

"Rituals of Survival": A Critical Reassessment of the Fiction of Nicholasa Mohr

Author(s): Barbara Roche Rico

Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 2007, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2007), pp. 160-179

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40071914>

#### REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[http://www.jstor.com/stable/40071914?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.com/stable/40071914?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Nebraska Press and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*

# “Rituals of Survival”

*A Critical Reassessment of the Fiction of Nicholasa Mohr*

BARBARA ROCHE RICO

---

Back in 1972, I was asked to write a novel based on short series of vignettes I had completed. It was then that I decided that if I as a woman and my ethnic community did not exist in North American letters, then we would now.

Nicholasa Mohr, “The Journey toward a Common Ground”<sup>1</sup>

---

The first Puerto Rican woman writer to have her fiction published by a major publishing house in the United States and the author of a dozen books for adults and young people, Nicholasa Mohr has been called “the most productive and recognized Nuyorican novelist” writing in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Her fiction, which has received numerous awards (including the *New York Times* Outstanding Book of the Year, the National Book Award, and the American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation), has been praised for “its delicate insight combined with . . . deliberate detail” and for what it has avoided: trendiness, stereotypical representations, and trite endings.<sup>3</sup> In spite of Mohr’s substantial literary production during the last thirty years, there is currently no critical biography or volume of criticism devoted solely to her work. Until just recently, not even the date of her birth (1938) has been correctly reported in many of the popular reference guides.<sup>4</sup> Although in recent years there has been some scholarly analysis of Mohr’s fiction in terms of the categories of “novels of development,” *bildungsroman*, ethnobiography, or the fiction of immigrants, most of the critical appraisals and published reviews of her work during the last twenty years have classified it almost exclusively as “children’s literature”—a label that the author herself has rejected.<sup>5</sup>

The critical neglect of Mohr’s work is part of a larger problem: although Puerto Rican writers living on the U.S. mainland have published a substantial body of literature in the last century, this output has been greeted by a nearly total critical silence—or what one reviewer has called a “paucity of criticism.”<sup>6</sup>

An important impetus for my research on Mohr has been to prompt a serious reconsideration of her work, to expand its audience, and to show how her writing has a distinctive role within the canons of Latina/o literature, the literature of feminism, and the expanding canon of American culture.

After demonstrating the ways in which earlier critical categories have not done justice to the richness of Mohr's fiction—and have caused many to treat it in a dismissive manner—this essay will identify three features that make Mohr's fiction especially distinctive for its time and influential for later writers: 1) its representation of a community in exile; 2) its construction of female agency within that community; and 3) more specifically, its exploration of the emergence and development of the female artist within a colonized space.

#### CRITICAL EXPECTATIONS AND SUMMARY JUDGMENTS

Nicholasa Mohr's first novel, *Nilda*, published in 1973, earned significant critical praise, garnering the *New York Times* Outstanding Book and Jane Addams Book awards. Moreover, critic Marilyn Sachs, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* on two occasions, has notably praised Mohr's fiction more generally as being "more focused on people than on a message" and "for producing writing that will appeal to adults as well as young people."<sup>7</sup> These comments notwithstanding, an assessment of the reviews of Mohr's work published in mainstream and educational media over the last thirty years suggests an overreliance by critics on fixed and very narrow reader expectations for two literary categories: "ethnic literature" and "literature for children." Let me list a few examples. Whereas some reviewers have praised her work as a representation of a particular underrepresented community—"a vivid tapestry of community life," and "one of the finest books about Puerto Rican life"<sup>8</sup>—other reviewers treat the work dismissively or find Mohr's writing either too political ("realism with an ethnic garnish") or not political enough, representing, for example, "oppressed people [who] do not necessarily understand the mechanisms of their own oppression."<sup>9</sup> Even though Mohr has pointed to nineteenth- and twentieth-century realists as "influences on her style," the "ethnic literature" classification has led reviewers to assess her work using criteria not often applied to other fiction—for example, by the expectation that it would present "positive role models" and "clear endings."<sup>10</sup> One such evaluator used a "content rating" chart to assess Mohr's work, counting the number of role models in the text, then gave the novel failing grades on a number of socially desirable criteria; at the same time, almost as an afterthought the reviewer assessed Mohr's "writing" as "excellent."<sup>11</sup> At the other extreme was a particularly patronizing review judging Mohr's story as both "episodic" and plotless; the review concluded, however, by stating, "Without remarkable attributes the

book, nevertheless, has strong characters and is significant for its honest, realistic view of an important aspect of contemporary American life.”<sup>12</sup>

The designation of Mohr’s fiction almost exclusively as children’s literature is also problematic, if perhaps in a more complex way. Although Mohr has written a few books specifically for young people, she has continually asserted that most of her writing is for a general audience. From the publication of her first novel, however, publishers have marketed her work as “children’s” or “young adult” literature and designated an “appropriate” audience age range for each work. It could be argued that such classification has increased book sales and helped to popularize Mohr’s writing. She was, for example, one of only four authors featured on a prime-time Oprah Winfrey special entitled *About Us: The Dignity of Children—with Oprah Winfrey*.<sup>13</sup> The graphics of the book’s cover, the font used, and the size of the book make it seem that Mohr participated in the marketing decision, but at the same time she bristles at the suggestion that she writes for children. In the 1986 essay “On Being Authentic,” she says, “Except for two children’s novels, my books were written for the general public, yet most were marketed as young adult literature.”<sup>14</sup>

The classification as children’s literature has affected the choice of reviewers, the horizon of expectation brought to their assessment of the works, and by extension the kind of reviews that have been written. In a review published in *Hornbook*, for example, an elementary school teacher praised her writing—“an effective evocation of character and place”—but then railed against the main character’s “repeated use of words like *gonna* and *gotta*,” which the reviewer found an “irritating, entirely unnecessary attempt at verisimilitude.”<sup>15</sup> In an interesting “Catch 22,” a *Newsweek* reviewer pointed to Mohr’s first novel *Nilda* as an example of the “pandemic of realism that has invaded young people’s fiction.”<sup>16</sup> It is probably not surprising that Mohr, like Tillie Olson before her, has treated this continual classification of her work as a form of silencing.<sup>17</sup> In “On Being Authentic,” she connects this categorization with a dismissive and patronizing attitude toward her writing: “Perhaps the ‘established state of the imagination’ of the major publishing houses would regard a Puerto Rican female as ‘perpetually juvenile.’” Given that other popular works of writers of color (such as Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*) were also once classified as “children’s literature” or “young adult fiction,” but are now recognized as subsuming such reductive categories, I want to suggest that Mohr’s fiction also warrants a critical reappraisal.

