

# Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference

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**Fig. 1** | The Conference Logo, southwestpca.org (2024).

The Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) just celebrated its 45<sup>th</sup> year in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where nearly 700 attendees gathered to share their research findings and exchange ideas (see Figs. 1-2). With the Marriott Hotel as its home base, the conference ran from Feb 20<sup>th</sup>-Feb 23<sup>rd</sup>, covering four days and a myriad of panels that ranged from Alfred Hitchcock and Animation Studies to Film and History to Disability Studies.

SWPACA's tag line, "If it's not popular, it's not culture," captures the conference's atmosphere and objective. Pop culture's reputation has improved in academic circles, yet

the field continues to combat an image of unsophistication; however, there is nothing low brow about the panels at SWPACA. Pop culture should be at the forefront of academic research as it reflects transformations in cultural attitudes and awareness and can even influence society's shared interests. To examine pop culture is to examine the issues in today's world. Music, film, television, literature, fashion, technology, and art are all forms of pop culture, and they deserve to be studied with the same rigor as traditional academia.

While the conference is expansive, with 233 panels, events, and activities in 70-plus subject areas, it feels quite intimate thanks to the culture of encouragement and support that the Executive Team has cultivated. The conference leadership is comprised of Lynnea Chapman King, Tamy Burnett, Kathleen Lacey, and Stephanie Lim, who ensure that attendees have a positive experience; they are all highly visible at the Help Desk, so any issues can immediately be addressed. Overall, the conference is very user-friendly. The Executive Team embraces the conference's mission, which is "to promote an innovative and nontraditional academic movement in the humanities and social sciences celebrating America's cultural heritages, and to increase awareness and improve public perceptions of America's cultural traditions and diverse populations" ("About" southwestpca.org).



Fig. 2 | The Sandia Mountains of Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2024.

SWPACA fulfills its mission, even with the conference format. Rather than selecting a fresh annual theme, the panels are driven by trends in popular culture, which ensures that the panels reflect the ways that music, art, film, television, and literature, are examining the current social climate. In this way, the conference continually evolves alongside society. Where once popular *X-Files* panels faded away, *Harry Potter* panels flourished then declined, and next year the conference will offer a new area on Taylor Swift and Swifties. This allows the cultural zeitgeist to direct the conference topics which makes SWPACA even more timely and relevant as the panels adapt to reflect the needs of the time. To maintain this relevancy, the Executive Team welcomes ideas for fresh subject areas as new content matters emerge to ensure that the conference continues to engage with current social issues.

The interdisciplinary range of pop culture is apparent in the conference's offerings. In the Film, Television, Music, and Visual Media category, there are panels on "The American West," on "Rap and Hip-Hop," on "Game Studies," and on "Adaptation: Literature, Film, and Culture." In the Historic and Contemporary Cultures area, there are panels on "Classical Representations in Popular Culture," on "Psychology and Popular Culture, on Mothers, Motherhood, and Mothering in Popular Culture," and on "Beats, Counterculture, and Hipsters." The Identities and Cultures field includes panels on "African American /Black Studies," on "Native American/ Indigenous Studies," and on "Chicano/a Literature, Film, and Culture." The Language and Literature category involves panels on "Biography, Autobiography, Memoir, and Personal Narrative," on "Children's / YA Culture, on Graphic Novels, Comics, and Popular Culture," and on "Myth and Fairy Tales." The Science Fiction and Fantasy area has panels on "Apocalypse, Dystopia, and Disaster in Culture," on "Zombie and Pandemic Culture," and on *The Last of Us*. Finally, in Teaching and the Profession there were multiple panels on Pedagogy and Popular Culture. This list represents a fraction of the options available at the conference.

Most of these areas had multiple panels over the course of the week, so the diversity and scale of the conference



Fig. 3 | Jazmine Keeton (Texas State University) presents "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: A Dystopian Underworld" (SWPACA 2024).

become apparent. With an average of thirteen panels running concurrently, the largest complaint many attendees had was that there were so many interesting panels occurring at the same time that having to choose became difficult, which is more a virtue of the conference than a vice. For those interested in either attending or presenting, I highly recommend perusing the conference webpage's list of the areas offered: [southwestpca.org/conference](http://southwestpca.org/conference).

