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The Instrumental Use of the Trope of the Native American in 19th Century British and American Accounts of Southeast Asia

A Talk by Farish A. Noor

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The 19th century witnessed the expansion of Western colonial power and influence across both mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, and the publication of a growing number of books about the region and its peoples by Western scholars, travellers and colonial administrators. The 19th century was also a time when pseudo-scientific theories of polygenesis and racial difference were rife, and deemed respectable in academic and political circles in the West. This paper looks at how some British and American authors were inclined to examine Southeast Asians through the lens of racial theory, and how in the course of doing so were also inclined to compare some Southeast Asian ethnic groups to the natives of America. In the course of doing so Native Americans were invariably seen and cast as a homogenous racial group that was then located at the bottom of a hierarchy that differentiated between superior and inferior races. The repeated deployment of the trope of the Native American, as the embodiment of inferiority and savagery, was an instance of racial stereotypes being instrumentalised at a global level, as part of a new pan-Atlantic Anglo-American discourse of race and racial difference.

APRIL 26, 7 PM
(PACIFIC TIME)

APRIL 27, 10 AM
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