

LETRAS BORICUAS: SUPPORTING PUERTO RICAN ARTISTS AND WRITERS ACROSS THE ARCHIPELAGO & THE DIASPORA

Presenters: Elizabeth Alexander, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Jen Benka, Academy of American Poets; Mayra Santos Febres, Letras Boricuas Selection Committee; Aracelis Girmay, Letras Boricuas Selection Committee; Neeltje van Marissing Méndez, Flamboyant Foundation; Alexis Ortiz, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; Willie Perdomo, Letras Boricuas Selection Committee; Félix Joaquín Rivera, Letras Boricuas Selection Committee; Carlos Rodríguez, Flamboyant Foundation; Carina Del Valle Schorske, Letras Boricuas Selection Committee

This individual artist focused preconference session will delve into the collaborative work of funders who have situated their grantmaking work at the intersections of cultural preservation, recovery and resilience for the Island’s cultural ecosystem, and creative approaches to supporting individual artists. In collaboration with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and Flamboyant Arts Fund, this preconference session will focus on case studies that illustrate how funders in Puerto Rico and the continental US can collaboratively mobilize financial and other resources to create new streams of support for individual artists.

Focusing on Letras Boricuas – a first of its kind fellowship for emerging and established Puerto Rican writers from across the archipelago and the diaspora – participants will have the opportunity to learn about establishing new funding opportunities, how the initiative came together and the challenges we faced along the way, the rigorous and collaborative program design process, navigating power dynamics, centering antiracist practices and language, balancing the unique needs of artistic communities in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora, bilingual communications, how to create space for each party to bring its expertise to the table, and how to translate experience from the continental US into the Puerto Rican context.

Please note this session will be presented in English. Captions and live interpretation will be provided throughout in both English and Spanish.

Agenda:

	<i>What</i>	<i>Who</i>
<i>2:30 PM</i>	<i>Welcome</i>	<i>GIA and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation</i>
	<i>Lectras Boricuas and a commitment to Puerto Rico presentation</i>	<i>Elizabeth Alexander and Alexis Ortiz</i>
	<i>Flamboyant Foundation – Puerto Rico presentation</i>	<i>Carlos Rodríguez and Neeltje van Marissing Méndez</i>

	<i>Academy of American Poets presentation</i>	<i>Jen Benka</i>
<i>3:00 PM</i>	<i>Writer's Panel Discussion</i>	<i>Elizabeth Alexander (moderator), Marya Santos Febres, Carina Del Valle Schorske, Willie Perdomo, Aracelis Girmay, and Félix Joaquín Rivera</i>
<i>3:30 PM</i>	<i>Q&A</i>	<i>All presenters</i>
	<i>Readings</i>	<i>All presenters/facilitators</i>
<i>4:00 PM</i>	<i>Closing</i>	
	<i>Break</i>	
<i>4:20 PM</i>	<i>Epilogue: An intimate Conversation with Writer, Artist, and Keynote Speaker</i>	<i>GIA</i>
	<i>Poetry Reading & Dialogue</i>	<i>Gloriann Sacha Antonetty Lebrón</i>
<i>5:20 PM</i>	<i>Closing</i>	

Preconference Presenter Bios:

Elizabeth Alexander – decorated poet, educator, memoirist, scholar, and cultural advocate – is president of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the nation’s largest funder in arts and culture, and humanities in higher education. Dr. Alexander has held distinguished professorships at Smith College, Columbia University, and Yale University, where she taught for 15 years and chaired the African American Studies Department. She is Chancellor Emeritus of the Academy of American Poets, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, serves on the Pulitzer Prize Board, and co-designed the Art for Justice Fund. Notably, Alexander composed and delivered “Praise Song for the Day” for the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama and is author or co-author of fourteen books. Her book of poems, *American Sublime*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 2006, and her memoir, *The Light of the World*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography in 2015.

Jennifer Benka has worked in the arts & culture sector for 25 years with a particular focus on supporting writers and literature. As the president & executive director of the Academy of American Poets, Jen oversees two of the world’s largest poetry publishing platforms today, Poets.org and Poem-a-Day, and grants and awards to more than 200 poets and 90 nonprofit literary organizations annually. Jen also serves as an advisor, judge, and nominator for multiple national and international literary fellowship programs. An author of two collections of poetry and numerous essays, Jen is regularly

interviewed by the media, including by NPR, CNN, and the New York Times. She holds an MFA degree in writing from The New School University.