#### REREADING HISTORY, SEEKING SANCTUARY

The critical reappraisal of the fiction of Nicholasa Mohr should be redirected: away from the marketing strategies of mainstream publishers and the patron-

izing assessments of the reviewers of the past and back toward the writer herself, who is naturally a privileged—though not exclusive—authority on her own body of work. Since the time of Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own*, female authors have combated the invisibility and silence of their positions—and the indifference, apathy, or antagonism of early reviews—by devising their own polemics, their own language for assessing their literary output and that of other women writers. In more recent years, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Bharati Mukerjee, Julia Alvarez, and Judith Ortíz Cofer (who was also born in Puerto Rico) have produced important essays—what one might call “nonfiction self-portraits”—that provide interesting commentaries on their fiction.<sup>18</sup> Mohr's essays and her “partial memoir” (or *testimonio*) entitled *Growing Up inside the Sanctuary of My Imagination* are extensions of this tradition, in that they suggest ways in which a commentary on her work might proceed.<sup>19</sup>

Mohr's *Sanctuary* provides details about her development as an artist. While it would be unwise to view Mohr's fiction as a transparent representation of the artist's lived experience, the memoir particularly and other writing as well can be viewed as providing a kind of privileged commentary, which “writes back” to elements of “mainstream criticism” that have tended to bracket Mohr's importance or treat her work in a more patronizing way.

Read together, *Sanctuary* and the essays Mohr published earlier in *The Bilingual Review* outline in the language of nonfiction a portrait of the artist in her own words. The sources weave a narrative tapestry in which a few autobiographical patterns recur, most notably the tensions between familial obligations and the individual's wish to express herself creatively. *Sanctuary* reveals that Nicholasa Mohr was born Nicholasa Golpe Rivera in Spanish Harlem in 1938, the child of migrants. Her parents died before she had finished grammar school; she was sent to live with relatives. Although she excelled at art, she was put on a “vocational school” track in high school, and told by administrators that she should train to become a seamstress. Undeterred by these appraisals, Nicholasa Golpe completed the vocational courses, but continued to prepare herself for an academically more challenging track. Like Tillie Olson, she used the New York Public Library as “her university.”<sup>20</sup> After working in factories and waiting on tables, she was able to enroll in art school in Mexico, where she found a special connection with the works of Orozco, Rivera, and Kahlo. Returning to New York, she studied at the New School of Social Research, where she met Irwin Mohr, whom she married in 1957. The couple had two sons; her husband died in 1980.

Mohr's essays also point to the process by which, during the 1970s, she established herself as an artist and printmaker, and then started to write. As she explains, her writing began as a kind of explanatory marginalia: “My agent

informed me that a collector who was also a publisher had requested that I write about my experiences growing up.”<sup>21</sup> Mohr has recounted in several of her essays that the results were considered unsatisfactory by agent and publisher alike: “They urged me to try again. . . . They expected me to write about gang wars, sex, violence, and all the negative stereotypes imaginable.”<sup>22</sup> As the critic Juan Flores explains, the voice they apparently wanted constructed was that of “a female Piri Thomas.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than rewriting her text to fit the first readers’ horizon of expectations, Mohr approached another publisher—Harper and Row—and was awarded a contract. Like Tillie Olson, Mohr then secured a fellowship to the MacDowell Colony, where she finished *Nilda*, which was published in 1973.

In her essay “On Being Authentic,” Nicholasa Mohr reflects on the development of her work: “I had to produce books which covered a period of history of thirty years before I could finally write about the Puerto Rican community in its present environment.”<sup>24</sup> In his overview of the literature written by Puerto Ricans, Juan Flores classifies Mohr’s fiction as blending but moving beyond the “testimonial stance” of earlier generations of writers, combining the autobiographical and the imaginative modes of community portrayal.<sup>25</sup>

#### REPRESENTING COLONIAL INHERITANCE AND A COMMUNITY IN EXILE

In her preface to *El Bronx Remembered*, Nicholasa Mohr connects the narratives of her characters to a shared cultural myth, when she calls them “strangers in their own country. Like so many before them they hoped for a better life, a new future for their children, and a piece of that good life known as ‘the American Dream.’”<sup>26</sup> These terms at once connect Mohr’s writing to a tradition of immigrant fiction and establish a clear distinction from it. Clearly several of Mohr’s stories call attention to familiar issues in the literature of American immigrants. The beginning of *In Nueva York*, for example, recalls the city’s promise to newcomers: “[A]ll the workers ever talked about was going to New York City. In Nueva York, they said, the wages were high and the opportunities greater. Some workers received letters from relatives in New York who promised a fortune could be made there.”<sup>27</sup> Like the stories of Anzia Yezierska several generations earlier, Mohr’s *El Bronx Remembered* associates a character’s movement from rural to urban landscapes with an escape from the “petty gossip” and the conservative social pressures of the homeland’s small towns.<sup>28</sup> Although Mohr’s work may be compared to some of the works of immigrant fiction, it would be inappropriate from both a historical and a cultural perspective to classify her fiction exclusively in this way. Puerto Rico constitutes a special and frequently anomalous case for analysis.

