her right to voice out her body in writing (18). This is obvious as the narrator lapses into writing "with pollen and honey", a completely foreign style to the phallic use of language (9). In other words, the female body and female sexuality are rewritten by the narrator whose fragments are anthropomorphized into living beings just like the womb produces life and continuity. In a Lacanian sense, the narrator is drawn to the other ,which translates as a continuation of the self and without which the self cannot exist.

The narrator's self-love inspires and ignites female desire which sets the cycle of (re)production into motion, thus, giving birth to Sabina by virtue of the generative powers of the womb. Her body becomes autoeroticized in order to create her other and this, actually, represents a break away from the standard rules regulating human sexuality. George Bataille affirms that eroticism "always entails a breaking down of established patterns . . . of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (18). Accordingly, this proliferation of the body can be seen in the light of what Zweig has called an act of divinity's "self-delight" (12). The female's conviction of expressing her body is substantiated through the recreation of that body into many more. Hence, Sabina embodies the continuity that humanity seeks. Furthermore, she captures the sense of togetherness that the imaginary enfolds and the symbolic seems to be lacking. This togetherness is different from the separation engendered in the symbolic order because "[t]here is no mockery between women. One [woman] lies down at peace as on one's own breast" (Nin 11).

The solidarity that the narrator exhibits is in fact the result of being an autoerotic being. This quality is possible because of her bodily constitution, as Luce Irigaray claims. Irigaray asserts that

woman touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman 'touches herself' all the time . . . for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, with herself, she is already two- but not divisible into one(s)-that caress each other. (350-1)

In this sense, Nin's work manages to corroborate this duality in the female body and even extends it to embrace (an)other presence in the form of Jeanne who will be discussed later on. This multiplicity entails a different system of signification or a different language from that of the male; one that would "[e]xorcise the demons" of phallic determinism by "cheating them of centuries" of sexual and textual hegemonic superiority (Nin 18). Nin's narrator seems to be aware of the importance of words in reclaiming her body. She must

write herself into language and this only attests to the work's initial epistemological quest. Being one with her other self Sabina, the narrator states:

THIS IS THE BOOK YOU WROTE  
AND YOU ARE THE WOMAN  
I AM. (15)

Again, the female is already many within herself. It is the other in her which incurs an autoerotic quality to her body. There is no need for any exterior forces to stimulate female sexuality and desire. Therefore, writing this "BOOK" concretizes the female both physically and textually by way of the fragmentation that is the result of an act of self-delight which will lead to "the divine knowledge of integration, of fusion" that are qualitative of that continuity of being Nin seems to be pursuing in her work (11).

This centrifugal movement outside the self should be viewed as one of the bases of Nin's feminist aesthetics whose foundations she has more or less laid down in her tentative study on Lawrence. I say tentative because of Nin's use of a male literary figure to voice her philosophy. This under-cover experimentation with a female aesthetics spreads later to take a literary shape of its own in *House of Incest* and her two volumes of erotica, *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979). It is not in the capacity of this article to cover these works although they are vital in formulating a comprehensive understanding of Nin's literary corpus. Her work attempts to destabilize that state of complacent separation of discontinuity that is most apparent in the phallic structure of social existence. Nin's redefinition of concepts like "life" and "death" extends to include her literary production. For example, her re-formulation on death as the individual's failure to progress in life by "elect[ing] a state and remain[ing] in it" rather than actual annihilation and decay becomes more understandable in *House of Incest* (Nin, *D.H. Lawrence* 20). Death in its literal sense is recognizable if we view the three presences<sup>†</sup> separately, but when perceived as fragments of an all-encompassing whole, they give death a new meaning. It acquires a transcendental power capable of bringing the continuity of the female body. It is through being one with her others that the narrator manages to disrupt the social order which has been built on the marginalization of the female and prioritization of the male.

Such a disruption is further pursued in the person of Jeanne whose "I love my brother" constitutes, in my opinion, the axis of this work (Nin, *House* 28). The theme of incest is important for Nin in formulating her female aesthetics of the womb. The entry into the symbolic order signals the curtailment of the relationship with the (m)other. It is the stage in which the individual moves from a continuous state of existence into a discontinuity that is marked by detachment of the one from the other. The child who depends on the continuity with the mother is now circumvented "when the father enters upon and disrupts this harmonious scene" (Eagleton 165). Henceforth, the individual is forbidden the access to the mother's body by acknowledging the "social taboo on incest" (165). It is, then, necessary to reunite the individual with the mother's body in order to return to that state of continuity. It is through incest that this is possible. Nin's employment of the metaphor of incest must not be taken at face value, for it holds many more connotations. Incest is defined as being a prohibited sexual relation between blood-related individuals with variations on how closely related these individuals are. George Bataille takes up the concept of incest on anthropological bases. Drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss, he maintains that incest can be seen in the contrast between the nature of man and animal. He believes that it makes up what we are; that is, it subsists in the "transition from Nature

