

Under the billiard table: Animality, anecdote and the tiger's subversive significance at the Raffles Hotel

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At the turn of the twentieth century, when tigers were already becoming extinct in Singapore, a living specimen was discovered under the Billiard Room of the Raffles Hotel. This paper attempts to discuss the significance of the tiger in relation to an architectural space – the Billiard Room of a Southeast Asian colonial hotel – by examining how its anecdotal forms – as propaganda, fact, myth and satire – have influenced perceptions of this space across different milieu. It argues that the tiger anecdote, while ontologically remote from the physical materiality of that building, has inevitably become inseparable from its architectural epistemology. Under these terms, it is impossible to talk about the architecture of the Billiard Room without incurring discussion about the factual, fictional and propagandistic aspects of the animal anecdote. As a subtext to these narratives, the location of the hotel in a tropical clime is key. Amidst the civil calm of the genteel Billiard Room, it is the tiger, which ably performs, or re-enacts, the risk of the tropics. Yet, what is unusual about this tiger is that a reading of its anecdotal forms ultimately transgresses the stereotypes associated with colonialism, indigenous culture, tropical living and wildlife, and subsequently, these too affect interpretations of the architectural space. Drawing on original archival and historical material, the paper contributes to a theoretical and historical understanding of why the tiger under the Billiard Room at the Raffles' continues to be a spatially compelling idea.

Keywords: anecdote, animality, billiard room, Raffles Hotel, storytelling, tiger

Was there really a tiger under the billiard table?

The visitor to Malaya in search of sport, whose time is limited, has very little chance of obtaining a tiger except by some lucky accident (Banks, 1924: 29).

There are two billiard tables in the middle of a room (Figure 1). Though rarely used, the tables are scrupulously maintained and occupy a significant position within a building which today functions as a restaurant and bar known as the 'Bar and Billiard Room' – or simply the Billiard Room – at the famed Raffles Hotel, fronting Beach Road in Singapore. Architecturally, the Billiard Room is an unassuming, low-lying, single-storey building with a deeply pitched roof, large windows, and an airy veranda that is further defined by a row of white pilasters encircling its entire perimeter. Slightly raised off the ground, its typology is consistent with the Anglo-Indian architectural tradition, popularized during British colonial rule in late nineteenth-century Singapore. Yet, more beguiling than its architectural lineage is how this space is persistently introduced to the public, for it is alleged that a tiger was once found, and shot, under one of its billiard tables.

In the present-day hotel's private museum, a series of framed archival newspaper articles together with historical as well as more recent cartoons recount in some detail how wild animals besieged the esteemed premises. The most famous incident allegedly took place in August 1902 when a tiger, escaping from a native circus act stationed near the Beach Road reclamation site, took refuge in the undercroft space of the Billiard



Figure 1. *The famed billiard table at the Raffles Hotel, Singapore (author's photograph, December 2009).*

Room. The beast was spotted by one of the hotel's 'bar boys', 'staring through the low veranda railing on the hotel side of the Billiard Room' (*The Straits Times*, 1902a). In no time, Mr C.M. Phillips, the head teacher from the Raffles Institution, one of Singapore's leading boys' school located near the hotel, was summoned to the scene from his slumber. He had been to a fancy dress ball the night before at Government House and was still nursing his hangover when he was called to the emergency. Dressed in his pyjamas, the head teacher proved to be a poor marksman as he aimed, fired and missed

the tiger several times, hitting the brick pillars of the building instead. After he finally managed to kill the beast, the tiger's body was dragged out from under the Billiard Room by nervous bystanders.

There were photographs of neither the ill-fated tiger nor of the uncoordinated head teacher. There was also no taxidermic specimen of the prize trophy. All that remains of this historical incident is a newspaper report featured in a local leading broadsheet, *The Straits Times* (1902a), which offers a blow-by-blow account of this 'hunt'. The ambivalent report, titled 'Shot at Raffles Hotel – under the Billiard Room', gives the impression that the reporter and the hotel crowd were not impressed by Philips's forlorn performance. Instead, sympathies resided with the majestic beast, fondly nicknamed 'Stripes', which was admired for his enviable length of 'tip to tip 7 feet 8 inches, and 5 feet 4 inches in height', and rather than being a menace was reportedly terrified of the crowd before being rudely shot.

Despite Mr Philips's dismal performance at the hotel, game hunting was generally fashionable in Singapore at the turn of the twentieth century. For instance, in Charles Burton Buckley's *Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (1984: 566, 622, 709–10), a key historical chronicle recording Singapore's early social and cultural history, tiger stories are liberally sprinkled throughout the book. Yet, even as the animal was seen as lucrative bounty (large rewards were offered to those who successfully slew a tiger), and persisted as a threat in the expanding business of plantations, the tiger was also a potent figure in Southeast Asian mythical cultures, believed to be a creature which straddled the dual boundaries of the human and animal worlds.