Even though it shares many of the elements of such writing, the literature of Puerto Ricans living on the United States mainland is not the literature of immigrants. Technically, all Puerto Ricans, whether they live on the island itself or on the United States mainland, have been considered American citizens since 1917.<sup>29</sup> As Mohr reminds us, “as citizens they did not face immigration and quotas;” they were “strangers in their own land,” political and economic refugees from an island that had not been able to maintain its independence. An in-depth examination of Puerto Rico’s history since its colonial period would necessitate an exploration of the complex interactions of cultural and political forces—indigenous, European, and Euro American—and would be well beyond the scope of this article. In the most general terms, however, the history can be seen as involving a pattern of conquest and colonialism (from 1493–1897), a few months of greater autonomy (1897–98), and more than a century of American domination (beginning in 1898), which some consider another form of colonialism. Each of these periods has, in turn, influenced the migration of Puerto Ricans from the island, and each finds representation in the fiction of Nicholasa Mohr.

In the background of much of Mohr’s fiction and that of other mainland Puerto Rican writers is the interaction of the native Puerto Ricans with the representatives of European and Euro American colonialism. After nearly five hundred years of Spanish control, Puerto Rico had enjoyed less than a year of autonomy before it became an American possession in 1898. Puerto Ricans were accorded American citizenship in 1917. Until 1948 the Island was administered by an official appointed by the president of the United States; as Arturo Morales Carrión reports, few of the governors or high-ranking appointed officials “knew enough Spanish to read a newspaper.”<sup>30</sup> The territory’s representative in the United States Congress was not permitted to vote, even on matters pertaining to the Island. It was not until the 1950s that Puerto Rico was permitted to write its first constitution since 1897. The island’s status as a free state associated with the United States has been supported in the plebiscites of 1967 and 1993. Nonetheless, citing several economic and cultural factors, many scholars have referred to the relationship between the United States and its Commonwealth as a form of “colonialism.” In fact, in 1978, all major political parties on the island filed a petition to the United Nations, calling attention to what they perceived as the continued colonialism of the United States.

During periods of prosperity, the United States mainland’s need for cheap labor has become an inducement for Islanders to migrate in record numbers. Between 1946 and 1964, for example, an average of 34,000 persons migrated annually, what the historians Antonio Stevens-Arroyo and Ana María Díaz-Ramírez termed “the largest migration in modern history.”<sup>31</sup> In more recent

years, periods of economic decline and industrial relocation have led to a deterioration of living conditions and an increase in revolving-door migration. In 1976 the United States Civil Rights Commission found that the Puerto Ricans living in urban centers on the U.S. mainland often experienced a low standard of living, discrimination, and limited educational opportunities, a situation described by others as “internal colonialism.”<sup>32</sup> This condition is often represented in the literature of Puerto Ricans themselves as that of a community of “political refugees.” In the words of the poet Martín Espada, “We are the Palestinians of Latin America.”<sup>33</sup>

#### COLONIAL TROPES IN MOHR’S FICTION

An image that pervades the fiction of Nicholasa Mohr is that of a people severed from much of their own history. In *Going Home*, Felita, the main character, comes to realize, “Nobody back home had taught me this history.”<sup>34</sup> Although Mohr’s novels do not chronicle historical movements in a direct manner, her subjects are often represented as coming to a new understanding of the history that has defined them. This connection also affects their views of themselves and their current social roles.

Mohr’s fiction can be read as the representation of “a colonized people” during several important historical moments. *Nilda* uses the context of the 1940s to explore one girl’s experiences as she takes on greater responsibility for her family; in the background of this novel are the issues of involvement of Puerto Rican migrants in the draft, as well as the emerging problems of drug abuse in the urban environment. Both *El Bronx Remembered* and *In Nueva York* include interconnected stories about mainland Puerto Ricans who were part of the Great Migration from the island from the 1940s to the mid-1960s. The novels *Felita* and *Going Home* address a young woman’s attempt to negotiate a bicultural identity—to situate herself within the cultures of her native New York City and the Puerto Rico of her relatives and ancestors. *Rituals of Survival* and *A Matter of Pride* are set during the period after the Great Migration when declining economic conditions made survival within an urban environment even more difficult. *A Matter of Pride* addresses even more insistently the tension between the mainland and island sensibilities, the role of gender and custom that can make one “doubly colonized.”

Calling herself “a daughter of the Puerto Rican Diaspora,” Mohr signals a connection between her work and those of others “writing back” to the mainstream culture.<sup>35</sup> She asserts that her fiction draws from her own experiences, growing up in what she has termed “a village within a city” and as a part of an internally colonized group.<sup>36</sup> Her work shares a connection with other texts

often termed “postcolonial,” because of its exploration of identity and affiliation, the need to recover a more authentic view of history and to resist received ones, the challenging of authority relationships, and the negotiation of a bicultural identity.<sup>37</sup>

In Mohr’s writing, “the Diaspora” takes on not only a historical but a cultural and experiential importance as well. Long after the Great Migration, the diaspora, with its images of geographical scattering and cultural dispersion, remains central to the community and its artistic vision. In many stories in both *El Bronx Remembered* and *In Nueva York*, geographical distance provides a rationale for the weakening of social connections: “Everybody lives in a place where you gotta take a train or a car or even a plane. Otherwise you lose contact.”<sup>38</sup> One loses contact not only with family members but also with the culture of one’s homeland. One loses contact with the actual experience of the island; spatial borders and temporal distances put the exile at a further remove from one’s native culture, one’s former lived experience. What one is left with is what Milosz has called “an island mythology,” in which nostalgia reduces and distills complex memories into simple image.<sup>39</sup> Puerto Rico comes to be pictured as “a beautiful island where the tall palm trees swayed under a golden sky and the flowers were always in bloom.”<sup>40</sup>

