

Through a Child's Eyes: Latin@ Resistance and Assimilation in the Works of Nicholasa Mohr

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Nicholasa Mohr's first novel *Nilda* (1973) and short story collection *El Bronx Remembered* (1975) were landmark publications for U.S. Latino Caribbean studies because they offered a woman's perspective during a period when male voices dominated Latino literature. As examples, Jesús Colón's *A Puerto Rican in New York, and Other Sketches* (1961), Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and Bernardo Vega's *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (1977) are three texts that defined Nuyorican literature for their portraits of enduring migrant life, living in an urban setting, and chasing the American dream. Nicholasa Mohr's works have not been held in the same regard as the aforementioned canonical U.S. Latino texts. Rather, Mohr's works have often been negated or dismissed due to the fact that they are unjustly classified as children's literature due to the simplicity of her language, images, and metaphors (Luis 23-4). Mohr laments the fact that her publishing houses market her as a young adult writer. When asked about *Nilda* being for young adults, Mohr declared: "Well, actually, I didn't consciously write that for young adults. It was marketed that way. Nor did I write *El Bronx Remembered* or *In Nueva York* for young adults. Those three books were never targeted by me for young adults specifically" (Kevane 91). Mohr's misclassification also leads to mixed reviews from critics. In regards to *El Bronx Remembered*, John Miller declares that "Too often in this collection, the short stories lack depth and are mawkishly sentimental portraits of ethnic contrasts rather than appropriate developments of character or of plot structure" (Miller "The Emigrant" 95). Other literary critics, such as Irma García, have called the works not political enough because Mohr represents "oppressed people [who] do not necessarily understand the mechanisms of their own oppression" (García 16). This article argues that Mohr's work goes beyond "sentimental portraits of ethnic contrasts" to assert sublimated, but politically charged stories about resistance and the consequences of assimilation through the eyes of a child protagonist. To that end, the literary devices that she employs are anything but simple; on the other hand, they are complex articulations of cultural resistance to colonial tropes. Indeed, while the disruption that North American culture visits upon the narrator's childhood world may not appear dramatically portrayed in Mohr's work, it is nonetheless real, more than justifying Barbara Roche Rico's call for a reassessment of Mohr's work in her 2007 article "'Rituals of Survival': A Critical Reassessment of the Fiction of Nicholasa Mohr" (Roche Rico 160-1). In particular, through the examination of consumption, cleanliness and illness, Nicholasa Mohr's use of child narrators implicitly underscores the struggles that characterize Latino literature. Through a child's perspective, Mohr is able to maintain a certain objectivity and innocence while commenting on the hardships that her family and community endured.

Nilda is a coming-of-age story narrated from the point of view of a ten-year-old Nuyorican between the years 1941 and 1945. From *Nilda*'s innocent perspective, the reader navigates a socially-charged environment in Spanish Harlem that deals with the influx of street drugs, the rise of Latino street gangs, police brutality, an unjust school system and World War II. Thus, the protagonist is in constant conflict with violence, racism, alienation and a quest for identity. The tenderness with which Mohr presents these episodes through a child's eyes does not

negate the seriousness of these developments. Furthermore, family tragedy also characterizes the text as Nilda's family struggles through poverty and welfare, drug addiction, unexpected mouths to feed, and parental deaths. While Miguel Ortíz, in his article "The Politics of Poverty in Young Adult Literature" (1978), claims that the author "creates then, throws away, an opportunity to make incisive political observations" (Ortíz 8), it is precisely through these events that Mohr interweaves the trials of an immigrant family and their own efforts to be part of the American experience while holding on to their Puerto Rican heritage. In agreement, Margarite Fernández Olmos argues that Mohr chooses the "little drama" (62). Rather than write about the grisly adventures found in Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets*, Mohr emphasizes relationships with the community around her that help her understanding of the world. In "Beyond Island Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Cultural Revitalization in Nuyorican Literature" (1992), Edna Acosta Belén points out how community relationships also spark cultural resistance, revitalization and continuity (Acosta-Belén 983). These relationships are more relatable to the lives of the regular working people and help the reader to subtly understand the constant hegemonic presence around them.

