

Revisionary Reconstructions of Urban Spaces: Claiming The Barrio as “Homely” Site in Nicholasa Mohr’s *Nilda*

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Although ghetto fiction is concerned with the geographical peripheries of white metropolis, its long-term strategy is to effect a radical restructuring of cityscape. This is not to state a criticism of neocolonial values upon which the city is built in opposition to the ghetto but rather of demonstrating the extent to which the white city and the ghetto are already deeply implicated within each other. In a ghetto novel, the white city is the subtext that we must recover, because history of ghetto formation itself is the subject of its discourse. Revaluation of the ghetto prepares us for later attempts to revive an urban and “ghettocentric” American identity. In contrast to some ghetto fiction where the ghetto is denounced as a place adverse to emancipatory “progress”, Nicholasa Mohr’s literary ghetto in *Nilda* (1986) is not a narrative reinforcing the stereotypical representations of how racioethnic urban life and violent crime define each other. It is not, in other words, a location of unproblematic inherited identities but a place where orientations and identifications are negotiated.

Keywords: barrio, urban, nuyorican, ghetto youth culture

Ghetto and Nuyorican Fiction

The examination of the hegemonic structures of neocolonialism in ghetto fiction might seem quite a marginal activity addressing residents of ghetto or those who are specialized in ghetto/urban studies. But although ghetto fiction is concerned with the geographical peripheries of white metropolis, its long-term strategy is to effect a radical restructuring of cityscape. This is not to state a criticism of neocolonial values upon which the city is built in opposition to the ghetto but rather of demonstrating the extent to which the white city and the ghetto are already deeply implicated within each other. To adapt Fanon’s observation that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” (as cited in Young, 1990, p. 119), we can suggest that the white (neocolonial) city is literally the creation of the ghetto. In a ghetto novel, the white city is the subtext that we must recover, because history of ghetto formation itself is the subject of its discourse. Revaluation of the ghetto prepares us for later attempts to revive an urban and “ghettocentric” (Watkins, 1998, p. 196) American identity.

How ghetto is constructed in fiction, written by American writers of diverse ethnic and racial origins, is inextricably related to how the city is constructed, as our preconceived ideas of approaching a city through pleasant suburbs would receive a severe shock in the ghetto fiction. Ghetto fiction offers an insight into what the

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spirit of ghetto community means in the context of ghetto fiction, while it leads into a broader discourse on the relationship between the modern ghetto and forms of institutional racism and violence perpetrated by the state against weaker segments of the society it governs. Crime and poverty associated with ethno-racial groups that dominates public discourse serve the representation of ghetto life to offer new ways to overcome essentialist constructions of urban spaces and territories. In a city where the occupation of public space is not rendered as legitimate for the ghetto residents, the urban ghetto is a site of ambivalence registering an “unhomely” (Bhabha, 1992, p. 141) site. In the context of Nuyorican fiction, and especially in Nicholasa Mohr’s works, the literary context provides its characters with a spirit of struggle for turning the “barrio” into a “homely” site. Hence thematic concerns of ghetto fiction inevitably forming strategies that contest the dominant discourse, simply because historically speaking ghetto signifies a transitory step to cultural integration, take on a different shape in a Puerto Rican woman writer’s novel. Vega’s (1995) severe criticism of Puerto Rican fiction writers whose majority deals with the issue of ghetto conditions, “I don’t think anybody has stepped out from under the shadow of the ghetto yet” (p. 135), was directed to the identification of the people with the ghetto reinforcing a stereotypical representation of Puerto Ricans as mere ghetto residents. Although the critical precepts at the foundation of his criticism is understandable, the author would argue that the literary strategies employed by Puerto Rican writers such as Nicholasa Mohr seem to revise the urban manifestations of Puerto Rican identity.

