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## DEMYTHOLOGISING THE RHINO: FROM DÜRER TO VENTER, FROM BEAST TO BEING

JEAN ROSSMANN, BEVERLEY JANE CORNELIUS

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**Abstract:** Eben Venter's novel *Decima* (2023) features Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, invoking complex myths about rhinos, while, in a synchronous thematic echo with *Decima*, the 'My Rhino is Not a Myth' exhibition in Timișoara, Romania (2023) also draws from Dürer's work to explore the interplay between science, art, and fiction. Venter reimagines the rhino as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility for nature. He demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, activism, *Decima*, Dürer, ecoliterature, rhinoceros, Eben Venter

### 1. Introduction

Eben Venter's novel, *Decima* (2023), features Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, thereby invoking complex myths about rhinos and transporting them into the contemporary milieu of South Africa's rhino-poaching crisis. In a synchronous thematic echo with *Decima*, across the globe, the "My Rhino is Not a Myth" exhibition in Timișoara (the 2023 European Cultural Capital) also draws from Dürer's work to explore the interplay between science, art, and fiction. Historically, the rhino has served as a polyvocal symbol for human agendas, as in Eugène Ionesco's attack on post-war totalitarianism, where the rhino stands for mindless conformity. Venter, however, reimagines the rhino as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility for nature, as well as for the narratives we construct about it. The urgency of this message is underscored by grim reality: in the last 15 years, 10 285 rhinos have been brutally slaughtered in the wild, pushing this highly endangered species perilously close to extinction (Save the Rhino 2024). Against this backdrop we examine how Venter demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns in *Decima*.

*Decima*'s protagonist-narrator – Eben – is a writer who has returned home to South Africa (from Australia) to visit his ailing mother and to research the country's rhino-poaching crisis. His mission is to expose the intricate network of rhino-horn poaching and trafficking, the network including poachers, kingpins, corrupt politicians and government officials, as well as practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The central figure of this network is of course the rhinoceros itself – a target,

a commodity, a dumb beast – who supplies the raw material for this trade and whose death is a means to an end. But Eben singles out in his account one specific rhino and grants her agency and subjectivity; she is a matriarch whose life and death he juxtaposes with his own mother's. Woven through his narrative are also tales of the historical exploitation of rhinos. He vividly recounts numerous tales of ‘great white hunters’ and their callous, excessive slaughter of African wildlife. More prominently featured is the tragic account of an Indian rhinoceros that drowned at sea en route to Pope Leo X in 1515. That rhinoceros was the inspiration for the German printmaker Dürer's woodcut, *Rhinoceros*. Through Eben's, broad-ranging investigation and his research in the narrative present, these historical atrocities are magnified, while his representation of one rhino's subjective view, foregrounds how unjustified and unnecessary is the threat of extinction for the species. As Michael Titlestad (2023 n.p.) observes in a review of the novel, “readers will inevitably wonder whether the narrator is Eben Venter, for the details of their lives correspond, and the book itself is clearly the outcome of the investigations it describes”. Titlestad goes on to say that, “asked that question in a public conversation Venter suggested that [...] he had made little effort to keep author and narrator apart” (2023 n.p.). Thus, this autofictional text artfully weaves together imaginative fiction with real-world scenarios.

Venter, placing a sentient rhino at the centre of his novel, questions the ability of homo sapiens to decide this creature's fate and asserts its right to inhabit the earth; thereby making an urgent (eco)political statement. The environment and ecology have become urgent subjects in the context of the Anthropocene in academic writing, journalism, and literature. As literary scholars, we ask: how effective can literature be in “push[ing] the world in a certain direction” or altering “people's ideas about the kind of society [or environment] that they should strive after” if it makes “political writing into an art” (Orwell 1946)? And, more specifically, we wonder, can a novel such as Eben Venter's *Decima* have any effect on the way that humans perceive the rhinoceros, or make any difference at all to its plight as an endangered species. Can a novel such as this spur, or be considered as, civic engagement?

A literary theorist, a psychologist, a human biologist, and a literary historian have asked similar questions in *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* (2019). They performed scientific, quantitative experiments with the aim of “establish[ing] whether [...] narratives of the plight of animals actually do [...] improve attitudes towards animal welfare, or make our attitudes pro-animal” (Małecki et al. 2019: 153). Their starting point for enquiry was the novel *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877), which is written as the ‘autobiography’ of a working horse. That novel made a profound difference to equine welfare because its protagonist and narrator – a horse – galvanised public outrage at the general cruelty meted out to horses in Britain at that time. The findings in *Human Minds and Animal Stories* clearly indicate that “animal narratives do improve attitudes toward animals”, that “the attitudinal impact of stories is not fleeting”, and that the impact is “dependent on the cruelty and severity of the animal-suffering it depicts” (Małecki et al. 2019: 154).

