

Fights of Fancy: Visual and Literary Modes of Resistance in Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda* (1973)

By Marissa L. Ambio

When Nicholasa Mohr's art agent first approached her, he was surprised to learn that she was a woman. Unfamiliar with how gender is used in the Spanish language or its naming conventions, he mistook Nicholasa for a masculine name. His erroneous supposition about the author's gender owes less to his lack of linguistic knowledge than to his impression of Mohr's artwork. For the agent, Mohr's graphic art is "powerful" and "intense" (Ladau). The agent's gender biases are clear. What is less evident, however, is how Mohr's *Nilda* functions as a Nuyorican novel of resistance, if at all.ⁱ Written as a journal composed mostly of the protagonist's inner thoughts, Mohr's novel presents the everyday experiences of a Puerto Rican elementary-aged school girl growing up in Spanish Harlem during World War II. The ostensible innocence of the protagonist along with the novel's inclusion of eight drawings have contributed to its classification as children's or young adult (ChYA) literature and, in turn, the notion that the novel is devoid of critical social commentary. Indeed, English-language literature for young readers has traditionally functioned to inculcate social norms, rather than to advocate resistance (Jiménez García, 116). Moreover, *Nilda* is often compared to Piri Thomas's semi-autobiographical *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), another classic of Nuyorican literature. Given the extensive physical and verbal violence depicted in *Down These Mean Streets*, *Nilda* was, at first, deemed a "childish" novel that does not engage the realities of *barrio* life, such as "gang wars, police brutality [and] prostitution" (Mohr, 2011, xi-xii).

Since John C. Miller's "The Emigrant and New York City: A Consideration of Four Puerto Rican Writers (1978)," however, literary critics have recognized the realism of Mohr's novel, along with its "didactic" potential (Gibson, 231; Shepard, 230).ⁱⁱ Donald B. Gibson, for instance, concludes that the novel reveals the role of institutions in sustaining poverty, while Anthony Shepard views *Nilda* as a narrative of survival (Gibson, 231, Shepard 230). Others regard Mohr's realist portrayal as merely representing and, hence, fomenting negative stereotypes (García, 1976, 16). Miguel A. Ortiz, for one, criticizes the novel's failure to meet expectations by concluding that "the author creates, then, throws away, an opportunity to make incisive political observations" (6, 8).

Recent scholarship, however, explores *Nilda* as a novel of resistance, proposing that Nilda's turn to her imagination and artistic creation enable her to counter the hostility she experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ Through daydreams, recollections and artwork, Nilda articulates her own narrative response to prejudicial treatment. While Nilda's creative acts are recognized as a demonstration of agency, they are still largely interpreted as a passive or limited form of resistance since they play out in an imaginary world. Nilda's creativity is considered either an escape, an act of healing that allows for alternate "ways of knowing," or an "imaginative power" (Sánchez González, 122, 125; Rodríguez 9-11; Roche Rico, 170-171). In each assessment, Nilda's appeals to her imagination and to her artistic creation are framed as a detachment from reality - a flight of fancy. Sánchez González, for example, reiterates the description of Nilda's imaginary and artistic creations as taking place in a "world of magic," where she "re-creates the world around her in her own fashion" (122-123). In keeping with the narrative, Roche Rico describes Nilda's artistic experience as a solitary journey: "taking "a voyage all by herself," the young woman takes pleasure in what she

has created and no longer looks exclusively to forces outside herself for validation” (171). Rodríguez, for her part, proposes that Nilda’s creativity offers the protagonist a sense of independence, leading Nilda to challenge the circumstances or individuals that deprive her of authority, especially her mother Lydia (21-22). Nilda’s challenges, however, remain within the private sphere of the family. Moreover, Rodríguez emphasizes that Nilda insists on keeping her artwork secret, a show of agency that nonetheless prevents her perspective from becoming public. While empowering, these forays into the magical, unknown or the secretive are solitary ventures that separate Nilda from the greater reality she encounters. And though Nilda eventually shares her drawings at the novel’s close, she does so with a family member -- an act Rodríguez describes as “intimate” (25).

