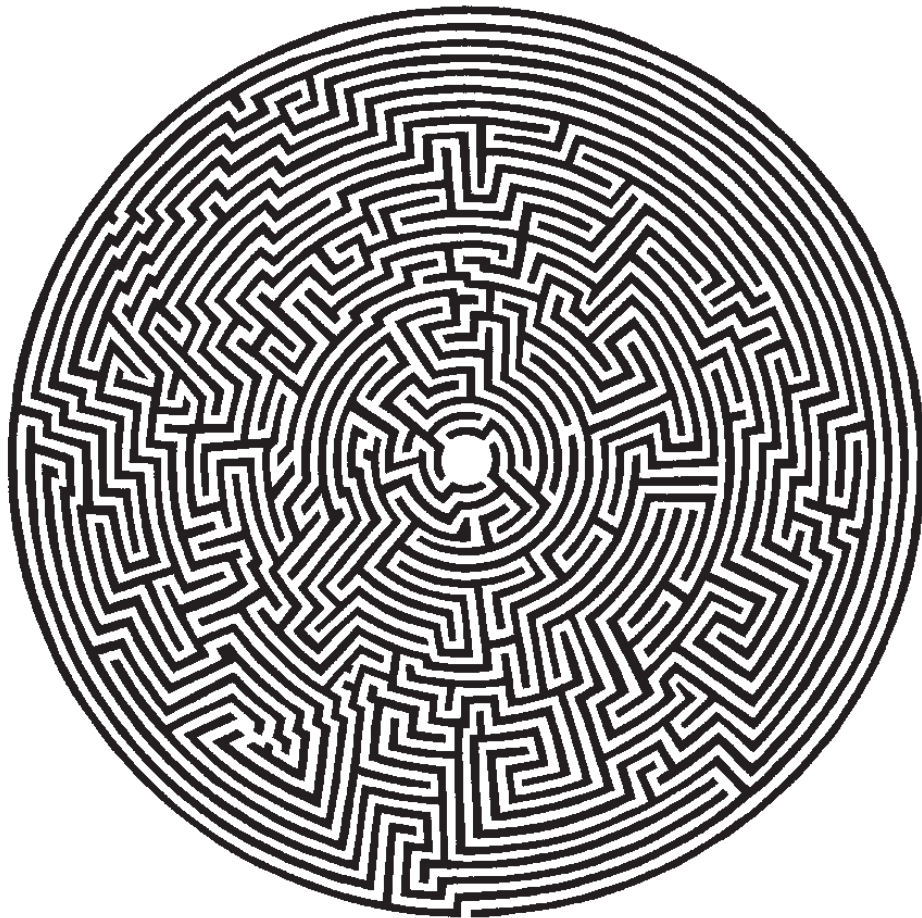


BEFORE COLUMBUS FOUNDATION  
PRESENTS THE

AMERICAN  
BOOK AWARDS  
2009



THE  
AMERICAN  
BOOK AWARDS

# THE AMERICAN BOOK AWARDS

America was intended to be a place where freedom from discrimination was the means by which equality was achieved. Today, American culture is the most diverse ever on the face of this earth. Recognizing literary excellence demands a panoramic perspective. A narrow view strictly to the mainstream ignores all the tributaries that feed it. American literature is not one tradition but all traditions. From those who have been here for thousands of years to the most recent immigrants, we are all contributing to American culture. We are all being translated into a new language. Everyone should know by now that Columbus did not “discover” America. Rather, we are all still discovering America—and we must continue to do so.

The Before Columbus Foundation was founded in 1976 as a nonprofit educational and service organization dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of contemporary American multicultural literature. The goals of BCF are to provide recognition and a wider audience for the wealth of cultural and ethnic diversity that constitutes American writing. BCF has always employed the term “multicultural” not as a description of an aspect of American literature, but as a definition of all American literature. BCF believes that the ingredients of America’s so-called “melting pot” are not only distinct, but integral to the unique constitution of American Culture—the whole comprises the parts.

