MLA’S SCAGLIONE PRIZE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERARY STUDIES AWARDED TO SIRAJ AHMED FOR ARCHAEOLOGY OF BABEL: THE COLONIAL FOUNDATION OF THE HUMANITIES

New York, NY – 5 December 2018 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its twenty-sixth annual Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies to Siraj Ahmed, of the Graduate Center and Lehman College, City University of New York, for his book Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities, published by Stanford University Press. The prize is awarded annually for an outstanding scholarly work that is written by a member of the association and that involves at least two literatures.

The prize is one of eighteen awards that will be presented on 5 January 2019, during the association’s annual convention, to be held in Chicago. The members of the selection committee were Devin A. Fore (Princeton Univ.) and Carmen Nocentelli (Univ. of New Mexico, Albuquerque), chair. The committee’s citation for Ahmed’s book reads:

Siraj Ahmed’s Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities traces the unacknowledged relation between colonialism and the philological revolution that gave rise to the modern humanities—and invites us to take stock not just of philology’s erasures but also of its effects on our capacities for political resistance. In so doing, Ahmed makes theoretical and methodological contributions that will be of great importance to many fields, from comparative literature and postcolonial studies to legal theory and European philosophy. Masterfully organized and analytically precise, Archaeology of Babel is informative, insightful, and provocative and should be read widely.


The Modern Language Association of America and its 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;
the 2019 convention in Chicago is expected to draw 7,000 attendees. More information on MLA
programs is available at www.mla.org.

The Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Comparative Literary Studies, awarded under the
auspices of the MLA’s Committee on Honors and Awards, was presented for the first time in
1992. Recent winners have been Sahar Amer, Alexa Huang, Donna V. Jones, Frédérique Aït-
Touati, David Spurr, Carmen Nocentelli, Silke-Maria Weineck, Steven S. Lee, Ayesha
Ramachandran, and Haun Saussy.

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 a Bibliography, Archive, or Digital Project; 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, Languages, and Cultures; the
Matei Calinescu Prize; the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prizes 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.

The Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Endowment Fund was established and donated by Aldo
Scaglione to the Modern Language Association in 1987. The fund honors the memory of
Scaglione’s late wife, Jeanne Daman Scaglione. A Roman Catholic, Jeanne Daman was
headmistress of a Jewish kindergarten in Brussels, Belgium. When arrests and deportations of
Jews began in 1942, she worked with Belgian and Jewish resistance units, helping to find hiding
places for two thousand children throughout Belgium. She also helped rescue many Jewish men
about to be deported as slave laborers by obtaining false papers for them. Jeanne Scaglione’s life
and contributions to humanity are commemorated in the United States Holocaust Memorial
Museum in Washington, DC.

Aldo Scaglione, a member of the Modern Language Association from 1957 until his death in
2013, was Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Literature at New York University. A native of
Turin, Italy, he received a doctorate in modern letters from the University of Turin. He taught at
the University of Toulouse and at the University of Chicago. From 1952 to 1968 he taught at the
University of California, Berkeley, and from 1968 to 1987 he was W. R. Kenan Professor of
Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. In 1987 he
came to New York University as professor of Italian and then chair of the Department of Italian.
Scaglione was a Fulbright Fellow and a Guggenheim Fellow, held senior fellowships from the
Newberry Library and the German Academic Exchange Service, and was a visiting professor at
Yale University, the City University of New York, and the Humanities Research Institute of the
University of Wisconsin, Madison. In 1975 he was named Cavaliere dell’Ordine al Merito della
Repubblica Italiana. Scaglione was president of the American Boccaccio Association and was a
member of the MLA Executive Council from 1981 to 1984. His published books include Nature
and Love in the Late Middle Ages (1963), Ars Grammatica (1970), The Classical Theory of
Composition (1972), The Theory of German Word Order (1981), The Liberal Arts and the Jesuit
College System (1986), Knights at Court: Courtliness, Chivalry, and Courtesy from Ottonian
Germany to the Italian Renaissance (1991), and Essays on the Arts of Discourse: Linguistics,