

Oropeza, Clara. *Anaïs Nin: A Myth of Her Own*. Routledge, 2019. xv + 114. ISBN-13: 978-1-138-05739-5.

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Clara Oropeza's *Anaïs Nin: A Myth of Her Own* is a 114-page scholarly work on the neglected yet key modernist literary figure Anaïs Nin. The book's aim is to re-vision Nin's work as a diarist and writer of fiction within the modernist canon. Drawing on a broad spectrum of recent scholarship (feminist, modernist and myth studies, psychology), the book will appeal to many readers. It is dense yet always pleasant to read; the argument is clear and to the point. The six chapters that compose the book are preceded by a short preface that situates Nin in her cultural context and states the issues at stake in her writing, ie. "giv[ing] voice to the plurality of truths" (xii), carrying out self-investigation through myth to embrace both the personal and the collective, and challenging sexism.

Chapter 1 is sixteen pages long and offers a dense section detailing the critical background for Oropeza's work. The chapter convincingly takes the reader through a historiography of critical discourse on autobiography. The term itself is soon replaced by the more open term "self-life writing," which enables the author to show that academic criticism on autobiography has long been "a history of valuing the humanist idea of the unique individual moving to locate a unified self." (7) By bringing many feminist critics and specialists of the diary into the discussion (Domna C. Stanton, Shari Benstock, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, and Elizabeth Podnieks, among others), Oropeza reminds us how, paradoxically, although women can claim to be among the first diarists, they have been set aside and never given credit for such a subversive and flexible genre, which also questions the boundaries between private and public, between self and self-image, and between discourse and the gaps or "fissures" it leaves. In this space, diaries—and Nin's diaries in particular—can create and experiment with fictional versions of subjectivity as well as its mythic possibilities. Oropeza's stimulating and engaging first chapter raises key questions about self-life writing (generic boundaries, the discrepancy between part and whole, etc.).

Chapter 2 positions the work of Nin within the broader context of literary modernism, reminding us of recent critical readings that call for a geographically broader definition of modernism, which takes into account previously neglected voices, such as those of women, whose writings on war, for example, have long been deemed "unauthorized" or invalid. Oropeza situates Nin's mythopoesis in the wake of T. S. Eliot's definition of a "mythic method," on which Nin draws in order to distance herself from the ideologically charged notions of "order" and "control" put forward by Eliot. Nin's mythopoesis is more akin to Virginia Woolf's, as Oropeza's choice of title for the book suggests. Also influenced by French Surrealism, Nin—a contemporary of C. G. Jung's and a close reader of Otto Rank—articulates a "personal myth" that aims to construct a sense of self while accommodating for the plurality of selves, at the same time making "a connection between the personal and the collective through mythic tropes in art" (20). Nin thus uses the privileged image of the womb, which Oropeza links with the early myth of the earth goddess, as the origin of the creative process in Nin. This device, in turn, enables Nin to link feminine writing and bodily experience.

Chapter 3 links Nin's wish to record "all facets of self" (Oropeza 36) to the problem of truth, which many critics have taken as a central issue when reading Nin. More interestingly, however, Clara Oropeza links the "polyvocal qualities" (37) of Nin's work and her mythopoesis to the crossing and questioning of generic boundaries that the diary form enables. In this respect, if Nin is a trickster/trickstar figure, Oropeza argues, then her corpus (both diaries and fiction) is seen as playing with shapes, genders, cultural frontiers, as well as challenging monocultural and patriarchal models.

Oropeza then reads Nin's work of the 1920s and 1930s through the lens of psychology and its relation to art. Indeed, in this period of her career, the motifs of incest and homoerotic love were predominant in Nin's writings. Again, the consideration of both fiction and diary allows for stimulating analyses where Oropeza links Nin's writings on sexuality to her construction of identity as a fragmented self, consciously placed within the broader modernist enterprise. Sexuality in Nin's *Incest: From a Journal of Love* is set against the backdrop of Freud's theories on libido and incest, also discussed by Jung and Rank, whose relationship with Nin is evoked in parallel with her creative work. In the middle of chapter 4, Oropeza situates Nin's works (expurgated and unexpurgated diaries) in the history of their publication and reception, as well as historiography, to make clear how Nin's archetypal quest actually "navigated male ideologies at the time, creating a feminine identity independent of men" (67). Oropeza analyzes incest in Nin from several points of view: as traumatic childhood experience, as literary metaphor—something Nin shared with Antonin Artaud and as an element of the "sensationalizing" (77) that came with the reception and editing of Nin's works, for which Oropeza brings insightful analysis drawn from her archival research on Nin's original diaries in the UCLA Archives.

Analysis of incest in Nin's work is expanded in chapter 5, which establishes a dialogue between *Incest* and *Winter of Artifice*, in order to show that art and the creative process in Nin enabled her not just to overcome a personal period of turmoil and to "create a narrative" (78) to know her own inner life but also to reach for the permanent, symbolic and mythic element in art. Throughout the book, Oropeza shows how mythic motifs are used (sometimes taken up and rewritten from various mythological backgrounds), yet this is done all the more closely in the final chapter (90–102) which focuses on Nin's *Seduction of the Minotaur* and her feminist rewriting of this myth.

Following this "ecology of the feminine self" (103), which ties the personal with the collective, and since it is grounded in mother-earth consciousness, Oropeza (in the epilogue) broadens the scope of her study by evoking Nin's ecological vision and the prospects her work might offer for an ecocritical reading. Comments on the motif of seeds in Nin early in the book are linked in the epilogue to "creative awakening" (109) and "an intimate "humanism", which sustains life as a part of a greater ecosystem" (109). This struggle for life and *communitas* is what is at work in stories such as Nin's. While Oropeza convincingly suggests that an ecocritical reading of Nin prolongs the feminist analysis, one cannot help feeling that such a broad question as ecocriticism would have needed more space to be commented on.

All chapters include notes and a works-cited section. This enables a thematic ordering of the bibliography. However, a general works-cited section at the end of the book would have been useful for easier further reference, and it would have avoided the repetition of some references in more than one chapter. The book's strength lies in its interdisciplinary

approach, and Clara Oropeza successfully blends critical biographical elements concerning Nin with literary questions and close readings of Nin's texts. The book is concise and clear at all times, and will be stimulating to those interested in modernism, myth, feminist criticism, and psychology.

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