

Sleeping together: Antiquarianism, anti-naturalism and Kate Colby's narco-poetics

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Abstract

In *Beauport*, American poet Kate Colby poses the question of whether the fictions that orient our daily lives are necessarily less real, natural and true than the more visceral, complex and historically subtle world supposedly revealed by experimental poetry. Colby provocatively revisits and re-evaluates the spheres of bourgeois domesticity, tourism and memorabilia, often dismissed in vanguardist circles for suggesting inauthenticity, ignorance and conservatism. Bric-à-brac's death-like stasis soothes her sense of impotence and brings her closer to the sleep-walking commonfolk she classes herself with. Colby taps into the democratic potential of these objects whose stagnant beauty problematizes progressivist notions of recuperative and regenerative politics.

Keywords: American poetry; realism; antiquarianism; natural history, wilderness; frontier; organicism; open form; decadence; fatalism; sleep; Charles Olson; language poetry.

“Everything reverts to the general equivalence in which one sleeper is worth as much as any other sleeper [...]. Everyone sleeps in the equality of the same sleep [...] and that is why it might seem strange to assert that sleeping together is such a high-risk undertaking.”

Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*

In a piece from *Recalculating*, his most recent book of poems, Charles Bernstein claims that “the job of poetry” is to undertake a “wild journey into the unclaimed” (2013: 86). Founded on an ever fresh experience of exile, American poetry, he adds, is peculiarly attuned to this task. Fittingly, vanguardist poets like Bernstein, spawns of what Ron Silliman, in his eponymous anthology, called “the American tree”, have, in the last few decades, managed to make the wilderness of language their home. Skeptical of the ability of communication and representation-based literature to do justice to the complexity of reality, this group of writers turned their attention to the more “realistic” domain of ungrammatical and disjunctive language. In “Language, Realism, Poetry”, the short

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essay that prefaces the anthology, Silliman notes that although most of the authors included in the latter identified with the kind of chthonic poetics¹ propounded by William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, they “sought other avenues, new methods that might lead to a more open and useful investigation, hopefully to renew verse itself, so that it might offer readers the same opacity, density, otherness, challenge and relevance persons find in the ‘real’ world” (1986: xvii-xviii). Williams had famously stood for a poetics centered on things, on the “facts” of life and nature, as Peter Quartermain points out in *Stubborn Poetics*,² and Olson had made similarly influential claims in favor of a “projective verse” and a poetics of the “open field”, a kind of poetry, that is, that would account for the processual wildness of the material world, its frenzied flow of energy, which the poet would channel through rapid-fire perceptual responsiveness and spontaneous speech patterns.³ Silliman’s group of “Language poets”⁴ thought, however, that “referentiality”, i.e.

¹ This new generation of poets “sensed the claustrophobic constraints of a poetics with which they nonetheless identified” (Silliman 1986: xvii). They at once understood Williams and Olson’s fascination with the “naturalness” of speech (1986: xviii) and they challenged these American pioneers’ poetics, claiming the latter were not as true-to-nature or matter-of-fact as those authors might have wanted them to be.

² In *Stubborn Poetics*, British poetry scholar Peter Quartermain explains that facts are of crucial importance not only because they “confirm something under dispute”, but also because they “disrupt [...] [frameworks] of understanding, challenging the order of things” (2013: 271). Facts, Quartermain maintains, are as valuable for science as they are for poetry. William Carlos Williams’s poems, the scholar notes, are “pointed [...] [but] nevertheless, deliberately pointless” (2013: 7), many times including words or phrases that refer to particular objects or mean exactly what they say, i.e. very seldom does Williams, who popularized the motto “no ideas but in things”, use words as a metaphorical means to express an abstract or general idea. Most often than not, William’s poems exist “just to say” (2013: 8).

³ See Charles Olson’s essay “Projective Verse” (*Selected Writings*).

⁴ Silliman makes plain this was a very loose group of poets, united less by a set of shared beliefs than by a set of common concerns, namely “The nature of reality. The nature of the individual. The function of language in the constitution of either realm. The nature of meaning. The substantiality of language” (1987: xx) and so on. In other words, and to reiterate my previous point, “realism”—

the idea that language can point the reader to objects and events in the real world, prevented Williams and Olson's strain of poetry from being truly realistic because, ultimately, the kinds of discourses we tap into determine the things that we can think about or refer to. Thus, Language poets set out to explore the internal wildlands of language, their aim being to reclaim ideas and modes of perception that the Eurocentric, rationalist and masculinist discourse of the mainstream had repressed or rendered meaningless.

