

A Woman's Portfolio: Beyond Survival to Female Agency in *Rituals of*

Survival by Nicholasa Mohr

By Jennifer A. Colón

Nicholasa Mohr is one of the most widely published and perhaps most well-read Puerto Rican authors in the United States. Following her first book, *Nilda* (1973), Mohr became the recipient of various literary awards including a 1973 Outstanding Book Award by the *New York Times Book Review*, the 1973 Best Children's Book of the Year of the *School Library Journal*, the 1974 Jane Adams Children's Book Award, and she is a 1975 National Book Award Finalist. Yet, she has received very little scholarly attention from literary critics. This is credited to the idea that Mohr: "has written thirteen books, primarily aimed towards young adults" (http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/Mohr_Nicholasa.html no pagination); however, this is an idea the author herself challenges: "The only two books I wrote consciously for children are *Felita* and *Going Home*, which is a sequel. I am delighted that *Nilda* is considered appropriate for the adolescent market, but once adolescents begin to read, they can read anything. I was reading adult literature by age 14" (Natov 117).¹ In the same interview, when asked about the gravity of the content in *Felita* as compared to *Nilda*, Mohr responds: "Well, *Nilda* is for all ages, so I deal with a lot in *Nilda* that I wouldn't deal with in *Felita* or *Going Home*" (Natov 120). Finally, when pressed about the fairy tale she is currently writing, presumably for children, the author clarifies: "It's meant to be for everyone, but I am sure kids will like it" (121). Clearly,

¹ *Nilda* (1973) was Mohr's first novel, and it was considered children's literature. This label remained with Mohr despite her claims that her only conscious production for children was her fourth book, *Felita* (1979), and its sequel, her sixth book, *Going Home* (1986).

Mohr herself continues to refute the idea that she is an author of adolescent or children's literature despite being categorized as such.

When Mohr entered the literary market, she was already an accomplished graphic artist whose boss suggested that she attempt writing, so she submitted 50 pages which he rejected. Mohr explains his rejection by saying that her content lacked the stereotypical street life issues: "He wanted something more sensational, something with sex and violence, which is ironic because all of that is in my books, but only where it's appropriate" (Natov 116). Although Mohr's writing did not fit the mold of those authors already contributing to the emerging body of work about U.S.-mainland Puerto Rican *Barrio* life, she persisted. Mohr seized an opportunity when the editor-in-chief at Harper and Row requested illustrations for a volume of poems; Mohr gave the editor-in-chief the once-rejected 50 pages, and a contract was made for her first novel, *Nilda*. Mohr recounts this story in assorted essays and interviews to varying degrees of detail, but the subtext remains: publishers were looking for sensationalized *Barrio* living that Mohr did not provide. Mohr retorts: "Someday that work could be written by a talented sister who's done time in jail, but not me - I'm too square and uninteresting" (quoted in Flores 53). Despite her less-than-dramatic content, she asserts that her version of *Barrio* life is equally authentic to previous, more titillating versions. Mohr also was uniquely poised to provide a testimonial account in English from the perspective of a young woman born and reared in the *Barrio* – a literary realm occupied previously only by men.

Mohr narrates from a child's perspective in several of her works, and she writes in uncomplicated prose about sanitized topics of growth and survival. Thus she is associated with

children's or adolescent literature or work within the *Bildungsroman* genre². Still, the simple prose and perspective should not miss the importance of Mohr's work both in context of the U.S.-mainland Puerto Rican literary tradition and in the serious messages she conveys.

According to Frances R. Aparicio:

Although Nicholasa Mohr has been called a “meat and potatoes” writer, because of her simple style and the emphasis she places on the humanity of her characters, who are likely to be everyday people with everyday conflicts to surmount, her storytelling is clear, direct, and powerful. That it found publication in the adolescent reader market does not detract from its importance as a voice of a people sometimes marginalized by economic and social stratifications. Mohr's work has been important because it has, often for the first time in English, presented and preserved family and household rituals from the Puerto Rican Culture. (no pagination)

In fact, Mohr is more than just another plain writer, she is uniquely poised to contribute a female voice in English within the ethnobiography genre³ and represent an otherwise doubly marginalized group: U.S. Latina women. Prior to her entrance into the market with her first novel, *Nilda*, in 1973, there was a short U.S. mainland Puerto Rican literary tradition already – solely written by men and containing sensational examples of criminal behavior in U.S.-Latino communities. Mohr was decidedly “uninteresting,” but she is nonetheless a pioneer in that she occupies an important place in the emerging U.S. mainland-Puerto Rican literary tradition.