In contrast to some ghetto fiction where the ghetto is denounced as a place adverse to emancipatory “progress”, Mohr’s literary ghetto in *Nilda* (1986) is not a narrative reinforcing the stereotypical representations of how racioethnic urban life and violent crime define each other. It is not, in other words, a location of unproblematic inherited identities but a place where orientations and identifications are negotiated. Family intimacy promotes mutual understanding and support in the face of hostile conditions in a Puerto Rican community which is held together by trust and respect for one another, for ritual laws effectively reinforce a sense of belonging. What Cruz-Malavé (1988) rightfully suggested for the Nuyorican literature can easily be considered in relation to Mohr’s novel:

In the Puerto Rican writer’s hands the bildungsroman becomes not just a story of personal development, packaged as a story of survival in the margins, in the fringes of society, for the voyeuristic tastes of middle America, but the space where those polarities, and the values and power relations associated with them, come into conflict and are worked out. (p. 10)

Subversive Constructions of Ghetto in *Nilda*

Writing from the position of a person who is not acculturated/integrated into New York’s metropolitan society, the young female protagonist Nilda is marginalized not only by her ethnicity but by her own patriarchal society as well. She experiences the conflict between her growing personal love of her family/community and her exposure to increasingly racist influences. In the course of the novel, Nilda as part of the ghetto youth reveals that the spirit of the ghetto has to survive within the ethno-racial community of the future, and even the rebellious young generation must retain their communal spirit.

Mohr’s *Nilda* then presents the possible meanings of the barrio life as a social bond. The tremendous pressures that barrio imposes on Puerto Rican social spaces also displays the devastation of the personal and community spaces these family members inhabit. Reading this bildungsroman, in which we witness Nilda’s experiences of growing up female in the barrio in 1940s, shows us a way of knowing the Puerto Rican community

in the barrio as urban places through personal experience. The “first woman’s narrative in English of the Puerto Rican experience,” *Nilda* is set in the early 1940s, “Although promoted by its publisher as a young adult novel, Mohr intended *Nilda* as a book for all ages, and it has truly served that purpose” (Kanellos, 1996, p. 206). A 10-year-old Puerto Rican girl, Nilda lives in a poor neighbourhood in the barrio in New York City with her mother Lydia, her stepfather Emilio, her great aunt Delia, and her brothers Victor, Paul and Frankie, while her oldest brother Jimmie, a drug dealer lives in New Jersey. The novel is narrated through a third person narrator who talks about the past experiences of Nilda. The barrio is represented with “crowded buildings... mingled with the odors coming from the tenements and sidewalks” (Mohr, 1986, p. 1) in the summer. The people seem to be circumscribed by the unbearable heat in the neighbourhood where the grocer Jacinto’s efforts to open the hydrant gives only temporary relief up until the policemen come to close the hydrant. The people’s sense of community in sharing the pleasure is juxtaposed with the humiliating attitude of the police in calling them “animals” (Mohr, 1986, p. 5). The police threat does not reveal the need to reinforce the laws but also set up the discourse of whiteness: “If this happens again, one more time, I’m going to arrest all your asses! The whole God damned bunch of you spicks” (Mohr, 1986, p. 6). The white police verbalize not only the brutality rationalized by the stereotypical vision of Puerto Ricans as “sub-human” but also the urbanites’ conception of the barrio residents.

Ghetto Youth Culture

For a very young girl such as Nilda, the negative perception of the white policemen seem to be embedded in the fearful authority their whiteness and uniforms represent, “the two big white policemen who loomed larger and more powerful than all the other people in her life” (Mohr, 1986, p. 7). The conflict between the community who are powerless enough to subvert the authority, and the white male surveillance of the police seem to still constitute the barrio as “home” for Nilda, who longs to be back home the moment she sets out for the Catholic camp: “Nilda... wondered what life would be like away from her family and the Barrio. ... This was the first time she had ever been without her family and out of her neighborhood on her own” (Mohr, 1986, p. 8) and feels it is God’s punishment for some misdeed, she must have done and is indeed overjoyed when they have to go home the next day because of the problem with the plumbing. The camp experience causes Nilda to think if Puerto Ricans have an equal access to certain jobs with white people, “All the nuns, priests, and brothers were very white and had blue or light brown eyes. ... She wondered if Puerto Ricans were ever allowed to be nuns, fathers, or brothers” (Mohr, 1986, p. 16). In contrast to white racist policies that exclude Puerto Ricans from better opportunities and occupations, Nilda imagines the daily lives of the white middle class people who live in beautiful houses much like in the movies she watched, “Families and kids, problems that always had happy endings. A whole mess of happiness, she thought” (Mohr, 1986, p. 9). Aunt Delia, the mentally deranged old relative who lives with them, emerges as a voice who bespeaks the dangers of city life all through the novel, since she always reads the horrible news of sexual abuse, crime, and violence to the family members out loud: “They’re finding the parts of a body all over the city. ... Some woman was found raped and beaten after being robbed” (Mohr, 1986, pp. 28-29).