This article proposes to read *Nilda* as a transitional work in Mohr’s artistic and literary oeuvre, examining the author’s handling of visual and literary expression to argue that both function as artistic modes of resistance, allowing the protagonist to confront figures of institutional authority. Nilda’s turn to her imagination and creative expressions proves essential for cultivating strategies of self-protection, resistance and eventually open defiance against these public figures. Moreover, the cover art of the first edition, considered to be of Nilda’s making and drawn by Mohr, reveals the violence with which Nuyoricans are afflicted. As such, the cover art speaks both to the hardship Nilda faces in the early to mid 1940s, as well as to events relevant to the Puerto Rican community at the time of the novel’s publication. Rather than flights of fancy, Nilda’s imagination and creativity are effective means of engaging and contesting the public at large.

Imaginary Migrations, *Barrio* Belonging

From the opening segment, Nilda and her neighbors are the target of discriminatory language and treatment on the part of institutional authorities. In this instance, local *bodega* owner, Jacinto, opens a fire hydrant at the request of his neighbors, who want to bathe in the water on a sweltering summer day. The police officers’ ethnic bias is evident from the moment they arrive on the scene, referring to Nilda and her neighbors as “spics” and “animals.” Resentful of Puerto Rican migration, the officers berate them for “coming here making trouble” (Mohr, 2011, 5). Like the aforementioned scene there are many where Nilda experiences the mistreatment of police officers, teachers, nuns, and social workers. Nilda’s engagement with the outside world, thus, consists of a series of these interactions, almost all of which occur in *el barrio*. During each confrontation, Nilda turns to her mind’s eye to resolve the conflict, envisioning an act of defiance or vengeance. Notably, Nilda’s imaginings take place almost exclusively in *el barrio*, suggesting her steadfast connection to the neighborhood and her engagement with a greater social reality.

In the few instances where Nilda finds herself or her imaginings in a setting other than *el barrio*, her thoughts never fully stray from the neighborhood. For instance, after the run-in with the police, Nilda ponders life at summer camp in the countryside. This imaginary act may be read as an “escape” from reality, or her decision to flee from the officers’ prejudice and, hence, *el barrio* (Sánchez González, 122). That Nilda likens the rural setting of the camp to the greenery of Central Park, and wonders whether life at camp would be devoid of the ethnic discrimination she just witnessed suggests that her imaginings are far from an escape or a utopian vision; instead, they are informed by the physical and social realities of life in *el barrio*. When at camp, Nilda’s cautionary vision proves valid; she experiences further discrimination, leading her to daydream. She imagines “her familiar world of noise, heat and crowds,” bringing her back to the opening scene at Jacinto’s *bodega*, back to *el barrio* (Mohr, 2011, 13). Nilda’s imaginings are an articulation of resistance,

all of which are firmly grounded in *el barrio*, serving to reaffirm her sense of belonging in the face of those who threaten her and her neighbors.

While Nilda's daydreams consistently take place in, or refer to, *el barrio*, the articulation of her imaginings evolves over time, indicating a process of maturation in her verbal and visual self-expression. As with the novel's opening, the first scene at Nilda's school reveals the ethnic bias of figures of institutional authority like her teacher, Miss Langhorn. Given that Miss Langhorn subscribes to assimilation and Manifest Destiny, in which U.S. expansionist policies are viewed as a "civilizing" force, she prohibits Spanish in the classroom, considering it an impediment to becoming a "good American" (Mohr, 2011, 46). Nilda's response to Miss Langhorn's linguistic prejudice is one of alienation. It is no wonder then that Nilda uses her imagination to picture herself in another time and place so that "Miss Langhorn's voice was far, far away" (Mohr, 2011, 48). Nilda's imaginary flight from Miss Langhorn, however, is to nearby Central Park, where she envisions building a snow fortress with Benji and her classmates. Considering the context that prompts the imagining and that Nilda situates herself at the border of *el barrio* with her fellow students, Nilda's military stronghold symbolizes the struggle for language for those that reside in her neighborhood. This struggle to retain linguistic and cultural identity is, thus, a physical one. Indeed, Miss Langhorn enforces her "English-only" policy through corporal punishment. As such, Nilda responds in kind. Her imaginary scene is devoid of dialogue, emphasizing military struggle to counter Miss Langhorn's physical aggression. Nilda forgoes a verbal response, relying instead on visual imagery to express her resistance to Miss Langhorn's linguistic prejudice as would an artist.