Today, tiger lore still thrives in the hotel. In its shop, there are cuddly tigers, tiger print t-shirts and tiger posters on sale. The Billiard Room continues to honour the game by keeping two tables, one marked as an 'original' dating back to the time of Stripes' visit. A tiger-themed billiard exhibition match was hosted here in the 1980s. At the bar, guests drink out of mugs emblazoned with a tiger motif and are given keepsake matchboxes which feature an image of a tiger and a question that begs curiosity: 'Was there really a tiger under the billiard table?' (Figure 2) The tiger story has also inspired a series of contemporary cartoons and two illustrated children's stories – Kathy Creamer's (1996) *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* and Kelly Choppard's (1996) *Terry's Raffles*

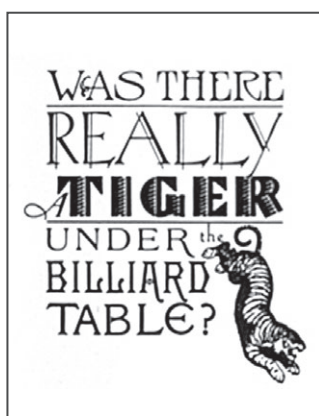


Figure 2. Souvenir matchbox issued to guests at the Raffles' Hotel Bar and Billiard Room: the persistent use of the tiger episode as a conversation piece and its significance as popular history associated with the Billiard Room competes with the 'official' architectural history of the space (author's photograph).

Adventures. During the hotel's centenary celebrations in 1986, a white female Bengal tiger from a visiting circus act was roped in by the hotel's manager Roberto Pregarz, who dressed himself up as a colonial hunter to re-enact the primal scene from a hundred years before (*The Straits Times*, 1986). Stories about the tiger getting shot became so widespread that the whereabouts of the beast shifted from under the Billiard Room to under the billiard *table*, a point which I shall elaborate in some detail later on. Given that the Billiard Room was operational between 1896 and 1917, then only reinstalled in 1989, the circulation of these and other remarkable stories in the intervening 70 years when this space was physically nonexistent means that during this interim period the Billiard Room effectively existed as an accessory to its tiger stories.

While these episodes may be read as part of the hotel's aggressive commercial propaganda, their effectiveness is fuelled by the continued existence of the Billiard Room and its table, which act as physical anchors for the controversial bodies – the tiger's and the white colonial male's – that are no longer there. Indeed, the aura behind such a space implies a masculine presence, not inconsistent with the influence of colonial patriarchal power during the Billiard Room's heyday in the early 1900s. Billiards was a popular game in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, which coincided with the period when the Billiard Room was fully operational (1890–1917). When Tigran Sarkies, the founder of Raffles Hotel, took over the property formerly called Beach House in 1887, the popularity of this gentleman's game must have made an urgent impression on the hotelier as he commissioned Regent Alfred Bidwell, the hotel's architect, to design and construct a purpose-built billiard room.¹

Bidwell's original building was ready in 1896 and featured a raised structure on brick pillars to ensure a level floor for the game (Figure 3). By 1906, the popularity of this first



Figure 3. An advertisement, c. 1902 for the Raffles Hotel on Beach Road, Singapore showing the Billiard Room at extreme left, after the 1896 renovations (Liu, 1992: frontispiece; image used courtesy of the Raffles Hotel Collection).

Billiard Room necessitated a larger accommodation, not only because of the increasing interest in the game but also because it became known as the place where one of the last tiger shootings in Singapore was witnessed (*The Straits Times*, 1906). The new addition, by architects Tomlinson and Lemit, was modelled after the Anglo-Indian detached bungalow, and the undercroft space where the escaped tiger hid in 1902 was eventually sealed off. By 1917, demand for rooms overwhelmed even the popularity of the game and the Billiard Room was converted into guest suites. It was only during the major restoration of 1989 that a decision was taken to reinstate the Billiard Room as a key space in the newly appointed national monument.

The billiard room as a male domain in mid-nineteenth-century expatriate life in Singapore is chronicled by John Cameron (1965: 303), the editor for *The Straits Times*, who noted that billiard rooms were frequently attached to respectable residences and served as ‘sanctuaries’ for the host and his male friends to relax after dinner, over a cigar and a glass of sherry. Billiard rooms were also points where the expatriate male community would congregate while overseas, typically in clubs, an institution where ‘the consolidation of bonds between public men [was accomplished] through the physical and ideological exclusion of women’ (Rendell, 2002: 63). It is likely that the Raffles Hotel doubled up as a club of sorts to the expatriate British community (Sharp, 1981: 38–41, 96–115), given that in 1911 male residents in Singapore outnumbered women residents by eight to one, and the majority of those staying at the hotel were bachelors (Liu, 2006: 46). Its Billiard Room served as the social centre, bringing together a community of British colonial servants, army officers, tin miners, planters, businessmen, hunters and explorers, who came from different social, political, economic and cultural background interests, but with a usually shared ideological perception of the white male’s dominance in instilling order in outposts often deemed impoverished until the onset of colonial rule (Sharp, 1981: 38–44; Liu, 2006: 46–50).

