

2025 TRAHA Jury Report

This year, the TRAHA jury, consisting of Dario Fazzi (Chair, RIAS), Sarah Snyder (American University), Katy Hull (University of Amsterdam), Manar Ellethy (Utrecht University), and Stef Lage Venterink (2024 TRAHA winner), reviewed nine beautifully written and thoroughly researched theses. All the finalists deserve recognition for their original analyses and innovative contributions, which collectively broaden the scope of US history and American Studies. The range of approaches and the relevance of the topics reflect the vibrancy of these disciplines in the Netherlands, while showcasing our students' ability to critically engage with North American sociopolitical and cultural developments. Below is an overview of the finalists' thesis topics, in alphabetical order, alongside the jury's brief appraisal.

Lauren Geel (University of Amsterdam), "Couples in Court: Same-Sex Adult Adoption, 1980-2015."

Lauren Geel offers an interesting and original investigation into an underexamined legal strategy deployed by LGBTQ+ individuals to secure familial recognition prior to the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. By focusing on a phenomenon seldom addressed by legal or historical scholarship, Geel illuminates how adult adoption served as a means for queer couples to challenge exclusionary definitions of family. This thesis is grounded in a broad array of judicial cases and contextualized within shifting ideas of kinship in late twentieth-century America. Structurally, the work is both imaginative and interdisciplinary: Geel first outlines the specifics of key legal cases, then positions these within the broader trajectory of family law, before finally turning to cultural representations such as memoir and film. This approach not only underscores Geel's grasp of diverse bodies of scholarship but also highlights how legal and cultural arenas overlap in shaping public perceptions. A genuine example of fine American Studies scholarship.

Mees Geenen (Erasmus University Rotterdam), "Enwhitening Haitian Darkness: Comparing US Foreign Policy Officials' Discursive Legitimisations of the US Occupation of Haiti (1915-34) and the US Intervention in Haiti (1994-6)."

Mees Geenen's thesis offers an engaging analysis of discursive and ideological legitimization employed by US foreign policy officials in two interventions in Haiti: the 1915-1934 occupation of the island and the 1994-1996 military invasion of it. Drawing on an impressive amount of primary sources, Geenen portrays both interventions as examples of racial othering, US exceptionalism, and imperial entanglements. By applying critical discourse analysis, Geenen unveils a "civilizational" motif that underscores how US policymakers justified repeated intrusions into Haitian sovereignty. The thesis stands out for its comparative approach, which helps to underscore the subtle yet enduring patterns of racialization that have shaped US foreign policy rhetoric and actions.

Iris Lagerweij (University of Groningen), "'Their World Is Just Like Ours... Except...': Fantasy, Desire, Power, and Gender in the Omegaverse."

Iris Lagerweij delivers a nuanced exploration of how erotic fan fiction, specifically the Omegaverse subgenre, reimagines and contests normative gender constructs. Focusing on two case studies, the thesis analyzes how authors complicate dominant American

tropes surrounding masculinity, intimacy, and power structures. Lagerweij's framework draws upon such American Studies scholars as Radway, Deloria, and Olson, affirming the significance of popular culture as a meaningful site of inquiry. Equally vital to this approach are the theoretical insights of Butler, Coppa, and McGurl, which Lagerweij weaves together to underscore how these fictions simultaneously challenge and reinforce oppressive gender norms. The thesis stands out for the clarity of its prose and deft handling of complex concepts. Most interestingly, the thesis underlines fan fiction's potential to reshape cultural definitions of identity, desire, and power in a way that seems both timely and compelling.

Davide Lamparelli (Utrecht University), “Our Duty as a Republican People’: Solidarity and Soft Power in US Newspapers during the Irish Great Famine, 1845-1850.”

Lamparelli's thesis examines how American newspapers built transatlantic solidarity around the Irish Great Famine of the mid-eighteenth century, thus functioning, according to Lamparelli, as an expression of US soft power. Situating this analysis within a significant turning point in media history, Lamparelli offers a fresh perspective on the interplay between inclusion and exclusion, demonstrating a strong command of historical context and academic debates on framing and agenda setting. Drawing on an extensive range of primary sources, Lamparelli carefully balances observations of commonalities in coverage with the distinct political alignments of each newspaper. This method underscores how support for Irish migrants amid the Great Famine assumed broader national significance, reinforcing the United States' self-perception as a republican society with moral obligations. Overall, this is a compelling, rigorously researched, and timely study of the sociopolitical dimensions of newspaper-driven solidarity.

Maud Rijks (Leiden University), “Water for Life’: Greenpeace’s Toxic Tours of the Great Lakes in the Late 1980s.”

In her thesis, Maud Rijks offers an innovative examination of Greenpeace's campaign against environmental injustices in the Great Lakes region. By foregrounding translocal activism, she demonstrates how Greenpeace bridged environmental, cultural, and political concerns to connect with local communities grappling with industrial pollution and toxic exposure. Rijks situates her discussion at the intersection of environmental history, transnational activism, and environmental justice, while incorporating detailed archival research drawn from Greenpeace records at the International Institute of Social History (IISG). Central to Rijks's argument are the concepts of solidarity networks and citizen science, highlighted through the “Beluga tour,” in which local communities were brought together under a shared sense of vulnerability reinforced by Greenpeace activists' water sampling. This case study underscores how Greenpeace fostered broader public awareness of ecological degradation and galvanized citizens to reimagine their understandings of ecological responsibility. At the same time, the thesis highlights the complexities of translocal alliances: while Greenpeace's approach helped unify different constituencies, it also revealed tensions inherent in coordinating diverse local needs and global objectives. A powerful reminder of the workings and limitations of environmental democracy.