As the Area Chair of Literature (General), I must spotlight some of the literature presentations. In the "Dystopias and Trauma" panel, Jazmine Keeton (Texas State University) analyzed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* through the lens of an apocalyptic world by describing the traits of a dystopia then using evidence from the novel to demonstrate how it aligns with that definition (see Fig. 3). One element is that the protagonist tries to solve a problem and central conflict by escaping, as seen throughout Carroll's novel. Another aspect of the genre is the indifferent character relationships and oppositional character relationships; in particular the Dodo and the Mouse and the Caterpillar and the Queen of Hearts. Most dystopian novels also include a controlling government, witnessed by the Queen of Hearts' totalitarian reign leading to fearful behaviour in her subjects. Finally, dystopian novels

include a critique of the current world, where the characters in Wonderland keep attempting to get Alice to conform to their ways of life. Keeton also demonstrated how dystopian literature is not just a contemporary phenomenon; it occurred in past historical periods as well.

In the “Women’s Issues: Domesticity and the Fight for Social Change” panel, Noelle Rudolf (University of Louisiana at Lafayette) presented on “Womanhood as Wifehood: The Perpetuation and Dissension of Louisa May Alcott.” She examined Alcott’s surprisingly liberal life given that her writings were rather conservative. Rudolf asserted that Alcott compromised her personal beliefs when she married off three of the March sisters. However, she argued that Alcott strategically used incompatible relationships such as Amy and Laurie’s marriage and Jo’s marriage to Professor Friedrich Bhaer to both conform to and challenge the societal norm that women’s primary aspiration should be marriage. Her discussion also connected to the alternate ending in Greta Gerwig’s 2019 adaptation of *Little Women* where Jo never marries, maintains her independence, and becomes a successful writer, an ending that resonates with modern viewers. This presentation interacted effectively with M. Andrews’ “Obituaries: Victorian Consumptive Woman Dies Wretchedly All While Saying ‘Everything’s Fine, Truly, I’m Alright. Can I Get You Some Tea?’ to Avoid Becoming the Monstrous Other in *Dracula* and Obituaries of Late Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts.” Andrews examined the illness scenes from the novel alongside obituaries from women who died from tuberculosis. The scenes describing both Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra after they are infected by Dracula mirror the nineteenth century obituaries that praised women for suffering in silence and for dying peacefully as to not disturb the men in their lives. Andrews argued these forms of writing modeled women’s performative cheerfulness in sickness and in death, which undoubtedly contributed to the idea that women who express their pain and suffering are labeled as hysterical. This stereotype affects women even today, where the medical community continues to under-prescribe pain medications to women.

Unfortunately, Horror is still fighting for academic recognition. Dr. Steffen Hantke (Sogang University) creates multiple panels and roundtables to establish Horror’s place in the academy. The interdisciplinary reach of Horror becomes evident when examining the conference program, which included panels on “International Horror,” on “The New Media Age of Horror,” on “The Social Analysis of Horror: How Horror and Apocalyptic Studies Can Confront ‘Real World’ Problems,” and on director Mike Flanagan, plus a roundtable on “Queerness and Psychoanalysis in Horror.” Beyond the variety of horror panels, Hantke’s “Roundtable on Horror and/versus the Academy” specifically addressed the ways that horror can be elevated to an academic course of study, how scholars can continue to fight for horror’s place in professional research and publishing, and how to maneuver the more disturbing aspects of horror when teaching. A diverse group of scholars including Danielle Herget (Fisher College), Emmanuelle Benhadj

(University of Pittsburg), Gary Hoppenstand, (Michigan State University), Hans Staats (Cedars Academy), and Sean Woodard (The University of Texas at Arlington) discussed how they maneuver and intertwine horror studies with more conventional literature and film.

The roundtable on “Horror Movies as Trauma Narratives” offered a psychological purpose for watching the genre. Adbul Rafay (DePaul University), Aleksandra Socha (University of Warsaw), and Antoinette Winstead (Our Lady of the Lake University) examined how viewers can use horror films to navigate traumatic experiences. Interestingly, scholarship “indicates that trauma survivors are disproportionately horror fans, and many horror fans self-report that they find watching horror movies paradoxically soothing” (SWPACA Program 107). The elevation of Horror to a cutting-edge psychological coping tool is one that deserves further study. Because most horror films include various kinds of emotional and physical violence, they offer the audience a psychological release because watching horror movies can help viewers process their personal trauma; they have a connection to characters who have endured similar trauma and have a safe space “to understand and process extreme events,” similar to exposure therapy. The panelists discussed domestic violence in *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Whannell, 2020), and *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), and the notion that women can only be empowered once they have been victimized. The panelists also examined racial trauma though the violence that black bodies experience in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022). They argued that black bodies are often traumatized in horror films, and that *Candyman* (Bernard Rose 1992) and *Get Out* can be viewed as a path to understanding racial and generational scarring, while *Heredity* (Ari Aster 2018) can be used to process one’s mental illness and generational trauma.

