

Reimagining Geopoetics through Indigenous Autobiography: Anahareo's Devil in Deerskins as a Cultural Landscape

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Abstract— Anahareo's Devil in Deerskins: My Life with a Trapper reconfigures the act of life writing as a geopoetic practice in which ecological imagination and Indigenous ethics converge to articulate a living dialogue between self, land, and community. This study situates Anahareo's narrative within the intersecting frameworks of Kenneth White's geopoetics, Carl Sauer's cultural-landscape morphology, and Indigenous epistemologies articulated by scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Shawn Wilson. Through textual and contextual analysis, the paper argues that Devil in Deerskins advances an Indigenous form of geopoetics grounded in relational accountability, reciprocity, and ecological remembrance. The autobiography transforms the Canadian wilderness from a scenic backdrop into an active participant in cultural continuity and moral reasoning, redefining landscape as an archive of experience and renewal. By integrating geopoetic theory with environmental ethics and cultural memory, this research reveals how Anahareo's narrative broadens the theoretical scope of environmental humanities and demonstrates the power of Indigenous storytelling to enact ecological restoration through language and imagination.

Index Terms— Anahareo, cultural landscape, Indigenous geopoetics, environmental humanities, Indigenous autobiography

I. INTRODUCTION

Across the spectrum of contemporary scholarship in environmental humanities and cultural geography, the intersection between self-representation and ecological awareness has generated compelling re-evaluations of how texts write the world. Autobiography, long considered the domain of the introspective individual, increasingly functions as a

mirror for collective consciousness and as a medium through which the Earth speaks its layered histories. Within this intellectual reorientation, Indigenous life writing stands as an act of reclamation and re-storying that re-anchors cultural identity within place, kinship, and ecological ethics. Anahareo's Devil in Deerskins (1972) occupies a distinguished position within this field: it transforms the genre of autobiography into a sustained meditation on the moral and spiritual dimensions of living with the land.

Anahareo, a Mohawk-Algonquin woman who came of age in the northern Canadian wilderness, narrates a life shaped by both the intimacy of ecological participation and the dissonance of colonial encounter. Her story has often been overshadowed by her association with Grey Owl, the conservationist with whom she shared a complex partnership. A deeper reading reveals, however, that Devil in Deerskins represents a profound intellectual and ethical project in its own right. The text situates Anahareo as an environmental thinker whose reflections on animals, land, and community anticipate contemporary discourses of sustainability and relational ecology. Through a voice at once lyrical and declarative, she renders the wilderness as a dynamic cultural landscape a geography of coexistence rather than conquest.

The notion of geopoetics, introduced by Scottish-French philosopher Kenneth White, offers a productive but limited lens for approaching such writing. White's geopoetics envisions a restoration of harmony between human consciousness and the Earth through imaginative travel and poetic reflection (White, 1993). Although visionary in scope, White's framework often remains rooted in Eurocentric ideals of solitude and aesthetic transcendence. When viewed

through Indigenous epistemologies of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) and gratitude (Kimmerer, 2013), geopoetics acquires a different resonance; one where place becomes teacher, kin, and participant. Likewise, Carl Sauer's (1925) concept of the cultural landscape the landscape as the cumulative expression of human activity finds renewal when reinterpreted through the Indigenous understanding of land as sentient and communicative.

The present study brings these conceptual threads together to argue that Anahareo's narrative transforms geopoetics from a philosophy of observation into an ethic of participation. The text reimagines the landscape as a co-author of moral insight, and re-situate human identity within ecological communion. Through the integration of White's and Sauer's frameworks with Indigenous relational philosophies, this essay explores *Devil in Deerskins* as a literary space where poetic imagination, environmental ethics, and cultural remembrance intersect to form what may be called an Indigenous geopoetic consciousness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Anahareo's work, though steadily expanding, remains comparatively overshadowed by critical attention to *Grey Owl*. Early studies of *Devil in Deerskins* tended to interpret it as an adjunct to colonial conservation narratives rather than as a text of intellectual autonomy. Recent scholarship, however, recognises its significance within Indigenous feminist and ecological frameworks (McGregor, 2010; Francis, 2018). This scholarship underscores Anahareo's articulation of ecological responsibility as an ethical inheritance, that aligns her writing with the broader resurgence of Indigenous women's environmental thought.

