

## Unsettling the Environment: The Violence of Language in Angela Rawlings' *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* Sarah Groeneveld

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**Abstract:** Canadian poet Angela Rawlings' *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* (2006), a book of experimental ecopoetry, raises questions about the violence of language in the context of a settler-colonial nation. This article argues that Rawlings' "unsettling" use of the nonhuman environment in her poetry allows her to critique the role that anthropo-, phallo-, and eurocentric language has played in the (discursive) settling of Canada. By exploring how Rawlings employs what Cynthia Sugars calls the "postcolonial gothic," I show how a postcolonial ecocritical reading of *Wide Slumber* reveals the (at times violent or difficult) intertwining of national, cultural, and ecological concerns. Ultimately, the concept of "unsettling" utilizes gothic disturbance in order to challenge the process of colonial settlement and discourse and show concern for the well-being of the natural environment.

**Keywords:** experimental poetry, ecocriticism, postcolonial gothic, violence, animals

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Canadian poet Angela Rawlings' (published as a.rawlings) long poem *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* (2006) opens with a quiet scene of moths descending slowly toward a lake. The soft sound of their wings ("a hoosh a ha") builds as their numbers multiply, until finally their collective voice emerges: "We bury our legs in sand. . . . We desire sleep to enter" (14). This peaceful scene only lasts for a moment before more disturbing images emerge on the facing page. As "[h]orned caterpillars epilepse," the collective voice protests, "[t]his is not what this is no, we

intended" (15). From this confused and disjointed line, Rawlings takes her reader through a lepidopterist's (a collector of moths and butterflies) dream that often metamorphoses into a nightmare, where bodies are fragmented, language deteriorates, and meaning is elusive at best. Rawlings' text is experimental, the lyric voice emerging very rarely and in an almost unrecognizable form. And yet, her text is grounded in the experience of the body and the physical environment that it inhabits, unsettling as that environment may be. The fact that Rawlings dedicates her poem to Northern Ontario invites a reading that asks what the text has to say about language, bodies, and the environment in the setting of Ontario and Canada as a whole. As the bodies of insects "epilepse" after settling by a lake, the text reveals the nation's fields and lakes as environments caught up in a violent history of settlement and colonialism.

In this article, I will argue that *Wide Slumber* can be read through the discourses of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, discourses that are connected through Rawlings' use of the gothic genre. This article therefore also engages with recently articulated theories of the "postcolonial gothic" (see Sugars and Turcotte; Rudd; Smith and Hughes). I suggest that the concept of "unsettling" unites the postcolonial, the environmental, and the gothic within Rawlings' *Wide Slumber*, a poem that challenges the process of colonial settlement and discourse, shows concern for the well-being of the natural environment, and utilizes gothic disturbance. These three frameworks are especially useful for examining a settler-colonial nation such as Canada in which no easily definable independence movement has marked the colonial as definitively "post" and where indigenous communities still live within the structures of an imposed government. Furthermore, Canada's peripheral relationship to powerful centers like the United States opens multiple avenues for exploring these questions of liminality, uncertainty, and unsettlement. On one hand, Canada's history of settlement makes for an obvious reason to think about the nation in terms of postcolonial theory. However, as Laura Moss states, "there has long been a debate over the legitimacy and utility of studying the literary history of a nation like Canada in the same terms as the Anglophone literature of the more conventionally accepted postcolonial contexts of India, Trinidad, and South Africa, for example"

(2). At the same time, like other settler-colonies, Canada's liminal status makes it a prime arena for "exploring in-between spaces that map out a territory between the extremities of the self and the Other, the sublime and the abject, the real and the virtual, America and Europe" (Edwards xv). It is also important to remember that this debate takes place from the perspective of the settler—as Alison Rudd argues, "Canada's identity . . . is dependent upon the erasure, exclusion and appropriation of First Nations points of view, so that the contemporary creation of a Canadian identity is based on the process of abuse and erasure" (86). Therefore, postcolonial theory becomes relevant to Canadian literature precisely because of the uncertainty or liminality of Canada's postcolonial status, which results in the production of unease and unsettlement. The gothic genre can therefore be used as a literary mode that allows Canadian writers to expose the fallacy of the kind of homogenous Canadian identity that Rudd describes. Instead, the gothic "unsettles the smooth surfaces of selfhood by exposing the fiction of a Western metanarrative that represents identity along single lines of analysis and that treats identity as one-dimensional, unicategorical" (Edwards xviii). The gothic therefore has the potential to destabilize both the self and the nation when placed within a postcolonial framework. Rawlings' text is well-suited to examine the multi-dimensional and multi-categorical nature of identity in Canadian literature, for in *Wide Slumber*, identity is always uncertain, never limited to just one category, constantly metamorphosing.

