

*Zona carga y descarga*  
Nascent Postmodernism in Puerto Rican Letters

Suzanne S. Hintz  
Germanna College, P. O. Box 339, Locust Grove VA 22508

The history of Puerto Rican letters includes a long tradition of literary journals that serve as a means of publishing the works of unknown authors from the island. Alejandro Tapia y Rivera directed the earliest journal, *La azucena*, which appeared from 1870 to 1871 and again from 1874 to 1877. Luis Llorens Torres edited the journal *La revista de las Antillas* from 1913 to 1915, and Antonio Pedreira led the publication of *Indice* from 1929 to 1931. These early journals “fulfilled the vital function of keeping channels of communication alive, not only among Puerto Rican intellectuals, but also between Puerto Rico and the rest of the world. ...They have been the principal instruments in the fight of Puerto Rican writers against the island's cultural isolation, particularly from the rest of Spanish America, abetted by the United States and the Puerto Rican annexationists” (González 580). They are also well documented because of the fame of their creators within the body of Puerto Rican and Latin American literature of the period.

During the mid-twentieth century several other literary journals appeared in Puerto Rico, some short-lived and others whose life span covered multiple decades. Luis Hernández Aquino directed three different journals between 1941 and 1950: *El día estético* and *Insula* from 1941 to 1943, and *Bayoán* in 1950. According to Francisco Manrique Cabrera, *Bayoán* published “poesía de un nuevo despertar” (362). Two subsequent, celebrated journals were *Asomante*, published from 1945 to 1970, and *Sin nombre* from 1970 to 1985. Both of these journals were the creation of

the indefatigable literary figure, Nilita Vientós Gastón. She actively sought out Puerto Rican authors and published both original prose and poetry as well as critical essays on Latin American literature. Vientós Gastón represents a vital link in the chain of Puerto Rican letters and their tradition of publishing for the people of the island.

One criticism that arose in the 1960s and 1970s of Vientós Gastón's editorial policies was the fact that in order to be published in *Asomante* or *Sin nombre*, one had to have been published somewhere else first. Vientós Gastón also represented the "establishment" of the time, and the new breed of writers, especially the revolutionary poets, who did not write about traditional themes, were not necessarily welcome in either of her journals. These two decades were also the years of student unrest on university campuses throughout the world. Puerto Rico was different from Mexico, France and the United States only in the fact that the students did not actually have a militant revolution within the university; there the protest took the form of social literature published in student-directed journals. These journals, another link in the long tradition of literary efforts on the island, created a means for peaceful revolution by providing a public forum in which individuals could express their sociopolitical concerns.

One student-directed journal to appear at the University of Puerto Rico was *Guajana*. Carmelo Rodríguez Torres documents in a 1994 article that *Guajana* was born from a lack of life in Puerto Rican literature (24). A group of students in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the Río Piedras campus began to congregate for poetry readings in the fall of 1960. During that academic year and the ensuing one the participants in the group grew in number, and by September 1962 they founded the poetry

journal at the university. Vicente Rodríguez Nietzsche served as director for every one of the twenty-three issues that were published during the twenty years that followed. There were six epochs of publication over the time span — from September 1962 to June 1964, from March 1966 to September 1968, from January to March 1970, from January 1974 to December 1974, two issues in 1979, and the last issue in 1982 in celebration of its twentieth anniversary. During the first period of publication, *Guajana* was supported by the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and, according to Rodríguez Torres, the Association of Student Librarians, but advertising supported the costs of publication of the remaining issues. The journal did not limit itself to publishing poetry; a few short stories, book reviews, and critical essays appeared from time to time. Two members of the teaching faculty of the Department of Hispanic Studies, Professors Margot Arce de Vázquez and Concha Meléndez lent their support to the journal by writing critical essays on the poets whom the journal was honoring in those particular issues. *Guajana* did however focus on certain themes in its publication, mostly of a political nature. The journal was antiwar and as documented by Rodríguez Torres, was against obligatory ROTC instruction at the university. By the end of the first decade of its existence the editorial staff proclaimed itself socialist and pro-independence for the island. Thus, the editorial policy of the journal restricted publication to those works that supported an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and anti-Vietnam philosophy.

