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Building the Puerto Rican Literary Canon: Nilita Vientós Gastón's Enterprise with the Journal

*Asomante*

### **INTRODUCTION: Literary journals and canon formation**

The history of literary journals in Latin America has proven to be of main importance to the literary past of each country in the region. Two main journals that exemplify this assertion are *Sur*--published by Victoria Ocampo in Argentina--and *Orígenes*--published by José Lezama Lima and José Rodríguez Feo in Cuba. These two journals made an extraordinary contribution to the literary histories of their own countries. They created generations of writers, launch acclaimed literary circles, and contributed to building up the national literary canon. Literary icons such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar and José Lezama Lima published first in *Sur* and *Orígenes*, respectively. The journals were the doors towards a literary career.<sup>1</sup>

In Puerto Rico, history repeated itself. Revisiting the past of Puerto Rican literature reveals that literary journals played a crucial part in its development. One of these journals was *Asomante* and its editor was Nilita Vientós Gastón. *Asomante* enabled the publication of new literature and the recognition of new literary personalities. It also provided a space for dialogue with other contemporary writers in and outside the island. However, for some reason, most of *Asomante*'s history has been understudied and even forgotten. There's little mention of *Asomante* in the most recent literary histories, and a more official recognition is still

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading please refer to: John King, Sur: a Study of the Argentinian Literary Journal and its Role in the Development of a Culture: 1931-70 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), Jorge Luis Arcos, Los poetas de Orígenes (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).

forthcoming. The study of *Asomante* is of interest to us because we believe that this journal had a major role in the canon formation of Puerto Rican literature. Many important Puerto Rican works of theater and fiction were first published in *Asomante*, such as *La carreta* by René Marqués and *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* by Luis Rafael Sánchez. Therefore, our study will dig under the strategies behind Nilita's venture with the journal *Asomante* and how these support both an explicit and implicit agenda of national canon formation.

Some of the questions we expect to answer are: Who is Nilita Vientós Gastón and why is it important to study her life? What is *Asomante* and why is it important to study --this Puerto Rican journal? Why has the journal been forgotten? Why it has not been used as an introduction to Puerto Rican literature for students? Why has it been neglected if it had a major part in the formation of the Puerto Rican canon? What strategies did Nilita—as Vientós Gastón was known and referred to in the media and among academic and legal colleagues--use that ended up creating a national canon in literature? Why except for the book *Nilita: la provocación de la palabra*<sup>2</sup> no other study has been published recently? This project will try to rescue Nilita and *Asomante* from oblivion, focusing on Nilita's editorial policy that favored the publication of young writers not published with the same emphasis anywhere else.

Before moving on to the Puerto Rican canon formation, it would be useful, as part of the introduction, to summarize Nilita Vientós Gastón's life, her cultural achievements and the overall history of the journal *Asomante* itself. This will familiarize the reader with the atmosphere of those years, heavily embedded in Puerto Rican cultural progress. At first glance, it is important to take note that the journal years were marked by historical events such as the end of the Second World War, The Korean war, the Cuban revolution, The Vietnam war, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Luis Nieves Falcón, "El compromiso social de Nilita Vientós Gastón y la represión política," *Nilita: La provocación de la palabra*, ed. Luis Nieves Falcón (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2004).

formation of the Estado Libre Asociado (ELA), an alliance between Puerto Rico and the United States, under Luis Muñoz Marín's leadership.<sup>3</sup> Having in mind these historical events will reveal Nilita's attitude towards the role of literature in politics. In general, *Asomante* published exclusively literary writings. No political manifestos or reports about the Cuban revolution were published, for example. However, this *belle-lettrist* focus radically changed with the birth of the journal *Sin Nombre* in 1970 for reasons we will review later in this report. The change was such that in 1972, Nilita worked as guest editor for the Cuban revolutionary journal *Casa de las Américas*, organizing a Puerto Rican issue called "Viva Puerto Rico libre." This title summarizes Nilita's radical incursion into political activism not just in 1972, but throughout her life. But before getting into further details, let's go back to Nilita's biography.

### **Nilita's life and cultural achievements**

Nilita Vientós no es hoy no más ni menos que la conciencia de Puerto Rico.<sup>4</sup>

Ricardo Gullón

Nilita Vientós Gastón was born on June 5, 1903 in the city of San Sebastián, Puerto Rico. The daughter of don Benigno Vientós, from the city of Lares, and doña Antonia Gastón, of Mayagüez, at the age of three moved with her parents to Havana and received there her elementary and secondary education.<sup>5</sup> She went to High School in the United States and later on graduated in 1926 from the Law School of the University of Puerto Rico. In 1948, she received a

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<sup>3</sup> The ELA agreement was the new arrangement that conceded the Puerto Rican people the right to choose their own governor and that passed a regional constitution written by the Puerto Rican government. All this meant more freedom for Puerto Rico but with continuing economical dependence to the United States. For further reading on the history of Puerto Rico please refer to: Nancy Morris, Puerto Rico: Culture, Politics, and Identity (Westport: Praeger, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Ricardo Gullón, "Nilita, en Puerto Rico," La Ínsula Sin Nombre (Madrid: Editorial Orígenes, 1990) 14.

