

Minds in the Water: Theory of Mind, Narrative Empathy, and the Cultivation of Ecological Care in Ebele Mogo's Omaliyi

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the psychological concept of theory of mind, the ability to attribute beliefs, desires, and emotions to another individual, in understanding how the genre of climate fiction creates empathy toward non-human beings. Using Ebele Mogo's short story Omaliyi (from the Grist Imagine 2200 climate fiction anthology, 2022) as an extended case study, this paper brings together scholarship on theory of mind, both cognitive and emotional dimensions, narrative empathy, Lisa Zunshine's literary cognitive perspective on fiction as a mechanism that exercises reader's mind-reading and metarepresentational capacities, and nature connectedness. Omaliyi tells of the re-emergence of a river's inner life into the consciousness of a community that no longer pays heed to it. The river is not merely used as an object of use but rather as a subject of address, and this is enacted structurally. The paper argues that giving a mind to a non-human agent, even a fictional one, is the starting point for engaging with the subject empathetically and morally. Climate fiction applies this method similar to current legal and political attempts such as the recognition of river personhood, granting the non-human entity the status of a subject rather than a resource. In the final section of the paper, the boundaries of anthropomorphized empathy as an environmental strategy are discussed.

Keywords: Theory of Mind, Narrative Empathy, Climate Fiction, Anthropomorphism, Ecological Care

1. Introduction

"Cry me a river" is a common expression used to refuse to listen to someone's grievances or complaints; it dismisses the task of listening. Ebele Mogo's Omaliyi can therefore be read as a sustained rejoinder to that idiom: not cry me a river, but rather the cry of the river, made to a society which has treated it, for an entire generation, as a part of its landscape and not as a fellow subject deserving of its due hearing. This inversion, from an expression that denies attention to a story that demands it, is what this essay attempts to address. The environmental crisis is, among other things, a crisis of attention. Rivers dry up, flood plains are paved over, and species die out not because everyone is malicious, but because humans consider the non-human world as a mere backdrop or a resource rather than a population of beings with their own way of existence. A number of psychological studies reveal that human moral concern tracks minds: humans extend care to beings believed to have the capacity to experience, while withholding it from beings perceived as mere physical entities [1, 2]. This raises a significant question in climate communication and environmental education: is it possible for fiction to attribute mind to nonhuman

beings, such as a grieving river, a remembering forest, or an ecosystem longing to be noticed? Do narratives that project such non-human entities with a mind of their own measurably shift how readers relate to the nonhuman world?

This paper takes up that question through a close reading of the short story *Omaliyi*. *Omaliyi* was written in 2022 by Ebele Mogo for Grist's Imagine 2200 climate fiction contest [3]. In *Omaliyi*, the main character, Olamma, a woman living in the city, is summoned home by the diviner (eze mmuo) to hear the sad news that *Omaliyi*, the stream of her childhood, is also sad. In the course of the story, the narrative focus moves from Olamma's confusion about how a stream might feel sad to an experience where she learns what *Omaliyi* feels in her suffering, and finally to a section narrated from the point of view of the river itself, who tells the story of decades of neglect before finally succeeding in getting her people to come back and restore her banks, floodplains, and relations. The psychological manoeuvre at the heart of the story is its assertion that a river is sad, remembers, and wants to be recognized. This is nothing less than the extension of the theory of mind beyond the human.

This paper is structured in three sections. The first section provides an introduction to the theories that will be used in the analysis of the story: theory of mind and its cognitive and affective aspects, the psychology of anthropomorphizing, the study of narrative empathy, nature connectedness, and relational ontologies of nonhuman personhood from outside the Western world. Then, the theoretical framework is applied through a close reading of the text *Omaliyi*. This involves an analysis of the way the formal elements of the story, such as its shifting narrative perspective, its ritualistic form, and Igbo cosmology, are used as means to induce theory of mind and empathy in the reader. Third, it situates the story within a broader landscape of environmental empathy strategies, including the legal personhood movement for rivers and mountains, and considers both the promise and the limits of anthropomorphic strategies for environmental care.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Theory of Mind: From Chimpanzee Cognition to Everyday Mentalizing