In 1978, the Board of Directors of BCF (authors, editors, and publishers representing the multicultural diversity of American Literature) decided that one of its programs should be a book award that would, for the first time, respect and honor excellence in American literature without restriction or bias with regard to race, sex, creed, cultural origin, size of press or ad budget, or even genre. There would be no requirements, restrictions, limitations, or second places. There would be no categories (i.e., no “best” novel or only one “best” of anything). The winners would not be selected by any set quota for diversity (nor would “mainstream white anglo male” authors be excluded), because diversity happens naturally. Finally, there would be no losers, only winners. The only criteria would be outstanding contribution to American literature in the opinion of the judges.

All winners are accorded equal standing. Their publishers are also to be honored for both their commitment to quality and their willingness to take the risks that accompany publishing outstanding books and authors that may not prove “cost-effective” in the short run. There are special Award designations (such as Lifetime Achievement) for contributions to American literature beyond a recently published book. The American Book Awards Program is not associated with any industry group or trade organization. The American Book Awards offer no cash prize nor do they require any financial commitments from the authors or their publishers. The Award winners are nominated and selected by a panel of writers and editors who also represent the diversity of American literary culture.

## **The 2009 Board of Directors of the Before Columbus Foundation:**

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Before Columbus Foundation Presents  
the winners of the

# American Book Awards 2009

**Houston A. Baker, Jr.**

*Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Right Era*  
(Columbia University Press)

**Danit Brown**

*Ask for a Convertible* (Pantheon)

**Jericho Brown**

*Please* (New Issues Poetry & Prose)

**José Antonio Burciaga**

*The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes: Selected Works of José Antonio Burciaga*  
edited by **Mimi R. Gladstein** and **Daniel Chacón** (University of Arizona Press)

**Claire Hope Cummings**

*Uncertain Peril: Genetic Engineering and the Future of Seeds* (Beacon Press)

**Stella Pope Duarte**

*If I Die in Juárez* (The University of Arizona Press)

**Linda Gregg**

*All of It Singing: New and Selected Poems* (Graywolf Press)

**Suheir Hammad**

*Breaking Poems* (Cypher Books)

**Richard Holmes**

*The Age of Wonder* (Pantheon Books)

**George E. Lewis**

*A Power Stronger than Itself: The A.A.C.M. and American Experimental Music*  
(University of Chicago Press)

**Patricia Santana**

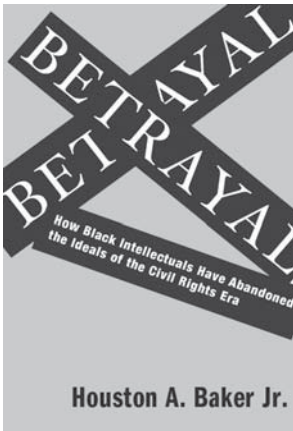
*Ghosts of El Grullo* (University of New Mexico Press)

**Jack Spicer**

*My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*  
edited by **Peter Gizzi** and **Kevin Killian** (Wesleyan University Press)

*Lifetime Achievement Award:*

**Miguel Algarín**



## Betrayal

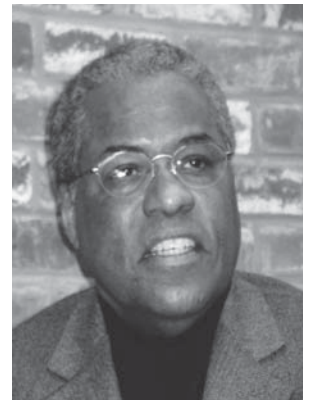
### How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Right Era

Houston A. Baker Jr. condemns those black intellectuals who, he believes, have turned their backs on the tradition of racial activism in America. These individuals choose personal gain over the interests of the black majority, whether they are espousing neoconservative positions that distort the contours of contemporary social and political dynamics or abandoning race as an important issue in the study of American literature and culture. Most important, they do a disservice to the legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and others who have fought for black rights. In the literature, speeches, and academic and public behavior of some black intellectuals in the past quarter century, Baker identifies a “hungry generation” eager for power, respect, and money. He also revisits classical sites of African American literary and historical criticism and critique. He claims King would have criticized these black intellectuals for not persistently raising their voices against a private prison system that incarcerates so

many men and women of color. To remedy this situation, Baker urges black intellectuals to forge both sacred and secular connections with local communities and rededicate themselves to social responsibility. As he sees it, the mission of the black intellectual today is not to do great things but to do specific, racially based work that is in the interest of the black majority.