While concerns about both the postcolonial and the gothic often coincide with concerns about land, the environment, or specific elements of the natural world, conversations about the postcolonial gothic have so far not explicitly incorporated insights from postcolonial ecocriticism. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte have used the concept of the postcolonial gothic to examine the haunted space of nations with a history of imperialism. As they explain, the legacy of imperialism often appears in "the form of unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression" (vii). While Sugars and Turcotte focus on the Canadian postcolonial gothic, other critics have found a similar confluence of the two discourses in former-colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, and the Caribbean (see Rudd; Smith

and Hughes). The pairing of the postcolonial with the gothic is useful for examining, as Rudd states in *Postcolonial Gothic Fictions*, “themes of insecurity in the face of an insecure world that is both unpredictable and menacing” (2). However, such criticism has not yet considered the important role that the environment plays in the postcolonial gothic. While the presence of a gothic landscape does emerge in Sugars and Turcotte’s *Unsettled Remains*, the land is often seen as a constructed setting—imaginative rather than material. Similarly, the gothic itself is often connected primarily to the internal rather than the external. While Sugars and Turcotte argue that “[f]or non-Indigenous subjects, the Canadian postcolonial Gothic arguably charts a largely psychological experience—haunted minds rather than haunted wilderness” (ix), *Wide Slumber* combines the two, asking what happens when the interior world of nightmares and the external world of a threatening environment collide. Rawlings’ experiments with language and explorations into dreams and nightmares evoke gothic themes such as uncertainty, liminality, the dissolution of boundaries, loss, and the destabilization of identity, but do so in a context in which the natural world and the creatures that inhabit it (both human and nonhuman) are of central concern. My goal is therefore to show that when the human-centered discourse of postcolonialism and the nature-centered discourse of ecocriticism collide within a settler-colonial context, they create a tension that is inflected with the gothic. If, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin state, the fields of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism “are not necessarily united even in their most basic interpretive methods or fundamental ideological concerns” (2), then perhaps this uneasy union between them can find expression within the gothic as a mode that allows space for uncomfortable and yet productive combinations. Just as Sugars and Turcotte argue that the postcolonial gothic can be paradoxically “unsettling and enabling at the same time” (xi), Rawlings’ text is interested in moments when contrasting or contradicting elements combine to produce simultaneous horror and pleasure.

Although the gothic can refer to a wide range of literary themes and forms, within *Wide Slumber* the genre emerges primarily in the form of the nightmare and the uncanny. While the gothic is often discussed

in terms of ghosts and repressed memory, these are not the only forms that the gothic takes in *Wide Slumber*, a poem that mostly focuses on ongoing or present violence to the natural environment. Not only have postcolonial critics recently theorized the “postcolonial gothic,” but environmental critics have also begun to bring the gothic into ecocriticism (see Hillard, Estok, Rozelle). Tom Hillard, for example, has recently argued that “ecocriticism has largely overlooked representations of nature inflected with fear, horror, loathing, or disgust” (688) and that “ecocritics stand to learn a great deal by looking seriously at the long history of unsettling and horrific descriptions of the natural world” (691). While it may seem strange for a field that focuses on celebrating the environment to focus on the rhetoric of fear, Hillard also points out that the gothic has significant connections to other kinds of environmental anxiety around crisis, disaster, and apocalypse (693). If it is productive to examine these horrific descriptions, then the concept of the “uncanny” or *unheimlich*, as defined by Sigmund Freud, provides a useful way to think about natural environments as spaces that feel inhospitable despite their familiarity. If gothic ecocriticism allows us to recognize the uncanny moment when our familiar planetary home becomes formidable or threatening due to environmental crisis, then a parallel uncanny affect occurs within a settler-colonial context. Settled environments become spaces that evoke fear not because they are completely unknown but rather in spite of the fact that they have been made into a home; they persistently feel unhomey and foreign to the settler. Rawlings’ use of the uncanny defamiliarizes the settled landscape in both of these ways. *Wide Slumber* works to “un-settle” the land through the use of poetry that disrupts colonial discourse and colonial processes of naming, revealing the settler’s gothic landscape to be a natural environment in need of decolonization or “unsettlement.”