John C. Miller, in a 1978 article, traces the growing interest in the recent “Puerto Rican Diaspora” (82) and notes an important development among U.S. mainland-Puerto Rican literary production since the 1950s:

The tremendous significance of this emigration was studied throughout these three decades by many authors, most of them non-Puerto Rican, in works that

² Work within the *bildungsroman* places her with popular Hispanic female authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes and more. Pilar Bellver Sáez writes an interesting article about Mohr's *bildungsroman* as a search for a heterogeneous socio-cultural utopian space which serves as a hybrid of the old and new cultures.

³ Aparicio attributes the definition of “ethnobiography” to James Clifford who sees it as an autobiography “in which the self is seen in conjunction with [the author's] ethnic community.” (Aparicio no pagination).

present a combination of anthropological, sociological, and psychological or pseudo-psychological elements. The most representative authors are Chenault, Handlin, Lewis, Mills, Padilla, Rand, Senior, Sexton, and Wakefield. There are also two autobiographies in English dealing either with the emigration or its effects on the children of emigrants. The first of these was written by Jesús Colón who, in *A Puerto Rican in New York* (1960), reflects the urban emigrant experience of a mature individual cultural conflict. The other, *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas (1967), presents the author's life from birth and childhood in El Barrio, as a gang member, then as a schoolboy on Long Island, and finally as a youthful dope addict and petty criminal who found himself when he was in jail (82).

These emerging autobiographies were everything that Mohr's early writing was not.

Mohr's fifth book, *Rituals of Survival: A Woman's Portfolio* (1985), marks a clear departure of her writing from categorization as children's or adolescent literature. First, the protagonists are all adult women rather than children, and the topics are consequently those that adult women face which are unique to them. Each story in this collection is set in the poverty prevalent in the *Barrio*; however, the obstacles faced are less because of outside discrimination from U.S. mainstream culture and more due to women functioning in a *machista* society which plants obstacles that each protagonist must endure, survive, and even conquer. The subtitle identifies this collection as a portfolio, and each story presents an example of one woman's method of survival. Mohr modestly plants the term "survival", but this collection surpasses mere survival stories and reaches a triumphant status – if only by 21st-Century sensibilities. The most critical observation of the plight of each woman is that she *chooses* the trajectory that her life will take and that alone surpasses mere "survival" as Mohr leads readers to first believe. A closer look reveals the obstacle, the inspiration, and the agency of each protagonist which culminates in her triumph. Each story has many similarities in characterization and structure: there is a female protagonist in the middle of three generations present in the story. Generally, she is the mother or wife. There are obstacles to her happiness which are twofold: there are economic restrictions as

well as male limitations on the protagonist, so her resentment grows throughout her life as her dreams are destroyed or her opportunities are denied. There is another character, present or absent, who, during a formative or critical moment, provides words of wisdom the protagonist will later use. Finally, the protagonist experiences the obstacles, yet she experiences a moment of opportunity which she meets with a solution. The actions taken reveal potential rather than destruction. Julio Rodríguez-Luis describes Mohr's purpose:

En *Rituals of Survival* Mohr pone el énfasis, en lugar de en la destrucción de lo que trababa su libertad, en el proceso de la afirmación de la personalidad de sus protagonistas ("The Artist"). En el acto mismo de su liberación ("A Time with a Future", "A Brief Miracle"), o en la búsqueda – inconsciente – de esa liberación a través de la de un espacio propio ("Aunt Rosana's Rocker"). El caso de la protagonista de este cuento no parezca que su deseo llegue a realizarse, e incluso, en vista de la naturaleza reprimida y dada a la ensoñación de Zoraida, el que exista la posibilidad de una reacción violenta de su parte contra su situación, está relacionado con la cercanía espiritual del personaje respecto a Puerto Rico (Rodríguez-Luis 591).