## Houston A. Baker, Jr.

Houston A. Baker Jr. is Distinguished University Professor at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South*; *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.*; *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*; *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, and a number of other studies of African American literature and culture. He is a published poet whose most recent volume is *Passing Over*.



Credit: Charlotte Pierce-Baker



## Ask for a Convertible

*Ask for a Convertible* by Danit Brown has been compared to Philip Roth's early work and while certainly it is wickedly funny and finely tuned to the Jewish scene, it is as much a story of resisting assimilation as trying to fit in. Thirteen year old Osnat Greenberg's emotional life is ruled by the tippy truce between her Israeli mother and American father when they move from Tel Aviv to Michigan in the late 1980s. After five days in America, her mother announces, “Everyone's so happy here, it's creepy.” Osnat survives with the help of the neighbor boy Sanjay, himself Indian by birth, whose instructions on the art of assimilation include finding the Playboy Channel and realizing your parents will never be happy. Meanwhile her mother Efrat secures employment at Fantasy Bridal where she is given instructions on selling happiness, “If she's old, you be older. If she's fat, you be fatter.” This is a coming-of-age tale that reverberates in all directions, constructed in linked stories and multiple points of view that put everyone's

behavior in sharp relief. Brown understands the moral accuracy of children and the strange constructions they devise to protect themselves. Befriended by the fat girl in school, Osnat rehearses for the next incursion of the Nazis, since as her friends says, “They might not be German this time.” Brown's prose captures the cadence of another language beneath the English, especially in the rhythms of the Polish-born grandmother. The insistent voices that inhabit the immigrant psyche come right off the page. The story achieves its big ambitions when Osnat as a young woman returns to Tel Aviv and her cultural illusions become cultural realities.

## Danit Brown

Danit Brown holds an MFA in fiction from Indiana University. Her stories have appeared in many literary journals, including *Story*, *Glimmer Train*, *StoryQuarterly*, and *One Story*. She lives in Michigan with her family.





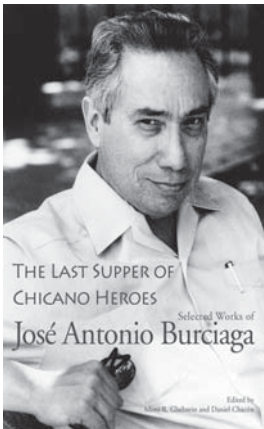
## Please

Jericho Brown doesn't just write pretty poems. He writes poems of startling beauty full of raw emotion, poems as immediate as a slap in the face that nevertheless lift the spirit. One can't help but be emptied and filled by them simultaneously. Breathtaking and life giving, these intensely honest poems are not therapy sessions or word games; they're poems of the heart. And this book is certain to mark Brown's emergence as an important new voice in American poetry.



## Jericho Brown

Jericho Brown worked as speechwriter for the Mayor of New Orleans before receiving his Ph.D. in Creative Writing and Literature from the University of Houston. He also holds an M.F.A. from the University of New Orleans and a B.A. from Dillard University, and he has served as poetry editor at *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*. His poems have appeared in *Callaloo*, *The Iowa Review*, *jubilat*, *New England Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. The recipient of a Cave Canem Fellowship, two scholarships to the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, and two travel fellowships to the Krakow Poetry Seminar in Poland, Brown is currently an Assistant Professor of English at the University of San Diego where he teaches creative writing.



## The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes Selected Works of José Antonio Burciaga

Gladstein and Chacón, in this rare collection of José Antonio Burciaga's work, open up the unseen mural of his life and accomplishments. Burciaga, in his short career as muralist, humorist, essayist, painter, and poet, was a unique voice and creative force. At all instances, he crossed the assigned boundaries of the status quo and challenged critics, politicians, cultural brokers, and even presidents. In this book, José Antonio is given the public canvas he deserves, as he always wanted, and we also are offered unpublished revelatory materials. A book for all in search of an art, a voice, and a mind beyond margins. Bravo for Gladstein and Chacón and all those that unfold these brilliant pages.