Rawlings’ often dark and nightmarish text also works to “unsettle” colonial discourse by uncannily dissolving borders—between sleep and wakefulness, human and nonhuman, words and symbols. Rawlings is able to do this through her unusual use of a radically experimental poetry that critiques the role that anthropo-, phallo-, and eurocentric language has played in the discursive settling of Canada. While there are

few explicit references to Canada or the colonial within the text itself, taking these contexts into account reveals how Rawlings' disruptive linguistic, symbolic, and visual arrangements expose the need to unsettle problematic discourse and protest the violence of colonial naming. Throughout the poem, Rawlings superimposes the cycle of the moth or butterfly upon the human sleep cycle so that the section "egg" is tied to "insomnia," "egg, larva" to "dyssomnia," and so on. The sleep cycle theme at first seems to be benign but quickly deteriorates into a nightmare where strange, disturbing images and contorted words produce a barrage of half-familiar, half-incomprehensible symbols and letters. Rawlings' choice to focus on moths also contributes to the text's gothic tone. Liminaly animal, strange, and incredibly difficult to anthropomorphize, insects present a slightly creepy and unexpected entrance into a work that is concerned with the environment. Insects can indeed be the stuff of nightmares, and Rawlings takes advantage of this connection by drawing a parallel between human sleep cycles and the growth cycles of lepidoptera who metamorphose throughout the text. But while the space of the nightmare implies a focus on the psychological or the interior, the intertwining of the nightmare with the biological processes of insects results in a gothic text that connects postcolonial and environmental hauntings. By exploring nightmares rather than specters, *Wide Slumber* reveals that it is by confronting our own frightening, subconscious otherness that we can become aware of the (at times violent or difficult) intertwining of national, cultural, and ecological concerns.

Before exploring the text's critique of the violence of language in a postcolonial setting, it is necessary to understand Rawlings' unique methodology and the way that the form of the text correlates to its uncanny, gothic themes. *Wide Slumber* works through various modes of communication simultaneously, largely through a process that Rawlings calls an "interdisciplinary" exploration of "sound, text and movement" (Zelazo). Throughout the book, the placement on the page of both words and black and white illustrations (drawn by Matt Ceolin) blur the line between poetry and visual art. At times, letters and words on the page evoke the forms of wings and jars that make up the illustrations, and textual symbols often work as visual representations. The beginning of each

section is marked with a letter or letter combination that illustrates the name of the section; for example, an “O” introduces the section named “egg” and “C~” introduces the section “egg, larva.” In 2002, Rawlings published a version of the text as a limited-edition chapbook made from “vellum and cloth-like paper affixed with miniature clothespins, thread and steel binder rings” (Greenstreet). In addition, Rawlings has staged “performances” of her text and made audio recordings available online<sup>1</sup> that supplement the work. Though these recordings are presented as “readings” of the book itself, they often diverge from the text on the page and include sounds, such as harsh breathing, that add an aural dimension to a highly visually-oriented poem. Rawlings describes the text, in all of these manifestations, as going through its own “metamorphosis” (Greenstreet), a process that includes post-publication translations into other languages, such as Icelandic and Spanish. The structure of the book is also highly unconventional. Not only is the book separated into sections rather than individual poems, but the back matter contains an “appendix” that includes diagrams, a “glossary” that provides Rawlings’ own definitions of words that appear in the book, an “epigraphs and acknowledgements” section that maintains many stylistic echoes from the main body of work, and “biographies” and “colophon” headings that echo the text’s artistic form. While this back matter may seem to exist in order to assist the reader in interpreting the complex poem, the information that it provides often results in further confusion or ambiguity. Each of these unconventional elements contributes to the uncanny aura of the text, the impression that one is entering an unwelcoming, unfamiliar, and yet vaguely recognizable world.

The intertwining of human sleep cycles and the metamorphosis of insects also invokes the fact that humans live lives that are enmeshed within specific environments. The connection between human bodies and the natural environment has long been a key component of post-colonial ecocriticism. Human enmeshment with the natural world reveals our interdependence and therefore our responsibility to consider the environment as something other than mere “setting.” This enmeshment takes on even more significance in the context of a settler-colonial nation, where the relationship between the landscape and the invad-

ing humans that dwell upon it is a fraught relationship built explicitly on conquest and ownership. Literary postcolonial criticism has often illuminated the role that language plays in this conquest. Alan Lawson describes the connection between language and colonization within a Canadian context:

For epistemological reasons, then, but also for professional ones, the colonial explorer had to empty the land of prior signification—what is already known cannot be discovered, what already has a name cannot be named. For the settler, too, the land had to be empty. Empty land can be settled, but occupied land can only be invaded. So the land must be emptied so that it can be filled, in turn, with both discourse and cattle. (n.p.)