The Island mythology is itself mocked in the ironically entitled *Going Home*, a later novel by Mohr, whose heroine Felita and her uncle confront the sharp differences between received and actual memories of the Island and the lived experience they encounter there. The family spends “one morning . . . walking for a long time and not finding the place Tio Jorge was looking for” until they encounter “two mean guard dogs behind a barbed wire fence,” only to have the uncle pontificate: “There’s no place where people can walk freely anymore.”<sup>41</sup> Even though the child has been taught the names of flora and fauna with the expectation that it would bring her “closer to nature,” her most vivid images of the natural world are the “cockroaches with wings . . . clinging to the ceiling of the shower.”<sup>42</sup>

If one generation experiences spatial restrictions, the next generation confronts another form of silencing. Colonial models inform the relationship between the figures in Mohr’s texts and the dominant culture, particularly those who represent social, religious, and educational institutions. Over and over again we see an environment marked by what Pierre Bourdieu has called “reproduction,” a superimposition of the personal as though it represents the legal, institutional, or the canonical.<sup>43</sup> Mohr’s narratives make use of opposition structures to expose some of the features of those in authority—particularly as they pertain to ethnic and gender stereotyping. In *Nilda*, Mohr’s first novel, the nuns at camp view the body as in need of “purification,” and attempt to

“save” the girls from their sins by force-feeding them religious doctrine along with their nightly laxatives.<sup>44</sup> Several of Mohr’s works depict other episodes of cultural and ideological “force-feeding,” such as when instructors or others in authority attempt to “rescue” the students from elements of their cultural background that the teachers have deemed unworthy. Praising the values of American civilization, democracy, and freedom, the teachers habitually deride the students “speaking that dialect,” and, somewhat strangely, scold them for sounding “like a bunch of Chinamen.”<sup>45</sup> It is significant that in Mohr’s narrative, the examination of such cultural labeling is not limited to the binaries of Euro American colonialism alone. In *Nilda* the main character’s dialect is sneered at not only by her teacher, but by a student raised to speak Castilian Spanish.<sup>46</sup> In some of her essays and her later fiction—especially *A Matter of Pride* and *Going Home*—Mohr’s writing addresses the rejection that Ricans confront when they attempt to return to their “Island homeland,” where they are often mocked and called names. In Mohr’s fiction, we see the effect of this, in the ways in which the rejection or “othering” of a figure causes the usually female subject to question her own identity, both as an individual and as a part of a group.

As in the case of other colonial and postcolonial receptions, Mohr’s narratives outline another process by which such cultural views are not only internalized by the subjects themselves, but are also accepted within the family, and either passed along—husband to wife (particularly when the wife is a more recent immigrant)—or passed down from parent to child. In the case of the former, it is not unusual in Mohr’s work for a husband, after listening to his wife’s complaints about her inability to speak English, to answer a friend’s inquiry in the following manner, “she don’t have to talk to nobody.”<sup>47</sup> A particularly chilling case of the latter can be found in *Nilda*, when the main character’s mother accepts without question a teacher’s poor appraisal of her daughter: “Amount to something. I don’t want to hear no complaints . . . You want to be a jíbara when you grow up? Working in a factoría?”<sup>48</sup> When such a message is sent from parent to child, it is as if the colonized state (with its set of binary oppositions) is itself a part of what one has inherited.<sup>49</sup>

At the center of Mohr’s narrative is a contrast between those whose outlook on ethnicity and gender roles is part of an inherited condition and those who refuse to allow other people’s definitions to limit them. Often this appears to be a generational tension. In the novel *Going Home*, Felita, having only recently arrived on the Island, is lectured by an aunt whom she has just met about the “proper” behavior of “a girl your age.”<sup>50</sup> Even as children, females are taught to view the onset of puberty as a potentially threatening condition for both the female and her family. (The arrival of the pregnant girlfriend of Nilda’s

brother becomes a reminder of such “dangers.”<sup>51</sup> And in the novella “The Artist,” the main character Inez perceives that her guardian’s apparent concern for her virtue is actually motivated by her worry “about what the neighbors would say.”<sup>52</sup> Girls are also expected to accept further limits on their freedom—as one girl in *Nilda* remarks, as she matures, her parents seem to get “worse and stricter.”<sup>53</sup> She is reminded of the penalties for speaking up, as when Nilda’s brothers caution her, “Your big mouth just cost you.”<sup>54</sup> In *Going Home*, “becoming a señorita” is represented by family members as an end to the girl’s being able to act as a “tomboy,” and the beginning of her “knowing her place.”<sup>55</sup> Often, the daughter’s protests about such restrictions are summarily dismissed. As Felita’s father asserts, “Girls don’t have as much freedom as boys. . . . That’s the universal law of nature;” her brothers dutifully pledge to “keep tabs on her.”<sup>56</sup>

REPRESENTING AGENCY IN MOHR’S FICTION: “WRITING BACK” TO  
INHERITED ROLES, INHERITED CONVENTIONS

Even as Mohr’s texts represent the migrant as within what other writers have termed “a colonized space,” her work also challenges any representation of migrants as entirely passive “victims,” subjects whose identities are shaped wholly by the environmental, cultural, and institutional forces that surround them. Mohr’s narrative at times shows the challenging and the direct resistance of the colonized subject to such attempts at enculturation. At a key point, *Nilda* constructs an argument between the main character’s mother, a devout Catholic, and Nilda’s stepfather (a devout Marxist), about the nature of American colonial control and the proper relation of church and state. Moreover, the stepfather makes a practice of defying institutional authority, cursing the caseworker who visits the apartment; he later applies the same form of address to the priest who visits his deathbed.<sup>57</sup>

