

Introduction

Toward Understanding the Young Lords

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In 1968, over half a century after U.S. citizenship was imposed on Puerto Ricans against the will of a democratically elected House of Delegates on the Island, Boricuas in the United States continued to face hard times. Economic conditions were lean: jobs were hard to come by (especially if you did not speak English), and those jobs you could find involved hard physical labor and little pay. More than one job was often needed to support a family. “Great Society” social programs should have helped boost economic conditions, but most of those benefits were lost in the messy bureaucratic web spun by the state in conjunction with local Puerto Rican-run professional organizations.¹ Politically, Puerto Ricans were still characterized as “docile,” and the role of political activism in urban centers like New York had been monopolized by professionals, experts, and elites.² Furthermore, Puerto Ricans faced extreme and complex forms of racism and xenophobia.³ By most accounts, life for the working-class Puerto Rican left much to be desired.⁴

The troubling situation was not unique to Puerto Ricans in urban centers. In fact, nationwide, deleterious social conditions sparked various political responses from a wide range of so-called marginalized groups. In the U.S. South, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) changed its strategy to one based on the principles of Black Power—a radical, sometimes militant Afrocentric response to racist classism and classist racism. Across the country, the Black Panther Party articulated a militant Black Nationalist political program designed to address anti-Black racism at its roots and resist white oppression “by any means necessary.” In the Southwest and elsewhere, Chicanos articulated a conception of Brown Pride that eventually included a separatist political strategy rejecting completely an Anglo-American conception of politics. It is within this period of political radicalism that the Young Lords street gang in Chicago became politicized and radicalized under the leadership of Jose “Cha-Cha” Jimenez, adopted the name “Young Lords Organization,” and spread first to New York.

As with any of these (or other) social movements, the situation within which the Young Lords arose and operated was anything but simple. They were a group of twenty-year-olds and teenagers, second-generation Puerto Ricans living in impoverished communities. Some of the Lords were fortunate enough to attend college. Most of the Lords were motivated both by the virulently racist, classist, and sexist oppression they faced daily and by a sense of love of their homeland and people.⁵ All of the Lords, virtually on condition of membership, were committed to articulating a new radical Puerto Rican identity aimed at the betterment of the Puerto Rican people in social, economic, and political arenas.

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If only the history of this heterogeneous organization had been written by now. Instead, there are only a handful of scholarly articles on the Young Lords. One memoir of activism written by a former Young Lord (Miguel “Mickey” Melendez) has been published to date. A few doctoral dissertations have been written in whole or substantial part on the Young Lords, but none of them has yet seen publication. Worse still, the primary documents produced by the Young Lords—speeches, articles, posters, photographs, illustrations, poetry, etc.—have literally been disintegrating in boxes, basements, and landfills. While the record of the Chicago Lords’ activities exists only in oral histories and archival news footage, many of the New York Young Lords’ materials have been preserved by private collectors (all former Young Lords) and archives. Sadly, however, only fragmented pieces of that material are easily available for the general public and those without immediate access to the archives and collectors.

It is unjust that when the name “Young Lords” is uttered, most people have little or no understanding of what Marta Moreno calls “this group of young men and women of color who made significant impact on history.” This book represents an attempt to right that wrong and to set the historical record straight about the Young Lords in their own words. Rather than rely on oral histories taken years after the fact or news reports propagated by a biased media, this book brings together material written, spoken, and otherwise produced by the Young Lords in their era. Organized around issues rather than personalities, this book offers a comprehensive collection of primary texts so that the Young Lords’ memory can be preserved and that you, the reader, can decide for yourself what the Young Lords might mean to us today. Before embarking on such a historical journey, however, a brief introduction to the New York Young Lords history and activism is necessary.

Origins of the Young Lords

Palante: Young Lords Party, the group’s historical and theoretical introductory book (a collection of narratives, explanations of their policy positions, and documentary photographs published in 1971), begins by addressing this issue of origins. A message from the Central Committee, the Young Lords’ governing body, recalls, “Many people ask us, ‘How did you begin?’ A few people have the idea that ‘some foreign power’ organized us, or that we are a gang. This is our story.”⁶ For the most part, the story begins in January 1969, when a group of Puerto Rican college students gathered as a kind of consciousness-raising measure to understand better the situation of their brothers and sisters in El Barrio (East Harlem). By one former Young Lords’ own admission, “the intentions of these people were good, but vague.”⁷

As months passed, different people entered and left the group, which became known as the Sociedad de Albizu Campos (SAC).⁸ In May 1969, the collective, partially organized by Miguel “Mickey” Melendez and including Juan Gonzalez, began to clarify its mission with the help of several key members. First, Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán, who would become minister of information and one of the most visible and vocal members of the group, came to New York and joined the discussions. Next, David Perez, a political radical from Puerto Rico who came to New York via Chicago, met up with Guzmán and SAC. On their first night spent talking together, they came to an agreement that SAC needed to stop meeting and start acting.