Mayra Santos-Febres was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico in 1966. She studied literature at the University of Puerto Rico and has a Ph. D. from Cornell University. She has been a visiting scholar at Rutgers (1992), Cornell (1994) and Harvard University (2004) as well as the Complutense University in Spain (2013), and Leipzig University in Holland (2005), among others. She co-created the Creative Writing Program for the University of Puerto Rico, and founded and directed The Word Festival /Festival de la Palabra, the most internationally recognized Literary Festival in Puerto Rico (2010-2019). Content Coordinator for the Interdisciplinary and Multicultural Institute at the UPR, Mayra Santos-Febres is currently the Principal Investigator for the development of University of Puerto Rico's Afro Diasporic and Race Studies Program, which recently received a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for academic diversification. As a writer, Mayra Santos-Febres has won many international prizes and recognitions, such as the Letras de Oro Award (Spain, 1994) the Radio France Juan Rulfo Award (1998), and the Premio Primavera Award, Spain (2011) for her novel *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*. Her literary work has been translated into French, English, Italian, Rumanian, Korean, Portuguese and Icelandic. She has published the poetry collections *Anamú y manigua* (1990), *El orden escapado* (1991), *Boat People* (1994), *Tercer Mundo* (2004), *Lecciones de renuncia* (2021), and *Huracanada* (2018). Her short story books include *Pez de vidrio y otros cuentos*, *El cuerpo correcto*, *Un pasado posible* y *Mujeres violentas*. She has also published the novels *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2001), *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (2002), *Fe en disfraz* (2009), *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2006) and *La amante de Gardel* (2015).

Aracelis Girmay was born and raised in Santa Ana, California. She received a BA from Connecticut College in 1999 and went on to earn an MFA in poetry from New York University. She is the author of *the black maria* (BOA Editions, 2016), *Kingdom Animalia* (BOA Editions, 2011), winner of the Isabella Poetry Award and a finalist for the National Books Critics Circle Award, and *Teeth* (Curbstone Press, 2007). In a statement for the New American Poets series, she says of her work, "I hope the poems are songs sometimes. I want the poems to ask questions. To engage other people. To promote compassion." Girmay was awarded a Whiting Award in 2015, and the judges' citation notes that "her project seems to be our deep and ongoing subjectivity, our vulnerability to history, to one another, to desire, and to the belief in something large and lasting that we might belong to. There's empathy, play, and fearlessness here, and both formal and emotional range." Girmay is also the author of a collage-based picture book, *changing, changing* (George Braziller, 2005). She has received fellowships from Cave Canem, Civitella Ranieri, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She teaches and lives in New York City.

Neeltje L. van Marissing Méndez, managing director, Communications and External Affairs at Flamboyant Foundation-Puerto Rico, plays a critical role to increase the profile of Flamboyant's work to revitalize Puerto Rico. Neeltje believes in the transformative power of education. She's also passionate about promoting reading and literature and spent the earlier years of her career as a manager of the Children's Literature Room of Puerto Rico's National Library and as general coordinator of the Festival de la Palabra, a yearly literary event that brings together 50 international and local writers and more

than 20,000 visitors. Prior to joining Flamboyán, she worked as executive director of the University of Puerto Rico Press. She oversaw publishing, sales, and marketing initiatives of this prestigious academic publisher. She also worked at Santillana, an international Spanish publishing house that specializes in K-12 educational materials where she held three roles as Children's Literature Editor, General Interest Books division director and communications director. She has a bachelor's degree in Modern Languages and Literature from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus.

Alexis Ortiz is a senior program associate in the Office of the President at The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Before joining the Foundation in 2017 as a program associate in the Arts and Culture program, Alexis held positions at the Kennedy Center, Jazz@Lincoln Center, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Lisa Booth Management. She has produced performances, tours, television specials, and community events at venues ranging from the White House to SXSW as well as for PBS, and has supported artists from across the country and around the world. Alexis holds a B.A. in Political Science and Latin American Studies from Yale University and an MA from the University of Miami in international administration, with a concentration in culture and sustainable development. She is a proud member of the Board of Jews for Racial and Economic Justice in NYC and an alum of the North Star Fund's People Power Giving Project and EDGE Funder's Alliance Global Engagement Lab.