More often than exercising direct resistance, however, Mohr’s subjects rebel “in passive ways.”<sup>58</sup> Like those of many other works often labeled “diasporic,” Mohr’s narratives make use of structures of mimicry. In her first two collections of short stories, for example, those who had been silenced or marginalized give themselves the last word when they recount the incident to others. At the end of the short story “The Wrong Lunch Line,” two friends of different faiths who had experienced a teacher’s intolerance are able to channel their aggression by making the incident into a joke.<sup>59</sup> In “The English Lesson,” the adult night school students defy the inequalities of the country and the classroom by caricaturing the teacher’s self-satisfied and condescending treatment of them. Here the received version of the “land of opportunity” is mocked

when a student defines his new homeland as the place where “everybody got a chance to clean toilets!”<sup>60</sup>

In Mohr’s earlier writing, agency is represented often as a process of writing back—especially in terms of the reappropriation and re-inscription of inherited institutions and inherited social roles. Mohr’s characters confront the erosion of traditional social groups by the formation of new social units to replace them. The formation of new familial and social bonds often can not only involve a return to the traditions of the island, but also provide an opportunity for cultural exchange among ethnic groups. Time and again, subjects need to separate themselves from the traditional institutions of church, school, and family and seek validation in refashioned social structures: the storefront congregation of the “born again” (refugees from a Catholicism that has had no room for them); the coffee klatch of night school students that must assert its identity and self-worth despite the condescension of a well-intentioned teacher; the new families that have been fashioned from refugees and survivors of family structures that have become inflexible, intolerant, and abusive. From these worlds her characters ceremonialize what she has called the “brief miracle[s]” of everyday life.<sup>61</sup>

If the early short stories focus primarily on the community in exile, the novel *Nilda* and many of the short stories in *Rituals of Survival* and *A Matter of Pride* focus on the female subject within a colonized space. Indeed a central issue in Mohr’s work is the emergence and development of the female artist within a colonized space. (Mohr was one of a very few writers in the 1970s to make the woman of color—whom Alice Walker had listed as “missing” from the canons of American literature—the central focus of her “artist portrait.”)<sup>62</sup> The focus of the artist seeking self-expression becomes a governing idea in much of Mohr’s work—fiction and non-fiction, work for adults and young adults alike.

Most directly, *Nilda* both appropriates and refashions conventional Euro American expectations of women’s “writing on writing,” and the related genres of *bildungsroman* (the novel of development) and *kunstlerroman* (the artist-portrait).<sup>63</sup> Outlining the journey as a search for identity—the text at times resembling a traditional novel of development; at other points using strategy that is closer to a magical realism—the narratives often represent the main character’s imagination as a contested space. The novel has features traditionally associated with the conventions of the female *kunstlerroman*—the representation of the illegitimate overly sensitive child who, finding the liturgy uninspiring, lights up every candle in the church so that a miracle can occur. Even as *Nilda* ceremonializes an artistic sensibility, the novel continues to stress the artist’s role as an agent of resistance and self-defense. Her art, particularly

her ability to caricature, allows her to assert a kind of imaginative power over those who would categorize her or subject her to their prejudices. 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.<sup>64</sup>

Mohr’s later work adopts the elements of caricature as a strategy of resistance against the silencing forces of domestic life. In “The Artist” and “My Latest Triumph” (two short stories featuring the same character, but written nearly twenty years apart), a female subject uses caricature as a buffer against what we might call another kind of “internal colonialism”—that of the domestic sphere: “Knowing that she was an artist and not like ‘ordinary people’ enabled her to build a strong emotional barrier that protected her from being spiritually defeated or brought down to submission. . . .”<sup>65</sup> Her art provided not only a form of protection, but also a form of resistance or revenge: “To make herself feel better [she] would draw the most scathing caricatures.”<sup>66</sup> More than a quiet form of resistance, art is central to the construction of the female identity.

Mohr’s use of narrative traditions suggests not only a feminist subversion of what is most often a male-authored genre, but also a form of postcolonial “writing back” to a tradition—upsetting it in significant ways in order to create a place for her subjects within it. While Virginia Woolf, reacting to the gatekeepers of her day, insisted that the woman writer have money and “a room of one’s own,” Mohr’s characters seek protection for their artwork in a closet, a shoebox, and “the sanctuary of the imagination.”<sup>67</sup> If earlier female *kunstlerromane* stressed the artist’s need for secrecy, Mohr’s artists find that their art, as if a kind of contraband, must be kept from view: in a later story in *Rituals*, for example, the artist’s materials are kept in a garbage bag under the kitchen sink, lest they be detected by a husband appropriately named “Batista.”<sup>68</sup> As a way of “writing back” to earlier artist portraits, Inez does not hesitate to pose nude at her art school; as the novella continues in Mohr’s collection *A Matter of Pride*, Inez, now a successful artist, engages in a supreme form of self-fashioning when she encounters the aging Batista at her gallery show several years later.

Sometimes in Mohr’s fiction, the visual arts provide a kind of compensatory moment for one who has been unable to speak: In *Felita*, for example, the main character, having not been offered a speaking part, rejects the nonspeaking part that was allowed her and assumed instead the role of stage designer.<sup>69</sup> As a complement to this, in the companion volume *Going Home*, Felita asserts her agency designing a mural that celebrates and memorializes the contributions of the Taino Indians.<sup>70</sup> Her actions underscore the interaction of imagination and the collective memory that is central to the process of historical reconstruction.

In more recent writing by Nicholasa Mohr, the intersection of art and female identity has been expressed in other “artist figures”—the storyteller, the *rosario* (who oversees the rosaries at funerals) and, in her last story, “the ugliest transvestites . . . ever seen.”<sup>71</sup> When one character questions “why Utopia [the transvestite] preferred to be a woman,” Mohr’s larger narrative provides a more profound answer to that question.<sup>72</sup>

Mohr began her own creative work as an artist and printmaker. Her first writing was a kind of annotation. Since then the writer has asserted her ownership of the margins, and helped to establish a place that the artist of the diaspora could call her own. In Mohr’s narrative, the Puerto Rican diaspora is more than a “scattering”—a geographical and cultural dispersion; it is also a “sowing”—a propagation of new forms, new opportunities for artistic expression and cultural exchange.

