

Death and Compassion: The Elephant in Southern African Literatures.

Dan Wylie.

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Dan Wylie's exploration of the representation of elephants in southern African fictional and non-fictional literature is not only simultaneously academic and witty, but also excellently ascertained in its goal. In his introduction, Wylie frames his point of departure as the "philosophical contestation between death and compassion, between those who kill and those who protect" (3). The term 'compassion' is thoroughly outlined, and Wylie is sensitive to this term's resemblance to sympathy, empathy, pity and reverence. However, in this book, compassion is "a more holistic term, a response that takes a more conscious place within an overarching schema of ethics" (6). In conjunction with 'compassion', terms such as 'sentimentality' and 'anthropomorphism' are also discussed. Whilst 'sentimentality' is aligned with "the ineffectuality of pity" (6), 'anthropomorphism' is regarded as a tool of "imaginative identification" (7). Both terms are explored throughout the text.

In nine dense chapters, Wylie analyses various texts from southern Africa, ranging from folktales and game-ranger memoirs to teen fiction and poetry. It is

through these analyses that our concepts of elephants and compassion are enlivened. The first chapter explores compassion in precolonial texts. Wylie is highly aware (and critical) of the processes of translation inevitably interfering with a modern reading of folktales. He dissects works translated by Wilhelm Bleek, such as *Reynaerd the Fox in Africa* and texts in the Bleek-Lloyd archive. He contrasts many of these works with other versions by, amongst others, Laurens van der Post. What becomes clear is that, although these stories, proverbs and rock art may have had elements of compassion towards elephants, the modern translations and interpretations portray more so the character of the translator and interpreter than that of the precolonial indigenous authors.

In chapter two, Wylie analyses travelogues, such as those written by François la Vaillant, Anders Sparrman and John Barrow. The accounts of these, and many other travellers during the early 1800s, rather portray a severe lack in compassion for elephants fuelled by naturalism, the advent of science, and zoology. Wylie (44) calls the slaughters described by these travellers nothing short of a "holocaust". Apart from Sparrman, who incorporates a story of indigenous peoples' belief that elephants weep in a similar way to humans, most descriptions of elephants are, according to Wylie, evidently in service of the promotion of the white masculine leader with little to no evidence of compassion.

Chapter three is closely linked to chapter two, exploring hunters' tales, and specifically the entwining of hunting and conservation efforts. Here Wylie explores theories of masculinity, postcolonialism and whiteness without jarring the analysis away from his search for compassion. Whereas anthropomorphism is often the basic tool used to evoke a compassionate representation of elephants in later works, in the hunters' tales it is often used as a "self-serving [...] projection" (73) of the hunter himself. Where the elephant is described as graceful and noble, it functions to highlight the nobility and grace of the hunter, and in so doing, supports the power relationship between human and nonhuman. Much like the novels about elephants explored in chapter four, such as Laurens van der Post's *The Hunter and the Whale*, along with Stuart Cloete's *The Curve and the Tusk*, these narratives are "not very good at remorse" (88).

Wylie finally finds elements of compassion in teen fiction. In chapter five he explores the "pedagogical values embedded in a selection of southern African novellas" (119). It seems that the key to portraying compassion in any narrative is the ability to conjure up imaginative identification with elephants in read-

ers. What so-called compassionate texts have in common, is their use of anthropomorphism, metaphors and fantasy. In teen fiction, compassion is often evoked through the recognition of the elephant's face, as is the case in *The Elephant's Tale* by Lauren St John. In John Struthers' *The Boy and the Elephant*, compassion is evoked through the emotional resemblances between human and nonhuman.

The game-ranger and field-research memoirs of chapter six and seven explore the ways in which knowledge about animals are used to evoke compassion, but ironically, also to justify the culling of whole herds of elephants. In this sense, these memoirs are similar to the hunter's tales discussed in chapter three. Chapter eight is devoted to the representation of the Knysna and Addo elephants. Wylie discusses how legends and myths about elephants fuel our compassion for them: "our compassion is dependent on the animal's capacity to exist as a symbol" (198). The poetry analysed in chapter nine supports this argument, considering the level to which the elephant is elevated to a legendary figure, or is described with quasi-human features, both aspects evoking compassion.

In some ways *Death and Compassion* is an overwhelming text. The level of insight with which Wylie navigates the vast number of narratives in search of compassion is commendable. Whilst the book is primarily academic, his use of humour allows this dense exploration to feel like an informal conversation about "elefriend[s]" (1). Apart from presenting insightful research on the ways in which elephants are represented in literature, Wylie also broadens the reader's understanding of the role of compassion with regards to human-nonhuman relationships in literary studies.

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