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The Gospel According to Ah Meng: Conservation, Celebrity, and the Singapore Story

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the story of probably the world's most famous captive orangutan, Ah Meng, who died in 2008 but has since been “replaced” by her granddaughter, Ishta, who took over as the “new face” of Singapore Zoo in 2016. Ah Meng's story is interesting for what it conceals and what it reveals, including the recent history of wildlife trafficking in Southeast Asia, for which Singapore – despite its conservationist credentials – acts as an important hub. Ah Meng's rescue and rehabilitation also raises interesting questions about the Singapore Story, the popular name given to the heroic narrative of historical survival and economic development associated with Singapore's ruling party, the PAP (People's Action Party), and especially its former leader, Lee Kuan Yew. This essay considers the extent to which Ah Meng is more than just a national ambassador animal or a global conservation icon, but is also a multifaceted figure for Singapore's progress in an unevenly developed capitalist world order in which it insists on playing a leading part.

Keywords

Ah Meng – orangutans – conservation – celebrity – unevenness – Singapore

Beginning at the End

This essay operates on the premise that animals have lives worth telling; that their stories weave between individuals and institutions; and that, like skimming stones, these stories have the potential to reverberate far beyond their own immediate horizons, offering insight into issues – cultural, political, economic – that may often seem far removed from the day-to-day realities of animals' lives. This is especially, though not exclusively, the case when the animals in question are celebrities. Studies of celebrity, by and large, have not paid much attention to animals, and while the fast-growing field of animal biography is certainly interested in famous animals, it also favors the egalitarian view that all animals, in one way or another, lead exceptional lives. Not all animals, however, lead virtually their entire lives in the public eye, which is the unmistakable domain – some might see it as the unfortunate fate – of the celebrity animal. Not all celebrity animals lead exemplary lives, any more than this applies to their human counterparts, and their celebrity – as is also frequently the case with humans – may be attributed rather than earned or come from notoriety rather than fame. In this case, though, we will be dealing with an exemplary life – so exemplary, in fact, that it has been identified with an entire nation's "good news" story, and has been spread, gospel-like, to advertise an entire nation's collective success.

As good a place as any to begin this story is at its end. On February 8, 2008, Ah Meng, Singapore Zoo's world-famous Sumatran orangutan, died peacefully of old age. A memorial service was held that allowed the public to see the body before it was buried. Copious tears were shed, and several suitably laudatory speeches were delivered. Subsequent press coverage worldwide referred to the end of an era for the zoo, which for its many visitors – well into the millions by this time – was virtually synonymous with Ah Meng, the genial subject of the zoo's trademark *Breakfast with an Orang Utan* program, which had been running with great success since its inception in 1982 (Sim, 2014, n.p.). During her lifetime at the zoo – she arrived there in its early days, after having been confiscated from a family where she was being kept illegally as a pet – Ah Meng had come to function as a paradigmatic "ambassador animal," the tag-name given to "an individual of a species – often a tame or habituated animal that lives permanently at a rehabilitation center or a zoo – that is used to educate the public about [that] species" (Heimbuch, 2015, n.p.).

Ah Meng was also an ambassador in other ways, meeting human celebrities from across the world – from Prince Philip to Elizabeth Taylor, from Steve Irwin to Michael Jackson – and functioning as the zoo's foremost conservation icon for the best part of 40 years. Simply put, Ah Meng was a living embodiment

of the success of Singapore Zoo, which, as Cheryl Sim remarks, has come to establish itself as “a leading facility for the captive management and breeding of endangered Asian primates” – including the critically endangered Sumatran orangutan – and which is now generally considered to be one of the finest “open concept” rainforest zoos in the world (Sim, 2014, n.p.). However, as will become clear in this essay, there is also a sense in which she acted – and, in the shape of her granddaughter, the “new Ah Meng,” continues to act – as a symbol for the success of Singapore itself as a forward-looking country that has managed, against all odds, to meet the twin imperatives of environmental concern and economic prosperity (even though, as we will go on to demonstrate, Ah Meng’s story may also act as an example for how these imperatives have *not* been met).