The term "theory of mind" was introduced by comparative psychologists David Premack and Guy Woodruff in a study conducted in 1978 regarding whether or not chimpanzees could attribute goals and intentionality to humans performing experiments on them. Theory of mind was defined by Premack and Woodruff as follows: "An individual has a theory of mind if he imputes mental states to himself and others" [4]. Since mental states cannot be directly observed, this attribution constitutes a theory in the proper sense: a system of inference used to explain and predict behavior. This term quickly found its way into developmental psychology, where it became associated with the concept of false belief, a test paradigm used to see whether children understand that other people's beliefs can differ from reality as well as from the child's own knowledge [5]. Children typically pass the false-belief test by the age of four years, which is also the age at which children become aware that other people hold minds that do not necessarily reflect their own perspective.

Contemporary research on theory of mind differentiates between cognitive and affective aspects. In cognitive theory of mind, one has to understand the beliefs and intentions of another individual, whereas in affective theory of mind, one has to infer the emotions of the other individual [6]. This differentiation is relevant to the present study because the story *Omaliyi* is mostly about the latter kind of theory of mind. The key question posed by the story – "How can a stream be sad?" – has nothing to do with the stream's beliefs or intentions; it has everything to do with the emotions felt by the stream.

2.2 Empathy: From Mind-Reading to Feeling-With

Theory of mind and empathy are related concepts, though different from each other. While theory of mind entails being able to think about the presence of a mental state in another agent, empathy is defined as the ability to empathize with a mental state, meaning being able to feel the same emotion as another agent in response to their circumstances. Empathy research distinguishes between cognitive empathy (perspective taking, similar to cognitive theory of mind) and affective or emotional empathy (vicarious affect sharing) [6]. Thus, theory of mind could be viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for empathy, since a reader needs to recognize that another entity is a subject of inner life prior to empathizing with that inner life. *Omaliyi* requires exactly such a sequence: prior to grieving together with *Omaliyi*, the narrator or the reader should acknowledge that *Omaliyi* is capable of experiencing grief. Thus, the question posed at the beginning of the story is far from rhetorical; it marks precisely the cognitive threshold that must be crossed to achieve empathy.

2.3 Anthropomorphism and Mind Perception

Endowing a nonhuman object with a mind constitutes a particular instance of anthropomorphism, a phenomenon defined as “the attribution of human characteristics or traits to nonhuman agents” [1]. Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo’s seminal tripartite theory of anthropomorphism states that anthropomorphism results from high levels of elicited agent knowledge, where human-centered knowledge about the nonhuman agent becomes cognitively available and applicable; effectance motivation, where individuals want to predict and understand the behavior of an otherwise unpredictable agent; and sociality motivation, which drives individuals to seek social connection lacking within their existing human relations. All three factors apply to the story of *Omaliyi*. Elicited agent knowledge stems from the full cultural and cosmological language that defines the *eze mmuo*, the divination beads, and the Igbo cosmology that explains *Omaliyi*’s origin as a descendant of Agulu Lake. Effectance motivation is expressed in *Olamma*’s insistence on understanding the reasons behind the stream’s sadness, because only once she understands does the stream’s shrinking, silence, and appearances during sleep make sense to her. Finally, sociality motivation can be seen in the depiction of a community, including *Olamma*, that has become estranged from ancestral relationships and is, in a sense, lonely for the kind of relational world *Omaliyi* represents.

It is also important to note that research on mind perception regards anthropomorphism not as a cognitive mistake to be rectified but rather as a nuanced process with at least two dimensions: agency (the ability to plan and act) and experience (the ability to have feelings) [2]. The river *Omaliyi* is granted agency by being described as someone who acts (sends dreams, calls people, and withholds her waters) as well as someone who has feelings (sadness, longing, and, eventually, happiness). This is crucial because experimental research into mind perception has shown that moral concern is linked specifically to the experience dimension: beings capable of experiencing pain gain moral status, whereas beings capable only of action, but not experience, do not [2]. Thus, the emphasis on the stream’s sadness is no coincidence – it is exactly what should trigger moral concern in a reader.