In *Rituals of Survival* Mohr puts the emphasis, instead of on the destruction of that which undermines his freedom, on the process of the affirmation of the personality of her protagonists ("The Artist"). In the very act of her liberation ("A Time with a Future", "A Brief Miracle"), or in the search – unconscious – of that liberation through that of one's own space ("Aunt Rosana's Rocker"). In the case of the protagonist of this story it does not seem that her desire will be achieved, and even, in light of the repressed nature and given the dreaming of Zoraida, there exists the possibility of a violent reaction on her part against her situation which is related to the spiritual closeness of the character to Puerto Rico (Rodríguez-Luis - translation mine).

Each story in this collection has a title including the female protagonist's name in parenthesis at the end. This evokes curiosity about the meaning of the protagonist's name and why it receives a prevalent place within the title. Clearly, Mohr credits the individual woman for her story. By placing the protagonist's name in the story's title, Mohr makes no frivolous choices naming her protagonists either: each name represents an element of the protagonist's personality. Mohr also incorporates even more subtle meaning when naming her secondary characters. For example,

there are various names which recur throughout the book in different stories. This is a technique she employs in a previous collection of short stories: “*In Nueva York* (1977), a series of short stories interwoven by the use of the same characters in one story or another shows another aspect of the New York Hispanic experience, the Lower East Side” (Miller 96). In *Rituals of Survival*, there is no indication that the repeated names belong to the same character and that s/he appears in more than one story. Mohr has been known to use several techniques when naming her characters according to her purpose:

In Nueva York (1977) o *Rituals of Survival: A Woman’s Portfolio* (1985) se estructuran como una serie de viñetas e historias que se centran en personajes diferentes y que, en conjunto, nos ofrecen un retrato complejo de la diversidad de personalidades y tipos sociales que se dan cita en los barrios puertorriqueños de Nueva York. *Nilda*, por contrario, es una novela de claro protagonismo individual (Bellver Sáez 104).

In Nueva York (1977) or *Rituals of Survival: A Woman’s Portfolio* (1985) are structured as a series of vignettes and stories that are centered on different characters and who, in conjunction with one another, offer us a complex picture of the diversity of personalities and social types that are in the Puerto Rican barrios in New York. *Nilda*, on the contrary, is a novel with a clear individual protagonist (Bellver Sáez 104 - translation mine).

In *Rituals of Survival*, Mohr simply uses a name more than once in the collection without those names necessarily referring to the same character. The effect of having the same name or its variant appear in different stories is barely noticeable on a conscious level, but it gives the impression of New York City by employing names common to it; and it lends a universal, familiar feeling to the character: this could be someone I know.⁴

⁴ Males:

Eddie (the youngest son in “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker), Freddie (the 4 year old son who died 38 years prior to the story “A Time with a Future”), Eddie (the pimp in “Happy Birthday”), and Freddy (Joe’s oldest friend and best man in “The Artist”)

Joe (the daughter Edna’s husband in “A Time with a Future”), Joe (Inez’s husband in “The Artist”) and Joseph Anthony Batista (also “The Artist”)

Frank Solar (“Brief Miracle”), Frankie (Eddie’s little brother in “Happy Birthday”), and Frankie (Lucia’s older bro and “husband” in “The Artist”)

When naming the collection, Mohr takes the same care with her book. *Rituals of Survival* is not a novel or even a series of vignettes about the same characters. “Rituals” refers to the prescribed order of solemn ceremonies practiced within a culture (Webster’s II 1013). Thus, the title of the collection refers to the obstacles each woman faces in this society, while the subtitle reveals that this is a portfolio of the solutions carried out by these women. The primary bond of each protagonist is the obstacles before them that they overcome – all of which are derived from their U.S. mainland-Puerto Rican *Barrio* life. *Rituals of Survival* shows common obstacles with distinctive coping strategies.