The image that Lawson describes of settling the land with both discourse and cattle is illustrative of why it is so productive to consider Canada, a settler-colonial nation, through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism. If a land is to be settled rather than colonized, invaded, or occupied, then there must be no one or nothing present initially. Furthermore, the process of settlement carries with it connotations of peace and innocence; since violence cannot be part of that particular narrative, the violence that does occur must be obscured. But of course, this is simply a matter of semantics—it is language itself that is creating or insisting on the empty landscape that is available for settlement. After the land is semantically emptied, it can be filled not only with “cattle”—pastoral animals that bridge the divide between human culture and the natural world—but also with “discourse.” Language itself shapes the land and makes it ready for human inhabitation. And yet this language of settlement, while insisting on its own non-violent nature, violently imposes itself on the environment and indigenous communities. As Justin Edwards explains, “[t]o settle the nation, to carve out a sense of homeliness on foreign terrain, has been part of the Canadian imperial enterprise of eradicating unsettledness and settling down at the cost of other cultures and nations” (xx). Postcolonial studies, environmental studies, and literary studies meet in this place, where the process of settling a land depends not only upon imposing oneself on the environment but

also upon the tools of language that are used to first empty and then violently shape the land into what the settlers need it to be.

### Unsettling Discourse

But if a land has been settled by means of violent discourse, then how might that same land be *unsettled* by discourse? This is the task that Rawlings takes upon herself in *Wide Slumber*, which engages deeply with these themes and questions by considering the violence that language can do to an environment and to both the human and nonhuman beings that inhabit it. Rawlings' "unsettling" use of language includes not only disturbing images but also the disintegration of language itself. Words are fractured and even appear to have been eaten, as if the environment were taking its revenge. This can be seen in a section titled "narcolepsy," on a page where words and symbols form the shape of a partly eaten leaf. The top of the leaf includes full words: "for breath: slow, slow, quick-slip / slow and slow soft mouth with barbed spines. / Stretch muscle; pin leg. Chew waste or rest" (30). But by the bottom of the page, this "chewing" has made the words incomprehensible: "weh .. eni dera tiw tuom / os wols na wols ciu / wols aer ro nuocc" (30). While the word "slow" can be found repeatedly in its inverted form ("wols"), suggesting some continuity between the top and bottom of the "leaf," the disintegration of words suggests that they have been chewed and digested by a caterpillar with "barbed spines" in her mouth, making her way across the green surface. This disintegration of text can be found in many places throughout *Wide Slumber*, as if the words that are used to describe nature are being digested, malformed, and excreted by nature itself.

Rawlings' unique strategy for deconstructing language provides a way for the environment to become an agent in its own "de-settlement." But Rawlings is not only interested in the violence done to nature; in many ways, her poem argues that the violence done to the landscape parallels the violence done to other oppressed or disadvantaged groups, particularly women and indigenous populations. *Wide Slumber* communicates an ethical responsibility to the environment as part of a discourse on violence that is done to both the human and the nonhuman. Throughout

the poem, Rawlings plays with multiple meanings of the phrase “pinning down,” evoking the violence of “pinning down” a moth in an insect collection, “pinning down” a woman in a sexual act (which at times resembles rape), and the metaphor of “pinning down” the meaning of words. Each of these forms of “pinning down” not only weaves together the fate of humans and nonhumans but also demonstrates that the metaphor of “raping the land”—as problematic as that metaphor is—can work in unsettling ways within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Within the text, the bodies of moths and women are made analogous to one another, often becoming indistinguishable. This occurs in the “Egg, Larva—Dyssomnia” section, which includes instructions on how to “*Collect, kill and mount specimen*” (22; emphasis in original). The instructions occur primarily on the right-hand pages, with a few phrases making their way onto the left-hand side. The left-hand pages also include words that evoke disordered sleep (particularly suggested by the section title of “dyssomnia,” defined by *Wide Slumber’s* glossary as a “broad classification of sleep disorders, referencing difficulty falling or staying asleep” [98]) and women’s bodies (the words “hymen” [26], “specula” [26], “vulva” [28], and “labial” [30] all appear). The word “labial” doubles as the name for lips and a part of female genitalia and gains a third meaning as a linguistic term when Rawlings explicitly defines it in her glossary as “articulated by closing or partly closing lips” (99). Words on the right-hand sides of the pages include references to body parts, including the “thorax” (23, 25), which, defined as the “middle region of the body between head and abdomen” (100) (i.e., the chest, containing the lungs) and placed next to the word “labial,” evokes the word “larynx” (which is located in the neck), another sound-producing organ. Within the nightmarish context of disordered sleep, it becomes difficult to tell what kind of whole body such fragments belong to.

