

THINKING THE SOUL  
BEYOND PROPERTY  
On Susan Howe's  
*Souls of the Labadie Tract*  
by Aodhan Madden

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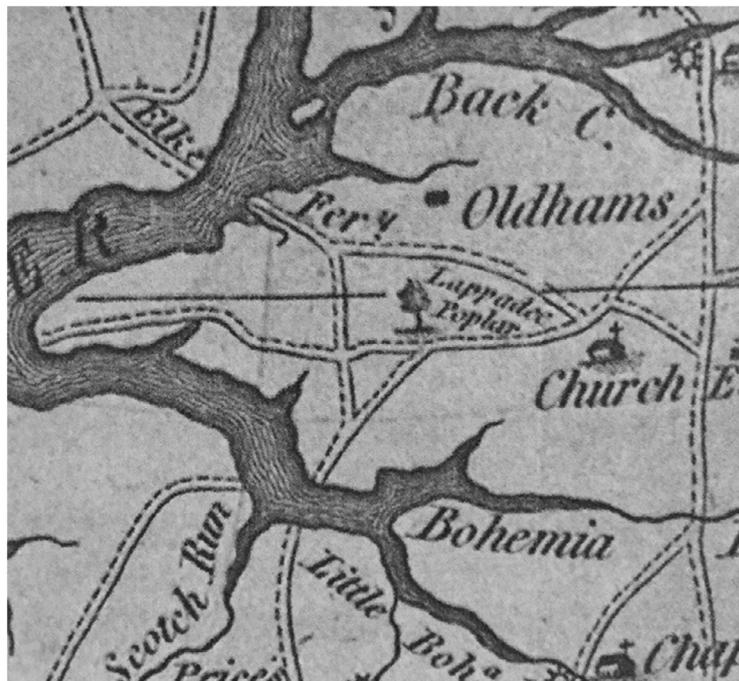


Figure 1 Scan of Derrick Griffith's *Landmark Map of Maryland*, 1795, which notes the existence of a 'lappadee poplar', the only tree singled out. The map also appears on page 71 of *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, concluding the cycle of poems.

Tract<sup>1</sup>

Within the folds of this word, the poet draws a white line between book, land, and property. The first *coincidence*. The “book” as *codex* is not after all a simple object of folded pages but the construction, the creation of a world, *the world*.

If the codex “is” the *creation* of the *world*, this world is Christian, its author God’s phantom. Whether wearing a “skin cap full of eyes,” a “mulberry coat” or simply made of “clay dust,” this phantom locates itself on the blank page.

To think means to recall the blank page while we write or read.<sup>2</sup>

Within *The Souls of the Labadie Tract*, the “antithetical crossroads” of book and land is occupied or *was* occupied by a quietest Christian sect who fled Europe to found their New Salem in 1683 in what is now known to be Maryland. Guided by the teachings of exiled French theologian Jean de Labadie, this group of a few hundred Dutch settlers were known to live life in community: private property didn’t exist, even children were shared. In 1732, the death of their last pastor is recorded, the community already dwindling, then finally disappearing, leaving nothing except a tree bearing their name, marked on a map.

Susan Howe's book is not the creation of the world but "a windswept alphabet monument" to a world now disappeared, the words transplanted "onto paper with soil sticking to their roots."<sup>4</sup>

As in, there are no "origins" in the poetry of Susan Howe. Disappearance is departure.

Fence blown down in a winter storm  
darkened by outstripped possession  
Field stretching out of the world  
this book is as old as the people  
There are traces of blood in a fairytale<sup>3</sup>

Neither is there "purity": myth is not the means to tell the "epic" of America through the figure of the Labadists. Rather through traces of blood and soil Howe can perhaps allow us to glance at the "lexical inscape" of the soul, its fence overblown.<sup>5</sup> This is her metaphysics.

*Ce que trahit l'écriture elle-même, dans son moment non phonétique, c'est la vie. Elle menace du même coup le souffle, l'esprit, l'histoire comme rapport à soi de l'esprit. Elle en est la fin, la finitude, la paralysie*<sup>6</sup>

(What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and the history as the spirit's relationship with itself. It is their end, their finitude, their paralysis).<sup>7</sup>

The blood of the soul. Writing is haunted, paralysed by its victim. *Souls of the Labadie Tract* is a monument to the violence of writing's very existence, swept by the breath of its subjects, "a telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms."<sup>8</sup>

As well as the breath of its objects. In his essay, *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, Georg Lukács theorises the moment when social relations acquire the characteristics of "a thing" through the creation of commodities.<sup>9</sup> The labour of the worker *and* the social relations that condition this labour thus acquire a "phantom objectivity." Within a capitalist society, property is thus a means of making the immaterial *material*, the means of catching the soul.

