

## Adaptation of Literary Works in Susan Howe's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*

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### Abstract

Susan Howe, an American poet-critic, is famous for her creative way of writing. Howe is very much obsessed with the texts of the past, whether literary or historical. Her writings revolve around the texts that are written by master male writers. She adapted certain texts for certain goals she set for herself. Her aim behind making adaptations is not merely to copy these works, but rather to put them in the current context and to question their assumptions. She reappropriated them to uncover the marginalized voices that are shut inside the linguistic structures or in the patriarchal way of writing that is almost egoistic.

**Key words:** adaptation, historical, literary, marginalized

### تكييف أعمال أدبية في التاريخ السري للخط الفاصل لسوزان هاو بواسطة

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### المستخلص

سوزان هاو، هي شاعرة وناقدة أمريكية مشهورة بطريقتها الابداعية في الكتابة. هاو مهووسة جداً بنصوص الماضي سواء كانت تاريخية أو أدبية. تدور كتاباتها حول النصوص التي كتبها أسلاف الكتاب الذكور. كيفت نصوصاً معينة لأغراض معينة كرسها لنفسها لها. هدفها من هذا التكييف ليس لغرض النسخ فقط، بل لوضع تلك النصوص في السياق الحالي ولطرح تساؤل حول فرضياتها. أعادت هاو تخصيص تلك النصوص لتكشف الأصوات المهمشة المحتجزة داخل التراكييب اللغوية أو الطريقة الذكورية للكتابة التي غالباً ما كانت مؤمنة بالأنثى.

**الكلمات الدالة:** التكييف، تاريخية، أدبية، مهمشة

## Introduction

Adaptation is a term that has many connotations and it treated differently by many theorists and critics. Adrian Poole, a professor of English literature at the University of Cambridge has made a list of terms like “borrowing , stealing, appropriating, inheriting, assimilating, being influenced, inspired, dependent, indebted, haunted, possessed ... homage, mimicry, travesty, echo, allusion, and intertextuality”. (1, 3). It can also mean “variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, afterlife, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, revision and re-evaluation”. (1, 3)

Linda Hutcheon treated adaptations as “deliberate, announced and extended revisitations of prior works” (2, xiv). Dudley Andrew suggested that the process of adapting is usually found in many arts, he delimited the mode of adaptation as “borrowing”. (3, 97). He noted that in using this sense of adaptation “the artist employs, more or less extensively the material idea or form of an earlier, generally successful text. Medieval paintings featuring biblical iconography and miracle plays based on Bible stories draw on an exceptional texts whose power they borrow”. (3, 97)

In her book *Modern Shakespeare Offshoot*, Ruby Cohen treated adaptations as being limited only to plays that contain “substantial cuts of scenes, speech assignments; much alteration of language; and at least one and usually several important additions”. (4, 3). Adaptations are preferable where the original is no longer justifiable as a general principle because it is no longer suitable for the ongoing process of development .the word “adaptation” is a Latin word meaning to fit to a new context, and recontextualization is an essential side of the process that led, for example to rewrites of Shakespeare’s *Othello* by black writers and women writers. Adaptation connotes a process rather than a start or an end, and as ongoing objects of adaptation, all Shakespeare’s plays remain in process.(5, 3)

Adaptation is compared with the notion of mimesis where both processes do not include “slavish copying” which means that they do not involve mere copying. The purpose of each is rather that of “making the adapted material one’s own” (6, 1). The idea of imitation was discussed by Aristotle who defined poetry as imitation and expanded the scope of the notion of mimesis beyond mere “copying”. This means that adaptations are creative practices in which a new material is presented . (6, 1).

In the arts, adaptation means the practice of borrowing or adopting which is a way of viewing the original work in a new and different way, and one that also allows one to see the original as a basic text on which to build the new one. (7, 34).