## Mimi R. Gladstein

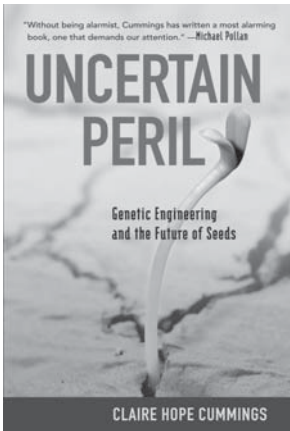
Mimi R. Gladstein is a professor of English and Theatre Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico in Contemporary American Literature. She is the author of *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* and *The Indestructible Woman in Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck*. In 1990-91, Gladstein was a Fulbright Professor in Caracas, Venezuela; in 1995 she taught, as a Senior Fulbright Scholar, at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid.



## Daniel Chacón

Daniel Chacón is author of *Unending Rooms*, a collection of stories, winner of the Hudson Prize. He also has a novel, *and the shadows took him*, and another collection of stories called *Chicano Chicanery*. His fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Lengua Fresca: Latinos Writing on the Edge*; *Caliente: The Best Erotic Writing in Latin American Fiction*; and *Best of the West 2009: New Stories from the West Side of the Missouri*.





## Uncertain Peril Genetic Engineering and the Future of Seeds

Life on earth is facing unprecedented challenges from global warming, war, and mass extinctions. The plight of seeds is a less visible but no less fundamental threat to our survival. Seeds are at the heart of the planet's life-support systems. Their power to regenerate and adapt are essential to maintaining our food supply and our ability to cope with a changing climate. *Uncertain Peril* exposes the stories behind the rise of industrial agriculture and plant biotechnology, the fall of public interest science, and the folly of patenting seeds. She examines how farming communities are coping with declining water, soil, and fossil fuels, as well as with new commercial technologies. Will genetically engineered and “terminator” seeds lead to certain promise, as some have hoped, or are we embarking on a path of uncertain peril? Cummings takes readers from the Fertile Crescent in Iraq to the island of Kaua'i in Hawai'i; from Oaxaca, Mexico, to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. She examines the plight of farmers

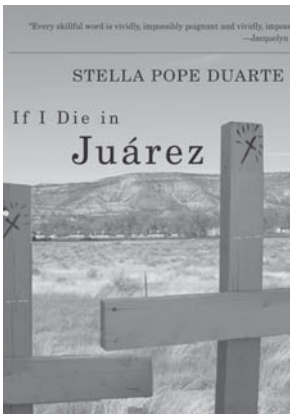
who have planted transgenic seeds and scientists who have been persecuted for revealing the dangers of modified genes. At each turn, she looks deeply into the relationship between people and plants. She examines the possibilities for both scarcity and abundance and tells the stories of local communities that are producing food and fuel sustainably and providing for the future. It comes down to this: whoever controls the future of seeds controls the future of life on earth. *Uncertain Peril* is a powerful reminder that what's at stake right now is nothing less than the nature of the future.

### Claire Hope Cummings

Claire Hope Cummings is an environmental lawyer and journalist. She brings three decades of broad experience in agriculture to her work. She has farmed in California and in Vietnam, where she had an organic farm on the Mekong Delta. For four years she was an attorney for the United States Department of Agriculture's Office of General Counsel. For the last 15 years, Claire has been active in the local food and farming movement in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Photo credit: Michael Fahey