By referencing the larynx and lips repeatedly, Rawlings suggests that the bodies she describes have the potential to have a voice or at least make a noise that will be heard. Sound is significant from the very beginning of the text, emerging in the first pages of the book as “a hoosh

a ha” (7), a noise that could be interpreted as labored breathing in addition to the sound of moth wings. Rawlings’ oral performances of the text demonstrate this fact; her reading of her own text becomes a performance that focuses on breath and includes eerie, disconcerting noises. The focus on orality also suggests that Rawlings may be indirectly engaging with the long history of indigenous Canadian literature, which can also be described as constantly in flux, difficult to “pin down.” For in *Wide Slumber*, it is not only specimens but “text” that is “*Collect[ed], sort[ed] and frame[d]*” (42; emphasis in original). Instructions are given to “[p]inch meaning” and “store [it] in [a] box with semanticide” (42; emphasis in original), a wonderful play on the word “insecticide,” and instead of a pin, a “pen” is “force[d] through the body of the text” (43). Coincidentally, Eva-Marie Kröller points out that “Anishinabe poet and cultural worker Marie Annharte Baker likens written records of Aboriginal culture to the fixative used by entomologists to preserve the bodies of insect specimens that typify their species” (24). The act of writing is therefore not only violent in the way that it “pins” down meaning but in the way that—as a colonial enterprise—it can “fix” cultures, languages, and literatures in problematic ways. Rawlings’ focus on sound and the body parts that create sound suggests that the oral provides an enabling alternative to written forms of language.

As enabling as the oral might be, it is still framed within the gothic, nightmarish tone of the text. The sound evoked by the larynx and lips could be the scream occurring near the beginning of the text (“sleep is bruised or screams or none comes” [16]), a scream that is forced through “partly closing lips,” evoking the idea of “pinning” as a violent act of rape. The idea of the scream is also suggested by violent words in the section, such as “kill” (22), “bleed” (22), “pinch” (23), “cannibalistic” (24), “simplode” (24) (implode), “cutworms” (24) (cut), “force” (25), “pin” (25) (as both the verb and the instrument), and “manipulate” (26). These images of violence, the sound of a scream, and the commands to “mount” (22) the specimen and “force insect pin / through middle of body between wings” (25) cumulatively evoke an act of rape. The symbol that heads the section (C-) can resemble larva struggling to emerge from an egg as well as a penis (-) being forced into a vagina

(C). Read this way, the text becomes a nightmarish space where violence and rape wound both human and nonhuman worlds, almost erasing the distinctions between them in the process. Although using rape as a metaphor for exploiting the environment has the potential to problematically diminish the significance of violence done to women, *Wide Slumber's* parallel of the two forms of violence effectively reveals them to be what Carol Adams and Josephine Donovan call "interlocking oppressions." Adams and Donovan make this argument within the context of the shared vulnerability between animal and women's bodies, stating that sexism and speciesism are both a result of a privileging of enlightenment rationality. Their critique therefore makes it possible to provide an "analysis of oppression" that incorporates "other life forms besides human beings" (2–3). When Rawlings draws a parallel between "pinned" moths and "pinned" women, we can read this connection as an acknowledgement of the ways in which bodies (of all kinds) are vulnerable to violence.

And yet, the way in which these violent words are juxtaposed with the vocabulary of desire opens up an alternate, and completely opposite, reading of the acts of penetration in this section. Because of the scattered, dream-like structure of the section, it is possible to read the processes described as merely part of the ordinary processes of nature. The instructions on how to mount a specimen are not gratuitously violent (one suspects that Rawlings copied the phrases verbatim from an actual lepidopterist's handbook), and a majority of the "violent" words and images describe the natural process of the larvae forcing its way out of an egg, or even a sperm cell fertilizing an ovum. Read this way, the sexual act that is taking place in these pages could be a consensual, loving act. The "scream" that is heard could be a scream of delight: the full line reads, "sleep is bruised or screams or none comes but we desire, we feel the full hot flesh of our wing swipe grass" (16). These two contradictory readings exist side by side in the text, leaving the possibility open that nightmares and dreams may be present simultaneously. These two opposed readings support Sugars and Turcotte's argument that the postcolonial gothic can be paradoxically "unsettling and enabling at the same time," since in such an unstable environment, conventions can be

used to convert “the unfamiliar or ghostly into nonthreatening—even sustaining—objects of desire” (xi). Within this framework, the enabling outcome of the postcolonial gothic is tied to the pleasure of destabilizing categories in a way that produces new meaning. As clearly as the violence of language makes itself felt in the text, the meditation on this language results in a productive creation of new ideas, as production itself is linked to both abstract knowledge and bodily reproduction. The incredibly disorienting experience of reading (and re-reading) *Wide Slumber* is due in part to the constant juxtaposition of extremes, the images of death (“cutting out of a throat” [53]) placed alongside and parallel to the erotic images (“swift like lovers at a throat” [53]). Within an ecocritical and postcolonial framework, the threatening environment therefore transforms into something simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, feared and desired. And while we may find this process “unsettling,” it is exactly the “un-settlement” of the land that Rawlings is trying to achieve.