Nilda continues to experiment with alternate modes of expression in her subsequent imaginings. Rather than linguistic prejudice, Nilda now confronts Miss Langhorn's efforts to sustain financial inequities through her administration of a seemingly inconsequential activity in Nilda's education: milk and cookies time. Although usually a welcome break in the school day, snack time for Nilda only brings dismay since Miss Langhorn insists the children purchase the more expensive milk prior to buying the cookies, making it possible only for those with the most means to participate. Given the financial hardship faced by Nilda's family, she is not always able to partake. Moreover, Miss Langhorn prohibits students from sharing with their classmates. The teacher's policies make it near impossible for Nilda to join her peers in this typically pleasurable event, provoking Nilda's marginalization, her resentment and her imagination. In previous imaginings Nilda banishes authority figures from her mind. After the incident with the officers, she focuses on life at camp since "[t]hese thoughts helped erase the image of the two big white policemen," while the snow fortress scene only includes Nilda and her classmates (Mohr 2011, 6, 47-48). This time, however, Miss Langhorn is present in Nilda's mind, allowing for direct confrontation. Nilda is, once again, in nearby Central Park where she is seated on a bench, enjoying cookies from a freshly opened box. As Nilda delights in the treats, Miss Langhorn walks by and asks for one. Nilda relishes the opportunity to deny her teacher's request, doing so more than once. In addition to imagining a dialogue in which Nilda verbalizes her denial, she also makes a point to "chew loud and make sure I smile at her" (Mohr, 2011, 49). Nilda's conspicuous consumption of the cookies along with her facial expression are non-verbal cues that reiterate her refusal to comply with Miss Langhorn's wishes. Nilda demonstrates that she has mastered multiple modes of communication, and exhibits the freedom to "speak" in any manner she chooses – English, Spanish or with non-verbal cues – to contest an authority figure that would seek to control what goes in, and comes out of, Nilda's mouth. To Miss Langhorn's discriminatory practices, Nilda imagines a

scenario, rather than a scene, incorporating both word and image in the creation of a narrative as would a writer.

As Nilda is further demeaned, her imagination becomes more vivid, incorporating one final mode of self-expression. This imaginary episode occurs at the Welfare Office, where both Nilda and her mother are berated by Miss Heinz, the caseworker. After the woman demeans Lydia for keeping Nilda home from school, and then chides Nilda for her lack of manners and poor hygiene, Nilda plots revenge in her mind's eye: using the nail file Miss Heinz gives Nilda to manicure her hands, Nilda envisions stabbing Miss Heinz. The assault takes place in the office while Miss Heinz's coworkers are present. That Nilda's revenge occurs in the same setting as her mistreatment and in the presence of bystanders suggests that Nilda's imaginings are increasingly approximating her lived reality. Nilda's violent fantasy also intimates that repeated verbal abuse and discrimination can lead to physical aggression, with dire consequences at best and criminal ones at worst. The violence Nilda describes, however, is tempered since the stabbing of Miss Heinz is depicted in fantastical terms. Rather than blood, the stabbing causes Miss Heinz to ooze cellophane as she melts away. Thus, Nilda's physical interaction in this episode is more symbolic than literal; it alludes to and foreshadows Nilda's active part in confronting her aggressors in the physical, rather than the imaginary, world making her role more akin to actor than subject, witness or "daydreamer." Indeed, when Nilda witnesses police brutality years later she lets out a piercing scream, instead of appealing to her imagination. Her voice draws the attention of neighbors who gather around the scene. Their questions cause the officers to cease beating Nilda's two friends, both of whom are mistaken for gang members. Nilda's strategies to contest authority figures evolve through a series of imaginings in which she expands her repertoire of verbal, visual and physical self-expression eventually making her responses known.