In his novel *Burmese Days*, George Orwell (1986: 17) describes a club in a colonial outpost:

Inside, The Club was a teak-walled place smelling of earth-oil, and consisting of only four or five rooms, one of which contained a forlorn ‘library’ of five hundred mildewed novels, and another an old and mangy billiard table – this, however, seldom used, for during most of the year hordes of flying beetles came buzzing around the lamps and littered themselves all over the cloth.

Orwell’s account highlights a less flattering image of the billiard room, which far from being a stable masculine sanctuary was conversely threatened by the animality of the tropical world. The depiction here is striking in that although the billiard room was fundamental to club life, it was also a decrepit space, furnished with a ‘mangy’ table covered by ‘flying beetles’ and ‘seldom used’. This desperate atmosphere easily correlates with the situation of British colonial men in Singapore who congregated at the billiard rooms without their wives (since wives were often left at home in England) not to reinforce a self-image of privilege and leisure (the stereotyped English country gentleman) but simply because they had nowhere else to go. In this sense, billiard rooms in the colonies held a very different meaning from those located in the metropole, the former desiring but failing to replicate the stability and status enjoyed by the latter. The billiard room in Orwell’s colonial club and the one at the Raffles Hotel are ultimately liminal spaces, ostensibly representing a male domain but simultaneously undermined by tropical animality. Hence, it is not coincidental that the tiger story’s anti-heroic, topsy-turvy and unpredictable nature subverts, displaces and destabilizes the masculine foundations of its Billiard Room.

Natural history and local myth

It is not surprising that in the presence of animals in general (metaphorical, mythical, or otherwise), we are forced to consider the mechanisms of control, and simultaneously, waywardness, and thus to consider morality, rationality, order, civilization, cities, and architecture (Ingraham, 1998: 80).

Panthera tigris has haunted the Singapore psyche long before the 1902 incident at the Raffles' Billiard Room. In fact, the persistent return of the tiger, a species that has existed in the Riau-Lingga archipelago, which includes this island since its geological beginnings a million years ago, indicates traces of unresolved conflict between humans and beast, colonial and native, culture and nature, the natural and the supernatural, fact and myth. The tiger has accumulated a contradictory reputation. It is simultaneously seen as 'treacherous and the source of death and fear' (Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* cited in Wessing, 1986: 7) as much as it is lauded for its stunning beauty, 'with his velvety step and undulating movements, the firm muscles working beneath his loose glossy skin, and the cruel yellow eyes blinking under the sun over a row of ivory teeth' (Armand Denis's *Cats of the World* cited in Wessing, 1986: 8). The tiger in the Billiard Room marks the repetition of a primal repressed scene, one which needs to be taken apart in the local context in order to understand its political significance.

In the colonial tropics, the perceived threat of the beast was strategically symbolic since it was commonplace for colonial governments to assert their supremacy over territory that was deemed 'dangerously animal, wild and unfree' (Chua, 2007: 138). According to historical accounts, the tiger menace in Singapore (and contiguous southern Johor) escalated in the 1840s after large tracts of forests were cleared to make way for lucrative black pepper and gambier (used in tanning) plantations, which formed almost 75 per cent of Singapore's cultivated area in 1851. Buckley (1984: 389) records that the majority of bourgeois colonial occupants supported a more liberalized land leasing system under the hand of Chinese planters as this would simultaneously modernize 'the jungle and marsh' as well as encourage the island to grow as 'a highly productive settlement' in economic terms. However, enthusiastic efforts to clear the interior reaches inevitably destroyed the tiger's natural habitat. The rise in importance of such economic crops coincided uncannily with the increased threat of tigers on the island. Taming the 'tiger-infested' jungle, a description synonymous with sparsely occupied and risky areas outside the city limits, was one way of keeping the beast at bay and expanding the island's productive boundaries. One could speculate that the tiger's appearance in the city was a calculated attempt by the colonial government to justify impending land clearances.