Situated at the interface of celebrity studies, conservation studies, and animal biography, this essay is interested in exploring Ah Meng’s life from various angles, offering a series of critical reflections that contribute to the relationship between these three broadly intersecting fields. It is also interested in a further set of relations, namely those between celebrity, conservation, and capitalism, which are increasingly recognized as being densely intertwined (Brockington, 2009; Huggan, 2013).¹ There are numerous examples worldwide of how this particular triad works, but for our purposes here we will concentrate on how it works at the *national* level, shedding insight into the tirelessly self-perpetuating “success story” that is modern-day Singapore. What does the story of Ah Meng reveal to us about Singapore, and – just as importantly – what other stories does this dominant national narrative, which is popularly bracketed under the rubric of the “Singapore Story,” either inadvertently bury or more actively suppress? As Dan Brockington remarks in his excellent 2009 study *Celebrity and the Environment*, “Understanding celebrity’s influence on conservation requires knowing what is being hidden by all that is visible” (Brockington, 2009, p. 24). In what follows, we will seek to argue that the story of Ah Meng conceals, as well as reveals, several different stories: stories about the hidden costs of global conservation, or about the unofficial price to be paid

1 The literature on neoliberal conservation is far too wide to be surveyed here; Brockington’s work is used as one of a very large number of possible examples. Some of the best work has been done in the African context: see, for example, Büscher, 2013; Ramutsindela, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; and earlier work (2002) by Brockington himself. As is clear from these examples, a further set of connections can be made between conservation and colonialism, which is relevant to Singapore insofar as the Singapore Story has been framed as the long and successful journey out of a colonial past (Loh, 1998; Perks, 2017). This essay touches on Singapore’s colonial roots, but space prevents a more extended postcolonial analysis. For a useful collection of essays that explores the postcolonial dimensions of contemporary conservation issues, see Adams and Mulligan (2003).

for official messages of collective national success. What is hidden beneath the conservationist gospel of probably the world's most famous orangutan, Ah Meng? What is at stake when endangered animals' lives are turned into commodities, and when endangerment itself becomes a commodity? And what is concealed beneath that most visible of markers, the seemingly unique but actually replaceable celebrity name?

Singapore and the "Vulnerability" Thesis

Sumatran orangutans are featured on the IUCN's Red List as "critically endangered," meaning that there is an extremely high risk in the near future of extinction in the wild (Hambler & Canney, 2004, pp. 88–93). Suffering as they do from acute habitat loss, it has recently been estimated that only 7500 orangutans are left, most of them hemmed into a diminishingly small patch of rainforest in northern Sumatra (Cribb et al., 2014). Hunting has been officially banned, but it persists, and orangutans are prized commodities in the global illegal wildlife trade. Under these dire circumstances, it would be churlish to see the rehabilitation and captive breeding programs at Singapore Zoo as anything other than an unqualified success.² However, opinions continue to differ on the pros and cons of keeping orangutans in captivity, and the negative physical and psychological effects of keeping animals captive for entertainment purposes have been well documented, even if some of the broader ethical issues surrounding this remain insufficiently addressed (e.g., Gruen, 2014; Hanson, 2002; Malamud, 1998).

There can be little doubt that orangutans are vulnerable, and that the Sumatran species (of which there are only nine existing groups in the wild) is especially so. In the Singaporean context, however, "vulnerability" is a category that applies to far more than endangered animals; it is a category embedded within officially sanctioned accounts of Singapore's history, as a continuing characteristic of the country itself. The common catchphrase attributed to this history is the "Singapore Story," and the most accessible account of it can be

2 A distinction should perhaps be made between captive celebrity animals and those who have continued to live in their natural habitat. The list in either case is too long to be meaningfully covered here, but animals in the former category might include Chi Chi the panda and Jumbo the elephant, and in the latter category Digit the gorilla and Sudan the rhino. What is common to both categories is the celebrity name, which implicitly carries the entire life story of the animal; also common to both categories is the charismatic presence of the animal itself. On the figure of the charismatic animal, which intersects with celebrity but is not necessarily identical to it, see Lorimer (2015).

found in the eponymous 1998 memoirs of Singapore's first post-independence Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Self-styled father of the Singaporean nation and, until his death in 2015 – and indeed beyond the grave – a hugely influential figure who played a significant part in the building of his own legend, Lee saw to it that his political party's authoritarian view of the nation's past, present, and future was firmly entrenched (Loh, 1998; see also Loh & Liew, 2010; Perks, 2017).