In the Pedagogy and Popular Culture panel “From Aerosmith to Zombies, Engaging First Year Composition Students with Popular Culture,” the presenters shared the benefits of using pop culture in the classroom. Yasmina Choate and Andrew Davis (Semoniole State College), and Paul Juhasz (Independent scholar), proposed that using a topic with which freshmen composition students are familiar builds their confidence, increases engagement, and is more accessible. Beyond using pop culture in the content of the course, they also experimented with using film techniques to teach the elements of writing. For example, a composition instructor would teach a common pattern in film: the establishing shot, the long shot, the medium shot, the closeup, and the visual transitions between these shots. They would then make the connections between the purpose of these shots and the purpose of writing components where the establishing shot represents the thesis, which introduces the audience to the topic; the long shots are the main points that will be detailed in the body paragraphs (the topic sentences); the medium shots and close ups are the specific details and evidence in the body paragraphs, and, just as there are transitions between these shots in film, there are

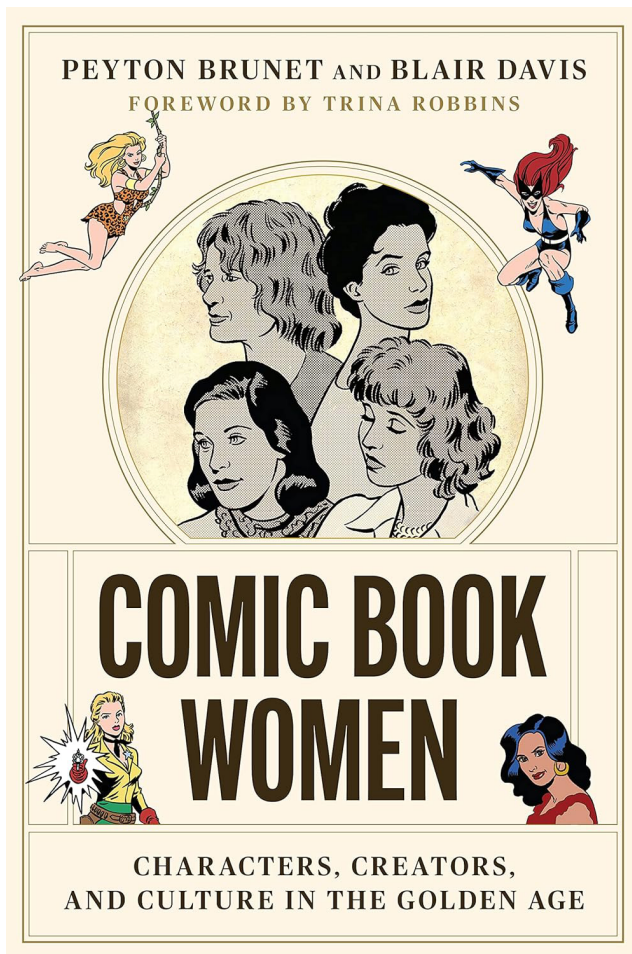


Fig. 4 | Cover of *Comic Book Women* (University of Texas Press, 2023).

also transitions between ideas in the paper. This innovative and interdisciplinary technique not only introduces students to basic film analysis, it also connects the foundations of writing to a visual medium within popular culture.

In addition to panels and roundtables, the conference also fosters a culture of community and networking. The Executive Team hosts an Opening Reception where the Peter C. Rollins Book Award and Student Awards Ceremony take place; this event includes a cash bar and a plentiful assortment of hors d'oeuvres. The Peter C. Rollins Book Award “recognizes contributions to the study of popular and/or American culture, particularly works analyzing cultural and historical representations in film, television, and/or other visual media” (“Awards and Professional Development” [southwestpca.org](http://southwestpca.org)).

