

**THE MLA’S WILLIAM SANDERS SCARBOROUGH PRIZE TO BE AWARDED TO  
DARIUS BOST FOR *EVIDENCE OF BEING*; AN HONORABLE MENTION GOES TO  
CHERYL FINLEY FOR *COMMITTED TO MEMORY* AND TO CHERYL A. WALL FOR  
*ON FREEDOM AND THE WILL TO ADORN***

New York, NY – 4 December 2019 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its eighteenth annual William Sanders Scarborough Prize to Darius Bost, of the University of Utah, for his book *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*, published by the University of Chicago Press. An honorable mention will be awarded to Cheryl Finley, of Spelman College, for *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*, published by Princeton University Press, and to Cheryl A. Wall, of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, for *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay*, published by the University of North Carolina 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 11 January 2020, during the association’s annual convention, to be held in Seattle. The members of the selection committee were Kalenda Eaton (Univ. of Oklahoma, Norman), chair; Christina Sharpe (York Univ.); and Mary-Helen Washington (Univ. of Maryland, College Park). The committee’s citation for Bost’s book reads:

*With Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence*, Darius Bost pays careful and thoughtful attention to key literary figures, like Essex Hemphill and Melvin Dixon, and expertly aligns his study with the trauma of the AIDS epidemic in black gay communities and the artistic expression produced from collective grief. Chapters include innovative, mixed-genre analyses that recover the role of the black body, sexuality, and black gay social life in the 1980s and 1990s when few critics were taking note. Especially poignant is Bost’s biography of Dixon, a remarkable reevaluation of his entire career as poet, fiction writer, scholarly critic, and translator. Bost shows that Dixon’s diaries become “a site for theorizing black gay self-making” and, in their melancholic mourning over AIDS trauma, a “kind of textual survival.”

Darius Bost is assistant professor of ethnic studies in the School for Cultural and Social Transformation at the University of Utah. His research has been supported by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation; the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Social Sciences at Duke University; the President’s Office and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at San Francisco State University; the Martin Duberman Visiting Scholars Program at the New York Public Library; and the Provost’s Office at the University of Pennsylvania. His research has been published or is forthcoming in *Journal of American History*, *Criticism*, *The*

*Black Scholar*, *Souls*, *Palimpsest*, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, *Occasion*, and several edited collections. He received his PhD in American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park.

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

With *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon*, Cheryl Finley has exhaustively studied the history, the aesthetics, the reception, and the influence of the original slave ship icon over three centuries. The imagination, the time, the archival work, and the devotion that produced this book are truly impressive. The writing and extensive documentation of history are notable and the images well-placed. From official recorded accounts of the trade to early children's literature to contemporary subversive performance, Finley has captured the enduring legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its hold on the human psyche.

Cheryl Finley is inaugural distinguished visiting director of the Atlanta University Center Collective for the Study of Art History and Curatorial Studies, an initiative established by Spelman College. On leave from Cornell University, where she is associate professor of art history, Finley is also visiting professor at the University of Johannesburg and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative. Finley's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Aperture*, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, and *American Quarterly*, and she is the coauthor of *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South*, *Teenie Harris, Photographer: An American Story*, and *Diaspora, Memory, Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z*. Her work has been supported by, among others, the American Council of Learned Societies; the Ford Foundation; and the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art. *Committed to Memory* has also been awarded the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Book Prize for the best book on the decorative arts, design history, or material culture of the Americas published in 2018.

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

Cheryl A. Wall's *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay* is a refreshing examination of the power of essay writing and the particular shifts in style, subject matter, and tone African American essayists have contributed through the decades. Wall emphasizes writing as an art form in the hands of the black writer that recalls a particular aesthetic intention not always associated with nonfiction prose. Wall's study includes sermons and orations of the nineteenth century, debates on art and aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance, and four of the most influential essayists of the twentieth century: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, June Jordan, and Alice Walker. Wall explores the essay in formal terms, looking at how language reflects the will to adorn: to improvise, to use the vernacular. Particularly important is Wall's attention to essay writing as an interrogation of the meaning of freedom and democracy.

Cheryl A. Wall is Board of Governors Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, and author of *A Very Short Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance*; *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*; and *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. She has edited several books, including the two-volume *Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* for the Library of America, and coedited *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*. Wall is editor of the "Contemporary Period" section of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. She is also author of more than forty articles and chapters in books, and her work has been published in journals such as *African American Review*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Black Scholar*, and *Callaloo*. She has contributed as a commentator for several

documentaries, a radio documentary, and two C-SPAN programs devoted to Hurston's life and legacy.

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](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. The prize has been awarded in recent years to Monica L. Miller, Lawrence P. Jackson, Stephanie Leigh Batiste, Erica R. Edwards, Samantha Pinto, Anthony Reed, Uri McMillan, GerShun Avilez, Sonya Posmentier, and C. Riley Snorton. Honorable mentions in recent years have been given to Meta DuEwa Jones, Sara E. Johnson, Francesca T. Royster, Mary-Helen Washington, Nadia Ellis, Angela Naimou, Robert Fitzgerald Reid-Pharr, John Levi Barnard, and Fred Moten.

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.

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.