In *Beauport*, published in 2010, Kate Colby poses the question of whether the fictions that orient our daily lives are necessarily less real, natural and true than the more visceral, complex and historically subtle world supposedly revealed by "realist" poets. Colby provocatively revisits and re-evaluates the spheres of bourgeois domesticity, tourism and memorabilia, often dismissed in vanguardist circles for suggesting inauthenticity, ignorance and conservatism. Although never directly referencing Williams, Olson or the Language poets by name, numerous passages in *Beauport* make it clear that Colby wishes to chime in on their conversation about poetry and realism. As a guide to her investigation, poet enlists the aid of Henry Davis Sleeper, an antiquarian who rose to prominence with the life-long construction of "Beauport", a castle he used to display his immense collection of bric-à-brac, in Gloucester, Massachusetts, the same town that Charles Olson glorified in *The Maximus Poems*, his pean to the working people that built America. With a luxurious arrangement of decorative floral shapes as its cover image, Colby's *Beauport* hazards the idea that the clichéd designs common to consumer culture and antiquarianism can promote intimacies of a more genuine kind than those traditionally fostered by "poets of the American tree", affinities which the latter, driven by a desire to enlighten and mobilize their audience, have snootily left untapped. With its exploration of the unthinking stasis that consumer products promote and antiquities materialize, the question Colby's book wishes to ask us is: what if, instead of waking us up, poetry's goal was to lull us to sleep?

Setting the tone for the book's bizarre investigation, *Beauport* opens on a simultaneously soothing and somber note:

how to best be faithful to reality in all its complexity—was the central issue being debated.

It is the sort of day in June when the light is so bright as to make one tired, a kind of palate cleanser for the mind. A lemony light spooned over all the weightier matters. Henry Sleeper is melting in it. Just a boy on the lawn, he's an empty vessel shaken, getting emptier. A prescient thud of sneakers in the washing machine. He is petting a fuzzy caterpillar with his forefinger, front to back, front to back, edging along with it as needed.

His mother looks on from the window, wondering. He is already halfway across the lawn.

The tonal brown bands of a fuzzy caterpillar. He is taken in with the tactility, the quiet of it, the immediacy, while behind him, his childhood is spreading. (2010: 9)

We are first greeted by a lethargic landscape, Colby informing us that “It is the sort of day in June when the light is so bright as to make one tired” (2010: 9). The setting is further described as “a kind of palate cleanser for the mind” (2010: 9), which suggests an intentional erasure of memory and, read in the context of the book as a whole, signals a departure from the kind of investigative mode that “realist” poets have been cultivating. This is not, in other words, your typical experimental poem, the dynamism and difficulty we have grown accustomed to being all but absent here. Colby’s is not an invitation to gorge on the grittiness of the real, the book presenting itself rather as “a lemony light spooned over all the weightier matters” (2010: 9).⁵ Strange for a contemporary composition, *Beauport* does not frown upon entrancing or immersive modes of experience.⁶ When we first encounter the poem’s protagonist, he is crawling across the lawn of his house in pursuit of a “fuzzy

⁵ It should be noted that Colby’s work is amply represented on PennSound, Charles Bernstein’s popular online archive, and the poet has appeared in Al Filreis’s PoemTalk podcast, venues associated with the Language poets and the authors they endorse. Colby’s many critiques of tropes and techniques of the poetic vanguard do not bespeak a major schism between her and the Language school’s politics but rather an attempt to amend and recalibrate them.

⁶ In *Artifice of Absorption*, Charles Bernstein explains that mainstream poems try to hide their status as language constructs for the sake of a “realism” effect (here the term means the opposite of what it does in Silliman’s essay), the images and concepts the text conjures up being emphasized over its material units of meaning. Compositions of this kind, foster, he contends, an unquestioning acceptance of the ready-made representations of the real that art brings to life. Poems like Bernstein’s aim to denaturalize “reality”, calling attention to how the meanings that compose it are produced and what they leave behind in the process.

caterpillar” which he hypnotically pets “front to back, front to back” (9). This scene articulates one of this book’s main preoccupations, namely the relation between nature and art. Here we are told that Sleeper is captivated by the tiny creature on the lawn. This is an odd passage because it concurrently portrays the interaction between Sleeper and the caterpillar as unmediated (“immediate”) and intensely engrossing (he “is melting in it”), the latter being a response more normally elicited by a work of art or a piece of fiction. Nature is here presented as if it were a work of art. This is also a “prescient” sequence, the poem informs us, because it not only anticipates Sleeper’s adult indulgence in the sensuous pleasures of antiquarianism but also Colby’s espousal of an aesthetics of absorption, which she sees as a means of mitigating the pain of everyday existence.⁷

Time’s passing is, in this sequence, depicted in a curious manner. Colby tells us that as Sleeper moves along with the bug, “behind him, his childhood is spreading” (2010: 9), an idea further developed in the following poem, which opens with the line “History is spreading” (2010: 10). The flow of events is not bemoaned as something irreversible and Colby does not lament the loss of direct access to the past. Instead, the past is liberated from the factuality of actual events and opens itself up to imaginative reconstruction. Most intriguingly, the past is portrayed as never having been immediate or objective to begin with, Sleeper’s direct interaction with the caterpillar being described as an absorptive aesthetic experience. Seemingly unmediated, Sleeper’s sensuous bond with the bug isolates him from the rest of the world and, to some extent, freezes him in time. The poem somberly comments on Sleeper’s dreamy course, telling us that “He is already halfway across the lawn” (2010: 9), metaphorically suggesting that the young protagonist is already half-dead

⁷ Presciently, the “washing machine” reference anticipates a passage in which Colby points out how difficult it is to keep things from unravelling even when you are making an effort to keep them in check:

In the Cape Cod laundry room
I sat on the washing machine
to keep it from inching across
the floor during the spin cycle
On the inside, my favorite jeans
wrapped around the agitator
and slowly ripped to shreds (2010: 28-29)

or, at least, fixed in the sort of vivid half-life that his beloved antiquities would later come to represent. Entranced by the world's beauty, Sleeper sleeps through life, his objects' death-like constancy inoculating him to the uglier facts of existence.