Lee's memoirs, and the national narrative to which they are attached, are generally seen as celebrating the country's rapid economic development, but they have also been more critically interpreted as being organized around a heroic "ideology of survival" that is linked to conformist Confucian values and a "tactical selection of [historical] facts" (Loh, 1998, p.6). Mediated by Lee and other leading PAP (People's Action Party) figures, the hegemonic narrative that evolves from these accounts confirms the hard-won sovereignty of a small, albeit globally significant, island nation that has severed links with its "backward" history and has fully embraced the modern development agenda, but that remains ever mindful of threats to that sovereignty, which might reawaken the colonial and communist specters of the past (Perks, 2017).

The idea that Singapore continues to be "vulnerable" is key to this narrative. As the Singaporean historian Loh Kah Seng puts it, the Singapore Story "aims to propagate two ideas: first, that the nation is 'vulnerable' and, second, that 'communitarian' solutions to this vulnerability can be found in the historical record" (Loh, 1998, p. 6). In this context, as he goes on to elaborate, the Singapore Story emerges as "more than [just] an account of the past; rather, it is a complex bundle of predetermined axioms and arguments on Singapore's history, geography, economics, sociology, and politics. While it does allow a range of possible perspectives, all of these nonetheless focus on the basic concept of 'vulnerability'" (Loh, 1998, p. 17).

It would be unwise to make too much of the correlation between the idea of vulnerability bound up in the Singapore Story and the vulnerability of a particular animal species; at worst, this loose associative thinking risks perpetuating the simplistic kinds of social and political allegories that continue to be projected onto animals, turning both them and their putative historical subjects into crude caricatures of themselves (see, for example, Armstrong, 2008; Baker, 2001; McHugh, 2011). Still, it would be equally unwise to *ignore* the link, especially in the case of an animal celebrity like Ah Meng who, from the moment of her first public appearance, performed a wide-ranging ambassadorial role that went beyond her usefulness to the Singaporean tourism industry – that amounted to important political and ideological work. Animal celebrities, David Giles suggests, are more or less "pure" commodities whose appeal is tied in almost entirely to the meanings that are "projected onto them

by (initially) the media and (ultimately) the public” (Giles, 2013, p. 124). Unlike human celebrities, who at least play some part in the manufacture of their public image, animal celebrities act as “conduits for our [human] fantasies and desires, whether of divination or of doting siblinghood; [they represent] the purity and innocence of living beings without human sin, artifice or careerist motives” (Giles, 2013, p. 125). This is true, but it also overlooks the significant *political* role that some animal celebrities play – or, better, are made to play – within the public arena. It thus seems perfectly possible to see Ah Meng as an unwitting political pawn in the PAP’s expedient account of the *nation’s* vulnerability. Nor is it unduly far-fetched to imagine her long-term protection by the Singaporean state, as well as her daily incorporation into Singapore Zoo’s regime of family-friendly display and performance, as interconnected examples of the country’s ongoing success in pursuing a peaceful path to sustainable development – itself a profitable marriage of conservation and capitalism (Davies et al., 2012) – along communitarian lines.

Conservation and the Southeast Asian Wildlife Trade

While sources for Ah Meng’s background are in dispute, it is generally agreed that she was born in 1960 and smuggled at an early age from Indonesia to Singapore, where she was kept illegally for over ten years as a companion animal (or, to use the less politically correct but in this case more damning appellation, domestic pet). Under circumstances which remain far from certain, she was then rescued by a Singaporean veterinarian and delivered to the care of Singapore Zoo, which was still in the early stages of its development and would not officially open its doors to the public until two years later, in 1973. The life of Ah Meng, who would soon evolve into the zoo’s star attraction, thus effectively paralleled the professional trajectory of the zoo, and for many visitors she became identical with it, although she had some human competition in the shape of the zoo’s founding director, Bernard Harrison, a charismatic figure whose creative work for the zoo has been internationally recognized (despite the somewhat backhanded compliment) as “putting the tiny island republic of Singapore on the international zoo map” (Singh, 2014, p. 214).

Ah Meng’s chequered past remains hidden to some extent, although the parent company of the zoo, Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), has maintained a solid track record in raising awareness of the illegal wildlife trade in Southeast Asia, for which Singapore operates as an important transit hub. Singapore is a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which currently protects around 5,000 animal species, while local

regulations are strict and punishments draconian, with smugglers facing fines of up to half a million dollars and accompanying jail sentences of up to two years (Lin, 2005). The illegal wildlife trade, however, persists, and Singapore's geographical centrality and strong connectivity make it a major hub for wildlife trafficking in the region, an increasing amount of which is now conducted online (Chin, 2012). It is impossible to underestimate the global as well as regional importance of this trade, which constitutes the world's fourth largest illegal trade after drugs, human trafficking, and counterfeiting; which has recently been estimated as being worth 26 billion USD per year; and which is sometimes seen, with good reason, as the major conservation crisis of our times.