Subsequent to the colonizing of arable land, livestock and plantation workers became prey to tigers. The exact number of casualties remained unverified, being often recklessly over-inflated to illustrate the risk of the oriental natural world through western perception, or guardedly underreported by plantation owners cautious about scaring off the local Chinese workforce (Boomgaard, 2001: 5). For example, mid-nineteenth century colonial accounts reported that '365 men per annum have their lives dashed out by the crushing stroke of the tiger's paw' (Cameron, 1965: 91), and further in support of this estimate, that 'five men in eight days, as early as 1840 . . . was not improbable' (Buckley, 1984: 220–21). Indeed, apart from India, 'there are no historic records of any country suffering a mortality from man-eaters comparable to that experienced for so long and so widely' in Singapore (Perry, 1964: 190). At the same time, rewards to trap and kill tigers were sponsored by the colonial government. These handsome bounties, which fluctuated in value between 100 Straits dollars (in the 1840s and 1860s, the price being

for a tiger either captured dead or alive) and 50 Straits dollars (in the 1850s), successfully lured both local and European game hunters (Boomgaard, 2001: 103).²

Beyond historical statistics, the wild beast and the threat or promise posed by such animality is an especially enigmatic part of Singapore's (still contentious) founding story. In the popularized version of the *Malay Annals*, a compilation of oral narratives of archipelago Malay history, a Sumatran prince, Sang Nila Utama (also titled Sri Tri Buana), arrived at an island called Temasek (the ancient name for Singapore) in the thirteenth century and spotted an ungainly beast:

And they all beheld a strange animal. It seemed to move with great speed; it had a red body and a black head; its breast was white; it was strong and active in build, and in size was rather bigger than a he-goat. When it saw the party, it moved away and then it disappeared. And Sri Tri Buana inquired of all those who were with him, 'What beast is that?' But no one knew. Then said Demang Lebar Daun, 'Your Highness, I have heard it said that in ancient times it was a lion that had that appearance. I think that what we saw must have been a lion (Ho, 2007: 150, citing C.C. Brown's translation).

Sang Nila Utama thus established his kingdom *Singa Pura* (Sanskrit for 'Lion City') possibly based on what he had witnessed. But as the Asian lion has not been known to exist east of India, it would be more likely for the Sumatran prince and his entourage to have encountered a tiger. Here, faced with the wild beast for the first time and 'working on the flimsiest of heresay' (Ho, 2007: 151), Sang Nila Utama's aide Demang Lebar Daun declares it as the revered lion or *singa*, henceforth putting the unknown animal in 'allegorical disguise for the establishment of Singahasana or "lion throne"' symbolizing Malay royalty (Ho, 2007: 151). Following this popular myth, it is significant that this city was established not only on the uncertain sighting of a beast, but also that its foundations may have been laid based on a fictional identification of this animal, two points which lend comparisons with the founding moment of the billiard room at the Raffles in the wake of its own animal encounter and the early stories.

In the Southeast Asian context, the tiger is believed to be an animal endowed with supernatural powers:

To the inhabitants of the Malay world, tigers were not merely animals to be trapped and hunted. Tigers are protagonists in many myths, legends, fairy tales, and fables. They can be found in the *wayang*, the Javanese and Balinese shadow theatre, as well as in other popular performances. They are encountered in paintings, carvings and sculptures (Boomgaard, 2001: 6).

Hence, prior to the nineteenth century, Southeast Asian cultures, particularly those of Java, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, loathed slaying tigers. These cultures understood that the tiger held in check crop-damaging and foraging animals such as the wild boar but, more significantly, they had superstitious beliefs about the tiger's relationship to humans. Tigers were believed to be an embodiment of one's ancestors and could provide protection to humans; they were said to be 'receptacles for the souls of departed human beings' (Thomas John Newbold, 1839 cited in Chua 2007: 135), and thus, stood at the boundary 'between human and animal, and between the living and the dead' (Chua, 2007: 135). It was also believed that the tiger had shamanic powers and – through a process of *jadi jadian* (the changing of form) – morph into human by day, and back into beast by night (Boomgaard, 2001: 187). These shape-shifting creatures were known as 'weretigers'.³ Thus, tigers 'as a mythic reality, played a powerful role in boundary maintenance. They were transitional creatures, spiritual in-betweens who

variously cautioned, cajoled and assisted humans in relating to the life-world' (Chua, 2007: 138). And significantly, as historians Peter Boomgaard, Robert Wessing and Kevin Chua all argue, the tiger did not come into existence apart from, or outside of, human civilization but more as a consequence of humanity, 'not [a] distant beast of nature, [it is] instead [a] permanent spectral embodiment of urban civilization, conjured up by and for us' (Chua, 2007: 136). This point reinforces the tiger's risky cultural and political roles, and its need to be 'tamed' in deference to colonial territorialization.

Thus, it is unsurprising that there is an enduring relationship between the animal narrative and the founding of space in this regional context. However, the animal narrative also establishes spatial and political boundaries (an empire, or an urbane city) through a 'logic of ambiguity', that is, through both sanctioned storylines as well as versions which misrepresent the story's content. In this way, the tiger stories create what Michel de Certeau (1988: 124–29) calls 'a frontier'. Referring to a third element or a space in-between, this frontier bridges what constitutes status quo spatial knowledge (e.g. learnt through architectural history determined by planners and architects, or legislated according to construction and planning laws) with what we viscerally experience, see and understand. The latter category usually exists as fragmented, particularized and polyvalent sets of knowledge which are not easily co-opted into 'authorizing references'.

