MLA Committee on Honors and Awards

2019 Annual Report

The charge of the Committee on Honors and Awards (CHA) is to “[oversee] the procedures that result in the nomination and determination of those receiving MLA honors and awards and reviews proposals for new honorary members and fellows.” Until this past year, the committee met once annually in the spring (at an all-day meeting in the MLA’s NYC offices) to conduct its primary business: reviewing prizes and their entry numbers, official prize announcements, and selection procedures; generating and considering nominations for honorary fellows; making appointments (including the selection of alternates and committee chairs) to fill vacancies on prize selection committees. This year, however, the MLA asked the CHA to conduct its business remotely over a series of Zoom meetings, which took place as follows:

- Zoom Meeting 1: 2 April 2019, 12:30-2:30pm, during which the CHA conducted all slated business except the appointment of new members to prize selection committees for 2019 and 2020, and the appointment of chairs of those committees. NB: in a last-minute change to the agenda, the CHA did make one emergency appointment to fill an unexpected vacancy on the First Book Prize Committee.

- Zoom Meeting 2: 30 April 2019, 12:30-2:30pm, during which the CHA considered follow-up questions to matters discussed at the 2 April meeting and made appointments for just over the first half of the open committee positions.

- Zoom Meeting 3: 4 June 2019, 12:30-2:30pm, during which the CHA considered additional follow-up questions to one chair appointment discussed at the 30 April meeting and one new matter relating to the relationship between the Scaglione Italian Manuscript Prize and the Scaglione Italian Literary Studies Prize.

The new format of Zoom-facilitated distance meetings of the CHA and relevant MLA staff resulted in a
total of six hours of discussions. This was roughly equivalent to the total duration of NYC meetings (which typically ran from 9-4pm, with a one-hour lunch break and a few coffee breaks). As chair, I conducted an informal poll of CHA members who had participated in meetings under both the old and new formats, and received varied feedback: while one member felt that the outcomes in the two systems were similar enough to not justify the expense of an in-person meeting at MLA HQ in NYC, two others felt that the prolonged span over two months and lacking social interaction made for significantly more difficult and fragmented deliberations. One of these suggested cutting dining costs in order to facilitate a return to the NYC meeting venue. It is worth noting that one first-year member resigned from the committee mid-way through its work this spring, citing the changed format for their decision; another more veteran member stated to me that they considered resigning but did not want to renege on their commitment to the institution.

This year, the CHA made seven nominations to fill 2019-2020 prize committee vacancies (additionally indicating a sufficient number of alternates as requested by MLA staff); twenty-one nominations to fill 2020-2021 prize committee vacancies (additionally indicating a sufficient number of alternates as requested by MLA staff); and appointed all necessary committee chairs. Beyond this task, the CHA fielded a number of questions from MLA prize committees and MLA staff. The James Russell Lowell Prize Committee expressed two concerns, regarding the large number of annual submissions (resulting in a disproportionately large burden on that selection committee’s members) and the relatively narrow array of submissions, increasingly skewed toward large presses that are easily able to bear the costs of submitting 6 copies of all submissions to committee members. The CHA discussed all of the JRL Prize Committee’s suggestions and in the end decided to address the first issue by recommending an expansion of the Committee’s size from five to seven members, and the second by recommending that the MLA look for ways to raise general awareness of the prizes among the membership to promote individual (as opposed to Press) submissions. The CHA was also
asked by MLA staff to consider the matter of co-winners and short lists. After considerable discussion regarding the merits of making superior work more visible to the MLA membership and the field at large, it was decided that Prize Committees considering more than 100 submissions in a given year may recognize a short list of finalists (five) in addition to co-winners, if the Committee so chooses. Prizes receiving fewer than 100 submissions may only recognize co-winners or honorable mentions, but not short lists. Following last year’s recommendation that there be a new Prize for Edited Collections, conferred in alternation with the MLA Prize for Collaborative, Bibliographical, or Archival Scholarship, the CHA was asked to consider a number of specific procedural questions such as the timing of the Prize’s cycle; its eligibility requirements; and the applicant pool vis-à-vis other prizes. Specifically, it was decided that applicants to the Shaughnessy and Mildenberger Prizes may also submit their volumes to the Prize for Edited Collections if they so choose and that applications will be due on May 1, with the same selection committee as the Prize for Collaborative, Bibliographical, or Archival Scholarship evaluating the applicants for the new Prize for Edited Collections. The CHA also fielded an MLA staff question regarding whether manuscripts honored (either with a prize or an “honorable mention” designation) by the Scaglione Italian Manuscript Prize should then be eligible for submission to the Italian Literary Studies competition; the CHA members agreed that they should not.

With thanks to Charles Bernstein, Vinay Dharwadker, and Susan Stanford Friedman for compiling and submitting the information to the 2019 Committee, the CHA hereby forwards the following honorary fellow nominations: Kamau Brathwaite, Amit Chaudhuri, Richard Flanagan, Susan Howe, M. Nourbese Philip, Lev Rubinstein, Adham Soueif, and Luis Valdez.

It is worth noting that the constraints of this year’s meeting structure did not permit the CHA to continue to address some recommendations of the 2018 committee. We did not address the matter of funding for new prizes (to recognize work in South Asian studies, Asian studies, and African studies along with a prize in Middle Eastern studies), nor did we “consider how the current prize structure
can better capture the vibrancy of postcolonial and empire studies. Two prizes currently recognize
the colonial legacies of European languages: the Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies
and the Singer Kovacs Prize. Other prizes might be restructured so that they similarly recognize the
effects of colonialism and diaspora,” as was recommended in the 2018 CHA committee report.

Respectfully submitted,

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2015-2019
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