This opening sequence offers us a sampler of most of the book's themes. *Beauport* is, to a large extent, about the worlds we immerse ourselves in to keep external reality from making our lives too complicated, painful and unpredictable. These fabricated domains of experience, intentionally simplistic and formulaic, are, as Colby claims throughout, just as real and natural as the lively lawn that, in this scene, Sleeper is sucked into. *Beauport* is also about the past and how partial, simplified and superficial accounts of it are not only more accurate than we think but also potentially profound, as ironic as that may be. Again, Sleeper's experience of his day, as emblemized by the opening scene, although selective and oneiric, was no less realistic than that of his more inquisitive peers. As Colby shows us throughout, for those that lived it, the past unfolded, after all, as a series of meaningful distortions, misunderstandings and simplifications of extant events.

There is, for Colby, a correlation between the way we experience the world and how we perceive the past. In *Beauport*, the poet sets out to investigate the role that artifice plays in this integrated process. If history is supposed to account for the lives of our ancestors, then should it concern itself strictly with what happened, the empirical facts, or should it also take into account people's many times slanted, incomplete and even incorrect understanding of their circumstances, which we might refer to as the facts of fiction?

Colby suggests that empirical truth alone ought not to determine the value of a historical document, experiences predicated on falsehoods being as important for the study of the past as those grounded in facts. *Beauport* is a poem that, as we noted, attempts to probe the common ground between life and artificiality, and one of the ways it does this is by investigating the link between fiction and experience. Numerous passages throughout the book suggest that experience is internally conditioned by assumptions we have about the world, i.e. stories we tell ourselves about the way things are. Colby notes, for example, that "Somewhere in high school history class [she] learned about a man who believed that it was in the process of falling asleep that one rested, rather than during the sleep itself [...]. He got a lot of work done this way, so

he thought” (2010: 70). Untruth can, thus, be as important as truth for an accurate assessment of the past.

Colby's interest in the experiential truth of falsehood and artifice is established right from the beginning of the book. *Beauport* opens with an epigraph, from Joris-Karl Huysmans's nineteenth-century Decadent novel *Against Nature*, which ironically reads: “He had long been an expert at distinguishing between genuine and decorative shades of color.” (qtd. in Colby 2010: 7). The “he” in the quote refers to the book's protagonist, Jean des Esseintes, a frail-bodied dilettante who retreated from society and built himself a large house where he could live a life of aesthetic contemplation. Most intriguingly, des Esseintes believed that he could, from the comfort of his home, have access to all of the sensuous pleasures the world had to offer. With the help of such artificial things as “colored essences”, for example, “he could enjoy the tints that real rivers assume according to the hue of the heavens and the more or less threatening aspect of rain-clouds” (2016: Kindle 1010). Ultimately, there was, for him, no difference between a natural object and a replica. For example, “fake wines” had, according to him, “the same aroma, color [and] bouquet” as their unadulterated counterparts, “whence it follows that the pleasure experience in imbibing these fictions is the same as pure unsophisticated liquor” (2016: Kindle 1039). Des Esseintes notes that trying to separate the natural from the artificial is counterproductive not only because authentic and synthetic things motivate practically indistinguishable sensations, but also because the experience of the present occurs in articulation with that of the past, perception being always “a matter of recollection” (2016: Kindle 1010).

Colby likewise suggests that our experience of the world is never unmediated, memories and associations invariably inflecting our perception of things. The poet notes, for one, that human experience is strangely retrospective: “I miss everything / all the time, even / what's in front of me: / paper, pencil, I miss / you, reading material” (2010: 61). For another, she makes plain that it is many times hard to tell our individual memories apart from images we saw or stories we heard: “I like those thumbprint cookies with the jelly in the middle, even though I'm not sure I've ever actually eaten one. I watched someone make them on TV and that feels like enough” (2010: 87). About the relation between imagined and authentic experience, the poet also tells us that “When I lived in California I imagined earthquakes all the time, could trigger the

sensation at will, even, while standing in lines or waiting for the train. The world is a vessel in which I would be shaken” (2010: 66). It is not only difficult to disentangle the external world from the fictions we bring to bear upon it but hard to ignore that these fictions have a tangible and palpable reality of their own.