At the Billiard Room, the tiger story sets up a similar frontier. Knowledge of the Billiard Room is not only assimilated through its architectural history, the intentions of its architect, or the colonial significance of this space as a male domain. Instead, the Billiard Room is also popularly known through and embodied by the tiger and variant stories encircling this animal. In this sense, the tiger stories set up different frontiers of knowledge that filter, mediate and transform the predetermined history of this room. I suggest that these stories potentially challenge conventional wisdom about this space, altering its contours from that of austere masculinity to a critical frontier marked by tropical excess and ambiguity.

Telling the tale from under the table

Heaven help the writer, who seeking tiger tales, depends on what these gossips tell him . . . What actually happens in the tiger world is strange enough without the embellishments of imaginative natives (Buck, 1932: 203).

In one of his many memoirs recalling past adventures in Singapore, wild life expert, hunter, actor, circus performer, world traveller and wild animal purveyor Frank Buck – an American who maintained a Singapore compound with the largest private collection of live animals in one place, and a frequent patron of the Raffles Hotel during the interwar years – tells how the hotel's tiger story was so popular that different variations kept cropping up.

Grounding his own reports on the factual solidity of the architectural space, Buck (1932: 203) reiterates, 'There is no questioning that a tiger was found in the old billiard room at the Raffles Hotel', and adds that, 'it would have been a simple matter for a tiger . . . to stray into the Raffles billiard room, which was then a big open space, with no doors or windows, on the ground floor'. Buck (1932: 203) then cites three different accounts of this story, which I reproduce here in verbatim:

One of the stories they tell you with a straight face is that the Chinese boy who came to clean up the room at six in the morning had found the tiger asleep on a billiard table and had

prodded it with a cue. I thought that the native waiter who told me this story was joshing, and my response to it was a hearty laugh. I soon saw I had offended him and pretended to believe the story. [C]an you imagine anyone crazy enough to jab a tiger with a billiard cue? [A]nother version (the story of one of those eye-witnesses, who, it later developed, wasn't even in Singapore at the time) is to the effect that the tiger, in his rush to get out of the room, knocked over the Chinese boy and made a dash for the kitchen. There, so the yarn goes, the animal helped himself to half of the beef which he dragged out on the porch, where he parked himself and ate his meal . . .

Mr Aratoon, the manager of the hotel, with whom I discussed this Singapore legend, offers the only sensible explanation. Unquestionably, he tells me, a tiger had entered the billiard room. Three reliable people had seen the animal make its escape. The big cat, he believes, reached the island shortly before dawn. Bewildered by its surroundings, it had dashed from street to street in an effort to find a way out. Seeing the open space on the ground floor of the hotel, it had entered, hoping that perhaps this would lead to open country. [W]hen the boy entered to clean the room, the animal was probably pacing up and down wondering what to do next. Seeing the boy, the beast's first thought would be to escape doubtless then it made its dash to safety.

In his account, Buck begins with what he takes to be the immutable facts of the Billiard Room – a simple open space on the ground floor, which momentarily housed the tiger. But in the first story which Buck tells us, the tiger is no longer 'factually' placed under the Billiard Room as documented in the 1902 newspaper report, but found *inside* the room itself, on the billiard table. In the second story, the tiger is relocated to the kitchen, before landing up on the hotel porch. The structure of the old Billiard Room is confirmed in architectural drawings and in the first newspaper report, as a standalone pavilion-type building, raised on brick pillars. Thus, it is difficult to imagine how the tiger could have rushed into what is essentially a space raised off the ground, mistaking a roofed structure for 'open country'.

Even as he admonishes the fabrication of stories, Buck is himself indulgent. He anticipates the 'beast's first thought', tells his readers what the tiger would have experienced and projects how it would have acted. Strikingly in Buck's versions, the tiger appears not to have been shot, nor is there mention of Mr Philips' involvement.

In these accounts, the tiger stories ground the experiential foundation of the Billiard Room. Yet, these stories tend to be embellished. They tend to change according to the time of telling, and fluctuate in relation to the audience and the storyteller. The story is always anecdotal, which makes it immediately problematic to structures that require certainty and fixity, such as scripted history. The anecdote, as architectural historian Barbara Penner (2005) points out, is regarded with suspicion and often alienated in academic discourse. Dictionary definitions link the anecdote to 'a tendency to tell too many stories', and oppose it to 'corroborated evidence or proof' (Allen, 2001: 48). Nevertheless, the founding moment of the Billiard Room as a space in the public's imagination is implacably structured on the anecdotal, as the *The Straits Times* (1902a) report awkwardly prefaces, 'A tiger was shot under the Billiard Room of the Raffles Hotel early this morning. Lest any one be inclined to *doubt the veracity* of this foregoing statement' (emphases added). But even more importantly, the power of the story is its degree of emancipation. The storyteller internalizes the story, either from first-hand experience or through another's telling, and in retelling it anew, explores and constructs 'the rhythm of the work (that) has seized her' (Benjamin, 1999: 91). The audience also becomes instrumental to the construction of the story as the teller surrenders the narrative to them, 'It is left up to him to interpret the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks' (Benjamin, 1999: 87).

