

The Affective Ecology in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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Introduction

In J.M. Coetzee's 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K*, the protagonist's— K's— interpersonal experiences and interactions within the environment are worthy of critical attention through the lens of affective ecocriticism. In recent years, the interdisciplinary fields of ecocriticism and affect theory have gained significant traction in studying human-environment relationships—how society and the environment behave towards one another. These relationships include the connections between humans and environments, their co-existence and interactions, and how humans depend on, adapt, and modify the environment.

Exploring the intersections between these fields reveals not only how they complement each other but also the complexities of human-environment relationships, whether those relationships are natural or constructed, occurring within uninhabited or overpopulated landscapes, and how emotions (in this context, used interchangeably with the terms “*feeling*” and “*affect*”) are inseparable from the world around us. Analyzing *Michael K* through this affective ecocritical lens gives readers insight into the affective dimensions of human existence, the complexities of emotional experiences, and how these elements of affects shape individual identity, relationships, and engagement with the natural world.

As shown through the novel's narration style, affect-driven plot, and overarching thematic structure (the contrast of war, displacement, isolation, and self-determination vs. K's pursuit of survival, freedom, and human dignity) these complexities can be obvious or underlying and are expressed through human-environment relationships. The more obvious stem from our “ecological consciousness” while more underlying complexities are linked to an “ecological *unconscious*” in which environmental concerns are repressed. Recent developments

in the field of ecology—more specifically “*ecopsychology*—” seek to heal the alienation between the recently created urban psyche and the age-old natural environment” (Harms).

K’s simultaneous fight to sustain himself and resistance toward futurity echoes sentiments shared by ecopsychologists such as Valerie Harms that “open access to the ecological unconscious is arguably the only path to sanity and sustainability”; therefore as K’s fate suggests at the end of the novel, the ecological unconscious is “the deepest root of collusive madness in a postcolonial and industrialized society” (Harms). Specifically, the socio-political-environmental context of South Africa during the time of the novel serves as a backdrop to K’s internal struggle and eventual downfall, highlighting the complexities of human society and political power dynamics in South Africa during the Apartheid regime. In particular, it demonstrates how fences and borders/limits and boundaries, both mental and physical, shaped K’s personal life and interfered with the natural world around him.

To most thoroughly explore these emotions and understand the socio-political-environmental context of *Michael K*, it is necessary to analyze the novel through the lens of affective ecocriticism, particularly through the narrative’s exploration of affective encounters and how they relate to environmental ethics. oppression, resistance, and struggle; state of violence; (the impossibility of) surveillance; othering, isolating, sanctioning and segregating; fences and borders

Understanding Affective Ecocriticism

Defining affective ecocriticism is nearly as impossible as grappling with the complexities this theoretical lens reveals about our human relationship to the natural world. It is also a fairly new interdisciplinary field in which ecocritics and affect theorists have found mutual interest in the ways literature and culture shape human relationships with nature— and vice versa—how

individuals' perceptions and responses to the natural world around them are shaped by affective experiences. This newfound common ground has garnered considerable momentum in recent years, especially in exploring themes such as modernity, postcolonialism, war, and human-environment relationships in the Anthropocene. One must first understand the etymology of the term “ecocriticism”, or rather, understand the ever-evolving nature of the field as our relationship with the environment is ever-changing.

The Etymology of Ecocriticism

We can start by tracing back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", the term “*ecocriticism*” was mentioned for the first time and then laid dormant in critical vocabulary until over a decade later. Most of us are familiar with the prefix “ecos”, which conjures up images of Earth and forms the basis of words such as ecology, economics, and ecosystem — these all share the same Greek root, “*ecos*”, derived from “*oikos*,” meaning “*house or household*”, while “*critic*” traces back to the Greek adjective “*kritikós*” meaning “*discerning, capable of judging*,” and the noun suffix “*-ism*” being an act; practice; process (Merriam-Webster).