This line of reasoning might explain why the spaces Colby describes in *Beauport* often straddle the line between the natural and the artificial, rendering the distinction all but irrelevant. Consider, for example, the following passage: “In a northern New England mini mart, ‘Two Princes’ on a loop and the smell of chemical hazelnut. Back on the road, the autumn leaves look like brushstrokes, the birches like black-and-white photos of themselves” (2010: 77). Here, the poet juxtaposes a constructed environment to a natural one, showing that, in experiential terms, the differences between them are strangely negligible. Colby’s description of the surrounding autumnal setting illustrates her view that perception is a creative associative act, not the passive reception of sensory stimuli. By merely looking at the said autumnal landscape, Colby turns her surroundings into something akin to a painting or a photograph. We can also say the passage articulates Huysman’s idea that artifice and nature motivate very similar sensations and that therefore we cannot proclaim one to be more real than the other.

Elsewhere, though, Colby adds to all this a third layer of complexity. In a poem that describes a visit to Niagara Falls, the author suggests that nature uses devices we normally associate with art to fashion its own forms:

In a classical analogy
cum statement
on coming and going
around, change,
transformation and all,
cumulus clouds echo
the vapor formations
of the falls – the arc of
a partial rainbow takes
the shape of
the very water I am
ready
to meet the maker (2010: 34)

Nature is here seen to be repeating (and duplicating?) itself at different levels.⁸ According to Colby, forms and structures recur across the human-nature and the art-nature divides, the natural entities described being akin to (and having the same substance as) those that make up her body, the turbulent world of the self and the flow of the poem, which, in imitation of Niagara's natural marvel, we see falling across the page.

In another poem, the image Colby advances of a group of people skating in the moonlight might also be said to emblemize what the author sees as the relation between art and nature: "Skaters tipped at rakish / angles, short-waisted or foreshortened in the full / moon's shrinking light / dying of their own life" (2010: 93). Nature itself distorts its forms all the time (in this case, moonlight makes the skaters appear disfigured), so human simplifications of reality can likewise not be dismissed as less truthful or real. Also noteworthy is Colby's reference to death which, as we saw in the first poem (where we found Sleeper in a death-like trance), appears, across *Beauport*, as a paradoxical form of life.

Throughout the book, the author sets perceptual simplification, the everyday and decadent domesticity against the notion of wilderness, the latter supposedly representing a grittier, radically unfamiliar and more truthful facet of the world. In *Decadent Culture in the United States*, David Weir notes that although, in the late nineteenth century, the United States were a still "an energetic, ascendant nation" (2), the idea that "American culture had become too aesthetic, too feminine" (16) had its supporters. Weir writes: "As America entered the 1890s, many expressed a concern that the great national energy that had opened the frontier and settled the continent was on the wane" (4). Frederick Jackson Turner developed his "frontier theory" ("wilderness" was an ever-receding and shape-shifting horizon America had to move towards in order to be

⁸ This idea of an echo that carries forms and ideas into different contexts is further explored in subsequent lines. The exclamation "but / for heaven's sake, what / good is that lighthouse / at the lip of the abyss?" (2010: 34), which awkwardly interrupts the poetic I's morbid rumination, we later learn is probably an echo of a conversation overheard while waiting in line for "the ladies' room" (2010: 35). Colby's repetition of the word "line" (the line for the bathroom but also the tourists' "foot-long foodstuffs" and the "lines / of white Christian vans") also draws attention to how the form of the poem mirrors real shapes in the material world.

reborn) in response to the idea of American decline. Olson's exaltation of the vigor of the first Americans and Language Poetry's celebration of linguistic chaos can be read as variations of this American theme. Colby tries to debunk this line of reasoning, reminding us: a) that "the wild" is itself an idealization of a particular aspect of the natural world, the *projection* onto nature of a human desire for the unadulterated and the unexplored ("a site virtually unseen / but it sees the moon / and the moon sees me / making out in the back / of the screening room": 76); b) that natural creatures' way of being is not really more truthful because, like humans, they relate to their environments in perceptually incomplete and impoverished ways ("A tree falls and they have no ears either"; 2010: 76); c) that even the most absurd phenomena – things we might yet find in "wild" uncharted territories – are part of the same continuum and thus share something in common with the realities we are familiar with, i.e. they will always be "like" X or Y ("The sound of three hands / clapping sounds like / clapping"; 2010: 76).

It is then a shameless fascination with partial and simplified representations of reality that Colby finds in the curatorial work of Henry Davis Sleeper. For the poet, Sleeper's collection presents an alternative to two competing perspectives: that of historians who subordinate particular stories to an overarching narrative about the past (the latter supposedly articulating a moral truth or a specific idea of progress) and that of poets who claim official historical narratives obscure a wild terrain of whispers, stutters and silences, the maelstrom of the voices of the dead, the nit and grit of time (we will come back to this). Sleeper's farrago of antiquities, on the other hand, displays an utter disregard for the truth of the past. More intriguing, from the collector's standpoint, were the past's lies: the fictions, idealizations and aesthetic undertakings of previous generations.

