Theodore Roosevelt American History
Award 2023 Jury Report

Every year, the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies has the privilege of organizing the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award (TRAHA), an accolade that recognizes the most outstanding MA thesis on an American history subject composed at a Dutch university during the past academic year. Initiated in 1987, the TRAHA has been a beacon of academic excellence, fostering the study of US culture and society, and serving as a launchpad for many promising academic careers.

This year, the jury, which encompassed different fields of expertise and included last year's winner, had the responsibility of perusing eight meticulously crafted theses, each one a product of extensive research, innovative methodologies, and commendable dedication. The submissions were forwarded by four universities, and the subjects covered a vast array of topics.

The submissions' comprehensive nature, contemporary relevance, and innovative methodologies are a testament to the dynamic state of American history studies in the Netherlands. They underline the field's expansive nature and its capacity to serve as a rich wellspring for academic exploration.

The TRAHA winner is granted a week-long, enriching journey to North Dakota, courtesy of the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation in Medora (ND) and the US Embassy in The Hague. This opportunity provides an immersion into the rich heritage of Teddy Roosevelt's Badlands, together with a visit to the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University. The award is also announced in *Elsevier Magazine (EW)*, thus guaranteeing the author of the best thesis national recognition in addition to the unique travel experience in the US.

The meticulous work, innovative thinking, and interpretative skills displayed by all nominees made the choice incredibly challenging. After much deliberation, the jury reached a unanimous verdict assigning this year's award to **Pip van der Zanden** for her thesis: "Decoding 'The Iron Curtain': The Role of Newspapers in Decoding American Propaganda in the United States and the Netherlands," completed at the University of Groningen.

Pip's thesis offers an incisive exploration of media's intricate role in shaping public perception, focusing on the film "The Iron Curtain," Hollywood's inaugural anti-communist propaganda piece. Her research deftly employs a transnational approach, investigating the reception discourse in both the US and the Netherlands, where the film spurred controversy, protests, and an initial prohibition by the Dutch Board of Film Censors.

This angle, with its unique comparison between the US and the Netherlands, contributes to the existing body of work on film history, providing a fresh perspective often overlooked in conventional analyses. The analysis demonstrated an exemplary level of research, with a broad array of American and Dutch newspapers examined for their reporting, reviews, and opinion pieces concerning the film. The clarity and organization of the thesis are also noteworthy.

The study adopts a reception-centric perspective, highlighting the importance of audience response when analyzing propaganda films and implementing Stuart Hall's Encoder/Decoder Theory to understand how newspaper portrayals can significantly influence audience interpretation. The empirical segment of the study also includes a comparison with "A Bullet for Joey," another anti-communist film bearing similar plot elements, yet without the spark of controversy.

Another remarkable feature of this work is the author's thoughtful reflection on the methodological approach, considering the varying forms of coverage in the newspapers and their potential impact. In addition, the author displayed commendable self-awareness in discussing the limitations of their approach, further bolstering the thesis's credibility.

The jury acknowledges this work as an important contribution to film history, with its well-structured arguments, innovative focus, and extensive research underpinning it. The historical context was seamlessly woven throughout, forming an insightful, cohesive piece of scholarly work deserving this award.

Congratulations again to Pip and her supervisor, Dr. Tim Jelfs, at the University of Groningen!

With the unveiling of the winner of this year's award, we take this opportunity to highlight the vitality and richness of the field of American Studies across Dutch universities by recognizing the shortlisted theses, all worthy of praise, listed in alphabetical order.

Sjors van den Besselaar, Radboud University, "'Do You Like Hurting Other People?' Critiquing American Violence in Hyperviolent Video Games".

The thesis explores how non-American video games developed in the early 2010s (in the post- 9/11 era) use narrative themes and storytelling techniques to associate violence with American culture. Through in-depth analyses of different case studies, the research reveals the portrayals of American violence, thereby uncovering the impact these representations have on shaping international perceptions of the United States. This fascinating study focuses on the themes such as trauma and the enjoyment and justification of violence – and discusses how they are linked to the image and understanding of the US.