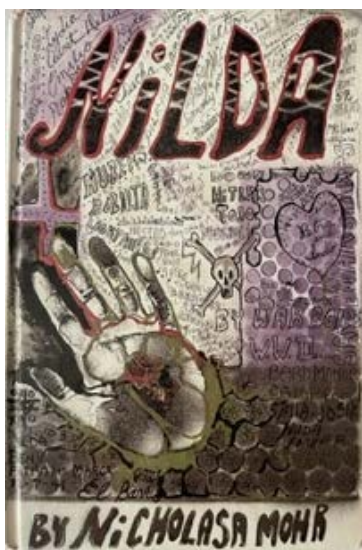
Given that Nilda explicitly disputes mistreatment, she no longer relies on her imagination as a forum for hypothetical confrontations. Instead, Nilda's daydreams are now about her potential. She envisions attending summer camp not as an attendee, but as a counselor. And yet, Nilda must still confront authority figures in her neighborhood. She learns, however, to engage these authorities, using any number of forms of communication as evinced when she retrieves Aunt Delia from the *bodega*. At this point, Nilda's aunt goes to Jacinto's store to play *la bolita* and, upon his refusal, calls two local police officers over to lodge a complaint. Translating the officers' comments from English into Spanish, Nilda explains to her aunt that playing *la bolita* is prohibited. Unafraid of the officers and uninhibited in serving as bilingual intermediary, Nilda diffuses the situation. As Nilda escorts her aunt to their apartment, she demonstrates her belonging to, even dominion of, the neighborhood she calls home. She also establishes her identity as a bilingual Nuyorican of artistic and literary creativity who has now come into her own.

As a *bildungsroman*, *Nilda* portrays the protagonist's maturation as the development of greater social awareness. Distinct from coming-of-age narratives which emphasize the protagonist's maturity in terms of individualism, Mohr's novel proposes that Nilda's development is intimately tied to that of her community.^{iv} That is, Nilda's coming-of-age is predicated not only on her self-awareness, but on the wellbeing of the individuals in her neighborhood as well (Bellver Sáez, 103-104).^v Rather than embarking on a journey, through which traditional coming-of-age protagonists garner new worldviews and a sense of independence, Nilda's evolution transpires through imaginary -and real - migrations through her neighborhood. Borne out of resistance but rooted in *el barrio*, Nilda's imaginative and artistic creativity evolves through her successive neighborhood encounters, ultimately yielding her active engagement with a greater reality.

Nicholasa Mohr, the Graphic Artist

Mohr's appeal to the visual and to artistic creativity as a vehicle for resistance may not only be a convention she develops in the novel, an indicator of Nilda's coming of age. When Mohr began writing *Nilda* she was already an established graphic artist. In fact, her work as an artist provided Mohr the opportunity to present the first fifty pages of her manuscript to a publisher. After submitting her portfolio to Harper & Row for a book jacket, Mohr asked Vice President and Editor, Ellen Rudin, if she would review her manuscript. Mohr's graphic art was not selected for the project, but Rudin offered Mohr a contract for *Nilda*. As editor of the children's book division, Rudin selected a book design that pitched Mohr's debut novel to an audience "ages 10 & up," expanding the Latinx literary market to a new but younger readership (Brady, 377). Thus, the first edition of *Nilda* utilizes large font size with ample margins and dimensions when compared to the subsequent Bantam Books edition, sold as a paperback pocket book novel.^{vi} As a literary work for young readers, the publishing house also placed restrictions on the "adult" content of Mohr's manuscript, particularly her treatment of the Catholic Church (Acosta-Belén, 40). It appears Mohr had little say about how *Nilda* was initially presented in the market given the limitations on content and marketing practices of Harper & Row. Or did she? As it turns out, Mohr created all of the artwork for the first edition of *Nilda*, including the cover art which provides a visual introduction of the book to potential readers.

The cover of *Nilda*'s first edition consists of background doodles, references to childhood pastimes, such as tic-tac-toe and bubble letters, all of which suggests a carefree notion of youth. Indeed, the natural practice of doodling bears the connotation of a mindless or aimless activity, one that is "not to be taken seriously" and thus, fitting for a children's book devoid of serious adult topics, such as religion, poverty or war.