During the late 1960s the Department of Hispanic Studies received funding to augment its teaching faculty by inviting visiting professors and literary figures to the university. Among those who accepted the invitation was Dr. Angel Rama, Uruguayan literary critic, who brought his

enthusiasm for contemporary Latin American literature to the young Puerto Rican intellectuals enrolled there. It was in one of Rama's classes on fantastic literature that a group of individuals pursued the founding of another student-directed literary journal to serve as a means of publishing young Puerto Rican authors. Under the guidance of Rama, Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, Eduardo Forastieri, Luis César Rivera, and Waldo César Lloreda formed the first working group that published *Zona carga y descarga*. The first issue of the journal appeared in September 1972, and the last and ninth issue was published in June 1975.

*Zona* was a literary journal of a different breed from what had previously appeared on the island. The editorial group decided from the beginning to create an open space, an area in which writers could “unload” their concerns or “discharge” their anger and in which Puerto Rican readers could become more aware of the social, political, and cultural issues of the moment. While no one issue was ever focused on any particular theme, nor were any works refused by the editorial staff on the basis of the author's political or social philosophy, a few themes recurred that were of import not only in Puerto Rico but also throughout the world in the early 1970s. Among them were the status of women in a patriarchal society, the question of overt homosexuality, and finally the anti-colonialism of all colonies, whether British, French, Dutch, or North American. The students who published and were published in *Zona* were pro-feminism, anti-homophobia, and pro-independence for Puerto Rico. These points of view were very liberal sociopolitically in the conservative-dominated atmosphere of the early seventies in Puerto Rico and thus created a charged atmosphere among the opposing philosophical camps. Even though this journal dared to “rock the conservative boat” in

Puerto Rican letters, it is considered today as one of the more influential literary movements of the period.

One must then ask the question, why is *Zona* so well thought of in terms of the history of Puerto Rican letters in the twentieth century and especially in the Generation of the '70s? According to Juan Angel Silén, it is because of the fact that from the very beginning *Zona* looked for a balance between the form and the content of literature. The editorial board wanted to break away from the traditional canon of Puerto Rican literature as it searched for a new canon, extracted from the margins of culture and society to relocate at the center (85-86).

The first act of the *Zona* group was to organize a forum on the status of Puerto Rican literature. The forum was held on March 1, 1971, at the Río Piedras campus, and participants included Professors Francisco Manrique Cabrera, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and Angel Rama. Nilita Vientós Gastón served as moderator of the panel. Sánchez described the literary crisis as a part of the phenomenon of social crisis, for he believed that "literature is produced within a social context" (*Zona* 5). Sánchez viewed the current state of Puerto Rican literature as one that exalted a "fossilized criollism" (6). Díaz Quiñones proposed that the idea of breaking the bonds of past literary movements and combatting censorship of the new forms and ideas would be in the best tradition of Spanish-American literature (6). Rama stated that he was opposed to colonialism because without liberty writers cannot give testimony to truth. He proposed that there had been no social values established in Puerto Rico that would oblige an author to live for writing (6). Literature has no value alone unless it is created with a spiritual value (7). Manrique Cabrera asserted that the literary crisis was due to a crisis in language;

he had interviewed several children who were ashamed to speak Spanish because English had become so important within the social values of the island. There were obviously different reasons for the belief that Puerto Rican literature was in a state of crisis, but all of these academic participants agreed that a state of crisis did in fact exist.

Thus, *Zona* was born to combat that crisis — to break the bonds of the previous literary generation and to provide an uncensored forum in which young writers could experiment with both the form and content of their literary creations. The first editorial page in 1972 was a collage of editorial opinions from all five of the organizers. The editorial policy, if there was one, was anarchical — without government or rule — and engendered from the surrealism of André Breton. The editors believed that “a writer is always the voice of the collective consciousness” (5). *Zona* promoted the young writers who were not imitators but were spontaneous reflections of Puerto Rican reality.

At the time of its publication, the *Zona* group felt that it was promoting a surrealistic approach to literature and literary change. However, viewed from a perspective of more than two decades, what *Zona* represented at that time was a break from the modernism and late modernism of past literary generations in Puerto Rican letters. It was in essence the birth of Postmodernism on the island.

