

writers, Niggli also investigates racial boundaries, exposes hierarchies and class systems within Mexico, and questions accepted gender roles. In the historical drama, *Soldadera*, for example, Niggli depicts women as important participants in the Mexican Revolution rather than as mere camp followers.

Niggli does rely on Mexican and gender stereotypes, which, for some readers, made her work more palatable to her American audiences. Although Niggli includes stereotypes in her work, she also depicts fully developed and complicated characters who challenge those very stereotypes. For instance, alongside the swaggering macho, Niggli presents strong men who demonstrate sensitivity and vulnerability or women who refuse to conform to gender expectations (Paredes 90).

Niggli holds a fraught place in the canon of Hispanic-American literature. Niggli herself never comfortably identified as either Chicana or Mexican, yet her work both anticipates and provides a cultural context for CHICANO LITERATURE.

#### Bibliography

- Herrera-Sobek, María. Introduction to *Mexican Village*, by Josephina Niggli. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994.
- Niggli, Josephina. *Mexican Folk Plays*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.
- . *Mexican Village*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994.
- . *Step Down, Elder Brother: A Novel*. New York: Rinehart, 1947.
- Paredes, Raymund. "The Evolution of Chicano Literature." *MELUS* 5 (1978): 71–110.

Catherine Cucinella

#### *Nilda* Nicholasa Mohr (1973)

NICHOLASA MOHR lives in New York City, and much of her fiction is set in the Bronx. She started her artistic career as a graphic artist but soon discovered that writing was also a powerful way to express herself. Together with other Puerto Ricans who started writing in the 1960s and 1970s, such

as PIRI THOMAS, Mohr has become one of the most important literary voices within the Puerto Rican community in the United States. *Nilda*, published in 1973, is a novel about a girl growing up in a New York barrio in the 1940s, living in harsh circumstances. *Nilda* received the 1974 Jane Addams Children's Book Award.

In the novel *Nilda* has a brother who is a drug addict, a stepfather who is sick, and a mother who suffers trying to keep the family together. *Nilda* recounts the miseries of the barrio, its violence, drug dealing, and poverty, but it is a novel that also tells stories that need to be told, stories that are life affirming and positive despite adversity. In Mohr's work women act as the agents that previously had been almost absent in the literature about the Puerto Rican barrio. Mohr is especially interested in recovering women's stories while rejecting false stereotypes of Puerto Rican women. *Nilda's* mother is an example of a strong woman who in the end becomes a positive model for *Nilda*: "I know you have something all yours. Keep it . . . hold on, guard it. Never give it to nobody . . . not to your lover, not to your kids, . . . it don't belong to them . . . and they have no right to take it" (277). Important themes in *Nilda* are the female experience of growing up in New York, mother-daughter and familial relationships, art as a liberating force against oppressive social situations, and differences between Latin American and U.S. values, among others.

*Nilda* is a coming-of-age story but can also be considered partly autobiographical since the young protagonist (like the author herself) discovers art as an alternative way to cope with negative circumstances and as a mean of self-assertion. In *Nilda* life in the barrio is described from the female perspective of a young girl who is witness to all the violence that was present in Piri Thomas's neighborhood, but there are differences between both works due to the main character's gender. According to Mohr, when asked by a publisher to change her manuscript into a female version of Thomas's *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS* (1967), she replied: "I have never been in jail. . . . Puerto Rican

women in El Barrio have had to cope with other situations . . . In my works I have tried to capture the everyday richness and variety of a warm and vital community and my characters always try to overcome no matter what the circumstances" (Acosta-Belén 38–39).

The barrio is also seen as the source of nurturing and resistance, a refuge against "official" spaces like the school and the camp where Nilda does not feel at home and where she suffers humiliation and discrimination. The tragedy that awaits her in the outside world of the barrio is counteracted by the support she finds in her mother and stepfather. They represent the will to survive under unfavorable conditions, the warmth that such a threatened youth needs, and the resilience they need to advance in their future despite social stratification and segregation. Mohr seems to give examples of the positive human qualities that can also be found in the Latino barrio. The barrio can be a source of artistic creativity and a literary vocation: "The diagonal, horizontal and vertical cracks in the sidewalks became dividing regions stimulating her imagination. The different shapes of the worn-out surfaces of concrete and asphalt developed before her eyes into dragons, animals, oceans and planets of the universe" (35–36). Nilda frequently uses her imagination to transform an outside hostile world into a new, beautiful, but fictitious world.

Although the novel uses a third-person narrator, which facilitates a necessary distance from the character, the perspective of the young girl is still useful for Mohr to explore new possibilities to represent the wide Puerto Rican experience. Nilda's naive vision emphasizes the impact of some narrative events and helps the reader have a different perspective on personal and historical events. Mohr's language is concise and direct, making the novel an adolescent book; her realistic use of language makes her story appealing for young readers who recognize the street talk that accompanies standard literary English. For its themes and characterizations *Nilda* can be read within the context of PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE.

### Bibliography

- Acosta-Belén, Edna. "Conversations with Nicholasa Mohr." *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 8, no. 2 (1980): 35–41.
- Miller, John. "The Emigrant and New York City: A Consideration of Four Puerto Rican Writers." *MELUS* 5, no. 3 (1978): 82–99.
- Mohr, Eugene V. *The Nuyorican Experience: Literature of the Puerto Rican Minority*. Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1982.
- Mohr, Nicholasa. *Nilda*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- Ocasio, Rafael. "From Nuyorican Barrio to Issues on Puerto Rican Literature Outside New York City: Nicholasa Mohr and Judith Ortiz Cofer." In *Literature and Ethnic Discrimination*, edited by Michael J. Meyer, 187–203. Amsterdam and Atlanta, Ga.: Rodopi, 1997.
- Sánchez González, Lisa. *Boricua Literatura: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Zarnowski, Myra. "Growing Up Puerto Rican: The Fiction of Nicholasa Mohr." *Dragon Lode* 9 (1991): 5–8.

Antonia Domínguez Miguela

### Nuyorican Poets Cafe

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe is located at 236 East Third Street in Manhattan. Established by MIGUEL ALGARÍN, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe is listed as a "hot spot" in promotional materials about New York City, and heralded as a cultural center of the famed Lower East Side (Loisaida).

Now a New York City icon, the Cafe was originally founded in 1973 in the cramped East Village apartment of Puerto Rican poet Algarín. Gatherings included such authors as MIGUEL PINERO, Pedro Pietri, and Lucky Cienfuegos, and it provided a creative outlet for the streetwise and urgent voices of New York poets and artists. By the mid-1970s interest in the Cafe had spread because it offered a venue for avant-garde work by Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans living in New York (Nuyoricans). The success of the Cafe can be measured,