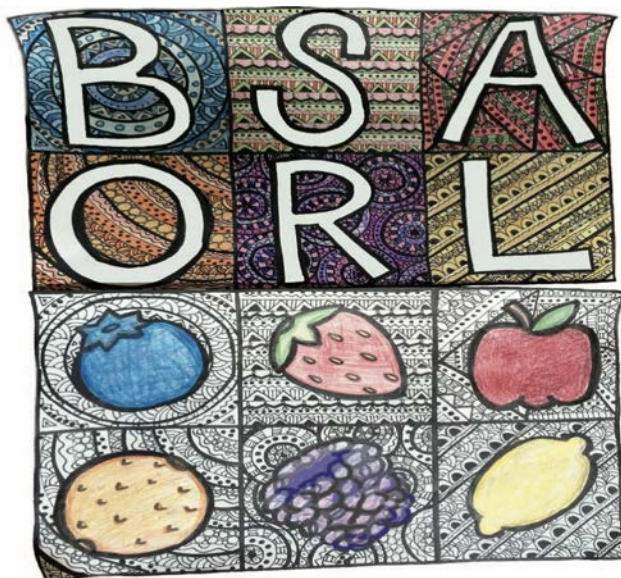


Artistic and scholarly studies, however, argue for a reassessment of doodling as a mindless endeavor, advocating that the practice be considered of consequence (Schott, 1133). In the artworld, the purposeful arrangement of repeating doodle patterns in semi-random order has recently been recognized as "Zentangle." An image from Marjorie Cohee Manifold's *Art Themes: Choices in Art Learning and Making* (2017), an instructional guide published by Indiana University Press, shows sample Zentangle patterns.

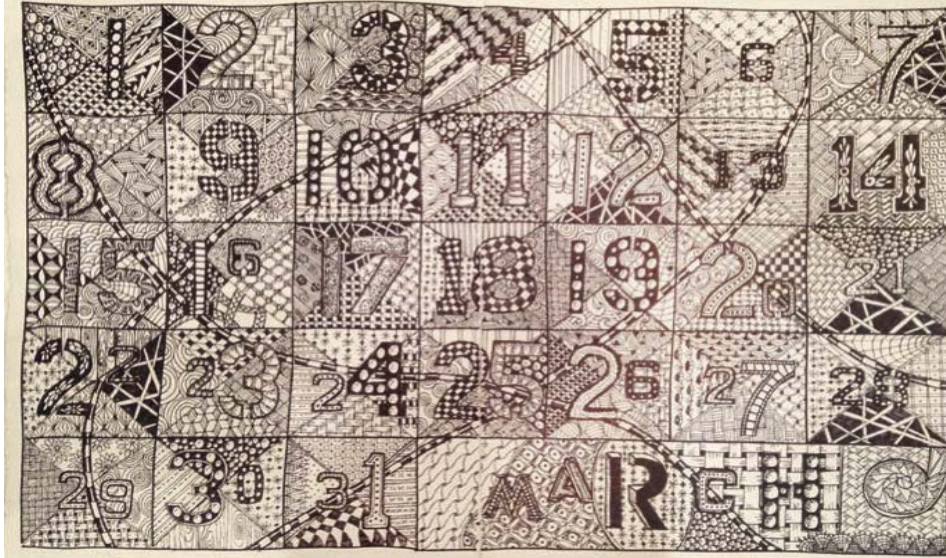


“A sampler of Zentangle Patterns created with a Sharpie.” Heather Lund (Manifold 309).

The Zentangles that appear on *Nilda*'s front cover include rows of encircled flowers filling the bottom third of the drawing, as well as the repeated purple circles arranged in a rectangle at the center right border. The following contemporary examples in which a Zentangle background design is combined with foregrounded visual symbols, letters and numbers is similar to Mohr's technique:



“Letter Sampler.” Katie Voytek (Manifold, 305).



“Visual journal with pages of a decorative alphabet.” Laurie Gatlin (Manifold, 306)

The practice of the formalized doodle as Zentangle is thought to have both aesthetic and therapeutic value. Hence, the nomenclature. The conjoining of *zen* with *angle* brings together the Eastern notion of meditation with the calculated layout and design needed for the pattern’s creation (Manifold, 308). Practitioners of Western science, likewise, recognize the benefits of doodling, including the enhancement of cognition, creativity and recall (Schott, 1134; Andrade, 103-104). Doodling is, thus, a far cry from a mindless endeavor, and it is certainly not child’s play. Hence, Mohr’s front cover suggests more than the frivolity, innocence and carefree days of childhood.

