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Eben Venter's 2023 novel, *Decima*, centres on the titular rhinoceros living in the Great Fish River Reserve, South Africa, under constant threat of poachers after her horn. Decima shares the narrative with human characters, some out to harm her (poachers, the rhinoceros-horn kingpin, practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine—TCM) and those willing to protect her (scientists intent on debunking the efficacy of TCM, conservationists working at the reserve). The novel's remarkable quirk is that we are privy to Decima's thoughts, feelings and her perceptions. The relationship between how animals look and how that looking is narrated, by both the narrator and the animals themselves, is the concern of this article. The various eyes that look within and look out of the text serve to validate the experiences of the beings who observe. This is especially true of the novel's animals—Venter reminds us through their eyes, which the novel designates as indexes of life and power, that animals can look back, that what they perceive in the material world and internally with their mind's eye is a story of which they are in full possession, but one we may never know completely.
Keywords: Eben Venter, *Decima*, zoocriticism, rhinoceros horn, perception.

Our first encounter with a rhinoceros in Eben Venter's *Decima* (2023) is one whose tragic fate is suggested in the first paragraph in which it is introduced. The Gujarat, then Khambat, rhinoceros is temporally and geographically removed from the novel's titular rhinoceros, who lives in the text's present in South Africa's Great Fish River Reserve. The Gujarat rhinoceros is captured in 1515 by poachers; this rare creature is ultimately meant as a gift for Pope Leo X. It is from here that "[t]he rhinoceros will never return to that lush savannah or wade into its cool emerald pools again, the rest of the crash twitching their tails, waiting on their never-to-return friend" (21). The ship transporting the rhinoceros sails round the Cape of Good Hope and makes its way to Europe. But off the coast of Italy, the ship capsizes. We are with the chained rhinoceros in its last moments as it descends into the frigid seawater. The narrator takes time describing the animal's death, focusing on different parts of the creature's body as those parts meet the fatal water. The first of the rhinoceros's body to touch the water are the feet. The water rises up its legs. It is through this bodily encounter that Venter's narrator makes us aware of the creature's interiority, that it feels "nothing but fear" (23), that it "has no experience of this, no knowledge would've been transferred about this sort of thing" (22). The water then moves further up the rhinoceros's body, up to the eye. Before the water submerges the rhinoceros's head and horn, eventually drowning the creature, the narrator pauses at the creature's eye, "that gentle almond-shaped eye with its half-moon of wispy lashes" (22). It is by the eye of the drowning rhinoceros that the narrator, stepping briefly into his present, recalls the eye of an orphaned rhinoceros calf, with the narrator able to care and establish familiarity between the two creatures across centuries: "This fineness of feature is not unlike that which I'd admired on a rhinoceros calf in the Rhino Sanctuary near Mbombela […]. [I]t happened to be the left eye, copperish and pleading, asking for nothing more than its place in the bush" (22). The eye elicits care and empathy; it is a conduit for the rhinoceros's interiority. Yet it is not only the eye of the drowning rhinoceros we observe in this introductory portion of the text. Once the eyes of the rhinoceros are described, we then learn something of Pope Leo X through a description of his eyes, albeit his eyes as they are painted by Raphael: "The left hand holds a magnifying glass to affirm the depth of his Renaissance knowledge […]. But his gaze is directed to the right, insidious, the eyes pouchy, and below, a pout" (23). Once

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v61i2.17573

DATES:
Submitted: 9 January 2024; Accepted: 26 July 2024; Published: ******* 2024

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the eyes of the Pope are described, the Gujarat rhinoceros, already having drowned in the preceding paragraph, is described once more, again with a focus on its eyes as it once again is submerged in the Mediterranean: "I keep thinking of those moments when [...] the dreck reaches the low head of the rhinoceros, the horn rubbing against the paling, the animal shackled, bewildered. There is nothing but fear. Still the water pushes up, so fast, flooding first the nostrils, up, up, then drowning its eye" (23). The rhinoceros drowns twice. This drowning rhinoceros, almost certainly going to die as we first meet it, haunts the rest of the text, haunts the narrator as its eye is among the last of its body parts to succumb in the sinking ship (without almost any mention of his horn, the obsession of so many humans in the novel, yet incidental to the narrator).

