

MLA PRIZE FOR A FIRST BOOK AWARDED TO TIM CASSEDY FOR *FIGURES OF SPEECH*; ADENA SPINGARN AND ROBERT STILLING EACH RECEIVE HONORABLE MENTION

New York, NY – 4 December 2019 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its twenty-sixth annual Modern Language Association Prize for a First Book to Tim Cassedy, of Southern Methodist University, for *Figures of Speech: Six Histories of Language and Identity in the Age of Revolutions*, published by the University of Iowa Press. Receiving honorable mention are Adena Spingarn, of Cortez, Colorado, for *Uncle Tom: From Martyr to Traitor*, published by Stanford University Press, and Robert Stilling, of Florida State University, for *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, published by Harvard University Press.

The MLA Prize for a First Book was established in 1993. It is awarded annually for the first book-length publication of a member of the association that is a literary or linguistic study, a critical edition of an important work, or a critical biography.

The MLA Prize for a First Book is one of eighteen awards that will be presented on 11 January 2020, during the association's annual convention, to be held in Seattle. The members of the selection committee were Christopher Sheehan Braider (Univ. of Colorado, Boulder); Margaret Homans (Yale Univ.); Priya Joshi (Temple Univ.), chair; Gayle Rogers (Univ. of Pittsburgh); and Priscilla B. Wald (Duke Univ.). The committee's citation for Cassedy's book reads:

An original, compelling, and persuasive work, Tim Cassedy's *Figures of Speech: Six Histories of Language and Identity in the Age of Revolutions* brings together the history of linguistics, the history of the book, and the cultural history of British imperialism to give us a vivid picture of the relation between language and identity as seen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from a wide range of social and geopolitical positions. Attending to a variety of projects concerning language—most of them quirky and all but forgotten—Cassedy offers important insights into assumptions about culture, identity, and race and sheds fresh light on the prehistory of both modern nationalism and modern thought about the role cultures play in conditioning who we are and how we experience our identities. It is a rare and wonderful gift to be able to craft a scholarly argument—and there is a strong scholarly argument in this work, grounded in deep archival research—that also tells page-turning stories.

Tim Cassedy is associate professor of English at Southern Methodist University, where he specializes in American and transatlantic literature, the cultural history of reading, and the history of readers' relationships with texts. He received his BA from Columbia University, MA from the University of Chicago, and PhD from New York University. Cassedy's articles have appeared in

journals such as *Word and Image* and *William and Mary Quarterly* and are forthcoming in *New Literary History* and *Literature and Medicine*. His manuscript in progress is entitled *Printing Madness: The Print Culture of Mental Illness from Phrenology to Inkblots*.

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

Tracing the stunningly wide-ranging history of how "Uncle Tom" became one of the most controversial epithets in modern African American culture, Adena Spingarn tells the story of a character, a type, and a particular phrase all at once. *Uncle Tom: From Martyr to Traitor* moves from a famous novel to a host of surprising sites: American theater, the formation of Jim Crow laws, and the internal politics of New Negro literature. Spingarn's prose is gripping at every stage, augmented by a number of uncanny images from the hidden troves of American history, as it uncovers how discussions of manliness, sympathy and affect, and questions of dignity and education were all focalized by this polymorphous figure. It took decades upon decades, and an immense number of writers, texts, and rhetorical positions, to transform Stowe's character into the figure that Malcolm X reviled. Spingarn's remarkably lush documentation of that process—provocative, contemplative, and insightful—makes this an urgent, compelling book for our times.

Adena Spingarn is a scholar of American literature and cultural history and author of articles published in journals including *American Literature* and *Theatre Survey*. After earning her PhD in English at Harvard and teaching in Stanford University's English department as an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Humanities, she moved to the Four Corners region of the Southwest, where she is currently at work on a book on racial censorship in American film from the silent era to the 1960s. Her scholarship has been featured on NPR's *Studio 360* in the United States and the BBC's Radio 4 in the United Kingdom.

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

In a series of brilliant readings, Robert Stilling offers a new understanding of anticolonial anglophone cultural production, one in which liberatory aims are best served, counterintuitively, not by the nationalist arts of social realism but rather by a cosmopolitan modernist poetics of decadence: arts and literatures that celebrate the aesthetic for its own sake. With Oscar Wilde appearing, surprisingly but repeatedly, as a valued touchstone for postcolonial writers and visual artists such as Agha Shahid Ali, Derek Walcott, Bernardine Evaristo, and Yinka Shonibare, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* rediscovers the queer anti-imperial politics of Wildean aestheticism and shows how it aided later writers and artists—even those who explicitly derogate decadence in art—to celebrate empire's decline and embrace antirealism's power to imagine and effect change.

Robert Stilling is associate professor of English at Florida State University. He holds a PhD from the University of Virginia and a BA from Yale University. Stilling's essays and reviews have appeared in venues such as *ASAP Journal*, *Nineteenth Century Literature*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*, and *PMLA*. His current projects examine the intersection of fin-de-siècle decadence and religious fundamentalism in fiction by Hanif Kureishi and Michel Houellebecq, deindustrialization in the poetry of Ted Hughes, and the relation between poetry and the repatriation of art, artifacts, and archives. *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* received the 2018 Modernist Studies Association First Book Prize.

The Modern Language Association of America and its over 25,000 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; the 2020 convention in Seattle is expected to draw over 5,000 attendees. More information on MLA programs is available at www.mla.org.

Before the establishment of the MLA Prize for a First Book in 1993, members who were authors of first books were eligible, along with other members, to compete for the association's James Russell Lowell Prize, established in 1969. Apart from its limitation to members' first books, the MLA Prize for a First Book follows the same criteria and definitions as the Lowell Prize. Recent winners of the prize include Andrew Piper, Vivasvan Soni, Nergis Ertürk, Meredith Martin, Raúl Coronado, Sadia Abbas, Lital Levy, Supriya Rajan, Michael Allan, Christy Wampole, Amanda Jo Goldstein, and Melanie Yergeau. Recent honorable mentions have been presented to Eric Slauter, Eugenie Brinkema, Corey McEleney, and Britt Rusert.

The MLA Prize for a First Book is awarded under the auspices of the association's Committee on Honors and Awards. Other awards sponsored by the committee are the William Riley Parker Prize; the James Russell Lowell Prize; 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 William Sanders Scarborough Prize; 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.