If we read the book cover as that of Nilda’s diary, this child protagonist is, in fact, well aware of the realities that surround her. The slogans “Down Hilter Tojo Mussolini,” “Kill the Axis,” “Long Live America,” “By [sic] War Bonds W.W. II.” and “Save War Stamps,” written in bubble letters evince Nilda’s familiarity with wartime lexicon, sentiments and activities^{vii}. This seriousness of war is matched by the fear of impending peril or death symbolized by the skull and crossbones, and the distress of economic hardship indicated by “welfare,” written to the lower right of Nilda’s name. While Mohr’s use of childhood symbols and traditional conceptions of doodling give the impression that *Nilda* is a book for a young innocent audience, she also introduces the adult themes of the novel through slogans and symbols. Her cover art, thus, announces that the novel is centered on a young female protagonist who is, indeed, aware of the realities of her time.

Mohr’s cover art is not a departure from her previous graphic art, which she considers to be “figurative” rather than abstract, a means for “dealing with people” and their characterization (Natov and Deluca, 118-119). As it turns out, Mohr took inspiration from a previous etching when creating the cover of *Nilda*. With its use of a circular Zentangle pattern surrounded by handwritten words and numbers along with familiar symbols, *Epitaph* (1971) is a stylistic and conceptual antecedent of the cover of Harper & Row’s *Nilda*. As such, the cover art of *Nilda* may be read in conjunction with Mohr’s etching. Take, for instance, the small handprint and unconventional use of capital and lowercase print in *Epitaph*. Mohr uses these elements in *Nilda*’s cover to suggest the presence of an elementary school-aged child, who makes hand art or who is learning how to print. Symbols like the skull and crossbones in the upper left quadrant as well as the cross in the lower right also appear on the Harper & Row cover. While the cross takes on a religious

connotation in *Epitaph*, since it is glossed by “GOD BLESS US ALL” as indicated by the arrow, the significance of the cross on the cover of *Nilda* is more ambiguous. Appearing inverted and with dotted lines in the center, the cross on the cover of *Nilda* at first glance resembles a traffic intersection. Viewed more closely, the following words are inscribed at the intersection’s ninety-degree angles: “Madre de dios,” “Santa,” “Jesus,” “Maria” and “cielo.” These religious references to the mother of God, Saints, Jesus, Mary and heaven impart new meaning to the intersection, now read as Christian symbol. Just as with *Epitaph*, Mohr uses a technique in which words impart meaning to nearby images, as if these words function as a kind of caption. In both cases, the crosses take on religious significance. The dual interpretation of the cross in the novel’s cover art as intersection and cross, however, could well be read as an attempt to subvert the subject limitations placed on the author, in which religion was to be avoided. As such and for Mohr, artistic creation and particularly the visual arts are a means of resistance.



Epitaph (1971)

An inspiration for the design and technique of the cover, Mohr’s etching also exhibits a Nuyorican consciousness for it addresses contemporary concerns of New York Puerto Ricans. Created in 1971 and with the words “Attica” and “God Bless Us All” easily legible, *Epitaph* references the four-day prison uprising at the upstate New York correctional facility earlier that year. The incident involved Puerto Ricans, both as prisoners and as members of the observer committee. While the riot was incited by news that correctional officers had severely beaten two inmates, Puerto Rican and Black prisoners had long expressed grievances over lack of medical attention, poor diet, exclusive assignment to menial and taxing physical labor, censorship of mail

and officer brutality.^{viii} The etching's title, epitaph, acknowledges the dozens of individuals that were killed in the riots, twenty-nine of whom were inmates (Thompson, 188). By including the plea "God help us all," *Epitaph* is a socially-conscious piece concerned not only with recent calls for social justice, but the uncertainty of their outcome.

Viewed alongside its precursor, the cover of *Nilda* takes on further meaning. For one, the inclusion of the handprint among references to adult hardship in both pieces disturbs traditional notions of childhood marked by innocence, emphasizing the notion that Nuyorican children confront adult realities. *Epitaph* is also an etching centrally concerned with violence. Hence, the agent's assessment of Mohr's work as "powerful" and "intense." With respect to *Nilda*, *Epitaph*'s focus on the Attica uprising draws attention to the violence in the cover art conveyed by wartime slogans. By taking *Epitaph* as inspiration for *Nilda*'s cover art, Mohr demonstrates an ongoing focus on the social concerns of Puerto Ricans, spanning the World War II era to the time of *Nilda*'s publication and beyond.