Mohr’s naming of characters and protagonists is strategic: the repetition of (primarily male) names is subordinated in importance to the names of the female protagonists; the significance of the protagonists’ names and the inclusion of the names in the story titles proclaim female protagonism in each story. In her stories, Mohr gives us Zoraida⁵ – enchanting woman – who experiences sexual pleasure in her dreams and daydreams; Carmela – a garden or vineyard – who is reborn when her husband dies; Virginia – a maid, virgin, or chaste woman – who attempts to reform herself into society’s sacred role of motherhood; Amy – beloved – who recalls the oral tradition of her grandmother in Puerto Rico and replicates it in order to save Thanksgiving for her children; Lucia – light – who despite being abandoned on her deathbed by her

Papo and Mary (in-laws of Amy in “A Thanksgiving Celebration”) and Papo (Inez’s cousin, the sexual deviant in “The Artist”)

Charlie (the deceased husband and father in “A Thanksgiving Celebration”), Carlito (son in “A Thanksgiving Celebration”), Charlie’s Tavern (the bar the protagonist visits with her art instructor, Aldo, the night her husband discovers her absence)

Females:

Lucia (protagonist, prostitute, patient in “Happy Birthday”) and Lucy (Freddy’s wife in “The Artist”)

Doña Clara (grandmother in “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker”) and Clara (granddaughter in “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker”)

Diminutives:

Often the male names are in the diminutive forms rather than the female names. This is a reversal of normal popular practice – especially in the United States. The examples of female characters with names in the diminutive include two children: Clarita (named for her grandmother, so perhaps the diminutive is used with regard to her age as well as to distinguish her from her namesake) and Lillie (this four year old’s name reflects her tender age, but Lillie is a name already in the diminutive form as given).

⁵ The definitions of the names in this paragraph are taken from www.behindthename.com by Mike Campbell.

lover/finance/pimp, finds a way to see beyond circumstances and love unconditionally; Inez – pure and chaste or lamb – who is a virgin at marriage and harbors a pure desire to pursue herself by pursuing her artistic talents: she is “The Artist”.

Each of these women is found in a similar generational context: they are the wives, mothers, lovers in the story who have young children in their care, and they have a mother figure whose words remain with them even when that maternal character is no longer present. In “Aunt Rosana’s Rocker (Zoraida),” Zoraida is a wife and mother of three children and her mother and mother-in-law are present. It is her mother who offers advice on how to diplomatically reject the sexual advances of her husband, and it is her children who inspire her to preserve her marriage and follow her mother’s advice.

In “A Time with a Future (Carmela),” Mohr departs from the generational pattern slightly by choosing an elderly protagonist. Roni Natov remarks on the unusual nature of characterization in this story:

The mother in “Carmella” was interesting. She is not the kind of character who is usually written about with much empathy. She’s an older woman, not attractive, particularly in this society. She is not marketable, not a famous writer; she’s just a widow and her kids don’t understand that what she needs is an apartment of her own, one she has chosen (Natov and DeLuca 121).⁶

Carmela Puig is a 66-year-old widow with children and grandchildren. Clearly, there are three living generations in this story as in each of the others in the collection. What differs in this one is that the protagonist comes from the oldest generation chronologically, but there is a role reversal experienced by this aging and now widowed mother in which her children feel it appropriate to decide the course of her life and to insist that she live under their supervision. Geraldine DeLuca notes this reversal in the attitude of children toward their mother: “We assume

⁶ “Carmella” is the spelling from the printed interview with Mohr whereas “Carmela” is the spelling from Mohr’s text.

that children finally have the right to think for themselves, but we sometimes forget about parents' rights. The children are very oppressive here" (Natov and DeLuca 121). In this way, Carmela too fits Mohr's pattern in this book as Carmela is the woman who needs to be on her own as many young adults would, and the children act as caregivers. She is inspired by the negative words of her brothers who attempt to restrict her based on her gender. Carmela remembers those words in order to prove them wrong.