### **The Violence of Naming**

Rawlings’ ambiguous language and symbols mock the idea that there is any “true” meaning to be found and pinned down on the page; “meaning” cannot be present without language, but language fails (at least most of the time) to capture and “pin down” any one particular meaning. In the poem, the process of interpretation and the slipperiness of language allow for the possibility of escape and the paradoxical assurance of uncertainty. Within *Wide Slumber*, the attempt to “pin down” meaning in colonial discourse can be specifically tied to a critique of the violence of naming practices within that discourse. In the text, scientific discourse and the role of the lepidopterist come under attack in a way that reveals certain kinds of naming to be imperialist methods for claiming environments. Not only does Rawlings draw a parallel between the lepidopterist who pins down moths and butterflies and the act of rape, but she also deconstructs the tools of language that the lepidopterist uses—specifically, the tool of labeling species. The names of various species of moths and butterflies pervade *Wide Slumber*, just as one might expect when exploring the dreamscape of a lepidopterist. But just as the

act of “pinning” meaning evokes the violence of “pinning” the bodies of lepidoptera, the act of colonial naming evokes the violence of colonial settlement. Rawlings’ naming practices within *Wide Slumber* not only critique this violence but visually situate names on the page in ways that dismantle artificial categories, thus suggesting more holistic, ecological, and unsettling ways of relating to the natural environment.

The idea that language itself can be a form of violence is a concept that is far from new to postcolonial criticism. Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who sometimes writes in the language of Gikuyu, sees English as an “imperial wound”: “The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (437). For those undergoing colonization, the imposed language can be like an invasive species, killing that which is native to the environment and becoming impossible to weed out. But the violence of language can also be seen as a human imposition upon the natural world. As Susanna Sawyer and Arun Agrawal explain, the process of naming the environment is, especially in a colonial setting, an integral part of the process of claiming that environment: “the systematist crystallize[d] a peculiarly Western and gendered way of naming, collecting, itemizing, and possessing Nature” (82). In the mid-eighteenth century, it was Carl Linnaeus, the man “most credited with reorienting the optics of Europe’s perception of Nature,” who “ordered nature through a singular, unified, classificatory system” (82) that depended upon the practice of naming. As a kind of colonialist Adam, Linnaeus set out to systematize the world and thus conquer it through knowledge. Sawyer and Agrawal explain that Linnaeus and other systematists “were complicit in the colonial erasures of local contexts and histories and played a productive role in tabulating and accounting the future worth of colonized spaces” (83). Like planting the imperial flag, naming became a symbol of colonial conquest.

Rawlings exposes the violence of naming through the way she presents specific names of moths, butterflies, regions, and lakes in her poem. Near the end of the text is a page that includes names such as “variable burnet, forester moth, blotched emerald, small waved umber, swallow-tailed” (77)—moths that can be found in various regions around the world. The names of these moths stretch across the page in six separate

lines, but between these lists are the scattered names of various flora: “ash,” “poplar,” “birch,” “sea campion,” “wood sage” (77). The presence of these names could evoke a catalogue, neatly organized for the lepidopterist or tourist. However, a few things automatically disrupt this reading. First, these names are not scientific classifications but common names. Second, the effect of the lines of moth names interspersed with the names of plants creates a visual picture that resembles the pattern of sleep spindles (the EEG visual representation of a burst of brain activity while sleeping), which Rawlings mentions a few pages before (73). This visual representation juxtaposes the scientific discourse of sleep with that of nature, uncomfortably blurring the line between the worlds inside and outside of the mind. Furthermore, while there seems to be a division between categories (the names of moths and the names of plants), this division is challenged multiple times. The name “knot-grass,” for example, appears among the names of other plants, but the name also belongs to the knot grass moth. Even the division between the “natural” and the “artificial” can be challenged: the name “fox moth” (74, 76) appears multiple times and while this is the name of an actual moth, it also happens to be the name of a biplane passenger aircraft that was assembled in Toronto. Through these subtle double meanings, the poem challenges the system of naming as a secure means of categorization and therefore of knowledge. These ambiguities and juxtapositions also allow for the environment to be presented as a whole; the lists of names do not separate elements of the environment but rather represent an entire ecology. Rather than using names as an imperial flag, Rawlings transforms the lists into a reinforcement of interconnectivity.

By drawing attention to the ambiguity that exists between categories, Rawlings is also able to playfully transform scientific discourses in a way that critiques rigid definitions and takes advantage of the uncertainty that is inherent in any kind of scientific claim. In her “LARVA, PUPA—REM” section, she includes two facing pages that suggest the possibility of “bottling up” the discourse of science itself. On the right-hand page is an illustration of a mason jar that looks like it is filled partway with water (57). On the left-hand page is a collection of words arranged to resemble the same size and shape of the jar on the right (56). These words are

