

THEODORE ROOSEVELT AMERICAN HISTORY AWARD 2018
JURY REPORT

Heleen Blommers (VU), “From a War on Poverty to a War on the Poor: How Poverty Programs Caused Resentment, 1964-1968”

In this elegantly written and thoroughly researched thesis, Heleen Blommers details the formation of a ‘narrative of failure’ that came to surround the Johnson administration’s anti-poverty programs, with a particular emphasis on the case of Baltimore. It is an impressive work, based on the author’s own (and extensive) archival research in Washington, Baltimore, and the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin, Texas, which gives a careful analysis of the construction and implementation of federal anti-poverty programs, as well as the reactions they provoked on the ground. Especially poignant are the author’s foregrounding of the legacy of the New Deal in the War on Poverty, as well as her close attention to the racial dimensions of its supposed ‘failure’. The result is an outstanding historical analysis, which reveals much about the tragedy of the lost crusade against poverty in the 1960s whose consequences still haunt us today.

The Jury unanimously agreed to award this thesis an honorable mention.

Dejan Duric (Groningen), “Capturing the Legal Soul: Law, Life, and Liberation in the US Sanctuary Movement, 1980-1991”

In this illuminating trans-disciplinary study, Dejan Duric deftly weaves together elements of theology, history, cultural studies, and law into an original analysis of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. The thesis explores both the theological foundations of the concept of sanctuary – which the author presents as a syncretic amalgamation of American Protestantism and Latin American liberation theology – as well as its interaction with the secular sphere, as represented by the INS and the American legal system. Based on primary sources, including interviews with the movement’s key players, Duric’s thesis gives a densely argued, yet lucid analysis of the movement’s theoretical underpinnings. The final chapter, which anchors the sanctuary movement in lived experience (or what the author terms ‘the legal soul’) gives the thesis additional significance – particularly in light of the recent resurgence of the sanctuary movement in response to the policies of the Trump administration.

Joel Ebeltsjes (Erasmus University Rotterdam), “Mahanisme in Nederland, 1890-1914”

The only thesis to be submitted in Dutch, this study by Joel Ebeltsjes is a well-conceived, original analysis of the impact of the writings of the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan on Dutch naval policy, at the turn of the twentieth century. The thesis thus merges political and military history with the history of ideas, and convincingly shows how Dutch policy-makers were subject to the same transnational intellectual currents as their counterparts in larger (and more extensively studied) European states. It makes extensive use of primary sources, including original research in the Dutch archives, to support its lucid, well-written argument, resulting in a thesis that pushes the boundaries of military history in new and interesting directions.

Stephanie Evers (UvA), “No Secret Anymore: Sexuality, Magazine Advertising, and American National Character, 1953-1964”

In this engaging work of scholarship, Stephanie Evers traces the ways in which the emergence of mass consumerism, as manifested in magazine advertising, interacted with the formation of lesbian identities during the 1950s. Situated at the intersection between LGBTQ+ history and the history of consumption, the thesis uses an innovative combination of sources and

methodologies to reveal the presence of same-sex love and attraction in the subtext of American magazine advertising, and shows how the expression of these themes in visual culture could have profound ramifications for the construction of lesbian identities. In the process, the thesis challenges commonly held views, on the chronology of the gay liberation movement, and on the 1950s as a time of constraint and conservatism.

Christiaan Hoogenboezem (Erasmus University Rotterdam), “Base Building by Invitation: The Origins of American Military Bases in the Netherlands, 1945-1960”

The next thesis focusses on the policies that helped determine the establishment of American military bases in the Netherlands in the early years of the Cold War. As such, it fits neatly in the trans-Atlantic field of American Studies, and contributes to the rapidly expanding literature on America’s global ‘base empire’. The author provides a detailed overview of the historiography on foreign bases during the Cold War, before moving on to a thoughtful examination of the domestic and international circumstances that produced the establishment of the American base at Soesterberg. Making use of both the relevant academic literature and an array of primary sources, the thesis thus offers a careful investigation into its Dutch case study, showing that even a small European country can offer new insights into the evolving global role of the United States.

Lisa van Kessel (Radboud University), “What is Justice? Legal Conflicts in Zones of Liminality in Louise Erdrich’s Justice Trilogy”

Through an admirably inter-disciplinary approach, which draws on literature, critical legal studies, and anthropology, Lisa van Kessel provokes a deeper understanding of questions of justice in American Indian life. Hers is an insightful study of the concept of ‘liminality’ as expressed in the novels of Louise Erdrich, which she defines, paradoxically, as a state of permanent transition between several legal, political, and cultural systems. By a close reading of Erdrich’s ‘justice trilogy’ the thesis captures the legal and moral limbo American Indians are caught in, and its study of selected episodes – including one especially horrifying lynching scene – brings the theory painfully and masterfully to life.

Marisa Kok (Utrecht), “Terrorism on Your Bookshelf: How the (Neo)Orientalist Discourse is Represented in Tom Clancy’s Techno-Thriller *The Teeth of the Tiger* and Jackie Collins’s Chicklits *Goddess of Vengeance* and *The Santangelos*”

Anchored in the academic debates on Orientalism and ‘Othering’ in American national identity, Marisa Kok’s thesis explores the depiction of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture in the wake of 9/11. She provides an original twist to her readings of selected novels by Tom Clancy and Jackie Collins by showing how the gendered perspectives of the two authors’ readerships factor into the way that these writers use (Neo-)Orientalist discourse. It presents an interesting read that leaves the reader convinced of (and worried about) the ways in which popular culture intentionally or unintentionally codifies racist discourse and stereotypes into our brains.