The 2023 winners were Peyton Brunet and Blair Davis’s *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age* published by the University of Texas Press (Fig. 4). The study investigates the depictions and roles of women in comic books spanning from the World Wars to the women’s rights movement, including real women’s treatment within the comic book industry. Brunet delivered the keynote address about women’s stylized bodies, fashion, employment, and range



Fig. 5 | Peyton Brunet’s keynote address at the Opening Reception/Peter C. Rollins Book Award Ceremony, SWPACA Conference 2024.

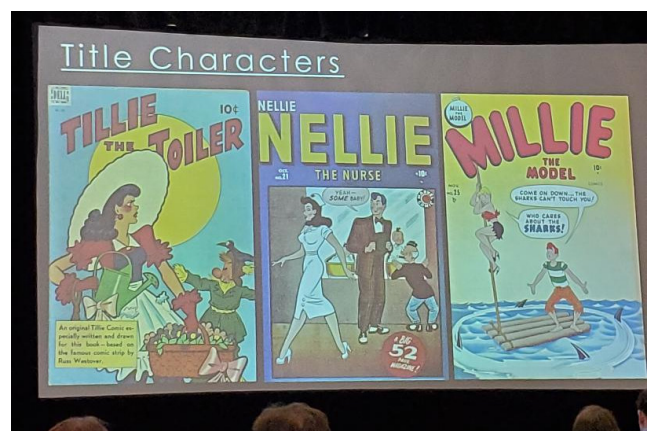


Fig. 6 | A slide from Peyton Brunet’s *Comic Book Women* presentation, SWPACA Conference 2024.

of superheroes in comic books (Fig. 5-6). The 2024 winner was John A. Lent’s *Asian Political Cartoons* (University of Mississippi Press) (Fig. 7). The keynote speaker is the previous year’s winner, so attendees at the 2025 SWPACA conference will get to hear Lent discuss his research when delivering the keynote at that year’s award ceremony.

Another aspect of the conference’s mission is dedicated to “supporting the development of new and young academic professionals in the fields of popular and/or American cultural studies through conference travel grants, paper awards, and professional development opportunities” (“Homepage” [swpca.org](http://swpca.org)). The most illustrious of these is The Michael K. Schoenecke Leadership Institute, which provides graduate students and newly-graduated scholars with two years of service and leadership experience, event management experience, and scholarly connections in the field of Popular/American studies. In this program, the Institute Fellows have opportunities to work with the Executive Team, help plan conference events, assist with *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, and work with area chairs for panel selection and creation. [Southwestpca.org](http://Southwestpca.org) has additional information on the application process, which will run from October 1-December

1, 2024 for the 2025-26 year. The website includes information on the eight Graduate Student Paper awards in the following areas: Creative Writing; Television, Music, and Visual Media; Historic and Contemporary Cultures; Identities and Culture; Language and Literature; Popular Culture Pedagogy; Film Studies; and Science Fiction and Fantasy.

Anyone examining the program can see evidence of SWPACA's commitment to supporting new academic professionals. The Executive Team also hosts a Student Breakfast, where the team provides a buffet-style breakfast, during which students have the opportunity to meet and mingle. There is also the Annual Student Dine Out, where students and Area Chairs take small groups to restaurants around town. The events that target students foster a connection between new professionals and experienced scholars that benefit both parties.

As with many conferences, SWPACA houses a Publisher Exhibit Room where attendees can purchase newly released popular culture scholarly works and where they can meet representatives from McFarland Publishing, University of New Mexico Press, and Intellect Press. The conference also includes independent presses such as Casa Urraca Press, Headless Shakespeare Press, and Valorena Publishing. In addition to the exhibit room, there are also professional development sessions on Publishing with McFarland, on Publishing with Academic Presses, an Editors Panel session, and a session on Creating a Stronger Application for Graduate School. SWPACA offers a variety of opportunities for graduate students to build their CV and to network.

Beyond the panels, there are other social events that foster camaraderie. There was Pop Culture Pub Quiz where teams of up to six members competed on trivia questions about popular culture over the last thirty years, and which included prizes for unusual categories such as the best incorrect answer and most creative team name. Another option was a Buddy Show Meet-up and Trivia where the audience viewed and discussed the pilot episodes of *Supernatural* and *Starsky and Hutch*. Prizes were also distributed in this session. On Game Night, participants can engage in "fun, challenging, but easy-to-learn games that are anything but traditional, including European games of the year and Mensa award winners. Multiple tables will be available for social, 'party' style games and quieter, more strategic fare, so the more the merrier" (SWPACA Program 91).