Kenneth White's geopoetics has stimulated substantial cross-disciplinary engagement that links poetics with geography, phenomenology, and ecology. White's emphasis on "the poetics of the Earth" imagines landscape as an arena where intellect and imagination rediscover wholeness after the fractures of modernity (White, 1993, p. 81). Scholars such as Bachelard (1964) and Berque (1995) further develop the idea of topo-poetics—the poetry of place within phenomenological traditions. Yet these discourses often overlook Indigenous relational worldviews that predate and exceed European phenomenology.

Integrating Indigenous epistemologies into geopoetic thought reveals the necessity of grounding imaginative vision in the lived ethics of reciprocity and kinship.

Carl Sauer's *The Morphology of Landscape* (1925) established a foundational vocabulary for cultural geography by describing landscapes as the cumulative expression of natural form and cultural process. Subsequent geographers, including Cosgrove (1984) and Duncan (1990), expanded Sauer's paradigm into symbolic and representational theories of landscape. Environmental historians such as Cronon (1995) later interrogated these representations for their complicity in colonial environmental narratives. Within Indigenous contexts, however, the landscape assumes agency and voice, and functions as archive, ancestor, and interlocutor.

Indigenous methodologies articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Shawn Wilson (2008) insist that knowledge production must embody relational accountability and community relevance. These frameworks inform contemporary Indigenous autoethnographies that bridge scholarly and ancestral knowledge systems. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) further illustrates how storytelling functions as ecological pedagogy, teaching reciprocity and gratitude through narrative rhythm and lived experience.

Critical engagement between Indigenous autobiography and ecological theory has been explored by scholars such as Armstrong (1998), who identifies storytelling as environmental praxis, and Whyte (2018), who articulates Indigenous science as a continuity of ancestral ethics in addressing planetary crises. Building on these foundations, the present essay extends the interpretive field of geopoetics to encompass Indigenous epistemic authority, arguing that *Devil in Deerskins* exemplifies a hybrid form of poetic geography—one that unites scientific awareness, cultural memory, and moral imagination.

Despite the growing interdisciplinary attention to environmental writing and Indigenous knowledge systems, a critical lacuna persists in examining how geopoetic theory operates when transposed into Indigenous autobiographical contexts. Scholarly discussions of geopoetics remain predominantly Eurocentric, while studies of Indigenous environmental writing seldom engage the philosophical language of geopoetics and landscape morphology. Apart from that, Anahareo's *Devil in*

Deerskins has rarely been analysed as a site where these theoretical trajectories converge to redefine the poetics of place through Indigenous epistemological ethics. The absence of such integrative analysis leaves an interpretive gap that this study seeks to address by exploring how Anahareo's narrative reimagines geopoetics as both cultural expression and ecological philosophy.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology guiding this research follows a qualitative and interpretive design rooted in literary hermeneutics and interdisciplinary synthesis. The analysis combines textual interpretation with theoretical engagement across the fields of literary criticism, cultural geography, Indigenous epistemology, and environmental philosophy, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of Anahareo's narrative as both artistic creation and ecological discourse.

3.1 Textual Analysis. Central to this approach is a sustained close reading of *Devil in Deerskins*, focusing on descriptive passages where ecological, ethical, and cultural dimensions converge. The study attends to Anahareo's linguistic textures her use of metaphor, rhythm, and sensory imagery as indicators of how language mediates her relationship with landscape. The interpretive lens identifies how the narrative transforms act of seeing and describing into acts of relational knowledge.