At the Billiard Room, the animal story transforms how one perceives this space. The tiger was originally reported to have hid in the underbelly of this space, but later mistakenly believed to have strayed under one of its billiard tables. While conventional architectural meanings linked to billiard rooms are based on enforced patriarchal hierarchies, in the Raffles' Billiard Room, the anecdote exposes the space to factual irregularities, excessive speculation and subjective claims. It is significantly entered from the 'lower' edges – from under the floorboards, between an animal's hind legs, framed by a pair of pyjamas, and surrounded by a cowering group of male hotel boarders, who reputedly lacked the courage to pull out the dead tiger's body from under the building after it was shot.

Also, rampant word-of-mouth fuelled by intense public curiosity about the incident coupled with the physical porosity of the Billiard Room were reasons enough for the tiger's whereabouts to be severely distorted. Like the stories told by Buck, erroneous reports began to circulate about the tiger being spotted under the billiard table. Notably, a later newspaper account from the *The Straits Times* (1902b) published a while after the first and only tiger sighting at the hotel similarly misreported that in 'the recent tiger incident . . . one of these "terrors of the jungle" was shot beneath one of the billiard tables at the Raffles Hotel'. These reports were all the more confusing given that some of them emanated from the hotel itself. For example, the hotel's cultural historian Raymond Flower (1986: 20) wrote in its 1986 centenary commemorative volume that the head teacher Philips saw the tiger under the billiard table, 'and fired three rapid shots, only to demolish one of the legs, and to bring down the table with a crash'. On another occasion, also in 1986, Pregarz (1990: 42–47), the hotel's manager, placed a rented circus tiger (brought in to celebrate the lunar 'year of the tiger') on top of the billiard table, thus embellishing the mistake made by Flower and further confounding the puzzle of where the tiger hid. The aim of reiterating these different anecdotes is not to locate an 'authentic' version of events but rather to explore how the event was amplified and repeatedly misrepresented.

Today, in the absence of the undercroft space where the tiger was shot, the billiard table itself restructures the architectural experience of the Billiard Room. With the disappearance of the building's undercroft space following renovations undertaken in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the billiard table began to assume the status of the imaginative object onto which the animal anecdote hinges. Significantly, the technical specifications for a billiard table reiterate the importance of its uprightness, solidity, firmness, elegant design and the smoothness of its surface to ensure the precision, speed and accuracy of the game (Captain Crawley, 1866: 12; Gillett, 1996: 5–6). It is striking that there is a resemblance between the qualities of a reputable billiard table and the Vitruvian principles of architecture, the latter similarly exalting beauty, commodity, uprightness, firmness and strength as architectural virtues. Another important meaning of the word 'table' is 'tabula', that is, a ground, or a foundation. Thus, the awkward perspective produced from under the table requires a conceptual recasting of the 'table' as an alternative 'foundation' for reconfiguring the architectural space of the Billiard Room.

To look under the table, in other words, is to look in the 'wrong' place. Yet, the view from under the table may offer a different understanding as opposed to knowledge gleaned from a legitimized architectural style, history or meanings associated with this building type. Metaphorically, a perspective of the room from 'under the table' implies an upside down view. It reflects a child's perspective, which may explain why the animal story survives most vividly today as part of a collection of

children's stories. It challenges what is upright, normal and orderly. Something that is 'under the table' can also be something that is ultimately hidden or repressed, and to turn the tables on someone or something suggests a subversive reversal of positions. This conceptual recasting is manifested in the grotesque presence of the animal.

Animality and grotesque architecture

In the humid tropics buildings are susceptible to the forces of nature, corrupted eventually by damp and wood rot, for example. As architecture, matter and time are evanescent, so too is history especially in its oral forms – it becomes more fluid, more story-like, and more susceptible to hearsay and erratic narration. Anchored by stories woven around, and under, the billiard table, the formation of its architectural knowledge shifts from the customary emphasis on immutable and controlled facts, be they about architectural style, history or masculine meanings associated with the Billiard Room, towards the unregulated potentials of the animal anecdote which is transmitted and received by different groups of people who encounter this space.

The ill-fated tiger in the Billiard Room is manifested as a sensual, feminine and grotesque body overlaid on a heterosexual, masculine, colonial stomping ground. The grotesque body, according to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986: 23), is marked by:

impurity (both in the sense of dirt and mixed categories), heterogeneity, masking, protuberant distension, disproportion, exorbitancy, clamour, decentred or eccentric arrangements, a focus on gaps, orifices or symbolic filth (what Mary Douglas calls 'matter out of place'), physical needs and pleasures of the 'lower bodily stratum', materiality and parody.