all highly scientific in nature: “hypnagogic” (drowsiness before sleep), “myrmecophily” (positive interspecies interactions), “corpus bursae” (part of the female lepidoptera’s anatomy). But, as the words I have selected suggest, Rawlings mixes up her scientific disciplines, combining words associated with sleep and sleep cycles with words associated with insect body parts and activities. These words are combined as if shoved together into the jar and left on a shelf for preservation or observation. Yet amongst these words are others that Rawlings has made up herself: “hypoviviposition,” “ectothenuresis,” “sleepidoptera,” and others exist next to the “real” scientific terms; and yet to the untrained eye, there is no difference between the actual and fictional terms. Rawlings’ poetry therefore exposes the constructed nature of scientific discourse and the way that it can be destabilized through experimental language. Rather than using science as a means through which to impose order or insist on absolute certainty, Rawlings reveals the fact that scientific knowledge always carries an element of uncertainty: that information is constantly being revised and rewritten.

Within a settler-colonial context, this decentering of scientific discourse and absolute definitions allows space for alternative kinds of knowledge. In the same way that “pinned” meaning overgeneralizes or devalues indigenous forms of language, static scientific discourse leaves no room for the kinds of metamorphoses (of meanings, forms, and bodies) that are so important for both postcolonial and natural environments. The glossary that Rawlings includes at the end of *Wide Slumber*, which includes many terms that Rawlings has invented herself, reinforces the idea that “meaning-making” is always an uncertain and potentially perilous activity. Some of the words that are defined do suggest that the glossary can be read as a “key” to unlock some of the hidden secrets of the text; for example, the word “anagram” is provided along with the definition “letters rearranged to reveal hidden meaning” (98). Yet, as with the other catalogues in Rawlings’ text, these definitions do not always provide one with the kind of knowledge that one would expect. For example, the definition of the word “butterfly” is “to cut and spread open and lay flat” (98), a gloss that reinforces a connection between language and violence. Rawlings’ re-working of the concept of the

glossary serves to challenge the idea that definitions are always singular and that knowing what a name means can help one actually understand the nature of the thing being named. For Canada, as a nation that is liminally poised between many different kinds of categories, this unsettling destabilization of science, language, and knowledge (particularly that which relates to the natural environment) enables a de-colonizing project by exposing the violence that colonial discourse enacts upon both human and nonhuman bodies.

### Uncanny Coupling

Rawlings' process of revealing language's incapacity to pin down meaning depends not only on destabilizing colonial and scientific discourse but also on the way that these destabilizations are uncanny. The unsettling of discourse within *Wide Slumber*, while admittedly deconstructive in nature, is primarily an exploration of a gothic, disturbing, nightmarish world in which words are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. The beginning of the "Pupa—Parasomnia" section, for example, includes a "deep slumber" page on which we find the words "of," "a," "or," and "th[e]" (61). Here, these *heimlich* words that are ordinary and immediately recognizable become *unheimlich* very quickly when placed next to one another in rapid repetition: "of 'a' or 'th' : th 'of' of 'a' or 'th' of 'or,' a" (61). This line can be read as if it were a complete sentence, but when one tries reading it out loud, the sound resembles fluttering wings. If simple words that seem to be completely ordinary and familiar turn out to be strangely inhuman and unrecognizable, then the poem suggests that language and the written symbols that we use to construct language are not secure or stable. However, it is not only language use that proves to be uncanny in *Wide Slumber*—Rawlings' uncannily queer coupling of human and insect bodies also serves to unsettle notions of where the boundary between the human world and the natural environment is located. Such a project is vital within the context of postcolonial ecocriticism where culture and nature collide. Yet as gothic and disturbing as *Wide Slumber's* uncanny bodily couplings can be, they always work toward the argument that such intertwinings can be both pleasurable and productive.

One of the most gothically inflected moments in *Wide Slumber* occurs in the section titled “bruxism,” a word defined in the glossary as “a parasomnia where the sleeper grinds or clenches her teeth” (98). In the center of the page, surrounded by letters and sounds such as “l,” “d,” “n,” “th,” and “nd” that require the use of teeth to articulate, is a short stanza that juxtaposes the dead bodies of humans and insects:

chest oppressor: demon  
corpse. leaking bodies  
of witch, demon, deformed  
human offspring. a block  
of dead insects in th butter dish (70)

The “leaking bodies” suggest an abject blurring between subjects within a gothic realm of witches and demons. The seemingly mundane, yet repulsive, image of dead insects in a butter dish is brought into this gothic realm in a jarring manner, forcing the reader to consider a dead insect body as yet another form of the “demon corpse” mentioned at the beginning of the stanza. The passage ultimately demonstrates the unsettling way that Rawlings connects human and nonhuman bodies. But within the text, the merging of bodies is not only juxtapositional or metaphorical but also physical and literal. The place where speech and language break down the most is wherever Rawlings touches on sexuality. Not only is sexuality a place where bodies and language meet, but in Rawlings’ world, it is also a place where humans and nonhumans closely—very closely—interact. And yet, if, as Donna Haraway suggests, the reduction of the physical boundary between human and animal bodies signals a “disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling” (52), then these unsettling moments in the text have the potential to produce “offspring” that—as deformed as they may be—are still productive rather than destructive. The offspring who are reproduced in such a fundamentally queer manner link uncanny desire and pleasure to the production of new ways of thinking that challenge traditional categories.