<sup>†</sup> I call them "presences" and not characters because of their fluid and continuous nature.

to Culture" (qtd. in Bataille 198). However, Bataille does not equal incest to the animal; rather, he considers it as a malfunction in the regulations governing organized sexuality. Thus, the taboo on incest serves as a building block in the organization of social-sexual and, therefore, power relations. The aversion towards incest comes from the fact that it forms a threat to social stability in that it re-arranges sexual relations in a manner that reorders those power relations. It reverses the Law of the Father and constitutes a return to the unity with the mother. Moreover, incest, for Bataille, is situation-prone, time-specific and people-dependent. This is due to the materialist quality that has been associated with it and, most importantly, to "the problem of the distribution of women" in the cycle of economic exchange (201). In addition, the erotic quality that is attached to incest renders it a bigger threat to the rules of phallic economy in the sense that both concepts endanger the foundations upon which that economy has been built since eroticism, in Bataille's view, is seen as "an infraction of the laws and taboos" (94).

Bearing this in mind, one can understand Nin's use of the incest taboo in her work and that is incarnated in the person of Jeanne who carries the burden of her incestuous desire for her brother in the form of a "crippled leg" (Nin 27). This deformity in the female body symbolizes the female's fear from pronouncing her sexuality; from admitting her desire. In fact, such disfigurement can be seen as the incarnation of the threat issued at the beginning of the work against female creativity. However, it is possible to argue for an alternative interpretation. Jeanne's deformity can be interpreted as the result of being weighed down by the discontinuity of separate living and the gendered and sexed roles the female has to abide by. She asserts that

[t]he world is too small. I get tired of playing the guitar, of knitting, and walking, and bearing children. Men are small, and passions are short-lived. I get furious at the stair-ways, furious at doors, at walls, furious at everyday life which interferes with the continuity of ecstasy.(28)

This sense of confinement is exactly what Jeanne's incestuous desire stands against. She represents a fissure in the seamless social structure that places the male on top of the pyramid while the female is assigned with all the mundane chores that usually make up woman's identity in that structure. Her refusal to abide by these rules is taken a step further in the form of incest. The taboo on incest works on several levels in Nin's work. It addresses the desire of the female to re-establish her connection with the body she has been denied an access to by establishing a close connection with the forbidden other who is embodied by Jeanne's brother and then moves to another level after proclaiming re-possession of her body.

Jeanne's desire for her brother indicates a desire for language; a desire for writing and the expression of the self. The brother, who symbolizes the phallogocentric social web, comes to represent an object of desire for the female subject and not vice versa. The desire for the other becomes apparent in the form of re-appropriating language. This thrill of committing an act of transgression in language is similar to the thrill one acquires in consummating a forbidden sexual act. Bataille explains that incest makes up the "first proof of the fundamental connection between man and the denial of sensuality, of the carnal and the animal" (216). Therefore, the desire for the br(other) helps to situate the female in the field of the sexual and the erotic as a gesture towards founding a female aesthetics based on transgression of the highest degree. In addition, the figure of the brother symbolizes an invading presence; one that would not allow for the configuration of an independent female aesthetics. Jeanne realizes this fact as she seeks the phantasmal and inapprehensible union with the brother. She states that

[w]hen my brother sat in the sun and his face was shadowed on the back of the chair I kissed his shadow. I kissed his shadow and the kiss did not touch him, this kiss was lost in the air and melted with the shadow. Our love of each other is like one long shadow kissing, without hope of reality. (Nin 31)

Therefore, Jeanne's love for her brother cannot sustain any desire for a marked feminine writing of the body. Furthermore, it forbids the female from the free flow of expressing her desires since she has constantly "felt the heads of men in . . . [her] womb" (25).

