



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

**THE MLA’S WILLIAM SANDERS SCARBOROUGH PRIZE TO BE AWARDED TO
JAMES EDWARD FORD III FOR *THINKING THROUGH CRISIS*; HONORABLE
MENTIONS GO TO SAIDIYA HARTMAN AND TO THERÍ ALYCE PICKENS**

New York, NY – 14 December 2020 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its nineteenth annual William Sanders Scarborough Prize to James Edward Ford III, associate professor of English and Black studies at Occidental College, for his book *Thinking through Crisis: Depression-Era Black Literature, Theory, and Politics*, published by Fordham University Press. An honorable mention will be awarded to Saidiya Hartman, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, for *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, published by W. W. Norton, and to Therí Alyce Pickens, professor of English at Bates College, for *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness*, published by Duke 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 9 January 2021, during the association’s annual convention, to be held online. The members of the selection committee were Kalenda Eaton (Univ. of Oklahoma); Christina Sharpe (York Univ.), chair; and Amritjit Singh (Ohio Univ., Athens). The committee’s citation for Ford’s book reads:

James Ford’s *Thinking through Crisis: Depression-Era Black Literature, Theory, and Politics* is structured as a series of notebooks, each of which provides the reader with possibilities (social, political, imaginative) of the collective. Ford presents the Black proletariat as a collective whose perseverance and ability to assess and innovate serves as models for activism in the coming years. The authors included in the study remix the refrain often used in the Black church (“ . . . the Lord will make a way out of no way . . .”) by reading “God” as the whole of the Black underclass. The holy, then, are the masses residing in Richard Wright’s water-logged Mississippi, Ida B. Wells’s lynching victims, and attendees of Zora Neale Hurston’s rural churches. This collective does not lean on the understanding of European philosophy but creates Black theory that guides and instructs.

The committee’s citation for Hartman’s book reads:

Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* attends to the Black women and girls who make anarchy a mode of life and world-making and to their errant search for beauty (at the beginning of the twentieth century and into our present)—not as surplus or extra but as a theory and practice of life; W. E. B. Du Bois’s general strike moved to the city and carried out by Black young women. In this profoundly important book, Hartman has sounded a grammar for Black life.

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

Therí Alyce Pickens's *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* reads a series of texts and is structured as a series of conversations about madness and Blackness and their relations. We must contend with how race and disability, Blackness and madness, are understood, separately and as mutually constitutive. In this field-changing work, Pickens reads a range of work from scholars, writers, and theorists (including Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, Mat Johnson, and Toni Morrison) to see what the novel form can and cannot do as far as mad Black and Black mad characters are concerned.

The Modern Language Association of America and its over 24,000 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.

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. Mildener 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.