The novel's interest in eyes, the eyes of its characters, and especially the eyes of Decima, is the trope that carries the narrative along. To varying degrees, eyes have preoccupied Venter's creativity in many of his novels, with the English translations of his Afrikaans texts as my points of reference—importantly, English is this article's language of interest since *Decima* was conceived first as an English novel (Titlestad, "'Decima is indeed about love': Eben Venter on his Startling Novel Centred on a Rhino" n. p.). In *My Beautiful Death* (1996, as *Ek stamel, Ek Sterwe*, with the English translation published in 2006) there is a protagonist, Konstant, who becomes progressively blind as he nears his eventual death from a terminal illness; in *Wolf, Wolf* (with the Afrikaans and English published in 2013, both with the same title) the patriarch of the Duiker family lies blind and dying on his deathbed, figuratively blind to his son's homosexual identity; and the richness of the world's colour is used as a metaphor to explore the sexuality of Simon, the protagonist, in *Green as the Sky is Blue* (2017, *Groen Soos die Hemel Daarbo*, with the English in 2018). In *Decima*, as reflected in the interests of this article, eyes are used to explore a zoological crisis on a global scale, with a focus mainly on South Africa. The eyes to which the novel calls attention are varied in biology and narrative. There are the eyes of rhinoceroses, vultures and humans; the eyes of poachers, traditional medicine men, academics, an ivory kingpin and storytellers. There are also about as many narrative strands to the novel as pairs of eyes, with each part describing a different aspect in the life of Decima, who is constituted through this composite of gazes, with her own perceptions of the world a part of it. I read Venter's characters' eyes alongside how they assert their presence in the world; that is, how they assert their 'I', with eyes and 'I's cohering and informing each other in Venter's language at various points in the text. Reading the novel's eyes and 'I's alongside each other demonstrates the complexity with which Venter expresses the text's political and zoocritical interests: it is a novel that warns against species extinction (in this case, for the most part, the rhinoceros) by the cause of human ignorance, political corruption and indifference to other beings. Through this, Venter creates a poetics of looking and narrative identity to explore what it means to be at the point of extinction in the contemporary moment, particularly as it concerns animals. I use 'animal' instead of the more common 'non-human' and its variants in the discipline of zoocriticism. The term 'non-human' suggests that humans are the yardstick by which all modes of biological being are measured—this seems to undermine the moral position of zoocriticism which advocates for equal care of all species. The word 'animal', I hope, signals the difference and, therefore, the unknowability between humans and this radically Other group. It is also the word used in the novel.

The novel's dense morality has interested early reviewers. Michael Titlestad writes about the novel's determination to render all actors in the rhinoceros horn trade, human and animal alike, as beings who warrant readers' patience and understanding. Titlestad suggests that, to know Decima's story completely, especially as it is one, in this current ecological context, that is implicated in the trade of rhinoceros horn, we must also come to know the poachers, kingpins, conservationists, academics and the communities, human and animal, that make up this story. He suggests furthermore that we must recognise the desperation of each party's stake in this. Beginning with the fraught intimacies between poacher and rhinoceros, between academic and herbalist, Titlestad's conclusions are global: "The rhinoceros will be long extinct before corrupt, negligent states begin acting in the interests of the marginalized. [...] 'Truths' in the public spheres are now 'my truth' or 'our truth,' and it would take a brave activist to walk the streets of Hong Kong, Hanoi or Bangkok proclaiming that what many of their citizens believe is nonsense" ("'Few novels preoccupy me; *Decima* inhabits me'" n. p.).

Of the novelist's extended empathy, Louise Viljoen, writing in Afrikaans, shows that "[t]hrough Venter's ability to weave acute detail, dialogue and empathy for his characters in his narrative, the poachers are given life and are more than scheming personifications of evil" (n. p., my translation). Venter's empathy, or, as Viljoen calls it, his "respect" (respek), marks the novel's success, where, in this context, we may think of respect as a way of living that assumes that all life on our planet has equal value. As such, it is "respect" that Viljoen argues comes to define Venter's narrative, respect the author feels for his characters and therefore the same respect

ISSN: 0041-476X E-SSN: 2309-9070

the author attempts to have his readers extend to all species. Viljoen illustrates how the novel's respect across species is exemplified through loss, particularly the loss of mothers: Decima who loses her mother, and who is herself eventually lost to her child, and the loss of the mother of the narrator-author who appears as a character in the novel.[1] The respect Venter affords his plot and characterisation is as important as the respect he affords his language, Viljoen observes: "The potential loss of his mother [the narrator-author's] and the language that they spoke [Afrikaans], is as terrifying for him as the extinction of the rhinoceros as a species" (n. p., my translation).

Viljoen reads the Afrikaans translation of the novel, with *Decima*, unusually for Venter, written initially in English and then translated, by Venter, into Afrikaans instead of the other way. The author is in complete command of both versions of the same narrative; similarly, characters (animal and human alike) are in full possession of their voices and the bodies from which those voices emerge. This signals a narrative feat made more impressive when considering the large cast who inhabit Venter's text.

Different humans perceive Decima differently, with this difference often marked by how Decima is valued. In one such instance, academics Roslyn Lung and Leigh-Ann Biggs travel to Hong Kong in 2016 to visit practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). They are funded by the University of Brisbane to investigate the rationale behind the use of rhinoceros horn in TCM. The identities of all practitioners are kept secret. Among the more forthcoming of the practitioners they interview is dubbed "Brown Eyes" by Roslyn (32). In a moment of weakness, Roslyn offends Brown Eyes by asking him who his supplier is. Brown Eyes asks the researchers to leave. With this, their research time in Hong Kong comes to an end. Leigh-Ann goes back to Brisbane to continue working on their paper, but Roslyn stays behind further to interrogate one of their practitioner participants without Leigh-Ann's knowledge.