The illegal wildlife trade is not just a huge threat to global biodiversity, but also carries equally significant risks for humans, as pathogens from trafficked animals can easily spread. It raises doubts, too, about contemporary conservation practices, which are explicitly designed to protect endangered animals but can inadvertently result in the spread of the very illegal activities they are designed to prevent. Perhaps the most arresting analysis of this is Rosaleen Duffy's 2010 study *Nature Crime*, which contends that even the most well-intentioned of conservationist attempts to protect endangered species often have contradictory motives, and that conservation as a whole is bound up in global-capitalist networks that cater to the requirements of Western consumers, many of whom continue to be lured by the appeal of "exotic" (i.e., non-Western) goods.³ As Duffy puts it, "We eat wildlife, we wear it as clothing and accessories, we consume it as medicine and we buy ornaments and souvenirs made from it [...]. Through global consumer culture, our everyday lives are bound up with the fate of wildlife populations that are [often] far distant from us" (Duffy, 2010, p. 10). Conservation feeds the wildlife trade even as it looks to curb its worst excesses, and Duffy provocatively sees it as sustaining the global criminal networks that have arisen to satisfy the consumer desires of the wealthy world. It also helps build a rationale for the vilification of local communities in the underdeveloped world – those who have the natural resources the wealthy world wants but are routinely accused of squandering them – or a pretext for "the creation of [wilderness] areas where [local] wildlife is protected, but [local] people are forced out" (p. 53).

While Duffy makes no mention of the exotic pet trade, this trade – which is growing by the year – plays a substantial role in the global trafficking of wild

3 As with Brockington's, Duffy's study is intended as one of many possible examples; others might include van Uhm (2016) and Wyatt (2013), while a useful regional source is the OECD's 2020 report on the illegal wildlife trade in Southeast Asia.

animals, with demand increasing across Asia, especially China, as one specific instance of regional economic development driving the global market in luxury goods (Deng, 2017; see also Bush et al., 2014; Lockwood et al., 2019). Ah Meng's decade-long spell as a domestic pet (1960–1971) can thus be seen as part of a wider pattern of animal abuse involving great apes – especially chimpanzees – being caught in the wild then sold on illegally to private households, where they often live in squalid conditions with owners having little understanding of the needs of the animals or, even where due care and attention are given, little developmental input, so that the “seeds of developmental disorder are [rapidly] sown” (Ross, 2014, p. 70). Keeping orangutans as pets has been illegal since 1931 under Indonesian law, although there are few instances of prosecution, while the import of orangutans into Singapore has also been outlawed from that time (Lin, 2005). However, further protection under international law, e.g., via the above-mentioned CITES, has not prevented them from being smuggled overseas, often in appalling conditions that end their lives before they have had the chance to begin them afresh.

While international conservation initiatives have enjoyed limited success in curtailing the exotic pet trade, the monitoring of illegal activities, many of them controlled by major international criminal networks, remains massively challenging, while global demand, much of it channelled almost untraceably via the Internet, continues to expand. It is difficult to disagree with Duffy that, while conservation proposes itself as part of the solution, it is also part of the problem. *Nature Crime* assembles an impressive array of evidence to show how conservation has gone wrong, serving only to produce “exclusion, marginalization, and even violence” (p. 221). The “fortress-style” approach taken by some national parks agencies and international conservation NGOs is a typical example of what happens when a ratcheted-up war to protect wildlife is used to justify military regimes aimed at controlling local people, with shoot-on-sight policies continuing to be used against suspected poachers in several different African countries, and the mantra of “saving wildlife” continuing to legitimate the sometimes brutal eviction of local villagers accused of encroaching on territories set aside for “landscape and wildlife populations that are deemed useful or saleable on the international market” rather than having value in and for themselves (p. 108). Meanwhile, there is a different kind of violence involved in top-down forms of conservationist decision-making, such as blanket trade bans that fail to take account of significant national differences in wildlife populations, or “one-size-fits-all” protection policies in which local considerations and complexities are conveniently ignored (p. 50). It is demand from the rich world, Duffy suggests, that drives these and other putatively conservation-based activities, which can have “a negative and unjust impact on [some of]