Unlike “*environ*”, the literal interpretation of “*ecocriticism*” roughly translates to one’s perception and judgment of home, emphasizing not just an awareness of our immediate surroundings but of our human impact on the planet’s basic support system. The implication behind the root word “*oikos*” is that nature is our home, contrasting the ways contemporary society has made it impossible to escape the commodification of nature—home has become a place to separate from nature, although by inhabiting space in the natural world we cannot escape the material world predating us and reaping the benefits from the natural world.

Therefore, the earliest scholars in the field referred to ecocriticism explicitly as the “study of

nature writing”, insinuating nature is our home, but there are many ecocritical theorists who, at least given modern context and the commodification of nature, would perhaps disagree if not find it inherently problematic.

In 1989, Cheryll Glotfelty (one of the first contributors to the ecocritical movement) urged this critical field be adopted as the “study of nature writing”. Scholars seconded her urgent call and the usage of the term slowly bloomed until confusion about the true definition and scope of the field arose once more. This confusion led to a new framework of ecocriticism: rather than attempting to provide a definitive answer, in 1994 sixteen ecocritical scholars published a series of papers to foster an awareness of the term’s varied uses (*and non-uses*). They were asked to consider how present understandings of the term might lead to future developments in scholarship and pedagogy (Branch, and O’Grady, 1994).

Although each writer took a distinctively different approach to define ecocriticism and its significance to their scholarship, there was a resounding consensus that this theoretical lens allows for a close examination of the portrayal of the natural world and landscapes in literature and culture, with specific emphasis on themes of environmentalism, sustainability, and ecological consciousness (*or unconsciousness*). Ecocriticism is, at its core, concerned with taking accountability for the implications of our human history on the natural world in the modern age, addressing the crises we have created, and breaking away from the material world. It is noteworthy to mention that this series of papers comes from the Western Literature Association and neglects perspectives of scholars outside of the North American West. This gap in cultural perspectives makes clear the need for new intersectional studies in the field of ecocriticism, which continues to arise as the state of arts and culture becomes increasingly difficult to navigate in postcolonial landscapes.

A debate has even been raised toward Coetzee, his novels, and his imaginative investigations of the real historical circumstances in South Africa, one critic going so far as to say that Coetzee is “bad for your cultural health” (Hope). Although he is from South Africa, being white and writing characters such as K is viewed by some as incredibly problematic, as the narration style focuses on K’s inability to express himself and his subsequent embarrassment, alienation, and life-long struggle. Critics raise valid questions regarding Coetzee and similar authors’ works, such as this novel: are they trying to escape historical reality, or, on the contrary, are they (and consequently, their readers) engaging with historical reality in a way that may require some sort of explanation and defense?

These are important questions to ask oneself while reading any text with a narrator as unreliable as K. Ecocritic and postcolonial scholars like Anthony Vital explain this is because:

“...ecocriticism has tended to reflect the interests and concerns of countries in the North. Yet there is no good reason not to develop African ecocriticism, one that engages in debating what society is the signing of significance to nature (in varieties of cultural products) reveals about both its past and present.”

This is particularly why studying a text like *Michael K* through an ecocritical lens is so important, as K's connection with nature is ultimately one of human exploitation and destruction, revealing the socio-political-environmental context of South Africa. Fellow postcolonial ecocritics who have grown up and are living in Nigeria echo Vital’s sentiment expressing that “ecocriticism in Africa, often framed by the postcolonial problem, appears to have a lot of focus on the notion of environmental justice.” (Kehinde and Egya). Furthermore, postcolonial ecocriticism, rooted in protest and activism, has contributed to collective literary awareness and

confrontation against the institutional powers working to perpetuate environmental degradation in Africa—especially intersections of power, politics, and environmental degradation.