Postmodernism is a term that has many meanings for many individuals. It is thus necessary to define the term in order to substantiate the position of *Zona* within the literary movement. The first critic who used the term “postmodernism” was Federico de Onís in his *Antología de la poesía española e hispanoamericana* published in 1934. In it Onís defines postmodernism as “a minor reaction to modernism”

(Jencks 13). He names Jorge Luis Borges as the first postmodern writer in Latin America. In 1942 the English critic Dudley Fitts also used the term postmodernism in the same context. In 1956 the historian Arnold Toynbee chose this literary term to refer to “our post-Modern age of Western history” (146). Other literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Irving Howe (192) and Harold Levin (277), return to using the term postmodernism in reference to a rupture with modernism, and in his book *Religion in a Secular City* (1970) Harvey Cox refers to the liberation theology as a postmodern theology.

The artistic community gave birth to its first postmodern movement in England in the 1950s. A group of artists who called themselves “The Independent Group,” promoted popular culture rather than the culture of the elite; they believed that the new communication media — television, radio, film, and the press — shaped popular culture. The intent of the Independent Group was to show the dynamic formation of a social consciousness, which they represented by creating the collage (Jencks 14). Postmodernism in art arrived in the United States in the 1950s prepared to present the dramatization of urban social reality in which artists believed that modernism was the crutch of capitalism, the conservatism of the government, and the orthodoxy of the Vietnam War. Postmodern art in the United States was a natural reaction to the established order (Jencks 18). Finally in 1971 the literary critic Ihab Hassan baptized this worldwide reactionary movement as postmodernism. He explained that postmodernism is subversive in form and anarchic in its cultural spirit. It dramatizes its lack of faith in art while it creates new artistic works intent on speeding up a cultural and artistic dissolution (59).

Literary critics of the 1970s and 1980s continued to define postmodernism, but it seems that each has a personal definition that is different from the rest. Some like Frederic Jameson (421), John Beverly (11), and Nelly Richard (455) label postmodernism as a postcolonial reaction from third world countries in an attempt to center their marginal views in the world of major powers. E. Ann Kaplan labels it as a deconstruction of modernism (2), which José Luis González defines as the cultural representation of the elite (37). Thus postmodernism in these terms would be the cultural representation of the populace. Toril Moi includes the feminist movement in postmodernism because women sought to bring their ideas to the center from their marginal position in the patriarchal world (35). Julio Ortega writes that postmodernism deals with the humanity of difference and of the existence and the culture of the other (198). George Yúdice states that postmodernism is the “polyphony of voices each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity” (7). He believes that postmodernism is due to the unequal distribution of income and hyperinflation.

The individual who has most directly defined postmodernism is the architect Charles Jencks. In his book *Post-modernism* he lists eleven qualities of postmodern architecture which are adapted here to use with literature: 1) fragmented unity, 2) pluralism, 3) a balance between the past and the present, 4) humanism, 5) remembrance of the past through parody, 6) intertextuality, 7) the use of irony for double meaning, 8) a reinterpretation of traditions, 9) the use of rhetorical tropes, 10) ambiguity, and 11) a movement from the margin to the center (Jencks 330-46). Jencks qualifies concrete characteristics on which postmodernism may be judged.



In view of all of these various opinions on the definition of the characteristics of postmodernism the literary journal *Zona carga y descarga* fulfills all of them. It was born in an effort by young authors to deconstruct the past, to move away from the modernism of the previous generations of writers, and to create a new center for the marginalized opinion. Through the artistic design and the creative writing within the form of the collage, it represented a fragmented unity, and its anarchic editorial policy encouraged a pluralism of ideas and genres. The magazine did represent a balance between the past and the present in that it attracted the participation of individuals who had already made a name for themselves in the Latin American literary world - writers like Angel Rama, Mario Vargas Llosa, José Donoso, Luis Rafael Sánchez, Severo Sarduy, and Héctor Manjárrez. It remembered the great literary figures of the past, not only through critical essays praising their efforts to Puerto Rican letters, but also through the intertextual references to them in the prose and poetry that was published in the journal. It also attempted to reinterpret the tradition of Puerto Rican letters by daring to be different. Much of the prose, especially the short stories of Rosario Ferré and Manuel Ramos Otero, use irony and many rhetorical tropes within their discourse, but most important *Zona* provided a forum for bringing the margin to the center. It promoted the feminist movement in Puerto Rico, the publication of Neoricán writers in a journal published on the island, and an arena for homosexuality in literature. These were avant garde themes in the Puerto Rico of the mid-1970s.

