

HISTORY WORKSHOP

The Department of History

Tuesdays ~ 12:30-1:30 pm ~ 203 Munroe Hall

Fields of Empire: Science and Ethnoscience in Twentieth-Century Southeast Asia

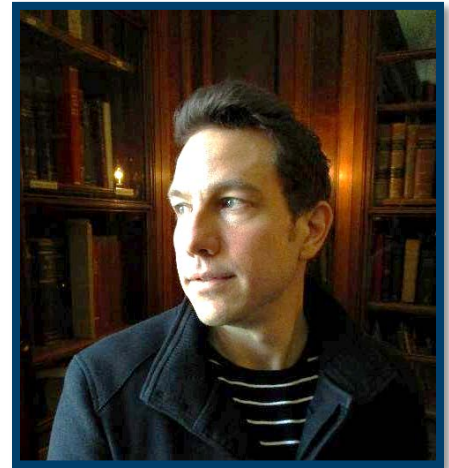
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Andrew W. Mellon Fellow, New York Botanical Garden

February 26, 2019

12:30-1:30 pm

203 Munroe Hall



Where does science end and ethnoscience begin? Such boundary work is rarely innocent, especially when it transpires in circumstances of pronounced social and political inequality. Imperial concerns, in fact, are at the very foundation of ethnoscience. The term ethnobotany was coined in 1895 - two years after Frederick Jackson Turner declared America's frontier to be closed, and three years ahead of the Spanish-American War, which precipitated a flurry of colonization in the Americas and Asia-Pacific. Using case studies in the Philippines and Sumatra, this presentation discusses how ethnoscientists contributed to, capitalized on and contravened these interests. Whether they underlined the correspondence between indigenous and Western knowledges or, conversely, alleged their fundamental untranslatability, I argue, bore vitally on attitudes concerning the transformation of peoples and resources into colonial possessions. By exploring the shifting motivations of Western ethnoscientists alongside the indigenous experts on whom they depended, this paper attempts a fine-grained understanding of the politics of ethnoscientific translation in colonial contexts. It also explores the role played by ethnoscientists as cultural and disciplinary intermediaries, transiting often uneasily between natural and human science frameworks, and navigating the politically charged borderland between indigenous and Western knowledges and cultures.