<sup>5</sup> All the previous biographical information is taken from two main sources: Carmen Alicia Dávila, "Nilita Vientós Gastón: Biografía mínima," Las huellas de Nilita Vientós Gastón, ed. Luis Nieves Falcón (San Juan: Fundación Nilita Vientós Gastón, 2002), Nieves Padilla de García, "Nilita Vientós Gastón y Asomante," Nilita: La provocación de la palabra, ed. Luis Nieves Falcón (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2004).

scholarship from the Rockefeller foundation and decided to study English literature at Kenyon College, Ohio. From 1946 to 1961 Nilita was president of the prestigious cultural institution called *Ateneo Puertorriqueño*. She was also in charge of *Pro Arte Musical*, the *PEN Club of Puerto Rico* and *La Casa Nacional de la Cultura*.

As a lawyer, she became the first woman to work for the Justice Department of Puerto Rico, and represented the people on the famous case *El pueblo vs. El Tribunal Superior 92, D.P.R. 596*, in 1965, which disputed the requirement of English in all civil and criminal courtroom cases involving mostly monolingual Puerto Rican Spanish speakers. In it, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Nilita, stating that the use of Spanish in Puerto Rican trials was imperative: “el medio de expresión de nuestro pueblo es el español y esa es una realidad que no puede ser cambiada por ninguna ley.” This was a major achievement due to the fact that the official imposition of English on the island was not officially ruled out until 1949 with the first Puerto Rican governor, Luis Muñoz Marín. Before then, most education was taught in English in public schools. Therefore, Nilita’s achievement was an important step towards the recognition of Spanish as the official language of the island.

Later on, Nilita left the Justice Department to join the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico. There she taught two major courses: Theory of the Novel and a seminar on Proust, Henry James and Virginia Wolf. Interestingly, the topics and themes of these courses coincide with the editorial perspective of her literary journals *Asomante* and *Sin Nombre*. Her literary publications also followed this direction. Nilita published a total of six books: *Introducción a Henry James* (1956), *Impresiones de un viaje* (1957), *Índice Cultural* (1962), *Comentarios a un ensayo sobre Puerto Rico* (1964), *El mundo de la infancia* (1984), and *Apuntes sobre teatro* (1989) (the last title was published posthumously). She also published

extensively in literary journals and newspapers. Her second and last books, *Índice Cultural* and *Apuntes sobre teatro*, are a collection of the columns written by Nilita for the newspaper *El Mundo*, later published by the “Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña (ICP)”.

As part of her literary enterprise, Nilita was the editor of two main literary journals: *Asomante* and *Sin Nombre*. The first issue of *Asomante* came out in 1945. With a total of 101 issues, the journal was published by the “Asociación de Graduas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico”, an organization which ended up claiming the intellectual property of the journal in 1970 in a case against Nilita. This dilemma caused *Asomante* to cease publication, and Nilita decided to publish a new version of the journal by herself under a new name:

*ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ Sin Nombre*. The end of *Asomante* was the beginning of *Sin Nombre*, which in the 1970s continued the literary agenda that Nilita had in mind. It lasted until 1985; both journals together completed 40 years of literary production.

Nilita was also in close contact with other Latin American literary journals. Proof of her networking skills is the exchange of advertisements between *Asomante* and other renown literary journals such as *Orígenes*, *Ciclón*, *Revista Iberoamericana*, *Idea*, *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, *Cuadernos Americanos*, *Sur*, *Cadernos Brasileiros*, *La Torre*, and *Mundo Nuevo*. Even more, Nilita contributed articles to *Ínsula* (Spain), *Sur* and *La Opinión* (Argentina), *Cuadernos Americanos* (Mexico), *Amaru* (Peru), and most importantly in 1972 the Cuban journal *Casa de las Américas*. She also published her work in Puerto Rican academic journals such as *La Torre* (founded at the University of Puerto Rico by the Spanish intellectual Francisco Ayala under provost Jaime Benítez’s direction), among others.

On July 10, 1989 Nilita passed away leaving behind two of the greatest literary journals of Puerto Rican and Latin American history. Their importance is revealed, primarily, and as we will see, on its responsibility with building up the Puerto Rican literary canon.

### **The years of *Asomante* and *Sin Nombre***

The journal of the “Asociación de Graduadas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico” was published for five years before getting into Nilita’s hands. It was her own idea to turn it into a literary project as she explains in the editorial note for the first issue of the new literary journal called *Asomante*:

Desaparece aquella cuyo primordial propósito fue el de ser exponente de las actividades de la Asociación para ser sustituida por ésta que persigue un propósito más amplio, llenar una de las más inexplicables lagunas en nuestra vida cultural, la carencia de una revista literaria.<sup>6</sup>

Nilita aimed thus to fill in the absence of literary journals on the island. Nilita will explain her main objective with the journal in an unpublished article called “Biografía de una revista: *Asomante* - *Sin Nombre*”:

*Asomante* se funda con el propósito de establecer diálogo con los países de nuestra lengua, estimular la producción literaria puertorriqueña y dar a conocer lo más relevante de la literatura contemporánea, especialmente las de lengua española, inglesa y francesa. Según apunto en la Introducción al primer número “la misma incertidumbre de nuestro destino político exige que nos esforcemos, mucho más que otros pueblos que ya tienen una clara conciencia del suyo, por fijar y aclarar lo que queremos y podemos ser”. *Asomante* quiere colaborar en la creación de una conciencia nacional, destruir nuestro aislamiento intelectual.

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<sup>6</sup> Nilita Vientós Gastón, "Nota editorial," *Asomante* I.1 (1945): 5.

Todos sabemos que sólo se llega a lo universal por el camino de lo nacional, al conocimiento de lo ajeno mediante el conocimiento de lo propio.<sup>7</sup>

These universal and national tasks will be discussed in further detail in subsequent parts of this study.