What has happened to these rebellious young writers during the last twenty years since the demise of *Zona carga y descarga*? Many of them, like Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, Vanessa Droz, Luis López Nieves, Aurea

María Sotomayor, and Ivonne Ochart are very successful writers in Puerto Rico at this moment. *Zona's* film critic, Luis Trelles, is the film critic for the San Juan newspaper *El nuevo día*. Walter Torres is now a very successful graphic artist for the University of Puerto Rico Press. Neorican writers Victor Fragoso and Pedro Pietri are successful authors within contemporary Hispanic literature in the United States. Eduardo Forastieri and Mercedes López Baralt have received international acclaim for their critical studies of Hispanic literature in the world of academia, and Manuel Álvarez is the literary critic for the *San Juan Star*. Francis Schwartz, the music critic for *Zona*, is now the director of Humanities for the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. This is but a small sample of the talent that had their first artistic endeavors published in *Zona*.

Rosario Ferré says that her initial interest in founding *Zona carga y descarga* was to be able to write and to publish what she wrote. Angel Rama had become her creative mentor, and it was Rama who suggested to her to found a magazine so that she would learn to fill the blank page. She did develop the discipline she needed to stimulate her creativity when necessary. So did many of the others. *Zona* was the means to achieve a writing career in an atmosphere that was closed to new ideas and new influences. It was the spring board to the postmodern movement in Puerto Rican letters — not just in the rejection of the “fossilized” canon of previous generations but the impetus to open the way for others to find a means of communication that was unbounded and uncensored. The *Zona* group did create a platform for the collective consciousness of contemporary Puerto Rico.

## Note

I want to acknowledge the assistance of Rosario Ferré, José Luis Vega, Francisco Acevedo, and Eduardo Forastieri for their invaluable information without which she could not have completed this investigation.

## Works Cited

- Beverly, John. "Postmodernism in Latin America." *Siglo XX – Twentieth Century* 9 (1991-1992): 9-29.
- Cox, Harvey. *Religion in a Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970.
- González, Aníbal. "Puerto Rico." *Handbook of Latin American Literature*. Ed. David William Foster. New York: Garland Publishing, 1992. 555-81.
- González, José Luis. *El país de cuatro pisos y otros ensayos*. Río Piedras: Editorial Huracán, 1989.
- Hassan, Ihab. "POSTmodernISM: A Paracritical Bibliography." *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975. 39-59.
- Howe, Irving. *Decline of the New*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Introduction." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (1993): 417-22.
- Jencks, Charles. *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. "Introduction." *Postmodernism and its Discontents*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. London: Verso, 1988. 1-9.
- Levin, Harold. "What Was Modernism?" *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966. 271-95.
- Manrique Cabrera, Francisco. *Historia de la literatura puertorriqueña*. Río Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1986.
- Moi, Toril. "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticisms in the United States." *Criticism in the Twilight Zone*:

*Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Politics*. Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad and Lennart Björk, eds. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990. 34–46.

Ortega, Julio. "Postmodernism in Latin America." *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas*. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, eds. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988. 193–208.

Richard, Nelly. "The Latin American Problematic of Theoretical-Cultural Transference: Postmodern Appropriations and Counterappropriations." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (1993): 543–56.

Rodríguez Torres, Carmelo. "Mester y Guajana: Una polémica de los sesenta." *Diálogo* August 1994: 24–5.

Silén, Juan Angel. *La generación de escritores del 70*. Río Piedras: Editorial Cutral, 1977.

Toynbee, Arnold. *An Historian's Approach to Religion*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Yúdice, George. "Postmodernity and Transnational Capitalism in Latin America." *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*. George Yúdice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 1–28.

*Zona carga y descarga* 1 (September 1972).