3.2 Theoretical Synthesis. The analytical process combines Kenneth White's geopoetic philosophy and Carl Sauer's theory of the cultural landscape with Indigenous frameworks of relationality and gratitude. This synthesis positions Anahareo's text as an epistemological bridge that transforms theoretical abstraction into lived ethics. White's assertion that geopoetics cultivates "a dialogue between mind and Earth" (1993, p. 61) gains experiential substance in Anahareo's descriptions of forest and river as sentient collaborators. Sauer's understanding of landscape as the outcome of human-natural interaction (1925) evolves within her narrative into an ethic of co-existence rather than transformation. The methodology integrates insights from environmental ethics, geocriticism, and sustainability theory. Leopold's (1949) concept of a "land ethic," Westphal's

(2011) exploration of geocritical space, and the principles of environmental sustainability outlined by Norton (2005) collectively inform the analysis, and reinforces the study's aim of situating Indigenous autobiography within global ecological discourse. Through this methodological synthesis, the study interprets *Devil in Deerskins* as a geopoetic articulation of ecological wisdom, and demonstrates how literary expression becomes a mode of environmental inquiry and cultural resilience.

IV. RESULT ANALYSIS

4.1 The Wilderness as an Aesthetic and Ethical Field
Anahareo's *Devil in Deerskins* constructs the wilderness not as an untouched backdrop but as an aesthetic and ethical field in which moral understanding is shaped through direct ecological participation. Her descriptions of rivers, forests, and animals perform a sustained meditation on coexistence, transforming the natural world into a moral interlocutor. In an early reflection, she observes that "the silver ripple of the river seemed to sing of life eternal" (*Devil in Deerskins*, p. 45). This phrase unites sensory immediacy with metaphysical insight, implying that water embodies continuity rather than mere motion. The poetic inflection recalls White's claim that "geopoetics arises where imagination moves in rhythm with the Earth's dynamics" (White, 1993, p. 81). Anahareo extends that rhythm beyond contemplation, and translates it into an ethic of responsiveness where perception becomes an act of care.

Her portrayal of the forest similarly foregrounds pedagogy. "The forest, in its quiet wisdom, teaches patience and humility" (p. 72) establishes a reciprocal model of learning in which landscape becomes mentor and moral guide. The emphasis on teaching and humility implies that ethical formation occurs through attunement to ecological systems rather than through human mastery. The statement reconfigures White's geopoetic wanderer who often seeks revelation in solitude into a listener whose identity is co-created through relationship. Sauer's vision of landscape as a record of human adaptation (1925) gains new resonance here: adaptation evolves into dialogue, and the cultural landscape becomes a spiritual ecology of mutual recognition.

Anahareo's prose evokes a world animated by sentient presence. When she writes of "the soft whisper of leaves that carried stories of those who walked here before" (p. 89), the sentence integrates memory and motion, collapsing distinctions between the human and the non-human. Landscape assumes narrative agency, and the autobiographical act transforms into co-authorship with place. Through this reciprocal narration, *Devil in Deerskins* exemplifies what may be termed a relational poetics a textual practice that merges the act of writing with the act of dwelling.

4.2 Cultural Landscape as Memory, Continuity, and Survival

The cultural landscape in Anahareo's narrative functions as a repository of memory and continuity, that preserves both individual and communal histories. Her recollection that "each step through the forest felt like a journey into the depths of my own history" (p. 56) embodies the phenomenology of belonging. Space becomes temporally charged, and movement across terrain evokes ancestral lineage. Sauer's conception of the landscape as a palimpsest "a layered record of human work upon the land" (1925, p. 19) is here transformed into a spiritual archaeology in which memory is embedded not in artifacts but in living ecosystems.

This landscape also articulates resistance. "Though the land bore scars, its spirit remained unbroken" (p. 132) reframes environmental damage as testimony to endurance. Colonial intrusion, rather than erasing Indigenous presence, amplifies the land's resilience and the community's capacity for renewal. The phrasing suggests that survival itself constitutes a form of authorship. Landscape, inscribed with traces of exploitation, simultaneously asserts regeneration. The passage aligns with Wilson's (2008) assertion that relational accountability sustains knowledge systems even under erasure, because relationship, once established, cannot be destroyed by violence.

Anahareo's recollections of hunting practices deepen this relational paradigm. When she notes that "the land spoke to those who knew its language, guiding us with its signs and whispers" (p. 64), she expresses a semiotic ecology in which signs emerge from reciprocity rather than observation. Such sentences embody what Kimmerer (2013) terms "the grammar of animacy" a linguistic structure that acknowledges non-human agency through verbs of relation. The cultural

landscape thereby becomes linguistic as well as physical, a text whose syntax mirrors ecological connectivity. Through language, Anahareo re-enacts the landscape's vitality, performing geopoetics as both representation and restoration.

