

***Laura op de Beke, "A Posthumanist Neo-Slave Narrative: Dismantling the Humanist Subject in Lilith's Brood"***

Laura op de Beke has written a particularly eloquent and thought-provoking thesis, applying posthumanist critique to Octavia Butler's science fiction trilogy *Lilith's Brood*. She shows that Butler's imagined universe echoes historical African American slavery, especially with regards to issues of personal autonomy, authenticity, and rationality, which are at the heart of posthumanist thought. Op de Beke's claim that Butler's 1970s novels "most consistently and most emphatically" harken back to slave narratives—a genre that was not well-known back then—challenges conventional ideas of literary chronology (5), while her argument that *Lilith's Brood* re-conceptualizes, rather than rejects, the rationality, autonomy, and authenticity of humanist philosophy is clear and original. Op de Beke's interpretations are adventurous—from hybridity and the trope of the tragic mulatto, to reflections on the "neoliberal reproductive landscape of the new millennium," with its "self-disciplining and ultimately self-exploiting subjects"—and demonstrate a command of high criticism. Her lengthy summaries of Butler bespeak not only intellectual fascination, but also an intense engrossment that leaves readers wanting more.

***Eva van Burg, "Writing History A Priori? Why Conspiracy Theories Fail to Explain the Relationship between Bernard Lewis and the Role of the U.S. Government in the Middle East"***

Writing on perhaps the juiciest and most of-the-moment topic, Eva van Burg analyzes conspiracy theories and their logic in her thesis on Bernard Lewis: a scholar of the Middle East frequently accused of masterminding US policy in that region since 1970. Her focus on Lewis illuminates two histories: the history of Islamic Studies as a field; and the history of the relationship between academia and policy-making in the late Cold War and post-Cold War periods. Van Burg's analysis of Lewis's case offers compelling conclusions with regards to conspiracy theories at large, showing how they usually proceed without evidence and paradoxically take any counter-argument as proof of their own veracity. Samuel P. Huntington's famous idea of a "clash of civilizations" might have provided a good counterpart to Lewis, though Van Burg's thesis already forms a riveting read for those of us seeking to understand the many theories circulated and believed by the newly-empowered alt-right.

***Alexcia Cleveland, "A Spoonful of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down: Poison Use by Slaves in Antebellum Virginia"***

The next thesis also deals with planning, plotting, and distrust in the sense that it examines accusations leveled at slaves of poisoning their masters (and their masters' children) in antebellum Virginia. Relying on a wealth of research, Alexcia Cleveland engagingly guides her readers through common fears (of a particular shade of green, for instance) and enthralling court cases, usually leading to conviction and capital punishment. Vivid details, from the antiquarian (the rise of the forensic investigator) to the grisly, pull the reader into the narrative. The primary sources and the second-hand stories of slaves using poison are vividly told and come alive on the page. At times, the reports of the nineteenth-century newspapers seem written for sensation and to support anti-slave sentiment, and therefore perhaps warrant a more critical (or even suspicious) readerly attitude than they receive. But Cleveland also brings broad currents to bear on the subject: such as shifts from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century science and the emergence of the ideology of paternalism in an exceptionally mature, well-written, and gripping thesis.

***Anouk van der Graaf, "Powerful Patterns of Persuasion: Reading the Activist Autobiography. Social Movement Techniques and the African-American Literary Tradition in the Life Narratives of Black Nationalists Malcolm X, James Forman and Angela Davis, 1965-1975"***

Anouk van der Graaf admirably anchors her discussion of the autobiographies of leading figures of the Black Nationalist movement in earlier African American literature and displays an impressive sense of assuredness and sophistication in formulating the stakes and contributions of her readings. There is a default tendency, perhaps dating to the 19th century, to take *authenticity* as the standard by which to measure protest writing; Van der Graaf pushes beyond that (potentially) patronizing frame to emphasize the strategic aspects of these texts (the artificial, the literary) as much as the sentimental. A wealth of direct citations from the primary texts drives her analysis forward, although one sometimes wonders whether the authors themselves would have recognized the strictly-applied distinction between consensus and action mobilization. Yet Van der Graaf's close interrogation of (cover)-images and narrative techniques, such as Haley's mediation of Malcolm X's story, characterize her thesis as an exceptionally thoughtful and wide-ranging contribution to the young field of Black Power studies.