In addition to serving as a title for Mohr’s third collection of stories, the phrase “rituals of survival” provides an interpretative frame for the writer’s work in a larger sense. At first, the linking of the terms “ritual” and “survival” might appear paradoxical; the *Oxford English Dictionary* associates the term “ritual” not with the essential, but with the ceremonial and the symbolic—a connection that is developed, in a variety of ways, in the research and criticism of scholars as disparate as Mircea Eliade, Victor Turner, and Northrup Frye.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, the connection between the individual artist and the community for which she speaks pervades Mohr’s writing, from the self-portrait of the artist she offers in her essays and her *testimonio Sanctuary* to the gestures of recollection she describes in her fiction. In reflecting upon her decision to write, for example, Mohr represents herself as not only responding to an invitation to make her visual art more accessible to the dominant culture, but, more importantly, “writing back” to a canon of literature (and a worldview) from which she felt not only marginalized, but altogether excluded: “I decided that if I as a woman and my ethnic community did not exist in North American letters, then we would now.”<sup>74</sup> The figures in Mohr’s fiction also reenact “rituals of survival”—symbolic acts that strengthen their connection with the community and their “ceremonial identity,” which in turn allows them to assert a sense of agency.<sup>75</sup> Thus in *Nilda* the symbolic practices in which the title character participates—returning to a special “sanctuary” in which she can compose her artwork, reflecting on her experiences, and calling on her muse—help her to fashion her own ceremonial identity. In several of Mohr’s other works, Mohr’s subjects display another kind of agency when they are called upon to confront (and are asked to respond to) received notions of American cultural myths in the context of a community in diaspora. Writing in the *New York Times*, the reviewer Marilyn Sachs has termed the characters

in Mohr's stories "too sturdy and resilient for defeat."<sup>76</sup> No longer constrained by expectations of invisibility and silence, they experience instead a new sense of freedom and "a calmness within."<sup>77</sup>

This essay has examined the artistic production of Nicholasa Mohr in terms of its critical reception over the past thirty years. As has been demonstrated, the categories of assessment (and the horizon of generic expectations that often accompany these categories) have often led reviewers to treat Mohr's fiction in condescending and dismissive ways. Clearly, Mohr's work requires a reassessment, not in terms of the criteria of the marketplace, but vis-à-vis patterns signaled by the author herself and by other commentators familiar with the poetics of the diaspora and patterns of female agency to which Mohr's fiction so often alludes. In suggesting how such a critical reassessment might be begun, this essay has identified the following critical concerns: the dislocation and cultural isolation of migration; the representation of a community in exile, and exiles in community; and a distinctive construction of internal colonialism, especially as it relates to the female subject. In these ways, Mohr's fiction raises issues that are vital not only to her own cultural group, but to the expanding canon of American literature.

#### NOTES

Parts of this paper were presented at the Convention of the Modern Language Association and at the annual conference of MELUS. I would like to express my appreciation to Nicholasa Mohr for granting me an interview at her studio; special thanks are also extended to Prof. Lillis O'Laire, currently of the University of Galway, for his helpful suggestions. The research for this essay was supported by an LMU College Fellowship and a Rains Research Grant from LMU. I would like to thank the following Rains Research fellows for their aid in preparing this manuscript: Melissa Ryan, Marisol García, Aryn Kennedy, and Stella Setka. I would also like to thank Doris Asencio-Toro, Director of the Library, Inter American University, San Germán Campus, Puerto Rico for her assistance.

1. "The Journey toward a Common Ground: Struggle and Identity of Hispanics in the USA," *Americas Review* 18, no 1 (1990): 84.

2. When I interviewed her in Brooklyn, New York, on July 29, 1996, Ms. Mohr asserted that the term "Rican" is considered preferable to "Neorican or Nuyorican" (which is seen as passé) by her and many other writers in her community. For further background on Mohr and her motivation to write, see Edna Acosta-Belén, "Beyond Island Boundaries: Ethnicity, Gender, and Cultural Revitalization in Nuyorican Literature," *Callaloo* 15, no. 4 (1992): 979.

3. Anne M. Flynn, review of *El Bronx Remembered*, by Nicholasa Mohr, *Bestsellers* 35

(1975): 266. For reviews focusing on Mohr's "avoidance of stereotyping, trendiness and triteness," see Marilyn Sachs, review of *Nilda*, *New York Times* book review, November 7, 1973, 27–28; Donald Gibson, "Fiction, Fantasy, and Ethnic Realities," review of *Nilda*, in *Children's Literature: Annual of the MLA Seminar on Children's Literature* 3 (1974): 230–34; Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Keeping Score on Some Recent Winners," *English Journal* 67, no. 2 (1978): 98–100; Tomelene Slade, "Growing Up Hispanic: Heroines for the '90s," *School Library Journal* 38, no. 12 (1992): 35. For one of the first published academic articles to treat Mohr's fiction, see John C. Miller, "The Emigrant and New York City: A Consideration of Four Puerto Rican Writers," *MELUS* 5, no. 3 (1978): 94–97, which praises *Nilda*'s "portrayal of Barrio life" and *In Nueva York*'s representation of the city.

4. My interview with the author, July 29, 1996. The following are among the standard reference sources that cite the date of birth as 1935: Laurie Collins, ed., *Authors and Artists for Young Adults* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 161; Carolyn Riley, ed., *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 12 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1980), 445–48; Nicolás Kanellos, ed., *The Hispanic Literary Companion* (Detroit: Visible Ink, 1996), 205; *Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson, Linda Wagner-Martin, Elizabeth Ammons, Trudier Harris, Ann Kibbey, Amy Ling, and Janice Radway (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 574–75 all s.v. "Mohr, Nicholasa."