the world's poorest communities" (p. 217). But as she emphasizes, conservation is not just a matter of the rich exploiting the poor, or of the West controlling the non-West; rather it belongs to a complexly interconnected *global* system in which the wildlife trade – both legal and illegal – supports a “wider portfolio of illicit activities” (p. 43), many of them facilitated by new technologies that make these activities hard to follow and their actors harder still to find (p. 36). As will be seen more fully in the next section of our essay, it is this system to which the story of Ah Meng belongs, and in which the various discourses that surround her meaningfully combine and sometimes destructively collide.

Uneven Ecologies, Storied Lives

We began this essay by referring to Ah Meng's death in Singapore Zoo and have since outlined the shady history of her youth as an illegal pet. Such detailing of biographical information is worthwhile because it helps to illustrate the negotiations individual animals must have with systemic forces, which both dictate their individuality and restrict it. Information of this kind also adds pleasing depth to animal personalities, and Ah Meng is an excellent example of an animal with an extraordinary command of media attention, notwithstanding the accompanying risk of appearing in one-dimensional representations. The description of individual animals' life events, informed by context, “break[s] the mold of identity that lumps together all animals as principally the same” (Krebber & Roscher, 2018, p. 2). As we have already seen, Ah Meng was a truly singular orangutan, and yet she has often been made to stand for far greater entities in media representations, from the institution of the zoo to the entirety of her species, to the plight of endangered animals at large. Her individuality – or lack of it – is worth considering at greater length, and it is for these reasons that we now consider several stories that have been told about events in Ah Meng's life, situating them among other notable instances in Singapore's economic and ecological development to show how she fits into larger systems (local, national, and global), but also how she does not.

There are inevitable pitfalls to narrating animal biographies, as there are with any biography. As André Krebber and Mieke Roscher point out in their 2018 volume *Animal Biography: Re-Framing Animal Lives*, the role of the biographer must never be taken for granted, since it is his or her task “to organize remnants into a coherent story; it is he or she who creates meaning through the organization of fragments and sources” (p. 5). Consequently, “the perspective of biographer and biographed cannot be neatly separated” (p. 8). The creation of meaning from the assembly of sundry details and events is not

peculiar to *animal* biographies, of course, but remains an issue for all kinds of biography, and indeed for all kinds of narrative in general. “Teasing out differences in perspective is impossible since we cannot access the consciousness of the represented individual” (McHugh, 2011, p. 23), but it is still worth attempting as faithful a description as possible, given limitations or biases on the part of the biographer, of the individual’s life.

This line of argument suggests that all biography – all narrative – is ideologically circumscribed, but that ought not dissuade us from the attempt; instead, it shows us why animal biography is useful in the first place. After all, animals can only ever be textually represented from “outside” their own consciousness, in a manner that is interlaced with different perspectives. In the sense that it has been mobilized to fulfill many different agendas – from acting as a national ambassador to offering material for gossip columns – Ah Meng’s life story has helped establish her as something of a primate polymath. Susan McHugh makes a similar point about ideology in *Animal Stories* (2011): “The trick, as narratologists are quick to note, is not to escape the stories so much as to reckon with the ways in which life continues only ever within them” (p. 218). Below, we consider some of the multiple stories about Ah Meng that have circulated in the region, thus exploring how this iconic animal is situated within or alongside stories of Singapore’s development.

Ah Meng’s biography has been documented, albeit haphazardly, across a wide range of magazines, interviews, newspapers, and documentaries: hers was a multiple storied life. Her confiscation from a family in a *kampung* (traditional Singaporean village) came amid the large-scale resettlements of the 1970s. These slum clearances relocated citizens from commercially viable land in the city centre to Housing Development Board high-rise apartments in outlying areas (so-called “New Towns”) such as Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Clementi, and Woodlands. Whilst this redevelopment program was primarily aimed at serving the national interest (as well as feeding the insatiable appetites of multinational capital), it was also strategically framed as having environmental aspects. For example, what was referred to from 1967–1998 as Singapore’s “Garden City” program involved a raft of tree planting, anti-littering, and resettlement campaigns which, together, so extensively urbanized the city’s landscape that, as historian Goh Hong Yi reports, “Singaporean youths are [now] familiar with nature only in the form of manicured parks and gardens. They are thus ‘predisposed’ to accept the state-directed, utilitarian discourse that nature has to be sacrificed for economic development and human needs” (Goh, 2014, p. 246). As mentioned above, this is the developmental discourse that runs through the Singapore Story and is reinforced in the public sphere, appearing frequently on radio and television, and in print media. There is considerable irony in the

fact that Ah Meng, for so long the icon of conservation in Singapore, would become the responsibility of the state through an environmental drive that, despite its cosmetic successes, engendered indifference toward nature among younger Singaporeans. It also serves as one illustration among several possible others of the *unevenness* of the conservation agenda and its associated practices in Singapore.