2.4 Narrative Empathy: What Reading Fiction Does to Readers

Another line of inquiry considers whether engaging with fiction actually alters the empathic abilities of its readers, or whether fiction merely illustrates those abilities in thematic form. In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, literary critic Suzanne Keen synthesizes the literature in psychology, neuroscience, and narratology surrounding this issue and argues that narrative empathy is a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect that may be triggered by reading about someone else’s situation, much as it might be triggered

by experiencing it directly [7]. While Keen is skeptical of the claim that novel-reading leads directly to prosocial and altruistic behavior in the real world – the link between empathy and altruism shown to exist in real-world encounters has yet to be demonstrated for fictional ones – what the narrative empathy literature suggests more definitively is that narrative conventions – first-person or close-third-person narration, the depiction of interior character experience, and other techniques that give readers privileged access to a character’s mind and affective experience – consistently increase reader empathy toward that character regardless of whether the character is human [7].

Omaliyi is an example of how exactly such techniques are used on a non-human narrator. In the final segment of the tale, the point of view of Olamma is entirely abandoned, and the reader gets first-person access to the interiority of Omaliyi: her memories of the feet of children in her waters, her loneliness, and her persistent efforts to get attention once again. This is a classic example of a narrative empathy technique – the use of first-person interiority – applied across species and even kingdom boundaries, from the human being to a hydrological phenomenon. According to Keen’s explanation of narrative empathy, this formal strategy should evoke empathy in the reader toward Omaliyi more effectively than any descriptive third-person account of the river’s destruction would.

2.5 Zunshine and the Novel as a Gymnasium for Mind-Reading

Whereas Keen’s study of empathic response to narrative raises the question of how fiction produces vicarious feelings, the work of literary cognitive scholar Lisa Zunshine poses a more direct question: what does the process of reading fiction do to the mind of the reader from a mechanistic perspective? In *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Zunshine argues that novels serve as a gymnasium for developing mind-reading skills by presenting readers with scenarios of nested intentionalities – A believes that B intends that C suspects that A is lying – at an intensity and level rarely seen outside literature, and that engaging with these layered mental states makes up much of the cognitive pleasure of reading fiction [8]. Zunshine’s second important idea, metarepresentation, concerns readers’ ability to track not only a character’s beliefs but also their origin and reliability. The idea of “source-tagging,” adopted from evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, means that a reader can hold a given statement “under advisement” until further information becomes available, without yet deciding to accept or reject it [8]. While Premack and Woodruff’s theory of mind concerns the general ability to attribute mental states, and Keen’s narrative empathy concerns how readers come to feel after reading a narrative, Zunshine’s approach sits between the two, describing in detail the specific operations a narrative performs on a reader’s mind-reading system. Her framework offers more precise tools for analyzing how a story such as *Omaliyi* affects a reader’s mind-reading process than either Keen or general theory-of-mind research alone.

2.6 Nature Connectedness and Pro-Environmental Behavior

Environmental psychology has accumulated a significant empirical research base on the idea of “nature connectedness” or “connectedness to nature,” a construct Mayer and Frantz define as individuals’ “trait levels of feeling emotionally connected to the natural world” [9]. A meta-analysis of correlational and experimental studies has shown that high levels of nature connectedness are associated with greater pro-environmental behavior and better mental health compared to low levels of nature connectedness. Moreover, experimental manipulations designed to increase nature connectedness resulted in increased pro-environmental behavior [10]. A related area of research has examined empathy toward nature specifically, finding that dispositional empathy is linked with stronger pro-environmental attitudes and behavior [11], and that empathy plays a mediating role in the relationship between personality and

connectedness to nature [12]. This body of research indicates that the state of mind Omaliyi seeks to produce in its readers, namely treating a river as a subject of empathy, has a real psychological foundation with documented behavioral implications.