The name of the journal was given by Spanish poet and literary critic Pedro Salinas. Nilita adopted the name claiming that the title *Asomante* worked as a metaphor of the project she had in mind. First, the name referred to a peak of a Puerto Rican mountain, making reference to the proto-teluric essence of literature as represented in the journal. Second, the verb “asomarse” (to look up and glimpse) suggested a new horizon to look at with an aim: the literature of the rest of the world. The journal was Nilita’s way of building bridges between the literature and culture of the world and that of Puerto Rico.

One important detail about the new journal is the fact that most of the literary critics were women. Nilita Vientós Gastón herself, plus Margot Arce de Vázquez, Concha Meléndez and María Teresa Babín, were important contributors. Without them the journal would not have been possible. Their contributions were the main blocks of the literary building that Nilita was creating, specially their work with anthologies and critical essays around the *Asomante* project itself. Concha Meléndez, for example, studied the short stories and the poetry published in the literary journal through its first fifteen years.<sup>8</sup> Margot Arce studied the Puerto Rican essay from 1930s to 1955<sup>9</sup> and María Teresa Babín worked on Puerto Rican theatre.<sup>10</sup> All of this individual

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<sup>7</sup> Nilita Vientós Gastón, Biografía de una revista: Asomante - Sin Nombre, Available: [http://home.coqui.net/nilitafnvg/nil\\_indice\\_bgpre\\_azar.html](http://home.coqui.net/nilitafnvg/nil_indice_bgpre_azar.html).

<sup>8</sup> Concha Meléndez, "El cuento en la edad de Asomante: 1945-55," Asomante XI.1 (1955), Antología poética de Asomante: 1945-1959, eds. Juan Martínez Capó and Concha Meléndez (San Juan: Ateneo Puertorriqueño, 1962).

<sup>9</sup> Margot Arce de Vázquez and Mariana Robles Cardona, "25 años del ensayo puertorriqueño," Asomante XI.1 (1955).

work, which will be discussed later on, contributed in their own way to the formation of the Puerto Rican literary canon.

*Asomante*'s editorial schedule consisted in a quarterly publication divided into four numbers as follows: January-March (number 1), April-June (2), July-September (3) and October-December (4). It followed this structure from 1945 until 1970, ceasing publication after the first issue of that final year. Each issue consisted of five main parts: an editorial note, a section of literary works, a section of book reviews, a guide for the reader, and a list of collaborators. The editorial note was always written by Nilita Vientós Gastón, although sometimes it was omitted. Essentially, the first issue, the tenth and twentieth anniversaries, and the ones paying tribute to literary renowned writers included an editorial note. All the others did not. The section of literary works was very broad. It gave space to the work of writers from Puerto Rico, Spain, France, England, Cuba, Mexico, North America, Peru, Argentina, and Chile, *etc.* and the genres featured went from poems, short stories, plays, chapters of novels, to literary essays, philosophical essays, translations of French and English poets, and historical documents. Most of the time, Nilita added a section entitled "Puerto Rico" which had two subsections: *Ayer* and *Hoy*. The *Ayer* section reproduced a literary text from the nineteenth century and the *Hoy* section, as the title suggests, a work from the present like the shorts stories "El Josco" and "Bagazo" by Abelardo Díaz Alfaro. The book review section was mainly dominated by Puerto Rican critics: Nilita Vientós Gastón herself, José Emilio González, René Marqués, Pedro Juan Soto, María Teresa Babín, Margot Arce de Vázquez, and Concha Meléndez wrote most of the reviews. However, reviews by foreign critics were also accepted and published. Finally, the collaborator's index featured a short biography about each individual contributor of *Asomante*.

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<sup>10</sup> María Teresa Babín, "Veinte años de teatro puertorriqueño: 1945-1964," *Asomante* XX.4 (1964), María Teresa Babín, "El tema de Puerto Rico en la literatura del presente," *Asomante* XI.2 (1955).

The pages before and after those five sections, displayed all the advertisements corresponding to the sponsors. A quick look at the advertisements will show the progress that the journal made through the years. The closer it got to the year of 1970, the more famous the journal became judging from the increase in the number of advertisements, a sign of the growing collaboration with other important Latin American journals. This will be discussed in further detail in the following sections.

After twenty five years of nonstop publications, *Asomante* closed operations. The closure had its political implications. In 1968, with the rise of the Puerto Rican party of the right, the new *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP), the journal developed an agenda that ran against the political platform of the government. The conservative and pro-PNP “Asociación de Graduadas de la Universidad de Puerto Rico” decided to take back control over the journal mainly because Nilita continued publishing left-leaning writers. Still, as she had indicated previously many times, her editorial choices were more concerned with literary quality than with their ideological concerns. Therefore, she decided to keep publishing “dangerous” but important technical innovators, such as the communist fiction writer José Luis González. Before letting others take control over her journal, Nilita created the company Asomante, Inc. and published the first number of 1970 under that name. The organization of the UPR soon sued Nilita and her new company, claiming the intellectual property of the journal. They won the lawsuit and forced Nilita to release the name. She then created *Sin Nombre* and kept publishing this journal until 1985. As she explains in her own words:

Para no interrumpir la labor de veinticinco años y poder continuar la tarea de proveer de un órgano de expresión a los escritores puertorriqueños y mantener comunicación con el mundo intelectual, dentro y fuera de Puerto Rico, he

decidido . . . publicar una nueva revista mientras los tribunales deciden definitivamente a quién pertenece el título de la revista *Asomante*.<sup>11</sup>