In the morning before the trip to the practitioner, Roslyn wakes up with a slight fever, the very condition that TCM practitioners claim rhinoceros horn may treat. She spends some of the morning trying to exacerbate the fever by consuming hot soup before eventually arriving at the practitioner's office. Once there, the practitioner is clearly reluctant about providing Roslyn with the treatment she came to receive. Roslyn shows the practitioner the treatment she would like, with the formula for the treatment that uses rhinoceros horn written down in her notebook. "This is not intended for you, he says and taps the page. […] Your eyes are hungry ghosts, you close your eyelids and your soul will still not be at rest. You are not my client" (38). Roslyn becomes impatient both with the practitioner's reluctance in administering the crushed horn, and with his belief that it will cure anything at all. She takes out a photograph of a slain rhinoceros and "With both hands she shoves the photograph into the face of the man, her hands shaking. […] This is where the horn comes from, she says" (39). The practitioner, annoyed, "grabs the stone pestle and waves it at her. Get out, he says, his eyes shot with jet" (39).

Roslyn's method of confronting the practitioner elicits only resistance from him as he claims her eyes are "ghosts". The ghostly transparency of her eyes suggests an openness to the world that threatens the practitioner. The blackness of the practitioner's eyes suggest that nothing may enter as he clings to an invalid and failed science, but one upon which his livelihood is built. Yet there is perhaps something else in Roslyn's gaze that unnerves the practitioner. The significance of the difference in their eye colouration may again be observed in the difference in their attitudes to the photograph onto which Roslyn holds. Roslyn's ghostly eyes suggest the spectral presence of the dead rhinoceros depicted in her photograph; she carries the death of the animal in her eyes. It is a death with which the practitioner, instructing Roslyn to leave, cannot contend. Varying ways of seeing are what define the interactions in this scene, define the characters' communication and miscommunication.

Then there is Frankie, who is poor. For this, along with Athule, Frankie's equally desperate colleague, they turn to poaching and the promise of the temporary wealth it will afford them. Here, Venter marks the tragic reciprocity between poverty and species extinction. In his study of various twentieth-century African ecopoets, writing under colonial or postcolonial conditions, Syned Dale Makani Mthatiwa shows that "[m]any social and ecological problems stem from animal exploitation. Similarly, there are many social and ecological problems that are rooted in human exploitation" (360). Along with the devastation and exploitation of land and indigenous populations during colonial expansion in Africa, the animals that inhabited these spaces were hunted or exterminated, and, as such, "it was the colonial encounter, the contact between whites and blacks, that worsened the relationship between humans and animals in Africa" (Mthatiwa 11). Venter shows how poaching becomes an extension of this colonial logic—postcolonial concerns are inseparable from zoological concerns. Frankie finds himself an actor at the centre of this entanglement.

Frankie meets with the ruthless poaching kingpin to receive his instructions. After feeling rattled by an intimidating and tense meeting with the kingpin, Frankie drives on the N2 out of Port Elizabeth and thinks of his wife and her "two round black eyes watching him, two pricks of poison, right there on the road in front of him" (70). The blackness of Frankie's wife's eyes is used to different effect here compared to the jet-blackness of the practitioner's eyes. In this instance, I read the blackness of the eye as a product of Frankie's imagination, a sign of the guilt and shame he has internalised after committing to killing a rhinoceros. His wife's eyes bring "terror to his mind" (70). Frankie's guilt continues to consume him as "his mind's eye forces on him a photograph he's seen of a slain rhinoceros; the horn cut so deep that the growth plates and sinus cavities of the animal are exposed, puddles of blood all around the head" (70).

But soon after the appearance of this disturbing image, Frankie focuses on a different aspect of the photograph: "He remembers something else. He had spotted something that wasn't mentioned in the words under the photo, something he knew to look for: a cross—cut into the eye of the rhino. Now the animal will not see the man who has killed it. He's protected" (70). Frankie disarms the animal's psychological threat by crossing out its eyes and negating its gaze. By implication, it is the gaze, communication without words, that instils in him a feeling of guilt and fear. There is language in looking, Venter seems to suggest.

As in the scene between Roslyn and the TCM practitioner, we have here another photograph, or at least the memory of one, of a rhinoceros, this one dead. In several examples, humans look upon rhinoceroses not eye-to-eye, but by way of re-presentation. Frankie and the practitioner must reckon with a photograph of a dead rhinoceros. Ziyanda Nelson, the gamekeeper in the reserve in which Decima is homed, protects the rhinoceroses on her land by, in part, looking upon them on the screen that broadcasts from the security cameras around the areas frequented by Decima. The imagistic presences of various rhinoceroses, including Decima, permeates the text. The rhinoceroses' images are also political—they are sometimes meant to provoke or shame humans into caring for the rhinoceroses with whom they share the planet. Practically, there are few instances in which human characters look upon a rhinoceros in shared space, so the way they are recalled is through photography and film. This means the reader is in a particularly privileged position in walking with Decima, sharing her space, identifying her individuality in a way that proximity allows. As Samantha Vice points out in *The Ethics of Animal Beauty* (2023), while there is merit in humans looking at animals from afar, in game reserves, say—it affords us some objectivity in understanding the animal—Vice is also wary of looking at animals in only this way, since

> the kind of looking it encourages is general and exemplary. While it allows us to admire individual animals, we are admiring them as instances of a kind. We are not searching out individuality or personality, or distinction from others in ways not captured by the language of tokens and types, and so we may overlook the separate, non-exemplary existence of each animal. (55)

In looking at animals in shared space, "our aesthetic experience is deepened and expanded" (55). Up close, we see Decima's individuality, "her relationship with the black rhinoceros crash in the park, […] her fondness for spekboom leaves and fingers of young euphorbia, […] her awareness of the danger she is in", these details among the more commendable aspects of the novel for reviewer Andries Visagie (14, my translation). Witnessing these specificities means that Decima's eventual death is not only a tragedy of the continued decline of her species, but also of the finitude of an individual life.