This violation calls for extreme measures, then. Male usurpation of the female body leaves no space for creation since the violating male has tried to rob the female from her right of (re)production by entering the womb. Luce Irigaray insists that man has forced himself on woman, denying her the right to sexual pleasure by means of the "violating penis" that inhibits the pleasure of the 'self-caressing' two-lips (351). Hence, the need to steer away from the masculine logic and the necessity to turn to the "other in herself" arise (353). Here, the narrator's multiplication and fragmentation become clearer. An intimacy of a different kind is created. It is the intimacy with the creative woman within; the one capable of disrupting the discontinuous state of the female subject. Jeanne is born from the narrator's awareness of herself; of her body and her love of that self, "angerous intimacy with the other" (18). In this sense, incest takes up a different range of implications. It can be understood in the relapse into a desire for a reunion with the body of the mother whom one has been severed from at the entry into the logic of phallic ideology. Therefore, the female exclusivity in *House of Incest* must be seen less in the light of circumventing and localizing of gendered subjects than in the light of de-marginalizing and re-instating a previously inferior other. This other is translated and installed by the narrator's projection of her body into a self-same other and the forbidden desire toward that other. This desire is dangerous and one that makes Jeanne wary of it. She hangs on the verge; hanging between rejection and acceptance. Jeanne enters an infinite circle of exchange with the other woman. She addresses the narrator, but ultimately reaches out for those excluded others whom the narrator prefigures and understands intuitively:

Don't say anything, because I see that you understand me, and I am afraid of your understanding. I have such a fear of finding another like myself, and such a desire to find one!(Nin 30)

Most often than not, female desire is frowned upon and is met with stern rejection from the exclusive male-oriented discourse. Therefore, Jeanne's fear from venturing into new realms is only natural. She acknowledges her true desires and finds in women a true receptor of those desires. She also realizes that voicing out her desires, speech, will mark an act of transgression, of going beyond the drawn parameters for the female. In addition, Jeanne's speech extends beyond the pages of the work. The *I* reaches out for unlimited, unidentified *you*s that are dispersed outside the boundaries of the self. This opens the door for a proliferation of others through the self that expands to encompass the entirety of humanity. A continuity of existence comes to being as a synthetic outcome of a syncretic union which starts within the self and extends to the outside world. It is a coveted synthesis in which "[w]hat we desire to bring to a world founded on discontinuity [is] all the continuity such a world can sustain" (Bataille, 18).

Jeanne's fear is also projected onto the figure of the armless dancer whose deformity symbolizes the ideological decimation of the female by the phallic discourse. She represents the lack that has been associated with woman. The dancer embodies all that is considered a taboo against the order and dogma of a discontinuous symbolic structure.

The crave to be one with her body, to (re)produce, to speak and to write ,are seen as a threat since her "arms were always tight and craving to embrace"; therefore, they had to be taken away just as the womb had to be violated ( Nin 49). The amputation of the dancer's arms reflects the social taboo on incest and the refusal of that masculine self-righteous society to acknowledge any excess of desire. Here, the narrator seems to project her sense of resistance through incest on three figures: Jeanne, Jeanne's brother and finally the armless dancer. There is a sense of continuity that is achieved by this transference unto others since it establishes an infinitive circle of unceasing exchange between the female self and its multiple others. A sense of generation and regeneration is possible and the epistemological quest that initiates this work is ultimately fulfilled with the promise of continuity. The narrator pronounces that she "WALKED into *my own book*, seeking peace"; thus, indicating a successful maneuvering and overcoming of gender and sexual boundaries in the face of establishing a female aesthetics that resides within the female body (43, my emphasis). This is also signaled in the dancer's re-possession of her arms as she "stood looking at her arms now stretched before her again"(51). The journey is completed and the continuity of existence is achieved as the culmination of the quest into regaining the female body and putting back the parts that have been violated and silenced by the phallogocentric discourse of power. It is an open-ended adventure that is in constant movement "towards daylight" (51).

### **Conclusion:**

This article has accounted for the lack of critical output on Anaïs Nin's *House of Incest*. It detoured from the autobiographical criticism that constitutes the majority of the scholarship on Nin's Literary production. I have attempted to read Nin's philosophy of "womb writing" as a way for the female to regain the right to own her body and, therefore, establish herself in the realm of the logic of the written word. The womb, for Nin, allows for generative powers that can be translated through the text of the body. I have argued that Nin's *House of Incest* represents a quest into the continuity of existence by way of self-multiplication and proliferation. This continuity embraces the female body and is opposed to the laws of the symbolic which assigns individuals into pre-modeled structure of gender roles in which man occupies the center of power and is in charge of language, while woman is relegated to the background as a dark and dangerous territory. It is from this point that I pick up to demonstrate that the female harbors generative powers by virtue of the womb. I have used George Bataille's work on eroticism to account for the quest for continuity and the proliferation experienced in the narrative. Lacan's rendition on the psychosexual development of the human subject has been used to account for the female search for a marked aesthetics that resides in the imaginary stage. In addition, I have employed the French feminist critics, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, in order to show how Nin's "womb writing" can be seen as an antecedent to an idiosyncratic and iconoclastic female writing in a continuous circle of exchange. Nin's own critical work on Lawrence has been used to back up her literary production as well. This all contributes to the female search for her body that can only be found in "the continuity of ecstasy" (Nin 28).

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