Justina Buskaitė, University of Amsterdam, "Objects in Mirror are Closer Than They Appear: Reflections of America in Post-Soviet Lithuanian Television."

The thesis explores the cultural shift in Lithuania following the Soviet Union's collapse, specifically focusing on Americanization and television's role in this transformation. It is a highly original topic that brings together interesting fields and issues using a very creative approach.

Buskaitė's study investigates the tension between modernity and tradition, examining the changing consumption patterns, marketing strategies of food companies, and the impact of perceptions of 'provincialism,' with the aim to understand the complexities of Lithuanian identity in the post-Soviet era.

Leonoor Kemperman, University of Amsterdam, "Into the Vaults of Dutch-American Diplomatic Relations: Reconstructing Early Trans- Atlantic Ties in a Financial Dispute during the American Civil War."

The thesis represents a great case study and offers a very detailed discussion of an under-researched event during the American Civil War – a diplomatic conflict between the Netherlands and the United States concerning a significant sum of money, bonds, and silverware confiscated by General Benjamin Butler in New Orleans in 1862. This meticulous effort of historical reconstruction showcases a thorough and genuinely commendable research work presented in a clear and compelling narrative.

Nikita Krouwel, Radboud University, "A New Dawn? Transatlantic Black Solidarity in the Dutch Black Lives Matter Protests (2020)".

This thesis investigates the dynamics of Black transatlantic solidarity as seen in the Dutch Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2020, with a particular focus on the interactions between Afro- Dutch and Black American activists. It seeks to explore how these transatlantic interactions have shaped and influenced Afro-Dutch activism, while illuminating the strengths and limitations of these connections. It is a remarkable thesis that breaks new ground on a topic currently not addressed by scholarship in an inventive way. It is a carefully contextualized study that generates and draws on new and valuable primary sources in oral history interviews with Afro-Dutch activists.

Jelle Rietveld, Leiden University, "American Mythmaking: Southern Antebellum Literature in the Context of American Racism (1824-1856)"

This thesis examines antebellum Southern literature, challenging the traditional North vs. South dichotomy that has often confined the discussion of American racism to a specific region. It argues that discriminating narratives served as broader instruments of racial stratification and, by emphasizing the popularity of these supposedly regional novels across the country, that they represented not merely Southern but American literature and culture. Through a well-written thesis, Rietveld addresses an interesting historical and historiographical issue while stressing the importance of a more accurate understanding of the history and impact of racism in the United States.

Chantal Schulte, University of Groningen, "Between the Margins: Defining Heterotopia in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands."

The thesis explores the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as a heterotopia. It uses a range of primary sources to examine how boundaries – geopolitical, psychological, emotional – are blurred and redefined in these borderlands, and it delves into the impacts of militarization, neoliberal capitalism, and the American Dream on border residents' experiences. The analysis focuses on the period from the 1970s on and aims to enrich border discourse by bridging gaps between disciplines and highlighting paradoxes of border life.

Jesse Jacob Vis, Leiden University, "When a Warrior Meets a Knight: The Political Alliance between Al Smith and John Raskob and How It Affected the 1928 Presidential Elections".

This thesis is a fascinating case study exploring the alliance between Alfred E. Smith and John Raskob and their shared opposition to Prohibition. It investigates how their backgrounds as Catholic immigrants influenced their politics and significantly impacted the 1928 Presidential Election. The analysis traces the path to Prohibition, its effect on New York City, Smith and Raskob's shared experiences, and their partnership's influence on voting trends. The research reveals the pervasive role of prejudice in US politics and how personal alliances can shape political outcomes.

Jury members:
Gaetano Di Tommaso (RIAS, Chair)
Jelte Olthof (University of Groningen), Manon Parry (University of Amsterdam), Nathaniel Weisberg (2022 TRAHA Winner)