Similarly, in Venter's *Wolf, Wolf*, our first significant encounter with an animal, or perhaps the animalistic, occurs when Mattheüs (Matt, the protagonist and narrator) sees the face of a wolf on the security-camera screen of his family's home—Matt is distanced from the animal, but he is frightened, nevertheless, knowing that it is on his property. As a prank, his lover, Jack, wears a wolf mask upon arriving at a house to which he is explicitly unwelcome—Matt's homophobic father does not approve of his son's sexuality (153–4). The wolf-lover arrives as a predatory threat, intent on preying on Matt Duiker, whose family name is a reference to what is among the smaller of the southern African antelopes. Here, Venter's use of animals and animal imagery is entirely metaphorical. In *Decima*, the author's interest in rhinoceroses is in and of themselves, their individual and particular personalities, and not only as a reflection of human states of being. This sincere interest in the animal is reflected in how Venter gives Decima space to assert her own meaning—there are several scenes in which Decima is the main or only character.

In the context of this novel, we may imagine Venter working as a Cubist painter would, with the rhinoceros at the centre of his studio as Venter moves around his subject, painting part of his subject from this angle, stepping

to the left of his subject and then painting her from that angle. By the end, we have a Decima that is something akin to the kind of animal that adorns the cover of the novel, which is of an image of the Gujarat rhinoceros, the deep folds of its skin suggesting that it is composed of loose-fitting parts that seem as though they have been transplanted from different beasts.

The same rhinoceros, especially its famous artistic rendering, inspired Lawrence Norfolk's novel, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (1996). Writing on Norfolk's text, Carmen-Veronica Borbély explains the composition and cultural currency of the image, which was produced in 1515 from Albrecht Dürer's woodcut:

> Purportedly derived from an eye-witness account of the outlandish gift presented to the Portuguese King, Manuel I by a Gujarati Sultan [before it is arranged to be gifted to Pope Leo X], Dürer's imaginative retrieval of what would become affixed for centuries in the European mind as the quintessential rhinocerotic image evinces a radically composite morphology indebted […] to a plethora of textual and visual precedents. (169)

Norfolk's text is playfully ahistorical, telling of the capture and unsuccessful transportation of the rhinoceros to Pope Leo X in Rome. The sought-after animal goes by these names: Gomda, Ezodu, Rosserus, and, the narrator's most-used term, Beast (Norfolk's capitalisation). Before it is captured, it is often called an Enigma (also capitalised). Several names are imposed upon the rhinoceros who is always only barely visible throughout. Even when it is transported through Italy, then a drowned and dead corpse, no one can see it:

> [I]t was overlooked in Arenula, disregarded in Trevi, missed in Morgi, skipped in Ripa, went unheeded in Pigna, and pretermitted in both Campitelli and the Campo Marzio. The Beast does not enter Rome so much as materialise out of it, leaving the shadows of its sloughed former selves on plastered walls and iron-braced doors, in broom-choked porticoes and rubbish-filled vaults. It wipes itself off the travertine and tufa of Rome's rioni leaving not after-images but only the surprise occasioned by their disappearance, a déjà-déjà-vu. (715)

What is at the forefront of the public's impression of the rhinoceros is its illusiveness; its absence becomes its overwhelming and most recognisable feature. The rhinoceros in Norfolk's text is represented through lack; Decima in Venter's text, however, is seen by many: poachers, gamekeepers, other animals, readers. Though rendered by opposite means, both authors' techniques attempt to show that the rhinoceros is unknowable by upholding its irrepresentability. That is, Norfolk almost never depicts the animal, and Venter demonstrates that presenting the rhinoceros by one image, or through one set of eyes, is to fall short of understanding the animal's intricacy. Such a depiction makes of Decima something that is unsettled, the opposite of a still life.

We are reminded by Bruno Latour, in *Facing Gaia* (2017), a series of lectures that challenge the kinds of metaphors we use in an age of ecological catastrophe, of the dangers of containing nature and its objects in art, particularly the kind of art that began in Europe in the 1400s (16). Such images, Latour explains, adhere to the kind of "*scopic regime*" that demonstrates a

> symmetrical strangeness that gives the object the very odd role of being there only so as to be seen by a subject. Someone who is looking […] at a still life […] is entirely programmed so as to become the subject in relation to this *type* of object, whereas the objects […] have no role other than to be presented to the sight of *this particular type* of gaze. (17, emphasis in original)

This limits both the object (that which is depicted in the image, and how it may be read) and the subject (the viewer, and the number of possible readings available to her). Venter's Decima is written against this kind of imagery. The Decima we are given is not a neat and coherent depiction of the animal, but a more modernist impression of her, perhaps more productive for Venter's purposes, which is to observe the animal from this and that subject's perspective, to observe Decima across time, to observe her from outside and in-.