Chiel Rozendaal (Erasmus University Rotterdam), “Leaving the South: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Roy Stryker’s Historical Section Representation of Internal Migration (1935-1943).”

Chiel Rozendaal’s thesis offers a thoroughly researched and highly relevant exploration of how visual representation in the Great Depression and New Deal Era functioned, focusing on the Historical Section’s photography project and the Great Migration. Through a compelling post-structuralist framework, the thesis interrogates documentary truthfulness and social constructions alike, demonstrating a keen familiarity with historiographical debates on power and representation. Rozendaal gives numerous insights into both institutional archives and photographic material, illustrating how supposedly objective imagery can be employed to shape public perceptions and emphasizing the significance of selectivity in what is shown and what is left out in the narratives on domestic migration. Particularly notable is the attention given to strategic omissions, especially of Black Americans in urban contexts, adding depth to existing New Deal scholarship. Overall, this meticulously constructed work compels readers to reflect on the ongoing influence of photographic narratives in shaping social realities, both historically and today.

Kirsten Soer (Leiden University), “Agents of Empire? American Women and the US Occupation of Japan (1945-1952).”

In this thesis, Kirsten Soer analyzes the role of American women stationed under the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) during the US occupation of Japan. Soer positions these women simultaneously as potential liberators of Japanese womanhood and instruments of American imperial power. Drawing upon recent historiographical trends, Soer emphasizes how these female SCAP members navigated a terrain shaped by Orientalist assumptions, while also pushing back against broad generalizations of Japanese people as inherently passive. By delving into oral history interviews and autobiographical accounts, the thesis vividly captures these women’s unique perspectives on occupation policy, gender equality, and cross-cultural encounters. The work is also written in a graceful style, featuring seamless transitions that guide the reader through a well-structured argument.

Ilia Suslenko (University of Amsterdam), “U.S. Public Diplomacy: The Evolution and Influence of the Senior Fulbright-Hays Lectureship Program on American History in the Soviet Union from 1973 to 1979.”

Ilia Suslenko’s thesis examines the Senior Fulbright-Hays Lectureship Program in American History in the Soviet Union (1973-1979) as a transformative, though often overlooked, element of US public diplomacy during the Détente era. By skillfully weaving together declassified archival materials with oral history interviews, Suslenko constructs a nuanced narrative that foregrounds the personal connections underlying the broader geopolitical interplay between the United States and the Soviet Union. This focus on human relationships demonstrates how academic exchanges can mitigate ideological divisions and promote informal influence. Overall, the work offers a timely perspective on how educational initiatives can function as bridges across states, raising ongoing questions about how, even amid renewed tensions, academic exchanges may continue to serve as valuable tools for dialogue and mutual understanding.

Mente van den Bosch (University of Groningen), “Batman Versus Superman: The Popular Geopolitics of the Post-9/11 Bush Administration’s Foreign Policy in Injustice: Gods Among Us Year One.”

Mente van den Bosch analyzes how superhero narratives reflect and critique real-world geopolitics. Van den Bosch highlights the “cross-discursive” power of comics to shape dominant ideologies. The thesis is structured into two parts: the first examines the evolution of Superman as a symbol of American identity and the second focuses on how the recent cinematic rendering of American superheroes have acquired more pronounced political roles, for instance by criticizing post-9/11 US foreign policy and militarization. Van den Bosch’s work is both original and well-researched, grounding each claim in an extensive historiography and comic scholarship. The diachronic overview of Superman’s development underscores the hero’s continuous and evolving cultural resonance.

The 2025 Theodore Roosevelt American History Award goes to Maud Rijks, for her thesis on Greenpeace’s toxic tours of the Great Lakes. Written in a manner that inspires the reader and conveys passion and commitment toward both the topic and the research at hand, Maud’s thesis led the jury to view it as akin to a popular trade book – one that both informs and encourages. Grounded on solid primary research and drawing on previously unexplored materials, Maud’s examination of Greenpeace’s battle against toxic pollution in the Great Lakes region, its involvement with local actors and dynamics, its struggles with industry, and its grassroots mobilization tactics highlights the potential of socio-ecological engagement and activism in the face of the overwhelming power of industrial conglomerates. In this respect, the thesis stands as both a cautionary tale and a message of hope for the future. Congratulations!

For the first time in the history of the TRAHA award, the jury has decided to acknowledge two more theses that are equally worthy of an honorable mention. Kirsten Soer’s exploration of American women’s role in the US occupation of Okinawa is a beautiful example of how sub-disciplinary cross-fertilization among diplomatic, military, cultural, and gender history can generate fresh perspectives and interpretations. The jury was impressed by Kirsten’s writing style and by her ability to advance her argument in a consistent, convincing, and engaging way. Similarly, the jury found Davide Lamparelli’s thesis incredibly well-crafted, characterized by an in-depth engagement with primary sources that Davide used shrewdly to form a compelling argument. The jury also appreciated the meticulous historical reconstruction of the period, the critical analysis of pertinent historiography, and the innovative interpretation of America’s nineteenth-century newspapers as vectors of transnational solidarity. The jury wishes to congratulate both Kirsten and Davide on their achievements.