Aunt Delia as Caricature

A term that is equally applicable to the visual arts and to literature, a caricature exaggerates physical traits or personal characteristics. Barbara Roche Rico identifies caricature as a technique Mohr utilizes in her later writings as a strategy of resistance (171). Mohr initially develops caricature-as-resistance in her debut work, *Nilda*, through the most unlikely of minor characters. Aunt Delia is an elderly woman who lives with Nilda and who is routinely dismissed, making her a character of ostensibly little consequence. She is known mostly for her obsessive tendencies, particularly with the latest news and *la bolita*. Ironically, Aunt Delia's incessant focus on the local news contributes to her characterization as being out of touch with reality. Aunt Delia's absentmindedness is only furthered by the fact that she misses basic social cues. Between her hearing loss and ceaseless rants about the latest news to imagined interlocutors, Aunt Delia fails to grasp the nature of her surroundings. As a consequence, her skewed, if sometimes comedic, sense of reality often results in her being disregarded by characters.

Since articles about muggings, rapes and shootings form the basis of her every commentary, Aunt Delia lives in a world crafted by newspapers. Her constant and emotionally-charged commentary, however, is an act of mimicry that draws attention to sensationalized violence in the news. Sometimes, Aunt Delia simply recites what she reads:

"Two masked gunmen entered the bank and at gunpoint made everyone keep still while they forced the bank tellers to give them the ready cash." Pausing, she added, "¡Qué barbaridad!" and sucked her lips. "They fled only to be pursued by a patrol car. In a shoot-out battle a few blocks from the bank, the police killed one man and seriously wounded the other...One policeman was also wounded and taken to Bellevue Hospital where he is reported to be in good condition. The men have been identified as Howard... (Mohr, 2011, 70).

Aunt Delia, with her interjection of surprise and gesture of disbelief, is a caricature of the media; she is an exaggeration of an already sensationalized portrayal of local life, provoking one to question the veracity of newspaper reporting. The above quote is, in fact, strikingly similar to an incident Piri Thomas recounts in his semi-autobiographical novel, the very one that landed him in jail. The main difference between the two episodes is that Piri and his companions staged their

armed robbery at a nightclub. By incorporating a news article detailing such similar circumstances, *Nilda* lends credibility to the type of violence that Thomas recounts.

At the same time, Aunt Delia may be *Nilda*'s sharpest rebuke of *Down These Mean Streets* and the media. Aunt Delia's fixation on crime and violence - turf fights, gang wars, drug deals, addiction, robbery and shootings - is as intense and extensive as Thomas's. Yet, the tone and profile of these two characters could not be more different. By casting Aunt Delia as an obsessed old woman, Mohr questions the appeal of such excessive brutality. In an interview, Mohr alludes to the gratuitous violence in *Down These Mean Streets* and, while she does not openly criticize Thomas's work, she is at a loss to explain why this type of novel has garnered so many readers (Acosta-Belén, 36-37). In this light, the consistent disregard of Aunt Delia may be Mohr's manner of challenging such repeated portrayals of violence and the audience they cultivate.

Indeed, in *Nilda*, the media's constant projection of urban violence suggests that the city is nothing more than a collection of crime-ridden neighborhoods. Instances of crime and violence, however, are depicted sparingly and only occur after dark. *Nilda* herself witnesses just two events. While walking home with her parents in the evening, *Nilda* follows a trail of blood into a building where she finds a man who had recently been stabbed. The second instance is the scene of police brutality described earlier, which likewise occurs after dark. Thus, only at night does Lydia insist that her daughter have an escort to ensure her safety. Otherwise, *Nilda* walks through the neighborhood by herself or with friends. *Nilda*'s experiences in *el barrio*, thus, counter the notion of violence conveyed in the papers. Moreover, the depiction of crime and violence is contextualized as one of life's hardships, rather than a defining attribute of *el barrio* or its residents. Mohr's portrayal of *Nilda*'s brother Jimmy is but one example. We learn that *Nilda*'s oldest brother sells drugs and is later sentenced to prison not by reading sensationalized accounts of Jimmy's drug dealing, but rather through his family's response to his troubles: *Nilda*'s parents meet with a lawyer to inquire about legal recourse for their son, while Lydia takes in Jimmy's pregnant girlfriend, providing her a place to live in Jimmy's absence. In both instances, Mohr underscores the impact of crime and violence rather than focus on the acts themselves. *Nilda*, like *Down These Mean Streets*, functions as corrective to a sensationalized media. In the case of Thomas's novel and despite its seemingly gratuitous crime, William Luis points out the discrepancies in facts as well as the liberties taken in the reporting of Piri's attempted armed robbery. Ultimately, Thomas's narration of the incident enables him to correct the inaccuracies and misrepresentations of the newspapers (137). For Mohr, the caricature of Aunt Delia and her obsessions serve as warnings about the media's portrayal of the Nuyorican community, while ridiculing audiences that relish such representations.