One strategy that Mohr employs to articulate cultural resistance and differentiation is the use of consumption. That is to say that the rejection of stereotypical white, North American food is parlayed into a mode of resistance. In regards to assimilation, Mohr has commented that "[f]or most of us growing up then, it was a time when success meant acceptance into that European culture that dominated the United States. All too often, the price of this success was paid by discarding our own history and never seeking the truth of our past. Anglo-American values demanded that we had to reject our parents' language and change our way of thinking. Even our clothes and food were seen to be foreign" ("A Journey" 61). In *Nilda*, there are two episodes that illustrate this notion in reference to food. As a young schoolgirl in August of 1941, Nilda is sent to an overnight Catholic camp run by nuns and priests. On her first and only night there, Nilda is exposed to a cuisine that as a Nuyorican, she is not accustomed to:

Supper that night consisted of first, a clear soup, which was so tasteless that it took Nilda a while to recognize the flavor—it was chicken—then the main course, a sausage pie. The meat was wrapped in a soft dough having the consistency of oatmeal; it was served with creamed beets and grits, bread spread with jam, and a glass of powdered milk. Dessert was stewed plums and prunes in a heavy syrup. Nilda was not very hungry (*Nilda* 11-12).

Among the items listed, beets, grits, and sausage pie in particular stand out as atypical to Puerto Rican culture. In fact, sugar beets recall Spain and the United States' colonial enterprises in Puerto Rico, where sugar-cane was introduced and established as the primary export of the island through an enduring plantation system. The fact that the nuns force-feed the girls frames a type of cultural and colonial imposition in which all ethnic groups in the United States are expected to assimilate to a "normalized" palate, here a metonym for North American culture as a whole. Attempts at controlling the children's bodies continue when Nilda is forced to drink Phillips' Milk of Magnesia, a laxative that will purify the girls for God (*Nilda* 15). This idea takes a deeper meaning when one considers that assimilation is not just "the social process of absorbing one cultural group into harmony with another" but additionally, "the process of absorbing nutrients into the body after digestion" (*Merriam-Webster*). Rather than a sense of cleanliness, the ordeal causes Nilda to feel nauseous and to cry. The nausea is of particular interest to the

concept of assimilation as Frantz Fanon uses the term “nauseating mimicry” to discuss an imitation of the hegemonic model as a setback in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) (Fanon 8). In contrast, Nilda goes home for lunch during the school year precisely because the cafeteria food reminds her of the food from camp that made her sick (*Nilda* 56). On one particular day, Nilda enters her apartment complex to the smells of fried pork chops, saffron, olives, and sausage mixed with rice. To Nilda’s delight, her mother had won the community lottery and was celebrating with a Puerto Rican meal. In the same vein that the camp/cafeteria food is a symbol of assimilation to North American culture, the Puerto Rican *arroz y gandules con chuletas* mark cultural resistance and differentiation. In his study on cultural resistance in Nuyorican poetry “Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao”: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.” (1985), Juan Flores rightly points out that Nuyoricans find cultural continuity in many aspects of daily life (Flores 8). Nilda not only seeks out alternatives to North American food, but finds food as a mode of resistance and cultural affirmation in her mother’s traditional Puerto Rican cooking.