Built upon the theft and commodification of bodies through slavery, the history of modern America could be exactly this: the totalisation of property. A world ruled by white lines and their phantoms.

The book, the poem, thus becomes the material of this phantom flesh. A sculpture of “the sixth sense.” The poet is neither Pygmalion nor Galatea but rather she who dwells in the moment of Venus’ creation, observing her transform words into flesh, marble into mere “dross or tin.”<sup>11</sup> She who stammers through the long return of the soul to God, its rightful owner, freed from its “ramshackle manacle.”<sup>12</sup> She who feels the inscription of property upon the soul, as its inevitable metamorphosis.

[The worker’s] fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation.<sup>10</sup>

Could Labadists be thought of as the last humans, the last free souls, preserved by their own contradiction?

And then there are those who within the blank page of the world are not recognised as commodity nor property but some other kind of “phantom,” outside objectivity:

The bones the Indian tall  
as tall lucky old man as you  
cold chilliness yes you

with me between us—of  
our being together even in  
english half english too late<sup>13</sup>

Here *the figure* of “the Indian” is without the specificity sometimes found elsewhere in Howe’s poetry, there is no “Squaekeag,” “Nipmunk,” “Pokomtuck” or “Mahican.”<sup>15</sup> Rather the figure is lost in the dislocated syntax of these three lines, caught between redundant hyperbole (“tall / as tall,” “cold chilliness”) and a gravely late insistence (“yes you,” together “too late”).

An object or an image *figures* when it receives more of our imaginative projection than its social or mythic function would require. This margin of excess [. . .] can be figured differently through time.<sup>14</sup>

The “excess” of “the Indian” is thus the margin of this book, of any book that is inscribed within the logic of settler-colonialism, within the conquest of souls and property. Through “old men,” such as Hope Atherton, Jonathan Edwards, and others assembled within Susan Howe’s library, “lucky” we glimpse at this tragic image. Desire through language is always too late. And so we glimpse at its failure instead, “lucky” because perhaps we might remember that there never was a blank page, only an *imaginative projection*.<sup>16</sup>

Poetry you may do the  
map of Hell softly<sup>17</sup>

Desire leads us through language, makes a  
map of broken letters, “quick dactyls” and “half  
english.” The poet does not recover the New  
Salem, now lost but shows us the way between  
the sancta sanctorum and the wastes of Hell.

Long walk on Erebus  
The hell latch Poetry

Maps give us some idea  
Apprehension as representation

I have imagined a center

Wilder than this region  
The figment of a book

Scarce broken letters  
Cold leaden sky<sup>18</sup>

Upon this passage we meet the cast of phantoms,  
we encounter their *figures*. With them, we  
imagine a place even wilder still.

## Maniacs and fanatics in measured epic dactyl<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps fanatical, perhaps maniacal, the Labadists were not measured in epic dactyl. Poetry is tailored to other “heroes,” those who do the nation’s hellish *work*.

Although briefly recounted in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, in reference to her earlier book *Singularities*, explicit episodes of colonial violence such as “The Falls Fight” are rarely *told* in her poetry.

With the modern “psychological” analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) this rational mechanisation extends right into the worker’s “soul.”<sup>20</sup>

Epic poetry, through telling the story of the Nation, extends into the soul, seeks its conquest, its “rational mechanisation.” Its violence is not self-reflexive, but a “soft map.” Howe *tells* the souls of these disappeared settlers without pathos, without glory. *Civil lacunae*.<sup>21</sup> Within her spare lyric, violence is left bare, windswept, beyond excess.

A violence which stutters within the assumption of a universal proto-language, *a soul language*.