But they also commented that “this influence may depend on the species of its protagonists” (*ibid.*). Bearing in mind that, unlike a horse or a dog, the rhino is

not a domesticated animal and is, therefore, less relatable; and that the many myths surrounding the animal render it a frightening beast, we wonder: could a story with a fictional rhinoceros-protagonist help the cause of the real-life rhinoceros currently facing extinction?

## 2. Dürer's woodcut: Invoking complex myths about rhinos

In *Decima*, his tenth and most recent novel, Venter boldly takes up the *cause célèbre* of saving the rhino from the brink of extinction by exposing the socio-economic complexities of the South African rhino-poaching racket, and imbuing an individual rhino with selfhood, and agency. Also, by featuring Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, Venter invokes complex myths about rhinos. In premodern times the rhino was the prototypical unicorn. Indeed the inscription on Dürer's woodcut draws on Pliny the Elder's description of a horned animal, purportedly the monoceros or unicorn (Pliny 1855: 281). Descriptions of unicorns are rhino-like, and thus Dürer's art was compelling and 'went viral' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because European culture was already fascinated with the single-horned beast. Could Dürer's *Rhinoceros* be "the most influential animal picture ever" and "the pre-eminent example of art besting reality"? (Sherwin 2016: n.p.). Despite never having seen a live rhinoceros, Dürer's depiction persisted as "the real deal" well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even after "live rhinos had toured the continent and dispelled the illusion" (idem: n.p.). Dürer's work not only inspired other artists, but found its way into zoological textbooks, cementing its place in the annals of art and science (Clarke 1986: 27).

Half a millennium later, Dürer's rhino remains a touchstone for understanding the power of art to influence public perception. This was highlighted in mid-2023 when *Rhinoceros* featured prominently in two cultural and creative productions at opposite ends of the globe: in a South African novel and a Romanian art exhibition. The latter, the exhibition in Timișoara, titled "My Rhino is Not a Myth," used Dürer's rhino as both icon and leitmotif, albeit with a contemporary twist. The exhibition's promotional material depicted the rhino's head as a 'connect-the-dots' style image, leaving it intentionally blank to emphasize the exhibition's focus on reimagining the past in the present. The catalogue describes Dürer's work as "a remarkable example of the power of imagination", a reminder of a time when knowledge had "not yet been systemised or divided into what modernity would call 'The Two Cultures' – science and humanities" (Notz et al. 2023: 21). The exhibition not only explores the interplay between science, art and, fiction but also positions the rhino as a lynchpin, foregrounding the entanglement of human and animal lives in the history of colonial violence.

The exhibition catalogue and *Decima* retell the sea journey of the Indian rhinoceros that informed Dürer's art. Both texts seek to redress the commodification and exoticisation of the animal. The catalogue reminds us that this rhino was once "a real, breathing creature, turned into living artefact that served as an instrument of power and magnificencia" (ibid.). This description applies equally to the intention of Venter's text. The exhibition catalogue – presented as an open, dynamic and non-linear series of visual and narrative texts – invites us to follow "the way of the

rhino [...] opening an imaginative portal through which we hear the rhino's voice once more" (idem: 11-12).

In these 2023 texts, the animal is brought to the fore thereby subverting official histories, where the rhino has served as a polyvocal symbol for *human* agendas. For instance, in Eugéne Ionesco's absurdist play, *Rhinoceros* (1959), the animal serves as a symbol of brutish fascism, furthering a satirical critique of post-war totalitarianism. Set in a French village, the play stages the fantastical conversion of its populace into rhinos, leaving one character, the protagonist Berenger, as the last human. The title of the Timișoara exhibition, "My Rhino Is Not a Myth," is a reversal of the character Botard's exclamation, "your rhinoceros is a myth!" (Ionesco 2000: 54). His refusal to acknowledge the "collective psychosis" everyone is undergoing, is a poignant reminder of the dangerous allure of conformity and the ease with which compassion and individual thought can be abandoned (Notz et al. 2023: 23). Taking its cue from this absurdist drama, the exhibition urges us to resist complacency and complicity in the face of ideologies that seek to erase or homogenise diverse identities, voices, and perspectives. However, the message comes at the cost of reducing the rhino to a Cartesian and anthropocentric dichotomy, where the unthinking, brute beast is contrasted with the thinking, sensitive human. Cartesian dualism set in place the hierarchy that sets the human above all other animal life. Since Descartes's assertion of "cogito ergo sum", animal is merely a symbol without subjectivity (Derrida 2008).