### **Building genealogies**

One of the main tools that Nilita developed over the years of *Asomante* was that of building genealogies. This project enabled Nilita to trace back a historical background that supported the journal and permitted its survival through the years. Connections were made between the Hispanic tradition and Puerto Rico. New literary siblings were recognized throughout Latin America and brought to the island. Even further, English and North American writers were published in translations, establishing bridges between their culture and Puerto Rican culture. All of it ended up establishing an important genealogical line: that between Puerto Rican fathers and their heirs. This last genealogy is the one that directly builds up the Puerto Rican canon by revisiting the literary production of the nineteenth century and placing it in front as the *figura* or premonition of the contemporary Puerto Rican production. As we will see, the genealogical scheme played a crucial role in Nilita's venture of canon formation.

### **The Hispanic tradition**

Nilita's first strategy towards building the Puerto Rican literary canon was creating genealogies that went back to the Iberian heritage. She links the Puerto Rican tradition to its Hispanic roots, tracing back the history of the island to colonial and precolonial, medieval times. Proof of this strategy is perhaps the first article of the first number of *Asomante*. Nilita wisely chooses a study of the medieval *Romancero* to open her journal. The article was titled "Los romances españoles" and was written by the acclaimed literary critic at Johns Hopkins University, Leo Spitzer. With his article, Nilita not only goes back in time, but she strategically centers the journal in the Hispanic tradition as if all Hispanic literature could be traced to a single

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<sup>11</sup> Nilita Vientós Gastón, "Palabras de la directora," *Sin Nombre* I.I (1970): 5.

starting point. The critic Leo Spitzer also represents the tradition of Hispanism that Nilita praised and that reached the island of Puerto Rico mainly as a result of the Spanish Civil war. Hispanism came into contact with the island when Republican exile personalities such as Nobel Prize winner Juan Ramón Jiménez and Spanish poet Pedro Salinas ended up spending most of their final years on the island. Not only did they serve as mentors for the journal (Salinas even gave the journal its name); they also contributed with poems that framed the journal within the Hispanic tradition. This focalized view, as other critics have argued, had its political implications. One of them, Luz Rodríguez-Carranza, suggests:

*Asomante* . . . was Hispanist in orientation. Its director, Nilita Vientós Gastón, and several of her collaborators were actively involved in the militant independence movement. . . . Opposition to North American hegemony expressed itself in intense identification with Hispanic culture. For *Asomante* Puertoricannes is rooted in this heritage, and its attention was directed especially to the canonical literature of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

By claiming a Hispanic inheritance, the journal distanced itself from other traditions such as those imposed by North America. Therefore, *Asomante's* implicit response to Puerto Rico's political situation by way of a mainly Hispanist program was both aggressive and subtle.

However, this "hispanofilia" was only used against political control since, in literature, English and North American writers were very much welcomed.

Even further, the figures of Juan Ramón Jiménez and Pedro Salinas were used as public banners of the journal *Asomante*. Their names served as free advertisement. Not only did they lift up the literary quality of the journal and attract many readers; they also helped establish a

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<sup>12</sup> Luz Rodríguez-Carranza and Nadia Lie, "A Comparative Analysis of Caribbean Literary Magazines: 1960-1980," *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, ed. A. James Arnold, vol. 3 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997) 143.

dynamic exchange between Spanish writers and Puerto Rican ones. This reputation was gained precisely by one of Nilita's move: publishing the work of these Spanish personalities on the front pages of the journal. This way, the journal would make sure to begin with works of great value and quality. Example of these works were Jiménez's poem "En los espacios del tiempo" (3, 1948),<sup>13</sup> his prologue to "Isla de simpatía" (1, 1953), and his literary essay "Márgenes propias y ajenas" (1, 1954). Pedro Salina's "El lector desorientado y sus orientadores" (4, 1947) and "La mejor carta de amores de la literatura española" (2, 1952) were also published in the first section of the journal, an action that implicitly proclaimed a Hispanic heritage.

This "hispanofilia" can also be observed in the first number of *Asomante* which exemplifies the other numbers to come. Four out of eight of the literary works are either written by Spanish writers or related to Spanish literature. The two essays that approach Spanish literary works are: Leo Spitzer's article, mentioned above, on the *Romancero español*, and José Trías Monje's work titled "La mujer en el teatro de García Lorca". Along with these two articles works by two Spanish poets appeared too: Pedro Salinas' "Brillo" and Jorge Guillén's "También el crepúsculo". This distribution of author and themes in the first issue foreshadows the fact that half of the works published in each issue to come would be dedicated to the Hispanic tradition. And over all, this tradition will serve as an important supporting pillar of the journal itself.

Other important Spanish icons that contributed to the journal were Vicente Aleixandre with the article "Evocaciones españolas. Doña Emilia Pardo Bazán en el balneario" (1, 1956), Rafael Alberti with the poems "Balada de la bicicleta con alas" (2, 1953) and "Por los campos y los ríos" (1, 1954), Luis Cernuda with an essay on André Gide (1, 1951), Américo Castro with "La palabra escrita y el Quijote" (3, 1947), Gabriel Celaya with a poem dedicated to Darío (1,

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<sup>13</sup> All the citations will include the number of the journal *Asomante* (1, 2, 3 or 4) followed by the year when it was published. Any article should be easily found with this information.