4.3 Ecological Ethics and the Grammar of Reciprocity Ethical responsibility forms the moral axis of Anahareo's geopoetic vision. Her condemnation of over-trapping introduces a critique of anthropocentrism that anticipates contemporary debates in environmental ethics. "The land does not belong to us; we belong to the land" (p. 101) condenses an entire moral philosophy into one declarative inversion. The sentence reverses Western hierarchies of ownership, establishing belonging as ontological dependence rather than possession. In this formulation, the self-gains meaning through service to ecological continuity.

Anahareo's insistence on moderation "taking only what is needed, we honour the spirit of the land" (p. 92) transforms necessity into reverence. The rhythm of this line, balanced and deliberate, conveys an ethics of sufficiency that resonates with Leopold's (1949) principle of a land ethic grounded in respect for the biotic community. Her environmental awareness, articulated decades before ecological ethics became a formal discipline, demonstrates that Indigenous worldviews encode sustainability as a cultural constant.

The narrative's moments of restoration reveal ecological reciprocity as both practice and metaphor. "The wilderness heals when given the chance" (p. 108) situates recovery within an ethic of restraint. Healing occurs through withdrawal from exploitation, affirming that regeneration is the Earth's inherent capacity when human interference ceases. This observation aligns with Whyte's (2018) description of Indigenous environmental justice as the renewal of ancestral continuities disrupted by colonialism. Through these reflections, Anahareo's autobiography becomes a manual for restorative coexistence, its language enacting what Kimmerer calls "a pedagogy of gratitude."

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Reimagining Geopoetics as Indigenous Praxis

The preceding analysis demonstrates that *Devil in Deerskins* does not simply illustrate geopoetic

principles but transforms them into Indigenous praxis. White's notion that poetic imagination restores harmony between human and Earth gains a new dimension when interpreted through Indigenous ethics of kinship. In Anahareo's narrative, imagination functions as ecological responsiveness; creativity becomes a mode of ethical adaptation. The geopoetic field is therefore no longer an abstract terrain for aesthetic contemplation but an inhabited world animated by relational obligations.

Through this reimagining, Anahareo articulates a counter-narrative to Eurocentric explorations of wilderness. Her engagement with the land unfolds through collaboration rather than conquest. Each description resists the romantic trope of the solitary wanderer by foregrounding shared existence. The wilderness, instead of serving as a site of transcendental revelation, becomes a community of presences animal, vegetal, elemental that guide moral understanding. In this regard, her narrative fulfills Sauer's insight that landscapes record human interaction but expands it to recognise the agency of the more-than-human world.

5.2 Indigenous Autoethnography and Geocritical Space

Anahareo's autobiography operates simultaneously as ethnography and geocriticism, documenting cultural practice while theorising spatial belonging. Through detailed observation of daily tasks building shelters, tending animals, navigating rivers she maps a world in which human labour and environmental awareness are indistinguishable. The rhythm of her narrative mirrors cyclical time, embodying what Wilson (2008) identifies as the relational ontology of Indigenous storytelling: knowledge unfolds through repetition, movement, and return. The geocritical dimension of her text thus arises from lived experience; place functions as epistemic structure rather than setting.

Her narrative also performs decolonisation at the level of form. By situating environmental ethics within autobiography, Anahareo transforms personal narrative into collective testimony. The self speaks not as individual subject but as relational consciousness shaped by land and lineage. This compositional strategy contests Western autobiographical conventions that equate selfhood with autonomy. In *Devil in Deerskins*, selfhood derives from ecological immersion; identity is the echo of participation. The

result is an Indigenous form of geopoetics that reconciles artistic expression with environmental accountability.