It is crucial to note a gap in this literature relevant to the present discussion: most work on nature connectedness deals with nature as a whole (forests, wilderness, the outdoors) rather than focusing on empathy toward a particular living entity with a life story of its own, as Omaliyi's river has. It is here that narrative fiction may do significant work, since, unlike the surveys of environmental psychology, a concrete, named, and storied river becomes a more plausible object of empathy, drawing on the same psychological mechanisms that allow people to empathize with individuals rather than with abstract categories of suffering – a phenomenon widely described in the empathy literature as the “identifiable victim effect” [13].

2.7 Relational Ontologies: Beyond Anthropomorphism

The Western psychological literature on attributing mind to nonhuman agents described above is primarily concerned with the projection of human mind onto nonhuman agents; “anthropo-morphism,” in its Latin roots, literally means the giving of human shape. Anthropological and Indigenous studies scholarship offers a different account, in which nonhuman minds are not projection but reality, which certain cultural traditions are better equipped to perceive. In *How Forests Think*, an ethnography of the Runa people of the Upper Amazon of Ecuador, anthropologist Eduardo Kohn argues that semiotic abilities – the ability to interpret signs and respond to them – extend beyond the human, such that forests literally think [14]. Kohn does not mean that Runa culture anthropomorphizes the forest, but that Western epistemology has been trained to perceive only human minds as minds.

Omaliyi works from a related but distinct framework of understanding: Igbo cosmology, in which rivers, lakes, and other natural entities are considered ancestral and spiritually powerful beings with whom humans maintain ritualized relationships. The narrative tension does not come from the diviner needing to convince Olamma that Omaliyi might, perhaps, have feelings; within the story's own cosmovision, that much is taken for granted. The conflict instead lies in Olamma's estrangement from her own culture and cosmology, a product of her urbanization and formal education, which leaves her, as a member of a younger generation, without the inherited framework that would let her understand the stream's sadness without translation. Omaliyi is therefore not a story in which an author anthropomorphizes a river for dramatic effect. It is a story in which an ontologically grounded system of relationship with the environment is recovered by someone alienated from it by her own cultural circumstances. This tension between framing the attribution of mind to nonhumans as ontological versus psychological remains a live and unresolved debate in cognitive science, environmental humanities, and Indigenous studies.

3. Case Study: Theory of Mind and Empathy in Omaliyi

3.1 Structure and Context

Omaliyi appeared in Grist's *Imagine 2200* climate fiction anthology in October 2022 [3]. The competition, sponsored by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Redford Center, invites narrative entries envisioning equitable climate achievements over the next 180 years. As a medical doctor, biomedical scientist, and author, Mogo has described her creative writing as an exploration of interiority, a description that applies directly to the psychological technique used in the story. The story is organized into five numbered sections set across three different time frames: a ritualistic present in which Olamma consults a diviner in the city, a nostalgic past in which Olamma recalls her childhood

days along Omaliyi's banks, and, finally, a section in which the river tells its own life story in the first person.

3.2 The River as Mind: Narrative Techniques of Mentalization

The story opens not with a description of environmental damage but with a question about mental states: "How can a stream be sad?" The way this question is formulated already places the central problem of the story in terms of theory of mind rather than ecology. Olamma's confusion does not arise from a lack of ecological knowledge – she does not, at this point, question that the stream has been physically damaged – but from a failure of affective theory of mind: a failure to recognize the possibility of attributing sadness to something other than a person.