As eighteenth-century scholar Ruth Mack tells us in an essay about the philosophical meaning of antiquities, unlike historians, whose aim is to give shape, meaning and direction to the past, the proponents of antiquarianism, a now nearly defunct field of study, concentrated their efforts into gathering material fragments of earlier times. The mystique of their collections derived, in part, from the fact that some of the objects contained therein had been part of circles of faith or belief that no longer existed. These "relics", which registered the superstitions of the past and had something supernatural or ghostly about them, were, according to

architecture historian Alexandra Buchanan, nevertheless catalogued and described alongside the objects of natural history (the fauna and flora of a particular region) during the early modern era, when empiricism was gaining traction but science did not yet exist as such. In her essay “Science and Sensibility”, Buchanan informs us that “antiquities had been included within the inductive program of Francis Bacon as a subject suitable for research and the Royal Society which used to put Bacon’s program into practice had included antiquarians as well as those interested in science in a more restricted sense” (1999: 174). In spite of being products of art or superstition, antiquities were nevertheless treated as facts of history and of nature by the proto-scientists of the time. This explains why antiquarianism was seen as a field of study that “swayed between the imaginative and the factual” (1999: 84), as Stephen Bending puts it in his essay on the topic. It is, however, precisely this ambiguous status of antiquarianism that Colby finds so provocatively contemporary, fictions being, in her poem, treated as irreducible facts of life.

As Susan A. Crane tells us in “Story, History and the Passionate Collector”, early modern natural historians dedicated their attention not only to the study of animals and plants with orthodox physiognomies but also to so-called “curiosities”, a term used to describe natural beings with odd or exotic appearances as well as man-made things with peculiar designs, i.e. the kind of objects that would have attracted the attention of antiquarians.⁹ The concept of the “curiosity” is particularly useful for our purposes in that it elucidates, as Crane points out, an approach to knowledge that has become foreign to us, which privileged an attentiveness to the diversity of nature over the discovery of its fundamental laws, its particularities and quirks over the universal principles that connected them and made them comparable. Crane adds that we can also frame this contrast as one between the “organicism” that would, in the nineteenth century, act as the organizing principle for the exhibits of the newly founded public museums and the sense of wonder

⁹ For an extended discussion of how renaissance “chambers of wonder” blurred distinctions between art and nature see Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park’s *Wonders and the Order of Nature* and Paula Findlen’s article “Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge”. My essay “Laughing for Survival: Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Language in Ed Dorn’s *Gunslinger*” suggests a connection between experimental poetry’s formal playfulness and what early modern thinkers saw as nature’s creative or ludic dimension.

and plenitude that the private collections of yore meant to evoke. The shift from the early modern “conglomerates of bad taste” to modern “organic wholes” (qtd. in Crane 1999: 192) signalled, thus, not so much a progression towards a more rigorous and truthful account of nature and history but an epochal inclination towards laws and overarching histories over particulars and singular stories, with which the peculiar objects collected by Renaissance natural historians were usually associated.

In his introduction to *Against Nature*, Haverlock Ellis draws a similar contrast between the “classical” or “organicist” view of nature, predicated on ideas of harmony, unity and beauty, and Huysmans’s “decadent” perspective. David Weir, in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, explains that decadent authors rebelled against Romanticism’s “cult of nature” (Rousseau’s idea that nature is good and civilization is bad), perversely celebrating the artificial, the unreal (dreams and hallucinations), the degenerate and the sterile. Weir notes that their taste for “antiquarianism and anti-naturalism” (16) anticipated the avant-garde’s embrace of the anomalous and the deviant. Huysmans pursued an alternative vision of the natural world, foregrounding the peculiarity and singularity of living beings, whose quirks, especially when bizarre, testified to nature’s affinities with art and its playfulness. As Ellis reminds us, Huysmans’s protagonist was fond of objects that frustrated the distinction between art and nature (in his collection he had, for example, “a tortoise curiously inlaid with precious stones”; Ellis 2016: Kindle 135) and beings that showed nature deviating from formal regularity (“he delights in all those exotic plants which reveal nature’s most unnatural freaks”; Ellis 2016: Kindle 135).

In her book, Colby likewise celebrates the natural world’s eccentricities, ecosystems and species that break away from the mainstream of evolution and develop in idiosyncratic ways, as the following passage exemplifies: “Invisible oxbow lakes, old bends / in the river, are dead appendages / where the birds go. Severed from / the stream, species evolve, adapt / to the vicissitudes of history” (2010: 103). Stagnation and stasis are here curiously highlighted as driving vectors of evolution: creatures left behind by time develop in their own recalcitrant ways and are not any less natural than their better-adjusted peers. Colby’s concern is not with the workings of nature per se but the ontological status of static phenomena like fictions and artistic objects, emblemized, in her book, by Sleeper’s collection of antiquities. Like

Huysmans, who thought that one's "private dream[s]" (Ellis 2016: Kindle 418) ought to be seen as natural occurrences, Colby believes that the fictions we immerse ourselves in our everyday lives should be treated as facts of nature and of history.