This body operates by inversion, that is, by turning something inside out, or upside down. Thus, the tiger anecdote effectively produces the Billiard Room's 'new' architectural body from bottom up as it were: The hunter could not see into the dark of the undercroft and so was forced to go down on all fours. This unusual posture robbed him of accuracy given by upright vision, and thus, he surrendered to his gut instinct. In his 'overturned' condition, he shot wildly and erratically. The space drawn out from this encounter is not one commandeered from an authoritative one-point perspective, a vantage point customary for a standard architectural account. Instead, we are given a fragmented, animalistic, out of control and lowly view – a simulation of a quadruped's perspective, or an unknowing child's perception of the world. This concept aligns with the distorted tiger lore, which displaces the animal from the undercroft of the building to under one of its tables. It articulates a similar inversion, by shifting the experiential construction of this space from architect-centred to storyteller-invented.

What I find compelling is how the tiger story destabilizes the Billiard Room as an eccentric space by punctuating the account with 'orifices' – irregularities, misinterpretation and individual embellishment – all of which work hard to disrupt its scripted role in normative architectural history accounts. The tiger, a trope that represents the untamed jungle, is also a tropical symbol par excellence. Overlaid onto the Billiard Room, this tiger presses forward the incommensurable differences between the monumentality of empire and the unruliness of the tropical world and its denizens. 'Architecture', as architectural theorist Catherine Ingraham (1998: 54) argues, is conversely the instrument of empire since it acts to control that which it confines:

Architecture is, in some sense that which acts in opposition to the animate. It is the embodied principle of the inert. It would be interesting to say that architecture negotiates the divide

between the animate and inanimate, but I think a more accurate description is that architecture controls or attempts to control this divide in order to maintain the propriety, the seamlessness, of the body in space.

Thus, just as architecture may be associated with progress and empire, the question of animality is linked to empire's 'other'. Drawing on Levi-Strauss's observation in *Tristes Tropiques* that '"architecture" seems to arrive in cultural history at the same time as the idea of "empire"' and empires are significantly 'created through a massive infusion of political and hegemonic force into the material world' (cited in Ingraham, 2006: 237), Ingraham emphasizes that 'architecture is routinely used as one of the symbolic markers of this empirical dominance, since it can concentrate material wealth, natural energy, and political process into one act, one site'.

The 'uprightness' of architecture is key to such symbolism, alluding not only to 'structural and morphological analogy but also architectural associations with civic appropriateness and human propriety' (Ingraham, 2006: 238). In other words, colonial architecture's uprightness is both structural and metaphorical – its claims to be evidentiary and empirical, thus also serving as 'the model for and about reality', is predicated on a clear separation between the colonizer (who is here credited with the active production of 'architecture') and the colonized (who is assumed to have passively inhabited this space). Animality is conceptually regarded as 'atavistic' and 'primitive', the 'other' to civilization, and thus completely opposed to the empirical ideals of architecture, which in this case is equated with the colonial era hotel's Billiard Room.⁴ David Quammen (2003: 253) further reminds us that colonization is not just the conquest of land and the disciplining of its subjects but entails a weeding out of its archaic superstitions and their accompanying 'monsters', 'You haven't conquered a people, and their place until you've exterminated their monsters'. As such, there is more at stake in the Billiard Room's tiger than its amusing tale.

Encountering the Billiard Room through its tiger anecdote

The tiger anecdote is a subversive instrument, antithetical to the aspirations of colonization and its monument, even when it appears in its most benign form, as a children's story. In the late 1990s, following major restoration work at Raffles, the Billiard Room featured as an architectural centrepiece for two works of children's fiction – Creamer's *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, and Choppard's *Terry's Raffles Adventures*. In these accounts, the notion of the grotesque body is replayed through the recurrence and recasting of the animal story whose 'invitation to pleasure is invariably an invitation to subversive pleasure' (Baker, 1993: 159). They perform the historical scenes within the Billiard Room using humour and caricature to parody the overblown sense of self-importance and power invested in particular colonial identities. As cultural theorist Steve Baker (1993: 123–24) and feminist writer Ursula Le Guin (1990: 10) underscore, to identify with the animal is ultimately to consort with an inexplicable 'other' – specifically with 'women, children and animals'.⁵ The Billiard Room cannot be divorced from its animal, and thus, is ultimately also implicated in the feminized foundations of this other. As these new 'animal stories' are circulated to another generation of readers, it is equally important to consider how a conventionally masculine hunting tale is transformed, and how the Billiard Room is inevitably encountered in gendered terms, bearing in mind that these stories were written for and read by an other – that is, they were written to be read to children by their mothers.