Nilda’s family problems center upon the sickness and hospitalization of her stepfather whom she calls Papa, after he had a terrible heart leaving him too weak to work as a consequence of which the whole family is forced to receive welfare, “We have no money, Nilda. If I make that woman angry, God knows what she will put down on

the application. We have to have that money in order to live” (Mohr, 1986, p. 70). Lydia’s hesitancy in the decision-making process for the Welfare Department is embedded in white officials’ treatment of Hispanic people as if they were a piece of dirt is reinforced by Nilda’s descriptions of how these officials either in the Office or in their house visualize Puerto Ricans or other Hispanics. The family problems are all laid upon the mother in such a way that it is as if we see a matriarchal family, for Lydia works at home and in some part-time jobs trying to hold the family together. The self-effacing life she is forced into leaves her with no space for individuality—a narrative of Lydia’s past will implicate a counternarrative of the future Nilda is expected to construct.

Nilda’s oldest brother Jimmy quit high school and left, working in New Jersey as a drug dealer. He is later put in the Rehabilitation center for being treated as a drug addict. His girlfriend Sophie is kicked out by her own mother, because she is pregnant with Jimmy’s baby and comes to live with Nilda’s family: Nilda realizes that “Sophie’s mother did not like Puerto Ricans [and] she didn’t like Jimmy” (Mohr, 1986, p. 90). Even though Lydia has a hard time to feed her kids, she knows the problems that await a young unmarried mother in the ghetto, “A new life is now part of our family, so we must all take care and protect the baby. It is our duty as his [Jimmy’s] family” (Mohr, 1986, p. 75). Her mother never accepts her back even long after her baby is born and so Jimmy comes to pick her up and they leave for a New Jersey and Lydia advises him to keep “away from the drugs” (Mohr, 1986, p. 30). She eventually has to marry somebody else, for Jimmy is arrested. Nobody knows where Jimmy is except that they hear “He was wanted by the police” (Mohr, 1986, p. 35). Unlike Paul who starts out as a gang member but ends up differently in the future, the danger awaits Jimmy apparently because the police was already after the gang. We later learn that Jimmy is sent to a “federal penal institution for the rehabilitation of criminal drug addicts” (Mohr, 1986, p. 195).

Artistic Reactions to the Everyday Life in the Ghetto

In the middle of all these hard life struggles, Nilda is the only one who has artistic talent in making beautiful drawings (“Drawing a line and then another, she had a sense of happiness” (Mohr, 1986, p. 50)), and has the creativity and depth in turning even a sidewalk game into a process of discovery in which she tries to discover different worlds of experience: “She continued looking for new and wonderful worlds that lay hidden underneath the concrete” (Mohr, 1986, p. 36). But ironically in the barrio her urge for discovery, is intervened by the brutality on the street as she discovers a seriously wounded man who is hiding inside a building. Her mother who is coincidentally around with Leo and they help with other people who gather to call the police to take him to the hospital. On their walk back home, the girls in the street prostitute themselves to Leo, a covert offer Nilda never understands, because her mother bypasses her questions and answers them incorrectly to protect her from the moral dirt around them. As they get on the bus, Nilda’s thoughts point to the spatial segregation of the ghetto where Puerto Ricans live:

She looked around her at the people on the bus. They were all mostly dark, Puerto Rican and black people. Pressing her head against Leo’s arm and closing her eyes, she thought. Before the white people start getting on, we’ll be long gone off the bus. (Mohr, 1986, p. 40)

That ghetto is full of dangers causes Nilda to be even careful when she has to walk through the dark tunnels on Park Avenue where she has to put her money in her shoe, as Paul tells her to do, to avoid being mugged.