1958) and a selection of poems entitled “Versos de circunstancias” (1, 1956), Ricardo Gullón with his letters from Spain, Federico de Onís with essays on Ortega (4, 1956), Juan Ramón Jiménez (2, 1957) and José Martí (3, 1953), Ángel del Río with “Tres momentos de la literatura contemporánea española” (1, 1948), Guillermo de Torre with numerous essays on Lope de Vega and Mallarmé and others linking Hispanic tradition to the European avant-garde, and María Zambrano with several philosophical essays: “Franz Kafka, un mártir de la lucidez” (1, 1947), “La mirada de Cervantes” (3, 1947), “Las ruinas” (1, 1952), “La palabra y el silencio” (4, 1967), among others. All of these contributions sustained the Hispanic platform of *Asomante* binding it with its Spanish canonical ancestors, or even more, with what can be called their literary fathers.

Hispanism was also promoted through the publication of special issues that paid tribute to Spanish icons such as Miguel de Cervantes, José Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, Federico García Lorca, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Pedro Salinas. No other country, not even Puerto Rico, received praise so extensively. This strategy also proves Nilita’s ideal construct for her journal. Publishing numbers on behalf of such great personalities assured the journal a canonical reputation.

Therefore, as previously discussed, Nilita sees *Asomante*’s genealogy not only as from Hispanic descent, but also as the continuance of the Puerto Rican tradition of literary writers. These Puerto Rican heirs are in debt with their Hispanic fathers and they should pay tribute to them by claiming their heritage.

## The Latin American brotherhood

Puerto Rico, a pesar de carecer de soberanía es una  
nación con hondo y probado sentido de sí misma,  
parte integrante de América Latina.<sup>14</sup>

Nilita Vientós Gastón

Breaking the island's isolation with Latin America was another strategy that Nilita pursued. To this task the Puerto Rican critic Concha Meléndez had contributed a decade before with the publication of her book *La novela indianista en Hispanoamérica* in 1934. This book symbolized a new open dialogue between the literature of the island and that of other Latin American countries. A few years later, Margot Arce de Vázquez published an important contribution to the Latin American literary bibliography: *Gabriela Mistral, persona y poesía* (1958). Once again, Arce de Vázquez exemplified the links being created between Puerto Rico and the rest of the Hispanic world.

Further proof of these Latin American networks appears in the various letters that Nilita received for the tenth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of the journal in 1955 and 1969, respectively. Names such as Fernando Ortiz, Alfonso Reyes, Mariano Picón-Salas, Fernando Alegría, Enrique Anderson Imbert, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Roberto Fernández Retamar, among others, filled the pages of the journal with congratulations to the editor. These letters bore an excitement as if their authors had been part of the *Asomante's* editorial circle. For example, Miguel Ángel Asturias even wrote a poem dedicated to *Asomante*. This circle that took Nilita twenty five years to consolidate prevailed with the collaboration of many Latin American writers.

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<sup>14</sup> Vientós Gastón, Biografía de una revista: Asomante - Sin Nombre.

But Nilita chose wisely the Latin American writers that she published in her journal. Miguel Ángel Asturias appears as a prime example, a figure who will later win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1967. Similarly, the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, after winning the famous prize *Rómulo Gallegos* in 1967, published a chapter of his next novel *Conversación en la catedral* in *Asomante* (1969). Although the examples are brief, they show how Nilita's editorial agenda pointed towards maintaining the high standards of her journal. Furthermore, the poets of the renowned Orígenes circle also contributed to Nilita's journal. The literary reputation that José Lezama Lima, Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz had with their own journal attracted Nilita and persuaded her to stay in close contact with one of the best journals ever produced: *Orígenes*. The publication in *Asomante* of the poems "Ahora penetra" (3, 1958) and "Horas regladas" (4, 1954) by Lezama Lima, "Catacresis esencial" (1, 1954) and "El Escorial" (2, 1951) by Vitier, and García Marruz's "Carta a Antonio Machado" (4, 1947) all evidence this. Nilita knew that publishing the works of the members of the Orígenes circle would help her journal achieve an equivalent quality. Even more, publishing poems by Lezama next to poems by the Puerto Rican transcendentalist poet Francisco Matos Paoli, for example, would add value and respect to the literature of the island. Nilita was unavoidably fixing the Puerto Rican literary canon with other collaborations.

The high standards also predetermined the Latin American literary critics chosen to write for the journal. It is hardly surprising that four of the most important Latin American thinkers were featured in *Asomante*: Alfonso Reyes, Mariano Picón Salas, Fernando Ortiz, and Enrique Anderson Imbert. Among these critics' publications in the journal, two are of special interest to us: Enrique Anderson Imbert's essay "Luis Palés Matos, desde la Argentina" (3, 1959), and Fernando Ortiz's "La Bomba de Puerto Rico" (2, 1953). As we can see from the titles, these

essays focus on Puerto Rico but from an outside perspective. These contributions show that Nilita was also interested in getting Latin American thinkers to work with Puerto Rican topics. This way, other Latin Americans would discover the island, its literature, and its cultural tradition and heritage. Looking at Palés Matos from Argentina, and at the “Bomba Puertorriqueña” from Cuba, enabled a Latin American brotherhood that lifted *Asomante* into a “higher” level, first, by having great literary critics as part of its index, and, second, by opening the doors of the island to the rest of the world.

Lastly, another way to perpetuate the Latin American bond between *Asomante* and the Hispanic world, was by publishing special numbers that paid tribute to icons such as José Martí, Rubén Darío, Alfonso Reyes, and Miguel Ángel Asturias. Their names reveal some of the best Latin American writers of all time. Therefore, *Asomante* had to pay tribute to them as a commitment with this brotherhood. This “celebration” implicitly celebrated at the same time its own Puerto Rican achievements given that the island also belongs to the Latin American family.