## If I Die in Juárez

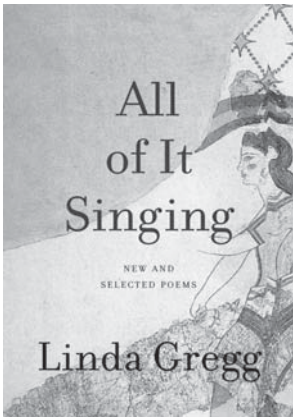
From the red-light districts in Ciudad Juárez to remote villages hidden away in the mountains of Chihuahua comes a tale of one of the darkest crimes to be recorded in the history of humankind. *If I Die in Juárez* traces the lives of three young women—Evita, a street child; Petra, a maquiladora worker; and Mayela, a Tarahumara Indian girl—who together uncover Juárez's forbidden secret: the abduction and murder of young women. Bound together by blood, honor, an ancient chant, and a mysterious photo, the girls bring the murderous streets of Juárez to life. Based on the author's interviews with relatives of murdered women, *If I Die in Juárez* is brilliantly crafted to give readers the experience of walking in the shoes of women who daily risk being abducted and murdered in the “capital city of murdered women,” joining thousands of others who for more than a decade have disappeared from Juárez, *las desaparecidas*, brutally murdered by assassins who have gone unpunished.

The agony of one of the darkest tales in human history brings to light a strange hope, illusive yet constant, resisting lies, betrayal, and the desert's silent sentence of death.

### Stella Pope Duarte

Stella Pope Duarte began her literary career in 1995 after she had a dream in which her deceased father related to her that her destiny was to become a writer. Her first collection of short stories, *Fragile Night*, (Bilingual Review Press, 1997) won a creative writing fellowship from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. In 2001, she was awarded a second creative writing fellowship for her novel, *Let Their Spirits Dance*. (HarperCollins, 2002). Her work since then has won numerous awards and honors nationwide.





## All of It Singing: New and Selected Poems

Linda Gregg's abiding presence in American poetry for over thirty years is a testament to the longevity of art and the spirit. *New and Selected Poems* for the first time collects the ongoing work of Gregg's career in one book, including poetry from her six previous volumes and more than twenty remarkable new poems.

"I have been reading Linda Gregg's poetry for quite a few years, and felt that a 'new and selected' volume was, without doubt, significant. However, for me to be convinced that her collection should receive the kind of recognition offered by the American Book Award, the 22 new poems that comprise the final section of the book needed to be as good, or better, than any of her previous work. I found these new poems dazzling in their clarity, fearless in how they face loss

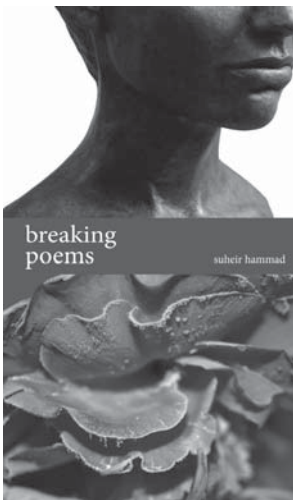
and defeat, and quite beautiful in the way they find, and celebrate, love."—James Bertolino

### Linda Gregg

Linda Gregg is the author of six books of poetry: *In the Middle Distance*, *Things and Flesh*, *Chosen by the Lion*, *The Sacraments of Desire*, *Alma*, and *Too Bright to See*. Her honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Literary Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She won 2006 PEN/Voelcker Award winner for Poetry and has won a Whiting Award. She lives in New York City.



Photo credit: Hal Lum



### Breaking Poems

Hammad departs from her previous books with a bold and explosive style to do what the best poets have always done: create a new language. Using "break" as a trigger for every poem, Hammad deconstructs, constructs, and reconstructs the English language for us to hear the sound of a breath, a woman's body, a land, a culture, falling apart, broken, and put back together again.

"Suheir Hammad's break introduces English to an Arabic vernacular that startles into being an altogether new language, bridging the archipelago of a Palestine under siege to the diaspora and beyond, breaking through convention, breaking open locks on mind and heart, breaking into a music inspired by the Coltranes, Sun Ra and free jazz, Lee Scratch Perry and Ravi Shankar, a music that is at once a joyous celebration of survival and a poignant *cri de Coeur* that cannot be ignored and that Mahmoud Darwish should have lived to see. This is a poetry written for people who have endured the winds of hurricanes and invasions. What wisdom, energy, joy and poignancy Hammad brings to the page—for all of this, and for teaching