In contrast to Ionesco's symbolic appropriation of the rhinoceros as a dumb brute, Venter presents the animal as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility not only for nature but also for the narratives we construct about it. Literature has an edge over the sciences or philosophy because of its capacity to open a space for the imagining of human/nonhuman interrelations (Zapf 2013). We examine how Venter demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns.

### 3. Venter's novel: Demythologising the rhino

The novel features three main story lines: (i) the author-narrator, Eben, doing research for a novel – a novel with a political purpose; (ii) a couple of first-time poachers, Athule and Frankie, who are trying to make a quick 'buck' by hacking the horn off a rhino and selling it; and (iii) the rhino herself, Decima, who is the focus of both the researcher and the poachers, as well as of various conservationists and wild-life rangers.

An additional narrative strand is that of two Australian academics researching Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in Hong Kong. They interview practitioners who explain the potency of the 'product'. In a TCM shop they witness "the destination – destiny – of that animal [and see] the horn with all its functions of rubbing and touching, of tossing and thrusting, the trademark of the animal, ground down into powder" (Venter 2023: 39). Symbolically "[h]orns convey a feeling of eminence and loftiness [and] their symbolism is that of power, [...] that possessed by the animals which bear them" (Chevalier et al. 1996: 513). Sale of rhino horn by TCM practitioners is based on ancient beliefs about its powerful medicinal properties that

cure infection and fever. Though the “Chinese government banned domestic trade and medicinal use of rhino horn in 1993, and removed rhino horn from the official TCM pharmacopeia” there is still “persistent and growing demand” (Cheung et al 2021: 2). Additionally, contemporary myths promote its supposed cancer-fighting properties (*The Great Rhino Robbery* 2024; Hsu 2017: 3), claims that have never been verified scientifically (Hsu 2017: 5), while the claim that rhino horn is taken as an aphrodisiac has been discounted as an urban myth “of the Western media” (idem: 4). A more recent development in the demand for rhino horn is its perception as a luxury item and status symbol; in its powdered form, it is ingested in alcoholic cocktails by the newly rich in vulgar displays of wealth.

Via its various story-lines, the novel thus presents a multi-faceted perspective of conservation and poaching in the present day while also delving into the far-reaching history of trophy hunting and the exoticisation of animals. It problematises anthropocentric and colonial binaries to defy any simple solution. Venter names this rhino-protagonist, Decima, which is “Latin for one tenth, but also [for] a largesse bestowed; [as] she is a generous gift to this southern African land” (Venter 2023: 28); she bestows wealth that cannot be measured instrumentally (e.g. in the form of rhino horn). She has intrinsic value as a sentient being.

The fictional rangers (and, counter-intuitively, also one of the poachers) exemplify in this narrative what multispecies scholars call the ‘art of attentiveness’ which is to view creatures as more than “mere symbols, resources, or background for the lives of humans” (Van Dooren et al. 2016: 6). Their attentiveness awakens a realisation of “shared lives [and] consequential relationships” (*ibid.*) that exist between human, animal, and all life. Attentiveness is co-extensive with “passionate immersion [which means] becoming curious and, so, entangled, ‘learning to be affected’ and, so, perhaps to understand and care a little differently” (*ibid.*) because of the shared and consequential nature of all planetary life.

