

ON NATIONAL TURF: THE RISE OF THE
YOUNG LORDS ORGANIZATION AND ITS
STRUGGLE FOR THE NATION IN CHICAGO

Ángel G. Flores-Rodríguez

Resumen

El propósito de este ensayo es colocar la historia del auge y decadencia de la Young Lords Organization (YLO) tanto en el contexto estadounidense como puertorriqueño. Al situar a la YLO simultáneamente dentro de la historia del nacionalismo puertorriqueño y de los movimientos de reafirmación étnica en Estados Unidos, percibimos la naturaleza emergente y contingente de las identidades nacionales a través de los espacios transnacionales. En conjunto, el ensayo complementará el campo de las prácticas políticas transnacionales con el perpetuo debate sobre la identidad puertorriqueña.

Palabras clave: Young Lords, nacionalismo puertorriqueño, identidad nacional, prácticas políticas transnacionales, puertorriqueños en Chicago.

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to place the history of the rise and decline of Chicago's Young Lords Organization (YLO) in both U.S. and Puerto Rico's national contexts. By simultaneously situating the YLO within the history of Puerto Rico's political nationalism and the United States' ethnic revitalization movements, we note the emergent and contingent nature of national identities across transnational spaces. Overall, the essay will complement the field of transnational political practices, as well as the perpetual debate on Puerto Rican identity.

Keywords: Young Lords, Puerto Rican nationalism, national identity, transnational political practices, Puerto Ricans in Chicago.

ON NATIONAL TURF: THE RISE OF THE YOUNG LORDS ORGANIZATION AND ITS STRUGGLE FOR THE NATION IN CHICAGO*

Ángel G. Flores-Rodríguez

Standing defiantly on top of the Academic Administration Building of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, five youths announced a new brand of Puerto Rican activism in the city. On May 14, 1969, the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a former Puerto Rican street gang turned political organization, led members from a myriad of grassroots movements in a sit-in inside the building located between Fullerton and Halsted avenues.¹ Filled with a reinvigorated sense of national and community pride and with the distinctive swagger of inner-city youth, the leaders of the “takeover” quickly renamed the building in honor of Manuel Ramos, a fellow Young Lord killed by an off-duty policeman ten days prior to the protest.² Members of the YLO targeted the Mc-

* I would like to thank Prof. John Nieto-Phillips of the Department of History at Indiana University for his valuable guidance and contributions to this project, and Prof. Jorge Duany at the University of Puerto Rico for the care and interest with which he revised the original manuscript. I also feel very much indebted to Zorimar Rivera and Vicent Moreno. Their conversations and ideas refined my thinking on this and other matters.

¹ The groups operating alongside the YLO that day were the Young Patriots, Black Active and Determined, the Concerned Citizens Survival Front of Lincoln Park, the Welfare and Working Mothers of Wicker Park, and the Latin American Defense Organization.

² During an informal gathering to celebrate Orlando Dávila’s birthday, a discussion broke out between the Lords and James Lamb, an off-duty police

Cormick building after three unsuccessful meetings during which its administration rejected demands for low-income housing, funds for a Puerto Rican cultural center, a children daycare center, and \$25,000 for leadership programs, among other requests.

For Chicago's poor Puerto Rican community, the theological institution operated as more than an innocent bystander to the distress of many. In the minds of the Lords, McCormick's administration was yet another accomplice of "urban renewal programs in the community... designed to remove poor people and replace them with middle and upper-income residents."³ The militant organizations of the Lincoln Park area envisioned the seminary as a presence within the community's borders that endorsed the physical displacement of a historically marginalized people. "They [were] taking our land in Chicago", recollected the former chairman of the YLO, José "Cha-Cha" Jiménez, "they were stealing our neighborhood... through economic pressures." For "Cha-Cha", losing space as a result of Chicago's urban renewal project was similar to his parents' experience when "they were force[d] to come to the United States, [allowing the United States] to take over Puerto Rico."⁴ Seen this way, the Young Lords' practice of "taking over" community spaces became more than a form of performative resistance. The Young Lords' occupation of McCormick

officer who was across the street from the party. Soon the discussion got heated and Lamb, who was reported to be inebriated at the time, shot in the direction of the Lords, killing Ramos with a bullet wound to the head. Four of the Lords present proceeded to detain Lamb with a citizen's arrest. Those four Lords were later charged of assaulting the policeman. No charges were pressed against Lamb.

³ "McCormick Take Over", *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 2, Chicago, Ill., May 1969.

⁴ Interview with José "Cha-Cha" Jiménez, "Lincoln Park Project: An Oral History of the Young Lords Organization", conducted by Mervin Méndez, December 6, 1993. Processes of urban renewal, argues Jane Margaret Jacobs, require urban visionaries entering "the territories of the poor inner city, to buy up cheap and supposedly 'unhomely' homes or large tracts of disused lands and, through their restoration and redevelopment efforts, render them and the neighborhood as a whole both more valuable and more 'civilised.'" Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*. New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 75.

was an attempt to recover a territory lost to an imperial entity, an act of “counter-colonization”.⁵

The stated mission of the Young Lords was to alleviate the injustice and exploitation of Puerto Ricans in the United States and on the island. The YLO brand of militancy, however, did not stem from intellectual circles. It was developed and constantly redefined on the ground. To use the words of reporter Frank Browning, “the lords [were] not prodigal sons, returned from suburbia to organize the ghetto. Less romantically, they started out operating in fundamentally the same style as in *West Side Story*.”⁶ From a turf gang mainly interested in “getting a reputation”, as Jiménez recalls, the Young Lords became the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a voice for militant Puerto Rican nationalism, opposition to urban renewal, solidarity with the black freedom struggle, and support for revolutionary movements around the world.⁷ They signed peace treaties with rival gangs, published a newspaper, spread to several U.S. cities, most notably New York, and formed an alliance—the Rainbow Coalition—with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Young Patriots, a white working-class group.⁸ Through these actions, the YLO sought self-determination and greater control over space, but, and importantly, the reestablishment of self-pride, dignity, and a sense of solidarity among Puerto Ricans in Chicago.

⁵ Lilian Guerra, *Popular Expression and National Identity in Puerto Rico: The Struggle for Self, Community, and Nation*. Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1998.

⁶ Frank Browning, “From Rumble to Revolution: The Young Lords”, *Ramparts Magazine*, vol. 9, no. 4, Berkeley, Calif., October 1970.

⁷ In his 1927 classic study, *The Gang*, Frederic Milton Trasher describes gangs as an “interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.” Trasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1927, p. 46.

⁸ Interview conducted by the author and published in “The Young Lords, Puerto Rican Liberation, and the Black Freedom Struggle”, *OAH Magazine of History*, 2012, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 61.

Similar to other minority movements in the United States, the emergence of the Young Lords in Chicago came as a reaction to their people's status as an internal colony on one hand and to their political reality as colonized subjects on the other.⁹ In a sense, the Lords' active resistance mirrored Clifford Geertz's definition of nationalist sentiment amongst colonial and postcolonial societies where the desire to be recognized, the search for an identity, "and a demand that that identity be publicly acknowledged as having import" translated into distinctive claims for "progress, for a rising standard of living, more effective political order, [and] greater social order."¹⁰ In practice, the YLO rallied around campaigns for community control and, like other Puerto Rican activists in the United States, followed the path already delineated by the Black Power movement of the era. The issues that galvanized black neighborhoods –welfare rights, housing shortage, access to quality public education, and police brutality, among others– "affected the Puerto Rican barrio groups with the same brutality" and were the main concerns in the Young Lords' agenda.¹¹

Even though the rise of the YLO marked the coming of age of Puerto Rican politics in the urban United States, the authenticity and legacy of Chicago's YLO as Puerto Rican revolutionaries and inner-city activists has been ignored by many, particularly on the island. By weaving together transcripts of oral histories (held at the Special Collections Library at DePaul University in Chicago), interviews, and traditional archival research, this essay seeks to place the history of the rise and de-

⁹ In *Puerto Rican Chicago*, Félix Padilla defines internal colonization as "a relationship of socioeconomic exploitation, subordination, and inequality within the borders of the imperialistic power, which enhances the position of the dominant group." Padilla, *Puerto Rican Chicago*. South Bend, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1987, p. 4.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States", in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*. New York, Free Press, 1963, p. 108.