Mohr’s use of consumption goes beyond food to consider language. The mouth, in that regard, is a producer of culture for its ability to consume and regurgitate English. During class, the teacher, Miss Langhorn, expects Nilda and her classmates to speak solely in English; the teacher strikes those who cannot follow this order with a ruler across the knuckles. For Miss Langhorn, representative of the school system, this rule is not just to improve students’ English, but to mold them into “good Americans” (*Nilda* 52). Miss Langhorn repeatedly tells her students that “You will never amount to anything worthwhile unless you learn English. You’ll stay just like your parents. Is that what you people want?” (*Nilda* 52). The teacher’s discourse here is quite clear, albeit reductive: English is the gateway to being American. What is more, those that want to be American must leave their culture behind and assimilate to a North American ideal. Such an attitude is reductive because places such as Puerto Rico, Florida, and the Southwest evince that a Spanish-speaking population was widespread at the time of their annexation to the United States. That is to say, the United States came to them, not the other way around. Thus, Miss Langhorn attempts to establish a simplified model that is predicated on separating oneself from one’s heritage, including one’s parents. Because Miss Langhorn waits for the children to respond “no” to her question, children are taught to not only despise their language and culture. Similarly, their parents are dismissed as being worthless because they are unable to reach this unattainable construction of Americanness. Indeed, the issue here is not that the students must learn English, but that English is valued as a superior language and culture. Therefore, despite Puerto Ricans being citizens by birthright, they still remain part of an underprivileged minority subject to discrimination. Mohr presents a similar paradigm in her story “The English Lesson” (1988) when a teacher, Mrs. Hamma, uses English as a tool of power to maintain her authority over a class of immigrant students. Like Miss Langhorn, Mrs. Hamma conflates English and American citizenship at the expense of cultural otherness. Such a model for assimilation creates dislocation and separation from one’s own culture. Even though Miss Langhorn has punished Nilda and told her that she will amount to nothing, she continues to speak Spanish in class (*Nilda* 53). Furthermore, Nilda continues to speak Spanish at home with her family (*Nilda* 156). Here Mohr subtly articulates cultural difference. Firstly, one does not have to speak English to be or feel American. As Ilan Stavans points out, bilingualism has been a way of life for centuries among Latinos in the United States (Stavans “Preface” lviii). To that end, Nilda is not less American at home speaking Spanish with her family than she is at school speaking English. Thus the conflation of having to speak English to be American is arbitrary. This is reinforced when her

older brother Victor joins the American army in World War II despite being born in Puerto Rico and speaking Spanish as his first language (*Nilda* 132). To that end, Mohr deconstructs a binary of either/or to offer a hybrid space in between. Secondly, and to that effect, Nilda is able to claim her Americanness without giving up her Puerto Rican heritage. This offers an alternative to assimilation in which the Latino can celebrate aspects of both cultures through a sense of wholeness, rather than rejecting one for the other. According to Stavans, “in the in-between, wholeness is not about choosing between the north and the south” (Stavans “Introduction” lxxi). Dislocation is replaced with “multilocation,” in which Latinos can draw on various elements from both cultures at any given time because they are constantly connected to North American culture, the culture of their families’ country, and Latino culture.

This concept of “multilocation” is pervasive in the short story “A Very Special Pet” from *El Bronx Remembered*. Named after the actress Joan Crawford, Joncrofo the white hen is the Fernández family’s pet. After moving to the Bronx from an agricultural village in Puerto Rico, Graciela and Eugenio Fernández bought Joncrofo to produce eggs for the family in their small Bronx apartment. Ironically though, the hen cannot produce eggs. As such, she fulfills her role as family pet; the children like having her because they are the only ones on the block with a pet hen. However, when Eugenio comes down with a cold, Graciela determines to kill Joncrofo in order to make a chicken soup. After nearly wringing the bird to death, Graciela cannot finish the job. To her children’s delight, the hen is still alive and will continue as the family pet. Here the Fernández family negotiates culture: for these two *jíbaro* parents, Joncrofo symbolizes a link to their rural past, particularly since Graciela and Eugenio had to sell their plot of land and livestock in order to make a better life in New York. Joncrofo is part of a cultural continuity that in theory would let the impoverished Fernández family practice their customs and maintain their Puerto Rican heritage. She is also a reminder of the family’s goal to make enough money in the Bronx to be able to return to Puerto Rico to buy a large farm full of livestock and various fruit trees (*El Bronx* 5). That is to say, the hen is a metaphor for not fully embracing the American dream of becoming rich in the United States because the goal is to make enough money in the United States to live comfortably in Puerto Rico. At the same time, Joncrofo symbolizes the family’s adaptation to North American culture. Graciela, despite having years of experience, cannot slaughter the hen and laments that she did not bring it to the butcher. The children do not view the hen as a source of food, but rather a family pet. Since the children do not want their mother to kill Joncrofo, assimilation takes place not by what the children are consuming as in *Nilda*, but by what they are *not*. Yet this assimilation is only partial: here an in-between space is carved out as the family participates in North American culture by keeping an unproductive house pet. Conversely, the pet marks their Puerto Rican otherness through her Spanglish name and the fact that she is a hen, an atypical American house pet. Here, Mohr promotes a Latino identity through cultural differentiation between American norms and Puerto Rican cultural continuity.