The government of independent Singapore has historically been suspicious of conservation as a “Western” agenda, and there is merit in the critique that international conservation efforts can echo colonial conservation discourse (Goh, 2014, p. 273). In one notable instance, Singapore’s sluggishness at signing CITES, the treaty that regulates the wildlife trade, led to a U.S. ban on tropical fish imports from Singapore: a move swiftly condemned as “a serious encroachment of the sovereignty of the Singapore government” by an unnamed source in the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Jansen, 1986). The matter was resolved shortly after the signing of CITES, but the impression of a high-handed power acting in a colonial manner toward Singapore was widely disseminated in the media at the time (Goh, 2014, pp. 263–7).

As previously noted, Singapore had long been a hotspot for the trade in rare and “exotic” animals, and indeed this trade was constitutive of the city’s status as a colonial entrepôt. Accompanying this trade was a colonially inflected discourse of “civilizational” differences in the treatment of animals. Thus, while colonial newspapers blamed “Asians” for cruelty to animals, it was wealthy colonial officials who created the demand for rare ones (Tan, 2014, p. 153). Such attitudes must be factored into the international negotiations of the time, where Singaporeans felt with some justification that they were being unfairly targeted, but they also resonated more locally after formal decolonization. Consider, for example, a 1978 incident in which Ah Meng sustained a gash to her cheek at the hands of an unruly zoo visitor. This prompted outcry and soul-searching among newspaper columnists and letter-writers at the time, one of whom flatly blamed “flat-dwelling children” for finding “nature’s world totally alien and frightening” and thus causing the injury, and another of whom proposed the creation of animal farms to help local children sympathize with animals (“End this Circle of Suspicion,” 1978; “Start Animal Farms,” 1978). Whilst the condemnation of these individuals’ behavior was patronizing in tone, there was also some recognition of the structural forces driving these actions. The view was that rapid urbanization had had the knock-on effect of separating children from “nature,” with deleterious effects on their attitudes toward animals. For these denizens of a “grown-up,” forward-looking city, the cruel behavior of some of their fellow citizens was a source of collective embarrassment, and similar incidents in the future would need to be forestalled.

By this time, Ah Meng was already a star performer in the daily Animal Showtime at Singapore Zoo, and the injury meant she missed a few days of work. This particular show format no longer exists, but shows at the zoo and its affiliates (e.g., the Night Safari, River Safari, and Jurong Bird Park spectacles) continue to feature family-oriented animal performances. These tend to reinforce “public good” messages, as in the case of the *Rainforest Fights Back*, which promotes conservation and encourages recycling. Animal shows have a long history, of course, and the jury is out about the extent to which present-day performances are cruel; certainly, Singapore’s zoos are a good deal more thoughtful than the early twentieth-century incarnations that kick-started the animal performance phenomenon in the West (Cribb et al., 2014, pp. 185–195). As Cribb and colleagues (2014) argue, “most zoos continue to function primarily as entertainment ventures that graft research, education, and conservation onto a ‘recreational rootstock.’” (pp. 185–186). But whether we consider Singapore’s animal shows to be part of a larger conservation message, or whether we consider that message to be a small part of the performance, matters less than the fact that the two are parceled together, advancing a reputation for Singapore as a hub not for the animal trade, as in previous decades, but for regional and global conservation efforts in an increasingly interconnected world.