5.3. From Cultural Memory to Environmental Philosophy

Anahareo's recollection of the wilderness as a living memory transforms narrative into environmental philosophy. Each encounter whether with river, animal, or storm invokes an ethical reflection that extends beyond description into metaphysical inquiry. Her prose affirms that moral knowledge arises from proximity to natural processes. This conviction parallels Kimmerer's argument that "knowledge is born of attentiveness" (2013, p. 24). Through attentiveness, Anahareo converts observation into wisdom, transforming autobiography into pedagogy. The text's dialogic relation to environmental thought situates it within broader discourses of sustainability and planetary ethics. By linking Indigenous ecological wisdom with the poetics of landscape, Anahareo anticipates twenty-first-century frameworks that advocate ecological reciprocity as foundational to climate resilience. Her work thus bridges disciplinary boundaries between literature, environmental science, and cultural theory. The integration of aesthetic and ethical inquiry models the kind of interdisciplinary consciousness necessary for responding to the climate crisis within both scientific and humanistic domains.

5.4 Interdisciplinary Resonance

Within a multidisciplinary context, *Devil in Deerskins* demonstrates how literature can operate as an epistemic bridge between cultural studies, ecology, and environmental engineering. The geopoetic imagination that animates Anahareo's writing contributes to a holistic understanding of sustainability by emphasising emotional intelligence and moral cognition as integral to environmental design. Her insistence that healing the land requires humility parallels emerging paradigms in ecological restoration and climate adaptation, where community participation and Indigenous knowledge are recognised as essential (Berkes, 2012).

The interdisciplinary value of Anahareo's narrative therefore lies in its methodological flexibility. It provides a model for integrating qualitative insight with ecological praxis, affirming that environmental innovation must include the humanities' capacity to

articulate meaning, empathy, and moral orientation. Her life writing, grounded in observation yet elevated by poetics, illustrates how storytelling fosters ethical frameworks adaptable across disciplines from environmental policy to engineering design and conservation psychology.

5.5 Toward a Theory of Indigenous Geopoetics

The synthesis of geopoetics, cultural landscape theory, and Indigenous epistemology in Anahareo's narrative yields a coherent theoretical contribution: Indigenous geopoetics as a decolonial re-visioning of the human-Earth relationship. This paradigm envisions creative expression as ecological participation, language as relational practice, and imagination as ethical responsibility. It reconciles scientific awareness with spiritual understanding, embodying what Sauer once termed the "morphology of living culture" (1925, p. 27) but extending it beyond anthropocentrism.

Indigenous geopoetics proposes that knowledge arises through reciprocity, where observation entails accountability and description becomes devotion. In *Devil in Deerskins*, every sentence enacts this reciprocity, every image sustains dialogue between human and world. The text therefore stands as both literature and theoretical intervention that reshape global environmental thought through the articulation of relational being.

VI. CONCLUSION

Anahareo's *Devil in Deerskins* reveals how autobiography can serve as a geopoetic reimagining of the relationship between humanity and the Earth. Her narrative situates personal experience within the vast continuum of ecological life, converting memory into environmental philosophy. Through the synthesis of Kenneth White's geopoetic vision, Carl Sauer's landscape morphology, and Indigenous principles of reciprocity, Anahareo constructs an ethical aesthetic that dissolves boundaries between art and survival. The wilderness she describes becomes a participant in moral reasoning, a living text that instructs through presence rather than precept.

This essay has demonstrated that Anahareo's work fills a significant critical gap by redefining geopoetics through Indigenous epistemologies. Her portrayal of landscape as teacher and relative challenges Eurocentric models of observation, and introduces an

ethic of relational accountability that resonates across disciplines. By reading her autobiography through the combined lenses of geopoetics, cultural geography, and environmental ethics, we gain insight into how storytelling performs ecological restoration and cultural resurgence simultaneously.

The implications extend far beyond literary scholarship. Within the multidisciplinary concerns of environmental science, sustainability, and cultural studies, Anahareo's narrative offers a model for integrative thinking where emotional, ethical, and ecological intelligence coalesce. Her writing teaches that environmental renewal depends upon narrative renewal, and that the restoration of the Earth begins with the restoration of relationship. In recognising the land as co-author and conscience, *Devil in Deerskins* affirms a vision of humanity rooted in humility, gratitude, and enduring care a vision that continues to speak with clarity and necessity in the age of climatic uncertainty.

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