A reoccurring prejudice that plagues immigrants and children of immigrants is the stigma of dirtiness. This imagery appears in *Nilda* when the young protagonist meets their family’s social worker Miss Heinz. Upon inspecting Nilda’s dirt-covered fingernails, Miss Heinz presents Nilda with a nail file, saying “Now Miss, this is for you. I want you to take this home with you so that you have no more excuse for dirty nails. This...is a nail file. Have you ever seen one before?” (*Nilda* 69). Miss Heinz, an extension of the hegemonic system, lectures Nilda and her mother on the ideal of a “proper,” young American girl: she is frequently bathed, familiar with

instruments for grooming, and well-mannered. It is precisely instruments like the nail file that facilitate attaining this ideal. However, it is specifically the notion of an ideal that leads to assimilation, as women or young girls attempt to personify a specific American aesthetic of beauty. Ironically, this instrument of assimilation becomes a weapon of resistance for Nilda as she vividly imagines killing Miss Heinz with the nail file (*Nilda* 71). The file is later discarded. The argument here is not that Latinos claim dirtiness as a manner to resist, but rather that Mohr uses cleanliness as a constraint. In other words, American notions of cleanliness, particularly as it pertains to females, restrict Nilda's freedoms. Mohr juxtaposes this restriction with the security and freedom that Nilda feels in an open field at her second summer camp. The field reminds Nilda of "her mother's description of Puerto Rico's beautiful mountainous countryside covered with bright flowers and red flamboyant trees" (*Nilda* 153). The field provides a natural space where Nilda can run and get dirty without the aforementioned constraints. Indeed, she notes how pleasant it is to not see signs like "do not walk on the grass" and "violators will be prosecuted" that are prevalent in an urban landscape. The natural environment thus symbolizes freedom, and the author directly relates this freedom to an imagined Puerto Rican landscape. Through the landscape Mohr articulates an alternative ideal for Latinas that highlights natural beauty while criticizing unattainable and restrictive American standards for beauty that expect constant grooming.

In "A New Window Display," part of Mohr's short story collection *El Bronx Remembered*, Mohr turns her attention to illness among Latino migrants. Disease is a common stigma linked with immigrants and their offspring. A recent instance of this was in the 1980s when the United States designated Haitians as one of the four main sources of the AIDS epidemic (along with homosexuals, hemophiliacs, and heroin addicts). Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) shows that illness is often described in military terms: the disease invades and weakens a defenseless body (Sontag 64-5). In *Translating Pain* (2009), Madelaine Hron argues that "[d]isease is thus a disquietingly productive metaphor when employed in a social discourse: it advocates differences between the self and the other, the nation body and the alien invader, the citizen and the immigrant – intimating that if this division between the sick and the healthy is not maintained, the outcome will be lethal" (Hron 120). To that end, Mohr appropriates disease among immigrants as a means of resistance. This story revolves around a group of young schoolchildren who regularly stand outside a funeral home in Spanish Harlem and take turns reading the inscriptions written by the deceased's loved ones. Little Ray, a Puerto Rican who migrated to New York with his parents four months prior to the novel's setting gains the group's favor for his upbeat optimism and his ability to read the inscriptions written in Spanish. His friends particularly admire his excellent Spanish pronunciation with one of them going so far as to say that "Little Ray talks Spanish as good as my grandmother and parents and everybody" (*El Bronx* 24). Being "fresh off the boat," Little Ray is described as speaking no English upon his arrival to the Bronx to now being fluent four months later through his constant interaction with his friends. Little Ray, in that sense, embodies the expected desire of the dominant system: that assimilation as defined by the Anglo society should be the ultimate goal of a Hispanic child who wants to survive ("A Journey" 62). Yet it is also at this point in the story in which Little Ray becomes mysteriously ill as a result of the bad weather. Unable to feel better and return to Puerto Rico where the climate will heal him, Little Ray dies (*El Bronx* 28). For Little Ray, his adaptation of American culture results in his death. To be sure, he becomes too Americanized. It is not coincidental that his only cure is his distant homeland. Indeed, Miller agrees that "the island represents a refuge, a place where the sick can be cured in the works of Mohr" (Miller