Hannah Kooy (Groningen), “Culture Wars Revisited: The Battle over Texas’ History Curriculum”

Hannah Kooy presents us with a study of a fascinating battlefield in America’s culture wars: the fight to rewrite the public school history curriculum in Texas in 2010. She frames this episode within a set of interlocking theoretical debates over the vision and function of historical education, and shows what happens when these visions become infused with ideological, religious, and political motivations. Based on careful research into primary sources, including the curriculum board’s meeting minutes, the thesis shows how Texas conservatives sought to refashion the teaching of history in their state. The result is an interesting, engaging thesis,

whose conclusions appear highly pertinent to American (indeed, global) politics in the ‘post-truth’ era.

Ingeborg Morawetz (Leiden), “The Tragic Hero as a Guiding Figure in the Cultural Discourse of the Black Lives Matter Movement: New Representations of Black Male Identity in *12 Years a Slave*, *Selma*, *The Birth of a Nation*, and Kendrick Lamar’s Album *To Pimp a Butterfly*”

In another highly socially relevant thesis, Ingeborg Morawetz explores the representations of black male identity in the cultural orbit of the Black Lives Matter movement, as manifested in three recent movies and Kendrick Lamar’s hit album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Using a constellation of analytical techniques, Morawetz shows how these four cultural products create narratives of individual emancipation, and in doing so present new representations of black masculinity. A close reading of key scenes and passages drives the argument forward, treating the reader to, among other things, a satisfyingly counterintuitive treatment of nihilism and gender roles in Lamar’s work.

Waseh Noerzay (Utrecht), “American Exceptionalism During the Afghan Soviet War 1979-1989”

Waseh Noerzay gives us a solid analysis of how the Carter and Reagan administrations defined the US’s global role, as it applied to their policies in Afghanistan. Its introductory chapter is especially strong, and connects the thesis to the academic debate on American exceptionalism that, as the author shows, is as old as the United States itself. The thesis then moves on to show how two alternating visions of exceptionalism (“pragmatic moralism” under Carter and “messianic Americanism” under Reagan) were invoked to justify successive American interventions in Afghanistan, setting in motion a chain of events that shape American policy right up to the present day. It makes extensive use of primary sources, including National Security documents, speeches by American and Soviet leaders, interviews, and memoirs that help bring the narrative to life.

Maria Rozhestvenskaya (Radboud University), “Paul Verhoeven’s Sci-Fi Trilogy: Understanding the Media Influence on Capitalism, Individualism, and Patriotism in the United States”

In this well-researched study, Maria Rozhestvenskaya analyses how Verhoeven’s three sci-fi films (*RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, and *Starship Troopers*) can be meaningfully read as a critique of American society. The author convincingly and intriguingly shows how larger debates surrounding capitalism, individualism, and patriotism in American culture are used in these movies to underscore and question the influence media, intentionally and unintentionally, has on Americans’ lives. The result is a thesis that elevates both one’s appreciation of the subversive qualities contained in Paul Verhoeven’s oeuvre, and of the intellectual qualities of the author herself, who guides the reader through her analysis in a clear, authentic style.

Tim de Wit (VU), “Pan-Indian Conspiracy Fears in the Union Government, and the American Civil War in Indian Territory, 1861-1866”

Finally, Tim de Wit investigates the often overlooked role of American Indians in the American Civil War. A page turner, the thesis presents a lively and fascinating picture of the Civil War’s effect on the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, the startling decisions and assessments the different actors in the region had to make, and how rumors of a pan-Indian conspiracy went on to influence Union policy. Drawing on an extraordinary wide range of materials, including interviews from the Federal Writers Project, personal letters, and correspondence of Confederate and Union government officials and tribal chiefs, De Wit’s analysis admirably foregrounds American Indian agency as it underscores internal divisions within and among the

tribes. The result is a mature work of scholarship, which shines much-needed light on a neglected theatre in the Civil War.

Winner: Megan Griffiths (Leiden), “Radicals, Conservatives, and the Salem Witchcraft Crisis: Exploiting the Fragile Communities of Colonial New England”

Radicals, Conservatives, and the Salem Witchcraft Crisis brims with ambition, promising to offer a fresh, original take on one of the most famous episodes in the history of colonial New England. Yet this is precisely what Megan Griffiths delivers. Through a close reading of original source material, such as trial transcripts, her thesis shows that performing ‘witchcraft’ – or accusing others of doing so – could represent carefully calibrated acts of rebellion against the social and religious constraints of Puritan society. Her interpretation of the possessed accusers, the accused, and the confessors as “Radicals,” who used the supernatural to liberate themselves from a Puritan system as represented by the non-possessed accusers and the judges (or “Conservatives”), is intriguing, carefully constructed, and ultimately persuasive. It is also an extremely well-written thesis, which sets out its argument with the clarity and conviction of a scholar in complete command of her subject.

It is with great pleasure that the Jury awards this thesis the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award, 2018.

Middelburg, 1 June 2018

Jury:

Renee de Groot (2017 TRAHA Winner)

Dr. Cees Heere (RIAS, Chair)

Dr. Roel van den Oever (VU)

Dr. Laura Visser-Maessen (Radboud University Nijmegen)

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