As this theory relates to Coetzee’s novel, K’s journey highlights the complexities of human society and political power dynamics, and how these directly interfere with the natural world in postcolonial Africa. Still scholars like Vital, Kehinde, and Egya are calling for a narrative change to how postcolonial ecocriticism is approached:

“Considering the general degradation that reduces the postcolonial societies to what Frantz Fanon calls the wretched of the earth,” Kehinde and Egya explain, “it could be agreed that these writers’ focus on the environmentalism of the poor is not out of place. However, this rubric deemphasizes the nonhuman implication of the environmental tragedies, leaves untapped the full potentials of those literary genres that aestheticize relations across species, and expands the vision for ecological sustainability” (#).

Posting a new approach to this rubric, the next section focuses on affective principles within *Michael K*, exploring how contemporary affect theorists have paired their discoveries with ecocritical studies, overall leading to a more *effective* framework to map out and tap into the full potential of both theoretical lenses. Although ecocritics have long tried to articulate complex emotional relationships to various environments, ecocritical scholarship has much to gain from the rich body of work on affect and emotion circulating within social and cultural theory (Branch, and O’Grady, 1994).

Contemporary Affective Ecocriticism

In pairing with this postcolonial ecocritical perspective, applying an affective ecocritical lens is essential to fully comprehend the novel’s socio-political-environmental context. K’s affective responses to his environment and the challenges he faced as part of a marginalized

community in South Africa during this period capture the negative and “ugly” feelings that we continue to grapple with in the days of modernity and the Anthropocene—we have reached the age of environmental limits in which toxic and parasitic human-environment relationships are taking a substantial toll on the natural world. Historically, affect theorists have been critiqued for their focus on the human body and the portrayal of its relation to the biological, material, and natural world. In particular, their exploration of affects as autonomic, pre-subjective forces, that move us, perpetuate the focus on how we are *impacted by* nature, how nature *moves* us, decentering the experience from nature itself. Some ecocritics and related scholars would argue that focusing on the intensities of human emotion, especially implying that they are visceral and prior to intentions distracts from focusing on the “*eco*”, our home, or “*environ*”, our surroundings. On the contrary, this is where the intersection of affect theory and ecocriticism lies.

One’s choice to express their emotions and stress towards struggles of modernity, or even in their choice to repress them, gives outsiders insight into the affective dimensions of their human existence, the complexities of their emotional experiences, and how these elements of affects shape their individual identity, interpersonal relationships, and furthermore, impacting their engagement with the natural world. Recalling the aforementioned theory of “ecopsychology”, a branch of ecology that is also posited here as a subset of affective ecocriticism, provides a close examination of how human (mis)behavior and feelings (the good, bad, and especially the ugly) both bond us to and alienate us from the natural world (Harms). It is similar to affective ecocriticism in its close examination of these psychological processes and shares its broader significance in deepening our understanding of human-environment relationships and fostering empathy towards diverse ecological experiences.

In doing so, one can reconcile their anxieties and worries about the natural world as opposed to not processing the intensity of these feelings, internalizing them, isolating, and falling into pits of despair and loneliness. Ecopsychologist Katie Harms, an early contributor to the field, suggests this theoretical framework as a way to address both the suffering of the Earth due to the misbehavior of people and the subsequent suffering of people due to the suffering of the Earth. Ecologists need psychologists and psychologists need ecologists in order to investigate dysfunctional behavior that leads to environmental problems (Harms, 1997). In the same way, ecocritics need affect theorists, furthermore necessitating this discussion on the topic of affective ecocriticism.

Another central intersection of affect theory and ecocritical work is its enhancement on classic nature tropes of the pastoral, frontier, wilderness, and the Kantian/ Burkian sublime and beautiful. In *Michael K*, presentations of pastoral images are often portrayed through daydream-like imagery, especially in the beginning when K thought he would return with his mother to her homeland and help her get better. The pastoral is placed in opposition to the rugged images of the wilderness being something K simultaneously struggles with, eventually comes to wonder, and then overcomes his fears. Contemporary scholarship is beginning to examine more obscure categories, arguing they represent fundamental shifts in representations of our culture and ourselves. Newer and perhaps less well-known tropes like affect theorist Sianne Ngai's proposed the 3 "modern" categories—the zany, cute, and interesting— which she proposes are, in sorts, modern inventions that contain new meanings due to the impacts of modernization.