The third story, "Brief Miracle (Virginia)", presents a reforming lesbian named Virginia. She also is in the middle of three generations in the story: her estranged parents are present again in the story, and she becomes the mother to two of her new lover's young children. The words that introduce her reform at the opening of the story are uttered by two men who sit drinking in Ricky's Tavern. They function as both the older, traditional generation and as a Greek Chorus reciting the moral views of society toward the sacred nature of motherhood and thus predict and endorse the trajectory of Virginia's actions: she has returned to her hometown and is making an attempt at reform by engaging in a heterosexual relationship in which she becomes a mother figure and satisfies both traditional, societal expectations as well as the religious indoctrination of her parents.

The most highly anthologized story of this collection perhaps is "A Thanksgiving Celebration (Amy)." It appears in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 5th ed. published by Houghton Mifflin. In the story, Amy is the mother of four children under the age of ten. No older generation is present in the events of the story, but the memory of her grandmother and her words are the inspiration that enables Amy to act and to salvage what could have been a sad Thanksgiving celebration.

Mohr reverses expectations in regard to the role of the generations in “Happy Birthday (Lucia).” Lucia is the wise 20 year old who is dying of advanced tuberculosis and receives a visit from Doña Nora, the mother of her lover/fiancé/pimp, Eddie. Lucia occupies the middle generation, and the youngest generation is filled by Eddie’s little brothers. Though Eddie’s younger brothers are of the same generation as Lucia and Eddie, they are still younger and live at home whereas Eddie is clearly a worldly man who has experienced a life of crime and capers. Lucia’s inspiration is found in recalling the words of her mother and grandmother who proclaim her “just born” (Mohr 95) upon her menarche while swimming in mixed company. The scene at the river and the words of the two older ladies in her family inspire her submission to the “water” in her death (rebirth).

By far the longest story is “The Artist (Inez)” at 53 pages of the 158 in the book. The protagonist is an Hispanic Cinderella who is orphaned and taken in by an aunt and her family who treat her poorly. She is the middle generation in this story despite the lack of her own physical children. Her artistic talent produces a surrogate child: her art – she nurtures it, she cherishes it, she sacrifices for it, it is her life. Therefore, this places her in the middle-of-three-generation pattern of this book.

The final element shared in each of these stories is plot. Classical plot structure is: exposition, conflict, complication, climax, and resolution. In each exposition, readers are introduced to a Puerto Rican female protagonist in the New York *Barrio*, often a male character with a repeated name, and three generations within the family. The conflict is a compelling desire of each woman to fulfill her fundamental spiritual dreams. These dreams differ with each story. However, the complication is always the same. This obstacle is twofold: it is economic in so much as there is not sufficient money to provide the means to achieve her goal, and there is a

male figure who would deny her dream. As these two obstacles thwart the dreams of the protagonist, her resentment grows until finally, recalling the words spoken to each protagonist in a critical moment, she is empowered to act against these obstacles in a distinctive way and to triumph over them. The climax and resolution vary, but they each demonstrate a novel solution to a common, difficult problem. In this way, Mohr's protagonists are exceptional.

Zoraida dreams of romance, love, sharing, and beauty in "Aunt Rosana's Rocker (Zoraida)." Casto not only fails to deliver a satisfactory married life to his enchanted wife, but he would deny her the only escape she has – first her erotic dreams in bed and then her erotic fantasies in the rocker. Casto is mystified by her orgasmic state, and he is therefore angered by her ability to achieve it without his assistance. Zoraida's obstacle is her husband and the economic needs of the family, because Casto claims that he cannot rest nor work without the soothing release achieved through relations with his wife. Zoraida remembers the advice of her mother, Doña Clara and upon seeing her children, she is inspired. She decides to practice a quiet defiance in response to her husband's sexual advances by retreating into her dreams, feigning sleep, or diplomatically refusing him. She darkens the house except for the night light and pretends to be asleep. When he comes to bed: "He reached over and lightly touched Zoraida; this was a safe time of the month, maybe she would wake up. He waited and, after a moment, decided to go to sleep. After all, he could always try again tomorrow" (Mohr 32).