*De même que l'écriture n'est pas la même pour tous les hommes, les mots parlés ne sont pas non plus les mêmes, alors que les états de l'âme dont ces expressions sont immédiatement les signes sont identiques chez tous, comme sont identiques aussi les choses dont ces états sont les images.*<sup>22</sup>

(Just as all men have not the same writing so all men have not the same speech sounds, but mental experiences, of which these are the primary symbols, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images).<sup>23</sup>

Aren't we all the very same  
As we long ago saw  
Little by little thought of it

Oh partly—not altogether

It isn't as if long ago—No  
I mean the secret between  
My age or any age—you<sup>24</sup>

In these seven lines we hear the stutter of a voice, of a diminished thought, trying to reckon with the Other and failing, the “we” succumbing to an insistent “you,” despite the concessions, the corrections.

However, this desire for commonality was only ever a secret among individuals, an alibi. The real *common soul* is governed by other laws, by other contradictions.

Courts have reasoned that Indian property rights were not protected by the constitutional prohibition against taking private property without just compensation because property rights of Native Americans were communal and inhered in the tribe rather than an individual.<sup>25</sup>

The *common soul* is not common at all but property to be given or taken or to be stolen and then sold on the market. “Every man has ‘a property’ in his own person,” this is the way that every man *is*.<sup>27</sup>

Larceny—you may protest  
in time you have the start  
on our old idols—Apostate

or some torn pieces of  
sixth sense at its most fragile  
in range of some others of us<sup>26</sup>

Theft—*larceny*—might then provide a means to understand the Labadist’s rebellion. The abolition of private property is theft against God, an absent act of idolatry that might put them “in range of some others of us.” Apostasy, a means to recover this fragile sixth sense, a means to encounter the Other.<sup>28</sup>

L'amour soumet l'amant, & si dans ses transports  
Un esprit s'abaissant s'incline vers la bouë,  
L'amour le rend bouëux, l'amour de luy se jouë;  
Et s'il aime la chair, il le transforme en corps.

Au contraire s'il aime un Dieu plus grand que  
L'amour élève l'ame & la change en Divine: (foy,  
L'amour transformant l'homme en ce qui le termi-  
Fait que soumis à Dieu d'esclaye il devient Roy. (ne,

29

Love is the lover's master, and if in its transports  
A lowering mind leans towards the mud  
Love makes it muddy, the lover love's dupe  
And if it loves the flesh, love makes the mind a body.

On the contrary if it loves a God larger than faith  
Love elevates the soul & makes it Divine:  
Love, transforming man into his own end,  
Makes God's subject, the slave, King.<sup>30</sup>

Yet the Labadists' refusal to submit to the totalising logic of property was only in the name of another more Divine submission. The Labadists were doubly owned. Once freed from the muddy master of the body, the soul was "free" as God's slave, an eventual sovereign. Mystic life followed prevailing material laws. Property was both the condition of their imprisonment and their means of final escape

The line between the mud of Hell and the palace  
of Salvation has a colour.

White line of a  
Hand's breadth  
A white wall a  
door any place

Millennial hopes  
certainly part of it <sup>31</sup>

The Labadists' becoming-the-property-of-God  
presupposed another equally "invisible" property  
relation: within the colonial context of America,  
whiteness was "an object or resource necessary  
to be a person."<sup>33</sup> In other words, only humans  
have souls, and every human is more or less  
owned.

Just as whiteness as property embraced the right  
to exclude, whiteness as theoretical construct  
evolved for the very purpose of racial exclusion.<sup>32</sup>

Now faith is not what we  
hereafter have we have a  
world resting on nothing

Rest was never more that  
abstract since it is empty  
reality we cannot escape<sup>34</sup>

If the soul is something to be owned, if the soul is  
the property that makes a human *human*, if the  
soul is a matter of faith, to escape the logic of  
property means to reduce the soul to nothing, to  
“no thing.” To find “Zero at the Bone.”

Several of Nature’s People  
I know, and they know me  
I feel for them a transport  
Of Cordiality

But never met this Fellow  
Attended or alone  
Without a tighter Breathing  
And Zero at the Bone.<sup>35</sup>

we are strangers here  
on pain of forfeiture<sup>36</sup>

Dickinson's "narrow Fellow in the Grass," this stranger to Nature, becomes a new figure, a new phantom. The poet brings us to him, even if only to warn you that a criminal against the common soul loses everything.

See—I have lost your world  
I can't for life of me recall  
It might have been for light  
Comes quickly out of itself

I can't attempt to cross over  
step by step forgive forgive<sup>37</sup>

Or brings us to him to show us this limit, the  
edge of this impossible map, the white lines upon  
which the soul's ashes are scattered.