5. Among the articles that stress the importance of Mohr's work within the context of "immigrant" or "migrant" literature are the following: Juan Flores, "Back Down These Mean Streets: Introducing Nicholasa Mohr and Louis Rivera," *Revista Chicana-rriqueña* 8 (1980): 51–56; John Miller, "The Concept of Puerto Rico as Paradise Island in the Works of Two Puerto Rican Authors on the Mainland: Nicholasa Mohr and Edward Rivera," *Torre de Papel* 3, no. 2 (1993): 57–64. For discussions of Mohr's work and the novels of development, see Ellen McCracken, "Latina Narrative and the Politics of Signification: Articulation, Antagonism, and Populist Rupture," *Critica: A Journal of Critical Essays* 2, no. 2 (1990): 202–07; Margarite Fernandez Olmos, "Growing Up puertorriqueña: The Feminist *Bildungsroman* and the Novels of Nicholasa Mohr and Magali García Ramis," *Centro: Bulletin of Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños* 2, no. 7 (1989): 56–73.

6. Edna Acosta-Belén, "The Literature of the Puerto Rican Migration in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography," *ADE Bulletin* 91 (Winter 1988): 60.

7. Sachs, review of *Nilda*, 28; Sachs, review of *El Bronx Remembered*, by Nicholasa Mohr, *New York Times*, November 16, 1975.

8. Zena Sutherland, review of *In Nueva York*, by Nicholasa Mohr, *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 30, no. 11 (1977): 178; Myra Pollack P. Sadker and David Miller Sadker, *Now Upon a Time: A Contemporary View of Children's Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 219–20; "New Books Unique to the Hispanic Culture," *Journal of Reading* 38, no. 3 (1994): 255.

9. Georges McHargue, "Children's Books," review of *In Nueva York*, by Nicholasa

Mohr, *New York Times* book review, May 22, 1977; for reviews faulting Mohr's engagement with political and ethnic issues, see Irma García, "Review of Nicholasa Mohr's *El Bronx Remembered*," *Interracial Books for Children* 7, no. 4 (1976): 15–16, which discusses what it identifies as "the mechanism of oppression" overlooked in Mohr's fiction; see also Miguel A. Ortíz, "The Politics of Poverty in Young Adult Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 2, no. 2 (1978): 6–15.

10. For interviews in which Mohr cites European and American sources—particularly Chekhov, Maupassant, McCullers, Jackson, and Welty—see the interview with the author quoted in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*; Nicholasa Mohr, "Pa'lante," Bridget Kevane, and Juanita Heredia, in *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*, ed. Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 83–96. In her essay, "Puerto Rican Writers in the United States, Puerto Rican Writers in Puerto Rico: A Separation beyond Language," *Americas Review* 15, no. 2 (1987): 91, Mohr cites Alice Walker, Raymond Carver, and Denise Chavez, among others, as important writers in the development of her work.

11. CIBC Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, "Into the Teen Years: El Bronx Remembered," in *Guidelines for the Future Human—and anti-human [sic]—Values in Children's Books: A Content Rating Instrument for Educators and Concerned Parents* (New York: The Center, 1976), 251–52.

12. Virginia Haviland, review of *Felita*, *Horn Book Magazine* 56, no. 1 (1980): 56.

13. Oprah Winfrey, *About Us: The Dignity of Children—with Oprah Winfrey*, April 1997.

14. Mohr, "On Being Authentic," *Americas Review* 14, nos. 3–4 (1986): 109.

15. Ethel L Heins, Review of *Going Home*, by Nicholasa Mohr, *Horn Book Magazine*, 62, no. 5 (1986): 591–92.

16. Jean A. Seligman, "New Novels for Juniors," review of *Nilda* and three other books, *Newsweek*, March 4, 1974, 83–84. After outlining librarians' generally favorable response to "more realistic texts" for young people, the article then observes, "For some young readers, however, the problems can seem overwhelming. Nicholasa Mohr's *Nilda* [is] the highly realistic story of a young Puerto Rican girl growing up in New York's Spanish Harlem . . . but for Karen Zich, the worst part is when the young girl becomes pregnant and has to leave school. 'When I found out Petra was pregnant,' says Karen, 'I had to put down the book, get myself a glass of milk . . . and cuddle up in my quilt.'"

17. Mohr, "On Being Authentic," 106–09. For challenges to this categorization within the academic sphere, see also Eugene Mohr, *The Nuyorican Experience: Literature of the Puerto Rican Minority* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); and Tillie Olsen, *Silences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Delacorte, 1978), 37.

18. Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), 371–72; Paule Marshall, "The Making

of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen,” in *“Reena” and Other Stories* (New York: Feminist Press, 1983), 1–12; Julia Alvarez, *Something to Declare* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1998); Judith Ortiz Cofer, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990).

19. Mohr, *Growing Up in the Sanctuary of My Imagination* (New York: Messner/Simon, 1994).

20. *Ibid.*, 61–64.

