

Theodore Roosevelt American History Award 2021 Jury Report

Every year, the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies organizes the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award (TRAHA), which is presented to the best MA thesis on a topic related to the history of the United States, written at a Dutch university during the previous academic year. The Jury of the 2020 TRAHA was comprised of Giles Scott-Smith (Chair, Leiden/RIAS), Markha Valenta (University of Utrecht), Emma van Toorn (2020 TRAHA winner), and Arendo Joustra (*Elsevier Magazine*).

The jury received eight MA theses, submitted by four universities. The scope of the subjects covered by the theses represented the broad coverage of American Studies programmes in the Netherlands. All of the theses demonstrated inventiveness in terms of topic selection, argumentation, and use of sources, with diverse methodologies being drawn from literary studies, cultural studies, diplomatic history, and media studies. The jury applied a three-level process for ranking the theses.

Firstly, the following criteria were used to assess each thesis:

- Topic: The relevance of the thesis for American History in the first place, and American Studies more broadly;
- Narrative: The quality of writing and the flow of the narrative combined with a clear argument and analysis;
- Originality: A clear expression of innovation regarding approach and subject matter;
- Sources: Creative collection of and use of a diverse array of sources, both primary and secondary.

Secondly, the place of each thesis in the rankings of each jury member was then taken into account (i.e. each jury member placed each thesis on a scale of 1 to 8)

Lastly, the number of 1st place rankings for each thesis from each jury member were also taken into account.

The jury was impressed with the overall quality of all the theses, and there was general consensus on a handful that stood out from the rest. A decisive factor in this process was the search for a clear perspective on American history, in line with the award – one or two theses were strong in their own right but lacked a clear historical dimension. Out of the three-level process described above emerged one clear winner:

Melanie van der Elsen of Radboud University Nijmegen, for her thesis ‘On The Edge Of Empire: Agency and Imperialist Practices in the US Territory of American Samoa’

Melanie’s thesis makes a nuanced, insightful argument in a clear fashion, integrating its study of history with an exploration of power, agency, exceptionalism, imperialism and territory and drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources to support its case. The author demonstrates a wide knowledge of the field of US history and is very capable in moving across

disciplines to put forward an innovative and mature intervention into current academic debates on US imperialism. American Samoa has rarely been examined in this way, most studies aiming at more well-known US territories. The thesis fully showcases the complexity, diversity and relevance of American Studies as a critical field of enquiry, and self-consciously engages with existing scholarly debates as well as boldly proposing new ones. A worthy winner all round.

Special mention must also go to the prominent runner up:

Katharina Kunze of the University of Amsterdam, with her thesis 'Slavery in Georgetown: The 1838 Slave Sale as a Jesuit Response to Slavery between Rome and American Acceptance'

The thesis engages with the whole concept of identity and what it means to be an American through a carefully crafted investigation into one specific act, the 1838 slave sale, in doing so linking in masterful fashion the local and the global levels of analysis. The thesis develops a powerful narrative that positions Georgetown at the centre of wider debates on slavery and the creation of the modern American nation, gradually peeling back the many contextual layers that we need to address to understand the significance of the decisions taken.

The other theses covered by the jury were as follows:

Bram Eenink (Leiden), 'It is Happening Here: The Second American Civil War in Fiction'

This thesis covered in engaging style this sub-genre of dystopian literature, exploring how the genre's narratives re-write the history of the Civil War and merge, bypass or distort fact with fiction. Providing good insight into the literary works that it analyses, the thesis ultimately questions the factual value of history, asking "Could one get ahead of history itself, and study the present from an imagined vantage point which knows what's relevant?" The result is an engaging thesis that clearly expresses the enthusiasm of the author for their chosen topic, demonstrating good awareness of the impact of new communications technologies to our thinking on past, present and future.

Rebecca Heuvelmans (Groningen), "Ovaries in the Oval Office": The (Meta-)Viewing Experience of the (Sexual) Body of the Female (Vice-)Presidential Hopeful on Screen

A four-part study of depictions of female political leaders with (vice-)presidential ambitions in recent popular entertainment shows, the thesis demonstrates how types of viewing are encouraged by specific forms of montage and visualization, in doing so perpetuating patriarchal cinematic codes among the audience. The stark contrast between passive femininity and political capability of the main characters frames the critique, drawing on the work of Laura Mulvey and the call to end techniques of visual pleasure that play to the male gaze. An innovative approach that makes full use of its media sources to present its case.

Lucas Holzhausen (Amsterdam), 'The Traveler: David F. Dorr and Inversions of Power'

This thesis provides a close reading of Dorr's travel writing to disrupt our understanding of 19th century Louisiana and the context of fugitive slaves. An engagingly written study, the thesis navigates the intersection between American literature and African-American history with ease, addressing important themes along the way such as race, agency, heritage, discourse, and genre, and moving seamlessly between the close-reading of texts and larger issues such as tensions between race and class. In this context, the author should be

commended for providing a contrasting narrative to that presented by the paragon of 19th century activist emancipation literature, Frederick Douglass.

Maaïke Kooijman (Groningen), 'Mama Grizzlies, Back-Alley-Media, and the Paradox of Success, Change, and Continuity in the Anti-Abortion Movement'

A politically engaged thesis that explores the factions and divisions among those advocating for anti-abortion, focusing on the relevance of controversial current-day debates. The narrative does a good job in outlining the arguments put forward by conservative activists and their influence on the attitudes of African-American women. By focusing on the debate surrounding the position that 'abortion is Black genocide', the thesis critically examines the lesser-known arguments put forward by pro-life feminists, drawing on a range of popular sources to emphasise its current-day relevance.

Mae Müller (Nijmegen), 'From Pastoral Gardens to Weatherworn Wastelands: On the Tracks of Nature in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*'

This thesis makes a powerful argument that film is a vital medium for the purposes of environmental analysis, not simply in terms of climate change but more broadly in relation to race, class, and history. Film, in this sense, can lead its audience to critically reflect on 'existential anxieties' and so provoke thinking on social change. In particular, the intersections between race and nature, illustrated incisively through reference to the impact of Hurricane Katrina, add to the argumentative power of the thesis overall. The narrative is able to cover film analysis, media studies, and environmental critique without ever becoming lost in the theory, the result being a finely crafted example of American Studies scholarship.

Eva Rouwmaat (Leiden), 'Fly Me To The Moon: The President's Science Advisers and the Politicisation of Space Exploration'

A well-written study that delves into the background and early introduction of scientific expertise into the highest levels of US policy-making during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The thesis engages closely with existing debates in the literature to build a methodical analysis of the science advisors, carefully weighing the evidence in order to structure its assessments of their importance (or lack of). The resulting thesis is a nicely judged work that subtly pieces together its argument based on a legion of primary documents, resulting in an insider account of how personalities, politics and policies intertwine to decide when and how expert advice is either taken up or rejected. An exemplary example of document-based research in US political history.

Middelburg, 27 May 2021

Jury:

Giles Scott-Smith (Leiden/RIAS, Chair)
Markha Valenta (University of Utrecht)
Emma van Toorn (2020 TRAHA winner)
Arendo Joustra (*Elsevier Magazine*).