The middle sections of the story build the case for the stream's mind step by step through embodiment rather than mere propositional logic. When Olamma finds herself standing at the depleted banks of Omaliyi and begins dancing the songs she knows by heart without planning to, she arrives at affective theory of mind not through reasoning but by re-living the experience through bodily memory and ritual, at which point "a heaviness soon descended on my chest, and I understood." In this sequence, the narrator poses a series of rhetorical questions – what happened to the plants, what happened to the small creatures, who would not be distraught at such a loss – that make the idea of the stream's grief seem obvious once the reader has been placed in the same position of embodied participation. This illustrates a point about theory of mind easily lost in a purely propositional account of the concept: affective theory of mind is often reached through simulation rather than deduction [15], and the story's ritual, danced, sensory route to understanding mirrors this simulation-based account of empathic cognition more closely than a strictly cognitive, inferential one.

3.3 Olamma's Arc: From Denial to Recognition

The development of Olamma's understanding across the story closely parallels the developmental trajectory by which children acquire the concept of minds separate from their own. She begins in a state resembling egocentric processing, unable to move beyond her own point of view (streams cannot be sad, because streams are not the kind of thing that can be) to consider an alternative, nonhuman perspective. She resists, sulks, and asks why the diviner makes her feel inadequate for not understanding; these reactions read as frustration at a genuinely difficult cognitive and emotional task rather than mere stubbornness. Only through direct encounter with Omaliyi does she revise her understanding of what the stream is and what it wants. This trajectory gives the story its emotional and argumentative shape: the reader is guided through Olamma's confusion, doubt, and eventual grief as scaffolding for the reader's own attribution of mind to Omaliyi.

3.4 Omaliyi's Voice: First-Person Narration as Empathy Technology

The story's most striking formal choice is its final handover of narration to Omaliyi herself. This shift accomplishes, at the level of narrative technique, what the rest of the story argues for at the level of theme: it grants the river not merely the role of an object other characters feel something about, but the role of a subject with narrative authority over her own account. Omaliyi's monologue makes a specific claim about the nature of the harm done to her: not simply damage, but a failure of recognition. "I just wanted to be seen. To be treated with dignity." This phrasing recasts environmental harm in language ordinarily used for interpersonal and social harm – being overlooked, being used without respect, being denied the standing of a someone rather than a something – and this is precisely the vocabulary that mind-perception and theory-of-mind research identifies as a trigger for moral concern [2]. The story does not ask readers to feel sorry for a damaged ecosystem in the abstract; it asks them to recognize an

elder who has been disrespected, a category with far greater moral pull than “environmental degradation.”

Omaliyi’s narration also performs a further move relevant to empathy research: she describes actively working to induce theory of mind and empathy in the human characters, sending “little signs – memories that were vivid, dreams that were intense enough to have her wake up tired, even whispers on the voice of the breeze,” before escalating to a direct message through the diviner. This is, in effect, a depiction of a nonhuman agent attempting to solve the very psychological problem this paper has been discussing: how to get an inattentive, disconnected audience to extend theory of mind to something outside the conventional boundary of personhood. The story is thus doubly reflexive: it is a work of climate fiction attempting to evoke reader empathy for nature, about a river attempting to evoke empathy from its human characters, using strikingly similar techniques – narrative, dream, embodied signal – in both cases. Where the idiom “cry me a river” names a refusal to hear a complaint, Omaliyi’s escalating campaign of signs is the narrative’s answer: the cry of the river, pursued until it can no longer be waved off as background noise.

3.5 Embedded Intentionality and Source-Tagging in Omaliyi

Zunshine’s two central tools – embedded intentionality and metarepresentation – apply with unusual precision to Omaliyi’s narrative architecture. For most of the story, the reader’s access to Omaliyi’s mental states is not direct but embedded several layers deep: the diviner believes that Omaliyi is sad and communicates this belief to Olamma, who must decide whether to trust the diviner’s claim about a mental state she cannot verify herself, while the reader simultaneously tracks Olamma’s uncertainty about the diviner’s reliability, the diviner’s claimed access to Omaliyi’s feelings, and Omaliyi’s feelings themselves. In Zunshine’s terms, this is a structure of at least three layers of nested representation: the reader knows that Olamma is unsure whether the diviner accurately represents Omaliyi’s sadness. The story’s initial tension is generated by the reader’s own metarepresentational work in deciding how much epistemic weight to give a claim about a nonhuman mind that arrives thirdhand, through ritual mediation, rather than directly from the narration itself. This is the same source-tagging operation Zunshine identifies in detective fiction, where readers must evaluate a statement’s reliability before further information arrives [8], here applied to a new challenge for the reader’s mind-reading system.