Renaissance and classical discussions of imitation have been divided into three main varieties. The first defines imitation to be similar to copying or pursuing a typical model as precisely as possible. While the second approach which is more important defines it as an effort not to replicate a model precisely but to turn that model in a way that is suitable to the imitator’s personality and state. The last attitude defined imitation as a quest to challenge and excel a model rather than just altering it. The last two approaches emphasize the writers ability to transform and recontextualize in order to bring new perspectives became more prevailing lately. (8,72)

The Romantic poets criticized the idea that poetry is imitation and replaced it with a notion of poetry as spontaneous creation. Edward Young, an English poet-critic, philosopher and theologian, sneered at “that meddling ape imitation”, and declared, “we

read imitation with somewhat of his languor who listens to twice-told tales: our spirit rouse at an original.” (9, 140) Thus the emphasis on originality was the Romantics aim. Modern and contemporary poets have almost extensively used the word imitation to refer to freer mode of translation, the adaptation of an existing poem. In modern criticism, especially post-Aristotelian criticism, imitation has been used as synonymous with mimesis and approximately means “representation”. (9, 140)

In modern times, T. S. Eliot wanted to reconsider notions of originality and value, querying the “tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (10, 1).

Originality in imitation remains the main aim of every ambitious poet. A lot of poets achieved this by layering and joining previous work with the new one and decorating the expressions with an idiosyncratic touch. Although it is modeled on a classic work of art, the final product is a distinctive artwork motivated by tradition but at the same time uniquely one's own. There is always that new touch which adds an originality to the newly created work. It was thought that sustainable attention to the integration of the ways of thought and feeling and expression of the great writers stimulates in the poet a habit of thinking and feeling after the mode of his own model. The poet who is equipped with this acquired nobility of sentiment can reinterpret for his own day the truth and myths of the past, complementing them with the fruits of his own. (11, 15)

In the late twentieth century, techniques of appropriation and repetition have been given due importance as patterns of composition, whereby texts are appropriated from different sources, unbent, rewritten, misquoted, segmented, re-stratified, gender exchanged, disordered, and then vamped into a new context. (12, 6)

The “rewriting” drive, which is not merely simple imitation, is sometimes expressed in theoretical terms such as intertextuality, and many of the early eminent theorists of this practice emerge from structuralist and poststructuralist movements of the 1960s, especially in France. (1, 2). Roland Barthes stated that “any text is an intertext”, proposing that the works of the previous and current cultures are always present in literature. Julia Kristeva has coined the term intertextuality in her essay “The Bounded Text” to give a description to the process by which any text was “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality” (1, 2).

Susan Howe's poetic project is linked to a devotion to history, memory, and mourning. Her approach to writing “is ultimately ‘framed’ by her historical consciousness” (13, 255). Howe's inquiry revolves around a central concern with the capacities of poetry to show the substitution versions of the past: “if history is a record of the survivors, Poetry shelters other voices” (14, 47). Howe's capitalization of “Poetry” and using the lower case for “history” amounts to a challenge to the authority of history and a claim for the value of a specifically poetic mode of historical realization. Howe seeks to destabilize the established contours of historical knowledge and resets its “subsurface” concrete or “visible” (15, 38).

In most of her poems, Howe does not make a distinction between her words and those of others by using quotation marks or citation. (16, 26). She has quoted the following line from Ralph Waldo Emerson on the topic of citation which specifies how much she is committed to this technique “Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests and mines and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation

from all his ancestors" (17,116). It is only by carefully reading her sources with constant reference to her work that it is likely to pick up those fragments taken from others. Howe is regarded as a plagiarist and that plagiarism is a "necessary" constituent of writing in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century. Plagiarism was eminently redefined as a necessity of literature, rather than a crime committed against it. (18, 59). As Howe said in an interview "some of us (in my generation), are magpies, cutting this from that, that from this, borrowing and assimilating" (16, 26).