### **The Anglo Saxon contribution**

Although the English collaborations are the least in number, Nilita knew that her journal had to form connections with the countries of the North. She wanted to create a dialogue with writers such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Langston Hughes, among others. *Asomante* included works from all of these writers first, because Nilita thought that Spanish translations were needed to promote English literature to Spanish speakers; second, because literature is valuable in any language. Bilingual formatting was also made accessible to the reader, making it easier to study the poems side by side, the original and its translation. Nilita’s interest in English culture was also present in her University courses (as in Proust, James y Virginia Woolf) and in her book Introducción a Henry James (1956). She knew

how important these writers were, and she encouraged Puerto Rican writers to become familiar with them. Reading their work, Nilita thought, would open new doors to the young generations in the island and help them improve their literary production. Therefore, English and North American writers were also responsible for building up the new literary generations of the Puerto Rican canon.

### **Puerto Rican genealogies: fathers and heirs of the literary canon**

The final and foremost genealogy created in *Asomante* was the one about Puerto Rican literature itself. Nilita insisted in promoting Puerto Rican historical literary heritage and published many of its documents, mostly from the nineteenth century. This revision of the early literature on the island constituted what could be called the “search for the fathers” of the Puerto Rican canon. Later on, the heirs of the canon established themselves in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Nilita’s strategy to build the Puerto Rican genealogy was to divide *Asomante* in half and devote the second section of the journal exclusively to Puerto Rican culture. This second part was titled “Puerto Rico” and it contained two subsections: “Ayer” and “Hoy”. The “Ayer” subdivision included literary works from the Puerto Rican writers of the nineteenth century and also important historical documents such as the letter that declared the abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico. The “Hoy” section, on the other hand, published materials by contemporary writers of the 40s and 50s, primarily poems, short stories, and plays. Side by side to these creative contributions, a critical note was also published under the “Hoy” section that revisited and commented on the nineteenth century author included in that same issue of *Asomante*. The note was generally based on biographical information and a critical approach to his or her work. It also served as a bridge between previous generations and contemporary ones. As seen, both

subdivisions could also be renamed with “Father” and “Heirs” of the Puerto Rican canon, instead of the “Ayer” and “Hoy” titles, respectively.

To appreciate this process of canon formation it is imperative to mention several titles included by Nilita. On the first year of publication, for example, two of the most important Puerto Rican writers from the nineteenth century were included in *Asomante*: Alejandro Tapia y Rivera and Manuel Alonso. Selections from *Mis memorias* (1, 1945) and from the book *El Gíbaro* (2, 1945) were chosen to open the Puerto Rican literary tradition. This fact is important, specially the publications of the sections from *El Gíbaro* “Un casamiento gíbaro” and “Bailes de Puerto Rico,” which are generally studied as part of the first book ever published (Barcelona 1849) in which an author born in the island focused exclusively on the island’s local folklore. Hence, Nilita insisted on revisiting the origins of Puerto Rican literature and creating an archive to trace its evolution.

It is worth mentioning here a long list of other publications which also contributed to this Puerto Rican archive to perceive the magnitude of Nilita’s enterprise: selections of “Crónicas del semanario satírico Juan Bobo” by Nemesio R. Canales (3, 1945), the poems “A Puerto Rico” and “La barca” by José Gautier Benítez (4, 1945), the poems “El pueblo” and “El Cacique” by Virgilio Dávila (1, 1946), “El golfo de penas” and “Ofelia” by Eugenio María de Hostos (2, 1946), selected poems by José de Diego (3, 1946), the poems “Cantares” and “Como escribo mis versos” by Lola Rodríguez de Tió (3, 1948), chapter five of Manuel Zeno Gandía’s novel *La Charca* (2, 1949), chapter eight of another of Zeno Gandía’s novels *Redentores* (4, 1955), selections of short stories and poems by Cayetano Coll y Toste (3, 1950), poems by Alejandrina Benítez from the *Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño* (4, 1951), etc. These publications were followed by critical notes such as: “Un costumbrista Puertorriqueño del siglo XIX, Manuel A. Alonso” by

Jorge Luis Porras Cruz (2, 1945), “En torno a ‘El Jíbaro’ de Manuel A. Alonso” written by José Emilio González (3, 1951), “Opinion de Hostos sobre Ruiz Belvis y Betances” by Ángel Luis Morales (3, 1945), “José Gautier Benítez” by Manuel Siaca Rivera (4, 1945), “Virgilio Dávila” by Francisco Matos Paoli (1, 1946), “Eugenio María de Hostos: Apuntes sobre su obra literaria” by Ángel Luis Morales (2, 1946), “Un hombre de América: R. Baldorioty de Castro” by Cesáreo Rosa Nieves (1, 1948), “Lola Rodríguez de Tió” by Luz María Algarín Feliciano (3, 1948), “La naturaleza en ‘La Charca’” by José M. Colón (2, 1949), “El arte de novelar en Zeno Gandía” by Enrique Laguerre (4, 1955), “Presencia de Manuel Zeno Gandía” by Cesáreo Rosa Nieves (4, 1955), “Don Cayetano Coll y Toste y el boletín histórico” by Arturo Morales Carrión (3, 1950), etc. However, the list above only includes articles on literary personalities commemorating and acknowledging their importance. Nilita was also interested in republishing foundational politico-historical documents such as the abolition of slavery titled “Informe sobre la abolición inmediata de la esclavitud en Puerto Rico de 10 de abril de 1967” by Segundo Ruiz Belvis, José Julián Acosta y Francisco Mariano Quiñones (4, 1948) and the “Discurso en la cortes constituyentes de 1870” by Roman Baldorioty de Castro (1, 1948). These materials were also included in the journal because the archive was not limited to Puerto Rican literature.