The resolution of this metarepresentational uncertainty comes not through direct assertion but through re-tagging the source of the claim: once Olamma herself feels the “heaviness” at the stream’s edge, the proposition “Omaliyi is sad” shifts from a secondhand report requiring source-monitoring to a directly experienced certainty, and the reader’s own provisional, under-advisement acceptance of the diviner’s claim is correspondingly upgraded. With the final section’s handover of narration to Omaliyi, the embedding collapses further still, giving the reader what Zunshine would describe as maximally direct access to a mental state previously available only through several layers of source-tagged report. Read this way, the story’s shifting narrative structure serves a purpose distinct from empathy-building alone, as a Keen-style account would suggest: it stages a precisely calculated sequence of changes in the reader’s confidence about a specific, contested mental-state attribution – exactly the kind of cognitive exercise Zunshine identifies as characteristic of literary narrative in general [8].

3.6 Igbo Cosmology as a Framework for Nonhuman Mind

The story’s psychological argument is inseparable from its cultural and cosmological specificity. Omaliyi is not merely personified in a general, universal way but is located within a particular genealogy, identified as descended from Agulu Lake, connected to the shrine of the deity Idemmili, and

governed by a particular practice of divination, offering, and taboo. The narrative notes that the ancestral prohibition against harvesting plants along the stream's banks was dismissed by later generations as mere superstition, a subtle critique of the human characters, and implicitly of the reader, for having abandoned a functioning ecological and relational system in favour of one that produced tangible ecological consequences. Considering Kohn's argument that non-Western epistemologies may perceive nonhuman mind and agency more readily than post-Enlightenment frameworks that treat mind as uniquely human [14], Omaliyi can be read as narrating a specific loss: not only the degradation of the stream, but the erosion of an inherited cognitive and cultural technology – ritual, dance, divination, taboo – for perceiving and responding to nonhuman mind, replaced by a purely instrumental, extractive relationship to the same physical entity.

4. Discussion: Implications for Environmental Empathy

4.1 Fictional and Legal Personhood: Convergent Strategies

Omaliyi's central concept, the personification of a river as a subject capable of being wronged, addressed, and reconciled with, has a striking real-world parallel in the "rights of nature" movement, which seeks legal personhood for rivers, forests, and other ecosystems. The most widely discussed instance is New Zealand's 2017 Te Awa Tupua Act, which recognized the Whanganui River as a legal person with rights, powers, and interests represented by human guardians, following nearly two centuries of advocacy grounded in Māori cultural tradition [16, 17]. Similar legal personhood has since been extended to rivers in Ecuador, India, and Colombia. Legal scholars caution against reading this phenomenon solely through the imported lens of "rights of nature" theory; in the Whanganui case specifically, what occurred was not the implementation of an external theory but recognition of Indigenous law and an Indigenous ontological understanding of the river as an ancestor, Te Awa Tupua, encompassing both its physical and metaphysical elements [18].

The parallel between Omaliyi and this legal category is direct: in both cases, a waterbody previously understood in instrumental terms is re-categorized as a being with its own interests, within an Indigenous cosmology where it always held that designation, and this re-categorization requires human representatives (legal guardians in law; the diviner and, eventually, Olamma in the story) to voice the river's interests within a dominant discourse that cannot otherwise register them. This parallel suggests that the psychological work Omaliyi performs on an individual reader, cultivating theory of mind and empathy for a particular river, is not merely a private aesthetic experience but an instance of a much larger, ongoing project of extending subjecthood to nonhuman nature.