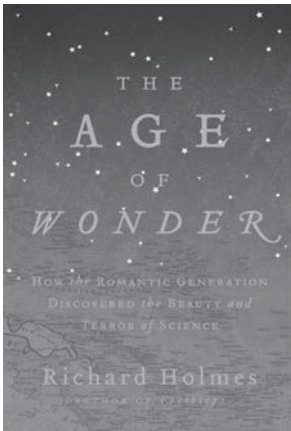
me a new speaking, I give her my thanks." — Carolyn Forché

### Suheir Hammad

Suheir Hammad's work has appeared in dozens of anthologies and numerous publications. She was a co-writer and original cast member in the Tony-award winning Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. An Amherst College Aaron Copeland Fellow, she stars in the movie *Salt of the Sea*. The author of *Born Palestinian*, *Born Black*; *Drops of This Story* and *ZataarDiva*, she has won several awards for her writing, including The Audre Lorde Poetry Award, a Van Lier Fellowship, and a Sister of Fire Award.



Photo credit: Tarek Aylouch



## The Age of Wonder

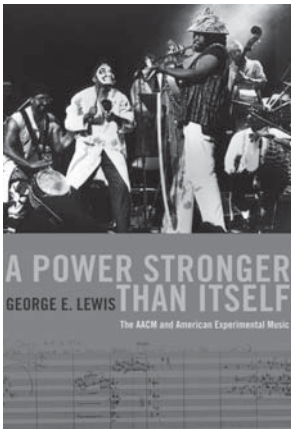
### How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science

At a time when Romanticism is being both rediscovered and redefined, Holmes' brilliant book offers new insights into the nature of Romanticism and into its relationship to scientific inquiry. Romanticism is usually regarded as hostile to science, its ideal of subjectivity eternally opposed to that of scientific objectivity. Holmes shows that this was not always the case and that the terms are by no means mutually exclusive. The notion of wonder is something that once united them, and can still do so: "There is Romantic science in the same sense that there is Romantic poetry, and often for the same enduring reasons." *The Age of Wonder* captures something of the inner life of science, its impact on the heart as well as on the mind. Holmes argues that the notion of the exploratory voyage, often lonely and perilous—an image frequently found in products of the Romantic imagination—is in one form or another a

central and defining metaphor of Romantic science. This book is important because it traces a deep relationship between supposedly opposed disciplines and tells us something new about ourselves and our history. "The old, rigid debates and boundaries," Holmes writes, "—science versus religion, science versus the arts, science versus traditional ethics—are no longer enough... We need a more generous, more imaginative perspective. Above all... we need the three things that a scientific culture can sustain: the sense of individual wonder, the power of hope, and the vivid but questing belief in a future for the globe."

### Richard Holmes

Richard Holmes is the author of *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*; *Dr. Johnson & Mr. Savage*; *Shelley: The Pursuit* (for which he received the Somerset Maugham Prize); *Coleridge: Early Visions*, and *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (a New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice, and a National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist). He lives in England.



## A Power Stronger than Itself

### The A.A.C.M. and American Experimental Music

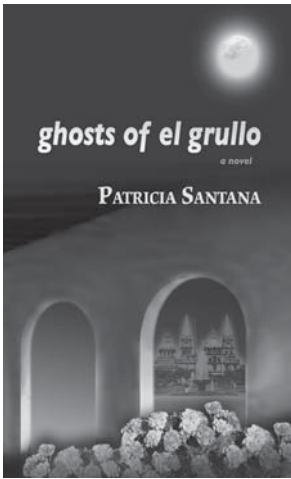
In an exciting, often astounding, work of original and powerfully deciphering scholarship, Lewis has written one of the most important books on the subject of jazz in particular and American music in general. Lewis tells the story of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, an institution that has come to represent the cultural vanguard of international music for over forty years. Employing a mixture of oral histories from the musicians themselves, "front line" reportage and rare archival documents, many disclosed for the first time, Mr. Lewis weaves together a compelling, engrossing and frequently provocative narration of one of the most fascinating periods of history in the United States. In the tradition of "damn sure, telling it like it is," Lewis offers at times profound insight into the formative years of many of our era's most significant composers, including such mercurial and often illusive personalities as Muhal Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, Henry

Threadgill, and Anthony Braxton. With clarity and wit, hipness and humanity, Lewis also provides the much needed and invaluable context of the cultural revolutions taking place that surrounded and informed the often equally radical music of the 1960s and 70s. Bringing the story of the AACM up in to our 21st century, Mr. Lewis both strengthens our roots and provides the fertile ground for the scholarship of tomorrow. This is truly a book for the Ages.