On top of this literary tradition, the new generations were developing and building themselves the Puerto Rican canon of the twentieth century. They were the heirs of this tradition and they already had a reputation given to them by the journal. Getting published side by side to such writers from the past century meant that they had a responsibility with Puerto Rican culture. Their production would be taken very seriously perpetuating the notoriety of the icons already mentioned.

Among the heirs of Puerto Rican poetry, various names stand out: Francisco Matos Paoli, Evaristo Riberta Chevremont, Juan Antonio Corretjer, José Emilio González, and Luis Palés Matos. They are presented as the inheritors of such poets as José Gautier Benítez, José de Diego, Virgilio Dávila, and Lola Rodríguez de Tió. Some of the young canonical contributions were “Criatura de la muerte” (1, 1945) and “Canto a Puerto Rico” (2, 1950) by Matos Paoli, “Espiritual rigor” (4, 1945) and “Río volcado” (2, 1955) by Ribera Chevremont, “Arquitectura del humo” by José Emilio González (2, 1955), “El llamado” by Luis Palés Matos (1, 1954), and “Aguas de Guaynabo” (3, 1957), “Genio y figura” (4, 1958), and “La quimera sublevada” (3, 1966) by Juan Antonio Corretjer.

On the other hand, in theatre and in short story writing, the writers were not directly heirs of past figures but they founded the canon themselves producing the greatest work done so far in these genres. On this matter, the figure of René Marqués is crucial. Not only was he the director of the Ateneo Puertorriqueño’s division called “Teatro Experimental” assigned by Nilita Vientós Gastón herself, but he also wrote and directed most of the theatrical plays on the island during the 1950s. His plays quickly got international recognition and became part of the Puerto Rican canon. Interestingly, they were first published in *Asomante*. The best example of a canonical play established by *Asomante* is “La carreta” written by Marqués himself and published between 1951 and 1952. Other important plays also published in *Asomante* are: “Medusas en la bahía” (2, 1955), “El murciélago” (1, 1956) and “Los vejigantes” (1, 1957) by Francisco Arriví, “El sol y los Macdonald” (1, 1957) and “El hombre y sus sueños” (2, 1948) by René Marqués, and “La pasión según Antígona Pérez” (1-2, 1968) by Luis Rafael Sánchez. We should stop over this last play because, although it was published in 1968, Luis Rafael Sánchez belongs to the generation

of writers of the 70s best associated with the *Sin Nombre* period. Therefore, *Asomante* also opened space for future generations and supported them ahead of time.

René Marqués was also a central figure in the short story canonical literature that was produced during the 40s and the 50s in Puerto Rico. Not only did he contribute with several short stories of great caliber, but he also reviewed the work of all the short story writers in his essay “El cuento puertorriqueño en la promoción del cuarenta.”<sup>15</sup> In this essay, Marqués perceived that *Asomante*'s grouping of short story writers was worth being called a new generation. Another literary critic that agreed with this assessment was Concha Meléndez in her essay “El cuento en la edad de *Asomante*: 1945-55”. Nilita Vientós Gastón also recognizes the importance of this generation of writers in the editorial note to the issue of *Asomante* that pays tribute to the Puerto Rican short story (3, 1956):

[L]os años de vida de *Asomante* coinciden con un período de enriquecimiento del género [cuentístico] al que han contribuido, en gran medida, los certámenes del Festival de Navidad del Ateneo Puertorriqueño y el estímulo que le ha prestado esta revista. Casi todos los cultivadores más recientes fueron descubiertos en esos certámenes o se iniciaron en nuestras páginas –Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, Edwin Figueroa, René Marqués, Pedro Juan Soto.<sup>16</sup>

Here Nilita mentions the literary prizes that she created while presiding the Ateneo Puertorriqueño. Many short story writers gained recognition in this contests and were later published by Nilita in her journal. Therefore, Nilita was choosing wisely what to publish in her canonical journal. Two short stories awarded in 1953 were the “Aguinaldo negro” (2, 1954) by

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<sup>15</sup> René Marqués, “El cuento puertorriqueño en la promoción del cuarenta,” *El puertorriqueño dócil y otros ensayos* (San Juan: Antillana, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Nilita Vientós Gastón, “Nota editorial,” *Asomante* XII.3 (1956): 7.

Edwin Figueroa and “Garabato” (3, 1954) by Pedro Juan Soto. Soto was also recognized in 1954 for his short story “Los inocentes” (2, 1955). Other canonical short stories published in *Asomante* were “El Josco” (1, 1946) and “Bagazo” (1, 1947) by Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, “En el fondo del caño hay un negrito” (3, 1950) by José Luis González, and “Los héroes” (1, 1958) by Emilio Díaz Varcárcel.

As seen above, Nilita’s enterprise building the Puerto Rican canon began by creating genealogies. Other strategies included creating anthologies and an editorial company under *Asomante*’s name.

