THE MLA’S WILLIAM SANDERS SCARBOROUGH PRIZE TO BE AWARDED TO
SONYA POSMENTIER FOR CULTIVATION AND CATASTROPHE AND TO C. RILEY
SNORTON FOR BLACK ON BOTH SIDES; JOHN LEVI BARNARD AND FRED
MOTEN TO RECEIVE HONORABLE MENTIONS

New York, NY – 5 December 2018 – The Modern Language Association of America today announced it is awarding its seventeenth annual William Sanders Scarborough Prize to Sonya Posmentier, of New York University, for her book Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, and to C. Riley Snorton, of the University of Chicago, for his book Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity, published by the University of Minnesota Press. Honorable mentions will be awarded to John Levi Barnard, of the College of Wooster, for Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture, published by Oxford University Press, and to Fred Moten, of New York University, for Black and Blur, 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 5 January 2019, during the association’s annual convention, to be held in Chicago. The members of the selection committee were Aliyyah Inaya Abdur-Rahman (Brandeis Univ.); Kalenda Eaton (Arcadia Univ.); and Mary-Helen Washington (Univ. of Maryland, College Park), chair. The committee’s citation for Posmentier’s book reads:

A major intervention in the field of ecocriticism, Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature examines the rich body of black literary response to natural and agricultural experiences to demonstrate how writers and lyricists have countered the alienation brought about by social and environmental catastrophe. Sonya Posmentier shows that catastrophe and cultivation can be viewed as interlocking ideas and as a basis for black modernity in the twentieth century. In meticulous and scholarly readings of a fascinating and informative array of sources, Posmentier shows that ecological characteristics and processes serve equally to define diaspora and that the focus on land, landscapes, and ecologies is one way black writers resist the constraints of a United States–bound identity.

Sonya Posmentier is an associate professor of English at New York University. She received her PhD from Princeton University, her MFA from the University of Oregon, and her BA from Yale University. Her essays and articles have appeared in The New York Times Book Review, American Literature, American Literary History, Public Books and elsewhere, and she has published poems in Grey, Seneca Review, and Perihelion. Posmentier teaches classes on black diasporic literature
and culture and is part of the NYU Sanctuary Campus Coalition. She is at work on a new book, *Black Reading*, about the intersecting histories of black cultural studies and modern lyric theory.

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

*Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is the first book-length study of race, specifically blackness, in the definition and development of transgender identity in discursive, scientific, historical, and medical terms. C. Riley Snorton identifies intersections between blackness and transness from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, attending specifically to the interimbicration of antiblack and antitrans legislation and violence. Drawing on an abundance of archival material, Snorton shows how slavery and the production of racialized gender provided the foundations for an understanding of gender as fluid, multiple, and mutable. *Black on Both Sides* is essential reading for anyone working in the fields of black studies, literature, history, genders, and sexualities. Snorton is reimagining the history of how blackness has been articulated within transness and, in doing so, is creating new ways to imagine livable black trans worlds.

C. Riley Snorton, professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, is a cultural theorist who analyzes representations of race, gender, and sexuality throughout history. He is the author of *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* and has coedited several special issues of journals such as *Transgender Studies Quarterly; Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International*; and the *International Journal of Communication*. Snorton has contributed chapters to numerous anthologies, including *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, *Black Genders and Sexualities*, and *The Comedy of Dave Chappelle: Critical Essays*. He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, an Andrew W. Mellon postdoctoral fellowship at Pomona College, and two fellowships at Harvard University’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research.

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

In this illuminating and engaging cultural history, John Levi Barnard argues that the United States has since its founding cultivated a collective national identity by appropriating classical traditions in the service of empire. *Empire of Ruin: Black Classicism and American Imperial Culture* turns to African American writers to show how they reappropriated classical traditions to reveal the connections between those traditions and the violence of slavery and empire. Amid the current debates over the meaning and political impact of national monuments, which use classical models to serve the nation’s political projects, *Empire of Ruin* takes on a timely relevance and “ultimately reveals black classicism as a force so significant that classical history and literature can never be deployed in public discourse without at the same time conjuring their own dialectical undoing.”

John Levi Barnard is an assistant professor of English at the College of Wooster, specializing in American literature of the long nineteenth century, African American literature and culture, and the environmental humanities. He received the Norman Foerster Prize in 2017 for an article in *American Literature* and in 2014 was awarded an honorable mention in the William Riley Parker Prize competition for an article in *PMLA*. Barnard has an essay forthcoming in the 1830–1850 volume of the new Cambridge University Press series *African American Literature in Transition*.

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

Fred Moten’s *Black and Blur* is the first book to be published in the trilogy *Consent Not to Be a Single Being*. The trilogy draws its title from a phrase of Édouard Glissant’s and
in many ways reflects the extraordinary ambition and accomplishment of Moten’s book to introduce new thought, methodologies, and expressive modes into black studies and black expressive culture. The texts under consideration and the theorists with whom Moten engages are so wide and various as to be dizzying (when not dazzling). Challenging and meditative, *Black and Blur* forgoes what we might anticipate in terms of argument to present a series of ruminations or alternatives to conceptualize and reinforce the line between what feels like ubiquitous antiblackness and the indefatigable richness of black life.

Fred Moten is a professor in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University. He holds an AB from Harvard University and a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Among his many works, Moten is the author of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition; Hughson’s Tavern; B. Jenkins; The Feel Trio* (poetry finalist for the National Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Award and winner of the California Book Award); *The Little Edges* (finalist for the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award); and *The Service Porch*. He has served on the editorial boards of *Callaloo, Discourse, American Quarterly*, and *Social Text*. In 2016 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and the African American Literature and Culture Society’s Stephen E. Henderson Award for Outstanding Achievement in Poetry.

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 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 Magdalena J. Zaborowska, Monica L. Miller, Lawrence P. Jackson, Stephanie Leigh Batiste, Erica R. Edwards, Samantha Pinto, Anthony Reed, Uri McMillan, and GerShun Avilez. Honorable mentions in recent years have been given to Daphne Lamothe, Meta DuEwa Jones, Sara E. Johnson, Francesca T. Royster, Mary-Helen Washington, Nadia Ellis, Angela Naimou, and Robert Fitzgerald Reid-Pharr.

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 Fenia and Yaakov Levant 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 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.