A philosophy of deep ecology permeates the narrative, “imagin[ing] a broader sociality that includes diverse communities of life on earth [and] the valuing of other beings as more than just resources” (Næss 2005 [1986]: 33). This ethics is signalled in the opening epigraph: “[i]f someone doesn’t like animals there is something wrong with them” (Venter 2023: 7). The author-narrator, Eben, asked about the book he is researching, asserts (echoing Orwell) its political intention: it is “for the sake of a particular animal, an attempt, if nothing else, to bring to the fore Decima’s sentience, to try to understand it in the way the first-century poet, Catallus, expresses the meaning of sentience: that is, *fieri sentio et excrucior*. I feel it and I am tormented” (idem: 137-38). Venter reappropriates the Roman poet’s famous epigram on love to describe the intensity of his passionate immersion in the life of a rhino. To feel this deeply is torture, as the Latin *excrucior* alludes to being torn apart on a rack. *Decima* is, as Michael Titlestad (2023: n.p.) observes, a “novel about love, in a profound and manifold sense”. The narrator broadens his own empathy (and the reader’s), placing the tale of the rhino matriarch, Decima, alongside reminiscences of his own elderly mother, implying an affinity and kinship between the two. Avoiding an inaccurate self-sameness, he declares he “will not equate [his] mother’s loneliness to that of a solitary rhinoceros in the bush [but that] there is a *continuity* between the feelings of

two such creatures" (Venter 2023: 28, *our emphasis*). Beyond the quest for solitude, they share a maternal instinct to protect their young and their love of the fauna and flora of the Eastern Cape, and a desire to conserve it. A portrait of place is presented – Decima's 'Umwelt' – through her focalisation, which provides a visceral and vivid portrait of her world, a sensory feast of the Eastern Cape biome:

Decima likes the late afternoon sun, its tepid rays in the cup of her ear, along her nose, with a whiff of spekboom after a day in the heat. She'll head west, then north-west where the land rises, she knows it does, where koppies are stippled with noors-thorn. Lifts her nose to the crash; they've already started moving for the night-time feed. Those noors are so lovely and tall with arms reaching up, up; she hopes for fresh regrowth too. After all, this is spring and stems should be sappy with milk, there could even be clusters of flowers already. Noors, very much a favourite snack for Decima. (Venter 2023: 87)

When the character, Eben, uses the word 'continuity' with regard to the feelings of the human *and* animal mothers, he challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, rooted, he notes, in biblical dogma (especially the call for dominion in Genesis 1:28), turning, instead, to the Romantic philosophy of sympathetic imagination as an ethical alternative to human/animal relations. Drawing on the combined powers of sympathy and imagination enables a mystical, shamanic oneness with the earth and its creatures. In a reflective, philosophical passage invoking Walter Jackson Bate's (1945) notion of the sympathetic imagination, the narrator advocates for sympathetic imagination over the dispassionate engagement of the hunter-stalker:

Sympathetic imagining and stalking are opposite ways of approaching an animal. The poacher or trophy hunter points the rifle at the rhinoceros, and if for a moment the animal and the human look one another in the eye, there often is no time, or insufficient light, and fellow-feeling can never come into play. [...] The ranger, on the other hand, visits and revisits the rhinoceros in the bush. Smells are exchanged, glances, then a tentative scratch behind the ear. Over time, imagining the life and history of each animal becomes possible, the space between human and animal is erased, and for a moment at least the human identifies with the animal. (Venter 2023: 76)

Although sympathetic intuition and stalking seem to correspond directly with conservationist and hunter/poacher respectively, there is in fact the possibility and hope that the stalker could desist. There is also Venter's depiction of the poacher's dire financial circumstances, which are the result of systemic inequality. Furthermore, the greed and machismo of the 'great white hunter' of the colonial period is juxtaposed to the bare and precarious existence of the contemporary poacher. Overall, Venter takes pains to represent the contemporary poacher with pathos. At the climax of the novel, when the poacher, Athule, has Decima in sight, exposed under the full moon, there is an opportunity to shift his outlook. His attentiveness to her and the richness of the bushveld awakens in him a moment of sympathetic intuition:

He is within seconds of shooting, yet he still gives himself the time of this moment. Night scents of bush and grasses and thorn tree he picks out, one different to the other. Like an animal he flares his nostrils and grants himself the bliss of it. The land and the

bush are his too, as they are to this umkhombe in front of him, and the air, yes, even the air can be shared by both of them this night, even if it is just for now. This is the place he's had to come to, to be like this animal in front of him. They have become each other's equals, both lit by the moon. For it is the moon that makes the animal so sharply visible to him, not as a target to be killed, rather as a creature living here, eating and shitting and standing and sleeping and, when it wakes up, knowing. Now, full moon means alertness. And courage.

The animal is silent as it stands there with its folds and creases, Athule giving off a smell despite the wind direction. And, as careful as he is to limit his movements, his presence is as clear as the flow of lines in the palm of his hand; they have become each other's targets.