For Colby, the facticity of fictions provides an answer to what she sees as the shortcomings of avant-garde depictions of the past as a sea of indiscernible murmurs and imperceptible energies. For example, the work of Susan Howe, a prominent author associated with the abovementioned Language school of American poetry, displays a strong preoccupation with what critic Will Montgomery terms "the underside of history" (2010: 84), the poet acting as a spokesperson for "historical actors rendered inarticulate in various ways" (2010: 84). Howe's writing facilitates the "return of the repressed" (Montgomery 2010: 80), the disjunctive language of her compositions dramatizing a liberation from the shackles put on alterity by mainstream grammar/culture and generating a space of authenticity and potential akin, as she suggests in the eponymous poem "Thorow", to the wild lands described by Henry David Thoreau (more about Thoreau later). Given Colby's conspicuous animosity towards the association of wilderness with truth and the voices of the repressed, one might gain from putting her project in conversation with certain interpretations of Howe that Will Montgomery criticizes in his book for "reduc[ing] [Howe's] poetry to a conflict between the systemic (always repressive) and the asystemic (inevitably liberatory)" (2010: 85). As such, Howe's complex compositions are, the critic adds, "left marooned in a banal counter-hegemonic project in which numerous 'others' are conflated and, worse, held to share an implied coalition against [...] 'normative language functions'" (2010: 84-85). Whether Howe's poems are or not guilty of the preceding is irrelevant for our purposes. What is important is that the binary understanding of alterity these readings emblemize – the idea that disjunctive language, wilderness and non-mainstream identities possess inherent counterhegemonic and regenerative truth value – can help us make sense of Colby's somewhat unorthodox political stance.

According to Colby, the authenticity-obsessed approach to the past here caricatured – informed by the notion that if one peels away the inauthentic layers of everyday language and bourgeois habit one will reveal a more truthful reality—papers over the common person's predominantly fiction-based experience of the real. Descriptions of

history as a wilderness of truth-laden fragments invalidates the authenticity of the bubble-like worlds, orderly and familiar, that our ancestors inhabited and that we, in our pursuit for predictability, keep wrapping ourselves into. If, Colby asks, human experience is largely shaped by fictions, is it wrong to fictionalize the past, sacrificing realism for the sake of relatability?

Museums normally present us an impersonal, ideological, nationalistic, teleological and, therefore, reductive account of the past, one that further erases the voices of those on the “losing side” of history. Colby echoes this view only to depart from it almost right away. She recounts a visit to the New England Museum, where the story of the extermination of Native Americans is dispensed in a neatly packaged and off-the-shelf sort of way:

the bendable, poseable
Native American mannequins
at the New England Museum
of Our National Heritage.
At the Donner Party Visitor’s Center
Press the button for illumination
and to hear the narration
of their harrowing tale. (2010: 83)

From these lines one would assume that a critique of the past’s commodification was in order. Colby is, however, constantly troubled by a question: “what if I am the one who doesn’t get it?” (2010: 39). She rushes to add, thus, that her “field of vision / is different than it sounds” (2010: 83). She is aware that poetry cannot accomplish very much against established views about the past, her efforts amounting to little more than “yanking hanks of grass / from a field, / landing ant-sized blows / on a giant” (2010: 83). The poet knows that taking up the role of the prophet or the educator is too much responsibility: she pictures herself “sinking beneath the weight of it” (2010: 83), unable to persuade others to change their views and being cast aside, like history’s excluded, not through violence but indifference. In what can easily be seen as a bold and somewhat shocking declaration of powerlessness, Colby tells us that “the hounds / keep nipping at my ankles / and I’d rather be saved / than try to train them” (2010: 84).

Even though the poet criticizes the institution of the museum, at the end of that section she shamelessly admits that her own understanding of

history is shaped by tourism, souvenirs and TV shows. Colby's confession is likely to set off the alarms of the leftist avant-garde establishment, whose contradictions the poet wishes to expose. The necromantic approach that experimental authors take to the past, marked by an emphasis on the generative potential of fragmented discourses and truncated events, seems, to Colby, to be not only formulaic but also maladapted to the realities of the past and the needs of the present. The poet reminds us, for example, that the cultivation of chaos and multiplicity (of viewpoints, bodily rhythms, and so on) by the vanguard as emblems of a fundamental truth about the world can only be explained as the product of a very recent need to resist the standardization of reality. Thus, experimental poetry's celebration of disorder seems out of touch with the concerns of past generations, who inhabited a world "before forward movement was measured in stock-keeping units. When you avoided, rather than romanticized, the kind of place with peanut shells on the floor. [...] [When] thunderbolts lumbered in before your very eyes" (2010: 37).