You you loose ramshackle  
extract poem do hold ashes  
as history qua history half<sup>38</sup>

This is Susan Howe's book.

America in a skin coat  
the color of the juice of  
mulberries' her fantastic

cap full of eyes will lead  
our way as mind or ears  
Goodnight goodnight<sup>39</sup>

The pages of America's book however, her *velum*,  
are not white but the colour of mulberries. Her  
glory, her *thought*, a bloody red, and barely  
human.

It is impossible to destroy men with more respect  
for the laws of humanity.<sup>40</sup>

I pick my compass to pieces

Dark here in the driftings  
in the spaces of drifting

Complicity battling redemption<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the poet is with her, in the night  
of her book, the night of her world, but lead  
no more, she breaks her compass. Between  
complicity and redemption, the soul's freedom  
has been cast, monumentalised. The Labadist's  
contradiction and coincidence. And so we drift,  
windswept, strangers in the dark

## Endnotes

1. The origins of this word are still obscured by their soil: tractus meaning “a period of lapse of time”, tractatus “little book, treatise” from the verb tractare “to handle” and the Proto-Indo-European root \*tragh- “to draw, drag, move” which then shapeshifted to mean “stretch of land or water” during the sixteenth century. In American English it is used to designate “a plot of land, marked for development.”
2. This quote is taken from Giorgio Agamben’s chapter “From the Book to the Screen,” in *The Fire and the Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 108. This text is indebted to his analysis of the book as being the manifestation of a Christian metaphysics and its linear conception of time (as opposed to say the volumen being essential to a cyclical, “pagan” conception of time), even though the complexities of his thought and its relation with Aristotle’s theory of thought, is only very lightly discussed in the body of the text.
3. This is a page from Howe’s poem “Thorow,” *Singularities*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1990), 44.
4. Susan Howe, “Personal Narrative,” in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007), 14, 18.
5. A term borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins, Howe uses this within “Personal Narrative” as a means to render the wilderness of the library or the impossible split between “word” and “Nature,” 18.
6. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1963), 40.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 25.
8. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 25.
9. Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” in *History of Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), 83.
10. Lukács, 92.
11. Susan Howe invokes these two materials in “Personal Narrative”, 14. They recall the literal shelving system of the library, as well as other “sculptural myths” such as Ovid’s Pygmalion, alluded to above, or equally the myth of Golem. Flesh is always other than what it is.
12. Howe, *Souls*, 38.
13. Howe, 54.
14. Lisa Robertson, *Nilling* (Ontario: Book\*hug Press, 2012), 11.
15. For example, in “The Falls Fight,” the first part of “Articulations of Sound Forms in Time” in *Singularities*, 3–4.
16. I wonder whether you could speak about Howe’s poetry, within a settler-colonial context, as an elegy of the “blank page,” this genre being a poetics of “imaginative projection,” and the “blank page” being an inherently Western construct. Through mourning the loss of a Western imaginary of thought, the poet arrives at new forms and possibilities.
17. Howe, 30.
18. Howe, “Thorow,” in *Singularities*, 54.
19. Howe, *Souls*, 30.
20. Lukács, 88.
21. Howe, *Souls*, 38
22. Aristotle quoted in De la grammatologie. Derrida, Jacques, 1963, p. 22.
23. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11.
24. Howe, *Souls*, 51.
25. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993), 1722.
26. Howe, *Souls*, 57.
27. Harris. Here she is quoting the “father” of liberalism, John Locke.
28. “Apostate” here could be a reference to Jean de Labadie himself, exiled from France due to his unorthodox teachings. This began his life of wandering, to Geneva, and then to Holland, Denmark, Germany, where he then died. He never went to America.
29. Jean de Labadie, *Poésies sacrées de l’amour divin* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1680), A2, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k72571s/f7.item.zoom#>
30. Translated from the original document by Aodhan Madden.
31. Howe, *Souls*, 43.
32. Harris, 1737.
33. Harris, 1734, quoting legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin.
34. Howe, *Souls*, 46.
35. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 460.
36. Howe, *Souls*, 49. These lines, a final couplet, collapse into the meaning of the word forfeiture: loss of property as punishment for a crime, debt.
37. Howe, *Souls*, 60.
38. Howe, 52.
39. The last page of the poem *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, 70.
40. Harris, 1734, quoting Alexis de Tocqueville from *Democracy in America*, 1723.
41. Lines from “Thorow,” in *Singularities*, 55.