### **Anthologizing in *Asomante***

Another strategy that established the Puerto Rican canon was that of anthologizing. By creating anthologies, the editors recognized some works over others and had to choose between “canon-worthy” publishing material or secondary ones. The importance of anthologies could be seen as in the history of the Cuban journal *Orígenes*. Cintio Vitier’s books *Diez poetas cubanos* (1948) and *Cincuenta años de poesía cubana* (1952) organized and included the *Orígenes* group of poets under the Cuban canon. Similarly, Nilita requested from Juan Martínez Capó an anthology on the poetry of the *Asomante* period later called “*Antología Poética de Asomante: 1945-1959*”.<sup>17</sup> Only Puerto Rican poets were published in this anthology, setting up the genealogy in a single poetry collection. In this anthology new genealogies are also acknowledged, as Concha Meléndez notes in her introduction. The Puerto Rican theme is all over the journal of *Asomante* building new genealogies between the writers. The best example of this process is the poem “Puerto Rico” by José Gautier Benítez and “Canto a Puerto Rico” by Francisco Matos Paoli. One succeeds the other, clearly revealing the “engineering” of a lineage.

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<sup>17</sup> *Antología poética de Asomante: 1945-1959*.

The second anthology created by Nilita was in the journal *Asomante* itself, published in 1956 as the third issue. It was called “El cuento puertorriqueño de hoy” and included such personalities as Emilio S. Belaval, Emilio Díaz Valcárcel, Abelardo Díaz Alfaro, Edwin Figueroa, José Luis González, René Marqués, Enrique Laguerre, and Pedro Juan Soto. Today all of these names belong to the Puerto Rican canon of the 50s, and as Nilita says in the editorial note of the 1956 issue, this is mostly due to the efforts and space that her journal provided to new generations of writers. These new generations not only had the support of the journal, but also were backed up by the older collaborators and literary critics as well. Proof of this is the great number of essays that *Asomante* published about the young writers: “El cuento en la edad de Asomante” (1, 1955) and “La literatura de ficción en Puerto Rico: 1955-1963” (3, 1964) by Concha Meléndez, “La poesía puertorriqueña de 1930 a 1945” (1, 1955) and “La poesía puertorriqueña de 1945 a los 1963” (3, 1964) by José Emilio González, “30 años de teatro en Puerto Rico” (1, 1955) by Wilfredo Braschi, “25 años del ensayo puertorriqueño” (1, 1955) by Margot Arce de Vázquez and Mariana Robles Cardona, “Veinte años de teatro puertorriqueño: 1945-1964” (4, 1964) and “Asomante en la cultura puertorriqueña” (3, 1965) by María Teresa Babín, and “El ensayo puertorriqueño en los últimos veinte años” by Mariana Robles de Cardona (3, 1964). Sometimes the critics dedicated single studies specifically to a single work by a younger writer. One example of this is the article “Apunte sobre La Carreta” written by María Teresa Babín (4, 1953). Here it is important to note that most of the literary critics that wrote these essays were professors at the University of Puerto Rico in the Hispanic Studies Department. As part of the academic establishment, they had also great influence on canon formation given academia’s fixation on canonical texts. Their essays were crucial then in developing the canonization agendas for future generations.

### **Creating an editorial company**

Nilita's third strategy that solidified canon formation was the establishment of an editorial company that would publish books by Puerto Rican authors involved in the *Asomante* project. By publishing these books under the label *Asomante*, the journal raised its standards and widened its enterprise. It also implied that the journal was getting more prestigious, and that a new editorial company was open for the new generations to publish their recent work. However, this editorial company was hard to sustain; only eight books were published in total: *Los vates* by Tomás Blanco, *El reformismo ilustrado en Puerto Rico* by Isabel Gutiérrez del Arroyo, *Gabriela Mistral: Persona y poesía* by Margot Arce de Vázquez, *Juan Ramón Jiménez, Ensayo de exégesis* by Bernardo Gicovate, *Viaje* by Juan Martínez Capó, *Poesías de guerra de Antonio Machado* by Aurora de Albornoz, *Tierra indiana* by Lilianne Pérez Marchand, and *Conceptos fundamentales de literatura comparada: Iniciación de la poesía modernista* by Bernardo Gicovate. In any case, the *Asomante* editorial label increased the reputation of the journal further more, and established the high quality of the *Asomante* project.

### **CONCLUSION: The *Asomante* generation**

As seen through the previous study, the journal *Asomante* was of great importance to Puerto Rican literary and cultural history. Most of today's considered canonical literature of the 50s was published there first and was studied first by critics that published frequently for the journal. However, the figure of Nilita Vientós Gastón and *Asomante* itself have been somewhat forgotten over the years. This study pretends to reconnect our present time with that of Nilita's in order to understand how valuable literary journals were in Puerto Rico. *Asomante* proves to be one of the most important ones, indeed, but further studies still are needed, especially one that also includes Nilita's second journal *Sin Nombre*.

As for now, our research exposed that Nilita's enterprise with *Asomante* was more than merely building up a literary journal. She not only compiled a great journal but also ended up creating Puerto Rican canonical figures by genealogizing, anthologizing, and establishing an editorial company. The high standards that she emphasized in *Asomante* helped young writers establish a reputation and thus created a new canonical generation: "Porque ha tratado [*Asomante*] de conseguir la mejor colaboración posible de los escritores de nuestra lengua."<sup>18</sup> The best collaboration was indeed from those new generations of writers which could be called, thanks to Nilita, "the *Asomante* generation."

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<sup>18</sup> Nilita Vientós Gastón, "Nota editorial," *Asomante* XI.1 (1955): 6.

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