Meanwhile, Ah Meng’s behavior supplied a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of intrigue and speculation throughout her public life. She was regularly profiled in gossip-column style as well as seconded for the more serious task of “improving” Singaporeans’ behavior from the 1980s onwards in various dieting, anti-littering, and recycling campaigns. More unusually perhaps, she also became an object of scrutiny for her interior life. In one incident in 1982, just days after she had hit headlines for her participation in the new *Breakfast with an Orang Utan* show, Ah Meng refused to cooperate with filmmakers for a Tourist Board video, hiding up a tree for several days before finally falling out and breaking her arm. In a subsequent interview, zoo director Bernard Harrison admitted that his by-now famous orangutan had starred in multiple different adverts of late, and that these projects would now need to be monitored carefully. It was reported that she had been in heat, which had no doubt contributed to her discontent, but had also reacted badly to having her infant taken away and was clearly suffering from overwork at the hands of the numerous local companies and national government agencies that were eager to secure her services. Unlike many other representations of animals (Cribb et al., 2014, p. 195), the report in question ascribed meaning to her behavior as protest, suggesting a complex response to her conditions – the requirement to perform for people and cameras during challenging periods – and the pressures of celebrity itself.

It is important to recognize that celebrity for nonhuman animals operates differently to the way it does for humans. Appearances at events and newsworthy behavior may be textual insofar as they can be interpreted, but they are extra-lingual as the animal or animals concerned cannot effectively speak for themselves. Still, the unevenness that characterizes the world of celebrity for humans is also applicable to nonhuman animals. There is a dialectics of visibility and invisibility at play in the public work of iconic animals. There is space for precious few in the limelight, and there is anxiety to fill a void when a celebrity animal passes (Tay, 2016). As media-worthy as Ah Meng's story is – as confiscated pet turned conservation icon – her beginnings are by no means unique. In fact, the zoo took in many confiscated orangutans in the early 1970s, but there was only ever one *celebrity* orangutan.

The unevenness that is being implied here can also be seen as a microcosm of Singapore's policies and attitudes toward conservation. While nature is "rare and exciting" to generations of Singaporeans born after the 1980s, according to Goh (p. 252), it is largely in the custody of the city's regional neighbors, who must act responsibly to preserve it. But at the same time, Singapore is a global city and financial hub, caught in a competitive race to make the most of the region's natural resources. In an acerbic essay for the activist blog *Singapore Unbound*, local playwright and poet Alfian Sa'at comments that:

Considering Singapore's relationship to its Southeast Asian neighbours, which includes the following: the import of migrant labour to power its economic growth, the burning of forests in Indonesia for its investments in the palm oil industry, the purchase of sand from devastated coastlines in Cambodia for its construction industry, its positioning as a hub which results in brain drain from its neighbours, it is not difficult to see how the wealthy island-state has practically transformed into a modern-day imperial power.

ALFIAN, 2019, n.p.

The sometimes startling economic disparity between Singapore and its neighbors produces an uneven *ecological* relationship, as well as an unequal economic one. In accordance with the Singapore Story, the "pragmatic" government of Singapore has historically been invested in development drives and facilitating profit maximization; consequently, conservation within the country has, until relatively recently, been the object of suspicion as a potential burden on capital growth (Goh, 2014). More recently, Singapore's conservationist narrative has been modeled in such a way as to illustrate to the world that it has conservation credentials and is a responsible global city. This story

is similarly uneven. It is conservation that has encouraged recycling and discouraged littering. But it is also conservation that has been responsible for the urbanization and commercialization of local ecologies, that has created manicured parks, and that has featured a rescued illegal pet from a demolished *kampung* as a celebrity icon while effectively sidelining the life stories of other, perhaps less photogenic and obedient, rescued orangutans. As a mode of conservation, this sits uncomfortably with the profit-extracting drive that underpins Singapore's status as a competitive global city and, as a result, it displaces the material constraints of the conservation agenda onto Singapore's neighbors. The hypervisibility of Ah Meng attracts attention away from such structural considerations, using the distorting mechanisms of celebrity to screen the broader implications of both her and Singapore's entangled lives.

The Queen is Dead, Long Live the Queen!

In February 2016, some eight years after Ah Meng's passing, the "new Ah Meng" was officially crowned. The media fanfare surrounding the coronation of Ishta, Ah Meng's four-year-old granddaughter and "the new face of Singapore Zoo" (Tay, 2016, n.p.), may not have been as shrill as that surrounding the original Ah Meng, but it was still more than enough to confirm the status of the zoo's latest ambassador animal and conservation icon – its latest animal celebrity, suitably equipped with the "repeatable uniqueness" that attends celebrity figures, human or animal, worldwide (Huggan, 2013, p. 4). The "new Ah Meng" – or so the official zoo story goes – was handpicked from Ah Meng's six living descendants for her friendly personality as well as her striking resemblance to the late great matriarch, and she was immediately pressed into service, flagging off the Annual Zoo Safari Run that had previously been set up in her grandmother's honor as her first official task. Not all Singaporeans were convinced by this less-than-subtle media stunt, although Ishta and her orangutan companions remain one of the zoo's favourite attractions, while the name "Ah Meng," ostensibly preserved as a respectful legacy, has retained much of its original commercial cachet.

