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## Devil in Deerskins: My Life with Grey Owl by Anahareo

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***Devil in Deerskins: My Life with Grey Owl***  
by ANAHAREO

U of Manitoba P, 2014 \$27.95

Reviewed by P. KELLY MITTON

Anahareo's multilayered autobiography *Devil in Deerskins: My life with Grey Owl* (originally published in 1972) is the story of one woman's struggle for sovereignty. On the surface of her memoir lies Anahareo's complicated romance with Archie Belaney, also known as Grey Owl, the preservationist. Yet woven in between the story of their relationship, her book presents a constellation of vital themes about colonization, land dispossession, Indigenous rights, Indigenous knowledge, and conservation.

Through her thoughtful and evocative storytelling, Anahareo describes how her ancestors fought against the injustices of British and French colonizers—and how land dispossession forced her grandparents to migrate from Bellville to Mattawa (35). And juxtaposed alongside stories of her family's history, Anahareo writes about her own journeys as a young Mohawk woman travelling through the wilderness of western and central Canada as she reconciles her identity.

Beneath the surface of Anahareo's story is the grievous injustice in which her family, and all Indigenous peoples, were ultimately denied access to their lands, resources, cultures, and traditional roles as a result of colonization and the 1876 legislation of the *Indian Act*. Thus, land alienation and disenfranchisement (though often understated) are a reoccurring motif throughout Anahareo's story.

One of the most significant events her memoir discusses is the impact of land dispossession on Anahareo's ancestor,

Naharrenou, who was a hereditary chief of the Mohawk Nation. Along with his people, Naharrenou fought tirelessly against British and French colonizers to seek land redress and sovereignty. But land justice did not follow. And, many years later, Anahareo's grandparents were unjustly confronted by land dispossession because, as Indigenous people, they could not legally purchase real estate. Deplorably, their land was "taken from them by those who were fortunate enough to be able to own land" (35).

After losing her mother at four-years-old, Anahareo was raised by her paternal Mohawk grandmother, who would have a profound impact on Anahareo's life. Anahareo writes, "She taught me to sew, bead, make deer-skin mitts and moccasins, embroider, crochet, knit, tan hides, and make soap. She taught me, too, the lore of medicinal herbs" (36). As a result, Anahareo learned sophisticated Indigenous epistemologies that contributed to her lifelong understanding of her Indigenous identity.

Anahareo was only nineteen-years-old when she turned down a fully paid college education to marry the charismatic and cavalier Archie Belaney (a British settler who claimed he was of Scottish and Apache descent). Although she was unaccustomed to a life in the wilderness, Anahareo seems undaunted by the challenge of their lifestyle. And although her memoir is sometimes dominated by stories of her husband's employment, I found the most compelling moments in her narrative occurred when she wrote about her accounts of canoeing, alone, through the wilderness; or her self-reflexivity about leaving her baby daughter to go prospecting. Anahareo writes, "I had the baby I wanted so badly, whom I loved more than anything in the world, yet I had to fight

an urge, almost unbearable at times, to go north again" (156). Her memoir reveals a complex woman who was independent and intelligent, and who stood up against patriarchal forces and institutions that threatened to marginalize her.

Set during the Canadian Depression, her overview of this milieu is cursory. There are moments in the book when she offers glimpses into the profound hardships she faced trying to find work and trying to eat. And when there was no work available, she sought income through prospecting. She recalls, "I made a rush trip to the mining town to record my three claims and then went looking for work. Of course, that was a laugh—there was a depression on. My only opening now was to go to The Pas, sixty miles east of Amisk Lake, down the Sturgeon River, and if I couldn't get work there, I would have to sell the canoe for a ticket to Prince Albert" (161). However, Anahareo's memoir does not delve into the effects the Depression had upon Indigenous peoples who were already disproportionately disadvantaged socioeconomically by land dispossession and loss of Indigenous rights.

Ultimately, *Devil in Deerskins: My Life with Grey Owl* is Anahareo's personal journey towards sovereignty. As the Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus declares, sovereignty is about "identity" and "it requires a relationship with territory (and not a relationship based on control of that territory)" (36). This is important because as Anahareo puts it: "Our family never lived on any Indian reserves" (36). So while she faced a particular sense of rootlessness due to colonization, wherever Anahareo travelled to she exercised a reciprocal relationship with the land she dwelled upon. Monture-Angus believes that Indigenous notions of sovereignty are about

the "responsibility" towards one's connection to the land, as well as the resources within that territory. One's identity is thus defined through their discrete relationship with the land. Monture's definition of sovereignty, then, is particularly helpful for understanding how Anahareo searched for and found meaning and connection with her geographic spaces: culturally, socially, politically, and spiritually.

Overall, *Devil in Deerskins: My life with Grey Owl* is an important literary work that deserves to be studied and celebrated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers. What I value most of all about Anahareo's book is that she is a role model that counters negative hegemonic stereotypes of Indigenous women. As Lina Sunseri asserts, "encountering real women that are in opposition to the stereotypical images presented in a racist society is crucial for the development of a positive Indigenous identity for the daughters of Indigenous women" (Sunseri 58). With Sunseri's words in mind, Anahareo's book is a vital text to dismantle colonial trajectories that marginalize Indigenous women.

### Works Cited

- Monture-Angus, Patricia. *Journeying Forward: Dreaming First Nations' Independence*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1999. Print.
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