Ngai like many other, affect theorists, explores through these categorizations society's progression into materialism and "capitalistic overworking" as portrayed in the novel through K himself, all the people he meets along the way who are working any jobs under the Apartheid

regime, but especially those on the railroad and in the work camps, such as Noel. He and others at the camp encapsulate the concept of “zany-ness”—a combination of capitalistic overworking and “play” combined, but the so-called playing seems always on a deeper level about work itself—going so far as to make jokes about their position in life, but in joking they are resigning themselves to hopelessness and accepting their part in the system.

Bringing this back into affect theory, we refer now to Ngai’s postmodern critique of “ugly” feelings. Her affective neologisms include affects like “disgust” “stuplimity,” “envy” and others that are considered non-cathartic—feelings that hold people back from progress. These might enrich ecocritical scholarship as Ngai’s approach yields many insights that ring true to concerns in the field, especially in relation to issues of race and gender. For example, she points out that envy, a paradigmatic ugly feeling, can be an actual recognition of social and economic inequalities—and yet our culture’s tendency is to stereotypically dismiss [it]. This is an important point, as according to Ngai in her book *Ugly Feelings*, these affects operate at the border between internal feeling and objective reality, between affective consciousness and material political conditions. This is precisely where their diagnostic power lies, but this power that derives from their liminality can be tamped down (126).

In a critical review of Ngai’s work, it is mentioned that “more successful than “envy” is the chapter on stuplimity...which is a defense of the critical efficacy of modernist techniques of repetition and senselessness, especially when these techniques are taken to such a deliberate extreme that they generate vast emotions of tedium and numbness” (Chua 5)

This notion of stuplimity is echoed through K’s love for idleness, as described in the novel:

“idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a

flowerbed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body” (#)

It is interesting to compare moments of stuplimity in *Michael K* to those of envy, as to most readers, K’s way of life and love for idleness is not desirable. In times of political unrest, especially that of the Apartheid regime, we find that the very soldiers and officers enforcing the colonial system become trapped within it. They wish to break free as K continues to do and envy him as unlike the rest of them, he has a sense of freedom in his stuplimity.

To finish the discussion on Ngai and bring the final “ugly” emotion of interest to light, she mentions in her closing remarks that disgust, a potent negative emotion, highlights the challenges encountered with the other emotions in previous chapters. She suggests that disgust does not simply resolve the issue of social powerlessness; rather, it effectively diagnoses it. While all the negative emotions she discussed shed light on this problem, disgust specifically brings us closer to the realm of political theory and one’s awareness of subjectivity and the inherent inescapability of the systems they exist within and/ or are enforced upon them. Compared to the other emotions, disgust’s intense and unmatched negativity appears to represent the furthest extent or threshold of what Ngai has termed “ugly” feelings, priming us for more practical or politically effective emotions (353-54). The notion that disgust “primes” us parallels directly with K’s experience. Treated as an object of disgust and disdain since birth all stemming from his cleft lip by his mother, and portrayed throughout his life to be silent, withdrawn, and craving isolation. The feelings of disgust he was suggested to, in this sense, primed him for all the trauma in his later life.

Therefore, calling attention to contemporary theories of affect theory (e.g. postcolonial ecocriticism, ecopsychology, and new affective tropes such as those posed by Ngai) further enhances our ecocritical understanding of environmental loss and the links between emotional investment (especially presentations of grief, trauma, or a lack thereof), intergenerational effects, and political action as they are expressed within texts that foreground deep time and/or future-oriented narratives. *Michael K* is a prime example of a fictional narrative through which K's and other characters' embodied affectivity—emotions resulting from the circular interaction between affective qualities or affordances in the environment and the subject's bodily resonance, be it in the form of sensations, postures, expressive movements, or movement tendencies— is directly related to and caused by the built structures (physically and mentally constructed) and natural landscapes in the novel.