Howe's acts of appropriation and redeployment are hard to decode and double-edged. They include veneration and iconoclasm, reverence and rebellion, "collision" and "collusion". The coexistence of such disputing impulses in Howe's work has been referred to by many recent commentators like Stephen Collis, Will Montgomery and Brian Reed. Howe has seen antinomy as a primary characteristic of American textual history. (15, 39). She stated that "contradiction is the book of this place" (19, 45). Her poetics embrace frictional oppositions articulated both as an attribute of American history and as a style of reflecting on the horizons of articulating its "other voices". Enacted upon the poetic page through the appropriation, disordering and redeployment of textual materials and page space, her archaeopoetics is led by a contentment that the archive's repressed or unvoiced potentials "can be reanimated by appropriation" (20, 15) at the same time as it acknowledges and preserves the particularity, the transparency and even the obdurate articulateness of historical remnants. (15, 39).

### Secret History of the Dividing Line

*Secret History of the Dividing Line* was published in 1978. The poem is characterized by its distinctive layout. Its title is derived from William Byrd's two versions of his *Histories*, *History of the Dividing Line* and *Secret History of the Line*, the latter is not intended for publication, it is a private tell-all version of the men's wrongdoings, their frolicking with wenches, and their jealous squabbling for power. Byrd's *Secret History of the Line* (1730s) documents the crossing of the Virginia-North Carolina border. The text that Byrd wrote is a special genre of literature used to write about property making and land surveying projects. Howe challenges the very idea of property making by merging Byrd's two titles making *Secret History of the Dividing Line* her own title. Byrd wrote to amuse and promote settlement. Byrd's account is written in a smart, abusive, and clearly descriptive way which contributes to its lifelong impact over the region. So, his work exhibits an appreciated field guide not only to the history, but also to the interlock of culture and nature that makes this place. Byrd's text stimulated Howe's long poem *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (1978), which criticizes the heritage of Byrd's colonialist landscapes. Both Byrd and Howe widen the reader's understanding of property as a literary genre, molded by story telling and graphic representation, and so open up more fictional and coherent ground for one's own intrusion into the places where he/she lives. (21, 2-3)

The opening page of the poem consists of two passages, each one contains four lines, delineated from each other by a distributing line of white space and it appears stranded in the center of the page. The verses in the poem at this point become like a measure of the confines of the colonization of America. The way of reading Howe's poem is similar to reading a map on a page. Its lines look like separating lines between the definite and the indefinite, between America as a geographical and historical datum and

as a poetic space. The amazing poetic marksof the poem are indications of the reader's success to an unexplored poetic territory (22, 112)

Mark mar ha forest mark mar ha forest 1 a boundary manic a land a  
tract indicate position 2 record bunting interval  
free also event starting the slightly position of  
O about both or don't something INDICA-TION Americ

made or also symbol sachem maimed as on her for  
ar in teacher duct excellent figure MARK lead be  
knife knows his hogs dogs a boundary model nucle  
hearted land landland district boundary times un. (23, 78)

The word "mark" is significant in several senses in both Byrd's texts and Howe's. Byrd's commission required blazing a trail, and he often refers to the signs his team left indicating the boundary line as "marks". For Howe, this term is poetically powerful, as it may be regarded as a label for the act of inscription, and in this sense the word serves as (a shorthand for both the act of Byrd performed in his historiographic exercise and the one she performs in writing her poem. This similarity might be recognized in many of her works. Eleanor Hersey explains in a piece on the feminist valences of what she calls Howe's "geographical poetics", "a connection between the physical places in and about which Howe writes and the location of her words in the page" (22,112). Mark is also personally powerful, as Mark is the name of her father and her son. This fact indicates that the position she occupies as one speaking from between the "marks", someone who emerges from out of a space that seems to be only one-dimensional in Byrd's text but nevertheless reveals its more complex shape in Howe's poem (22, 112). In this way she enacts an assertion offered in a passage by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari "the proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of multiplicity". ( 22, 112)