***Dries de Groot, "The Robot, the Alien and the Woman: The Representation of 'Otherness' in the Mass Effect Trilogy"***

Dries de Groot's study of the *Mass Effect* trilogy forms a welcome addition to this competition, being the first nomination that studies computer gaming and doing so with simultaneous critical distance and an aficionado's in-depth knowledge and experience. Although De Groot's conclusions—that *Mass Effect* "for the most part adheres to the conventions within contemporary science fiction" (abstract)—may seem like a truism, the thesis itself is more surprising than that, mainly because of its engagement with many different aspects of the elaborate gaming experience, such as characterization, plot development, utopian thinking, and feminism. When reading for the female Other, one wonders: maybe the drama itself is maturity, namely what is an adult? It seems like female others remain objects of puerile fantasy. Illustrations and YouTube clips enliven De Groot's writing, which pays due homage to the literary genealogies underlying science fiction, stretching all the way back to *Frankenstein* and Prometheus. An analysis of the complicated relationship between a technologically advanced game and its conservative audience could have been a nice addition. Although the specific American perspective (rather than, say, Western or Eurocentric) of *Mass Effect* does not always emerge with full clarity, De Groot's work should be welcomed not only as an examination of a vital new medium, but also for how it situates that new learning within areas of older scholarly expertise.

***Cynthia Van Der Heyden, "Raza Si! Hanigan No! Chicano Resistance to Racial Oppression during the Hanigan Case, 1976-1981"***

In a gripping style, Cynthia Van Der Heyden transports us to Douglas, Arizona in 1976, where three American men famously tortured Mexican immigrants (seemingly) for fun. Her thesis relies on many recent secondary sources, as well as impressive primary sources, including personal interviews. By sprinkling scholarly definitions throughout her engrossing tale rather than giving them all up front, she also tremendously enlivens her thesis. The author makes a persuasive argument that the Hanigan case was pivotal in the history of Chicano activism, especially the turn toward action on behalf of undocumented immigrants. She incorporates Critical Race Theory and Latino/a Critical Theory to explain why the Hanigans evaded prosecution for such a long time. Especially interesting is the turn toward the vocabulary of "human rights," and this thesis is in effect a study of grass-roots human rights activism. Although Van Der Heyden's style is sometimes more narrative than argumentative, she convincingly shows how the events and the ensuing legal proceedings put forth both individual racial hostility, as well as the more institutionally entrenched common sense racism.

***Belinda Korver, "A Historical Analysis of the Controversial Relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico in the Twentieth Century: It Takes Two to Tango"***

Belinda Korver takes us inside the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico—a relationship that has often, provocatively, been called colonial. Korver's clear statements as to the stakes and importance of her argument are outstanding, as is her structured use of many sources housed here in the RSC. Although her definition of imperialism excludes many social or cultural factors in favor of legal ones, her focus on three historical moments: 1898, the acquisition period; 1950s, the post-war era; and the 2000s, enables her to succinctly chart large, complex international developments.

***Anca-Ioana Mihaescu, "Solomon Northup vs. Booker T. Washington: Reconfigurations of African-American Identity in Autobiographical Life Writing"***

The highly ambitious work of Anca-Ioana Mihaescu on the autobiographies of Solomon Northrup and Booker T. Washington deals with the most canonical texts of this year's nominees. Surveying the themes of literacy, *masculinity*, and coloniality in African American literature, Mihaescu also includes a compelling defense of why her particular historical moment should be investigated. Mihaescu assesses how Washington's and Northrup's (re)creation of a black identity sometimes 'clashed' with a genre that, as she states "always reaffirmed American ideals, such as freedom and democracy." Although she perhaps cannot fully realize her stated aim of explaining racism in contemporary American society, her procedural analysis of these famous texts is systematic and thorough.