“The Concept” 59). The nameless disease indicates a metaphor for cultural displacement that is expanded via the climatic differences between Puerto Rico and New York. Mohr appropriates illness as a metaphor to highlight the “dis-ease” (to borrow Hron’s term) that immigrants suffer from as they attempt to adjust to a new culture. For her, a balance must be found between assimilation and total rejection. Those that do not find equilibrium face grave consequences. For Mohr, it is North American culture and not the immigrant that is metaphorically the invasive disease. It is worth mentioning that like Little Ray, Nilda’s mother also dies of an unknown disease. By inverting this stigma, she characterizes cultural differentiation as healthy and assimilation as unhealthy. Therefore, she takes an oppositional stance to assimilation and calls for otherness.

Mohr manifests disease/dis-ease more explicitly in *Nilda* through social commentary. In the novel, Nilda and neighborhood friends Chucho and Manuel have an altercation with the police. The two brothers are walking Nilda home at night when two policemen stop them to ask them questions about a fight that happened that night between two rival Latino gangs. Neither the brothers nor Nilda are affiliated with either gang; in fact, the brothers are devout members of the local Pentecostal church and do not believe in violence (*Nilda* 227-8). When the policemen do not receive the information that they are looking for regarding the feud, one begins to beat Manuel with his nightstick under the pretense that he is withholding information. After the other policeman is able to restrain him, Officer Ned rationalizes his excessive violence with “Bunch of bastards anyway. Spick got what he deserved” (*Nilda* 230) before taking Chucho and a severely beaten and bloodied Manuel to the emergency room. Later in the novel, we learn that “Manuel had been in and out of the hospital since then; he had lost almost all the vision in his left eye. He was going in again for a second operation” (*Nilda* 254). This passage underscores that American discrimination towards Latinos is the cause of Manuel’s ongoing struggles with his health. In this instance of profiling, in which the police presume that Manuel and Chucho are guilty because of their culture, social dis-ease between ethnic groups leads to long-term disease for Manuel. Mohr juxtaposes this notion in her short story “Happy Birthday” from *Rituals of Survival: A Woman’s Portfolio* (1986), in which a return to Puerto Rico pacifies disease. Flores shows how Puerto Rico’s portrayal as Edenic provides “a striking contrast between the cultural barrenness of New York and the imagined luxuriance of the Island culture” (Flores 8). Such is the case of Lucía, a terminal tuberculosis patient who leaves Welfare Island (New York City) and finds peace and tranquility in Puerto Rican waters:

Instead she would 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 let the water envelop her...Slowly and without any resistance, she let the current take her downstream and she drifted with the river into a journey of quiet bliss (*Rituals of Survival* 102).

Puerto Rico continues to play the role of nurturer, not only in terms of its natural spaces, as I noted when Nilda is at her camp, but also in terms of being able to heal. Meanwhile, the United States continues to be a site of dis-ease.

To reduce Nicholasa Mohr’s work to children’s literature overlooks the subtle social commentary she makes about living as an Other in the United States. Using sublimation, Mohr offers a variety of examples that delve profoundly into the complexities of assimilation in the

United States, and for that reason, deserves more attention in Latino literature. For Mohr, assimilation has harrowing effects that must be curbed through careful integration that eventually leads to wholeness. The author argues that rather than reject their family's heritage, Latinos must find a balance that allows them to move fluidly through American, Latin American, and Latino cultures via a "multilocation" that draws on the three cultures as necessary. "Survival, after all, must not be all our children strive for" ("A Journey" 67). In that vein, she proposes that being American and being Latino can be one in the same because of cultural differentiation. Finally, Mohr's commentaries on ingestion and regurgitation in regards to assimilation put her in dialogue with canonical post-colonial writers such as Surinamese Albert Helman and Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga whose works *Het eind van de kaart* [Where the Map Ends] (1980) and *Nervous Conditions* (1988) respectively use the same tools to subvert hegemonic colonial powers. To that end, Mohr's work affirms her place within a larger corpus of literature that articulates cultural resistance through food and disease in a global context.

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