¹¹ Meg Starr, "Hit Them Harder: Leadership, Solidarity, and the Puerto Rican Independence Movement", in Dan Berger (ed.), *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*. New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 2010, p. 138.

cline of Chicago's YLO in both U.S. and Puerto Rico's national contexts. Along the lines traced by Eva Østergaard-Nielsen's for research on migrants' political practices, this essay will emphasize the interplay between migrants' transnational networks, and the "environment that shape not only their ways of working but also the message that they try to get across."¹² Overall, the discussion in these pages will thus be orientated to complement the field of transnational political practices, as well as the perpetual debate on Puerto Rican identity.

Though absent in the general historiography of Puerto Rican nationalism and urban youth movements in the U.S., the Chicago Young Lords were critical in forging a militant identity abroad and launching a marginalized community to the center of North American urban politics. Moreover, the ways and the circumstances in which they achieved this goal facilitated the emergence of a community of second-generation Puerto Ricans with distinctive transnational ties. The Young Lords realigned the notion of the nation to address the politics of the inner city, namely by inserting the idea of community at the center of revolutionary nationalism. Paramount to their success was the embrace of a nationalism centered on the defense of community ideals. For the Lords, El Barrio became the seed that transformed the idea of the nation into a more tangible, intimate, and immediate imagined community. In this sense, the YLO and its supporters annexed the wind, ice, and snow that permeated Chicago's Puerto Rican community to the Puerto Rican nation. No history of Puerto Rican revolutionary politics is complete without the Young Lords' experience in the streets of Chicago.

BORDERLANDS OF RESISTANCE

The Young Lords believed that their experiences in the U.S. urban context were tightly connected to the history of colonialism in Puerto Rico. Migration was not a matter of choice for the one third of Puerto Ricans living in the mainland; it was

¹² Eva Østergaard-Nielsen, "The Politics of Migrants' Transnational Political Practices", *International Migration Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2003, pp. 760-761.

part of a “divide and conquer strategy”, enforced by the colonizer, in the words of a former Lord. Puerto Rican migration had deep historical roots and the Young Lords were apt to connect it to the U.S. occupation of the island. In a political pamphlet, Gloria González reminded her fellow Young Lords that “the ‘Yankees’ tried to weaken us by dividing the people with ‘Operation Bootstrap’.”¹³ As perceived by the Young Lords, colonialism was the main force behind the establishment of Puerto Ricans communities abroad. In effect, displaced from their original homes and facing hostility from the receiving society and other ethnic groups, Puerto Ricans in Chicago delineated a community space in which they imagined, performed, and defended the cultural dynamics of a Puerto Rican nation defined through its struggles against the United States.¹⁴ As expressed by Jiménez,

Our main focus was the neighborhood but also self-determination for Puerto Rico. We brought the colonial issue to Chicago on a massive scale. We did not know words like diaspora or anything like that but we always knew that we were connected to Puerto Rico. We saw ourselves as part of a shuttle culture, going back and forth all the time... Other people came to take over the neighborhood and the U.S. did the same thing in Puerto Rico. The whole issue of housing displacement, then, served as a way to explain the whole issue of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and vice versa.¹⁵

In other words, “Cha-Cha” and his fellow Chicago Lords understood forced removal in the city as an extension of the colonial program on the island. For the Young Lords, the loss of land and community control in Chicago meant more blatant colonial aggressions against the nation. This time, however,

¹³ Gloria González, “Protracted War in Puerto Rico”, in *The Ideology of the Young Lords Party*. Pamphlet for Political Education, New York, 1972.

¹⁴ Here, space should be understood as something that, although inherently physical, delineates an area of shared symbols and representations. Rachel Rinaldo, “Space of Resistance: The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Humboldt Park”, *Cultural Critique*, vol. 50, 2002, pp. 135-174.

¹⁵ Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

the Young Lords were committed to defend what they imagined as Puerto Rican land.

Within the urban landscape, the YLO leadership conceptualized their plight in terms of a national liberation struggle and assumed an anticolonial rhetoric in their stand against urban displacement.¹⁶ As noted by Carmen Theresa Whalen, Puerto Rican youth “defined a politics that bridged homeland politics of Puerto Rico with the reality of their lives in *El Barrio*... they linked the colonization of Puerto Rico to the poverty of Puerto Ricans in the United States and defined the issues as imperialism, capitalism, and racism.”¹⁷ By rediscovering the centrality of the island in the migrant experience, many Puerto Ricans built a strategic resistance to the hostility and exclusion that marred their everyday lives.¹⁸ The island, however, was far from being the land of an imagined utopia. The Young Lords did not conjure an idyllic homeland with the typical nostalgia of a migrant sensibility.¹⁹ The phrase “*Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón*”, as the YLO logo read, not only reinvigorated a sense of identity but also transposed the colonial landscape of oppression identified on the island to the streets of Chicago. In Chicago, colonial administrators, U.S. capitalists, and imperial forces took the form of tenants, real estate developers, and the local police to become the most visible agents of “urban

¹⁶ As explained above, the ways in which city elites justify and sanction the occupation of urban space create a particular form of resistance from displaced subjects. For a discussion of the relationship between gentrification and colonialism, see also Rowland Atkinson and Gary Bridge (eds.), *Gentrification in a Global Context: The New Urban Colonialism*. New York, Routledge, 2005.

¹⁷ Carmen Teresa Whalen, “Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: The Young Lords in Philadelphia”, in Andrés Torres and José E. Velázquez (eds.), *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1998, p. 107.

¹⁸ Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston, Arte Público Press, 1993.

¹⁹ For a literary example, see Piri Thomas’s classic *Down These Mean Streets*. New York, Vintage, 1997, particularly his second chapter “Puerto Rican Paradise.” For a theoretical approach to the symbolic understanding of nostalgia and the immigrant experience, see Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Sensibility*. Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

colonialism". This was yet another way in which Puerto Rican Chicago, according to Ana Ramos-Zayas, "became analogous to national territory, to the Puerto Rican nation."²⁰

Consequently, the Young Lords placed themselves within the nationalist tradition of the island. However, they substituted the typical theoretical rhetoric of Puerto Rican nationalism for a more confrontational, "in your face-type" discourse to become one of the most visible forces of Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalism in the U.S.²¹ Although significantly different from the style, tone, and ideology of the "old Puerto Rican left", the Young Lords were quick to claim a direct lineage to Pedro Albizu Campos's Nationalist Party.²² Flanked by flags of the Nationalist Party, the Lords emphasized their relationship to a history of revolution and repression in Puerto Rico. Yet, on the island, the Lords were never recognized as national revolutionaries.

Expressions of Puerto Rican nationalism tended to emphasize the defense of local customs against any U.S. influence, creating "an artificial binary opposition between American and Puerto Rican culture –one English-speaking, the other Spanish-speaking; one Anglo-Saxon in origin, the other Hispanic, and so on."²³ Puerto Ricans raised in the United States, the so-called *Nuyoricans*, have been commonly labeled as a homogenous group that stands on the edge of the Puerto Rican nation, completely foreign to the island's realities. For many Puerto Ricans on the island, *Nuyoricans* seemed as "hybrids

²⁰ Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003.

²¹ Johanna Fernández, "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City", in Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (eds.), *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 255-286.

²² For a discussion of the ways the image of the nationalist hero, Pedro Albizu Campos, has been used as a representation of Puerto Rican nationalism abroad, see Ramos-Zayas, *op. cit.*, particularly her chapter "Creating Race: Pedro Albizu Campos, Representation, and Imagination", pp. 168-206.

²³ Jorge Duany, "Nation on the Move: The Construction of Cultural Identities in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2000, p. 10.

who may ‘contaminate’ the culture with influences from the North.”²⁴ Nationalist scholars on the island described Puerto Ricans from the U.S. inner-cities as bearers of an “identity problem [common amongst] the descendants of Puerto Rican immigrants.”²⁵ In other words, they were victims of a “cultural schizophrenia” caused by a refusal to accept their assimilated status. Relying on the acculturation paradigm, scholars depicted Puerto Ricans in the United States as a threat to the cultural purity attributed to a limited idea of *Puerto Ricanness*. Many cultural critics accepted the notion that the experience in the diaspora foretold the ultimate decline of shared national ideals, meaning, to use Eduardo Seda Bonilla’s phrase, the “requiem for a culture.”²⁶ All things considered, the experiences of the YLO, an interracial organization, composed mostly of English-speaking Puerto Ricans living in the United States, stood outside the boundaries of an idealized notion of the Puerto Rican nation.²⁷

Historical renditions of the Young Lords’ experience continue to suffer from this limited idea of the nation. The fact that for many on the island, diasporic experiences do not represent an authentic Puerto Rican culture explains the relative paucity of scholarship on the YLO. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the lack of coverage from the island’s mainstream media enhanced their status as alien to the homeland,

²⁴ José Lorenzo-Hernández, “The Nuyorican’s Dilemma: Categorization of Returning Migrants in Puerto Rico”, *International Migration Review*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1999, p. 991.