A shift: again, it is as he wills it. He has to separate himself from this animal and resume his life. He has to get ready to do what he has come to do, no matter the outcome, no matter how little, nothing, he cares about that outcome.

It is time. He knows that the animal is aware of him, is prepared to charge at the slightest sound. Turn just a little, please, show your forequarter, now, please, and he raises the .458 as he eases into his breath, into the inhalation, and whispers again: Makwehle okwehlayo.

This time the inside of his mouth is fat with saliva: let be what will be. (Venter 2023: 170-171)

For a moment the rhino is not a 'target', simply a fellow creature sharing land and air as 'equal'. Athule, the poacher, returns to a halcyon time when "[t]he land and the bush are his too" (Venter 2023: 170), recalling a time before the exclusionary politics of colonialism and apartheid. This is a moment of complete identification and kinship between human and animal: shared creatureliness and bare existence – "eating and shitting and standing and sleeping" (*ibid.*) – but also shared knowing and sentience. It is the knowing that alerts the reader to the hard reality that this is a 'zero-sum game', and Athule (the poacher) must have the courage to choose his life. Decima's inevitable death, as well as Athule's uncertain fate, is all the more tragic because of this glimmer of Arcadian bliss.

If Decima's death is inevitable, it does not stop her from fighting for her life, from clinging to the hope of life. Following the passage giving Athule's heightened emotional awareness is a brief and final focalisation by the hunted, elderly rhino herself:

Yes, the smell of them, these two in front of her. That stink projecting her back, way back, the stink lodged in their groins and armpits.

She is ready for them. This massif of flesh, a primal energy that existed long before any of them and their rifles. Her body bulging either side of her head, tail upright, fiercely horned, a sentient being protecting herself and her young with all her available bulk.

Decima charges.

A sound cracks the night air of the Great Fish River land.

Whoever has heard it recognises its terror. (Venter 2023: 171)

The narratorial voice intrudes to announce the sound of a rifle firing the shot that will kill Decima. Up to this moment the reader is immersed in Decima's focalisation and lifeworld, sharing her disgust at the adrenal "stink" (Venter 2023: 171) of hunters,

a smell that takes her back to the memory of her mother's death. Charging is the last action we will share with her: her body-turned-weapon is suddenly mountainous in size and "fiercely horned" (*ibid.*). We join in her fight to survive, save her young, and, by extension, the species. The shot is fired, and the shift in perspective to "whoever" is jolting. It propels the reader out of a shared rhino-being, signalling the loss of her voice in the text and opening an existential void for the reader. The "whoever" includes the wildlife rangers who discover her body. The text occludes a portrayal of her decimated body, the typical dehorned sensationalist image of mass media. She is no spectacle or fetishised commodity. In these final moments *Decima*'s dignity, sentience and vitality is brought to the fore.

#### 4. Conclusion

And so we bear witness to the death of one rhino but more importantly to the gloriousness and sensual pleasures of her life, the day-to-day mundane details of existence. By being present with her for a time, a mental shift has occurred: from seeing her as 'beast' to seeing her as a 'being'.

Venter achieves this by bringing together two seemingly opposed modes of knowing: that is, science and art. As with the Timișoara exhibition, "My Rhino is Not a Myth", Venter's novel is concerned with the cross-over of fact and fiction; it draws on scientific knowledge, research, and journalism, as well as personal experience, to create this aesthetic response to the extinction crisis and to animal rights. Venter's *Decima* is remarkably timely in its focus on the rhino-poaching crisis, an issue that is gaining increasing visibility in both the public discourse and media (as evidenced by the even more recent 2024 documentary, *The Great Rhino Robbery*). *Decima* responds to the heightened awareness surrounding this environmental and animal rights issue with a narrative that underscores the urgency of addressing rhino poaching.

By living for a time with a fictional rhino, poacher, trafficker, and researcher in the world of this novel, the entire network of rhino horn trade and trafficking is exposed. Any mythical allure is dispelled and the business of rhino horn trading is seen for what it is: the exploitation and annihilation of a vulnerable fellow creature. Once time has been spent with this sensitive and gentle being, once the animal has been given a chance to respond, the myths no longer hold. This is what Venter's novel achieves. But, the novel does not present any simplistic solutions. It acknowledges the dire straits of (many of) those caught up in this macabre supply chain. Venter presents an urgent and profound political message in the form of art; so that the scales fall from the eyes of those witnessing the possible (inevitable?) demise of the rhinoceros in our time.

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