This uncanny coupling of bodies is evident early in the text, when the “we” voice of insects who descend slowly upon a lake encounter a

new physical presence. The voice states, “we stretch our feelers toward the warm body” (14), and in the moment of contact between bodies, a perturbing encounter occurs:

Slow light touch of hand on wing, scales brush off like butterfly  
kisses, hand on brow, eyelash dew and fog,  
breath and fur our entrance and we caress the dulled wet pas-  
sage, the flicker of soft quiet like sound or sand,  
when larva eats its eggshell and becomes pupa *a hoosh* (15)

Here, body parts become confused, language is unable to account for whose hand is touching whose wing or to describe whether “breath” and “fur” are nouns or verbs. “Hand” and “wing” touch and kiss, but the “butterfly kisses” that once evoked the childish contact of eyelashes now suggest a taboo sexual encounter. Before the scene can become too peaceful, the image of a larva eating its eggshell intrudes to further disturb the reader. Over these two facing pages (14–15), the bodies engage in a progression of sexualized actions: they “descend,” “enter sleep as a virgin,” “quiver,” “touch,” “caress,” “tongue,” “smell,” “heave,” “push,” “thrust,” “pulse,” and “come.” This sexual imagery in the text is finally brought to a climax in a moment near the end of the poem when uncanny coupling results in a strange offspring, evoking the “gestat[ion]” (24) that takes place over the course of the poem as the egg from the first section gradually transforms into a being with wings: “Exhale three dead white moths—cream moths. Moths with thick, furry antennae. Tickle the epiglottis and struggle to exit” (90). A scene that contains both death and resurrection, the birth of un-dead moths evokes a gothic fear of an unstable line between life and death. The moths are used to unsettle the human throat from which they emerge, evoking the liminal areas between human and nonhuman, life and death, playful “tickl[ing]” and violent “struggl[ing].” By playing in the imaginative place between the (re)productive possibilities and nightmarish results of erasing these distinctions, Rawlings maintains a gothic space that is simultaneously frightening and pleasurable, suggesting that uncanny pleasure and coupling results in queer, yet productive, forms of knowledge.

## Conclusion

The uncanny coupling that takes place within *Wide Slumber* suggests the pleasurable aspects of dwelling within multiple kinds of liminal spaces. However, when one considers the settler-colonial context of the text, these explorations into the liminal unsettle far more than just interior or psychological processes. Rawlings' focus on the environment and non-human creatures unites the gothic uncanny with real concerns about the way the natural landscape is exploited within a colonial setting and suggests that the colonist's goal of settling the land with discourse results in real violence against that environment. While the uncanny evokes a fear of uneasily occupied spaces, it also carries with it the potential to disturb and shock in a way that results in a productive "unsettlement" of the colonized environment. *Wide Slumber's* experimental poetics and unsettling methodologies therefore perform a process that Sugars and Turcotte describe as a shift in the way that the gothic has been used within Canadian literature:

Initially, it is fair to say, the Gothic emerged as a way of responding to the unfamiliar by demonizing and even fetishizing the 'unknown'—be it human or landscape. Often this monstrous presence was figured as an Indigenous one—a danger lying just beyond the garrison but not sufficiently removed. Over time, Canadian writers began to appropriate this force, to bend it to a national purpose, and to map the parameters of an identity that might embrace what was resonantly local so that the Gothic became a way to insist on, rather than deny, a colonial history. (xvii)

This productive potential is also suggested by the final section of *Wide Slumber*, which is titled "Imago—Arousal" (89). Rawlings' use of the word "arousal" is multiple, suggesting both arousal from sleep and sexual arousal, reminding us that ambiguity can be used toward productive ends. However, there is a third meaning to "arousal," one that connects the themes of sleep and sex to language—in this case, the word suggests a mental arousal, or a kind of awakening of understanding. This awakening reminds us that intertwining national, cultural, and ecologi-

cal concerns is “unsettling and enabling at the same time” (Sugars and Turcotte xi) and that the process of unsettling the environment by challenging the violence of colonial discourse allows us to emerge with a new, unsettling understanding, “wide and eyed” (Rawlings 91).

## Note

- 1 See Penn Sound’s archive of Rawlings’ work, including an audio file of her reading the full text of *Wide Slumber*, at [writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Rawlings.php](http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Rawlings.php).

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