²⁵ See Manuel Maldonado Denis, *Puerto Rico y los Estados Unidos: emigración y colonialismo: un análisis sociohistórico de la emigración puertorriqueña*. Mexico City, Siglo Veintiuno, 1978.

²⁶ Eduardo Seda Bonilla, *Réquiem para una cultura: ensayos sobre la socialización del puertorriqueño en su cultura y en el ámbito del poder*. Río Piedras, Bayoán, 1980. His essay, “Ser es hacer: el problema de identidad de los descendientes de inmigrantes puertorriqueños en Estados Unidos”, proposes that amidst strong foreign influences Puerto Rican culture is bound to assimilate and “die.”

²⁷ For a discussion of the centrality of the Spanish language in the construction of a Puerto Rican national identity, see Carlos Pabón, “De Albizu a Madonna: para armar y desarmar la nacionalidad”, in *Nación postmortem: ensayos sobre los tiempos de insoportable ambigüedad*. San Juan, Callejón, 2003, pp. 17-54.

resulting in a dearth of sources on the Young Lords and, subsequently, a lack of historical narratives produced by island-based historians.

Nonetheless, a handful of scholars have recently tried to study the Young Lords from a historical perspective, yet critical literature on them is still scanty, to say the least. As of now, the two most complete works on the Young Lords are doctoral dissertations. Both works fall within the recent revival of urban history and its concern with the reformulation of politics in the context of a highly racialized and ever more segregated urban space.²⁸ Darrel Enck-Wanzer's incisive dissertation, for example, treats the Young Lords "as a critical and representative example of a post-modern social movement that relies on the tactical deployment of an intersectional rhetoric that incorporates verbal, visual, and embodied discourses." Enck-Wanzer's work centers on the YL's verbal and embodied discourses while examining the ways in which the Lords articulated an anticolonial agency and a radical discourse for democratic space. On the other hand, historian Johanna Fernández's dissertation highlights the strong class impulse during the rise of the New York's Young Lords Party. Placing its history as part of late 1960s radicalism, Fernández presents "an account of the history of the YLP during its short, yet phenomenally active, political life by documenting the organization's major campaigns, ideological trajectory, and decline."²⁹ Both works are particularly concerned with the development of the New York organization. References to Chicago's YLO are usually made as a way to introduce the activities of the more recognized Young Lords Party of New York.³⁰ The N.Y. Young

²⁸ Robert O. Self, "The Boundaries of Class in Urban America: Street Gangs, Social Workers, and the Meaning of the Mean Streets", *Reviews on American History*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2000, pp. 290-297.

²⁹ Johanna L. Fernández, *Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York City, 1969-1974*. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2004, AAT 3147233; Darrel Enck-Wanzer, *The Intersectional Rhetoric of the Young Lords: Social Movement, Ideographs, Demand, and the Radical Democratic Imaginary*. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2007, AAT 3264325.

³⁰ To highlight its separation from Chicago's YLO, the New York group became the Young Lords Party which then turned into the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization.

Lords' future exposition in the United States' media, the charisma of some of its leaders, and the city's imagined centrality in the history of Puerto Rican migration to the United States explain this tendency.

BEYOND NEW YORK: PUERTO RICANS IN THE WINDY CITY

Displaced by the U.S. imperial project, foremost, and the island's modernization policies, specifically, Puerto Ricans arrived in substantial numbers in the United States during the postwar years. As laid out by the Puerto Rican government, the island's path toward modernity, better known as Operation Bootstrap, was grounded in a Malthusian ideology that stressed the correlation between population control and socioeconomic progress. In this context, state officials displayed a deep anxiety regarding the island's rural peoples and, as shown by Gina Pérez, constructed them as a "surplus population."³¹ With its focus on urban instead of rural development, the Puerto Rican government constructed the conditions and then promoted the benefits of mass migration to the mainland.³²

Disappointed by the lack of economic opportunities in New York City, Puerto Rican migrants began to envision Chicago and its burgeoning industrial economy as a more favorable destiny. The first substantial group of Puerto Ricans, less than one thousand in number, arrived in Chicago in 1946 mainly as contract workers. Subsequently, other private agencies in the city benefitted from the assistance of the Department of Labor in Puerto Rico to recruit more Puerto Rican laborers for domestic and foundry work.

In 1949, an extension of the Bureau of Employment and Migration, originally established in New York City two years earlier, opened its doors in Chicago. Eventually renamed the

³¹ Gina M. Pérez, *The Near Northwest Side Story: Migration, Displacement, and Puerto Rican Families*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 38.

³² Throughout her book on the transnational network between the city of Chicago and San Sebastián, Puerto Rico, Pérez demonstrates that, contrary to the government's stated neutrality regarding mass migration, the policies that accompanied Operation Bootstrap institutionalized migration to the United States through a carefully planned strategy. Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

Migration Division of the Department of Labor, this agency of the insular government was responsible for assisting migrants and promoting a positive image of Puerto Rican families in the Windy City. The Division attempted to quell nativist fears while simultaneously encouraging more families to leave the island for a Chicago willing to embrace their arrival.

According to their public image campaign, Puerto Ricans in Chicago embodied the characteristics of a model minority, hard workers ready to integrate and assimilate into the American way of life. "Chicago's proud Puerto Ricans", as the title of a Chicago *Daily News* article read, compared positively to "other Latinos [who were] more easily incited to violence."³³ Contradicting this model minority rhetoric, however, were the pervasive forms of discrimination that defined the everyday realities and constrained the socioeconomic advancement of many Puerto Ricans in the mainland. A mostly peasant and working-class group, Puerto Ricans in Chicago were limited to the lowest-rung jobs available and forced to settle amongst the most deprived areas of the city. This structural relationship to the city's economy furthered their separation from mainstream American culture, which, in turn, continued to "constrain the economic opportunities of newcomers."³⁴ Denunciations against Chicago's housing and employment shortage, as well as the city's neglect to address these issues, gained steam and, by 1954, replaced the government's official narrative of a successful Puerto Rican migration to the Windy City. For instance, in 1954, the island-based *El Mundo*, the same newspaper that only a year earlier ran an editorial column echoing the government's positive outlook on migration to Chicago, assured its readership that the "municipal authorities of the cold metropolis do not have a cordial attitude toward potential Puerto Rican migration and want to discourage it by any means necessary." In the end, Puerto Ricans' status as a model minority in Chicago was short-lived, if lived at all.³⁵

³³ *Daily News*, June 5, 1965. Quoted in Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

³⁴ Alejandro Portes and Ramón Grosfoguel, "Caribbean Diasporas: Migration and Ethnic Communities", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 533, no. 1, 1994, p. 62.

³⁵ Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

The social, economic, and political conditions forced upon Puerto Ricans, notes Félix Padilla, influenced the circumstances in which migration to the United States developed. U.S. colonialism rendered Puerto Rican spaces and their population as subordinate, part of a complacent anti-modern “culture of poverty” in need of social uplift.³⁶ Amidst this colonial relationship, the U.S. government, pressed by the exigencies of World War I, designated Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens; nevertheless, these rights came with a debasing value. By reconfiguring the juridical boundaries of the nation, the U.S. government treated Puerto Ricans as separate and unequal. Puerto Ricans then became bearers of a “second-class citizenship” which highlighted issues of imperial domination and racial subjugation. On the island, they were denied equal rights to political participation and the full protection of the Bill of Rights. Puerto Ricans, as noted by Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, “are distinguished by a legacy of colonization by the U.S. nation-state that reduced their land in its entirety to an officially ‘unincorporated territory’ in a condition of indefinitely (permanently?) deferred exception that reduced them to subordinate U.S. citizens.”³⁷ Legally, the U.S. government categorized Puerto Ricans as “foreign in a domestic sense”, indefinitely disenfranchised from the imperial nation.³⁸ In this sense, Puerto Ricans “were rendered marginal before emigration” and as such were treated in Chicago.³⁹

Many Puerto Ricans thought of Chicago as a temporary home. The desire to eventually return to the island fomented a distinctive ethos among the first generation of Puerto Ricans

³⁶ The most prominent discussion on Puerto Ricans and “the culture of poverty” is Oscar Lewis, *La vida: una familia puertorriqueña en la cultura de la pobreza. San Juan y Nueva York*. Mexico City, Mortiz, 1971. See also Kelvin Santiago-Valles, ‘Subject People’ and Colonial Discourses: *Economic Transformation and Social Disorder in Puerto Rico, 1898–1947*. Albany, N.Y., SUNY Press, 1994, p. 8.