4.2 Climate Fiction as Applied Psychology

If narrative empathy research is correct that literary techniques such as first-person interiority reliably increase reader empathy regardless of a character's ontological category [7], and mind perception research is correct that moral concern depends on the perceived capacity for experience [2], then works of climate fiction such as Omaliyi, which give voice to nonhuman actors, do more than provide aesthetic pleasure: they represent a targeted application of two convergent bodies of psychological research to the problem of environmental disengagement. This offers a partial answer to a familiar critique of climate communication: that statistical, abstract depictions of environmental harm (parts per million, hectares deforested, species extinction rates) fail to motivate action because they do not engage the psychological mechanisms that generate empathic identification and behavior change [13, 19]. Omaliyi substitutes a

named, storied river for a statistic, aligning itself with what is already known about how to make suffering legible to the human empathic system.

4.3 Limits of Anthropomorphic Empathy as Environmental Strategy

This argument should not be overstated. Anthropomorphism-based empathy strategies carry documented risks and limitations. First, anthropomorphizing nature by mapping human emotional categories onto it can itself be a subtly anthropocentric move, implicitly suggesting that nonhuman entities matter only insofar as they resemble persons, rather than expanding moral concern to encompass forms of value and vulnerability that do not map onto human experience [20]. Second, empathy research more broadly has established that empathy is a poor tool for impartial, scalable moral reasoning precisely because of the identifiable-victim effect noted above: people respond strongly to a single, identifiable victim while remaining comparatively unmoved by the statistics of larger harms that lack such narrative individuation [13, 21]. An environmental campaign built mainly on empathy for individually storied rivers, however effective at the level of a single reader, risks overlooking equally significant environmental concerns – atmospheric carbon concentration, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss among non-charismatic species – that do not fit this mould of identification. Third, as noted above, Keen’s own review of the empirical literature cautions that the empathy fiction generates has not reliably been shown to produce altruistic action in the real world, even though the empathy-building process itself, in the act of reading, appears reliable [7]; the theory of mind and empathy evoked by a story such as *Omaliyi* might not reliably translate into pro-environmental action, an open empirical question this paper cannot resolve on the basis of a single text.

Omaliyi itself partially addresses the first of these criticisms. Because the story’s anthropomorphism does not operate from a universally applied model of the human mind as a default form, but instead grounds the river’s mind in a particular cosmology in which the river is an ancestor and an elder whose language (dreams, ritual signs, the mediation of a diviner) is explicitly non-human and requires translation rather than projection, the story is less vulnerable to the charge of shallow anthropomorphic projection than a more generic personification of nature would be.

5. Conclusion

Omaliyi offers a compact, rich example of how narrative fiction can draw on psychological findings in theory of mind, anthropomorphism, and empathy for explicitly environmental ends. The central question the story poses, “How can a stream be sad?”, is not a rhetorical flourish but a precise naming of the cognitive threshold the narrative works to cross: affective theory of mind extended from humans to nature. Its formal devices, including the handover to the stream’s own first-person perspective in the final section, align closely with the narrative techniques identified by narrative-empathy research as most effective at generating reader empathy, while its emotional core, the demand to be acknowledged and respected rather than simply used, aligns with what mind-perception research identifies as the psychological trigger for moral concern. At the same time, the story’s grounding in an Igbo mytho-ritual tradition, rather than a generic personification of nature, offers a partial corrective to the concern that such narratives merely perpetuate anthropocentrism in a different guise, gesturing instead toward the kind of relational ontology that Eduardo Kohn and other anthropologists argue Western thought is only now learning to appreciate [14], and which Indigenous legal-political movements, from Whanganui to the Amazon, are already implementing in institutional form. Whether this kind of storytelling produces durable pro-environmental behavior, rather than a strong but temporary empathic response, remains an

open empirical question. However, in demonstrating how theory of mind and narrative empathy can be deliberately marshalled toward ecological ends, Omaliyi stands as a clear, self-aware example.

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