Two weeks later, on June 7, 1969, they found their model for activism: the Young Lords Organization, a street gang “turned political” in Chicago. At this point, the members of SAC developed coalitions with other progressive Latino groups: a group of street photographers/activists from El Barrio and, from the Lower East Side, a group of former gang members and street activists who had taken the name “Young Lords.”⁹ After a series of mergers, a unified group, the New York Young Lords, received an official charter from the Chicago organization on July 26, 1969.¹⁰ According to Guzmán, “we split from Chicago in April 1970 because we felt they hadn’t overcome being a gang”;¹¹ but, as described below, the reasons were even more complicated. At this point, the group became the “Young Lords Party,” a name and mission they retained until changing, in 1972, into a different, decidedly Maoist, organization called the “Puerto Rican Revolutionary Worker’s Organization.”¹²

Phase One: Young Lords Organization (YLO)

In the beginning, the Young Lords Organization in New York was primarily a community service organization. Borrowing from the models offered by the Young Lords Organization in Chicago and the Black Panthers, in addition to their own experiences in community organizing, this new group of New York Lords sought first to address change at the local level in their immediate community through “serve the people” programs.¹³ Three aspects of this early stage are particularly important. First, they were motivated by multiple traditions of thought and action. Second, they were focused on practical public tasks (cleaning up garbage, testing for disease, providing social services, etc.). Finally, they sought transformations in the community that cannot be measured sufficiently through lenses of “influence” or policy “success.”

Unlike many Chicanos in the Southwest, the Young Lords were not exclusively oppositional. Rather than reject outright the Anglo political system (although they did reject voting as the means of political action) or accept entirely the Marxist critique of capitalism, the YLO occupied a liminal space among multiple political traditions. Through required political education courses, the YLO members and “friends of the Lords” broadened their critical vocabulary and became comfortable operating within and outside of dominant and subversive traditions at once. Everything was fair game, regardless of whether there was clear ideological consistency between their different traditions or vocabularies. Such theoretical liminality and paradox further worked its way into their practical endeavors in the local community; but it was also because of their community that they were so liminal and paradox ridden. One Young Lord explains the embrace of paradox by saying, “We find in our community—the Puerto Rican community—that things are compatible. For instance, people have Catholic saints and at the same time they’ll have a Voodoo doll, you know, or a piece of bread above the door so that the evil spirits can eat that and leave in peace.”¹⁴ The YLO, then, embraced such “compatibility” in their theoretical articulations.

In practice, the YLO was most concerned with the immediate problems facing their community. Opening their first office on Madison Avenue in East Harlem (there is now a low-income housing project where their office used to be) and branch offices in the South Bronx, Brooklyn, the Lower East Side, and elsewhere, the YLO focused on health, sanitation, and other social issues with which the establishment did not adequately cope.

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Beginning with the “garbage offensive,” one day after they received their official charter to become the “Young Lords,” the YLO directed their attention to making life better in the various Puerto Rican slums. They founded a lead paint testing program in response to countless children being poisoned by the paint in their homes. They ran a blood and x-ray testing program for tuberculosis. They established community education initiatives, a breakfast program for poor children, free clothing exchanges, and day care for working families. They also led the drive to renovate a hospital (Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx) that had long been condemned for being unsanitary and unsafe, and they established the first in-patient drug rehabilitation program for the working class. Some of these programs worked in opposition to the system by pointing out institutional racisms, while others were reformist in impulse.

While many of the programs and offensives the YLO implemented were successful in the conventional sense of meeting their stated practical goals, the success of the YLO should not be measured by such an instrumentalist standard. Such analysis overlooks the constitutive effects of the YLO’s activism, namely, that the YLO constituted and cultivated a fundamentally political consciousness in El Barrio that offered residents a social imaginary through which an active political life could be led.¹⁵ In part through such transformations in the people’s consciousness, the YLO thrived in their communities and garnered the active support of both a broad membership (numbering in the thousands) and a loyal nonmember community base.