³⁷ Nicolas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship*. New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 11.

³⁸ Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall (eds.), *Foreign in a Domestic Sense Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution*. Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2001.

³⁹ Padilla, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

in the United States. For many, the purpose of resettling in Chicago was to find temporary economic relief which would then enable them to return to the island. However, “those who had originally intended to return to Puerto Rico found that it was more difficult to save money in Chicago than they had expected.” As a result, Puerto Ricans became “trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, marginal employment, chronic unemployment, and welfare.”⁴⁰

“Cha-Cha” Jiménez’s arrival in Chicago, for instance, followed a familiar pattern. After moving with his mother to New York in 1948, the family settled in Massachusetts for a few years before arriving to Chicago in 1950. Upon arrival, two-year old “Cha-Cha” and his family moved to the Clark Street area, near Chicago’s growing downtown.⁴¹ Limited housing opportunities, in addition to the establishment of a social service agency by the Puerto Rican government, enhanced the concentration of Puerto Ricans around this area. According to “Cha-Cha”, Puerto Ricans who moved there “were looking for cheap rent. They were not looking to establish themselves... Some wanted to bring their families, but the goal was to make money and go back to Puerto Rico. That was also my parents’ lifelong dream.”⁴² By the late 1950s, however, the changing patterns of the city’s landscape and economy resulted in the movement of Puerto Rican families from “La Clark” not to Puerto Rico but to the neighborhoods of Wicker Park, Humboldt Park, and Lincoln Park. At this time, urban renewal projects, directed by the administration of Mayor Richard J. Daley and centered on the development of the Carl Sandburg Village project, forced Puerto Ricans to move further north. As recollected by Jiménez, “we were just coming into a Lincoln Park heavily populated by whites. Not that we wanted to be there, it was more that we were pushed into it. They used to say that Puerto Ricans moved a lot, but they were wrong. We got pushed out. We did not move a lot by our own choice.”⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–68.

⁴¹ *Lincoln Park Project: An Oral History of the Young Lords Organization*. José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez and Eugenia Rodríguez (mother). December 12, 1993. Transcript in Spanish.

⁴² Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

To make matters worse, Puerto Ricans in Chicago, in contrast to those in New York, lacked an identifiable contiguous community outside “La Clark.” As scattered Puerto Rican families settled in the Lincoln Park area, then a predominantly white neighborhood, Puerto Rican youths became easy targets for surrounding white street gangs. Amidst the harassment of mainly Italian and Polish youth groups, such as the Romas, Oais, the Aristocrats, and the A-lords, Orlando Dávila, “a Puerto Rican brother”, organized the Young Lords street gang in 1959, though they did not name themselves as such until 1962. For Jiménez, Dávila, and a handful of friends, protection and control of space were their main goals. In the words of “Cha-Cha”, becoming part of the Young Lords “was a matter of controlling my life, of not having to worry about being chased, a sense of pride.” Furthermore, it was a reaction against the complacency and passive attitudes associated with the first generation of Puerto Ricans in the city: “we were not going to accept that”, asserted “Cha-Cha”, “we [were] not going to tolerate that, we are proud people, and maybe we were not thinking ‘Puerto Rican’ at the time... but we were willing to fight to death no matter what to defend each other as a family, as some type of unit.”⁴⁴

White ethnic gangs’ propensity to defend community spaces from groups perceived as outsiders furthered Puerto Rican youth’s belief that they represented something contrary to mainstream conceptions of whiteness and, ultimately, Americanism. Fights between neighborhood gangs became rituals in which adolescents performed, reified, and defended imaginary community boundaries. In other words, youths in Chicago produced space, to use Henri Lefebvre’s formulation, violently.⁴⁵ As Puerto Ricans became targets for nearby white ethnic gangs, the collective responses from the newcomers acquired a nationalist bravado in form and tone. Equally important, the city’s gang subculture magnified “racial injustice in the field of everyday life”, and, as such, were channels into the political sphere. By the 1960s, “teens and young adults”, argues historian Andrew J. Diamond, played “leading roles in

⁴⁴ Lincoln Park Project: Interview with José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez.

⁴⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1991.

articulating community identities [and] defending neighborhood boundaries.”⁴⁶

Led by the “original seven”, Dávila, Fermín and Benny Pérez, Joe Vicente, Santos Guzmán, Ángel “Sal” Del Rivero, and Jiménez, the Young Lords were quick to engage in battles with other neighborhood gangs; “we now wanted to chase those who originally harassed us”, recalled Jiménez. “It was more like calling them out ‘come on, and let’s fight here... let’s see how bad you are.’”⁴⁷ The general attitude of the Lords during these gang years resembles Eric Schneider’s argument on New York’s street gangs, where “adolescents constructed masculinity through the repeated performance of violence before an audience.”⁴⁸ The first fight the Lords picked, reminisced de Rivero, took place at Arnold’s Pizzeria, a neighborhood restaurant frequented by the Romas. “We were looking for a fight to establish ourselves”, remembered “Sal”; “we started the fight there and we jumped a couple of guys right on the door... and just like that we started kicking some butt... we left a couple of guys laying down. It wasn’t like we stabbed them or anything but we knocked them out.”⁴⁹ At this time, “turf-fights” were not the Young Lords’ exclusive activities. Alongside the Young Lordettes, as the women members of the gang was called, the Lords also organized social activities at the local YMCA and even managed to open a coffeehouse in 1967, Uptown #2.⁵⁰

However, the years after 1965 marked the collapse of the street gang. Members of the organization were either in and out of jail, or outside Chicago. Addiction to narcotics, mainly acid, heroin, and cocaine, also took a toll on the Young Lords.

⁴⁶ Andrew J. Diamond, *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908–1969*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁴⁸ Eric C. Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁴⁹ Lincoln Park Project: Interview among participants of the YLO: José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, “Sal” Del Rivero, and Fermín Pérez, 1995.

⁵⁰ The Young Lords even organized a “soul month” in collaboration with the Blackstone Rangers from the South Side of Chicago. Every Saturday, the Young Lords organized and advertised through the radio dances at the local YMCA.

As remembered by “Sal” de Rivero, his street family was almost completely disintegrated at the time. “During the period when I came back to Chicago [1966], was when I started seeing [“Cha-Cha”] doing drugs... it threw me completely off. Everybody was going their own way.”⁵¹ In 1968, only nineteen years old and a heroin addict, “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, former president of the street gang and future chairman of the political organization, was arrested and sentenced to Cook County Jail.

YOUNG LORDS SERVE AND PROTECT THE COMMUNITY

A defining year in the lives of many, 1968 was vital for the development of social movements around the United States. Within the context of Chicago, the social upheaval that defined the 1960s also triggered the politicization of urban youth gangs. During these years, street gangs shaped not only the mindset of their members but the city’s local political structure. With approaches as radical as violent protests, to more conventional political methods, inner-city youths combined ideological and pragmatic responses to their alienation from mainstream labor, political, and cultural structures.⁵² Consequently, youths that normally stood outside conventional political dynamics redefined themselves as political actors. Through this transformation, urban youths articulated a sense of selfhood developed during the gang years in a more visible space, where the possibilities of transforming their realities and that of their communities were undeniably higher. For the Young Lords, the late 1960s were no different. Amidst the tumultuous atmosphere of the decade, they radically changed their presence in Chicago from street gang to political organization, “from rumble to revolution”, from the politics of the streets all the way to mainstream electoral campaigns.⁵³

After two months at the house of correction, “Cha-Cha” returned to the streets in 1968, and encountered what seemed

⁵¹ Lincoln Park Project: Interview among participants of the YLO: José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, “Sal” Del Rivero, and Fermín Pérez.

⁵² James Short, Jr., and John Moland, Jr., “Politics and Youth Gangs: A Follow-Up Study”, *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1976, pp. 162-163.