### George E. Lewis

George E. Lewis is the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University. A recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship in 2002, Lewis has made over 120 recordings as composer or performer, and his publications on experimental music appear regularly in scholarly and popular journals.





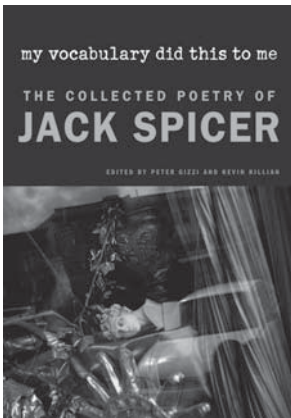
## Ghosts of El Grullo

*Ghosts of El Grullo* is the sequel to Santana's first novel *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility*, which won the Chicano/Latino Literary Prize and was an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. It is the story of Yolanda Sahagún's initiation into womanhood. Having left her much-beloved San Diego barrio, Yolanda is living in the university dorms when a series of events—her mother dies and her erratic father sells their family home—forces her to re-examine her life. She travels to El Grullo, Jalisco, the Mexican village where her parents grew up, and struggles to understand the ghosts in her life—her mother, her father, and her seemingly idyllic childhood. As she strives to keep her family from disintegrating, Yolanda must also learn to hold herself together in spite of the chaos that surrounds her.



## Patricia Santana

Santana is chair of the foreign languages department and professor of Spanish at Cuyamaca College in El Cajon, California.



## My Vocabulary Did This to Me The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer

In 1965, when the poet Jack Spicer died at the age of forty, he left behind a trunkful of papers and manuscripts and a few copies of the seven small books he had seen to press. A West Coast poet, his influence spanned the national literary scene of the 1950s and '60s, though in many ways Spicer's innovative writing ran counter to that of his contemporaries in the New York School and the West Coast Beat movement. Now, more than forty years later, Spicer's voice is more compelling, insistent, and timely than ever. During his short but prolific life, Spicer troubled the concepts of translation, voice, and the act of poetic composition itself. *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* is a landmark publication of this essential poet's life work, and includes poems that have become increasingly hard to find and many published here for the first time.

## Jack Spicer

Jack Spicer (1925–1965) published books including *After Lorca* (1957), *Billy the Kid* (1959), and *The Holy Grail* (1962).

## Peter Gizzi

Peter Gizzi is a poet and author of numerous books, including *The Outernational* (2007), who lives in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

## Kevin Killian

Kevin Killian is a poet, novelist, critic, and playwright living in San Francisco.



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**Lifetime Achievement Award:**  
**Miguel Algarín**

Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, Miguel Algarín moved with his family to New York City in the early 1950s where his love for the written word intensified by the artistic energy radiating from the City streets. Obtaining advance degrees in literature from the University of Wisconsin and Pennsylvania State University, Algarín developed a successful career pursuing his passion for literature. He served as a Professor Emeritus for more than 30 years of service to Rutgers University where he taught Shakespeare, Creative Writing, and United States Ethnic Literature.



The life and work of Algarín spans the universities and the streets, so much so that combining the two resulted in the development of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, a New York City cultural haven within the Lower East Side famed for being creatively drenched with great artistic intensity. Being the founder of such an organization, Algarín's mission was to create a multicultural venue that both nurtures artists and exhibits a variety of artistic works to both enlighten and empower the underclass, it is a mission that has remained true to this day.

Algarín is the author of more than ten published books of poetry, the editor of several anthologies, and an accomplished writer for television and theater. He has received three American Book Awards and was presented with the Larry Leon Hamlin Producer's Award at the 2001 National Black Theater Festival. Algarín is also the sole translator of the Nobel Prize-winning poet Pablo Neruda's *Songs of Protest*. In his best-selling, critically acclaimed book *Love Is Hard Work*, Algarín shares his own struggle with being HIV positive.

American Book Awards  
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