The word mark in the first line refers to the mark William Byrd made in delimiting a border between "tract[s]" of woods land. In addition, the mark is also means a trace that is left, an indication that directs one to certain events that have occurred. William Blake's "London," with its lines "And mark in every face I meet/Marks of weakness, marks of woe"(24, 144) might come to mind. The opening lines of the poem "mark mar ha forest boundary manic" makes the word "mark" loaded with many paragrammatic potentials. "mark mar ha" is a stutter which comes before an interjection, a failure, maybe to "mark" the borderline in question, "boundary manic" is fundamental to Howe's thought. She is fascinated with questions of "secret" segmentations, borders, boundaries and splitted lines.(24,144)

The visual side of the poem symbolizes the effort that Byrd has done to make the land measureable. Howe has made the blocks of lines in her poem similar to the tracts of land that structure Virginia and Carolina on the two sides of the line that Byrd drew. However, the matter here is different, one can see at this point quite precisely what occurs when a text runs up against a boundary. As an effort to make a consistent geometry, this

distributing line divides the words in half and the result is making meanings weak: for example the word “tract” may be a perfect word, as in “a tract of land”, or be a fragment of pining for that land, “attraction”. Does “nucle” a reminder of Lear’s insanity and thus of a relationship between landscape, insanity and nature as an untamable chaos? Perhaps it is a part of textual polarity pulled from the beginning of the line above it, a “nuclear” residue? Another important and most interesting word fragment on this page is “Americ”. In his recent book *Measuring America*, the Professor of International Politics, Andrew Linklater, has explained that Byrd’s crossing of the dividing line between Virginia and Carolina was part of a colonial project to map America that led, after Independence, the American statesman and founding father was the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, to suggest his grid system which established America as a land and a nation. The suggested discourses of state and land in this poem are strictly determined by the very system of exemplification they adopt. Howe has found the word “Americ” among Emily Dickinson’s papers. The poem’s cracks and textual breaks allow it to plot competing vision of American literary nationalism. ( 25, 56-57)

*Secret History of the Dividing Line* is a map that is indeterminate and unreliable. On its third page one reads “ my map is rotten and frayed with rain.” (23, 80). This quotation is not taken from Byrd’s text straightly, but rather, it echoes a sense present in his text, the sense of being misled in the uncharted clutter of the American wilderness. The poem overtly draws the wearied cultural and ideological edges of America, the left fragments of texts lacerated from texts. It uncovers the constructions of colonial and ideological power that have drawn straight geographical lines into the American land in an endeavor to define its patriotic contours. Although the rottenness of the map exhibits how profoundly debatable is America’s ideological terrain, Howe’s poem displays the material condition that originates, as a text. It represents a kind poetic map that the American poet, Charles Bernstein has described : “a text that reflects upon its own acts of representation.” (25, 56). Through reading her sources, Howe tried to decompose the policies of dissimulation and secrecy upon which their sociopolitical power is set. (25, 56)

Following these two four-line blocks, there is a phrase “THE LAST FIRST PEOPLE” (23, 79) written in capital letters and placed at the upper side of the page. This phrase is quoted from Charles Olson’s revision of Herman Melville “We are the last ‘first’ people. We forget that. We act big, misuse our land, ourselves” (26, 19), and here it is highly ambiguous. Peter Middleton, a professor at Southampton University made the argument that “Olson himself is a figure of the male poetic authority which Howe finds it necessary to question. It is an authority which derives in part from its very confidence about its references to official knowledge of history and science” (27, 155). Howe’s pursuit of knowledge about war in this poem different: “set out to learn what fear was” “I know what war was” and “I learned things/ fighting of various wolves that hung around the door” (23, 90). Within the intertextual “universe” of material strategy and invasion, Howe’s issue of knowledge is the missed child and the parents looking for the missed child, “Trembling fathers futile in the emptiness of matter/ howl “wilderness”” (99), “belly that will bear a child forward into battle” (99) the child survives at a place alongside the separating line, between matter and its echo, between one component and another, between a deed and its unconscious, so, the issue of knowledge which takes part in war is manifold, male and female, father, mother and child, protagonist and victim set out in motion through the world’s fiction . An irony is found in Howe’s quotation for

it tells something about the successors of a previously inhabited space who thought of it as being vacuous. (27, 155)