The vanguardist assumption that disjunctive accounts of experience are more genuine than those articulated via everyday language and conventional imagery is also challenged by Colby, who notes that "Real time only happens / in the witching hour, / when meaning breaks down / but the words used remain the same" (2010: 95). There is, in other words, many times a disconnect between one's turbulent thoughts and emotions and how the latter are put in words, neat grammatical structures and plain speech often hiding complex experiences. In this section of the text Colby also reminds us that significant experiences oftentimes take place in the most mundane places ("The Chinatown bus leaving every twenty minutes for your chose destination with a wireless connection"; 2010: 95) and not necessarily in the wild or hectic spaces so frequently glorified in poetry. Overall, progressive authors have shown, in Colby's opinion, a disregard for the familiar, being dismissive of bourgeois routines and desires, whose escapist nature they often criticize. However, middle-class escapism is not, Colby explains, a passive phenomenon, being, in fact, many times a re-active response to fear, anxiety or pain: "You pick your own / lock or safe / metal cage / and which side the sharks are on" (2010: 67).

Colby's line of reasoning is, in this regard, eminently Freudian, the Austrian thinker's notion of the "lethargic psyche" being of crucial

importance for a sensible assessment of the escapist tendencies in question. Glossing Freud, psychoanalysis scholar Aaron Schuster explains, in *The Trouble with Pleasure*, that “Life reacts, it does not act, and it does so in order to ward off the pain of living” (2016: 95). “Everything the mind does”, Schuster continues, “is thus a matter of defence, and all activity is at bottom a defence mechanism” (2016: 95). Sensing in Freud’s insight the potential for an incisive political critique of contemporary society’s obsession with productivity and dynamism, Schuster asks us to invert the order of the original diagram, which had the superego/ego placate the violent urges of the id: “What if we were to reverse this picture so that the profound desire of the id is to sleep and it is the superego that constantly harasses and presses for frenetic activity?” (2016: 95). If, as Schuster puts it, “culture is a stream of commands to wake up!” (2016: 95), then Colby is right to point out that there is a strange conformist element to the avant-garde’s cultivation of discomfiting movement.

The poet also re-evaluates the idea that forward-thinking literature ought to shock its audience, shaking it out of its lazy and ignorant habits of thinking. In the following passage, Colby makes plain that people do not need literature to frustrate their expectations because life itself, even domestic life, inevitably takes up that didactic role: “Go ahead now / go ahead now / just go ahead now / Cut the baby’s curls and get on with it / you can’t shock the tin man in the electric chair” (2010: 72). Progressive literature, the poet suggests, has lost touch with the dreams and desires of common people, its narrowness of focus being comparable to that of an airplane reading light that leaves the surrounding sleepers in the shadows:

The cabin lights will soon be dimmed, but there’s a reading light located over your
seat for your convenience
outside its beam
people are breathing

block letter declarations
of lye-blind humanity. (2010: 98)

From the high horse of theoretical sophistication and proscriptive utopianism, vanguardist literature has, in recent decades, tried to debunk or expose the “lies” that drive the lives of the average person, to shake people out of their vegetative state of decadent and degenerative apathy.

Colby opts, instead, for a more compassionate approach: addressing herself to her “dear model citizens”, she poignant and defiantly declares that she would “rather become the world / than have it / the other way around” (98). With the “open field” notion of ur-poet Charles Olson, a fellow New Englander, very likely in mind, Colby suggests that, in order to be truly welcoming of the world’s diversity, poetry should make room for the complexity and the vulnerabilities of others: “kiss me wide / open field / I’ve decided / I am going / to start seeing / other people” (2010: 42). Paradoxically, in order to be true to his democratic ideals, Colby must, in other words, break up with Olson and the elitist of his poetics.

Olson’s complex view of history is worth recapitulating here. According to Gary Grieve-Carlson, author of *Poems Containing History*, Olson believed that a will to overwhelm nature has dominated throughout human history since the melting of the glaciers. In the poet’s view, postlapsarian humanity’s estrangement from its surroundings, from “that with which [it] is the most familiar” (qtd. in Grieve-Carlson 2016: 183), has conditioned the way history is written, abstraction and teleology being privileged over facts, in particular facts that complicate official mainstream narratives. Traditional historians portray the past as if it were a static object of the natural sciences, ignoring exceptions and anomalies that turn historical occurrences into dynamic events. Olson positions himself against a reductionist take on history, favoring an approach that “pays close attention to the archival records [and] primary sources” (Grieve-Carlson 2016: 186) and attends to “the marginal and the overlooked” (2016: 183), hoping to find examples of how the primordial will to be one with nature has been kept alive. Examining the early history of New England, Olson shows us, for example, that accounts of how Gloucester fishermen tried to establish an economically self-sufficient community were ignored in favor of the grand narrative of the Puritan conquest of the land and its subjugation to their high designs and dreams. Skeptical of the Puritans’ allegorical approach to nature and history, emblematic of a will to disguise and distort the world’s gross matter-of-factness, Olson presents himself as authenticity’s paladin.