⁵³ Browning, *op. cit.*

like a repetition of the redevelopment projects previously enforced in “La Clark.” “Lincoln Park was being taken away from us”, noted Jiménez, “the signs were everywhere: the one-way street, the ‘Old Town’ signs on the stores... you would see neighbors being thrown out on the street by the Sheriff.”⁵⁴ This time, however, Puerto Ricans’ attitudes towards urban renewal projects were strikingly different. According to Iris Morales, a New York Young Lord, “Puerto Rican youth entered a national and worldwide movement that said, in no uncertain terms, the *status quo* must change.”⁵⁵ In 1966, for example, when a white policeman shot Arcelis Cruz at the intersection of Damen and Division Street, Puerto Ricans flooded the scene to protest what they felt was an act of police brutality. The city’s police quickly responded by bringing a contingent of dogs to disperse the crowd. In what later became known as the Division Street Riots, Puerto Ricans “not only defied the police, but also looted and burned neighborhood businesses, particularly those identified as white-owned.”⁵⁶ For three days, Puerto Ricans in Division Street manifested their resentment towards the local faces of authority. To a large extent, the riots delineated and accentuated the two opposing sides that, three years later, were about to compose the revolutionary landscape in urban Chicago. During the final years of the 1960s and reflecting the tensions within society, “the growth of movements in minority communities, the lessons learned from prison, and especially advances and struggle in the Black community”, the YLO sought to unite the people in the community to fight against the most visible grievances of Puerto Ricans in Chicago.⁵⁷

As a free man, Jiménez focused his new social consciousness to fight the redevelopment plans that targeted Lincoln Park. As with many black and Latino youth, prison was the space where the former gang leader became radicalized:

⁵⁴ Lincoln Park Project: Interview with José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez.

⁵⁵ Iris Morales, “Pa’lante, Siempre Pa’lante: The Young Lords”, in Torres and Velázquez, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁵⁶ Padilla, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁵⁷ “A New Organization”, *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 2, Chicago, Ill., May 1969.

I also started reading about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and hearing about the Black Panthers through the loudspeakers. The radio was on almost twenty-four hours a day, so I heard the news that way. I remember hearing about the Panthers doing watches against the police and occupying a courthouse. Those things got me interested and thinking that I could do the same thing, something similar to what blacks were doing but within the Puerto Rican community.⁵⁸

Outside prison, Pat Devine and Dick Vision from the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park Survival Front, urged “Cha-Cha” to join the struggle against the Lincoln Park Community Conservation Council (LPCCC)—a group of property owners of the area who represented the community in the Urban Renewal Board. For Jiménez, “they were the ones throwing and pushing people out.” Accompanied by Pat Devine, “Cha-Cha” attended LPCCC meetings where the absence of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and poor whites intensified his discontent with the procedures. Encouraged by Devine and Vision, and with a very different sense of purpose, Jiménez tried to reorganize the Young Lords to involve them in the struggle against urban renewal. However, his former acquaintances were not as receptive as “Cha-Cha” had hoped. “It was hard getting people interested. Everybody knew they were being pushed out of the community but they felt they could not do anything about it because they would lose their welfare check, and the youth just wanted to get high.” Still, for a winter LPCCC meeting, Jiménez was able to gather “fifty of us, mostly youth, and marched two by twos for blocks to the Urban Renewal meeting.” There, the group proceeded to disrupt the meeting, throwing chairs, breaking windows, and breaking a model display of the community.⁵⁹ After that night, stormy LPCCC meetings became a Lincoln Park tradition.⁶⁰

A week after disrupting the LPCCC meeting, the politicized Young Lords aimed their militancy towards the Wick-

⁵⁸ Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ “Cha-Cha: Guilty or Innocent?” *Young Lords Organization Newspaper-Pitirre*, vol. 2, no. 7.

⁶⁰ “Threats, Shouts at Lincoln Park Council Meeting”, *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1969.

er Park Public Aid Agency. Alongside members of the Latin American Defense Organization, the Spanish Action Committee, and the Black Panther Party, the Lords staged a sit-in demanding a new director and an union for the office employees. The protest culminated with a confrontation between the police and demonstrators, resulting in the arrest of Jiménez and Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois branch of the BPP. Following the tumultuous events of that winter, police began to target and harass Jiménez on a constant basis. After the sit-in, the Chicago Police Department detained Jiménez more than ten times in less than a month.⁶¹

Yet, rather than being intimidated, the Lords met these tactics with a flair for the dramatic that characterized most of their actions. On a February night, for example, the Lords arrived at the Chicago Avenue police station community meeting to denounce police harassment.⁶² “We took over the meeting, and explained to the citizens that were present that we were not there to fight them”, remembered Jiménez, “we were there to protect them, we were protecting the community, and the police were harassing us, and trying to repress the people’s movement.”⁶³ As expected, the Lords’ dramatic efforts were less than enough, and police repression increased with the group’s growing visibility and impact in Lincoln Park.

Nonetheless, the Lords continued to employ brash methods to earn community support. Aware of the city’s intent to turn a vacant lot in the corner of Armitage and Halsted into a private tennis club, the Lords occupied the empty space and turned it into “People’s Park.”⁶⁴ On a similar note, a month after their occupation of McCormick Theological Seminary, the Lords began to negotiate with the congregation of Armitage Street Methodist Church for permission to use the building’s basement as a daycare center. Although supported by

⁶¹ “Hands Off Cha-Cha”, *The Lincoln Park Press*, vol. 2, no. 2, March 1969.

⁶² “YLO Takes over Police Station”, *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 1, Chicago, Ill., March 1969.

⁶³ Lincoln Park Project: Interview with José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez.

⁶⁴ “Peoples’ Park in Chicago”, *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 4, Chicago, Ill., September 1969. See also “Vacant Property on Halsted Street Is People’s Park”, *Chicago Tribune*, September 17, 1970.

the church's minister, Rev. Bruce Johnson, the YLO lacked the approval of the parishioners to use the church's facilities for community service. After pleading to use the church's space resulted in a futile exercise, the Young Lords decided to "take over" the church and rename it the "People's Church." Surrounded by images of Latin American revolutionaries, a day-care center opened its doors on the church's grounds in August of 1969. Among other things, its cited purpose reflected the Lords' concern with Puerto Rican women in Lincoln Park: "one of the purposes of the center is to free women from being household slaves and to make the caring of children everybody's business... Women in Lincoln Park can no longer be mere servants. They must become fully participating members of the new society we are building."⁶⁵ The "People's Church" functioned as the Lords' main workspace. Besides the daycare center, the Young Lords started a free breakfast for children, legal aid programs, and were even able to open the Ramón Emeterio Betances Health Clinic.⁶⁶

If moving into the "People's Church" seemed difficult, maintaining the space proved to be even harder. City inspectors found eleven building code violations and required the Lords to raise the basement floor three feet.⁶⁷ Furthermore, tragedy quickly struck the "People's Church." "Friends of the people" Rev. Bruce Johnson and his wife Eugenia were found brutally murdered inside their home on September 30, 1969.⁶⁸ In a letter to the editors of the *Chicago Daily Defender*, the members of the YLO interpreted the brutal murder

... as a warning to all the people fighting for their just rights, to the Latin American people, to the YLO, and to all the other people who show they are willing to learn from and work with the Puerto Rican revolutionary movement. These murders show to what vicious leng-

⁶⁵ "Revolutionaries Serve the People!" *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 4.

⁶⁶ Alberto Chavira, a Northwestern medical student, ran the YLO health clinic.

⁶⁷ Padilla, *op. cit.*, 121.

⁶⁸ The events surrounding the murders of Bruce and Eugenia Johnson still remain murky.

ths some people will go to prevent the growth of a just struggle.”⁶⁹

Though taken back by the death of two of its most important collaborators, the YLO continued to focus their energy on the city’s urban renewal plan. In what was perhaps their most significant activity, the Lords, together with the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park Survival Front, created the Poor People’s Coalition Development Corporation. They fought for the creation of residential property on an urban renewal site on the east side of Larrabee Street, between Armitage and Eugene avenues. The coalition’s plan proposed the construction of a seventy-unit development with forty-percent of the housing set aside for poor families, instead of the Federal Housing Authority minimum of fifteen-percent low-income family units.⁷⁰ On February 11, 1970, however, the Department of Urban Renewal publicly rejected the coalition’s plan in favor of a housing design felt to “give continuance of the economic diversity of the area.”⁷¹ This was, perhaps, the city’s most significant blow to the organization. Around this time, “Cha-Cha” Jiménez was also sentenced to a year in prison after the theft of \$23 worth of lumber.