Willie Perdomo is the author of *Smoking Lovely: The Remix*, *The Crazy Bunch*, *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon*, and *Where a Nickel Costs of Dime*. Winner of the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Cy Twombly Award for Poetry, and the PEN Open Book Award, Perdomo was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Poetry Society of America Norma Farber First Book Award. He is co-editor of the anthology, *Latínext*, and his work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Poetry*, *Washington Post*, *The Best American Poetry 2019*, and *African Voices*. He teaches at Phillips Exeter Academy and was recently appointed New York State Poet Laureate.

Félix Joaquín Rivera is a writer and university professor. He has published *La muñeca de chocolate* (nonfiction novel, 1995), and *La Cripta* (short novel, 2021).

Carlos Rodríguez Silvestre, executive director of Flamboyán Foundation-Puerto Rico, shapes, implements, and oversees all aspects of the Foundation's mission-driven work and programmatic strategy in Puerto Rico. Carlos believes education is one of the most important tools we have to achieve a more just society and disrupt barriers of inequity. Before joining Flamboyán, Carlos was an engineer and business strategist focused on solving complex operations and logistics challenges faced by Fortune 500 companies. Prior to that, he supported sales, finance, operations, and federal regulatory compliance for Univision Communications, Inc. He earned a bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering and a master's degree in Industrial Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology. He has a Master's in Business Administration (M.B.A.) from The Wharton School at University of Pennsylvania, and a Juris Doctor from the University of Puerto Rico School of Law. Carlos is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE)

in the jurisdiction of Puerto Rico, a member of the Puerto Rico College of Engineers and Surveyors (CIAPR), and a member of the Puerto Rico, Florida and Washington, D.C. BAR. Carlos serves as Board President of Colaborativo PR and as Treasurer for the Filantropía PR Board of Directors.

Carina del Valle Schorske is a writer and translator living between New York City and Puerto Rico. Her essays and criticism have been published in many venues including *Bookforum*, *The Believer*, *The Common*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the *New York Times Magazine*, where she is a contributing writer. Her cover story on Bad Bunny was featured on CBS, and her essay on the social history of her grandmother's apartment building in Washington Heights was a finalist for a National Magazine Award. Alongside Ricardo Maldonado, Erica Mena, and Raquel Salas Rivera, she co-edited *Puerto Rico en mi corazón*, a bilingual anthology of contemporary poetry from both the archipelago and diaspora (Anomalous Press, 2019). She won Gulf Coast's 2016 Prize for her translations of the Puerto Rican poet Marigloria Palma--an ongoing project. Her debut essay collection, *The Other Island*, was honored with a Whiting Nonfiction Grant in 2020 and is forthcoming from Riverhead Books.

Epilogue Presenter Bio:

Gloriann Sacha Antonetty Lebrón is an Afropuertorican writer, communication strategist and professor. She is the founder of Revista étnica. For more than 15 years she has been working in communications for nonprofits and in advertising/ public relations agencies.

As a writer, she has published the collection of poems: *Hebras*. In addition to having stories published in the anthologies: *Cuentos de Huracán*, *Maraña of Tejedoras de Palabras*, *Palenque*: Puerto Rican anthology of thematic "negrista", antiracist, Africanist and afrodescendant. She has also published in the *Academia* magazine of EDP University, *Boreales*, *Letras Magazine* of the UMET, *Afroféminas* among others. She has been a communications professor at Universidad Sagrado Corazón (where she graduated), and also at the Universidad del Turabo.

Gloriann Sacha won the social enterprise award of EnterPRize 2017. Have received recognition for her communication work with a Silver Anvil of PRSA, Gold award in SME Digital Awards and Honorable Mention of the Gautier Benítez Poetry Contest of 2014 for her poetry book *Hebras*. She is a member of the Colectivo Las Ancestras, Poesía Afroversiva and Collective Ilé.