21. Mohr, “On Being Authentic,” 106–07.

22. Mohr, *Sanctuary*, 113; “On Being Authentic,” 108.

23. Flores, “Puerto Rican Literature in the United States: Stages and Perspective,” *ADE Bulletin* 91 (1988): 43.

24. Mohr, “On Being Authentic,” 109.

25. Flores, “Puerto Rican Literature,” 43.

26. Nicholasa Mohr, *El Bronx Remembered: A Novella and Stories* (New York: Harper, 1973; repr. 1991, ix).

27. Mohr, “Old Mary,” in *In Nueva York* (New York: Dial, 1977), 2.

28. Mohr, “Herman and Alice,” *El Bronx Remembered*, 133.

29. For an overview of the historical patterns, see Adalberto López, ed., *The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1980); Antonio Stevens-Arroyo and Ana Maria Díaz-Ramírez, “Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Struggle for Identity,” in *The Minority Report: An Introduction to Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Relations*, ed. Anthony Gary Dworkin and Rosalind J. Dworkin (New York: Holt, 1982), 196–232; Kal Wagenheim and Olga Jimenez de Wagenheim, eds., *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History* (Maplewood: Waterfront, 1975). For a discussion of the use of “internal colonialism” to describe the history of the federal government’s relationship with the Island, see especially Juan Flores, ““*Qué asimilated, yo soy asimilao*”: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity,” in *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*, 2nd ed. (Houston: Arte Publico, 1993), 182–198.

30. Arturo Morales Carrión, “Puerto Rico and the United States: A Historian’s Perspective,” Conference Paper presented at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 16, 1981, appeared in print in *Revista del Colegio de Abogados de Puerto Rico* 42, no. 4 (November 1981): 594; see also Morales Carrión, *Puerto Rico: A Political and Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1983). For a detailed discussion of the history of the application of United States law to matters related to Puerto Rico, see José A. Cabranes, *Citizenship and the American Empire: Notes on the Legislative History of the United States Citizenship of Puerto Rico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

31. Stevens-Arroyo and Díaz-Ramírez, “Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Struggle for Identity,” 202; for an overview of migration history, see Virginia E. Sánchez-Korrol, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

32. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Puerto Ricans in the Continental United States: An Uncertain Future* (Washington, DC: Commission on Civil Rights, 1976).
33. Mireya Perez-Erdelyi, "An Interview with Martín Espada," *Americas Review* 15, no. 2 (1987): 77–85.
34. Mohr, *Going Home* (New York: Dial, 1986), 147.
35. Mohr, "A Separation," 88.
36. Mohr, "A Thanksgiving Celebration (Amy)," in *Rituals*, 81.
37. Among the many relevant overviews of the application of postcolonial theories to modern fiction, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989); Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990); Gustavo Perez-Firmat, *Literature and Liminality*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London: Routledge, 1990).
38. Mohr, "Old Mary," in *In Nueva York*, 13.
39. C. Milosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968).
40. Mohr, "A Very Special Pet," in *El Bronx*, 12.
41. Mohr, *Going Home*, 107.
42. *Ibid.*, 99–100.
43. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*; translated from the French by Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990).
44. Mohr, *Nilda* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1986), 14–15.
45. *Ibid.*, 214.
46. Mohr, *Nilda*, 156–57.
47. Mohr, "The English Lesson," in *In Nueva York*, 50.
48. Mohr, *Nilda*, 60.
49. Among the relevant discussions of the psychological aspects of colonialism, see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983; repr. 1996). I would like to thank Dr. Lillis O’Laire, currently of the University of Galway, for first calling my attention to this source.
50. Mohr, *Going Home*, 13.
51. Mohr, *Nilda*, 41–50.
52. Mohr, "The Artist (Inez)," in *Rituals*, 114.
53. Mohr, *Nilda*, 168.
54. *Ibid.*, 34.
55. Mohr, *Going Home*, 58–59.
56. *Ibid.*, 20.

57. Mohr, *Nilda*, 202.
58. Mohr, "The Artist," 112.
59. Mohr, "The Wrong Lunch Line," in *El Bronx Remembered*, 69–75.
60. Mohr, "The English Lesson," 64.
61. Mohr, "Brief Miracle," in *Rituals*, 57.
62. Walker, *Mothers' Gardens*, 371–72.
63. For a discussion of the female *kunstlerroman* (which some consider a subgroup of the *bildungsroman*) and the role of the women artist, see especially Olsen, *Silences*, 37; Susan Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 243–264; Linda Huf, *Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature* (New York: Unger, 1983), which was one of the first works to explore in some depth a handful of female *kunstlerromane*, but which gives very little attention to female writers of color; Suzanne W. Jones, ed., *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics and Portraiture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Annie O. Esturoy, *Daughters of Self Creation: The Contemporary Chicana Novel* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) is one of the few works to treat the reappropriation of the Eurocentric *kunstlerroman* tradition by one group of women of color.
64. Mohr, *Nilda*, 50.
65. Mohr, "The Artist," 106.
66. *Ibid.*, 112.
67. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, foreword by Mary Gordon (New York: Harcourt, 1981); Mohr, *Sanctuary*.
68. *Ibid.*, 114.
69. Mohr, *Felita*, 82.
70. Mohr, *Going Home*, 146–49.
71. Mohr, "Utopia, and the Super Estrellas," *A Matter of Pride* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1997), 197.
72. *Ibid.*, 186. In my interview with her, Mohr also recalled her mother making such a statement to the author during her childhood.
73. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), 716 s.v. "ritual": "the order of performing a ritual or devotional service . . . [or] ceremonial act." Among the relevant discussions of the importance of ritual in shaping identity, see especially Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1954); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, Aldine Pub., 1964); Northrop Frye, *Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).
74. Mohr, "The Journey toward a Common Ground: Struggle and Identity of Hispanics in the U.S.A.," *Americas Review* 18, no. 1 (1990): 84.
75. For a discussion of the term "ceremonial identity," as it was introduced, in a dif-

ferent context, see especially Thomas M. Greene, "Ritual and Text in the Renaissance," in *Reading the Renaissance: Culture, Poetics, and Drama*, ed. Jonathan Hart (New York: Garland, 1996), 33.

76. Sachs, review of *El Bronx Remembered*, *New York Times* book review, November 16, 1975, 30.

77. Mohr, "A Thanksgiving Celebration (Amy)," in *Rituals*, 88; for references to "freedom" as a character's reward, see especially Mohr, *Rituals*, 29, 53.