

Dialogue with a Work: Artifact

Lucille Nelson

Dialogue avec une oeuvre: objet fabriqué

Quinze ans plus tard, Lucille Nelson contemple sa rencontre adolescente avec les romans et le journal intime d'Anaïs Nin. Elle introduit dans le moment présent du souvenir certains objets – des extraits de son propre journal, une lettre d'Anaïs Nin et une carte postale envoyée par elle – qui témoignent de l'intensité et de la signification de ses lectures de jeunesse. En écrivant en tant que femme à d'autres femmes, y compris Lucille, Anaïs Nin a légitimé les expériences internes vécues par cette écrivaine adolescente et l'a aidée à oser se créer, à formuler son être actuel et potentiel. Cette création d'une vie est un processus qui continue encore jusqu'au présent. Ici cette évolution est juxtaposée à des objets appartenant à son adolescence, qui rappellent le dialogue important avec l'oeuvre d'Anaïs Nin qui l'a influencée à l'époque.

Adolescence: the years between fifteen and twenty. Between '69 and '74. In Quebec. High school, cegep. An all English environment. On the political scene, the Quiet Revolution, the FLQ, the October Crisis, the first common front strikes, Women's Liberation. On the home front, my eldest brother is killed in a car accident. The family moves across the river to a house in St. Eustache. My father loses his job and starts his own business; my mother continues her work as a nurse. Not my favourite years, those late teens. Taking refuge in books, I read voraciously.

It was not until my second year in cegep that I discovered Anaïs Nin. I no longer remember how I found out about her. But I read one of her novels and was touched as I had been by no previous writer. She was the first author I read who described emotional reality in a way that

spoke to my experience. What struck me was her way of describing people's interactions. She was not taken in by appearances. My sense of identification was increased by the fluidity of time in her novels. She paid attention to the emotional, not the chronological reality of it. She focused on what was important and essential, and she did this speaking as a woman to other women.

Hey, that's me she's talking to!

Soon I also came across her diaries. I found them fascinating, particularly the first one, though I preferred the distilled essence of the novels. I bought my first black bound artist's sketch book and started my own formal journal. In it I recorded some of my reactions to her.

March 20, 1973: (I am nineteen)

On the weekend I talked to A. I think perhaps I spoke to him from my strength for once, from myself. Anaïs Nin is definitely a help in encouraging me to step out of myself. I spoke also with Mum and I think we actually said something to each other for a change.

The next entry is dated April 1, 1973:

I am very drawn to the books of Anaïs Nin. She holds a tremendous power to bring hope to me when I despair.

And a day later, part of a very long entry:

... M.'s words filled me with a fierce desire to know myself, to live my life as I decide, as life wants it to be lived. I know the vision of which he speaks, I know it exists. I see it differently. I wonder if Anaïs is not more correct: that she speaks for women, that she has travelled the road women must travel, which is different from that of man.

And again, on April 4th:

Anaïs Nin, with each sentence she writes, calls to me to come out of myself, to stretch to the limits of being. I want to move, to run, to discover, explore, to communicate the tension and energy she gives me.

Reading about Kafka (Conversations with Kafka by Janouch), I was filled with gravity, with awe, with silence and thought. Reading Nin I want to dive into poetry, pick up paper and colours, meld things together, create a new being.

On April 14 I wrote:

I want to write a letter to Anaïs.

Dear Anaïs,

This is a letter from one of your children, who is trying to become what she is. Yours are the first books I have read which have had any understanding of what it is to be a woman.

Your writings have filled me with the desire to create, to stride out of my room, to walk through the streets and create myself, to meet life and challenges.

Your writings have filled me with hope, where others have only supplied illusions, despair and stasis.

You have shown me how life, growth are continuous, unending, not static.

I do not have the skill to bring to you the ecstasy, the joy your writings bring to me.

I approached you through your novels. I have been tasting you, cherishing you since I discovered your books in September 72. Your novels were clarity, light, depth. I was astounded by your understanding and intuition, your warmth and humanness, your caring.

Yours were the first books I read which showed me what a human life could be, in words that touched me, that evoked changes in me, that gave me more strength to fight and express myself.

Would you mind seeing one of your children? Do you receive visitors who come from far off lands to lay flowers at your feet? I would like to visit you.

Will you be at home next fall? That would probably be the only time I could go down to California ...

This was a draft letter. Unfortunately I did not keep a copy of the final version.

I received a card two weeks later, on May 1:

Dear Pat: Your letter was beautiful, a poem in itself, but I live in Los Angeles. I was in Montreal March 5 – at McGill Un. and Sir William. I appreciate your warm response and hope one day we may be in the same city.

Anaïs Nin

If I come to Canada again, I will let you know.

I did not record my response to her reply. (One of the paradoxes of journal writing is that special events sometimes go unremarked.) I merely noted that *'She writes with a fountain pen and black ink.'* And added: *'I shall write to Anaïs when I discover what me salary would be, and my hours of work, and whether I can take time out in September.'* And an afterthought: *'(I forgot (didn't think) to enclose a stamp with my letter to Anaïs).'*

On May 4, 1973 I wrote:

I have been discovering new aspects of myself. I am translating Anaïs Nin into my life and experience – I spoke at length and with enthusiasm at a seminar on education at Vanier. Speaking of my desires, ideas (if education were doing what it professes to do, there would be no institutions). The necessity of internal integration at deep levels in order to experience life fully. The heavy and one-sided emphasis on intellectual integration (integrate ideas, etc.), which leaves out the value of fragmentation, and does not necessarily take one to deeper levels.

I thought about going to L.A. – a pilgrimage; but never did. I think I didn't want to chance being disappointed by a real life meeting – I mean, what did I have to say? I was sensitive to the artificiality of such encounters.

But her writing set me on a new trajectory. She came into my life at a time when I desperately needed clarity. I treated all questions about life with great earnestness and was truly captive to my woman's training to provide empathy, love and caring, even when it was manifestly inappropriate. Anaïs Nin fed my restlessness, and that was a good thing.

It's a curious thing to think back on those years. Have I remained true to the joyful energy of discovery? the delight, the ecstasy? Anaïs Nin told me as a woman that I could trust myself – and she provided models of how intuitive women live in the world. Her sensitivity to people's internal process made my own process legitimate.

In the fall of the year I wrote Anaïs, I got a job in a bookstore and started a printing course. The following spring, almost a year to the day after receiving her card, I went West. Set out alone to seek my fortune.

The journey to the continent's edge brought transformation. I decided to call myself by my middle name – Pat belonged to the late teens. The next phase of my life would need a new persona. But that's another story.

Going through those early journals, I got impatient with some of the ways I haven't changed in the intervening fifteen years. I pulled all Anaïs Nin's books off my library shelves and put them in a stack by my bed. I wonder if it's time to begin another cycle ...

Anaïs Nin's work is still in print, published by Ohio University Press. The five volumes of her 'continuous novel' are *Ladders to Fire*, *Children of the Albatross*, *The Four-Chambered Heart*, *A Spy in the House of Love*, and *Seduction of the Minotaur*.

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Patricia Wilson
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