As an addendum to the novel, in a section of "Acknowledgements", Venter lists his "use of the following material in the writing of this book". Among those listed is John Berger's canonical zoocritical essay "Why Look at Animals?" from his anthology *About Looking* (1980). At the heart of Berger's argument are the abuses animals endure in the capitalist west, in which animals are caged in zoos and commodified. This widens the gulf between humans and animals as zoos become sites in which animals are looked at and are no longer active participants in the exchange of looking.

ISSN: 0041-476X E-SSN: 2309-9070

Before the nineteenth century, according to Berger, animals and humans both looked at each other. With this looking came an epistemology of the (human) self:

> The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. [...] The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is being seen by the animal, he is *being seen* as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. (3, emphasis in original)

There is a poignant irony that describes the looking that occurs between human and animal before the nineteenth century. At once, we were both ignorant of each other; yet it is precisely this mutual ignorance that afforded human and animal some common ground, and therefore afforded us more or less equal power. In the contemporary moment, however, the moment in which animals are caged and commodified, "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them" (Berger 14). An extension of this logic is the image of the animal, in which humans may stare at the animal in an image without affording the animal subject the opportunity to stare in return. Power and knowledge are unidirectional and this means we cannot truly know each other since we are, through human power, spatially removed from one another.

Venter's text acts as a response to Berger's premises, and adopts the kind of looking described by Berger evident in the pre-1800 west in which animals and humans were able to look upon each other. Decima is seen by the reader, but she is also an active observer in the world. Her eyes are not only looked upon but look out as well. It is also an eye supplemented by narrated thought. After Decima's granddaughter is born, we see the two playing. While they do, Decima recalls a recent ancestor, a rhinoceros killed in Kenya, caught in Theodore Roosevelt's game murder spree in 1909: "But it is the eye of the creature lying there [...], the eye forever staring down the years—and so many years it's been. It is the pain, the pleading, the long memory—that is what wakes Decima up" (126). To understand the significance of this seeing, we may turn to *The Climate of History*, in which Dipesh Chakrabarty advocates for appreciating and, to use Chakrabarty's word, *seeing* the world as a planet, a recognition of Earth as a celestial body billions of years old, an object in the universe that far exceeds the human understanding of Earth as world with its politics, economies and national borders. This is also necessarily to see Earth in the time by which it operates, to see it in deep time (against human time): "Today, the work of deep time is beginning to break into our everyday consciousness of human-historical time, calling on us to witness [...] the convulsive nature of this planet" (192). Chakrabarty advocates that we see time differently, that we see the Earth not merely as a backdrop of human action, but as an object that predates our existence. Decima's time, though certainly not deep time, functions in a similar fashion, along similar principles: she sees herself in relation to a time before she was born. When she dreams of her murdered ancestor (an animal with whom she has never shared space), we see Decima seeing, where her seeing is not only in the materiality of the world, but extends also to memory—she sees with her mind's eye. We see how Decima sees internally and across time.

Through this, Venter attempts to restore what Berger deems lost in human-animal relations, which is human recognition of the capacity of the animal to see, recognition of the animal to command her own narrative through seeing. Venter writes the looking of animals back into narrative and introduces it into modernity, the very era that has brought her to her death. But Venter's adherence to Berger is not blind. Along with the Berger essay, "Why Look at Animals?", Venter cites an essay that is critical of Berger's position, Jonathan Burt's "John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals?': A Close Reading" (2005). Though Burt is still in favour of the moral basis of Berger's argument, where the target of Berger's criticism is uncaring humans' cruelty toward animals, Burt's reservations of Berger's position has mainly to do with how Berger goes about this, particularly the assumptions Berger makes regarding the depiction of animals in images. Burt proposes that "the idea that animal imagery is itself fluid and ambiguous appears lost in the fervour of Berger's stance against imagery" (204). For Burt, Berger is far too rigid in his understanding of the moral and aesthetic possibilities of images and looking at animals. Animal visibility is much more complex by Burt's estimation, especially when studying the history of this practice, arguing that, for

example, "animal welfare politics has been highly dependent on illustrations, photographs and film for the power of its message and its success" (213). Burt continues:

> As the discourse of animal welfare and rights is given increasing expression in the nineteenth century it is also the case that the status of the animal in public visual culture undergoes a change and the two are to some extent connected. Animals needed to be *seen* to be treated correctly which was an important and measurable criterion of welfare and an index of what it was to be a visibly civilised society. (213, emphasis in original)

The transference of animals into images is not, per se, indicative of the cause of their decimation, Burt argues. Animal conservation organisations, according to Burt, seemed to understand better than Berger did about the capacity of humans to care for Others through strategically composed animal images. Yet the care elicited from seeing is not altogether altruistic. Burt notes in the final sentence that the metrics of a good society was determined, in part, by the capacity to care for animals: if we may look upon animals with care, then we may, in turn, be looked upon favourably.