Offering the perspective of a ten-year-old girl and the first novel written by a Nuyorican woman, *Nilda* stands out among the Nuyorican literary works of the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting on *Nilda*'s reception, however, Mohr concludes: "Recognition is given more to those books that are great escapades: a little bit of robbing, shooting, swearing; men going around like Puerto Rican John Waynes...Those books for some reason get an enormous amount of play and recognition" (Acosta-Belén, 36-37). There is little doubt to whom Mohr refers. Her assessment points out that *Nilda*'s reception is based more on what the novel does not portray, rather than what it does. As a unique work within the corpus of Nuyorican letters, Mohr's debut novel should be approached on its own terms. Written by an artist-author, *Nilda* is as much a work of graphic art as it is a narrative text. Relying on imagination and graphic images, Mohr crafts a dual response to authority figures who limit self-expression, whether in the fictionalized account of *Nilda* inspired by Mohr's childhood, or in the cover art, which speaks to her own obstacles as artist and writer. To read *Nilda*

is to interpret the narrative as well as the images. *Nilda* is, thus, a novel of resistance that weaves together multiple modes of artistic expression to articulate a Nuyorican social consciousness, if we take the time to look.

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End Notes

ⁱ Sánchez González proposes that the antecedents of Nuyorican literature of the 1960s and 1970s can be found in the literary production of Puerto Rican writers from the early decades of the twentieth century. Writers such as Luisa Capetillo, Arturo Schomburg, Jesús Colón, and Bernardo Vega established the “Old School” Boricua intellectual tradition that informed the “New School” Boricua politics of the Civil Rights Era, conceived as highly ideological and political in its advocacy for social justice (21).

ⁱⁱ Juan Flores, writing in the late 1980s, situates *Nilda* within the third phase of Puerto Rican mainland, or Nuyorican, writing. Works of this stage combine testimonial literature with the imaginative portrayal of community, further underscoring and specifying the novel’s realism (43).

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Arbino argues that *Nilda* functions as a novel of resistance, particularly with respect to pressures of assimilation (2-5).

^{iv} Cruz Malavé examines *Nilda* as Nuyorican *bildungsroman* in comparison to Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* to conclude that, unlike other models, Mohr’s novel emphasizes reunion (47).

^v For Pilar Bellver Sáez, the emphasis on community wellbeing is indicative of a Nuyorican consciousness, articulated in Mohr’s handling of the *bildungsroman*. In contrast to the traditional coming-of-age narrative, which focuses only on the protagonist’s maturation, Mohr’s novel situates Nilda within the Nuyorican community, thereby portraying her development as linked with that of *el barrio*: “*Nilda* representa un cuestionamiento de la ideología individualista y burguesa que marca desde sus orígenes al género. Frente al interiorismo psicológico del *Bildungs* clásico, en *Nilda* la crónica de lo individual da pie a la denuncia de una situación colectiva de discriminación racista y sexual” (103). “El cuestionamiento de la ideología burguesa e individualista del *Bildungs* clásico se manifiesta asimismo en el protagonismo que cobra la comunidad puertorriqueña en el texto” (104).

^{vi} A comparison can be drawn using the 1974 Bantam edition of *Nilda*. Designed as a paperback pocket book novel, the Bantam edition was marketed to an adult audience.

^{vii} See Elizabeth Garcia’s “Double Victory for Puerto Rican Women Too” for a discussion of *Nilda* as historical narrative with respect to the treatment of the World War II context.

^{viii} See Thompson’s *Blood in the Water: The Attica Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy* for a detailed account of the incident and its aftermath based on previously inaccessible local, state and federal documents.