Phase Two: Young Lords Party (YLP)

As mentioned above, in May 1970, the New York Young Lords Organization made the decision to split from the national organization in Chicago. There were various reasons for the split, some having to do with differences of opinion and vision, others having to do with the New York group not feeling as though they were respected enough given the amount of work they were accomplishing (running the newspaper, leading a larger membership, etc.), still others related to the New York Lords believing Chicago had a hard time leaving their gang past behind, and yet others related to what the New York chapter felt was a need to have a truly national party.¹⁶ With the split came a renewed sense of vision and direction for the New York Young Lords Party. Continuing various community programs (and, by this time, having branches throughout the Northeast), the YLP adopted a more explicitly political structure that was better aligned with their stated goals. Specifically, the YLP developed “mass people’s organization[s, which] involve[d] the Puerto Rican people wherever they [were] at any level of struggle.”¹⁷

There were five different organizations within the YLP during this stage. First, the Puerto Rican Worker’s Federation took the struggle into places of employment in an attempt to challenge and, eventually, overthrow capitalist economics. Second, the Lumpen Organization enlisted the class below the workers, including those in jail, drug users, and the unemployed, in the struggle. This wing of the YLP was largely responsible for the (in)famous Attica prison uprising.¹⁸ Third, the Women’s Union sought to organize women in the struggle and challenged misconceptions about gender, sex, and sexuality. Fourth, the Puerto Rican Student Union mobilized students in high schools and colleges. Finally, the Committee for the Defense of the Community dealt most directly with different community issues such as health, land use, and breakfast programs. In all, according

to Juan Gonzalez in a speech to Hawaiian students in November 1971, the YLP believed they were “trying to build a structure to involve our people in whatever level they wanted to involve themselves. . . . So, we see those people’s organizations as the beginning, the seed of the people’s self-government where the people train themselves to be involved in the revolutionary process and exercise their political power.”¹⁹

During this phase of development (from May 1970 to July 1972), the YLP expanded operations, membership, and scope. In September 1970, the YLP successfully integrated its cadre and leadership along gendered lines, revising their Program and Platform to explicitly reject sexism and machismo and placing women in leadership roles on the Central Committee. They also began recognizing and tackling heterosexism in the organization. In March 1971, they expanded their operations to Puerto Rico, launching “*Ofensiva Rompecadenas*” (Chains Off Offensive) by opening branch offices in El Caño and Aguadilla and coming under the strict scrutiny of the FBI’s COINTELPRO (Counter-intelligence Program).²⁰ The expansion, however, was short-lived when all the members of the Aguadilla branch resigned in April 1972.²¹ The YLP left the island completely, concurrent with their decision to shift focus and change mission, which emerged from the First (and last) Party Congress held June 30 to July 3, 1972.

Phase Three: Puerto Rican Revolutionary Worker’s Organization (PRRWO)

As a result of the Congress, the Young Lords entered their third and final phase, becoming the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Worker’s Organization. Lasting until 1976, the PRRWO represented a radical shift from the YLO and the YLP. One of the most telling examples of the differences between the earlier iterations of the Lords and this final stage is found in their respective icons. Where for the YLO and YLP, iconic figures such as Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Pedro Albizu Campos, and Malcolm X were featured prominently, the PRRWO (on the cover of their publication that emerged out of the Congress) featured Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. The PRRWO closed its community offices and organizations and directed full attention to the workers’ struggle from an international Marxist perspective. Gone were the featured concerns for immediate community problems and the need to educate the people. The membership declined sharply, and those who remained were sent to work in factories to aid in developing a workers’ consciousness through unionization. Furthermore, the PRRWO left behind its concerns for democracy in the organization and eventually devolved into a proto-authoritarian regime under the leadership of Gloria Fontañez. Loyal members were accused of being “spies” for COINTELPRO, some were placed on house arrest, and others were threatened and beaten. Only a handful of members remained when the PRRWO went defunct in 1976.