Carmela dreams of caring for herself alone, freedom from duty to others and the ability to do whatever she envisions in "A Time with a Future (Carmela)." Carmela's obstacle is her husband and the economic needs of the family. The story begins just after the death of her husband, and the narration is quasi-stream-of-consciousness as she meanders through the death of her 4-year-old son 38 years ago and the death process of her cancer-ridden husband,

Benjamin. Ben made her a mother and caretaker of four. Though he loved her, he forced Carmela to abandon their 4-year-old son in the hospital to die alone, because Benjamin had to work in order not to lose his employment during a depression. Ironically, Ben makes her promise to care for him at home until his death – a promise which obliges her to additional duty and which she finds extremely difficult to keep. Carmela remembers the discouraging words of her brothers and the life she has spent quieting her deepest resentments, and she decides to live her golden years with the potential found in a second childhood. The final reflections of the story about birds, sun, new buds, boys, and childhood evoke this new life awaiting her. Carmela will live in obligation to no one but herself: “She looked out from her terrace at the river, and a sense of peace filled her whole being. Carmela recognized it was the same exhilarating happiness she had experienced as a young girl, when each day would be a day for her to reckon with, all her own, a time with a future” (Mohr 53).

Virginia’s dream initially appears to be of reforming her lifestyle and reconciling with her parents and with society by returning to her hometown and living a heterosexual, family lifestyle in “Brief Miracle (Virginia).” The story opens with two men drinking at Rick’s Tavern voicing the ideals of a *machista* society. They function as a Greek Chorus, because they are anonymous men speaking the moral and societal expectations for a woman and presenting a male obstacle. With these opening words and the pattern of the obstacles in the first two stories, readers must correctly surmise that Virginia will be a failed mother. Her second obstacle is economic needs which drive her to work wherever she can instead of cultivating her artistic talent as a vocation. Virginia’s obstacles are societal norms in a *machista* society and her economic needs when she was forced to work for years in a variety of jobs she hated.⁷

⁷ In other stories, the conflict was individual woman versus individual man. Here, however, Virginia is read as a token lesbian against society; thus the conflict is individual versus society.

Therefore, when she finds a marketable artistic skill, readers might incorrectly guess that her personal lifestyle will also thrive. Society's "perfect life" is a perfect hell for this woman who excels in a so-called deviant and transient life. Virginia's "wanderlust" (Mohr 67) leads her to escape: under a false pretense, she leaves the home and departs on a bus without a word to anyone. Virginia is not even sure why she must move on, but she honors that desire even though she does not fully understand it: "'Spring, summer, autumn and winter,' she murmured, realizing that she was approaching the end of her summer and soon would be entering her autumn – and then, what would she find there?" (Mohr 73).

Amy dreams of having the love and sharing of her husband, a lighter burden, and money to provide a Thanksgiving meal fit for her children and potential guests in "A Thanksgiving Celebration (Amy)." Amy's obstacle is the loss of her husband and the economic needs of the family. She had a loving relationship with her husband, and his death left her with four small children for whom to care and no economic means of supporting them. Unlike the death of Carmela's husband which liberated her from a life of duty to others; the death of Amy's husband enslaves her to a life in service to others. In fact, the welfare system – the embodiment of patriarchal society and its limitations for women – further oppresses her. Amy recalls the stories of her grandmother in Puerto Rico whose tendency was to tell fantastic stories that Amy once questioned but: "The old woman had been completely convincing. And for many years Amy had secretly believed that when her grandmother was a little girl, somewhere in a special place, animals talked, got married and were heroes" (Mohr 85). Amy adheres to her tight budgetary restrictions for the celebratory meal and invents a story for her children to make the most basic staples seem magical and perfect: "Amy continued, remembering stories that she had long since

forgotten. The children listened, intrigued by what their mother had to say. She felt a calmness within. Yes, Amy told herself, today's for us, for me and the kids" (Mohr 88).