The language Berger uses to describe the peril of the animal in modernity is also, for Burt, telling of the limitations of Berger's appreciation of an alarming situation. For Berger, animals, in their collective groups of species, do not die so much as disappear in modernity: "Everywhere animals disappear. In zoos they constitute the living monument to their own disappearance" (24). And where animals have disappeared into are images; they have been transposed into text. "The treatment of animals in 19th century [sic] romantic painting was already an acknowledgement of their impending disappearance", explains Berger; he continues: "[t]he images are of animals receding into a wildness that existed only in the imagination" (15). For Burt, Berger's suspicions about animal imagery are limited by Berger's reluctance to speak directly about animal death, substituting these occurrences as mere disappearance. Burt believes that because Berger is "drawn to the spectacle of captivity as [his] main point of focus rather than, say, the spectacle of slaughter, [Berger is] drawn to what is still visible rather than directly challenging what has in fact become invisible" (214).

Burt's use of visibility and invisibility, or disappearance as Berger would have it, is more dynamic than Berger's well-intentioned uses of the terms. Not all instances of animals in imagery are harmful; and when animals become invisible, or disappear, it is not always mere disappearance—these instances may be indicative of something crueller, more sinister.

Venter's text attempts to navigate the same matters of the points at which animality and representation meet, particularly in the context of extinction. As a response, Venter uses the text to make the animal not only visible, but to elicit care from the human reader (as seen in the role of photographs in the scenes of Frankie and Roslyn described earlier). While Berger sees animal-as-text as a sign of their demise, their consumption, Venter, like Burt, reinscribes power into text to make the loss of the rhinoceros mournable. And it is not only through photographs, not only by looking at animals, that Venter intends to elicit this care; it is also elicited by narrating instances in which animals look back. Venter makes Decima's eye matter by imbuing that which is behind the eye with the relatability of consciousness. We are privy always to Decima's thoughts, her mind's eye.

In his favourable review of the novel, Michael Titlestad speaks of the care with which Venter renders the animals in his text, aware, too, of the limitations of these expressions: "We are reminded of the ethical and philosophical shortcomings of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism [...]. It is not that we need to 'humanise' animals—to do so is reductive and disrespectful. It estranges them from us. [...] Decima's life is lived and experienced beyond the reach of discourse" ("'*Decima* inhabits me'" n. p.).

Indeed: reading animals in African literature, and drawing on works from Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (2013), and Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity" (2011), Evan Maina Mwangi argues that we would be remiss if we were to read animals in African folktales exclusively as instantiations of humans and human interests: "the animals have their own interests and intrinsic value beyond serving as metaphors of the human condition" (54). Yet Mwangi also cautions that rendering animals in and of themselves may not always be the author's intention (82). *Decima* intends to sidestep this danger of having animals primarily serve human interests, desires and selfishness; it is a novel that works against the assumption of the rhinoceros's killability, to use Barad's phrase (123). Yet given the context of poaching, it is also a text that addresses instances in which humans intend to justify killing rhinoceroses by speaking on behalf of the animal, dismissing any possibility of sentience, for the animal to 'speak' for itself. The various ways this anthropocentrism functions and fails warrants interrogation.

There is a telling interaction between Frankie and the Kingpin, who tries to ready Frankie for his job. The Kingpin, through insult, tells Frankie about how there is no reason to fear the rhinoceros he is about to kill: "Are you a weak person? […] Remember that animal standing there can't talk, so that means he can't think, you are the one thinking. So why are you scared?" (66). Frankie thinks his response to the rhetorical question without uttering it: "Is this man trying to be clever or what? Why does he talk this shit when he knows the rhinoceros is the angriest of all animals?" (66). The Kingpin, as though alleviating himself of any potential guilt at killing a sentient being, declares that the rhinoceros is without thought because it is without language. The causal relationship between the two, thought and language, of course denies the rhinoceros any experience, memory or emotion that the novel sets out to afford her, the kind of emotional complexity acknowledged by Frankie who must eventually face her.

The novel references the language of science as another mode that attempts not to expound on the consciousness of a rhinoceros, but is modelled as a specific kind of discourse that is sympathetic to the rhinoceros as an animal with as much right to survival as humans. Roslyn Lung and Leigh-Ann Biggs are of course the scientists intent on exposing the fraudulence of TCM. However, recognising an incoherence between her feelings and what their research claims, Roslyn is "not happy with the tone of the article. It's too mild". Leigh-Ann, exhausted by their exhaustive research, decides that it is "perfect", suggesting that the language of science ought to be appreciated because of its detachment from its subject—animals in this case. Leigh-Ann encourages Roslyn to move on (71). Roslyn does not back down, insisting that the language of their research contain more "punch", arguing that the work of the TCM practitioners is the cause of "slaughtering, no, murdering of rhinos" (72). The paper is eventually published (158–9), and the novelist narrator informs us that "[i]n all likelihood, the article will have no effect on the activities or beliefs of the various players in the rhino game. As my mother would say: it means boggerol [bugger all]" (159).