Tzvia Back an English-language Israeli poet, translator and literary researcher pointed out that the six lines that follow Olson's capitalized phrase "THE LAST FIRST PEOPLE" are adapted from different sources:

We sailed north  
It was March  
White sands  
Fragrant woods  
The permanence  
Of endless distance (23, 79)

These lines are an adaptation of William Carlos Williams's essay on the Spanish explorer and conquistador Ponce de Leon: "They sailed North. It was March. In the wind, what? Beauty the eternal. White sands and fragrant woods, fruits, riches, truth! The sea, the home of permanence, drew them on into its endless distances..." (28, 43). These lines also have echo with the introductory lines of "Marina" one of T.S. Eliot's *Ariel Poems*;

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
o my daughter. (27, 155)

All three texts are about grand adventuring and about a father and his daughter , although the change in Howe's poem is that it is the daughter who writes. What is implied within this situation of the deviant and mediated allusion to Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, is that Miranda, Prospero's daughter, as agent, was able to reach Prospero's books. (27, 155)

Howe has made many intertextual references which are taken from the texts of male writers as part of a deliberate and destructive investigation of the surfaces of the history of American literature. Perhaps this poem is about war, conquest, and also about the colonial writing about women's events of giving birth to death: "AND THIS IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR LABOUR/for mark my father and mark my son". (23, 81). A woman who writes in this place of battle does not make her writing to be in line with the valiant epics of written history:

Although my pen was leaky as a sieve  
I scribbled 'Arm, Arm!  
Ear Barked the Moon (23, 55).

Her writing is not linear, and her pen is a device of fluidity, or may be interspersing, prevalence, so that as the illegible word reverberates in space, intertextual echoes might call out of the future. (27, 160-161)

The principal mythical site in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* is that of the forest, this word is found in the first line of the poem. Much of the poem's wandering occurs in this environment. Howe wrote in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1974* "marks and signs/ I followed the track" (90). Among the pathways through the poem is to follow this wandering: "no pocket compass/ or notched tree" (90). This quotation is taken from Roualeyn Gordon Cumming's *Thrilling Stories of the Forest and Frontier*. It is about a farmer's wife who has lost her way back to her home. A couple of pages later, comes the self-silencing "I cut out my tongue in the forest" (92). This closely links the thorough, the intellectual and the environmental and parallels explicitly with Hilda Doolittle's lines "the brain and the womb are both/ centers of consciousness, equally /important" (27, 136). The sensuous aspect of the tongue in Howe's work is affected by withdrawal and disconcerting. (27, 136). There is a quotation from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act v scene 1: "I kiss the walls hole/ not your lips at all" and another one from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Friar's Tale": "for this somnour wood/ were as a hare.". This quotation playfully uses a word which fits the rustic texture of the poem, "wood", but for Chaucer this word meant something else 'mad'. Such range of relations in the poem foretells not only her handling of Puritan portrayal of 'wilderness' as "a place to which one came against one's will and always in fear and trembling" (29, 44), and Henry David Thoreau's notion of nature. In a letter to the poet John Taggart, Howe would explicate the importance of the forest to her poetry:

The Forest is language, yes, but it's also quite specifically the Forest, the American Forest. Now we can't take it, but can't conquer language, that wilderness in us, for Americans I think this metaphor and myth of a primeval forest that we violated is a primeval guilt. I have it and must keep repeating it. I can't help myself. (29, 44-45)