Poverty, the sole reason for the people to live in the barrio, also becomes the impediment in interpersonal

relations between the prejudiced teacher Miss Langhorn and the students. Miss Langhorn sells the crackers and mill during the milk hour, and hence those who cannot afford them cannot have them: "Very rarely did Nilda join the line for milk; most of the time she had no money at all. Every morning Nilda longed to have milk and one of those cookies" (Mohr, 1986, p. 55). Even if this is the case, her mother teaches her about the value of education, an opportunity she was never given back home: "You do as the teacher says and learn, so you can be somebody someday... I only got to the fourth grade; I never had the advantages you got here in this country" (Mohr, 1986, p. 60). In a later scene, the reason for her mother's urge for education is evoked more forcefully: "I had no mother, only a mean stepmother who beat me. If I could have had your opportunity for school and your privileges, never ... never in a million years would I have had so many kids" (Mohr, 1986, p. 190). In fact, the only way the family can survive through poverty is when her mother hits the number and they get money to buy food and other supplies. Paul and Victor join the Army because that is the only way they can earn money and learn a trade for the future.

Nilda's mother pays money for the Bard Manor Camp for Girls this time Nilda enjoys herself. We see again that Nilda feels the barrio is a safe space, a home, for her: "As the train sped out of New York City, leaving the Barrio and the tall buildings behind, Nilda became frightened, not knowing what was going to happen to her" (Mohr, 1986, p. 144). Remembering her mother's descriptions of Puerto Rico's beautiful countryside Nilda enjoys the beautiful flowers in the natural landscape of the camp: "The happiness was inside, a new feeling, and although it was intense, Nilda accepted it as part of a life that now belonged to her" (Mohr, 1986, p. 155). Even though she is happy the camp life is not isolated from how poor girls are treated by other girls when they pretend to be better. Josie, brought up in a foster home, because her parents have broken up, make up for it by telling lies that she is very rich, inviting the jealousy of other girls such as Evelyn who damages her suitcase and writes nasty things on it for which she is punished. As Miss Rachel tells Evelyn: "You are nobody special around here to decide who needs a lesson" (Mohr, 1986, p. 161). After the camp is over, Nilda feels at home in the barrio: "The warm stagnant air in the subway, the vibrations of the moving car, combined with the noise of the train passing over the tracks, placed Nilda in a familiar setting, one that she had known all her life" (Mohr, 1986, p. 166).

The Impact of Poverty on Lived Spaces

Drawing strength from her own cultural values, Lydia turns to the spiritualist to solve Papa's problems of recovery: As a man who hates and distrusts religiosity as a means of economic domination of the wealthy classes, Papa gets very angry not simply, because he is a communist, but because his whole family had been killed by the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, "During a bombing raid which had almost totally annihilated his tiny village on the northern coast of Spain" (Mohr, 1986, pp. 201-202). He points to the exploitation by the woman spiritualist Doña Tiofila who wants a chicken to be sacrificed and given to her, because for Emilio she is "the only person in the whole Barrio who eats chicken every day" (Mohr, 1986, p. 177). When Emilio dies, Lydia is thrown into a state of hysteria from which she recovers by Nilda's presence. Absenteeism from her school for a couple of weeks creates a moment of tension between Nilda and her teacher Mrs. Fortinash, a racist, who refuses to understand or respect Puerto Rican customs: "You people are the limit! No wonder you don't get anywhere or do anything worthwhile with these kinds of customs" (Mohr, 1986, p. 212).

The issue of severe poverty shapes the future plans of Paul who decides to join the Navy: "Look, Nilda, if I join the Navy, I can learn me a trade, man. You know. Be something, be somebody. And help Mama out and the

family” (Mohr, 1986, p. 180). Frankie joins the Lightnings, the gang set in constant bloody fights with the Barons. In a hunt for the gang members on the night of the street protests against fascism, Nilda witnesses closely how “fascistic” or brutal the police can become to the gang members, Frankie and Manuel. The police wants the names of the gang members and sees Manuel as a collaborator with the gang. As he keeps calling Manuel “spick” (Mohr, 1986, p. 227), he is overly brutal: “He picked up his nightstick and swung hard at Manuel. Nilda heard a thud and saw blood coming down the side of Manuel’s face as he reeled over” (Mohr, 1986, p. 227). He beats him for no reason, because he is innocent and is very slow in taking him to the hospital with the condition that there will be no official complaint. Manuel passes through lots of operations in years to come with his left eye totally blinded.