The day before beginning to serve his sentence, Jiménez and a group of Lords went underground for almost twenty-seven months. Fearing violent repression, Jiménez surrendered to police only after Edward Hanrahan’s defeat and subsequent exit as state attorney. “Cha-Cha” turned himself in on December 4, 1972, exactly two years after BPP leader Fred Hampton’s death.⁷² Upon its return to the Windy City, the organization’s impact on Chicago’s urban politics was not nearly the same it had been just two years earlier. Court expenses and recurrent incarcerations drained the organization financially and emotionally.

⁶⁹ “Letters to the Editors”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 8, 1969.

⁷⁰ Padilla, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.

⁷¹ “DUR Delays Bid on Land Development”, *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 1970.

⁷² “Young Lords Leader Surrenders to Police”, *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1972.

In prison and aware of the delicate stage of his organization, Jiménez decided to follow Bobby Seale's example to channel his militancy through electoral politics. Under the slogan "The Dawning of a New Day", Jiménez sought to become the first Latino elected to the City Council when he challenged Christopher Cohen for alderman in the 46th ward.⁷³ His bid for office culminated in defeat during the February, 1975, primaries.⁷⁴ The YLO's reaction to housing discrimination and city-sponsored displacement asserted Puerto Ricans' status as a politicized minority. Their prominent place in Chicago urban politics allowed for an unprecedented degree of interaction between the YLO and other marginalized minorities in the city; a not so common occurrence in light of Puerto Ricans' historically ambiguous and problematic relationships with other minority groups in Chicago. The politics of race and citizenship in the United States is still to this day an obstacle for Puerto Ricans to develop solidarity across racial and national lines.⁷⁵ Yet, the efforts of the Young Lords Organization led to a merger between Puerto Ricans and other disempowered groups.

The Lords sought to eliminate national and racial barriers by conjuring a strong Latino identity at a time when their experiences in *El Barrio* were understood as the systematic socioeconomic exploitation distinctive of internal colonialism. Consequently, Chicago's YLO established a Latino/black coalition ignited by confluences of class and race. This was perhaps the Lords' greatest accomplishment as a political organization in Chicago.

BERET SOLIDARITY AND NATIONAL OBLIVION

By embracing a Puerto Rican identity and reacting to their colonized status, the Young Lords recognized their place

⁷³ "Jiménez Runs for Alderman", *Chicago Tribune*, June 21, 1974.

⁷⁴ Jiménez received 39 percent of the votes.

⁷⁵ De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, *op. cit.* On the intersections between Puerto Rican racial perceptions and the United States' racial system, see also Clara Rodríguez, "Challenging Racial Hegemony: Puerto Ricans in the United States", in Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek (eds.), *Race*. New Brunswick, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1994, pp. 131-145.

as part of Latin America's history of oppression, cementing along the way a strong Latino identity. Though employing a nationalist discourse in their fight for land in Chicago, the YLO was able to incorporate other Latinos into their revolutionary project. Since their foundation as a "turf-gang", Mexicans played an active role in the development of the organization. One of "the original seven", Ángel Del Rivero, was of Mexican descent. Furthermore, Omar López, Minister of Information, an avid spokesperson for the organization and also of Mexican descent, played an instrumental role for the political organization. Outside the internal structure of the organization, the Young Lords established a close relationship with the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO), a predominantly Mexican movement also based in Chicago. Even the Latin Kings street gang, a former enemy of the Lords, collaborated with the organization providing security during rallies on the streets. Meanwhile, Chicano newspapers, some as remote as New Mexico's *El Grito del Norte*, expressed constant support and solidarity for the YLO.⁷⁶ Likewise, the YLO newspaper featured articles on the Brown Berets and other members of the Chicano movement. A perfect example to document this relationship with Chicago's Mexican community is that one issue contained an image of Emiliano Zapata next to Pedro Albizu Campos on its front cover.⁷⁷

One of the most salient features of the YLO was its close association with Fred Hampton and the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party. Held as the vanguard in a "people's revolution", the BPP was a source of inspiration and guidance for many ethnic revivalist movements of the time. Without direct connections to other groups from the Puerto Rican left, the Black Panther Party and other advocates of Black Power served as revolutionary mentors for the YLO.⁷⁸ Jiménez frequently embarked on speaking tours with Hampton, where he

⁷⁶ "Police Murder Young Lord", *El Grito del Norte*, Las Vegas, New Mexico, June 14, 1969.

⁷⁷ *El Young Lord: Latin Liberation News Service*, Milwaukee, Wis., vol. 1, no. 1, April 1, 1971.

⁷⁸ Jeffery O. Ogbar, "Puerto Rico en mi corazón: The Young Lords, Black Power, and Puerto Rican Nationalism in the United States, 1966-1972", *Centro Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006, pp 157-158.

“would spend the whole day with him [...] He would be speaking the whole day”, noted Jiménez, “while I learned how to go about those things through him. That’s basically how we started; we developed a trend of observation and participation just by taking part in movement activities.”⁷⁹ The YLO’s convergences with the BPP were particularly visible during the organization’s origins. For example, the Young Lords patterned their formal organizational structure after the Panther ministerial structure. The central committee of the YLO consisted of ministers of information, education, health, and defense, as well as a field marshal and a chairman. In terms of their public image, too, both organizations shared many similarities. Like their “black brothers”, leather jackets and purple berets became the standard look for the Lords.

By 1969, jointly with the Young Patriots, an organization of radicalized Appalachian whites from the Uptown section of the city, the YLO and BPP delineated a pact to establish an official alliance between the groups.⁸⁰ Under this *Rainbow Coalition*, it was common to see Hampton and Jiménez “give a typically awe-inspiring speech on revolutionary struggle, while white men wearing berets, sunglasses and Confederate rebel flags sewn into their jackets helped to provide security for them.”⁸¹ Besides collaborating with the Young Patriots, the Lords supported other white street organizations such as *Rising Up Angry* and other groups dedicated to organize “Greaser” gangs who could not relate to the black or brown movement.⁸² The creation of the coalition, highlighted in articles in the national press, namely in the *Guardian* and the *Black Panther*, gave the Lords some national recognition. That same year, members from the Society of Albizu Campos, a Puerto Rican student association in New York, aware of developments in Chicago, requested to start a Young Lords branch in their city.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁸⁰ For more information on the Young Patriots and Appalachian whites in urban Chicago, see Gitlin Todd and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago*. New York, Harper & Row, 1971.

⁸¹ Ogbar, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

⁸² “Rising Up Angry”, *Young Lords Organization Newspaper-Pitirre*, vol. 2, no. 7.

Following the example set by the Panthers, the Lords initiated peace treaties with former enemies, developed a thirteen-point program and opened free breakfast, clothing, and health programs. Similar to the BPP, the Young Lords also published their own newspaper for the purpose of “defining revolutionary goals, recruit individuals to the cause and train them as educators and protectors of the people and to connect ourselves with developing groups in the different areas of the city.”⁸³ In 1969, the Lords and Panthers were able to orchestrate massive demonstrations in support of efforts to free “brother” Huey and the convicted demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention.⁸⁴ Later on, when Fred Hampton’s life came to a violent end, members of the YLO were part of the honor guard that carried the coffin bearing his body.⁸⁵

The ways in which the United States was viewed as a colonial power became a vital point of convergence between the two movements. Both groups explained their realities through a theory of internal colonialism, which rendered black and Puerto Rican identity in relation to and freedom from, the dominant white culture. As racial minorities bounded by an antagonistic urban structure, both groups fought to achieve recognition as sociopolitical entities with claims to control their own destinies.⁸⁶ Especially central to the YLO political philosophy was the parallelism between African Americans’ forced arrival to the U.S. via the slave trade and Puerto Rican migration as an inevitable product of colonialism. The close ties between the groups echoed Juan Flores’ interpretation of the nature of black-Puerto Rican rapport in the urban United States:

⁸³ “Why a YLO Newspaper?” *Young Lords Organization Newspaper*, vol. 1, no. 1, Chicago, Ill., March 1969.