In this passage, she clearly talked about her poetics connection to an American place: the uncoercibility of language is conceived to be similar to the opposition of American wilderness to colonization. For Howe, there is a fundamental indictment to the American understanding of landscape, whenever it became American it will never remain a 'wilderness'. The allusion to *Midsummer Night's Dream* "I kiss the wall's hole/not your lips at all" (23, 103) states her viewpoint that the representations of English literature were pivotal to the creation of the American forest. In linguistic terms the extraordinary ungovernability of poetic language provides a metaphorical devices of going back to a time before that abuse of the landscape occurred. For Howe, the wilderness, whether linguistic or otherwise, is never achievable in a pure state, that too is a myth. (29, 45)

In *Secret History of the Dividing Line* Howe juxtaposes Irish and North American colonial experience. The poem constitutes an extended play around the meaning of mark, the name of her father whom she always associates emphatically with her American side, in addition, the source text is her father's edition of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's Civil war letters, this American History passes directly through Ireland, as the sequence moves early from Holmes's letters and historical information on New England "THE FIRST ENGLISH CHILD BORN IN NEW ENGLAND WAS NAMED PRERGRINE OR THE WANDERER" (23, 81) to an ancient Irish town that is a longstanding site both of invasion from the outside and of civil war: "We enter the town of SWORDS... According to ancient records, SWORDS was burnt by the Danes in 1012, 1016, 1030,



1138, 1150, 1166 A.D.; and in 1185 it was taken and sacked by O'Melighlin, king of Meath" (82). Through fragments of echoing sounds that call up Ireland's name, Howe suggests an analogy between her groping for connection to this ancient history and her address to her father: "O/ where ere/he He A/ere I were/father father " (83). Here in a complexly intertextual moment, "father father" echoes the dedicatory poem of Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, after Howe has used in her sequence from that book "THE LAST FIRST PEOPLE" (30, 171)

The history of American migration dominates the sequence partly under the sign of Olson with the early allusion to *Call Me Ishmael* and the working with a central theme of that book which is mapping. In Howe's words, "the journey first/.../ westward and still westward" (23, 85). Nevertheless, the Irish context still haunts the background (30, 171), via, for example, "the old, wild, indomitable sea-kings/ Viking" (23,95) who invaded Ireland and reached North American shores: "all my fathers were/ horned sages sailing in ships/ icy tremors of abstraction" leaving herself, her literal or perhaps both now "stranger and sojourner" (23, 98).

The poem offers a profound literary intervention into our property histories. Like a land surveyor who draws lines on the ground from point to point, Howe connects words, sometimes through sound rather than meaning, into graphic pictures on the blank terrain of her page. Howe's text plots an extended analogy between property and poetry, between using lines to shape property parcels on the land and poetic verses on the page. (16, 63). The poem is an extended meditation on the meaning of property from colonial America to the present day United States. It moves nonlinearly through different historic moments including precontact Native America, the colonial invasion, and the America Civil War. Running through the poem, although only intermittently, is a vocabulary suggestive of property making: "boundary", "border", "land", "tract", "fences", "compass" and so on. (23, 105). As Joyce argued, Howe turns her page into a field, as a surveyor does, where she creates textual landscapes with words, lines, and blank space. Specifically, Howe commandeers to facilitate our appropriation of it. Like Byrd, Howe made unacknowledged use of many sources, including William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*, and letters written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Howe repurposes Byrd's multivocal style to construct graphic landscapes that transform privatized terrain into a cultural property inherited by all. (21, 3) Her poetic landscapes fulfill her claim that her lines are "certified by surveyors chain-bearers artists and authors walking the world keeping Field Notes" (23, 28).

*Secret History of the Dividing Line* is a meditation on boundaries, conquest and war. It is also about property making which is reflected in the title. She merged the titles of Byrd's *Histories* and made her own title. She criticized the legacy of Byrd's colonialist landscape. The limits of the colonization of America are presented as white spaces. The theme of wandering is also present in the poem. Howe made an adaptation of male writers like Eliot and Williams in order to question male poetic authority.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

## Abstract

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