Lucia dreams of being with the man she loves without economic reasons separating them in "Happy Birthday (Lucia)." Lucia's obstacle is that economic conditions have thwarted her pursuit of love. First, her family in Puerto Rico sends her to work for a family headed to New York which separates her from her first love, Manuel. Then, she works as a prostitute to support her second love (and pimp), Eddie. In a patriarchal society, a female has very few options for employment. Therefore, working as a domestic for a wealthy family forced her to leave her family, first love, and home for a job with little security and no means to return to a life of her choosing. Her next money making endeavor is as a prostitute for a man who works as her pimp – a familiar plight for poverty stricken women throughout the ages. Like *Hamlet's* Ophelia⁸, Lucia submits to the water in death. She uses her imagination to escape the harsh realities of the ward, of her past, of Eddie's absence:

It was all too confusing and she was too exhausted to think about all that, instead she would go back and bathe in the riverbed. Lucia concentrated once more and saw the clear, transparent water and the swift movement of her hand as she tried to grab a tadpole. The cool water splashed her face, running down her neck and body. Lucia stepped into the river and felt the water envelop her. She turned and swam toward the deeper part. Slowly, and without any resistance, Lucia let the current take her downstream and she drifted with the river into a journey of quiet bliss. (Mohr 102)

Inez dreams of cultivating her artistic talents and being able to live from the profits of that work in "The Artist (Inez)." Inez's obstacles are her husband and lack of money for art classes. When Joe fails to respect her artistic talent and aspirations, and there is no money, the two factors lead her to become a nude model and to lead a secret life. The couple's first major

⁸ There is an allusion to the Shakespearian character of Ophelia, from his play entitled *Hamlet* (1602), in Mohr's story; and the very next story in the collection has a character named Aunt Ofelia. Ironically, the character who bears the name Ofelia merely evokes the name while Lucia evokes her actions.

fight is about money, and when Inez is threatened, and she responds by: “grabb[ing] a large flat cast iron grill”, that “she was ready to swing” (Mohr 129). This excites Joe sexually and makes her more assertive in their lovemaking. Later, when Joe discovers her posing in the nude, he becomes enraged; and she makes love to another man. Clearly, their disputes empower her rather than threaten her. In their third major confrontation, the two live apart but meet in public for Inez to request a divorce. Joe admits that he finds her more enticing than ever and touches her. When, in another act of personal agency, she rejects his advance, he begins to insult her. She realizes that to completely rid herself of Joe, she must crush his reality in order to make herself completely undesirable to him and to make him feel less manly in her presence: “Inez recognized that, although she was apprehensive, she was no longer terrified of him, not anymore. She knew what she had to do and she waited” (Mohr 154). She brings him to sobs in a restaurant, and despite her inner fear, she bears his last insult:

“I never ever want to see you again. You can fucking drop dead for all I care!” Joe turned and walked away so rapidly that he seemed to be running. She watched until he disappeared around a corner.

Inez looked up at the sky: thin clouds obscured a full moon. She waited until the moon appeared illuminating clouds and silhouetting rooftops against the dark blue sky. She stretched out her arms and inhaled, filling her lungs with the cold brisk night air. Then, Inez turned, spun herself around and around and skipped a few times before she headed for home. (Mohr 158)

Unlike previous writings by Mohr, *Rituals of Survival* undeniably contains adult, feminist themes and cannot be classified as juvenile literature. This collection of stories employs shared character names, techniques and complications to the protagonists. As a collection, however, there is a growing sense of optimism in the increasing female agency of the protagonists and in the resolutions. To mark this increasing female agency, there is simultaneously an increasing

level or light or feminine symbols such as the full moon of Inez⁹. What readers must know is that Nicholasa Mohr wrote material that is not child-like, uninteresting or uncomplicated but instead is compelling, accessible, and completely necessary as a critical contribution to U.S. mainland-Puerto Rican literature.

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⁹ Though Mohr's writing is undeniably uncomplicated with symbols and allusions, there are several to be studied in this collection. The study of light alone would prove to be most interesting.

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