⁸⁴ “Black Panthers Set May Day Mass Rally”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, April 30, 1969. See also “Ten Arrested as ‘Convention’ Trial Opens”, *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 25, 1969. “Cha-Cha” Jiménez was jailed on charges of mob action during the demonstrations against the “Conspiracy Eight” trial.

⁸⁵ Only 21, Hampton and fellow Panther Mark Clark were shot and killed before daybreak when state attorney’s police raided the Panthers’ temporary headquarters at Monroe Street. “5,000 Mourners Walk Past Coffin of Hampton”, *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1969.

⁸⁶ Robert Blauner, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt”, *Social Problems*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1969, pp. 393-408.

this crossing and blending of colonial cultures, is not to be confused with the proverbial “melting pot” of Anglo-American fantasy, nor is it a belated example of cultural pluralism. Though characterized by the plurality and integration of diverse cultures, the process here is not headed towards assimilation with the dominant “core” culture, nor even toward respectful coexistence with it. Rather, the individual and interweaving cultures involved are expressions of histories of conquest, enslavement and forced incorporation at the hands of the prevalent surrounding society.⁸⁷

The political, social, and economic realities of each group, specifically racial inequality, labor migration, and systematic criminalization, served as the basis of a black-Puerto Rican relationship in Chicago.

Though the BPP was instrumental in furthering of the organization, the Young Lords experience should not be defined simply as that of the “Latin Panthers.” In terms of their internal dynamics, the Panther’s resembled more a conglomerate of individuals whereas the Young Lords “were a community based youth organization that used to be a gang. And in that gang the members were sons and daughters of the families that lived in that neighborhood. It was not something that was artificially put in the neighborhood. It grew out of the neighborhood.”⁸⁸ Urban renewal was an intricate element of the Lords’ experience. Most Young Lords moved constantly from one area to another.⁸⁹ Although not necessarily from a political perspective, the Young Lords always understood the emotional effects of urban renewal. In an interview for the Lincoln Park Project, Omar López, former YLO Minister of Information, recognized that

... when you are a kid, it counts a lot to have some kind of continuity with your friends and it hurts when you

⁸⁷ Juan Flores, “Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy *Asimilao*: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” in *Divided Borders...*, pp. 184-185.

⁸⁸ Lincoln Park Project: Interview Number 2 with Omar López. Conducted by Miguel Morales, February 17, 1995.

⁸⁹ During his childhood in Chicago, “Cha-Cha” Jiménez’s family moved approximately nine times before he completed his elementary education.

begin to see your friends move away... When you do not have the mobility at that age, that kind of separation has an impact. That was the kind of impact [urban renewal] was having on the young members. They began to say “hey, wait a minute, there is a disruption all over the neighborhood.” It then was people like Cha-Cha and Ralph Rivera, and others who were really the initiators of the Young Lords as a political organization, who raised the question “Why is some of this happening?”⁹⁰

However, the fact that most of the organization’s members knew each other had a detrimental effect on the internal discipline of the Lords. Due to the lack of rigidity within the internal structure of the YLO, personal loyalty and long-standing friendship relationships were stronger than institutional regulations. The strong neighborhood ties among the Young Lords made it difficult to resolve unruly behavior from some members and to eradicate the organization’s remnants of a gang identity. “You have to understand, man, that even before, we were in some ways already revolutionary. Dig?”, said Cosmo, YLO’s Field Marshall to Frank Browning, “It is not that we were a gang one minute and the next we were all Communists.”⁹¹ In Chicago, many Lords failed to concentrate on their own assignments, showed up late to meetings and procrastinated while on the streets. Above all, the consumption of hard drugs such as heroin was a major problem for the organization, taking a toll on the efficiency of many members. “Drugs were a problem”, remembered López, “it affected the organization and its morale.”⁹²

By April, 1970, the New York Lords separated from Chicago’s YLO citing their lack of discipline and political education. As articulated by Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán, New York’s Minister of Information, “we split from Chicago because we felt they had not overcome being a gang.”⁹³ Certainly, the different educational and social background between members of the two branches prompted this division. For Jiménez, those

⁹⁰ Lincoln Park Project: Interview Number 2 with Omar López.

⁹¹ Browning, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁹² Lincoln Park Project: Interview Number 2 with Omar López.

⁹³ Pablo Guzmán, “La Vida Pura”, in Torres and Velázquez, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

in New York “were very well educated in terms of Marxist theory and literature.” While in Chicago, he explained, “it was not as important how much Marxist literature we knew, it was how much the people knew about what was going on in their surroundings.”⁹⁴ The New York group was composed of a majority of college-educated youth with prior political experiences as members of student organizations in different New York universities, a stark contrast to the informal street education that defined Chicago’s members.

The relationships between Chicago’s YLO and other movements from the Puerto Rican left were, at best, difficult to sustain. On the island, the limited support for the Lords came almost in its entirety from student groups such as the *Federación Universitaria Pro Independencia* (FUPI).⁹⁵ As a result, the Young Lords lacked not only additional sources for financial support but, more importantly, much needed political mentorship from the island.

The YLO turned to history as a source for its inspirational struggle. The YLO newspaper included features on Puerto Rican history, varying from articles on figures not known for their politics, such as José Campeche, to informative capsules on the island’s long tradition of oppositional politics. In effect, prompted by their discovery of a national history, the Lords became devoted followers of Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party tradition. Interestingly, the Lords’ most cited and commemorated historical event was not the *Grito de Lares*, the 1868 armed uprising against Spanish colonial forces, but the Ponce Massacre of 1937, an event that culminated with the death of more than twenty unarmed protesters. Heroism, for the Lords, rested on Puerto Ricans’ ability to survive as victims of imperial oppression. Advocating heroic forms of survival became a compelling method of less confrontational resistance for the Lords.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Quoted in Flores-Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁹⁵ The Pro Independence University Federation (FUPI), a left-wing nationalist student organization, has been one of the most visible organizations in the fight for Puerto Rican independence since 1956.

⁹⁶ For a discussion of Puerto Ricans’ cultural and physical survival as a form of resistance, see Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, *El arte de bregar*. San Juan, Callejón, 2003.

Inserting their reality on the streets within the island's colonial history, the YLO organized marches in which angry cries of "the streets belong to the people, free Puerto Rico now, and long live Don Pedro" turned the streets of Chicago into national revolutionary spaces.⁹⁷ Through a process of creative appropriation of national symbols, the Lords reproduced Puerto Rico's revolutionary culture and sought to become active participants of a long anticolonial struggle.

Although the YLO sought to place its efforts within two national contexts, the organization remained at the margins of both the U.S. and Puerto Rican nation. Inside the city, structural and institutional racism underlined the Young Lords' socioeconomic marginalization and their association with urban crime life. Their past as one of the multiple "turf-gangs" in the Chicago area proved too difficult to eradicate from popular imagination, hindering the group's attempt to cement their image as a political organization. Mainstream newspapers, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, refused to describe them as something more than a "Latin American street gang... [or] a so-called community group."⁹⁸ Chicago's media's recurrent depiction of the YLO as an undisciplined street gang, closely influenced by inner-city blacks, also resonated in the island, reinforcing the stereotype of U.S.-born Puerto Ricans. In the minds of many, U.S. inner cities "had come to house a large population of poorly educated single mothers and jobless men—mostly Black and Puerto Rican—who were unlikely to exit poverty and become self-sufficient."⁹⁹ Both groups were lumped together as participants of a unique, segregated experience, shaped by issues of race and class exclusively manifested within U.S. inner cities. To this day, such associations still prevail. During her fieldwork on the island, for example, Gina Pérez observed how this criticism was directed at the

⁹⁷ "Jíbaro Seguro, a los Yanquis Dale Duro", *Young Lords Organization Newspaper-Machete Redentor*, vol. 1, no. 5, Chicago, Ill., January 1970.

⁹⁸ "Parley Fails; Gang Holds Seminary Unit", *Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1969.

⁹⁹ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 5.

youth who previously lived in the United States. According to some Puerto Rican elders, returning migrants had “internalized the cultural values attributed to urban ‘ghetto’ living and had brought them to the island: gangs, drugs, and increased violence in Puerto Rico were blamed in large part on *los que vienen de afuera*.”¹⁰⁰

Citing the experience of a Philadelphia Young Lords in Puerto Rico, Carmen Theresa Whalen argues that members of the organization were out of tune with the independence movement in Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, the movement was “very academic and very scientific.” People in Puerto Rico, conceded Juan Ramos, a Philadelphia Lord, “were very disrespectful to us... It was shocking because we thought that they would be proud of us because we were Puerto Ricans of the States that wanted very much to be a part of them.”¹⁰¹ Conflating race and urban politics with a vibrant anticolonial ideology widened the YLO’s differences with an island-based movement that overlooked racial dynamics in favor of a political nationalism rooted in a class struggle.