***Anna Muns, "Locked Up in Darkness: The U.S. Federal Supermaximum Prison Debate"***

Anna Muns writes on the debate surrounding federal super-maximum prisons, where inmates spend 23 hours per day in solitary confinement. Her examinations expertly incorporate perspectives from law, psychology, psychiatry, and public administration, and she even includes a surprisingly helpful table outlining the political, economic, and judicial challenges to supermax prisons at the end of her work. By looking at the Illinois senator Dick Durbin and the Thomson prison, she focuses a diffuse debate, while her neutral stance in evaluating mental health issues, noting that for many prisoners such ailments may have developed prior to confinement, is particularly notable. The discrepancy between, on the one hand, the growing concern for the lack of dignity of prisoners, and on the other hand the fact that this same "dehumanization of prisoners . . . can make it easier for politicians to implement a certain policy" is fascinating. Of all nominees, Muns reads perhaps the most surprising primary document, namely the federal budget plan of the Bureau of Prisons, and even manages to make those numbers come alive.

***Rosa S. Oskam, "Chicken Kiev and the Building of a New World Order: US Engagement with Ukrainian Independence and Denuclearization (1991-1994)"***

Finally, Rosa S. Oskam investigates the cooperation between the United States and Ukraine since 1991, in a topic that has gained even more relevance and currency since the most recent U.S. Presidential elections. Oskam's analysis is both sophisticated and nuanced, proceeding briskly through ideas and definitions of U.S. hegemony and exceptionalism. Oskam provides a rigorous diplomatic history of U.S. relations with Ukraine during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She carefully navigates different chronicles by historians and the historical actors themselves. Centerpiece is the "Chicken Kiev" speech, which pretty clearly demonstrates the first Bush administration's doubts about Ukrainian independence. Oskam also includes the concept of US hegemony and its influence on US foreign policy in relation to Ukraine, distinguishing between the "realist, or materialist" and the "normative" approach, which helps to explain the reluctant approach by the US to fully support Ukrainian Independence, as it had to take Russia into

account in a new world order. When the USSR finally did collapse, the administration changed its strategy and rhetoric. In effect, this thesis is a study of uncertainty within a presidential administration and the kind of rhetoric that emerges from that uncertainty. Oskam also excels at presenting multiple perspectives on a single policy initiative, lending equal air time to both proponents and opponents. Her presentation of the large-scale ramifications of what may seem like arcane policy proposals—such as the failure of G.H.W. Bush to win re-election—are unexpected and persuasive.

***Renee de Groot, "The Rewritten War: Alternate Histories of the American Civil War"***

Winner: Writing on works of speculative, or, as she calls it, "alternate histories," Renee de Groot explores the curious genre of (non-)fiction that considers alternative endings, beginnings, and, most importantly, motives for the American Civil War. This thesis a mature work of scholarship on a knotty subject. Eschewing easy or obvious interpretations, which would settle for pointing out the racist or reactionary motives that seem to underlie many re-imaginings, De Groot instead notes that "within Civil War alternate histories, there is a dearth of escapist fantasies of vindication, revisionism or revenge." (18) Her consistent, careful attention to eleven (at times very lengthy) Civil War Alternate Histories (CWAH) is all the more admirable in light of what seem to be at times risible or offensive apologies for slavery or secessionism. Impeccably researched, De Groot identifies the key elements of the CWAH's to identify their functions: challenging "reconciliation culture," to "counterintuitive socio-economic critique," "as a platform for reflections on history," and "historical consciousness." Methodologically, de Groot is a generous reader but also an incisive one, and it is this balance that lets her weave fine readings in and out of the historiography of Civil War memory, often to brilliant effect—e.g. the reading of Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South* (1992). As literary criticism, the thesis finds that ideal middle ground between close reading and contextualization, see, for instance, De Groot's nods to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, to an amazing inversion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and to the tradition of the jeremiad. Somehow the thesis almost never belabors plot summaries, even though it has to convey a lot of plot. In sum, De Groot has managed to raise interesting, sophisticated questions on a highly original topic with nuance and admirably thorough scholarship.

Honorable mention: Cynthia Van Der Heyden.

Middelburg, 31 March 2017

Jury:

Dr. Joanne van der Woude (University of Groningen)

Dr. George Blaustein (University of Amsterdam)

Martina van Cimmenaede MA (winner TRAHA 2016)

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