In addition to Trivia and Games, there were also film screenings. During Film Noir Night, we viewed 1946's *The Stranger* with Edward G. Robinson, Orson Welles, and Loretta Young that included introductory remarks, a general discussion, and a fun trivia contest to earn noir-themed prizes. On a more serious note, the Women, Gender, and Sexuality area had a Roundtable and Screening on Feminist Border Arts, and on the opposite spectrum, there was the always hilarious Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K), where attendees were treated to *The Giant Spider Invasion* (1975). The MST3K screening always includes one or two shorts, and this year we enjoyed two from RiffTrax: "Building an Outline" and MST3K's "Are

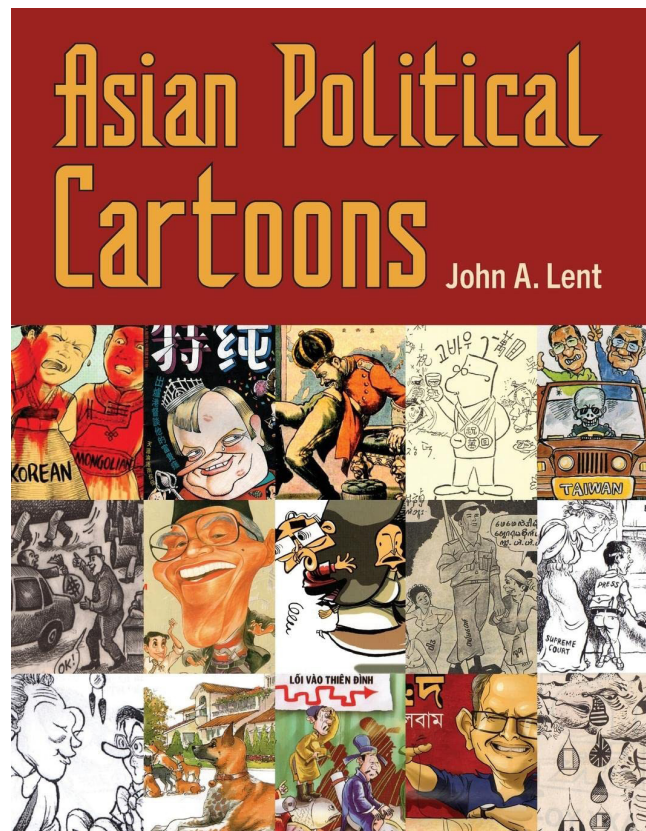


Fig. 7 | Cover of *Asian Political Cartoons* (University of Mississippi Press, 2023).

You Ready for Marriage?" While the conference offers a variety of social gatherings for those who wish to stay in the Marriott, attendees can also explore Albuquerque, especially Old Town and Church Street Café with its famous sopapillas, or even travel to the Meow Wolf Museum in Santa Fe. This menagerie of social events demonstrates the versatility of interests in popular culture and how the conference program both accommodates and reflects this variety.

Overall, SWPACA is one of the most welcoming and supportive conferences I have ever attended, and that atmosphere originates from the Executive Team and the Area Chairs and radiates to the attendees. I must illustrate this with an account from a panel. A graduate student presenter's voice and hands trembled as she shared that this was her first conference and that she was terrified. Immediately, multiple people in the audience encouraged her, telling her this was a safe space, and that we wanted her to enjoy her first presentation and the fruits of all her labour. The student ended up relaxing, smiling, and giving a dynamic presentation. She will likely remember that moment for the rest of her life, and, at that moment, I could not have been prouder to be involved with the conference. This is the kind of atmosphere that permeates the air at SWPACA.

The 46<sup>th</sup> Annual SWPACA conference will take place on February 19-22, 2025 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Area chairs will begin accepting proposals starting September 1, 2024. In addition to the full, in-person conference, the conference is

now offering a Summer Salon Online Conference from June 20-22, 2024. This smaller version of the in-person February Conference is ideal for graduate students and young professionals or anyone looking to present in their areas of interest. The Area Chairs will begin accepting proposals starting March 25, 2024. CFPs are posted in <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/> and <https://networks.h-net.org/group/pages/20001709/>

call. I recommend this conference for anyone with an interest in popular culture, anyone who wants to incorporate popular culture into their courses, anyone who desires to be in tune with contemporary social developments, anyone who wishes to be a part of the movement that establishes pop culture's place in the academy, or anyone who wants to encourage and support the next generation of scholars. ■

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