
Reviewed by Erin James (University of Idaho) Published on H-Environment (October, 2022) Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)


Taylor Eggan’s *Unsettling Nature: Ecology, Phenomenology, and the Settler Colonial Imagination* begins with a consideration of his own home. Recalling his initial delight at the flawlessly landscaped yard of his new rental property, Eggan is especially enthusiastic about an Oregon white oak growing up from a circle cut into the back deck. He and his partner set up a table and two chairs under the tree’s canopy and establish a personal sanctuary. “We made ourselves at home,” he writes, noting how quickly they come to think of the tree and the property as “ours,” as “extensions of ourselves” (p. 1). Yet this picture of landscaped bliss is fleeting: in their second summer on the property, Eggan notices their tree lagging behind as the rest of Portland erupts into bloom. He soon realizes that the tree is being slowly suffocated by an ivy creeping over from the neighbor’s property and faces an abrupt shift in his way of seeing: “What had initially appeared to me as something beautiful, conjuring rustic images of European gardens and ivy-covered ruins was in fact the very picture of violence. A slow-motion strangulation was transpiring right above our heads, even as we sat there in its shade sipping rosé” (p. 2).

Eggan uses this opening anecdote to introduce the key claim of his book: that ecological homecoming narratives—the dominant narrative of ecological philosophy and eco-phenomenology—bear an uncanny resemblance to the narratives that inform settler colonialism. For it isn’t just any ivy that threatens the Oregon oak. English ivy (*Hedera helix*) is a plant steeped in the traditions of courtly love, civility, wealth, and privilege. No doubt, as Eggan argues, the British settlers arriving in America brought the ivy with them to make the New World feel more like home. It certainly helped him to feel more at home, initially. And yet the plant is also an invasive menace that threatens native vegetation, so much so that it’s legally blacklisted in Oregon. For Eggan, the struggle between the oak and the ivy taking place in his backyard illustrates a potent ideological trick by which imperial settlers affectively reconstitute stolen indigenous lands as “my own particular beloved place,” or my “home” (p. 4). The oak and the ivy, once a familiar landscape of beauty, is now an image of homemaking through violence.
I begin a review of Eggan’s book with a detailed look this anecdote because it highlights the strengths of his writing. *Unsettling Nature* grapples with big ideas: imperialism, the history of phenomenology, Freudian psychology, cognition, narrative theory, decolonization, globalization, affect studies, interpretive methodologies, and the material agency of the world in which we live. Yet despite the rigor and depth of Eggan’s analysis his claims are always accessible, rooted in very real histories of place and practice—both his own, as a contemporary scholar seeking to upend centuries of settler colonial homemaking, and those of writers in the American Southwest and southern Africa. Part 1 begins with a deep dive into the metaphysics of home that Eggan finds hiding in Martin Heidegger’s work and running through contemporary phenomenology, bolstered by a thorough critique via decolonial and Black studies scholars. It then turns to the aesthetics of landscape in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* (1925) and D. H. Lawrence’s novella *St Mawr* (1925) to introduce two key concepts: the home(ly) metaphysics of landscape that coalesces around one and brings one “home to” oneself, and the *ecological uncanny*, which unsettles narratives of settler colonial homemaking. Part 2 turns our attention to the Afrikaans *plassroman* (farm novel) tradition with astute readings of C. M. van der Heever’s Afrikaans-language *Somer* (1935), Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Always Singing* (1950) to establish and dismantle the structures of farmworld ideology. The real heart of Eggan’s book, though, lies in the short and brilliant bridging texts that end each section and offer readers new interpretive tools. Excursus 1 introduces a theory of ecological realism, which Eggan defines as “the direct (rather than representational) perception of the really existing and fully populated environments in which organisms find themselves” (p. 132). He argues that this new mode of reading is an especially valuable way of working against allegory—of reading literary environments as the messy and complicated assemblages of lives and experiences that they are instead of as symbolic representations of the social forms of human violence that have long dominated analysis of settler colonial literature. Ecological realism is invested in the gaps in a text, as these absences are where the ecological uncanny surfaces. He offers up a character hearing a frog’s croak as an illustrative example. The frog’s presence registers on the surface of the text, but because the frog is marginal to the human character’s story, their experience remains unexplored by the text’s narrator. Yet in Eggan’s hands the croak is not simply ambiance or atmosphere for human drama, but a signifier of nonhuman worlds that are broadly invisible to human narratives. Such moments of ecological realism, he writes, “exist as holes in the textual surface, one of many possible gaps that might disturb the narrative totality if interpretation did not work so hard to paper over them and produce the illusion of pure surface” (p. 137). Excursus 2 builds upon this framework of ecological realism to introduce the concept of *exo-phenomenology*—a speculative mode in which practitioners are “keen to leave behind the idea of ecology as primordial dwelling, and to denaturalize the range of normative ideologies to which that dwelling plays host” (p. 221). Such a project involves radical reeducation, in which we push the boundaries of our perception to become attuned to phenomena that would otherwise remain alien to us. Hence the anecdote of the oak and the ivy. By practicing his own affective project, Eggan uses exo-phenomenology to trouble the home(ly) rhetoric of his own “home.”

Taken together, Eggan’s theorization of ecological realism and exo-phenomenology offers literary critics and environmental humanities scholars essential tools by which to unpack centuries of whitewashed environmental narratives of home and belonging. As his humble opening anecdote also demonstrates, these tools also have vivid real-world implications for the environments in which we
read and live.


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/).