For Dewald Koen, "[i]n this respect, Venter delivers indirect critique of the scientific establishment who sit in proverbial ivory towers and research about poaching, where their research rarely brings attention of this evil practice to the public's attention" (73, my translation). Titlestad believes Venter is perhaps more scathing: "In some ways, academics come off worse than poachers" ("'*Decima* inhabits me'" n. p.). (In measuring the work of the academic against the work of the novelist in this context of poaching, it may be worth noting that the figure of the novelist in the text is not subject to the same disparagement.) Yet the novel's appendix argues differently to the novelist's mother with respect to the function of the academic in zoological justice. Venter cites Helen P. Laburn and Duncan Mitchell's scientific paper "Extracts of Rhinoceros Horn Are Not Antipyretic in Rabbits" as having informed the writing of his novel. Both science and political action are needed, Venter seems to say in the end, a sentiment echoed also in the writing of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's discussion on the use of scientific language in the plight of elephants in the ivory trade (170). Science may only take us so far in ending the trade in rhinoceros horn (the actions of nations, cultures, conservationists are perhaps more consequential and urgent), but, as far as Venter is concerned, science, and its language, are necessary components for animal welfare.

Various discourses around Decima compete with the stories Decima tells of herself. Yet the novel's structure, in which different voices are used to speak to Decima's different experiences and how she is differently received, shows that all forms of storytelling, anthropomorphic or not, are more than the sum of its parts in rendering Decima whole. And the narrator does not try to explain Decima, at least not in any direct way; rather, the narrator allows Decima to speak for herself, both in thought and, for a brief moment, in speech.

Decima, for about three pages of the novel, engages in an exchange with her friend, Skalpie, a vulture (116–8). After Decima expresses some mild irritation about the arrival of her friend the vulture, they speak about oxpeckers, they speak of the heat of the day, about the waxing moon (where its increasing brightness anticipates the danger of nocturnal poachers), and they speak of death, the deaths of both their kin. The conversation is a bold turn in the novel, and we never see its like again, the narrator making us privy only to Decima's thoughts and emotions before and after this moment. When Decima and Skalpie speak, as is the case whenever a human speaks, the novel represents this direct speech unconventionally without quotation marks. The language of narrator, human and animal exist on the same narrative plane. This marks a democracy of voice and ontology in the text, where all

speak as part of the same narrative. In his interview with Michael Titlestad, Venter explains his decision to have Decima and Skalpie speak:

> One voice was still missing: the voice of Decima, the black rhino mother. Can I really suspend the disbelief of the reader and let the rhino herself talk in the book? My partner read the first draft of my novel and, when he got to Decima chatting away with Skalpie the vulture, exclaimed: "Oh, this sounds just like a Disney cartoon." Maybe, and that was OK too. ("about love" n. p.)

But perhaps only speaking through the mind of Decima is sufficient for Venter's objectives. To have Decima speak, also with another species, is perhaps to undermine the animals' special difference from humans. Also, this speech may seem misplaced since it appears fairly late into the text, long after the rules of what is and is not physically and ontologically possible and expected in this world is set up so carefully by Venter. Nevertheless, Venter's representation of speech, both in style and context, never loses sight of the novel's larger political and ecological objectives.

When Skalpie and Decima speak, they use "I" to mark their presence. For example, explaining how she will defend herself against a human attack, Decima says, "I will if I can, and I can, says Decima, I will storm them and throw them into the air against the light of the moon" (118). She positions herself as the subject of her own narrative by use of the narrative 'I'. Yet in most instances in which we are privy to animals' internal monologue, often expressed indirectly through the narrator (language without speech), the narrative is stylistically and grammatically different from the kind of narration and language we see from the human characters in the novel. Consider for example a thought from one of the rhinoceros bulls who enters the midden shared by Decima and the rest of the crash: "One of homecoming it is, of love for this midden, for cow and calf as they wander past: this is the thing, our thing" (163). Another example from Decima occurs earlier in the novel, when she smells a butterfly carrying the scent of one of the gamekeepers, Ziyanda Nelson: "Now Decima knows for sure it is her, that tawny scent from her female skin brought by butterfly, she it is" (30). In conventional English sentences, the subject of the sentence is placed first, followed by the verb, and the object comes last in the sequence. Yet, in many instances, when the animals express their thoughts, the object and subject swap position, allowing the object of the sentence to take precedence. (It is worth noting once again that the novel was published in English first and then translated in Afrikaans by Venter himself. Afrikaans and English structure sentences the same way in terms of subject and object position; that is, both conventionally place the subject first and the object last. However, in the two examples cited, the grammatical quirk in the English version is absent in the Afrikaans version.) What takes precedence is the thing being acted on (the object) rather than the actor (the subject) of the sentence, similar to how Venter reminds us that animals, when looked upon by humans, may also be active lookers—the object may be as important as the subject.