The question of 'where', according to Mark Cousins, is surprisingly repressed in architectural discourse which is instead dominated by questions relating to ontology ('what is the object?') and temporality ('when is the object dated?'). Cousins (1996: 109) argues that this question is key because it does not merely describe the object's location but crucially delineates a '*scene* which inscribes the places of what is installed', that is to say, the scene places the object of architecture and its observer in relation to each other – it speaks of how the architectural object is given cognition through this relationship. By extension, one may suggest that the architectural object does not render itself as legible subject matter before it is encountered from a particular 'point of view' (Cousins, 1996: 109).

An emphasis on the scene of this architectural encounter seeks to relate a space to its possible producers, in this case the Billiard Room in relation not only to Bidwell who contributed significantly to the Raffles and its Billiard Room's designs but also to its consumers (both animal and human) who have vibrantly reproduced this space through their physical occupation and anecdotal iterations. Instead of repressing the 'view' from which the second set of (anecdotal) knowledge is derived, what are the epistemological implications of an architectural object which is experienced in the midst of events, stories and evidence linked to the tiger under the Billiard Room/table?

Needless to say, modes of access into the Billiard Room are not the same for everyone. These routes are distinctly marked by gendered, racial and class boundaries, which also need to be scrutinized. In this sense, the Billiard Room is constantly being formed and re-formed through each telling of the tiger story, and this story remains compelling precisely because of its mix of natural history, myth and fiction, revolving around the tiger in a tropical context. Indeed, the tiger story shifts from a passive mode of 'knowing about' a space to actively 'knowing how' a space was used, 'knowing who' appropriated it, and 'knowing who' was subjugated. The stories overturn the Billiard Room: from masculine to feminine space, from independent architectural structure into anecdotal accessory, from fact to fiction, from architect-centred to storyteller-invented.

Conclusion

What I have tried to argue in this paper is that the animal story related within the tropical contexts of the Billiard Room produces its own heterodox forms of knowledge, which often challenges established knowledge conventions associated with such a context. And while there are no female figures in the tiger tale, the practice of storytelling is engendered as feminine, connected as it were to an imaginary domestic space, where the oral genre remains strong. It also raises important questions as to how the architectural knowledge of a masculine space such as the Billiard Room is ultimately sustained by a fundamentally feminine practice. De Certeau (1988: 123) argues that storytelling is the 'delinquent' double of history while Jane Rendell (2003: 291) sees it as a political activity that enables a reclamation of a history dominated by 'men's anecdotes'.

Today the tiger story has taken yet another turn in that it has been commodified by the hotel as cuddly toys and various touristic paraphernalia. While this paper is unable to adequately flesh out the recent transformation of this lore as a benign marketing tool, it acknowledges the double-sided nature of this rhetoric, which is, on the one hand subversive, but on the other hand emasculated, cute or even silly. If the tiger is emblematic of tropicality and its attendant constructions, then this problematic transformation also reveals something about how the tropics is contextualized today – as

a construct that may be safely manipulated and passively consumed. Such a 'tamed' worldview of tropicality is similarly reflected in recent discourse on tropical architecture, which tends to emphasize the tropics apolitically, and subsequently translating the forces of this region into a set of malleable architectural shapes and forms.

When the Billiard Room is encountered through the tiger story – through the embodied acts of looking from the underside, of hunting down uncertain facts, and the oral traditions of small talk and storytelling – it ceases to become a passive space. Instead it abets with, and is reproduced through, these actions. If the tropics has been linked to the feminine, the wild, and the degenerate, then the Billiard Room at the Raffles Hotel is evidence of a distinct tropical spatiality which destabilizes its conventional masculine foundations. Indeed, encountering the Billiard Room through its tiger lore is just a prelude to the tropics' 'subversive pleasure'.

Endnotes

- 1 An early newspaper report announcing the opening of the new Raffles Hotel also promises a 'large and commodious billiard room containing four tables' (*The Straits Times*, 1887). Other rival hotels in Singapore also advertised their billiard rooms as a major feature including L'Europe and Adephi, as well as the lesser-priced Sea View Hotel and Hotel van Wijk.
- 2 The reward was halved in 1850 because the results were minimal, but increased again around 1860 when the additional 50 dollars was put up by the merchants' fund (Boomgaard, 2001: 103).
- 3 The first reference to weretigers in the Malay world is from an early fifteenth century Chinese source which recounts the story, told to visitors to Melaka at that time, of 'tigers which turned into men' (J.V.G. Mills' *Ma Huan*, 1970, cited in Boomgaard, 2001: 187).
- 4 For the conservative role of the 'primitive' in architectural discourse, see Forty (2006).
- 5 For a philosophical discussion on the unthinkability of animals in Western philosophy, sexual difference and voice, see Derrida (2004).

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