



Contact: Paula M. Krebs  
646 576-5102, awards@mla.org

**THE MLA'S WILLIAM SANDERS SCARBOROUGH PRIZE TO BE AWARDED TO  
JOSHUA BENNETT FOR *BEING PROPERTY ONCE MYSELF*; HONORABLE  
MENTIONS GO TO SYLVIA JENKINS COOK AND TO MELISSA DANIELS-  
RAUTERKUS**

New York, NY – 6 December 2021 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its twentieth annual William Sanders Scarborough Prize to Joshua Bennett, professor of English and creative writing at Dartmouth College, for his book *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*, published by Harvard University Press. An honorable mention will be awarded to Sylvia Jenkins Cook, professor of English emerita at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, for *Clothed in Meaning: Literature, Labor, and Cotton in Nineteenth-Century America*, published by the University of Michigan Press, and to Melissa Daniels-Rauterkus, associate professor of English at the University of Southern California, for *Afro-Realisms and the Romances of Race: Rethinking Blackness in the African American Novel*, published by Louisiana State University Press. The prize is awarded for an outstanding scholarly study of African American literature or culture.

The William Sanders Scarborough Prize is one of eighteen awards that will be presented on 8 January 2022, during the association's annual convention, to be held in Washington, DC. The members of the selection committee were John Drabinski (Univ. of Maryland, College Park); Christina Sharpe (York Univ.); and Amritjit Singh (Ohio Univ., Athens), chair. The committee's citation for Bennett's book reads:

Brilliant in its approach and gorgeous in its prose, Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself* employs conceptual frames from ecological criticism and animal studies to recast and reinterpret the African American literary imagination. His treatments of key figures from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries show the power of these interpretative frames by breathing new life into texts by well-known figures like Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Robert Hayden, and Toni Morrison, as well as opening new dimensions in works by contemporary writers such as Jesmyn Ward. What emerges from this approach is a creative, elegant, and compelling study of the intersections among ecology, the human animal, and the nonhuman animal as sites of thinking. Bennett offers innovative readings and a refreshing model for literary and cultural criticism.

The committee's citation for Cook's book reads:

Sylvia Jenkins Cook's *Clothed in Meaning: Literature, Labor, and Cotton in Nineteenth-Century America* is a fascinating study of the connections among labor, servitude, class, fashion, and literary expression in relation to the lives of exploited laborers at the close of the nineteenth century. Cook offers a rich treatment of material culture, sensitive to the creative function of the imagination under terrifying conditions and meticulously

documented across a range of evidence (newspapers, magazines, manifestos, slave narratives), and her work finds profound meaning at the crossroads of oppression and forms of fleeting luxury. Her scholarly intervention is informed by literary theory and animated by close readings of key and unexpected texts in service of its goals: deepening our understanding of the complex ways in which meaning making is achieved through words, from literary text to popular publications, in an environment indifferent or hostile to black lives.

The committee's citation for Daniels-Rauterkus's book reads:

Melissa Daniels-Rauterkus's *Afro-Realisms and the Romances of Race* revisits a series of familiar figures in the period between emancipation and the Harlem Renaissance, exploring the work of white American and African American writers concerned with representing blackness and black lives in literary form. Daniels-Rauterkus's "proleptic hermeneutics"—at once concise, rigorous literary history and theoretically informed scholarship—infuses well-known texts and debates with new energy and insight. Canonical figures like Mark Twain and Charles W. Chesnutt, for example, appear fresh and vibrant with her careful, unique readings, and less commonly theorized figures such as Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins are elevated and given the complex treatments they deserve. Daniels-Rauterkus transforms our understanding of racial formation in the United States and how literary figures, through widely varying representations of blackness, contributed to that formation in nuanced and unexpected ways.

The Modern Language Association of America and its over 23,000 members in 100 countries work to strengthen the study and teaching of languages and literature. Founded in 1883, the MLA provides opportunities for its members to share their scholarly findings and teaching experiences with colleagues and to discuss trends in the academy. The MLA sustains one of the finest publication programs in the humanities, producing a variety of publications for language and literature professionals and for the general public. The association publishes the *MLA International Bibliography*, the only comprehensive bibliography in language and literature, available online. The MLA Annual Convention features meetings on a wide variety of subjects. More information on MLA programs is available at [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org).

The William Sanders Scarborough Prize was established in 2001 and named for the first African American member of the MLA. It is awarded under the auspices of the Committee on Honors and Awards. Other awards sponsored by the committee are the William Riley Parker Prize; the James Russell Lowell Prize; the MLA Prize for a First Book; the Howard R. Marraro Prize; the Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize; the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize; the MLA Prize for Independent Scholars; the Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize; the Morton N. Cohen Award; the MLA Prizes for a Scholarly Edition and for Collaborative, Bibliographical, or Archival Scholarship; the Lois Roth Award; the Fenia and Yaakov Leviant Memorial Prize in Yiddish Studies; the MLA Prize in United States Latina and Latino and Chicana and Chicano Literary and Cultural Studies; the MLA Prize for Studies in Native American Literatures, Cultures, and Languages; the Matei Calinescu Prize; the MLA Prize for an Edited Collection; the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prizes for Comparative Literary Studies, for French and Francophone Studies, for Italian Studies, for Studies in Germanic Languages and Literatures, for Studies in Slavic Languages and Literatures, for a Translation of a Literary Work, and for a Translation of a Scholarly Study of Literature; and the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies. A complete list of current and previous winners can be found on the [MLA website](#).

William Sanders Scarborough (1852–1926), brought up in the South, was a dedicated student of languages and literature. He attended Atlanta University and graduated in 1875 from Oberlin College, where he later received an MA. After teaching at various Southern schools, Scarborough

was appointed professor of Latin and Greek at Wilberforce University. He later served as president of the university from 1908 through 1920. Scarborough's published works include *First Lessons in Greek* (1881) and *Birds of Aristophanes* (1886) and many articles in national magazines, including *Forum* and *Arena*. In 1882 he was the third black man to be elected for membership in the American Philological Association. Scarborough's areas of interest included classical philology and linguistics with an emphasis on African American dialects.