Opposite in many ways to Olson’s historically informed, dynamism-drunk and sweat-soaked poetic collages, Henry Davis Sleeper’s collection of decorative artefacts offers a fitting metaphor for the kind of community envisioned in Colby’s book. “Contentedly self-contained” in the “living death” (2010: 79) emblemized by his evocative

memorabilia, the antiquarian stands-in for all those who try to find, in the past or the present, something, true or fake, that captivates them and that therefore feels natural and real. Ironical and irreverently, Colby suggests that, like Henry Thoreau, her “sleepers” are moved by an “impulse to experience things directly, to perform a Baconian induction on the world and end up with oneself” (2010: 32). They too are champions of immediacy and of life’s facts. However, unlike Thoreau, who wanted to “awaken his neighbors” (1986: 19) to what lies “beyond the surfaces of American life” (1986: 9), as Michael Meyer puts it in his introduction to *Walden*, Colby’s sleep-walkers know that their shallow worlds are just as real as those discovered through thorough research and introspection. A rigorous report of the minutia of nature is not enough to account for the richness of the real, as the antiquarians of yore were well aware and as the average person, with her particular desires and dreams, secretly suspects. Staunch opponents of the unreflected artificiality of mainstream culture, the likes of Thoreau and Olson idealized the material world as a more genuine domain of experience and, in the process, demoted the fictions that drive our everyday lives to the status of false trivialities. By contrast, Colby asserts that “images have invented history, dead-on, looked straight into the eye of the lie of it” (2010: 101). The worlds we create to hide from the world, the poet claims, are as much part of it as the more consensual facts of nature: “We’re now snowed in and I’d like it to stay this way: electric candles in the windows, a wood fire that looks as good as any fake. Life imitating something realer than itself. Topiary animals. Stick bugs” (2010: 87). Life is at once a dynamic and complex flow and a collection of static constructs.

There is, for Colby, a relation between history and bed-making (“We are making history, our beds, or sweeping the beach with a broken metal detector”; 2010: 11), history being very much like a layered accumulation of private and collective dreams, its written account a “stratigraphy” (2010: 80). We “make our beds” by fabricating and immersing ourselves in fictions, warding ourselves off from an uncertain future, making the journey ahead more tolerable (“If it’s the journey that matters, then I’ll sleep / when I want to”; 2010: 27). But it is also this active surrender, this precarious admission of our powerlessness to change others and the world that, for Colby, brings us close to the dead

and those defeated by history.¹⁰ If, as Stephen Bending reminds us, a few centuries ago, antiquarianism posed a threat to the national narratives of cultural elites because it made the past accessible to the everyman as purchasable domestic commodities, in Colby's poem it again serves the purpose of democratizing history and bringing people together through time. Beauport's connection to the past is established not through accuracy or faithfulness to its fragments but via a complicity with its fictions and a compassionate acknowledgement of the vulnerability of its people. Colby's is not a reparatory but a conciliatory realism, her Beauport being not where everything can "begin again" (Montgomery 2010: 86) or "start all over" (Grieve-Carlson 2016: 198), but where history is put to rest, people with wildly diverging views being brought together through their shared impotence to resist the sundry hardships of life.¹¹ In the spirit of nineteenth century decadentism, Colby figures the "Medusan beauty" of death as a refuge against the tyranny of generative and regenerative time.¹² "My biggest fear and fascination is being buried

¹⁰ Colby's fatalism – the notion that we do not have the power to meaningfully change the course of history – is evocative of Robert Lowell, whom she mentions in passing in one of the poems (21). In "The Monotonous Sublime", a chapter from his book *Robert Lowell, Nihilist as Hero*, Vereen M. Bell notes that, like Colby, Lowell saw "artifacts" as "palliatives to anxiety" (106). Bell is here referring to Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning": "when I look into my heart / I discover none of the great / subjects: death, friendship, love and hate – / only old china doorknobs, sad / slight, useless things to calm the mad".

¹¹ Grieve-Carlson ends his essay about Olson with the idea that in his work the poet succeeds in showing us how Gloucester is still a place of resistance to the profiteering and homogenizing mainstream. It is, in other words, "still a place to go fishing from. She is still le beauport" (2016: 198). Although throughout *Beauport* Colby sometimes flirts with the Olsonian-Whiteheadian view of history as a series of ongoing events, the following passage, which we find towards the end of the book, clarifies her position: "Developing skylines prickle with steel cables reaching upward from unfinished buildings. I'll say it – all those potential future stories. Cables run through and between everything I do, but I hate unfinished business. I'll just keep madly stabbing with my index finger, carry a big stick" (2010: 110). Events may indeed make up the fabric of history but, more often than not, the potential they carry is not just ignored but, due to its fear-inducing and anxiety-provoking nature, actively resisted.

alive” (2010: 80), the poet confesses. Beauport attempts to address these diverging feelings. The best weapon against death is, ultimately, death itself, or its pre-emption through some form of suspended animation. Like death, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out, sleep is a great equalizer: “One sleeper is worth as much as any other sleeper” (2009: 17). It is, Colby shows us, to the mausoleum of illusions, that communal house of living death, that all “pilgrims of stasis” (2010: 40) go to lie and, together, sleep their troubles away.

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¹² David Weir cites Mario Praz’s essay “The Beauty of the Medusa” on the fin-de-siècle’s fascination with fatality: “the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment” (qtd. in *Making of Modernism* 5). Failure is, for these authors and Colby, alluring in how it frustrates the mainstream’s fixation with productivity and progress.

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