Discourses centered on race relations and other forms of difference were not necessarily a priority on the island. Cultural identification regardless of racial differences—what students of Latin American racial ideologies identify as the hegemonic idea of *mestizaje*—was the modality in which island-based Puerto Ricans defined race relations.¹⁰² “The need to constantly reaffirm the island’s cultural uniqueness”, suggests Yeidy Rivero in an attempt to define the long-standing idea of *mestizaje* in Puerto Rico, eclipses “the web of racial domination embedded in the internal construction of Puerto Rican culture, identity, and racial discourses.”¹⁰³ Therefore, by situating race and racism as central aspects of their political agenda, members of the YLO conflated issues imagined as

¹⁰⁰ Pérez, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Whalen, “Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics...”, p. 119.

¹⁰² Clara Rodríguez, *Puerto Ricans Born in the USA*. Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 52.

¹⁰³ Yeidy M. Rivero, “Erasing Blackness: The Media Construction of Race in *Mi Familia*, the First Puerto Rican Situation Comedy with a Black Family”, *Media, Culture, and Society*, vol. 24, 2002, p. 482.

limited to the U.S. context with notions of Puerto Rican nationalism. In the minds of many Puerto Rican nationalists, to talk about race and issues of internal colonialism was only relevant when alluding to the United States. In other words, political dissimilarities between the groups resulted from the Lords' physical surrounding. Distance was ascribed not only to linguistic differences but to a peculiar process of racialization that rendered U.S.-based Puerto Ricans as too influenced by inner-city U.S. blacks. On the island, many challenged the Lords' self-identification as Puerto Ricans by trivializing the cultural capital of an identity construct abroad, a product of constant interactions with blacks in the urban United States.

Delineated along racial lines, the division between the politics of Puerto Rico and the politics of inner cities limited some of the Lords' discursive strategies, especially their efforts to realign a national identity to fight for self-determination in Chicago. Politically, this gap placed the YLO closer to a reformist entity far removed from the revolutionary status the group claimed, while, socially, it rendered them as a national minority within U.S. society.¹⁰⁴ Such claims belittled the YLO's national resistance discourse and their performances as freedom fighters. The absence of other nationalist groups during the group's time as a political organization, moreover, curbed the YLO's claim of exercising forms of authentic anticolonial resistance as conveyed by many from the movement on the island. There was no space for them as national revolutionaries because, as the argument went, they were not seen as part of the nation. To use Lilian Guerra's formulation, the Lords' experiences were indicative of "the life in limbo experienced by many immigrants who are as much alienated from and by the conditions and circumstances of their adopted country as they are alienated from and by those of their beloved country."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ The case of the U.S. branch of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) is also indicative of this dynamic. On the island, PSP leaders raised concerns regarding the party's activities on the mainland, which were defined as a "struggle for democratic rights" rather than a struggle for national liberation. José E. Velázquez, "Coming Full Circle: The Puerto Rican Socialist Party, U.S. Branch", in Torres and Velázquez, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁵ Guerra, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Ultimately, by hindering their sense of belonging to a wider imagined community that extended the Puerto Rican nation to the streets of Chicago, members of the organization lost a great source of motivation and the belief that their actions were not limited to the immediacy of the Chicago landscape.

THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

After years of direct resistance to the city's urban renewal plans, the YLO's efforts to avoid the displacement of Puerto Ricans in Lincoln Park came to no avail. In retrospect, for "Cha-Cha", "things would have been different if the Latinos and other poor could have been organized earlier." At the same time, as conceded by some of its members, the tactics used by the youthful Lords frightened would-be supporters.¹⁰⁶ For many Puerto Ricans in Chicago, the Young Lords' style seemed too confrontational and dangerous.

Similar to other social movements in Chicago, the Lords were also victims of systematic repression from the Daley administration. Because of their links to Chicago's street life, Mayor Richard J. Daley identified the Lords as one of the many criminal youth organizations that plagued the city. "Anyone that wore a purple beret was stopped and many times even beaten by the police", recollected Jiménez. "The police would come by on the street with bull horns and call us by name to ridicule us in front of the community."¹⁰⁷ "Back then", noted a New York Young Lord, "petitioning for change often meant the cops got turned loose on you."¹⁰⁸

Elected in 1955, Mayor Daley prioritized institutional responses to the cry for law and order that resonated throughout the city after the violent protests during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. In 1969, Daley designated a special group of officers, "knowledgeable in the problems of youth and youth crime, for the purpose of investigating and gathering information for the prosecution of crimes perpetrated

¹⁰⁶ "Cha-Cha Jiménez: The Gang leader on the Lam is Now the Politician on the Stump", *The Reader*, vol. 4, no. 18, February 7, 1975.

¹⁰⁷ Lincoln Park Project: Interview with José "Cha-Cha" Jiménez.

¹⁰⁸ Guzmán, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

ed by organized youth gangs” for his “War on Organized Youth Crime.” This program represented a change in public policy, treating gang activity as a form of organized crime rather than the outcome of a “misguided youth.”¹⁰⁹ The Young Lords, alongside the Black Panthers, were at the top of this list. In addition, the Lords’ association with the “New Left” at a time of widespread dissent also turned them into targets of Chicago’s Red Squad.¹¹⁰ Chicago’s Red Squad purpose was twofold: to gain information of future activities and to intimidate members of the organization. “The way they did it was by... placing squad cars or unmarked cars right outside the [People’s] church, watching twenty four hours a day.”¹¹¹ Repression intensified the ways in which the organization’s youthfulness became also one of its greatest limitations. A constant suspicion of infiltration created an array of accusations among members and frustrated the activities of the organization: “if you had planned to have peaceful demonstrations, or maybe just informational demonstrations, a guy would come up... and [try] to bring it to the extreme to get you away from your objective.”¹¹² This strategy exploited factionalism within the organization, caused defections from the group, and demoralized those who decided to stay.¹¹³

In the end, as a result of government repression, youthful inexperience, drug abuse, and the lack of political mentorship, organizational vulnerabilities became too difficult to overcome. In 1974, with Jiménez’s electoral defeat, the Young Lords Organization’s time as the most visible agent of urban politics in Puerto Rican Chicago was near its end.

¹⁰⁹ Report issued in 1969 by Mayor Richard J. Daley and State Attorney Edward Hanrahan, [<http://www.gangresearch.net/ChicagoGangs>], accessed November 12, 2011.

¹¹⁰ Created in the 1920s to spy on union organizations, Chicago’s infamous Red Squad became the city’s most feared surveillance unit. During the 1960s the Red Squad infiltrated, framed, and successfully divided many activist groups in Chicago. It also served as a conduit of information for the FBI in the city. David Farber, *Chicago ’68*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 148-152.

¹¹¹ Lincoln Park Project: Interview Number 2 with Omar López.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Morales, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

Although their presence and popularity in the streets of Chicago could be described as ephemeral, the Lords were able to capture the barrio's imagination by asserting a sense of community and providing living leadership to Puerto Rican youth in the Windy City. Indubitably, the Young Lords movement was also a vehicle for the politicization of a large sector of second-generation Puerto Ricans. "The radical experience became", concludes Andrés Torres in his introduction to *The Puerto Rican Movement*, "a 'school' to thousands of future leaders in all walks of life, people who went on to become figures in many areas: community organizing, labor, education, culture, and politics."¹¹⁴ Even to this day, the Young Lords' experience speaks volumes to a number of Puerto Ricans who are still victims of poverty, social displacement, and political isolation in the United States and on the island. Therefore, scholars need to reassess the meanings and limits of an imagined national space to include the cultural and political continuities of a transnational Puerto Rican community found in the diaspora. By going beyond the notion of separate spheres between the island and the mainland, and situating the experiences of the YLO within the national narrative, we can see how many Puerto Ricans, outside what is conceived as "national territory", actively participate in the political and social affairs of a dynamic nation, one capable of crossing ethnic, racial, and spatial boundaries.¹¹⁵

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¹¹⁴ Torres, "Political Radicalism in the Diaspora—The Puerto Rican Experience", in Torres and Velázquez, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹¹⁵ Duany, *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p. 28.