Examining *Michael K* through an Affective Ecocritical Lens

As previously mentioned, K's affective responses to his environment and the challenges he faced as part of a marginalized community in South Africa during the Apartheid regime capture the negative and “ugly” feelings that we continue to grapple with in the days of modernity and the Anthropocene. With an understanding of contemporary developments and conversations in the field affective ecocriticism, we will explore the text through the embodied affectivity of selected main characters in the novel, highlighting the role of emotions, in shaping their perceptions of, responses to, and interactions with the environment. Through a broader scope, examine the both obvious and underlyingly present complexities of human-environment relationships presented within the narration style, affect-driven plot, and overarching thematic structures of the novel.

Of utmost significance to analyze through an affective ecocritical lens is the unreliable narration throughout *Michael K*. For starters, the title leads readers to suspect perhaps the narrator would be K himself, telling his own story. Instead, the beginning of the novel (which starts at K's birth) is told from a third-person perspective. This is until the second chapter, which is in essence at the very end of the novel. This chapter presents the perspective of a medical officer at the clinic where malnourished K is observed from an external viewpoint for the first time. Rather than having to solely rely on K's (often distorted) perspective, readers see him through a new set of eyes and are presented with an entirely different affective demeanor than that of K and his reclusive/withdrawn nature.

In contrasting the narration style of this chapter with that of the rest of the novel, we see that the officer is envious of K and his freedom. As the camp and clinic fall under stricter military control, he fantasizes about living life on his terms like K does, which reflects Ngai's theory of envy, which like other "ugly" feelings is paradigmatic, but envy can be an actual recognition of social and economic inequalities (126). Despite the opportunities they offer us for critical reflection, our culture tends to stereotypically dismiss, discourage, and silence these feelings—envy is considered a purely subjective affect (e.g. "*it's all in your head*" or "*you're the one with the problem*").

This subjective dismissal of negative and uncomfortable affects is a key concept explored by Ngai. Recalling her argument that the power of affects—stemming from their liminal position—can be diminished. As seen in instances of envy in *Michael K*, they are overly simplified and shifted from active involvement in the objective world to reflections of subjective personality traits. Ultimately, this dismissal can make an individual feel wrong for feeling in the first place which, as previously explained, contributes to the many ways these negative, or

“ugly” emotions hold us back from progress or any sort of personal growth that could be offered through allowing oneself to explore the feeling, work through, or express it rather than repress and dismiss it. This is why so many of the guards and officers are so hostile and abusive, but also accounts for the contrast we saw in the guard who confided in K at the camp before he was stabbed, the same night K escaped—they are envious of those who refuse to conform to the system of oppression, and they realize they are also part of the inescapable system they enforce.

As seen in K’s character, his ability to express himself and establish relations with people failed after being a subject of disgust and conditioned into silence. As written on page 48 and commonly repeated throughout the novel, “the right words would not come” to K, and he would beat himself up over the embarrassment, confusion, and/or stress (Coetzee). Where he was forced to repress those emotions and push down this part of his consciousness, he was able to engage with the earlier referenced “ecological unconscious”. K’s early encounters with nature, especially in moments of solitude in the wilderness and repeated moments of him looking out into the “veld”/ up at the sky/ into nature to escape (most notably during moments of embarrassment, confusion, and stress) evoke emotions such as fear, awe, and tranquility. These intense affects, almost sublime, transcend language and contribute to the novel’s exploration of these ineffable moments of human experience.