Narrative 'I's, the mode through which we are able to discern the speaker as participant and observer in the world, and the eyes through which the subject observes, are varied and used to political effect by Venter. We learn from the novel's animal characters about affording prominence and care to actors who are often neglected, often acted upon, observed but seldom appreciated as observers, whose stories and observations may be narrated about but are almost never acknowledged as agents of their own narratives. The use of eyes in the novel are such that we are aware not only of those who look upon Decima, those who objectify her (as horn, as object of care, or representative of a species that is worth saving, as friend, as mate, as daughter, as mother), but we are also aware of how Decima looks upon and narrates the world on her own terms.

Animals of different species can communicate with each other in the novel, as Decima and Skalpie do. And there is also communication from animal to human, but only insofar as that human is the reader. While Decima and other animals think in human language (in this case English or Afrikaans), or speak to each other in human language, human readers of the novel are always privy to their linguistic expressions. That we readers cannot speak back echoes the fact that humans within the text cannot speak to animals in the text, either. We may only observe what Decima observes and look upon the subjects and objects of her narration.

Though they are never perfectly as we are, the adoption of our languages suggests that there is ontological continuity between human and animal: we are similar but not the same; we may understand each other, see what the other sees, but with limitations. In some instances, Decima's sentences lack subjects completely. When jackals are about the midden, Decima becomes anxious for the safety of her kin: "Must warn them against this racket, the scallywags" (89). By removing herself as a subject of the sentence, by removing her 'I', Decima effaces

ISSN: 0041-476X E-SSN: 2309-9070

her being from the sentence entirely, and is instead preoccupied with the crash who are in danger in the presence of the jackals. What matters more than her is the crash to which she belongs, all reflected in her grammar.[2]

The extraction of the subject of the sentence, the self-erasure, may also speak to something more sinister: Decima's eventual death. It is a technique used also in Venter's *My Beautiful Death*, when Konstant, protagonist and narrator, succumbs to death towards the end of the text. At this point, he begins to lose his body along with his 'I' in relation to his materiality in the world: "Verbs don't fit my *I* anymore, *I* am not to be found anymore" (269, emphasis in original). Decima's lack of 'I' marks her impending murder by the novel's end—she comes from a line of murdered ancestors. Her grandmother was killed by Theodore Roosevelt, and her mother was killed by poachers for her horn. In the instance in which her mother is killed, the young Decima's ear is nipped by hyenas who begin to consume her mother's murdered body (75). From this, Decima continues to carry the event as a reminder of humans' cruelty; she carries the memory in and on her body: "The time between the attack on the body that was her mother's and now, here, with her rump in shady spekboom. That time is not known to Decima in weeks, months or even in years, but as a memory carved into her flesh" (75). Decima carries with her a lineage of death by murder. Death, or decimation, is inscribed in her name and in her history. It is from this that we assume the likelihood of her death by the end of the novel, and the question that sustains our reading of the text is not if Decima will die but when and how she will die.

When Decima, as a calf, witnesses her mother's death by poachers, the hacking of her mother's horn is described in graphic detail. Decima's death is approached differently. The "sentient being" (171), as the narrator describes her, smells the danger of the poachers nearby, and "charges" (172). Immediately after, "[a] sound cracks the night air of the Great Fish River land" (172). The scene shifts to Ziyanda, the gamekeeper, who witnesses the dead Decima on her monitor. We are never told what Ziyanda sees, but her devastated reaction affirms the novel's stance that images of animals have some moral efficacy to them. The hacking of the horn, its sale and medicinal use go unrepresented, unseen—the reader only ever assumes this inevitability. All that finally matters, the novel seems to suggest, is that Decima has died. The trade of her horn is not a story worth telling or an event worth seeing.

Michael Titlestad confirms that "in writing *Decima*, [Venter] had made little effort to keep author and narrator apart" ("*Decima* inhabits me" n. p.). Yet Venter's author-narrator is never domineering; the author abstains from his position as the sole, narrating 'I' of the novel, sidestepping his importance in favour of the animals about whom he writes. Venter explains in an interview with Michael Titlestad that, in the final moments of the text, he

> took the risk of letting Skalpie, of all animals, the vulture, have the last word. … Skalpie mourns the loss of his old friend, Mrs Rhino, he moves away from light into shadow and mourns for himself, and by the time he tucks his head into the pale fold of his wing, he mourns for the entire planet. At the centre of his mourning is not the anthropos, but the animal. ("'about love'" n. p.)

This narrative generosity is motivated by the eye of the rhinoceros. When the narrator describes the novel's first rhinoceros, the Gujarat rhinoceros who drowns in the Mediterranean, it is the eye of the drowning creature that drives him "to write about this great mammal, restoring the respect that is its due" (22). 'Eyes' and 'I's of various kinds are used as devices to work toward restoring animals as beings in possession of both body and mind, in possession of eye and narrating 'I'. It is precisely because of this variety of looking and telling that informs the novel's strengths.

Notes

1. Dewald Koen, in his review of the novel, notices, too, Venter's interest in drawing parallels between human and animal female ancestry (73).
2. The same sentence in the Afrikaans reads as follows: "O, sy moet hulle tog waarsku teen sulke raasbekkigheid, die swernote (91)." With the inclusion of "sy"—"she"—Decima, as syntactic subject, is re-inserted into the sentence. Venter's zoological objectives are expressed differently in the Afrikaans when compared to the English, especially in subtleties of language.

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