It seems worth pausing here one last time to consider the fate of the celebrity animal, whose fame, like that of many of her human counterparts, lives on after death, not just in the myriad stories that are told about her, but in the equally wide range of would-be replicas and replacements – both material and symbolic – that crowd in to take her place. Samuel J. M. M. Alberti's supple concept of "animal afterlives" comes to mind here, but with several important differences. For Alberti, "biological death is only one moment, one narrative

hinge of many (admittedly a particularly resonant one) in the life/afterlife of [a remembered] animal” (Alberti, 2011, p. 6). The “life/afterlife” splice suggests that life continues after death, whether in a literal, physical sense – as material remains – or in the accumulated representations that both carry and consecrate the animal’s original name. Alberti is surely right that animal afterlives consist of multiple “survivals” through which the stories of deceased animals continue to be told and their identities, far from being preserved, come to take on a range of new meanings that push well beyond the boundaries of their original lives (Alberti, 2011, p. 7). However, his related point that these survivals reconfirm the *individuality* of the animals concerned seems more questionable. For Alberti, the very fact that animals’ stories can be told – that they are *bona fide* biographical subjects – may help render individual animal lives potentially as meaningful as those of individual humans. As we have seen, this insight is backed up in the relatively new but rapidly expanding field of animal biography, which allows not just for the recording of “the exceptional lives of unusual animals,” but for a full-fledged account of their individuality that is more than just a projected reconstruction of their feelings or a by definition impossible reading of their minds (Krebber & Roscher, 2018, p. 2). The operative words here are “exceptional” and “unusual.” Animal biographies, for all their egalitarian aims, often focus on the stories of famous or iconic animals: animals whose fame is the product of the media machinery that surrounds them and, above all, a function of their attributed names (Alberti, 2011, p. 9). These names, which survive them long after their death, may be markers of individuality in one sense, but they are also paradoxically *de-individualized*: indeed, one important index of animal afterlives is the capacity of *other* animals to take on the celebrity name (Huggan, 2018, p. 60).

Returning now to Ah Meng, it’s clear that it is the name that is the guarantor of her (and her successor’s) survival. It is the name that has granted her life after death in the shape of the celebrity “sequel” or replacement. It is the name, ironically, that has rendered her nameless by vouchsafing her status as an essentially interchangeable commodity, circulating in the regional and global markets for which modern-day Singapore acts as a powerful, and powerfully self-promoting, hub. Finally, it is the name that has helped consecrate her as a latter-day savior figure, perpetuating the Singapore success story by associating it with the campaign to save a much-loved animal species from extinction – to grant it another lease of life. As we have tried to show in the short space of this essay, the gospel of Ah Meng (the birth, the death, the resurrection) is at heart a “good news” story, but it is also one that resonates with the contradictions of capital, celebrity, and conservation in the context of endangered animals’ lives. As Dan Brockington (2009) remarks at the end of *Celebrity*

and the Environment, there seems little point in attempting to uncouple celebrity from conservation, or to wish away the profound effects that an unevenly developed global capitalist system has on the protection of endangered wildlife. “The challenge facing the conservation establishment,” he suggests, is how to “institutionalize critiques of its celebrity-ridden practices so that it does not allow the commodified and iconified relationships they entail do violence to the ecosystems and societies [that] conservation is trying to serve” (p. 150). It is our hope that, in its own small way, this essay has contributed to that critique, reminding us that the conservation business has several other ends than the attempt, however well intentioned, to “save” the world’s wildlife. It is humans of course who are generally thought of as “nature’s saviors,” although the concept of animal rescue is often closely tied in with human redemption of some kind (Huggan, 2013, p. 7). As always with salvation discourses, it is the basic questions that need to be asked: who is saving what, from whom, and for what reasons? These questions continue to reverberate across the multiple lives/afterlives of Ah Meng, generating new meanings for the past, present, and future of the forward-looking global city that sees itself as having saved her: Singapore.

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