This also directly aligns with Ngai’s notion of disgust acting as a sort of affective primer for other emotional experiences, as K struggled to survive after the death of his mother and faced the disturbing and abusive aspects of captivity, all the while staying determined to hold true to his beliefs and unwavering by the conformity of those around him. As mentioned earlier with the “zany-ness” of some of his fellow camp members, he was not even interested in engaging in jokes about being part of the system or being such a talented fencer, which is of course an

allegory for the literal and physical boundaries enforced by the Apartheid regime. He was even told this explicitly by the medical officer in chapter two: “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it.’ (166).’

He found freedom from the camp and captivity through his isolation and gardening. Even before having to evade and escape captivity, K had been living off the land one day at a time. The initial goal of his journey was not even to find his purpose but rather to assist his mother and return to her home. Assisting her was what he believed to be his purpose in life, until her death he found “...he did not miss her... except insofar as he had missed her all his life” (34). In first escaping the railroad labor gang and returning to his mother’s home and starting a garden, he was in a sense able to heal his damaged relationship with her, accounting for his sensual relationship with planting harvesting, and eating the food he grows from the land. Even more, he found a purpose in himself after a life of feeling shamed and embarrassed. This was not without a cost, however, as his freedom, and in essence his purpose, was continuously stripped from him as he had to evade captivity and intruders (animals and humans alike) from invading his space.

This echoes famous ecocritic Greg Garrard’s sentiment that “the farmer... is often an enthusiastic agent of rural capitalism rather than a centre of resistance to it, and is, therefore, ill-suited to the stabilizing role” (119-20). This also calls attention to an important aspect of ecopsychology, which is the importance of balancing a synergistic relationship with the natural environment. This involves the removal of the ecological ego, which can be difficult to do so when one solely depends on their immediate environment for food and survival, especially for an individual like K who has no community to rely on (and prefers to keep it that way). Therefore,

in moments of frustration and when the environment becomes out of K's control, he feels helpless and/ or alienated, in turn choosing to hide away in a cave when the soldier invades his space and later hide away in a hole, nearly starving to death after escaping the labor camp and fearing his captors would discover him.

In place of his initial love for gardening, we see a distinct change in K's embodied affect as he replaces it with a love for idleness. He finds, as Ngai would say, a newfound sense of "*stuplimity*" or as Ngai explains it "a bringing together...of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue" (271). In moments of pushing his body to the physical limits (e.g. starvation) to tend to and watch over his garden, he feels simultaneous satisfaction paired with exhaustion while coping with the constant anxiety of his freedom being stripped away. This is important to note when also considering many psychologists construe affect as a broader term that encompasses not only emotions but also feelings in terms of drive states such as thirst and hunger (Fuchs and Koch).

K's complicated relationship with his environment sheds light on how, as ecopsychologists explain, our physical separation from the natural world leads to psychological dysfunction, although in modern society we might see this separation as much more intentional and passive on the individual level, whereas K's purpose in life was gardening and in having his control of it stripped away he lost his will to live. This disconnection, alienation, or overall dysfunction may lead to ecologically destructive behavior; individual human suffering such as anxiety, depression, and anger; or various forms of social and collective suffering such as racism, sexism, violence, and alienation from society (Scull, 2003). Thus, as we separate ourselves or are separated from nature and lean toward a more materialistic society, we are not only threatening the well-being of nature but are threatening our well-being as well.

Conclusions and Implications

Applying this affective ecocritical reading of *Michael K* to the broader scope of modern human-environment relationships in the Anthropocene opens up conversation past the ways modernity in South Africa contextualizes and transforms human relations with nature to one on a global scale. It leads readers to think critically about the materialistic impact of modernity on society and encourages them to find more equitable, sustainable, and healthy ways of inhabiting their place/home, as well as how their choices might affect other peoples' places/homes. By extension, this works towards healing the natural world. Inherently speaking, nature does not need people, but people need nature. This need is reflected throughout K's experience in the novel, and his internal struggle represents one we all face on some level, consciously or unconsciously. Thus, analyzing texts like *Michael K* through this lens works to enrich and reshape affective ecocritical theory's approaches to engaging with audiences in the era of the Anthropocene. This is no easy feat as humanity gravitates away from a natural ecology in favor of a more materialistic one. K's and other character's affective responses to the natural world around them reveal an underlying struggle to reconcile with their anxieties and worry about their environment.