About This Book

This book developed out of my research in the Department of Communication and Culture at Indiana University. Writing about the Young Lords from Bloomington, Indiana, was quite an undertaking—especially considering that, at the time, only two microfilm reels that (a) included materials from the Young Lords and (b) were permitted to circulate through interlibrary loan existed in the United States. *Palante: Young Lords Party*, the group’s book, was long out of print, and many libraries had reported their

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copies lost or stolen. ¡*Palante, Siempre Palante!*—Iris Morales’s 1996 documentary on the Lords—had been in circulation for some time, but its archival materials were primarily visual and fragmented. Over the course of a couple of years, then, I went to New York as often as I could to meet with former Lords and collect materials from individuals and institutions. Since then, I have posted some materials online; but the longer websites and Wikipedia entries were up, the more requests I started getting from students and scholars for information about the Lords. This book will help ensure that students, scholars, and community activists in the future will have a smoother start in their journey toward understanding the Young Lords.

Choosing materials for this volume was a challenge. Other books like this (most notably Phillip S. Foner’s *The Black Panthers Speak*) organize their material around key figures in the organization. While this book could have been organized in such a manner, I felt that doing so would be contrary to the spirit of collective politics the Young Lords fought so hard to advance. Therefore, this book is organized around thematic and political offensives: organization, ideology, history, education, garbage, gender, the church, prisons, etc. In the editing process, I have introduced “silent corrections” of minor, meaningless, and distracting errors. As a rule, however, every effort has been made to preserve the texts as the Young Lords originally published them. In making the specific selections for each chapter, I sought first to choose pieces that seemed representative; that is, I looked for *content*, not *characters* that represented well the issue/theme at hand. It is important to note, though, that as careful as I was to pick pieces that I thought were representative (asking some Lords, too, if they were comfortable with my choices), what ultimately made it into this book is the result of decisions I have made. It is, no doubt, a cliché to say that this book only scratches the surface of a vast body of discourse by the Young Lords, but it is nonetheless true. This book is an attempt at a fair introduction that offers breadth and some depth; but it is far from a comprehensive collection.

NOTES

1. Antonia Pantoja, “Puerto Ricans in New York: A Historical and Community Development Perspective,” *Centro Journal* 2, no. 5 (1989): 21-31; Carlos Rodríguez-Fraticelli and Amílcar Tirado, “Notes towards a History of Puerto Rican Community Organizations in New York City,” *Centro Journal* 2, no. 6 (1989): 35-47.
2. Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1992), 13-60.
3. For a broad examination of the forms of racism Puerto Ricans face, see Flores, *Divided Borders*. For a comparison of Puerto Ricans to other ethnic and racial groups, see Ramón Grosfoguel and Chloé S. Georas, “Latino Caribbean Diasporas in New York,” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene M. Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
4. The History Taskforce of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies offers an explanation of the economic conditions of Puerto Ricans on the Island and in New York (and the relationship between the two) in History Task Force Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *Labor Migration under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
5. See Young Lords Party and Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).
6. Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, n.pag.
7. Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, n.pag.

8. "Sociedad de Albizu Campos" translates as the "Albizu Campos Society." Pedro Albizu Campos was the Harvard-educated cofounder and leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party in the 1930s.
9. Pablo "Yorúba" Guzmán, "Ain't No Party Like the One We Got: The Young Lords Party and *Palante*," in *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories from the Vietnam-Era Underground Press*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (Ann Arbor, MI: Azenphony, 1991), 296-97.
10. Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, n.pag. and 73-74.
11. Pablo Guzmán, "La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 157.
12. Guzmán, "La Vida Pura," 167-68.
13. Iris Morales, "¡Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 213-14.
14. Felipe Luciano qtd. in Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, 31.
15. I draw this distinction from Ronald Walter Greene. See, Ronald Walter Greene, "The Aesthetic Turn and the Rhetorical Perspective on Argumentation," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 35 (1998): 19-29. An earlier and similar construction was made by Bruce E. Gronbeck, who distinguishes between the "instrumental" and "consummatory" functions of rhetoric in presidential campaigning. See, Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The Functions of Presidential Campaigning," *Communication Monographs* 45 (1978): 268-80.
16. For a good description of the rationale behind the split see Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, 10-11.
17. Juan Gonzalez, "Untitled Speech Given in Hawaii on November 16, 1971," in *Juan Gonzalez Papers* (New York: 1971), 6.
18. The uprising at Attica was rooted in prisoners' demands for humane treatment. After negotiations led by a panel of community activists and government officials were cut short, the standoff was ended by military-style assault on the prison in which numerous prisoners and guards were slaughtered.
19. Gonzalez, "Untitled Speech," 8.
20. Morales, "¡Palante, Siempre Palante!" 221-23.
21. Morales, "¡Palante, Siempre Palante!" 222.