Racism is not the only issue that endangers the future of the ghetto youth but sexism as well, as Nilda’s friend Petra is pregnant to Indio’s baby, and they have to get married. Upon hearing this, Nilda’s mother becomes didactic to Nilda: “When you want to fool around, think of that girl, think of Petra. What kind of life will she have? Finished, no more school, no more fun—no more nothing!” (Mohr, 1986, p. 259). Lydia seems to speak out of her own experience, because the real father of the children never married her, and Papa is the only one who married her. When she gets very sick, and eventually dies at the hospital, Nilda has to live with Aunt Rosario, as her mother pre-arranged for her. The night before she dies, Lydia calls Nilda to the hospital to give her an important advice: She says the role of motherhood devours a woman and crates the need to feed the kids. Welfare people will rob you of your home: “I have never had a life of my own... No life, Nilda... nothing that is really only mine... that’s not fair, is it? That’s not right” (Mohr, 1986, p. 276). She tells that Nilda should never give up on drawing, because she should hold on to that which is only hers: “To give it all up... you will lose what is real inside you” (Mohr, 1986, p. 278).

Conclusions

This advice is Lydia’s demand that Nilda should open up a personal space in the urban territory refusing to let anyone “ghettoize” her female selfhood. The implication in the family reunion after Lydia’s funeral before she moves out of the barrio with Aunt Rosario is that Nilda will struggle to resist the oppressed state of the mother in her future life. The perspective of a very young ghetto girl like Nilda seems to be conducive to a critical view of both the white racist and the Puerto Rican patriarchal society and to the formation of a counterdiscourse. Her mother’s advice is an urge for survival in a hostile environment, and how not to be trapped by the physical and cultural space of the barrio. The issue of sexual difference within the urban working-class Latino community points to the complex process of the construction of the gendered subject. The novel notes a cultural transition that may take place in Nilda’s life, while it also questions the patriarchal community of traditional Puerto Rican culture. Nilda’s mother stands for the need to construct multiple selves, subjectivities, or positionings that have value against the gendered oppression they encounter in their lives in the ghetto. Lydia’s demythification of motherhood will help Nilda, hopefully, to identify with the values necessary to shape a democratic social order where women will not be “ghettoized”.

In addition, the novel represents ghetto youth as located within a set of signifiers that deny their full selfhood, and hence reveal a wider social dilemma. By its definition, ghetto fiction constructs a broader discourse about youth where the bodies of youth are endangered by the very conditions that serve as the basis for the ghetto formation. Giroux’s (2002) statement about the ghetto youth culture as that which “defines its relationship to each

other through spectacle of brutality, humiliation, and a self-centered indifference” (p. 175) does not fully hold out true for the Puerto Rican ghetto youth. In view of what Nicholasa Mohr told about her own family in an interview, that they had to live in “a crowded apartment... [as] a poor family. But it was rich because there was a lot of love in my family... a lot of laughter and a lot of sharing” (2004, p. 4), her novel represents ghetto youth capable of sustaining a spirit of community, as we see Paul, Victor and Nilda caring for each other in a closely-knit family relationship. While these anti-stereotypical reconstructions of these young people bear hope for the future of the cityscape, it is also crucial to remember that “Any discourse about youth is simultaneously a narrative about the ideologies and social practices that structure adult society” (Giroux, 1998, p. 125). The novel then functions within a discourse about youth revealing how stereotypical representations of Puerto Rican youth (i.e., “spick”) resonate with specific conservative attacks on related issues of sexuality, race, and gender, while it renders realistic representations of ghetto youth in a country where representations of youth culture and bodies constitute part of a larger debate about power, ideology, and politics. As in Manuel’s and Jimmy’s cases, coercive strategies employed to discipline ghetto youth are violative and punitive, while reproducing whiteness as a form of racial domination in the public space of the inner-city. Counterdiscourses, generated by ghetto fiction and embodied by young people, are deployed to produce alternative meanings about the sociocultural context of the ghetto.

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