Recall the medical officer and his mother are the only individuals who regard Michael with empathy. There is something notable about these relationships, as although they are in positions of being K's caretaker, their presentations of empathy, general affective demeanors, and the bit of insight given to us from the narrator reveal both Anna's and the unnamed officer's underlying fears about getting old. For Anna, her fears stemmed from her lack of a stable home. Being at the hands of the Burhmann family, and being mistreated and/ or vulnerable in a world that is increasingly harder to live in for each generation. K's mother reveals our underlying fears

about getting old, being mistreated, and/ or vulnerable in a world that is increasingly harder to live in for each generation. That is of course if readers share his pessimistic perspective; however, the narration style and ending of *Michael K* certainly make it difficult not to share his mentality, or at least empathetically engage with it.

In an analysis of *Michael K*, one ecocritic posits that “the species goes about its business ungovernably, uncontainably, and, in a significant way, unconsciously. The logic at stake is not self-evidently apocalyptic—so long, that is, as we remain inside the anthropocentric purview. Outside it, however, the apocalypse we spent the last century fearing is general, there all the time, mundane. The apocalyptic is the ordinary.” This is reflected in U.S. Army Private Roy Scranton’s article “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene”, in which he shares his experience coping with war by adapting the mentality of 18th-century Samurai Yamamoto Tsunetomo, which commands that “meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily”. This all further demonstrates how the emotional impact of environmental degradation affects us on a psychological level, attests to the level of trauma humans and the natural world have experienced and their resilience in the face of ecological disasters, and offers a way to cope with eco-anxiety and psychological responses to environmental crises.

Likewise, affective ecocriticism demonstrates clear value in examining uncomfortable emotions and exploring our cultural anxieties and offers an incomparable theoretical framework for understanding the complex nature of human-environment relationships. By examining the affective dimensions of environmental representation within literary narratives such as *Michael K*, scholars can gain deeper insights into the emotional and ethical dimensions of our collective ecological consciousness and environmental engagement. This holds promise in addressing contemporary environmental challenges and fostering a deeper appreciation of the

interconnectedness of humans and our environment, in the face of a society that is destroying the environment and simultaneously damaging itself (on conscious or unconscious levels). Future directions and possibilities for affective ecocritical analysis will provide lenses through which we can learn to grapple with the daily anxieties and worries stemming from the natural world and environmental crises.

Texts like *Michael K* (and analyzing them through an affective ecocritical lens) remind readers that not only is South Africa still in shambles after the end of the Apartheid regime, but how the world at large is equally in shambles. This literature makes us aware and feel. It confronts us with how we internalize and can often act similarly to characters in the novel as we seek to understand and heal our relationship with the Earth (as well as cope with anxiety toward the environmental crises, dying, despair, isolation/ being alone, etc.). Engaging with this literature can help inform and strengthen frameworks of environmental risk communication in times of public/ worldwide crisis.

There are seemingly infinite sub-theories concerned with the intersections of affective experience, especially relating to modernity and learning to cope with life in the Anthropocene. Outside of Ngai's theories of affect and other recent developments in the field of affective ecocriticism, (e.g. postcolonial ecocriticism and ecopsychology), other contemporary ecocritical studies have emerged sharing similar concerns explored throughout this essay. These include, for example, but are not limited to: ecopoetics, ecosickness, ecogothic, ecogrief, ecosickness, and ecofeminism. Just like the natural world, this theoretical framework is always evolving in response to humanity's drive towards a material ecology. Each new approach stands to help us adopt a less pessimistic vision toward our Earth's future and each other as we explore this trauma and connect with our ecological unconscious.

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